

No Cape Required

Somewhere along the trendy College Street strip in Toronto, there stands a closely guarded building...the studio of Cameron Stewart! Can the reclusive artist who once inked life into Superman, Batman, Catwoman, and Hellboy save the shrinking comics universe from the combined threat of Hollywood film specs and forty year old superhero addicts?

Interview by Shane Laurila; Photography by Craig Boyko; Illustrations by Cameron Stewart

Let's start off with the story of how you broke into comics via a Grant Morrison autograph.

I've always been into comic books ever since I was a kid, but when I first started taking notice of who actually wrote or illustrated them Grant Morrison was one of my early favourites. His *Arkham Asylum* graphic novel was at that time like nothing I'd ever seen before and certainly like nothing I'd ever read. He came to Toronto in 1989 for an autograph signing at the Silver Snail and I waited in line for hours in the freezing cold. Years later, in 1999, when I was working two retail jobs at the Silver Snail and Suspect Video, I went to the San Diego Comics Convention with my portfolio in tow. Most of it was just fan art. I wasn't expecting a job, just looking to get some criticism and input on my work. Morrison was there doing signings for a couple of books he was working on. Most people were there to get autographs for *Justice League*. I arrived with an older and fairly obscure title of his

called *St. Swithin's Day*. That got his attention and opened the door for us to have a conversation. I asked him if he'd look at my work, which he did, and he liked, and he suggested that I talk to his editor as they had yet to lock down an illustrator for some upcoming issues of *The Invisibles*. Arriving in San Diego on my first day - as just a fan - and one of my favourite comics writers is talking about getting me a job.

And did you get the job?

I did talk to the editor and show her my work but when I got home what followed was two months of nothing. I had just got to the point where I had resigned myself to the fact that nothing was going to happen when one of the other editors at DC called me to do some work on *Scooby Doo*. It wasn't the comic I really wanted to do but it was a way in and a professional job. The first editor did eventually call and I did get to work on *The Invisibles*, but not until the very end and not until some



other inking jobs she assigned. Since then I've been working non-stop.

As a kid did you spend hours practicing?

I would draw my favourite characters, copy them and then change superficial details. Like, I'd draw The Flash but turn him into my own character. Sometimes I go through my old sketch books and cringe, but I still do that for my own personal study. If I'm interested in how somebody draws something I will copy it to learn, but nobody will ever see those.

Other than *The Flash* what were you reading as a kid?

When I was very young mostly DC Comics like *Batman* and *Superman*. I remember that I got teased for reading *Wonder Woman* because it was supposed to be a girls' comic. But I enjoyed reading about a woman in a gold bustier with an invisible plane.

Was she an inspiration for the well-proportioned women you're known for drawing?

It could have been inspired by Lynda Carter. I remember watching that show as a kid and not really understanding the feelings it was generating in me. An important influence was that, when I was younger, I lived in England where I read comics like *Eagle* and *2000A.D.* The artist who I spent the most time copying was the definitive Judge Dredd artist, Brian Bolland. So I have a mix of American and British influences.

Since *Scooby Doo* you've worked on *Catwoman*, *Superman Adventures*, *Batman*, *Hellblazer*, *Deadenders*, *Human Target*, *Transmetropolitan*, *The Manhattan Guardian* and *Hellboy*. As a comic book artist, that's a lot of collaboration.

I've been amazingly lucky that I've worked with so many people in such a short time. I still view myself as a rookie but I've worked with some of the best in the business. The writers I'd always wanted to work with were Alan Moore, Grant Morrison and Peter Milligan. I've worked with Grant and Peter, so the only one left is Alan Moore, but he says he's done with comics. These days, though, I'm more interested in moving away from the collaborative efforts and developing my own stories. I like the collaborative aspect but it hits that point where you often find the story is going in a direction that's against your vision of it. Sometimes I'll be illustrating a scene that's just boring to me, and if I was writing the story myself it wouldn't have been included. Collaboration can be frustrating because someone else's input into the comic is often not the vision you had. That happens all the time with colouring. I've worked

with great colourists, but when I see the final product I'm often surprised or shocked. Not because it's bad work, just because it's not how I would have done it. In the future I'd like to move away from working on other people's properties and create more of my own stories.

Describe the collaboration process with Grant. He'll usually give me a general description of the characters. Like, with *Seaguy*, he told me he wanted him to look like a young Peter O'Toole. I didn't want to draw *Seaguy* by copying Peter O'Toole photos, but that gives me a springboard to draw a handsome guy with a long face and blonde hair. Then I add much of my own vision. One of the collaborative problems that can arise with Grant in that when he writes scripts he has all the visual information included but the dialogue has been written in a very temporary, rough form and he writes the final script only after he sees what I've drawn. So working with Grant feels much more collaborative than with other writers, because I know that he's extrapolated the dialogue from things I've drawn. But when I read the final product I often think that if I'd known that's how the dialogue was going to turn out I would have drawn things in a different way.

Are you in a place in your career where you can sit at the bargaining table with editors to have your own work published?

As far as DC goes I don't know, because I haven't tried it yet. But with some of the smaller publishing companies, yes. My friend and writing partner, Ray Fawkes, and I have already self-published a couple of short stories of our own characters, *The Apocalipstix*, an all-girl rock band in a post-nuclear wasteland - sort of Mad Max meets Josie & The Pussycats - and we're in talks to bring that to one of the smaller publishers.

DC isn't the young and innocent publisher that it might have been when *Superman* was young and innocent. It's a major brand. What's your relationship with them? Are you just a cog in their machine?

When you're working on something like *Superman* it is a major brand and you don't have as much creative control as you might like. So, yeah, you are a little bit like a cog in the machine. But the other side of that coin is that DC publishes a significant number of 'creator-owned' titles, created and owned by the talent rather than the corporation. *Seaguy* is creator-owned, the copyright on those characters belongs to Grant and myself, and I hope to do much more creator-owned work in the future. My relationship with DC, though, is great. They've treated me very well.

Why the abrupt end to *Seaguy*?

Seaguy was initially conceived as three volumes of three issues each, but it ended after the first volume. I think the reason *Seaguy* maybe didn't catch on is not because he didn't have super powers but because he just wasn't Batman or Spider-Man. It's difficult to sell a new character in the comics market today because the audience has shrunk. The majority of people buying comics have been reading *Batman* for thirty years and that's all they want to keep reading. They're just not that interested in new characters. So a lot of comic book stores will cater to that and not stock new material, because comic book stores, unlike magazine and book stores, are in the uncomfortable position of not being able to return what they order if it doesn't sell. Then it becomes kind of a vicious circle where people only read *Batman* or *X-Men* because they're two of the few titles that are being stocked where they live. Here in Toronto we're spoiled with a few great shops that cater to all different tastes with a wide range of stock. But you get into comic book stores in some smaller towns and there are four or five main titles being stocked. So a character like *Seaguy* doesn't sell too well and, for the company, that's taken as a lack of interest from the comics market and evidence that all fans want is more Batman. It's frustrating because I've done my time at DC, worked on some of those big titles and now I want to do new material with my own characters outside the superhero genre, but it's a risk.

Has the success of Hollywood's superhero movies had an influence on how comics are drawn or conceived?

Comic book artists are certainly a little more saavy now than they were in the past. Most of them know that Hollywood is keeping a close eye on our medium. I'm not going to lie - it would be great to have something that I've done be turned into a film. The danger of that, and I've seen this happening a lot, is when writers and artists treat their comics as a stepping stone to movies. There are a lot of comics being made both independently and by major publishers that are clearly designed to appeal to Hollywood. They look and read like illustrated film pitches, with drawings of famous actors for the characters. The problem with those comics is that the imagination is being scaled back to accommodate the limits of a film budget. That reduces comics to being merely a testing ground for film properties, rather than a creative and exciting medium in its own right.

Could comic books become more popularized if artists and writers were afforded more visibility? Stan Lee seems to be the only famous comics guy in North America.



Stan Lee is the only genuine celebrity to come out of comic books. When I talk with people who know nothing about comic books and they find out what my job is they always ask, 'Oh, have you met Stan Lee?'. He's famous because he's the media huckster who takes every opportunity to get on television to talk about how he created Spider-Man. As far as Marvel or DC are concerned, though, their stars are the characters. By making the creators visible it takes the focus away from the characters which, ultimately, is the main commodity. This is something particular to North America. In Europe and Japan the artists are celebrities. Moebius is a national hero in

France. In Japan all the manga artists hold press conferences for their new releases.

Why do North American artists live a life of indentured labour?

A lot of artists are former fans who are just grateful to be able to draw Superman or Wolverine. Remember, there's a very specific personality type that becomes a comic book artist. We're the hardcore obsessive fans who couldn't let comics go when we grew up! By and large, we tend to be reclusive types who spend most of our time locked away drawing. The suicide and insanity rate for comic book artists is just below dentists.

That's why I got out from working at home and moved into a studio with people living and working around me.

Why is your art considered 'good'?

I don't even know. For me, it's not good. I'm never satisfied with my own work. I know that I'm competent and that my work is decent. I know that I pay attention to detail, but I'll look at another artist's work and think 'What am I doing? I'll never be this good.' But then there are times when, if I'm feeling bad about my own work I can go into a comic book store, pick something up, flip through it and say, 'Gee, maybe I'm not so bad after all'.

What's the best work out there now?

My favourite artist working today is Frank Quitely. His work is absolutely phenomenal. He creates a world unlike anyone else and I feel completely immersed in it. He worked with Grant Morrison on *X-Men* for a while and the last thing he did was called *We3*. I'd like to say his work is revolutionary but I don't think it is because, for me, the word revolutionary implies that other people will take up what he's done and continue it. And I don't think other artists will because they're just not capable. Some of the current artists are making xerox after xerox after xerox of artists who maybe weren't so good in the first place. But Quitely's raised the bar so high and is, by far, my favourite artist.

What's the biggest obstacle facing the comics industry?

The audience is facing extinction. Children aren't really interested in comics, at least not superhero comics. So what's happening is that the majority of people who are reading comics are the former kids who grew up reading *Batman* and *Spider-Man* and who still want to read *Batman* and *Spider-Man* for whatever reason. So those comics are being written with 25 to 40 year olds in mind, with material that's either uninteresting or inappropriate for children. Whether that's a good thing or not is up for debate. There's a lot of solid work that's coming out but it's a very short-sighted approach to the long-term popularity of comics. If I was calling the shots, Superman or Green Arrow would be written, if not for children, at least for all ages. Like the cigarette companies know, get a customer when they're young and you've got a customer for life. But the kids' comics aren't being written for kids, there's no new readers coming in, so twenty years from now who's that audience going to be? For someone like me who loves the medium and makes his living in the industry, it's a a terrifying thought that there may one day be nobody left to read them.