

tain Ultra to Spider-Man. The flexible cast, which included more than a few occult or otherwise bizarre figures, allowed for some of Marvel's most off-the-wall stories, such as the menace of Nebulon's Celestial Mind Control Movement (a cult whose devotees dressed like clowns in order to come to terms with the "bozos" within themselves) and serial killer elves. The Defenders' adventures ranged from the ridiculous (coping with a huge influx of prospective members after an unauthorized TV documentary on the non-team) to the sublime (thwarting an attempt by Satan and the Six-Fingered-Hand to bring about Hell on Earth), written by such diverse scripters as Steve Englehart, Steve Gerber, Dave Kraft, Ed Hannigan, and J. M. DeMatteis (whose stint on the *Defenders* yielded some of the most impressive and thought-provoking stories ever done for comics up to that point). Unfortunately, it couldn't last. The book had a reasonably steady, longtime following, but the team's core cast (Doc Strange, Valkyrie, Hellcat, Nighthawk, and company) lacked mega-popular drawing cards with which to attract a wide audience (though a few Defenders, such as Hulk and Silver Surfer, have more recently become hot properties). The book struggled financially (a situation not helped by a general absence of impressive artwork in the book's later years), and the end began in *Defenders* #125, when most of the core members of the Defenders left the group and the remaining characters were organized into an "official" group consisting of Valkyrie, Gargoyle, Moondragon, and three defectors from Marvel's popular *X-Men*: Beast, Angel, and Iceman. The change, meant to increase readership, failed miserably. The book still lacked impressive artwork and extremely popular characters, and at the same time lost most of its following with the departure of its key characters and the transformation of the group into just another super-team. The book led a bland, quiet existence until it mercifully expired with #152 about two years later, at which time the short-lived "official" Defenders disbanded.

As previously noted, however, revivals are big business in comics these days. *The Defenders* has been cancelled for years, but neither fans nor comic creators have forgotten the team. Since the original Defenders were never really an official team, you could say they never really broke up, and Marvel has toyed with the idea of reviving the group by having Doc Strange round up some of his old cronies on occasion (such as, for instance, the embarrassingly bad "Return of the Defenders" storyline that ran in a series of *Marvel Annuals* last year and briefly reunited Strange, Namor, the Hulk, and the Silver Surfer). The most recent reunion came in *Doctor Strange* #50, wherein Doc, who is currently suffering from a major reduction of his mystical power, recruited the Hulk, the Silver Surfer and the Ghost Rider to help battle the dread Dormammu. At the conclusion of that

adventure, Doc gets to thinking: as detailed in Marvel's recent "Midnight Sons" series, there are more than a few mystical menaces lurking about the Earthly plane these days, and Doc can't handle it all by himself, especially in his current weakened state. So it is that Doc hits upon the idea of reviving the old Defenders team as Earth's last line of defense, and it is here that the new *Secret Defenders* series begins.

In essence, the new team stems from very much the same premise as the original Defenders, an informal group of heroes who team up only when faced with a threat that requires their combined abilities to oppose it; however, there's a bit of a twist this time. Doc Strange is the only regular member. Most of the old Defenders and many other heroes can't commit to a full-time organization, and Doc Strange has no desire to create a highly visible and easily targeted super group anyway. Instead, whenever Doc senses a new menace growing, he uses mystical intuition (and a tarot deck) to instinctively select heroes who are available and whose abilities suit the given situation. Hence, the Defenders' membership will literally change with every case for which the Doc assembles the team, and virtually anyone could be drafted into membership so long as they are willing. Moreover, the group's existence is secret (hence the new title).

In general, *The Secret Defenders* is an appealing and innovative reworking of the original Defenders concept. Doc Strange's new recruitment method (conceived by Dann Thomas, wife and collaborator of series writer Roy Thomas) is very original and holds virtually unlimited potential for a variety of cast members without being too contrived or cumbersome. As the writer himself described it, the new title's shifting line up resembles old, contrived team-up titles like *Marvel Team-Up*, where Spider-Man joined forces with a different super-hero or heroes each month, but the difference here is that there is an ongoing continuity with a central figure (Doc Strange) who has a definite, continuing role as a centre of alliances. While this tends to ensure a dynamic and varied cast, there are some potential weaknesses: for one, if Doc Strange remains the only core member of the Defenders it may be hard to establish a specific *Secret Defenders* following beyond fans of Doc Strange. In other words, the book's continued health may depend largely on fans of team-ups and guest stars rather than the Defenders per se. Such fans tend to have short and fickle attention spans, and one hopes that the creative team handling *Secret Defenders* will concentrate on producing good stories rather than catering solely to demand for popular characters (some ads for the book have been group pictures dominated by such fan-faves as Wolverine, Johnny Blaze, Ghost Rider, etc.). It's probably dangerously tempting for Marvel to consider doing lots of Wolverine/Punisher/Ghost Rider/Cable/team-ups and such, all the ultra-violent vigilantes who sell so well these days. For the first issue of the new series,

though, at least some restraint was shown in assembling a reasonably varied cast of characters. The first new lineup Dr Strange recruits consists of Darkhawk (a fairly popular, flying, armor-clad, urban teen crimefighter who has his own book), Nomad (a wandering, sometime crimefighter who also has his own book and who goes into action with his shotgun in hand and his baby girl Bucky strapped to his back), Spider-Woman (wall-crawling, web-spinning single mother who is an active member of Avengers West Coast), and, to ensure brisk sales, the ever-popular Wolverine (the feral, adamantium-clawed star of *X-Men*, his own book, and *Marvel Comics Presents*, and occasional guest star in just about everything else Marvel publishes). While Wolverine's there to appeal to cut-and-dried (no pun intended) action fans, kinder and gentler characters like the down-to-earth Spider-Woman, the inexperienced Darkhawk, the philosophically cynical Nomad and the cerebral Doctor Strange provide a solidly balanced cast.

The initial cast shows promise, as does the basic revolving membership theme if done well, but the book suffers creatively at present. The problem is not the writing. While his dialogue can sometimes be a bit stiff or out-of-character, Defenders co-creator and current scripter Roy Thomas turns in some of his usual good stuff. One of the shamefully few literate comics writers of his generation, Thomas brings to his scripts a wide knowledge of Marvel's characters and of people, places, and events outside of comic-book-land as well. The current plot, as one would expect from longtime *Dr. Strange* scripter Thomas, has some nice supernatural mystery elements and that touch of the bizarre and obscure that often characterized the old Defenders stories. Doc Strange senses evil brewing and, after recruiting his new batch of Defenders, mystically dispatches his associates to the heart of the trouble: Phoenix, Arizona, which has lately found itself overrun with teenage bank robbers, one of whom dies of old age before he can be questioned. Something strange, sinister, and supernatural is going on...which makes this a job for the Defenders (insert dramatic music here).

While the story is competent, the really disappointing aspect of this book is the art, if you can call it that. Penciler Andre Coates is not the artistic find of 1993. He draws Doc Strange rather well, as in the moody opening scene with Doc's tarot cards, but his renderings of the other characters range from competent to poor. His action scenes are not strikingly dynamic, and his layouts are by no means stylish or imaginative. His figure drawing could use some work, and his backgrounds are nothing to write home about either. At best, Coates' work is competent...more than can be said for the inker, Don Hudson, who makes unimpressive artwork worse with consistently sloppy finishes throughout. The drawings have an unfinished, scratchy appearance with lots of unnecessary lines and

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