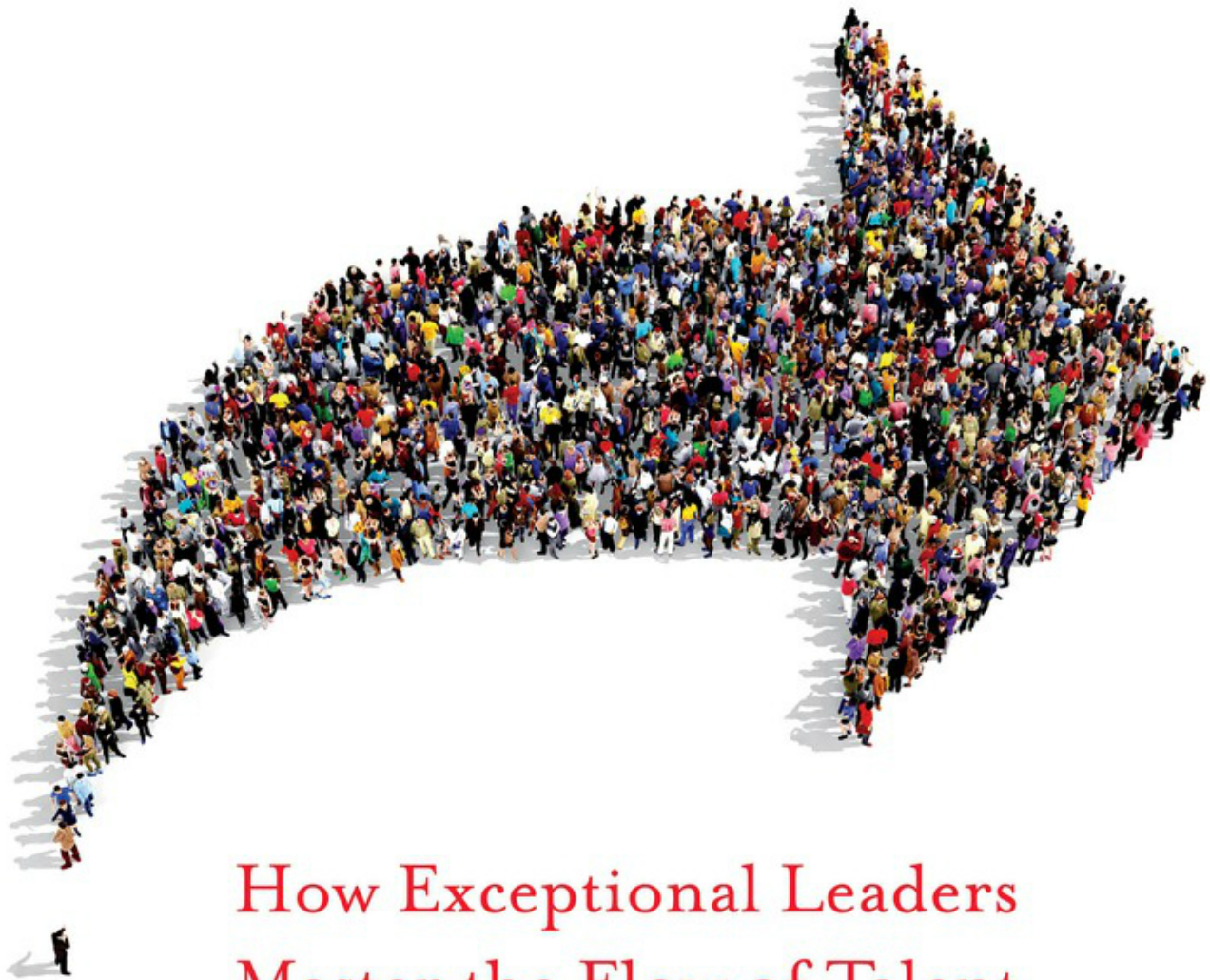


“*Superbosses* shows the incredible impact that great managers can have, both on their employees and on entire industries. Finkelstein has written a true leadership guide for the Networked Age.”

—Reid Hoffman, cofounder and chairman, LinkedIn; coauthor of *The Alliance*

# SUPERBOSSSES



How Exceptional Leaders  
Master the Flow of Talent

# SYDNEY FINKELSTEIN

author of *WHY SMART EXECUTIVES FAIL*

# STAN LEE AND JACK KIRBY<sup>1</sup>

Narrative by Sydney Finkelstein

Based on research for  
**SUPERBOSSSES: How Exceptional Leaders Master the Flow of Talent**  
<http://www.superbosses.com>

All Stan Lee and Jack Kirby hoped to do was to make a living. Sons of the Depression, lifelong savers, and fanatical providers for their families, the duo ended up in a much different place than they anticipated: they reshaped an entire industry. Stan Lee was a comic book writer, and Jack Kirby was an artist. When they started in the field in the early 1940s, comics were the lowest of pulp products, generally considered trashy reading for adolescents. By the sixties the profile of comics began to change, in large part because of Stan Lee's public relations genius. Lee changed the way people thought about comics. He lectured at universities and hammed on national television. His message? Comics are excellent stories told by enormously creative people that promote literacy, leadership, and patriotism. There is no difference, Lee insisted, between High Art and Low Art; he cited Shakespeare and the Bible as major literary influences ("What ho, Horatio!" Lee loved to quip in honor of the dead Master<sup>2</sup>).

Lee changed the stories comics told. Instead of perfect superheroes like Batman (remember his super-cushy pad and butler?), Lee envisioned imperfect fighting teams whose personal relationships often threw a curveball into the action. He imagined Peter Parker, Spider-Man's alter-ego, as a typical teenager saddled with acne, an aging aunt, and girl problems. And Jack Kirby, the other half of this prolific partnership, changed the way comics were drawn. Forever fascinated by bodies in motion, Kirby's quickly rendered and visually stimulating drawings forecasted much of what was to come, both in comics and in the motion pictures that retold their stories. Kirby's style of drawing—the boxy ripped muscles, the in-your-face punch, the panoramic fights—became the trademark style of Marvel. And Marvel, with Kirby and Lee at the helm<sup>3</sup>, became the top player who rewrote the rules of the game for the industry. The two are famous, the subject of several nonfiction books and part of the inspiration for the Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Kavalier and Clay* (2000). The characters they created—among them the

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<sup>1</sup> This narrative is a working summary of source material, prepared by Sydney Finkelstein, as background for his book, SUPERBOSSSES. <http://www.superbosses.com> © Sydney Finkelstein, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Lee, Stan. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 12.

<sup>3</sup> There were others, too. People always mention Steve Ditko, another famous artist. But Ditko wasn't as famous as Kirby, and did not leave as vibrant of a legacy. A loner, Ditko was a follower of Ayn Rand's Objectivist philosophy.

Fantastic Four, the Hulk, the X-Men, the Silver Surfer and Spider-Man<sup>4</sup>—continue to have a presence today as comic books, comic strips, cartoons, television shows, and full length motion pictures.

### *Commonalities*

The two men creators a lot in common. Born five years apart and raised in the same burrow of the same city, the pair of Manhattan boys grew up in poverty. Back then they were Stanley Lieberman and Jacob Kurtzberg, both Jewish. Both adopted jaunty pennames and eventually changed their legal names. Both entered comics right out of high school and neither went to college. Working was a way to bring home extra cash for the family, and both began providing for their parents while they were still in school. Their homes were not fancy. “Looking out the window, all we could see was the brick wall of the building across the alley,” Lee remembers of his childhood apartment, inevitably comparing it to the Los Angeles mansion where he lives, which boasts dual views of the ocean and the city.<sup>5</sup> Despite the humble beginnings, Lee always knew he was destined for success. Once when he was young, he found a paint can and a ladder in his school. Without missing a beat, he climbed up the ladder and painted *Stan Lee Is God* on the ceiling.<sup>6</sup> “Unless they ever repainted the school, those imperishable words are still up there,” he said in a 1977 interview. “I always got a kick out of that.”<sup>7</sup>

Born in 1922, Lee rushed through his education (skipping grades here and there) and graduated by the time he was sixteen.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile Kirby, born in 1917, was a quiet, tough kid. He spent much of his childhood fighting in street gangs (which he memorialized in the autobiographical 1983 comic “Street Code”<sup>9</sup>), reading the pulps, and going to the movies. He later told biographer Mark Evanier, “The pulps were my writing school. Movies and newspaper strips were my drawing school. I learned from everything. My heroes were the men who wrote the pulps and the men who made the movies. [ . . . ] At times I felt like I was being raised by Jack Warner.”<sup>10</sup> Both Kirby and Lee were avid readers. Lee’s mother said that when Lee had gone through every book in the house, he turned to reading the labels on the ketchup bottles.<sup>11</sup> When Lee was fifteen he started entering a weekly essay contest sponsored by the local newspaper. After winning three weeks in a row, the editor called him in and asked him to give someone else

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<sup>4</sup> Steve Ditko was also instrumental in Spider-Man’s creation. While Kirby & Lee initially worked on the project together, Lee chose Ditko to execute the first Spider-Man comicbooks. Ditko remained the lead artist on Spider-Man until he left Marvel. See Lee’s account of this in *Excelsior!*, p. 171.

<sup>5</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 11.

<sup>6</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 55.

<sup>7</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 55.

<sup>8</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Evanier, Mark. *Kirby: King of Comics*. New York: Abrams, 2008. 23-33

<sup>10</sup> Evanier, Mark. *Kirby: King of Comics*. New York: Abrams, 2008. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 9.

a chance. And then the editor changed Lee's life by suggesting Lee become a professional writer.<sup>12</sup>

Lee started working for Timely, which became Marvel, at the age of sixteen. He had special in because he was cousins with the publisher, Martin Goodman. When Lee started at Timely, Jack Kirby and Joe Simon were the lead creators—they wrote and drew, and their biggest seller was a new character named Captain America, a red-white-and-blue superhero whose iconic debut issue featured a fistfight between the hero and Hitler. Lee, at that point, was a mere errand boy, wide-eyed at the talent of Kirby and Simon. Kirby and Simon began doing work on the side for National (later DC), and told Lee about it. A few weeks later, Goodman fired them from Timely—he'd found out they were working for the competition. Though never substantiated, Kirby always suspected Lee ratted their secret. Kirby reportedly said to Simon, "The next time I see that little son of a bitch, I'm going to kill him."<sup>13</sup> The three men, Simon, Kirby and Lee, would take a break from comics to serve in World War II, and by the time Kirby and Lee worked together again at Timely, Lee was the head editor and Kirby a freelance artist. Kirby opted not to make good on his threat.

### *Differences*

The fundamental difference between Kirby and Lee, according to some comic book critics, is evident in their war stories. Lee spent the war stateside. He was classified as a playwright (one of seven or eight guys classified that way), and he spent a fair amount of time laboring over assignments like "Create a poster that'll make the guys go get checked out for venereal disease."<sup>14</sup> He created pamphlets, video scripts, and training manuals, frequently using cartoons to simplify the communication (a character like Fiscal Freddie could explain the basics of banking more interestingly and succinctly than several paragraphs of text). While his title was "Sergeant," Lee never felt that he entirely fit in there. Meanwhile Jack Kirby was with the 111th infantry division, which operated out of Omaha Beach (he arrived 2 ½ months after D-Day). When his commanding officer learned that Kirby was a comic book artist, he assigned Kirby to reconnaissance missions. Kirby would travel alone into enemy territory and then draw maps to relay the information to his fellow soldiers. It was dangerous work. "In war and in comics," write Raphael and Spurgeon, "Stan Lee was the ebullient careerist, always looking for a way to continue his breadwinning, while Kirby was the silent achiever surviving in the trenches."<sup>15</sup>

Lee was a high-spirited original. When writing the comics, something he frequently did from home, he joked that his poor wife had to listen to him read aloud. But of course he couldn't

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<sup>12</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 85

<sup>13</sup> Ronin, Ro. *Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee and the American Comic Book Revolution*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2004. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 44.

<sup>15</sup> Raphael, Jordan and Tom Spurgeon. *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003. 66.

just read the comics in a monotone; instead, he acted out the drama. He remembered: “She heard me muttering, mumbling, grunting, groaning, laughing, crying, shouting, threatening, pleading, and persuading; acting every role in my own inimitable and frantic way.”<sup>16</sup> Lee hated what he regarded as the solitary nature of writing, and appreciated working in a free, creative environment surrounded by people. He wrote in his autobiography *Excelsior!*:

I’ve always had a lot of energy and it was hard for me to sit still, even at work. I sometimes think I never really grew up, and I got a lot kick out of kidding around with the gang in the bullpen. Writing comics—sitting at the typewriter, hour after hour, and I’m talking about loooong hours—could get pretty tiring, so whenever I had a chance, I’d do what I could to jazz things up. I liked to feel that there was a measure of excitement at the office. Sometimes I’d burst into song or play my ocarina—I was the worst player in the world, but at least it made a lot of noise and, bad as it was, it was better than my singing. Anyway, it gave the staff a chance to hurl good-natured invective at me.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, Kirby was a quiet, maniacally focused workhorse. Lee remembered how Kirby responded when asked to draw a sympathetic monster, the character who became The Hulk:

Nothing fazed ol’ Kirby. Instead of walking out indignantly and saying, “I’ve got no time for jokes, Lee,” as I might have expected, he simply uttered his usual noncommittal grunt, and with a nod of his head and a puff on his cigar, bent over his drawing board and created a monster who was so perfect, so empathetic, that the readers took to him immediately and today he’s still one of our most popular heroes.<sup>18</sup>

Kirby did not care to come in the office and fool around with the other artists in the bullpen. He was happiest alone, working at his drawing board, off in his imagination. Kirby described his imagination as being inside, “a very active and bright and colorful place that’s as good as any circus as I’ve ever seen.”<sup>19</sup> By all accounts, Kirby was a creative genius and a true force of nature. He drew faster—more than three times as fast—as the average artist. His supply of ideas was nearly endless, although after he’d finish telling one story he’d barely remember it. One of the greatest franchises in Marvel, the Silver Surfer, simply appeared in one of Kirby’s panels, unannounced and without prior planning. He told Lee a few outlines of the character, and Lee gave the Silver Surfer his own book. Kirby was totally forgetful, and relied on his wife, Roz, for most of the mundane details of life. Those close to the Kirby’s commented that being Jack Kirby was a two-person affair. Mark Evanier elaborated on Jack’s dependence on Roz during a speech at Roz’s funeral in 1998:

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<sup>16</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 135.

<sup>17</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 147.

<sup>18</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 122.

<sup>19</sup> (Jack Kirby on Entertainment Tonight).

You couldn't help but appreciate the synchronicity: Jack sitting there 'til all hours, cobbling up tales of great champions, protecting the world from total annihilation...and Roz sitting there in the next room, protecting Jack. Compared to her, the super-heroes had it easy — because Jack, God love him, needed a lot of protecting.<sup>20</sup>

### ***The Face of Marvel: Stan Lee***

Given the differences between the two men, it is no surprise that Lee took a significantly larger role in the media than Kirby. “I traveled a great deal in the seventies and eighties, spreading the Marvel gospel wherever I could,” Lee recalled.<sup>21</sup> Around this time Lee’s entire image changed. He discarded the ubiquitous skinny tie and white collared shirt for a slim-fitting patterned button-down, open at the throat and revealing some chest. He bought big sunglasses and grew a large mustache.<sup>22</sup> Jack Kirby, in contrast, struggled to give a good interview, and never dressed for the press. The ideas in his head often came out sounding garbled, or just reactionary. In a famous anecdote, Kirby and Lee gave a national interview together during the 1960s. When asked how such a small company as Marvel intended to take on an industry giant like DC, Kirby got audibly angry on the air. “We’re bigger and better than DC!” he said, “We sell more books than they do!”<sup>23</sup> Lee was horrified. He’d wanted to portray Marvel as “the little company that could,” not as a major player in the industry. “Don’t you see, Jack?” he asked him later, “We’ll get more sympathy from the audience if we play up our small staff and smaller budget in comparison to DC.” Kirby didn’t see. And afterward, Kirby rarely gave interviews.

### ***A New Kind of Comic Book***

“Marvel turned the whole field around. We proved that comics would be produced that weren’t just kidstuff.”—Stan Lee<sup>24</sup>

While Lee’s methods of telling Marvel’s story later became controversial,<sup>25</sup> there’s no doubt that Marvel during the sixties fundamentally changed the comic book game and it was Lee’s vision that enabled them to do it. Let’s take a minute to review the players. On the one hand, was Timely, Inc, which became Marvel. Their most famous characters were Captain

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<sup>20</sup> Evanier, Mark. “Roz Kirby.” *POV Online*, January 9, 1998, <http://www.povonline.com/cols/COL172.htm> (Accessed November 21, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 139.

<sup>22</sup> See pictures in the centerfold of *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*. Raphael, Jordan and Tom Spurgeon. *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 208.

<sup>24</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 105.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, Lee published a series of books with Simon & Schuster about the history of Marvel. His history downplayed the role of the artists in the creation process and seriously offended most of his staff.

America, the Human Torch and the Submariner. On the other hand was National, which became DC. Their kitty of characters boasted Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman and dozens of others. And both publishing houses did comics in all the genres—westerns, romances, cop-and-robber stories, animal sequences for the kiddies. DC was clearly the top dog in the industry, at least as far as superheroes went. But during the early sixties Marvel began to do a whole lot of things differently.

Marvel changed the characters. Their characters became more layered and flawed than DC's. They spoke in different kinds of voices—for instance, Thing in *Fantastic Four* has a more simplistic dialogue than, say, Roy Reed who tends to drone on about things (interestingly Reed was partially based on Lee himself<sup>26</sup>). Complicated histories and weird interpersonal connections further differentiated these new heroes from the pack. For instance, in the *Fantastic Four* (the first comic book of this kind), two of the four protagonists are engaged, and another two are siblings.<sup>27</sup> Lee loved to set up a team where various tensions could dominate the personal drama, which in turn made the action more interesting. We see that with Spiderman, whose best friend is also the son of his worst enemy, and with X-Men in the complicated back story between the Professor and Magneto. To accompany their new string of bestselling books, Timely (at Lee's recommendation) changed their company name from to Marvel because, as Stan Lee said, "When we saw how our books were starting to sell, I figured we ought to change our name and give ourselves a whole new image."<sup>28</sup>

Lee connected the heroes in what he dubbed the Marvel Universe. So if an alien arrived, super heroes from all kinds of books would arrive at the scene. And while gang-ups in DC comics happened occasionally, Marvel gang-ups always resulted in violence. The Hulk, for instance, fought everybody, including the other heroes. DC Comics meet-ups, in comparison, were like "lodge meetings in tights"<sup>29</sup>; Everyone got along. As Lee reimagined these kinds of stories, he also set about creating a relationship with the readers of comics that pushed the industry envelope.

### ***A Fanatical Fanship***

"We had what every company dreams of having, a fervent, fanatical fan following all over the country and throughout the world."—Stan Lee<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Lee, Stan. *Excelsior! The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 116.

<sup>27</sup> Lee, Stan. *Excelsior! The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 117.

<sup>28</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 177.

<sup>29</sup> Raphael, Jordan and Tom Spurgeon. *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003. 117.

<sup>30</sup> Lee, Stan. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 156.

Lee nurtured a unique connection between the creators of comic books and the readers. He began by identifying the ideal Marvel reader: himself. “We do the kind of stories that we ourselves would want to read if we read comic books” he told Dick Cavett in 1968.<sup>31</sup> Next, he started talking to the reader on the pages of the comic book—breaking down the fourth wall, and poking fun at himself. Cultural historian Bill Schelly explained, “Sometimes he’d comment on the proceedings in a caption, like ‘Don’t worry, frantic ones! This will all make sense eventually—we hope!’”<sup>32</sup> This kind of self deprecating humor and insider tone inspired fans to do something that Lee, in his twenty years of comic book experience, had never seen before: they sent fan mail. “We never used to get fan mail, then all of a sudden we were inundated with it,” said Lee. “And it was wonderful.”<sup>33</sup> The mail was opinionated and to-the-point. “Kill off Aunt May,” several readers recommended.<sup>34</sup> Lee declined to kill off Peter Parker’s aunt, but he did start encouraging fan mail by responding to it in a column he put in the front of every book titled “Stan’s Soapbox.” The soapbox employed the same chatty, informal tone as the interior panels, and readers (and Lee) loved it. He regarded it as his own personal conversation with each reader.

Lee also encouraged fan involvement by issuing “no-prizes” when a fan discovered some sort of discrepancy in the story—for instance noticing that a car was blue in one panel and red in the next. The “no prize” was an empty envelope with a Marvel return address and a stamp that read “This envelope contains a genuine Marvel Comics No-Prize which you have just won!”<sup>35</sup> Biographers Spurgeon and Raphael explain the genius of the No-Prize: “The No-Prize was a way of rewarding reader involvement while at the same time deflecting the emphasis from nitpicking at the details.”<sup>36</sup>

Lee was quick to admit mistakes to the readers, a quality that made him seem more human and endearing. At one point he even wrote on one of the covers, “Look, this may not be one of the best stories we’ve ever done, but we’ve given you enough good ones so that you owe it to us to buy this lemon anyway.”<sup>37</sup> Surprisingly the comic sold really well, and fans wrote in saying “Oh, it wasn’t so bad.”

To unite the various fan groups—from the ironic college kids to the earnest adolescents, Lee created the Merry Marvel Marching Society (MMMS). He knew from the moment of creation that he wanted it to be a different kind of fan club, one that was a little bit off-beat and

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<sup>31</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Raphael, Jordan and Tom Spurgeon. *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003. 111.

<sup>33</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 63.

<sup>34</sup> Lee, Stan. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 133.

<sup>35</sup> Raphael, Jordan and Tom Spurgeon. *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003. 112.

<sup>36</sup> Raphael, Jordan and Tom Spurgeon. *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003. 112.

<sup>37</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 152.



interesting. So he sent the fans different kinds of paraphernalia, like a record where the entire bullpen of artists were singing a Merry Marvel Marching Song. Lee recalled:

Jack “King” Kirby and I feigned an argument in front of the mike with brilliant dialogue, like—Jack: “What are we doing here anyway?” Stan: “Making fools of ourselves,” while our demon letterer, “Adorable Artie” Simek, insisted upon playing his off-key harmonica, and production manager “Jolly Solly” Brodsky pleaded for us to cut the nonsense short because we had deadlines back at the office. My one-in a million secretary/assistant, “Fabulous Flo” Steinberg, begged us to restore some sanity to the whole affair, and on and on. Our wacky little record, which played for about five minutes, was one of the many offbeat things we sent to our Merry Marchers. . . they loved it and it was oh so typically Marvel!<sup>38</sup>

Years later, Lee would turn up on colleges for speaking engagements, and run into former fans, who’d say “I still have my Merry Marvel Marching Society membership card and I wouldn’t part with it for anything.” Of this, Lee said, “Kinda gives me a lump in my throat.”<sup>39</sup>

Lee’s efforts to connect with the consumers in unique ways further differentiated Marvel from the competition, and DC began to notice. Lee said in a 2000 interview:

I had a lot of friends that worked [at DC] and they used to tell me they would have an editorial meeting once a month and put our books on the table and say, “Let’s see if we can figure out why the Marvel books are outselling ours.” They would look at the cover and one genius would say, “I know why! It’s because there’s more dialogue balloons on the covers.” So the next month they would put a lot of dialogue balloons on the covers. The minute I found out about it, I took off all the dialogue balloons. It didn’t make *any* difference in the sales. That wasn’t what did it. But it must have driven them crazy! Then they would say, “It’s because they use a lot of red on their covers.” So that next month we would stop using red! We played this little game for months. They never caught on.<sup>40</sup>

Of course keeping up with all this work was incredibly tiring for Lee. He was writing all the comics, assigning all the artists to their various tasks, speaking around the country, writing his monthly soapbox and running the various fan outreach efforts. It was, to harken back to an old hero, a Herculean endeavor.

### ***Talent Magnet***

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<sup>38</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 153.

<sup>39</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 154.

<sup>40</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 176.

“Fortunately, over the years, I’ve devised a technique for dealing with all this work, namely getting the best people possible to help.”—Stan Lee<sup>41</sup>

Comic book professionals wanted to work at Marvel. Roy Thomas remembers entering the field in 1965, and how badly he wanted to meet Lee:

I wanted to meet Stan Lee, because despite my admiration for [DC writers] Gardner Fox and John Broome and others, I knew Stan was writing the most vital comics around. So I just sat down one night at the hotel and—I wrote him a letter! Not applying for a job or anything so mundane as that—I just said I admired his work, and would like to buy him a drink sometime.<sup>42</sup>

While Lee declined on the drink, he did offer the fresh talent an opportunity to take a writing test. When Thomas passed the test (taken on a Friday), Lee issued him a writing assignment due the following Monday.

Some of the top artists in the field cut their teeth working for Lee, and their work is memorialized today. For instance a class at NYU teaches the connections between film and the comic strip, and uses the work of Steve Ditko to illustrate how efficiently perspective was used in the comics.<sup>43</sup> Even DC talent—like Gene Colan, Frank Giacoia, and Mike Esposito—couldn’t resist working at Marvel. They avoided incensing (or even telling) their DC bosses by using pseudonyms.<sup>44</sup> Ronin Ro wrote: “Stan was the best talent scout the industry has ever seen—John Romita, John Buscema, Gil Kane, and other are today considered some of the greatest ever to work in the medium. Stan also discovered new talents like Jim Steranko and Barry Smith, whose work eventually changed the look of comics.”<sup>45</sup>

Lee’s talent hunt went outside of the mainstream market. In the mid-seventies, Lee also engaged with top artists from the underground comic scene, simply because he found the scene exciting. The underground scene was epitomized by *Mad Magazine*, which lampooned the mainstream media, filling a role much like *The Onion* or *The John Stewart Show* today. Unsurprisingly, most underground artists would have thought there was something wrong with Stan Lee, who epitomized the fast-talking big businessman they so often satirized. However Lee’s reputation and enthusiasm—accompanied by Marvel’s deep pockets—enabled him to bridge the gap (he offered to pay \$100/page, whereas underground typical pay was \$25/page).

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<sup>41</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 140.

<sup>42</sup> Raphael, Jordan and Tom Spurgeon. *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003. 116.

<sup>43</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 171.

<sup>44</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 142.

<sup>45</sup> Ronin, Ro. *Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee and the American Comic Book Revolution*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2004. 292-93.

Lee identified Denis Kitchen as the man who could help him put together the underground comic, and referred to himself on the credits page as the “instigator” of the comic, explaining, “if [the racy material in the comic] gets me in trouble, I can say, ‘I’m not responsible, all I did was instigate it.’ But if it’s a big hit, then I can say ‘Hey, I *instigated* it!’”<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately the comic didn’t sell. Lacking the raw bite, dirty language and lasciviousness that made the underground comics unique, the Marvel/Comix combo instead just looked awkward, like a “middle aged man wearing bell bottoms.”<sup>47</sup> Despite the failure of the product, it is telling that Lee’s likeability and verve enabled him to get the project off the ground in the first place.

Occasionally, too, people outside the industry would come to Marvel and ask for Stan Lee. For instance, Alan Renais, a successful screenwriter, sought Lee out to cowrite a screenplay.<sup>48</sup> The screenplay didn’t ever get taped, but again talent wanted to work with Lee.

When Marvel comics would become the fodder for Saturday morning cartoon shows, Lee would work closely with the creative teams in LA to make sure they did justice to the original. Occasionally these trips ended badly; Lee would be disappointed when the show’s creative team cared more about catering to the sponsor than the artistic integrity of the show.<sup>49</sup> Overall, though, Lee’s enthusiasm and good reputation paved the way for him to make connections with talent working in a number of fields.

Notably Kirby was absent from these conversations. While he was offered the job of Artistic Director by Lee, Kirby declined.<sup>50</sup> He preferred to be a freelancer, he explained. He didn’t want the hassle. But, almost despite himself, Kirby had a huge influence on the talent--and the shape of the comics to come.

### ***Creative Leadership Techniques***

In their very different ways, Kirby and Lee managed to shape the people and the industry. Here are a few of their tricks.

#### ***Lee Method: Keep Talent Busy***

Stan Lee hated to see an idle artist—he thought that was the quickest way to get your talent scooped by the competition or frustrate them into finding another line of work. And it personally bothered him that the people in his employ might be scrambling to find money to

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<sup>46</sup> Raphael, Jordan and Tom Spurgeon. *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003. 144.

<sup>47</sup> Raphael, Jordan and Tom Spurgeon. *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003. 144.

<sup>48</sup> Raphael, Jordan and Tom Spurgeon. *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003. Pictures section.

<sup>49</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 33.

<sup>50</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 174.

eat.<sup>51</sup> So Stan made sure to provide continuous employment, sometimes to the detriment of the company.

In one famous anecdote, Stan doled out more assignments than the company needed—and didn't bother to tell boss Martin Goodman about the extraneous inventory. He stuffed the books into a closet, and intended to use it when the time was right. When Goodman saw the closet he ordered Lee to fire everyone in the bullpen. Lee understood that Martin was making a bottom-line based decision and followed his boss's orders. But he still felt it was a mistake—he needed to assign the extra stories, he argued, in order to invest in his people. He said:

Those were the black days for me. Not only had I worked closely with all our staff writers and artists, but I considered most of them my personal friends. [ . . . ] And suddenly I was the one who had to give them the bad news, to tell them they were out of work because the decision had been made to first use up the inventory I had accumulated before assigning any new strips.”<sup>52</sup>

Later, Lee's “Marvel Method” would enable him to create a number of artist assignments at once.

The “Marvel Method” seemed like an answer to Lee's problem of keeping his artists and his bosses happy. Here's how the Marvel Method worked: Lee would meet briefly with an artist and outline a story. He'd create a short sheet of notes on the story, which might read something like this:

In this issue I want the Sub-Mariner to kidnap Sue Storm. Her husband, Reed, has to lead the Fantastic Four under the sea in a rescue attempt. The gimmick of the story will be, Namor didn't kidnap Sue to use her as bait to capture the FF, but rather because he loves her. When Reed rescues her I'd like to show Namor's heartbreak, so that the reader actually feels sorry for an ostensible villain.<sup>53</sup>

The artist would then draw up story accordingly, using the pacing he preferred and embellishing the story with his own details. And, after the story was drawn, Lee would go back over it and fill in the dialogue bubbles. The method kept a lot of artists working because it took much longer to draw and color a page than simply to write the short bits of dialogue that went inside the bubbles. Lee's approach to production was a success in the short-term; he kept an unusually high number of artists busy with assignments for months and played on his strength of writing quickly. In the long run, though, the method almost became a liability because the collaboration

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<sup>51</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 80.

<sup>52</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 81.

<sup>53</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 145.

made it unclear exactly who contributed what—a fine point that would become hugely significant when the revenue surrounding these characters skyrocketed.

### *Lee Method: Don't Censor Your Talent*

Lee preferred to let his talent sort out the creative details. He remembered working on a comic strip that used the word *pogo stick* in the punch line. The editor felt that *pogo stick* wouldn't resonate with rural audiences, and he instructed Lee to change the gag so that the punch line had the word *roller skates* instead. Lee knew that *roller skates* deflated the joke, but he changed it anyway. The strip was eventually dropped, and Lee said, "this type of censorship, to me, is almost indecent." When you hire an artist to do a job, you let him do the job. Lee elaborated:

It seems to me that if a person is doing something creatively, and he feels that's the way it ought to be done, you've gotta let him do it. That way you either don't let him do the strip at all, or let him do it his way. But I think too many books have failed because at some point they were emasculated by an editor. And because the artist, or the writer, or the musician, or the actor, or whatever is desperate for the job, he compromises. He feels it should be done one way, the editor wants it done another way, and they compromise. I don't think anything good artistically has ever been accomplished that way.<sup>54</sup>

Lee put his words into action years later when the Hulk, a Marvel franchise, became the subject of a popular primetime television show. He was amazed to see how the creative team transformed the Hulk for this new medium, and he was glad to stay out of their way. "I learned a helluva lot about TV from Ken Johnson during the many discussions we had about how to best adapt *The Incredible Hulk* to television. The success of that show, under Ken's direction, proves beyond any doubt how important it is to put creative projects in the hands of truly creative people."<sup>55</sup> Lee enjoyed being fairly hands-off as a boss, and was quick to hand responsibility to an enterprising young person. Spurgeon and Raphael wrote: "He was quick to recognize talent in a new writer or artist, and he had no qualms about assigning important responsibility to young staffers. Conway, for example, was twenty-three years old when he assumed the mantle of editor in chief."<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, some argue that Lee didn't give his artists the kind of freedom he purported to value. The Marvel style was Jack Kirby's style; every drawing needed to look like a Kirby in order to maintain the Marvel brand. That is, except for the other drawing dynamo, Steve Ditko, who more or less did as he pleased. Don Heck, another artist in the bullpen, put it this

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<sup>54</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 36.

<sup>55</sup> Lee, Stanley. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 198.

<sup>56</sup> Raphael, Jordan and Tom Spurgeon. *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003. 152.

way: “Stan wanted Kirby to be Kirby, Ditko to be Ditko . . . and everyone else to be Kirby.”<sup>57</sup> To that effect, Lee created in house style guides and training programs to equip his artists to emulate “King” Kirby. Some of this involved sitting with Jack himself and planning a rough layout of the story.<sup>58</sup> While Lee might have missed an opportunity to have a variety of artistic styles, he successfully capitalized on the product that was selling and was able to get that product out of most of his artists. “To get a financially viable comic from Kirby is one thing,” said comic book historian Ronin Ro. “But Stan Lee could get marketable work out of every guy under him.” “He got the best out of his people, Stan did,” wrote Mark Evanier, “And he certainly got the very best out of Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, encouraging styles and imaginations to run free.”<sup>59</sup>

To work with Kirby was, Lee has written and said numerous times, a complete delight. Lee certainly stayed out the way of Kirby’s talent. He would outline the barest of bones for a story, and Kirby would be off and running, adding all kinds of creative touches Lee never thought of. “I can honestly say that doing those strips with those talented guys was one of the happiest times in my life,” Lee reflected.<sup>60</sup>

#### *Lee Method: Make Your Talent Part of Your Product*

As Lee sought to make readers feel more involved with Marvel, he tried to introduce them to the Marvel creative department. One could almost argue that he made himself—and everyone who worked for him, right down to the secretary—into characters for his readers to meet on the page. One way Lee made the staff visible was by creating a credits page, written in the same chatty tone as his Soapbox letter. The credits page was unique in comics; up until then the artists drawing and inking the panels had remained anonymous. The credits might read something like this: “Written with Passion by Stan Lee. Drawn with Pride by Jack Kirby. Inked with Perfection by Joe Sinnott. And lettered with a Scratchy Pen by Artie Simek.”<sup>61</sup> In addition to this shout-out, Stan gave his staff nicknames—“Genial” Gene Colan, “Darlin’” Dick Ayers, Gil “Sugar” Kane, and so on. Some staff didn’t like their names, but Lee didn’t care. He knew it was the right sort of thing for the readers, and that was what mattered most.

He also talked about the staff frequently in his monthly newsletter *The Bullpen Bulletin*. These shout-outs occasionally changed or shaped the careers of the people in his department. For instance, in the middle of his career, Jack was nicknamed the “King of Comics” by Stan Lee, and Stan reported that he was the “artists’ artist.” To this day, Kirby is known as the King of Comics, and this kind of publicity made it possible for a young fan to become particularly devoted to their favorite artist. Here’s the long-version of Lee’s quote about Jack:

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<sup>57</sup> Evanier, Mark. *Kirby: King of Comics* New York: Abrams, 2008. 133.

<sup>58</sup> Evanier, Mark. *Kirby: King of Comics* New York: Abrams, 2008. 133.

<sup>59</sup> Evanier, Mark. *Kirby: King of Comics* New York: Abrams, 2008. 133.

<sup>60</sup> Lee, Stan. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 146.

<sup>61</sup> Lee, Stan. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 154.

Didja know? Jolly Jack Kirby's ears must be really burning. Every comics mag fan has his own personal favorite among all the artists employed by all the different companies—but when it comes to naming the ARTISTS' ARTIST, there isn't even a contest!! Every time the conversation here at the Bullpen gets around to artwork (and what ELSE is there to talk about?), you should hear the top men in the field lower their voices when the name King Kirby comes up. It's generally agreed that when you talk of super-hero illustration; of action drawing; of imaginative conceptions; of dynamic double-barreled drama; Marvel's many-faceted master simply has no peer! There is hardly a pro pencil-pusher in the field today who hasn't been influenced by Jolly Jack's memorable masterpieces—or by the constantly shattering impact of his creativity.<sup>62</sup>

The overall effect of making his staff part of the product was to three-fold. First, it branded certain artists as Marvel artists—even after Kirby went to work for DC, the vast majority of readers continued associating him with Marvel. Second, it enabled readers to feel another level of intimacy with the product. Finally, it allowed Lee to promote the careers and further the professionalization of the field, another passion of Lee's.

*Lee Method: Reposition the Industry in the Wider Marketplace*

“We're trying to elevate the medium. We're trying to make [comics] as respectable as possible.”—Stan Lee<sup>63</sup>

Lee and Kirby both saw endless possibilities in comics, and their comments now seem almost prophetic. Evanier reports that Kirby saw exactly where the industry was going—even seeing that comics would make a comeback in the movies:

[Kirby] said the ComiCon<sup>64</sup> would grow until it took over all of San Diego. He said the definition of ‘comics’ would expand beyond those things printed on cheap paper. It would be about comic books as movies, comic books as television, comic books in forms yet to be invented. He said—and this is a quote—“It will be where all of Hollywood will come every year to look for the idea for next year's movies.”<sup>65</sup>

Stan Lee felt that comic books had the power to make important social commentary, to be incisive and satirical and smart. He believed that a day would come when an intelligent adult wouldn't be embarrassed to be seen walking down the street with a comic strip, and he constantly pushed toward that goal.

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<sup>62</sup> Evanier, Mark. *Kirby: King of Comics* New York: Abrams, 2008. 16.

<sup>63</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 11.

<sup>64</sup> “ComiCon” is the annual convention for the comic book industry.

<sup>65</sup> Evanier, Mark. *Kirby: King of Comics* New York: Abrams, 2008. 207.

One reason people thought of comics as low media is because of the way it was produced: on the cheapest of paper with all sorts of absurd ads in the back of the books. On one of Stan's lecture circuits, a fan asked him what he thought of the ads. Lee's response is especially interesting, because it reveals his methodology for changing someone's mind about comics. He said:

I couldn't agree with you more. Yes, they are necessary in order for the comics to be financially successful, but they evidence a tremendous lack of judgment and discretion on the part of our advertising department. For years the ads in comic books have been a source of great embarrassment to me, and as soon as possible I intend to upgrade them. We had one I thought was a horror [ . . . ] It said "You can be taller, increase your height by three inches." And I went to my then-publisher and I said, "How can you allow a thing like this in the book?" and so we did take that ad out. Unfortunately it's just one of the things we haven't had too much time to think about. But I agree with you 100 percent.<sup>66</sup>

Lee's response immediately pacifies the audience member. He readily acknowledges the problem, provides a distinct example of the problem that is worse than anything the critic himself brought up, and promises to try to fix the problem—and shows how he's already doing so.

Lee also tried to reposition comics by responding to professional critics. He had some very real opposition to his product, most notably a famous psychologist claimed that adolescent violence could be linked to comic book reading.<sup>67</sup> Lee sought to deflect these critiques by suggesting that comics don't promote violence, but rather action and adventure. He said,

Our comics are not violent. Sure, they have a lot of fighting and action. Fistfights. The kind of fistfights we have in our comics is no different from those in *King Richard the Lion-Hearted* fighting in the crusades. You've got to have conflict. Good vs. Evil. There has to be a giant saying "Fe fi fo fum" and chasing Jack. That's not violence. The real violence in the world is bigotry, war, hatred.<sup>68</sup>

Later in his autobiography, Lee would be more personally derogatory. He wrote that his opposition, Dr. Wertham had a "muddy, little mind" and that as far as he was concerned "Wertham was a fanatic, pure and simple."<sup>69</sup>

Lee also attempted to reposition comics by talking publicly about the potential they had in the classroom. He said:

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<sup>66</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 38-39.

<sup>67</sup> The psychologist's name was Dr. Frederic Wertham. See more in McLaughlin. McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 216.

<sup>68</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 52-53.

<sup>69</sup> Lee, Stan. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 92-93.



If comics were given to every kid from kindergarten up, I would be greatly surprised if the reading ability of students didn't improve 100 percent. Of course, librarians and teachers might not see it this way. If you're an educator or an educational publisher, you've got to think that textbooks are more influential than cheap volume literature, or, as they think of it, "newsstand sensational material." But what they don't see is that comics can be a bridge for alienated kids.<sup>70</sup>

He suggested that comics should also be studied at the college level, saying, "If people are going to study movies, TV, opera, ballet, concert, sculpture, painting, and other media, they might as well study comic books because comic books are just as profound and strong a factor in shaping, and moving, and molding people's thoughts."<sup>71</sup> He argued there was no reason comics shouldn't be seen as viable art; at one point, he even allowed that he may be as good of a writer as Charles Dickens.<sup>72</sup>

While Lee had a handful of uphill battles—the comics were a cheap, pulpy medium, and the content did offend some readers—ultimately he was quite successful in repositioning comics and helping to professionalize the industry. His success can be measured in the following way: all the predictions he made regarding the industry came true.

### ***Jack Kirby: The Approachable Master***

Although his personality was so different from the jovial, over-the-top Stan Lee, Jack Kirby was enormously invested in his work and passionate about the work of others. He enjoyed the work of most of his contemporaries, yet by almost any industry standard he was the top performer. When he left Marvel, Lee passed the responsibility of penciling "The Fantastic Four" (one of Kirby's babies) to John Buscema. Buscema—like other artists Lee approached with this task who'd refused outright—didn't want the responsibility of following such a luminary. "He approached genius as far as I'm concerned," Buscema said. "He revolutionized the way we did comics."<sup>73</sup> Buscema kept a stack of Jack Kirby comics on the desk for reference. When he got stuck, he'd browse through the pages for inspiration. Decades later, long after he'd finished his tenure as the penciler for the comic, he kept Kirby's books.

Kirby was very available for new talent. Mark Evanier remembered:

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<sup>70</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 51.

<sup>71</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 104.

<sup>72</sup> McLaughlin, Jeff, ed. *Stan Lee: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. 52.

<sup>73</sup> Ronin, Ro. *Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee and the American Comic Book Revolution*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2004. 145.

Jack was a very sweet man with a heart as large as his imagination — and if you read anything he ever did, you at least know how large his imagination could be. [ . . . ] he was an enormous supporter of New Talent. If you showed Jack your work, he would not give you an art critique — he didn't do that kind of thing — but he would give you words of encouragement, along with pointers of a "spiritual" sense, discussing the mindset with which you should approach your work. And he would never, no matter how poor your work was, tell you to give up.<sup>74</sup>

Kirby was interested in the perspectives of others and believed that everyone brought something valuable to the table. It didn't matter if you were a new artist or an old artist. For instance, when Evanier was working with Kirby, Kirby was doing a retake on Superman for DC. He complimented Evanier's ability to draw the seal with the super "S" and asked Evanier to do it for him. Evanier wrote, "It was the one thing in the world that I drew better than Jack Kirby."<sup>75</sup>

Kirby's humble persona belied an extreme confidence in his abilities. "Give me your worst book, and I'll make it your best," he reportedly said to DC executives upon his hire.<sup>76</sup> But despite his self confidence, he believed in other people, too. And he didn't think he was a better person than someone else simply because he drew a sharper comic.

### ***Teach by Example: The Kirby Effect***

"If you look at my characters, you'll find me." –Jack Kirby<sup>77</sup>

During his three years as Kirby's assistant, Mark Evanier identified something he dubbed "the Kirby effect." The Kirby Effect is the result a reader responding passionately to the power of Kirby's artistry. He elaborates:

It is more than a matter of a kid reading a comic book and enjoying it; it is a matter of something special — some primal and positive energy — reaching up off a badly-printed page, arcing to the youth's creative nodes and stimulating them in some way, bringing to the forefront, all that the person possessed in imagination and vision. The stimulation might later be redoubled with a personal audience with *The King* but that was, while always desired, not mandatory; a lot of kids got it just through the work, just by avidly reading *New Gods* or *Kamandi* or whatever.

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<sup>74</sup> Evanier, Mark. "The Jack FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions About Jack Kirby." *POV Online* <http://www.povonline.com/jackfaq/JackFaq1.htm> (accessed November 21, 2010).

<sup>75</sup> Evanier, Mark. "Notes from M.E." *POV Online* August 23, 2003. <http://www.povonline.com/notes/Notes082203.htm> (accessed November 21, 2010).

<sup>76</sup> Evanier, Mark. *Kirby: King of Comics* New York: Abrams, 2008. 167,

<sup>77</sup> Jack on "Entertainment Tonight."

That enriching — I have come to call it the Kirby Effect — might not send the youth stampeding into the field of writing and/or drawing. Often, the reaffirmation offered by Jack's work inspired someone to an achievement in business, in others of the Arts...even, in one case, to become the best danged spot-welder he could be.<sup>78</sup>

At the end of his career, Jack moved to Hollywood and did cartoon animation. The young artists working there had grown up on his work, and were thrilled to see him arrive. Evanier describes: “Roz would drive him to the studio twice a week, and all the young artists on staff would line up to greet him. Over and over, it was ‘Mr. Kirby, I have to tell you, your work is the reason I got into drawing.’”<sup>79</sup>

High profile creative people from a number of industries have emphasized Kirby's influence on their work. For instance, Neil Gaimon, the incredibly prolific and popular science fiction writer, reflected: “Kirby's influence on me, just like Kirby's influence on comics, was already set in stone.”<sup>80</sup> Pulitzer prize winning author Michael Chabon similarly wrote in his author's note of *Kavalier and Clay*: “Finally, I want to acknowledge the deep debt I owe in this and everything else I've ever written to the work of the late Jack Kirby, the King of Comics” (639). As Evanier wrote about Kirby's omnipresent influence: “If he wasn't your favorite artist, the odds were good that he was your favorite artist's favorite artist.”<sup>81</sup>

Since the eighties, Jack Kirby has become a household name. Mark Evanier wrote that Kirby spent the last years of his life (he died in 1994) accepting awards. Being present for all the honors the world suddenly wanted to bestow on him was nearly a full-time job. But Kirby's story has a pull of bitterness along with the sweet. During his time in the comic world, Kirby was an unsung hero. Marvel executives never truly recognized his talent. And, as years went by and Marvel was sold to various companies, many executives above the Marvel company didn't even know his name (one executive even thought that Stan Lee did all of the drawing along with the writing). Kirby didn't receive credit for a number of his designs, and walking into a toystore with his grandson and seeing all the Hulk toys for sale (many with his drawings on the packaging) was enough to send him into a tailspin. So unlike Stan Lee, who taught so pointedly and was such a personality, Kirby taught by example, through his work. And people have found him there, and celebrate him today.

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<sup>78</sup> Evanier, Mark. “The Jack FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions About Jack Kirby.” *POV Online* <http://www.povonline.com/jackfaq/JackFaq1.htm> (accessed November 21, 2010).

<sup>79</sup> Evanier, Mark. *Kirby: King of Comics* New York: Abrams, 2008. 191.

<sup>80</sup> Evanier, Mark. *Kirby: King of Comics* New York: Abrams, 2008. 13.

<sup>81</sup> Evanier, Mark. “The Jack FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions About Jack Kirby.” *POV Online* <http://www.povonline.com/jackfaq/JackFaq1.htm> (accessed November 21, 2010).

## *Legacy*

“The early sixties was an era I’ll never forget, a time of cascading creativity and escalating excitement. It seemed as though we could do nothing wrong. The ideas were tumbling out like confetti and the entire bullpen staff was caught up in all the excitement” –Stan Lee<sup>82</sup>

Kirby and Lee together had an enormous influence on the comic book industry, and the wider world of entertainment. While Lee was lauded during the 60s and 70s, today he is a highly controversial persona in the field. His trademark sign-off, “Excelsior!” is often satirized. He has worked in Hollywood for over two decades without experiencing the same level of success as he did in the comics industry. And the fervent fans whom he so adored have become critical of Lee’s tendency to overstate his role in the creation of the comics they love. Lee has also been involved in a number of lawsuits—for instance he sued Marvel for \$10 million following the release of the 2002 “Spider-Man” movie. In recent years, now into his eighties, Lee seems to have mellowed out. He’s quicker to acknowledge the work of Ditko and Kirby in creating the characters. While critics may claim Lee’s gesture is “too little, too late,” comic book historians agree that Marvel simply would not have become the force it was in the 60s and 70s without Lee at the top.

Meanwhile, Kirby’s legacy continues to blossom. Ronin Ro elaborated:

Jack himself continues to be the subject of well-received magazines the Jacky Kirby Quartly, the Complete Jack Kirby, and the award-winning Jack Kirby Collector . . . In Hollywood, the phenomenal success of Fox’s live-action *X-Men* (which earned \$100 million in a quick eleven days) and its sequel (\$85.6 million in two days) was followed by other blockbusters: *Spider-Man* (a record \$114.8 million its debut weekend), *Daredevil* (over \$40 million), and *The Hulk* (a historic \$62.6 million in forty-eight hours). . . .

If Disney’s computer-generated *Dinosaur* isn’t reminding Jack’s fans of *Devil Dinosaur* (right down to its tale of a dinosaur and a lemur uniting for a heroic expedition), if Neo, the hero of *The Matrix Reloaded*, isn’t knocking dozens of clones in black suits off his back or pounding his right fist on the pavement before flying (scenes seemingly torn from Jack’s old *Hulk* and *Thor* pages), the machine-lined walls, metal surfaces, explosions, acrobatic fight scenes, computer screens, and technological wonders in most big budget action movies bring Jack’s old drawings to mind.

While most of his peers have been quietly relegated to comics history Jack has had his work exhibited in France’s National Center for International Comics museum and has

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<sup>82</sup> Lee, Stan. *Excelsior!* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 169.

been the subject of heated bidding during auctions at Sotheby's; and no less than the Smithsonian Institution requested to have the battered desk at which he sat and worked.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ronin, Ro. *Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee and the American Comic Book Revolution*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2004. 292.