

COSMICON II



By Warren Clements

Graphic and photos by Peter Hsu

"Sure it's torn that makes it authentic"

Walking into last weekend's Cosmicon at the peak hour was like stumbling into the middle of Kids' Day at the Ex.

The teenybopper comic art dealers were all veterans, hard-edged businessmen at the age of 14. They dealt comics and nostalgia as a junkie deals dope, exploiting a collector's mania for old issues by selling a 10 cent pulp for \$10. One dealer was charging \$200 for an original Batman, issue two; the first issue is considered priceless.

While most visitors were Canadian, most of the dealers were American, fresh from battles to clear their wares at the border. Some were stopped — "you didn't declare these comics" — "ya, well those issues are defective" — while others paid duty, hoping to get refunds on unsold material.

One young dealer had his transportation to York paid for by his mother. One way. Another lounged by the bar for 15 minutes talking to friends before daring to ask the barman for a drink. A member of the council strode by muttering "he's underage" and the dealer slunk off muttering veiled threats.

And in the middle of all the comics and movies stood the industry itself, the men concerned with producing the art and defending it against critics. "I know," said James Warren, publisher of magazines 'Creepy' and 'Eerie', "that you can't produce a Ray Bradbury or Fellini by telling him he can't read my comic books."

The \$3,000 cost of this year's convention, held by and in Winters College, has been paid off through display table rentals and tickets sales to the 1,500 fantasy fans who attended. Organizers Ken Ketter, John Schaw, Patti Bregman and friends learned a valuable lesson from last year's fiasco, the original Cosmicon, which accumulated a debt of over \$2,000.

As late as last Christmas, bills were flooding the Winters council office charging large sums for hotel accommodation (this year the guests paid their own way) and a special dinner (reduced this year to a reception). When this year's invited guest, Star Trek's William Shatner, demanded \$1,000 plus \$300 expenses to attend the Con, organizers were unanimous in declining the offer.

The final guest list was impressive. Besides Warren, participants included Carmen Infantino, publisher of DC Comics (Superman); Jeff Jones, artist for National Lampoon; and P.J. O'Rourke, writer for the Lampoon.

Warren dazzled the crowd with a virtuoso slide show and running commentary: "I love Winters College — I spent last night in my room watching a fly crawl up the drapes. They gave me a room half a mile from here. I took a girl there last night and by the time we got there, she'd changed her mind."

But the main attraction was the fans themselves. "I was distracted from the films, from the panels, from the dealers' tables," said Michael Quealey, acting master of Winters and leader of a Humanities course in fantasy, "by the incredible people who showed up. They made a circus look like kindergarten."

Ken Ketter is already talking of a bigger and better Cosmicon III in '74, with a movie producer as special guest.



Cosmicon brought many amateurs in to see and compare artists styles. Joan McCracken is sketching an artists displayed work.

"Beware the red in his eyes..."

Comic books have traditionally steered away from politics, with two notable exceptions — the Second World War and McCarthy's Red Menace. The early Iron Man tales were typical of the anti-Communist plotlines. The villains were members of a secret organization; their faces were cloaked in shadow, even when they stood in direct sunlight; they had hooked noses. They were never beaten by superior forces, but by internal bickering, treachery and cowardice. If Superman flexed his fist, they would creep home to Moscow on all fours, growling "you haven't seen the last of us"



You pay yer money and takes yer choice — Marvel, National, Warren Publications, or the old E.C. line responsible for "Mad" and "the Crypt of Terror".

"Everyone at the Lampoon is really crazy..."

P.J. O'Rourke, writer and editor of National Lampoon, sat at the head table in the McLaughlin dining hall and faced the Cosmicon II audience. A short teenybopper raised his hand.

"Is there really a Gahan Wilson?"
O'Rourke's eyebrows knitted. "What?"
"Well, I mean, the way he draws, you wouldn't think..."
"Gahan Wilson is a perfectly ordinary guy in his 30s. A snappy dresser." Disappointed silence.

"What did you expect me to say? That he had six arms and green hair?"
"What about Rodrigues?" piped another voice.
"He's very straight, a very conservative guy."

Robert Cluett, professor in English and satire at York, fielded the questions as O'Rourke satisfied everyone's curiosity concerning the inner workings of the Lampoon.

"Why don't you publish real letters to the Lampoon?"
"They're boring, that's why. Our letters were written by Doug Kenney, and then by Brian McNamara."

"Where do you draw the line between humour and poor taste?"
"We don't."

The National Lampoon started three years ago, the brainchild of Harvard Lampoon writers Doug Kenney and Henry Beard. Following a successful string of parodies — Time, Life, Bored of the Rings — their production company made an attractive offer.

Since there was an obvious market for satire, they said, how about a national magazine to capitalize on it? Since then the Natlamp has become progressively disassociated from Harvard as the writers drift off and drift in. O'Rourke himself, though working off and on for a year, was only hired full-time last year.

"The staff at the Lampoon is more like a family than anything else," he commented. "But as far as politics and outlook go, we couldn't be further apart in some respects. Beard is a right-wing libertarian, Sean Kelly is an English professor in Montreal, and one of our senior editors is Marxist."

But even with writers politically at odds, the magazine realized a definite stand was necessary to make fun of the world. They chose the Swiftian position:

"Lampoon gradually moved towards the aristocratic viewpoint, aristocratic with a small 'a' — sort of snotty, actually. Preppy humour. The type of humour you develop when you're forced early on to become clever, clever because you're not handsome, clever because you can't be rich. The Lampoon writers used humour as a defense mechanism, so basically I suppose they're all neurotic to a certain extent. I'm a bit neurotic, and I'm one of the saner members of the crew."

"The Lampoon developed this aristocratic vantage point because they needed a Swiftian position to attack the right and the left. Abbie Hoffman found this out, that he could not be a Lenny Bruce and be politically involved. You need a position where you're not called upon to propose a solution for the problems you point out."

O'Rourke cited Lampoon's antecedents as New Yorker 'nasty wit', unleashed, Evelyn Waugh, Swift, S.J. Perelman, Dorothy Parker, and others. "The things they used to talk about doing in their office, we do."
Cluett mentioned, "I counted your antecedents, and I think you had about seven. Does it worry you that five of those seven ended up in insane asylums?"

"Well," O'Rourke mused, "some of the Lampoon staff are really quite crazy. Michael O'Donoghue, for instance, he smokes about six packs of cigarettes a day."

The claims of poor taste brought against the magazine haven't hurt too much. The core of the magazine has that "fashionable nastiness" popular with the chic circles of New York.

"Oh," they say, "that National Lampoon is just too, too outrageous." Mind you, the Lampoon lost \$200,000 worth of advertising last year because of offensive articles. But we're not worried. Well, not too worried."

Members of the audience wondered whether such articles as the Dan Blocker 'interview' in the latest issue resulted in libel suits. O'Rourke said Natlamp didn't have too much to fear in that direction, as the suits would cause much more noise than the articles themselves.

"Where do we get hit," he said, "is in the piddling legal details, like copying an artist's style too closely. And we're very careful about sex and nudity. If we showed 'spread shots', as they're referred to in the trade, it would give somebody easy leverage to knock us off the stands."

On the subject of hate mail, he mentioned the largest amount came from people offended by religious parody. Fans might note another episode of Son O'God comics in a forthcoming 'Prejudice' issue.

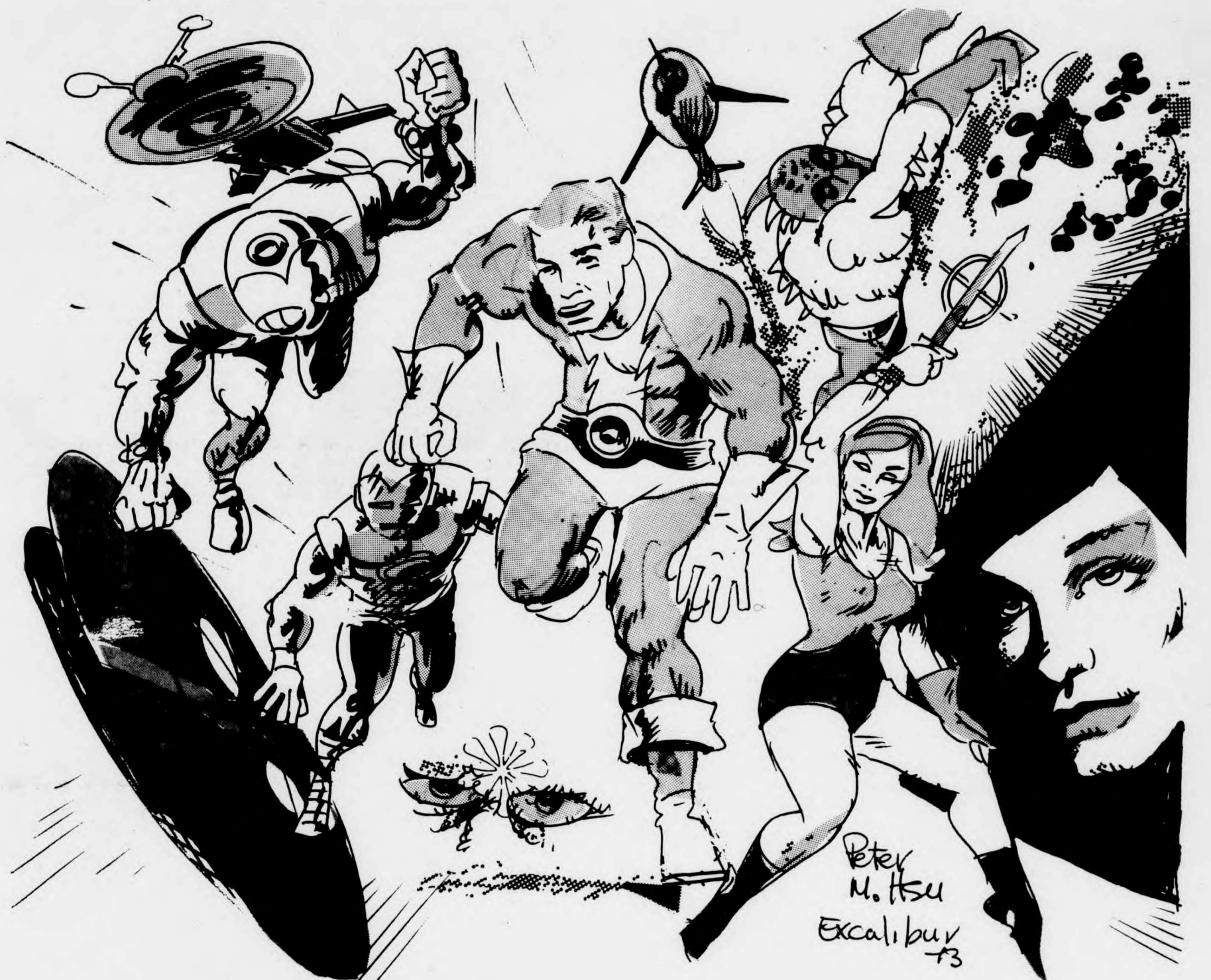
O'Rourke commented that Mad magazine "has a mental age of 14", and is "tedious, but successful." Asked whether he saw any serious competition in the American humour market, he said not.

"We are having a terrible time finding writers. About a dozen writers are turning out the whole thing. If there were a surfeit of good writers, then we might be worried about competition."

"It's not as though our prices were low. We pay \$100 a page to writers, or 15 cents a word if it's solid copy. That's not as much as Playboy's rate of \$1 a word, but frankly I don't think the articles in Playboy — or any articles — are worth that much."

He stresses that Lampoon survives because it is excellently managed from the business end. The magazine has a paid circulation of 600,000, and a readership of three million.

And for those readers offended by last year's parody on Canada — "the retarded giant on our doorstep" — let it be known that it was written completely by Canadians.



"... drawn with Canadian ink ..."

Due to a lack of interest and organization, the Canadian Comics and Fantasy panel was cancelled. Feeling that this reflected badly on the state of the Canadian industry, this reporter joined a makeshift panel of concerned individuals in the Absinthe pub. Among the participants: Steve Skeates, American writer for Aquaman and Superman; Ron Kasman, York student, fantasy fan and young artist; and Ron Sutton, a Toronto artist just back from a job as apprentice to comic artist Berni Wrightson in New York.

EXCALIBUR: What is the state of Canadian comics today?
SKEATES: New York.

KASMAN: The trouble is that Canada has been raised on foreign comics. Quebec reads European comics like Pilote and Tintin while Ontario reads American comics. Canadians don't have the capital to crack the market. One of the Marvel titles (Fantastic Four, Spiderman, etc.) can fold, or go into the red for the first two issues, and Marvel's other titles will support it. In Canada, the Toronto Star might succeed if it ever decided to publish comics, but that's about it.

EXCALIBUR: Can we expect ever to see a Marvel in Canada?
SKEATES: Yes, once we take over.

SUTTON: There will never be a colour Canadian comic book. The market isn't great enough to pay for it, and the printing facilities aren't available. Even in the States, Marvel and National (DC) both send their comics to Sparta, Illinois to be printed, because it's the only place that can handle the complicated colour printing.

EXCALIBUR: Where are Canadian comics heading at this moment?
KASMAN: Except for isolated strips like 'It Happened in Canada', they're mostly underground. There's an underground comic put together in B.C. called 'White Lunch Comics', with a character called Rocky Raccoon. It's published in California.

SUTTON: Right now I'm getting together a book with Canadian artists like Rob McIntyre, Tom Robe, Vincent Marchesano and myself. It's called 'All-Canadian Beaver Comics', and will be printed this spring with any luck.

KASMAN: A lot of American comics got their start in Canada. Hal Foster, the creator of Prince Valiant, was Canadian. At 18 he went to the States because he couldn't find work here. Superman was originally Canadian — his writers lived in Toronto. Metropolis was modelled on Toronto, and the Daily Planet was the Toronto Star.

SKEATES: There's no use setting up a new comic industry in Canada. Comics are dying. What's a promoter supposed to say? "Let's go set up a dying industry in Canada?"

EXCALIBUR: Why is the industry dying?
SKEATES: Back in the Depression, all the magazines were thriving. People

had no money, they wanted to forget their problems, and there was no television. So they bought comics and pulp magazines. One comic in the 40s sold as many copies as all the comics these days put together. Television killed comics — TV Guide is the best selling magazine in the world today. Mad is the fifth in line. The only comics that sell today are the ones that disguise themselves as magazines.

KASMAN: That's why the French comic magazines sell so well. People who wouldn't be caught dead with a comic book will pick up 'Pilote'.

EXCALIBUR: Does Canada have any successful comics?
KASMAN: Canadian Educational Comics, published by Mark Zigler, has already published two issues. It's going to be published in book form, and they hope it will be used as a textbook.

It covers subjects like Louis Riel, and the best artists in the book are John Heard — who's since gone to England to draw comics — and Jon Fraser, who designed the latest record cover for Chilliwack.

The closest thing to a real Canadian comic is Fuddle Duddle, a satiric comic. But that's the only one. It's rather depressing, when you think of how many smaller countries have their own comic industries. Israel, with a population of three million, has its own comics. And Mexico.

Our only chance is a Canadian content law in comics. An embargo on American comic books, similar to the CRTC content rulings for radio and television.

SKEATES: Then nobody will come to your Con.
KASMAN: They had something similar to an embargo during the Second World War, with the paper shortage. That's the period that produced Commander Steel and Johnny Canuck, "Canada's answer to Nazi oppression".

Now you have false Canadian content, which is really terrible. There's a guy down at the Toronto Star who touches up the Figments strip. In one strip he changed the word "president" to "prime minister", and in another he inked over the network name CBS and scratched in CBC.

But getting back to Canadian comics — Sheridan Art College has started a course in cartooning and illustrating, which is a good idea. They've already had lecturers like Jeff Jones, Will Eisner (creator of Spirit) and Harvey Kurtzman (creator of Mad).

EXCALIBUR: What do you think the Con's place is in all this?
KASMAN: The convention is largely a vehicle for the American art industry. But the Con is good in that it lets little guys like Ron Kasman talk to people like Vince Marchesano (from Hamilton) and find work. Out of six art display rooms, only two aren't Canadian.