

COMICSCENE

HISTORY OF COMICS

1976

**SUPERMAN V
SPIDER-MAN**

**BULLET
V ACTION**

DC & Marvel meet

CAPTAIN BRITAIN

The U.K. Superhero

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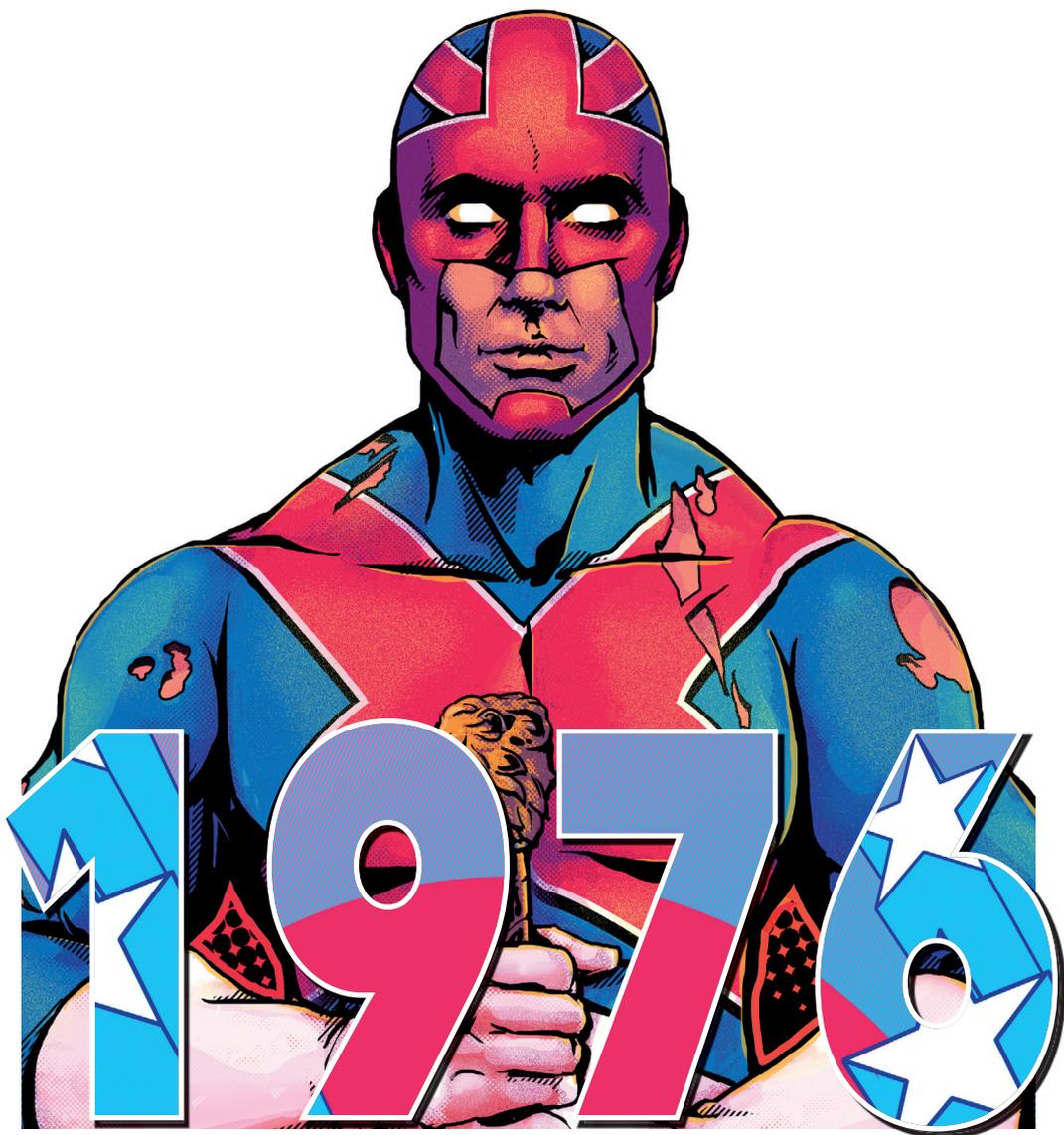
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**THE HISTORY
OF COMICS**



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KRAZY FALSE TEETH

KRAZY

A NEW COMIC FOR KIDS ONLY!
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AAAAGH!

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D

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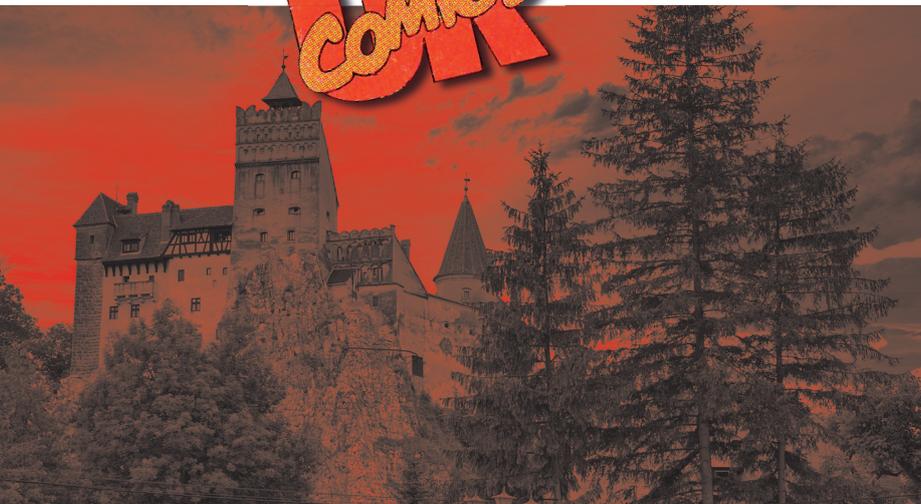
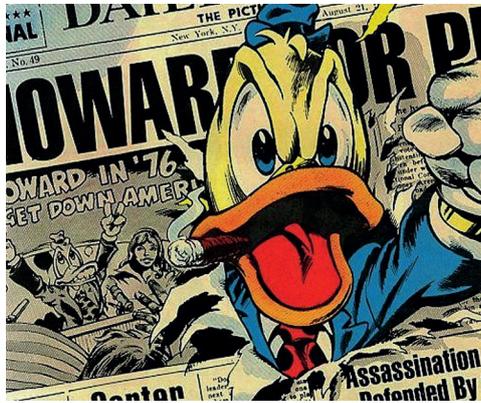
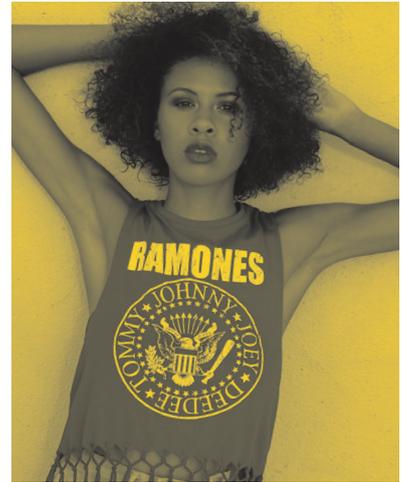
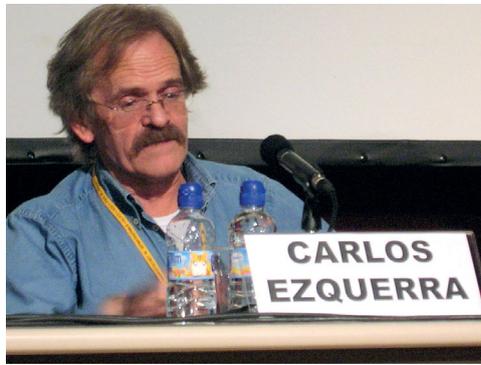
I THOUGHT I'D FOOL THEM WITH A PICTURE OF A BIT OF CHEESE!



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1976

CULTURE & COMICS

In some ways, **1976 was fairly quiet in the real world.** Famous Italian-American crime boss, Carlo Gambino, died in his sleep of a heart attack, disappointing some people who had other ends in mind.

The first Anglo-American Concorde cut the flight time between New York and London to just over 3 hours. The Apple 1, which was to revolutionise computing, was created by Steve Jobs and former computer hacker Steve Wozniak. Queen Elizabeth II of England and I of Scotland sent her first Royal email. Her Prime Minister, Harold Wilson resigned, while over in the USA Jimmy Carter only just won the American Presidency after a close run contest with Howard the Duck (see Howard #7 for details).

Of course, in the USA it was a significant year for another reason: it was the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence from the UK (which was ironically now closer than ever due to Concorde). Jack Kirby had returned to Marvel just in time to give us a history lesson with Captain America's Bicentennial Battles - in tabloid format just to make a bigger splash. This was also the year that he created The Eternals and tried, and eventually failed, to keep his series out of Marvel continuity. Guardians of the Galaxy also got a reboot, making this year a very important one for fans of the MCU.

Howard the Duck's co-creator, Steve Gerber, writing with Mary Skrenes, gave us Omega the Unknown. While not totally unknown, its low sales initially led to its cancellation after 10 issues, but it is fondly remembered and was reprinted in 2019, so no Marvel character gets ignored, or remains unknown, forever.

Mike Ploog and Doug Moench gave us a fantasy magazine called Weirdworld, while those famous survivors, the X-Men

“Some cynics referred to Goodman's new venture as **Vengeance, Incorporated** because the new owners of Marvel insisted on Stan staying on but without Martin or his son Chip.

finally got to #100. The very next issue saw the rebirth of Jean Grey as Phoenix, another story which the movie world eventually saw fit for adaptation.

And then, there is Marvel UK. Some famous people passed through the doors of the UK version of The House of Ideas: Harry Papadopoulos was a photographer who managed to get some unique pictures of rock stars, Neil Tennant would go on to be one of the Pet Shop Boys, and Danny Fingeroth wrote A Marvelous Life, about none other than Stan Lee (whose wife, of course, came from Newcastle). Fingeroth became the assistant of Stan's brother Larry Leiber in 1976.

Larry had been among a number of people in 1974 who had joined Martin Goodman's Atlas/Seaboard publishing company, an ill-fated attempt to do a Marvel 2.0 without Stan Lee - and without any of the characters that people loved. Some cynics referred to Goodman's new venture as Vengeance, Incorporated because the new owners of Marvel insisted on Stan staying on but without Martin or his son Chip. Larry was welcomed back at Marvel but was put in charge of what had begun as a

repackaging department to put together comics for the UK market.

Roy Thomas had created Marvel's first British superhero with Union Jack in *Invaders #7*, but now Marvel UK would get its own not-totally reprint comic with *Captain Britain #1*. Chris Claremont had been born in the UK, but didn't live there; Herb Trimpe was living at the time in Cornwall, but was American. Claremont is still proud of the review he got in the UK's *Financial Times* where his story was described as a "farrago of illiterate SF nonsense". Well, all publicity is good publicity. The good Captain, like many a Marvel hero, would keep getting reinvented like a Phoenix over the years, with Alan Moore and Alan Davis' run being a real peak. (Especially when two gangsters, McShane and Bobby show up in a highpoint of comic book art.)

There were other British comics, of course. Dez Skinn, who would eventually take charge of Marvel UK, began publishing *House of Hammer*. Based on the famous British film studio, each issue would feature articles by the likes of Denis Gifford, but more importantly comic adaptations of some classic Hammer films such as *Dracula: Prince of Darkness* and *Vampire Circus* and back up strips like *Van Helsing's Terror Tales*. And the creators of these strips! Steve Moore, Steve Parkhouse, Paul Neary, Brian Bolland, Trevor Goring, David Lloyd, John Stokes, Brian Lewis! Many of these names would reappear in *Warrior* a few years later, and no wonder.

Roy of the Rovers was finally granted his own comic after a mere 22 years scoring goals in *Tiger*. The title lasted 872 issues, so I reckon we can say it was a bit of a success.

“

1976 was, of course, the year that **Carlos Ezquerra** began designing **Judge Dredd**. He based the Judges on outfits he saw while growing up in Franco's Spain.

DC Thomson revived their old title which had been cut short by WWII, *Magic*. But evidence that it was derivative of their more famous titles can be gleaned from *Cuddly* and *Duddly* who were "nephews" of *Biffo the Bear* and the aptly named *Copycat* was the "nephew" of *Korky the Cat*. It did, however, linger on until 1979.

DCT had a much better title in *Spellbound*. Romero's *Supercats* is a cult classic. There were these four girls from *Moonbase 4* who "had been chosen from all corners of the galaxy for their courage and very special powers". The story called *The Music Master* is like *Logan's Run*, set on a planet where no one appears to be older than 30. And if that sounds creepy, wait until you get to *When The Mummy Walks - Terror in a Quiet London Street*. The publisher was onto something here, but ironically cancelled their comic just one month before the debut of IPC's *Misty*.

IPC's *Krazy* didn't last very long, but had some nice strips in the *Krazy Gang* by Ian Knox and 'ello, *It's Cheeky* (who

got his own weekly in 1977) by Frank McDiarmid.

In the British Underground, whose influence was soon to make it through to the mainstream, Arts Lab produced the very fine *Street Comix* (the x means it's an Underground mag).

Then two comics appeared the very same day. DCT's *Bullet* was from the same publisher as *Warlord*. The main character, *Fireball*, seemed to be related to *Warlord's* *Lord Peter Flint*. DCT seemed to be vaguely creating their own universe here, not merely with comics like *Magic*. *Fireball's* stories were self-contained in 9 (!) whole pages. British comics, even adventure ones devoted sometimes only 2 pages a week to a story. Some other comics were about to come on the scene where what they had to say could not be confined to only 2 pages.

But the most important British comic was *Action*. You may have heard of it. It sold 180,000 copies per week to an average, slightly older, age group of 10-16. They were warned, the establishment: "WARNING - This comic is not suitable for adults!" But the adults took it away. "The Sevenpenny Nightmare," screamed *The Sun*. "They've taken away our comic!" shouted kids in Brixton. (Note that "our" comic; very meaningful.)

1976 was, of course, the year that Carlos Ezquerra began designing *Judge Dredd*. He based the Judges on outfits he saw while growing up in Franco's Spain. Said Carlos, "I drew him before the 1977 punk boom of leather and chains."

Leather was certainly the outfit of choice for the *Ramones* whose first album was being released while over in Ireland U2 were getting together for the

first time. Meanwhile The Eagles had a very un-Ramones sound on Hotel California, less influential, perhaps than Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue, but somewhat easier to sing.

Over at the movies, Rocky's cinema audiences often behaved as if they were watching a real boxing match. Taxi Driver took us to some dark places, but did it brilliantly. Jodie Foster still thinks it is her most important film. And then, somewhat ironically in this year which was celebrating the start of the US Presidency, All the President's Men showed how one President was brought down.

In Europe, Jean Giraud's alter ego Moebius was stunning people with his artwork on the Michael Moorcock inspired Airtight Garage of Jerry Cornelius. I say he was stunning people with his artwork... the story was seen by many people as incomprehensible, but we all bought it anyway. Best just to let Moebius take you on a trip upon a magic swirling ship... or something.

The only trip that American Splendour was on was a trip through the life of the unique Harvey Pekar. If you have not seen the film of the same name, order it on Amazon; there's even a dvd edition with a wee comic in it based on the year he was a guest at the Edinburgh Film Festival. How to describe this comic to someone who has never encountered it? Well...

"Rarely has anyone been willing to open up and show the world all their insecurities, stupid acts, fleeting moments of triumph, petty worries and often pettier hatreds," as FJ puts it in The Slings & Arrows Comic Guide. Pekar's friendship through record collecting with Robert Crumb led to some stunning

“

1976 was the year that Jenette Kahn officially named the company where she had recently become publisher, DC.

artwork in the early issues. Equally good are other artists like Frank Stack (aka Foolbert Sturgeon) and Spain, more normally associated with Underground comics, sorry comix. If you don't think feeding the cat, or falling out with David Letterman, or getting stuck behind an old woman in a supermarket checkout queue are dramatic enough, just wait until you read what Pekar has to say.

1976 was the year that Jenette Kahn officially named the company where she had recently become publisher, DC. It had been a long, long time since anyone had referred to it as National. In the comics, it was a year of returns: The Justice Society returned from the Golden Age in All-Star #58, retaining the old numbering from 1951, a mere quarter of a century before; Green Lantern returned in #90, this time partnered with Green Arrow because, eh, they were both green; and the Teen Titans returned on their most popular series yet. Mike Grell's Warlord was an enjoyable read but Bob Kanigher, Joe Kubert and the Redondo's Ragman was actually one of the year's best comics and the first time I ever came across the word "Tatterdemalion".

Kirby may have returned to Marvel, but his Kobra was published by DC while one of his best characters, Darkseid,

featured in the Secret Society of Super Villains. They didn't remain secret for long, but it does get a prize as the year's most alliterative title.

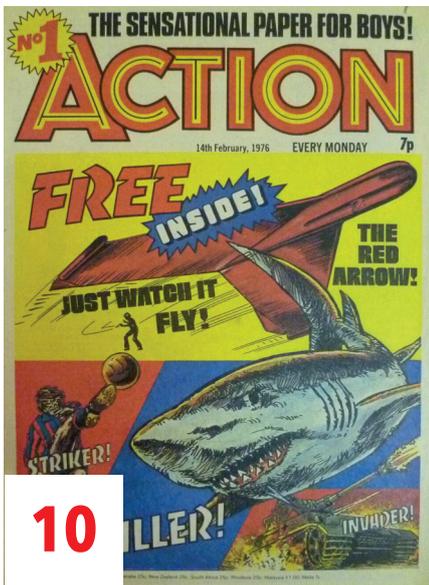
And then, finally, for the first time since 1947, Siegel and Shuster got their proper credit in Superman #302. Batman's Bill Finger would have longer to wait for any proper recognition.

There were no credits for the two creators in another Superman project. In the tabloid format that was popular at the time, Supes finally met Spider-Man. This was DC/Marvel's second co-publication after the Wizard of Oz and had been put together as a project by the two old buddies, Stan Lee and Carmine Infantino (who was still referring to National as NPP). Jenette Kahn went ahead with the book and it was a huge success for both companies, leading to several other team-ups and many other unlikelier team-ups between heroes from different companies over the years.

As I said, in some ways - but only some - 1976 was a fairly quiet year.

AUTHOR:
JOHN MCSHANE

1976 - TEN COMICS



10

Action

By various creators,
Action created by Pat Mills
Publisher: IPC (UK)

1976 - the world is changing, the old guard are being shouted down by the young, punk is exploding, and Action happened. It was controversial, it was hard-hitting, it was a seismic shift in comics that set a template that would inform much that would follow.

Selling 180,000 copies a week at its peak, it brought forth questions in the House of Parliament and had the right wing frothing at the mouth, hated by Mary Whitehouse, described as 'the sevenpenny nightmare' by The Sun, it ended up being withdrawn by IPC by the end of '76 for 'editorial consideration,' only to be brought back as a shadow of its former self that limped along until cancellation in 1977.



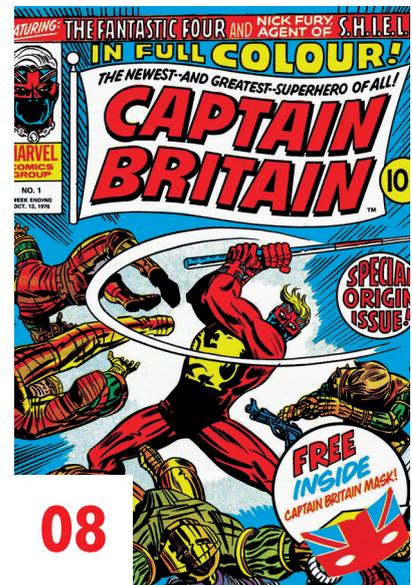
09

Bloodstar - The First Graphic Novel (sort of)

Based on the short story by Robert E Howard, illustrated by Richard Corben
Publisher: The Morning Star Press (USA)

There are many, many different volumes and comics that are described as the first graphic novel, but with Bloodstar there's at least some historical consensus that this was the very first graphic novel to call itself a graphic novel - just like this in fact... 'Bloodstar is a new, revolutionary concept — a graphic novel'.

Adaptating Robert E. Howard's short story The Valley of the Worm, Richard Corben's work here is full of everything you expect, an exciting mix of his gloriously organic and sensual art and Howard's violent approach to adventuring, ending up with something that is one of the best, the purest, of all Howard adaptations.



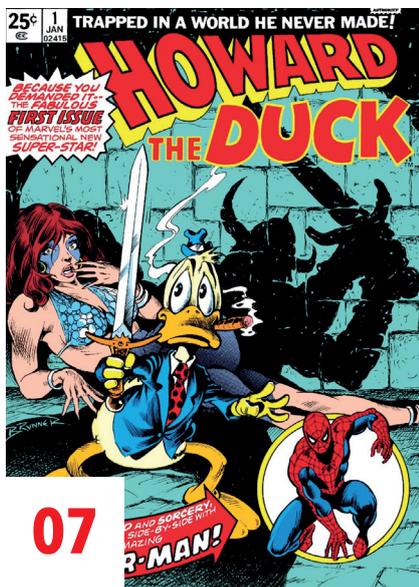
08

Captain Britain Weekly #1

Written by Chris Claremont, pencilled by Herb Trimpe, inks by Fred Kida, colours by Marie Severin, letters by Irving Watanabe. Cover by Larry Lieber
Publisher: Marvel Comics (UK)

Sure, it was hokey at times, sure it was a very US-based idea of just how Britain in the 70s looked, but it had that iconic early costume and it formed the foundation for all that would follow for the good Captain. Also, something you'd have never thought possible, a CGC 9.8 issue 1 has a record sale of \$1,629, closely followed by issue 8, the first appearance of Betsy Braddock, later to become Psylocke, which commanded a record \$1,199 for a CGC 9.8.

YOU HAVE TO OWN



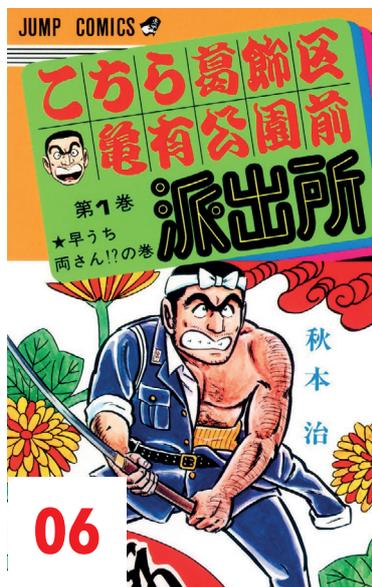
Howard The Duck #1

Written by Steve Gerber, pencils and colours by Frank Brunner, inks by Steve Leialoha, letters by John Costanza, cover by Frank Brunner
Publisher: Marvel Comics (USA)

Howard The Duck's 23 issues with co-creator Steve Gerber on writing duties was one of THE highlights of comics in the 70s, something clever and funny, an absurdist, existentialist romp where you will believe that a talking duck's exploits could become a magnificently funny commentary on both the modern world and the world of comics.

“

... Marvel Preview #4 selling for a record \$4,500, with \$3,800 for the first appearance of Rocky Raccoon in Marvel Preview #7



KochiKame: Tokyo Beat Cops (Kochira Katsushika-ku Kameari Kōen Mae Hashutsujo)

By Osamu Akimoto. Originally published in Weekly Shonen Jump
Shueisha (Japan)

A comedy crime Manga, full of bumbling and inept cops, none more rubbish than middle-aged Ryoutsu, always on the look-out for the next money-making scheme, which always goes wrong. Effectively, KochiKame is just a hugely popular, really well-made sit-com in comics form. Beloved by generations of readers, it ran for 40 years in Shonen Jump, with 1,960 chapters filling 200 volumes, this is an epic Manga series with over 156 million volumes sold.



Marvel Preview 4 - First appearance of Star Lord & Marvel Preview 7 - First appearance of Rocket Raccoon

Marvel Preview #4 - Starlord: First House Earth - Written by Steve Englehart, art by Steve Gan and Bob McLeod.
Marvel Preview #7 - The Sword in the Star! - Written by Bill Mantlo, art by Keith Giffen.
Publisher: Marvel Comics (USA)

1976 was a pretty good year for valuable debuts in Marvel Preview, first Star Lord, then Rocket Raccoon, and both of them owing a skyrocketing increase in value thanks to the Guardians of the Galaxy films (which had a lot to do with Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning's 2008 team).

All of which explains why the first appearances of an infrequently featured space cowboy and a one-off joke character named after a Beatles song go for such high prices, with a CGC 9.8 Marvel Preview #4 selling for a record \$4,500, with \$3,800 for the first appearance of Rocky Raccoon in Marvel Preview #7 – he'd only get the name Rocket six years down the line in Incredible Hulk #271.

1976 - TEN COMICS

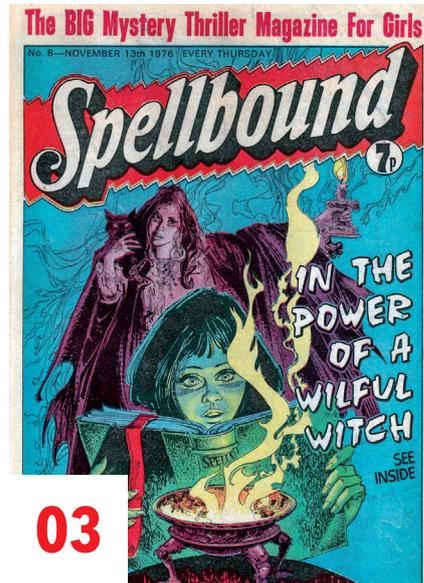


Roy Of The Rovers

Written by Tom Tully, art and cover by David Sque
 Publisher: IPC (UK)

After appearing in Tiger comic since 1954, it seems rather amazing to think that it wasn't until now that Roy Race finally stepped into his very full-colour comic, finally confirming his legendary status as Britain's most iconic footballer.

Roy of the Rovers in the '70s had it all, beloved by kids and adults, all those title runs and relegation battles, the dreams of cup glory, the plentiful England appearances alongside the real stars of the modern game, and those wonderfully far-flung off the pitch dramas, not to mention those fabulous 70s fashions and, oh, those luscious locks!



Spellbound

Various creators
 Publisher: DC Thomson (UK)

It's all too often forgotten, but without Spellbound, DC Thomson's girls' horror weekly title of 69 issues, it's debatable whether we'd ever have seen IPC's far more lauded Misty.

But Spellbound got there first, full of strange adventures, twisted tales, and comics by the likes of Esteban Maroto, Jesus Redondo, Edmond Ripoll, and Jordi Franch. Ahead of its time? Oh yes. A forgotten moment in British girls' comics history? Absolutely.

“

...Spellbound got there first, full of strange adventures, twisted tales, and comics by the likes of Esteban Maroto, Jesus Redondo, Edmond Ripoll, and Jordi Franch.

YOU HAVE TO OWN



02

Superman vs Spider-Man

Written by Gerry Conway, pencils by Ross Andru, Neal Adams (uncredited), John Romita Sr (uncredited), inks by Dick Giordano, Terry Austin (uncredited), Bob Wiacek (uncredited)
Publisher: DC Comics & Marvel Comics (USA)

The first modern superhero company crossover, Supes and Spidey teaming up for an inconsequential tale battling Doc Oc and Lex Luthor - a throwaway story but still a major event. The complicated credits list give you a clue to the behind the scenes tampering going on - with Neal Adams borrowing the pages from Giordano and redrawing the Superman figures, whilst John Romita Sr. altered the Spider-Man scenes as well.



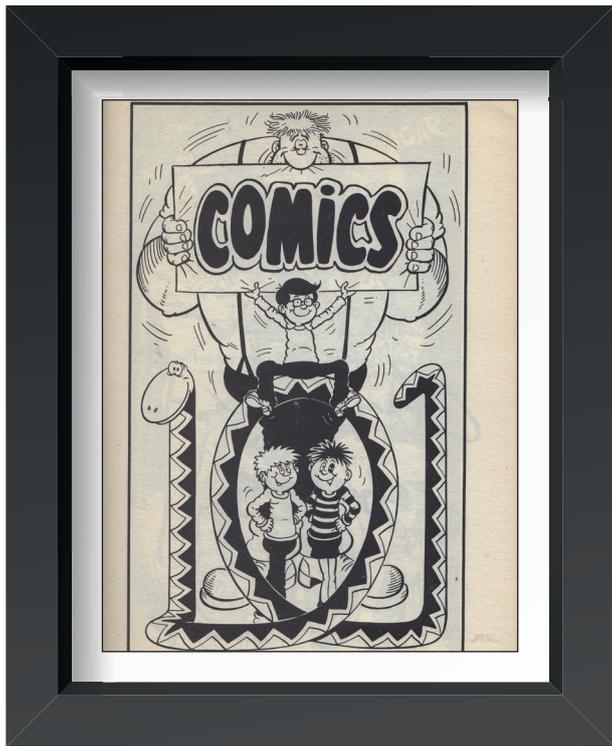
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The Uncanny X-Men 101 - First appearance of Phoenix

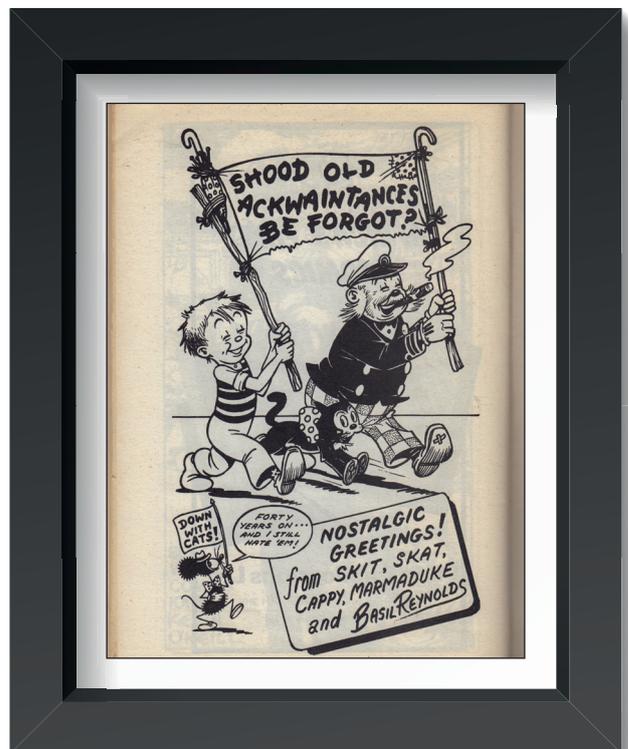
Written by Chris Claremont, pencils by Dave Cockrum, inks by Frank Chiaramonte, colours by Bonnie Wilford, letters by John Costanza.
Publisher: Marvel Comics (USA)

In so many ways, it was this moment that set up everything that was so good about the XMen in the future, with Claremont gathering himself for the whole Dark Phoenix saga, planting the seeds with a doomed Jean Grey piloting the shuttle down to Earth, absorbing cosmic radiation that should, by rights, have killed her. Instead, she emerges from the water after impact, reborn as... The Phoenix. It's Claremont's X-Men at its finest, over-written for sure, but a comic us of a certain age simply can't help but love.

'Hear me, X-Men! - No longer am I the woman you knew! I am fire! And life incarnate! Now and forever... I am PHOENIX!'



COMICS 101
HELD 19-21 MARCH 1976



UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS ARE MADE BY CHARLES GRIGG, SID BURGON, WALTER BELL, JIM CROCKER, ERN SHAW, BASIL REYNOLDS, MIKE LACEY AND MANY OTHERS...



1976

COMIC MUSEUM

Comic artefacts, memorabilia and fandom

The first ever British comic convention was held, in Birmingham, in 1968 and began a sequence of conventions that would run, with some interruptions, until the late 1990s, when it would be succeeded by other conventions such as BICS and the Bristol comics conventions. While the number of comics sold in 1976 was far higher, the number of opportunities to actually meet comics creators at conventions was far lower – compare that to the situation nowadays with far fewer comics sold but far more conventions for fans to attend. In fact 1976 provided fans with a rare opportunity to attend two conventions in a single year!

The ‘usual’ convention was held, in August 1976, at the Regent Centre hotel in London and was the direct descendent of that first convention in Birmingham in 1968. However, before that, there was Comics 101. Held 19-21 March 1976 the name derives, I believe, from the idea that given that Funny Folks was launched in 1874 a comics convention in 1976 is a celebration of comics in their 101st year of publication. Of course, it also works

well as a play on the American university course numbering systems, where the number 101 is often used for an introductory course at a beginner's level in a department's subject area.

Whatever the reason, this event was different from the other British conventions that had been held up until this point. The reason? Simple – its focus on British, rather than US, comics. This was derived from its organiser – Denis Gifford. These days Gifford is primarily remembered by comic collectors in the UK for his prodigious output of comic reference books that grace many shelves. His interest was more pre-1950 than post-1950 comics but his collection was enormous (after his death it took a dozen auctions spread over 3 years to sell his collection) and his connections with comics creators was also fantastic. Hence, his desire to stage the Comics 101 convention.

The convention programme was a feature of the 1968 convention and continues, sort of, to this day. The chance to see unique art by creators has always led me to collect these programmes. The Comics

101 programme has the same idea at heart but because of the involvement of Gifford the artists featured in the convention booklet are seldom seen in such publications. These then are, in some cases, their only contributions to convention booklets. In fact to call this a ‘booklet’ is to do it a dis-service because it's 80 pages long! Unique contributions are made by Charles Grigg, Sid Burgon, Walter Bell, Jim Crocker, Ern Shaw, Basil Reynolds, Mike Lacey and many others. The pre-dominance of contributions from humour artists (another strong area of interest for Gifford) is a feature of the programme.

In the years since Comics 101 there have been plenty of comic conventions and plenty of souvenir programmes produced (see my blog www.boysadventurecomics.blogspot.com for details of all those I've discovered so far) but I have to say that this is my favourite of them all. Good luck finding a copy – it'll be worth the effort I promise.

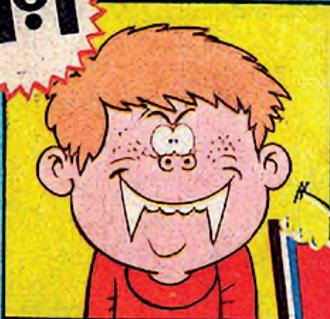
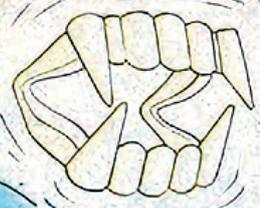
AUTHOR:
RICHARD SHEAF

No.1

EVERY MONDAY (If you're lucky)

16th OCTOBER, 1976

FREE GIFT
KRAZY FALSE TEETH



**DO NOT
BE CAUGHT
READING
THIS COMIC
IN CLASS**



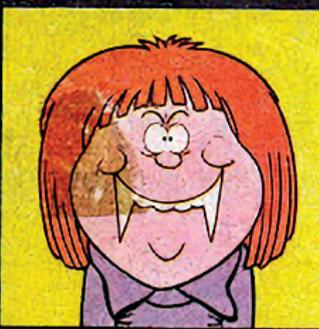
READ ON...

KRAZY

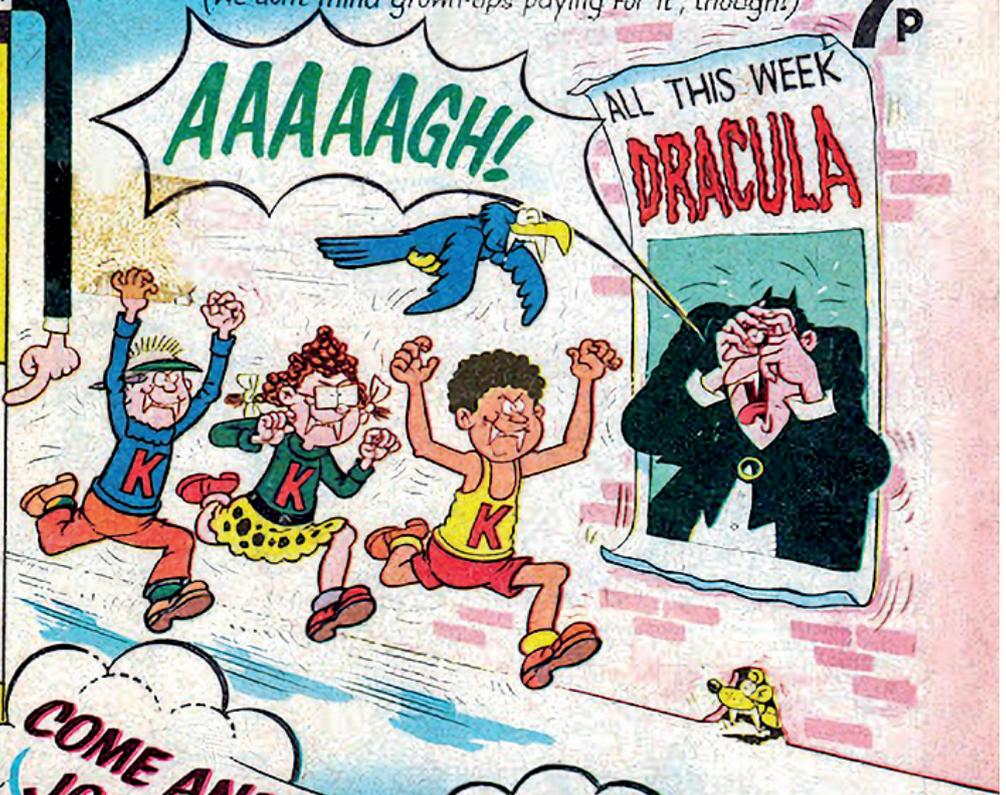
A NEW COMIC FOR KIDS ONLY!

(We don't mind grown-ups paying for it, though!)

7p



IF TEACHER WALKS INTO CLASS UNEXPECTEDLY, QUICKLY FLIP KRAZY COMIC OVER SO THAT THE BACK COVER SHOWS FACE-UP. BE SMART, KIDS- PROTECT YOUR COMIC WITH THE KRAZY COMIC DISGUISE.....



COME AND JOIN THE KRAZY GANG-INSIDE!

Australia 25c, New Zealand 25c, South Africa 25c, Rhodesia 25c, Malaysia \$1.00, Malta 7c.

Krazy No. 1

KRAZY

On October 16th 1976, a **newcomer jostled for attention** amongst the already crowded field of Britain's thriving 1970s comic scene.

The comic was Krazy (later Krazy Comic). It was, as the cover warned us, "a new comic for kids only!" (The message, "we don't mind grown-ups paying for it though!" appeared underneath). And any kids or grownups prepared to take a chance and part with the necessary 7p required for purchase would be rewarded with a free gift of some special 'Krazy false teeth' designed in the vampire style in time for Halloween, in addition to the comic itself. Anyone buying the second issue a week later would get a Superjet camera.

But Krazy had another trick up its sleeve, a unique selling point to help make it stand from the other already established IPC titles like Buster, Whizzer and Chips, Whoopee! and Monster Fun as well as the generally older DC Thomson "funny" titles, The Dandy, Beano, Beezer, Topper and Sparky.

For the front page contained a warning, "Do not be caught reading this comic in class", followed by some instructions: "If teacher walks into class unexpectedly quickly flip Krazy comic over so that the back cover shows face up. Protect your comic with the Krazy comic disguise."

And here was the ruse: every week the back page of Krazy would be cunningly disguised, theoretically fooling potentially disapproving parents into thinking it was something other than the back of a comic. One week it would look like a private diary, the next a holiday brochure or a record sleeve, a place mat, a school exercise book, a towel (for anyone wishing to "laugh while you bath!" according to the comic), an

incomplete piece of 'paint by numbers' artwork or in the case of the April Fool's Day edition, an exact though inverted version of that issue's own front page.

Was anyone ever genuinely fooled into mistaking the back of Krazy was a record sleeve or a bath towel? It seems unlikely. But it didn't matter. It was all part of the anarchic spirit of mischief which exemplified what Krazy was all about and which has ensured that all these years later, Krazy still holds a special place in the hearts of many comic fans to this day.

KRAZY TOWN

No comic today would dare to call itself Krazy. Like the slightly later DC Thomson title, Nutty which spawned Bananaman, the name Krazy suggested a certain flippancy about mental illness which seems insensitive to 21st century readers. Despite this, while inevitably very much of its time, there was little about Krazy's content to offend either then or now.

Unusually Krazy avoided having an obvious lead story although The Krazy Gang (as its title suggests) came close. Sort of a new Bash Street Kids for the 1970s, the gang located in a gang hut in Krazy Town were an amiable bunch comprising Ed (gang leader), Blue (a parrot), Liz (the only girl) and three boys, Cheeky, Brainy and Sporty. The gang's last member was Freaky: a bizarre, multi-eyed hovering alien being.

The Krazy Gang would prove to be one of Krazy's most enduring stories, surviving in various forms for almost a decade. Although all the characters were ageless, the appearance of Liz changed

fairly dramatically over the years, ultimately leaving her looking like a refugee from the studio audience of Children's ITV pop show, Razzmatazz.

The gang's adventures saw them combatting a variety of annoyances, notably interfering park keepers and rival grouping, The Brown Gang. The two most successful characters, however, turned out to be Cheeky, who will be discussed more later and a certain rancid interloper initially referred to as 'Pongalongapongo.' A smelly, disgusting creature and the enemy of The Krazy Gang, the character whose name was inspired by singer Max Bygraves' nickname, 'Singalongamax' soon got a strip of his own. He soon became known as Pongo Snodgrass and ultimately just 'Pongo.' His character along with Cheeky who also got his own strip, 'Ello, It's Cheeky proved to be amongst the most enduring aspects of Krazy's legacy.

THE SPIRIT OF '76

Krazy seemed to hit the ground running. One potential rival, DC Thomson's Cracker crashed and burned fusing into the pages of The Beezer only weeks before Krazy hit the stands. Another, IPC's own Monster Fun fell within a fortnight of Krazy's arrival, merging seamlessly like so many others before and after this into the pages of Buster.

Both of these developments must have been simultaneously heartening and worrying to the team at Krazy. On the one hand, the reduced competition was obviously welcome. On the other, both

comic's fates served as a warning. Cracker and Monster Fun had both only been launched the previous year. The decade had already witnessed the demise of Cor!! Jet, Knockout, Shiver and Shake and Buzz and these were just amongst the "funny" titles. Would Krazy get the chance to establish its own long-term following? Or would it share the same premature fate?

ANARCHY IN THE UK

Krazy thrived on a spirit of chaos and unpredictably. Rather like a comic version of the then recent Monty Python's Flying Circus on TV, characters from one story would spill over into another, one-off stories would come and go all over the place and regular readers would rarely know what to expect next. The first issue included a map of Krazy Town, the location for almost all the mayhem and high jinks which would occur within the pages of the comic. It is unclear even now to what extent this spirit of anarchy strengthened Krazy as a brand and to what extent it may ultimately have undermined it. It is certainly true that today, old issues of Krazy are keenly collected and sought after.

The spirit of Krazy was perfectly demonstrated by the comic's front covers. Rather than featuring any regular cover star, these would always be geared around often increasingly imaginative joke scenarios geared towards promoting the sale of the comic.

A typical front page, for example, showed a pilot alarming a newsagent as he parachuted through the ceiling as he "dropped in" for his copy of the comic. Another politically incorrect cover showed a sombrero-wearing Mexican facing death by firing squad (a common set-up in Dave Allen sketches on TV at the time). "No blindfold!" he insisted, in a rather confused accent. "I wish to finish reading ze Krazy!"

Another showed an alien landing in a flying saucer approaching a boy engrossed in the comic. "Take me to your leader!" the alien said, delivering the standard clichéd extra -terrestrial greeting." Not until I've finished reading my Krazy!" the boy replied. You get the idea.

Occasionally the covers would flirt with reverse psychology. 'I forbid you to read this comic...' warned the agitated features of a demonic looking teacher staring out of one cover. Sometimes, however, Krazy would adopt almost the exact opposite approach. "You...will...do...as...I...command! Buy this comic! Buy this comic!" read one very similar cover featuring a stage hypnotist swinging a watch in the readers' direction.

In the long run, neither of these tactics seem to have really worked.

STORYVILLE

Opinion today is sharply divided as to whether the year 1976 represents a golden age or a unique low in Britain's

post-war history. For some, it represented a spiritual and economic low point with the government supposedly held to ransom by a cabal of (it is argued) overmighty trade unions and forced to go "cap in hand" to the IMF to bail out the economy. But for many children growing up at the time, untroubled by these distant and unexciting issues, the period is often remembered as an endless summer; as indeed, due to unprecedented weather conditions in 1976, it actually was.

A 2004 survey published by the New Economic Foundation in fact identified 1976 as Britain's best ever year in terms of national, economic and social wellbeing.

Many factors must have played a part ranging from the affordability of package holidays, rising wages to the coming of the Muppets. Perhaps the arrival of Krazy in October also played a small part in this? Who knows?

The comic certainly had a wealth of memorable stories and characters. Birdman and Chicken, drawn by Trevor Metcalfe, was essentially a parody of Batman (the hapless sidekick, Chicken, was dubbed 'The Boy Blunder').

Robert Nixon's The 12½p Buytonic Boy was another parody, this time of the popular TV hit, The Six Million Dollar Man, a character also often referred to as Steve Austin, the Bionic Man. The boy otherwise known as Steve Ford (as opposed to Steve Austin: Ford and Austin both being car manufacturers), the Buytonic Boy acquired his special powers

after buying a special tonic for exactly that price from one Professor Nutz. He soon found himself in the employ of the Everso Secret Service battling the forces of the NME (enemy). The story originally appeared in *Monster Fun* but as the TV series *Six Million Dollar Man* itself and indeed half penny coins began to fade into memory, the strip was later repeatedly retitled, being known as at various times *BB: Buytonic Boy*, *The Buytonic Boy* starring Steve Ford, *Super Steve vs NME Nasties*, *W4* and the more enduring, *Super Steve*.

TV parodies were a speciality of *Krazy* which also had a section entitled *A Krazy Look At TV* which parodied *The Generation Game*, *Jim'll Fix It* and other TV hits of the era. *Mickey Mimic*, meanwhile, ("he can impersonate anyone") focused on a boy who could imitate anyone from Bruce Forsyth, Tommy Cooper to Peter Falk's Columbo.

Another character, *Hit Kid* ("any time...any place...any one!") originally drawn by Sid Burgon, targeted local bullies from behind a thick overcoat, hat and sunglasses which totally obscured his actual appearance.

Other strips included *Ray Presto*, *Boy Magician*, *Scardey Cat*, shadow master *Handy Andy*,

the bicycle-riding, bowler-hat wearing *Detective Fumbly* written by Willie Cook, *Big Game Hunter*, a rare female character, *Overhelpful Helen* and rivals *Fit Fred* and *Sick Sid*.

THE CHEEKY REVOLUTION

By October 1977, *Krazy* seemed to be doing well. Another rival, DC Thomson's *Sparky* which had started in 1965 had recently merged into *Topper*. And the character of *Cheeky* originally from *The Krazy Gang* and more recently to be found in his own joke-filled spin-off strip had now become so popular that it was decided to launch a full-blown spin-off title.

Cheeky Weekly's timing was unfortunate. Although it is actually very unusual indeed for a character from one story in one British comic to spin-off into a publication of its own, *Cheeky* arrived just after another very similar looking character from DC Thomson's *The Beano* had done the very same thing. *Plug* had been in *The Bash Street Kids* since the 1950s but now in their own rival solo titles they were pitted against each other. As writer Graham Kibble-White put it later, it should have been billed as "the battle of the overbite."

In fact, *Cheeky Weekly* came out of the battle best. Whereas *Plug* folded into *The Beezer* in 1979, *Cheeky* aided and abetted by strips like *Calculator Kid*, *Mustapha Million*, *Stage School* and yet another Steve Austin parody *Six Million Dollar Gran* lasted into February 1980 before merging into fellow IPC title, *Whoopee!* Incidentally, two thirds of *Cheeky's* stories were produced by the talented Scots artist, Frank McDiarmid.

Cheeky Weekly had, in fact, lasted for 117 issues. By now, it had outlasted *Krazy* itself.

THE LAST LAUGH

The final issue hinted at the news which lay within. "Krazy stars on the move: read all about it inside." It was 15 April 1978 and *Krazy* was about to merge into *Whizzer and Chips*.

Krazy's light had burned brightly but briefly. It had lasted for 18 months and 79 issues, longer than *Monster Fun*, *Plug* and later titles like *Wow! School Fun*, *Hoot and Nipper* but not as long as *Cheeky Weekly*, *Cracker* or indeed virtually any other comic you can think of.

It was not quite the end. Seven *Krazy* annuals appeared, dated between 1979 and 1985. Years after *Krazy's* launch, *Whizzer and Chips* children too young to remember *Krazy* itself could enjoy the likes of *The Krazy Gang* and *Super Steve* while *Hit Kid* and *Handy Andy* would reappear in *Buster and Nipper* while even *Pongo Snodgrass* himself would briefly resurface for air in the reprint-friendly, *Big Comic Fortnightly*.

A decade on, another comic, *Oink!* recaptured much of *Krazy's* anarchic spirit. But, like *Krazy*, it too would fold before it had time to establish a permanent foothold in the psyche of Britain's children.

The great *Krazy* dream was to all intents and purposes, over.

AUTHOR:
CHRIS HALLAM

■ Christmas celebrations for Roy, with Lawrie McMenemy, manager of Southampton



ROY OF THE ROVERS LAUNCH

By Barrie Tomlinson

I had been editor of Tiger for just over six years. I had given the comic a new design and changed it to an all-sports title. The alterations had worked well and the circulation was strong. I had a top team of contributors and I had introduced real-life sports stars into Tiger, which had proved to be popular. **Roy of the Rovers was the number one story in the comic**, as it always had been.

The Roy of the Rovers story, which had appeared in the first issue of Tiger in 1954, had been created by editor Derek Birnage, writer Frank Pepper and artist Joe Colquhoun. Lion editor Bernard Smith had thought up the story title.

That team created a great foundation for the story and gave us a character who has never been forgotten and who still lives on, in memories and in print.

In 1976, the writer was Tom Tully and the artist David Sque.

One day I was called into a meeting with editorial director John Sanders and told that because Tiger was performing well I was to produce a new football comic, in the same style as Tiger.

I liked the idea!

We talked about what the title should be. I quickly suggested 'Roy of the Rovers'. At first I was told the title was too long but then the name 'News of the World' came up and that title had the same number of words! Eventually the title was agreed and all I had to do was fill the 32 pages with football stories and features!

I was asked if Tiger could survive without the Roy story. I said I thought it could but as a safeguard I suggested we ran a Roy of the Rovers story in both titles for a couple of months and see what would happen.

So it was all agreed and off I went to

think up some ideas.

I chatted to Tom Tully over the telephone, in my office and over some long lunches and he was happy to write the Roy story in both comics. We talked about the plots and how the stories would develop in both comics. The stories would be linked in some way but both would be independent of each other. David Sque would draw Roy of the Rovers in the new comic and Yvonne Hutton would be the artist for the Tiger version of the story.

In his own comic, Roy would have his picture-strip in colour!

There would, of course, be other stories and I spent many hours working out what those stories should be. I still have my original typewritten notes about the ideas.

Let's take look at those stories. SMITH AND SON featured Barry Smith, a former international striker who was badly injured during a match and who decided to get into management. He became the boss of Grandon Town, a team struggling at the bottom of the Fourth Division. The club couldn't afford to employ any help for the manager so Barry decided to ask his young son, Danny, to be his assistant, working just for pocket-money.

MILLIONAIRE VILLA was a story about millionaire David Bradley. He approached the chairman of a hard-up

club in the First Division and offered the club millions of pounds if they would let him play in the first team. The problem was ... David Bradley wasn't too good at football!

MIKE'S MINI MEN was all about table soccer. Subbuteo had done many competitions in Tiger and I knew the game was very popular with readers so I thought it was time there was a story all about lads playing the game. Mike Dailey was the hero of the story and the strip became even more popular than I thought it would be. It is well remembered even today!

TOMMY'S TROUBLES was a story which featured schoolboy Tommy Barnes who was a brilliant footballer but his school work was terrible. Tommy was usually in big trouble for ignoring his school work and concentrating too much on football. This story was written by Fred Baker, who wrote the highly popular Billy's Boots story. I felt sure Fred could create another winner ... and he did!

I decided to write two stories myself: THE HARD MAN would feature Johnny Dexter, a tough, hard-tackling defender for First Division Danefield United. Johnny was always in trouble with his hard style of play and I thought it would be a story with few laughs. It was like that until, much later, manager Viktor Boskovic appeared on the scene. But that's another story!

NEW FOOTBALL PAPER.Picture storyTHE HARD MAN

A First Division player who is always in trouble. A big, tough strong player. A cross between Norman Hunter and Billy Bremner. A good midfield player. He finds trouble on and off the pitch. His tough, no compromise tackling gets him into bother with referees and opposing players. He gets involved in fights on the field. He's frequently booked, occasionally sent off and often banned, but the home fans love him. Off the field he still gets into bother. His reputation follows him around and trouble-makers are always trying to involve him in bother. The press follow him around, there are always photographers on hand, to get photographs of the latest trouble. This is the strong story of the paper, often hard and brutal, but reflecting the daily true-to-life First Division soccer scene.

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THE HARD MAN would feature Johnny Dexter, a tough, hard-tackling defender for First Division Danefield United.

The other picture-strip I wrote was THE FOOTBALL. “During its lifetime, a football can have many owners It can be owned by rich people and poor people...it can be kicked by young and old alike. But always it is surrounded by people who have one thing in common ... a love for the game of soccer. This is the story of one particular football and the things that happened to it.” That was the introduction to episode one. During the time the story appeared, the football was owned by so many people in so many places!

There was one other story which was a little bit different. It was called YOU ARE THE STAR. In fact, it was very different. You never completely saw the hero of the story because the hero was you, the reader. We left a space each time the hero's name was mentioned and the reader could enter his (or her) name. It became the reader's story and it was a chance for the reader to be the star of a picture-strip in Roy of the Rovers.

Those were the stories. What about the features? In Tiger we had some big footballing names writing for us. Gordon Banks, Trevor Francis, Malcolm Macdonald. I felt that in Roy of the Rovers, Roy had to be the main contributor so I invented THE ROY RACE TALK-IN. This again was something new. For the first time, readers could telephone Roy and leave a message for him. I hired an answering machine and waited to see if we would get any calls. We did. Thousands of them.

The first weekend the issue was on sale I telephoned the answering machine to make sure it was working.

It wasn't!

The sheer volume of calls had totally filled the machine. I had to rush to my office in London, on a Sunday, to put a new tape on to the machine, so readers could continue making their calls. It was fascinating to listen to what they had recorded. There were lots of questions and Roy answered many of them in each issue. If a reader's question was used they won the super prize of two pounds!

We were very generous on Roy of the Rovers.

It's worth noting that I can't remember any dodgy calls. Roy of the Rovers readers were good folk!

Other regular features included ROY'S QUIZ LEAGUE. In the quiz readers scored one goal for each question answered correctly. If you scored four or five goals, you won the match and got two points. Two or three goals, it's a draw and you get one point. Zero or one goal, then you lose the match. Zero points. At the end of the season, you could check your points total in Roy's Quiz League, to see where you had finished in the league table.

THE BIG ACTION was a centre spread double pager in which we showed a big football action photo in colour. The gimmick was we also published the photographer's photo and the camera he had used to take the photo and all the details of the settings etc. We even said

what sort of film was used.

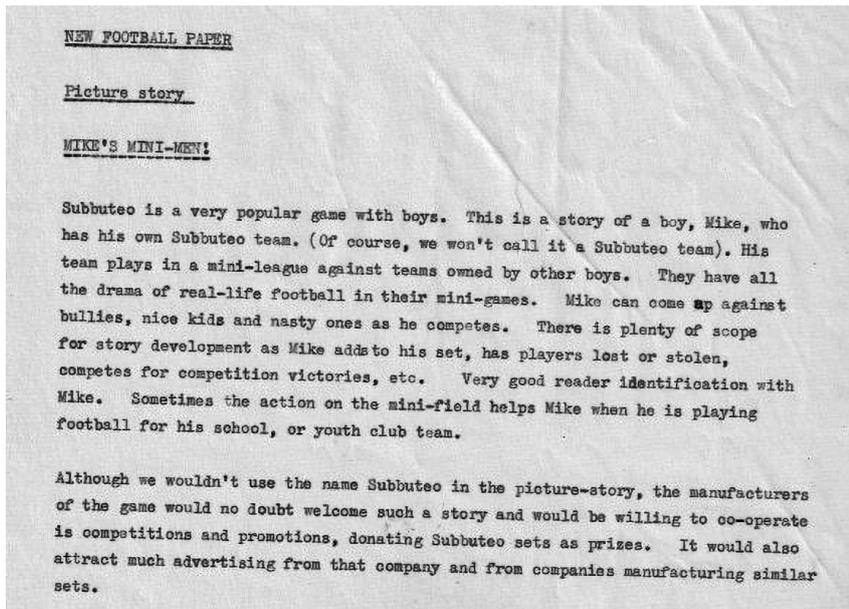
MY TEAM'S PERFORMANCE THIS WEEK was a full page in which the readers could record their team's performances. There was space for the name of the club, opponents, date of the match, what competition it was, The team names, the goalscorer, the result, the referee, the attendance, the reader's comments on the match and marks out of ten for the game. Lots of details and readers really enjoyed filling in all the facts.

GREAT GOALS was a full page photo of top match action, as requested by readers, who stood a chance of winning £2! More generosity!

FAMOUS FOOTBALL FUNNIES was a page of readers' jokes illustrated by a top cartoonist. We started with the best. In issue one, the cartoonist was Frank Dickens and in issue two it was Bill Tidy.

On the back page, in colour, was SIGN PLEASE! Readers could write in to request a photo of their favourite player. If their request was used, they would win £2. We published the player's autograph on the photo to make it a bit special. The first player featured was Mick Mills of Ipswich Town.

The launch issue of Roy of the Rovers had to have a special send-off and I thought I would go with something really special. I had previously written to Buckingham Palace to ask the Duke of Edinburgh to write an article for Tiger. He had agreed but I decided we should put the article in the first issue of Roy of



MIKE'S MINI MEN

Mike Dailey was the hero of the story and the strip became even more popular than I thought it would be.

the Rovers. Once again, I wrote to the palace and the Duke agreed that we could use his article in Roy's first issue. That was quite a scoop.

Free gifts had to be sorted out. The one thing I hated was using 'stock' gifts. There was a special department which dealt with free gifts and the gifts always seemed to be the same thing. I suggested that for issue one we give away a MY TEAM'S PERFORMANCE CHART FOR 1976/77. I designed the chart myself and our art department put together the final artwork. It looked good and was an excellent gift. For issue two there was a free rosette for every reader, along with adhesive letters for the reader to put the club of their choice on to the rosette. I had to work out the number of letters we could print, so the name of every major club was able to be included in my design. That took some working out!

For issue three, we gave away a free football game, which I think I designed along with freelance, versatile contributor

Reg Orlandini. At the end of it all, I was pleased that Roy of the Rovers had three unique gifts.

Not a space spinner or plastic plane in sight!

There were some special greetings in the first issue of the comic:

England manager DON REVIE said:
"The very best of luck to Roy of the Rovers. I am sure your new paper will be a real winner!"

Star striker MALCOLM MACDONALD said:

"I've always been a great fan of Roy of the Rovers. I want to see every issue!"

This from TOMMY DOCHERTY:
"I've been trying to sign Roy of the Rovers for years. Greetings on this big occasion!"

MICK CHANNON said:
"Every success to Roy of the Rovers. I hope I score as many goals as he has!"

I think I put together a powerful line-up, combining good stories, top features,

special free gifts and lots of personal stuff from Roy, to give the comic good identification. The circulation figures proved to be very healthy and I was pleased to see we had a winner of a publication. It was a tribute to all those contributors and editorial staff who has worked on the Roy of the Rovers story since its launch in 1954.

Roy became even more famous over the years, making headlines in the media for all sorts of reasons. When top players showed great footballing skills, commentators would often call it "Real Roy of the Rovers stuff!" That's why my book, all about my years working with Roy of The Rovers, is simply called REAL ROY OF THE ROVERS STUFF.

AUTHOR:
BARRIE TOMLINSON

No 1

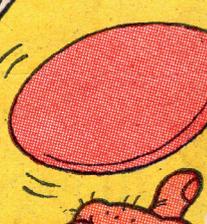
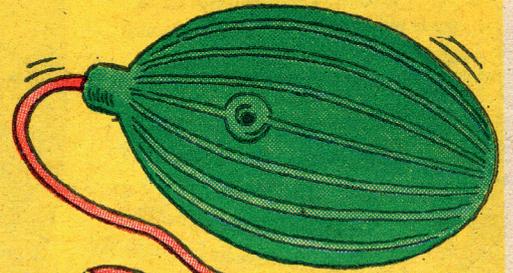
EVERY SATURDAY

14th JUNE, 1975



MONSTER FUN COMIC 6p

FREE "plate" wobbler INSIDE



EEEK!

NO 16 EVERY SATURDAY 27th SEPTEMBER, 1975

MONSTER FUN COMIC 6p

FREE COMPETITION INSIDE

100'S OF 50 SINGLE-TITLE BECCA RECORDS TO BE WON!

Meet KID KONG and his fre

mic...

Introducing **The LITTLE MONSTERS** ... in "Posts v. Posts"

SOUNDS LIKE WE'VE FINALLY CAUGHT ONE, LADS!

I THOUGHT TO POOL THEM WITH A PICTURE OF A BIT OF CHEESE!

YOU'VE CHOSEN A PICTURE OF A HOUSE!

SNAP!

BONK!

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80c, Malta 7c.0.

MONSTER FUN COMIC

IT'S A WILD, WEIRD, WHACKY WEEKLY!!

When Monster Fun Comic arrived on the newsstands across the UK at the beginning of the Summer of 1975, it was joining the IPC children's humour comics family, its senior siblings at the time being Buster, Whizzer and Chips and Whoopee! Two other comics – Shiver and Shake and Cor!! – had folded the previous year.

Differing from other IPC comics, MFC sported not only a cover date but also an issue number. What's more, MFC issue numbers 2 to 5 only had the number – but no date. The seventies was a turbulent period in the UK with the country experiencing an economic crisis, so when the editorial staff were preparing the early editions of the comic, they were in no way certain when it would even appear in the shops due to the frequent printing stoppages being caused by industrial action.

Edited by Bob Paynter, MFC was another attempt at the comedy horror genre by IPC. Shiver and Shake had played the theme half-heartedly because only a part of the comic was supposedly spooky. With MFC, the publisher went all the way, resulting in a paper chock-full of funny horrors.

Not that they were genuinely scary, of course, but monsters nonetheless: 'Kid Kong' (the banana-obsessed son of King Kong); 'Draculass' (the daughter of the infamous count of Transylvania); 'Creature Teacher' (the monstrosity manufactured by desperate teachers in a chemical lab and put in charge of the unruly class 3X); 'Invisible Monster' (who gradually became visible as the story progressed); plus

'Freaky Farm', 'Teddy Scare', 'The Little Monsters' and so on.

Other 'horror' strips included 'Martha's Monster Make-Up', featuring a girl whose jar of monster make-up transformed people and objects into monstrous things; 'Brainy and his Monster Maker' featuring a boy who invented the world's first monster-making ray gun; 'Major Jump Horror Hunter', an adventurer who collected all sorts of weirdies for his monster menagerie; 'Tom Thumbscrew the Torturer's Apprentice', a strip that was set in the dark Middle Ages and offered a weekly helping of dungeon humour; 'March of the Mighty Ones', an adventure serial about runaway mechanical monsters; and 'Terror TV', a strip about a TV channel with a mission to terrify its viewers by running weekly monstrous parodies of popular TV shows. There were a few traditional strips too, such as 'X Ray Specs', 'Art's Gallery', 'Dough Nut and Rusty' and 'Mummy's Boy'. The most

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The total number of strips that appeared in MFC over its short life of just 73 issues was rather small, with only 26 in all.

interesting feature of the non-horror variety was probably 'S.O.S. (Save Our Stan)', a clever combination of a comic strip and a puzzle, somewhat like an interactive game where the main character couldn't do without the reader's help.

The total number of strips that appeared in MFC over its short life of just 73 issues was rather small, with only 26 in all. In comparison, the 79-issue run of Shiver and Shake managed more than 40! In retrospect, we now know that five of the twelve features introduced in the premiere issue of MFC ('X-Ray Specs', 'Kid Kong', 'Martha's Monster Make-Up', 'Draculass' and 'Mummy's Boy') outlived the comic and were transferred to Buster when the two titles merged a year and a half later. 'X-Ray Specs', in fact, survived till the very last issue of Buster (by which time it was most certainly reprints).

The stellar team of MFC artists included two giants of British comics: Leo Baxendale, whose 'Badtime Bedtime Books' were his swansong in comics, and Ken Reid, who illustrated 'Martha's Monster Make-Up'. Experienced humour artists such as Robert Nixon, Mike Lacey, Trevor Metcalfe, Terry Bave, Sid Burgon, Norman Mansbridge, Les Barton and Andy Christine were also part of the team, as was Mike White who was in charge of 'March of the Mighty Ones' – the only adventure serial in the paper. MFC also recruited a host of young artists who soon became regulars in UK comics – Tom Paterson, Tom Williams, Jim Watson, Barrie Appleby, Nick Baker, Ian Knox, Vic Neil and others.

MFC even had its 'Honorary Editor'

and host, who would turn out to be none other than Frankie Stein the friendly monster! Originally created by Ken Reid for Wham! comic of the mid-60s, the character was revived in Shiver and Shake, to then find himself in Whoopee! when the two titles were merged in 1974. Thanks to Robert Nixon's brilliant art and the efforts of IPC script-writers, the character had formed a solid fanbase in the days of Shiver and Shake during 1973 - 1974, and continued to prosper in the combined Whoopee! and Shiver and Shake. That's probably why Bob Paynter decided that putting him (notionally) in charge would do good for the new paper. It is quite surprising how much of Frankie there was in MFC: in addition to contributing the odd 'editorial', running the 'Letters to Frankie' section and making a few front-cover appearances, he featured regularly in 'Frankie's Diary' and 'Freaky Frankie' strips, and was also the host of the 'Ticklish Allsorts' feature; he even got a pull-out poster, and one of the booklets was dubbed 'Frankie Stein's Pull-Out Book' – never mind that he didn't even appear inside...

MFC had quite a few innovative reader participation features of which 'Master Ugly Mug and Miss Funny Face' face-pulling contest surely was the most hilarious. Readers could embarrass themselves to their hearts' content by sending their silliest mug shots to MFC in the hope of winning themselves £2 if their picture was published. 'Finish-A-Fiend' was another readers' favourite: every week they were asked to finish a freaky figure that an MFC artist had started off for them.

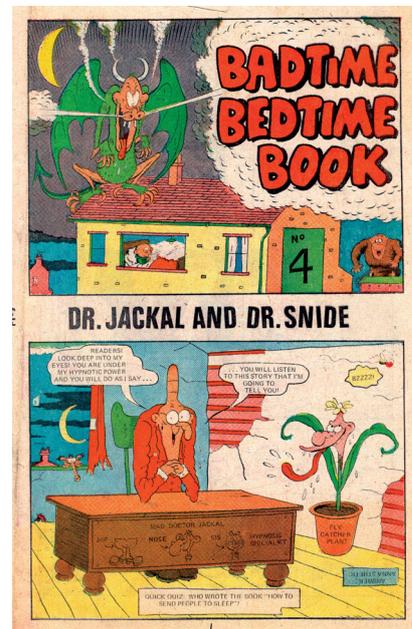
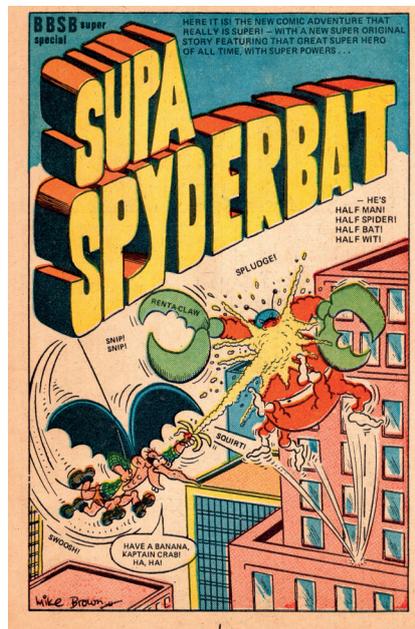
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Nine £1 prizes were handed out to the senders of entries for the 'Monster Hits' chart of top 10 gags, while the contributor of the week's chart-topper collected £2.

Winning attempts were published on a weekly basis and contributors were rewarded with £2 prizes. Nine £1 prizes were handed out to the senders of entries for the 'Monster Hits' chart of top 10 gags, while the contributor of the week's chart-topper collected £2. A crisp one-pound note was up for grabs for each potty play-on-words idea used in 'Art's Potty Pictures'. Generous cash prizes were also paid for the best entries in the 'Invisible Monster' challenge in which readers were invited to send the drawings of their idea of what the invisible protagonist of the weekly strip looked like. Frankie Stein also joined the fun, offering £1 for every letter published in the 'Letters to Frankie' section. Some fans went the extra mile to make sure they got this: one clever boy claimed he was an alien from planet 'Scaro' who needed Earth money to buy MFC with. Another 'correspondent' lamented

that he was held captive by a mad professor who made him take hate potion to despise MFC, so he needed the money to bribe his kidnapper to release him so that he could enjoy MFC again...

Readers also demonstrated their creativeness by proposing new story ideas, such as 'Draculad' – Draculass' fellow character who was born underground with a stake in him... Other grim story ideas included 'Midnight in the Cemetery', 'Midnight in the Haunted House' and so on.

Initially MFC was quite adventurous with its front covers. In 1975 'Sid's Snake' could always be trusted to be on the cover of Whizzer and Chips while 'Bumpkin Billionaires' never failed to appear on the front page of Whoopee! By contrast, Buster rotated its cover stars on a weekly basis, but 'Buster's Diary' was always present nonetheless. With MFC one never knew what to expect; it would feature 'Kid Kong' one week and 'X-Ray Specs' a week later, followed by 'Martha's Monster Make-Up', and subsequently by an advertisement-style cartoon of some kids, a copper and a green monster, followed by 'Creature Teacher', and then by 'The Little Monsters', and so on. The striking white-on-red logo and the dominant yellow background colour made the comic instantly recognisable on the newsstands but otherwise those early covers had little in common. The practice continued throughout 1975 and ended in issue 35 when the front page was permanently given to 'Gums' – a clever and funny tie-in with the blockbuster Hollywood movie 'Jaws'.



■ **Badtime Bedtime Books**

MFC may have not delivered too many strips, but it was surely the champion in terms of the number of pull-outs amongst its IPC siblings. Only a handful of those 73 issues did not have a pull-out booklet, poster, game or something else to cut out, which makes the quest of building a full set of complete issues a collector's nightmare.

As many as 43 of the pull-outs were the fondly-remembered Badtime Bedtime Books. These were centre-page pull-outs which were meant to be removed from the comic, cut up and arranged into eight-page minibooks. Each book was a self-contained whacky story. Unfortunately, the printing presses of Fleetway Printers in Gravesend, Kent often failed to do them justice.

Leo Baxendale wrote about Badtime Bedtime Books at length in his book *A Very Funny Business*, and that's how we know it was Bob Paynter who created the concept and gave it to Leo Baxendale to develop.

The mid-70s was a time when Baxendale had grown disillusioned with the comics industry and was looking for an opportunity to quit because he felt it would soon fall into decline. Although he was excited about the BBBs, from the very start he had planned to use them as a 'test bed' for his new ideas, as well as being a vehicle to manoeuvre his way out of comics.

The first BBB received glowing reader feedback which Leo Baxendale compared with reaction to his very early 'Bash Street Kids' in *THE BEANO*, and he immediately knew he was on the right path. Significantly, adults wrote in too – a

clear indication that something very special had appeared; adult letters like these were a new phenomenon for IPC comics. Unfortunately, pressing deadlines prevented Baxendale from producing a quality 'vintage' book every time. He gradually divested himself from other strips he was still drawing for IPC, concentrating single-mindedly on the BBBs, but he still didn't have enough time to do them as he thought they should be. As a consequence, he adopted a loose sketchy style, producing a vintage set only once in a while. This was also the time when Baxendale started contemplating a series of his own 'Willy the Kid' annuals; he no longer had the time to write BBBs, and eventually stopped drawing them too, leaving Bob Paynter with a huge challenge of first finding the writers and later the illustrators to match Baxendale's talent.

By the time Bob Paynter had to put together the first issues of 1976, he had already run out of Baxendale's BBBs. The notions of 'MFC' and 'pull-out something' had already become inseparable in the minds of the young readers, so the magazine had to live up to its image.

Posters were the obvious solution. As many as eight appeared early in 1976, featuring 'Creature Teacher', 'Gums', 'Kid Kong', 'Terror TV' and others. There was even a 'Badtime Bedtime Book' poster in No. 36! In the meantime, Bob Paynter tried a few other artists, including Artie Jackson, Leslie Harding and Terry Bave, all of whom turned out not quite up to the task of drawing the BBBs. Things improved with the arrival of Mike Brown who was able to imitate Leo Baxendale's

style to perfection. The Editor must have been satisfied because towards the end of the paper's run the frequency of BBBs had been restored to its previous level. Mike Brown proudly initialled or signed most of the sets, so he too must have been pleased with his work.

The imminent issue with the 'important news inside' came with the cover-date of 30th October 1976, and starting from 6th November 1976 *Monster Fun Comic* was merged into *Buster* to become *Buster and Monster Fun*. The centre-spread of the last issue showing a crowd of MFC characters marching to meet their new friends in *Buster*, would be the final MFC pull-out. IPC always made their 'special' announcements sound as if a merger was great news, but many readers surely didn't see it that way...

Nevertheless, *Buster* would give the comic a good home, keeping the MFC name on the cover for nearly three years until 25th August, 1979.

Only two *Monster Fun Comic Summer Specials* were published (1975 and 1976). Interestingly, the first special was put together and launched almost simultaneously with the weekly.

Monster Fun Annuals outlived the weekly by a wide margin: the last book came out for the Christmas of 1984 with a cover date of 1985. *Buster and Monster Fun Summer Specials* continued even longer, all the way to 1995!

AUTHOR:
IRMANTAS POVILAIKA

ON TARGET FOR BIG THRILLS!

EVERY MONDAY
No. 67—MAY 21st, 1977

BULLET

7p

DEATH DIVE...

IN THE PATH
OF A
SPEEDING
TRAIN!

SEE
"FIREBALL"
INSIDE!



BULLET

The Fireball Way

Peter Gouldson looks back at the 1976 launch of **'Bullet', DC Thomson's 'Rough Tough Action Story Paper for Boys'**

They were always so different, and in February 1976 that difference was highlighted more than ever. There was the coarser paper stock for one, and those serrated edges, and that uniform lettering that seemed to be upholding some proud tradition in the final coda of 'Printed and Published in Great Britain by...'. Then the other, its titles perhaps more anarchic, more unruly. The panels and pages bolder, the colours on the covers more brash, the lettering often a wild, handwritten scrawl. Yep, growing up reading UK comics in the '70's it was dead easy to tell the difference between a DC Thomson and an IPC title.

With sales continuing their decline throughout the decade, both publishers remained big fish in an ever smaller pond. 'Eagle', that bastion of 1950's British optimism, had been put out of its misery just before the start of the decade, a shadow of its former self. Humour titles may have continued to hit the mark yet in the realm of boys adventure titles the likes of 'Victor', 'Hotspur' and 'Valiant' were beginning to look a tad old hat when measured against shifts in popular culture elsewhere such as film or television. If hindsight now sees a '70's UK comic scene with its own distinct feel, it was taking its time finding it.

Surprisingly it was the more traditional DC Thomson who first joined the new age. September 1974 saw the launch of 'Warlord', a war title that painted a more gritty, realistic portrayal of conflict. A big

hit, it took IPC a little while to respond, but in early 1975 they came back with 'Battle Picture Weekly' with perhaps an even heavier sprinkling of grit; artist Carlos Esquerra's work on strips such as 'the Rat Pack' being a prime example. Both titles were clear rivals, vying for the attention and limited pocket money of a nation's youth. The distance between Dundee and London was not so great as to not get wind sometimes of what the other was planning, which was clearly the case in early 1976, when both companies launched rival boys adventure titles at the exact same time. The story of IPC's 'Action' is told elsewhere, so let's have a closer look here at DC Thomson's 'Bullet,' dubbed the 'new rough, tough action story paper for boys' arriving

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**'Explosives expert'
Red Raglan (tough guy
credentials established
in the first few panels
by ending up in jail
along with pal Ferret
following a brawl) ...**

in the shops just a couple of days later than its IPC rival on Monday 9th February.

'ACTION STORIES - FAST AND FURIOUS'

A dynamic saloon car cover from staff artist Jeff Bevan was chosen for the launch, with further enticement, as was tradition, coming in the form of a launch 'free gift'. The 'Super Secret Sign Ring' and its accompanying 16 stickers seemed pretty decent enough, before the action got off to a fine start inside with first strip 'Smasher'.

'Explosives expert' Red Raglan (tough guy credentials established in the first few panels by ending up in jail along with pal Ferret following a brawl) is working in the Middle East oil state of Tabana. A glowing bubble suddenly emerges from the sea outside town, which we quickly find contains Smasher, a terrifying, giant, man made metal monster. Impervious to bullets and able to walk through walls and buildings, Smasher turns out to be controlled by evil genius Doctor Doom (not to be confused with the arch nemesis of Marvel's first family the Fantastic Four) who intends using his big nasty robot to further his own lofty ambitions '...to rule nations and govern the whole globe from pole to pole' no less. Nothing seems to be able to stand in the robot's way, that is until Red Raglan and Ferret manage to get it to topple back into the sea with the help of a mechanical digger. Pride hurt, plans foiled, Doctor Doom already knows Smasher's

next mission...kill Raglan!

The storyline may have been pretty typical fare for boys adventure comics of the last decade or so, but the sumptuous Ian Kennedy art more than made up for it, his quality craftsmanship transcending the usual poor paper quality and reproduction in UK comics at the time.

Next up came 'Twisty', where artist Barrie Mitchell got to display his usual high quality work on a football strip. Twisty may have been left with a slightly deformed leg after a car crash, but that didn't stop him being more than handy when it came to playing the great game. Dazzling the local youths who treat him as an outsider ('c'mon what's the matter with you all? I'm supposed to be a cripple, remember?') Twisty's talents are spotted by coach Barney Hollis, youth team manager for local club Sleethorpe United. A plucky rags to riches tale (with even a wicked guardian in the shape of Uncle Charlie in place to provide the stereotypical 'a good clip around the earhole never did 'em any harm' staple of comics of the time) 'Twisty' was one strip that wouldn't have seemed out of sorts in its new IPC rival (with a strong case to be made for 'Action's' more traditional 'Coffin Sub' to make the opposite switch perhaps).

A two page 'Tale of Terror from Solomon Knight' provided a short spook before we're then introduced to 'Survivor', the tale of plucky young Dick Arnold fighting for his life alone after a plane crash, both himself and the dead pilot victims of sabotage by Arnold's greedy cousins who are after their grandfather's vast inheritance for themselves.

'HE THRIVES ON THRILLS, HE LIVES FOR DANGER...HE'S FIREBALL'

There's no doubt as to the big draw here however. In the 'rough tough action story paper for boys' they didn't come rougher or tougher than 'Fireball', probably one of the most hi-octane and exciting characters ever to appear in UK boys comics. Just as 'Code-Name Warlord' took centre stage in its sister

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We're immediately thrown into the thrills of a Silverstone saloon car race where, whilst hitting 140 mph, Fireball is interrupted on his 'radio telephone headpiece'...

title, deemed worthy of a higher page count and forever claiming the prestigious duotone centre pages, so too here with 'Fireball', his first adventure spread over a more than generous nine pages. Yer typical 1970's moustached action man, medallion and calling card always to the fore ('Fireball for hire - mysteries solved - problems licked - lost things found - crooks straightened out - any time, any place - but only tough jobs accepted') here was a real man of action.

We're immediately thrown into the thrills of a Silverstone saloon car race where, whilst hitting 140 mph, Fireball is interrupted on his 'radio telephone headpiece' by Preece, head of MI5, and told he's needed immediately for an urgent mission. Reluctantly quitting the race Fireball arrives by the very next panel (Preece: 'My...that was quick!') before quickly heading off to the airport to rescue Lars Hansen, a kidnapped agent with sensitive information held in Norway. Enemy agents quickly realise Fireball is on the case and he knows he's walking into a trap, but having already driven a racing car, flown a plane, rode a motor boat that's been attacked by a bigger vessel before swimming ashore and taking off again on a pair of skis (all by page 4) that's obviously not going to deter our guy in the slightest.

As he's skiing along like some winter olympian he's, naturally, fired upon, and makes his escape by...bobsleigh, as you do. Later, job done and being congratulated back in Preece's office, Fireball merely looks bored, ruminating on life and wondering if he'll still have time to enter the saloon race at Brands Hatch that weekend.

Depicted by a variety of Spanish artists and clearly based on glamorous television character Jason King, 'Fireball' would continue in a similar weekly vein, its allure clear to any young reader whose typical day was taken up with geometry and John Craven's Newsround instead so later, when their new hero somehow found the time between the thrills and spills to declare 'You could be a Fireball like me! Find out how next week', it seemed pretty certain that many would be doing just that.

The explosive nature of the main strip was a tough act to follow. 'Three Men in a Jeep' drew the short straw, a wartime strip set in 1944 Northern France with three jailbirds wrongly imprisoned during active service breaking free and escaping in a nearby, umm, jeep. The start of their own private war 'killing huns', the strip had the slight feel of a 'Warlord' reject. Things luckily pick up again with final strip 'Vic's Vengeance', the story of a son determined to avenge the death of his father. Running the family east end market stall, Vic's Dad becomes the victim of London gangland extortion, killed when the shed containing all his stock collapses in on him after being deliberately set ablaze. A somewhat harrowing storyline, the strip nevertheless ensured the launch issue finished strongly.

'YOUR WOULD-BE ATTACKER BARS YOUR ESCAPE ROUTE. AS HE APPROACHES, TURN QUICKLY AND 'PONY KICK' HIM IN THE SHIN WITH YOUR HEEL. THIS WILL REALLY HURT HIM...'

If anything the thrills and excitement get cranked up even higher in the second issue, the line up augmented with yet another strip. 'Wonder Mann' was a computer enhanced super sports action man, whose

strange badge is actually a tv link to a laboratory where computers arrange every detail of his training. Seeking physical and mental sporting perfection and virtually unbeatable at every sport (though hardly playing by the competitive dictum of 'a level playing field' and a prime contender to be banned from most sporting activities) by the end of the first episode our new action 'mann' is looking to walk straight into the England cricket team about to face the Aussies. Another rather fantastic free gift, a 16-page colour fold out guide entitled 'Survival - the Fireball way,' came packed with facts and tips 'that could actually save your life, in attack, in fire, at seas, in the great outdoors'. As if this wasn't exciting enough for a readership used to plastic planes, turning the page straightaway their young eyes no doubt gazed in wonder at the full page plug that they'd had to wait a whole week for. 'You could be a Fireball like me' repeated the undoubted star of the show, leaving a nations youth pleading with parents for a 25p postal order, the sole obstacle standing between an army of readers and fully fledged membership of the 'Fireball Club'. If the bright red wallet, pendant, identity card and a special message from the great man himself wasn't enough, best of all was getting in on 'the top secret story of... how I became Fireball'. For many this was just too much to resist, even if the invitation to join their new hero for a 'punch up in Paris' didn't quite sound so alluring.

An 'Uncle Pete' had been mentioned in the second instalment of the strip, but it was only now, through membership of the 'Fireball Club', that the real story emerged - as a young child Fireball's parents had died in a mysterious car crash, with the young boy becoming the ward of his father's friend, Lord Peter Flint (yes, THAT Lord Peter Flint, secret agent wartime star of 'Warlord' himself, yes, I know!) creating a kind of early DC Thomson crossover event that would probably warrant some kind of variant embossed cover these days. The

club pendant would come in handy too; worn by the character himself it would be seen to protect him from a snipers bullet in one episode, leaving the kids of Britain clever enough to join feeling much safer walking the streets. Until the rather flimsy thin plastic 'chain' snapped off.

Later attempts to enhance the Fireball brand even further went so far as to have DC Thomson editor Garry Frazer, obviously the winner of the office 'most likely to have a punch up in Paris' award, pose for photos pretending to be the 'actual' Fireball. "A lot of you have been asking if I'm just a drawing on a few pages of Bullet or if I'm real," lied the real person pretending to be a fictional character. "... well, the editor decided I should answer, so judge for yourselves." With a fake moustache touched up by artists, the end result was, with no disrespect whatsoever to Garry, something of a let down to many. Not all could see through the ruse however, with calls coming through to the DC Thomson office asking to speak to Fireball, Garry was spared further torture when quick thinking assistants informed the caller that their hero was actually 'out on a mission'. God bless 'em. God bless 'em one an' all.

A strong line up, the more than decent free gifts, a particularly striking main feature, the starting up of the 'Fireball Club'...all credit to DC Thomson, it was one hell of a way to launch a comic, and if the preview of the third issues free gift of another bloody plastic plane (not actual size) seemed a return to normality, the excitement would still continue for a while yet. However an early letter printed in that third issue (which may or may not have been written 'in-house') perhaps best encapsulate the huge difference between 'Bullet' and its new rival. 'What a guy Fireball is', declares the excited young reader, quite possibly. 'Me and my pals would love to be like him! How is he able to do the things he does?'

'Sorry man! declares the rather lofty

response. 'That information is strictly confidential! Only those who join the 'Fireball Club' are allowed into that secret!'

And therein lies the difference. 'Bullet' may have outlived its rival and enjoyed a rather impressive run of 147 issues before finally biting the, ahem, bullet in a merger with Warlord in 1978, but it's a title that would go on to often get overlooked in comics highlight reels of the times. Its longevity comes up short when faced with the strong legacy of its competitor. Much more a traditional kind of UK boys comic, 'Bullet' seemed to be all 'you can be like us,' as opposed to 'Action's' much more radical 'we're one of you'. As such, 'Bullet' seemed more Jason King than Sweeney, more Glam than Punk. It almost seems as if it came along a few years too late in 1976, already a relic from a not-so-long-ago time, leaving 'Action' and other titles a little further down the line to best capture the zeitgeist.

For some, for the briefest of times however, it seemed the most exciting thing ever.

AUTHOR:
PETER GOULDSON



■ Battle of the Century

SUPERMAN VS THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN

The combat of the century

In 1976, what had long been a dream for comic book fans came true: to be able to see a story where Superman, the first of the superheroes and icon of DC Comics, and Spider-man, a flagship Marvel character whose popularity surpassed that of possibly any other comic book character during the 1970s, appeared together. It was a dream because no one had imagined that these two companies that were then competing to dominate the comic book market could agree to create a story where their most famous characters would meet.

In fact, although many fans are unaware, this was not the first collaboration between Marvel and DC. A year earlier, the two companies had released an adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*, the 1939 film. However, this collaboration had been much more circumstantial, since it arose from the fact that, in yet another of those coincidences that occurred in the comic book industry at the time, both companies were simultaneously working on their own adaptation project knowing that a toy company was considering launching a line of figures related to the film. The need to put the adaptation on the market as soon as possible led Stan Lee (then Marvel's editor) and Carmine Infantino (who held the same position at DC) to put a halt to the race to see who would produce their adaptation first and instead embark on what would be the first collaboration between the two companies.

However, it cannot be said that this was truly a joint effort, since apparently the Marvel version, created by Roy Thomas and John Buscema, the team in charge of *Conan* at the time, was much more advanced. For this reason, it was Marvel that ultimately fully produced the issue, and the only sign of the collaboration between the two publishers was the label "Marvel and DC present..." that headed the publication. In any case, it is difficult to imagine that this project had a great impact among superhero fans. On the other hand, the choice of the characters that starred in this first joint work made it difficult to presage that the collaboration between

the two publishers could continue.

Recall that it had not been so long ago that Stan Lee had inherited the tasks of Marvel editor from Martin Goodman and his son Chip. During the reign of the latter, the business was run based on fierce competition with rivals that made it possible to perceive a certain tone of resentment towards DC, their largest competitor in those years. This resentment, on the other hand, arose easily at any hint of competition in Carmine Infantino. However, Stan Lee was a much more pragmatic man, and his main interest was increasing the diffusion and popularity of his characters and of himself as an author.

In fact, that desire on Lee's part was the germ of the project. Fundamental to this was the figure of David Obst, a literary agent who had had enormous success selling the book *All the President's Men* written by journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein about the Watergate scandal to Hollywood. Obst was, therefore, a person with great popularity in the literary field, so that, in his quest to expand his popularity outside the field of comics, Lee met with him to explore the possibilities that the author and his work could have outside that scope. Obst, who was not a deep connoisseur of the comic book world, asked why there had not been a crossover between Marvel and DC to date, to which Lee replied that he would be delighted if that happened but that he thought Infantino at DC would not be

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Obst was, therefore, a person with great popularity in the literary field, so that, in his quest to expand his popularity outside the field of comics...”

willing. However, after Obst's conversations with the DC editor and probably because the idea came from an agent with the air of respectability that Obst had at the time, Infantino accepted it, and the dream began to come true.

However, obviously, in this case, it was not a matter of playing with the characters of a film foreign to both publishers but of putting the two main icons of each of the companies on the board. For that reason, both companies were heavily involved in the creation of the story, so it was decided that DC would contribute the writer and Marvel the artist, and finally, DC would be responsible for the inking and production but in close collaboration with Marvel and under the condition that both protagonists and their secondary characters would have completely equal participation in the story.

DC's choice of writer was on the one hand obvious but on the other hand another example of the rivalry between the two companies in those years. Gerry Conway, who had signed a very successful run on *The Amazing Spider-man*, had just signed an exclusive contract with DC, in an editorial move that, in both directions, was common at the time as a result of the aforementioned rivalry. One of the tasks that Conway had at DC was to write stories for *Superman*, so Infantino argued that he was the obvious choice because of his knowledge of both characters, although the possibility of bragging about the signing to the rival company also influenced the choice of this writer. In the same way, Ross Andru was Marvel's choice, not only because he was drawing the *Spider-man* series at the time but also because Marvel had signed him away from DC a

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DC's choice of writer was on the one hand obvious but on the other hand another example of the rivalry between the two companies in those years.

few years earlier, from an editorial where he had drawn *Superman* on several occasions.

In any case, the choice of these two artists, for whatever reason, allowed the meeting of a creative team that had given great moments of glory to *The Amazing Spider-man* series a few years before and that had turned it into one of the most important books in the 1970s. They were joined by Dick Giordano as an inker, who had the uncredited collaboration of artists such as Terry Austin, Joe Rubinstein, Bob Wiacek, Neal Adams and John Romita Sr., with the latter two being responsible for retouching the images of the *Superman* and *Spider-man* figures and their cast of characters, respectively. Both publishers considered it appropriate to care for the brand image of both franchises.

The chosen format was the tabloid, a much larger format than the usual comic-

book in which both Marvel and DC had already been publishing different stories (mostly reprints) since the early 1970s and in which the adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* has been published. It was a format that was supposed to rescue the companies from the decline in sales that was then taking place in the comic book market because it supposedly allowed publishers to sell their publications outside the usual circuit of newsstands due to its size and cardboard cover that allowed greater durability than the traditional comic-book. In addition, it was assumed that in the newsstands themselves, this larger format could give more visibility to the comics and make them stand out from other products. However, the format was ultimately a failure because sellers did not know where to place it and because its high price was unattractive to some readers, especially in the case of reprints that regular followers already had in another format.

However, for a special project such as this, the format was ideal if the artist was able to take advantage of its characteristics. In addition, when one sees the result, it is obvious that Ross Andru was able to do it, disseminating through the story several spectacular splash pages and double-page compositions with huge panels that took full advantage of the spectacular nature that this format allowed. Thus, we can highlight the two splash pages corresponding to the initial combat between *Superman* and *Spider-man* resulting from the typical initial confusion associated with any encounter between two superheroes, in which, in the first, our arachnid hits *Superman* (helped by radiation from a red sun with

which Lex Luthor had irradiated him) and, in the second, the Man of Steel hits him back. Consider also that double-page encounter, where Andru shows one of what would be his main virtues during his run on *The Amazing Spider-man*, his ability to showcase New York City.

In these images, two of the aspects that would be fundamental in the development of the crossover can be deduced: on the one hand, the aforementioned balance had to exist in the appearances of both superheroes and their secondary characters. From the cover that Infantino himself designed repeatedly until the image of neither of the two superheroes predominated over the other, to the structure of the story with an introduction of each of the protagonists, the introduction of their villains and a structure in chapters that would allow both characters to shine. That balance was also sought in the villains with the presence of Lex Luthor and Dr Octopus as enemies, in an effort to ensure that their participation was balanced in the story but without either losing his own characteristics. Thus, we have Luthor's megalomania that leads him to want to destroy the Earth in front of a more grounded Dr Octopus who opposes Luthor's plans when he discovers that his main objective is the total annihilation of his planet.

However, this is not the only example, since, as Conway himself affirms, it was about distributing the protagonism in a practically mathematical way. Thus, the appearances of Lois Lane are balanced with those of Mary Jane or J.J. Jameson with Morgan Edge, owner of Galaxy Communications where Clark Kent worked at the time. In the same way, the first chapter of the story (after the

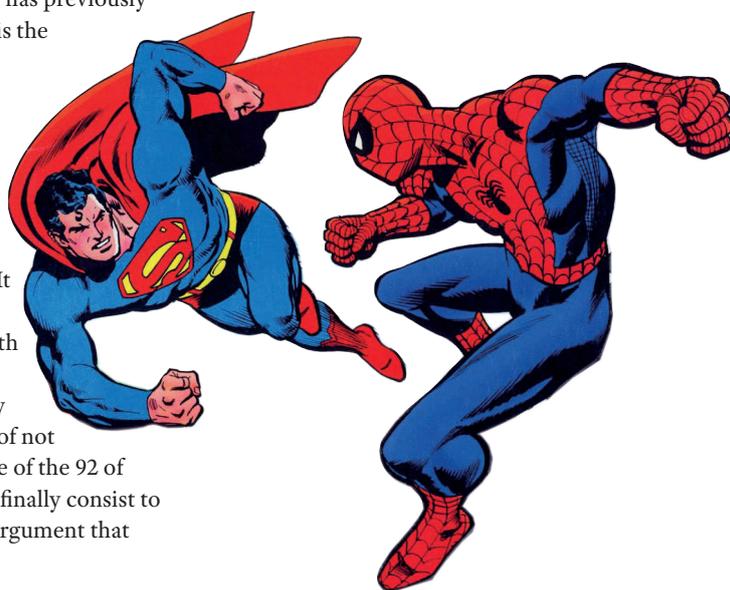
introductions of the characters) takes place in New York, habitual territory of the adventures of the wall-crawler, with the excuse of holding a convention of journalists to which both the Bugle and Galaxy staff attend, while the final chapter takes place in outer space, something more typical of the adventures of the Kryptonian superhero.

The second important feature of the story and one of Conway's primary goals in writing it is the pursuit of fun. This is helped not only by the succession of spectacular scenes allowed by the tabloid format that we have already mentioned but also by the fact that, in the plot, Conway forgets any reference to continuity. Although the story is located in the present moment for both characters (which is why Clark Kent works for television and not for the *Daily Planet*), there is no reference to the protagonists belonging to different universes, but despite being their first meeting, the story assumes that both have always shared the same Earth and that the only thing that has previously avoided their meeting is the distance that separates Metropolis from New York, which is represented by the plane that the Galaxy staff takes at the beginning of the story to travel to New York. It was probably a time when the obsession with continuity was not so pronounced, but in any case, it was a question of not dedicating a single page of the 92 of which the story would finally consist to having to include any argument that

would deviate from the story's main objective, which was to display the main characteristic that had led both publishers to success: their ability to depict a sense of wonder.

With all these ingredients, it is not surprising that the special was a considerable success at the height of its historical importance and the spectacular work that Conway and Andru did thanks to the great understanding they had between them and the understanding of what a story like this should be, a story that fans had awaited for years and that no one knew whether it would be repeated. It was, but it took five years for this to happen, in 1981, when the second meeting between the two characters was published in a new story again in tabloid format. However, as Michael Ende would say "that is another story and shall be told another time."

AUTHOR:
KIKO SAEZ DE ADANA





THE LEOPARD FROM LIME STREET

With Rebellion's second volume of collected strips,
the 'Beast of Selbridge' was truly back.
For some he never really went away.

The first thing that hits you is that title logo. Against some very strong contemporary competition, it remains one of the very best, instantly conjuring up a mixture of danger and dynamism, mystery and fun. Then you're hurled straight into the action as 'the whole spine-chilling business' begins and you're introduced to 13 year old Billy Farmer, boy orphan, in the throes of being bullied again. But not for much longer...

'TELL YOUR PALS BUSTER IS THE COMIC WITH THE LEOPARD BOY IN!'

Beginning in Buster dated 27th March 1976, The Leopard From Lime Street would go on to become one of the most fondly remembered UK comic adventure strips, its arrival only increasing the lure of a title that was already proving to be one of the strongest in the Fleetway/IPC line. Ultimately going on to last just short of a mightily impressive 40 years, Buster, at this point in its journey, had already merged with a selection of less successful stablemates such as Jet, Cor!! and Monster Fun. Along with new humour launch Crowjak, the Crime Busting Crow, the brand new adventures of Billy Farmer were thus complementing an already strong lineup, with IPC's humour and adventure strip mix finding room for

Marney the Fox, Chalky, Pete's Pocket Army, Ivor Lott and Tony Broke and (subsumed from previous home Jet) Ken Reid's classic Faceache.

The first four page instalment introduced us to 'plucky little chap' Billy Farmer, dusting himself off after yet another run in with school bully Moggsy and the usual gang of sycophants. Both a conscientious student and keen photographer, Billy pays a visit to Professor Jarman's Zoological Institute and Gardens, hoping to capture some interesting photographs for the school magazine. He's accidentally scratched by a runaway leopard, and although no harm appears to be done, Professor Jarman insists that he take Billy home, informing him that the leopard involved was suffering from a rare disease and being treated with a brand new type of experimental radioactive serum. Sure enough, once home, Billy soon finds himself possessed with new found strength, the speed and agility of a jungle cat and increased night-time vision. After stumbling across his old school pantomime outfit (and painting on some well placed leopard spots) Billy hits upon an idea, and thus the Leopard from Lime Street is born, effortlessly bounding from bedroom window to nearby tree and on his very first mission; to track down the notorious local burglar known as Cat-

Man and take some photographs of him to sell to the local newspaper.

Let's address that most obvious and repeated criticism levelled at the strip straight away. Adopting the powers and abilities of a 'radioactive' endowed creature may be one noticeable nod towards a particular 'super-heroic' storyline, yet to then have the main protagonist sell news photos to an antagonistic newspaper editor (in this instance Thaddeus Clegg, skinflint news editor of the local rag the 'Selbridge Sun') takes the 'homage' to almost cringeworthy levels. However, to dismiss Leopard as wholly derivative would be a criminal injustice as it remains one of the real gems of UK adventure strips, produced by one of UK comics truly brilliant creative teams.

'ONE OF THE STRANGEST AND MOST EXCITING STORIES EVER TOLD!'

Writer Tom Tully had enjoyed a successful comics career dating back to the early 1960's working on Heros the Spartan with legendary artist Frank Bellamy for the original Eagle. Subsequent writing credits read like a 'who's who' of long revered UK strips, Janus Stark, Kelly's Eye, Adam Eterno and the Steel Claw among them, and by the time of Leopard he'd already embarked on what would become a long

running stint on Roy of the Rovers. As well as going on to write classic strips such as Johnny Red for Battle, new titles such as 2000AD would also utilise his skills, becoming known for futuristic sports strips such as Harlem Heroes and Inferno as well as working alongside Dave Gibbons on the 'Servant of Evil' storyline for Dan Dare.

With Mike Western's layouts complemented by Eric Bradbury's inking, the strip was also graced with two of the very best visual storytellers in the business. Western's work was instantly recognisable to a whole generation of UK comic readers from a multitude of wondrous covers he produced for IPC over many years, as well as working with Tully on fondly-remembered strips such as the Wild Wonders. He was also about to produce some career defining work alongside John Wagner on Darkie's Mob in Battle. Bradbury was yet another master draughtsman, familiar to many from a myriad of great UK strips including Mytek the Mighty, House of Dolmann, and the magnificently macabre Cursitor Doom, with further fine work ahead of him for '80's title Scream! With Bradbury working over Western's layouts the Leopard strip seemed lifted to a completely new level, now set against the brooding terraced streets, chimney-stacks, rows of shops and derelict bomb-sites of Selbridge.

Against this backdrop Tully moulds his script around the template he'd use to great effect in later strips such as The Mind of Wolfie Smith where an underprivileged and somewhat unloved 'normal' lad somehow becomes possessed with some 'special' power.

Billy attends Selbridge Secondary School having failed at his '11 plus' exam, he's bullied and 'not strong enough to punch his way out of a paper bag', he's an orphan, with a violent uncle as a guardian. If Tully's characterisation seems to veer off at times into stereotypical working class tropes ('... hurry up and get me supper ready woman I'm off down the working men's club...') it's worth bearing in mind that such portrayals were much nearer the mark in 1976 than they seem now. Seeing Billy on the receiving end of actual physical violence from his uncle ('...and I still owes yer one for knocking me over the other day...take that!!') might seem shocking now but was written in the expectation that whole swathes of Buster's young readership might actually empathise. This in itself throws into sharp contrast one huge difference between the 'big two' in the UK comics industry at the time; read and loved as they both were by thousands of readers, DC Thomson and IPC were nevertheless competitors in a tight marketplace. If at times they'd ape each others successes, it seemed to many onlookers they actively sought, and indeed had, distinct editorial values. If for some it's a difference in values that's blurred or even difficult to explain, the realm of adventure strips and the harsher reality of Billy Farmer's world to that of Billy the Cat and Katie should.

From the very first four page instalment it's clear that here was something just that little bit special, and newly armed with kitsch accessories such as his home made grappling claw ('I've fixed that claw-like ornament I found on the old fire-tongs to one end of the chord...let's see how it

works') Billy's high octane adventures would keep up the fast pace for many years to come. At whatever point readers might stumble across this strip, they'd be instantly along for the ride, caught up in Billy's world and drawn in by the sheer pace of the antics. Yet for me there remains throughout a kind of tension, a frisson that comes through particularly in the visuals, which gives the strip its unique flavour and seems to lift it to a higher level. Undoubtedly one of those parts, never failing to impress week after week, was that sumptuous title logo, capturing the imagination all over again and whetting the appetite for what was to follow.

As a regular reader of the strip, you simply didn't know what to expect next. Billy would leap from tangling with the Cat-Man and trying to get the better of Thaddeus Clegg, before rescuing a beautiful television starlet, kidnapped as she films her show in town ('...what a load of rubbish. This is one series that I won't be watching, even if we had a telly'). He gets falsely accused of arson before going after a circus acrobat who's been impersonating the increasingly notorious 'Beast of Selbridge'. Whatever the madcap scenario, the exploits of Billy Farmer seemed a refreshing change from the other action/adventure strips of the time, and it was easy taking to a character who'd used the earnings from his exploits as a deposit for a brand new colour tv set for a downtrodden aunt. Yes, there's fun, thrills, excitement and oddball antics, but always that sense of danger, that edge, that Mike Western and Eric Bradbury could conjure up so effortlessly. Perhaps it's the script working at odds with those

sometimes sombre, brooding visuals that gives the strip so much of its chemistry and energy. As a very young child yet to learn to read properly, the stellar artwork of Francisco Lopez always seemed to give off an eerie and foreboding atmosphere, with intrigue or danger forever lurking around the corner, even at moments when the script didn't necessarily call for it. Leopard often gave off that exact same feel, that sharp contrast between word and image creating that magical 'third' element that's only possible through comics. Perhaps here, with the city-blocks of a New York or a Gotham replaced by the more down to earth rooftops of Selbridge, that sense of danger and foreboding seemed that little bit more real too?

'AND THOSE EYES, ALL GREEN, A-AN GLOWIN'...HE...HE AIN'T 'UMAN!'

All of which isn't to undermine just how much fun the strip was. A huge part of that fun was seeing how Billy's powers and persona evolved over time, and what merely starts off with the enhanced reflexes and increased speed ('...you idiot, there's no one there! You're shooting at shadows!') is steadily developed over time. His enhanced strength becomes more prominent; the initial 'punch the air' moment as he effortlessly turns the tables and fells his violent Uncle merely the precursor to inevitable retribution against school bully Moggsy. Part of the character's appeal comes from his own coming to terms with the sudden changes and seeing him learning the ropes as he goes along; accidentally showing off some new found ability ('Billy kept forgetting that he now possessed the strength and

agility of a leopard') and leaping down stairs or over eight foot high walls, even running high speed down Selbridge High Street excitedly carrying that newly-purchased, extremely heavy colour telly. Introducing himself to 'first foe' Cat-Man ('I'm the Leopard from Lime Street, mate!') he's perhaps foolishly narrowing down the scope needed for any search into unlocking his secret identity, yet such charming naiveté remains part of the strips appeal. Billy would undergo even stranger changes as the weeks progressed; gaining the ability to roar like a leopard, grow elongated canine teeth and even develop a penchant for ultra rare meat. Our intrepid young hero always seems to take each and every startling change in his stride ('... something else I'll have to watch - my eyes are turning green, beginning to glow') yet there's also the times when Billy, quite apart from naturally being unable to resist getting his own back on the bullies, does indeed seem to get more feral in nature, the wilder more animalistic nature of his personality taking more of a hold ('Start talking... before I get to work with this claw!')

While fans of Crowjak the Crime-Busting Crow may have to remain patient a while longer, Leopard aficionados were spoilt rotten with Rebellion's second volume of collected strips released in June 2019. Following up an excellent first volume released in April 2017, each original classic strip was again lovingly reprinted in order, enabling readers to follow the whole 'spine chilling business' as it originally unfolded. The very fact that, with the wealth of material now at their disposal, Rebellion presented a second volume so quickly speaks for itself, not just for the quality of the original

material and the creators involved but for the warmth and affection (and interest) still held for the strip and the character today. It seemed almost inevitable that Billy Farmer be chosen as one of the small handful of characters re-presented to the world in 2018's excellent *Vigilant* by Simon Furman and Simon Coleby, offering updated versions of himself and other well-remembered British adventure strip characters such as Adam Eterno and the Steel Commando to a new generation of readers. Yet such fresh takes on beloved characters also undoubtedly appeals to fans of the original strips too who get a kick from seeing characters from the past returning. In such a milieu, is the time ripe also for more of Billy's solo adventures? Just what did happen next, between then and now, to a character that seemed so much of his time, at that time? What of the late teenage/early twenties Billy? Can a leopard change its spots?

Whatever might lie in wait for our feline chum, the 'Beast of Selbridge' remains very much a part of the UK comics landscape, enjoying as high a profile now as he's ever had. What a huge testament to the three magicians who wove their creative magic all those years ago.

And did I mention that title logo?

AUTHOR:
PETER GOULDSON

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THE NEWEST-AND GREATEST-SUPERHERO OF ALL!

CAPTAIN BRITAIN

10P



MARVEL COMICS GROUP

NO. 1
WEEK ENDING
OCT. 13, 1976

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SPECIAL ORIGIN ISSUE!

FREE INSIDE CAPTAIN BRITAIN MASK!



■ Captain Britain No. 1

CAPTAIN BRITAIN WEEKLY – THE BIRTH OF A LEGEND!

British comic fans of a certain age will **never forget the excitement of October 1976, when Captain Britain exploded from the pages of his very own comic**, the first time Marvel UK had published anything other than Marvel US reprints. This was a huge thing for British readers, our very own Marvel superhero, in full colour, each and every week!

For 39 issues, we'd be thrilled by the adventures of our very own British Superhero, albeit one created, written, and drawn for us over in the good ol' USA.

In the weekly Captain Britain, we discovered the origin of Britain's new hero; met Merlin and Roma and saw Cap's mythical beginnings; saw the wonderful original red Captain Britain costume, complete with the pole vaulting quarterstaff that was eventually upgraded into the Star Sceptre; were introduced to Brian Braddock's family, saw Betsy Braddock's psychic powers (mentioned just once in issue #8 and completely forgotten about until years later when Alan Moore brought her back), and so much more – a host of wonderfully over the top villains, Gods, Monsters, Prime Ministers and Royalty, Nick Fury, Captain America, The Red Skull... all right here in Britain!

Beneath that stunning first issue cover, back in 1976, it was all about the brand-new hero, Captain Britain, with 'Smilin Stan Lee proclaiming inside that, 'It had to happen!', and that 'All of Britain has been waiting for him! And now, he's here at last!'

Finally, we had our own British superhero! Sure, Marvel had given us a few British heroes over the years, including Union Jack and Lady Spitfire, but Captain Britain was all-new, all-exciting, and all-British!

Sadly, I wasn't there first time around - in 1976 I was just beginning primary school. But I did discover Captain Britain Weekly in that most wonderful of things a few years later – the wet playtime comic box, only brought out occasionally. I was an immediate fan, loving the idea of a proper British hero, with his striking costume and action-packed adventures.

Little did I know then the impact the character would have on my comics reading in the future, with the Dave Thorpe, Alan Davis, Alan Moore epic tales becoming the defining moment in my comics reading. But none of that would have happened without this first version of the adventures of Brian Braddock and Captain Britain here in Captain Britain Weekly!

A VERY AMERICAN BRITISH HERO!

Whilst you could certainly describe the new Captain Britain as all-new and all-exciting, it wasn't exactly all-British and it wasn't really that original – not at first.

From the outset, this was a British hero created in the Marvel US offices in New York, with the finished strip sent off to Marvel UK to publish (with a young, pre-fame, pre-Pet Shop Boys Neil Tennant as editor).

According to Stan Lee once again - 'We spent nearly a full year creating the characters, developing the themes, and producing the greatest possible stories and

illustrations,' but quite who the 'we' that Stan refers to has never been clear, and to this day the actual creators of Britain's greatest hero are unknown – with the obvious conclusion being that this was a creation by committee, although Herb Trimpe is often reported as saying that the visual design of the Captain looks like it was one of John Romita Sr.'s.

The Captain Britain team who brought the idea to the final printed page was writer Chris Claremont, penciller Herb Trimpe, and inker Fred Kida, all working under editor Larry Lieber. Allegedly, Claremont was chosen to give this new British hero an authentic voice because he was born in the UK (even though his family left for the USA when he was three) - yes, was it any wonder we weren't really getting a uniquely British voice?

And as far as originality goes, it's all too obvious that this is just standard Marvel superhero fare, practically written to a template, with just the costume, the setting, a few wacky villains, and some wonderfully terrible dialogue ('Chaps!') to make it British – effectively it's Spider-Man with a bit of the magical, Arthurian origin story thrown in. As Captain Britain, Brian Braddock does his very best impression of Peter Parker, spending far too much time in the early episodes worrying about protecting his secret identity, and interacting with a supporting cast seemingly



ripped from the pages of Spider-Man and given a slightest of tweaks to give us the illusion of something different.

But to so many of us, that didn't matter one bit – he was OUR hero!

MEETING CAPTAIN BRITAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME...

The first issue dropped us straight into the action, in thrilling fashion, with Captain Britain battling the Reaver, in all his mock knight in armour costume brilliance (and with extra points for the massive plumage of course!)

It doesn't take long to realise that Cap is just as confused as we are to just who he is and where he came from - which is when Claremont does the great thing of switching back to the past, with a flashback to let us all in on the origin of Captain Britain.

We see a young Brian Braddock, a physicist working at the Dartmoor Research Centre, possibly the only 20-year-old smoking a pipe in England at the time. Before the night is out, his life will have been turned upside down, as he enters the world of the crazy and the magical... chosen by none other than Merlin to become Britain's protector, a brand-new superhero taking up the mantle of Arthurian legend.

During the attack by the Reaver, he escapes on a motorbike, only to crash off the road. Crawling from the wreckage, Brian meets the two figures that will come to dominate his life... Merlin and his daughter Roma, with Merlin telling him that, 'Thou art in a most ancient circle of power... and thou art here to be judged... on peril of thy immortal soul!'

He's given the choice, there and then... 'Thou must choose either the amulet or the

“
...The costume was and is a magnificent thing, bright and bold, although for a hero calling himself Captain Britain, striking as it undoubtedly is, the costume is hardly what you would really call British

sword... life or death... for thee... And mayhap, for thy world as well!!' (You can see what I mean about it being all dramatically overwritten, but wonderfully so, very much in keeping with what was standard in Marvel comics at the time.)

Reasoning that he's no killer, Brian grabs the amulet and is transformed. Again, Claremont lading on the dialogue... 'Be one with thy brothers of the Round Table... with Arthur and Lancelot, Gawain and Galahad, with them all..'

And there he is, Brian Braddock reborn as Captain Britain!!!

The costume was and is a magnificent thing, bright and bold, although for a hero

calling himself Captain Britain, striking as it undoubtedly is, the costume is hardly what you would really call British... the bright red costume, emblazoned with that gold heraldic lion – yes, it's a lot more Captain England than Captain Britain, with the British elements of the Union Flag coming in almost as an afterthought.

But no matter, it still looked wonderful, in this wonderfully exciting moment in Brit comics. And if the prospect of an all-new British superhero wasn't enough for you, the full colour Captain Britain strip was accompanied by some excellent reprint material, classic Stan Lee and John Buscema Fantastic Four plus the brilliant Jim Steranko Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. strip, again in full colour.

FROM 'FULL-COLOUR' (OR FULL-COLOR) TO B&W CAPTAIN BRITAIN...

They did make a huge thing of this being 'In Full Colour!' with the headline screaming at you from every one of the first 23 issues of Captain Britain Weekly. But that wasn't completely true – it was actually just 16 pages of colour, the covers and the first and last eight pages, which meant the Captain Britain strip and the Nick Fury strip.

However, there were moments where things went just a little wrong, with a couple of CB strips (in #2 and #3) having a final page in black and white instead of colour, complete with an editorial invitation to colour it yourself – a wonderful bit of invention in the face of adversity and some form of trans-Atlantic communication cock-up.



Anyway, the colour (or color – it was spelt both ways across the run) lasted until Captain Britain Weekly #24 when, ominously, it was back to full b&w, albeit with four extra pages and the addition of glossy covers. Sure, the book continued to issue #39, but the signs were there, with the loss of colour, that savings needed to be made and that Captain Britain Weekly's days were numbered.

39 ISSUES OF CAPTAIN BRITAIN - THE GOOD AND THE NOT SO GOOD...

Across those 39 issues of Captain Britain Weekly, there's a real sense of this being full of ups and downs. Those initial Claremont issues were clunky for sure, weighed down with your typical Marvel writing for the time, the endless expository dialogue, all those thought bubbles with Brian thinking through his every move. But it was wonderful in spite of that, maybe even because of that, depending on your preference. There was a sense that these early issues were just over-the-top wonders, with ridiculous villains (The Reaver, Hurricane), a hero who seems surprised by every new aspect of his powers, and all-out action, all done in suitably Kirby-esque style by Trimpe and Kida.

When Gary Friedrich takes over writing duties with issue 11, it all seems to find a different sort of voice, with Friedrich taking longer to explore things and going a little further into the mindset of Brian Braddock. He even sets about doing the first longer Captain Britain tale, bringing in Captain America and the Red Skull for 13 weeks and giving us the first real epic Captain Britain saga.

Towards the end of the Red Skull storyline, we make the switch to black and white in issue #24, but we also get one of the highlights of the latter half of Captain Britain Weekly, as the great John Buscema takes over the art, doing his typically beautiful thing.

Friedrich's excellent run goes on until issue #36, exploring more of Brian's acceptance of his non-scientific powers, culminating in the upgrade of the slightly ridiculous quarterstaff pole vaulting thing to the magical Star Sceptre. Following that, there's a short series of run of the mill stories to see the series out, from Lieber, Len Wein, Bob Budiansky, and Jim Lawrence, none of them trying anything different from a standard Marvel comic template that could be applied to any old series.

AFTER THE END - WHAT CAME NEXT FOR CAPTAIN BRITAIN?

After that initial 39 issue run, Captain Britain Weekly went the way of so many, with the comic cancelled and the Captain Britain strip moving into Super Spider-Man and the Titans, renamed to Super Spider-Man and Captain Britain. It lasted 23 issues, #231-#253, with nothing particular special about it until the final five issues, where it managed to go out on a high – albeit with a reprint of Captain Britain's first proper Marvel US appearance, with Cap and Spidey at the mercy of Arcade, courtesy of Chris Claremont and John Byrne.

It seemed that Chris Claremont hadn't forgotten Captain Britain and, over the years, would do a lot to bring him into the Marvel fold, with the inclusion of Cap, and particularly Betsy, into the X-Men, all

leading onto Excalibur and beyond.

Following that last adventure, Captain Britain was off in comic book limbo, only to return for something very special in 1979-1980, when Steve Parkhouse and John Stokes, the first British creative team on the British hero, re-introduced him in the pages of Hulk Comic's Black Knight Strip, with a brilliant look at the more mystical, ancient British aspect of Cap's origins.

And then, of course, there was the rebirth, something we'll cover in depth in the years to come here at the History of Comics, first with Dave Thorpe and Alan Davis, and then with Alan Moore taking over as writer... across Marvel Superheroes, Daredevils, Mighty World Of Marvel, and Captain Britain Monthly - it's still one of the greatest Marvel superhero epics, still one of my favourite comic runs.

As the years have gone on, Brian and Betsy have carried the mantle of Captain Britain, with their stories becoming integral to the entire Marvel Universe. And no doubt, sometime in the future, it will be Captain Britain's time to take his place in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

But of course, none of that would have been possible if it weren't for that very first issue of Captain Britain Weekly, one of the defining moments in British comics in 1976.

Captain Britain (Marvel UK) issue #1-39, 13 October 1976 - 6 July 1977.

Continued in Super Spider-Man and the Titans, becoming Super Spider-Man and Captain Britain, issues #231 - 253, July - December 1977

AUTHOR:
RICHARD BRUTON

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ACTION

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is a way of life in
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■ Action - Kids Rule OK

YOU'RE DEAD, PAL! DEAD!

Peter Gouldson looks back at Action, **'the explosive new paper of the '70's'** that lived up to the hype and where 'aggro' was a way of life!

This green and pleasant land, 1976. A popular culture that still held dashing wartime 'kill the hun' escapades and the Sun's 'Page Three Girl' to its collective heart was suddenly seen by some in the Establishment to be getting out of hand. Against a backdrop of ever deepening political tensions and one economic crisis after another, the moral outrage that had greeted films such as 'Death Wish' a few years earlier had failed to stem a new realism. Tough, no-nonsense film and television 'heroes' or 'anti-heroes' such as Dirty Harry or the Sweeney now caught the zeitgeist. This was the era of 'Taxi Driver', of 'Rollerball', with punk rock about to emerge snarling from the suburbs, driven by anger and ennui. For the briefest of moments it almost seemed as if the Establishment actually seemed to be recoiling.

If you were an adult, craving a sense of safety and security for yourself and your family above all else, this probably didn't feel like the most secure of times. But if you're a kid, growing up in a maelstrom such as this?

What's not to like?

Fast! Fierce! Fantastic!

At UK comics publisher IPC, Editorial Director John Sanders oversaw a department strewn with titles, flooding an ever-dwindling market in an attempt to capture a bigger slice of sales. As he saw it, boys adventure titles were beginning to lose out to television in the minds of children,

and with a UK industry awash with moribund titles still living in the past (Victor, Hotspur, Valiant) the desperate need to inject UK comics with something new, something vital, is often forgotten about.

Ironically it was IPC's somewhat more traditional competitor DC Thomson that finally made the running into the new age. Launched in September 1974 'Warlord' was a war title with a difference, depicting for the first time the tough realities of war and its consequences, with the likes of 'Union Jack Jackson' and 'Code-Name Warlord' quickly becoming firm favourites.

With the new comic a hit IPC needed to respond, doing so early in 1975 with 'Battle Picture Weekly'. Sanders had turned to young freelancer Pat Mills (who had himself enlisted fellow freelancer John Wagner, both with a background of working together in girls comics) to oversee the project. The transition from girls weeklies to boys war title wasn't as odd as it seemed; both men had worked on 'Tammy', one of the most innovative titles of the day with its themes of loneliness, wicked step parents and mental cruelty at the vanguard of a 'new wave' of comic storytelling. Sanders liked Mills and enjoyed the passion and dark humour he injected into his work, even if 'Battle' did cause a stir with the 'old brigade' at IPC. The decision was quickly vindicated however with 'Battle' proving to be another winner. In late 1975, with Wagner sent off to help ailing the old-school 'Valiant', Mills agreed to prepare a

brand new comic that took its lead from the previous success.

The new project (working titles 'Boots' and then 'Dr Martens') would keep to the realistic, edgy dictate but be set in the modern day. Mills was paired with ex-'Lion' editor Geoff Kemp, and for three months both men had an office to themselves, ensconced on the 19th floor of IPC's King's Reach Tower offices, with the latest issue of 'Country Life' being put together on the floor above. A lot of the time was spent talking, not just trying to come up with new storylines but also around the basic idea of coming up with a comic with a difference. In an era of killer shark film 'Jaws,' depicting bits of bodies floating around a cinema screen, both men felt the need for something more earthy and authentic, yet doing so was taking a risk; such films came firmly under what was then known as an 'X Certificate' (now '18') rating, strictly adult fare, and not something that a young readership would be legally allowed to watch. Both men were canny enough however to know that kids were all too aware of these 'forbidden fruits' anyway, and such risqué themes in a comic would only add to its allure. Right from the beginning, 'Action' as it would become known, sought to appeal to this 'aware,' streetwise demographic, adopting the selfsame anti-authority, predominantly working-class attitude of the audience it aimed for, a world away from the traditional jingoistic 'tally-ho, let's kill the hun' values upheld in other titles.

The reality meant that creators would be a mix of both old and new, with 'veteran' writers such as Jack Adrian, Ron Carpenter, Gerry Finley-Day and Tom Tully alongside new kids on the block such as Steve MacManus and Chris Lowder. Artistically it was a mixed bag too, Brits such as Geoff Campion and Tony Harding joined by Ramon Sola of Spain and Italian Massimo Belardinelli. With such a strong vision emanating from Mills however, the disparate mix wouldn't matter; all the strips, with possibly one exception, would prove to be cutting edge. With a cover date launch set for February 14th 1976, Mills and Kemp were set to present their own version of a Valentine's Day Massacre.

'Warning to Nervous Readers... Don't Buy Action!'

The 'tough, no nonsense' title, running at 32 pages and costing seven pence, hit newsstands on Saturday 7th February 1976, with the same cover date as DC Thomson's new launch 'Bullet'. Seen as direct competitors at the time, it wouldn't take people long to discern the gaping chasm in terms of approach between the two, something that would only ever grow over time. 'Action's' launch free gift of a cheap 'red arrow' plastic flying plane (with accompanying elastic band) hardly left young hearts aflutter, yet a decent enough Carlos Ezquerra cover, if failing to make the crap plane look exciting (just watch it fly!) did manage to get across the variety and vitality of what lay in wait inside. They couldn't ever be accused of not warning anyone what to expect from the onset either; 'LOOK OUT!' Action is deadly,...led the lead-in editorial page. "You are about to experience the toughest stories ever!" before continuing with similar hyperbole throughout. These 'warnings' should be

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There was to be no doubt however as to who was the star of the show however. Occupying the prestigious coloured centre page spread, 'Hook Jaw'...

seen for what they were; 'Warning to nervous readers...don't buy Action!' is just a red rag to a bull for a young readership craving something of its time, their time.

If ever a strip seemed of its time then lead-in strip 'Dredger' was it. Working for government security agency DI6, his methods in stark contrast to public schoolboy toff and head of security Simon Breed ('where the deuce is our new agent?') Dredger is basically a tough no nonsense killer, booted out of the Royal Commandoes for 'brutality' before turning up as a mercenary in Africa. Dredger's methods come in handy when needed to foil hijackers of a plane with an oil baron, important to UK business interests, on board. Not interested in national security ('Spare me the flag waving....I want some kip') when it comes to getting the 'dirty business' done our guy isn't one for taking any prisoners ('...you're dead, pal! Dead!') going so far at one point as to forcing one of the hijackers to open his mouth before

inserting a grenade telling him '...I'm going to pull the pin out and blow your mind.' Artist Horatio Altuna manages to capture Dredgers gritty world to perfection and by the end of the first episode, job done, Dredger walks away leaving four dead, a plane in flames and thousands of young readers with their jaws agape, never having read anything like it ever before.

Another ground breaker from writer Gerry Finley-Day and artist Mike Dorey immediately followed. 'Hellman of Hammer Force' was a war strip with a difference, told from the point of view of a German soldier. Major Kurt Hellman, panzer commander of 'Hammer Force,' leads his men over the Belgian border in 1940 at the height of the Third Reich. Hellman's credentials are laid out quickly to readers used to seeing things entirely from an Allied point of view - he's a 'soldier, not a butcher,' in stark contrast to Gestapo officer Gauleiter Kastner the 'slimy nazi toad' he's forced to work alongside. A true soldier of honour with no love for Hitler, the angle of 'good' German soldier seemed bizarre, shocking even, at a time when memories of the War were still fresh in the minds of many people.

More taboos were broken in following strip 'Blackjack', a boxing yarn with a lead character who was, of all things, black. Taking real life boxing legend Mohammed Ali as clear inspiration, up and coming heavyweight contender Jack Barron not only has to contend with the clear racism from the mouths of opponents but has his career threatened by injury, after a left jab to the head leaves fragments of bone playing havoc with an optic nerve. The medical advice is simple - stop fighting, or fight on and be blind in one year. A clear inspiration to the neighbourhood kids in the poor east end neighbourhood he grew up in, Jack

feels he can't let them down and hang up his gloves, and decides to continue being an inspiration for the people who see boxing as a way out of the poverty surrounding them.

A couple of sports orientated strips added originality to tired old formulas. 'Play Till You Drop!' introduced Alec Shaw, star striker for Rampton City whose good guy persona ('I'm not interested in money, playing football is enough for me') is tested when he becomes the victim of blackmail. Meanwhile in 'Sport's Not For Losers!' (working title 'Smoking's a Drag!') the good sibling/bad sibling template takes a twist when conscientious Dan Walker gets injured in a track event. Unable to continue his training for the Championships he's forced to rope in loser older brother Len to take his place in the name of family honour. 'Can Len kick the smoking habit?' is the cliffhanger question posed by writer (and future Tharg and 2000AD editor) Steve MacManus, destined to leave even more of a mark on the title.

Possibly the only misstep, and one that Mills readily admitted to, came with the strip 'Coffin Sub'. Mills had insisted on a sea story of some sort, but the resulting tale of a submarine captain blaming himself for the death of his former crew seemed pedestrian and middle of the road compared to the fare surrounding it. Luckily things quickly get back on track with final strip 'the Running Man'. Set in a violent New York, a visiting British track athlete is kidnapped by the mafia and given plastic surgery, completely changing his face to make him look exactly like the son of a local mafia don, a wanted cop killer ('I don't know why the cops want me dead but I've got to run...like I've never run before!') The idea had come from Mills, who'd once again trusted MacManus to come up with a workable script once given the general outline. MacManus wrote the

entire first instalment in a ten hour stretch one Sunday, before handing it in to Mills on the Monday. After only minor adjustments it was deemed good to go. Argentinian artist Horacio Lalia, whose realistic style suited the violent 70's New York setting, manages to ground the somewhat bizarre premise by adding a dose of realism to proceedings, and the end result was another winning strip.

'When Hook Jaw Strikes, You Only Scream Once!'

There was to be no doubt however as to who was the star of the show. Occupying the prestigious coloured centre page spread, 'Hook Jaw' told the tale of a great white shark, a natural predator with the blade of a harpoon still lodged in its chin after its ferocious attack on a fishing boat. The legend of 'Hook Jaw' remained just that until a year later when the great white suddenly reappears after an oil drilling platform owned by the greedy 'Red McNally' is set up in the area. Disturbed by the drilling, the killer shark attacks, brutally killing four divers, yet chief diver Rick Mason is unable to persuade McNally to move his base of operations.

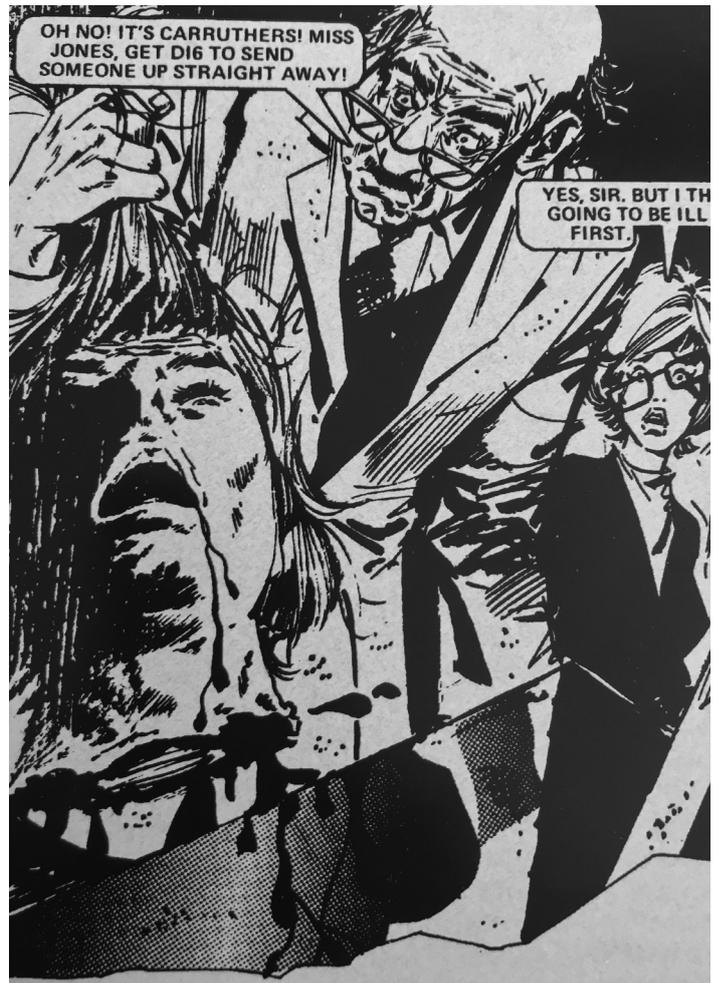
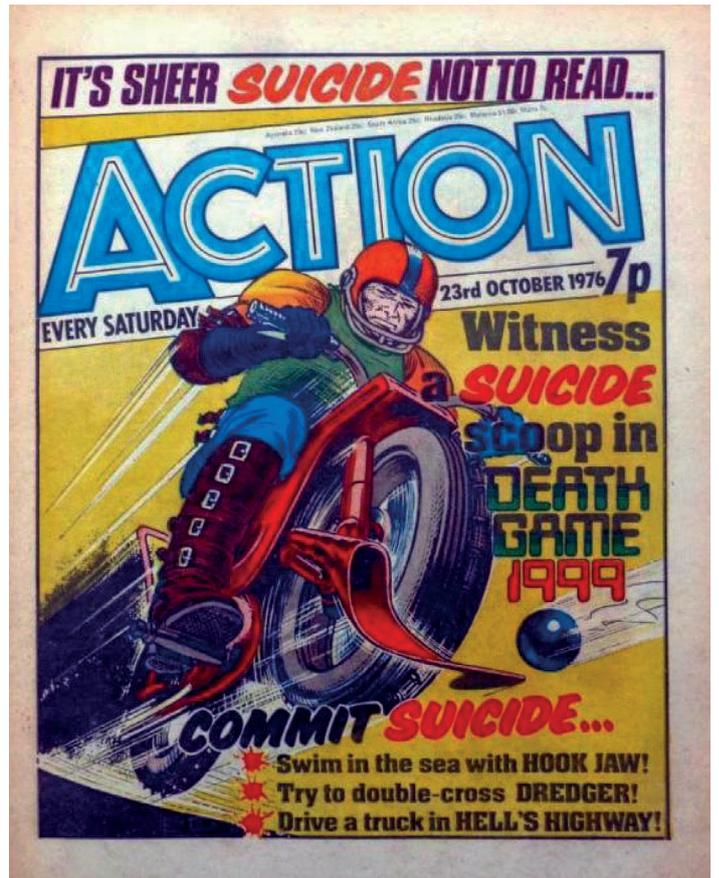
The strip was created by Ken Armstrong, whose knowledge of the subject matter would prove invaluable. 'Ken would supply the technical knowledge' said Mills, '...and I would dramatise the information in a full-on 'Action' style.' Mills had found whom he believed to be the perfect artist for the strip too in the form of Spaniard Ramon Sola. The two men had previously worked together earlier on the 'Sugar Jones' strip for girls mag Pink, and would go on to work together on 'Flesh' for '2000AD'. Mills was amazed at the artist's work here, claiming Sola 'did the impossible - he made the fish the hero.' A tremendously visceral strip, the

depictions of the great white decapitating helpless divers week in week out saw the waters run a deep red ('Hook Jaw's placement on those coloured centre pages was no accident, with Sanders himself according to Mills often insisting on 'adding a drop or two of red paint'). The strip quickly became the most popular story in the comic, with young readers prohibited from seeing what all the fuss was about surrounding 'Jaws' just lapping it all up.

The editorial pages also seemed to fly in the face of convention, with staid traditions of other UK titles almost openly mocked. 'Trivial Facts' ('...an american bird fancier once trained her pet cockatoo to roller skate!') seemed to mock the 'fun fact' staple of other weeklies, while the celebration of public figures achievements got turned on its head with the award for 'Twit of the Week.' University Challenge presenter Bamber Gascoigne was no doubt a very proud inaugural winner, closely followed by the likes of Russell Harty, the Bay City Rollers and Nicholas Parsons (twice). Meanwhile a real life 'Money Man' (actually old 'Valiant' editor Stewart Wales) would visit a different town centre each week awarding the then princely sum of five pounds to the first person to recognise him and holding a copy of that weeks Action.

Another popular feature was suggested by Mills himself. No doubt persuaded by the enticement of the ten pound fee, MacManus was persuaded to be transformed into 'Action Man', taking on any task suggested by readers. If the images of a future Tharg attempting to be a fire-eater at the local circus ('at one stage my face fungus nearly caught alight and things were getting really hot') didn't fire the imagination, the following weeks visit to Chessington Zoo and a close encounter with Johnny the boa constrictor might have.

■ Hook Jaw



Years later MacManus would admit to not actually owning a drivers licence, with certain tasks taken on by fellow staffer Kelvin Gosnell. Perhaps wisely, he also stopped short of suggestions of being thrown into the North Sea and to be rescued by a Royal Navy helicopter.

Here perhaps for the very first time was an entire publication that looked to speak the language of its readership, typically working class boys. 'Action's' heroes, or anti-heroes, came from poorer backgrounds, like boxer Jack Barron or footballer Kenny Lampton. They were anti-authoritarian, like Dredger or Kurt Hellman. This all just seemed so fresh and exciting and, if anything, the second issue packed an even bigger punch, proving the first wasn't just some brief aberration, some moment of madness that had slipped through the net after someone had put too much sugar in their coffee. The free gift 'Hook Jaw' transfer beat the launch issues plastic plane by a country mile, while inside Dredger was quickly up to his usual tricks, this time in South America, where a sadistic guerrilla gets a fire urn of hot coal in the face for his troubles. 'Hellman...' provided readers with the unusual sight of British tanks getting blown up being a cause for celebration. 'Hook Jaw' continued to be the most powerfully striking strip however; Mills' rule of having the great white killing someone every week in an ingenious and as graphic a way as possible soon became exactly what readers expected and indeed wanted to see. Here one of the divers, unable to see through his oil smeared mask ('...hope it's this way?') blindly swims into the giant open jaw of the killer. With such strong visuals dominating, it would be easy

to miss the clear subtext of the strip. Those who saw 'Hook Jaw' as a strip merely about violence and bloodshed were missing one of the strips central tenets; for Mills, Hook Jaw was a symbol, a force of nature fighting back against the expansion of capitalism and the despoilers of the planet, attacking greed as exemplified through the character of McNally ('...we got the oil capped, what did his life matter anyhow?'). Of course, for the natural rebel Mills, the strip was also a swipe at the conservatism of the UK comics scene, its repetition, its forever playing safe.

Launch sales of around 250,000 were strong for the times, before falling back slightly, as was the norm. The postbag grew quickly however, the high body count and bloodshed becoming the talk of many a school classroom and playground. Sanders described the finished product as '...superb, the best we had ever produced in one publication.' Mills, leading the way when it came to ideas on how each strip should develop, had come up with a comic with a coherent, strong identity all its own, yet such was its impact it quickly grabbed the attention from some outside the insular world of comics.

The 'London Evening Standard' was the first of the popular press to take note, in an awkwardly-headlined article 'Aargh! Lives - But the Blood is Printed Red.' With the title's violence brought to the fore, it declared 'Action is a deliberate, calculated and commercially minded attempt to cash in on what the kids want.' Then the 30th April edition of daily rag 'the Sun', in a deliberate attempt to stir up the previous century's moral panic surrounding the reading habits of the lower classes and the 'penny dreadful', labelled the title the

'seven-penny nightmare', declaring the comic 'lurid' and inviting readers ('do YOU worry what YOUR kids read?') to have their own say.

Battle lines were being drawn.

DEAR STEVE, I AM NOT A SOPPY OLD SCHOOL GIRL, I'M A TOUGH TOMBOY. I'VE HAD LOADS OF FIGHTS WITH BOYS (ESPECIALLY MY BROTHER). I USUALLY WIN.

Even for some within the walls of IPC there was a feeling of unease. To the old guard the new title's editorial team were cocky, too sure of themselves, accused of running before they could walk. With controversy already clinging to the title from its initial brush with the press, the title did indeed seem to develop something of a swagger. The covers alone tell a story; vivid, brash depictions of high octane thrills, spills and irreverence; '...They call it a sport...it's more like plain murder' - 'Warning! This comic is NOT suitable for adults!' - 'This shark will scare the pants off you!' - 'Don't mess with Dredger, or you're dead!' 'Commit Suicide!' blared the cover of one (later withdrawn) issue, the actual word 'suicide' mentioned prominently three times on the cover. Clearly here was something that stood out from the crowd, but was this really a title believing its own publicity, or simply doing what it did best? Was 'realistic' really being increasingly mistaken for a more one-note 'violent'?

Later strips came ready made to fit into what seemed a winning formula, replacing weaker stories and actually making the title stronger. 'Coffin Sub' was first to go, before 'Play Till You Drop!' was replaced by another football strip, 'Look Out For Lefty!'

centring around Kenny 'Lefty' Lampton a player with a short fuse. The strip seemed to centre around class divisions as much as football itself. Meanwhile fellow launch strip 'Sport's Not For Losers!' was replaced by 'Death Game 1999', an incredibly violent futuristic sports strip centred around the deadly sport of Spinball, a motorcycle/hockey hybrid. Clearly based on popular 'X-Certificate' film 'Rollerball', readers lapped up the mounting body count as inmate Joe Taggart, falsely arrested and sent to prison, agrees with other convicts to 'play the game' before a bloodthirsty television audience rather than face the death penalty.

Then, during the hot sizzling summer of 1976, something quite amazing happened. In complete contrast to the usual continual downward trend in sales following a launch, sales of 'Action' actually began to increase. Word of mouth on playgrounds throughout the land was having its effect and the title was making IPC a lot of money, with a reader loyalty that had not been seen in a very long time. And the more that readership grew, the more the 'adult' world, somewhat aghast, sat up and took notice.

The replacement for Blackjack came in the form of dystopia 'Kids Rule OK,' set in a 1986 after a plague has wiped out most of the adult population. Wearing its 'Lord of the Flies' influence on its sleeve, warring tribes of unsupervised youths fight it out on the lawless streets of Britain. Undoubtedly an incredibly attractive proposition for whole swathes of its readership, writer Jack Adrian's hopes of eventually exploring themes of honour, loyalty and comradeship in the face of dreadful circumstances would unfortunately not bear fruit. The strip was about to play a major part in the biggest backlash against comics since the 1950's.

It's important to put the events that

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...A comic...a COMIC of all things... was inciting the nation's youth to turn against the police.

followed into context. The decade's political, economic and social upheavals aside, the UK was currently enjoying, before then quickly enduring, one of the longest, hottest summers on record. With temperatures reaching 35.9 degrees Celsius (or as most people measured these things back then, almost 100 degrees Fahrenheit), Brits everywhere did what they normally do in the face of such a long period of intense sunshine; after the novelty quickly wore off they eventually got more bad tempered. Tensions were becoming frayed, particularly in the inner cities, and a huge news item late that summer centred on the riots that broke out at the annual Notting Hill Carnival on 30th August, with over 100 police officers and 60 carnival goers badly hurt.

It's in that exact milieu, that powder keg, that the issue of Action, dated 18th Sept 1976 hit newsstands.

'I can't watch, it's too horrible.'

A particularly striking Ezquerra cover came accompanied with the usual 'Action' hyperbole (Wow! - Dare you watch Death Game 1999! Wow! - Blood flows as Green fights on! Wow! Disembowelled by Hook Jaw!), yet it's the actual 'Kid's Rule OK' cover that caused a furore. Under the

banner 'aggro is a way of life' a chain-wielding youth, unruly mob and burnt out cars behind him, brandishes his weapon - unmissable as it flies through the air intersecting the title logo itself - looking to come down full force on the hapless adult cowering before him in the foreground. If such a scene seemed harrowing enough, an apparent oversight in the colouring of the cover would open the floodgates for complaints. There, discarded on the barren ground to the side, lay a discarded police helmet, its blue hue matching perfectly with the clothes of the cowering adult victim. Whether intended or not, the conclusion to be drawn seemed obvious; our feral chain-welding friend was about to strike down an officer of the law.

For the moral gatekeepers of Fleet Street it was all too much, and for an Establishment whose control of a country in terminal decline seemed to be continually rocked, this must have seemed a very special type of hell. A comic...a COMIC of all things...was inciting the nation's youth to turn against the police. Incensed, blood pressure rocketing, those capable of actually opening this thing, hands shaking in so much rage, would now come close to a coronary. 'Hook Jaw' seemed particularly bloodthirsty that week, with the theme of blood even picked up in the letters pages by young reader Sunil Joshi of Croydon, seemingly possessed with his own personal bloodlust ("I have every copy of Action so far and I think it is great. I like it because there is lots of blood in it - and I like blood") Worse was to come: in an era blighted by homegrown football hooliganism and increasing violence on the terraces, football strip 'Look Out For Lefty!' saw main character Kenny Lampton condone the action of girlfriend Angie Roberts, ('Good ol' Angie') after she throws a glass bottle from the crowd onto the pitch

hitting a member of the opposing team.

A pontificating mainstream media duly became 'outraged' on behalf of all decent upstanding citizens. An indignant Daily Mail, its readership already perturbed by a summer that had left the begonias looking a tad withered, lined up secretary of the Football League Alan Hardaker, priming him with a copy of the offending football strip. "It really is appalling that there are people so brainless to sell comics to children with stuff like this inside them," said Hardaker, no doubt shaking his head, before the Mail rather undermined their own cause by continuing his quote "...and the man responsible should be hit over the head with a bottle himself." Comics historian Denis Gifford, whose own tastes in comic books clearly didn't extend to 'Action' waded in, deeming the title "... clearly geared to the lowest form of behaviour in children, just as pornography caters the mass market for adults, this provides violence for a mass market of children." Pressure group DOVE (Delegates Opposing Violent Education), just one of many organisations whose influence far outweighed its actual membership, began a campaign to festoon the comic with stickers ('Caution- This is a Blacked Publication!'). The West Midlands Consumer Protection Department were asked to investigate and take appropriate action. An urgent question was raised in the House of Commons.

In the midst of all this insanity new editor John Smith had taken over the title from Kemp (his actual first involvement coming with the very issue that had caused the furore) and he quickly found the job entailed fielding phone calls from outraged parents. However the real person in the firing line was Sanders. Prepared to defend a title he believed in (and was continuing to make a lot of money for IPC) he'd already

fielded hostile interviews with BBC radio programmes 'Today' and 'Newsbeat' before worse was to come on live television where, before the audience of early evening news and current affairs programme 'Nationwide,' Sanders had to run the gauntlet of a real 'hatchet job' interview from popular presenter Frank Bough.

IPC themselves would be anything but a unified voice on the matter. According to comic historian Martin Barker, it was an open secret that IPC old hands like Jack Le Grand, with friends in very high places, 'wanted 'Action' to fail.' When the Newsagents Federation met with IPC, the publisher seemed to accept complaints and be 'extremely penitent'. This was suddenly seen as crucial to the future of the company itself; with the UK's magazine distribution system centred on just two main distributors, John Menzies and WH Smiths, Barker states that as far as WH Smiths were concerned "...it's clear that they warned IPC that if something was not done about the offending publication there would be some kind of reprisal." Rumours persist that this threat would extend to the entire IPC roster. Imagine if you will, those rather awkward moments at the cocktail party, pity the poor IPC executive having his evening sullied by the editor of 'Country Life' asking why his own publication was being tarnished by its association with 'that comic.' With Sanders somewhat fed to the lions IPC undertook an exercise of damage limitation and did what any self respecting board of directors would do acting in their own self-interests - they caved in. Sanders was on holiday in Italy when he found out about the title's suspension, reading about it in the 'Daily Telegraph.' The last pre-ban issue hit the stands dated 16th October, before the title disappeared for six weeks, only adding to its allure for a young readership now revelling in its reputation.

If eager young eyes no doubt greeted its return that December ('We're Back! We're Sensational!'), they would quickly realise that the comic they'd grown to love was now the same in name only. Heavily sanitised, new editor Sid Bicknell had clearly followed a directive to make 'Action' safe. Two strips, 'Kids Rule OK' and 'Probationer' were dropped completely with no explanation. 'Death Game 1999', now entitled 'Spinball', shed its core violent overtones. Hook Jaw's killing sprees now went on off panel as well as off the coloured centre pages; those waters no longer running red from the kill. The vitality of the covers themselves were now also gone, making the title looking indistinguishable from any other. It would limp along, a shadow of its former self, for another fifty issues before suffering effective death by merger (with Battle) just under a year latter.

A victim of its own success, there's a supreme irony in 'Action's' short lifespan. The irony of it being one of IPC's most successful launch's of the decade. The irony of presenter Frank Bough, soon to fall victim of his own sex scandal at the hands of the gutter press, being led by that same press in tearing Sanders apart and questioning his morals on live television. The supreme irony of the Sun and Daily Mail lecturing anyone, of any age, about anything. But that's how things went down, that's how it happened, leaving behind a gap in the market, many a childhood memory and a legacy that would far outlast the small matter of cancellation.

And yes, it really was that bloody hot that year.

AUTHOR:
PETER GOULDSON

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1976 - COMIC REVIEWS



House of Hammer

Created by Dez Skinn, various creators
 Publisher: Top Sellers Ltd. (1976–1978,
 UK) & Quality Communications
 (1982–1984, UK)

House of Hammer was Dez Skinn's prelude to what will go down as his defining entry in the history of British comics, the game-changing series that was *Warrior* (which will, no doubt, be featured, in 1982's volume of *The History Of Comics*). But to British horror and comics fans, House of Hammer is still something important, a British black-and-white magazine covering the long and wonderful history of Hammer Films, that ever so British film studio that made so many of those classic horror and sci-fi movies you should really remember.

But for comics fans, the draw of House of Hammer wasn't necessarily the articles, the interviews, or the features, it was the original comics adaptations of all those classic Hammer movies from the likes of Steve Moore, Brian Bolland, John Bolton, Trevor Goring, David Lloyd, John Stokes, and Brian Lewis on most of the covers.



2001: A Space Odyssey

By Jack Kirby, inks by Frank Giacoia, colours by Marie Severin and Jack Kirby, letters by John Costanza. Cover by Jack Kirby and Dan Adkins
 Publisher: Marvel Comics (USA)

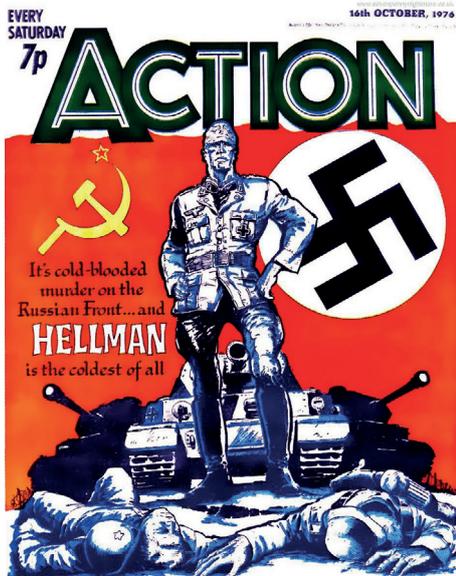
'Jack Kirby is back!' wrote Stan Lee in very Stan Lee fashion in one of his Soapbox columns... 'One of Jolly Jack's first projects will be a Marvel Treasury Edition of (hold onto your hat) 2001: A Space Odyssey!'

Whether it was the Treasury Edition that adapted the Stanley Kubrick & Arthur C. Clarke movie, or the 10-issue series that followed at the end of the year (including the introduction of Machine Man), this was a major event for Marvel as it marked part of the return of The King, coming back to the company he made Marvelous, where he'd work on Captain America, Black Panther, and create The Eternals, The Celestials, and Devil Dinosaur during this short time. But for me, 2001 was



just perfect Kirby, with all those huge space vistas, that glorious art, (we'll overlook the overdone extra dialogue though,) – this was Kirby's vision of a visionary work.

And just imagine what might have been... there was also a proposed Kirby adaptation of *The Prisoner* TV show that never quite made it – Kirby completed the first issue, adapting the first episode, 'Arrival', it was partially inked by Mike Royer, but Marvel dropped the series, making it one missing piece of Kirby's vast legacy, eventually included in an original art edition from Titan Books in 2018 that gave us a glimpse of what could have been.



Action

By various creators, Action created by Pat Mills.
Publisher: IPC (UK)

Setting the template for 2000 AD by moving comics away from the tried and tested, old-fashioned, safe comics of the past, Action had that spirit of anti-establishment and anarchy that seemed all the rage in the mid-70s. With Pat Mills at the helm, creating most of the early strips, the comic began just a couple of days before DC Thomson's Bullet, a comic very similar in concept, that of a more exciting, more modern comic for boys, but one that had none of the radical ideas of shaking things up in the way that Action did.

Mills' line-up was hardly revolutionary, with a mix of strips familiar to British readers - a monster strip (Hookjaw), a war story (Hellman of Hammer Force), a police strip (Dredger), the kids on their own strip (Kids Rule OK), and then three different sports strips, covering boxing (Blackjack - created by John Wagner), future sports (Death Game 1999), and football (Look Out for Lefty), that sort of thing. But every single one had a twist, every single one was dialed up to 11, all of them with something extra, something more violent, something obviously anti-social or anti-establishment... that's what immediately marked Action out as something very different, something pushing the boundaries.

Highlights included the weekly ways to show a shark ripping apart bad guys hurting the oceans in Hookjaw by Ken Armstrong and Ramon Sola, Mills was never shy of grabbing ideas from whatever was popular at the time, whether it was Jaws for Hookjaw, or the success of Rollerball for Death Game



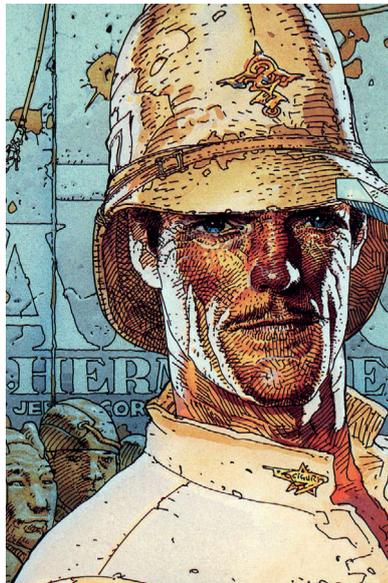
Bullet

Various creators.
Publisher: DC Thomson (UK)

It was a pretty big week for UK comics in February 1976, with two new titles coming out within a couple of days of each other. Unfortunately for Bullet, one of those was IPC's Action, the radical and controversial comic that would make all the headlines. The other? That was Bullet, published a couple of days later and always destined to be overshadowed.

Just like Action, Bullet was something of a move away from your standard boys comics of the time, looking to more action-based drama. But when compared to Action, Bullet just came off as a bit too tame, a bit too bland, with characters just once removed from what we'd already seen, whereas Action always had that edgy, punk feel to things, full of violence and counter-culture ideology. Whether it was the main strip, Fireball, the giant robot strip Smasher, football strip Twisty with its story of a teenage footballer fighting against the odds, or Vic's Vengeance with another teen looking to get back at the gangsters who killed his dad, Bullet always felt like it was pulling its punches.

Of course, if you compare it in terms of longevity, Bullet wins out there, with 147 issues compared to Action's 86 issues (although really Action was done with the first 36 issues, after which it had its rough edges smoothed over by editorial intervention). But in terms of historical significance and the impact of the strips it ran, Bullet always came that second-best.



The Airtight Garage (Le Garage Hermétique, Le Garage Hermétique de Jerry Cornelius)

By Moebius

Publisher: Métal Hurlant (France/Belgium)

Beginning in black and white in Métal Hurlant magazine and reprinted many times (with varying degrees of success in the coloured versions), this is one of Moebius' most famous and most acclaimed works.

'With The Garage... I drew the first two pages with the feeling of making up a big joke, a complete mystery, something that could not possibly lead anywhere. And yet, at the same time, I was trying to create something that captured a feeling of joy and fantasy that I felt inside me, almost as if I was remembering the incomplete part of a dream.' Moebius on The Airtight Garage.

Taking four years to complete, The Airtight Garage is a meandering and difficult masterpiece from a true genius of the comic arts, sometimes confusing and perplexing, yet always truly gorgeous and a

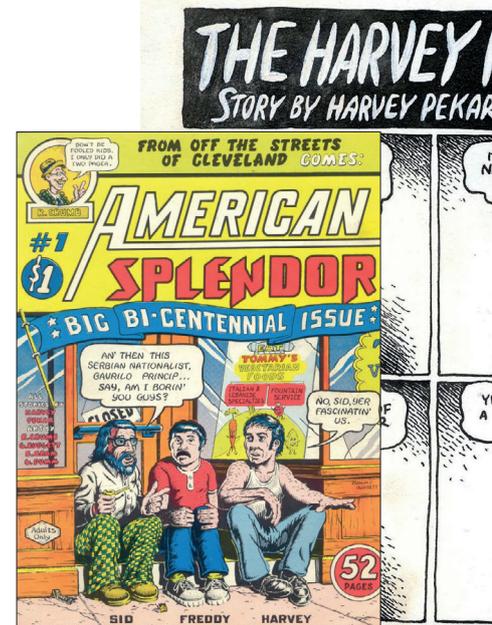
work that pushed the medium forward. Airtight Garage is an artist's improvisation piece, an epic tale of multiple realities (and yes, Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius sort of makes an appearance). As Major Grubert orbits the asteroid 'Garage', complete with its pocket universe allowing access to different worlds, different realities, Moebius experiments with themes, ideas, artistic styles, and even the concept of artistic creation itself, the concept of the Airtight Garage allowing him full range to experiment wildly, wonderfully.

No matter what you get from the storyline, the beauty of Moebius' artwork is undeniable, with his incredible and imaginative line showing us all manner of stunning sci-fi moments, making this a true work of genius.

American Splendor

By Harvey Pekar and various artists

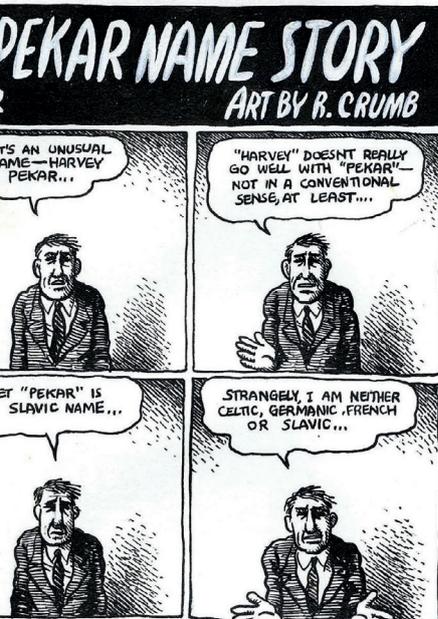
Self-published (USA)



'Comics are words and pictures. You can do anything with words and pictures.'

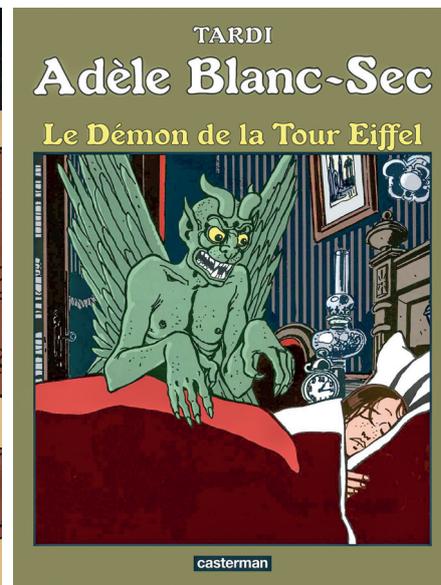
That was Harvey Pekar's whole ideology about comics right there, and American Splendor was his life's work, earning him the oft-quoted accolade, no doubt embarrassing to Pekar, as 'the Mark Twain of comics.'

Working most of his life as a simple hospital clerk in Cleveland, Pekar was an irascible, grumpy bastard for sure, but in American Splendor he told his wonderful truth, with down to earth stories full of all that truth, full of Pekar's grouchy humour, focusing on his life and that of his friends, family, his workmates, and all the perfectly realised observations of the trials of day-to-day existence. At some point,



Pekar even gained a strange sort of cult status, becoming a recurring guest on Late Night with David Letterman, until (in a very Harvey move) calling Letterman out on air over NBC's ownership by General Electric, which got him banned from the show for four years. But despite that small bit of fame, despite the 2003 American Splendor movie, Harvey just kept on making his wonderful comics.

Pekar's self-published American Splendor ran 17 issues from 1976 to 1993, before then being published at Dark Horse and DC Comics until 2008, two years before his death. He never drew a line, but managed to assemble an incredibly talented group of artists to draw each of his idiosyncratic tales, American Splendor illustrators include Robert Crumb, whose work is what began Pekar's interest in writing comics in the first place, Alison Bechdel, Chester Brown, Alan Moore, Gary Dumm, Frank Stack, Drew Friedman, Spain Rodriguez, Joe Sacco, Joe Zabel, and Ed Piskor.



The Extraordinary Adventures of Adele Blanc-Sec (Les Extraordinaires Aventures d'Adèle Blanc-Sec)

By Jacques Tardi
Publisher: Casterman (Belgium)

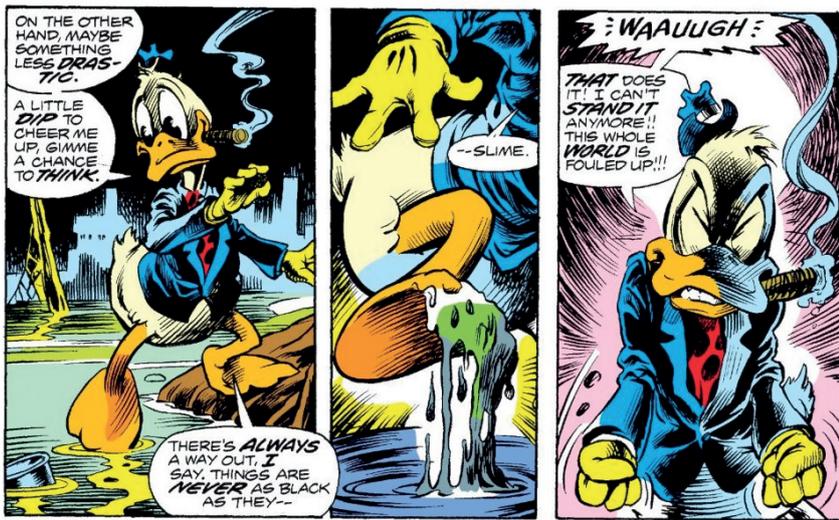
Tardi had been a name in Euro comics since his work in Pilote and his collaborations with Moebius and Pierre Christin, but it's the brilliant Adele Blanc-Sec that really announced a new major talent in the world of Euro comics. This magnificent, unconventional heroine of Bande Dessinée first appeared in *Adele et la Bete* (Adele and the Beast), serialised in *Sud-Quest*, and the follow-up, published straight to album format, *Le Démon de la tour Eiffel* (The Demon of the Eiffel Tower).

You can call it a steampunk detective story, some use gaslamp fantasy, but Adele Blanc-Sec is just a magnificently thrilling and inventive comic, all driven by Tardi's sublime artwork that was still recognizably Ligne Claire, yet with a style all his own, something that was an obvious evolution of the clear line look popularized by Hergé, creating something that justifiably saw Tardi recognized as one of the most influential of modern European comic artists.

Way different from his later WWI masterpieces, *It Was The War of the Trenches* (1993) and *Goddamn This War!*

(2008), *The Extraordinary Adventures of Adèle Blanc-Sec's* nine volumes (1976-2007) follow the (extraordinary) adventures of a Belle Epoque journalist detective as she comes up against all manner of fantastical foes – mad scientists, prehistoric perils, demon-worshipping cults, Egyptian mummies brought back to life, and so many more. She's a deliberately different sort of heroine, smart and sarcastic, eminently capable of whatever weirdness came her way, her name telling us all we need to know - Blanc-Sec translating, perfectly, as 'Dry-White', and her dry, sarcastic approach to men is a perfect antidote to the usual portrayals as women in weak supporting roles, especially when set against the societal mores and prejudices of the time period. Instead, she's far more modern in her outlook, capable of dealing with life and love on her own terms, and more than capable of handling those extraordinary adventures.

With Tardi's wonderfully atmospheric artwork, his stylistic touches adding beauty to his fantastical plots, Adele Blanc-Sec is still fresh and fun, still a perfect entry point for the work of a European master.



Howard The Duck #1

Written by Steve Gerber, pencils and colours by Frank Brunner, inks by Steve Leialoha, letters by John Costanza, cover by Frank Brunner and Glynis Wein.
 Publisher: Marvel Comics (USA)

It would be easy to forget, after seeing 1986's abysmal movie, how great Steve Gerber's Howard The Duck was; a radical, cutting-edge, biting satire on the modern world that mixed comedy, absurdity, and social commentary so well to become one of the most original reads of the 1970s.

First introduced in 1973's Adventure into Fear #19 by Gerber as a simple gag in his Man-Thing storyline, Howard was an instant hit, going from guest, to back-up feature, and then into one of the best short runs of comics of the 70s. 'Trapped in a world he never made,' Howard ends up in Cleveland, a long way from Duckworld, trying his best to fit in, even managing to fall in love with one of 'the hairless apes,' nude life model Beverly Switzler - something Gerber somehow managed to

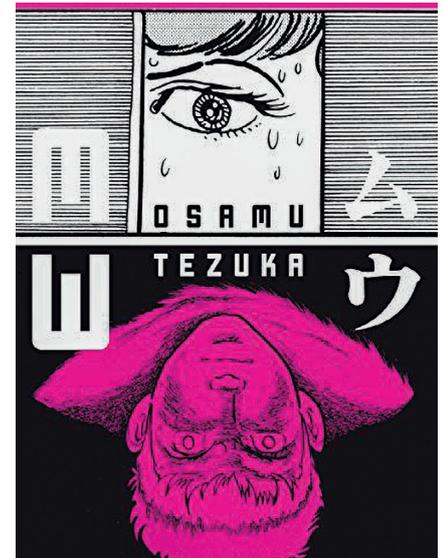
make work... sort of.

Gerber's mix of comedy, satire, and wonderful existential situations, led to a great run and, incredibly, even became something of a counter-culture icon, going as far as running for President against Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter in '76 for the All-Night Party in the comic and even polling thousands of write-in votes in the actual election.

It all came to an end with issue 27 for Gerber, marking the start of a near-decade long lawsuit over over rights and ownership of the character that ended up being settled in 1985, saddling Gerber with legal bills until his death in 2008. Howard's adventures continued without him, but none of them came close to the Duck that Gerber created.

“

Michio Yuki is a charismatic psychopath, a kidnapper, extortionist, and serial killer, who kidnaps his victims, demands a ransom, and then kills both his victim and the person paying the ransom.



MW

By Osamu Tezuka
 Originally serialised in Big Comic 1976-78
 Publisher: Shogakukan (Japan)

MW is something very different from the creator of Astro Boy, part of Tezuka's transition into Gekiga Manga, with a really dark tale of a priest, a serial killer, and the mystery of MW, the US chemical weapon that ties two men together.

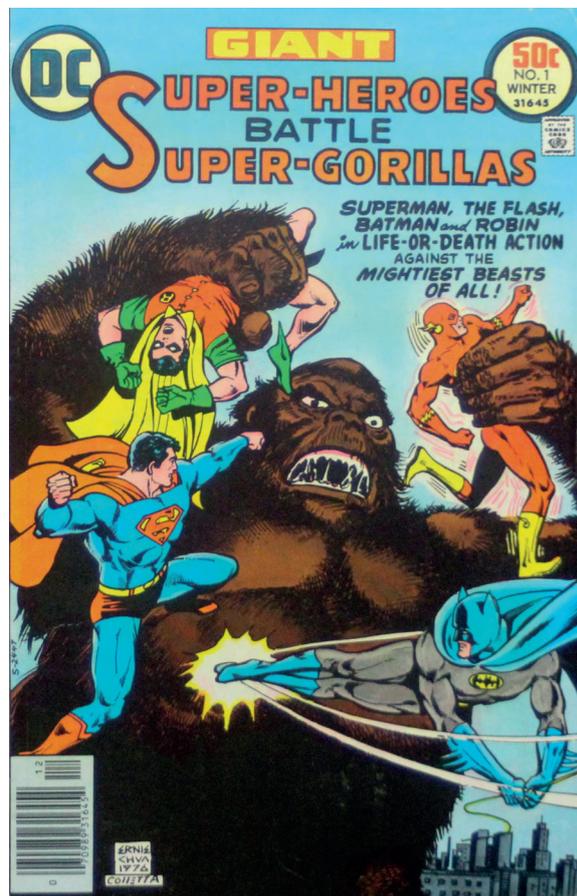
Michio Yuki is a charismatic psychopath, a kidnapper, extortionist, and serial killer, who kidnaps his victims, demands a ransom, and then kills both his victim



and the person paying the ransom. Yet after every killing, Michio seeks forgiveness from Father Iwao Garai, a Catholic priest. The pair are engaged in an affair, the priest another victim of Michio's psychopathic charms.

Yet in MW, no-one is innocent and the priest's involvement goes back to his youth, when Iwao kidnapped and raped Michio. This trauma, as well as exposure to 'MW', an experimental US chemical weapon, is what created the monster that Michio becomes.

It's so very dark, monsters created from monstrous events, the sins of the past driving the sins of the present, a very adult work for Tezuka, full of murder, violence, complex sexuality, and sexual violence, one that completely goes against what you may know of his work, yet one that's all the more shocking for that.



Superheroes Battle Super Gorillas 1

Cover by Ernie Chan and Vince Colletta. Superman - The Super-Gorilla from Krypton (reprinted from Action Comics #238, 1958). Written by Otto Binder, pencils by Wayne Boring, inks by Stan Kaye. The Flash - Grood puts the squeeze on the Flash (reprinted from The Flash #172, 1967). Written by John Broome, pencils by Carmine Infantino, inks by Sid Greene. Batman - The Gorilla Boss of Gotham City (reprinted from Batman #75, 1953) Written by David Vern Reed, pencils by Bob Kane and Lew Sayre Schwartz, inks by Charles Paris, letters by Ira Schnapp.

Publisher: DC Comics (USA)

Superman, The Flash, Batman, and gorillas, Super Gorillas! It's pure 70s DC craziness, albeit with three stories from previous decades. Incredibly, it's not even the first Super Heroes Battle Super Gorillas comic either, DC had already done a DC Special issue in 1975. But here, you get King Krypton - the Gorilla of Steel, Gorilla Grodd, and The Gorilla Boss of Gotham City, and it's just as wonderfully, ridiculously silly as you'd expect - although it's also the perfect illustration of the gulf between the two primary American comics companies at this time. Whilst Marvel was giving us the cleverness of Howard The Duck, DC were giving us this - ridiculous

and silly and fun no doubt, but hardly cutting edge!

I'm sure it was all designed to catch the wave of everything Planet of the Apes, but all I can think of, when chuckling through the silliness of it all, is the oft quoted list of Carmine Infantino's seven things guaranteed to sell a comic if they're on the cover. So how much better would this have been if they'd really leaned into that and we'd had Gorillas... PLUS Dinosaurs, Motorcycles, on a purple background, with the city in flames, Robin crying, whilst Supes asks the reader... 'How can we beat the Super Gorilla?'

COMIC FACTS

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American Splendor
by Harvey Pekar is
published

“

**Fantagraphics
Books** is founded

“

**Moebius Airtight
Garage** appears in
Metal Hurlant

“

Jenette Kahn
becomes DC's
publisher and
editorial director

“

The first volume of
the **Extraordinary
Adventures of
Adele Blanc-Sec**
by Jaques Tardi is
released

1976

Interesting facts
about the comics and
characters of 1976

“

Superman 302 restores the credit that Superman created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster

“

Archie Goodwin becomes Marvel's Editor In Chief

“

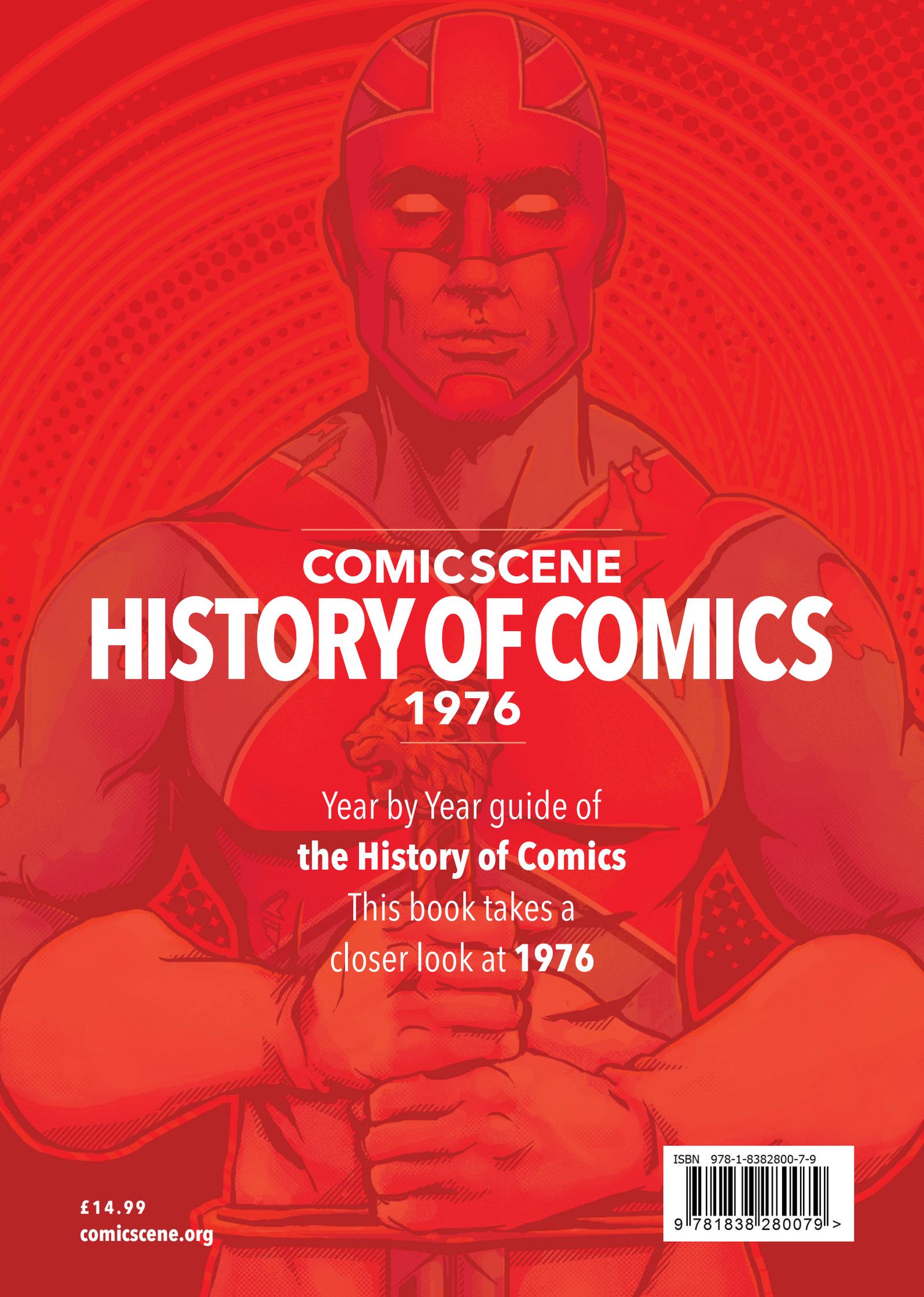
E.H.Shepard, illustrator of Winnie the Pooh and Wind in the Willows, dies age 96

First issue of Roy of the Rovers

First issue of Captain Britain Weekly in the UK

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The Eagle Awards are created by Mike Conroy and Richard Burton



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