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OCTOBER 2016 | HK\$50

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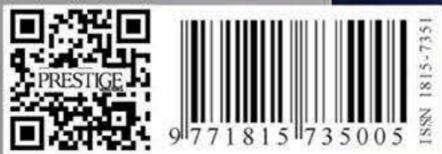
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Pulp Heroes

Marvel Comics maestro STAN LEE and his POW! Entertainment business partner GILL CHAMPION talk super powers and more with JOE YOGERST

IT'S INCREDIBLE TO think that Spider-Man, The Hulk, Thor, the Fantastic Four, the X-Men and Iron Man all came out of the brain of a single individual. But that's the trail that comic maestro Stan Lee has blazed over the last 75 years for the likes of Marvel Comics and POW! Entertainment.

One of the few entertainment-industry figures who bridges the considerable gap between the Roaring Twenties and the 21st century, Lee was born in New York City in 1922. Raised in an era when vaudeville, radio dramas and silent movies dominated the entertainment scene, he was drawn to writing for a hip counterculture medium called comic books at an early age.

By the time he joined Marvel in the late 1950s, he was already a well-established figure in the comics world. But over the decade that followed – in the manner of so many of his superheroes – he rose to become the dominant force. Among his collaborators were Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, two of the greatest comic-book artists of all time.

Contrary to squeaky-clean heroes such as Superman and Wonder Woman, who were born in previous decades, Lee's characters came with both super powers and super flaws. They were much more human and much more accessible to a readership dealing with the real-life foibles



called *Stan Lee's Cosmic Crusaders* (launched at Comic-Con San Diego in July) in which Stan plays himself – a comic book writer who takes in seven alien misfits with super powers.

Among the other cool projects he's working on are a collection of 35 ringtones that feature his trademark gravelly voice, and a graphic digital novel called *God Woke* with actor William Shatner. Meanwhile, Lee's creative invasion of Asia continues with this month's premiere of the animated superhero film *A*, a sequel to the original *Chakra* released in 2013.

Stan Lee and Gill Champion recently found time to talk about their life in the comics industry.

of Vietnam, civil rights and the Psychedelic Sixties.

After becoming publisher of Marvel, Lee struck out on his own in pursuit of new business opportunities. He formed POW! Entertainment in 2001 with partners Gill Champion and Arthur Lieberman. He also branched out creatively, as a cameo actor and producer of blockbuster films based on his own superheroes.

At the age of 93, Lee remains one of the driving forces behind both POW! and the ever-expanding superhero entertainment universe. One of his latest projects is an animated series

WHY DO YOU THINK YOU HAVE SUCH A FERTILE IMAGINATION? YOU NEVER SEEM TO RUN OUT OF IDEAS – OR THE ENERGY TO MAKE THEM A REALITY.

Stan Lee: Maybe it's because I love what I do. When you enjoy what you do, you just can't get enough of it. I love to dream up stories and write them. It's a great feeling after I've done a story to realise that other people enjoy it. So the more I do, the more I want to do, because I wanna get more of those great feels.

HOW DID YOU GET STARTED IN WRITING AND MAKING UP CHARACTERS?

SL: Ever since I was a little kid I've told myself stories. I would make them up. I would even draw little things on scraps of paper. I would draw a straight horizontal line and that would be the horizon. Then I would draw little stick figures running around and doing things. I was always imagining stories.

DO YOU HAVE A REGULAR ROUTINE OR SET PLACE WHEN IT COMES TO WRITING OR CREATING?

SL: Not really, I just write whenever something has to be written. If I'm home, I write it on my computer. If I'm at the office, I write it here. Sometimes I just spend time thinking about what to write. I have no set routine at all.

HOW DID YOU AND GILL FIRST LINK UP?

SL: I'll let Gill answer that.
Gill Champion: I was fortunate enough to be introduced to him when, post-Marvel, Stan was looking to start another entity. Having been a fan of the genre, it turned out to be the luckiest day of my life. I love every day that we're together working. We just tap into

his imagination and look at what he wants to write.

HOW DOES YOUR COLLABORATION WORK?

GC: We like to throw a lot of ideas back and forth. Stan does the writing, but we certainly have discussions about it. But basically it begins with Stan's concept and treatment. The fun thing about *Cosmic Crusaders* is that we really wanted an opportunity to give Stan a chance to play himself in an animated show and expand his acting career a bit.

STAN, YOUR CHARACTER IN COSMIC CRUSADERS IS PRETTY FUNNY. YOU WROTE YOURSELF AN AWFUL LOT OF GREAT LINES.

SL: I love humour, so the more I have in our stories, the more I like it.

TELL ME MORE ABOUT THE CHAKRA MOVIES AND YOUR VENTURE INTO ASIAN SUPERHEROES.

GC: We've been working with a company called Graphic India and we partnered with [co-writer] Sharad Devarajan, who's one of the principals there. As part of our effort to expand into new opportunities, we felt like India was a great choice because they love superheroes and Stan's brand is so widely accepted there. We wanted to come up with something that would not only capture the flavour of India but have an international flavour as well.

HOW HAS THE CREATION PROCESS CHANGED SINCE THE 1930S AND '40S?

SL: It really hasn't changed at all. The way it works is, I dream up an idea for a new character and try to decide with Gill if we want this to be a comic book, a TV show or a movie. Whatever we decide on, we try to get some writers – who are the best writers in that field – to work with me and see if we can make something great out of it. That's what makes it fun. Every new idea for a character, we never know where it's going to go. Will it be a movie, a TV series, a comic book? What will it look like? How popular will it be? As we're writing it, we get a lot of new ideas all the time. By the time we're finished, it's often a little bit different from when we started. It's usually even better.

WHY DO YOU THINK COMICS AND COMIC-BOOK CHARACTERS ARE SO POPULAR AROUND THE WORLD AND WITH SO MANY GENERATIONS?

SL: It's such a nice way to read a story. You read the dialogue. You see the characters. It's like seeing a movie but the characters don't actually move. It's such an easy way, and a pleasant way, to see an exciting story.

WHICH ONE OF YOUR MANY CHARACTERS WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO SEE COME ALIVE IN TODAY'S WORLD?

SL: You never really think about these guys coming alive. But if one of them had to become alive, maybe Spider-Man would be the best.

AND WHICH ONE IS MOST LIKE THE REAL-LIFE STAN LEE?

SL: [Laughs.] I think a little bit of me is in all of them. But possibly Iron Man, because I think he's one of the most realistic of all of them. I kinda like him.

DO YOU LIKE THE WAY ROBERT DOWNEY JR PLAYS HIM IN THE MOVIES?

SL: Nobody plays it better. He was born to be Iron Man. **■**



OPPOSITE: GILL CHAMPION (LEFT) AND STAN LEE