

Think Pieces on Stan Lee and the Marvel Universe

Time with Stan Lee Here and There

ARTHUR ASA BERGER

When I read Marshall McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), I came across a chapter titled "Money in the Comics" and there was a photo of Stan Lee, on page 150, smoking a pipe and looking very serious. He had written an article "There's Money in Comics!" McLuhan quotes Lee's article with a passage titled: "Don't Write Down to Your Readers." McLuhan ends his discussion of the comics talking about their lack of pretentiousness and writing: "The great artist necessarily has roots very deep in his own time—roots which embrace the most vulgar and commonplace fantasies and aspirations."

I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on *Li'l Abner*, and was convinced that popular culture, in general, and the comics, in particular, often were valid and sometimes great works of art (think of *Krazy Kat* and countless other comics) and also useful in that they provided insights into popular values and beliefs. The professors on my dissertation committee regarded my interest in the comics as a bit offbeat and bewildering. In those days, writing about a comic strip read by 200 million people daily seemed beyond the pale. Most of my colleagues in academe considered my interest in the comics to be a sign of immaturity. We are talking about the late 1960s. Now there is great interest in comics and popular culture.

When I decided to write a book on the comics, *The Comic-Stripped American*, if I recall correctly, I contacted Stan Lee and we had a bit of a

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correspondence over the years. He sent me a dozen copies of an issue – one of his *Spider-Man* or *Fantastic Four* episodes – that I used in my class on popular culture. I had my students read the issue and then had them over to my house where I brought in a psychiatrist to talk about what he saw in the episode.

I have a chapter in the book on Lee titled “Marvel Comics: Machines, Monsters and the Myth of America,” in which I wrote about the significance of the grotesque in Marvel Comics, the psychoanalytic significance of monsters found in comics (and other forms of popular culture), and of the mythic significance of Lee’s creations. What we have to realize is that Stan Lee is one of the great mythmakers in American culture and he has been creating mythic figures for around 70 years. I can remember how he struggled to get film companies to make a film of *Spider-Man*, but they were all afraid of doing so. When someone was adventurous enough to make a film with one of his characters, they made a fortune.

In 1984, I was a visiting professor at the Annenberg School at the University of Southern California. I had a class of 200 students in a course dealing with popular culture and the arts. I invited Stan to give a lecture and he was kind enough to do so. At the time he got rather large lecture fees, but he gave this talk for free. What was astounding to me is that after he gave a speech about his work as a writer of comic strip adventures, I opened up the class for questions. Not a single student had a question. I was absolutely astounded. So, I asked Lee a few questions, and then took him for lunch at the Faculty club. This was, of course, years before the first *Spider-Man* movie.

One other amusing thing related to my friendship with Stan Lee. I asked him to write an introduction to one of my books and he was kind enough to write a couple of pages and send it to me. When I told my publisher I had an introduction from Stan Lee, he was unimpressed and refused to use it. I can imagine what was going on in his head: “Who

wants to use an introduction from a guy who writes comics? What kind of a fool does Berger think I am?"

A number of years ago, one of the TV networks did a report on Lee. They interviewed me about him. I explained that in my opinion Lee is one of the most important writers of the last 50 years or so, who has generated an amazing modern sci-fi mythology.

I bumped into Lee in Europe at a conference on comics 10 or 20 years ago. And he came to Sausalito once, for some reason, and we had lunch at a seafood restaurant. That's the last time I saw him.

If I recall correctly, he has a Rolls Royce. So he was right. There is money in the comics.

Face Front, True Believers!: Stan Lee and the Gen X Trinity

JEFF MASSEY AND BRIAN COGAN

Make mine Marvel!

Avoid Brand Echh!

Win a Coveted No-Prize!

Accepteth no substitutes!

Excelsior!

Before Whedon, before Lucas, even before Roddenberry, there was Lieber: world-creator, comic huckster, bombastic barker, and unifying voice behind the early Marvel Universe. Stanley Martin Lieber—better known to the world as Stan “The Man” Lee—gets a lot of flak from comic fans nowadays. And maybe some of that is deserved. He takes a lot of credit; he deserves a lot of it. But even if he only created half of what he claims, he’d still be twice as prolific as any mere mortal. Sure, he’s slung the hyperbole a bit thick now and again, and he’s nothing if not self-aggrandizing, but it’s hard to deny the impact of Stan Lee has had on nerd culture.

In fact, for two New York lads coming of age in the Bronze Age—well, back in the early Seventies, at any rate—Stan Lee was an essential part of what Burt Ward would have undoubtedly called the “Holy Nerd Trinity!”: Monty Python, Dr. Demento, and Stan Lee.

Monty Python: the surreal God-Fathers of Comedy!

Dr. Demento: the invisible Voice of Novelty Music!

Stan “The Man” Lee: the two-dimensional Face of Marvel Comics!

Ahhhh...just thinking about these elder gods makes us want to break out a long box, crank the TV tuner to PBS, and plug our crumbling earphones into the old Walkman. True, some Gen Xers also knelt at the altars of *Star Trek* (1966), or *D&D* (1974), or even *Star Wars* (1976), but Roddenberry, Gygax, and Lucas remained distant figures subsumed by the glory of their own creations. Of course, Roddenberry—the man—would oft rub elbows with fans at cons, but for a self-avowed humanist he was mighty preachy (if you wanted overt moral lessons, you may as well join a real religion); “Jediism” may qualify as a religion on census forms nowadays, but fans revile as much as they revere Lucas (real gods don’t revise the Bible *every five years*, George!); and Gygax—like every good Dungeon Master—was clearly an evil bastard, when you get down to it (face facts: it’s hard to worship the man who’s hurling an endless stream of rabid kobolds at you from behind a tri-fold screen). Geeks may have adored the worlds that these three SFF folks created, but we never worshiped the creators themselves. On the other hand, the mathematically impossible Nerd Trinity of Python, Demento, and Lee—five British thespians, two Californians (an animator and a DJ), and a Gothamite ink-slinger—were inspirational geek gods unto themselves. We idolized them as the modern gods of the Idiot Box, the Boom Box, and the Long Box.

The Pythons—six acerbic “Brits”¹ who invaded our televisions through the magic portal of PBS—were an Olympian mini-pantheon, recognized as comic gods (or comic rock stars, which is pretty damn close) in 1970s America; disciples would flock to their live shows like Ancient Greek petitioners to the Pythian Oracle at Delphi. (And, like the Delphic Oracle—who breathed in the vapors of the giant python below her feet—many a Monty devotee approached their altar stoned.) Every

¹ We know: Gilliam is a weirdo on many levels, least of all his shifting nationality.

Pythonic utterance—received from that ancient holy land (England)—demanded repetition, every sketch deemed scripture to be memorized and recited in endless litanies of “Nudge, nudge,” “Ni!” and “This is an Ex-Parrot!!!” As their live shows (from *Hollywood Bowl* to the O2 reunion in London) attest, human disciples of Monty Python often knew the holy writ as well as their creators. Like the Pythian Oracle, the Pythons spoke in tongues, a six-headed god with a legion of voices: Pepperpots and Gumbys and Upper-Class Twits and interrupting Colonels and “so-called” Cardinal Richelieu and Dennis Moores and at least four Yorkshiremen. And though they were six (Chapman, Cleese, Idle, Jones, Gilliam, and Palin) they were simultaneously one (the full Monty): their collective identity revealed their hidden divinity, surely, as the Tiamat of Comedy. In a weird way (is there any other?), the Pythons *were* comedy; all of their humor—even the failed bits—is them: hence the necessary coinage of “pythonesque” to define all such surreal comic antics. They defined their own genre as creator gods whose creations always bear the image of their maker. In short, they were the GOD-the-FATHERS of comedy. Say no more!

As the Pythons were to comedy, so Dr. Demento was to music: from his distant perch out in Culver City, California, Barret Eugene Hansen delivered unto us all the dumb ditties, funky favorites, and kooky tunes that ever existed...even if he had never written a novelty record himself.² The Demented One spoke to us late at night, delivering his stereophonic message right into our rooms, echoing off our sci-fi posters, comic books, and half-painted lead figures; fortunately, this voice in our headphones didn't compel us to burn things. Instead, Demento lorded over the nerd-waves, broadcasting esoteric weirdness and bizarre toonage that—simply by being aware of its existence—solidified your status among other nerds. If you could stay up late enough to tape the Funny Five on a Sunday night,

² Granted, he released a fine cover of the Benny Bell/Paul Wynn classic, “Shaving Cream.” Be nice and clean!

you were A) alone on a Sunday night, and B) hip for the week...among a very limited clique who, like you, were also alone on a Sunday night. The next day at school you collectively sniggered at the hidden innuendoes of “Fish Heads,” lauded the acerbic wit of Tom Lehrer, and argued whether that young upstart “Weird Al” would ever get the national recognition he so surely deserved. All those study-hall homilies arose because of the Good Doctor, the VOICE of novelty music, the disembodied disseminator of others’ words, the invisible rider on the airwaves: he was the HOLY SPIRIT of novelty music. Python compelled us to repeat the gospels; Demento reminded us to sing the song of our collective passion. And, of course, to always, always, staaaaay deeeeeemented!

Which leaves Stan “The Man” Lee...the final third of our Gen X godhead. In the 1960s and 1970s, Stan made comic books—a medium simultaneously dismissed as “kid’s stuff” and reviled as the “seduction of the innocent”—cool again. And it wasn’t “just” that he co-created Spider-Man, the Avengers, the FF and every third superhero on the big screen nowadays; Stan was a creator, sure, but he was also the face of Marvel and the very embodiment of Comics Culture.³ Stan spoke to his legions—the Mighty Marvel Marching Society—from a Soapbox that echoed the self-aware bombast of vaudeville and circus sideshows. He was a hustler and a proselytizer. We knew he sold snake oil, and we lined up before him just the same. He urged us—the shy loners browsing the spinner rack at 7-11—to “face front, true believer!,” to join *FOOM*,⁴ to receive from him his ultimate blessing: the Mighty Marvel No-Prize! Like any good preacher, Stan even had his own Latin catch phrase: EXCELSIOR! Granted, he stole his grandiloquent sign-off from the New York State motto, but more kids knew it coming from Stan than from any flag hung in

³ No one at Marvel’s Distinguished Competition came close to the awe-inspiring locution of Stan Lee, as much as “avuncular” Julius Schwartz may have tried.

⁴ FOOM = “Friends of Ol’ Marvel”—the company’s second in-house fan club.

a schoolroom cafeteria. In short, Stan Lee was the mortal face of the comic book creator-god, the alliterative voice of the brand, the shepherd leading the flock. He was, in his heyday, the JESUS CHRIST of comics.⁵ I mean, his nickname was “The Man”! What more proof do you need of his demi-divinity? Not convinced? Remember the Marvel Bullpen? Back when the “Big Three” were Jack “The King” Kirby, Stan “The Man” Lee, and “Shy” Steve Ditko? It doesn’t get much more Biblical than that, folks. For social misfits born at the close of the Silver Age, the Nerd Trinity wasn’t a cult...but it wasn’t not a cult, either.

How cool is that? Actually...not very. Not at the time. It didn’t make you many new friends and it certainly didn’t help your social standing in junior high school. Nerd clout was not cultural currency back then, alas. Geek Guys didn’t self-identify so much as we were violently labeled by self-proclaimed cool kids: jocks and cheerleaders and other stereotypical campus dinosaurs. Geek Girls in the 1970s didn’t describe themselves as such because the term hadn’t even been coined yet. (Comic shops in the Seventies were generally dingy aisles of long boxes reeking of male sweat and female exclusion.) “Geek,” “nerd,” and “dork” remained pejoratives. Hell, the first significant movie to “get” nerd culture, *Revenge of the Nerds*, didn’t come out until 1984. Nineteen Eighty Four! Until then, nerds in pop culture simply didn’t win the girl, save the day, or deserve that awesome slow clap. Except in the comics. And that’s largely due to Stan Lee.

Much ink has been spilled articulating the ideological differences between Marvel and DC. But when Stan was in charge, Marvel was simply younger, hipper, and more sympathetic than their “Distinguished Competition.” The early heroes of the Marvel Universe weren’t über-powerful aliens, Amazon princesses, or millionaire playboys. The pantheon that Stan created (and/or co-created: trinitarian theology is hard math!) were overtly human, secretly powerful, openly mistrusted, down-

⁵ Or at least a BRIAN.

to-earth, and god-like...kinda like that Jesus guy. Marvel heroes were regular joes and schmoes (Ben Grimm, the rough and tumble mook from Yancy Street; Steve Rogers, the original 98-pound weakling), awkward teens and college kids (brash rebel Johnny Storm; all those socially insecure X-Men), or overly intellectual types (nebbishy scientists like Reed Richards and Bruce Banner or ironically infirm physicians like Steven Strange and Donald Blake). Compared to flying Boy Scouts, high-born warrior-princesses, and brooding Hollywood hunks, Marvel superheroes were fringe figures at best: dorks and outcasts, the lot of them.

But the key guy, the number one Marvel hero, the cornerstone of the nascent empire, was a nerd *par excellence*: Peter Parker, the Amazing⁶ Spider-Man! An intellectual high school nerd, ridiculed by the cool kids (ooh, that Flash Thompson!), rebuffed by the popular girls, fascinated by science, devoted to his elders, broke as fuck and living in Queens...Parker was a *teen intellectual schmoe*: a nerd trinity unto himself, really. It's as though Stan had a camera in the bedroom of every downtrodden geeky kid in America.⁷ Parker looked like us (glasses: a necessity for dork-hood at the time—not some lame “disguise” copped by folks with 20/20 x-ray vision); Parker sounded like us (talking “smart” has never been socially cool, kids); and Parker acted like us (always doing one thing while thinking about another). In short, Stan knew geekdom, Stan wrote geekdom, and Stan exalted geekdom. He never stopped selling the word of the nerd—and selling it hard. There's a word for that: evangelism.

Marvel Comics has had many leaders: CEOs, Editors-in-Chief, and ad-men. Some have been comics creators, some have been hucksters, some have been unapologetic business types. None—*none*—will ever inspire the devotion of fans that way that Stan Lee did. Like Demento and Python, Stan delivered a gospel that made us all collectively say: “finally, something made *for us*.” For the geeks and nerds and losers and schmoes

⁶ See also: Spectacular! Sensational! Superior!?...well, two out of three, anyway.

⁷ But let's be clear, lest the ghost of Herr Wertham rise again: he didn't.

who always knew we had a spark of something awesome in us that no one else got. Stan “The Man” Lee was a geek god come to walk among us in human form, the living embodiment of comic nerdism.

Without Monty Python, nerds of a certain age would have had no unifying rituals to recite, no common gospel to draw us together; without Dr. Demento, we’d have no music in our souls. And without Stan Lee, we’d all still be getting pantsed, swirled, and noogied. Like the heroes he co-created, like that Jesus guy he emulated, Stan “The Man” came to earth and saved the day. Amen.

Or, as Stan would have undoubtedly, unabashedly, and proudly shouted: **’Nuff said!**

What if Stan Lee didn't change his name? ¹

JEFF MCLAUGHLIN

When we think of Stan Lee, we don't usually think of him being a poet (although I think he really is) but first as the co-creator of Spider-Man and many other superheroes; a writer, and then as a business man, and then as a first hesitant but then a very willing spokesperson for the entire mainstream American Comic book industry. All of this came about after he changed his name. What would have happened if Lee didn't do this and instead achieved his original stated goal of writing the Great American Novel?

Let's begin first with a name...

I wonder what affect changing your name has on you. Are you still the same person as before? Does your sense of identity or self change? Think of all those actors and actresses who have changed their names. Are they putting on a new mask on top of the old one? Marilyn Monroe was born Norma Jeane Mortenson would she be the same sex symbol? Boris Karloff was born William Henry Pratt, would he still be as scary?

Van Damme was born Jean-Claude Camille François Van Varenberg
 Mel Brooks was born Melvin James Kaminsky
 Gene Wilder was born Jerome Silberman
 Sigourney Weaver was born Susan Alexandra Weaver
 Sting was born Gordon Matthew Sumner

¹ I hope you appreciate the fun allusion. I don't seriously think that what follows in this paper would have actually occurred...hence the counterfactual question: What if? If you are not familiar with what I am alluding to simply google: What If comics.

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And on and on.

The reasons for the name changes of so many famous faces are various. These include making it easier for American audiences to pronounce, to sound less “ethnic” (and more “WASPy”), to be more “interesting,” to fit in better with whatever field the person is in, and to not be confused with someone else with a similar name. In many cases a name change became a game-changer.

Many people know that comic book creator and writer Stan Lee changed his name from Stanley Martin Lieber.² His brother Larry on the other hand, an extremely talented comic book artist himself, kept the surname. The week before writing this think piece, I happened to be in a grocery store and the cashier remarked, “It’s amazing to think that Stan Lee is 93-years old! (Why she said this is another story). I smiled and nodded, then her colleague at the next till over said: “Stanley who?” The response was: “No, Stan Lee, the comic book guy. You don’t know who Stan Lee is?”

Although it is somewhat sad for anyone to feel that they have to lose the name they are born with in order to succeed,³ why would someone adopt a name change so that it sounds like just one name (like Sting perhaps or “Jeff Frey”) and thereby create confusion? (I love my last name thank you very much.) Well, given the times in the 1940’s; given the disapproval of “non-American” sounding names and given the fact that being in the comic book business was seen as being on par with being in the pornography business, one can understand why one may wish to have a secret identity.

² Stan adopted this as his pen name in 1941 for his first comic book publication: a story in *Captain America Comics* #3. *Stan Lee: Conversations*, edited by Jeff McLaughlin University Press of Mississippi, 2007, xv.

³ I am assuming that the names people are given are good names, names that loving parents wish to give and not silly names like “treestump” or “34x.”

Indeed, other folks who now have legendary status in the comic book field changed their names as well – typically to Anglicize it. Thus Jacob Kurtzberg became Jack Kirby, Nicholas Viscardi became Nick Cardy, etc. Stan wanted to keep his original name, his “real” name for the Great American Novel he was going to write, which suggests that if and when he achieved that level of success, it was the name he was given that he wanted the world to know. He could hide behind “Lee” until then. But which legacy would have been better: the “book book” by Stanley Lieber or the comic book by Stan Lee?

I wish to present a utilitarian point of view that clearly favors the latter. I’m glad Lee didn’t write the great American novel because he has contributed more to popular culture than he could have dreamt of otherwise. This assessment in turn leads us to the much bigger question of how do we measure the value of art. And this in turn leads to fun questions like: Would the world be a better place with a Mona Lisa than without? What if the painting was kept in secret and only the person who possessed it knew of its existence? What if knowledge of its existence died with Van Gogh? I will leave these for your consideration at your next dinner party.

As far as I know, the closest Stan Lee has come to writing a serious novel is his long poem “God Woke.” Lee is well known for his way with, and his love of, words. He likes how they sound, he likes how they flow and even how they look on a page. Even though he was so busy writing scripts and meeting daily deadlines, he spent a great deal of time picking out just the right text to carry the story forward, to excite the comic book reader, to make everything thrilling, amazing, and fantastic. Once and a while he could have let things slide, but that wasn’t his style.

With “God Woke,” Lee wasn’t putting words into one of Marvel’s superheroes for next month’s issue. And my evidence for its personally perceived significance comes from his own words as he has referred to this work as his “the most important thing” and “my all-time classic.”⁴

⁴ *Stan Lee: Conversations*, 195.

Yet, for some reason, although it was written circa 1970, it wasn't published until some 37 years later; and it had only been recited in public once (by his wife and daughter at "A Night with Stan Lee" at Carnegie Hall in 1972).⁵

Lee imagines God returning to earth to look over His creation. But this God is clearly not the one that fits the typical Judeo-Christian portrayal for His *return* to Earth is due to a *vague recollection*. Having an imperfect memory is not something an all-powerful deity would have, nor would there be any sense of His desire to "return," since this would mean he departed, and yet the Judeo-Christian God is considered to be omnipresent in our affairs:

God Woke

He stretched and yawned and looked around
 Haunted by a thought unfound
 A vagrant thought that would not die.

What He hears is the constantly disappointing clash and din of selfish human activity:

A billion bodies ever bending
 A billion voices never ending.
 Give me, get me, grant me, let me, love me, free me, hear me, see me.

This God reflects upon what he sees and is critical of not only it, but of himself:

Who else but a fool
 Would create mortal man
 And then be expected to tend him
 Mend him

⁵ Ibid., xvii

Cry for him
Die for him
Over and over and over again.

God Sighed.

God views humanity with a degree of spite and anger that seems to be drawn from his disappointment. His disappointments are as lengthy as the poem. And it is a long poem.

Ultimately before He leaves:

He looked His last at man so small
So lately risen, so soon to fall.
He looked his last and had to know
Whose fault this anguish, this mortal woe?
Had man failed maker, or maker man?
Who was the planner and whose the plan?
He looked his last, then turned aside.
He knew the answer.
That's why
God cried.⁶

Why would someone who has written millions of words leave something that he considered to be so important unpublished for so long; something which seems to ache in its realizations and observations of things gone bad and opportunities lost. Perhaps he couldn't find a proper venue for it. Perhaps it was too controversial. Perhaps it was too serious for someone who was known the world over as "Stan the Man." Before we consider this to be what he might have saved Lieber for, bear with me. I think it could have fit within the Marvel Universe.

⁶ Ibid., 219-226.

Like a comic book aimed at an older audience, the lamentations expressed in “God Woke” could be blended with visually dynamic, Jack Kirby-created character: the Silver Surfer. Here is part of the Surfer’s official story:

Norrin [Radd’s] life changed forever when a menacing alien spacecraft pierced Zenn-La’s long-neglected defense systems. Convincing a Council of Scientists member to provide him with a spaceship, Radd soon confronted the invader, Galactus, who intended to consume Zenn-La. Radd offered to become his herald and seek out new worlds for him in exchange for Galactus sparing Zenn-La. Galactus agreed, transforming Radd into a silver-skinned, cosmic-powered super-being patterned after an adolescent fantasy plucked from Norrin’s memories. Known thereafter as the Silver Surfer because of the silvery flying board he rode, Radd departed Zenn-La with Galactus.⁷

After discovering Earth, and all that humanity is and can be, the Silver Surfer turns against Galactus, who then traps him on our planet. The Silver Surfer then wanders the globe, often victimized himself, trying to both aid and understand human beings. Lee states:

I was trying to make the Surfer a pure innocent who is trying to help people and is being misunderstood and persecuted for the very things he is trying to do, which are totally good and unselfish.⁸

The Surfer was Lee’s mouthpiece. It allowed him to say what he personally felt. So strong was his own personal connection to the Surfer,

⁷ http://marvel.com/universe/Silver_Surfer visited 9/21/2016.

⁸ An Interview with Stan Lee, Leonard Pitts Jr. in *Stan Lee: Conversations*, 98.

that while he remained at Marvel, Lee passed down an edict that no one would write Silver Surfer but him.⁹

So here we have a being, the ultimate outsider, who has already personally suffered to save his own, visiting Earth making observations and criticisms about how humans are always fighting and this same being is profoundly saddened over the fact human beings don't realize that they are living in a paradisiac world. It sounds much like what the poem attempts to capture. Which only makes sense: Lee is expressing deep concerns and making harsh judgments about humanity in "God Woke." He sees the Surfer as a means to express similar thoughts in comic book form.¹⁰

Given that the Surfer is personally connected to Lee in ways that his other characters are not (they have their own lives to live, as it were, and as such, are more apt to have their own views), and given that the Surfer's melancholic meanderings and musings sound similar to those of Lee's God, as well as that the Surfer speaks for a Celestial Being (as it were), a "graphic poem" could have been made of *God Woke* that, if tweaked appropriately, could have spoken to a wide audience.

Could this graphic poem as I'm calling it have been Lee's Great American work? Whether it would have been a critical or financial success is of course impossible to tell. For Lee, if it had been successful, it would have been nice, but if it wasn't meant to be, his past behavior shows that he would have just moved on. Lee was constantly creating and co-creating characters and comic book series; if it didn't catch on and sell well, he moved on to try something else. Lee is always looking forward, never behind – this is both a business and creative imperative. He was never one to rest on his laurels. Lee in fact is never one to rest period.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Obviously in no sense am I comparing the Surfer to a deity – he never speaks as one, or as some sort of ultimate celestial being (unlike say, The Watcher).

But if “God Woke” were adapted to fit into Lee’s creative universe, he surely would have to stick with Lee (and not Lieber), because the former name by itself sells books. “Stan Lee” is a world famous brand,¹¹ which is why “Stan Lee Presents” appears as a common introduction on page one of all those Marvel comics.

Let’s do thought experiment and ask: What would have happened if Lee had stayed Lieber and only wrote the Great American Novel or achieved his goal and then used Lieber like David John Moore Cornwell uses John Le Carre. What would happen? Ideally,

- He’d sell a lot of copies of that book.
- There’d be a time when the book would be read by most everyone in school (or in a university classroom).
- There’d be CliffsNotes written summarizing it for kids who didn’t read it and yet needed to write an essay on it by tomorrow.
- There’d be an academic text or two examining it.
- A film and/or theatrical adaptation.
- He’d do a book tour.
- He’d do book readings.
- Book signings and a handful of gushing fans and folks who genuinely were personally affected by the words on the page.
- He might be asked to mentor students.
- He might be asked to write guest articles.
- Doctoral dissertations would be written about the work.
- Professors would give conference papers about it.

Or it might be recognized years after his passing. Or worse: it could be forgotten like so many other brilliant works. It would be like our Mona Lisa never being seen...

¹¹ Trying to keep up to this high standard must be challenging. ‘nuff said.

Ideally, it would be a success, but could it change the world the way he, and his colleagues, and those before him and those after him changed the North American cultural landscape with the lowly comic book? As you can guess, my conclusion is going to be “no” and that the way it changed was in a good way, a way that far outweighs what might have been if the original reason to remain to be called Mr. Lieber had come to pass.

For example, by writing comic books and creating superhero characters, Lee would inspire and facilitate people to let their imagination soar. Children would play games pretending to be the characters. There would be an unending list of spin-offs to continue the sense of joy: toys and all sorts of household items; movies, plays, theme parks. (Well, right now, this sounds very much like the *Harry Potter* books or *Lord of The Rings* trilogy doesn't it? Not that that's bad!) It would provide the means for people to learn how to read and become visually literate, and those who can't, it allows them to follow a story through pictures. It will create a love of wanting to read more (including perhaps those great American novels!) It creates fictional worlds within worlds and a mythology that can be revisited endlessly from many different points of view. It would present an ever changing list of narrative themes. It will broaden one's horizon and open one's mind. It can teach morals where good ultimately wins over evil. It could engage young readers in a way where their own personal favourites would be adopted and followed as if they were real people – real heroes in their lives. It would present different stories and different views of those same favorite characters as they are written and drawn by different individuals. It will make people smile more. It will allow them to escape. It will create communities where people can feel safe for feeling different. It would generate and promote fun! It would explore all topics –

and even save lives!¹² And, it would welcome all new comers with open arms.

Obviously, Stan Lee did not do any of this on his own. This is why legacy of the Lee's and the Kirby's and the thousands of men and women in comic books over the decades deserve far greater appreciation for creating and bringing such a "simple" entertainment to the world.

¹² Craig Yoe and his partner Clizia Gussoni have worked with the soap company Lifebuoy to create a program with Unilever based upon using comics to educate children and distribute life-saving soap through a cast of superheroic characters known as The School of 5.

These 5 characters are specifically designed taking children's needs in mind to establish a routine of hand-washing that could protect them from death by diarrhea-related illnesses and pneumonia, illnesses which claim the lives of 1.7 million children every year. Spanning 23 countries and 19 languages, The School of 5 reaches children through comics and multi-media outreach and is the largest "hygiene behavior change" program in the world." The School Of 5 Superhero Comic Program Saves The Lives Of Children In 23 Countries – Craig Yoe In The Bleeding Cool Interview by Hannah Means Shannon

Posted July 21, 2014 <http://www.bleedingcool.com/2014/07/21/the-school-of-5-superhero-comic-program-saves-the-lives-of-children-in-23-countries-craig-yoe-in-the-bleeding-cool-interview/>

Hung Up on Superhero Sex Organs? Why *Mallrats* Remains Stan Lee's Greatest Movie Role

JOHN KENNETH MUIR

In every one of their big budget movie blockbusters since the 21st century began, the producers behind the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) have seen fit to give Stan Lee, the so-called “Father of Modern Comics,” a cameo role.

If you blink, you might miss him, but Lee has been a hog-dog vender in *X-Men* (2002), a security guard in *The Hulk* (2003), a mail carrier in *The Fantastic Four* (2005), and a Federal Express delivery man in *Thor* (2011), to name just a few of his blue-collar cameos. When Lee isn't cast as a literal face-in-the-crowd (*Spider-Man* [2002]), he is often instead made-up or costumed to resemble some other public figure we also recognize. He was a lookalike of Hugh Hefner in *Iron Man* (2008), and a dead ringer for Larry King in *Iron Man 2* (2010).

The joke in both circumstances is that a figure of supreme importance in Marvel Comics' history has been reduced to playing either an utterly anonymous everyman role or one in which his fame or notoriety is undercut by Lee's passing resemblance to someone else of the celebrity class. In virtually all such MCU examples, audiences who recognize Stan Lee are asked to regard him as the equivalent of a living “Easter Egg.”

So even though Lee is known by all comic-book fans – and beloved by most of them – his creative contributions to the actual blockbuster movies of the Marvel Shared Universe are minimal. He doesn't direct the films. He doesn't write them, either. Instead, Lee serves as an “executive producer” and a drive-by cameo machine. Except on very rare occasions, his presence doesn't move a movie narrative toward its conclusion, or turn a tale in a significant way. One might even conclude that Lee appears in

these cameos to satisfy one important demographic group: *the fans*. There is no need to offend comic readers, after all, by failing to pay homage to the (co) creator of the likes of Spider-Man, the Hulk, Iron Man, the Fantastic Four, and The X-Men, right?

Ironically, if one seeks to locate a Stan Lee movie performance that accurately reflects his position and legacy in comic book history, one must search outside the now-ubiquitous MCU. More than 20 years ago, in 1995, Lee had a vital supporting role in director Kevin Smith's slacker coming-of-age comedy *Mallrats*. There, he gave sage dating advice to the film's young, love-struck protagonist, Brodie Bruce (Jason Lee).

Why did this cameo – *one set in a movie filled with fart and dick jokes* – capture the essence of Lee's importance to comic-book history so well?

There are two reasons, primarily.

First, Lee is revered by fans because in the early 1960s he developed superheroes for Marvel who were three-dimensional people. His writing efforts concentrated on characters like Peter Parker, who was going through adolescence, or The X-Men, mutants who felt like outsiders in their own world. Because of this grounded approach in the fantasy genre, the disenfranchised youth and ethnic co-cultures of the turbulent Vietnam Era found themselves drawn to Lee's characters, and to his world view. They found in his comics many characters they could relate to or empathize with.

In the mid-1990s, following the success of his independent comedy, *Clerks* (1994), Kevin Smith cast Stan Lee as himself in *Mallrats*. There, Lee offered the avuncular and funny voice for the same disenfranchised groups. Specifically, Lee was cast as a friend and father figure to the adolescents or young adults. And even though the film's script made jokes about a competition between Stan Lee and Mick Jagger regarding their sexual conquests, Lee's presence and persona were gentle, even sweet. And, his appearance in the film moved the narrative significantly toward

the dramatic denouement. Lee's advice came in handy for Brodie as the young man sought to win back the young woman he had lost.

The second reason Stan Lee's role in *Mallrats* remains significant is that alone among his movie roles, it contextualizes his career achievements in comic-books, and reveals how those achievements have affected "the next generation." Kevin Smith is widely known as a fan of the films of George Lucas, for example. Lucas's first successful film was 1973's *American Graffiti*, a coming-of-age tale which saw a young, troubled man, much like Brodie in *Mallrats*, seeking to win the love of a young woman – and encountering a pop culture idol on his quest.

In the case of *American Graffiti*, the young man, Curt, was played by Richard Dreyfuss, and the icon who advised him was radio deejay Wolfman Jack (1938-1995). According to author Robert Meyerowitz of *The Phoenix New Times*, the radio personality was considered to have provided the "soundtrack to adolescent longing" for the American generation that grew up with hot rods, and in the tradition of "cruising" in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In *American Graffiti*, Wolfman Jack implored Curt to see the world, to get out of his small town and experience life before it was too late. In *Mallrats*, Stan Lee similarly represents the voice of wisdom, and his scene clearly alludes to the Wolfman Jack scene in the Lucas film. Specifically, Lee's advice concerns relating to people and honoring an important relationship.

In particular, Lee recounts the story of a lost romantic love, and how his upset at the end of that relationship informed the comics we have loved so much over the last 50 years. Lee talks about Doctor Doom's body armor, for instance, and the Hulk's anger. He relates both of those things to his own emotions, and his feelings about shutting out the larger world after failing in an important relationship. Lee's love story is made-up expressly for the movie, but it nonetheless honors what made Lee's contributions to the medium of superhero comics so unforgettable. We

could always relate to the heroes and villains, and understand that we had the same hurts and pains that they experienced.

Stan Lee's presence in *Mallrats* reveals Kevin Smith's self-reflexive approach to filmmaking, and his penchant for incorporating references to a key pop culture influence (such as *Star Wars* [1977]). It reflects the idea that both Wolfman Jack and Stan Lee, perhaps unwittingly, became important voices for a generation. Adolescents spent time alone in the car with Wolfman Jack's voice on the radio during the golden age of cruising. Other adolescents spent time alone in their bedroom, or in the library, or at restaurants, reading Lee's comics, encountering his characters. Listening to the radio in a car and reading a comic book before going to sleep might both be termed intimate acts. They are one-on-one, immersive activities. It's just us and the voice on the radio, or the words on a comic-book page. A direct connection is forged.

Given Lee's importance to Kevin Smith's narrative, it is not surprising that Lee reported to writer Russ Burlingame of *Comicbook/Marvel* in June 2016 that *Mallrats* is his favorite film performance. In this case, Stan Lee still got to be part of a joke. Only here he is the one telling that joke. And his jokes, rather than being one-off Easter Eggs, remind audiences of what he had achieved at Marvel; how he had used human life experience to render "real" and three-dimensional a whole generation of superheroes.

Lee's role in *Mallrats* is of value too, because Lee, speaking Smith's words, finds a way in his avuncular line readings to both honor the fans and poke fun at their passion. For instance, he notes that Brodie is obsessed with superhero sex organs. That obsession may not have arisen at all, however, without Lee's career long-held edict not to dumb down superheroes or talk down to readers. His reading of the film's dialogue suggests, perhaps, at least a hesitation about the outcome of his life's work. But again, Lee's fans and readers are like the very heroes he created: curious about life and love, and engaged in the difficult process of growing up.

For the next several years, Lee will no doubt continue to pop up regularly – and predictably – in MCU movies, playing throwaway roles, or reminding us he’s still with us. But for the fans that grew up with Stan Lee’s words and his ideas, his 1995 *Mallrats* appearance best reminds us of his position and importance in the Marvel galactic firmament.

In Praise of Heroes

ROBERT MCPARLAND

Heroes. They are stirred by events into action, summoned to adventure. Fire erupts. Clouds consume. Signals are sent and planes take to the sky. Villains rise from the shadows. Darkness covers the face of the earth. Then heroes appear: strong, brave, and resilient. With determined motion they act, affirming their sense of duty. In those moments that call upon their concern, in those cataclysmic breaks from every-day life – 9/11, December 7, 1941 – they respond with resolve, self-sacrifice, and courage.

In a pragmatic, technological world, the human spirit cries out for wonder and heroism. It longs for imaginative creators like Stan Lee who conjure dazzling archetypal heroes. When the world is too much with us, as Wordsworth once said, a truly imaginative spirit can help us to again see Proteus rising from the sea or hear old Triton blowing his horn. Called into service in 1942, Stan Lee, while mending communications equipment for Signal Corps and later creating military training manuals, fostered the imagination that would bring us Spider-Man, Iron Man, Daredevil, the X-Men, the Hulk, Thor, and other extraordinary heroes. In the coming years, he not only fostered an entertainment enterprise, he enlivened imaginations and lifted our sense of wonder, our appreciation of heroism and uncommon resolve.

There is the seed of courage within us, a mirror of empathy for each other. How else would a mother lift her child from disappointment? Why else would a firefighter charge into a burning building to save a life? What else would prompt a soldier to sacrifice for a comrade in arms? For all our competition, atomization, conflict, and unreason, there is altruism, the pulse of empathy. It puzzled Thomas Henry Huxley, “Darwin’s bulldog,” who saw it as a means of survival of the species. Altruism, empathy, and heroism seem to run counter to Herbert Spencer’s insistence that

biological life is about “survival of the fittest.” Yet, our fittest, our heroes, act with honor on behalf of nation and community and ever go beyond themselves.

We need the awesome prowess and vitality of archetypal heroes for they urge among us the best of human possibility: integrity, concern, and a fighting spirit. In all their comic brightness, they sparkle from the ingenuity of the artist that casts them forth. With splash, dash, and drama, they surprise us, awe us, and stir our sense of the sublime.

Stan Lee’s archetypal heroes revive the mythopoeic imagination in contemporary readers and filmgoers. They are among our communal stories on bright illustrated pages; the stories we watch and listen to around the fire of the television or movie screen. Sir James Frazer, in *The Golden Bough* (1890) showed us that ancient myths have similarities across cultures. Myths and their heroes, he revealed, were something more than ways to dramatize natural phenomena that could hardly be explained otherwise. The psychologist Carl Jung claimed that these archetypes spring from the collective unconscious. Northrup Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), attempted to relate the underlying forms of comedy and tragedy to themes of death and resurrection in the seasons of the year. The human imagination seems to be constituted in such a way that it works with certain shapes, images, themes, and “elemental ideas,” asserted the German ethnologist Adolf Bastian (1826-1905). Joseph Campbell, in his fascinating study *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) identified “the monomyth,” a universal story pattern. The hero is called to adventure, experiences an initiation and rising fortunes, then faces what Aristotle called *peripeteia*, or a reversal of fortunes. Heroes face monsters, twisting plots, fierce conflicts, and they make thrilling escapes. When all seems lost, against impossible odds, the hero emerges. From imminent loss, constriction, or imprisonment he or she breaks free, rises to the challenge, and “saves the day.” He brings home what Campbell called “a boon,” a gift to society. These are the accomplishments of the grand heroes of

comic book fame, the protagonists of film and story. Perhaps, they are also the quests and potentials within our students, our friends, our neighbors, who may be called at some point in their lives to an unexpected and uncommon heroism.

The novelist Charles Dickens begins *David Copperfield* (1850) with David's voice: "Whether I shall become the hero of my own life, these pages must show." The pages of Stan Lee's life began similarly in New York. Then, on one apparently ordinary day, he wrote notes for Captain America. Soon he had devised that hero's signature: a defensive shield became an offensive weapon to fling at the enemy. Its forceful flight was perhaps paradigmatic of the entry of American forces into the war in Europe and the Pacific. In Signal Corps they designated Stan Lee as "playwright," like Robert Sherwood, or Irwin Shaw. He repaired equipment and telephone poles and he wrote copy for training films. However, behind the prosaic tasks lay a fierce imagination. Spider-Man would one day cross the heights, surmount those wires, and climb into the public sphere.

Stan Lee's characters today are as well-known as any in the public imagination. Recently, I entered a classroom to teach a class and saw on the blackboard, in neat chalk swirls of penmanship, a writing-prompt that the teacher who had been there before me had written: What is your idea of a hero? So, I asked my class that question also and I mentioned Stan Lee and his characters. One of the students then reminded us: some of Stan Lee's characters are injured when they are young. They are thoroughly human, as well as heroic. Daredevil, for example, is blinded while helping someone and he is vulnerable: he gets angry; he falls in love. Yet, he is daring, bold, and tenacious. He perhaps overcompensates, like the Olympic champion who is told she will have difficulty walking, but who faces the challenges and learns to run and runs swiftly and well. The hero is fearless and honorable. Hector appears: a flash from a cloud.

With his shining helmet glittering across the field, he turns to face the mighty Achilles. Heroes fight, despite the odds, with remarkable tenacity.

Even so, some of the most valiant heroes may be flawed. Odysseus makes a bargain with Circe to free his men. The bewitching nymph has turned them into swine and he saves them, but he stays in Circe's bed for years. Odysseus could blind Polyphemus the Cyclops through trickery, insisting that he was "Nobody," but he was proud and Poseidon raged against him. Odysseus was the cunning strategist that the Greeks admired, but he was also the deceptive manipulator Ulysses that the Romans despised. So, what are we to make of our iconic figures? Hillary and Trump, JFK and Ronald Reagan. In a world of love and terror, amid our elections and Thanksgiving and New Year's rituals, can we realize the heroic reminders and the fantastic possibilities of a Marvel universe? How might we rise to the occasion?

Stan Lee reminds us that the hero is not only Thor, Ironman, and Spider-Man. He is also Daredevil, who suggests that fledgling lawyers, or the injured sons of boxers, can be heroes in disguise. Novelists have suggested this too. They remind us that the hero is Jane Eyre, who gets free from abuse and from Lowood and blossoms into a governess and then becomes an heiress, marrying Mr. Rochester. The hero is David Copperfield, the orphan who goes forth into the world. Like Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion seeking Oz, what they have done is that they have developed what was potentially within them all along. So they are much like that brilliant young man, Stan Lee, repairing communications equipment one day and sending color, imagination, and hope into the world the next: a creator of magic, an inventor of heroes, an entertainer for an appreciative audience. His legacy is that of an artist of enchantment who has touched the world with an unmistakable sense of wonder.

The Clouded Legacy of a Comic Book Legend

JOSEPH J. DAROWSKI

Stan Lee's impact on the American entertainment industry is undeniable. The characters he co-created with talented comic book artists, most notably Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, influence global popular culture more than 50 years after their first creation. But, despite this, Lee certainly has his critics who argue his influence is overrated. Of course, he also has many fans who have come to know him as the kindly grandfather of American comic books thanks to his film cameos and promotional appearances for comic book adaptations over the last decade. So which version of Lee is the truth? Is he a villain masquerading as a hero, or is he a geek-hero who just has his own tireless critics, ala Spider-Man and J. Jonah Jameson.

Unsurprisingly, in summing up the legacy of a man who has worked in the entertainment industry for 70 years, it's complicated. Stan Lee co-created some of the most popular characters in comic books that have subsequently conquered the small screen and the silver screen (and video games, board games, t-shirts, toy aisles, etc.). As the public face of Marvel Comics, and an irrepressible salesman, did he (purposefully or not) end up with at least the perception of having more to do with the creation of the characters than the artists? Probably.

Of course, there are more problematic layers to deciphering where credit for characters and stories properly belongs. First, there is the famed "Marvel method" of comic book writing. In this highly collaborative style, Lee would give his artists only an outline of a story (sometimes written, sometimes just in conversation) and the artist would then draw the entire issue. After the pencils were done, Lee would add all the text to the issue: dialogue, narration boxes, editorial commentary, etc. And there would be instances where the artist took a much larger role. For example, with

Doctor Strange, Steve Ditko pitched the concept, designed the character, drew the first issue, but then Lee wrote the text for that issue. Are they co-creators, or is Ditko the creator? These issues were trivial when the stories being published by the company were utterly forgettable and made no impact outside of the comic book industry, as had been the case for much of the creative output Lee oversaw in the 1940s and 1950s. When, following the trends of the industry, he and his artists started telling superhero stories in the 1960s there would have been no reason to expect that these creations would one day become literal billion dollar franchises, so who cared who got credit? Eventually issues of credit and compensation led to rifts with Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko.

Another confounding variable in all of this is the nature of Lee's position at Marvel Comics in the 1960s. Unlike his artists, who generally were doing work-for-hire contracts, Lee was a salaried employee. As Alex Pappademas notes:

He was Marvel's editor-in-chief and de facto art director; later, he was Marvel's publisher. Finally, around the turn of the '80s, he left behind the day-to-day business of comics and moved to Los Angeles to get Marvel's movie and television division up and running. Really, though, he became what we'd now call a brand ambassador. [...] Over the years, Marvel changed hands, went bankrupt, reemerged, restructured. Stan stayed in the picture. Each time he renegotiated his deal with the company, he did so from a unique position — half elder god, half mascot. Administration after administration recognized that it was in their best interests PR-wise to keep him on the payroll. For years, he received 10 percent of all revenue generated by the exploitation of his characters on TV and in movies, along with a six-figure salary.

To put it mildly, this was excessively more favorable than the financial remuneration his co-creators received. Regarding Jack Kirby, Pappadamas

wrote, “Jack Kirby, on the other hand, was a contractor. [...] like most comics creators back then, he was paid by the page and retained no rights to any of the work he did for the company or the characters he helped create; by cashing his paychecks, he signed those rights over to the company. It took him decades just to persuade Marvel to give him back some of his original art, much of which was lost or given away or stolen in the meantime...” The difference in public acclaim, financial reward, and career longevity between Lee and his artistic collaborators is stark.

All of this leaves fan attitudes toward Lee mixed. It is undeniable that he was a major player in the creation of icons such as the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, the Hulk, Iron Man, the X-Men, and many more. But, while he is now the public face of the early Marvel era and appears on talk shows, at conventions, and in movies, he was not the sole voice behind those creations. And, because of many factors, he not only has received more public acclaim for creating those characters, he has received more financial rewards for these creations than his collaborators. So, what should we think of Stan Lee? He was a creative man who worked with artistic geniuses. He was hugely responsible for marketing Marvel Comics and establishing a tone and narrative style the revolutionized comic books. Due to differing roles and contracts, he ended up with significantly more fame and money than his collaborators. It can reasonably be argued that he did not address unfair systemic problems within the comic book industry, particularly in regards to creators’ rights for work-for-hire talent, but those were industry-wide problems. In the end, if you view Lee solely as a hero or a villain, that’s probably not fair to the complex legacy of a legitimate popular culture icon.

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Stan Lee: Thinking About an Icon's Legacy

BOB BATCHELOR

Stan Lee is Marvel madman, mouthpiece, and all-around maestro – the face of comic books for six decades. Without a doubt, Lee is one of the most important creative icons in contemporary American history. ‘Nuff said...

Lee shares the same stage that once held Ella Fitzgerald and F. Scott Fitzgerald, as well as Babe Ruth, John Updike, and Norman Mailer. He sits there proudly with Bob Dylan, Toni Morrison, Tom Hanks, Hank Aaron, and Elvis (‘cause he just might still be out there somewhere). His legacy is undeniable: Lee transformed storytelling by introducing generations of readers to flawed heroes who also dealt with life's challenges, in addition to the treats that could destroy humankind.

Generations of artists, writers, actors, and other creative types have been inspired, moved, or encouraged by the universe he gave voice to and birthed. Lee did not invent the imperfect hero, one could argue that such heroes had been around since Homer's time and even before, but Lee did deliver it – Johnny Appleseed style, a dime or so a pop – to a generation of readers hungry for something new.

Today, all a person has to do is watch fans interact with Lee to comprehend his significance. Face front, true believer! This is a spectacle, like a continuous Christmas morning for adoring masses. In turn, they give him sustenance and energy. Approaching Lee, most can simply squeak out “thank you.” Others walk away dumbfounded. Moments later, delight fills their faces, whether they waited in line at a comicon for four or five hours or briefly shook his hand. This must be what it would be like to meet Santa Claus!

Contemplating an Icon:

** *The Fantastic Four* transformed the kinds of stories comic books could tell. *Spider-Man*, however, brought the idea home to a global audience. Lee told an interviewer that he had two incredibly instinctive objectives: introduce a superhero “terribly realistic” and one “with whom the reader could relate.”¹³ While the nerd-to-hero storyline seems like it must have sprung from the earth fully formed, Lee gave readers a new way of looking at what it meant to be a hero and spun the notion of who might be heroic in a way that spoke to the rapidly expanding number of comic book buyers. *Spider-Man*’s popularity revealed the attraction to the idea of a tainted hero, but at the same time, the character hit the newsstands at the perfect time, ranging from the growing Baby Boomer generation to the optimism of John F. Kennedy’s Camelot, this confluence of events resulting in a second golden age for comic books.

** While people often credit Lee for his role in gradually turning comic books into a more respected medium and establishing Marvel’s place among the world’s great brands, he is rarely given enough credit simply as a writer. Just like novelist and filmmakers had always done, it is as if Lee put his hands up into the air and pulled down fistfuls of the national zeitgeist. In this sense, he understood his audience the same way Walt Disney did or John Updike, who at about the same time was crafting Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, the American everyman (a character one could certainly imagine reading comic books). Lee as writer did what all iconic creative people do – he improved on or perfected his craft, thus creating an entirely new style that would have broad impact across the rest of the industry, and later the world.

** Stan Lee’s official archive, housed at the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming, is filled (in part) with office memoranda, advertising and circulation studies, countless fan letters, human resources

paperwork, and other corporate effluvium that might make most researchers' heads spin(<http://www.uwyo.edu/ahc/>). From a different perspective, though, what seems like miscellany, actually reveals the depth of Lee's work across the entire Marvel enterprise. His responsibilities not only covered writing, editing, and approving artwork, but extended to general managerial and editorial work that most people do not contemplate. Of course, when Marvel's popularity increased, he hired people to help keep pace, but the archive uncovers a leader fully in charge, despite his carefree persona. Lee created and co-created countless superheroes, villains, and plots, all while simultaneously running the comic book business as it grew from a virtual one-man operation in the mid- to late-1950s to an empire across the 1960s and into the 1970s.

** When I asked Lee last month how it felt to inspire generations of fans and artists with his flawed hero narrative, he paused for a moment. He isn't the type who dwells on legacy, instead focusing on the next idea. In nearly illegible handwriting, Lee scribbles down these thoughts in tiny 2x3 inch notepads. "It's an incredibly great feeling, when I think about it. I don't have that much time to think about, but when I do..." His voice trails off. Lee isn't used to contemplating his legacy, most journalists and fans ask him who his favorite character is or what he was thinking when he created them. But, with a brief grin and eyes almost sparkling behind his semi-dark glasses, you can see his pride and hear it in his voice. The thing about icons is that they never really stop creating. Thinking about that moment makes my hands tremble and my heart leap. How often does one get to stand in the shadow of greatness?