



# Marvel-lous

As in all businesses, cycles of decline and expansion exist. "Marvel right now is on a decrease of sales," he says, "and independent publishers are on the increase." Yet Marvel may be on the rise again.

During the barbarian age, an artist/writer began to bring a new flavor to some old characters. This period could also be called the discovery period. John Byrne took an old concept and breathed life into the *New X-Men*. The *New X-Men* quickly became the number one product on the market, and though Byrne is no longer involved with the comic, it remains in top spot. But the two titles he now controls are closing fast on his previous success, *Alpha Flight* and the *Fantastic Four*. (It may interest readers to know that *Alpha Flight* is about a Canadian super hero group).

Byrne was born in England but raised in Alberta (the *Alpha Flight* connection). He trained at S.A.I.F. in Calgary but eventually dropped out. Being a typical success story, Byrne went to New York, began work as a back-up artist at Marvel.

The company liked his work and let him develop his idea about the *New X-Men*. The rest is history. With a yearly salary of a quarter of a million dollars, Byrne is the highest paid artist in the industry.

Thomson indicates Marvel Comics made a resurgence in the industry in 1978. He terms this the new golden age with a rediscovery of the Marvel heroes. "I'd have to point out John Byrne for causing the resurgence." Byrne's work revitalized many other titles as the *New X-Men* rose.

Part of Marvel's continued success may also be a cashing in on popular trends in comics. The most popular being the mini-series format. Thomson explains the company reasons they have a character who cannot survive in a book of their own, but will sell well on a short term basis. Though this idea began at D.C., Marvel has been producing some limited editions of its own which have done well. On the other hand, Marvel pretty well avoided the other extreme which D.C. tried, the maxi-series. Thomson says, "People prefer the mini-series. I don't know about the maxi-series. I think they're too long." He indicates that sales of D.C. maxi-series have fallen off at Darkstar. Marvel does have one title which could be considered a maxi-series, *The Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe*. "But *Marvel Universe* is different," he says. "It's an encyclopedia that everyone wants."

For a change of pace, there is one trend that Marvel did start, the graphic novel. The graphic novel allowed Marvel Comics to publish material it could not do under its regular trademark. Both D.C. and Marvel publish under the guidelines set by the Comics Code Authority. The Authority was created in the '50s when a public uproar rose about the violent and sexual content available in children's comic books. The Comics Code brought about the demise of many publishing companies, but D.C. and Marvel survived through conform. Yet it is popular and profitable to publish outside of the Code's guidelines, though strict enforcement of the Authority is lax.

Another product published by Marvel is *EPIC Magazine* and a line of Epic comics. Both titles allow Marvel to publish material they would not normally, even with the laxity of the Code today. It also allows artists and writers an opportunity for more control and creativity they never enjoyed under the regular Marvel banner.

Marvel Comics is successful. From all appearances, it is here to stay, but in order to do so it must meet the needs of the public who purchases their material. With an expanding industry, Marvel may have some hard work ahead of it. Yet they have done it before and it looks like they may do it again.

by Wesley Oginski

With the huge success of popular movies like *Star Wars*, *Superman*, the *Movie* and *E.T.*, the comic book industry is gaining an incredible amount of credibility as a thriving business. Yet even in hard times, Marvel Comics has been able to do quite well. Today they are the number one publishing company of comics in the world, thanks to such titles as the *New X-Men*, *Alpha Flight*, *Daredevil* and the *Fantastic Four*.

Marvel actually began publication of comics in 1939 under the company name of Timely. The company experimented with many flags and trade names, one of the best remembered being ATLAS in 1951. Still the characters published under these titles are not memorable, except for the Human Torch, the Sub-Mariner and Captain America. Only these three characters still survive under the modern Marvel trade mark, in one form or another.

Bruce Thomson, a collector and co-owner of Darkstar Collectables, explains how Marvel fits within the history of comic books. He says that comic's history can be divided into particular periods or ages, beginning with the First Golden Age denoted by the creation of the D.C. character Superman. This is the first costumed and super-powered hero to be published in the comic format. His popularity set other comic publishers to creating costumed super heroes, including Marvel's Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner. Captain America was not to arrive until a few years later.

The second period is the Silver Age. Marvel does not stand out in this period according to Thomson, D.C.'s heroes undergo what he terms a rebirth in the '50s. Technically this is the beginning of the parallel worlds in the D.C. universe.

As comics entered the '60s, D.C. dominated the industry, while Marvel barely hung on and only a few other companies like Archie Comics and Gold Key tried to serve markets outside the super hero interest. The name Marvel was born as the publishing company changed direction in the late '50s and early '60s. Here began the Second Golden Age.

"That's when Stan Lee came along," Thomson says. Stan Lee created the *Fantastic Four* and *Spiderman* (who eventually created a cult following). "They have such believable characters (at Marvel). In D.C., they're (the characters) not living in the real world. Somebody would have come across Superman's identity years ago," exclaims Thomson, asking what kind of disguise a pair of glasses and a stroke of a comb creates.

If we examine just the past two decades of comic book history, some distinct periods still stand out. Thomson starts with the pop art stage, when comic art became fashionable in the mid-'60s. You may remember the BIFF, BAM and POW of T.V.'s *Batman*. "Then we got into what I like to call realism art. It wasn't started at Marvel, but at D.C. with Neal Adams," he says. But Adams also began to



Captain America (top) is one of Marvel's early heroes. The *Fantastic Four* (centre) came from Stan Lee in the "golden age" of the 60's. *Alpha Flight* (bottom) came into their own recently.

deal with harsh controversial issues, such as drugs in the *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series.

"Then the barbarian age began about 1970," he continues. This stage saw a trend to creating barbaric heroes in the Robert E. Howard tradition of *Conan* and *King Kull*. Only *Conan* survives from that period today.

"The big thing with Marvel Comics now," Thomson adds, "is the quality of art they carry. The story quality is also very good."

Yet comics have been around for a long time. Many people may think that all the stories and plots possible for a comic book have been done. Even Thomson has had that feeling of *deja vu*. "At times I wonder if they're not going back and rewriting old stories for a new age," he explains. "I've collected for 15 years and worked in comics for 12. Sometimes I pick up a new comic and think I've seen it before."

But Marvel Comics still holds a superiority in sales. It outsells its nearest competitor, D.C. Comics, by about 5 to 1 on a worldwide basis.

