

Panelology

By Sean McQuaid

Northstar (four-issue limited series)
 Writer--Simon Furman; Penciler-- Dario Carrasco Jr.; Inkers--Ian Akin and Jack Keefer

He's faster than the Flash, meaner than Wolverine, and probably the only French Canadian gay super-hero in mainstream comics. He's Northstar, fresh from the ranks of Marvel's recently cancelled *Alpha Flight* team book, and he's now appearing in his own four-issue limited series.

Jean-Paul Beaubier, alias Northstar, debuted as a member of the Canadian super-team *Alpha Flight* in *Uncanny X-Men* #120-121. The Canadian heroes (created by Canadian writer-artist John Byrne) were so unexpectedly popular that they were spun off into their own series, which enjoyed great popularity and publicity under Byrne but slowly declined in the hands of later creative teams--so that, after a run of more than ten years, *Alpha Flight* was recently cancelled; by that time, though, *Flight* member Northstar had attracted a good deal of publicity himself.

Northstar was always the maverick of the *Alpha Flight* ranks, a fascinating character if not an overly likeable one. An arrogant,

acerbic, self-superior, silver-haired mutant speedster, he seemed rather like a somewhat more extreme version of Marvel's long-established Quicksilver character; there was more to it than that, though. On a purely physical level, Northstar was unique in that he couldn't just run super-fast-- he also had the ability to out-and-out fly. Plus, he had a symbiotic link with his twin sister, Aurora, so that whenever they touched they produced a blinding white light. More interesting, though, were Northstar's character and background. He used his powers to become a champion skier, a celebrity, but he had a secret past as a terrorist in the Quebec separatist movement during the 1970's. These political beliefs (eventually made public) and Beaubier's mutant nature combined to fuel Northstar's bitter outcast mentality.

Northstar's biggest

(and somewhat dubious) claims to fame, though, is a comparatively recent revelation about the character's personal life--the fact that he's gay. This bombshell, dropped in *Alpha Flight* #106, generated a spurt of media interest surpassed in recent times only by DC Comics' "Death of Superman" campaign. People were shocked that a character in a mainstream, high-profile book (published by the none-too-adventurous Marvel Comics) could be depicted as a homosexual, and there was much speculation as to whether anything positive would come of it.

Proving the old publicity adage that it doesn't matter what they say about you as long as they spell your name right, Northstar's controversial characterization catapulted him from relative obscurity to relative notoriety, and Marvel is testing the waters with a limited series to see if this also translates into saleability. Pseudo-politically correct issue exploitation, anyone?

One thing you notice about the debut issue of *Northstar* is the fact that writer Simon Furman has carefully avoided any overt reference to Northstar's sexuality whatsoever. This may be gutlessness on Marvel's part (trying not to scare off less open-minded readers right off the bat), but it's also sensible story-telling--does a Batman book devote itself to careful study of the Dark Knight's heterosexuality? Seldom, if ever. Issues like a character's sexuality, religion, race, and so forth, should only be centred on if those issues are the focus of a given story; otherwise, you run the risk of turning characters into stereotypes, disposable tokens. Marvel shouldn't back away from Northstar's sexuality, but they should be careful to present it as one aspect of his character, not his defining trait. As "Marvel's Gay Super-Hero", he would probably be even less successful than, say, "Marvel's Black Super-Hero", Cage (remember his swift and merciful cancellation?). Thus far, homosexuality is only present in the book as an undercurrent-- things like Jean-Paul's hinted significant other, Raul; his strictly male circle of social acquaintances; and an unspoken contempt in certain government officials' views of him as an embarrassing aberration they would like to remove from the public eye.

Speaking of those nasty government types, this is where the plot thickens. By the time *Northstar* #1 begins, Jean-Paul has quit *Alpha Flight* and fled Canada after bridling at government investigation of his conduct as an *Alpha Flight* member. Arriving in Europe, Jean-Paul returns to the life of a hard-partying, bad boy celebrity while trying to find some direction in his new life of freedom. Meanwhile, the Canadian covert agency Department K has concluded that Northstar is a loose cannon who should be removed from the public eye; to do this, they send a warped and wicket quintet of super-agents called Weapon:

P.R.I.M.E., who set out to forcibly captive Northstar for detainment and questioning, without worrying about any of the niceties of due process. When a sleazy reporter who has been harassing Northstar is mysteriously murdered, this casts further suspicion on the hero, and he soon finds himself a fugitive; worse yet, his few personal friends are being threatened by unknown parties, leading Northstar into an assassin's ambush in Paris, with Weapon P.R.I.M.E. hot on his trail.

Simon Furman's story is reasonably engaging and multi-faceted. Northstar's flight from the government and his mysterious would-be-assassins combine nicely with the hero's journey towards self-discovery-- everything seems to be going somewhere, and at a reasonably fast pace. Northstar remains the pompous albeit noble hero you love to hate, and he carries the story with minimal reliance on the supporting cast. Penciler Dario Carrasco Jr.'s stuff is dynamic and fast-moving, with the capacity for mood and characterization as well as high-speed action.

Northstar #1 is a solid debut effort despite its flaws (for instance, there is little revelation of the character's backstory for new readers), and it will be interesting to see where the character goes from here. Who knows? Comics may finally be ready for a gay character or two to come out of the phone booth.

Campus Comment

What do you think the attitude on campus is toward sexual orientation? (particularly gays, lesbians, bisexuals and queers)

"I think it is bad. The whole damn Island is bad. People are scared of gays and lesbians to the point of starting rumours and hurting them. At an institution of higher learning, I would hope that people would be beyond that."

Mike Klenavic
 Freshman History

"The Island is homophobic and can't be open. People are in the dark because there is a large gay population on the Island. People do not understand, and once this barrier is broken then it would be better accepted."

Jason Clark
 Sophomore Arts

"The Island is homophobic. But the people around university are more accepting because the issues are more prominent and discussed in the university setting."

Stephen Shoemaker

"The attitude is bad. People don't have a high opinion of it. They are afraid of it because they are so sheltered here."

Jennifer Bell
 Sophomore Home Economics

