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February 2025

**No. 157**  
\$10.95

# BACKISSUE!

TO WHOM  
IT MAY CONCERN--  
YOU CAN'T  
FIRE ME--  
**I QUIT!**  
SO THERE!  
*(Signed)*  
Irwin Schwab

~choke~

**KEITH  
GIFFEN**  
TRIBUTE  
ISSUE

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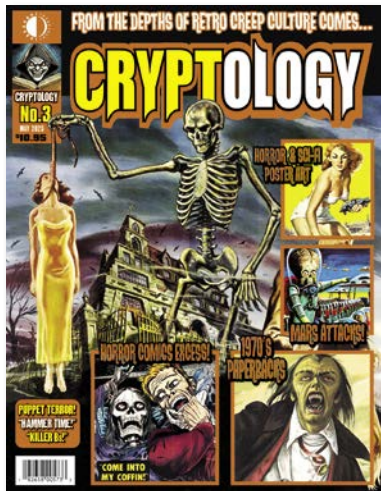
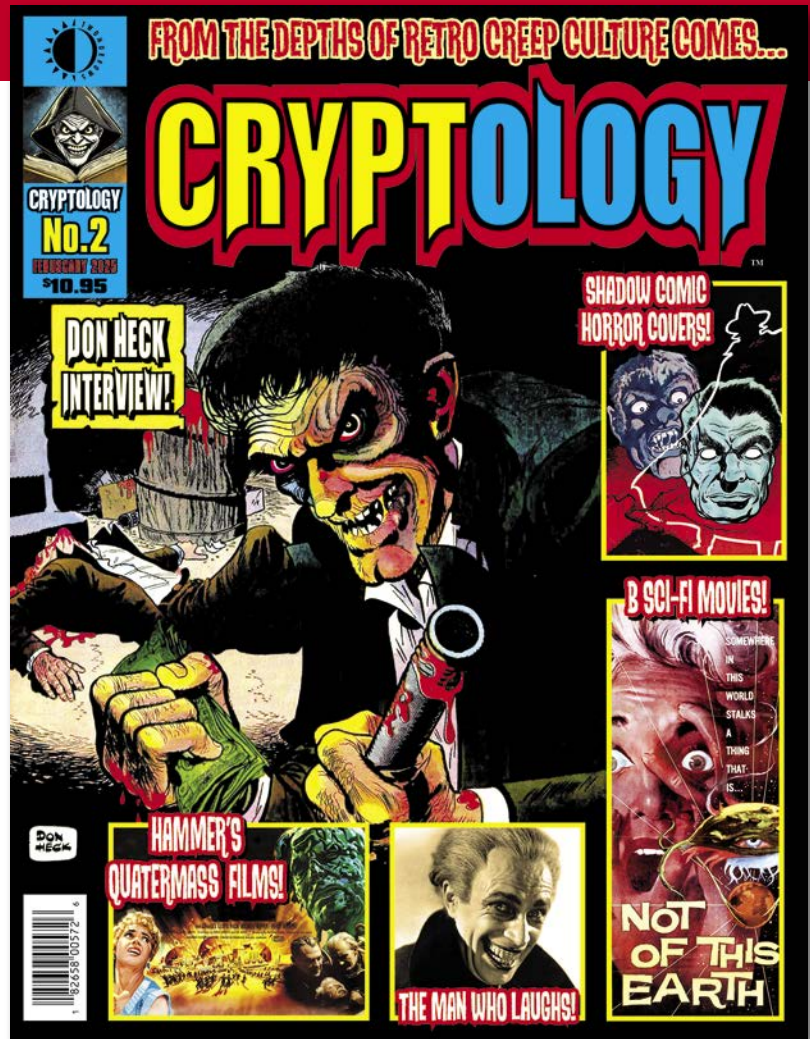
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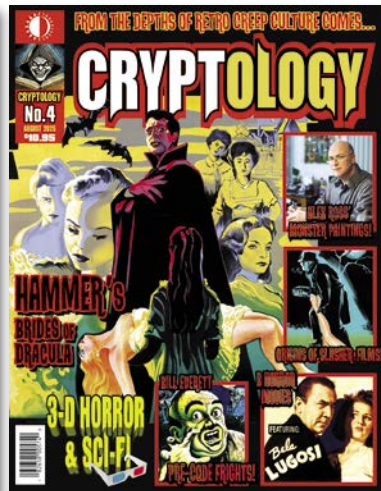
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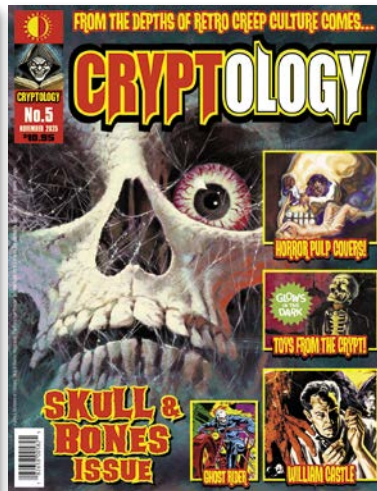
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# KEITH GIFFEN

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# BACK seat driver

by Michael Eury

*"Keith Giffen has more ideas per minute than Marvel has variants covers for McFarlane's Spider-Man #1."*

That's how I introduced this issue's spotlighted comic creator at the 1991 San Diego Comic-Con where, as the editor of DC Comics' *Legion of Super-Heroes*, I had the honor of presenting the convention's coveted Inkpot Award to Keith. 1990's launch of Todd McFarlane's new *Spider-Man* book and its multiple variant covers for issue #1—a new gimmick at the time—was still fresh on everyone's mind, so my introduction triggered a roar of laughter in the room, with only two faces abstaining. One was the late Carol Kalish, then the head of Marvel's marketing department, who rolled her eyes and playfully shot me "a look" over my barb. The other was Keith Giffen himself. He was squirming in his seat. Keith had not been aware that he was about to receive the Inkpot, and *Legion* inker Al Gordon and I came close to tranquilizing Keith to get him to accept our offer to join us at "that Inkpot thing." Keith would've preferred to be drawing comic books or dragging on a cigarette or perhaps even having a cinder block dropped on his foot instead of being at an awards presentation—especially where he was a recipient. But he graciously accepted the Inkpot. He sure as heck earned it!

Keith Ian Giffen, born in Queens, New York, on November 30, 1952, died on October 9, 2023 after suffering a stroke the day prior. He should not be confused with Keith Griffin of Mobile, Alabama, a DC letterhack of the 1970s, or the Australian football player of the 1930s also named Keith Giffen.

If you knew Keith personally, you'd never confuse him with anyone. Keith Giffen was one of a kind, a wiry, quirky little fella with an acerbic wit and few conduct filters. He'd tell it like it is—Keith would not only refuse to ignore the elephant in the room but he'd also crack a joke at the elephant's expense.

Keith's audacity was in evidence upon his passing, as he parted this earthly plane with a joke, posting on social media just before he died: "I told them I was sick... Anything not to go to New York Comic Con. Thanx. Keith Giffen 1952–2023. Bwah ha ha ha." The last laugh, indeed.

In the pages following, *BACK ISSUE's* writers are joined by a legion of comic book creators in exploring the wild, wonderful, and often wacky world of the imaginative and irreverent Keith Giffen—artist, writer, plotter, co-conspirator, agitator, and creative genius.

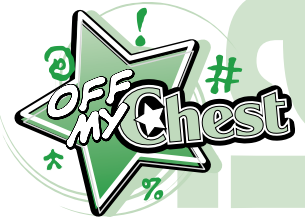
I owe a lot to Keith. As a DC Comics editor I worked with him in the early 1990s on *Secret Origins*, *Legion of Super-Heroes*, *Eclips: The Darkness Within*, and one of my favorite single professional experiences ever, 1992's *Ambush Bug Nothing Special* one-shot. When I shifted to Dark Horse Comics' editorial staff in the mid-1990s, I recruited Keith to write an off-beat superhero book titled *Agents of Law*, about a badass who takes over a utopia. I learned a lot about comics from Keith—and often almost coughed up a lung laughing at his lightning-fast wit and audacity. But most of all, I found Keith entertaining—especially on the comic book page. And so did thousands of other readers. From his askew view of superhero teams to his co-creation of offbeat characters that have become superstars, Keith Giffen's imprint upon this medium will remain for years to come.

This tribute edition marks another milestone for ye ed beyond its celebration of Keith Giffen's artistry. It is my final issue as editor-in-chief. As I announced in issue #155, I retired on August 30, 2024—although I'm still in the editorial chair as I pen this column in late May of 2024. Beginning next issue, Roger Ash, introduced in #155, takes over as *BACK ISSUE's* editor.

What an honor it has been for me to helm *BACK ISSUE* since our 2003 launch. I'm grateful to publisher John Morrow, our designers and writers, the comics professionals who have donated their time and talents to this magazine, our retailers, and to you readers for the opportunity to come to you time after time to share the stories behind the stories of the comics we so love. Thank you for that privilege.



# THE SECRET ORIGIN OF GIFFEN & FLEMING



by **Robert Loren Fleming**

I became the DC Comics proofreader in the spring of 1982, which meant commuting by train into Grand Central Station. I used to step out onto 42nd Street, pass the stone lions in front of the NY Public Library, and go by Sak's Fifth Avenue and St. Patrick's Cathedral on my way to Rockefeller Center. DC's offices were located beyond the ice rink with its golden statue of Prometheus, just past the NBC studios at 30 Rock. My office window overlooked the cotillion of multi-colored jockey statues in front of the famed 21 Club on 52nd Street. All of this was pretty dazzling to a kid who had arrived from an obscure small town in the frigid wastes of Western New York. There I had been the only comic book fan, never having had a single friend who shared any of my interests. But that was soon to change.

On my first day of work I went through my desk and discovered in one of the drawers an ashtray roughly the size of a hubcap. This I placed on the corner of the desk closest to the doorway and directly opposite an extra chair. I knew that someone was bound to see that chair and ashtray as an invitation, and that's how they were intended. My office was at the dead end of the hallway up against a fire door, so there was no foot traffic going past. However, one of the jobs of the proofreader was to return original art to the artist, so I knew they'd be coming and that a lot of them smoked.

Keith Giffen was one of those smokers, and he liked to talk. I was a chatterbox, so we got along right from the start. One of the attractions of my office for Keith, besides that ashtray, was the fun of hiding from all of the DC editors. He would show up at one of their doors and do a little business and then purposely leave his coat and art portfolio behind, so they'd know he was still in the building. Keith always worked on two or three projects at a time, so there would be editors roaming the halls trying to hunt him down. Somehow it never occurred to them that he was with me the whole time. Of course, this meant inhaling a lot of Keith's secondhand smoke. Years later, when I used to spend long afternoons plotting *Ragman* stories with Keith and editor Andy Helfer, who was also a smoker, I'd have to wear a nicotine patch for the next week or two.

Until the day he died, Keith believed that he had passed on drawing my first book, *Thriller*. That's because I talked about it incessantly to anyone who would listen. I was working up my

pitch for the series, perfecting it so that I could stop reading comic books for a living and start writing them. Nobody ever gave a novice writer his own series, so Keith was undoubtedly humoring me, but I did eventually sell the concept to DC, to the surprise and horror of many. Keith always kicked himself for not grabbing the opportunity to draw the book, but the truth is that I'd never even considered him for it. He was the artist working on *Legion of Super-Heroes*, one of DC's top-selling titles, which was written by my boss Paul Levitz. It would've been crazy to try to poach Keith, even if I thought he was the right artist for the job.

It was *Thriller* that led to *Ambush Bug*. Keith got a big kick out of the humorous sequences I wrote for my Elvis Presley stand-in, Kane Creole. He asked if I'd be interested in dialoguing some short pieces in *Action Comics* featuring his Bugs Bunny-style trickster, with Superman as straight man. Editor Julius Schwartz didn't want me, but was willing to give me a chance on a trial basis. It took me about eight pages to win him over. During the course of those short features, something wonderful happened. *Ambush Bug* had appeared in a few comics before this and was a fun character, well written by other writers. But in our first pieces together, Keith and I established that the Bug knew that he was a comic book character. He had somehow managed to break into this universe from the outside world, just as we had, finding himself in a place where everything was possible and there were no real consequences for anything you did. We loved comics as a medium, just as the Bug did, and we lived and breathed the DC Universe in all its delicious complexity. Best of all, *Ambush Bug* quickly became the synthesis of our separate personalities. When Keith tried writing the Bug on his own after I retired, he said in an interview that he couldn't bring the sense of innocence to the character that I had supplied. For my part, I refused on more than one occasion to write the Bug's dialogue over a different pencil. I could literally see Keith under that mask and in the character's body language.



## **Keith Giffen's Pal, Bob Fleming**

Collaborators and friends Keith Giffen (left) and Bob Fleming at a 1980s convention. Courtesy of Robert Loren Fleming.

Pretty soon we got to do the first *Ambush Bug* miniseries, which Keith accepted reluctantly. He told me later that what he really wanted was to revive *Thriller*. As a bluff he first asked for the last thing he thought DC would agree to, so that when they turned that down he might get *Thriller* as a consolation prize. But the Bug was popular with readers, so DC gave us four issues. I always told Keith that this was the best thing that ever happened to me in my time in comics. I was proud of *Thriller* and would've liked to revive it, but writing *Ambush Bug* was one of the joys of my life. We both had more fun doing that character than everything else we did put together. Every Friday we'd meet at the DC offices to exchange our pages. I'd chortle over Keith's new pencils and he'd guffaw over the dialogue I'd written. Editors used to come out of their offices to tell us to shut up: we were a public nuisance. Lots of fans got the joke, but we loved the ones who didn't even more. They'd loudly express their outrage and it would feed us and make us

stronger. Lots of the editors at DC were appalled as well, but when they'd get Julie Schwartz to censor our gags we would just come up with something funnier and a bit more barbed. The Bug lived in a comic book universe where he couldn't be seriously harmed, and so did we.

Lunching with Keith was an interesting experience. He had an eccentric sense of humor and enjoyed spreading discomfort wherever he went. At one of our favorite haunts, I always ordered the chicken fingers. Every single time I did he'd pipe up and tell the poor waitress that my order made no sense, since chicken didn't have fingers. As if this wasn't irritating enough, he finally ordered the chicken fingers himself one day and decided they were great. From that day forward he never made his dopey joke again! I once made the mistake of mentioning that I was going to have to start dieting, since I was about to hit 200 pounds. For months afterwards, Keith informed every waiter, waitress, bartender, and doorman we'd encounter that I was "pushing 200 pounds," and then he'd nod his head sagely. He took great delight in flustering strangers.

Another problem with Keith was that he'd often leave out a critical part of a joke or story, so that people with no context were left perplexed by his remarks. I'd have to fill in gaps by helpfully informing them that he meant ham and eggs, or was referring to a yellow Buick, and then they'd laugh their asses off. Keith unwittingly wrote my obituary in an interview he did after I'd retired from comics, by calling me the "late" Robert Loren Fleming. There were no quotation marks around the word "late" because I was no longer around to add them. So the urban legend began that I was dead, and it spread like a fungus all over the internet for years. And to my surprise, I kinda liked it.

One time Keith almost got my wife fired. He used to meet me every Friday morning in Grand Central Station, and on this particular occasion I was joined by my wife Shari. She and her boss were coming to the city for a meeting, and her boss was wearing what was truly the most ridiculous hat I'd ever seen. Keith met the three of us in the Main Concourse and we made our introductions. Then I saw Keith's eyes hone in on that hat, like a hunting dog pointing at a wild pheasant. Turning to Shari I saw that she had seen what was coming, too. Keith's mouth started to open to say the devastating remark that we could already read on his face, and together we acted as one. Shari grabbed her boss' arm and pulled her off in one direction and I dragged Keith away in the other while we both yelled at the top of our lungs how we were late and really had to get moving!! I don't remember whether Keith ever told me what he'd been about to say—I think I blacked out.

When we would do interviews together about *Ambush Bug*, Keith used to enjoy telling the same stories over and over again. This drove me a little crazy since it seemed boring and repetitive, but he was like a kid in that way. His favorite story was about a Bug page that I'd had particular difficulty dialoguing. It consisted of the little Japanese version of *Ambush Bug*, who I had named Mitsu Bishi, running all over the place in a blind panic. It was already very funny but it clearly needed some kind of context, not unlike one of Keith's conversational gags. Keith always handed me the *Ambush Bug* pages cold, without any explanation or notes, and was always pleased with whatever I came up with. But he was even happier when I'd get stuck and phone him up begging for help. Nothing in heaven or on earth could persuade him to render the tiniest assist. So on that Mitsu Bishi page I spent days—literally days where I thought about nothing else—trying to come up with a solution. And then for no reason whatsoever it became plain to me that the lyrics of the Hokey-Pokey dance song fit every move the little character made on that page like a hand in a glove. He put his right arm in, he took his left arm out, he shook them all about, etc. And Keith loved it and he never stopped talking about it. Which is why, I finally came to realize,



### Thrills Galore

A sampling of issues from Fleming's trailblazing 1980s series, *Thriller*.

TM & © DC Comics.

he was such a wonderful collaborator. Before I worked on that sequence it was his Mitsu Bishi page. After I finished the thing, it was my Hokey-Pokey page, then and forever. He celebrated what I did and was my greatest champion.

Speaking of champions, I can't talk about Keith without bringing up his wife Ana. In the years before she died she had the spelling of her name changed to anglicize it, but I always think of her as she truly was, a proud and intelligent Cuban American with an accent and an attitude. She had unilaterally restarted Keith's comic book career by secretly making an appointment for him to meet with DC editor Joe Orlando several years after he had blown himself out of the business. Ana saw Keith's talent and potential and she nourished and encouraged it. One of the things Keith and I had in common is that we both had married women who were way too hot for us. I know this to be true because Ana told me so herself. She said that Keith couldn't believe his good fortune when she became interested in him. And also according to Ana, Keith had reported to her that my wife Shari was much too hot for me. Those who know me as the stone cold stud I was and still am may find this hard to believe, but it's actually true. What's more important, Keith and I both married women who were loyal and supportive and nurturing of our talent. And hot, yes, you bet.

I spent hundreds of hours talking to Ana on the telephone, although we had never met in person. She liked to call Keith's collaborators, partly to be involved in what he was doing and mostly to make certain they were solidly in Keith's corner. She and I hit it off over our mutual regard for her weird spouse, plus I was, y'know, a chatterbox. Ana liked to talk even more than I did, so we would blab on into the night. At one point I knew by heart the eye colors of every member of her huge extended family, and she'd get disgusted with me if I got one wrong. We didn't meet because she wasn't the sexy knockout she had once been, and she dreaded being photographed or even seen by anyone who might judge her with the harshness that she judged herself. It was sad, since I liked her so much and knew she was selling herself short. She reminded me of my beloved grandmother Marietta, who I had made into a character in my series *Thriller*: smart, proud, funny, with a charming accent and an infectious love of life.

### Stop Buggin' Me!

Keith and Bob's *Ambush Bug* infected DC readers' funnybones, although not everyone got the joke. Detail from the Giffen/Oksner cover to *Action Comics* #565 (Mar. 1985).

TM & © DC Comics.



Years after I retired, DC Comics contacted me and asked me to do another *Ambush Bug* miniseries with Keith. I was very reluctant initially, but then Ana got on the phone. "Don't you want to do Om-Boosh, Bob?" She asked with her endearing accent. I couldn't say no to her. Keith and I ended up having loads of fun again, mocking all of the characters and concepts we held so dear. We were particularly proud that we managed to get *Ambush Bug* laid in one of the issues, and it was right there on the cover. I'm not sure Batman has ever gotten lucky (and he's a freakin' millionaire), but it definitely wasn't on a cover of *Detective Comics*. As usual, nothing bad that the industry could throw at us even made us blink. When one page was printed without any of its accompanying captions or dialogue balloons, we just created a cut-and-paste page in the next issue under the heading: Now You Can Be DC's Production Department!

The best part of doing that *Ambush Bug* series in 2008 was that I was finally able to meet Ana in person. She and Keith were guests that year of the San Diego Comic-Con, and I had planned to go for the first time in ages since I now had something to promote. She was lovely, of course, and the three of us got to spend several days together happily reminiscing like the old chums we were. It's the part of comics that fans never get to see—those silly stories gave me the chance to make the best friends of my life.

When I was younger I suffered from depression. It's no coincidence that the cover of my first comic, *Thriller* #1, features a guy preparing to throw himself off the Brooklyn Bridge. One time it got so bad that I mentioned to Keith that I had been having thoughts of suicide. He suddenly grabbed my arm and leaned forward, talking through clenched teeth.

"If you do that, I'll kill myself and come after you!" he said. "I'll come after you!" This seemed way too weird and intense to me at the time. Keith wasn't phobic, but I didn't recall him ever touching me before. And he was clearly furious. I quickly changed the subject and vowed to myself never to broach it again. But here's the miraculous thing: every time the thought of self destruction crossed my mind from then on, I'd picture an enraged Keith chasing me through the afterlife. He ruined suicide for me, I couldn't take it seriously anymore. One day on the commuter train I must've been laughing out loud, because the guy sitting next to me asked what was so funny. "I was just thinking of killing myself," I said.

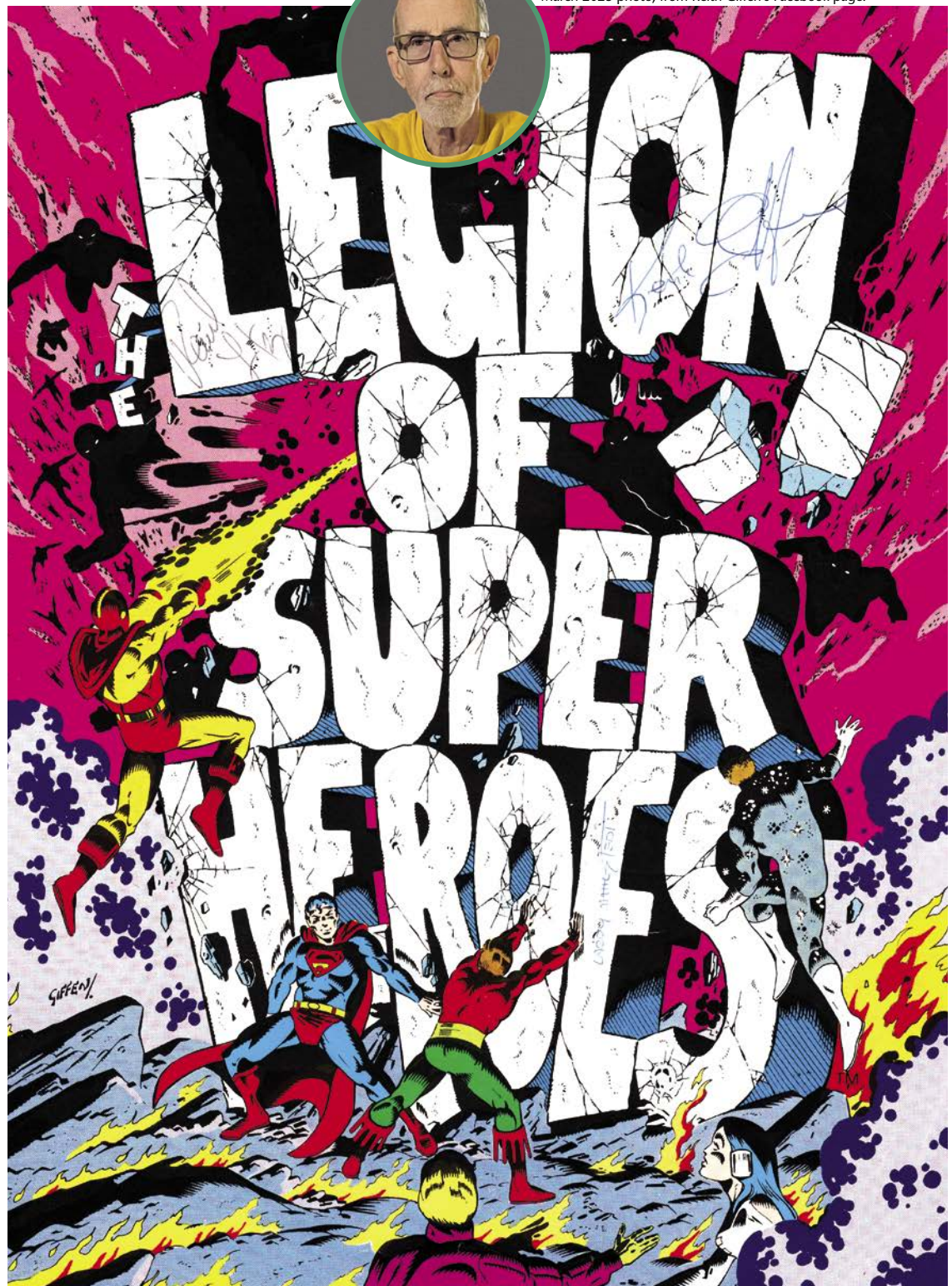
Thanks, Keith.  
Love, Bob

Writer ROBERT LOREN FLEMING transitioned from DC Comics' proofreader to scripting in the mid-1980s, producing the innovative series *Thriller* with artist Trevor Von Eeden. Frequently paired with Keith Giffen on *Ambush Bug* and other projects, his writing credits include *Aquaman*, *Eclipso*, *Ragman*, and *Valor*.

end

# KEITH GIFFEN

March 2023 photo, from Keith Giffen's Facebook page.



## Tomorrow Team

The remarkable combo of artist Keith Giffen and writer Paul Levitz made *The Legion of Super-Heroes* DC Comics' number two title in the early 1980s, second only to *The New Teen Titans*. Shown here is a rare one-sheet reproducing Keith's innovative cover art for issue #293 (Nov. 1982), signed by Giffen and Levitz in the upper logo area. From the collection of Jim Ford.

TM & © DC Comics.

# INTERVIEW

by *Glen Cadigan*

Over 20 years ago, Keith Giffen and I spoke on the phone about his days on *The Legion of Super-Heroes*. We also discussed what led up to that career-changing assignment, as well as what followed it.

What you see here happened on April 7, 2003, although a handful of follow-up questions were conducted at a later date and edited into the main text.

— Glen Cadigan

[*Editor's note:* This interview was originally published in Glen Cadigan's TwoMorrows Publications book, *The Legion Companion*, and appears with Mr. Cadigan's permission. It has been edited for presentation in *BACK ISSUE*.]

**GLEN CADIGAN:** I'd like to start with the early part of your career. You broke in at Marvel, correct?

**KEITH GIFFEN:** Yeah. I think the first thing I ever sold for Marvel was an inside front cover for *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu*. The first actual comic book story [was the] "Sword in the Star" backup in an issue of *Marvel Premiere* or *Feature* or whatever [*Marvel Preview* -ed.]. I know that Satana was the cover feature.

**CADIGAN:** How did you end up at Marvel?

**GIFFEN:** "How not to break into the comic book industry." Boy, talk about doing everything wrong. I was working at Hoffman & LaRoche as a hazardous material handler. I always wanted to break into comics, so I slapped together a portfolio and figured, "Let me make the rounds." In my naiveté, I figured, "Let me call first," not realizing that if you call it's easier to say, "No." Again, I looked at the list of comics and I thought, "I don't want to start right at the bottom calling someone like Charlton." I didn't want to start at the top, either, at Marvel, because I really didn't figure that I stood a chance at getting into Marvel. This is when Atlas [Seaboard] was still publishing, so I called Atlas, and I said, "I was wondering if you'd be looking at art samples," and blah blah blah, and the receptionist there was just wonderful. She was so personable and nice and kind. "Oh, sure, come on down, but you better come down soon. We're going out of business." And I thought, "O-kay," and then I hung up. I thought, "Screw it."

So I called Marvel and I talked to the receptionist, and she said, "Tell you what: just bring it in and drop it off. Johnny'll look at it and then you can pick it up tomorrow." Real encouraging. So I go into the city and I drop it off with the receptionist, and she just shoves it into a desk drawer. So I go, "That's the last they'll see of that for a while," and I go home. The next day, I'm about ready to go back in and get my portfolio, but then I thought, "Nah. Let me give it another day." Like another day's really gonna matter if some guy just walks in off of the street. And I go in the day after. I don't call first, I just go in to get it, and I walk into the lobby, and the secretary leaps up from her desk and starts yelling at me, haranguing me about being a professional and being stupid. I thought, "Whoa! Where did this come from?"

As it turns out, Ed Hannigan had just left the "Sword in the Star" series, and the deadline was tight and they needed a warm body. Bill Mantlo saw my portfolio when it was in [Marvel art director]



John Romita's office because John Romita, God bless him, really did look at the stuff. He wasn't a con guy just sitting at a desk somewhere, and he really looked at it, and they were trying to get a hold of me, but in my consummate professionalism I had not put my name, address—no contact [information on it]! I just dropped it off! There was no way they could [get a hold of me]. And I landed the first "Sword in the Star" script, and it's pretty much been downhill since then.

**CADIGAN:** When did you cross over to DC?

**GIFFEN:** I did a handful of things for Marvel. My chronology's all screwed up. I don't know if the *Defenders* thing I did was before I wandered over to DC the first time or after. I suspect it's after. I know I did "Woodgod," and I might have done one or two other things. Bill Mantlo realized I wasn't going to be getting a lot of work at Marvel, so he reached out to Gerry Conway, who was an editor at DC that he knew, and so he said, "Take a look at this guy's work," and I wandered over there and Gerry put me on *All-Star Comics*. So here I am,

## Rocky Road

Giffen's earliest published works were scattershot but captivating, such as the inaugural appearance of Rocket Raccoon, written by Bill Mantlo. From the black-and-white magazine *Marvel Preview* #7 (Summer 1976). Scan courtesy of Jarrod Buttery.

TM & © Marvel.

**Master of the Mystic Arts**  
Wait... that's comics' other "Doctor" magician. Giffen's handful of "Dr. Fate" backups in *The Flash* in the mid-1980s were fan favorites (see this issue's Giffen's Greatest Hits feature for more info). Keith penciled and inked this Fate pinup in 1987 for the *History of the DC Universe Portfolio*. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions ([www.ha.com](http://www.ha.com)).

TM & © DC Comics.



new in the business, I've maybe done three comics in my entire life, and I'm working with Wally Wood. On top of that, I'm doing breakdowns and doing the storytelling for Wally Wood. I landed there, and then it was sort of a long, drawn-out, agonizing period of doing everything wrong and blowing myself completely out of the business in about a year. I could've written a book, *What Not To Do*. I wound up down in south Jersey selling Kirby vacuum cleaners door to door.

**CADIGAN:** *How long did that last?*

**GIFFEN:** About six months, then I got into repossessions because I was small and thin and I could fit through half-open car windows. There's nothing like sneaking into some guy's parking lot by his apartment building down in Atlantic City in the dead of night [and] hot-wiring a car in front of an applauding audience of hookers and junkies. I used to work with a Neanderthal man who would actually carry a gun. But I was the small, skinny guy who could do this kind of stuff. He was there in case it got hairy-knuckled.

**CADIGAN:** *I guess after doing that for a while, comics didn't seem so bad.*

**GIFFEN:** You know, I came back up north and I got into phone collections, and a series of dead-end jobs, and she wasn't my wife then, but I guess my wife-to-be had been dating me for three months and didn't know I could draw. That was how firmly I had shut the door on it. When she found out, she started campaigning with me to get back into it, and finally what won me over was she said, "Don't you at least owe them the opportunity of hanging up on you?" 'Cause I slinked out of town, tail between the legs. I just disappeared.

So I called Joe Orlando, figuring Joe was the one I did the most damage to—Joe and Paul Levitz—and Joe just said, "Come in and we'll talk." He sat me down, and he liked what I had to offer, but I screwed up so badly I had to be on a probationary period, and he said, "If you're willing to do that, we're willing to give you another shot." And I've been at DC pretty much since. I owe a lot to Joe Orlando for taking the chance on a guy who was a complete and utter... what a screwball! What a foul-up! Goldbrick, you name it. And then to Dick Giordano. At that point he was editing some ghost books, as well as one or two other things, and he was the one who hooked [me] up with [Robert] Kanigher to do some stories to see if I could match a deadline. Then Mike Barr offered me the "Dr. Fate" back-up in *The Flash*, and then Paul Levitz was kind enough to let bygones be bygones and give me a shot on the *Legion*.

**CADIGAN:** *How familiar were you with the Legion then?*

**GIFFEN:** I was very familiar with the Legion. I'd been a fan since the John Forte days, but I was more familiar with the Legion as vast untapped potential. I kept looking at that book and thinking, "You could really push this. No one's really thinking it through." Paul was trying to in a lot of the stuff he was doing, but a lot of the artists didn't seem to understand it. In the 30th Century, if it's got wheels, it's wrong! And he had some great artists there, but I just kept thinking, "If I get my hands on that book, I know I can make something of it." And they gave me the opportunity. It was like, "Put your money where your mouth is."

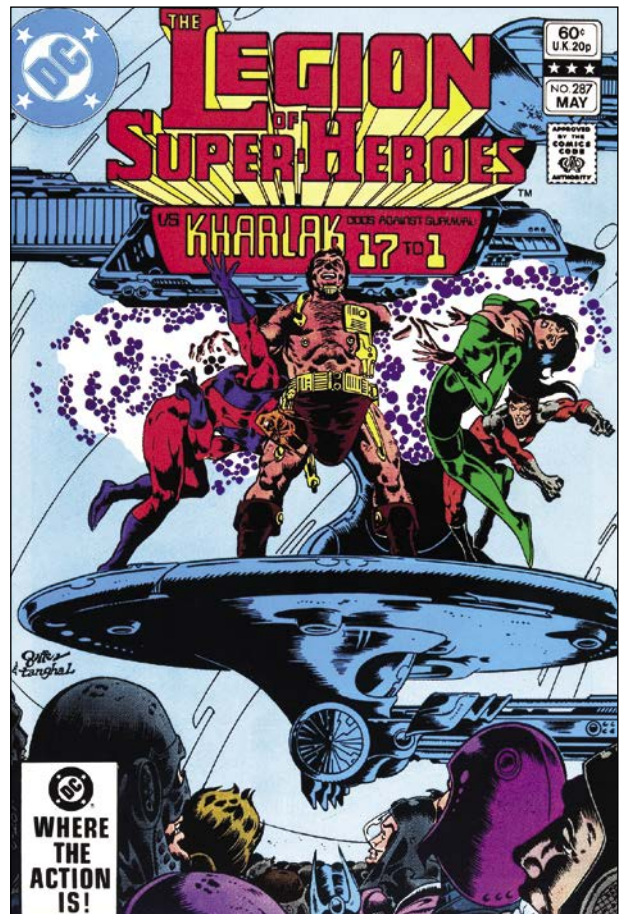
**CADIGAN:** *How long was it before you started playing an active role in the plotting?*

**GIFFEN:** If the artist wants to be involved in the plotting... [Paul lets them]. Paul used to give me the co-plotting credit, but you have to

### Keith Had Legion Covered

Two stunning Giffen-illustrated *Legion of Super-Heroes* covers: (top) The Khund warrior Kharlak gives the LSH a hard time in issue #287 (May 1982; cover inks by Romeo Tanghal). (bottom) Keith penciled and inked this chilling eye-catcher for the cover of #289 (July 1982), depicting stranded Legionnaires.

TM & © DC Comics.





### Can You Find Satan Girl?

From one-time appearances to long-serving Legionnaires, virtually every character from the Legion's rich pre-Crisis history is included in this extraordinary poster! Measuring 15 by 40 inches and released in 1983, this illustration drove penciler Keith Giffen to burnout. Inks by Larry Mahstedt. Courtesy of Heritage.

TM & © DC Comics.

understand, that was nothing more than chatting with him in the hallway or talking on the phone. He's always been really, really generous in terms of giving credit. Paul would write a plot. I would take Paul's plot. I might poke around with it a bit, take a scene that he thought was a throwaway and maybe try to add a bit more juice to it. Eventually it did evolve into "Can you top this?" where we would sort of be bouncing things off of one another. I was never actually a co-plotter in terms of sitting down and working out the stories with him, but he gave me a lot of latitude to play my little games. In terms of the oneupmanship thing, he beat me soundly when he wrote the one caption that froze me in place. It was a caption in one panel of "The Great Darkness Saga" and this was the art direction: "The population of the planet Daxam rises off of the planet." At that point I realized that he could do me much more damage than I could do him.

I really enjoyed doing the *Legion*, and I probably would have continued doing the *Legion* [for a while]. Everyone wonders, "What happened? Why did you leave the *Legion*

the first time? Was there friction? Was it you and Paul started fighting?" Nothing could be further from the truth. I left the *Legion* the first time because I did that Legion poster and fried myself. After I was done with that poster I thought, "I don't want to do this anymore," and sort of wandered off. The *Legion* was good times. I often wonder what would have happened had we not peaked early with "Great Darkness." After "Great Darkness," everything was, "Can you top that?"

**CADIGAN:** *When did you start to realize that "The Great Darkness Saga" was shaping up to be something special?*

**GIFFEN:** When Paul said, "I want to use Darkseid." The minute he said, "I want to use Darkseid," I didn't even have to hear the story. It was like, "I'm on board. Ab-so-lutely." The idea of introducing that character into the Legion's mythos, I just thought it would be a great story period, over and out. I never knew that it would generate the response that it did. At best when I was doing the stuff, I just thought we were doing a fun comic.



**CADIGAN:** *When did you start to feel like the title was yours to play around with?*

**GIFFEN:** Not until it became mine to play around with. Karen Berger called me into her office and said, "Paul's going to be leaving the *Legion*. Would you like to take over?" Then I thought... When you're collaborating with somebody on a book, especially somebody who's had a long run on the book... like I'm walking on board, Paul's been writing the *Legion*. He's had this long run on it, who am I to come in and go, "Now, Paul, we'll do it this way." You defer to the guy who has the most experience with the book, and as long as the guy's doing good work—which Paul was—I had no problems with it at all.

The "Five Years Later" thing [beginning with 1989's *Legion of Super-Heroes* #1 vol. 4], everyone thinks was an act of ego on my part because I wanted my *Legion* to be mine, mine, mine, and not to build up to it, but what it really was I knew that I had to dismantle a lot of stuff that Paul had worked for on his run, [and] I didn't want to be the guy that did that. I wanted to boost my run on the *Legion* far enough away from Paul's that his run on the book would just remain his run on the book, and nobody would screw with it.

**CADIGAN:** *When you were first drawing the Legion, you were also drawing Omega Men at the same time.*

**GIFFEN:** Yeah, that was a mistake.

**CADIGAN:** *Why do two science-fiction books at once?*

**GIFFEN:** Stupidity. There's really no other answer for that. I thought it was an interesting concept, and I was actually dumb enough to give it a shot [laughs]. It didn't last very long. I realized probably by the end of the second issue I'd bitten off more than I could chew.

**CADIGAN:** *When you first started working on the Legion, did you have much contact with Legion fans?*

**GIFFEN:** At first, not really, but it grew gradually. I don't even remember how I got connected with Legion fandom, but Harry Broertjes' name keeps floating to the surface. Harry, Tom and Mary [Bierbaum], Ken Gale... I don't recall exactly how it reached the point wherein I started interacting with Legion fandom, mostly through an APA [Amateur Press Alliance] called *Interlac*. I guess it was a gradual process. And Legion fans get a bad rap. They can be opinionated and arrogant and half-crazed, but that's the charm! [laughs] I wouldn't have it any other way! If they thought you were coasting, they'd crucify you.

**CADIGAN:** *Did you pay any attention when you were on the book to how popular it was?*

**GIFFEN:** Yeah, because I always had one eye on knocking [*The New Teen*] Titans off its perch. Stay ambitious! I just thought, "Mmm, boy, just take one month just to do that, to knock it

## The Thirtieth Century Meets the Fourth World

(left) After a brief prologue in issue #287, “The Great Darkness Saga” kicks off in *Legion of Super-Heroes* vol. 2 #290 (Aug. 1982). Cover by Giffen and Frank Giacoia. (right) Jack Kirby’s Darkseid—the (black) heart and (dark) soul behind this Legion epic—as rendered by Keith on the cover of 2014’s *Great Darkness Saga: The Deluxe Edition*. Cover inks by Al Milgrom.

TM & © DC Comics.

off.” We never did, of course, because Marv [Wolfman] and George [Pérez] were the juggernaut back then.

**CADIGAN:** Well, you could have pulled a Tonya Harding and broken George’s arm.

**GIFFEN:** If you’ve ever seen George and me together, I probably couldn’t get my hands around George. I’m a little gnomish creature. George is this huge, massive person who could hurt me. [Editor’s note: George Perez passed away on May 6, 2022. BACK ISSUE #147 was a tribute edition dedicated to the pacesetter *New Teen Titans* superstar.]

**CADIGAN:** Do you remember when you found out that they were adding another monthly Legion book to the schedule?

**GIFFEN:** Yeah. I remember saying, “No way!” I had learned my lesson on the *Omega Men*. I believe that was when we started plundering *New Talent Showcase*. People like Terry Shoemaker, Karl Kesel, and various others. I think Steve Lightle came out of that period. I love new talent. I used to go down and look through the *New Talent Showcase* all the time. I have no memories as to why they did that. That was during the period when the book was agony for me to do. Like I said, that poster

came along and blew me out of the water. Every line was just like sweating blood. That period, I mostly remember it as I was winding down off of the book and really not having a good time.

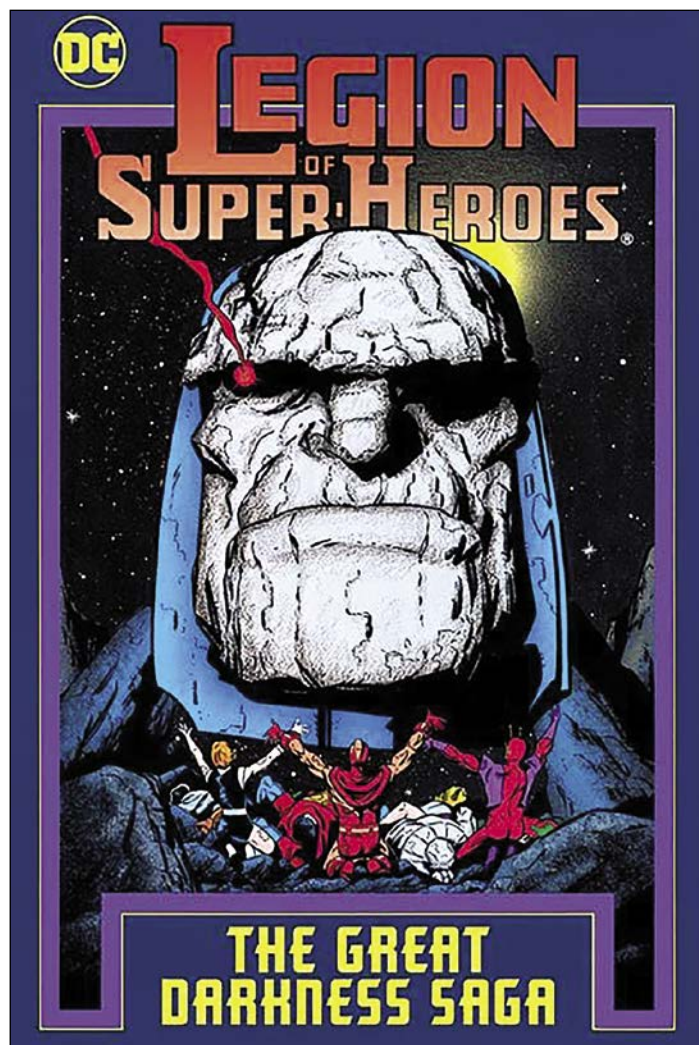
**CADIGAN:** Did you follow it after you left?

**GIFFEN:** No. I never followed *Justice League* after I left, I never followed *Lobo*... I don’t follow stuff after I leave, because all I’d then be doing is going, “That’s not the way I’d do it!” Well, of course; it’s not the way you’d do it. You’re not doing it! Why make yourself crazy?

**CADIGAN:** Did you change your approach to that storyline, given that it was the launch of a brand new title?

**GIFFEN:** Not really. Like I mentioned before, by that time I was pretty much fried and I was running on autopilot. I gave those books as much attention as I really honestly could, considering the circumstances. I had one foot out the door at that point. I guess if there’s any different approach to be seen, it was just trying to keep myself interested.

And this had nothing to do with story, it had nothing to do with the writing, it had nothing to do with the book. It was just after doing that poster, I was fried.





**CADIGAN:** *You also redesigned some of the members of the Legion of Super-Villains for that storyline.*

**GIFFEN:** Yeah. Some of them looked really hokey. I mean, c'mon!

**CADIGAN:** *When you would do something like that, would you have a backstory in mind?*

**GIFFEN:** Nope. It would be, "Okay, let's see now: This was first drawn in 1950-something. Maybe we should update it a little." As quaint and nostalgic as the Legion could be with their upside-down rocketship and their two-fingered salute to the Legion flag and their very early old-school costumes, it's time to move on. It was time to move on. It took Dave Cockrum to take the first major step in redefining the Legion, and at that point I figured, "These are young kids! Don't kids always tinker with their looks?" And even the Legion of Super-Villains, which was an older group, they were still basically the opposite Legion. People play around with their visuals, and play around with the way they look, and play around with their fashion sense. I didn't see any reason for these people to still be wearing the same costumes that were in vogue in the 1950s, or whatever the 30th Century equivalent would be.

**CADIGAN:** *Karate Kid was killed off during that storyline. Why did you dislike him so much?*

**GIFFEN:** Well, you have to choose one, don't you? Super-karate. It stuck in my head like a burr. Even when I was a kid, I just didn't like him. Oddly enough, my favorite color is orange, but still, I never could wrap my head around that character.

**CADIGAN:** *So was it a disappointment that you didn't get to draw that issue yourself?*

**GIFFEN:** Ultimately, it was. But it happened, so I'm okay. But he's back, anyway. "Comic book death"

starts to be an oxymoron. It's something that I don't think anyone really takes too seriously. I just wanted to see him get it. I don't know, I just wanted to see him kick it in the neck. If I was on the *Legion* today, I'd want to kill that snake.

**CADIGAN:** *Are there any Legion stories from your first run that you wish you had a chance to do over?*

**GIFFEN:** I guess the latter issues of the run, when I was running out of steam. I'd like a chance to go back and do those right. And when it comes to beyond that, definitely "The Magic Wars." I'd like another chance at, because I think I really dropped the ball on that one.

**CADIGAN:** *What happened there?*

**GIFFEN:** Boy, for the life of me I can't remember. If you go by limited recollection, I think it might have been just a scheduling thing that I had to really, really rush my way through it, and I shouldn't have. There may have been more to it than that, but for the life of me I can't put my finger on it right now.

Keep in mind, most of these things that happened [that] had to do with the artwork or the approach or my side of the book, 90 percent of them were my fault. Y'know, your head's in the wrong place, or you take on too much work, or you don't walk when you should have... there are so many things that can impact the art and impact the book. I never wanted it to get thought, "Well, Paul was writing those stories, and therefore..." No, no, no, no. Most of the problems I had on the *Legion* were *mine*.

**CADIGAN:** *When you returned to the Legion, did you know going in that Paul was only going to stick around for another year?*

**GIFFEN:** Yes.

## Pocketful of Super-Heroes

Loyal *BACK ISSUE* readers know that DC's *Adventure Comics*—the title which hosted the "Tales of the Legion of Super-Heroes" throughout the '60s—briefly became a digest-sized reprint/inventory anthology in the '80s, each issue including a Legion reprint. Anniversary edition *Adventure* #500 (June 1983) devoted its entire 148 pages to the LSH, including these charming then-and-now front and back covers by Giffen and Mahlstedt.

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**Always Ready for an Adventure**

Giffen and Mahlstedt paid tribute to (inset) Curt Swan and George Klein's classic cover for *Adventure Comics'* tricentennial edition, #300 (Sept. 1962), with (below) their cover for *Legion of Super-Heroes* #301 (July 1983).

TM & © DC Comics.

**CADIGAN:** *Were you one of the people who tried to convince him to stay another year?*

**GIFFEN:** No. When Paul makes up his mind, you can joke around with him about it, but you are not going to change his mind. Paul digs his heels in, and that's it. He pretty much figured it'd run its course. He knew he had other stuff that was going to start demanding the lion's share of his attention as he worked his way up the corporate ladder, and he had the professionalism to say, "Rather than do it at 50 percent, I'll leave."

**CADIGAN:** *So did the two of you put your heads together and come up with a year-long plan?*

**GIFFEN:** Not really. When I worked with Paul, I followed Paul's lead. I'd kibitz and add little things and make suggestions, but Paul was always very, very generous with the co-plotter credit across the board.

**CADIGAN:** *What was the reaction to the new uniforms which you introduced shortly before "The Magic Wars"?*

**GIFFEN:** If I remember correctly, it was the usual reaction to any change in a long-running series: shrieks of outrage, followed by this grudging acceptance, followed by a handful of people stepping up and going, "Well, I kinda almost sorta like it." Legion fans, God love 'em, they're definitely a vocal bunch. I remember coming on the *Legion* and being told, "You're no Pat Broderick!" And then when I left the *Legion*, Greg LaRocque was going, "My God! They're all over me because I'm not doing it like you!" And then when I came back on the *Legion*, I was told, "You're no Greg LaRocque!" [laughs], so that's part and parcel, and it was just part of why I enjoy Legion fandom so much.

**CADIGAN:** *Why, exactly, did you return then?*

**GIFFEN:** Because it's a fixation. I'm obsessed with the book. I'd return again, given the opportunity. It's a book that I keep going back to. It's a siren song. I guess I went back then to really try to do something, really, really, really different with the book, and it sounded like DC was really ready for something radically different to be done with the *Legion* book. I went in figuring, "Let's give it a shot!"

But I didn't want to be too radically different, which is why I brought in Tom and Mary [Bierbaum], who were very much of Legion fandom, and had great affection for Legion history. They were pretty much there to temper my more extreme ideas.

**CADIGAN:** *How did L.E.G.I.O.N. '89 come about?*

**GIFFEN:** At the end of *Invasion!*, we were waiting for people to come and want to do spinoff books, because at the end of any crossover, a lot of spinoff books come out, and nobody

stepped up. The reason I did *L.E.G.I.O.N. '89* and *JLE* [*Justice League Europe*] was because there were all these openings for spinoff books and I felt, "Well, if no one else is going to do them, I'll grab them." I think Bob Fleming came up with *Blasters*, as well. You have to understand, *Invasion!* as a miniseries was not very popular among the professional rank-and-file up at DC. I guess nobody wanted to play in our playground. "All right, more for me. Thank you."

And *L.E.G.I.O.N. '89* was an idea waiting to happen. "The Legion's in the 30th Century. What would a Legion in the 20th Century be like?" Once I found out I could use Vril Dox and steal Phantom Girl, and also Lyrrisa Mallor, then it all just fell together.

**CADIGAN:** *Did you ever feel like your hands were tied on that title because it all had to line up with the Legion a thousand years later?*

**GIFFEN:** Nope, I never felt I had to line it up with the Legion a thousand years later because I was dealing with the reality now. I kept a weather eye on it, of course, but no. The first year of *L.E.G.I.O.N. '89* was just sheer enjoyment. It was really just flying by the seat of your pants and having a ball.



**Double-Header (not to be confused with the Legion Sub of the same name)**

(top) *Legion of Super-Heroes* vol. 3 #1 (Aug. 1984) continued the Levitz/Giffen team's run in DC's then-new Deluxe Format, available in the burgeoning direct sales market. The previous *Legion* book was retitled *Tales of the Legion of Super-Heroes* and remained distributed on the newsstands in addition to comics shops. After a year of new material produced exclusively for *Tales*, with (bottom) *Tales of the Legion of Super-Heroes* #326 (Aug. 1985), the series reprinted material originally produced for the Deluxe title, one year after its original publication. Cover art by Giffen and Mahlstedt.

TM & © DC Comics.



**CADIGAN:** So what made you return to the Legion in the late 1980s?

**GIFFEN:** I'm tempted to say another paycheck. The *Legion* is a book that's always exerted this weird kind of siren song, this siren influence on me that I just keep returning to it eventually. I wouldn't be all that surprised if I wind up doing *Legion* work down the line again someday. But just the chance to try something different. And I told Karen [Berger] what I wanted to do with the book. She was for it. I guess it was my chance to try something different in terms of how you structure the story—what happened to the characters—just take the book in a new direction. And it was also the home of the infamous nine-panel grid, which I was castigated for doing and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, when [Moore] did it in *Watchmen*, was a genius! I guess people were trying to say, "Well, he did it better than you did." But I have never done anything as unpopular as that nine-panel grid in my career. And I'll tell you why I was doing it: because you're getting more story! Apparently not.

**CADIGAN:** How shortly after you relaunched the new Legion book did you start to feel that DC wasn't supporting it, or that the support which you had was slipping away?

**GIFFEN:** I forget what provoked the confrontation, but there was a confrontation with the *Superman* group. I really forget what provoked the confrontation. I just know that the end result of the confrontation—I don't even remember what it was about, to be honest with you. I've often wondered, "Did I have anything to do with that?" 'Cause I seem to remember walking in and finding out that we could no longer use any *Superman* mythos retroactively. And I thought, "What does that mean, 'retroactively'?" That means that I've got a group here that's been influenced by a character whom I'm [not] allowed to acknowledge?" And that was why that hourglass issue came about.

But it was that early that everything started falling apart. The wheels started coming off of this thing. It was just this real, dogged determination on mine and Tom and Mary's part to fix things so that we weren't doing the white event that everyone thought I was going to do. 'Cause I think everyone really thought, "Oh, he's just going to erase it all and do it his way. He's such a maniac! He's got such a big ego!" And yet we struggled to try to salvage as much as was humanly possible in that book. There were times when I thought, "Why am I bothering! I'm over here, I'm trying really hard to respect the book, and I'm just getting nailed for it." But that's part and parcel.

**CADIGAN:** Didn't DC want you to start over from scratch at one point?

**GIFFEN:** Yes, yes. At one point, I was taken out to lunch, and [they] said, "Why don't you do a 'white event'? Just get rid of everything? It's too complicated." But that would have meant not only saying to the Legion fans, "Oh, by the way, the last 30 years? [laughs] F\*\*\* you," but it would also have meant doing what I brought the book five years ahead to avoid doing. And I couldn't do it. I remember saying, "Absolutely not," and that was the beginning of the end there.



## Badder Than Bad

(top) The Legion of Super-Villains vs. the Man of Steel on the Curt Swan/Stan Kaye cover to *Superman* #147 (Aug. 1961)!

(bottom) The irksome Legion enemies are nastier than ever before in *Legion of Super-Heroes* vol. 3 #2 (Sept. 1984). Cover by Giffen and Larry Mahlstedt.

TM & © DC Comics.



**CADIGAN:** *How far into the run was this?*

**GIFFEN:** I don't recall. It was probably not too far removed from the "Khund War" saga when I quit the book for a couple of months.

**CADIGAN:** *So they weren't just fill-in issues?*

**GIFFEN:** No, no, no. That was, "Oh, my God, he's gone." And I came back in time to do the covers. I walked off of that book many times. Most of the time it was just a one- or two-day walk-off, but that one lasted a bit. It was just a matter of... It didn't even come down to supporting the book. It was just... [sighs]. It was like being pecked to death by ducks. It got to the point where it just got ridiculous. Everything I did was being second-guessed. Even Legion fandom was going, "Since when is Dream Girl this sorceress?" I'm thinking, "No, that's Glorith." "Oh, but she's got Dream Girl's hair." "Excuse me?" That was pretty much what I was putting up with on a day-to-day basis.

**CADIGAN:** *What did you think people's reaction to the "Five Years Later" Legion would be when you headed into it?*

**GIFFEN:** I had no idea. I learned early on that my take on things is pretty far removed from the way things are gonna turn out. I have never had a success in the comic book industry that I didn't walk into thinking it was going to be an abject failure. I thought I was going to be fired for doing the *Justice League* the way that we did it. I thought *Lobo* was gonna be a disaster. *Legion*, I guess... [sighs]. I don't want the book to go away. I want there to be a *Legion*. And it was kind of shaky, in danger of maybe going away. Plus, like I say, I've always had a soft spot for the Legion. I guess I didn't know what to expect. I certainly didn't expect the open assault from every angle. You know, DC, fandom... here this is, like, "Jesus! It's just a comic book! Relax!"

**CADIGAN:** *On a scale of one to ten, how close did you get to tell the story which you wanted to tell?*

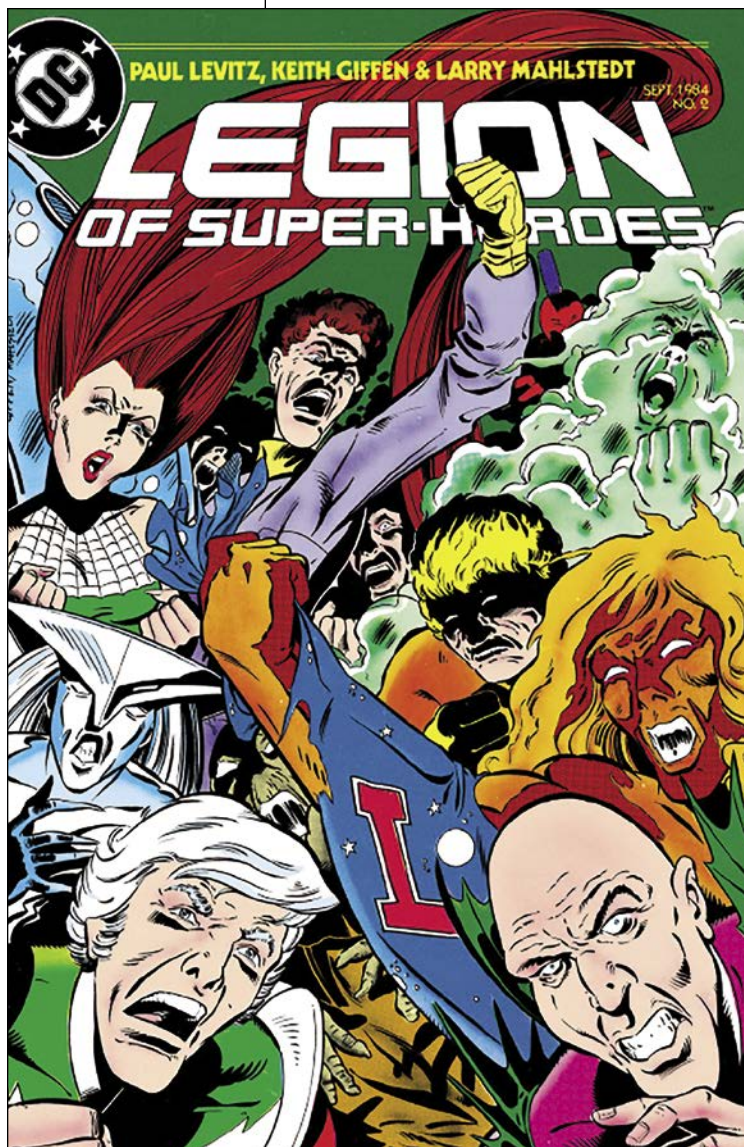
**GIFFEN:** Five. I got about halfway there.

**CADIGAN:** *So what would we have seen had you stayed?*

**GIFFEN:** Had I stayed and not been interfered with, the SW6 batch [supposed teenaged clones of the Legionnaires] would be discovered to be the real Legion. The conspiracy theory was true. They were taken and stuffed aside somewhere. Put in stasis. My guys—the guys I'd been playing with—were clones. The war to free Earth would have been much bigger and more spectacular and had real moments of tragedy, and then when Earth was freed, the kids would then inherit Earth and the United Planets, and whatever team was gonna continue with the *Legion of Super-Heroes* book would move it slowly back to that the good future. My guys—what's left of them—would wander off to another solar system where they would become the last bastion of law and order before the unknown, and they would call themselves the Omega Men, and we'd revive that team.

**CADIGAN:** *Do you see how that may have upset some people?*

**GIFFEN:** Yeah, sure, but I don't care. That sounds cold, but I really don't care. It was the story that was being told. I sat down and thought about it long and hard, and I really wanted to give people back this young Legion. Cloning them and giving them young kids, well, that wasn't giving them back the Legion of Super-Heroes, now then, was it? Doing this, it gave them back the Legion of Super-Heroes. It was their Legion of Super-Heroes. It was the characters that they knew and loved, and if you wanted to play the continuity game, that fact that they were clones, the



## Revenge of the Nerds

Keith gave the 30th Century's favorite also-fans a few fun outings in the '80s, including this 1985 *Legion of Substitute Heroes* one-shot, dialogued by Paul Levitz and inked by Karl Kesel.

TM & © DC Comics.

aberrational behavior could cover every continuity glitch ever since way back. I could understand that just like I could understand the hourglass issue was gonna piss people off, and Laurel Gand was gonna piss people off, but then what do they say? "If you don't piss people off, you're not doing your job."

Don't get me wrong; I did not want to make an enemy out of Legion fandom. I did not go out to deliberately ruffle people's feathers, but I didn't second-guess the story based on, "Oh, this might piss off a certain amount of people who really like this character," or, "This might offend a certain amount of people," simply because you're going for the overall audience. You're going for the impact. And it's comics! It's a comic book! If I give Superman a third leg and people go, "Wow! I really hate the third leg," I can take it away. So it's trying different things.

**CADIGAN:** *What about Legionnaires who joined after the Silver Age? What was your take on them, because you didn't clone those characters?*

**GIFFEN:** Those could be reintroduced as necessary, or they could borrow it out of the characters. If they were wanted, then they would be left behind on Earth. It was going to be a real, fair divvying up. I was actually going to take most of the duplicate characters.

**CADIGAN:** *Have you ever heard the Keith Giffen hat trick rumor?*

**GIFFEN:** That was the whole deal. When we did the Earth War, every Legionnaire's name was gonna be put into a hat, and I think it was five were gonna be pulled, and they died. It was the only way to do it fair. I had my favorites, and everyone had their favorites. I figured this was the best [way to do it]. Now, those that were critical to ongoing storylines would not make it into the hat, but there were certain characters [who would]. Yeah, that was true.

**CADIGAN:** *Was that the one time in your career when you put your heart and soul into your work more so than any other?*

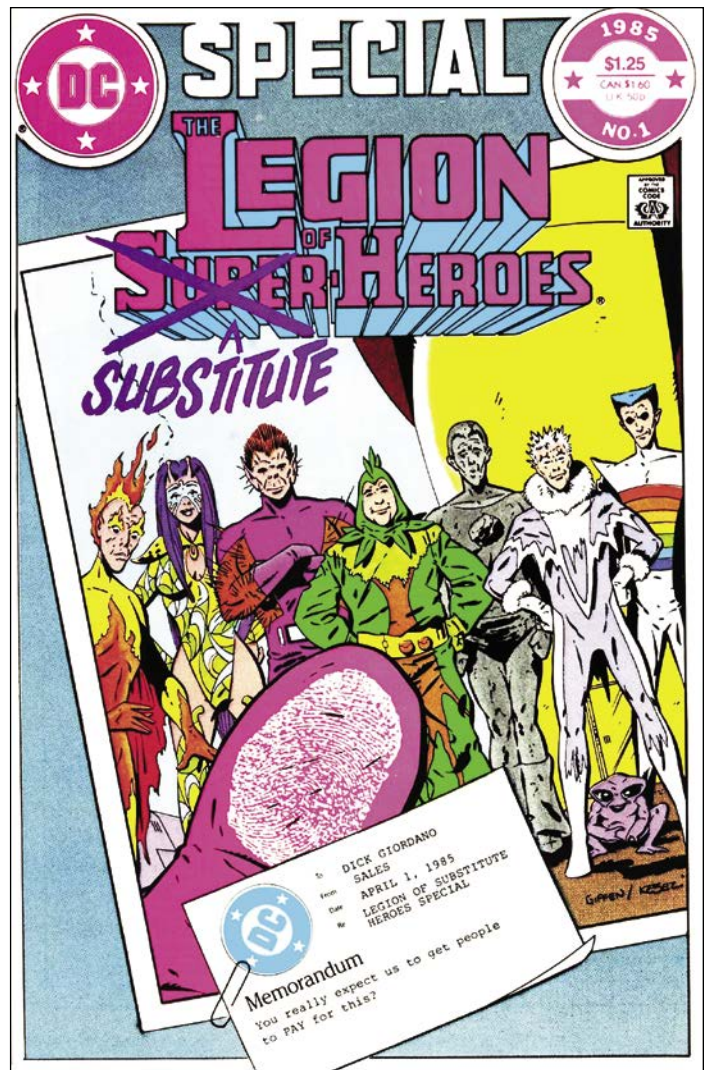
**GIFFEN:** I always try to throw 100 percent of myself into the work, but I guess the *Legion* thing, there was a little bit more in there, a little bit more in terms of what I really wanted to do in terms of storytelling and tone in a book.

Yeah, I guess that was. Out of all the work I'd done for DC up until that point, yeah, *Legion* was the book that I put that little bit of extra into—the "Five Years Later."

**CADIGAN:** *Do you think that if you had told the same story, only using different characters like Alan Moore did in *Watchmen*, that it would have had the same reaction? [Editor's note: *Watchmen* was originally based on Charlton Comics' "Action Heroes" (see BI #79).]*

**GIFFEN:** I never even thought of that. No, because I'm no Alan Moore, and Alan was at the top of his game then. I think that *Watchmen*'s success was due to the fact that at that point, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, they were at their peak. They were at the top of their game. It was just really mindbending stuff, some of the themes that Alan was exploring.

If you break down my "Five Years Later" Legion, it's pretty much dates back the old pulp fiction stuff. Moore and



Gibbons, they were on a whole 'nother level. I think they would have succeeded wildly with the Charlton characters or done as it was, and I think *Legion* "Five Years Later," it wouldn't have that Legion of Super-Heroes backlash, but I maintain that it was Legion of Super-Heroes that kept it alive sometimes, just the fact that it was a marquee name. I don't know how it would have done if we had come out with all [new characters]. I have no idea what other name we could have used, but I think for the story I was telling, it kind of had to be Legion of Super-Heroes.

**CADIGAN:** *Were there any events put into "The Magic Wars" to set up your run on Legion?*

**GIFFEN:** One, but I don't recall what it was. I recall specifically asking for one thing.

**CADIGAN:** *Was Magnetic Kid killed to set up the events of Cosmic Boy's downward slide?*

**GIFFEN:** No, no, no, no.

**CADIGAN:** *We've gone all this time and we haven't mentioned the Legion of Substitute Heroes yet.*

**GIFFEN:** Yeah, poor group. That's like my bipolar group. When everyone wants to take them seriously, I turn them into buffoons, and when everyone thinks they're buffoons, I introduce them in "Five Years Later" as an effective commando squad. It's just the whole idea of unfulfilled potential that the Legion was full of. All these wonderful characters just waiting for somebody to

come along and give 'em a new twist. I used to love doing the Substitute Heroes stuff because it proved that Paul Levitz does have a sense of humor.

**CADIGAN:** *Do you think you were unfairly criticized for turning them into comic relief?*

**GIFFEN:** Not at all. If the criticism is heartfelt, there's no unfair criticism, because criticism is an opinion. I can disagree.

**CADIGAN:** *When you did leave your "Five Years Later" Legion, was it just a case of you'd been worn down to a certain point?*

**GIFFEN:** I don't know if "worn down" [is the right term]. I did spend a lot of time during that run angry more than worn down. I know I left the book angry. I know that blowing up Earth [in *Legion* vol. 4 #38] was a temper tantrum, but I wouldn't say worn down. I guess "fed up" [is more accurate].

**CADIGAN:** *Do you think that the work which you did during that Legion era has affected your chances of returning to the title one day?*

**GIFFEN:** Well, they say that in comics you're only as good as your last failure. I don't think so. If I were to go back to the *Legion*, I carry a lot of baggage with me when I go into the *Legion* book. There are certain expectations, I think, or prejudices people have by hearing that I'm going on the book, as opposed to hearing Jeph Loeb's going on the book. I guess it depends on who's editing it. Some guy who really loathed what I did is not going to give me the work, but some guy who liked what I did is going to be more amenable. It depends on who's in the [driver's] seat.

**CADIGAN:** *How much consideration do you give to whomever has to write a comic after you've left it?*

**GIFFEN:** None. I tell the stories that I want to tell. When I don't want to tell the stories anymore, I

usually walk away from it. Like on *Justice League*, I always maintain I stayed ten issues too long on *Justice League*. I really should have left at #50, like I was planning on doing. Like I wanted to. When I left the *Justice League* book, that didn't mean that there were no more Justice League stories to tell, it just meant that there were no more Justice League stories that I wanted to tell. Whoever's gonna come on the book either picks up where I left off, or discards it [and] sends it in a whole other direction. Unless the guy comes up and specifically makes a request: "Hi, I'm taking over the book next issue. Could you do me a favor and write so and so out of the book?" That's different. That's a direct request. But in terms of, "Okay, I know I'm doing my last issue, and I know that [so and so] is taking over," I'm not going to go, "Hmm, I wonder if I could set something up for [him]."

No. That's ridiculous. He doesn't need my help.

**CADIGAN:** *Do you admit that you push the envelope?*

**GIFFEN:** Sure. You have to, don't you?

**CADIGAN:** *Are you your own best judge of whether you've pushed it too far?*

**GIFFEN:** No. Not at all. Stuff I think is completely innocent, people go, "Oh, God, no." Stuff that I just figure is a nice little chuckle, people back away [from]. They're appalled. I'm not a good judge at all as to whether I've gone too far, which is why on a book like *Lobo*, I really need an editor. Otherwise I'm afraid it's gonna go spiraling off into a weird place where we probably don't want to be. I've got billboards in the *Lobo* thing that are like, "I can't believe it's not yogurt; the only fertility clinic you'll ever need." That got taken out. "*Batman V: The Apology*." They didn't think that Warner Bros. would find that very funny. The funny thing was "*Bulimia II: The Return*" stayed there. I guess I tend to project my tolerance, or trawling the gutter, on other people.

**CADIGAN:** *You left the industry there for a period in the mid-1990s to work in*



### 'Where Has All the Magic Gone?'

Giffen felt he "dropped the ball" with his contributions to "The Magic Wars," the final story arc of volume 3 of *The Legion of Super-Heroes*. (We think he was being a little hard on himself.) Splash page to *LSH* vol. 3 #63 (Aug. 1989).

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animation.

**GIFFEN:** There was no work. I wasn't getting any work. I had to. I had to survive. I couldn't get arrested.

**CADIGAN:** *What brought you back to comics?*

**GIFFEN:** I came back because... it was weird, because in my entire career in comics, I've only been offered a job three times. The rest of the time I've either had to find it for myself, or I'm offered something to rework. I'm talking about offered a job

## Legion Out of Time

The Giffen-spawned *L.E.G.I.O.N.* '89 offered Keith and collaborators the opportunity to explore Legion-related planets and concepts in the contemporary DC Universe. Cover to issue #1 (Feb. 1989) by Kevin Maguire and Al Gordon.

TM & © DC Comics.

that's already there. That was when Karen Berger said, "You want to take over the *Legion* after Paul is gone?" and Mike Barr said, "You want to take over the *Legion*?" There's two Legion references. And Peter Tomasi called and asked me if I wanted *Suicide Squad*.

Other than that, it's always been, "You want to take over *Justice League*? You have to rework them from #1," or "You want to do this? It has to be from #1." I get these little damaged, f\*\*\*ed-up birds, and I gotta see if I can make them fly again. I kinda like that, but it would be nice if somebody goes, "Well, you know, you've been doing okay, so you want to do *Batman* for a while?" But I never get that. I've never been offered any of that stuff. I think it might have a lot to do with the fact that I don't have the circuit breaker in my head that says, "This isn't appropriate for the book."

**CADIGAN:** *You have been accused of reworking concepts a lot.*

**GIFFEN:** Yeah, and you know what? That's part and parcel of this field. I mean, you stop growing—you stagnate.

When I was doing *Justice League*, okay, yes, it was grim and gritty, *Dark Knight* and *Punisher* were ooh, scary, and we came out with a sitcom. But the deal was, I said, "Here's the deal. If we're using your character and they walk into a *Justice League* book, we're gonna have a little bit of fun with them, but we'll return them to you in the same shape they were when they walked into the book. We won't f\*\*\* 'em up." And even then, people were just, "Oh, but they're acting silly. They're acting funny." I thought, "No, they're acting human." And a lot of times, I'm called on specifically to rework a book. It's not like I go, "Oh, you offered me the Flash. I'll turn him into a Hispanic woman." I'm usually called on and said, "We'd like the Flash to be a Hispanic woman. Think you can work that?"

**CADIGAN:** *So it cuts both ways?*

**GIFFEN:** Yes. It amuses me how many people would actually rather see a book die then see the changes made to keep the book alive. I mean, if I hear, "Bring back Hal," one more time... Get over it.

**CADIGAN:** *How proud are you of your body of Legion work?*

**GIFFEN:** I'd do it again the same way without a second thought.

**CADIGAN:** *Both runs?*



**GIFFEN:** Yes. Even if I knew that poster was coming to blow me out, I'd still do it. I like what I did on the *Legion*. I enjoyed doing the *Legion*. I even enjoyed the more obnoxious fans. It was fun. It was fun to do. It's something I'm glad I got a chance to do. It's something that, hey, don't be surprised if I wind up back there again somehow.

**CADIGAN:** *Is it one of those comics that you just can't get out of your head?*

**GIFFEN:** I think so, yeah. Pretty much so. I don't pick it up anymore, but again, it'll just be me going, "That's not the way I'd do it." But you know what? If they called me tomorrow and said, "You want to come back?" I'd probably go. I have no idea what I'd do at this point, but I'd probably go.

*For over two decades, GLEN CADIGAN has written about comic book history. A sometime contributor to both BACK ISSUE and Alter Ego, his most recent book was The Life & Art of Dave Cockrum.*



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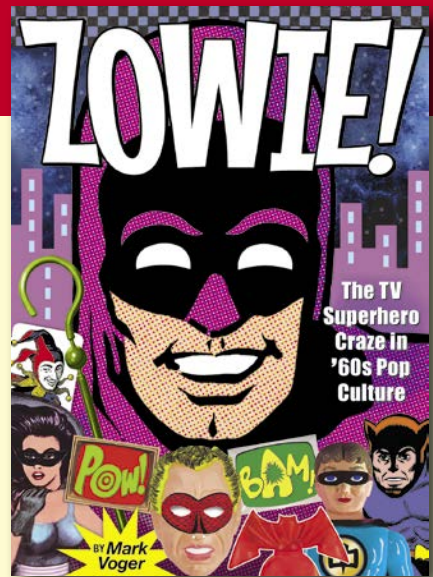
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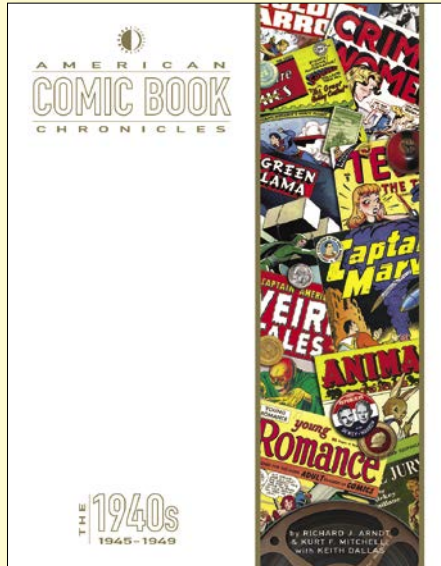
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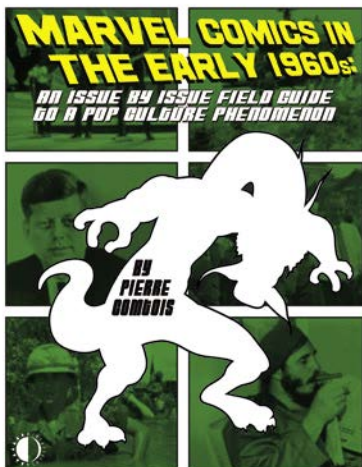
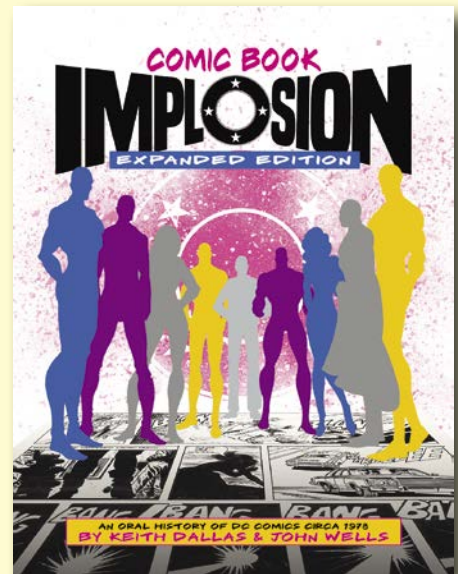
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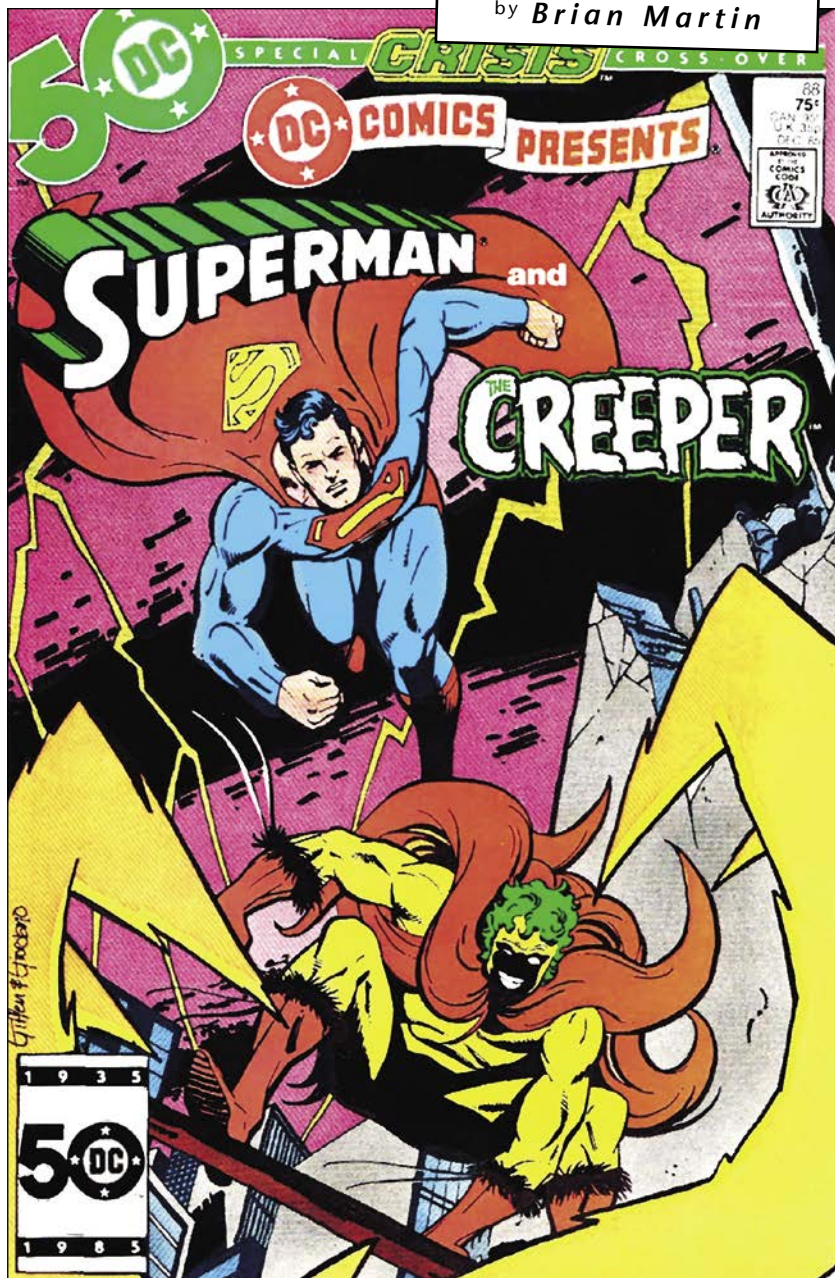
# The GIFFEN

# Take



It's appropriate that Keith Giffen began his breakthrough run on *Legion of Super-Heroes* with the climax of a story starring Chameleon Boy. Given the stylistic changes his art went through, the moniker could have almost applied to Giffen himself!

by **Brian Martin**



## He's a Chameleon, Boy!

Keith Giffen's oft-evolving art style led to periods of stylistic imitations some critics found excessive. Here at *BI Central*, we applaud his willingness to have taken chances, as with this weird Superman/Creeper cover for *DC Comics Presents* #88 (Dec. 1985). Cover inks by Dick Giordano.

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## THE IMAGE OF ME

Keith Giffen first appeared on the scene with Marvel Comics, though he did almost-contemporaneous work for DC Comics as well. *Amazing Adventures* #35 (Mar. 1976) featured Giffen's first published pencils, albeit over P. Craig Russell layouts. Giffen would do layouts for Wally Wood in *All-Star Comics* #60 (May–June 1976) at DC, but his first proper penciling credits were the Sons of the Tiger tale in *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* #22 (Mar. 1976) for Marvel, and *Kobra* #3 (June–July 1976) for DC.

From there, for the next few years the art of Keith Giffen appeared quite regularly. He had lots of individual stories in different titles with runs on *All-Star*, *Challengers of the Unknown*, and *Claw the Unconquered* for DC, and an extended stint on *The Defenders* for Marvel.

Giffen admitted that he tended to follow others in an interview in *Amazing Heroes* #16 (Sept. 1982), confiding that before he broke in, while working a day job, he spent time "studying books on anatomy, [and] perspective by night... (Odd now, to think how I threw all that away to become an instant clone of whichever artist happened to be hot at the time...) Seriously, it was really getting out of hand... all the swipes, the imitations."

The first noticeable example of "the swipes, the imitations" took place within issues #48–50 (June–Aug. 1977) of *The Defenders*, as these see Keith adopting a very Jack Kirby–influenced style. But if you look closely, the change does not really take place until after the third page of #48. This pattern would repeat itself later more than once. While not slavish, there were noticeable differences from the preceding issues, and the shift would not stick around very long. In *Comics Interview* #1 (Feb. 1983), the artist stated, "I was told to draw like Kirby, and when I did, everyone told me he was passe." So, except for a page or two in issues #51 and 52, he abandoned the attempt.

Another artist Giffen took from was to join him in raising the fortunes of DC in the early 1980s. "I was looking over at Marvel and what George Pérez was doing," Keith told Roy Thomas in *Alter Ego* #14 (Apr. 2002). "He was putting a lot of detail. I was very much looking at his stuff. I was fascinated by it."

While you can see some instances of imitation in early Giffen stories, for the most part they are identifiable as Keith Giffen artwork. Panel arrangements, character poses, and visual motifs recur quite often, and he would retain some of them even through his later radical stylistic changes. In all of these early stories the artwork and storytelling are both extremely clear.

But then he was gone. From late 1978 to late 1981 (with the exception of one five-pager that was probably from inventory), the comic world was Giffen-less. Keith always said he basically kicked himself out of the business, telling *The Jack Kirby Collector* #29 (Aug. 2000) he did so by being “never on time. Full of excuses.” To say he returned triumphant might be a bit of an understatement, even though that return soon led to the artist’s first truly radical stylistic shift.

### OH, NO, NOT YOU AGAIN

Giffen paid penance when he returned by doing some backup stories for DC and *Micronauts* #36 (Dec. 1981) for Marvel. The latter tale still looked a lot like his pre-sab-batical stuff, but then he landed first the Dr. Fate backup in *Flash*, then, critically, *The Legion of Super-Heroes*. As mentioned elsewhere in this magazine, with the Dr. Fate strip, the “new” Keith Giffen rapidly revealed himself.

“Keith was still very young and constantly growing,” according to frequent collaborator Paul Levitz. “I think stepping away from the Marvel assignments, where Jack’s influence has to permeate everything, was very liberating. And the SF nature of the *Legion* was a challenge he took real joy in rising to.”



PAUL LEVITZ

© Luigi Novi / Wikimedia Commons.

And rise he did. The Levitz/Giffen *Legion* run is justly celebrated. From backups in issues #285–286 (Mar.–Apr. 1982), Giffen took over the lead feature with #287 and soon the entire book. Admittedly, the backup stories still looked like his previous work, but by #287, he began to forge his own path, particularly in the scenes that featured futuristic technology.

That path would reach its destination in issue #290, the first chapter of the celebrated “Great Darkness Saga.” Within that comic, Keith Giffen firmly established a style all of his own, one that encompassed rather than imitated what he had learned from others. For the next year and a half he, along with inker Larry Mahlstedt, would establish a look that was as definitive for the *Legion* as anyone before or since.

### SURELY YOU JEST

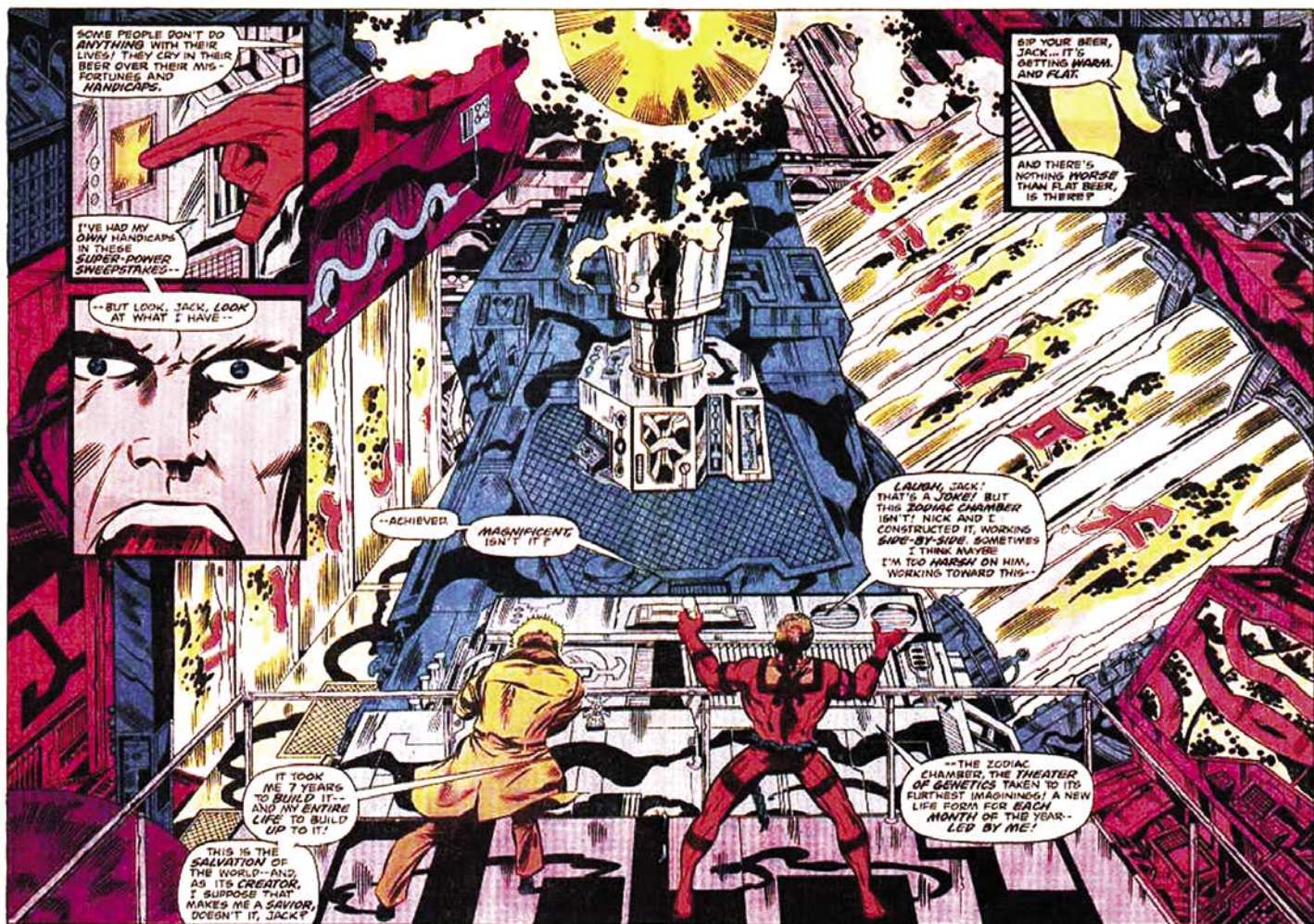
Elsewhere in this magazine you will find an essay examining *DC Comics Presents* #59 (July 1983). For our purposes, though he was still using the art style that had made his reputation on the *Legion*, Keith plotted the story, and this was a preview of the Giffen sense of humor that would soon make itself very evident. And a manic sense it was.

According to Paul Levitz, “The couple of humor issues we did together were mostly his stories,

## Feel the Kirby Krackle

The King of Comics clearly imprinted young Keith Giffen, as Jack Kirby’s influence is unmistakable in the double-page spread from *The Defenders* #48 (June 1977). Inks by Dan Green.

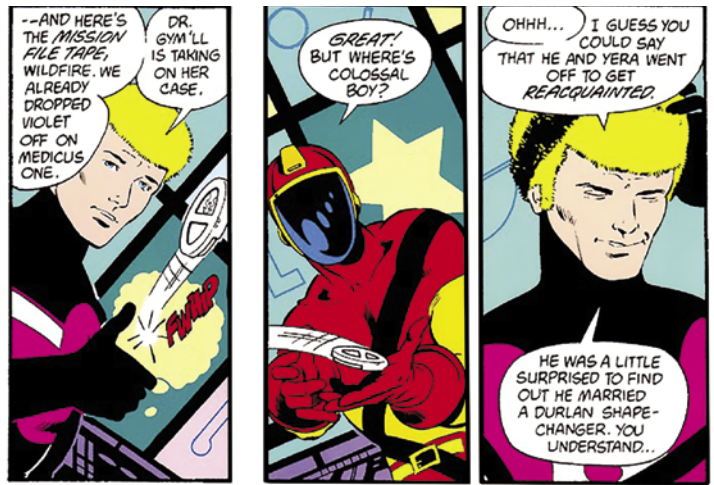
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## No, They Didn't Change the Penciler Mid-Issue

(top) It looked like traditional Keith Giffen/Larry Mahlstedt art in the earliest pages of *Legion of Super-Heroes* #307 (Jan. 1984), but later in that issue, (bottom) Keith began experimenting with leaner figures with more angular faces, as well as with comedic layouts.

TM & © DC Comics.



with me polishing dialogue. Keith was much funnier and wilder than I ever could be." Levitz dialogued this story and the later *Legion of Substitute Heroes Special* (1985).

### IT'S ALL TOO MUCH

The first truly major stylistic change happened very suddenly—so suddenly that, once again, it happened right in the middle of an issue! From page 5 to 6 in *Legion* #307 (Jan. 1984), there is a very noticeable switch in style. Going from the extremely clean, detail-heavy art that had been the norm basically since Giffen arrived back at DC, things took a turn towards a cartoony style. At the same time, the layouts noticeably altered. Now there were empty spaces left on pages where no panel reached. Borders became jagged. Characters' limbs extended beyond panel borders and figures traveled from one panel to another. You would almost think it was entirely different artist. And in a certain way, it was. Paul Levitz mentioned in letters pages at the time that between those pages Keith illustrated part of *Superboy* #50 (Feb. 1984) and decided to experiment. But why?

"Get the Giffen Legion poster," proclaimed the UPC boxes on direct sales DC comics dated December 1983. And what a poster it was. Giffen decided that he would show EVERY character that ever appeared in a Legion story, and proceeded to draw them all. But there was fallout from all of the effort this entailed. "In drawing that Legion poster I totally burned myself out on the book. After that poster I just had to walk away." That's the way Keith himself described it to *TJKC*. He did stay with the *Legion* for another eight months, but even beyond the changes mentioned above, the metamorphosis happened quite quickly. But let's pause a moment for a cartoon short.

### LOOKS LIKE THE PERFECT PLACE FOR AN AMBUSH

*Action Comics* #560 (Oct. 1984) featured the first solo tale for Ambush Bug, a character Giffen described to our own Michael Eury in *The Krypton Companion* as "Bugs Bunny as a supervillain." Introduced in *DC Comics Presents* #52 (Dec. 1982), he is maybe the character most identified with Keith and an embodiment of that previously mentioned manic sense of humor, giving Giffen his first chance to stretch his artistry in the service of comedy.

The artwork might have turned out a bit different, though, as veteran inker Karl Kesel tells *BI*, "I do kick myself for turning down the chance to ink the first Ambush Bug story. I didn't have the time! And Bob Oksner did a great job."

### ON THE DARK SIDE

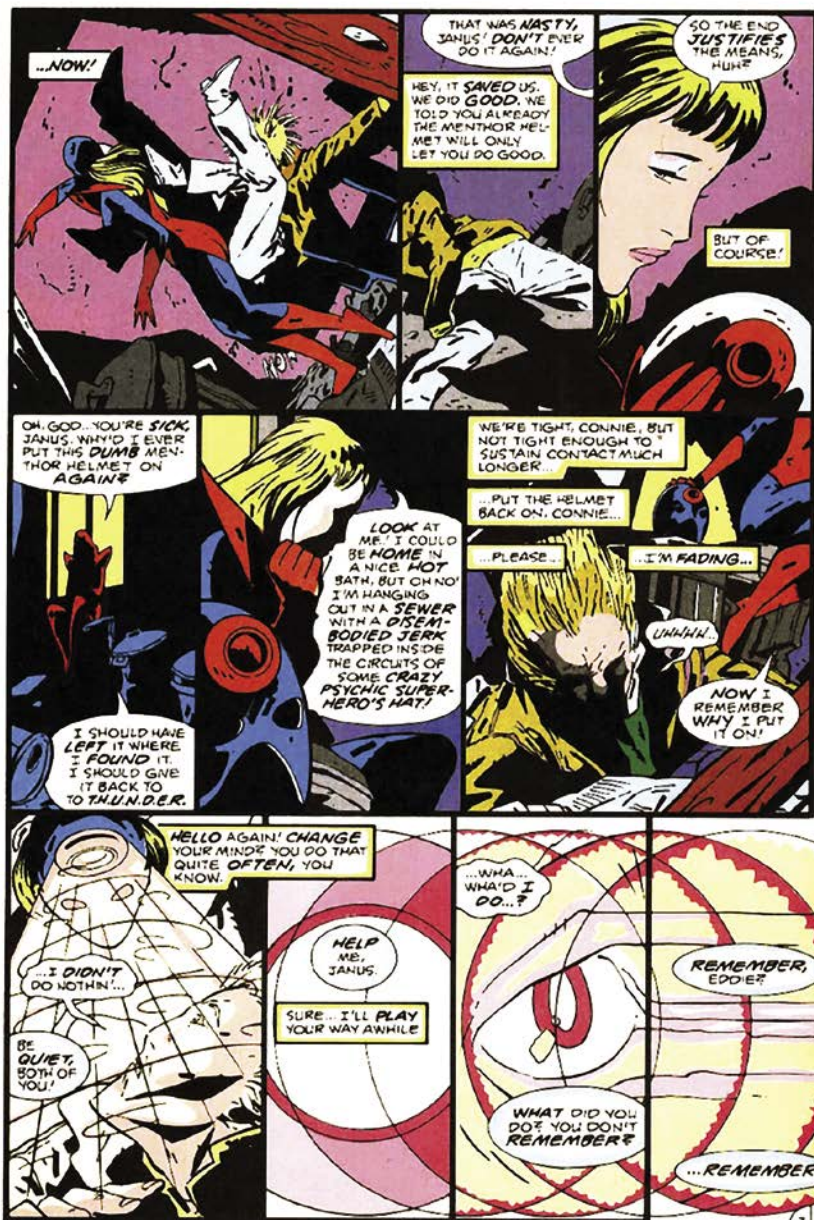
Not long after this, the best way to describe what happened is a quote I once read about the music of Radiohead. Keith began to pull at his art like taffy. With *Wally Wood's T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents* #1 (Nov. 1984), his figures—especially the faces—began to noticeably elongate. Those faces, and sometimes major portions of bodies, were also often almost totally obscured by black ink.

This period is referred to by some people as Giffen's José Muñoz period, as his art seemed to mimic the Argentine artist who was relatively unknown in North America at the time. "A friend of mine... showed me a whole bunch of xeroxed pages of this Muñoz artwork," Keith said in the *TJKC* article.

## 'THE THING THAT BOTHERS ME ABOUT THE FANS IS, THEY KEEP OSCILLATING'

Fan reaction to Keith Giffen's stylistic changes were often quite extreme. Here are a few examples:

- "Keith Giffen is an able replacement for Sal Buscema."  
— Rick Hango, *Defenders* #45 (Mar. 1977)
- "I still can't understand why Keith's artwork has transmuted into a Kirbyesque style."  
— Bryan Hollerbach, *Defenders* #52 (Oct. 1977)
- "Keith Giffen is the best artist I've ever seen."  
— Greg Whitmore, *Legion of Super-Heroes* #295 (Jan. 1983)
- "It's good to see he's not afraid to experiment with his style."  
— Neal Alhadeff, *Wally Wood's T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents* #2 (Jan. 1985)
- "What I do know is his current work doesn't hold a candle to his previous Marvel and DC efforts."  
— Roger S. Payton, *Wally Wood's T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents* #3 (Nov. 1985)
- "Is it just me or has Giffen forgotten how to draw in the last couple of years?"  
— Bill Middleton, *Amazing Heroes* #117 (May 15, 1987)
- "Artistically, it was terrific. Welcome back, Keith."  
— David Harris, *Legion of Super-Heroes* #55 (Holiday 1988)



**JOSE MUNOZ**

Ferran Cornelia/Wikimedia Commons.

## 'A Change of Mind,' Indeed!

(top) Giffen was in full José Muñoz mode—with dense, multiple panels suggestive of the nine-panel grid that would soon dominate his layouts—in this Menthor adventure from Deluxe Comics' Wally Wood's *T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents* #2. (bottom) The illustrative style of Argentinian cartoonist Jose Muñoz clearly influenced Giffen's work during the 1980s. Shown here is a silkscreen print from the 2010s of Alack Sinner, Muñoz's rough-and-tumble gumshoe, in a signed print special edition limited to 50. Courtesy of Heritage Auctions ([www.ha.com](http://www.ha.com)).

T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents TM & © the respective copyright holder.  
Alack Sinner TM & © José Muñoz.

"All I could do was study this guy's work. There was no time I was sitting there tracing or copying, no. Duplicating, pulling out of memory, and putting down on paper after intense study, absolutely."

His layouts became more abstract, and he began using more panels per page. However, his DC art at the time did tone down these eccentricities just a little. For a while.

## WHAT A CREEP(ER)

"The Superman/Creep gig was an odd one, probably the oddest mainstream comic I ever worked on. I can't say it was Keith's most successful experiment, but like everything Keith did—it was interesting!" That's the way Karl Kesel describes *DC Comics Presents* #88 (Dec. 1985) to *BI*. With that comic, the *Hell on Earth* graphic novel (examined just last issue!) and a backup in *Omega Men* #37 (Apr. 1986), Giffen brought the extreme style mentioned above to DC. He did not keep using it there, though, primarily experimenting in independents like *Taboo* #1 (Fall 1988). By the time he returned to *Legion* with #50 (Sept. 1988), he had adopted a style that was much closer to the one he used on the series previously, while incorporating some of the new things he was doing. But not long before that, he had found what was to be his calling for much of the rest of his career.

## LAY IT OUT ON THE LINE

When Keith Giffen first left the *Legion of Super-Heroes*, he was still listed as co-plotter and designer with issue #314 (Aug. 1984), and then he was sole plotter and designer on the *Legionnaires 3* miniseries (Feb.–May 1986). But a turning point arrived with *Justice League* #1 (May 1987). With this comic he was installed as plotter and layout artist on the series. The phenomenal success of that series led to many other jobs for Giffen doing exactly the same duties. *L.E.G.I.O.N.*, *Justice League Europe*, and 52 are prime examples, while he also helmed many a miniseries that way.

The reasoning behind Keith doing so much of that type of work was, as the artist related in *TJKC*, after copying Muñoz for a while, "I was so gun shy at that point about putting pencil to paper. I moved into the plotting and the breaking down and telling the story, which I always thought was my strong point anyway."

When it came to how those breakdowns looked, Karl Kesel inked *Legion* #314 and stated, "Keith's layouts always looked like Keith to me. His pacing, his figure placement, and gestures. Very distinctive. There was a reason people working over his layouts didn't make many changes—they weren't needed!"

Artist Bart Sears worked with Keith on the *Invasion!* crossover miniseries, then on *Justice League Europe*, and tells *BI* that "the plots/layouts I received from Keith, I always viewed as the first stage of his art/thinking process. Clear but not detailed. Simple shapes for figures, quick but very clean. I was free to do what I wanted/thought best to tell the story he wrote."

When asked if the layouts seemed tailored to his style, Bart says they were "not tailored to my style at all. Keith told the story just how he would tell any story he was drawing."

Asked why he did so much plotting later in his career, Giffen echoed other artists turned writer telling a *Comic Pals* interviewer, "It's a lot easier to write *Charge of the Light Brigade* than it is to draw it." Further to that, when asked about doing just layouts rather than full rendering, he told a Multiversity Comics interviewer in 2013, "It's pure storytelling and I love it. I've never given a damn about that wind-blown cape. Does it look like a cape? Yes? On to the next panel!"

Karl Kesel informs *BI* about a project with Giffen layouts that almost came to be. "DC almost did a *Captain Boomerang* one-shot in the early *Suicide Squad* days, with Keith and John Ostrander co-plotting, Keith doing layouts, and me pencils and inks."

In the same period, on jobs where Giffen did full pencils, his art tended to vary from the conservative style he had returned to the *Legion* with in 1988, to the slightly more ink-infused, stretched-figure style, depending on the subject matter. A Clayface origin in *Secret Origins* #44 (Sept. 1989) received the more extreme version; *Action* #646 (Oct. 1989), the more conservative.

### NINE TONIGHT

When he returned to *Legion* with a new #1 (Nov. 1989), another important Giffen book covered elsewhere in this issue, Keith adopted a stylistic affectation that would almost come to be associated with him, even though he did not use it that much: the nine-panel grid. Used extensively by Dave Gibbons in *Watchmen*, Giffen would use the grid (a page divided into nine identically sized panels, in three rows) for this series and 1992's *The Heckler* (see *BI* #91) almost exclusively.



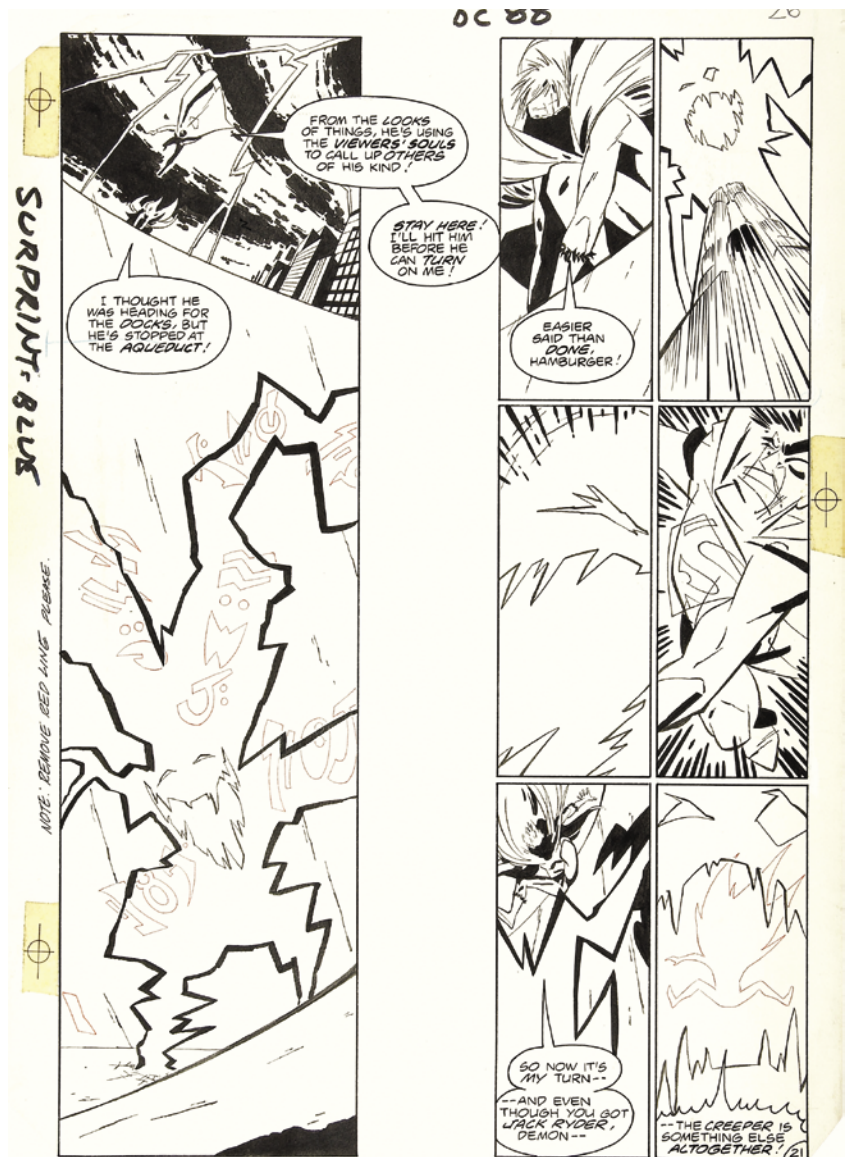
**KARL KESEL**

Facebook.

### LET ME GIVE YOU A BRIEF OUTLINE

In 1993, Giffen made another change, though it was short-lived. The new style appeared in a couple of issues of *Lobo Infanticide* (1992–1993), but he then showcased the dichotomy by affecting the change within a single page of art!

On page 21 of *Legion of Super-Heroes* vol. 4 #39 (Jan. 1993), he used the same style he had been using for quite some time, one which, as we've discussed, used a lot of black, particularly when it came to characters' faces. But as the nine-panel grid of the page reached its final image, the style abruptly changed. It is like his pen almost ran out of ink. The images were now depicted with thin outlines and no patches of black anywhere. Saying he went straight to ink while using this style, he told *TJKC*, "Trencher came along, which was an experiment in not penciling. Taking a zipograph and drawing his glasses and go!" He used this



### You're Creepin' Me Out, Man!

Giffen's off-kilter illos for Steve Englehart's Superman/Creepertale in *DC Comics Presents* #88 were a sharp departure from the series' norm. Inks by Karl Kesel. Courtesy of Heritage.

TM & © DC Comics.



## The Stark Knight

Giffen's experimental style and heavy reliance on blacks offered an eerie interpretation of Batman—as well as the flamboyantly hued Boy Wonder—in the Clayface bio in *Secret Origins* #44 (Sept. 1989).

TM & © DC Comics.

most prominently on that *Lobo* (1992) miniseries, then *Trencher* and *Images of Shadowhawk* (both 1993) for Image, and then abandoned it.

Fans of that period include Bart Sears, who feels, "I think around the time Keith did *Trencher* he was at the top of his game artistically."

## FINGERTIPS, PART TWO

For the rest of his career, Giffen settled into a style that was a bit of a hybrid of his earlier looks, sometimes angular, sometimes smooth, but there were no more wild flourishes, showing mostly one affectation from his past. Comic artist Scott Koblisch tells *BI*, "I inked Keith at DC for the last few years of his career. Keith had settled back into the heavy Kirby influence. I'm a huge Kirby fan myself, so I certainly fed into that. If there were a few dots of Kirby, I'd make it a larger part of the pattern, or if fingers weren't fully squared off, I'd square them.

"I knew instinctively what he was shooting for and I just made sure it happened as best I could. He was very easy to work over. I could easily ink two to four pages a day."

Koblisch was a longtime Giffen fan before working with the artist. "I loved his shifting style, I gravitated to shifting styles in my own work during college. There was a freedom to his constantly changing that attracted me greatly."

Karl Kesel echoes that sentiment, saying, "Keith's pencils were always very complete, very definite. Quite honestly, I enjoyed his continuing evolution since it always challenged me: 'How do I translate this into ink?' If that meant using a brush, I used a brush. If that meant using a marker..."

Keith kept this style for maybe the longest period of any. Maybe it was due to all of the layouts he was doing, or maybe he just finally found one he was comfortable with and did not experience a catalyst to prompt another shift. Regardless of the reason, we are left with a huge body of incredibly diverse artwork with which to remember this extraordinary creator.

Let's just leave with a quote from Mr. Giffen. Though he was not talking about style, his comment to GalaxyCon 2020 might sum up his whole attitude:

"If comics don't diversify, we're in a lot of trouble."

And diversify he did.

*The author would like to thank Karl Kesel, Scott Koblisch, Paul Levitz, and Bart Sears for their assistance in preparing this article.*

*BRIAN MARTIN lives in Oakville, Ontario, Canada, and experienced Keith Giffen's art all through his career and its many changes.*



SCOTT KOBLISCH

Gage Skidmore.



end

## 'Top of his game artistically.'

That's how Bart Sears described Giffen's work during the period Keith produced the Image series *Trencher* (shown in issue #1, May 1993).

What do you think?

*Trencher* © Keith Giffen estate.



# KEITH GIFFEN'S 20 GREATEST HITS OF THE BACK ISSUE ERA

*One of the most unpredictable creators to emerge during the Bronze Age, Keith Giffen's work always took on a life of its own. Even when aping the art styles of Kirby or Muñoz, Giffen's work boasted a raw energy that electrified the page.*

As he matured as a storyteller, Keith became more involved with the plotting of the series he was drawing. Before long he became the driving force behind numerous hit series, visually laying out stories for other artists, with a more seasoned scribe penning the dialogue. Eventually Giffen took over full writing duties on many of his projects.

As this edition of *BACK ISSUE* showcases the impressive body of work left behind by the late writer/artist, ye ed and our pool of talented freelance writers, plus a handful of Keith's collaborators, have chosen 20 Giffen-written-or-drawn comic books from the 1970s through the 1990s that, for a variety of reasons, rise above the pack. In many cases, these stories introduced important new characters or storylines with lasting resonance.

And in all cases, they represent the unparalleled imagination and the buoyant enthusiasm of the one-and-only Keith Giffen.



Comic: *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* #22 (Mar. 1976)

Publisher: Marvel Comics

Cover art: Ken Barr

Title: "Who Is the White Tiger?"

Writer: Bill Mantlo

Artists: Keith Giffen and Rico Rival



In *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* #19 (Dec. 1975), writer Bill Mantlo teamed with a relatively new artist named George Pérez to create the White Tiger. The White Tiger's alter ego is Hector Ayala. This is significant in comics history as he was the first Latin-American lead character in an American comic, and Marvel's first Hispanic superhero. Three issues later, in #22 (Mar. 1976), Mantlo teamed with another young artist, Keith Giffen (along with inker Rico Rival), to create the hero known as the Jack of Hearts.

The Jack of Hearts costume is based on the playing card of the same name and is suitably intricate and colorful, though that color would be added later as his first appearance was in a black-and-white magazine. The costume remains a *bête noir* of artists due to its complexity. Giffen would become known for his more minimal art, so it's interesting that he designed so lavish of a costume. It also shows his development as an artist over time.

There is nothing in the art that screams Giffen, but he was fairly new at this and developing his style. There are a couple pages that use non-traditional layout, as they're drawn in columns and read down the page instead of across. Surprisingly, these read easily as the art naturally leads the reader down the page. Learning to lead the reader's eye around the page is a definite skill, and it's impressive that Giffen did this seemingly effortlessly. The pendants that give White Tiger his powers are worked into the design of a page that recaps his origin, giving it a nice stylistic feel.

But how did White Tiger and Jack of Hearts come together? As so often happens in superhero comics, a misunderstanding leads to a fight.

Hector is on a roof, bemoaning his fate. Sure, he's a hero, but that doesn't seem to mean much. He was accused of murder, fought the Prowler, was eventually cleared of murder, and then there are the problems with his family. And, even though he's unaware of it, J. Jonah





**NO. 2**

Comic: *Marvel Preview* #7 (Summer 1976)

Publisher: Marvel Comics

Cover art: Bob Larkin

Title: "The Sword in the Star!: Stave 2: Witchworld!"

Writer: Bill Mantlo

Artist: Keith Giffen



Interviewed by William Colosimo in *BACK ISSUE* #119 (Apr. 2020), Keith Giffen confirmed: "My first published story was 'The Sword in the Star' in an old issue of *Marvel Preview*, the black-and-white magazine. It cover-featured Satana. It was the backup feature, where I first drew Rocket Raccoon."

Giffen spoke of his childhood love for comics in *Jack Kirby Collector* #29 (Aug. 2000). When Jon B. Cooke asked Giffen if he specifically wanted to be a comic book artist, Giffen replied, "Yes. Specifically comic book artist. I had no interest in advertising or any of that. It was always geared toward doing comic book work. I broke into comics by doing everything wrong. I was working as a hazardous material handler and I took a week off and said, 'Hey, I think I'll break into comics.' So I just drew up a bunch of pictures and slapped them together." Giffen first approached Atlas [Seaboard Comics, of the mid-1970s] and then... "I call up Marvel. I don't know who the secretary was then, but it was not the most positive—'Yeah, um, bring your portfolio in and they'll look at it and you can pick it up tomorrow.' I was stupid enough. I go into New York and drop off the portfolio and I go home. Next day I figure I'll go get it and I thought, 'No that's not a good idea.' So I let a day go by and rather than just go get it, I called. And the woman said, 'Get in here now.' So I go in and she's yelling at me, she's really pissed off at me. It took a while for it to sink in that apparently Ed Hannigan—prior commitments had forced him off this backup strip in a B&W magazine called 'The Sword in the Star.' And Bill Mantlo, who was the writer, happened to see my samples lying around and said, 'I like him; why don't we get this guy?' And they couldn't contact me because, like the genius I am, I had dropped off my portfolio with my name on it and that's it. No phone number, no address, no way to contact me. So they needed me yesterday, and that's pretty much how I got my start in comics."

And what a start. From the majestic opening spread, it's astonishing to think that this is Giffen's first published work. The futuristic odyssey features Prince Wayfinder searching for a mythical weapon he hopes can save his people. (Spoiler: it's a sword.) Part one appeared in *Marvel Preview* #4 (Jan. 1976). Giffen illustrated part two in *Marvel Preview* #7 (Sept. 1976). Wayfinder himself seems inspired by the characterizations of Barry Windsor-Smith. His android companion, Alkinoos, is pure Jack Kirby (complete with Krackle). Wayfinder's solar barge—with its contrast of simplicity and complexity—parallels some of John Byrne's technological renditions.

After seven pages amongst the stars, Wayfinder and Alkinoos land on the forest planet of Endor Witch-World. Attacked by a carnivorous tree from Jim Starlin's nightmares, and a Jurassic volcanic "Plagueosaur" that would make George Pérez proud, Wayfinder is joined by a gun-totin' raccoon named Rocky.

Please understand that the above comparisons are compliments of the highest order. Giffen has his own distinct, highly detailed style; he is copying no one, but we can see both originality and inspiration in his art. He is standing on the shoulders of giants.

The forest scenes are lushly and imaginatively laid out, as Wayfinder and Rocky battle the monstrous Plagueosaur, followed by the beast-men of the mysterious and seductive witch-queen of the forest, Kirke. The wisecracking Rocky, in particular, makes use of his agility and armaments—demonstrating (in his very first appearance) the attributes for which he will become known.

Mantlo told Mark Waid in *Amazing Heroes* #60 (Dec. 1984): "Rocket was a secondary character in 'The Sword in the Star' which itself was a feature that never went anywhere because all the vehicles for it died. Rocket did a walk-on part in the series. Keith had him marching out of the swamp, dressed in battle armor, and smoking a pipe [Author's note: actually, a cigar]—which I didn't realize until later was an almost exact rerun of the way Howard the Duck first appeared. I called Keith and said, 'This is fun, let's go with this.'"

"Remember the old Beatles song 'Rocky Raccoon'? I think that was part of the inspiration. I think we were trying to do our version of Howard the Duck. You know, wink, wink, nudge, nudge," Giffen laughed. "He was a throwaway gag. I wish I could say I had a lot more to do with his development, but honestly, I'm credited with creating the character when... all I did was draw a raccoon!"

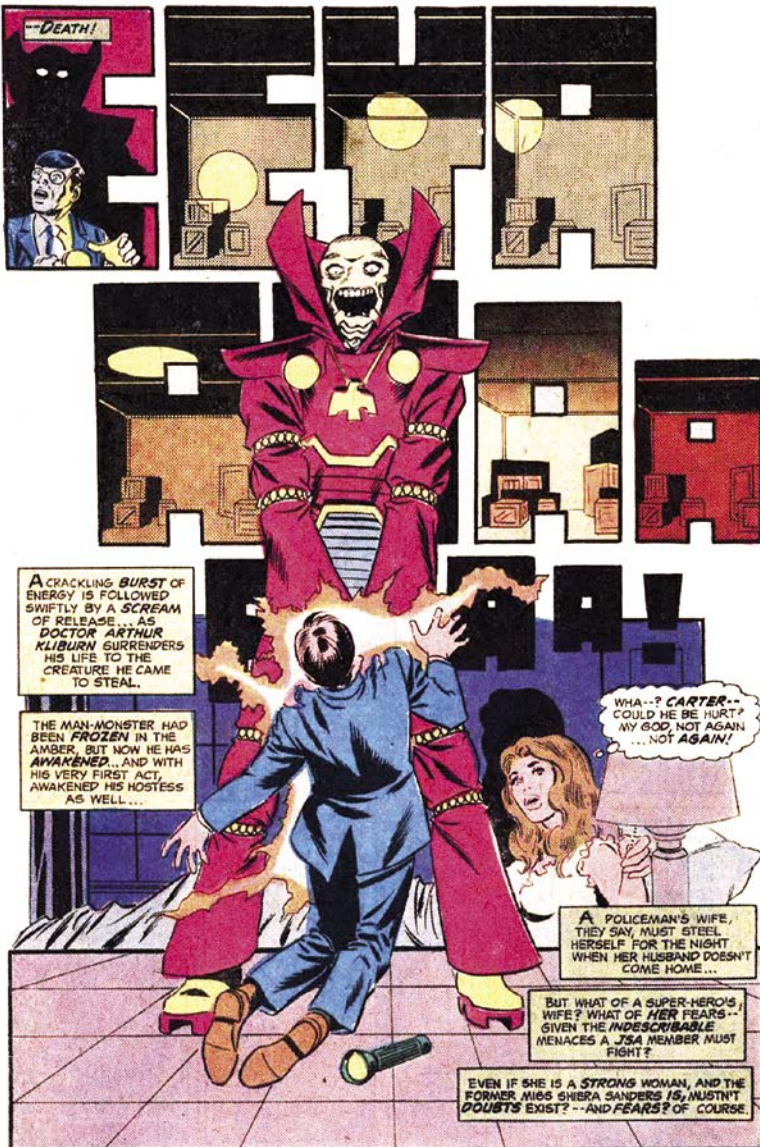
Jarrod Buttery





# NO. 3

Comic: *All-Star Comics* #62 (Sept.–Oct. 1976)  
 Publisher: DC Comics  
 Cover art: Ernie Chua  
 Title: “When Fall the Mighty”  
 Writers: Gerry Conway (plot), Paul Levitz (script)  
 Artists: Keith Giffen and Wally Wood

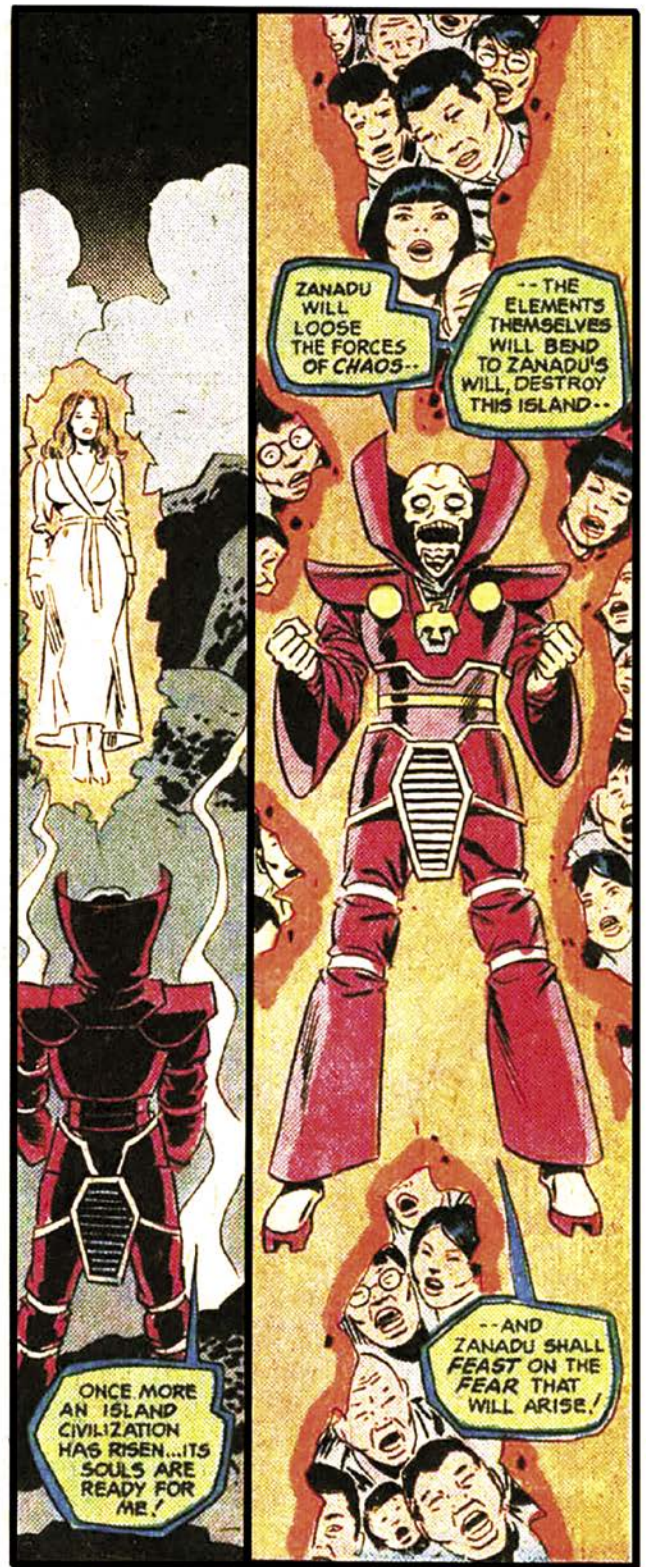
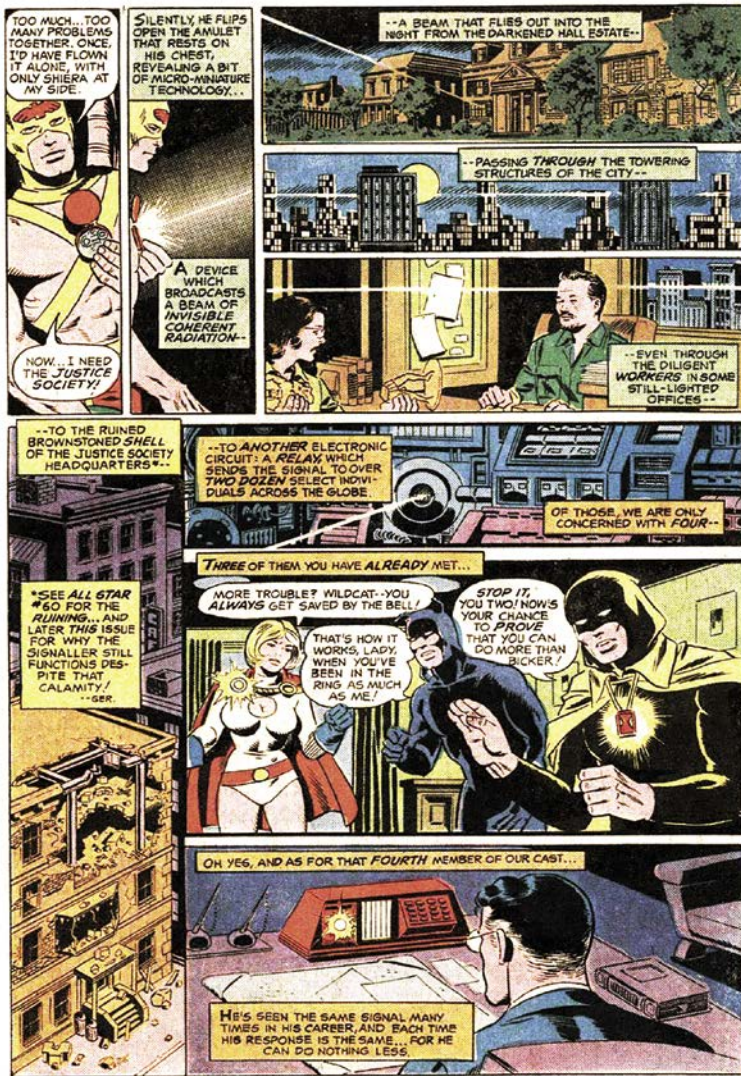


We were all very young. Keith was 23, I was 19. The list of our credits might have filled an old 3"x5" index card, maybe. Gerry Conway was the grand old man at 23, but having started phenomenally, he'd probably have needed a couple of sheets of notebook paper already for his.

Gerry had revived *All-Star Comics* as part of his arrival at DC as an editor. As of its third issue he brought Keith in as layout artist, his first ongoing assignment, with Wally Wood continuing on the finishes. I no longer recall the circumstances behind the decision, but I suspect Gerry felt Keith's youthful energy and modern style might have moved the series ahead from Ric Estrada's very professional but less dynamic layouts. In any case, they managed two issues together, and then Gerry vanished—jumping back to Marvel to serve as its editor-in-chief for what would turn out to be a legendarily short three-week reign. Keith was at work on their third issue from a plot (Gerry preferred working in the Marvel style of separate plot and dialogue when he had the chance), and I stepped into the writing assignment on the series (possibly over the bodies of several other writers in my youthful, ahem, energy).

I vividly recall sitting in my Greenwich Village apartment, the nicotine aroma from Keith's pages drifting up into my nostrils. The pages were unlike pretty much anything I'd worked on at DC to that time, either as a writer or as an assistant editor. 10- and 12-panel pages abounded, with tiny figures as a result... so far from the more traditional 5- and 6-panel pages that had been my professional experience. I'd never written dialogue over pencils or layouts before, only done full scripts or broken down plots to help Gerry or Denny O'Neil in a pinch.





I stared at the pages. Looking back, I know I was in over my head. At the time, it just felt like frustration and anger.

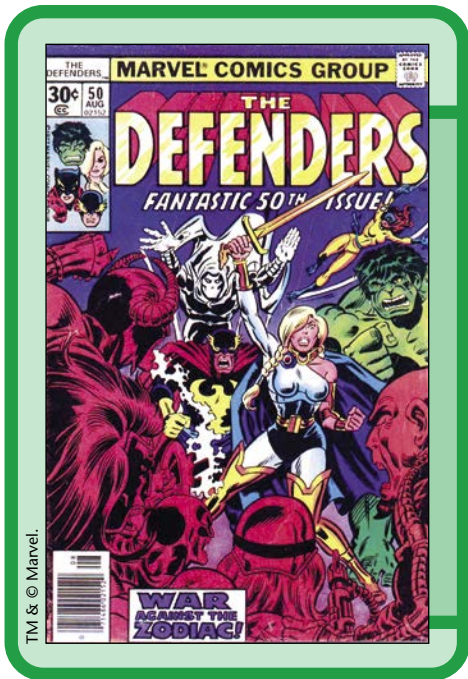
I dialogued the 18-page story in three hours. (I'm a fast writer, but that's at least three or four times the best speed I can recall on anything else in my decades-long career now.) If you'd had a camera on me, you could have seen the steam coming out of my ears.

But maybe I should have written more stories in anger. Overall, it reads as well or better than anything I did in that period of my career. And page 9, oh, page 9.... I'm not sure I've ever put words on a page more people have loved. Of course, that was Gerry's plot moment, and Keith's pacing/layouts, not to mention Woody's lovely finishes. But oh, that page.

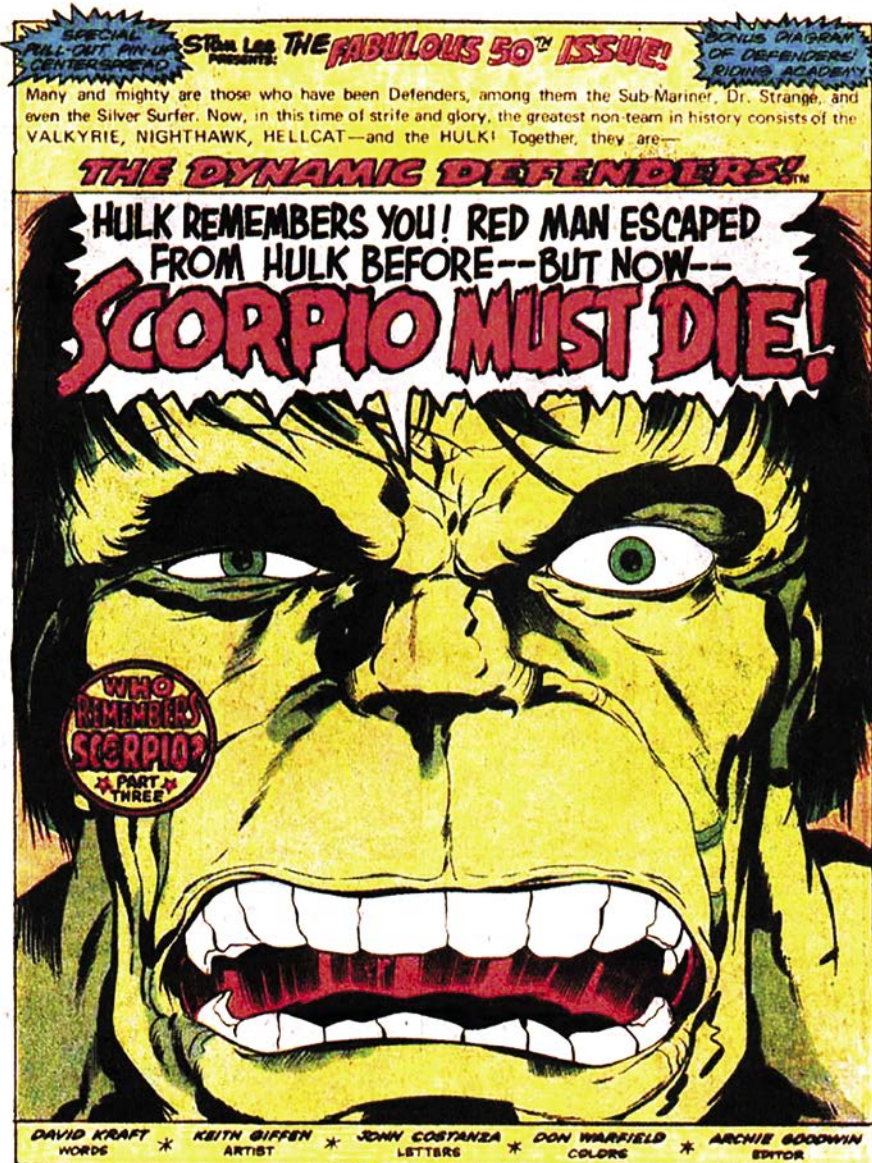
Keith did one more issue, which I have no equally vivid memory of. But overall, let's just say we hadn't bonded as a creative team. And some five years later, when he was proposed as one of the regular artists while I was writing *Legion*, I was nervous. And oh, so wrong. Sometimes a challenging first date can make for a hell of a marriage!

Paul Levitz





Comic: *The Defenders* #50 (Aug. 1977)  
 Publisher: Marvel Comics  
 Cover art: Al Milgrom  
 Title: "Who Remembers Scorpio? Part Three: Scorpio Must Die!"  
 Writer: David Anthony Kraft  
 Artists: Keith Giffen and Mike Royer, John Tartaglione, and Dave Cockrum



I tend to think of Keith Giffen as more of a DC guy, as the entries that follow this one will show, but *Defenders* #50 is a prime example of what could happen if he was let loose in the Marvel sandpit. Just take a look at the splash page. Giffen gives us a full-page facial portrait of the Hulk. This is not the Hulk of the then-current house style as best portrayed by Sal Buscema, nor is it the Hulk of Herb Trimpe or Jack Kirby, although there are elements of both here. This is Giffen's own bestial take on the Hulk—a demented, monstrous figure. The word balloon has him saying "Scorpio must die," but it is the look in his eye which tells us he really means it. And yet, it's kind of funny, too, which is emblematic of the Keith Giffen we would become familiar with through his work (and possibly in person, too, for those who knew him which, sadly, I didn't).

*The Defenders* was the Marvel superhero title which was always a little bit different from the rest of the company's output, making it just the place for Keith Giffen, along with writer David A. Kraft, to be given a run. "Scorpio Must Die" is the third and final part of "Who Remembers Scorpio?" It is also an anniversary issue marked by the inclusion of a double-page spread (still part of the story) showing the team in action as well as a diagram of the Defenders' riding academy (which we had all been losing sleep waiting for).

On page two, Scorpio introduces his new Zodiac team. This is archetypal Marvel stuff, with each member introducing themselves and their powers, but straight away Giffen and Kraft play against type. Frankly, none of this bunch look like they could last ten seconds against the Hulk and one of them, The Zodiac's Cancer, even admits he "doesn't like Greenie's looks." Only eight new characters are introduced. It's almost as if Giffen gets bored after that, but sets up the plot of what has happened to the missing three.

Much of the issue that follows is a fight scene between the Defenders and the new Zodiac, intercut with Scorpio's search for his missing team members. Giffen doesn't skimp on the action. The anniversary inspired double-page spread across the center pages suggests that the Hulk was the character Giffen was most interested in, followed by Valkyrie. Hellcat, Moon Knight, and Nighthawk are very much in the background. The previous issues had seen a tendency by Giffen to "buxom up" the female characters (including the Red Guardian, who is not present here), but that is less obvious in this issue.

Also playing against type is the full-page diagram of "The Defenders' Long Island Hang-out." Compared to previous schematics of the Fantastic Four's Baxter Building, this is not the detailed super-team HQ readers might have been expecting. Were Kraft and Giffen having a joke here? It's basically a picture of some generic farm buildings with small cutaways which reveal, well, nothing much really. My favorite touch is the grazing pasture in which the winged horse Aragon is happily munching grass in full view of the highway.

So, plenty of quirky, funny, exciting action in the emerging Giffen style. Then come the final two pages, and what a masterful change of pace. Scorpio's dream is dead. He is alone apart from an LMD (life model decoy) of Nick Fury. To set the scene there is a great panel of a record playing to conclusion as Scorpio says, "I just had to hear little Judy sing 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' one last time." Scorpio is the brother of Nick Fury and believes Fury despises him. The LMD version of Fury, however, claims respect for Scorpio. Possibly he loves him, although he claims to be a being without free will. It is that lack of free will which causes the LMD Fury to acquiesce to Scorpio's request to give him his gun. Between panels, Scorpio kills himself. By the time others arrive, the gun is back in the hands of the LMD Fury and it is assumed he killed Scorpio. Suicide is rare in comics. Kraft and Giffen manage the storyline with skill.

The indicators are all here for what Giffen would go on to do in the rest of his career. We see his ability to jump between humor and action. He knows when to go for the max (as in his version of the Hulk) and when to downplay. We should mention the art assist on inks from Mike Royer, John Tartaglione, and Dave Cockrum, but this still looks and feels like a Keith Giffen comic. What more could you want?

Ian Millsted



MEANWHILE, IN AN ADJOINING CHAMBER, AS YET UNREACHED BY LIGHT BUT THE RESOUNDING DIN OF THE FURIOUS BATTLE RAGING BEYOND ITS METALLIC CONFINES, KYLE RICHMOND-- ALSO KNOWN AS NIGHTHAWK-- STRUGGLES WITH HIS UNYIELDING BONDS. HE HAS BEEN HELD PRISONER HERE SINCE MID-MORNING OF THIS DAY, A WEALTHY PAWN IN SCORPIO'S PLANS FOR A BETTER WORLD. BUT NOW EVENING HAS FINALLY FALLEN-- AND NIGHTHAWK'S STRENGTH IS DOUBLED AT NIGHT.





# NO. 5

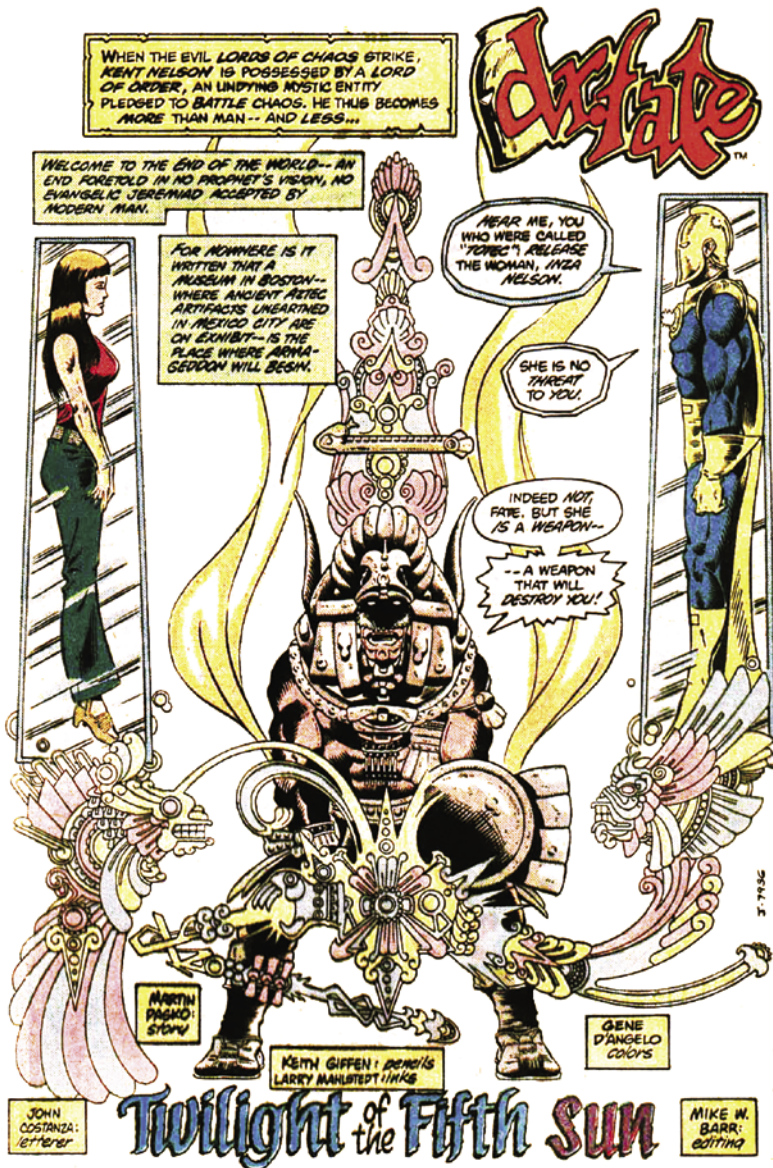
Comics: *The Flash* #306–313 (Feb.–Aug. 1982)

Publisher: DC Comics

Cover art: Carmine Infantino and Bob Smith (#306, shown)

Writer: Martin Pasko

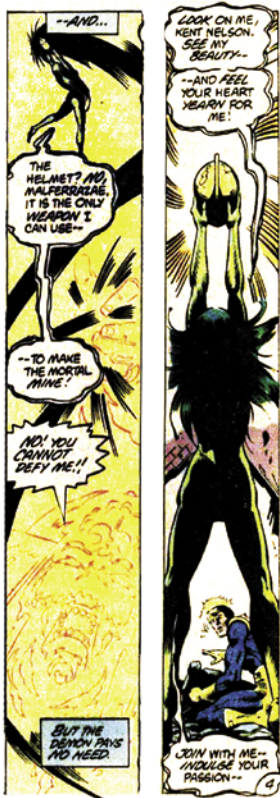
Artists: Keith Giffen and Larry Mahlstedt



"When evil strikes, when chaos is unleashed upon the multiverse, and all who live by order scream in anguish—one man alone is equal to the challenge. Dr. Fate." That wording headed an ad in *Legion of Super-Heroes* #283 (Jan. 1982), among other books, that heralded the doctor's arrival in the backup slot in *The Flash* beginning with issue #306 (Feb. 1982). The ad was illustrated by Keith Giffen who, along with inker Larry Mahlstedt, would initially team with writer Martin Pasko on the feature. The feature would only run eight episodes, but it was a major bellwether in the career of Giffen in particular.

Seemingly a bit of a strange pairing—a mystical character in the back of what, for superhero features, was a more science-based character—was exactly the point. The good doctor replaced the previous feature because, as the editor of the comic at the time, Mike W. Barr, told the *TwoMorrows* book *The Flash Companion* (July 2008), "My thinking was that with Firestorm you have exactly the same type of superhero as you have with the Flash: so, anyone who likes Firestorm is probably going to buy *The Flash* anyway. But with Dr. Fate, you had a totally different type of character. So hopefully if you get rid of Firestorm you keep all the readers who were buying the book for the Flash, and you bring in readers who will buy the book just for Dr. Fate." This is important from the Keith Giffen standpoint in that, though he would certainly have done an excellent job if given Firestorm, Dr. Fate—and subsequently the *Legion of Super-Heroes*—were better-suited projects to give free rein to an imagination that was on the verge of exploding.

The first four-issue tale pits the mystic against the supposedly reborn Aztec deity Totec, who is in actuality a Lord of Chaos named Malferrazae. Since the good doctor is a Lord of Order, of course, they clash. Story-wise, the tale begins a subplot which would occur through the whole run, the fact that Fate's host's wife Inza (got all that? Scorecards are available in the gift shop) is none too happy living her life in a windowless, doorless tower. Her inclusion allows Giffen to stretch his "pretty woman" drawing muscles as she appears in each episode.



In terms of artistic development, Giffen displays his facility for design with the elaborate work that goes into depicting the spells of the villain. Not content with mere flashes of light, Totec's, and for the most part Dr. Fate's, every act of prestidigitation is depicted with a loving complexity of design.

Impressive though the first arc is, in some ways it feels as though it was just a warmup for the next four-parter. With the master of surreality Steve Gerber joining the writing team, Giffen and Mahlstedt seemed to let loose with this storyline. The use of color holds—drawings where an element of a picture is depicted without a black line around it—which would become a Giffen staple for at least the foreseeable future, is extensive here. Not a single page which features the use of magic does not feature the effect.

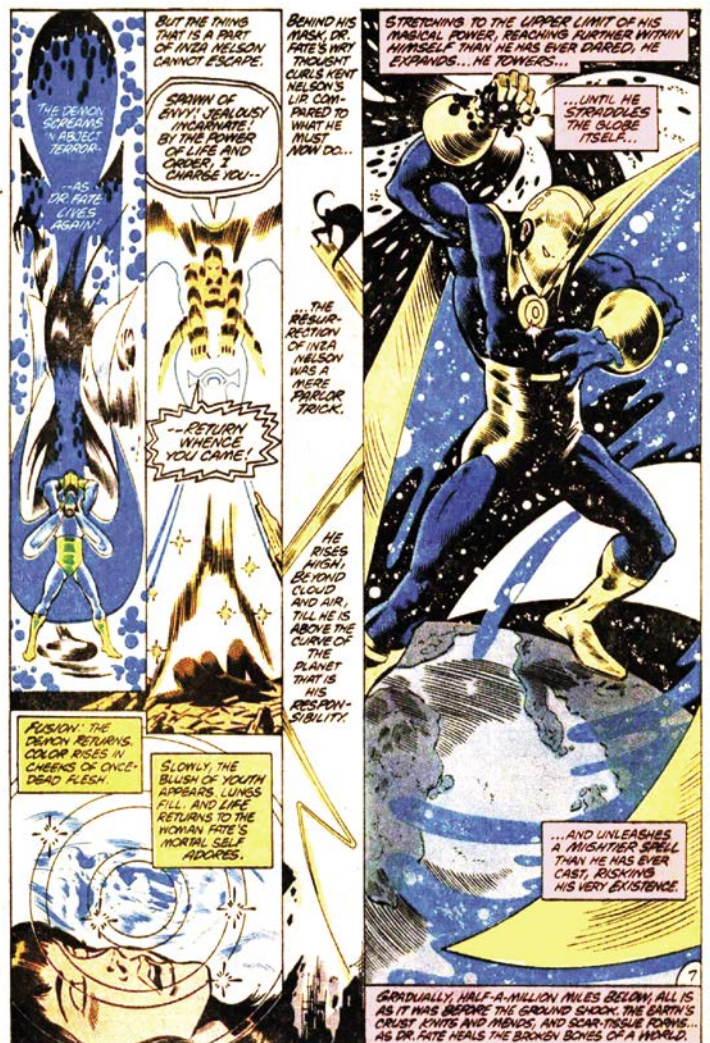
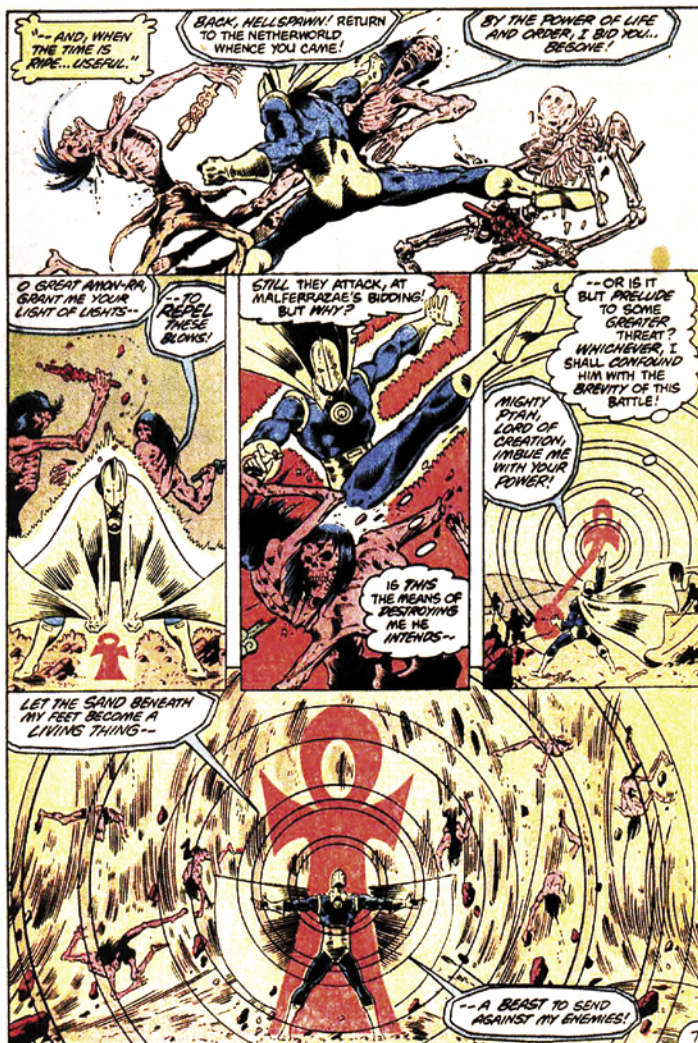
Beyond that aspect, the entire storyline exhibits such imagination in design and other visual effects, such as the extensive use of zip-a-tone (which is of course applied by the inker, but is so pervasive in Giffen's work that he probably suggested its use—or his work did), still more evocative symbols imbedded in spell casting, and a stylistic use of silhouettes, that you can see their development into standard Giffen tropes.

Even in terms of storytelling motifs and conventions that were to follow him, we can see them developing here. Page four of the story in *Flash* #312 (Aug. 1982) features a two-panel reaction sequence by Inza that you can see in many subsequent Giffen stories.

These eight stories were popular enough that they were reprinted in issues #2-3 (Feb.-Mar. 1985) of *The Immortal Doctor Fate*, a Deluxe Format miniseries that reprinted the good doctor's solo appearances in the Bronze Age.

I guess part of the significance, and to be honest, attraction of these stories is that not only are they great stories to read and look at, but you can almost see the talent advancing—one might even say being released—from the first page of the run to the last. On page eight of the story in issue #307 (Mar. 1982), a loathsome creature emerges from within Inza to menace our hero. Though much more palatable, this sequence of issues definitely mirrors that occurrence, as we literally watched a major talent evolving right before our very eyes.

Brian Martin





**NO. 6**

Comics: *The Legion of Super-Heroes* vol. 2 #290–294  
(Aug.–Dec. 1982)

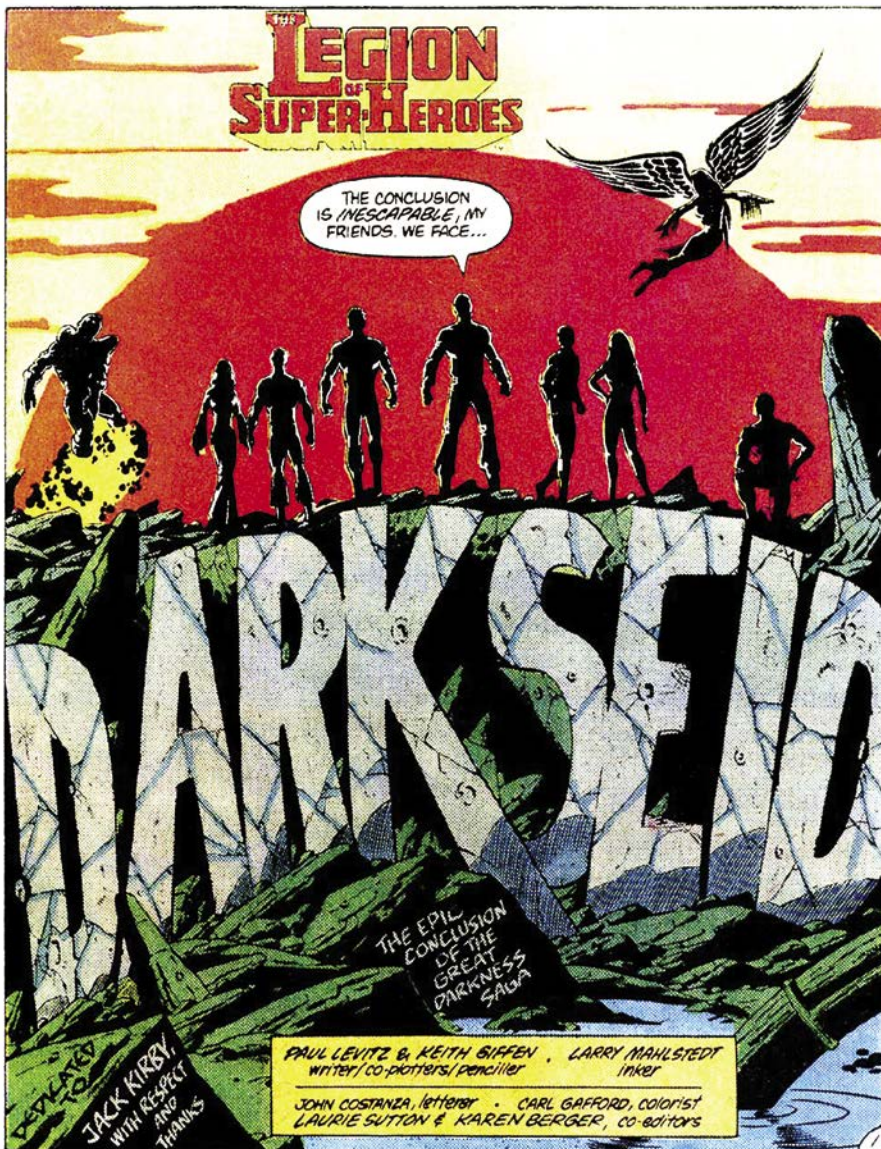
Publisher: DC Comics

Cover art: Keith Giffen and Larry Mahlstedt (#294, shown)

Title: “The Great Darkness Saga”

Writer: Paul Levitz

Artists: Keith Giffen and Larry Mahlstedt



“The Great Darkness Saga” is a visual tour de force engulfing the Legion of Super-Heroes in a mystery of galactic domination against an enigmatic Master of Darkness, which features nearly every hero of the 30th Century and a good number of villains, too. Penciler Keith Giffen, superbly finished by inker Larry Mahlstedt, envisions a dynamic and splendid universe of science and magic, threatened by unspeakable evil, and ultimately the vandalization of an entire world in this five-issue story from *Legion of Super-Heroes* vol. 2 #290–294 (Aug.–Dec. 1982).

Of course, such epic villainy would not be possible without writer Paul Levitz setting the stage and driving the action. “We did over 60 stories together,” Levitz wrote upon the announcement of Giffen’s passing. “Many of them he made far better than they might have been with any other collaborator, because of his ideas and contributions to character moments and drama.” Giffen drew detailed pencils from Levitz’s written plot with typically a paragraph suggesting one page. Levitz would then write captions and dialogue in response to the penciled artwork. Giffen was acknowledged with a co-plotter credit for his embellishments to the story beginning with issue #293. “A few we had rough times on,” Levitz remembers, “but I think no more than could be expected in a long relationship. Keith was a curmudgeon by choice, an act he perfected and enjoyed.

“We found ourselves in creative harmony as only happens in the rarest moment for comics writers and artists: despite different styles, tastes, and approaches to our work we bounced ideas back and forth in a constant ‘can you top this’... and had a ball,” Levitz wrote in the introduction



to *Legion of Super-Heroes: The Great Darkness Saga Deluxe Edition* (June 2010).

Legionnaires fight the Servants of Darkness across the galaxy. From the towers of Mega-California and London, to the shadow planet Talok VIII and the prison planet Takron-Galtos, to a final desperate stand on the Sorcerers' World, where gleaming city spires surf upon ocean waves, and finally to the apocalyptic world that spawned the Master, Giffen was assigned a galaxy to design, and then to devastate. "There's no point of reference to work off of," Giffen described the challenges of drawing the Legion at the New York Comic Con on April 19, 2008, in celebration of the Legion's 50th Anniversary. "You've pretty much got to make it up as you go along... and, Paul," he warned his fellow panelist, who orchestrated that devastation, "I'm going to tell my favorite story here."

"You'll never forgive me," Levitz apologized.

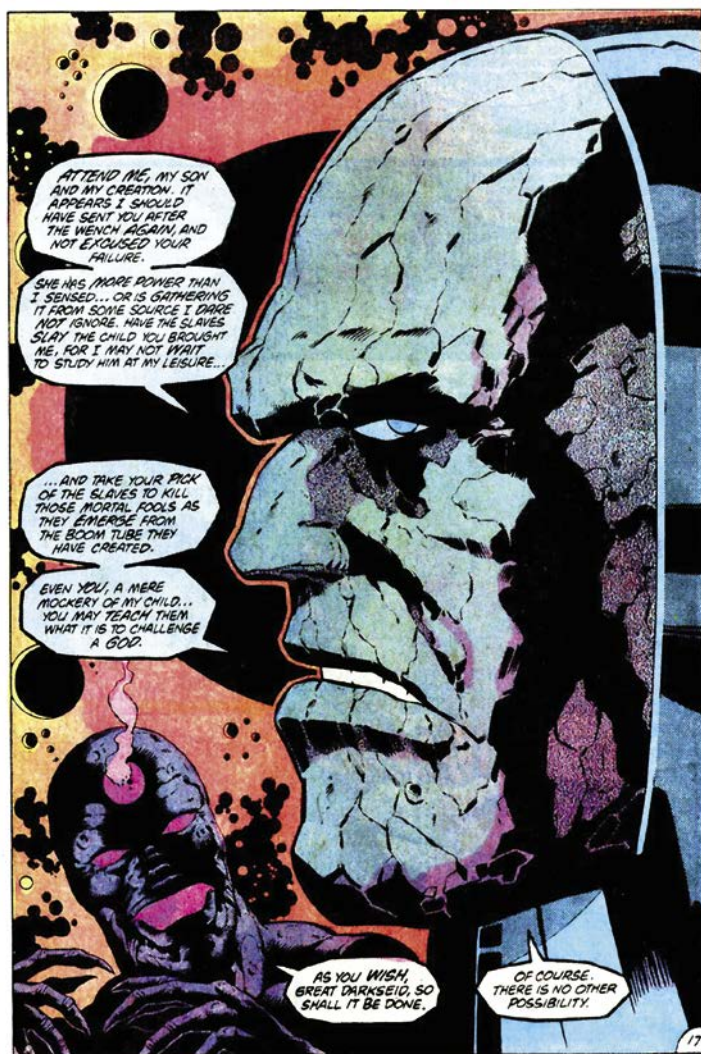
"In *The Legion of Super-Heroes*, I actually got in a script when we were doing 'The Great Darkness Saga,' the panel description, and it wasn't a full-page panel, either, but the panel description Paul gave me was that, 'The population of the planet Daxam rises off of the planet.'"

"It didn't really take long to write," Levitz offered.

"Which pretty much prompted me to start writing instead of drawing, 'cause I suddenly realized it's a lot easier to write 'Charge of the Light Brigade' than to draw it," Giffen said. "But only on *The Legion of Super-Heroes* can you get away with that kind of panel description and not many people are willing to try to work their way around it."

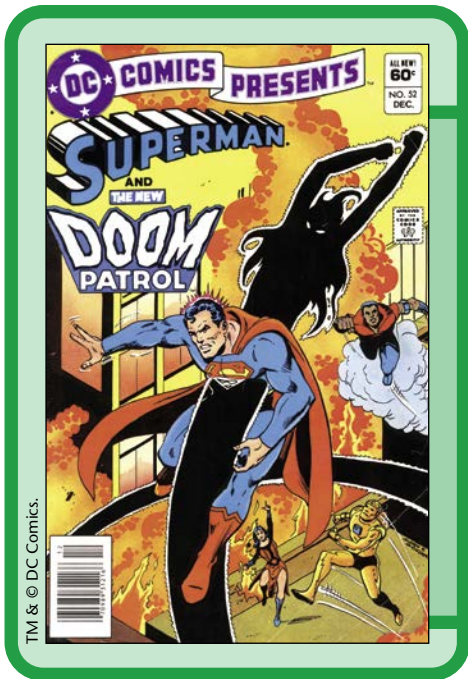
Three billion mind-controlled Daxamites, each with the power of Superboy, deface their world to resemble the head of their Master, who finally stands revealed. Levitz acknowledges that the restructuring of a planet was inspired by a childhood classic, "Superman Under the Green Sun," from *Superman* #155 (Aug 1962).

Giffen took on the *Legion* artistic assignment after returning to work at DC Comics following a bad break. "I got back with Joe Orlando's help and did some 'Dr. Fate' backups," Giffen said in an interview from *Jack Kirby Collector* #29 (Aug. 2000). It was the choice of villain that struck the bargain. "It seemed to impress people enough that I was offered the job of doing backups on the *Legion*. Which I never thought I'd do, because I had really done Paul bad. When I was offered it with [editor] Mike Barr, I sat down with Paul and we cleared the air. It's really to Paul's benefit. He really put it behind him and said, 'Let's see what we can do on this. I'm bringing Darkseid into the mix, are you interested?' And that just sold me."



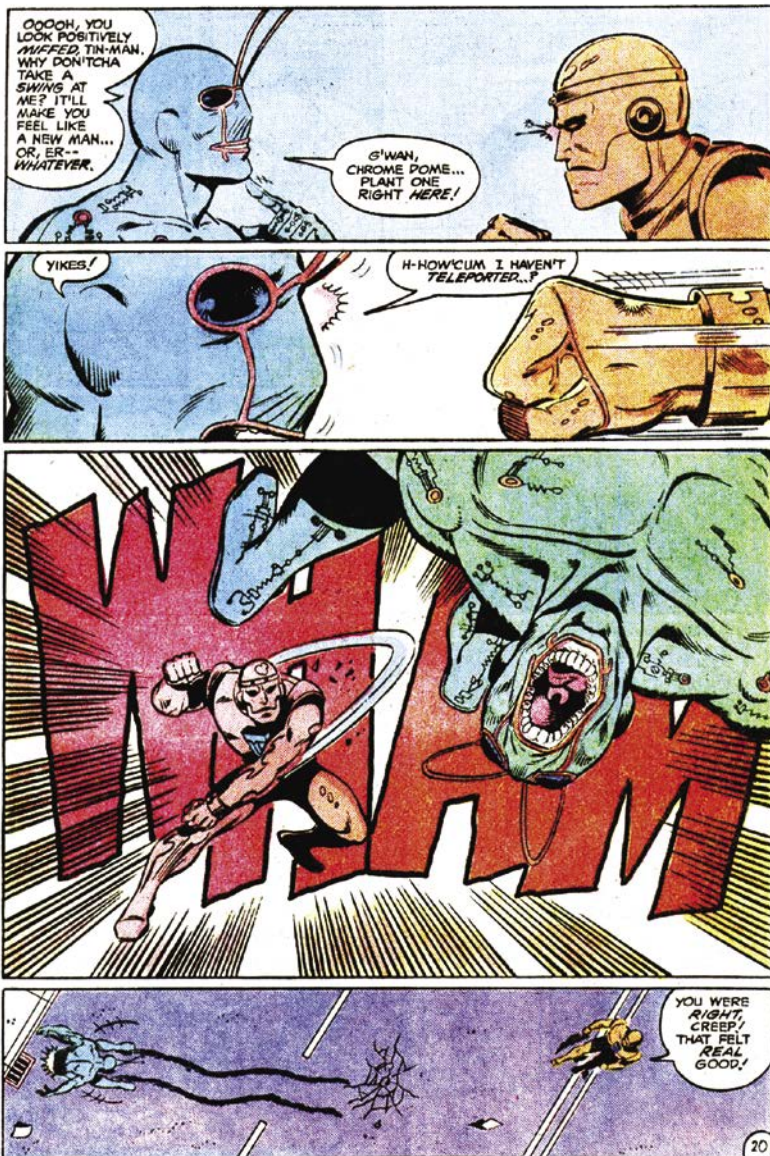
"We peaked too soon," Giffen told *BACK ISSUE* during the 2008 New York Comic Con. Be that as it may, it was an apex of brilliant heights in the galaxy-spanning *Tales of the Legion of Super-Heroes*. "The Great Darkness Saga" is an enduring testament to the universe of creativity that was Keith Giffen. Long Live the Legion!

Jim Ford



**NO. 7**

Comic: *DC Comics Presents* #52 (Dec. 1982)  
 Publisher: DC Comics  
 Cover art: Keith Giffen and Dick Giordano  
 Title: "Negative Woman Goes Berserk!"  
 Writer: Paul Kupperberg  
 Artists: Keith Giffen and Sal Trapani



Five years after their debut in *Showcase* #94, the "new" Doom Patrol joined Superman for *DC Comics Presents* #52, under a flame-filled, Keith Giffen–penciled and Dick Giordano–inked cover. The cover is quite action-packed, with a superb take on Superman taking a gut-shot from Negative Woman as the other Doom Patrollers race towards the fracas.

Nowhere, however, does the cover declare the true treasure that lies within—the debut of the Ambush Bug! A character long associated with Giffen (and maybe even an avatar of the creator himself, to some degree), Ambush Bug debuts as a villain... but more on that in a bit.

The issue opens with a modest splash page (reduced to 2/3 of the page due to credits, recaps, and indicia) of Superman diving into a destroyed power plant setting resplendent in Kirby Krackle. Jack Kirby's influence on Giffen is obvious from the first image and carries throughout, as Giffen frequently dips into the krackle well and liberally draws up Kirby-like background technology.

Giffen uses all 23 pages to celebrate comics, creators, and characters. His take on Superman visually nods towards Curt Swan's version of the character, while Giffen's backgrounds flit between Kirby-esque and the nondescript Chiaroscuric minimalism with which Giffen would later become synonymous. There's even a brilliant "Buscema punch" in this issue, as Robotman is given the chance to show that Superman isn't the only heavy hitter between the covers of *DCCP* #52.

Titled "Negative Woman Goes Berserk," *DCCP* #52 is written by New Doom Patrol co-creator Paul Kupperberg, drawn by Giffen, with Sal Trapani on inks, Ben Oda lettering, and Gene D'Angelo coloring. Edited by Julius Schwartz, this issue is set in the era where much of Superman's supporting cast in the *Daily Planet* gang are television news folk.

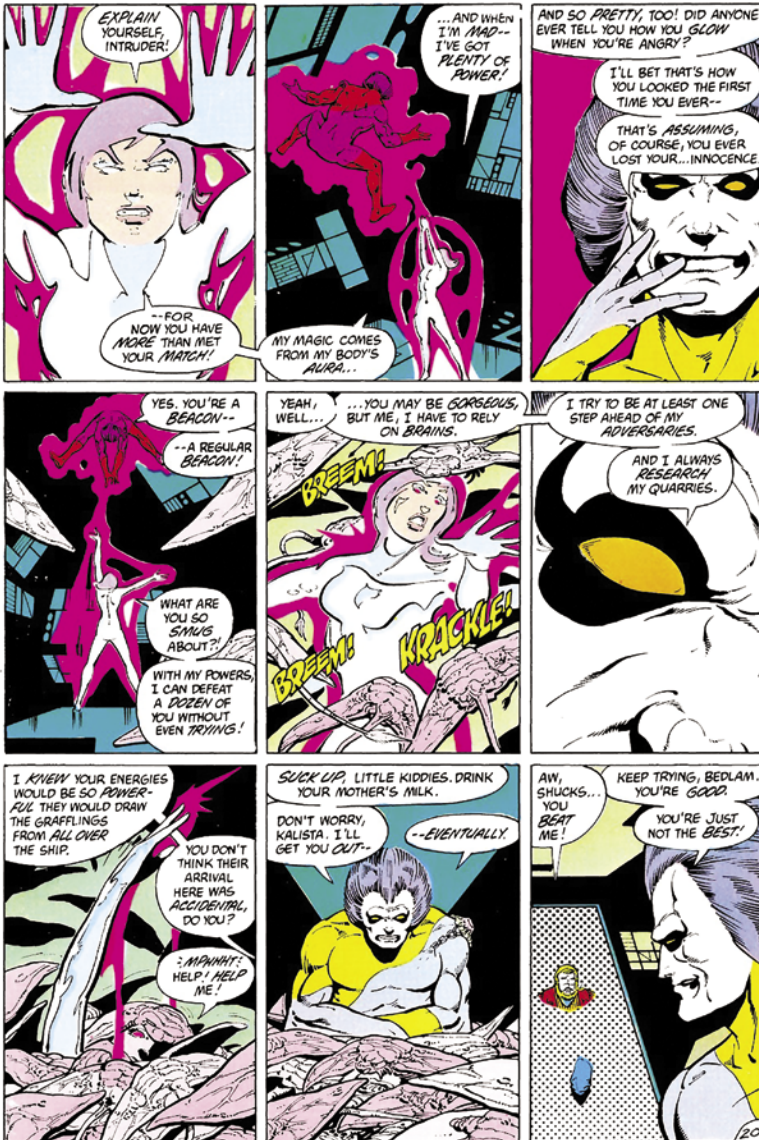
It's at the intersection of Superman's supporting cast and news broadcast that Ambush Bug makes his debut, by murdering Metropolis District Attorney Syms on-camera during a test broadcast! When





# NO. 8

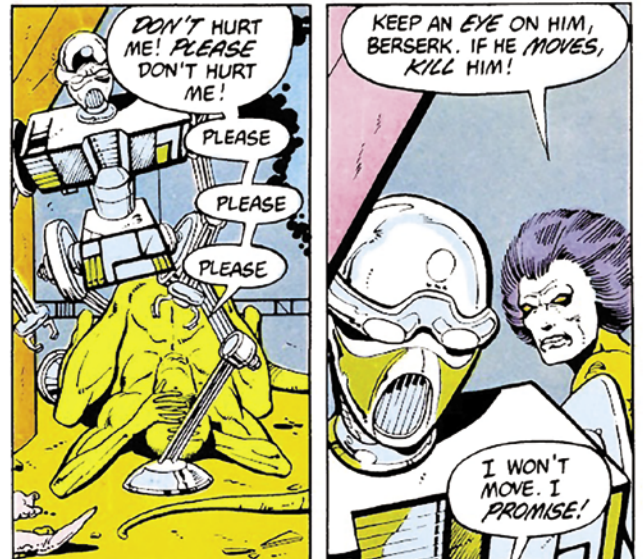
Comic: *The Omega Men* #3 (June 1983)  
 Publisher: DC Comics  
 Cover art: Keith Giffen and Mike DeCarlo  
 Title: "Citadel War, Chapter Two: Assault on Euphorix!"  
 Writer: Roger Slifer  
 Artists: Keith Giffen and Mike DeCarlo

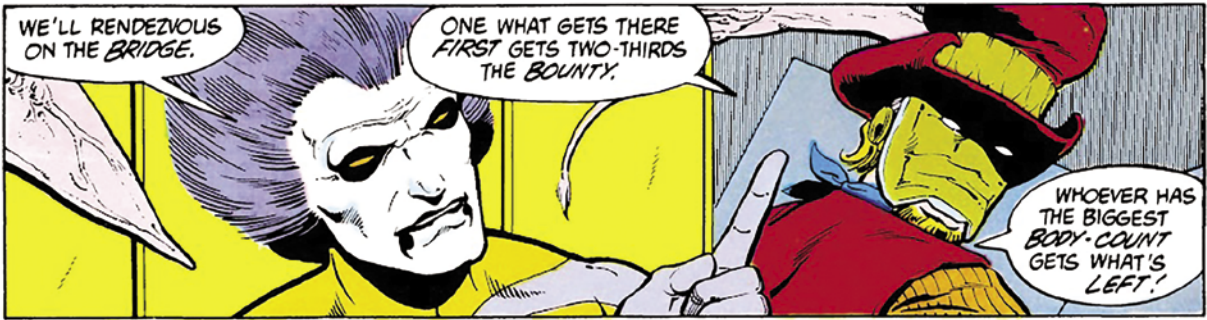


The Omega Men are a ragtag group of freedom fighters standing against the Citadel, a force that has conquered all of the Vegan System except for the planet Euphorix. Unfortunately, infighting may destroy the Omega Men quicker than Citadel can. It is within this backdrop that our story begins.

The cover of *Omega Men* #3 (June 1983) features Kalista, one of the leaders of the Omega Men, hanging from the front of a futuristic-looking, flying sort of motorcycle. The vehicle is driven by a white-faced, grinning character with purple hair, clad in orange and purple spandex. Looking more like a maniacal Ronald McDonald than DC's Main Man, this was comicdom's first image of Lobo, courtesy of Keith Giffen and inker Mike DeCarlo.

Here's what you need to know to set up the first appearance of Lobo. The Citadel cannot get past the planetary shield around Euphorix. They need information. Kalista has to do that, so they set up a ruse to get her away from the Omega Men's base. Once she and her crew are headed toward Euphorix, a pair of bounty hunters and their robot intercept them. Lobo's partner,





Bedlam, looks like a cowboy with a mask covering most of his face, and they are assisted by the robot, Berserk.

Giffen's skill for visual humor and Lobo's ultra violence are demonstrated immediately. The first two characters to encounter Lobo are the cowardly Shalgen, who Giffen makes look as pitiful and sniveling as the character himself, and Humbek. Humbek is a parody of cartoonist Fred Hembeck and looks like an alien version of Hembeck's self-portrait. To thank them for unwittingly getting them on the ship, Lobo "fixes" Humbek's nose by flicking it through his brain and out the back of his head. Bedlam and Lobo split up, with the one who reaches the bridge first getting an extra cut of the bounty. More money is also promised to the one who kills the most people.

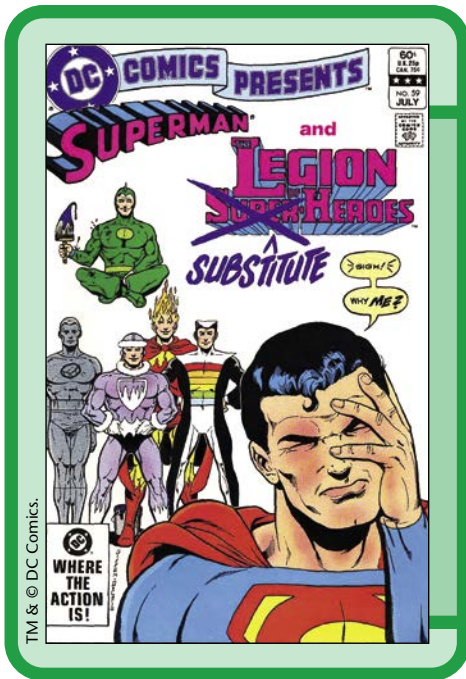
As written by Roger Slifer, the bounty hunters are extremely disturbing as any of the death or disfigurement they cause is done very matter of factly. And except for the back of Humbek's head exploding, most of the major violence occurs off-panel. Lobo reaches the bridge first and easily defeats Kalista with the aid of some alien bat things that have also invaded the ship. The bounty hunters depart the ship with Kalista strapped to the front of Lobo's transport, just like on the front cover. Shalgen is amazingly left alive.

Here's a bit of trivia for you: Lobo is never referred to by name in the entire issue.

While he would undergo many changes before he became one of DC's most popular characters in the 1990s, taking a look back at Lobo's first appearance is worthwhile. You can see what stuck and what didn't, and you also get an enjoyable comic.

Roger Ash





# NO. 9

Comic: *DC Comics Presents* #59 (July 1983)

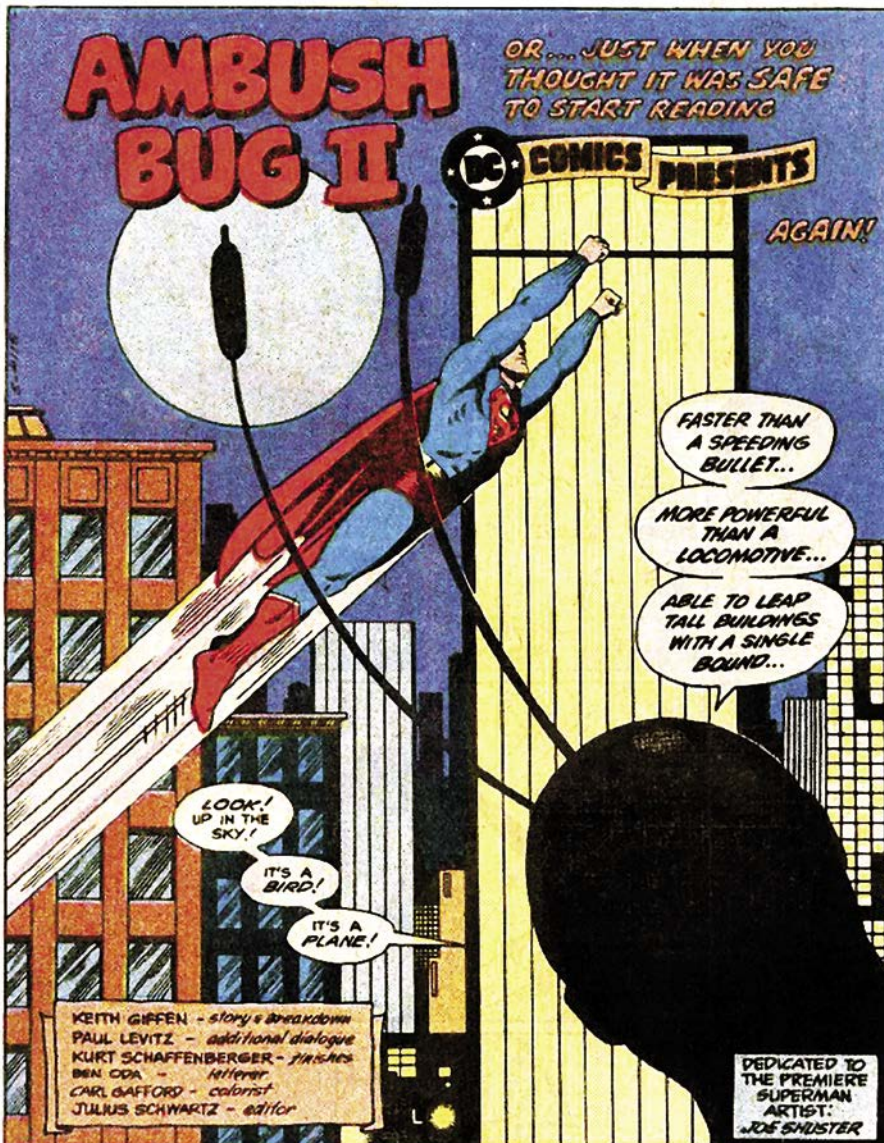
Publisher: DC Comics

Cover art: Keith Giffen and Mike DeCarlo

Title: "Ambush Bug II"

Writers: Keith Giffen (story), Paul Levitz (additional dialogue)

Artists: Keith Giffen and Kurt Schaffenberger



As evidenced by this *BACK ISSUE* tribute, Keith Giffen was a master of combining reverence for comics history and disregard for the conventions of the medium itself. While he honed his craft in the 1970s at Marvel and mastered his method with his early work on *Legion of Super-Heroes*, a new stage of his career was starting to coalesce with *DC Comics Presents* #59 (July 1983), titled "Ambush Bug II, or Just When You Thought It was Safe To Start Reading DC Comics Presents Again."

Giffen was finding his slapstick groove in teaming up Superman with his recent creation, the agent of chaos Ambush Bug, and by adding in the Silver Age oddity, the Legion of Substitute Heroes. *DC Comics Presents* was a perfect testing ground for his sense of humor, since its stories were not bound by continuity (hammered into the reader by one editorial box that states, "Don't ask where this fits into Legion continuity"). Here Giffen could embrace all of his interests in one self-contained 23-page story that had all the energy, irreverence, and wit of an old Warner Bros. cartoon classic.

Giffen didn't disguise his intentions (did he ever?). The splash page is a direct reference to the old Superman radio show opening with Ambush Bug watching Kal-El fly by and quoting the "It's a bird, it's a plane" theme. The story is simple: Ambush Bug hopped a ride on a time-traveling Superman's back and ended up in the 30th Century. A decidedly less homicidal Ambush Bug than his last appearance in *DC Comics Presents* #52, he is quickly subdued by Supes and placed in the custody of the Legion of Substitute Heroes. Escaping, Ambush Bug wreaks havoc on the underprepared Subs and on Metropolis.

Debuting in *Adventure Comics* #306 (Mar. 1963), the Legion of Substitute Heroes was

another perfect fit for Giffen's sensibilities, an interest in comics history with a healthy dose of respectful indifference. With heroes like Infectious Lass, Porcupine Kid, Stone Boy, and Double Header, who could resist the sight gags, running jokes, and comic payoffs that Giffen mastered in his iconic "Bwah-ha-ha" *Justice League* a few years later?

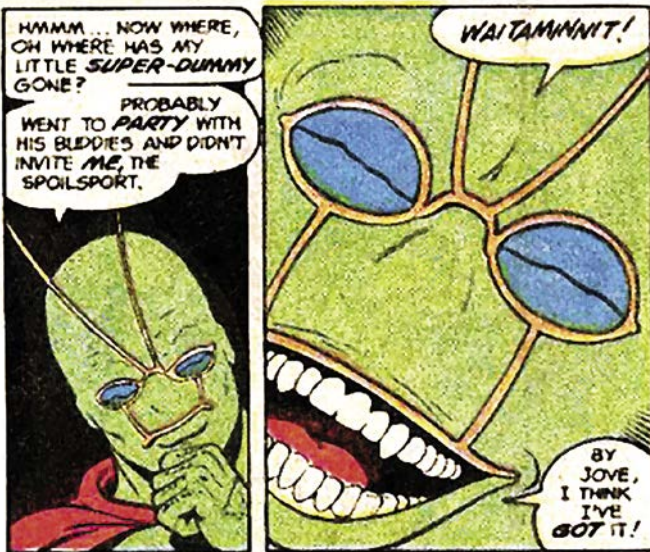
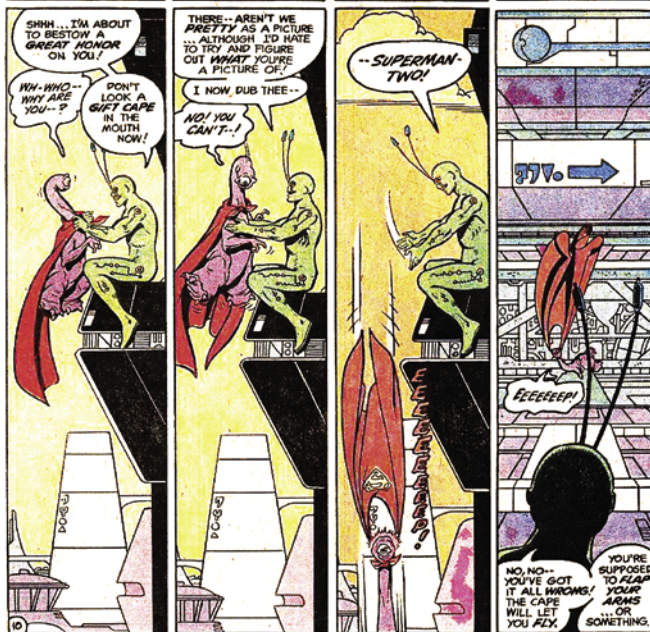
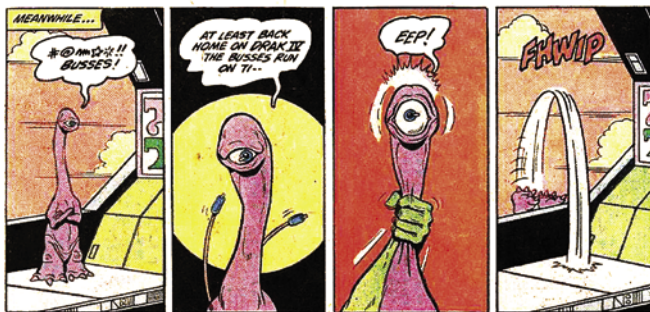
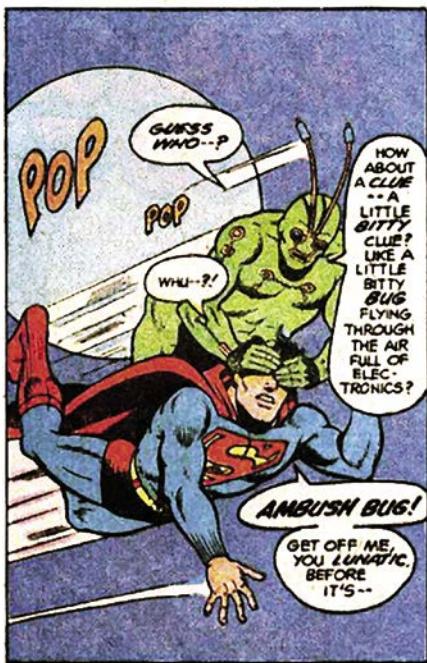
Ambush Bug's chaotic approach—imagine a Silver Age Deadpool and all the madness that invokes in the reader's mind—was no match for the 30th Century's C-listers. In his romp through future Metropolis we get Ambush Bug's pushing of the fourth wall with his constant narrative, "I love the costumes. They should've used these guys in *Star Wars!*" or "I wonder if this is a preview of *Return of the Jedi!*" as the Substitutes chase him in vain.

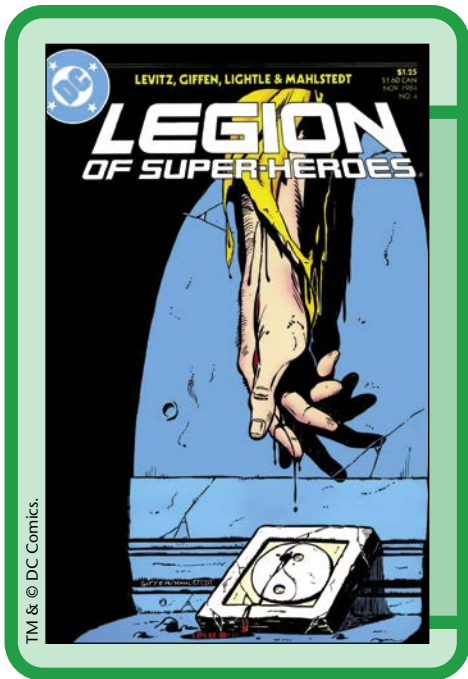
Giffen also doubled down on his love of comics history by penciling Superman in the style of creator Joe Shuster, with a dedication to him right on the splash page. The vintage Superman look which clashed with the futuristic scheme of 30th Century Metropolis (Giffen's current style was in its prime; he had just finished his masterpiece "The Great Darkness Saga" and was redefining the Legion universe as this story was published) mixed with the very modern dialogue of Ambush Bug made for a fast-paced and hysterical story. No knowledge of the characters was necessary—the issue was essentially a three-minute roller coaster ride. The reader burned through the issue in no time thanks to the humor and energy.

Look at the running gag of recurring panels of the Substitutes trying to save a Stone Boy stuck headfirst in the ground and try not to think of the "pie in the face gag" he would later use in his *Justice League International*. Listen to Ambush Bug's monologues and try not to hear Lobo, the Heckler, or Video Jack. Giffen was sharpening his tools a few years before he truly made history with the *Justice League*. This issue wasn't a test run so much as proof-of-concept for what was to follow.

Giffen never had much time for upholding the norms of the comic book. His strength was always in reshaping the expected, commenting on the industry, and a story like this one, in what was always seen as a standard-bearer like *DC Comics Presents*, was transgressive in the best way. The reader just did not realize it yet, but Keith Giffen was about to turn the DC Universe on its head in just a few years. Giffen ends the issue with the most direct homage to what he was going for with the epigraph "Th, th, that's all folks," absent only Porky Pig. Fortunately for the reader, that was not true.

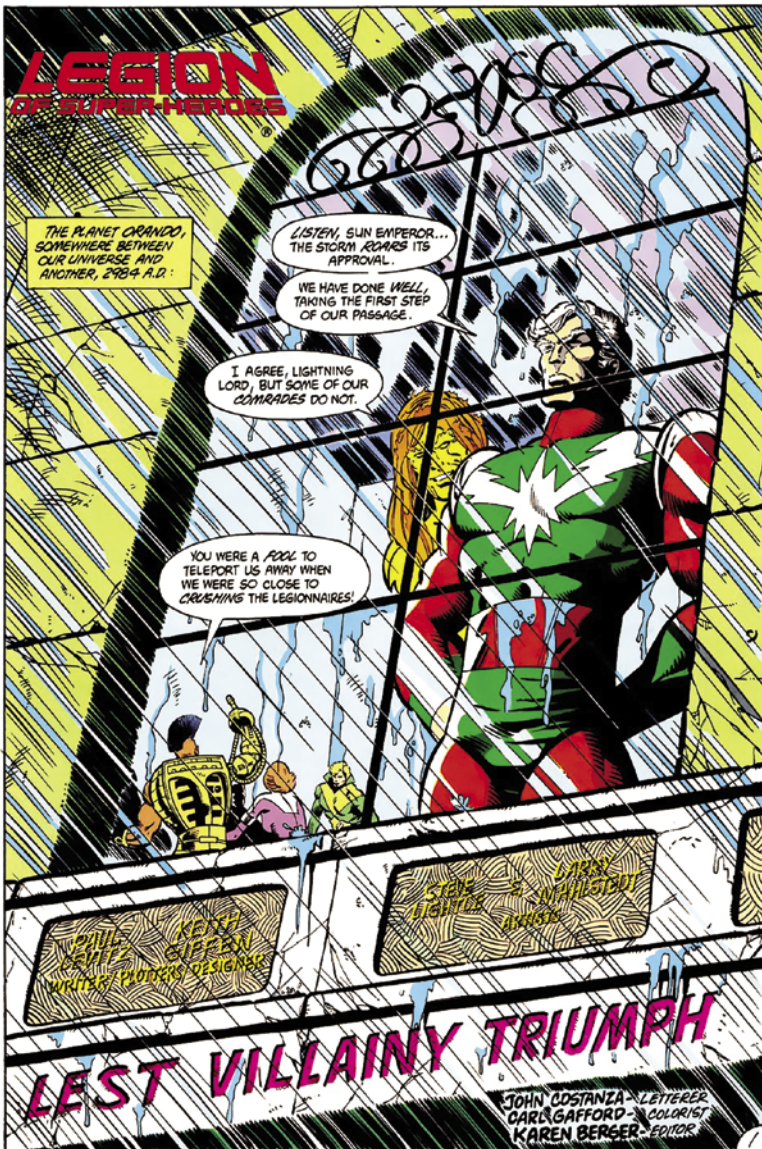
Joseph Norton





# NO. 10

Comic: *Legion of Super-Heroes* vol. 3 #4 (Nov. 1984)  
 Publisher: DC Comics  
 Cover art: Keith Giffen and Larry Mahlstedt  
 Title: "Lest Villainy Triumph"  
 Writers: Paul Levitz and Keith Giffen (co-plot)  
 Artists: Keith Giffen and Larry Mahlstedt



In 1984, Giffen campaigned for the death of long-time Legionnaire Karate Kid. "I despised the character," Giffen told *BACK ISSUE* in 2006. "I don't know why that was, but Karate Kid was the one character that rubbed me the wrong way."

Karate Kid was introduced in *Adventure Comics* #346 (July 1966), along with other Legion applicants Princess Projectra, Ferro Lad, and Nemesis Kid, in "One of Us Is a Traitor," by Jim Shooter and Sheldon Moldoff. Nemesis Kid turned out to be the villain in question, later joining the Legion of Super-Villains, while Ferro Lad was killed in action several issues later. However, Karate Kid and Princess Projectra enjoyed a prolonged romance.

The character was a product of the Silver Age. At the time, Legionnaires could justify their super-heroism simply by adding "super" in front of their power—super-magnetism, super-lightning. But super-karate?

Perhaps due to the growing popularity of martial arts in 1970s, Karate Kid remained a favorite of Legion fans. He was the first Legionnaire to spin off into his own ongoing series, which ran for 15 issues, in the mid-1970s.

Giffen first "joined" the Legion as penciler on *Legion of Super-Heroes* vol. 2 #287 (May 1982). According to



long-time *Legion* scribe Paul Levitz, recruiting artists for the *Legion* was a challenge, presumably due to the large cast and variety of costumes.

"I was the odd duck. I was the guy who actually wanted, and was glad, to come on board," said Giffen. "I was really thrilled when I picked up the *Legion* assignment, just for the fact that, you know, I would never have to look up what a Studebaker looked like again.

"Then, when Paul started feeding me the stories, there was just some kind of a connection that we made wherein he gave me a lot of leeway in terms not only of artistic input, but input into the stories, and it just became just a really fun assignment."

He was frequently credited as "co-plotter" on the series, though Giffen downplayed that role. "Paul wrote the plots, I got the plots. Paul's always been very generous in giving me a little bit more credit than I was due on those early *Legion* stories. I might sit down and go, "Wouldn't it be cool if—?" But I was in no way, shape, or form a co-plotter."

In the summer of 1984, when DC launched *Legion of Super-Heroes* vol. 3, for the burgeoning direct market, Giffen joined Levitz on the new series, while volume 2—retitled as *Tales of the Legion of Super-Heroes*—continued running concurrently.

The opening story arc of the new series featured Karate Kid and Princess Projectra returning from their honeymoon to her home world of Orando, only to discover the entire planet held hostage by the Legion of Super-Villains, led by Nemesis Kid. As the story progressed to the fourth issue, Karate Kid and Nemesis Kid found themselves fighting for the very life of the planet, and Karate Kid sacrifices himself to save Orando. Nemesis Kid would meet his fate in the following chapter, at the hands of Princess Projectra.

Though DC Comics would later introduce a successor, this particular version of Karate Kid was laid to rest permanently. After the following issue's conclusion, Giffen stepped away from the book.

"Of course, once we killed him, I left the book," said Giffen. "I'd been fulfilled. 'Our job's done, see ya!' And I closed the circle. Unfortunately, like most people who really get into the *Legion of Super-Heroes*, you can never really leave."

In the years that followed, Giffen returned to the *Legion* from time to time, drawing *Annals* and writing spinoff series such as *Legionnaires 3* (Feb.–May 1986) and *Cosmic Boy* (Dec. 1986–Mar. 1987). He returned to the book full-time with *Legion of Super-Heroes* vol. 3, #50 (Sept. 1988), remaining until #63 (Aug. 1989).

"I've always compared the *Legion* book to like a siren's song coming to me across the waves. I can only ignore it for so long. Then I go back and I just know I'm going, 'Oh, God. Here we go again.' But, you know, if you really, really like the book, you can never really leave it."



Philip Schweier





# NO. 11

Comic: *Ambush Bug* vol. 1 #3 (Aug. 1985)

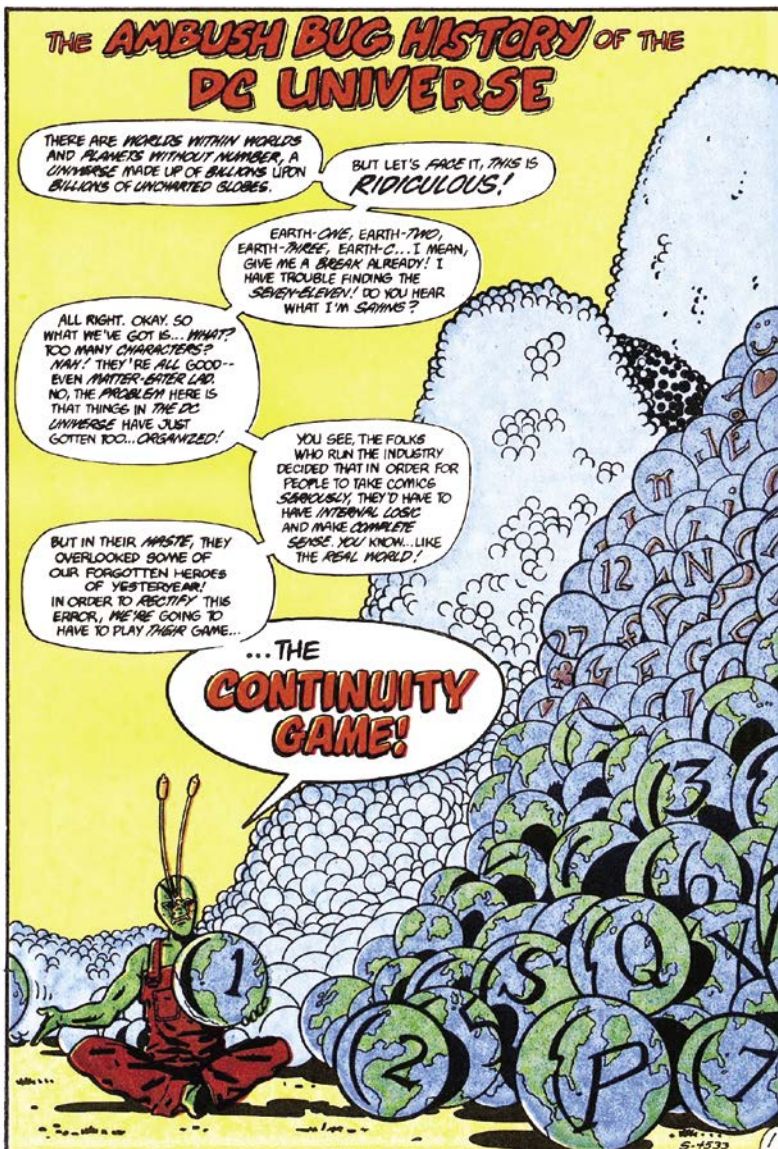
Publisher: DC Comics

Cover art: Keith Giffen and Bob Oksner

Title: "The Ambush Bug History of the DC Universe"

Writers: Keith Giffen (plot), Robert Loren Fleming (dialogue)

Artists: Keith Giffen and Bob Oksner



Comic books "grew up" in the 1980s—you've heard that a million times, right? *Daredevil*, *Swamp Thing*, *Dark Knight*, *Watchmen*, and scores of indies elevated comics from their roots as juvenile reading material into a cutting edge, cerebral art form.

But throughout that metamorphosis, most comic books stopped being fun. That's why a lot of us had an itch for *Ambush Bug* in the '80s. This irritating little pest (*Ambush Bug*, not Keith Giffen; but then again...) kept popping into *Superman* stories, making the formerly unflappable Man of Steel see red (and we don't mean by flashing his heat vision). By 1985 *Ambush Bug* had spun off into his own miniseries (another mini and *Specials* soon followed).

*Ambush Bug* had a superpower that was fresh back then: he knew he was in a comic book. His ability to break the fourth wall cleverly invited each reader to be in on the joke—and what cracked up a lot of us was the Bug's playful mocking of the absurdities of comic book lore.

Which is why *Ambush Bug* #3 stands out as the best issue of a riotous four-issue run. When it hit the stands, DC Comics was celebrating its 50th anniversary. The event's two high-profile series—*Who's Who* and *Crisis on Infinite Earths*—were early in their lifespans. It was a time for pride, to bask in the glow of an extraordinary milestone in publishing.

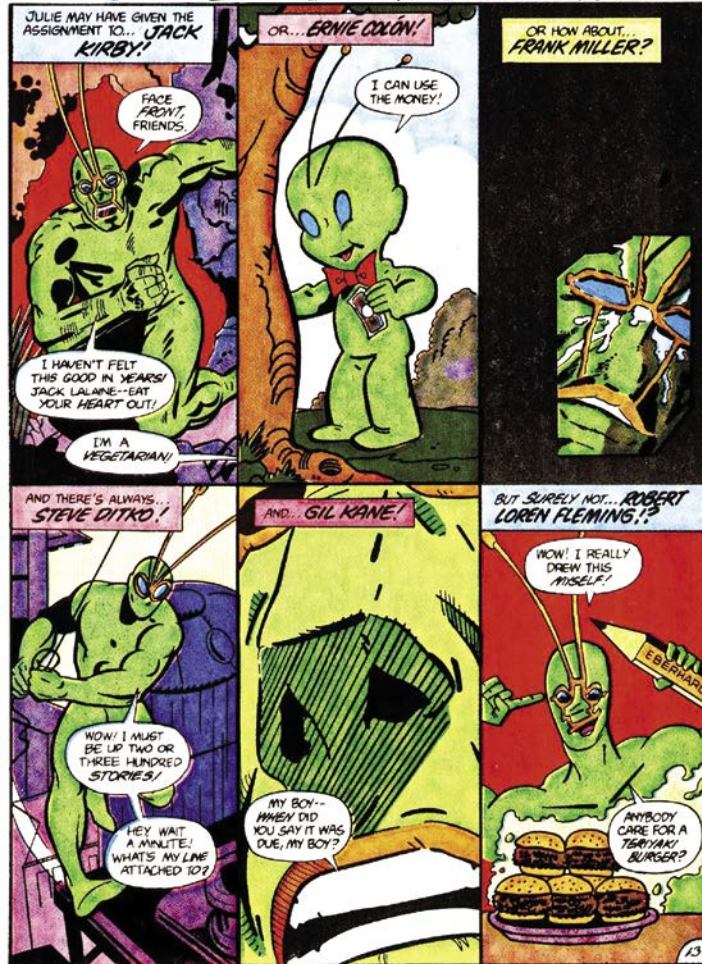
And in stepped that party pooper *Ambush Bug*, reminding longtime readers and informing newbies that not all of DC's publishing past was cutting edge or cerebral!

Some characters, like *Wonder Woman's* culturally offensive adversary *Egg Fu* and *Aquaman's* water-sprite nuisance *Quisp*, were embarrassing relics. DC also had its share of continuity-confounding characters like *Wonder Tot*, commercial failures like *The Green Team*, and out-of-work kids' comics characters like *Doodles Duck*. *Ambush Bug* #3 doesn't ignore the minor leaguers and obscure hangers-on of DC's past—it spotlights them! If there was some bit of DC lore that had been swept under the carpet, Keith Giffen, "as" *Ambush Bug*, was the whirlwind that blew it back out in the open.

# AMBUSH BUG AROUND THE WORLD!



# WHAT IF? KEITH HAD BLOWN HIS DEADLINE ON THIS ISSUE?????



"The Ambush Bug History of the DC Universe" isn't a linear story. Instead, it's a series of mostly one-page vignettes and gags.

Present in the issue are Giffen's panel-grid-heavy peeks into the lives of DC has-beens such as "Whatever Happened to Binky?," which allows the disgruntled teenaged stars of this Archie clone to complain about their lots in life. There are sendups of the activity pages that once peppered DC books, including "How to Draw Ambush Bug," where Giffen's art tips share space with the feature's added bonus: "How to Make Teriyaki Burgers" (yes, there's a real recipe). In other short features, Giffen takes cracks at his contemporaries—from fanzine king Fred Hembeck to riffs on Jack Kirby, Frank Miller, and other artists filling in on *Ambush Bug* (yes, there's an Ambush Bug nostrils upshot "by" Gil Kane). Classic comic book ads are parodied (no, I am not a graduate of "The Ambush Bug Mart's" advertised Famous Editors School). The issue's ballsiest spoof is Giffen riffing on the controversy over his José Muñoz art swipes in the one-page "Ambush Bug Around the World," where Keith draws the Bug in a variety of international styles. Perhaps the best-remembered feature in "The Ambush History

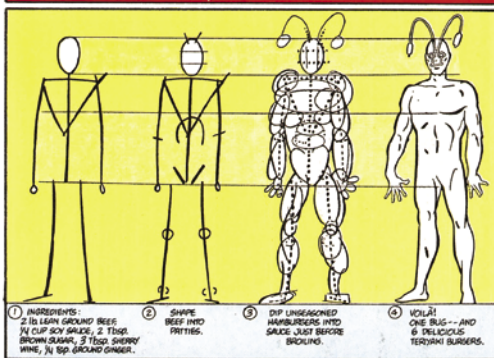
of the DC Universe" is its takeoffs of *Who's Who* dossiers for characters who didn't make the cut for the real *Who's Who* (good news for readers anxious to catch up with old timers like Cryll, the long-forgotten alien pal of the equally long-forgotten early Silver Age sci-fi hero Space Ranger). Why, there are even theme songs for each of the Legion of Super-Pets—with sing-along lyrics! With his excavation of so much of DC's buried past, Keith Giffen might very well be regarded as DC Comics' chief historian of 1985 (sorry, E. Nelson Bridwell)!

Kudos must be given to Robert Loren Fleming for *Ambush Bug* #3's gut-busting dialogue. Fleming often speaks for disenfranchised longtime DC readers through the characters' comments, such as Bat-Mite's pining for the Caped Crusader of Jack Schiff—era yore: "All of a sudden, he's this creature of the night, his cape's thirty feet long, and he's got no sense of humor."

Despite Ambush Bug's rapidly growing popularity, back then there were those who didn't "get" the character, or Giffen and Fleming's frantic frolics through the far-out fringes of the DC Universe. Guess you didn't have to wear a 30-foot-long cape to lack a funny bone.

Michael Eury

## HOW TO DRAW AMBUSH BUG WITH ADDED BONUS: HOW TO MAKE TERIYAKI BURGERS





Comics: *Hex* #15–18 (Nov. 1986–Feb. 1987)

Publisher: DC Comics

Cover art: Keith Giffen and Carlos Garzon (#15, shown)

Writer: Michael Fleisher

Artists: Keith Giffen and Carlos Garzon



WRITING/EDITING:  
MICHAEL FLEISHER

ART:  
KEITH GIFFEN & CARLOS GARZON

BOB LE ROSE - COLORS | AGUSTIN MAS - LETTERS

**CHAIN OF DOOM**

There's no better way to savor Giffen's José Muñoz-influenced period than with his four-issue run on DC Comics' *Hex* (*Hex* #15–18, Nov. 1986–Feb. 1987). *Hex* itself was an oddity, even for the late 1980s. It featured the classic DC Western hero, Jonah Hex, stranded in a post-apocalyptic, *Mad Max*-like future. This dystopian setting was a thematic match for Giffen's dark and atmospheric style.

Based on the last issue's letters page, Giffen's art style wasn't appreciated at the time, but like a fine wine, the perception of his art did get better with age. His work was dense and was something that had to be taken in and absorbed. This short run was a great example of how Giffen controlled the story's pacing and flow through abrupt shifts in camera viewpoint and establishing shots.

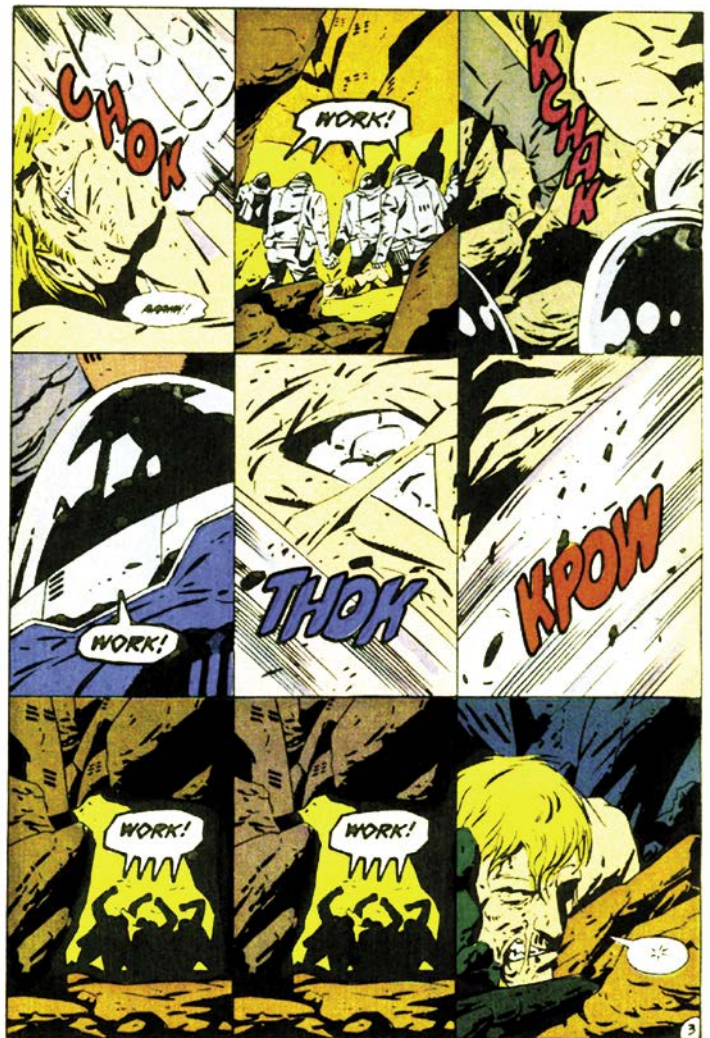
Giffen's art was a dramatic departure from the previous artist on the series. His moody and blocky style sharply contrasted previous artist Mark Texeira's more realistic and dynamic work. Right from issue #15's cover, Giffen made it clear that his art was setting a new direction for the series. Within the issue, Giffen's style jumped out at you with his distinctive panel layout and razor-thin, black-gutter lines. These thin gutter lines rushed you to the next panel, almost like there was no break, instead of the usual softer and thicker white gutters that made you pause and fill in the action. This approach sped up the pace, leaving little to your imagination of what happened in between those panels. Interestingly in issue #18, Giffen switched back to the white gutters and in sections, he added black solid frames within some panels to add tension and stress importance.

Giffen's work revolved around the choice and layout of the page's panels. His choices complemented the story flow as he smashed through the established panel rhythm to make them visually pop. You can clearly see that he was experimenting with his panel grid layout, trying to jam four panels into one row, or using continual long shots that were split up into four panel parts to visually represent movement.



Hex #17 stood out as Giffen strictly adhered to the traditional nine-panel grid format with black gutters and used it throughout the entire issue, except for a dramatic full-page explosion. As you read through, the panel layout controlled the pacing and trained you to accept that flow, until the key moment that had its unforgettable impact. Giffen creatively used small number-shaped panels for a three-second count-down to trigger the explosion.

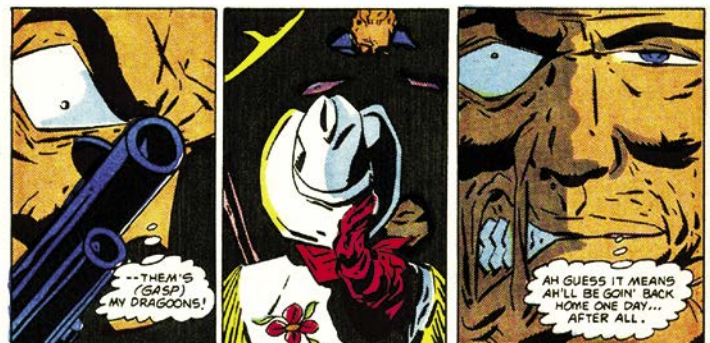
Giffen's experience as an artist showed through in his relationships with the rest of the creative team: the letterer, colorist, and inker. His style complemented the work of the various letterers during this run. He sometimes constrained the dialog and sound effects within the panel's frame and then at times, those effects splashed over multiple panels for a memorable result. Giffen's art style meshed well with colorist Bob LeRose. LeRose used yellow tones that highlighted the

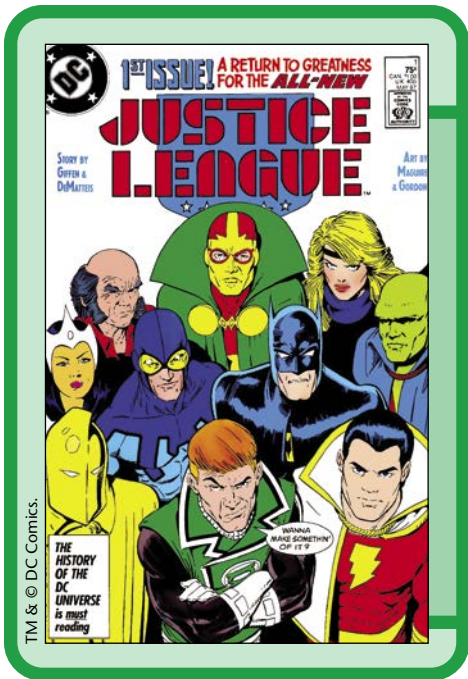


weird alien landscapes, structures, and the strangeness of the alien creatures' physiques. Carlos Garzon's heavy inks emphasized Giffen's work, overpowering the meager light with dense shadows. Their work together leveraged these shadows and negative space to enrich and frame the dialog, making it resonate with the reader.

Contrasting his early 1980s work on *Legion of Super-Heroes*, which was cleaner and smoother, with his run on *Hex*, Giffen took the opportunity to explore and evolve his art, adding a roughness to it and developing his use of heavy shadows. His efforts on *Hex* can be seen in ways as a prototype for his relaunch of *Legion* in the "Five Years Later" storyline. Despite the initial negative reaction, Giffen's artistic shift has slowly but surely won over the hearts of comic fans and has come to be seen as both provocative and innovative.

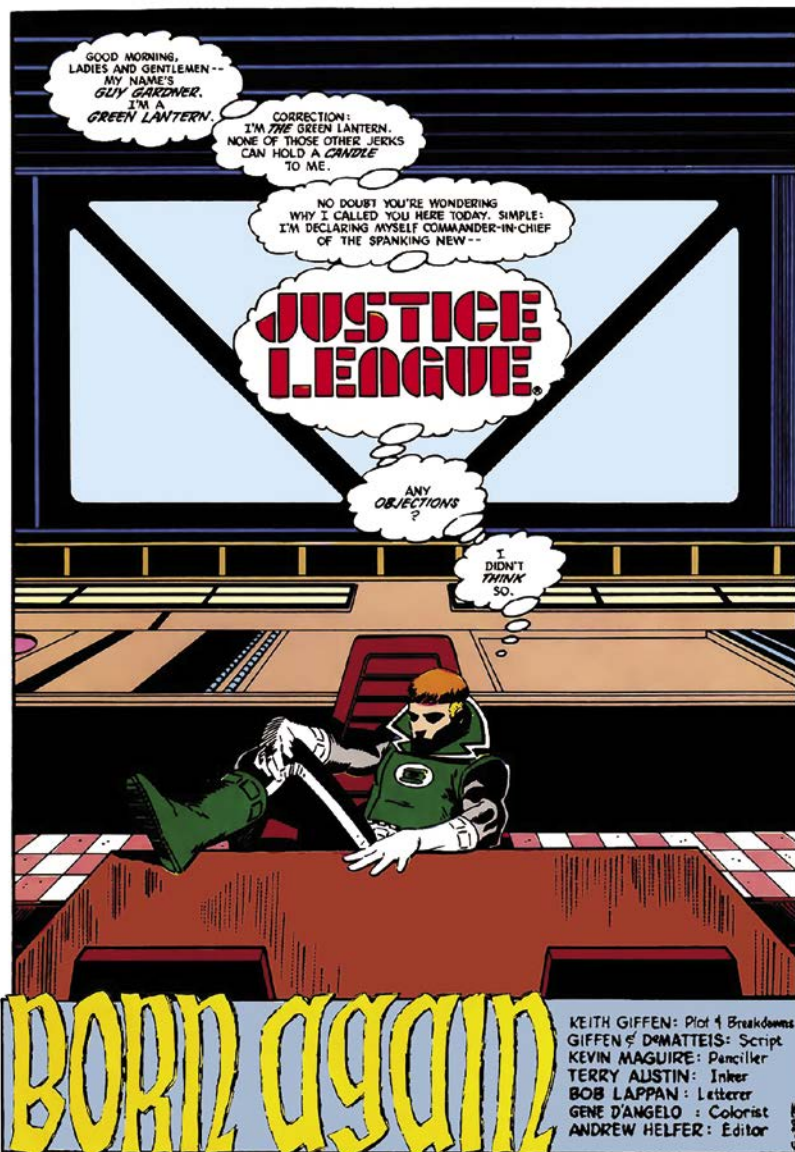
Jason Shayer





# NO. 13

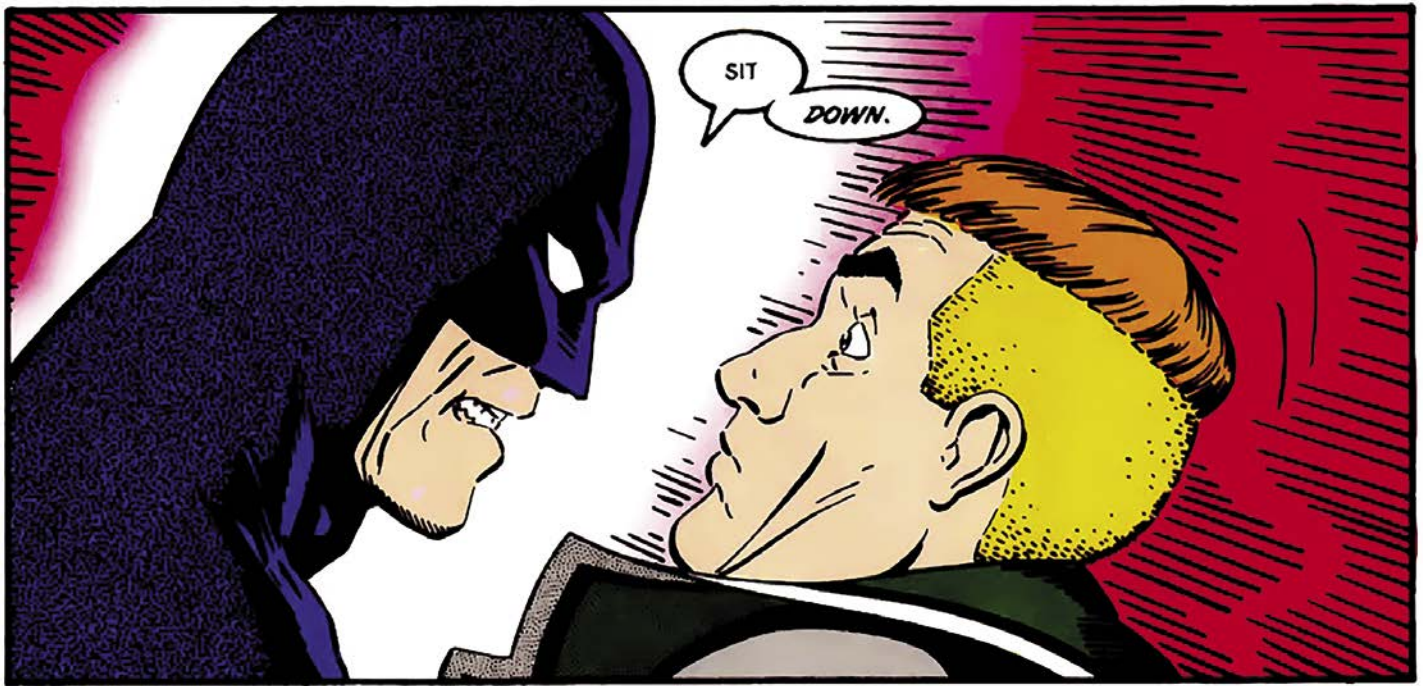
Comic: *Justice League* #1 (May 1987)  
 Publisher: DC Comics  
 Cover art: Kevin Maguire and Terry Austin  
 Title: "Born Again"  
 Writers: Keith Giffen (plot) and J. M. DeMatteis (dialogue)  
 Artists: Keith Giffen (layouts), Kevin Maguire (pencils),  
 and Terry Austin (inks)



*Justice League* #1 (May 1987) is one of those game-changing latter-1980s books that does not go dark and gritty—which was the increasingly default setting of many comics of that period—but instead utilizes strong character building to add new dimensions to the Justice League in a post-*Crisis* DC Universe. In fact—with a surly Guy Gardner asking the viewer pointblank on the cover, “Wanna make somethin’ of it?”—this brilliant issue immediately begins the work of showing readers (especially new DC fans) that humor can indeed go hand-in-hand with the superhero genre (long before the MCU’s *Guardians of the Galaxy* films).

Commenting via email upon how this collaboration on *Justice League* #1 with Keith Giffen—who plotted, co-scripted, and provided breakdowns for the issue—originated, writer J. M. DeMatteis reveals, “I’d been working on the previous incarnation of the JL, wrapping up the Detroit League, and my editor, the great Andy Helfer—who was putting together the new League with Keith—asked me to come aboard. Keith was originally going to write the whole thing himself but decided he needed someone to write the scripts over his plots. Given Keith’s talent, I didn’t think he needed me, but Andy and Keith really wanted me aboard. Honestly, I joined the team reluctantly—and it turned into one of the greatest gigs ever, as well as beginning an ongoing collaboration with Keith that lasted for 30 years.”

In terms of why we love *Justice League* #1, any of us can readily cite the standard hits of this issue—Guy Gardner clashing with the newly formed JL members until he is finally put in his place on page #11 by a no-nonsense (“SIT DOWN.”) Batman, whose darker demeanor is initially echoed by Martian Manhunter, who is doing his best to keep the team together. Alternatively, we can bring up how this issue introduces fresh, interesting faces to this iteration of the team that debuted in *Legends* #6 (Apr. 1987)—Mister Miracle, Oberon, and Dr. Kimiyo Hoshi, the new Dr. Light—as well as the charismatic, scheming Maxwell



Lord IV. However, when I asked J. M. how he and Keith approached adding to the Justice League mythos in terms of new members, characters, and tone with this historic issue, he replied:

"We never thought that way. We were always flying by the seat of our pants. Keith would come up with his amazing plots—and even if we discussed them ahead of time, he usually went off and did something different once he got to work—and then I'd pretty much write the first thing that came into my head when I was dialoguing. There was no *Grand Plan*. It was just spontaneous fun.

"People think we planned to do a 'humorous superhero book.' We didn't. The tone just evolved as we went along.

We were discovering the characters—and each other—and the book formed itself around that.

We did so much work during those five years—*Justice League*, *JL Europe*, *JL Quarterly* (along with spinoff books and miniseries)—that it really was like a machine. We didn't have time to look at the work, or the value of our collaboration, with any objectivity."

Reflected throughout this conversation with DeMatteis is the truth that as much as *Justice League* #1 serves as an energetic revitalization of DC's premier Silver Age superhero book, it equally represents the first vital chapter of a rewarding creative partnership between Keith and him, which he highlighted by stating:



"When *JL* wrapped up, we went our own way. When you're a freelancer, you're always on to the next gig, not looking back, and I don't think any of us (including Kevin Maguire, who was so important to the book's success) had any great nostalgia for the series. It was a fun gig, and it was over.

"It wasn't till we came back together, ten years later, for *Formerly Known as the Justice League*, that we all realized just how special the collaboration was. That something magical happened when we worked together.

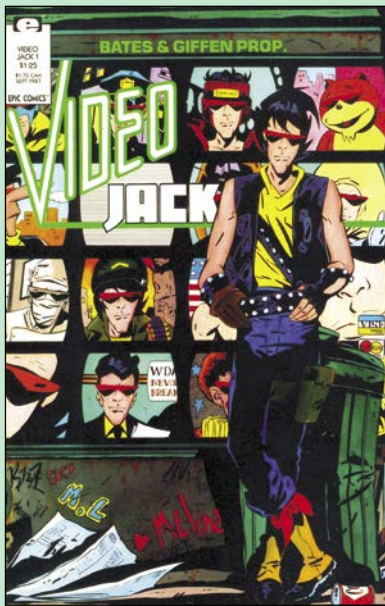
"As the years, and projects, went on, Keith and I worked more closely. We'd talk on the phone regularly, bounce stories ideas around.

But in the end, it was still all about spontaneity. Even when we'd discuss the plots, Keith would usually go off and do something unique and surprising, and I, in turn, would surprise him by adding new story and character elements in the dialogue. By working in that way, we created something together that neither of us could have done alone.

"Keith was one of the single most creative people I've ever known. A force of nature. The Jack Kirby of my generation of comic book creators. He was also a generous collaborator and a truly good guy. I still can't wrap my head around the fact that he's no longer here. What a loss."

Tom Powers

# NO. 14



Comic: *Video Jack* #1 (Sept. 1987)  
 Publisher: Marvel Comics/Epic Comics  
 Cover art: Keith Giffen and Dave Hunt  
 Title: "Pilot Error"  
 Writers: Cary Bates, with Keith Giffen (co-plot)  
 Artists: Keith Giffen and Dave Hunt



By the mid-1980s, my long tenures on *Superman* and *The Flash* were winding down due to seismic changes underway at DC—John Byrne was taking over the Superman titles and *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was taking out the Flash. A “double whammy” of lost income that left me sufficiently motivated to find other work for myself. Cutting to the chase, by 1986 I was writing three new books.

The first was *Captain Atom*. DC recently acquired the property from the defunct Charlton Comics when I took it on. Co-plotted with Greg Weisman and drawn by Pat Broderick, the goal there was a complete re-imagining of the character that could fully integrate a new incarnation into DC’s current monthly line-up.

*Silverblade* was at the other end of the spectrum. Set outside the DC Universe, it was a 12-issue maxiseries illustrated by Gene Colan. Mythologizing the Golden Age of Hollywood (instead of comics), it told the story of an aged movie star who regained his youth when a magical entity bestowed him with the power to conjure any of his movie roles and possess their abilities. After two decades of being limited by the constraints of conventional superhero fare, I was psyched for the opportunity to venture into uncharted territory and luckily DC agreed to pick up the tab.

And then there was *Video Jack*. This was yet another fringe concept far removed from the comics mainstream. Nevertheless, it would eventually find a home, too, though not at DC. But to be clear, *Video Jack* would have never materialized if not for Keith Giffen.

Back in those days, Keith and I would often cross paths up at the DC offices, and we’d schmooze and





compare notes on whatever we happened to be working on. The first time I mentioned *Video Jack*, it was a crude, barebones concept, but to my surprise Keith sparked to the idea right away. True to form, that day his inventive mind was already kicking into overdrive with a flood of suggestions and ideas. Once we began batting possible scenarios and plotlines back and forth, it became clear we were in sync. A few more brainstorming sessions later, we struck up a handshake deal to collaborate, though at that point it was far from certain this very odd project would ever find a home.

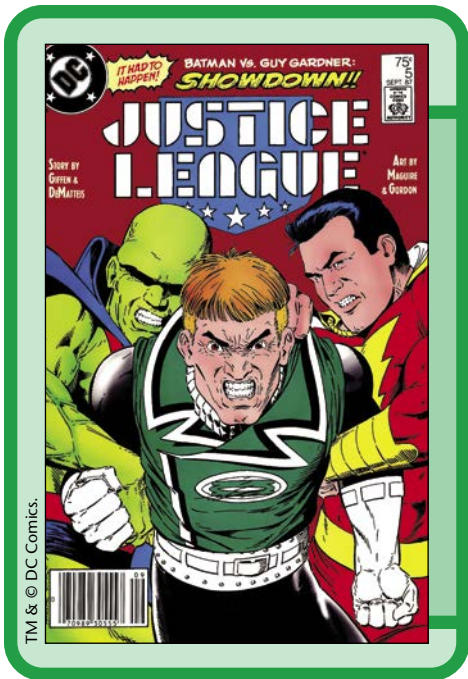
Enter Archie Goodwin. He headed up Marvel's Epic Comics imprint, which was turning out creator-owned books that showcased some of the edgiest material on the market. After our inquiries indicated Epic just might be receptive, we set up a pitch meeting with Archie. Much to our relief his response was positive, and thanks to his guidance we were greenlit for a six-issue miniseries. Without question, Keith's involvement was key to the fast-track approval, especially after he agreed to pencil the first three issues. And it was his standing and influence in the industry that attracted the impressive roster of "guest-artists" who made invaluable contributions that filled out the latter issues.

In retrospect, *Video Jack* will always be a product of its time, an analog world where TV viewing was all about remote controls, VCRs, and channel-hopping. Streaming was decades away from being a thing yet and bingeing only applied to junk food. But as some people have said, *Video Jack* was also ahead of its time—an observation many have made about Keith himself. Maybe he regarded a comic book about a hero and villain fighting across a maze of TV and movie genre-dimensions as an advance peek of a future where we would all be saturated with 24/7 entertainment.

In any event, given the scope of Keith Giffen's incomparable body of work, *Video Jack* was a minor entry in a career that spanned over a thousand comics across four decades. Speaking for myself, I'm just glad I could be there along for the ride for a few of them.

Cary Bates





# NO. 15

Comic: *Justice League* #5 (Sept. 1987)

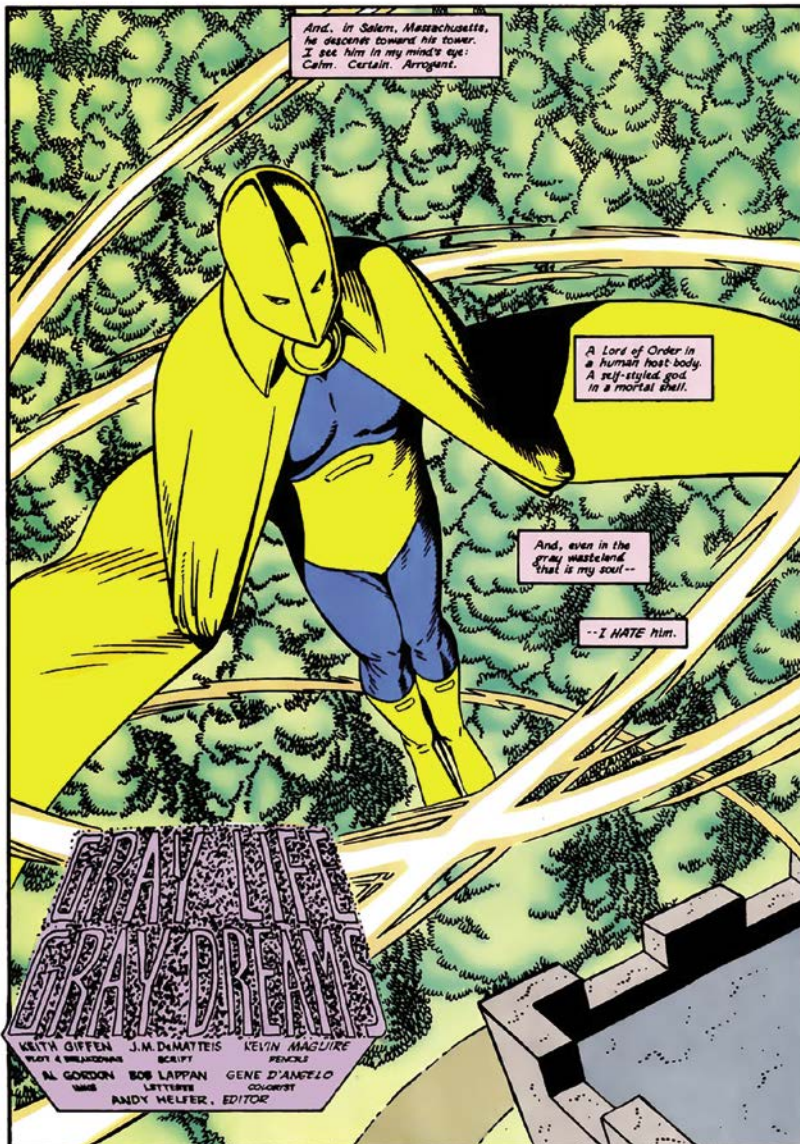
Publisher: DC Comics

Cover art: Kevin Maguire and Terry Austin

Title: "Gray Life, Gray Dreams"

Writers: Keith Giffen (plot) and J. M. DeMatteis (dialogue)

Artists: Keith Giffen (layouts), Kevin Maguire (pencils), and Al Gordon (inks)



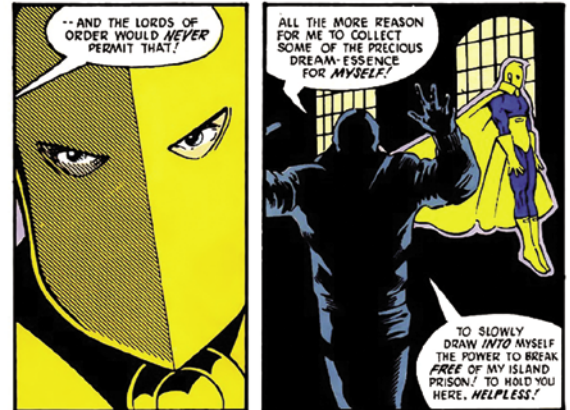
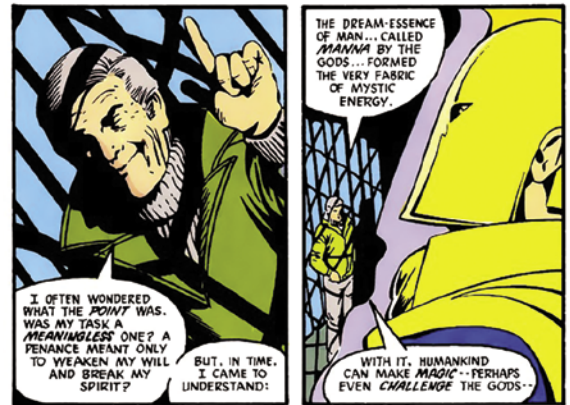
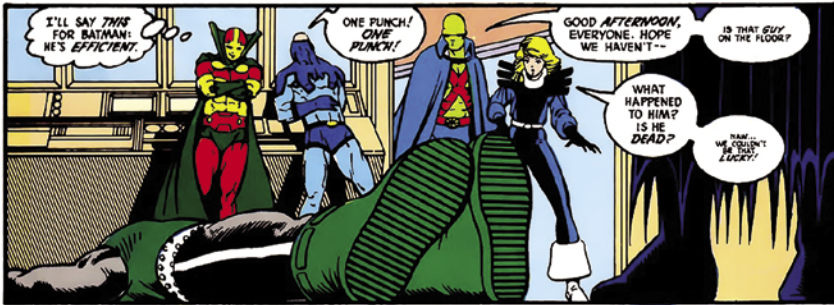
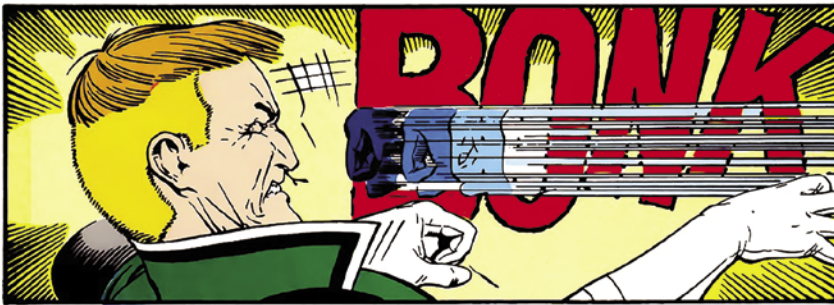
The beauty of the J. M. DeMatteis, Keith Giffen, and Kevin Maguire *Justice League* run was the unlikely membership of the then-new team and how they interacted to one another.

No issue in that saga conveys the raw emotion within the group like *Justice League* #5. "Gray Life, Gray Dreams" offers readers a novice team looking to work together while at their wits' end with bonkers Green Lantern Guy Gardner, who believes he should be leading the league. The exasperation is at a boiling point when Batman, after being challenged by Guy, delivers a knockout punch to Guy that would make Rocky Balboa, Apollo Creed, and Mike Tyson proud. Blue Beetle's repeating "One Punch" and Mister Miracle's thought after the incident—"I'll say this for Batman: He's efficient."—could very well be the reaction of some of the reading audience.

There's more to *Justice League* #5 than just the punch felt throughout the DC Universe. The Lords of Order need the Gray Man to drain dream energy from the dead, gaining the attention of Doctor Fate, who is captured. Fate calls the rest of the League, who must save an entire town from the Creeper and try to get along with each other along the way.

*Justice League* #5 is a clear example of one of the many strengths of the entire run of Giffen/DeMatteis/Maguire JL books: The character dynamic is something that shouldn't work, but it does. In other writers' and artists' hands, such a comic may not have been pulled off. Yet, in the hands of Keith Giffen and company it helps the stories flow smoothly and gives readers something different from the grim-and-gritty sagas that were gaining popularity at the time. The trio of creators flipped the script on the superhero genre by putting people together who may mix as well as oil and water. This made *Justice League* #5 and all the issues before and after it under Giffen, DeMatteis, and Maguire truly stand out among anything else DC and Marvel were putting on newsstands and in specialty shops at the time.

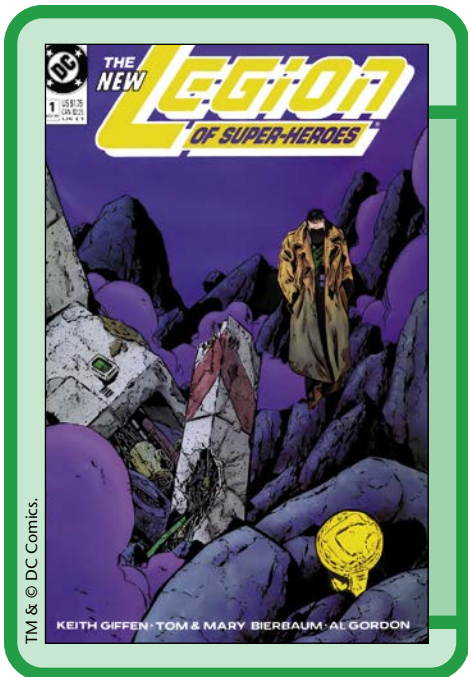
Perhaps what makes *Justice League* #5 and the rest of the Giffen and Co. JL series of comics so great is the fact



the creators worked so well together since editor Andy Helfer had them begin to collaborate on the then-new *Justice League* book in the mid-1980s. Reminiscing about the legendary Keith Giffen, J. M. DeMatteis stated that there was no ego involved when he and Kevin Maguire worked with Giffen on the JL projects. Plots were devised by Giffen. Yet, DeMatteis had freedom to take them in any direction possible. In fact, Giffen encouraged DeMatteis do this while adding other details. Giffen would, in turn, build on whatever DeMatteis came up with, adding more unique twists to DeMatteis' scripts. The end result, according to DeMatteis, was something more than either of them could have achieved on their own.

*Justice League* #5 was just one of the many amazing comic books that are a part of Keith Giffen's legacy. Its kind of storytelling may never be duplicated again. Yet, "Gray Life, Gray Dreams" proves that Giffen's work as a artist, writer, and plotter continues to have an impact on fans, creators, and those who worked closely with him. That's something that will remain for many years to come.

James Heath Lantz



# NO. 16

Comic: *Legion of Super-Heroes* vol. 4 #1 (Nov. 1989)

Publisher: DC Comics

Cover art: Keith Giffen and Al Gordon

Title: no title

Writers: Keith Giffen (plot) and Tom and Mary Bierbaum (dialogue)

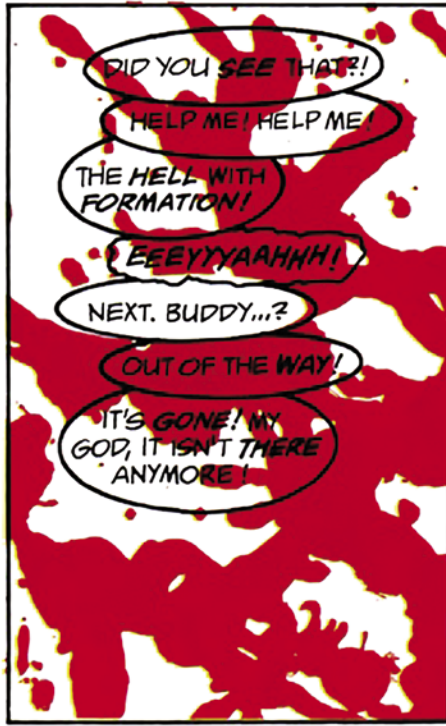
Artists: Keith Giffen and Al Gordon



*Legion of Super-Heroes* volume 4, launched in 1989, was Keith Unchained. As the co-plotter of much if not all of volume 3, he was the natural heir to the writing reins when his partner Paul Levitz left the series. The thinking from on high was that, in addition to knowing the material, Keith was the main creative force behind *Justice League*—a breakout top-seller for the company—so maybe he could elevate the already-popular *Legion* series to that level.

As the book's new editor, I had a front-row seat to watch Keith rise to that task, barreling forward with an enthusiasm I'd never seen from him before (or since). It's not that Levitz had been "holding him back" in any way; it's just that he got a second wind when he realized this would be his vision alone. Plus, he knew I wasn't going to insert myself unnecessarily. In the first place, he was DC's top-selling creator with a decade of experience behind him, and I was a freshman editor. What power would I have over Keith even if I'd wanted to exert it? Second, I operated (still do) under the theory that a big part of being an editor is casting, that the magic happens when you hire the right (responsible) people for the job and get out of their way as much as possible. The only "editorial mandate" I had for Keith was, basically, "do whatever the hell you want to do, I trust you. Neither of us have much respect for traditional boundaries. Just hit your deadlines."

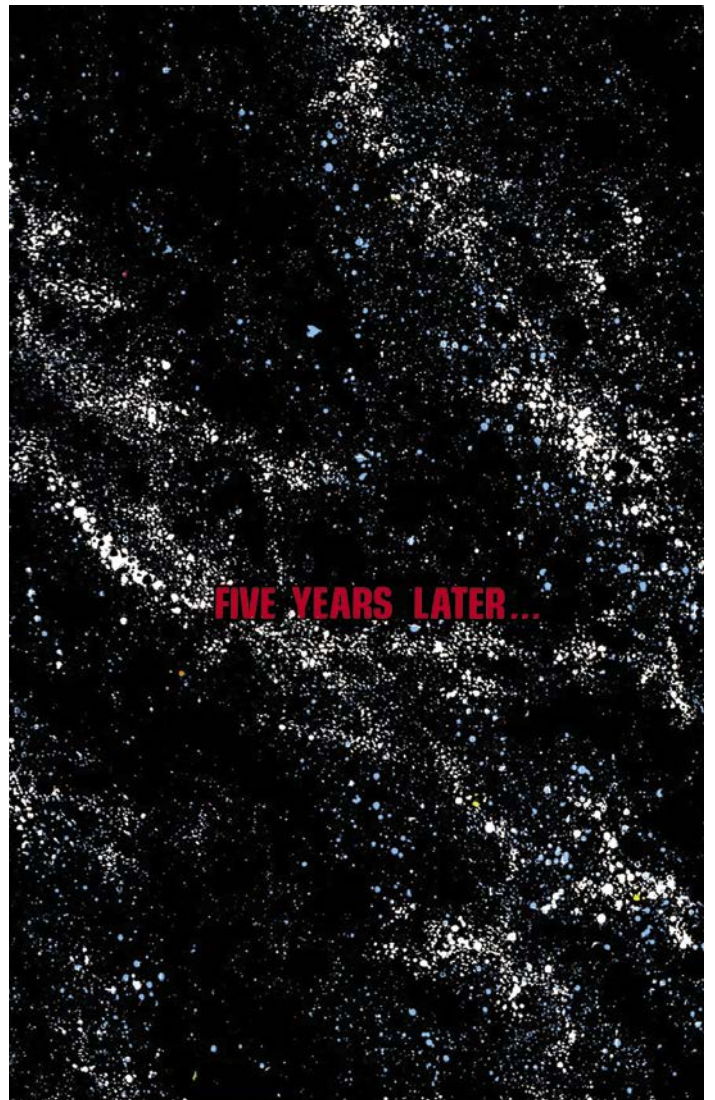
This, then, was our working relationship: No matter how he may have briefed me ahead of time about the story in progress, we both knew he might as well have been reading me a soup label. Keith didn't write up formal plots or scripts. He plotted as he drew, consistently changing the story in his head depending on what new, better idea popped up as he went, and what he delivered often had very little to do with what he'd set out to accomplish. And while that "I'm building the plane while I'm flying it" approach could have been catastrophic in the wrong creative hands, it was exactly the freedom Keith needed to do his very best and most exciting work—and his most experimental. Keith's *Legion* wasn't breezy. It was a brutally challenging read, layered to a depth unlike anything else being published anywhere. At Keith's suggestion, we hired longtime *Legion* fans Tom and Mary Bierbaum

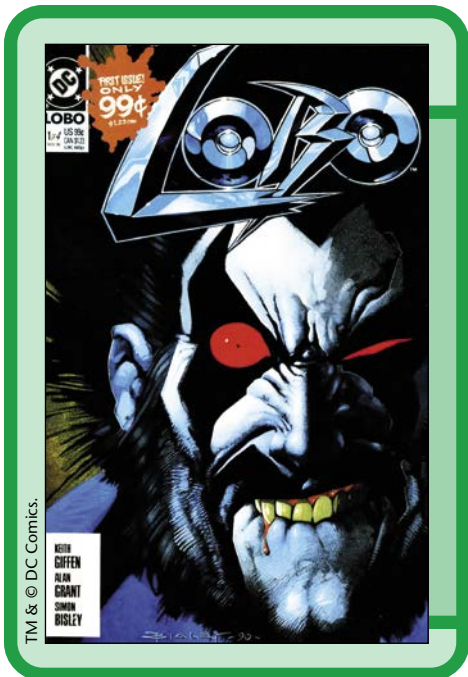


to collaborate with him and provide final dialogue, and they were often my lifeline, briefing me on what to expect whenever Keith was working so furiously that he didn't have the bandwidth to. Keith was a bullet train and I was hanging on for dear life. The only time I can remember wanting to—or successfully being able to—steer him was with issue #2, pleading desperately with him not to choose a Legionnaire to kill by putting all their names in a hat and drawing one at random. That was the sort of manic energy I was dealing with as Keith's editor—and it was awesome. Keith's fearlessness was truly inspiring and was a big influence on me as I began my own career as a writer.

Keith's *Legion* was ridiculously ahead of its time. Because of its complexity, it never hit the *Justice League* sales peaks that management had hoped for at the time, but such is the eternal curse of a visionary creator. Keith got the last laugh there, anyway; DC published a ton of comics in the late '80s and early '90s that are long forgotten, but fans are still discovering and talking about Keith's *Legion* run to this day.

Mark Waid





# NO. 17

Comic: *Lobo* #1–4 (Nov. 1990–Feb. 1991)

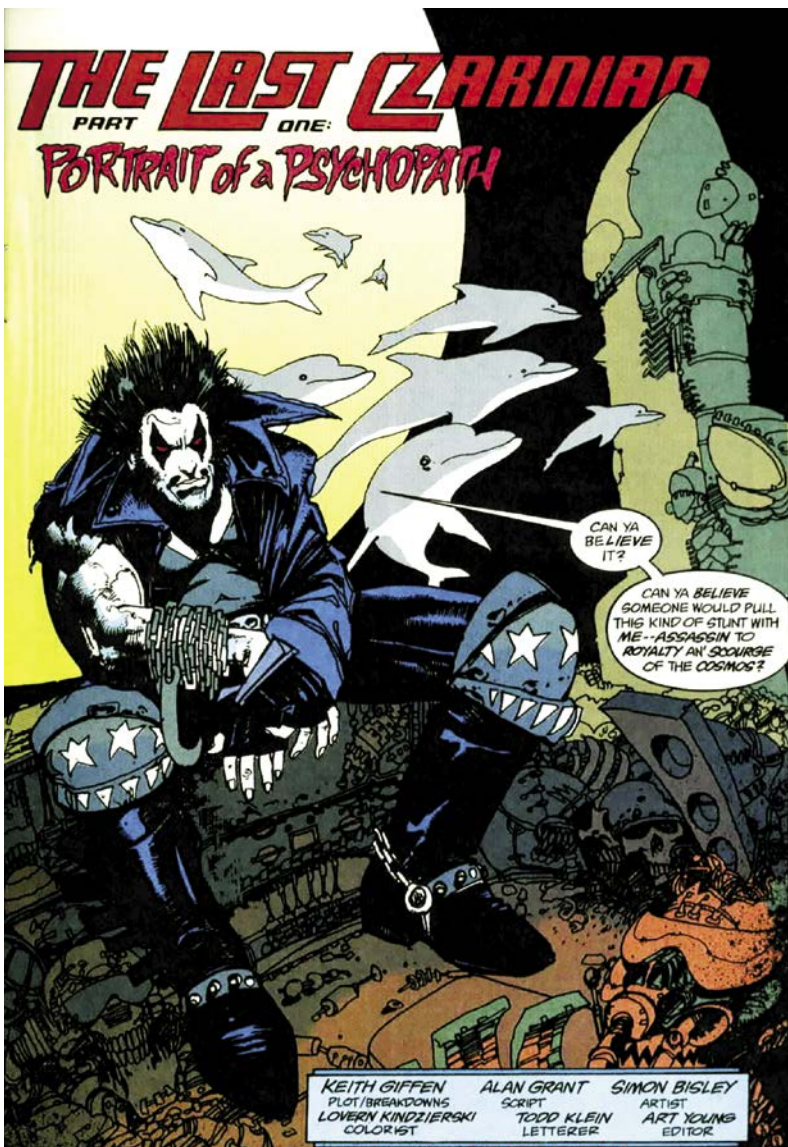
Publisher: DC Comics

Cover art: Simon Bisley

Title: “The Last Czarnian”

Writers: Keith Giffen (plot) and Alan Grant (dialogue)

Artists: Keith Giffen (layouts) and Simon Bisley (finished art)



When the first issue of the *Lobo: The Last Czarnian* miniseries hit comic shops in 1990, it could have been another mediocre comic book parody. However, it wasn't. This was something different, and readers knew it.

The miniseries presented a lead character who was not only a satire of the violent nature of comic book “heroes” of the time, but it was also an outstanding story as well. In the past, humor books such as Marvel's *Not Brand Echh* and *What The—?* gave readers goofy parodies of comic books and their characters. While these were diverting, they were just one-note stories that didn't take the material to the next level and were usually quickly forgotten. This wasn't the case with this miniseries. Readers and fans have one person to thank for that: Keith Giffen.

Lobo was created to parody Wolverine and the Punisher from Marvel Comics. Those two characters became popular for their often violent unheroic actions and were ready to be taken down a notch. However, when Lobo acted violent and unheroic, it



was funny. And not just a little funny, but really, really funny. Due to his personality and witty stories, he became popular with readers. It is the humorous nature of the Lobo stories themselves, exemplified in this miniseries, that helped to make this unlikely anti-hero stand out amongst the other grim-and-gritty denizens of the comic book pages. He also cussed—a lot.

Lobo spoke his mind and didn't take any guff. He had a new attitude for a new generation that was raised on *Sonic the Hedgehog* instead of *Super Mario Bros*. Giffen knew his audience, and although he didn't predict how popular Lobo would become, he knew that readers were craving something different, so he gave it to them.

Lobo was originally created by Giffen and writer Roger Slifer for *Omega Men* #3 (June 1983), but it was this miniseries that propelled the Main Man to stardom. Without this miniseries, he might have been nothing more than a footnote in comic book history. *The Last Czarnian* showed readers the possibilities of what could be done with Lobo, and that he was more than just a one-note character.

In the story, written by Giffen and scripter Alan Grant with artwork by Simon Bisley over Giffen layouts, Lobo thinks he had killed all of the Czarnians years ago, making him the last one. However, he is mistaken. There is one left, and not just some random Czarnian, either. It's his hated fourth grade teacher Miss Tribb, who he is now tasked with protecting and delivering safely to L.E.G.I.O.N.'s Vrill Dox. And the Main Man never goes back on his word! While this sounds like a thin premise, it's the execution that makes the book stand out. In the hands of others, this might just have been a run-of-the-mill story that entertained fans, but nothing more. The satirical wit found throughout elevated the series while still engaging with the base nature that is Lobo.

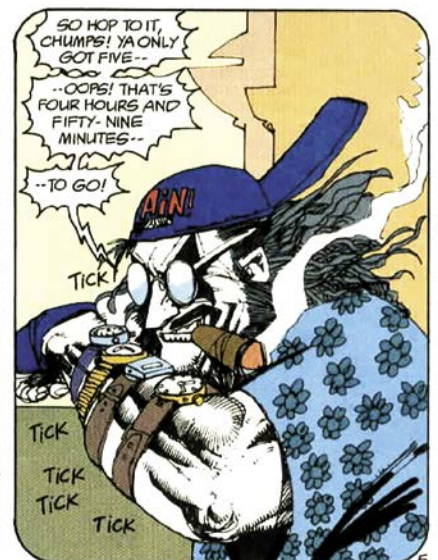
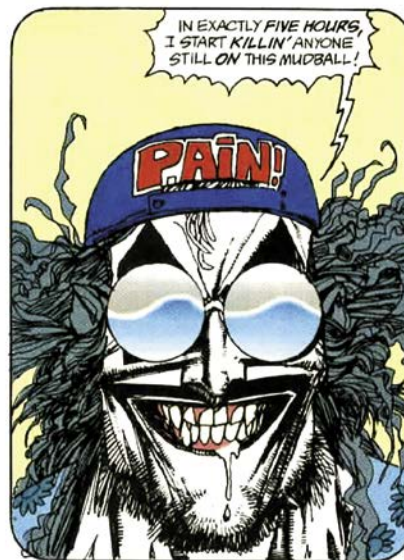
Each issue ramps up the violence and humor as the Legion of Decency, police, S.W.A.T., a trucker convoy, and the Pan-Galactic Dance Company are hot on Lobo's tail. With stops at a murderous spelling bee and a pleasure planet, the series delivered everything fans wanted and more.

Keith Giffen will be remembered for a lot of things, including the in-your-face Lobo. However, even Giffen himself was surprised at the character's success. In a March 2006 interview with *Newsarama* he stated, "I have no idea why Lobo took off. I came up with him as an indictment of the Punisher, Wolverine, bad-ass-hero prototype and somehow, he caught on as the high-violence poster boy. Go figure."

Giffen was a master at creating the absurd and making the concept work. Lobo is just one example in a long line from this master storyteller. Just look at this miniseries and you can see why he was a beloved creator. Giffen created some of the most unique comic book characters and stories in the medium. Although he will be missed, his work will continue to be enjoyed for generations.

Thank you, Keith, for creating Lobo and for bringing this miniseries to life, you fraggin' bastitch.

Ed Lute





**NO. 18**

Comic: *Eclipso: The Darkness Within* #1 (July 1992)  
 Publisher: DC Comics  
 Cover art: Bart Sears and Mark Pennington  
 Title: "The Darkness Within Part One: All Men Make Faults"  
 Writers: Keith Giffen (plot) and Robert Loren Fleming (dialogue)  
 Artists: Keith Giffen (layouts), Bart Sears (pencils), and Randy Elliott and Mark Pennington (inks)



An eclipse is defined as the total or partial obscuring of one celestial body by another (*merriam-webster.com*). The dark potential of the DC villain Eclipso was obscured for decades until Keith Giffen got ahold of him. Once a B-list villain easily defeated by the flash of a camera bulb, Eclipso transformed into arguably the most problematic DC evildoer of the modern era. With the assistance of '90s superstar artist Bart Sears, frequent collaborator Robert Loren Fleming, and the editorial guidance of Michael Eury, *Eclipso: The Darkness Within* #1 (July 1992) demonstrates the creative brilliance of Giffen as he released the wicked urges that dwelled inside this once innocuous villain.

Prior to the summer of 1992, Eclipso infected Bruce Gordon, a simple solar scientist and unlucky photographer who unintentionally unleashed his inner evil while exploring in the South Pacific. Bruce gained the dark powers of Eclipso following an unfortunate encounter with a tribal witch doctor (Mophir) who slashed him with a mystical black diamond in 1963's *House of Secrets* #61. Henceforth, whenever an eclipse occurred, Bruce would transform into Eclipso and proceed to inflict mild-to-moderate havoc.

Eclipso came into conflict with multiple DC heroes over the years, including Batman and the Justice League, yet he was rarely considered a legitimate threat. This is mainly due to the fact that his Achilles heel was readily available in large supply to both heroes, mortals, and schoolchildren: light. Eclipso could be transformed back into his human host if one had a match, a flashlight, or some leftover Fourth of July sparklers.

In the early 1990s, dark-themed comics were selling well and crossover events brought new readers to various titles. Rolling the dice on a reimagined version of a middling Silver Age villain to anchor a summer crossover storyline was somewhat of a calculated risk. Frequent collaborator Bob Fleming shares some details about the revamping of Eclipso's origin: "We both [Keith and Bob] liked the character... the black diamond was a cool weapon. Our plan was to retain the original stories as part of continuity by revealing that all of Eclipso's past actions had been designed to obstruct his most dangerous opponent, the leading solar energy scientist Bruce



Gordon." Issue editor Michael Eury adds, "That was the magic of Keith Giffen: being able to see the potential, or a new direction, in a character that others might disregard."

In *Eclipso: The Darkness Within* #1, Eclipso's secret domain on the dark side of the Moon is accidentally discovered by a patrolling Lar Gand (known to pre-*Crisis* readers as Mon-El of the Legion of Super-Heroes), who finds his mind and body possessed by a sinister spirit. Motivated by the sudden realization that he can control superheroes when they are agitated, Eclipso begins to manipulate several characters, including the Creeper, into picking up shards of his black diamond to test his newfound ability. Eventually he is stopped by his former host, Bruce Gordon, via a device that emits pure solar energy directly from the sun. Suddenly Eclipso's alter-ego had become his greatest nemesis as well as an early adopter of solar power!

*Eclipso: The Darkness Within* #1 features stellar art by Bart Sears, who previously worked with Keith on *Justice League Europe*. Bart recalls his time with Keith quite fondly: "Keith was a writing wonder. He drew all of his plots on 8.5"x11" copy

paper. He'd rough in dialogue as he liked, and that's what I and Robert worked from. As far as I know, that's how Keith wrote everything, in pictures... He told me he had a fishbowl kind of thing, and whenever he had a crazy thought or idea he'd scratch it down on a slip of paper and throw it in the bowl, and when he needs a story, he'd reach in and pluck one out."

This new and improved version of Eclipso has appeared consistently for over 30 years throughout DC comics, animation, action figures, television, film, and video games. His ever-evolving presence includes being the living embodiment of the wrath of God, possessing Superman, indirectly causing the death of Sue Dibny, disrupting the Justice Society of America, blighting political houses on Gemworld, and serving as an agent of pure chaotic evil. The days of being a two-bit menace stymied by headlights are long gone. *Eclipso: The Darkness Within* #1 proves, through the renewal of its diabolic antagonist, that the creative instinct and ingenuity of Keith Giffen shall forever remain un-eclipsed.

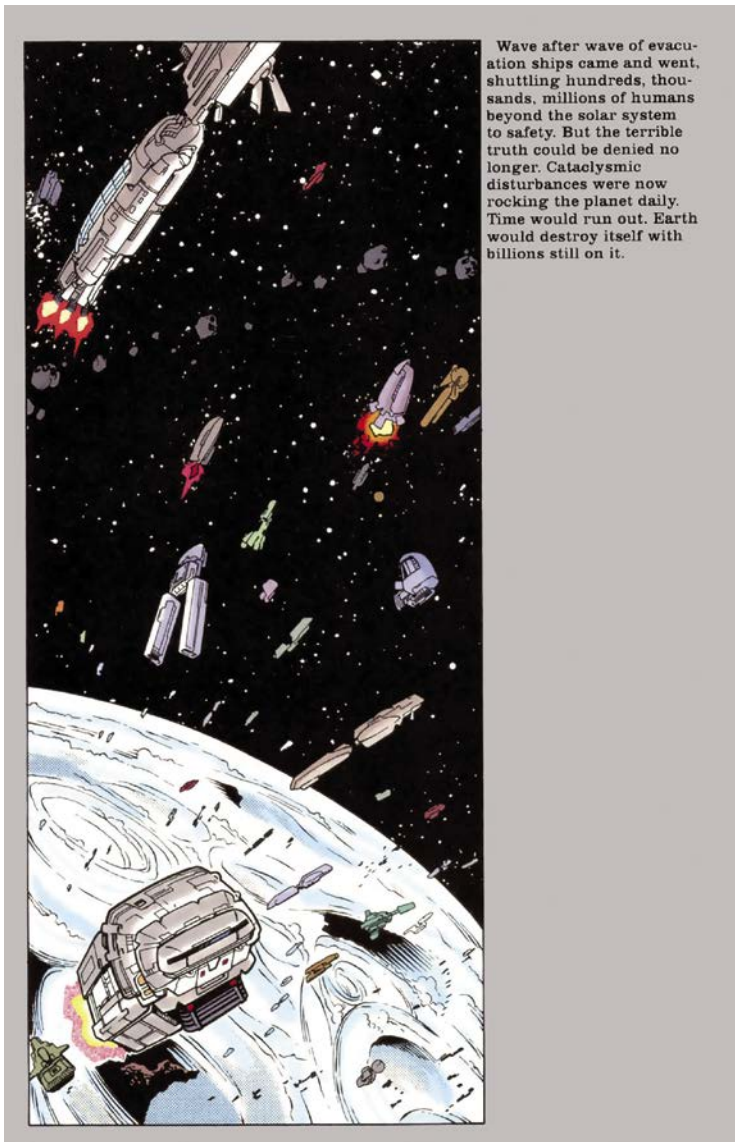
Matt Merante





**NO. 19**

Comic: *Legion of Super-Heroes* vol. 4 #38 (late Dec. 1992)  
 Publisher: DC Comics  
 Cover art: Stuart Immonen and Ray McCarthy  
 Title: "Requiem"  
 Writers: Keith Giffen (plot) and Tom and Mary Bierbaum (dialogue)  
 Artists: Keith Giffen (layouts), Jason Pearson (pencils), and Karl Story (inks)



Wave after wave of evacuation ships came and went, shuttling hundreds, thousands, millions of humans beyond the solar system to safety. But the terrible truth could be denied no longer. Cataclysmic disturbances were now rocking the planet daily. Time would run out. Earth would destroy itself with billions still on it.

In my mind, *Legion* #38—the issue where we blew up the Earth—is quintessential Keith.

First off, what a jolt for the readers. Whenever they were sure Keith would zig he would zag, never more so than with this issue. The series had just taken three full years to show the Legion and its allies finally defeat the sinister alien-dominated government of Earth—a brutal war had been fought and countless lives had been lost. So finally, a chance for the readers to catch their breath and savor a hard-won victory. But no, that's not what the readers got, not in a universe whose course was being charted by Keith.

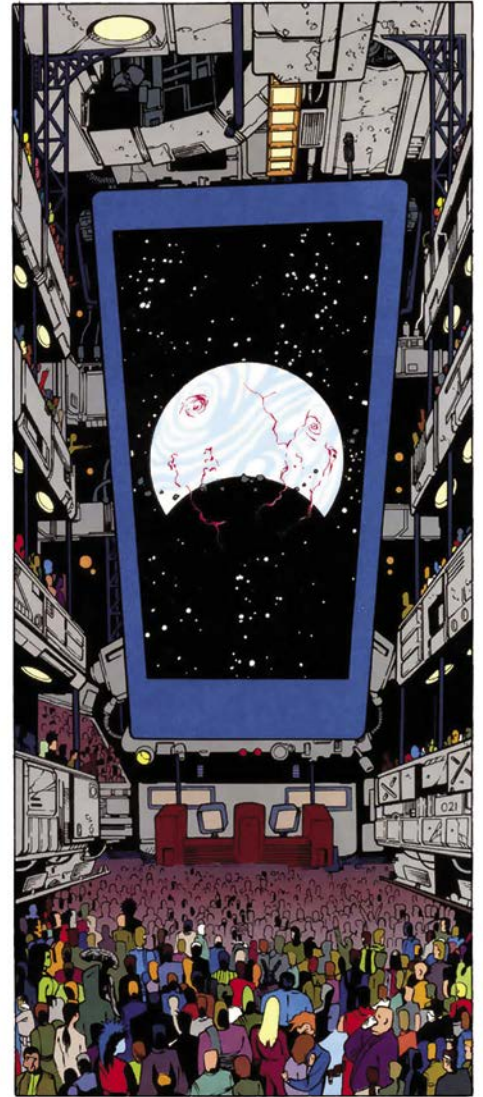
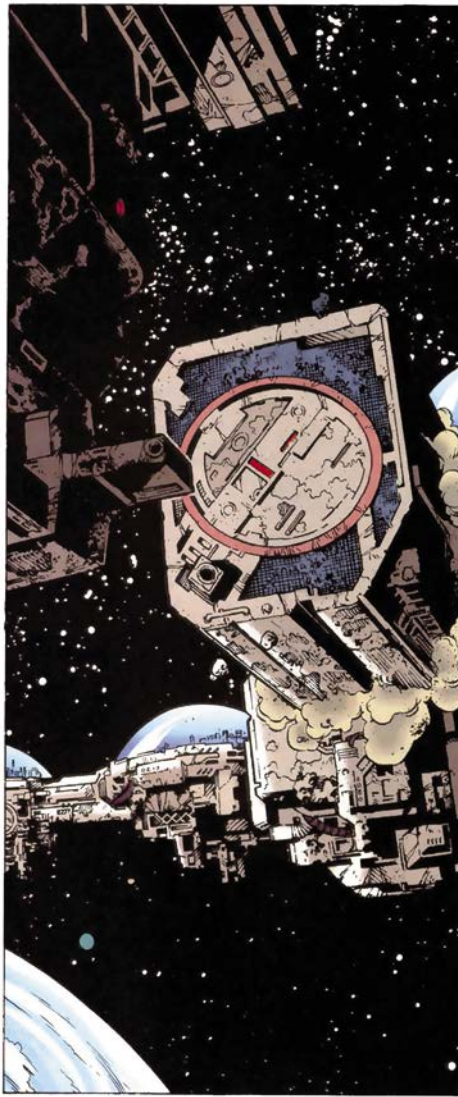
This issue was also quintessential Keith because he well understood that many fans—maybe most of them—would *hate* this development. And that never bothered Keith, not as long as the story was good.

But the most important way #38 was just pure Keith was how he challenged his collaborators to reach beyond their limitations and accomplish things they didn't think were possible. What incredible trust Keith was showing in Jason Pearson as penciler—giving him an entire issue of nothing but splash panels!—and Mary and me as scripters—tossing us one of the most significant events in DC history and challenging us to tell it all as a single text-heavy issue-length news article.

For us, this would be a level of comic book scripting we'd never attempted before, and on probably the most important issue we would ever work on. Yeah, just a little pressure.

And what got us through it—allowed us to rise to the occasion—was the faith Keith showed in us. And how, even if we fumbled the ball in some way, he could always put a positive spin on our misfires and encourage us to keep trying and keep taking chances. But most of all, we met this challenge because of the sheer enthusiasm and creative energy Keith brought to the issue—and to all our collaborations.

Credit for the overall story goes, of course, to Keith. I'm not sure, but I'd guess he was the one who came up with the idea to include Neil Gaiman's Death character on a couple of the pivotal pages, which was maybe the best-remembered touch to that issue and the



one that arguably lifted it over the top. What I view as the great success of the story can certainly be attributed to each member of the creative team (Jason, Mary and me, inker Karl Story, colorist Tom McCraw and editors Michael Eury and KC Carlson), but it was Keith's courage and leadership that elicited such quality work out of all of us.

In later years, I've heard #38 described as Keith's angry "going-away gift" to DC for interfering with a lot of what he wanted to do with the Legion, and that may well have been the story Keith himself told—nobody loved spinning a good yarn more than Keith. But in fact, the destruction of Earth had been in the planning stages for a long time. I remember after we destroyed the Moon 18 issues earlier, some fans were questioning the scientific probability of blowing up a body as big as the Moon and I privately wondered what those fans were going to think when we moved on to blowing up the Earth. Also note that we set events in motion that would lead to Earth's destruction in #32, a full six issues before the ultimate cataclysm.

In any case, keep in mind that the idea of destroying Earth was run up the flagpole with



the editors and the higher-ups at DC and given the okay, so it was hardly some surprise prank Keith pulled on his way out the door.

And like everything Keith did in the "Five Years Later" Legion, it was a superficially bleak and depressing story, but when you dug beneath the surface you found the powerful heartbeat of the Legion spirit—an idealistic, never-say-die perseverance that would ultimately triumph. Yes, Earth was annihilated in #38 and the loss of life was enormous, but 94 domed cities rose from the planet and survived. A "New Earth" would carry on. And if DC had stuck with Keith and the "Five Years Later" storyline, the Legion and its allies would have ultimately found a way to restore the planet.

And that triumph would not have been some Polyannish example of the good guys winning because that's what the audience wanted, it would have been a hard-fought, genuine triumph against the kind of daunting, grim, sometimes hopeless-seeming odds the world throws at its heroes in real life.

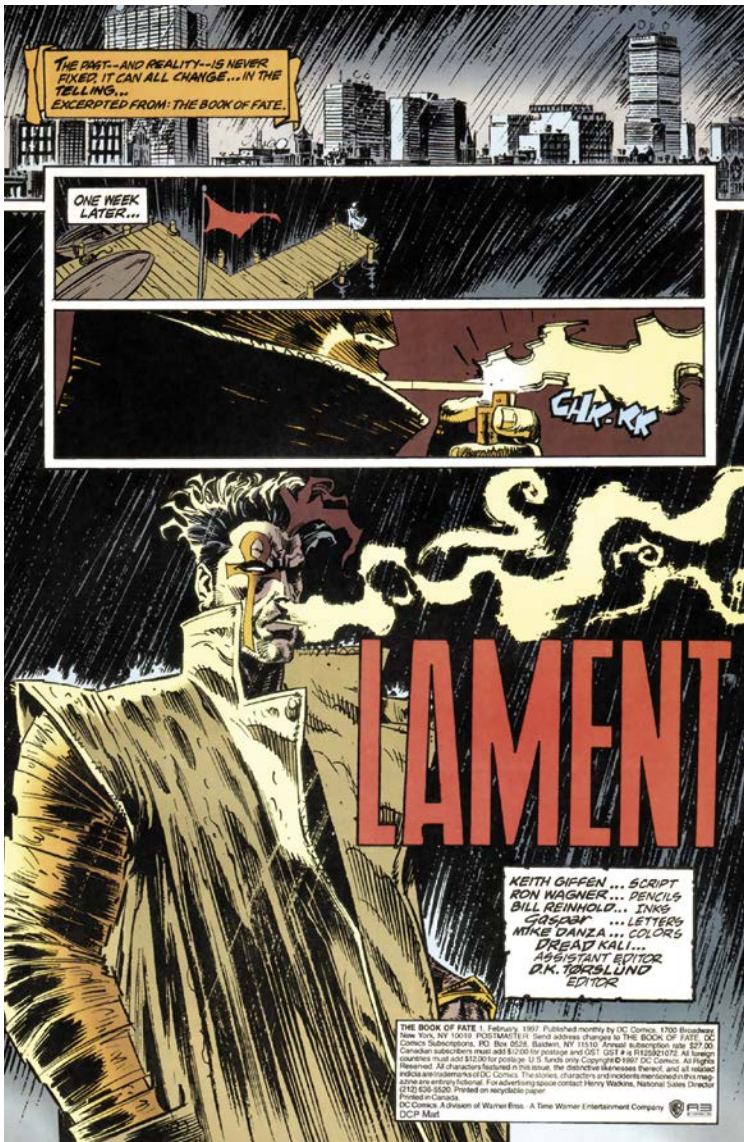
In fact, the kind of against-all-odds, defiant triumphs Keith kept achieving throughout an incredible career and a remarkable life.

**Tom Bierbaum**



**NO. 20**

Comic: *The Book of Fate* #1–12 (Feb. 1997–Jan. 1998)  
 Publisher: DC Comics  
 Cover art: Ron Wagner and Bill Reinhold (most issues),  
 Keith Giffen (later issues)  
 Writers: Keith Giffen; Alan Grant (dialogue over Giffen’s  
 plots beginning with issue #9)  
 Artists: Ron Wagner and Bill Reinhold; Keith Giffen



In the grand scheme of Keith Giffen’s long association with the Justice Society of America, 1997’s *The Book of Fate* is something of a wildcard. It is, however, also one of the most underappreciated works in a career full of hidden gems.

The book follows “down-and-dirty mystical guy” (as Keith himself put it in a 1999 interview with Mike Jozic for the *MEANWHILE... e-zine*) Jared Stevens and his mission of putting a stop to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse before the world is completely engulfed by chaos. While that quartet of evil is no stranger to the pages of the DC Universe, the execution of a would-be trite concept is nothing short of spectacular; at the heart of the book lies cutting commentary on both the genre and the in-universe social class dynamics within the superhero hierarchy.

Despite the varying opinions on the mid-1990s reimagining of Doctor Fate, the series effectively acted as an extension of the themes explored in *Lobo* and *Trencher*—Keith Giffen did not present Jared Stevens as an archetypal hero ready to join the ranks of the Justice League but as a down-on-his-luck nobody with a heart of gold consistently colliding with the apparent rigidity of the world he’s been thrust into.

Recalling his work on the book, inker Bill Reinhold tells *BACK ISSUE*, “working on *The Book of Fate* was a highlight in my long career. Ron Wagner and I had previously worked together on a run of *Daredevil* in 1996, so by the time we worked on this we already had a good personal and artistic relationship. This book though took us into somewhat of a different direction than *Daredevil*, which was a more down-to-earth street-level reality. Keith Giffen’s *Book of Fate* was like a detective/multi-planes of existence story.

“I was always trying to experiment with line and texture. Inking Ron often felt more like a jam between two artists than just tracing a penciler’s work. In other words... more fun!

“Ron left the book for other opportunities, but I stayed on,” Reinhold continues. “And I’m so happy I did, because Keith Giffen took over penciling for the last issues of the series. I first knew of his work as an artist in the late ’70s drawing Marvel’s *The Defenders*. At that time, he had a



very strong Jack Kirby influence. Similar to what Barry Windsor-Smith did also early in his career, so I loved it! Keith Giffen as an artist has gone through many styles, but my favorite was when he became highly influenced by Argentine artist José Muñoz. I personally give Keith credit for introducing me and many of us comic artists to the amazing work of Muñoz. This was the kind of artwork he did on *The Book of Fate*. It was interesting to ink—as in although the lines and blacks were very distinct, I could still play a little with the weight of the line or how things turned without losing the strength of his work. Back then, of course, inkers always inked the original pencil art, except for the occasional light-box job. Keith's pencils, with all the planned strong blacks, were the lightest pencils I'd ever seen! I partially depended on darker xeroxes as reference.

"On a last note, I also want to give a huge thanks to editor Dan Thorland and assistant Alisande Morales for bringing me on this book and many others that have made my career so interesting."

Indeed, *The Book of Fate* represented one part of the editorial effort known as the "Weirdverse"—centered around the

mysterious and the occult, it was a sort of main continuity Vertigo. In Keith Giffen's capable hands, the 12-issue arc that had been meant to jumpstart an ongoing still stands perfectly well on its own as one of the most compelling miniseries of its time. In many ways, it may very well be Giffen-as-writer at his very best: laugh-out-loud funny, clever, sharp, cynical, and endlessly imaginative.

Reflecting on his friend and collaborator, series artist Ron Wagner leaves us with a final comment and ultimate testament to Keith Giffen's impact on the medium: "My memories of working with Keith on *The Book of Fate* are all good ones. I really enjoyed the madness of it all, I always marveled at Keith's imagination and creativity in his concepts and writing. *The Book of Fate* was one of my favorite books to ever work on. I also really enjoyed our phone conversations. He was such a character and wasn't afraid to say what was on his mind. He also always looked out for me, making sure I had work or trying to get me on various projects. His passing has left a huge hole in this crazy industry and the world. Oh, but what a legacy he has left behind."

Alissa Marmol-Cernat



# Keith Giffen's 20 Greatest Hits Contributors

**BACK ISSUE's** incoming new editor **ROGER ASH** has been a fan of comics for most of his life and enjoys sharing his love of them with others. A longtime contributor to this magazine, Roger has previously worked with Westfield Comics and the Baltimore Comic-Con.



**CARY BATES** began his career as a teenager who submitted story ideas to *Silver Age Superman* editor Mort Weisinger. He went on to pen *Superman* and *Action Comics* stories for over two decades. His other credits include *Legion of Super-Heroes*, *The Flash*, *Captain Atom*, the *Superboy* TV series, and *Video Jack* with Keith Giffen.



Journalist **TOM BIERBAUM** and his wife Mary, a nurse, were active members of *Legion of Super-Heroes* fandom before becoming a comic book writing team in the 1980s. In addition to scripting *Legion* vol. 4 over Keith Giffen's plots, the Bierbaums also contributed to *New Talent Showcase*, *Legionnaires*, *Jurassic Park*, and other series.



**JARROD BUTTERY** lives in Western Australia. Research chemist by day and theater actor/director by night, he somehow finds time to read lots of comics. He has contributed over 30 articles to **BACK ISSUE**.



**BACK ISSUE's** retiring editor-in-chief **MICHAEL EURY** was fortunate to work with Keith Giffen as his editor at both *DC Comics* and *Dark Horse Comics*. He was caricatured by Giffen in a romance cover parody in *Ambush Bug* Nothing Special #1.



**JAMES HEATH LANTZ** is a freelance writer whose stories, essays, and reviews can be found online and in print at [Sequart.org](http://Sequart.org), *Superman Homepage*, his blog, and such publications as his self-published *Trilogy of Tales* and *PS Artbooks' Roy Thomas Presents Sheena* vol. 2.



**PAUL LEVITZ** started his career producing the newszine *The Comic Reader*. In the early to mid-1970s he assisted *DC* editor Joe Orlando before beginning an unparalleled climb up the company ladder by becoming an editor, ultimately ascending to the roles of *DC's* president and publisher. As a writer he is known for the *Justice Society of America* in *All-Star Comics*, *Legion of Super-Heroes*, *Stalker*, and *Starman* (with Steve Ditko) in *Adventure Comics*, among other works.



**ED LUTE** is an educator, freelance writer, and comic book historian. He is honored to be chosen for this tribute issue for Keith Giffen, one of his favorite creators.



**ALISSA MARMOL-CERNAT** credits Keith Giffen for her love of comics, having been introduced early on to *Lobo* and *Ambush Bug* and immediately taken up a lifetime of comic book collecting. She is also a London-based aspiring filmmaker and proud *BI* contributor.



**BRIAN MARTIN** is an office manager from Oakville, Ontario, Canada. He began his affiliation with this magazine as a regular letters column correspondent before becoming one of **BACK ISSUE's** most prolific contributors.



**MATT MERANTE** is a freelance writer/essayist and literacy specialist whose interests include comics, art, film, and pulp fiction. He greatly admires the work of Gene Colan, Sal Buscema, Norm Breyfogle, John Byrne, and Keith Giffen, among others. Matt lives with his family in Virginia.



**IAN MILLSTED** is a writer and teacher based in Bristol, England. He is a frequent contributor to **BACK ISSUE** and occasionally pens the rotating department "Retro Brit" for our sister publication, *RetroFan*.



**JOSEPH NORTON** thanks Paul Levitz and Keith Giffen for their deprogramming of this *Marvel Zombie*. In the summer of 1982 he found *Legion of Super-Heroes Annual* #1 on the 7-Eleven spin rack, opening the *DC Universe* to him. This is his sixth **BACK ISSUE** contribution.



**TOM POWERS** teaches English at Montgomery County Community College, which is located in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania. He is also the author of *Gender and the Quest in British Science Fiction Television: An Analysis of Doctor Who, Blake's 7, Red Dwarf and Torchwood* (McFarland, 2016).



**PHILIP SCHWEIER** is a life-long *Legion of Super-Heroes* fan who has had the privilege of chatting with several of the *Legion's* creators (including Keith Giffen) on behalf of **BACK ISSUE** magazine.



**JASON SHAYER's** addiction to comic books and his 12-year-old mind frame have caused more than a few people to raise an eyebrow. When he's not writing or reading, he's teaching his daughter the finer points of comic book collecting.



**MARK WAID** jumped from fandom to *DC's* editorial department in the late 1980s, where he worked with Keith Giffen on the 1989 *Legion* revamp. He soon left *DC's* staff and became a freelance writer, beginning a long and celebrated career that includes *The Flash*, *Kingdom Come*, *Fantastic Four*, *Daredevil*, *Incorruptible*, and *Batman/Superman: World's Finest*, among others.



Unbeknownst to many, **DOUG ZAWISZA** had nothing to do with being selected as the model from which Keith Giffen was inspired to create *Cheeks*, the *Toy Wonder*. And he's okay with that. Doug is the author of the *TwoMorrrows* book, *The Hawkman Companion*.



end

# KEITH GIFFEN in the 2000s

## Ideas that Inspired Millions

by Jonathan Brown



October 11, 2023 was a fairly uneventful night in my household. My youngest foster son had turned six that day. There were presents, a special dinner, and a cake. There was nothing that seemed funny about the evening. My little one had just had a sugar crash and I had gotten him to bed. I was leaving his room when my foot brushed against something a little odd. I looked down to see a Jaime Reyes Blue Beetle mask staring back up at me. The *Blue Beetle* film had just come out, and the little guy was enamored with it. For his birthday, my foster son had asked for a Blue Beetle costume, and I had no problem obliging. As I looked down at the new treasure, a sense of joy washed over me. Here was my "in." I was going to be able to share my love of comics with this little guy because *Blue Beetle* had opened the door. I was going to get to share with him the Justice League. I was going to let him see the wonders of the larger universe through the eyes of Green Lantern. Together we could "Bwah-ha-ha" at the antics of Booster Gold and the Blue Beetle. Even if it was not supposed to be funny I could not help but chuckle, looking down at this plastic toy. The Blue Beetle was going to allow me to introduce my little guy to the work of Keith Giffen.

After leaving his room, I went to my own and lay down on the bed. I began my usual end-of-the-day decompression by mindlessly scrolling through my phone. It was there that my world was rocked. Keith Giffen had died. I was flooded by an array of emotions. This was a creator whose influence had greatly impacted me. This was someone who I had interviewed for articles and had given me pointers on how to improve my writing. This was someone who I greatly admired, and he was gone. The juxtaposition of the excitement I had just experienced with the grief I was now experiencing was not lost on me. It felt like the scene had been written. As I calmed down, this provided me some comfort. The sense that the news of one of my favorite writer's death had reached me in a way where it felt written felt almost comical... even though it was never intended to be funny.

This night I found myself reflecting on my relation to Keith Giffen's work, and how I had developed an appreciation for it. I had returned to comics after a usual high school hiatus. In the early and mid-'00s I found myself frequently drifting into my local comics shop. I was learning about creators and storylines as I aimlessly stumbled from book to book. At this point I found myself in the middle of a crisis.

### **The New Blue Beetle**

*Infinite Crisis* #5 (Aug. 2006), revealing Jaime Reyes as the all-new Blue Beetle. Cover by Jim Lee and Sandra Hope. While Geoff Johns wrote this issue and the *Infinite Crisis* crossover series, Keith Giffen created the new Blue Beetle, as this article reveals.

TM & © DC Comics.

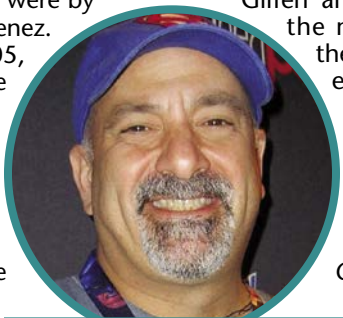
## GIFFEN GETS BUGGY

As my fandom grew, DC Comics began to swell and point everything towards *Infinite Crisis*. This started with a prologue book entitled *Countdown to Infinite Crisis*. This work was written by Geoff Johns, Greg Rucka, and Judd Winick. The pencils were by Rags Morales, Jesus Saiz, Ivan Reis, and Phil Jimenez. The book was published on March 30, 2005, and featured a cover date of May 2005. While the story was set up to introduce four prelude miniseries for a larger story, the book was deeply significant. It ended with the death of Ted Kord, the second and most prominent Blue Beetle [the former Charlton Comics "Action Hero" purchased by DC Comics and incorporated (along with other Charlton characters like Captain Atom and the Question) into the DC Universe with 1985's *Crisis on Infinite Earths—ed.*]. As I looked on the internet to understand why this mattered it became apparent to me that this created a giant heart-shaped hole in the DCU. Ted Kord had become a prominent comedic character in the universe. He made people laugh, and now with his gruesome death, the soul of this fictional world was a darker place.

The light would shine again. A new Blue Beetle would arise. The character Jaime Reyes would be introduced in *Infinite Crisis* #3, written by Johns and penciled by Jimenez. It would be revealed that Reyes was Kord's successor and the new Blue Beetle in issue #5. The first image that introduced this new

incarnation of the character to the world would be the cover of this issue, drawn by legendary artist Jim Lee.

However, these monumental creators were not the ones who created the emerging star—it had been the work of Keith Giffen and Cully Hamner. Artist Hamner had designed the new superhero look, and Giffen had molded the man who would fill that costume. Former DC executive Dan DiDio, who led the *Infinite Crisis* initiative, shares with *BACK ISSUE*, "it was early in my tenure as Executive Editor that I decided we needed to start diversifying the DCU. We added Jason Rusch as Firestorm, Ryan Choi's Atom, and Kate Kane as Batwoman. So when Ted Kord was killed in *Countdown to Infinite Crisis*, plans were in place to create a new, Latin Blue Beetle. That's where Keith came in. He had been pushing for a new Latin character in the DCU, so it seemed like the perfect fit. So while Keith created the backstory we were looking for the right artist to create the right



DAN DIDIO

© Luigi Novi / Wikimedia Commons.

design built around of the concept of the scarab. After several rejected designs, Cully came in with the perfect look. And once everything was approved, they started on the series. Keith came back because he had more stories to tell and wanted to get Blue Beetle back to where he intended his story to go."

After this initial appearance in *Infinite Crisis*, Keith Giffen would take point on a new ongoing series entitled *Blue Beetle*. The first issue was published nearly a year after the death of Ted Kord, appearing on shelves on March 29, 2006, with a cover date of May 2006. John Rogers would join Giffen as a co-writer and Hamner handled art. Giffen would stay on the book for the first ten issues, and return for issue #19. He would then return a decade later when DC relaunched the series as a part of its "Rebirth" publishing initiative. The new book would begin with a *Rebirth* one-shot, with Scott Kolins taking over art duties. Giffen would be joined by longtime collaborator J. M. DeMatteis with issue #8. Keith's final *Blue Beetle* comic would be issue #14 (Nov. 2017).

The Blue Beetle was not Keith Giffen's only contribution to the DCU in the new century, but it is perhaps his most enduring. The character has gone on to make appearances in cartoons, live-action television, video games, and now has his own feature-length film. The character is a huge part of the legacy left behind by Mr. Giffen.

Comic creator Josh Trujillo, at this writing the current *Blue Beetle* scribe, tells *BACK ISSUE* this about legacy of Giffen's Blue Beetle: "I was immediately drawn to Jaime Reyes after years of reading Giffen's work in *JLI*, the *Legion*, and wackier stuff like *Ambush Bug*. He, John Rogers, and Cully Hamner created an instantly likable, kind, and memorable character that forged a new path while still honoring DC's rich legacy. Probably next to Lobo, I think Jaime will end up being Giffen's most enduring creation (and for good reason!). That initial run is perfect, capturing the humor, heart, and bite that made Keith such a force to be reckoned with. Working on Blue Beetle has been a highlight of my career, and following in the footsteps of Keith Giffen is a tremendous



### Beyond Bwah-ha-ha

After partnering the previous Blue Beetle, Ted Kord, with buddy Booster Gold in the *Justice League* titles, Giffen, joined by artist Cully Hamner, reimagined the character as a Latino teen—and a new DC superstar was born! *Blue Beetle* #1 (May 2006). Cover by Cully Hamner.

TM & © DC Comics.



*Giffen DiDido Koblisch*

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**One Man Army Corps**

Giffen, with co-writer Dan DiDio, revitalized Jack Kirby's Bronze Age O.M.A.C. series by introducing Kevin Kho as the new One Man Army Corps. Kirby's spirit clearly guided Giffen when penciling this slam-bang action page, ably inked by Scott Koblisch. Original art signed by Giffen, DiDido, and Koblisch, courtesy of Heritage Auctions ([www.ha.com](http://www.ha.com)).

TM & © DC Comics.

honor and responsibility. I hope our tribute issue gave new fans a taste of what made him so great. I don't know what he would have thought of it, but if he were still with us he certainly wouldn't hesitate to let me know his honest opinion!

"There's some comfort in knowing that his stories will live on forever, and inspire the rest of us to do better. We owe him everything."

As alluded to above, *Blue Beetle* was not the only place where one could find Keith Giffen's fingerprints in the aughts at DC Comics. Giffen dabbled in nearly every corner and time of the DCU. He shepherded the selfish spacefarer Larfleeze in his only solo ongoing series to date. He introduced us to a bunch of dramatic clones from the future in the pages of *Justice League 3000* and *Justice League 3001*. He even helped tie together the works of various creators as he anchored weekly and biweekly series like *52*, *Countdown to Final Crisis*, and the first six issues of *Justice League: Generation Lost*.

Dan DiDio explains why Keith Giffen was ideal for these types of projects. "First of all, he was one of the few people quick enough to handle the workload, and he loved the challenge. In creating the storyboards for the various weekly titles, Keith brought a consistency in storytelling that allowed for multiple artists on the project. Keith was a triple threat, working not just as an artist but also as a writer in helping smooth out the transitions between segments, and in some ways, acting as an editor, too. Always ensuring the flow of the book. Keith worked well with everyone, and they all respected each other, but he wasn't afraid to step in when a writer might need help." Dan and Keith also collaborated on the New 52 incarnation of *OMAC*, which would run for eight issues. The first issue had a cover date of November 2011. While Giffen had been known in these years to pick up a pencil for a one-off every now and then, this marked his return as a full-time penciler on an ongoing series. This was a natural environment for DiDio and Giffen to work together as a love for the creation of Jack Kirby had been a cornerstone in their relationship. DiDio states, "It's hard just to tell one story about working with Keith, but our shared admiration for all the the crazy Kirby DC characters made it easy for us to find projects to collaborate on. But he certainly enjoyed throwing in unscripted moments to the comics we worked on, whether it was exploding toilets in *Outsiders*, or a seven-page fight scene between *OMAC* and Superman, they were usually added unexplained and left for me as writer to figure out why they were there."

## MR. GIFFEN GOES TO MARVEL

It would be easy to dwell solely on the Giffen DC work of the 2000s. Keith Giffen even admitted to me when I interviewed him for a *BACK ISSUE* article years ago that he considered himself DC guy. However, the DCU was not alone in being home of Keith's grand ideas. Giffen made an impact on Marvel at this time as well, primarily in the form of the cosmic event *Annihilation*, a series of miniseries focused on various cosmic characters. While the official collections point to 2005's *Drax the Destroyer*, a four-issue limited series written by Keith Giffen and illustrated by Mitch Breitweiser, as the start, the seeds for the saga were planted earlier.

Andy Schimdt served as the editor of Marvel's space books at this time. He tells *BACK ISSUE* about how Giffen came on board and launched the project into orbit and beyond. "The creator on the *Thanos* solo book left after the sixth issue, and I asked to take over the book because I like science fiction [Schmidt

was originally the book's assistant editor]. I also loved Keith's work, so when given the book, I reached out to Keith [with an offer to write *Thanos*] and he accepted. We leaned more sci-fi than what had been done previously to differentiate it, and it was fun to do something a little more superhero-adjacent. Prior to Keith coming on board, I had tried to get something bigger up and running in the science-fiction space. But once Keith was on *Thanos*, I now had a creator with a track record to pitch the big ideas with him attached.

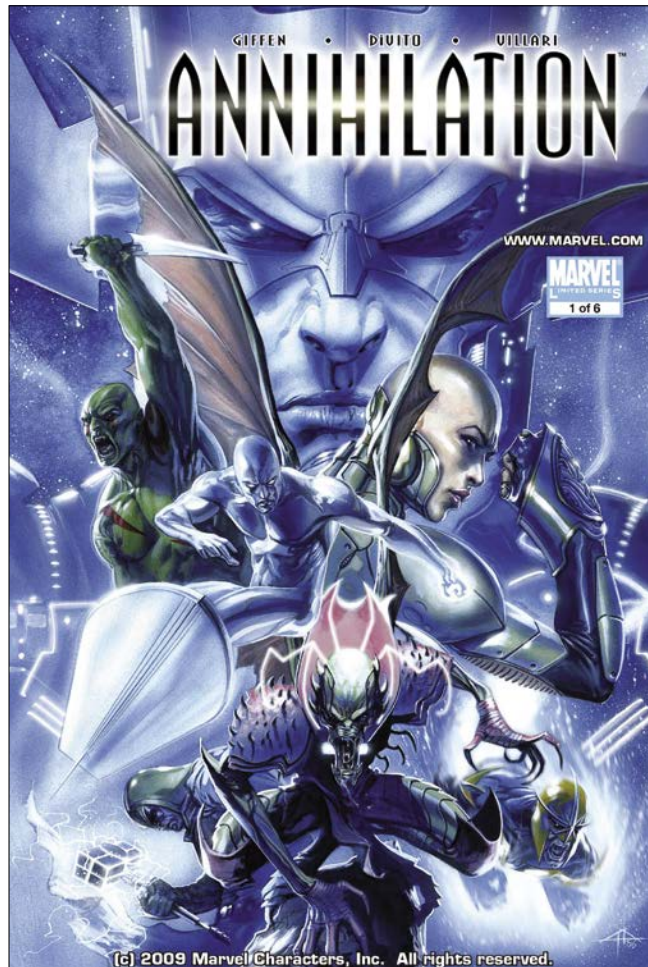
"I wanted to keep working with Keith," Schmidt continues, "and so I internally pitched what would eventually become *Annihilation*. It took a long time to get it approved. I asked Keith to do a four-issue *Drax* miniseries kind of as a proof-of-concept for the Marvel brass. When they saw that book, they started to get what I was going for. At that point, it only made sense to have Keith be the anchorman for the whole event.

"So I brought Keith in and we formed the skeleton of the whole [*Annihilation*] event. Once we had the project laid



JOSH TRUJILLO

Gage Skidmore.



### Big Drax Attack

The cosmic crossover *Annihilation*, creatively helmed by Keith Giffen, seeded the Marvel Universe with story elements which would soon be translated to Hollywood via the *Guardians of the Galaxy* film franchise. *Annihilation* #1 (Oct. 2006) cover by Gabriel Dell'Otto.

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### Showing His Dark Side

In 2004, Giffen stepped in as writer/artist of *Thanos*, taking over from the character's creator Jim Starlin. Original Giffen/Klaus Janson cover art to *Thanos* #9 (June 2004), courtesy of Heritage.

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## Keith Giffen's Creation Inspires Six-Year-Old Superhero

This article writer's son dons the scarab and costume of the Blue Beetle to combat injustice. Or maybe just for fun. A new generation of Giffen fans arises!

Photo courtesy of Jonathan Brown.

Blue Beetle TM & © DC Comics.

out, it was a matter of finding other like-minded creators who got what the vision was—harder sci-fi, and honestly, a war story, not the fantasy-type work that had come before. With the right creators on the same page, the project came together relatively smoothly from there.” Like DiDio at DC, Schimdt had not just found the right creator for a project, but a valued collaborator. “It was like fighting a fire hose. One of the many things I loved about working with Keith was how he always had a lot of big ideas and he would throw them all at you all at once. He’d pitch single issues with ten big ideas, any one of which could easily be the crux of the whole issue. I found that often the role I played with him was helping him choose just one big idea per issue, so that they could have the room to really have impact. I often would file his ideas away and bring them back up later and say, hey, now would be a good time to incorporate this one, and he’d usually see why it would work later and be happy to bring it back in. It’s also just so fun to work with someone who is willing to just throw crazy and bold ideas at you and never let up. He was one of the most unguarded creators I’ve ever met. He never held anything back because that idea might be better somewhere else or he wanted to hold onto it for some other project. He just was all-in, all of the time. And his energy, despite the years he had on me, was off the charts. He could hardly sit when he would come into the office, because he’d start riffing and he’d have to stand up and be excited about it. I felt old around him, and he was about 30 years my senior.”

Keith Giffen and Andy Schimdt's collaboration shaping *Annihilation* would not just create an amazing series of comics, but also a foundation that Marvel would lean into as their ambitions turned to motion pictures. *Annihilation* was the birthplace for the modern incarnation of the Guardians of the Galaxy, which would become a box office smash and lead the title into the realms of animated series and video games as well. This film would serve as the public's intro to Giffen's co-creation Rocket Raccoon. Keith had a love for this character and wanted to explore him in *Annihilation*.

Andy Schimdt shares this story about Keith Giffen pitching an idea: “During the first *Annihilation* series, Keith would come into my office semi-regularly and pitch this idea of Rocket Raccoon living with Groot, the living tree, and they were a duo. Was Groot Rocket's house? Were they partners or even lovers? ‘We will never say,’ Keith would tell me. But my feeling was that we really had to make a statement that *Annihilation* wasn't that silly. And Rocket and Groot as a concept, while fun, was a bit too silly for what we were doing. But I told him, ‘Look, if this first event works, and we get approval to do more, I will absolutely let you use Rocket and Groot.’ So, you can blame me either for holding Rocket and Groot back an extra year or for approving them for the next series. But if you like them together, then you really need thank Keith. That was his idea all the way.”



ANDY SCHMIDT

Alix Schimdt.



While most of *BACK ISSUE's* readers will know Keith Giffen from his work from the mid-1970s to the 1990s, his contributions to comics in 2000s and beyond can not be understated. His creations at this time would go on to impact millions. At this time he captured imaginations, gave so many people a hero that looked like them, and a relationship that brought a smile to nearly every face that watched a Marvel movie. He never slowed down. I was blessed to interview him a few times in these years. I was honored that he would read my work and give me feedback. I was also fortunate enough to receive a few pieces of life advice from the man, but most of all I am happy I got to be a fan. I got to read many of these books as they came out and be awed by the creative and witty genius behind them.

This article is my way to say goodbye to someone I truly respected, but I cannot wait to open an issue of *Blue Beetle* next to a six-year-old dressed up as Jaime Reyes so he can say hello.

JONATHAN RIKARD BROWN holds an MA in Religious Studies from the University of Georgia, and an MDiv from Candler School of Theology. He serves as a pastor in the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. He is deeply interested in the intersection of faith and pop-culture especially how comics reflect our modern mythological identity.



end



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### DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS, PART ONE

Congratulations on 150 issues of *BACK ISSUE* magazine! That is quite an accomplishment.

I especially enjoyed the article on Walt Simonson's version of Batman and his comments on how he has taken different approaches to drawing the character over the years. I did not realize this, until reading the article. Very insightful.

Regarding the article on *Marvel Classics Comics*, in *BI* #152, the inside art piece shown on page 38, taken from *The Iliad* (MCC #26), was actually drawn and inked by Paul Gulacy and not Yong Montano, who completed the interior art for the story. This Gulacy piece was used on the inside back cover of the comic. Please see the attached scan of the art, taken from the actual comic, which includes Gulacy's published signature, in the lower right corner.

— Dave Lemieux



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*Yours was one of two messages we received about this error, Dave. Thanks for identifying this art as the inside back cover, since our caption was written with Yong Montano's interior art in mind. Our apologies to our friend Paul Gulacy for improperly crediting his work.*

### DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS, PART TWO

Thank you, Michael, for the shout-out in the letters page of the *Sal Buscema BACK ISSUE* [#152]. That was a real boost. I have been looking through the early B&W issues, especially issue #1 with the glorious George Pérez Captain America/Batman cover, and I can safely say that the enthusiasm and joy put into each issue, from 2003 right up to date, has not diminished in the slightest.

Thanks to everyone at TwoMorrows for their obvious dedication put into every publication.

— Martin Downham

P.S. Page 52 of issue #152: the cover of *Captain America* #255 was by Frank Miller, not John Byrne.

*You're very kind, Martin. With this being my final issue as editor, your remarks about BI's long-lasting verve mean a lot.*

*Re your correction in the postscript: Thank you. Yes, that was a Miller/Joe Rubinstein cover. We regret the error.*

### REMEMBERING DICK GIORDANO

I'm behind on my *BI* reading, and I know I'm late to the party, but I just finished #150, and I had to add my two cents about Dick Giordano.

I first met Dick in 1983, when I was 19 years old. I appeared at 666 Fifth Avenue [then DC's headquarters, in Manhattan—*ed.*] after spending 40 minutes trying to find a cab in the pouring rain. I must have looked like a drowned rat, but Dick took me seriously from the very first moment. He helped me get freelance work and offered me a job when I graduated college. He walked me through my first San Diego Comic-Con (which was also my first comic book convention ever). He fought to bring me on staff—despite a hiring freeze—as an Editorial Assistant and then promoted me rapidly to Assistant Editor, followed by Associate Editor. I can't begin to describe how much I learned from him. And how his warmth infused all that was best about DC in those days.

Even after I left DC Comics, New York and my staff job behind, Dick and I would see each other whenever I was in NYC or he was in LA. He was an amazing mentor—and obviously, from *BI* #150, not just to me. I'm 60 now, and thus considerably older than Dick was at the time of our first meeting 41 years ago. In that time, I've tried to be a mentor to others the way Dick was a mentor to me. I can't say if I've succeeded—that's for others to judge. But all these years later, having known Dick makes me want to try.

Dick Giordano is missed.

— Greg Weisman

He is indeed, Greg.

### HE'S DIZZY FOR VERTIGO!

As a postscript to my letter of June 12, 2024 [see last issue for this letter—*ed.*]. I'd like to reaffirm just how much I've enjoyed—indeed, am still enjoying—*Sandman Mystery Theatre*. It's what I would call an excellent read, which is not something you can say about every comic, either then or now.

On other matters—have you considered focusing on the early years of Vertigo for an upcoming edition of *BACK ISSUE*? There was a cornucopia of titles on offer, from the familiar and (almost) mainstream to the experimental and

downright obscure. From the list of available titles alone, it feels like a time when it was possible to take risks. The time period falls within the remit of *BACK ISSUE*, and even if your magazine is primarily concerned with the superhero side of comics, it feels like there's a lot of stuff that deserves a second look, or at least a moment again in the spotlight.

— Simon Bullivant

*Judging from the response we received, Simon, BI #151's "Pro-2Pro" interview with Matt Wagner and Steven T. Seagle inspired several BI readers to undertake a Sandman Mystery Theatre deep-dive. (I'm one of them!)*

*There certainly is a wealth of weird, wild material we could cover in an issue devoted to Vertigo's early days, including proto-Vertigo series like Doom Patrol and Animal Man. It's under consideration for a future ish.*

### MARVELMANIA MEMORIES

Marvelmania? I remember the instant excitement of seeing the first ad in *Sub-Mariner* #19, late summer '69. Looked great and was welcome. Not much seemed to be going on with the MMMS, which I'd joined the year prior. So much tremendous Kirby art on posters, decal sheets, and buttons. But it seemed snakebitten from the start. In the local Detroit paper, some months later, their investigative column noted a reader was having a protracted wait getting items he ordered. Not a confidence builder. I did like their magazine and still appreciate it for the first glimpse of Steve Ditko's unused cover to *Amazing Fantasy* #15. A shame that a club for heroes was apparently run by a crook. Loved the cover you ran, in color, of their second black-and-white catalog. Really a showpiece.

If Sal Buscema was unable to be interviewed, under your earlier deadline, perhaps you could still do one, shortly, and run it in an upcoming issue? Marvel talent from the '60s is in seriously short supply, so it'd be nice to hear from the remaining six, no matter the overall theme.

I hadn't read any of the late-'70s Marvel novels. From this exploration, it sounds like they were all churned out under unforgiving deadlines. A shame. Better to have done half as many outstanding books or schedule them only after they were finished and judged worthy. But that wasn't the deal they agreed to and signed off on. Maybe the monthly schedule was to hook completists, just as the comics had?

In the intro, my attention was captured by the comic book paperbacks of the '66-68 era. Marvel did well enough with the first four to do two later ones: *Daredevil* and *The Fantastic Four Return*. Did they come out too late in the trend such that the market was already oversaturated? Or did readers prefer four in-color comics for their 50 cents?

The two biggest laughs in your Marvel Value Stamps article: that Roy was honest enough to concede he didn't care for the notion, and that for some measly reward, readers of the day lost a fortune in vandalizing their *Hulk* #181s.

I'd heard of, but hadn't followed, *Marvel Classic Comics*. I can see I definitely missed one thing: some excellent Gil Kane covers. Loved the variety! In addition to the eight you presented, I looked up the others online. Thanks! A welcome reminder. Think I liked *Last of the Mohicans* best. Nicely staged. Less fond of *Dracula*. The fangs and sharp fingernails go against what I like about *Dracula* as a monster. He was

so normal-looking, and an aristocrat to boot, he could get close, and no one suspected they were in danger. He wasn't one of the snarling grotesque monsters who immediately gave the game way.

*Marvel Age* was fun and necessary, as *The Comic Reader* had stopped around that time. I remember enjoying it. Thanks for noting it lasted 140 issues. I'd drifted away, considerably earlier, not being a fan of what Marvel morphed into in the '90s. Although I should have been more open to read the solicitations.

*The Adventures of Captain America* miniseries, drawn by Kevin Maguire and Terry Austin, looks like I missed something beautiful and intriguing. Hope it's rereleased as a trade paperback. I'd buy it as a Copper Age golden oldie.

— Joe Frank

### FULL TRANSPARENCY

Thanks for the terrific article on the mid-'70s Pendulum Press classic comics line!

I was in the middle of fifth grade in 1975, and suddenly my English teacher bestowed upon us a whole line of these great comics for in-class reading!

I was in heaven!

I loved the fact that all the other kids (including my best friend) were now knee-deep in "my world," reading and enjoying comics! I recall thinking, "I wonder if they need me to tell them which panels to read, and in what order..."

Of course, the odd art (to a ten-year-old fan who only consumed Marvel and DC superhero comics) was a bit off-putting, as was that typeset lettering and black-and-white interiors, but..

Of course, I quickly latched right onto the most superhero-like title of the line, the *Invisible Man* adaptation, with amazing Alex Nino art!

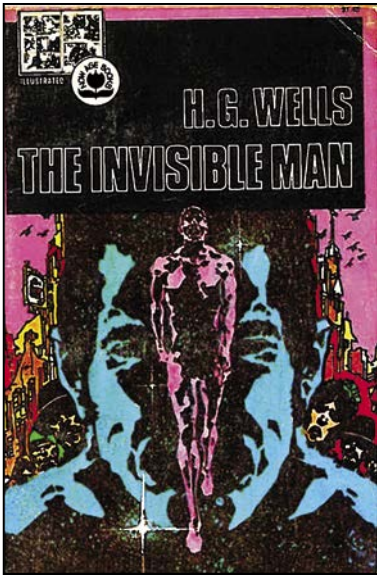
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My family was just about to make the move from Jersey to North Carolina then, and I made *sure* I got my own copy of that particular book! I *had* to have this! It took a lot of maneuvering into the arcane world of teachers and adults, since these were *only* available to teachers! "How did she get these? They weren't in the last Scholastic book club order forms, next to the latest issue of *Dynamite!*"

I still have that very comic today!  
Keep up the great work!

— Al Bigley

### A LETTER FROM 'THE MAN'

I really enjoyed the behind-the-scenes article in *BI* #152 by Paul Kupperberg about the Marvel novel series of the 1970s. You may find this letter I received from Stan Lee from summer of 1977 interesting. Coming off of a few journalism and short story awards, I was bold enough to send Stan a pitch for a Captain America novel. It was ripped from the headlines (because I hadn't yet sworn off clichés) featuring a skyjacking and action in the Middle East.

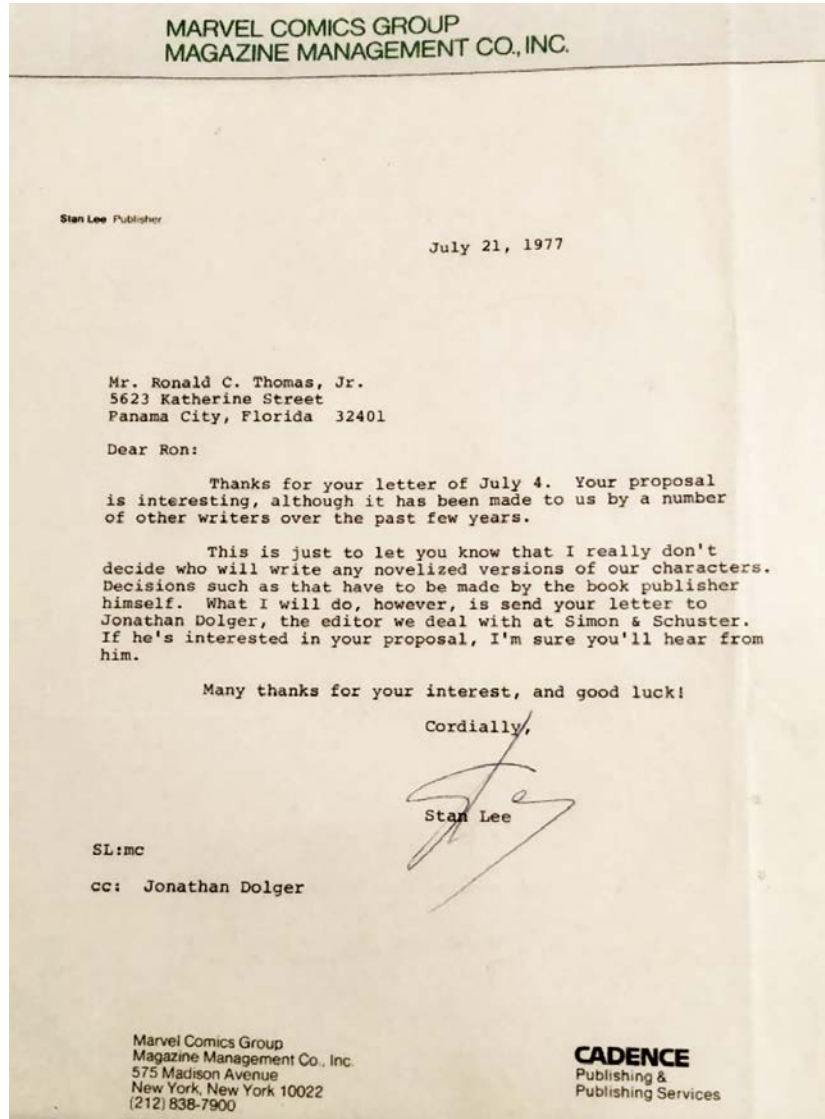
Stan's encouraging letter went into my "rejection slips" folder, added to other prestigious letterheads like *Foreign Affairs* and *Analog*. Decades later, after years of teaching and writing for many magazines (as well as working in Myron Fass' magazine shop), I saw Stan was coming to Florida for a con.

I pulled out the letter and brought it along with one of those B&W publicity stills of Smilin' Stan in front of a wall of 1970s Marvel covers. While he was signing, I showed him the letter, thanking him for his courteous reply which increased my focus on writing. He seemed touched and asked his assistant to snap a picture of the letter!

And I still have my set of those Marvel paperbacks in my study.

— Dr. Ronald C. Thomas, Jr., C.P.M.

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What a great story! Thank you for sharing the letter.

Next issue: *Hey, Mister!* (Sister, too!) It's our "Hey, Mister!" issue! Starring the *Fantastic Four's* Mr. Fantastic, STEVE DITKO's Mr. A, the 40th anniversary of MICHAEL T. GILBERT's Mr. Monster, indie hero Mr. X, the *Teen Titans'* Mr. Jupiter, R. CRUMB's Mr. Natural, Archie's Mr. Weatherbee, and a villain history of the cool, cruel Mr. Freeze. Featuring the work of JOHN BYRNE, NICK CARDY, GERRY CONWAY, DAN DeCARLO, PAUL DINI, THE HERNANDEZ BROS., KELLEY JONES, MIKE MIGNOLA, DOUG MOENCH, DEAN MOTTER, ROY THOMAS, MARV WOLFGAN, and more, under a Mr. Freeze cover by ED McGUINNESS! And welcome *BI's* brand new editor, ROGER ASH! Don't ask—just *BI* it! See you in sixty!

Your friendly neighborhood Euryman, signing off!

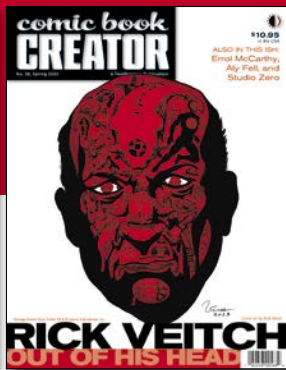
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editor emeritus





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**STEVE ENGLEHART** is spotlighted in a career-spanning interview, former DC Comics' romance editor **BARBARA FRIEDLANDER** redeems the late DC editor **JACK MILLER**, **DAN DIDIO** discusses going from DC exec to co-publisher, we conclude our 100th birthday celebration for **ARNOLD DRAKE**, take a look at the 1970s underground comic oddity **THE FUNNY PAGES**, and more, including **HEMBECK!**

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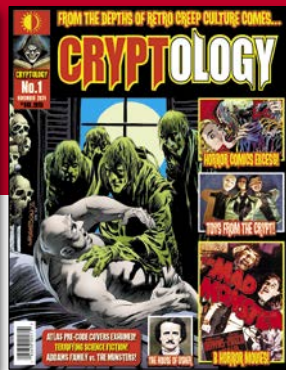
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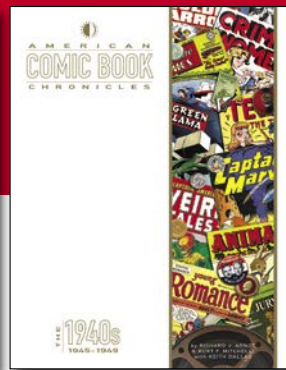
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**SUPPORTING PLAYERS!** Almost-major villains like Kanto the Assassin and Diablo, Rodney Rumpkin, Mr. Little, the Falcon, Randu Singh, and others take center stage! Plus: 1970 interview with Jack by **SHEL DORF**, **MARK EVANIER**'s 2024 Kirby Tribute Panel from Comic-Con, never-reprinted Simon & Kirby story, pencil art gallery, and more! Unused Mister Miracle cover inked by **MIKE ROYER!**

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**MADNESS!** Kirby's most deranged work: Dingbats, Goody Rickels, Destroyer Duck, the Goozlebopper, Not Brand Echh, and wild animation concepts! Plus, a 1980s Kirby interview by **JAMES VAN HISE**, a look at Jack's psychedelic coloring, Kirby's depictions of Dr. Strange, Forever People art gallery, **MARK EVANIER**, a crazy 1950s Simon & Kirby story, behind an unused Machine Man cover inked by **STEVE LEIALOHA!**

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 This issue, we combine LEGO and fine art, with brick-inspired paintings by **STEFANO BOCANO**, **ADNAN LOTIA**'s growing collection of LEGO mosaic album covers, and we visit a LEGO art gallery by **BRICKGALLERIA!** Plus: **BRICKNEDD**, **BANTHA BRICKS**: Fans of LEGO Star Wars, step-by-step "You Can Build It" instructions by **CHRISTOPHER DECK**, and Minifigure Customization with **JARED K. BURKS!**

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 The Jetsons, Freaky Frankensteins, Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling's **HOLLYWOOD**, the Archies and other Saturday morning rockers, Star Wars copycats, Build Your Own Adventure books, crazy kitchen gadgets, toymaker **MARVIN GLASS**, and more! Featuring columns by **ANDY MANGELS**, **WILL MURRAY**, **SCOTT SAAVEDRA**, **SCOTT SHAW**, and **MARK VOGER**. Edited by **MICHAEL EURY**.

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 Tune in to Saturday morning super-heroes Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends, The Mod Squad, Hanna-Barbera cartoons, Jesus Christ Superstar, Mr. Potato Head, "Old Yeller" actress **BEVERLY WASHBURN**, Flying Nun collectibles, and more! Featuring columns by **ANDY MANGELS**, **WILL MURRAY**, **SCOTT SAAVEDRA**, **SCOTT SHAW**, and **MARK VOGER**. Edited by **MICHAEL EURY**.

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**RETROFAN #39**  
 Can your mind stand the shocking truth of... **ED WOOD CAST CONFESSIONS?** Plus: Ideal Toys' Zeroids, television Tarzan **RON ELY**, Planters' Peanuts' Mr. Peanut, **CHARLES ADDAMS**, TV's The Fugitive, the forgotten 1981 Spider-Man cartoon, and more! Featuring columns by **ANDY MANGELS**, **WILL MURRAY**, **SCOTT SAAVEDRA**, **SCOTT SHAW**, **ED CATTO**, and **MARK VOGER**.

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**RETROFAN #40**  
 Here comes TV's Dennis the Menace, with stars **JAY NORTH**, **GLORIA HENRY**, and **JEANNIE RUSSELL!** Plus: Hogan's Heroes turns 60, TV Western Have Gun-Will Travel, Big Little Books, The Incredible Hulk in animation, **MICKY DOLENZ** as Circus Boy, and more! Featuring columns by **ED CATTO**, **ANDY MANGELS**, **WILL MURRAY**, **SCOTT SAAVEDRA**, **SCOTT SHAW**, and **MARK VOGER**.

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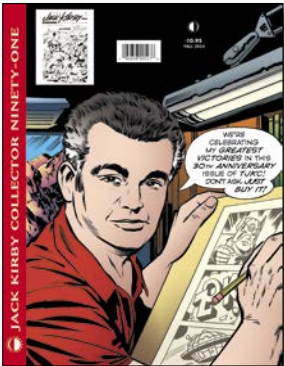
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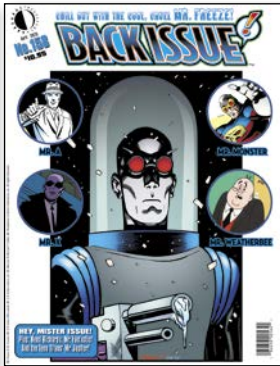
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