



EC is for me, see? by James Lloyd

EC.

EC is for me, see? You bet your sweet ass you don't! Look at you... Your eyeballs protruding, your tongue gently lolling, the cappuccino slowly encrusting on your lips... You, the knowledgeable hipster! You might know all about percussion ensembles from Senagal but what do you know from EC Comics? What do you know about the '50's most notorious crime and horror comics ever? From where would you have heard of the *Old Witch*, or *Melvin Mole*, or *Superduperman*? How would you know about EC's funky sci-fi stories or the he-man adventure of *Two Fisted Tales*? So maybe you know *MAD*... But the original *MAD*, the *real MAD*? You only know *Tales from the Crypt*, cuz of the dippy HBO TV show with the dumb robot crypt keeper host, and because the gangsta types in the '90's started co-opting the title on account of "crypt" sounding like "crip" (or crib). No, a small look back is needed. And why not? Last year, the year 2000, marked the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of EC Comics, and while fandom doffed it's tiny hat with the usual half-hearted tributes, the mass media at large, predictably, uttered nary a squeak. however, the San Diego Comicon did quite an amicable job of acknowledging the anniversary by hosting the EC Reunion, which brought together nearly all the surviving artists of the EC gang, possibly for the first time since the company's demise. I had the moderately good fortune to have been present at a fraction of these festivities, so The Editor asked me to write an article bearing witness to this momentous occasion.

For the uninitiated, EC Comics have always held an exalted position in comic book lore, due to their talent pool of artists, whose work was an anathema to the multitude of hacked out post-depression era trash of the time, and is still rarely surpassed today. These artists are equally distinguished for their penchant for gutsy material (in more ways than one) in their line of fantasy-scare books- which pushed the boundaries so far, it landed them in the midst of a legendary battle with the government of the United States of America and EC's fellow publishers. Bill Gaines' televised appearance at the inquest on Comics and Juvenile Delinquency forever cemented his status as comicdom's favorite martyr for the cause, while Harvey Kurtzman's *MAD*

has further enhanced EC's legend status, and earned Kurtzman sainthood among multitudes of weirdos since.

But for the uninitiated we go back! Back to the beginning! Back before Bill Gaines, to the dark ages of the '30's and the dawn of the comic book industry. Despite being coined the Golden Age, it was a time when desperate kids who wanted to make a buck or two during the depression worked in good faith for a pittance in slave galleys. It was in this typical good faith that two kids named Siegel and Schuster walked into Detective comics and handed over millions upon millions in future revenue in the form of a character called Superman. Publishers in the '30's, see, were anyone who could afford the paper; they were car salesman and butchers. "They were accountants" sez Harvey Kurtzman, "and they brought an accountants mentality to the business". They were hustlers, shysters, and schemers, who had as much use for art as Stan Lee has for a comb. One such schemer was New York businessman Max Gaines, whose many enterprises included haberdashery, munitions production, the invention of the "We Want Beer" necktie... And the publication of the first American comic book (*Famous Funnies*, 1934). He also aligned himself with Detective Comics, and after aiding and abetting the inception of no less than Superman, the Flash, Batman, and Wonder Woman, he set out on his own with a line of family comics in the early '40s. Christened *Educational Comics*, the company published such daring material as *Picture Stories From The Bible*, *Tiny Tot Comics*, and *Animal Fables*. And for this sin, Fate played it's first hand in August of 1947, sending a boat hurtling towards Max while on holiday on Lake Placid, killing him instantly, and landing his failing business solely in the hands of his only son Bill. An aspiring school teacher, Bill Gaines had no intention of publishing comics, but took over the reins of Max's failing business at his mother's urging. Seven months into Bill's ineffectual reign at Educational, young Al Feldstein walked through the door, and introduced the romance comic to Gaines' lineup, followed quickly by young Shelly Moldoff's proposal for a new line of horror comics (catching the wave of comic's new trend, but never receiving credit or compensation). Bill had been a screw-up and mis-fit, but he knew a good thing when he saw it. He even got into the act himself, and began writing plots and inventing new titles for his line, his eccentric nature infecting the spirit and the twisted new material of his company. His slobnick image also belied a shrewd, and creative, business sense, and, in his own perverse way, he began to turn the company around.

Bill had been transformed. *Tiny Tot Comics* gasped its last, as *The Vault of Horror* shuffled forth from the dark. EC's New Trend had begun, marking a turning point, not just at Max Gaines' company, but in the entire comic book medium. Where funny animals had frolicked, rotting zombies now stalked the pages, where Mary and Joseph had once bravely sought room at the inn, Mary now hacked Joseph to bits and kept the pieces in separately labeled jars. As rotting corpses emerged from the grave, Max Gaines spun in his. Bill Gaines had buried his father, and was now burying his business as it had existed, the rebel image he's become so fondly (if not accurately) associated with first manifesting itself here in his disrespect to his old man's staunch moral code. Within the next two years, *Educational Comics* was done in, to be replaced by *Entertaining Comics*. This was the real birth of EC. The new trend of horror, crime, and science fiction

comics were a revolution – a small renaissance in the medium, and when a wave of imitators sprung up, Bill and Al continued to innovate... on their own terms. The nubile women became even more nubile, the gore flowed more freely, the art became more accomplished and expressive. With Al as the brains (writer, editor) and Bill as the heart (publisher, think tank), EC now exclusively published horror, sci-fi, and crime comics, and got its first taste of its notoriety to come. However, it was not until a third, unique individual entered the scene that EC would make its remarkable transformation from entertainment to institution. That third individual was young Harvey Kurtzman. And he invented *MAD*.

But Al Feldstein, more than anyone else, is EC. He was the editor of the entire line, and right-hand man to Gaines (with whom he made frequent cameos in the stories themselves). He also concocted, with Bill, the characters most beloved and closely associated with EC: The Old Witch, The Vault Keeper, and The Crypt Keeper- the three ghouls who cheerfully introduced each individual horror story with Al's hideous puns. And if it weren't for EC's weird policy of ignoring writer's credits, Al would be appreciated on a whole other level; because despite the later, scatter-shot contributions of some hired hands, Al wrote every damn story they ever published. As a writer and an artist, Al could be a hack (he once explained EC's basic plot structure as: "Man sharpens pencils, the pencils sharpen man's head"), but most often he produced remarkably entertaining, readable stories for the masses. It was genre work, inspired by the pulp novels of the time, and written for the moment, not for the ages, but they were wonderfully dense, literate works (so dense, in fact, his narrative prose often overwhelmed the artwork in the stories). Occasionally, he would even give the readers something profound. Real Shakespearean stuff, especially in the Science Fiction titles, which possessed an elegance the crime and horror comics did not.

He also had a hell of an eye for talent. Al attracted some of the greatest in the biz to the East Side offices on 225 Lafayette street thanks to the creative freedom, quality control, and page rates he offered. The rest was providence. EC's new line-up of talent dedicated themselves to producing the most involved, painstaking artwork yet seen in comics. In *Vault of Horror* and *Tales From The Crypt*, fan favorite Graham Ingels – who signed his work "Ghastly" – exhibited his very special talent for the perverse and grotesque. Ingels was possibly EC's most subversive artist; no matter who you were in an Ingels story – a rogue, a vixen, an innocent child, an aging spinstress – every character (or chair or rock) was rendered as a leering grotesque in a grotesque world. Perhaps due to this unique vision, he worked in horror and crime to the exclusion of all else. Truly one of a kind, the influence of his spidery line work and claustrophobic blacks can still be felt today, most notably in the works of Bernie Wrightson, our modern day master of the macabre.

While Ingels will always be identified with the Old Witch, fellow fan favorite Jack Davis drew the definitive Crypt-Keeper, not to mention some of the most infamous horror strips of the line (many of which he'd rather we forget). Before he became the darling of ad execs everywhere, Davis, perhaps the biggest name in the EC canon, brought his energetic and instantly recognizable style (which he seemed to have defined at birth) and his lip smacking mastery of the brush to bear on all of EC's titles. He found a way to adopt it

perfectly to suit the dirt and grime of the war stories, or exaggerate it to match the crazy extremes of a *MAD* send-up or ripping horror yarn. He is a cartoonist's cartoonist; the accuracy and appeal of his work blows all others off the map.

Over in *Crime Suspense Stories* and *Shock Suspense Stories*, Johnny Craig, George Evans, and Reed Crandall were bringing material to life that rivaled the gruesomely sensational cover blurbs of the *Real Detective/True Crime* magazines with which EC shared shelf space. Anything was game in the seedy underworlds of the suspense stories; they reveled in betrayal, murder, adultery, spousal and sexual abuse, and subsequent revenge... All delineated with savage sharpness by Craig, Evans, and Crandall. Less expressive than Davis and Ingels, their solid draftsmanship was ideally suited to depict the hard-edged reality of the crime stuff. Craig in particular distinguished himself here, proving to be a master of noir in such gems as "The Sewer" and "Touch and Go".

Somewhat transcending all these pulp antics were the science fiction titles. *Weird Fantasy* lifted young readers away from the blood and rain-soaked gutters of *Crime Suspense Stories* and into the cosmos as it should exist, while *Weird Science* gleefully played on the nation's fear of atomic energy and annihilation in the wake of Hiroshima and the escalating Cold War. Here, comic's tragic hero Wally Wood, along with Al Williamson and Joe Orlando, dragged the Buck Rogers visual style endemic to sci-fi at the time into the '50's- injecting a funkiness, credibility, and sensuality to the proceedings. Wood in particular had a great sense of that period's pop culture iconography; he brought the Mamie Van Doren/Jane Mansfield starlet to his bared mid-riffed damsels in distress, and the tail fins and chrome grills of the '50's convertible to his rocket ships. Another work horse, he spent uncountable hours rendering interstellar landscapes, machinery, and monsters with impeccable grace. As Frank Miller so aptly put it: "He could find glamour in anything. He could draw a dog turd and it would be the most beautiful thing you ever saw in your life."

Keeping pace with Wood was Al Williamson, EC's science fiction artist extraordinaire, who created pretty boy artwork of great elegance, coming as he did - like Wood - from the Harold Foster/Alex Raymond/Burne Hogarth school of illustration. A studio unto himself in the '50's, he worked independently, employing a talent pool of artists as assistants that rivaled EC's heavy hitters (much to Feldstein's envy, which was obvious even now in San Diego). Among them were Angelo Torres, Roy Krenkel, and no less than the great Frank Frazetta- who eventually drew one whole solo story for *Weird Science* before going on to establish his name as *the* Frank Frazetta, and produce the master pieces that adorn the vans of Judas Priest fans everywhere. Unfortunately, despite these blessings in the art department, much of the sci-fi stories suffered from EC formula syndrome-though the occasional ray of intelligence did shine forth and a truly thoughtful tale would be served up, most often due to Feldstein's reverential adaptations of Ray Bradbury's stories. *The Flying Machine* and *There Will Come Soft Rains* are rightly considered classics of the art form.

The sci-fi comics also felt the hand of Jack Kamen, who drew more stories for EC than any other artist. Though he lent his considerable craft to all of EC's titles, he never displayed the same flair as his contemporaries, earning him the uncharitable tag "everyone's unfavorite" from Bill Gaines. True, his work may have had less personality than, say, Wally Wood's, but he

was no less talented. Originally hired to draw romance comics that never materialized, his talent for depicting gorgeous women was still apparent in everything he touched.

Defying categorization was Bernie Krigstein. A fine artist slumming in the funnies for the moneys, he brought an amazing hard-edged graphic style to the EC line up. His surreal, visionary interpretations of the most routine Feldstein story are as much a revelation today as they must have been in the '50's. His greatest story will always be *Master Race*, a suspense story of comeuppance concerning the Holocaust. Risky stuff, considering it was one of EC's first code approved stories. For those so inclined, it can be found in *Impact* #1.

Meanwhile, as EC's New Trend began taking off, legend-to-be Harvey Kurtzman was making his presence known on his side of the pond. When Kurtzman started at EC as a callow youth he was a hired gun like everyone else, working on the occasional crime and sci-fi story. "Within six months," cartoonist Roger Brand once reported, "he practically owned the place." He innovated, inventing almost every one of his own techniques, many of which are now common coin in the medium. Hinting at the greatness that was to come, he refused to use Leroy type (a mechanically produced lettering system used in all of EC's titles except *MAD*), refused Feldstein's page breakdowns, refused to work in horror comics, and was subsequently given his own title to write and edit (becoming Feldstein's only rival in the process). *Two Fisted Tales* was a singular effort- not just in the EC oeuvre, but in the whole of the comic book medium. Originally the comic was exactly as the title suggests: real man's adventure stuff (the first issue even features an embarrassing "Yellow peril" action piece penned by Al Feldstein called *Hong Kong Intrigue*. Feldstein's comment now: "Poor Harvey!! This was my idea of a 'two-fisted' tale to help launch the magazine."), but Kurtzman transformed it. The comic became a vehicle for a searing look at warfare, past and present. *Two Fisted*, and its later incarnation, the more aptly titled *Frontline Combat*, was a refreshing contrast to the John Wayne jingoism dredging every flag-waving racist page of the other war comics of the time. No such grandstanding would be found in Kurtzman's war books; he found humanity in the common soldier of all races (the common element being their humanity), and tragedy in every conflict. Harvey's exhaustive research for the books put assistants in all manner of strange circumstances, the books themselves into the realm of greatness, and Kurtzman himself in the hospital, wasted by his own perfectionism. As legend goes, burned out and needing extra income, he proposed an idea for a humor comic to Gaines from his hospital bed (or Gaines proposed it, as legend also goes). Gaines agreed, and added one more title to his lineup in 1951, an innocuous little three letter title that spelled *MAD*. All arguments about who initially sparked the idea are hereafter forever rendered moot. Harvey created *MAD*. Period. He formed it's manic breathless humor, refusing to let it become sweetened, blasé, or generic. He brought the borscht belt quality to it, the Jewish sense of awareness that would later attract folks like Bob & Ray and Ernie Kovacs to it's pages. And after a modest start the comic started to sell, and the plates began to shift.

MAD magazine would eventually find fame the world over for it's social and political satire, but few people know that Kurtzman's original *MAD* was an entirely different animal. *MAD* the comic book made it's mark by specifically trashing other comics. Undisputed classics *Superduperman*, *Ping Pong*, and *Little Orphan Melvin* gleefully ransacked the pub-

lic's favorite characters, and sent unsuspecting readers reeling. Here the lunatic Will Elder- the ultimate, original, and definitive *MAD* man- shone. He was a wicked mimic who nailed the styles of fellow professionals with killer accuracy and turned them on their head. To this day I'm amazed he got away with his parody of the Mouse and the Duck (treading carefully here) in Harvey's seminal breakthrough send-up *Mickey Rodent*. Perhaps the Mouse was not yet so rabidly devoted to crushing all-who-sully-the-golden-signature-of-uncle-Walt in it's gloved iron fist. Apart from these chameleon-like abilities, Elder, a whacked-out prankster, set the tone for the art in *MAD* by cramming every panel with eye popping sight gags, all rendered with as much care as the stuff he was actually getting paid to draw. Mercenary buddies like Davis and Feldstein must have thought he was off his rocker. Fans of his know it. More than any other cartoonist before or since, Elder earns my love and gratitude.

Then there was li'l Marie Severin, "EC's conscience", and her big brother John. Marie was the young pup at the EC offices, as well as unofficial mascot, and the sole colorist for their entire line. As is par for the course with EC, she was a marvel, working subtle wonders with that horrible four color system they clobbered comics with right up until the '90's. Her much cited habit of choosing a dark hue to color the loose intestines decorating the horror mags earned her the old chestnut label "EC's first sensor". Her brother John Severin worked solely in Kurtzman's war comics due to his solid staging and dedicated attention to historical detail. He also worked on *MAD*, but his talents did not serve him best in the funny pages. The hawk of the EC bunch, Big John was fervently anti-communist ("And probably all the other 'anti-s' that go along with it" remarks Kurtzman's wife Adele). When he took over as the editor of *Two Fisted Tales* after Harvey Kurtzman, he ditched the anti-war angle and returned it to testosterone fueled fighting man stuff apropos the title.

Such was the EC line-up. This remarkable grouping of diverse talents did not occur entirely by chance. Severin, though originally a southern kid like Davis, had gone to the same high school of Music and Visual arts in New York as Elder, Kurtzman, and Feldstein, forming a sort of unofficial version of the gang as teen-agers in the '30's. At EC, Davis, Elder, Wood, and the rest seemed to thrive on an atmosphere of healthy (but fierce) competition, enjoying a great period of vitality during the company's short life span. It showed on every page. They were dedicated to their craft, and the work. Though famous for the irreverence of their material, they were not iconoclasts (rather, they were not flakes). The war, the depression, instilled in them a need for security. The work ethic that developed kept them fastened to the desk, while their imaginations ran wild on the page. Because of this we have a substantial body of quality work to celebrate fifty years later. But what it meant for Bill Gaines at the time were sales, not to mention the first flourish of comic book fandom. Pen pal fan clubs like *Spa-Fon* and *Fandom*, started by dedicated young collectors (remember there were no comic book specialty stores at the time), popped up the country over, attracting tykes like Robert Crumb and Marty Pahl. Bill had turned his fathers's business into a success story, and EC's

artists savored their first taste of stardom in the industry. But the walls were starting to close in around them.

The rest is an oft told story: By 1953 parents were starting to take notice of what their kids were reading (which wasn't hard, given the severed heads and limbs on the covers). Dr. Frederick Wertham- a concerned, paranoid, demented child psychologist- poured a healthy dose of lighter fluid on the smoldering flames of discontent with the publication of his notorious book *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he pegged Batman and Robin as fags, saw the Nietzsche-Nazi myth in comics' power fantasies, and laid the blame for adolescent crime solely at the feet of Gaines and company. The outcry that followed literally saw comics being burned on the funeral pyre of public outrage as set ablaze by the good doctor (filmed footage of which has given comic fans enough Nuremberg rally imagery for well over a half century of hand wringing). Finally, in 1954, television (comics new entertainment rival) lit up the homes of America with the *Senate Subcommittee Hearing on Comics & Juvenile Delinquency*. Gaines voluntarily appeared at the hearing to defend comics,

and while his opening comments are legend, he stepped all over his dick in the second half of his testimony. His notions of what made for good taste in horror comics and cries of communist persecution were smeared across papers nation wide by tongue-clucking reporters. Ultimately, the national exposure hurt more than it helped; The witch comics had been given their public dunking. Suddenly publishers were scrambling to appease the community, and thus instituted the Comics Code Authority, a voluntary system of heavy-handed self-regulation (forever after represented by that weird little stamp of approval in the corner of those double-sized Archie digests you bought as a kid).

So sweeping, ill-defined, and repressive were the new code's guidelines that EC's brand of spatter stories could not possibly earn the okay- and no comic would be distributed without it (adding to the burden in no small way was the fact that Gaines' fellow publishers conspired to put him out of business by forbidding the words "horror", "crime", or "weird" on the cover of a comic book). Sure enough, Gaines' rivals succeeded; he quickly put his crime, horror, and science fiction titles out to pasture. This was the downside of EC. Now all Bill had was Kurtzman's strange little esoteric humour comic, *MAD*, and that was threatening to walk out the door. Harvey Kurtzman, ever ambitious, wanted to work in a more sophisticated format than comics and was being wooed by then novice magazine publisher Hugh Hefner. Bill, desperate to keep Harvey, countered with an offer to let Harvey turn *MAD* from a 10 cent comic into a "slick", which Harvey would have creative control over. And that, kiddies, is how *MAD* magazine was born. Conveniently, it could now avoid the censors, as it no longer fell into the shameful realm of the comic book medium. Kurtzman fiddled with the new format as Gaines' company burned, and as a result, got better work than ever from his regular contributors Davis, Wood, and Elder. *MAD* magazine was launched in July, 1955. The new format worked, and moreover, it sold, "like pizza on Mulberry Street". The rest is all troubled history.

In the meantime, conditions worsened at EC. Cops raided the offices and busted the secretary and business manager due to



a Mickey Spillane parody in *Panic*, EC's own *MAD* imitation. Gaines and Feldstein were both in therapy. In a pathetic attempt to appease the code, and to keep the gang busy, they concocted the New Direction line- featuring such socko titles such as *M.D.*, *Extra!*, and *Psychoanalysis* (the latter inspired by Bill and Al's own therapy jaunts). It neither appeased the Code, nor kept any one busy. One story addressed anti-semitism, yet no jewish references were allowed. The line folded quick. EC closed it's doors. Many of the industry's artists were now out in the cold. Feldstein found himself unemployed, while others got mediocre work drawing *Superduperman* with a straight face, while still others left comics altogether. And this is the Code's legacy. It ended the renaissance. Comic's escape from the ghetto that started with EC ended with EC, and as frightening as that is, ghoulunatics, the Code still exists today (thanks largely to chains like Wal-Mart), it's restrictions unrevised. Even your dear author's artwork is now subjected to it. Thus we have another fiftieth anniversary to take note of soon.

Back at EC, Bill Gaines was not a beaten man. *MAD* was continuing to sell, despite Kurtzman's snail-pace perfectionism, and Gaines started to recover from the disaster of the New Direction line.

Then Harvey demanded 51% ownership of *MAD*.

He didn't get it. Prompted by his business manager Lyle Stuart, a sleazy tabloid publisher who resented Kurtzman, Bill dropped Harvey like one of his many diets, and hired Feldstein back to run *MAD* in the fall of '56. With Al bringing method to the *MADness* and Bill further honing his business savvy, they put the magazine firmly on it's path to becoming the money-making vehicle for homogenized kiddie fare as we recognize it today. Harvey set forth on his own enterprises with all the aplomb of a door-to-door vacuum salesman fleeing neighborhood dogs. Gamely following him were Wood, Davis, and Elder. Poor simple Harvey... He thought the best artists, writing, and production in the business were more important than the business. Three different magazines, and three different failures put Kurtzman safely at Hugh Hefner's bosom, creating smarmy *Little Annie Fanny* strips for *Playboy* magazine over the next twenty years. Did Kurtzman overstep his boundaries, or did he merely ask for what was rightly his? For those of us who know full well that our history is comprised of one long screwing over of the creative mind since time immemorial the case is open and shut- as so expressed by Scott Russo: "If there's one life lesson Harvey can teach us all, it's not to work for a fat old diabetic scum bag like William M. Gaines. *MAD* magazine is the only thing he published that lasted. It was Kurtzman's brainchild. Gaines is rich as a pig in shit. There is no justice." But I would advise those who endorse such an - ahem- *extreme* point of view, that *MAD* was all Gaines published at the time, and thus Harvey was asking for- nay, demanding- 51% of Bill's entire business. Remember, although nothing Gaines published besides *MAD* survived, nothing Kurtzman every created besides *MAD* survived either. Perhaps Harvey and Bill needed each other. 50/50 (or 51/49, as the case may be). But, in the end, creators

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rights are creators rights, and if owning something one created- the whole damn thing- was unheard of at the time, and if 51% ownership was considered an insult, then Kurtzman was at least owed a chunk, *something*, of what was his by rights.

There were more downsides. Reed Crandall and fan favorites Wally Wood and "Ghastly" Graham Ingels were slowly being consumed by alcoholism. Sadly, the cartooning profession, with its long lonely hours and constant pressures, is a breeding ground for the disease, and now it had a firm grip on the EC collective. Ingels always produced less than his fellow artists because of it, and with EC's demise it devoured him. Wally Wood, who returned to *MAD* after Kurtzman issued an us-or-them ultimatum, was fired by Feldstein for turning in a job behind schedule, and for its condition... The job was a drunk man's mess. Wood went on in the undergrounds, creating charming strips in his own title *Witzend*, but his problems with the bottle continued. He turned his back on the EC days, and an air of bitterness arose in his work. Wally's most famous story for EC was *My World* from *Weird Science* #22. An auto-

biographical story, Wood takes us through a visual collage of fantasy scenarios, all meant to represent his fertile mind. He ends the story with the last panel coda: "For my world is the world of science fiction... conceived in my mind and placed upon paper with pencil and ink and brush and sweat and a great deal of love for my world. For I am a science fiction artist. My name is Wood." The words were actually penned by scripter Feldstein, and Wood was now trying to kill that identity forever in *My Word*. Switching from lush alien landscapes to the sprawling urban jungles of modern day New York, *My Word* is an acerbic look at a cartoonist's place amidst a sexually obsessed soci-

ety. The new coda in the last panel: "My word is the word I choose to make it, for I conceive it in my mind and put it down on paper with a lot of sweat and love and shit like that, For I am a troglodyte. My name is spafon gool." He did not wear the new identity well. Spafon gool had a long dark road ahead of him.

Graham "Ghastly" Ingels would fare no better. He continued to struggle in comics to no avail, until giving up for good in '59. Unfortunately he stuck with the bottle, and after three years as an art instructor he suddenly abandoned his family and his job one day in 1962... Disappearing, seemingly, off the face of the earth. The other EC artists moved on in different directions, some keeping true to the cause, others bowing out- all to varying degrees of success. Bill Gaines continued with *MAD*, finding vindication in the '70's resurgence of EC fandom. Nurturing his larger than life image, he found great fame in the '80's and '90's, largely ignoring the contributions of Kurtzman, and Feldstein in later life. Ignoring them so's he would get the glory... So's he could go on making his millions... So's he could eat wine dipped, mongolian fried sausage and fill his cherished wine cellar...

Flash forward to the year 2000, to the San Diego ComiCon, and the veterans re-uniting for the first time in the forty years- plus since the end of the affair. Many have led legendary careers in the interim, becoming institutions until themselves. In fact, one of the young men who was in the audience that

day remembers following the works of Davis and Williamson as just a little aficionado-to-be, long before ever hearing about the two letter company that kicked off their careers, Williamson for his Star Wars strips, and Davis for his fine, fine Spalding ads ("Man, those rubber balls are just too slick!"). Now they had been gathered under one roof, in the meager conference rooms of the convention center, for one last fling- all greying, some spry, some not, but in apparently good spirits and willing to indulge in faded nostalgia once more for the sake of the fan-addicts.

The ubiquitous Al Feldstein, EC figure head and front man, was the most accessible and available of the returning heroes (appropriately so, given his level of involvement with the company). Al saw it all, from the publication of the first *Entertaining Comic* to the world-domination of *MAD Magazine*, from which he retired as the highest paid editor in the world in 1985. He now works to forge a new identity as a painter of the vanishing western landscape, but despite the inherent wonders of *Bobcat with Cub #4* or *Sioux Women with Child*, his name remains synonymous with the Little Company That Could But Wasn't Allowed To.

Perhaps the star participant at the convention was cherished nutball Will Elder, patron saint of crazed cartoonists, appearing for the first time publicly since 1976. Weathered, spacey, and speaking in fluent senior citizen, he struck a frail, diminutive figure not unlike Mel Brooks' Jewish Yoda. Yet he constantly broke up the crowd with razor-like wit that appeared out of the blue at regular intervals, relating tales of famous pranks (my favorite being the time he dressed joints of meat in children's clothing and scattered them across the local railroad tracks, fooling everyone -- including the police). Elder always stayed true to his humor roots after EC, sticking with Kurtzman through *MAD*, *Humbug*, *Trump*, and twenty years of beautifully painted *Little Annie Fanny* strips, which he followed with semi-retirement after the strip ended in the '80's.

Joining him on the panel was fellow humor artist Jack Davis. Originally unscheduled to appear, Davis breezed in on the third day and sat himself next to compatriot Elder (who immediately carried on with him like they were a pair of teenagers). Plump, healthy, and good natured, Davis was, as Jim Woodring wrote, "the very image of the grand and venerable practitioner", relating polite anecdotes apropos a southern gentleman, all in a gravy thick southern accent. At present Davis is widely recognized as the grand daddy of commercial art, but while his loose, water color TV guide covers, movie posters, slim jim ads, et al. still have that trade mark Davis zing, they can't (for me) match the crisp crackle of his pen and brush work of the EC salad days.

Also in attendance was Al Williamson, who came across as bullish and irascible during panel appearances, and let the audience decide for itself whether his attitude was tongue-in-cheek, or the hubris of a man who is rightly recognized as comicdom's premiere fantasy artist. Joining him was former assistant Angelo Torres, who stuck with *MAD* after his EC days, re-inventing himself as the magazine's second best caricaturist (after Mort Drucker. Sorry, Ang), and Jack Kamen. Under-appreciated work-horse Kamen left comics for commercial illustration after EC folded, where he stayed until his

retirement, the loss to comics going unchecked. Par for the course, he was hardly the center of attention in San Diego, but at least one person present was in awe of the man. EC's other science fiction artist, Joe Orlando slipped out from under the shadow of Williamson and Wood in post-Gaines life, finding his own style at DC comics, where he remained for more than thirty years, eventually becoming one of the company's top executives. He died in 1998, so we'll forgive him.

The spectre of "Ghastly" Graham Ingels did not present itself during the con, though a walking corpse would have been a fitting addition to the proceedings. As mentioned earlier, Ingels had vanished in the early '60's, but Bill Gaines eventually tracked him down in Florida in 1977, only to be brusquely rebuked by his former employee. Ingels had apparently given up the bottle, was teaching in the arts, and was adamant that he was not to be bothered with his EC days. Russ Cochran, publisher of the EC reprints throughout the last three decades, eventually coaxed Ingels out of hiding in 1988, convincing him that the renewed fan interest in his EC art would benefit sales of his current work. Ingel's paintings of historic Victorian homes in Florida sold as well as you would imagine

to thirty year old comic book collectors looking for another zombie pin-up for their parent's basement. Finally, Ingels gave them what they wanted when Cochran commissioned him to produce a handful of new paintings of the EC's horror host, *The Old Witch*, which sold for more money than a fan-boy has a right to possess. Ingels had finally come full circle. He passed away in 1991, shortly after another EC guy-turned-fine artist left us. Avant-garde cartoonist Bernie "Master Race" Krigstein gave up the ghost in 1990. Had he lived, I doubt he would have graced too many comics book conventions. He, too, denounced his funny book career early on.

Also missing from the roster were the crime boys; George Evans, Johnny Craig and Reed Crandall. Evans and Craig passed on the reunion for different personal reasons, Crandall simply passed on, but not before reaching an ignominious end to a distinguished career as night janitor of a Pizza Hut in Wichita Kansas circa the mid-'70's. Alcoholism took its final toll when he died of a coronary in a nursing home in 1982. After continuing to work in war comics for DC, Evans retired from comics in 1996, but still produces one of those beautiful bi-plane drawings now and then. Craig found work-for-hire where he could after EC, often relegated to inker status, but he too hung up the brush in the '90s. Currently he can still be commissioned to produce a vintage scene of grisly murder for those with the right coin.

Silver-haired Marie Severin was also present, in better health and mind at age 70 than myself at half that (which she sweetly rationalized away with some line about the cartooning profession being harder on men than women). She's come a long way, baby. Originally EC's colorist, she was also an accomplished artist in her own right. But, with her youth as a disqualifier, she was not quite up to company standards. Since then she has staked her claim at Marvel Comics, gracing their books with genuine drawing skill. Her current work can hold a flame to any of the old EC boys, including her big brother John, who was nowhere to be found at the con- and was given nary a mention in any of the promotional materials, or in any



of the panel discussions I attended (not even from his sis). John Severin has also come a long way since his awkward days at EC. He's found fame as the number one artist at *Cracked* magazine, *MAD*'s chief rival, rendering any given assignment in a beautiful combination of delicate line work and mechanical grey tones. Maybe it was this first class act of treason that earned him symbolic pariah status at the San Diego celebration.

Finally, and most notably, absent were Harvey Kurtzman and Bill Gaines. For the longest time, you *couldn't* have put the two men in a room together, but the animosity between them eventually dissolved, and by the mid '80s they seemed to have made amends. Gaines even "charitably" offered Kurtzman work at *MAD* once again, and Kurtzman, despite everything, charitably accepted (the pay having no small part in this decision). Feldstein comments: "I thought that was very sweet and kind of Bill to allow him to do that, although I think he [Kurtzman] was already beginning to suffer a little from his physical problems" (read: the work stunk). Kurtzman was sick. During the last decade of his life he suffered from Parkinson's disease, and later colon cancer. He died in 1993, still cracking up fellow patients during chemotherapy sessions. He is still regarded here and abroad as one of the most influential cartoonists ever.

Gaines, himself, had shuffled off his massive mortal coil just months prior to Harvey in '92 due to medical conditions exacerbated by a life long love of food and wine. The proximity of the two passings (I believe) kicked off a decade that witnessed the death of far too many of our most cherished luminaries (most recently Don Martin and Charles Schulz). Bill and Harvey will always occupy a special place in my heart (though Harvey gets the left ventricle). Fortunately, they were represented at the re-union by their widows, Adelle and Annie, respectively. I know little about Annie Gaines, other than that she was Gaines' third wife, was active at *MAD* magazine as Gaines' assistant editor for the last dozen years of his life, and to this day represents the heart and soul of her late husband at whatever's left of the *MAD* offices. As for Adelle, having recently read a beautiful interview with Mrs. Kurtzman, I am dying a thousand deaths that I missed this her appearance at the reunion. She too has her place in EC lore, as she met Harvey while a secretary at Timely Comics (later to be known as Marvel Comics), and started a marriage which lasted nearly as long as EC's enduring legacy. She possesses an insight, intelligence, and wry, wry, sense of humor that must have complemented Kurtzman's sensibilities perfectly (many of her recollections of the good old days are the sharpest, not to mention most laughably cynical, of the Entertaining gang). She's also a worthy trustee of her late husband's memory; She has worked for the past 12 years at Clear View School, a school for emotionally handicapped children, which she and Harvey helped establish for the sake of their autistic son, Peter. A remarkable woman. But even leaving these outstanding qualities aside, meeting either Mrs. Gaines or Mrs. Kurtzman will now be the closest anyone can get to meeting Harvey or Bill. By virtue of this alone, their presence in San Diego was price-

less.

For the hopelessly devoted much of what San Diego had to offer was priceless. If we had heard the stories a hundred times before, hearing them now at least confirmed our faith in EC mythology. If Kurtzman taught us all the world was a lie, seeing the EC Gang cavort like high school kids in San Diego was at least a chance to momentarily return to childhood innocence. It was, in all sincerity, a once in a life time experience.

But.

With such efforts being expended by fans and organizers to give the grand high mystic gods of pen and brush a proverbial twenty-one gun salute-complete-with-cake-and-ice cream... With our rapturous applause at the merest cough from one of the honored guests gleefully drowning out the Ben Katchor and Phoebe Gloeckner presentations down the hall... The question begs asking: What exactly were we celebrating? Perspective is needed; We can not idealize EC comics too much. Despite the prodigious talent and technical efficiency found within, they do not represent the pinnacle of what the

medium has to offer. On the contrary, EC comics were at best primers, a primitively structured use of the art form as compared to the expression, invention, intelligence and literary scope seen in the better undergrounds of the 60's and alternatives of today. I highly doubt when Al Feldstein was frantically writing one more revenge from the grave story at three in the morning to fill that week's quota he had any notion that he was creating potential "classics-to-be", destined to be scrutinized under a microscope fifty years later. "I wasn't seeking any lauding or fame for this," Feldstein says now, "I was seeking a cheque so I could pay my mortgage out on Long Island

and get these kids of mine grown and pay for the car and whatever, you know. So that was the drive on my part. I was turning out a product that was deserving of the compensation I received." Fifty years later, that product is by and large inconsequential. You can find the gems, but truthfully, the rest of the work is going to take you on the same carousel ride. While I do think the student of comics can learn a lot from Al's scripts, and certainly from the artwork appended to them, EC's real contribution and worth can be summed up in one word: *MAD*. Which came courtesy of one Harvey Kurtzman.

Given Harvey's eternal rewards for this contribution, the picture of Bill Gaines as heroic force for magic and mirth starts to run and stain as well. His heavy handed paternalism, his penchant for self-aggrandizement, his refusal to pay royalties or return artwork (when *MAD*'s art vaults overflowed they held an auction at Sotheby's, and subsequently netted over \$600,000. None of which went to the artists. No "just desserts" when this vault was disturbed, EC really was dead)... It all smacks of the typical image of a publisher who sees himself and his business at the top of an inverted pyramid, with the artist sitting squarely on the bottom. That Harvey died one more embittered veteran earns old Bill not a few demerit points.

But no injustices can strip Kurtzman of his mantle as the genius behind *MAD*. *MAD* was an neutron bomb dropped on the peaceful nation of '50's pop culture. It's initial release had

*If I had it all to do over
again, I wouldn't do it...
And yet, I'm not sorry I
am where I am.
I guess it all depends on
how this works out.
If I make it, it was all
worth it. If I don't, it
wasn't.*

-Wally Wood

a delayed effect, like a shock wave slowly working its way from the epicenter of the initial blast out to the very periphery of the collective unconscious of America's youth, laying waste to the '50's idealism that stood before it. I'm convinced that the arrival of *MAD*, coinciding with Elvis' arrival on the television, did no less than bridge the modernist and the post-modernist ages, paving the way for a new era. Art Spiegelman claims "*MAD* had at least the same impact as pot or LSD on the shape of the '60's.", as is echoed by Patti Smith, who so aptly put it: "After *MAD*, drugs were nothing." *MAD* had a young Robert Crumb rummaging through endless garage sales for back-issues, saved Bill Griffith from a career in plastics, and made a young Denny Eichorn throw up in the toilet. It put the zap to Gilbert Shelton and Rick Griffith. It even made young feminists laugh. Witness Trina Robbins: "My generation became the hippies and Yippies and rebels we did because *MAD* taught us to laugh at authority. *MAD* formed us." Because of it Kurtzman was pegged "the father of the under-grounds" (he wryly demanded a blood test).

The rest of the EC cannon, however, was found to have had a malignant effect on the other end of the undergrounds. The horror stuff was being aped so slavishly by folks like Jaxon and Richard Corben, the *Death Rattle* gang, that *Zippy* creator Bill Griffith eventually issued *A Battle Cry* in 1973, an important wake up call that bears repeating thirty years later. "Why is there a tendency in the underground comic to resemble a slightly altered version of above ground comics?", Griffith penned, "What's this business with the tits and monsters and werewolves? Hey, I want to know what's underground about corpses besides burying 'em, huh? And all that half-baked, crackpot science fiction creeping onto the racks that was pathetic back in the '50's when it was at least new? I recognize the mastery of the EC creators, as well as other innovators of the '40's and '50's. What's really important to recognize is that comics then were still an unevolved art form for all their technical prowess and tight execution. They were held back by their times, restrained, leashed by the law, by economic realities and public reaction. On the other hand underground comics have burrowed through to the day light as an evolved art form, bringing together diverse elements and ideas ... So what do we need with the EC tradition?"

What do we need with the EC tradition, indeed?

In her reflection on the medium in the *Comics Journal*, Heidi MacDonald once wrote: "Like it or not, we're trapped in our sick, beautiful little world. And it is beautiful no matter how bad the pain. I can't help but recall Wally Wood's famous self-portrait (My World). Talk about a sad life and death... But what great art along the way. Was it worth it? I think all art is worth the suffering." Was it worth it? Were the space-ships, the inter-stellar beef-cake jocks, the tits and monsters and werewolves worth it?

Myth-making aside, any suggestion that Wood's art cost him his life- that the greatness brought him down to the nothingness- is ultimately inaccurate, and, I think dangerous. The sit-

uation is more complex than that: Jack Mendehelson, writer of *Panic* and the *Yellow Submarine* movie, revealed in San Diego that Wood once confided to him that he suffered crippling 24 hour migraines that he could do nothing about... save work through them. Given the labour intensive complexity of Wood's work, this would drive anyone to drink. His intense schedule- compounded with his psychiatric problems, compounded with a string of failed marriages, compounded with financial problems- brought on a stroke, leaving him partially paralyzed and blind in one eye. He internalized it all... Drawing whatever work-for-hire jobs came his way through the sixties and seventies. Wally finally came to the end of his line when they started hooking him up to a dialysis machine. In 1981 he took his own life. His last work, *Gang Bang #3*, a superhero smut rag, was published posthumously. It is not a worthy epitaph. Nor are the tales of his boozy indiscretions, such as his dismissal from *MAD*. Given the circumstances, and the quality of his work that was printed in *MAD*, it can be forgiven. In the end, I don't believe his passion and intensity- and the art it subsequently produced- ever took a toll on Woody. Rather these qualities saw him through tremendous adversity- the kind that too often conspires to stop artists dead in their tracks.

"If I had it all to do over again, I wouldn't do it..."

And yet, I'm not sorry I am where I am.

I guess it all depends on how this works out.

If I make it, it was all worth it. If I don't, it wasn't."

-Wally Wood

I agree with Scott McCloud's assessment in *Understanding Comics*: Our culture is held in thrall to the simplified, dynamic reality of the cartoon. This, then, is the popularity of EC Comics. The power and simplicity of the images- the *cartoons*- still resonate. Jules Feiffer, in his essay *The Great Comic Book Heroes*, put it thus: "We were a generation... We were out to be splendid- somehow." Much of that generation couldn't draw, but they had heart... and once in a while one of those non-drawers drew so much, for so long, with so much heart, that a Jack Kirby emerged. Kirby, Crane, Caniff, Eisner, Wood- all of them took tremendous pride in crafting comic's first rocket-from-the-crypt, industrial strength icons. They had *cajones*. And if you understand this, you understand why we must honour them: These cartoonists were our manhood- our living manhood! An Angels zombie, a Wood hot rod in space, Elder's *Melvin Mole*, Davis' *Crypt Keeper*... these icons, no matter how naive and unsophisticated they seem in retrospect, have made a greater impact on our society's consciousness than a million gutless attempts at "art" by girl cartoonists of both genders in the fifty years since. And this then, is worth it. This is our heritage... and our greatest debt. EC may be long dead, but its soul still haunts the land. The EC gang have forever encoded their genetic imprint of lunacy on generations of misfits to come.

Hoo Hah.

James Lloyd by Drippy The Newsboy

Boy-o-boy-o-boy-o-boy! Mr. Lloyd is one of my favorite cartoonists! Ask him to draw you a picture and he'll do one! And it will look just like Bart or Homer or Maggie or Fry or Bender or even Bill Gaines.

