

PANELOLOGY



BY SEAN MCQUAID

BEFORE THE USUAL PANELOLOGICAL ponderings, a word or two of business is in order. Firstly, an addition to last week's Avengers review: several characters were omitted from the roster published last issue, and should have been included as follows:

The Great Lakes Avengers (midwestern adventurers who established themselves as an unofficial Avengers franchise without the approval or knowledge of the actual Avengers; they subsequently became allies and associates of the actual Avengers; an unofficial, informal expansion team): Mister Immortal, Flatman, Big Bertha, Dinah Soar, and Doorman.

The "1950's Avengers" (not actually Avengers members, but founders of a 1950's Avengers team that was a predecessor of sorts to the current group, though technically unrelated): Marvel Boy II (the Blue Marvel), the 3-D Man, Venus, Gorilla-Man I, and the Human Robot.

That's a load off my mind. On realizing the omission after the piece went to print, I was crushed at the thought of the inadequate information I'd propagated in my careless hubris. It was almost enough to make me relinquish my Avengers priority identicard in shame (but only almost-- hey, even Captain America makes mistakes now and again. Besides, do you know how hard those cards are to get?). At any rate, I have atoned and brought another corner of pop culture obscurity to light in the bargain (best change the subject-- that creeping hubris is rearing its ugly head again).

That being done, the other explanatory note regards the subject of this week's column: there's no review of new books. Why? Well, it's a combination of things: *Force Works* (which I've long planned to review) has had its publication date pushed up a few months, probably due to technical difficulties (damn pop-up cover!); *Northstar* is on the stands by now, but I'm delaying my review of it to coincide with the X-Press's GLBQ supplement, which has been delayed until next week (*Northstar* being the most prominent, openly gay hero in mainstream comics-- who says these things aren't educational!); and to top it off, there wasn't any very interesting/unique/affordable new stuff out the day before this article went to press, so the comic book cupboard was bare.

Rather than rest on my laurels (or my posterior), I decided to take advantage of the lull and do another overview of the comics scene-- but, inspired by the Avengers, I'm zeroing in on the super-team scene. More

specifically, in light of the recent attempts at reviving the Justice Society and the Invaders, I've decided to take a retrospective look at the major super-teams of the Golden Age-- comics' earliest, most successful period, from the late 1930's to the early 1950's.

The Justice Society of America (founders: Flash, Green Lantern, Doctor Fate, Hourman, Sandman, Hawkman, the Atom, and the Spectre; other members include Johnny Thunder, Red Tornado, Staman, Doctor Mid-Nite, Mister Terrific, Wildcat, Black Canary, and the Golden-Age versions



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of Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, plus post-1940's additions Miss America, Red Tornado II, Huntress II, the Star-Spangled Kid, Power Girl, and the Golden-Age version of Robin). The JSA was comics' first super team, appearing in *All-Star Comics* as an all-star sampling of the best characters from the DC Comics line. They were the finest and most successful of the 1940's super teams (of which there were very few), and served as inspiration for the dozens of groups that have populated comic books since then. They faded out in the 1950's along with almost all other comic book heroes, but when the genre was revived in the Silver Age (late 50's, early 60's), they inspired the first modern super team-- DC's Justice League of America. Moreover, the JSAers were inspired

by the JLAers (and reader demand) to return to activity as a semi-retired group, a position they retain today (though they have never recaptured their original commercial success, due in part to their somewhat anachronistic role in the modern comics continuity). The JSA have had several abortive attempts at their own present-day series (*All-Star Comics*, *Adventure Comics*, and the recent *Justice Society of America*). They have also appeared in stories set in the 1940's, in such series as *All-Star Squadron*.

The Law's Legionnaires, a.k.a. **The Seven Soldiers of Victory** (founders: Star-Spangled Kid and Stripesy, Shining Knight, Vigilante, the Golden Age Green Arrow and Speedy, and the Crimson Avenger, plus hangers-on Wing, Stuff, and Billy Gunn). One of the goofier best-kept secrets of comicdom, the Law's Legionnaires were DC's other major 1940's super team, appearing in *Leading Comics*; however, their stories were poorly done on the whole, and

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the team (composed principally of supporting stars) never caught on. In the 1970's, the Justice League and Justice Society (who often teamed up) discovered the Legionnaires alive and well in a time warp, but after their rescue the L.L. returned to obscurity, with most of their members retiring, dying, or just plain fading away. Like the JSA, they appeared frequently in the 1980's series, *All-Star Squadron*.

The Freedom Fighters (members include Uncle Sam, the Ray, the Black Condor, Phantom Lady, the Human Bomb, Doll Man, Firebrand, the Jester, the Spider, Manhunter, Quicksilver <Max Mercury>, Plastic Man, Midnight, the Red Bee, the Red Torpedo, Neon the Unknown, the Invisible Hood, Miss America, Magno, the Hourman, and numerous others). This odd group originated in a modern-day JLA/JSA team-up wherein a parallel Earth was discovered in which the Nazis had won World War II, and the resistance was led by that world's costumed heroes, the Freedom Fighters. The Freedom Fighters, who had mystically retained their youth via their mentor Uncle Sam, were actually a collection of the cream of the old Quality Comics characters (purchased by DC Comics), most of whom DC had left unused for years at

that point. These Freedom Fighters popped up occasionally for years and even had their own series briefly in the 1970's, but never really hit it big. Then, when *All-Star Squadron* appeared, writer Roy Thomas incorporated the Quality Comics characters into that book's cast, postulating that they originated in this time and place and later emigrated to the parallel Nazi world (Earth-X) to try to liberate it. This was all a moot point after DC's *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series wrote most of DC's parallel earths (including Earth X) out of existence, for the sake of streamlining DC continuity. In the new history that's emerged, the Freedom Fighters are said to have been a splinter-group of the All-Star Squadron that based itself in Washington and conducted overseas missions as well as homefront cimefighting under the auspices of the U.S. government. This incarnation of the Freedom Fighters has never really been explored, since (as a separate group) they became peripheral characters in *All-Star Squadron* and the later *Young All-Stars* series. The Freedom Fighters haven't resurfaced since, though some individual members and/or their successors remain active in present-day DC continuity.

The All-Star Squadron (membership too numerous to mention, but includes all the 1940's characters in the above groups, plus many others). This 1940's group was actually created for DC Comics by Golden Age buff Roy Thomas in the 1980's and was modestly successful, running about five years before the book was scrapped (due in part to then-company policy to de-emphasize DC's earlier characters) and re-released as the *Young All-Stars*, focusing on the team's younger members. The scaled-down version lasted about half as long as the original before it was cancelled. The earlier series was a delightful cast-of-thousands period piece mixing history and comic book continuity with solid adventure stories and characterization centring on a core cast while maintaining wide circle of secondary characters. The team, as conceived by Thomas, was presidentially-created, wartime homefront alliance of all of America's "mystery-men" (super-heroes), who voluntarily served in the group when necessary or at their own discretion. This included members of other groups, like the JSA, Law's Legionnaires and Freedom Fighters. As such, the All-Star Squadron featured among its ranks virtually all the major Golden-Age heroes of DC Comics and Quality Comics, and a few more besides.

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