True Believers: Stan Lee and the Legitimization of the Comics Fan Community

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A fan community is perceived as an organic, grassroots response to a media property. There is no magical formula to make something acquire a fanbase (though there have been many efforts to create a cult hit, to varying degrees of success), and one film or television series can inspire a rabid following where another similar work can fade quickly into memory. The necessarily elements of the grassroots cannot be simply forced by producers, but must evolve naturally within the social networks of the property's consumers. In the age of Twitter, interactions between fans and creators are more commonplace, but historically the industry often removed barriers between consumers and producers. Comics, perhaps more than any other medium, seem to inspire the creation of fan communities, both around the individual characters and creators, as well as comic book publishers, even back to the earliest days of Richard F. Outcault's Yellow Kid and Buster Brown.

   The superhero genre magnifies these tendencies; we are inspired by and aspire to be figures like Superman and Wonder Woman, or perhaps relate to the problems of and identify with Spider-Man and the X-Men. While there is certainly some artifice to how superheroes are created (usually reflecting some aspect of an era's dominant or youth culture), the followings these characters develop tend to be largely grassroots in nature, much like sports teams. It was not some elaborate marketing plan that made Wolverine or The Flash popular, but rather the result of fortuitous timing and quality work. Stan Lee complicates this narrative, however.

Stan Lee's entry into the comics industry occurred more out of convenience than interest. He was not at Marvel (or Timely, as the company was known at the time) from the start, as Joe Simon and Jack Kirby were, joining the company for a steady paycheck more than artistic endeavor. He was a writer and editor, hardly the artistic ideal struck by Winsor McCay, George Herriman, or Will Eisner, particularly in a period when comic book stories were not taken seriously. Moreover, Lee was a workman first; he did not spring from some artistic tradition. Whereas a figure like Carl Barks credits inspirations like McCay's Little Nemo and Fredrick Opper's Happy Hooligan as formative influences, Lee joined Marvel through a family connection with the end goal of collecting a steady paycheck (Raphael and Spurgeon, 19-20).

Lee could not claim to be a long-time fan of comics, as many of his artists and writers would be, but he nevertheless came to perform as perhaps the ultimate comics fan as an editor for Marvel. He served as a tireless cheerleader for Marvel's comics, a figurehead for the company at large, even when he was not in charge. Eventually, he stood at the forefront of the fight for a wider acceptance of comics across society. Lee strikes a complicated figure: it is hard to determine where his public persona ends and his businessman instincts begin, but his influence on the development of comics is clearly visible, and his position as a patron saint of comics is well-recognized within the modern Marvel fan community. Bradford Wright posits: "Stan Lee recognized the wisdom of hip marketing. He cultivated an image of Marvel Comics as a maverick within the comic book field, much like the outsider superheroes themselves. His cover blurbs, house editorials, answers to reader letters...self-deprecating humor, cross-references between titles, and recurring in-jokes" helped Marvel to appeal to a new fanbase, and grow beyond the bonds of comic book readership at the time (Wright 217).

Lee is at once a fan, and a creator, though he is perhaps neither, at least not as the larger community defines the concepts. Lee used his position

and natural talents to become the face of Marvel, bridging the creator and the fan community, and positioned himself as a standard bearer for geek causes. Lee was active as a writer an editor first of all, but utilized the letters page of his comics to interact with his fans, focused on appealing to a wider (and older audience), participated in the fledgling comics conventions, and used his celebrity to push for the acceptance of comics within the mainstream culture. Lee is responsible for both the rise of the Marvel fandom and for the larger acceptance of comic books within the dominant culture, forces inexorably linked with this one man.

Lee may well have been the first comic book celebrity, or at least the one most able to navigate the borders of fandom and mass culture. His is a name known outside of comics fan circles, recognized within a broader cultural context, selling both himself and his work. Jerry Seigel and Joe Schuster were notable enough that newspapers covered Siegel's entry into the military during World War II, but the pair faded into obscurity during the decades of legal battles over Superman's creation that followed. Donald Duck scribe Carl Barks was unmasked in 1960 through the efforts of diligent fans, but he seemed generally dumbfounded that people enjoyed his comics as much as they did. While friendly, he had little interest in engaging with the nascent fan community (additionally, the fans of his various Disney comics tended to be somewhat removed from the fans of superhero comics). There were others who were certainly famous: Charles Schulz with Peanuts and Hal Foster with Prince Valiant, but they were not public figures in the Lee fashion, with their characters being being more famous than the creators themselves. The possible exception is Winsor McCay's Little Nemo, with McCay using his creation as a springboard toward the vaudeville-styled exhibition of his groundbreaking animation Gertie the Dinosaur (though McCay would be largely forgotten by the public as Disney came to define animation). Lee embodied something beyond a mere creator of comics; Jim Sterenko or Joe Simon might be major draws at a convention, but Lee was recognizable to larger

public. He was a showman, selling the idea of comics not only to his pre-established fanbase, but to a public that had not too long before turned against comics.

It is unclear where Stanley Lieber, the man, and Stan Lee, the celebrity, begin or end. We can regard Lee as a constant, consistent performer: there is no clear end or beginning to his half century of social engagement. The dichotomy exists in his role as both a producer of media, and the role he inhabits as a fellow fan of comics (particularly his own). Comics fans by their very nature are insular, as all fan communities tend to be; Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed" (Bourdieu 502). Lee must carefully negotiate his roles, as both insider (producer) and outsider (fan); if he is unsuccessful, he would be marked as an uncool interloper or as simply another facet of the powers that be. Henry Jenkins reminds us "the relationship between fan and producer is not always a happy or comfortable one and is often charged with mutual suspicion, if not open conflict" (Jenkins 32). The fan consumes and repurposes the media object to their own ends; the producer endeavors to control the object for their own ends (creative, economic, or otherwise). Lee places himself in a privileged position as the face of Marvel (regardless of his actual position within the company), but simultaneously occupies the position of fan, encoding this situation within his various engagements with the greater Marvel fan community. The Marvel fans organize in such a way to grant themselves social power, and thus can select their membership; Bordieu explains: "it should not be thought that the relationship of distinction (which may or may not imply the conscious intention of distinguishing oneself from common people) is only an incidental component of aesthetic disposition" (Bourdieu 505-506).

Lee must negotiate the fan community accordingly; he is marked by his position as existing outside of the fans, and is thus viewed with distrust (after all, he cannot be a fan of his own work, at least not in the manner of Marvel fans at large). This process creates a strange system with regard to Lee; Jenkins explains: "meanings form the basis for the construction and maintenance of this fan community; the expectations and conventions of the fan community also shape the meanings derived from the series and the forms taken by the fan's own artistic creations" (Jenkins 88). Lee is able to cast himself as a fan and ingratiate himself within the burgeoning community, if not as a full member, than as a sympathetic figure within the production process. With his unique position, he is able to voice the opinions of his fanbase, most significantly for a greater acceptance of comics, despite being himself separate from the masses.

The letters column provided a performance space for the comics reading community. It had been adapted from traditions within the pulp science fiction publishing community, which shared some overlap with the comic reading public (Schelly). There, the average reader was given a forum through which to have contact with the writers and artists of given comic, though the tone differed between publishers. Generally, the letters discussed major plot developments or character points, creating a mechanism for feedback on which characters and stories were popular beyond fickle sales figures. Not all letters columns were created equal, however. Matthew Pustz points out: "Marvel letters pages often contained very long letters in which fans praised, criticized, or offered detailed suggestions. Unlike DC editors, who referred to readers as 'them,' the editors of Marvel's letters pages frequently directly addressed their fans, often using the inclusive 'we' or 'us'" (Pustz 167).

While this effort might not be purely credited to Stan Lee, he was editor, and often took a hand in directly answering letters (even for comics he did not directly work on). The encoded message within these columns was that the fans were as much a part of the creative process as writers,

illustrators, and editors, and that their opinions mattered. Lee spoke to them as peers, and his excited energy rarely seemed to flag, referring to his readers as "true believers!" and likely contributing to a response from college-aged audiences: Esquire found letters from more than 225 colleges during a report on Marvel in 1966 (Wright 223). These columns were personalized; Bradford Wright points out in Comic Book Nation that "appearing in each title were Marvel editorials and house news items like 'Stan's Soapbox' and 'Bullpen Bulletins,' all designed to impart that there was more to the Marvel experience than just reading a comic book and throwing it away... Lee also worked to generate reader intimacy with the Marvel staff" (Wright 218). The familiarity and accepting nature of the space allowed for fans to interact with the creators more freely than they might otherwise have.

Furthermore, these fan letters were not anonymous under Lee, including full names and even mailing addresses, ensuring that the missives were not anonymous (and perhaps striking back at criticisms that letters were being faked in-house). Pustz explains, "in comic books, there is always the potential for fans to interact in sites published, and hence made official, by the creators responsible for the production of the texts themselves. This kind of interaction takes place in the letters pages included in most regularly published comic books" (Pustz 166). The process takes a creative aspect, in the mode of Henry Jenkins, with fans performing their fandom by demonstrating knowledge and expounding on theories, even attempting to resolve plot holes and other uncertainties within comics (success in these endeavors would occasionally be rewarded with the "No-Prize," consisting of an empty envelope, though certainly worth a degree of clout within the fan community writ large).

Lee, in his position as editor and often author of these columns, could utilize the space to empower Marvel's fans, and offer them a degree of (alleged) agency in dictating how storylines and characters developed over time. Pustz writes: "Marvel's readers were encouraged to suggest story

ideas, as editors emphasized the close ties between the audiences and the creators. The idea that fans – as editors in absentia – and professionals were creating the comics together was central to Marvel's rhetoric" (Pustz 167). By blurring the lines between fans and creators, Lee broke free of the constraints of his position and joined with fans in the celebration, creating a liminal space where editor and reader were rendered equal. Lee explains, "I use the letters to help me edit the magazine. It shows what readers want and don't want. And for the most part I try and follow their dictates because they're the ones that buy the books" (Van Gelder 24). The space reinforced reader relationships with creators; it had been fairly recent that the practice of crediting artists, writers, and others for their work on comics had become commonplace. It also served as a space for Lee himself to secure himself a position as the face of the company; he certainly had legal rights to most of Marvel's popular characters, but the letters column served as space to secure his position in minds of fans. "By devoting space in each publication for a sampling of letters and extending his routine as genial, self-mocking host to his responses, Lee created a secondary level of involvement for readers and promoted the sense that Marvel cared about its fans," said Marvel historians Jordan Raphael and Tom Spurgeon (111-112). The letters column winkingly acknowledged fans in a way that had not been done before (and would not be improved upon until the rise of social media, particularly Twitter), and allowed the readers to feel special. Fans received a certain amount of social capital in getting a letter printed, with Lee as the gatekeeper (and as a fan himself, expounding at length over the events in the comics and the fan letters themselves).

Lee-coined phrases like "Face front, true believers!" and "Excelsior!" entered the cultural lexicon as he continued to cultivate his position as a fellow nerd to his readers. His seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of the Marvel canon placed him as the preeminent scholar of the line. Even in the comics that did not feature his writing, he remained a presence, his work

as editor playing out across the pages of the burgeoning Marvel empire. These efforts ensured that, even as Lee was increasingly removed from the actual production occurring at Marvel, he maintained a position within the minds of fans that no one else at Marvel (and, indeed, with the possible exception of Carl Barks at the time, in comics at large) could possibly match. Lee used these columns to become a fixture at the company, placing himself at the forefront.

In 1972, Lee was promoted to president and publisher of Marvel, removing him from day-to-day production, but allowing him to become the face of the company in the public sphere. Lee further secured a position within the Marvel hierarchy by engaging with the fans in a variety of environments, ranging from becoming a fixture at the nascent comic book conventions of the 1970s to undertaking a series of lectures on college campuses. His engagement with college-aged fans proved fortuitous for the publisher and for the man himself, allowing him to cement himself as a sort of godfather for the Marvel fan community.

The Merry Marvel Marching Society (MMMS) fan club would prove Lee's masterstroke, a reflection of his keen understanding of the company's changing readership, despite the club's relatively short-lived success, lasting until roughly 1976 in various forms. (Ro 84) The fan club, nominally targeted toward readers of all ages, connected strongly with college audiences, who were already voracious readers. Wright explains, "some fifty thousand college students had paid a dollar each to join Marvel's official fan club" (Wright 223). By appealing to college students, Lee was not only successful in expanding his readership, but also retained more deeply invested long-term fans. "Marvel created its own fan community with the Merry Marvel Marching Society. The club crystallized Lee's happy-go-lucky public persona," said Raphael and Sturgeon (112). This quickly allowed for the formation of a deep-rooted fan community, with Lee as its leader; no longer were comics the domain of a few insular collectors, but a space for the discussion of characters,

stories, and the growing Marvel universe. The MMMS allowed Marvel's fans to unite, not simply within a small-scale social-physical space, but within a larger fan community. These readers would in turn follow Marvel's comic line more closely than the typical reader, subscribing to particular series and following along as their favorite characters did crossovers into other lines.

While Lee cannot be wholly credited with the rise of the comic book fan (EC Comics had a small, if dedicated, following during its heyday, and Carl Barks had gained a reputation of note by the early 1960s), he was in large part responsible for creating the Marvel comics fan. Lee cultivated certain currents within the comics reading public to his own ends, growing a particular strain of fan that would become diehard loyalists. His efforts to attract college-aged readers would in turn transform his rhetoric; he became a standard-bearer for the defense of comics even as he began to shift away from direct engagement with the community. The MMMS did not survive the 1970s, but laid the seeds that would soon sprout into a much larger community.

This courting of the college-aged consumer was fortuitous in its timing, coinciding with the quiet shift into the Bronze Age of Comics and the rise of underground, independent label books, called "comix." Lee might have been peripherally aware of the movement, though it was hardly a force in the comics world at that point. Underground comix moved away from the sterility enforced by the Comics Magazine Association of America with its Comics Code stamp of approval and toward more realistic, "mature" stories. Lee had an uncanny ability to recognize the currents. He charted the demographic changes that had allowed Marvel to thrive in the 1960s, and perhaps foresaw comics logical evolution into an art form intended to appeal to an increasingly wide and diverse audience.

The MMMS faded away, but was simply another front of Lee's multimedia efforts, an experiment that yielded several useful results,

including a more direct impact in introducing Lee to a college-aged audience and making him into a major popular culture figure on campuses. Wright argues that "Stan Lee himself became a much-requested speaker at colleges and universities...the Princeton Debating Society invited him to speak in a lecture series that also included Senators Hubert Humphrey and Wayne Morse. At Bard College, Lee's lecture outdrew one by Dwight D. Eisenhower" (223). Lee took these public opportunities to broadcast his own beliefs in the power of comics. Given the opportunity to speak publicly, he came down clearly on the side of his fans, and did not shy away from arguing vociferously on behalf of comics.

In the early 1950s, Lee was an editor at Timely when Fredric Wertham published Seduction of the Innocent. He was well aware of William Gaines's disastrous testimony before the Senate in 1954 that marked the height of moral panic, which resulted in the industry creating the Comics Code Authority. Lee himself was never called to testify; he recalls: "I hated the idea of what was happening with Wertham. I hated the fact that he was tarring every comic book with the same brush, but there was nothing we could do about it. We had to live through it" (Raphael and Spurgeon 48). Lee recognized that the battle against censorship had been lost, and that continuing the fight would have merely resulted in greater trouble for the industry (after all, the Comics Code was a voluntary effort; the alternative was more stringent government regulation). He may not have been happy about the outcome or consequences, but he was content not to buck the system.

Later, in the 1970s, Lee retroactively positioned himself as a great defender against comic book censorship, coinciding with his promotion to president and publisher of Marvel. (Riesman) Raphael and Spurgeon explain that Lee "wrote about a series of public debates between Fredric Wertham and himself. It is a highly emotive buy vaguely phrased discourse, and it appears in the text without the slightest bit of factual confirmation. No record exists of a series of Wertham/Lee debates" (48).

It seems apparent that the debates never occurred (though Lee's writing about them may have served as a cathartic release), though the effort may in part offer some insight into Lee's fan behavior.

With his position at Marvel weakened by the Comics Code, Lee gained some empathy for the consumer, and sought to correct the injustices where he could, inviting fans to contribute in their own ways. While not true fan fiction, this episode has certain hallmarks of fan behavior, particularly in Lee's effort to take control of the narrative and set right what once went wrong. He had been silent in 1954, not that he would have had any great impact on the flow of events (the same as any other creator or fan), and saw a glimmer of possibility in the 1970s to strike a blow for freedom and fandom.

Though Lee may not have engaged in actual debates with Wertham, he nevertheless proved himself a happy warrior. His appearance on the Dick Cavett Show in 1968 marked a crucial turning point in the acceptance of comics by the culture, with Lee leading the charge. Cavett's program was certainly more counterculture-friendly than some of his late night contemporaries, though the television show still existed within the mainstream. Lee used this to his advantage. Given the opportunity to refute the dismissal of comics that had occurred in the early 1950s, Lee happily did so, even offering some subtle criticisms of the Comics Code Authority without calling it out by name. Lee explained that "we try to write [comics] well, we try to draw them well, we try to make them as sophisticated as a comic book can be...the whole philosophy behind it is to treat them as fairy tales for grown ups and do the kind of stories that we ourselves would want to read if we read comic books" (Cavett 15). By putting himself out before the general public (and not simply writing editorials and responding to letters in the back of a comic book), Lee stepped up to defend the reading of comics in a cultural context; he is endeavoring to make reading comics more acceptable. He pointed out several times that "comic books are read by college students," which

reinforced his message of comics being produced for audiences outside of the child and teenage demographics (Cavett 15). Lee further argued:

[T]he big thing we're trying to do...is that we're taking these two words – "comic books" – which have always been spoken with disdain...we've been trying to give them a little more respect...they are part of the media today, like radio and television, they are a method of communication, and there's really no reason why a comic book couldn't be well-written and well-drawn just like anything else. (Cavett 19)

Lee's call might have been self-serving, but it cemented his position as one of the industry's great defenders, and perhaps one of the first voices to go on national television to speak on behalf of comics since the implementation of the Comics Code. He spoke eloquently and excitedly on the subject, and gave his readers something to rally around (and perhaps a few talking points for engaging with their parents over the dinner table). Raphael and Sturgeon remind us "Lee was accessible to the reporters, was eminently quotable, and, when he started to read what they were gleaning from his comic books, was able to grasp the essence of what they were saying and repeat it back to other journalists from other magazines" (116). Lee was not embarrassed, and navigated the (at times) dismissive discourse that surrounded comics in the era.

Beyond his efforts within the media blitz, Lee was supportive of the nascent convention scene. The earliest conventions were side rooms or panels at science fiction and fantasy conventions, where there was some crossover between the various fandoms. The first "true" comic book convention occurred in 1964, either in New York or Detroit depending on definitions (Duncan and Smith 173). Within a few years, the events had grown in size and scope, drawing in the industry's leading talents (Will Eisner, Joe Simon), up-and-comers (Roy Thomas, Jim Steranko), and Lee himself, who seemed tireless despite being of middle age (Duncan and Smith 179).

Lee readily engaged face-to-face with fans, much as he had already done, preaching to the choir on the value of comics. Lee keenly understood "the importance of maintaining strong ties with the faithful... the dedicated fans wielded enormous influence through informal networks. Even as he chased the media spotlight, Stan carried on his efforts to build Marvel's readership one fan at a time" (Raphael and Sturgeon, 163). He was not above the common rabble of conventions, but continued to position himself within the liminal space between fan and producer. In interviews, he spoke out in favor of the fans, and made directly connections between himself and his community, explaining, "we writers and artists and editors...were kids not too long ago. But we live in the same world as our readers, and certainly what our readers are concerned with, we are concerned with...we never thought of ourselves as separate and distinct from our audience. We are our audience" (Van Gelder 22). Lee consistently demonstrates a sense of empathy with his audience, despite being removed by age and profession, and speaks confidently for the fans.

Lee further proved a tireless promoter of Marvel's initial forays into becoming a multimedia enterprise, even though his direct contributions to the projects were limited at best. Due to a legal battle in 2004, "[Lee] gets executive-producer and co-creator credits on them...these connections to the Marvel movies are huge for Lee because fame outside the eternally disdained world of comics has always been one of the man's ultimate goals" (Riesman). The recent popularity of Marvel films reflects the ultimate success of Lee's decades of effort, and the general acceptance of comic books (and their fans) into the dominant culture. Riesman remarks "Lee...saved a genre and led his acolytes through the harsh world of mainstream entertainment for decades – only to see his people finally enter the promised land of Hollywood billions without him. So now he stands on the border, smiling and welcoming people in" (Riesman). He

has achieved his goals, but remains in the ether: he no longer has the creative prowess he once did, but his reputation creates expectations.

Lee has transformed himself into a venerated object within the larger comics fan community, and he serves as an in-joke and internal reference point within Marvel films. His omnipresent cameos began with voice work for Marvel's animated series in the 1980s, but took a dramatic leap forward when he appeared in X-Men (2000). By the time that the comic book movies became a dominant genre, Lee secured himself a place at the head of the pantheon of comic book creators, a figure recognizable to fans and the general public. His appearances in the Marvel films were winking nods (at best, he had a line or two), but served a deeper purpose as a sort of seal of approval for the films. Lee has not appeared in every film (though he has appeared in each of the flagship Marvel Cinematic Universe offerings), and his absence was noticed in Fantastic Four (2015). Questioned about the film's failure, Lee posited that "it's probably because I didn't have a cameo in it" (King). While this was said in jest, it does reflect the power of Lee's celebrity, his lack of appearance retroactively served as an implication the film's lack of quality.

Lee remains active in the convention scene, though he has slowed down somewhat at his advanced age (93 in late 2016). He continues to make appearances at various conventions, explaining, "it's the fact that fans still care. I like all the comics conventions: The smaller ones are easier, the bigger ones are exciting" (Cavna). He is in some senses outmoded; his defense of comics as art has become commonly accepted within the dominant culture, while his nurturing of the early comic fandom has faded into memory with successive generations. He has achieved greater victory than he might ever have hoped, though he has now taken on the role of an elder statesman, rather than the brash upstart he performed for decades.

In more recent years, he has founded his own convention in Los Angeles, Comikaze Expo, now in its sixth year of operation. Lee explains,

"these things are important because they keep the fans' interest alive in comics. They keep the fans reading and their imaginations stimulated. We live in a pretty tough world and tragic things happen all the time" (Cavna). He remains perhaps the most famous comic creator of all-time, recognizable to comic fans and the public alike. Lee has a knack for somehow managing to stick around within popular culture, eternally performing the fan for an audience who will never accept it entirely.

Lee, the consummate self-promoter, ensured that he found a place in the shift toward fan communities that unfolded over decades. He was on the forefront, interacting with the burgeoning community and acting as an ambassador between the administrative and creative sides of Marvel and the fan community. Lee witnessed not only the transformation of comics under Marvel's bold new creative endeavors, but also the rise of the comic book fan (as opposed to the comic book reader) that began to take shape in the 1960s. Lee encouraged readers to follow along with winding storylines that became more commonplaces, and became a presence at some of the early comic conventions. He was not the only comics figure to make appearances (artists in particular were in high demand, and could make a decent supplemental salary on the circuit), but he took on the role of his larger-than-life persona, playing up his flamboyant personality for the assembled public. Furthermore, Lee became a fixture within the larger culture, giving interviews to talk shows and newspapers in defense of comics, and taking to the lecture circuit of universities and colleges across the country. He was willing to take to the airwaves with his grand defense of comics, to place himself in the public eye for the opportunity to sell the idea of comics as art, and indirectly support the comics fandom that was developing in earnest. Lee is not some perfect, unblemished figure, but played a crucial role in the acceptance of comics within the mainstream culture, and lent the fan community around them a sense of legitimacy.

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