

A “BEHIND THE SCENES” Look at DITKOMANIA #77

by Rob Imes

DM #77 came together surprisingly easily (one says in retrospect) and so I thought it might be fun to give readers a “behind the scenes” glimpse into just how it was done. Most of the material which appeared in the issue was submitted to me less than 2 weeks before the issue was printed – and much of it mere days, even hours, before presstime! The following detailed account will reveal just how much a “fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants” venture producing an issue of DM can be. And how lucky I am to have so many great contributors who make it all possible.

On Wednesday, November 25, 2009, shortly after printing DM #76, I sent an email to UFO Chairman Nic Carcieri, saying: “Good news & bad news: Bad news is that my computer is pretty much dead right now... I'm typing this from the library. So, it's looking like I won't have a column for the upcoming TF. I also won't be able to compile the UFO Checklist for the issue either. The good news is that I was able to finish the new issue of *Ditkomania* just before the computer went ka-put. I mailed out copies of DM #76 to all UFO members on Tuesday afternoon.”

I had said in DM #76 that DM #77 would come out in January 2010 and the theme would be Ditko's independent comics like Mr. A. (I chose this theme since Dave Sim offered to draw the cover for #77 with Ditko's new indie character, “The !?,” as mentioned in my column in TF #209.) However, other than Dave's cover (which I had only seen a pencil sketch of, the one printed in TF #209), I had no idea what would be in the issue. I also no longer had a computer that worked. The only thing that I had was *time* – the issue was not due out for another month-and-a-half.

On December 1, Jason Sacks sent me an email saying, “I was looking last night at the Fantagraphics *Ditko Collection* books and was thinking about which stories I'd like to write about for *DitkoMania* 77. The most interesting story for me is the “H Series” two parter, which triggered some interesting (I think!) thoughts about Ditko and his relationship to the popular media at the time. But any article about Ditko's independent and political work has to talk about the first story in the collection, “Angel”, which is a fascinating story especially in comparison with his work on the Question. The scene in which Mr. A allows the killer to fall off a flagpole is a perfect contrast to the famous flood scene from the Question story in *Blue Beetle* #4. Let me know which one you'd like me to write about and I'll get the article over to you.” I replied to Jason, “Anything you want to write for the issue is fine with me...! So far I don't have really any articles for #77. I will probably write a review of the new Mr. A. reprint for the issue (unless you or someone else would want to tackle that).”

On December 12, Dave Sim's *glamourpuss* associate, Sandeep Atwal, emailed me the finished inked image of Dave's cover for DM #77. Earlier I had written Dave asking if perhaps a DM pin-up of his Ditko-homage character The Platonist (which Dave had mailed me a pencil version of back in late 2008) could be inked by Dave and used as the back cover for #77. On December 14, Dave wrote me, “When I dug out “The Platonist” piece, I wasn't very happy with it. The idea is good, but it was hardly “ready to ink” so that won't be ready for a back cover. I've got it mentally

filed away for a re-do in 2010.” Due to the lag time for “snail-mail” between Canada and the USA, I didn’t receive Dave’s letter until around Christmas, I think.

On December 22, I emailed Michael Aushenker (who writes the “Ditkotomy” column): “Basically anything relating to Ditko’s indie work is on-topic for the issue. I’d like to have reviews of the two new Ditko books (the *Mr. A* #1 reprint and *Strange Suspense Volume One*). I haven’t yet seen Craig Yoe’s Ditko book, so if you happen to get a copy of that, I could use a review of it. There’s a Ditko fan in France who has said he’ll review *Strange Suspense* for me, and Nick Caputo plans to review “When is a Man to be Judged Evil” from that *Mr. A* comic, so we seem to be safe on covering all that ground. Larry A. Johnson (LYNSKI) has done an illo of *Mr. A vs Count Rogue*, and Sim has done the front cover, depicting “The !?” character. Javier Hernandez will be doing a piece on Ditko’s recent B&W releases. Rodney Schroeter might be doing something for the issue about Ditko’s politics. If there’s room, I might write an article on Ditko’s treatment of dictators in his comics, or perhaps write a piece about the use of humor in his Objectivist comics. Ideally I’d like to have this issue treat Ditko’s self-copyrighted comics the same way we treat his mainstream stuff... delving into the stories, talking about the characters, etc. And ideally I’d like to have this issue focus more on Ditko’s new stuff. But, I’ll see what I get. So far I haven’t received much for the issue in the way of articles.”

I work in retail and December is the busiest month of the year. Planning the next issue of DM on my days off during that hectic season was not a priority, lacking the time and energy to do so. Despite the lack of a computer and contributions, I always felt confident that I would be able to put out the issue in mid-January as scheduled. A friend had offered me the use of his laptop if needed, and another offered to take a look at my computer and see if it could be fixed. (In the end, he was unable to fix it, but it turned out that an old computer I had in my closet since 2007 – one which I thought was dead – was in fact working, and my friend got my computer up and running by December 20.) Even though all I had for DM #77 by Christmas was the Sim cover and LYNSKI illo, as well as a 4-page lettercol that was left out of DM #76 due to lack of space, I wasn’t too worried since I had backup material on hand if needed. Mike DeLisa had written a negative review of Blake Bell’s Ditko bio back in the summer of 2008 which I had thought of printing in DM #67 but ultimately rejected. Since DeLisa’s 4-page review had mentioned Ditko’s indie titles like *The Avenging World*, I thought that perhaps I could print it if I had the space in #77. Also, I’d written an internet post circa 1999 about humor in Ditko’s comics that had cited examples in Ditko’s indie work; I could recycle that old post for publication if need be. Or I could write up a new article about a topic I’d been mulling over, under the title “Ditko vs. Dictators” which would examine Ditko’s depiction of tyrannies in such works as *The Safest Place* and “The Germ.” (I may yet write such an article for a future issue.) So, I wasn’t too concerned that I’d have nothing to print in #77, despite the paucity of actual submissions by early January.

A major breakthrough came on December 29, when Nick Caputo emailed me a link to a site which showed the unpublished 1991 *Mr. A* #1 cover -- which I had not seen before. I immediately realized that I could use this piece as the middle of the issue if I could get in touch with its owner and obtain a hi-res image from him for publication. I could also write up a short 1-page article about the cover, perhaps accompanied by the unpublished back cover (which I *had* seen before, over on Brian

Franczak's *Ditko Fever* website). The interior of DM #77 was starting to take shape: the Mr. A. #1 cover would be the middle and the other articles would have to be arranged around it (with the lettercol at the back of the issue like always). Articles about Ditko's newer work would be near the front of the issue (closer to the Sim cover depicting Ditko's new hero), followed by material related to Mr. A. (closer to the Mr. A. centerspread), and then articles less related to either (such as the Ditkotomy column), and lastly, the letters. I wouldn't publish DM #77 until January 18, but it was on December 29 that I finally had an outline for how the issue would look.

On December 28, Bryan Stroud offered to write a review of Ditko's recent essay "The Ever Unreachable." By January 2, I received the finished article from Bryan, which came to 3 pages long. It was the first completed article submission for DM #77 that I had received, a mere 16 days before presstime. I was still holding onto the DeLisa review from 2008 at this point in case I needed it.

On January 3, I heard back from Micah Spivak, the owner of the *Mr. A.* cover, who provided me with great quotes to use in my article, in addition to a hi-res scan. Also on this day, I printed out LYNSKI's Mr. A. illo as a test, only to find it looked a bit fuzzy on the page. I emailed him asking for a higher-resolution image to use (which he soon did). Also during this first week of January, I was emailing Mort Todd and Robin Snyder for info on the aborted 1991 *Mr. A.* series for the short article I was writing (my intended 1-pager growing to 2 pages in the process).

Months earlier, Brian Franczak had offered to write an article about Ditko's indie hero The Void, and #77 seemed like a perfect fit. Brian planned to format the article himself and would send me jpegs of his pages which I could then print out. Although this limited my ability to do much hands-on editing, I trusted that Brian would do a good job; I was also happy that it meant less work for me to do on my end. He sent me page 1 of the article on January 6, and informed me that it would probably run around 7 pages. I started to wonder if I'd once again find myself with *too much* material for the issue, rather than too little.

On January 12, I received Jason Sacks' article on Ditko's *H Series*, however I was not completely satisfied with this early, shorter version. I emailed Jason, "You refer to [the final panel] as an epitaph, but I rather see it as "what might have been," since it reads to me like Ditko had intended the story as a kind of "pilot episode" for a new series... a superhero series where the hero's costume changes with each adventure. (Ditko later drew Captain Universe... where the costume stayed the same but the secret identity changed each issue.) The girl shown in the penultimate panel would seem to be a character that would be introduced in the next D. Skys story -- which never appeared. I'm wondering if you'd like to add anything more to your article... For one thing, it might be good to mention that D. Skys would seem to stand for the word "Disguise" (i.e., his disguise changes with each adventure). His brother owning the costume shop gives him access to all his different disguises and his acting profession allows him to play the part well.

"The opposing philosophies of D. and his brother Ed remind me of arguing Ditko characters like Hawk & Dove, or Fera and Static, or the two brothers in "My Brother..." (*Murder* #3). By having the two opposing views as blood relatives, Ditko is able to indicate that their worldviews and actions are not shaped by society, upbringing, etc., but are free-will choices (since both brothers presumably had

similar upbringings). Ed's attitude is not the result of his "environment," in Ditko's view, but by his own choices for which he must take responsibility. By saying Ed's life is still salvageable, Ditko is showing that Ed still can change for the better if he chooses to do so (as Fera did at the end of the *Static* serial).

“There's still a lot more that could be explored in this story... a comparison between Old Hollywood values vs. New Hollywood (something I touched on in my Superboy article [in *Comic Fan!* #5]). The humor and irony shown by having the unclean Spot worried about germs and the corrupt lawyer ironically named Puren (i.e. Pure). The way in which the villains of the piece make the same arguments and justifications as the movie producers do. D. Skys' negative reference to "torture," a topical topic now. And the possibility that the Hollywood backdrop is a metaphor for Ditko's own attempts to fit in in the comics industry (and in comics fanzines) in the 1970s when anti-heroes and barbarians were all the rage. D. Skys could perhaps be a stand-in for S. Ditko himself. Let me know if there's any... observations you'd like to add to the piece (and feel free to use anything I said above if you want).”

The next day, Jason replied, “I'm frankly a little overwhelmed by the high level of thought that you've obviously put into this story. Your comments...bring me to a deeper insight into the piece. I'm embarrassed that I never picked up on the D.Skys =disguise name game, for one thing, and the idea of the film industry being a bit of a parallel to the comics industry is an interesting insight -- though one that I have trouble really agreeing with. I don't think the comics industry in the early 1970s embraced the antihero in the same ways that movies did; in fact, I see the comics industry as being much more small-c conservative than the movie industry. Stan gave us Peter Parker with hangups, but Spider-Man in the Romita era did fight for good versus the evil of the Shocker, the Kingpin and the like. We did get heroes like Luke Cage, who of course refused to fight Doctor Doom, but that wasn't anti-heroic as much as it was a thoughtful character quirk, I think. So sure, I'd like to add more to my article. I'm especially intrigued by the thoughts about the brothers paralleling other brothers in Ditko. And I did read online that this was intended as a pilot for a series for DC; I'll find that reference and add it into the article as well. I'll get on my revisions tomorrow and expand into some of the ideas you express below. It's already 1700 words and 4 manuscript pages. Is another 800 words OK, or would that start eating into the space that you had planned to use for other articles?”

At this point I still had no idea what I'd be using for the back cover or the front inside cover. (I had already decided to use LYNski's illo as the back inside cover.) On January 13, Jim McPherson (whose first-time contributions to DM #76 were favorites of mine) told me that he had penciled a Mr. A. illo and wondered how firm was my January 15 deadline. I told him that the absolute latest I could receive it was Sunday, January 17th. “Sunday early, or Sunday late?” Jim asked. “The earlier the better,” I replied. I asked him to send me a scan of what he had drawn so far, so I could get a better idea of where in the issue it might go. When he emailed me the image, I told him that I thought it would make a good back cover. So, now I had a back cover. Or rather, one that was still being inked and which I hoped would be finished in time.

Also on January 13, Nick Caputo emailed me his completed article reviewing the Mr. A. story “When is a Man to be Judged Evil?” Nick wrote, “Since the deadline is approaching, and I've been revising and restructuring my article for the past few days, I thought I'd pass it on to you tonight, before I attempt to revise it again! It

seems like every time I think I have a short article that won't take much time, I wind up working on it more than ever! I'm never fully satisfied with the final product, but I do my best, and hope others find it interesting."

The official deadline day, Friday, January 15, 2010, had arrived. Months earlier, Javier Hernandez had offered to write an article about Ditko's new comics, titled "B&W & Read All Over," which I planned to use as the opening article in the issue, but I had not yet received anything from him. On January 15 at 1am, he sent me The Mocker illo that would accompany Michael Aushenker's "Ditkotomy" column (which I had received from Michael on January 11). Michael's article had a few tiny errors in it that I had to check out and correct, and then verify the changes with Michael, in a very short space of time. (After the issue was published, I noticed that I had misspelled the word "regular" in the byline at the end of Michael's column, something I probably would have ordinarily caught in time. The only other typo I noticed in the issue was an ungrammatical use of "he's" in Javier's piece. Again, if I had had more time, I might have spotted it *before* the issue was printed.)

January 15 was not only Deadline day, but at 10pm, on www.cerebustv.com, Dave Sim gave a major plug for DM and announced that his original artwork to the cover of DM #77 would be available on eBay. Since I'd be printing up DM #77 on Jan. 18 and sending most of the copies out on Jan. 19, I hoped that I'd be able to get the issue in the hands of readers prior to the auction ending on Jan. 22 (and as far as I know, I succeeded in most cases). On the website, Dave was shown inking the cover of #77 and also mentioned my name a few times. Unfortunately he mispronounced my last name, sounding like Don Imus' last name, when actually it rhymes with words like "dimes" and "times" instead. No biggie, though, as I'm used to it!

Friday, January 15, 11:54pm. Just before midnight, Jason Sacks sent me the revised version of his *H Series* article. "As you can see," Jason wrote, "I included some of your suggestions and added a few of my own. The article is now close to twice the size it was; I hope that doesn't cause you too much trouble."

Saturday, January 16, 3:18am. I received Javier's illo that would accompany his article (but still had not seen the article myself). "I hope this doesn't mess up your schedule," Javier wrote, "but I will have to finish my essay in the morning. I want to step back from it for the rest of the evening and tackle it again with a fresh pair of eyes (and brain!) Saturday morning! I apologize for the delay. Seems like when I asked you months ago for a chance to contribute, the deadline seems oh-so-far away!!" At 3:33am, I replied, "I'm going to be away most of Saturday, so no need to rush it to me in the morning or anything. I have all of Sunday off work, which is when I'm going to put all the finishing touches on the issue, write up the first page (the Editkitorial page), compile the UFO Checklist, and any other odds & ends that need to be done. I'll be printing up the issue early on Monday morning and I hope to have your copy sent out to you on Tuesday. (Luckily I also have all of Monday & Tuesday off work.) So, if you could have it for me by noon on Sunday, that would be great. Incidentally, I do have the front inside cover and the back cover free at the moment. Jim McPherson is inking a Mr. A. illo he drew, which will probably go on the back cover. But if you feel up to drawing any more illos (particularly of Ditko's new heroes, such as Miss Eerie), I could probably use it for the front inside cover." I loved Javier's illo for his article, prompting my sudden request.

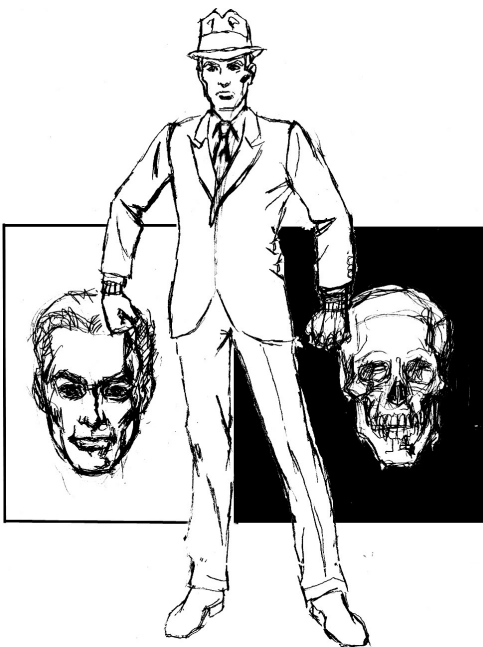
Saturday evening. Brian Franczak emailed me the first 4 pages of his Void article. "Sorry to be so last minute," he wrote. "Been sick as a dog all week and I'm still dragging. Here are the first four pages of the article. Let me know if there are any more changes that need to be made to them (I may have missed typos); I'll do my damndest to get the last three pages to you tomorrow (Sunday). Personally, I'm really hoping you have enough material already and you can just hang on to this article for some future date." Which is exactly what I decided to do.

Also Saturday evening, I received the finished, inked Mr. A. illo by Jim McPherson. So, DM #77 now had a back cover.

Sunday morning, 4:44am (my time, Javier lives in California, so it was 1:44am there), Javier sent me a beautiful Hero vs. Villain illo for the front inside cover. Shortly before noon (and less than 24 hours before presstime), Javier sent me DM #77's opening article, as well as two Ditko panels that would accompany the piece.

The rest of Sunday, January 17, was spent by me writing the editorial page, compiling the UFO Checklist (with Nic's help), formatting the pages, proofreading and so forth. I took the bus to the local copier place at 8:30am Monday, January 18 to print up the 200 copies of DM #77. (I usually go in the early morning to avoid the crowd.) By 10:30am the issue was published, and shortly after I was back home folding the sheets and stapling them. I had stayed up late into the previous night addressing all of the manila envelopes, so that I'd be able to devote all my time on Monday to putting the issue together after it was printed. By 1pm, I had 40 copies sealed in their envelopes ready to mail, but Sam Kujava informed me on my Facebook wall that the post office was closed for the Martin Luther King holiday. I kept folding and stapling (and sealing) on Monday non-stop from 6pm to 2am, only pausing for bathroom breaks and to take a swig of pop before delving back into the task at hand. I had around 150 copies that needed to be sent out, and I wanted them sent out as soon as I could. I managed to get them all ready to mail out by noon on Tuesday, January 19, when I went to the post office and mailed copies of DM #77 to points across the globe, including Europe, Asia, Australia and the USA itself.

Four days later, one of DM's contributors emailed to ask, "So what characters are fair game for the next issue of *Ditkomania*?" And some people wonder how a fanzine devoted to a single artist can last so long... !



Above: Jim McPherson's penciled version of the Mr. A. illustration that (after being inked) appeared on the back cover of DITKOMANIA #77.