

Ray X *X-Rayer* #132

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An Artist's Life: From Flesh Garden To Hugo Gernsback

By Ray X

14 nominations. 14 losses. Someone with a weak ego would have given up after those results.

Category: Best Fan Artist. Award: a rocket-shaped trophy named after sciencefiction pioneer Hugo Gernsback. Nominee: artist/cartoonist Steve Stiles.



Despite the repeated losses Steve kept plugging on with his fanzine art. For him his cartoons were for fun, not a way to win an award.

"There were times," Steve explained in an email interview, "when I wondered why I was being overlooked, or how a particular artist got nominated when I was sooooo much better —I'm an egotist (you have to be if you want to survive in any of the arts), but that wasn't a source of any major discontentment; life's too short."

Steve's artistic life was inspired by the EC Comics line published in the 1950s, in particular a Mad Magazine satire by Wally Wood called "Flesh Garden" that spoofed a popular space hero. ("Flesh Garden" should not be confused with a movie called "Flesh Gordon" which took – ahem – a different satirical approach to the same material.)

Steve: "As a little boy I came down with the flu and my grandmother gave me a stack of comics; among the Andy Pandys, Little Lulus, and Donald Ducks was a copy of MAD #11: I

opened it up to Wallace Wood's terrific splash panel "Flesh Garden!", and I think it was then that I began wanting to become a cartoonist!"



One boy's artistic inspiration.

Besides Mad EC also published SF and horror comics, the latter creating a parental uproar over its gruesome stories. A psychiatrist, Dr. Frederick Wertham, proclaimed comic books were causing juvenile delinquency, turning innocent children into switchblade slashing criminals.

Steve: "When I grew older enough to appreciate to the serious E.C.s (which my parents didn't allow in the house) most of their titles had folded, thanks to Fredric Wertham's witch hunt. Luckily, there was a used bookstore a few doors down from our apartment building so I was able to collect back issues for prices that would drive today's collectors mad with envy."

The EC SF titles "Weird Fantasy" and "Weird Science" published adaptations of Ray Bradbury short stories. This lead Steve to travel to the library and discover other authors like Robert Heinlein. He was one step away from discovering SF fandom.

Steve: "[I]n the summer of 1957 I had started a penpal correspondence with a fan named Peter Francis Skeberdis, who I discovered in the lettercol pages of Larry Shaw's INFINITY magazine. At some point I scribbled a cartoon on one of the pages of a letter I sent him. Peter in turn sent my scribble (which was pretty awful) to F.M. and Elinor Busby, and during my first week of high school (Music & Art, which was the high school that some of my E.C. heroes had gone to) I suddenly had an issue of my first fanzine, CRY OF THE NAMELESS #116, with MY cartoon in PRINT!! Wow!"

In the early 1960s Steve attended meetings of The Fanoclasts club in Manhattan. The group was hosted by Dick and Pat Lupoff who produced a fanzine called XERO with bhoB Stewart.

"At the time my cartooning was pretty lame," says Steve, "both in execution and in concept, but one evening Dick set up his lighting table, handed me some stencils and styli and ordered me to sit down and DRAW! I was really on the spot; what to do?—and then I thought about fantasy author Lin Carter's pet rabbit, which he kept in his bathroom. The damned thing was rather vicious, which made it awkward to use the facilities, but it was great humorous material so I did a six vertical panel sequence called 'LIN CARTER'S BUNNY

RABBIT.' It was crude as hell but something I could build on, the launching point for me as both a fan artist and a pro. I'm grateful to Dick but I don't know if Lin ever forgave me."

He had hoped to break into the comic book industry after art school.

Steve: "However, by the time I graduated, it was apparent that comics were a dying industry —apparent back in those days, that is! DC was more or less a closed shop that practically owned the distribution system, effectively limiting Atlas Comics —the future Marvel Comics— to a handful of titles, and then, I think, there was Charlton. As far as I was concerned, those companies published mediocre dreck (Krypto, the Super Dog!), compared to everything Feldstein and Gaines had done. When the first issue of Fantastic Four hit the newsstands I thought it was interesting but that it would never last —so much for my abilities as a prophet!"

As a student Steve realized he had to make a living. His parents urged him to enter the advertising industry.

Steve: "I made pretty good money as a pasteup artist — far more than many beginning comic book artists— and got to see quite a few of the Madison Avenue top agencies; BBD&O, Dancer Fitzgerald, Y&R, Revlon, but didn't particularly like what I saw, all these people working in those tiny little gray cubicles. I also noticed that those people I liked, the mensch types, never seemed to last very long, while the weasel types, the Eddie Haskells, tended to predominate. Maybe I exaggerate, but at any rate I had no motivation to move up into art director positions and was making a comfortable living where I was."

He's proud of one particular claim to fame in the ad field. A campaign to promote a particular cigarette used the concept of brand loyalty, implying that such loyalty proved the Tareyton was the best. A man appeared in a print ad with a black eye accompanied by the slogan: "I'd rather fight than switch!" Steve was the air brusher who added the famous black eye to the model.

His interest in comic books remained. In the late 1960s an opening appeared to come his way.

Steve was friends with artist "Dapper Dan" Adkins who was working at Marvel Comics, a good connection in the industry. Dan penciled the Dr. Strange series but wanted to switch to inking. Steve's fan art had been often compared to Dan's pro work so the two teaming up on Dr. Strange was a natural fit.

In Marvel's early years "Fabulous Flo" Steinberg served as secretary to editor "Smilin' Stan" Lee. (It was the Marvel Age of Alliterative Nicknames.)

Steve: "I put together a bunch of penciled pages and Dan took them in to the Marvel offices. A few weeks passed and then I got a call from Dan: his wife Jeanette had been by the offices and was told by 'Fabulous Flo' Steinberg that 'Dan's friend' had been hired."

Steve quit his regular job, leaving behind a bad-tempered boss. He sped over to Marvel where he spoke with production manager "Jumbo John" Verpoorten, learning that he didn't get the gig. Why? Fabulous Flo had mixed up Steve's name with the artist who was really hired, Frank Springer.

Steve: "Gosh, Flo didn't seem that fabulous just then!"

Steve did land other comic book jobs. Freelancing provided him with steady work until "Black October," a crash in the industry in 1995 caused by various factors.

Steve says freelancing for comic book companies provided him with steady work until "Black October," a crash in the industry in 1995 caused by various factors. Besides outlets drying up he also struggled with a changing job market for illustrators.

Steve: "I discovered that my commercial art skills were all obsolete, replaced by computer software. I had no computer skills, I had no computer, and at age 55 I had no marketable skills; wow, that was a depressing shock!"

He survived through a series of "shitty" temp jobs until he found full time employment at a book company in 2002. He learned computer skills along the way, becoming adept at Photoshop. After retiring from the book company he keeps busy with free lance work and fan cartooning. As for the latter the Hugo award for Best Fan Artist just stayed out of reach but he kept campaigning even after 14 losses.

2016 was the magic year for him. 15 was the charm.

The win proved Steve's point: You have to be an egotist to survive in the arts.

And in life.

The 1980s Cartoonist at Home.



Cue The Ultra Q



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