

# Comic Column

by Sean McQuaid

An unwritten rule of modern comics is the principle of safety in numbers; that is, super heroes and their ilk have a habit of forming teams in ever-increasing droves. Eminently practical reasoning, when you think about it: why risk life and limb when you can pursue bad guys in the relative security of a crowd of superpersons? The concept also makes good financial sense: why risk money on the appeal of some lone character when you can provide a gang of heroes more likely to attract a wider variety of readers? That was the question asked by young artist-editor Sheldon Mayer in 1940, when he created the Justice Society of America. The JSA were the world's first super team, and the model from which all the modern super teams were developed. Super teams like the Justice League, the Avengers, the titans, and the X-Men are among the most popular and successful comics in publication, and that being the case one would expect the JSA to be thriving; however, the JSA's recent revival in their own title has proven less than profitable. The book has an appealing cast of classic characters and entertaining scripts, but suffers fatally from blatantly cartoony artwork and a nostalgic sensibility that sometimes strays into self-indulgent corn.

The JSA first assembled in *All-Star Comics* #3, dated Winter 1940. It was a time when superheroes were still a relatively new idea. Superman had sparked the concept's popularity when he exploded onto the scene in 1938, and the trend gathered steam in 1939 with the appearance of such masked mystery-men as the Crimson Avenger, the Batman, and the Sandman. DC comics, publisher of the biggest names



like Superman and Batman, expanded its publishing with the new "All-American" line, whose titles included *All-American Comics*, *Flash Comics*, and others. Early on, All-American editorial boy genius Sheldon Mayer hit on the idea of publishing a book that would showcase the top heroes of the DC and All-American lines under one anthology title: thus was born *All-Star Comics*, but Mayer's innovation didn't end there. With the book's third issue he introduced the Justice Society of America, the world's first super team and the cream of the DC/All-American crop. The assembled heroes included: the Sandman, a gas-masked, cloaked, gas-gun wielding Green Hornet derivative who was in actuality bored playboy Wesley Dodds; the Hourman, mild-mannered chemist Rex "Tick-Tock" Tyler whose Miracle pills gave him a sixty-minute charge of superhuman strength

and speed; Doctor Fate, a golden-helmeted mystic who'd been tutored in the magic arts by an Egyptian sorcerer named Nabu; the Spectre, a murdered police detective who returned to the earthly plane as a near-omnipotent ghostly avenger; the Atom, a diminutive chap who took up costumed crimefighting after having trained to the peak of athletic perfection to fend off big bullies; the Green Lantern, whose magic ring, when charged at the lantern from which he took his name, enabled him to mystically affect all matter and energy save wood; the Hawkman, a reincarnated Egyptian prince who fought evil with ancient weapons and with the wings and "Nth metal" harness that enabled him to fly; and the Flash, a scientist who accidentally inhaled a weird combination of chemical vapors that gave him the ability to move faster than "the rapidity of thought", let alone a speeding