

Entertainment

COMIC COLUMN

by SEAN MCQUAID

This month ComiColumn takes a look at something a bit less high concept, namely the *Titans Sell-Out Special*, which will have been in the bookshops for about a week by the time you read this. With 40 pages of story on higher quality new format paper at \$4.25 Canadian, it's a good read albeit a bit pricey, and a nice intro to the Titans for those unfamiliar with their ongoing series.

For those of you who don't know a Titan from a hole in the wall, it's understandable; the team has had less exposure in recent years due to lessening popularity and the fact that special format books like theirs are only available to the direct sales market (comic shops, specialty stores, and the like), but DC Comics has in the past few years tried to juice up the Titans and restore their popularity. The team currently features many new characters, though its origins stretch back to the fifties, when they started out as the Teen Titans, an alliance of kid crimefighters and sidekicks including Robin, Kid Flash, Wonder Girl, Speedy, Aqualad, and various lesser known junior supertypes such as Beast Boy, Hawk & Dove, Bumblebee, Golden Eagle, etc. It was a hard concept to take seriously, especially given the tendency of writers in those dark decades to make the characters sound like what they thought were typical teenagers (Like, groovy, Daddy-O!). The relative shortage of teen heroes also led to some pretty weak characters being invented for the series, including Mal Duncan (angry young streetwise black man), Lilith (go-go dancer turned psychic), Gnarrk (time-displaced caveman), and the Harlequin (who claimed to be the Joker's daughter and dressed like him but was only doing that as a sign of rebellion against her real father, Two-Face, whose criminal past was her motivation for crimefighting ... Yeah, right). With characters like these, and villains like the Mad Mod, Mister Twister, and Ding-Dong Daddy, it's perhaps merciful that the series was cancelled, though it was briefly revived and soon cancelled again in the seventies.

There was a lot of potential in the group, though, if a writer was willing to take them seriously, and that's what Marv Wolfman did when he and penciller George Perez revived the book as the

New Teen Titans in the early eighties, with Robin (Batman's original sidekick Dick Grayson, who soon after this passed the Robin costume on to a new kid and established his own adult identity as Nightwing) leading a smaller, reorganized version of the group that included Kid Flash (the Flash's old sidekick), Wonder Girl (junior Wonder Woman imitator), Changeling (formerly Beast Boy of the Doom Patrol) and three new characters: the half-mechanical Cyborg, the mysterious Raven, and the voluptuous alien powerhouse, Starfire. This group was by now slightly older than the previous teams (most of the team, including some of the former Teen Titans, are now into their early twenties), and a bit more mature, and Wolfman concentrated on character interaction as much as plot advancement. The new group was a wildly successful hit for DC Comics, but in later years the book stagnated. While various past members and new Titans have wandered through the series in the years since it began, Wolfman brought very little lasting change or development and worked with the same core characters for most of the next ten years, during which time the title switched from general sales to direct market distribution and suffered a diminishing audience. The book was becoming a repetitive soap opera and also languished under a succession of bad pencillers with the departure of George Perez. The book was slowly dying.

As it turns out, though, the Titans wouldn't go down for the third time. DC and writer Marv Wolfman began making changes in the team. Some of the more embarrassing and superfluous characters were either killed off or written out of existence (i.e. Aquagirl, Gnarrk, Harlequin, etc.) and the alteration of the "DC Universe" continuity's time line by the events of the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series gave DC's writers the opportunity to do with the Titans what they've done with a lot of their characters: rewrite their backgrounds, history, and origins where deemed necessary. So it was that angry young black man Mal Duncan was rewritten into the slightly less embarrassing character called the Herald, Batman-and-Robin-groupie Bette "Batgirl" Kane was rewritten into the less derivative character Flamebird, and the Harlequin was written out of existence altogether (I guess supervillains aren't supposed to have kids). With various other cosmetic and character alterations to the group's past the old Teen Titans were now a slightly more respectable background for the current Titans (see *Secret Origins Annual #3* for