

# PANELOLOGY



BY SEAN MCQUAID

*The Avengers* (ongoing series)

Writer: Bob Harras; Penciller: Steve Epting; Inker/colourist: Tom Palmer

AVENGERS ASSEMBLE!

FOR OVER THIRTY YEARS NOW, THAT alliterative battle cry has rung through the pages of comicdom. Hokey as all-get-out? Admittedly. Cornily inspirational? Undeniably. Timeless? Apparently. The Avengers have been assembling for over three decades, remaining both a comic book institution and a wellspring of storytelling. Even today, the book is among the finest series produced by Marvel Comics.

Of course, it hasn't always been that way. Any decades-long ongoing series has its share of creative droughts, and there have been some truly bad periods over the years. The creative teams who produce comics vary from year to year, and the large, fluid cast of the *Avengers* makes the book particularly varied in its content, for better or for worse. Thankfully, the last couple of years have seen a change for the better in the series, as a crack creative team has given the book renewed direction and, as a result, renewed popularity. We are in the midst of the latest *Avengers* renaissance, perhaps the first since the days of Jim Shooter and his contemporaries in the 1970's.

The *Avengers* have a certain prestigious status in comic books in that they are the last great super hero team-- that is, a team composed of a cross-section of characters from its company's continuity, a representative slice of the heroic community with a certain amount of history and prestige behind them. The only comparable entities are the Justice League (whose history is much more checkered and dubious in spots) and the Fantastic Four (who predate the *Avengers* but aren't long for this world and are, like the X-Men, a more static and insular group of characters). As classic *Avengers* writer Roy Thomas long believed, the *Avengers* are the spiritual heirs of comics' first super-team: DC's Justice Society of America. Like the JSA, the *Avengers* are a group with a proud heroic tradition, with a membership reflective of the crime fighting community-- ranging from veterans like Captain America to rookies like Thunderstrike, and from godlike beings such as Hercules to ordinary mortals like the Black Knight.

One of the defining traits of the *Avengers* has been its varied and shifting cast, the one respect in which the group differs from all the

other major super teams. By the sixteenth issue of the series, all the original members had left the group and been replaced, and the only constant in the *Avengers* roster is change. Around seventy-five characters have been affiliated with the *Avengers* over the years (more on that anon), and part of the book's continuing appeal is the union of disparate individuals in pursuit of a common cause allowing for some interesting characterization and a large background cast on which to draw.

Almost as fluid is the book's creative team, which is currently among the best the *Avengers* has had in years. Bob Harras, previously best known as the editorial guru of the X-Men family of titles, took over the writing reins of the *Avengers* over two years ago-- and long may he reign. Prior to his arrival, the book was stagnating in a lengthy period during which characters came and went with no unifying plotlines or direction-- merely an episodic collection of tales about a largely unrelated group of characters. Harras has developed a strong central cast (albeit with the occasional roster fluctuations endemic to the *Avengers*), with long-running, engaging subplots like the android Vision's rediscovery of his capacity for emotion, and Crystal's triangle with her estranged husband Quicksilver and her would-be lover, the Black Knight. There are also even stronger central plots concerning the team, like the group's ongoing moral dilemma as to how far they should go in pursuit of justice (whether they should become as ruthless as the increasingly darker menaces they face), and the team's intermittent war with the Gatherers, a team of adventurers from destroyed alternate realities who claim the *Avengers* are somehow responsible for the destruction of their timelines-- and of realities yet to be destroyed. Harras has reintroduced both characterization and direction to the book, making the *Avengers* a suspenseful and mildly addictive ongoing series.

Harras is ably aided and abetted by artists Steve Epting and Tom Palmer. Rookie Epting produces drawings that are very sparse,

sketchy, and unfinished in terms of surface quality, but with a solid veteran like Palmer to ink his stuff, he's a more than palatable artist. Epting has a very cinematic approach to storytelling, with a penchant for epic scale-- both in the actions and emotions of his characters, reinforcing the larger-than-life tone suited to this book. Palmer's finishes are sometimes murky, turgid and oppressive, but his inks have a chiaroscuro depth and sophistication lacking in many artists, giving his drawings, and especially his characters, uncommon substance and weight.

The *Avengers* is currently in the midst of a good-quality run, and while it's not exactly Shakespeare, you can always count on some action, spectacle, an all-star cast, and a touch of soap opera. It's definitely worth a read for any fan of super-hero comics, or comics in general for that matter.

## Trivia Treat:

For those of you who shrink away from long-established, large cast books like *Avengers* because you just can't keep track of the characters, here's a sort of super-hero scorecard for you. What follows is perhaps the most complete list of the *Avengers* membership roster ever published.

**Current Roster** (more or less): Captain America, the Vision, Hercules, Crystal, the Black Widow, Sersi, the Black Knight, Doctor Pym (a.k.a. Giant-Man I), Quicksilver, and Thunderstrike, along with unofficial (honourary) members Deathcry, Magdalene, and the new Swordsman. That's the roster at this writing, though major changes are reportedly ahead.

**Inactive members** (*Avengers* not currently working with the team but who remain allies of the group, some of them serving as reservists or back-up members): Thor, the Hulk, the Wasp, Hawkeye, the Black

Panther, Mantis, the Beast, Moonragon, Binary, She-Hulk, Starfox, Tigra, the Thing, Namor the Sub-Mariner, Firebird, Doctor Druid, the Invisible Woman, Gilgamesh,

Quasar, the original Human Torch, Machine Man, Stingray (an honorary member of sorts), the Living Lightning, Darkhawk, and active reservists the Falcon, Captain Marvel II, and Spider-Man.

**Former members** (*Avengers* who resigned altogether, with no probable intention of returning to service at present): Iron Man, the Scarlet Witch, Wonder Man, War Machine, Moon Knight, USAgent, Rage, Sandman, and Spider-Woman II.

**Incapacitated members** (*Avengers* who are indefinitely out of action): Hellcat (insane) and Jocasta (dismantled).

**Deceased members:** the original Swordsman, Mockingbird, Mister Fantastic, and honorary members Captain Marvel I, the original Whizzer, and Marrina.

**Time-displaced members** (*Avengers* who are native to and/or currently active in other time periods): The Two-Gun Kid, Charlie-27, Nikki, Martnex, Yondu, Starhawk I, Starhawk II, Major Victory, and Yellowjacket II (all of whom, coincidentally, were honorary members).

**Unofficial associates:** Rick Jones (former honorary member), Demolition Man (one-time honorary member), Ant-Man II, Giant Man II, Red Wolf, Paladin, the Shroud, and Agatha Harkness.

**Staff:** Edwin Jarvis (butler and chief of staff), Peggy Carter (communications), Michael O'Brien (security), Fabian Stankowicz (inventor/technician), Zachary Moonhunter (pilot), Keith Kincaid (physician), and Donna Maria Puentes (receptionist). Past staff include John Jameson, Genji Odashu, Arnold Roth, Inger Sullivan, Gilbert Vaughn, Talia Kruma, Robert Frank Jr., M'Daka, Bill Foster, Scott Lang, Walter Newell, Diane Newell, and a variety of others.

For a more complete story on the *Avengers* (including most of the above folks), I recommend the *Avengers Log*, on sale now. It's a very comprehensive summary of the history of the *Avengers* and the individuals connected to it (the only conspicuous omissions being Bill Foster/Giant Man II, the new Swordsman, Deathcry, and Magdalene), and makes a great reference guide and artwork sampler for veteran fans and new readers alike.