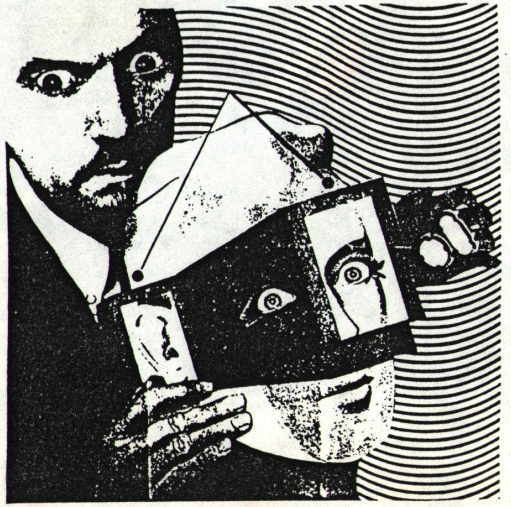

STRANGE SUSPENSE STORIES
STRANGE
SUSPENSE STORIES
APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY
A CHARLTON PUBLICATION
HE HAD TAMPERED WITH THE UNKNOWN AND NOW THE FURY WAS AROUSED!
Read THE MENACE OF THE MAPLE LEAVES!


MARVEL
DOCTOR STRANGE

Does the lamp on the cover look to you like it could have come out of a Ditko comic?

The back cover goes with the lead article, which is actually an excerpt from a chapter on Steve Ditko from the forthcoming book by Mike Benton, MASTERS OF THE IMAGINATION: THE COMIC BOOK ARTISTS HALL OF FAME. (Fall 1994, Taylor Publishing). Other artists profiled in this book include Jack Kirby, Carl Barks, Will Eisner, Harvey Kurtzman, Wallace Wood, Bernard Krigstein, Jack Cole, C.C. Beck, Alex Toth, Joe Shuster, Walt Kelly, and Basil Wolverton.



The centerspread article was submitted by Ditko-obsessed William Landsburg from KOOKS MAGAZINE #8 (Nov. 1991). I think that it's a fascinating look at the master from a different perspective.

Christopher Melchert, who has been a DM contributor since the beginning, provides another inspired look at a classic Ditko comic.

DITKO IN YOUR FUTURE? DARK DOMINION #0, the card set, is going to be transformed into DARK DOMINION the $20 comic which will present Jim Shooter's actual script for the series that he co-created with Ditko. (Did you know that Ditko gets a royalty check from Defiant every month? Marvel, by comparison, doesn't give Ditko anything for co-creating Spider-Man - Marvel's biggest success!)

Joe James, who also worked on the card set, is going to reinterpret the script. This is an idea that is new to comics but is commonplace in other mediums such as movies and music.

This project will include preliminary sketches, which are still being selected. Some unseen Ditko art will probably be included. When I know more, you'll know more. An August release date is set.

Before The Spider-Man:
Steve Ditko's Art of the 1950s

(An extract of a chapter on Steve Ditko from the forthcoming book by Mike Benton, **Masters of the Imagination: Comic Book Artists from The Hall of Fame**. Fall 1994 Taylor Publishing)

Steve Ditko was born November 2, 1927 in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. As a young boy, he was a fan of the 1940s comic book superheroes and the artists who drew them. He especially liked Batman and admired artist Jack Burnley's work on Starman in Adventure Comics and Mort Meskin's Johnny Quick in More Fun Comics. When Halloween came around, Ditko and his brother took to the streets dressed as Batman and Robin. He recalled that as a teenager "my biggest ambition was to get into comics. I liked drawing--the kind done for comics. I never had any desire to be an illustrator or do a Saturday Evening Post cover." Ditko practiced drawing at home until he was able to move to New York City in 1950 to enroll at the Cartoonists and Illustrators School. At the school he came under the influence of instructor Jerry Robinson, one of the first artists to draw Batman. Until Robinson, Ditko confessed he had been completely self-taught. "You'd be amazed at the hours, months, and years one can spend practicing bad drawing habits. Jerry gave me a good foundation, but I have to watch out; bad drawing habits are hard to kill." Robinson remembered Ditko as a quiet and serious student who was fascinated by Batman and costuming.

After working on art assignments with classmates, Ditko made the rounds of several small comic book publishers in 1953. He sold his first published story ("Paper Romance") to Gilmor Publishing, a miniscule company that managed to put out one issue of Daring Love (September 1953). Through Gilmor Publishing, Ditko drew a cowboy story ("Range War") with the Utah Kid and his Indian friend Golden Eagle for Timor Publishing's Blazing Western Comics (January 1954). Ditko and a classmate worked on a horror story ("Hair-Yeee!") for another closet-size publisher (Farrell Publications) which appeared in Strange Fantasy (December 1953). For the same publisher Ditko drew a story about a dissolving man called "Stretching Things" (Fantastic Fears, January 1954). An important phase in Ditko's early career was a three-month stint at the Simon and Kirby studio in late 1953 where he worked with Mort Meskin, his favorite comic book artist. Ditko drew for Black Magic Magazine (November 1953-March 1954) and assisted Jack Kirby and others on an issue of Young Romance and Captain 3-D (December 1953), a "three-dimensional" comic magazine which came with a pair of red and blue reading glasses.

Ditko got his "first break" when Charlton Press offered him the chance to draw stories and covers for their crime, horror, and science fiction titles. His first comic book cover was for Charlton's Racket Squad (January 1954), and he was soon drawing stories for Strange Suspense Stories, This Magazine Is Haunted, and Space Adventures. Ditko's stories in this period (before the comic book code regulations took effect in late 1954) had a nightmarish quality to them with grotesque demons, disturbing perspectives, and smoky shadows. His early work demonstrated a growing mastery of lighting and architectural detail. During 1954 he drew 19 covers and 170 pages of stories for Charlton Comics, including almost all the art for several issues of The Thing, a particularly gory book with dialogue like: "Squirm, you filthy brute! You look better without a head anyway!"

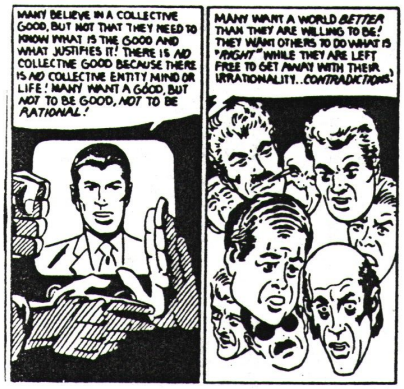
In 1954 Ditko left comics temporarily. When he returned to New York almost a year later, he learned Charlton Comics had cut their pay rates in half following a flood at their printing plant. He went to Marvel Comics and got his first assignment from editor/writer Stan Lee in late 1955. In six months he drew fifteen stories primarily for Marvel's suspense and fantasy titles. Since the Comics Code placed severe restrictions on horror and violence,

Ditko toned down his naturally scary style. When Marvel cut back on production in late 1956, Ditko returned to Charlton Comics. Although rates were low, Charlton gave him all the work he wanted. From 1956 to 1957, his annual production rate soared from 60 pages to over 450 pages. Many stories appeared in the suspense and fantasy titles, such as Strange Suspense Stories, Out of This World, Unusual Tales, and Mysteries of Unexplored Worlds. Ditko's work for Charlton from 1957 to 1958 produced some of his most memorable stories. He experimented with panel layouts and, while some stories during this high production period were understandably sparsely inked, he lavished detailed shading on his figures. His first major comic book character was the unearthly host in Charlton's Tales of the Mysterious Traveler (February 1957): "I am the Mysterious Traveler! There is no country on earth unvisited by me! No epoch in history when my footfalls have not made soft stealthy sounds as I walked through the shadows!" The comic was based on The Mysterious Traveler radio show (1943-1952) whose sonorous narrator introduced each "strange and terrifying tale." With Ditko's art, the Mysterious Traveler became an exciting visual character. For Charlton's This Magazine Is Haunted (July 1957), Ditko drew another suspense host called Dr. Haunt: "I travel the earth searching for the strange and the mysterious! The eerie and the unusual... wherever the hounds of the unworld bay to the moon, there go I, Dr. Haunt!" The blue-faced, green-garbed doctor carried a crooked walking cane with a crystal ball topper. Ditko spent some time designing the costume and obviously enjoyed drawing the character.

In spring 1958 Ditko began working on Charlton's Space Adventures and Outer Space as the nation became obsessed with the space race. In late 1958 Stan Lee asked Ditko to return to Marvel Comics to help launch a new line of science fiction and fantasy comics: Strange Worlds, Tales of Suspense, and Tales to Astonish. Ditko drew stories for all three (including covers for all the second issues) and contributed regularly to Marvel's Strange Tales, Journey into Mystery, and World of Fantasy. Although he was appearing in nearly every issue of Marvel's fantasy comics from 1959 to 1960, he continued his Charlton assignments. In late 1959, Ditko and writer Joe Gill created the first comic book superhero of the Space Age for Charlton Comics. In Space Adventures (March 1960) an atomic rocket accident transforms a "USAF missile expert, test pilot, and ace trouble-shooter" into Captain Atom, a nuclear-powered superhero. Ditko cloaked Captain Atom in a shiny, knitted mail costume and with a breezy mask cut open at the scalp to reveal a shock of blonde-white hair. The captain reportedly bore a resemblance to a sturdier version of the artist sans glasses. With Captain Atom, Ditko's art took on a three-dimensional perspective as the hero flew through space, across pages, and out of panels through a trail of atomic stars. Ditko drew 15 episodes of Captain Atom for Charlton's Space Adventures for a year and a half but observed later that the character "went nowhere."

As the 1960s began, however, Ditko's career was poised to take off. While Captain Atom brought him little recognition at the time, he would soon begin work on his most famous creation: The Amazing Spider-Man!

DITKO = DITKO



To the dedicated comics fans among us the intimate details of the life and work of Steve Ditko are probably very well known, but for the remaining majority the fact we think most important is this: Ditko is co-creator of some of the most famous and popular American comic characters, and some of the most fantastically nutty.

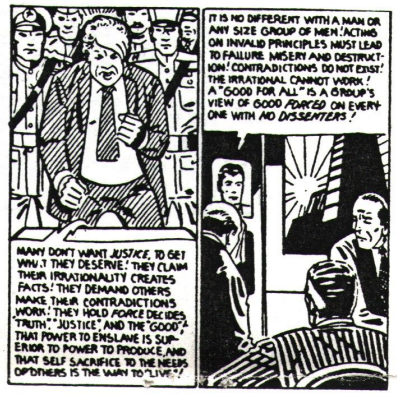
Developing a unique illustrative style through the 1950s and '60s, Ditko's creations for Marvel comics include *Spiderman, Dr. Strange, Shade the Changing Man.* He also created dozens of less popular and downright incomprehensible characters such as *The Mocker, The Question* and *Missing Man,* for other publishers. But it seems Mr. Ditko went on a little vacation along about the late '60s and spent some time under psychiatric supervision. Then he created *Mr. A.*

Only Jack Kirby has injected more pure philosophy into what is still considered a low-brow medium, than Ditko. But where Kirby's philosophy resembles classical pantheism, and idealizes the hugeness of the unknown, Ditko's creations are the children of Objectivism: Ayn Rand reduced to an astounding purity in the crucible of Ditko's inkbottle.

Reduced they are indeed. The characters' names are sometimes cut down to three or four letters, as if begrudging even that much space for anything other than expounding the destructive effects of inner contradiction, the importance of individual responsibility and the insidiousness of compromise. A=A, a thing is what it is and nothing more. Right is always Right and compromise with the Wrong pollutes and even destroys Right. The evil found in Ditko's criminals and their supporters generates not from a pure disregard for the rights of others, though that is present, but from the belief that their crimes aren't really *that bad.* They claim that they are *forced* to antisocial acts or that they are exercising their right to free expression.

There are no "victims of society" in Ditko's black and white world, there are only victims of weakness and ignorance, of compromise and greed and insensitivity. His most pitiful victims are *self*-victimizing, maintaining inner contradictions and engaging in constant inner warfare to defend and justify acts and thoughts they know to be wrong, which they know to be destructive of the greater good.

In the context of the costumed crime-fighter, these ideas can be more easily laughed off, but they can also be presented more succinctly



than in a dry essay. Figures like Mr. A or Killjoy and their foes have been stripped of all qualities not essential to the depiction of the incident at hand. The characters can and do say, in a few words, what might take volumes of philosophical musings in our "real" world.

The strangest thing we find in Ditko's work is our own grudging agreement. Yes, we love to invalidate his basic premise by asking, "but what *is* 'A' and who *determines* what it is? Doesn't the identity of 'A' depend on the perceiver?" Yet we still agree with his conceptions of responsibility and justice. Like Ditko, we are irked by the very idea of "victims of society," implying an innate weakness in humanity which cannot be overcome by the will to achieve and succeed. We are irritated by the popular obsession with preserving the rights and

freedoms of people who have sacrificed all reasonable claim to those rights by their blatant, even aggressive and deliberate disregard of the basic rights of others.

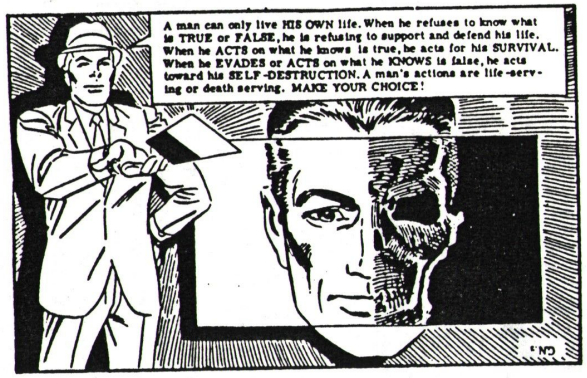
The costumed crimefighter is the idealization of the individual passing beyond the constraints of our laws in response to deeds committed by those with no regard the protection of the weak and those who utilize flaws of a finite regulatory system to perpetrate "legal" injustices. Spiderman was one of the first major "outlaw" crimefighters in comics, and Mr. A is one of the purest. His intervention is welcomed by the masses and secretly approved by the sincere and honest authority, but publicly decried as criminal by those who benefit from the perpetuation of inequity and injustice.

A=A and what is right is right for all people.

It would be nice if things were really as simple as all that.

--Mr. N (N =_)

Note: Mr. A is currently out of print, but Steve Ditko's work has appeared in many mainstream and independent publications. Ask at your local comics store. Not the kid at the cash register, he doesn't know anything. Ask the scruffy guy with half a beard and a beerbelly.



"The Thing on Bald Mountain"
TALES TO ASTONISH #7 (1/60)
reviewed by
Christopher Melchert

A few weeks ago, I stopped in at a comics shop here in Springfield, Missouri, spied a new box of comics at five for a dollar, and walked out twenty minutes later with four dollars' worth. Among my finds was a copy of WHERE CREATURES ROAM #2 (September 1970), reprinting Marvel pre-super-hero stories from 1960 drawn by Ditko, Reinman, Sinnott, and Heck. All four artists have signed their names, by the way: these men took pride in their work. No doubt the hysterical credit lines in special boxes that Stan Lee later added to all Marvel stories helped draw readers' attention to the creators -- I'm sure they did mine, when I became a Marvel freak at ten or eleven. The simple signatures on these stories are much more dignified, though, and one wishes that signatures had been enough.

Don Heck's story is in some ways the most interesting. In the 1970's, I thought of Don Heck as one of the worst artists working in New York; yet his drawing here is admirable: seldom hard to

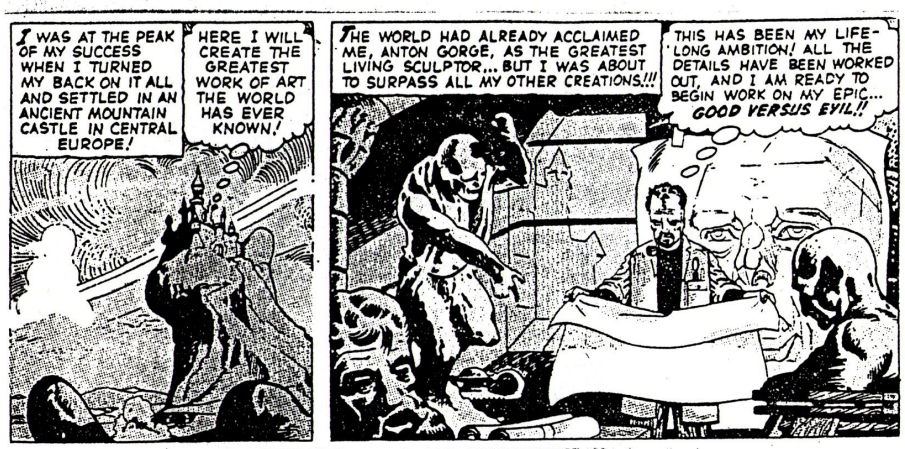
Below: strong drawing from Heck.

understand at once, detailed in panels without being cluttered, not repetitious from panel to panel. He seems closest to the SATURDAY EVENING POST school of commercial illustration. No doubt his work suffered severely when original art went from twice up to once-and-a-half in 1966.

Ditko's story is interesting, too. I thought of him in the 1970's as one of the best. What's striking here is partly how good he already was, more how he got better from here. The drawing is strong: it has more detail, seems more careful than Reinman's; panels are composed much more interestingly than Sinnott's; and, at best, there seems to be more variety within panels than Heck provides in terms of line weight, black areas, blank areas, and so on.

In DITKOMANIA #39, Martin Hirchak characterizes Ditko's work by its "'feel' for mood, depth, and dynamics." These are certainly in evidence, here; e.g., in the opening two panels. Ditko quickly establishes a mood, mainly of isolation and obsession -- the lonely castle, then the sculptor alone amidst his models and diagrams. Depth he gives us, too: foreground, middleground, and background. It's remarkable how many artists

Below: strong drawing from Ditko.



habitually deal with only one or two of these in any one panel, like the other artists in this issue of WHERE CREATURES ROAM. The drawing in back and the head at the lower left even look out into our space, suggesting yet another level. I note different line weights and amount of shading to mark each level. "Dynamics" is the hardest to pin down. Taking Hirchak to mean tensions within the composition, I will point out the many different directions in which heads gaze in panel 2. Isn't it remarkable, too, the twisted, struggling figure that Ditko puts to the left of panel 2, right in the middle of the page? It seems to exteriorize the sculptor's moral struggle.

Admittedly, the art also has its weaknesses: sometimes, succeeding panels seem too much alike (e.g., page 2/panels 4 and 5, page 3/panels 4 and 5), and sometimes one misses more background (e.g., page 3/panels 4 and 5, again). As we have been reminded by Bill Hall's checklist, Ditko drew an awful lot of pages every month, back in the early '60's, and could not have spent a great deal of time on any one.

The story was originally published as "The Thing on Bald Mountain," but the editor of the reprint has retitled it "I Spent Midnight with Monster on Bald Mountain!" This sort of needless adulteration was common enough, when Marvel reprinted these things in the early '70's, and readers should be aware that the recent hardback collection was taken from the '70's reprints, not the original printings in the late '50's and early '60's. I heard of a fan who complained to the editor of that hardback collection of a blurb at the end of one story for the next issue of CREATURES ON THE LOOSE, one of the reprint titles. The editor said he thought that had been its original appearance.

The cover, I'd guess, combines Kirby's drawing with Ditko's inks. The editor of the reprint has forgotten to delete a blurb in the corner referring to another story inside the original but not inside this reprint: "What is the secret of the man called . . . Khan?" I'd guess

that Ditko was instructed to come up with a story around the cover idea: a man in a castle constructs a stone statue, it comes to life and threatens him, but somehow another statue comes to life as well and rescues him. Maybe Ditko was given only the idea of a man in a castle and a stone statue: how the sculptor got out of his jam was up to him.

The plot is this: a sculptor has withdrawn to a mountaintop castle to build his masterpiece, a pair of figures in battle representing good and evil. Lightening strikes the evil statue and it comes to life. It threatens to destroy its creator and seems unstoppable until the statue of good miraculously comes alive in turn. The two statues struggle, fall down the mountain, and are both destroyed. In the final panel, the sculptor, holding the two broken-off heads in his hands, looks up a shaft of light, wondering whom to thank for his deliverance from the sculpture of evil.

The struggle between good and evil and the impossibility of compromise between them became, of course, Ditko's leading theme from the later '60's forward. It became explicit when he discovered Ayn Rand, as it appears, about 1966; however, he approached the problem from numerous angles during the previous decade, and here is an example. It is hard not to see Ditko, himself, in this sculptor. True, there is a sculptor on the cover, already, so this was probably not Ditko's own idea; however, there is no second statue on the cover, and no hint that the statue represents any abstract principle: it must have been Ditko's idea to make this a story of good versus evil.

Building up figures from clay reminds us of the creation story in Genesis, which makes the sculptor not only Ditko but God as well. Yet the story ends with the sculptor looking upwards, as though to God -- in particular, the benevolent God who creates good to neutralize evil. Perhaps, then, we should see the sculptor as the essential man who creates good and evil from natural materials (page 2/panel 3) and must depend on divine mercy to preserve him from evil (page 5/panel 6).

Lacking the element of choice, it is not a very gripping allegory. Choice is just what Ditko would stress later on. This story also lacks any social element: the sculptor faces the evil statue alone, as Ditko's later heroes make their stands alone, but there is no multitude urging accommodation with evil, no temptation to follow that multitude. Still, it is interesting to see Ditko begin to grapple with the problem. It is touching to see the sculptor at the end, looking upward in wonder: it might almost be Ditko, himself, not yet sure how to frame the problem of good and evil that yet obsesses him.