

COMIC BOOK ARTIST

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FEATURE ARTICLE:
THE ARTISTRY OF
FRANK CHO
THE MONKEY BOY SPEAKS!

ISSUE
#2



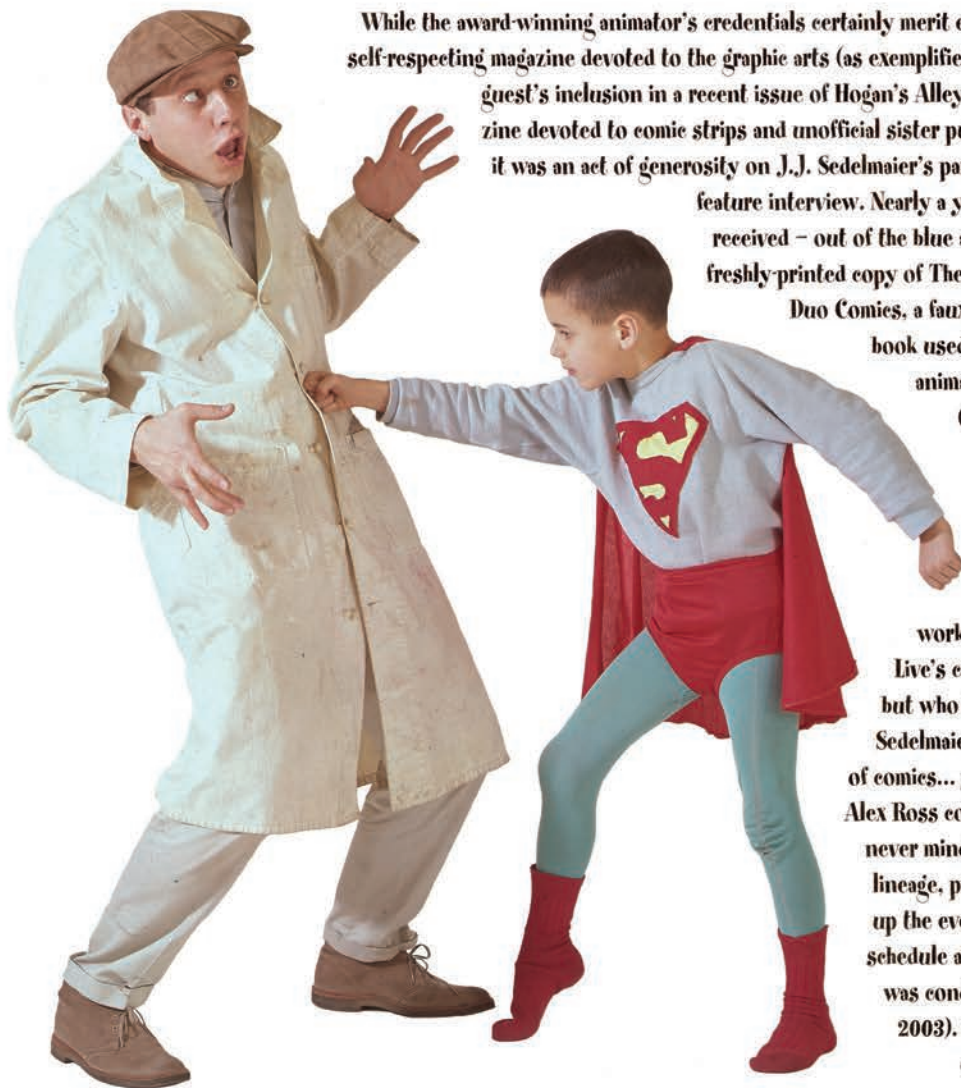
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ALSO: MIKE FRIEDRICH & THE STAR*REACH STORY, J.J. SEDELMAIER, AND ALEX ROSS SKETCHBOOK



The Unambiguously Happy Life of Mr.

J.J.



While the award-winning animator's credentials certainly merit examination by any self-respecting magazine devoted to the graphic arts (as exemplified by our following guest's inclusion in a recent issue of Hogan's Alley, a quarterly magazine devoted to comic strips and unofficial sister publication to CBA), it was an act of generosity on J.J. Sedelmaier's part which led to this

feature interview. Nearly a year ago, this editor received – out of the blue and unsolicited – a freshly-printed copy of *The Ambiguously Gay*

Duo Comics, a faux four-color funny-book used to promote J.J.'s animation achievements

(which is discussed within). Now, we

here at CBA are familiar enough with the guy's stuff – from his

work on *Saturday Night Live's* cartoon segments –

but who knew just how hip Sedelmaier was to the world of comics... yet one look at the Alex Ross cover (seen at right),

never mind J.J.'s prestigious lineage, prompted us to ring up the ever-friendly guy and schedule an interview (which

was conducted on March 6, 2003). The transcript was copy-edited by J.J.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY JON B. COOKE

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ABOVE: After an advertising photo shoot, a very young J.J., costumed as his super-hero idol, clowns in the mid-'60s for some gag photos with his talented father, Joe Sedelmaier (who would eventually become world-renowned for his "Where's the Beef?" and "Fast Talking FedEx Guy" TV commercials in the 1980s). Courtesy of J.J.

Sedelmaier

Comic Book Artist: *Where are you originally from, J.J.?*

J.J. Sedelmaier: I'm from the Midwest. I originally grew up in Evanston, Illinois and Chicago.

CBA: *And what's "J.J." stand for?*

J.J.: "Good animation." [laughter] It's John Josef, but I don't go by any of those names anymore. The last person who called me "Johnny" was my dentist when I was a kid.

CBA: [laughs] *And you let him get away with that?*

J.J.: Oh, no. He did it once and that was it! [laughter]

CBA: *Your father was into comics?*

J.J.: Yeah, my father was into comics as a kid, comics and movies, and he held onto his comics and actually was able to convince his mom to hold onto them as well. So I grew up reading the first issue of *Batman* and all the classic Golden Age comics, and (like I was telling you earlier) I was really the only one of my friends who knew any of the Fawcett heroes like Captain Marvel and Spy Smasher and Ibis and all the other people who I thought were kind of cool, but they'd disappeared off the face of the Earth by the time I was a kid. But sitting and going through his stuff — And he taught me how to make sure I didn't bend back the covers, and as a result the comics are, they might as well be from the Mile High Collection.

CBA: *Really?*

J.J.: Oh, yeah, they're *gorgeous*. No stiff boards or Mylar bags. They were just in a corrugated box with dry-cleaning plastic, that thin kind of wispy stuff, wrapped up. And they're in beautiful, perfect condition.

CBA: *Does your father still have them?*

J.J.: He's still got them in Chicago. He kept all his comics, his Big Little Books.

CBA: *Wow! That's highly unusual, I guess.*

J.J.: Well, it's highly unusual not so much that the kid held onto them, but that the parents didn't put them into the paper drive for the war, or just didn't dump them. So I was very fortunate to have that as an influence and a background... and reference, actually.

CBA: *So did comics have a mystique for you when you were a kid? Did you have a thrill?*

J.J.: They were what taught me how to draw. They taught me anatomy. They taught me... they were really what influenced me to get into drawing. That's what I wanted to do, originally. I was either going to do comic books in New York when I

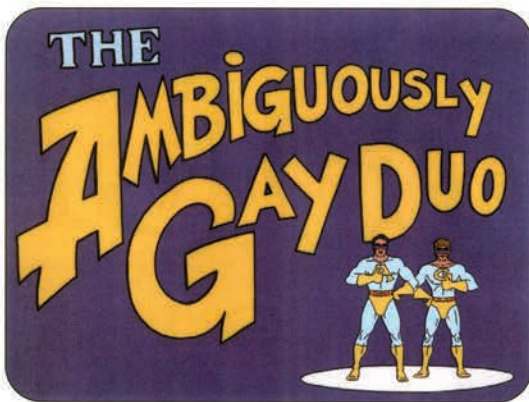


TRANSCRIBED BY STEVEN TICE

ABOVE: Alex Ross's great cover art for the J.J. Sedelmaier Productions, Inc. promotional comic. Courtesy of J.J. Sedelmaier. Ace and Gary ©2003 The Dana Carvey Show.

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finished school or do animation in California. I didn't know there was animation in New York when I moved here. But I found out what comics were about when I finally got there, and it was a real kind of — The mid-, late '70s was a pretty bad time for comics in America. Really pretty boring. So I just started taking my portfolio all around and showing it to anyone who would look at it. And that's when I found out there was animation going on in New York, and got into that because it was — I enjoyed the idea of being involved with that as much as comics. And I think in the long run I benefited much more by getting involved in animation and doing the sort of thing I ended up doing than staying in comic books, because animation got me involved in all sorts of design. And film, and getting to know cartoonists and artists and illustrators and designers. The people I've worked with, Jon... if you could have told me 30 years ago that I'd be working with these people, I'd just, "Get the @#%\$ out!" [laughter]

CBA: I know the feeling. [laughter]

J.J.: "You can't be serious!" Just the middle of last year I worked on a project with Neal Adams. I mean, Neal Adams, before I got to New York in the late '70s, was the best. Because he was able to do good drawing and interesting storytelling and take these bankrupt characters and resurrect them. I found that so exciting. To finally get together with him and get to know him a little bit, it was just great. [Editor's note: As of August '03, Sedelmaier had completed a second project with Adams.]

CBA: What does your father do?

J.J.: He is a commercial filmmaker. "Where's the Beef?" and the Federal Express [fast-talking guy] spots. That whole realm of film making. In some ways, his work... he's kind of semi-retired now. He just had a short film [Open Minds] in Sundance this past year, but he hasn't done a commercial in a long time. But he wanted to be a cartoonist as a kid. He moved to Chicago to go to the Art Institute. He had always been interested in film and had made his own movies. But his films and his work in some respects are almost like live-action comic strips. His characters. He's really influenced by



[Charles] Chaplin and [Buster] Keaton and W.C. Fields. But the way he structures his stuff can sometimes be illustrative or comic/cartoon-like. His stuff was so much in the casting. He had such a hand in changing what people were conditioned to accept for these kind of plastic actors who didn't look like "real" people. They were all perfect teeth and well-groomed and coiffed hair and so forth. And he was really the first one to successfully bring everyday-looking people into commercials, certainly, and he's influenced people in film as well.

CBA: Obviously, in the early '80s, your father's career really exploded. I recall even a 60 Minutes segment on him, right?

J.J.: Yeah. 60 Minutes, 48 Hours, the cover of Esquire. Separate from maybe people like George Lois and Stan Freberg, there aren't too many commercial makers who hit like he had hit. I'm thankful that when I did get involved in animation, I didn't get involved in the commercial realm of animation; I got involved in series, longer form... not feature-length animation, but television animation that wasn't commercials, because if I had gotten into commercials at

that point...

CBA: You would have felt inhibited because of —

J.J.: Well, not so much inhibited, because I wasn't in a position yet, since I was just starting out entry-level, to really have an influence or any sort of control. But it would have been a pain in the ass hearing, "Ah, you're Joe's son. You're following the old man." In the area of animation I was involved in, no one knew the name Sedelmaier at all, so that was fortunate. Then, by the time I got into it, I had enough confidence and had enough presence in my little realm to feel a lot more comfortable and it didn't bug me at all.

CBA: Probably the tagline Joe Sedelmaier will always be best known for — I think it was even introduced into politics — was "Where's the Beef?"

J.J.: Yeah, the [U.S. Vice President Walter] Mondale thing.

CBA: Isn't there an anecdote about that Wendy's commercial? That the catch phrase was different and it changed on the set?

J.J.: The phrase was originally was "Where's all the beef?" And I believe

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THIS PAGE: Title cards for shorts produced by J.J. Sedelmaier Productions. All courtesy of JJSP. The Ambiguously Gay Duo. ©2003 The Dana Carvey Show. Captain Linger ©2000 Turner Entertainment Group. The X-Presidents and School House Rock ©2003 their respective copyright holders.

J.J. Sedelmaier

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it was [actress] Clara Peller who basically just said "Where's the beef?" And my father thought it sounded better and more real that way. He had a focus, had a vision, but he didn't let it be so tunnel vision that if something happened on the set, he wouldn't be able to go with it. And I'm very proud of being a part of the whole heritage. I would say up to about '95, '96, he started slowing down then and not doing as much work. Not slowing down as a person; just not taking as much work. It was like we were peers in the same industry; it was really terrific.

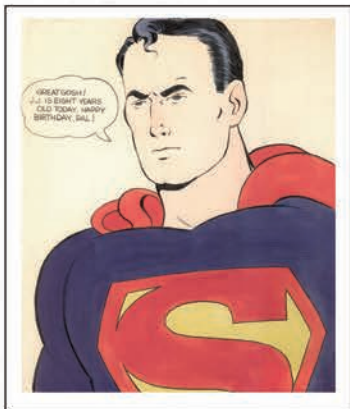
CBA: A viewer could tell one of your father's commercials from a mile away, which was I think extremely unusual for the form, for a layperson to actually recognize the thumbprint of the creatives... There was just a

wackiness about the stuff, a naturalism.

J.J.: The wackiness, and then you started also seeing people ripping him off, which is another sign of...

CBA: Fame? [laughs]

J.J.: Fame, yeah. But usually that stuff was so over-the-top and everything that his stuff wasn't, it was just someone's impression of what they think a Sedelmaier was. And it really wasn't, because when you look at what his stuff was, it stood



out because it was taking everyday life and putting it right in front of you. The other stuff, in some cases they even started casting almost deformed people. [Jon laughs] It was just very weird.

CBA: Joe's career stretch back into the '60s?

J.J.: He was an art director... He came in as an art director and then became an art director/producer. He made the major transition toward the end of his advertising agency career, when he was at J. Walter Thompson, I think. He had the Gino's Pizza Roll account, which eventually I think became, in certain areas of the country, it was Chun King. They did a test film and he did the test film. He cast the people in the agency and directed, shot and made it. He showed it to Gino Pallucci, the guy who owned the company, who was the client. And he loved it. Gino said, "I want to air this." The agency people said, "Oh, well, no, we're not going to air that. It's just a test." He said, "Screw that! I want to air this!" [laughter]

CBA: Go, Gino!

J.J.: Yeah! He was a really staunch supporter of what my father was doing. He slowly but surely got that in. I learned a lot by watching him do that.

CBA: What year was that, roughly?

J.J.: He went into his own business in '67 or '68.

CBA: As a kid, I grew up in Westchester, I remember these great Jack Gilford commercials.

J.J.: I don't think he ever worked with Jack Gilford. Jack did Crackerjack spots, didn't he?

INSET ABOVE: Joe Sedelmaier drew up this oversize birthday card for a young J.J. in the '60s. Superman ©2003 DC Comics. All images courtesy of JJSP.

CBA: Yeah!

That's right.

J.J.: Gilford was probably a little bit too well-known for my father to use. I think that was just a little bit before my dad's time. There was a school, anyway.

The Jack Gilford Crackerjack, the Benson & Hedges commercials with the too-long cigarettes which had the smokers inadvertently breaking them in elevator doors, etc.

CBA: [Singing a jingle] "One-oh-one... just a silly millimeter longer."

J.J.: Yeah! And the Alka-Seltzer stuff...

CBA: "I can't believe I ate the whole thing." [laughs]

J.J.: Yup!

CBA: I believe there's a relationship with Your Show of Shows, Sid Caesar, Harvey Kurtzman, Woody Allen, Levi's Rye Bread... a real New York City Jewish sensibility that came into American humor...

J.J.: Help! magazine and the other publications that were influenced by Mad, and all the other real irreverent stuff.

CBA: But with a very strong element of humanity and warmth to it. It wasn't hostile and excluding, actually inclusive and made fun of everything, especially itself!

J.J.: Yeah, it wasn't as pissed-off at humor eventually evolved into.

CBA: Do you feel a kindred, a connection to this kind of humor? Because it seems to come out of your work, too, as well...

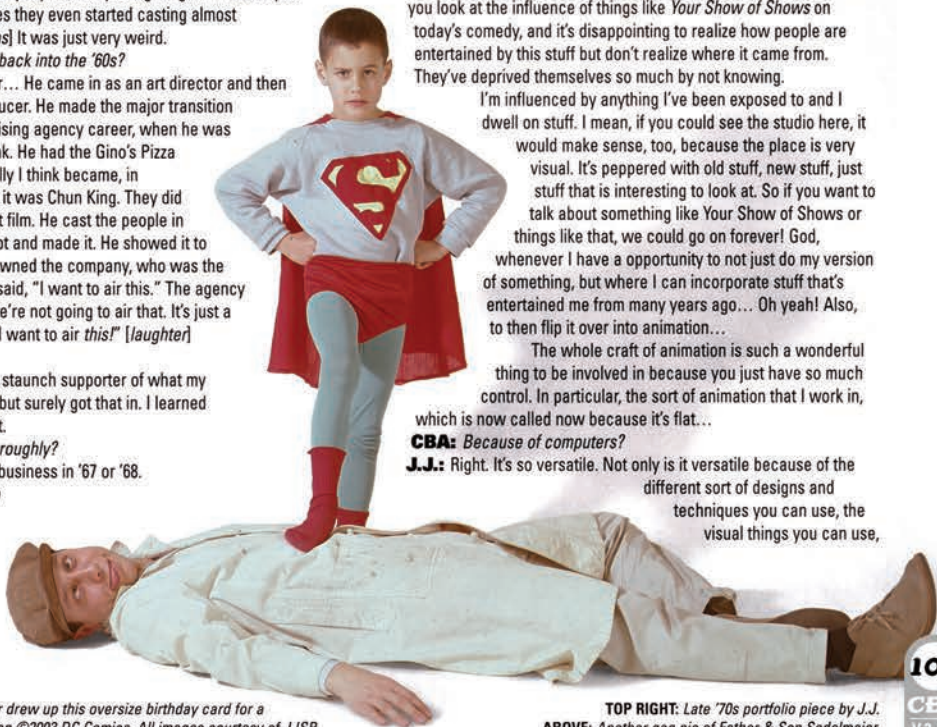
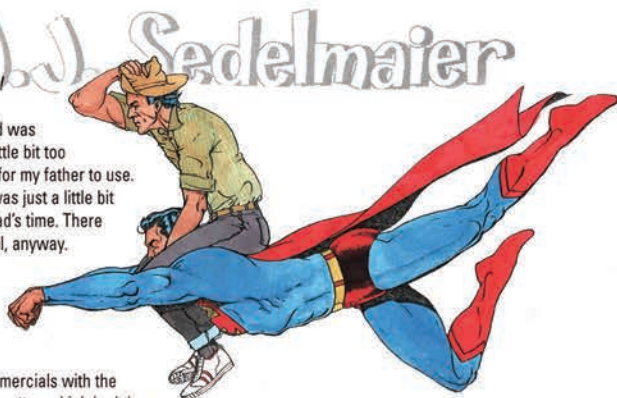
J.J.: Absolutely. I'm constantly disappointed with the lack of exposure people have to this stuff, because it's so great to see all the stuff that really hasn't been duplicated in its pure kind of first-generation sense. When you look at the influence of things like Your Show of Shows on today's comedy, and it's disappointing to realize how people are entertained by this stuff but don't realize where it came from. They've deprived themselves so much by not knowing.

I'm influenced by anything I've been exposed to and I dwell on stuff. I mean, if you could see the studio here, it would make sense, too, because the place is very visual. It's peppered with old stuff, new stuff, just stuff that is interesting to look at. So if you want to talk about something like Your Show of Shows or things like that, we could go on forever! God, whenever I have a opportunity to not just do my version of something, but where I can incorporate stuff that's entertained me from many years ago... Oh yeah! Also, to then flip it over into animation...

The whole craft of animation is such a wonderful thing to be involved in because you just have so much control. In particular, the sort of animation that I work in, which is now called now because it's flat...

CBA: Because of computers?

J.J.: Right. It's so versatile. Not only is it versatile because of the different sort of designs and techniques you can use, the visual things you can use,



TOP RIGHT: Late '70s portfolio piece by J.J.
ABOVE: Another gag pic of Father & Son Sedelmaier.

The Collaborators and J.J.

The creative whiz on working with some darned notable talents

After viewing the credits on the guy's sample reels, we realized J.J. Sedelmaier and his White Plains, New York production company has worked with an astounding array of talented artists on a multitude of projects. So, just for kicks — and because we wouldn't be CBA if we didn't ask for our interview subjects to jump through hoops at the very last minute! — we asked our interview subject to rattle off some anecdotes via e-mail about collaborating over the years with such an incredibly diverse group. Here's J.J.'s entertaining reply, listed by artist name in alphabetical order:

NEAL ADAMS

Comic book artist, *Batman*

Neal and his studio, Continuity Associates, have helped JJSP produce animatics (a limited technique of production that allows an idea to be tested before full production is approved) for the advertising agency DDB in New York. The first project we did had Neal working with characters I designed (I thought I'd died and gone to heaven!) and the artist added a richness of which no one else is capable. Frankly, once I had gotten over who I was working with, it became a helpful learning experience in terms of animatic production. The second project we collaborated on (finished about a month ago) had us working together with cartoonist Bonnie Timmons' style. The success of that project shows how flexible he and his staff are. Another fun aspect is that he and Marilyn, his wife, work together just like my wife, Patrice, and I.

DICK AYERS

Comic book artist, *Sgt. Fury*

Dick and his son, Richard, had seen an article in the newspaper about the studio here, so they called and asked if they could visit. I had no idea he lived in the region and was thrilled to have him come by. He spent an entire

afternoon hanging out, telling stories and answering questions. It was soon afterwards when Robert Smigel called and said that *Playboy* had asked him to write a comic strip starring Ace and Gary, the Ambiguously Gay Duo, and would JJSP do the art. I had Dick lay out the piece and do the lettering. He added just the right amount of style harkening back to the '60s that I was looking for. He helped me out on another *Playboy* piece, as well. I'd like to work with Mr. Ayers more!

R.O. BLECHMAN

Cartoonist

Bob was my boss at the Ink Tank from 1984 until '90. He's a genius who's been an influential force in print and design for over 40 years. I was lucky to have cut my teeth there, where I learned there was room for both cartoons AND animation in commercial production.

GEORGE BOOTH

Cartoonist, *The New Yorker*

I've worked with George on at least four commercials (and he also did a Christmas card for the studio about 10 years ago). He takes direction really well! It's a totally collaborative process where we bounce faxes back and forth like nuts! The guy is so easy going, you can't help but see his point of view. We share a love of W.C. Fields and Laurel & Hardy.

Levine, Blechman illos, and *Beavis & Butthead*

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MIKE JUDGE

Animated cartoon

creator, *Beavis and Butthead*

We did the animation for the first season of *Beavis and Butthead*. It was the first time we or MTV had produced "long form" work. They paired us up with Mike, who was searching through the process like all of us and ultimately responsible for every aspect of the show. He's a brilliant writer and creator. Luckily, I had animator Tony Eastman (and later Yvette Kaplan) working on the project. I think it was Mike, Tony and Yvette who really made it gel. I always wanted to work with him on commercial projects but once *Beavis* hit, he became too busy.

DAVID LEVINE

Illustrator/caricaturist, *New York Review of Books*

We did about six commercials for Brown & Co. over the course of three or four years. The spots used a caricature of a real person — George Brown — to sell investments. The ad agency discouraged us from having any contact with David because of budget concerns. They gave us a pre-existing print advertisement he'd done for them and said that's it. I arranged to videotape George for reference and we used other "David Levine work" as reference, too. I ended sending the finished commercial to David to get his opinion. I held my breath for a week-and-a-half waiting for his feedback. He loved it, thank God!

ALEX ROSS

Comic book artist, *Marvels*

Thanks to the brilliant cartoonist Chris Ware (also living in the Chicago area), I was able to reach Alex to discuss having him do the JJSP promotional comic book cover. He originally did a sketch working off the cover of *Batman* #1. After discussing the design a bit more, he did a sketch similar to the final outcome — which I LOVE. It's subtle and plays with the characters, as well as the genre. I also think it was an opportunity for Alex to dwell in a little self parody, too!

GARRY TRUDEAU

Comic strip creator, *Doonesbury*

We animated Garry's "Mr. Butts" character for an anti-smoking television spot. It was the first time — possibly the last — I'd worked on a project where one single person had ultimate approval. Whatta treat! He was in on every step and, as a result, we were able to change and develop material on the spot without worrying about approvals and any extra time it often takes to get stuff signed off on. One of my favorite spots!



whether it's working with artists or just abstract stuff, you've also got to develop a way of moving it. You've got to develop a technique of animation that's going to be right for whatever design, concept and message you're trying to get across. So there's different levels of vocabulary that you have to put all together to make the thing really work. It's very fulfilling. So when it's entertaining, it's even better! [laughs]



CBA: What I enjoy about your work and Robert Smigel's work is that it's astonishingly unpretentious.

J.J.: Well, that's good.

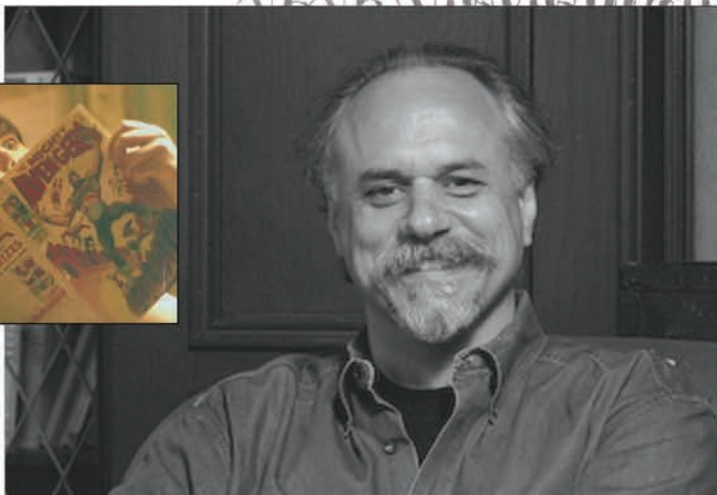
CBA: We see the obvious influence of bad animation from the '70s and you have fun with that, whether it's *Super Friends* or *School House Rock*. It's reverent to the technique, it's irreverent to the content, if you know what I mean.

J.J.: Right. I'm very, very fortunate to have been able to pair up with Robert on projects. There's a guy, Stuart Hill, with whom I've done the *Captain Linger* stuff for Cartoon Network. And there's guys at Cartoon Network, as well: Michael Ouwelen and Erik Richter. We did the *Harvey Birdman* pilot for *Adult Swim*... we only did the pilot; we're not doing the series.

To pair up with people, that's really exciting. To be able to find people who see things kind of your way, only in a different realm. Then you collaborate and you don't step on each other's toes. It's just you're adding to their stuff, they're adding to your stuff. It wouldn't be what it was if you weren't both involved.

The *Saturday Night Live* work has been so important to animation, too, because if there's anything that I set out to do when Patrice and I opened the studio, it was to try to take animation into realms it hadn't been before. Not just in terms of design, but in terms of content, in terms of trying to get people to consider animation as a source of entertainment other than just for kids. To get out of the ducks and bunny stuff.

As much as I still love Marvel and stuff from Disney and the more conventional approaches to animation — it's fallen into such a trap and is in such a rut and there's been such a glut of shit being done. It's done a lot of harm to the craft and I don't know that it's ever going to go away. CGI is running a real high profile now. It's a very popular technique and it's being given a lot



of attention, a lot of the money, and a lot of the development focus now. Two-D is this old stand-by and I can't imagine is not always going to be there. It's just constantly waiting out these different trends, though, until all the sorting-out takes place. 'Cause there's not only CGI, but there are things like Flash and other techniques people sometimes try to use, but don't know how to marry it with the right sort of design or whether it's too limited for the

design, or even too limited for the concept. So every time someone screws up in animation, it sets the industry back three times as far.

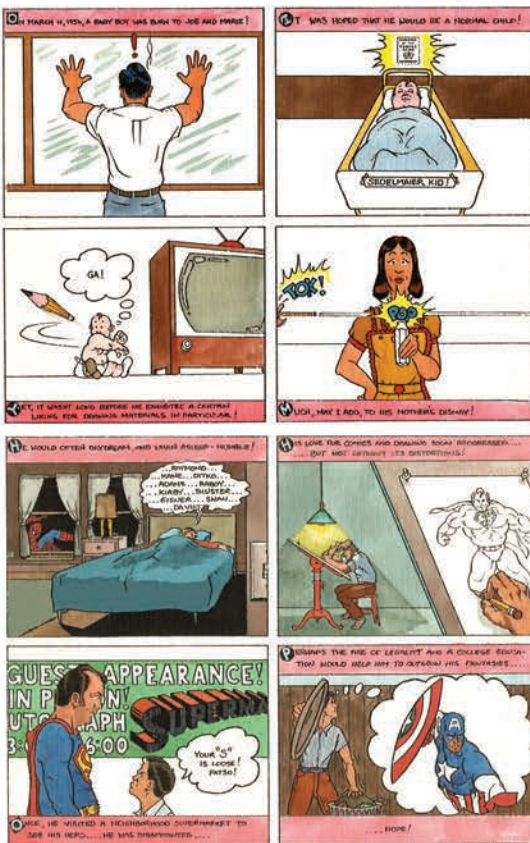
As a technique, animation is judged so harshly. I mean, you don't judge live-action the same way. You don't judge an actor the same way. If you see a shit film with [Robert DeNiro] in it, that doesn't mean you're not going to go back and see a film starring DeNiro. But if you see a bad animated feature, watch out! You're not going to be as prone to go back to see another animated movie if that one sucks.

CBA: What was it, *Treasure Planet*? [laughs]

J.J.: [Groans] Who knows what that was. [laughter] I didn't even go to see that one.

CBA: That certainly sent a shiver through the industry, nonetheless.

J.J.: Yeah, but it's interesting that the majority of the films nominated for Academy Awards this year are 2-D, for lack of a better description. You've got people like Don Bluth [director of *The Secret of NIMH*] going out and saying, "We're going to break away from Disney to do everything Disney isn't doing anymore." Then they go out and the work is nothing but watered-down Disney. As much as I'm not a fan of [Fritz the Cat and *Wizards* director] Ralph Bakshi's stuff, I've got



TOP RIGHT: J.J. Sedelmaier today. **TOP INSET:** J.J. joking with *The Avengers* in the late '80s. **ABOVE:** Autobiographical portfolio piece from the late '70s (©2003 JJS). All courtesy of JJS. All characters ©2003 their respective copyright holders.



to admire him for what he's accomplished... I haven't liked the rotoscope stuff he did (where you trace over live action), but boy, the guy is relentless. The guy has drive!

CBA: If Bakshi could talk R. Crumb into doing something... [laughs]

J.J.: Plus, he's influenced [Ren & Stimpy creator] John Kricfalusi, too, and John's done an incredible amount to take a very cartoony sense and make it for adults, which is terrific. *Ren & Stimpy* was just amazing.

CBA: Have you seen *The Ripping Friends*?

J.J.: Yes. I love that, too.

CBA: [laughs] *Kricfalusi goes so far, you just really wonder what kind of upbringing he had.*

J.J.: Oh, don'tcha? He's incredible. We were involved at Nicktoons at the same time he was, and that's when I got to know him. He would send us some of the episodes before Nickelodeon got their hands on them.

CBA: *Uncut, so to speak?*

J.J.: Yeah. In between the laughs and the gaping expressions on our face, we're all kind of thinking, "Oh, the poor guy! What sort of turmoil is going on inside him?" But he's an amazing talent. If you ever have an opportunity to have him take you through a storyboard, it's truly an awesome experience.

John K. is one of those guys who — God forbid! — if he didn't find animation, you really have to wonder how he'd have ended up. He's really got quite a drive in him, too.

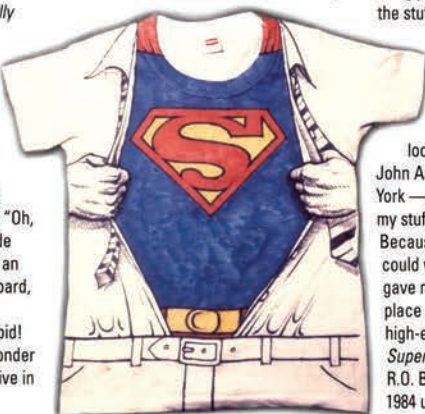
CBA: *You went to the University of Wisconsin?*

J.J.: Mm-hm.

CBA: *What was in your portfolio when you were going around in '79?*

J.J.: There were strips that I had done some illustration for, there were character drawings, life drawings... Most of it was pretty much "guy stuff." I wasn't as comfortable drawing women. I was very conscious of anatomy. It was pretty well drawn, but there weren't a lot of ideas behind the drawings. It was, "Okay, this guy can draw," but it wasn't really associated with story except for some of the strips I had illustrated but hadn't written.

CBA: *What did you want to be?*



J.J.: I wanted to work in comic books.

Meaning I wanted to draw — I thought — the paneled kind of storytelling approach comics took.



©2003 J.J. Sedelmaier.

CBA: *Straight super-hero genre stuff?*

J.J.: Pretty much straight super-hero stuff. But I didn't realize until I started talking to people in the industry what a dead end it seemed to be. And it wasn't even inspiring...

I probably would have gotten burned-out on it after a couple of months, as opposed to feeling like I was working my way up a ladder. At that point anyway, it seemed unless you had your own characters, your own strip, your own idea, your own concept, than you were just going to end up being part of an assembly line. Granted, it's even more so at the beginning stages of animation, but what I found out is that because I'm very comfortable around people and dealing with them, getting into the creative process had more opportunities available; it seemed, in animation. There was a lot of commercial stuff going on.

CBA: *Did you actually go to Marvel and DC?*

J.J.: Yes. I went to Marvel and DC. I went to *Mad*. *Mad* picked up my portfolio and without opening it just threw it in the garbage can... which is fine. I was happy to be there and meet everybody and look in their archives and stuff. I saw [editor] Mike Barr at DC, who basically said he needed to see more drawings of women. I can't recall who I saw over at Marvel.

CBA: *Who did you speak with to get the skinny on the comics industry, so to speak?*

J.J.: It was just my impression after talking to these people, after I was there, something just didn't click. Then I started really looking at the stuff being done. Then I went into hibernation for a couple of months.

In the meantime, I met Patrice, who became my future wife, who basically said, "Even if you're discouraged, get out there and show your stuff to anyone who'll look at it." So I did. By doing that, I met a guy, John Anthes, over at PBS — Channel 13 in New York — who was a lovely guy. He really looked at my stuff and gave me a list of people to go meet. Because he felt, "You know, your drawing style could work well for cartoons and animation." He gave me the name of Robert Greenberg, who had a place called R. Greenberg that was kind of like a high-end, optical titles company. They did the *Superman* title sequence. The other person was R.O. Blechman, who I ended up working with from 1984 until 1990, right before we opened the studio here, and I probably learned more there than

anyplace else. The third person was a guy named Tony Eastman, who is the son of P.D. Eastman of *Go, Dog, Go!* and *Are You My Mother?* Dr. Seuss books. I'm still very good friends with Tony and I've directed his animated work more than anyone else's.

CBA: *You fell in with a good crowd!*

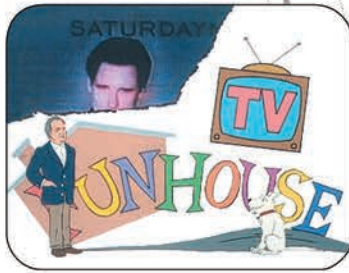
J.J.: Oh, God, yes! R.O. Blechman was an idol of mine...

CBA: *Was it advantageous to work with such a minimalist cartoonist as Blechman? He's renowned for that very scratchy-wiggly line.*

J.J.: Well, he's another person who's been endlessly ripped off and is a true influence on the industry because he was doing things differently than anyone else.

CBA: *I had a long interview with Ed Subitzky, and he raves about what a mentor Blechman was.*

J.J.: Oh, yeah. Blechman has influenced so many people. Also, he fell into the right crowd, too. He fell in with John Hubley, who was an animator/director... John and Faith Hubley had a studio that really was the only studio consistently doing artistic work in animation. John was the one who said to Bob [Blechman], "You should design this stuff for me. You can animate —" Bob said, "Well, no. People don't think my stuff can be animated." John said, "Bull! It can be animated! Absolutely! Anything can be animated!" People thought, "Oh, well, you've got a broken outline, how are you gonna stop the color from spilling out? Where are you gonna stop the color if there's no line to hold it in?" Now, to us, that seems insane! But back then there weren't a lot of people thinking out of the box, thinking



outside of the line. So he was the one who goosed Bob into that.

To work with Bob... I mean, I started as an assistant animator, became an animator, then became a producer, then became the executive producer, then became the studio's rep, and then the associate director, and finally director. So by the time I left, it was really... "I gotta get outta here, this isn't my studio, this is his studio." But the training and the exposure was tremendous... Bob didn't only work in his own style; he would contract people to design things. That's where I also learned what was out there in terms of the potential of the craft.

CBA: When did you hook up with Robert Smigel?

J.J.: The first thing we did was "Cluckin' Chicken" for SNL, in 1992. Which was a parody of a fast food restaurant.

CBA: When did you hang out your own shingle?

J.J.: We incorporated in 1990 and then opened the studio in '91.

CBA: It was you and Patrice?

J.J.: Yup! We've stayed pretty small, except right after "Cluckin' Chicken," when *Beavis and Butt-head* came in. Then we ballooned up to an incredible size. I think we were up to 50 people, which was really wild. But "Cluckin' Chicken" was the first thing Robert and I paired up on, and I have to say, after working together on that, if you'd told me that two years later we'd be working together again in any capacity, I would have said, "No, no way. There's no way." Because it was a very frustrating experience, and I said things to Robert in a professional kind of venue that I've never said to anyone else! *God!* [laughter]

After we had done "Cluckin' Chicken," I got a call from a producer, Jeff Ross, at NBC because there was a new show they were going to start and they wanted to do animated titles. It was the *Conan O'Brien* show. So I go over to NBC and sit down with the producer, and Conan comes in, and Robert comes in. I thought, "Hooly shit! What's gonna happen here?" I was

conceited enough to say, "This is a set-up!" (As if NBC would set me up. [laughter] So he starts, "Well, we want to do titles for the show and I worked with you over at *Saturday Night Live*..." I said, "Wait! Hold it. You want to work with me? I said terrible things to you!" Smigel says, "Oh, everyone says that to me." [laughter]

So we went from there, and then, after *Conan*, he went to *The Dana Carvey Show*, and that's where he had the idea for *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*, which at this point was a one-shot cartoon. He sent over the scripts and, y'know, I've read a lot of scripts I could see were funny, but, Jon, he sent me this thing that was so much a part of my psyche, it was a part of me. People in the studio thought I was crazy because I was laughing so loud in my office. Because I could see this thing, even before it was produced. I was so juiced about the whole thing. To be able to do something that was going to be this long, that was going to poke fun at comic books and bad animation and be funny and the whole gay thing... It was just a great package (so to speak). [laughter]

Soon thereafter, *The Dana Carvey Show* went off the edge of the cliff, but Smigel went to *Saturday Night Live* to see Lorne Michaels with the idea of doing these cartoons. We did the first three years of the cartoons and then I said, "I'll continue doing Ace and Gary, but other than that, we're going to back away." Because we started getting so well known just for THAT type of work. We were also very busy commercially, and this SNL stuff wasn't paying enough to send your kids to college. But you couldn't beat the visibility.

CBA: It comes as a surprise that the SNL stuff didn't pay that well.

J.J.: The only reason *Saturday Night Live* can do what they do for so long is that they divvy out the budget very carefully. Granted, the animated segments are very popular, but it isn't where their money is going to go. The other thing is, we had fallen into a little bit of a rut with it in that, even

though each segment was different, it still became a very grueling kind of production scenario. We had an average of three or so weeks to do three to four minutes worth of animation. Usually, I've got eight weeks to do a 30-second commercial. But again, the fact that we were able to do this body of work that changed people's image of cartoons that really had stuff to say, as well, was just wonderful. It was great!

CBA: *The really big animated hit in the early 1990s was The Simpsons. Was there an impact on the general field of animation with their success?*

J.J.: Well, *The Simpsons* had a big influence on the mainstream certainly, but what was really important to the field of animation, more than anything else, was MTV. When they started out, they had so much edge and they were so cool (and still can be, but they became very corporate). In the beginning, they were hiring studios to do these 10-, 15-second I.D.'s [spots just promoting the MTV name]. They didn't hire one studio to do those spots. Sometimes they went to studios, sometimes to individuals, independent filmmakers, illustrators. Their idea about animation was, "How can we get something visually entertaining up there for 10 seconds that uses our logo which doesn't change? Anybody who wants to do an I.D., do whatever you want, but you've got to work within this structure of what the logo is, your interpretation of the logo." There was such a diverse variety of styles and approaches and film making techniques, and stop-motion and computer and all this other stuff, that I think the field started to get this momentum.

Of course, then the advertising industry starts going, "Hey, what's cool? What's hot? What aren't we doing that we should be doing?" And they started picking up on it. The advertising community was much more receptive to the idea of bringing this stuff into mainstream form and it really helped push things into areas animation hadn't been before.

Another person who needs to be mentioned is Richard Williams, who really had a strong effect on the industry. He did *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, a real Hollywood-type film, but his idea of taking this classical Disney type of animation but updating it was inspired. He had this influence on British commercial studios, almost all of them became disciples, in one way or another, of Richard Williams. Then British animation started coming over to the United States in commercials and starting really influencing... not "influencing"; what it did is it lit a fire under all the schmucks who were doing animation in America who didn't really give a shit about the craft anymore and were figuring that they were just going to do cereal commercials for the rest of their lives, and now this beautifully designed, beautifully animated stuff started coming over from Britain, and anyone who couldn't hold their own against that went out of business. Which is a good thing. It weeded out the industry.

CBA: *Can you give us a for-instance of this British influence? Would CBA's readership recognize anything that would be characterized as quintessential?*

J.J.: Well, it happened so long ago, they probably wouldn't recall. There was some stuff done for *The Wall Street Journal*. Kellogg's started having their characters animated in a much fuller, much more involved manner. Then also the use of illustrators who aren't known for being animated and getting drawing styles not normally associated with animation, which select

small studios had started to do in the United States but the British picked up on as well. What it gets down to is the use of artist's styles that aren't normally associated with being animated. A wispy pencil or charcoal line technique. It's a classical approach with an updated spin.

CBA: *Was it Mike Judge that you met early on? How did Beavis and Butthead come in?*

J.J.: MTV had a show called *Liquid Television*, which was produced by Colossal Pictures in San Francisco, a terrific animation studio. That was a compilation of animated shorts. I think many of them were already produced and Colossal and MTV licensed them in this compilation form that became *Liquid Television*. Two of the shorts were Mike Judge's, one being "Frog Baseball," a *Beavis and Butthead* short. Evidently they started getting a bunch of feedback on *Beavis* from viewers. They did a little research, looked into it, and decided MTV should consider a series and do their own animation. So they contacted Mike.

Abby Terkuhle was the one at MTV you went to if you had an idea to do an I.D. So if MTV had an animation department, Abby would head it. So Abby contacted my representative, Andy Arkin, and the three of us started talking about whether it would be possible to do a series. I went over there to see the short and, y'know, I found myself laughing almost against my better

judgment. But it really appeals to, I think, everybody, because everybody's known a *Beavis and Butthead* while growing up. And the look of the thing and the crudeness and the naive quality to it was intriguing. And then I started looking at it some more and going, "Really, there's not a whole hell of a lot of animation here."

It was just around that time when I had gotten to know this guy named John Whitney Jr. and a company on the West Coast that specialized in digital ink-&-paint

animation, had started to talk about how they could build up libraries of images they could repeat. You just had to re-expose the existing art. So applying that to *Beavis and Butthead* just seemed natural. We had Whitney come in to New York City for a meeting with MTV. His father, John Whitney, Sr., did optical/computerized-type animation in the '40s. So he had this really unique grasp on this sort of thing. We basically said, "We can do this, but we can't do it without John Whitney and his company's [USAnimation, later called VirtualMagicUSA] involvement." So we did 120 minutes of animation in five months, which was astonishing. There were no pencil tests, a very critical phase in the animation process where you get to see stuff just in line form before going to the final stage. There was none of that. We just dove in. If this had presented itself and we had been open maybe two more years, I wouldn't have taken it, and there were plenty of people, Colossal included, saying, "Are you out of your mind? We've heard of this project. This will be the death of you." [laughter] And being as new as we were to everything, we just dove in. Then it really took off.

We only did the first season of *Beavis and Butthead*. If we continued, it would have just consumed us completely. It already had, and that was not what Patrice and I wanted out of the company, so after the first season, we said, "It's better we do other stuff as well, and we can't do both at the same time, so..." That's when MTV opened their own studio. It was great because a lot of people just hopped from our White Plains shop, over to MTV in the city.



ABOVE: J.J. Sedelmaier Productions worked on both the VW "Speed Racer" print and television spots. ©'03 the respective copyright holder. Courtesy of JJSP.

CBA: With *Beavis and Butt-head*, did your star rise? Did you get noticed? That was a hit, right?

J.J.: Yeah, it was a big hit. I mean, [U.S. Attorney General] Janet Reno was talking about *Beavis and Butt-head*! There were a lot of unfortunate other things that were kind of occurring in the news that were attributed to *Beavis and Butt-head*. But, yeah, it put us on the map in a lot of ways, but it wasn't something... I think I was subconsciously worried about being too closely associated with it because it had such a strong identity, too. But I tried to make as much as I could out of the association while it was happening, and parlayed into other things, which worked out pretty well. It's a very nice, wonderful feather in the studio's cap to have that in its background. They moved Mike Judge out here from Texas. He'd come, we'd go through all the stuff here in the studio, then they'd take him into the city and he'd supervise and in many cases do a great majority of the recording. So the first season really was a grueling process. Mike was amazing, because he was involved in every single aspect of the show.

CBA: Was Mike the voice of both characters?

J.J.: He was the voice of both the characters. He was the voice of Tom Anderson, the old guy, and other assorted characters.

CBA: Did Mike do a significant amount of writing?

J.J.: Yes. If he wasn't doing the writing, he was going through all the scripts with everybody. It was a pretty overwhelming process because, you know, he'd just done those two films on his own, so really didn't know what the process was. In a lot of ways, he didn't even know his own style yet. I mean, we're designing 50 characters, let's say, and each character that he designed would kind of evolve. Well, there wasn't enough time for things to evolve, they had to just happen.

CBA: What's the concept behind *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*?

J.J.: The concept surrounds people's preoccupation with these two superheroes who follow the formula of the Batman and Robin type thing, the main character with a sidekick, and people's preoccupation with them being gay

when they're really not. (Plenty of football players slap each other on the butt, only that doesn't make them gay.)

I don't know if Robert [Smigel] was necessarily aware of Dr. Fredric Wertham [author of *Seduction of the Innocent*, a '50s anti-comic book bestseller], but he knew the gags that were going on with the whole Batman and Robin shtick. Really, the funniest lines aren't the ones where Ace and Gary go, "What's everybody looking at?" The funniest lines are, y'know, when the villains reply, "Nothing!" [laughter] Now BigHead has gotten to the point where he's totally preoccupied and spending his evil powers trying to set them up to look gay, to "out" them. We've done 10 episodes altogether and it's been really a rewarding experience to know there are people all over the world who are so entertained and also just so happy to have the Ace and Gary characters put stuff out in the open which says it like it is. I never realized how many gay and lesbian film festivals there are! We get six or seven requests a month to enter the films into festivals, because it'll show one place and they'll see it in another place. This stuff has never aired on television overseas, so people are getting exposed through film festivals and word of mouth.

I've never run across anyone who has been outraged with *TAGD*. There used to be a magazine called *Animato*. We put a fifth anniversary ad in their magazine that just incorporated the title card from the Ambiguously Gay Duo. It was just an image amongst other images of stuff we had produced. I guess somebody from some sort of "Family Values" organization called the magazine and said, "We take objection, we are offended by this image."

CBA: What, they wanted them to be unambiguously gay?

J.J.: Yeah, exactly! Who knows? But the guy at *Animato* called and said, "You know, the ad you ran really threw somebody's nose out of joint. What we'd like to do is split the cost of doing the ad if you run it again."

CBA: [laughs] I like that.

J.J.: That's the only criticism I've ever heard. People find out you have any



I met with the director, Sam Raimi. I thought I didn't get the part. I don't think he saw me as Mary Jane. I was bummed. I really wanted to be in this movie!



Let's get right to "Spider-Man" - How'd it come together from your end...?

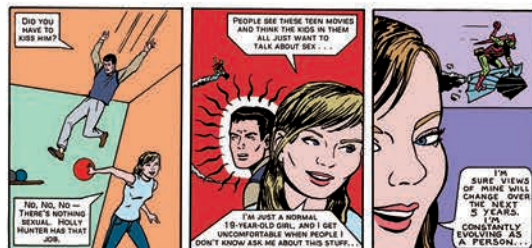
Three months later, they called me back and screen-tested me with Tobey Maguire. I think we read really well together. It was only then I got the part. Billy plays this guy who's in love with me - Mary Jane. She gets real shy. He's loved her since he was a little kid. He gets bitten by an insect and becomes a superhero.

female power! There was one superhero I liked from an animated cartoon and that was Sailor Moon. Oh, and I also liked Lilo Lilo Lilo and Rainbow Brite.



Were you into comics at all when you were a kid?

No, not really. I didn't read "Spider-Man." Girls weren't really into the same superheroes that boys are. We want to emulate women who have



IF SOMEONE CAME UP TO YOU AND SAID "HEY, YOUR NUMBERS' UP, YOU HAD YOUR FUNK AND NOW IT'S TIME TO FIND ANOTHER GIG. WHAT WOULD YOU DO?"

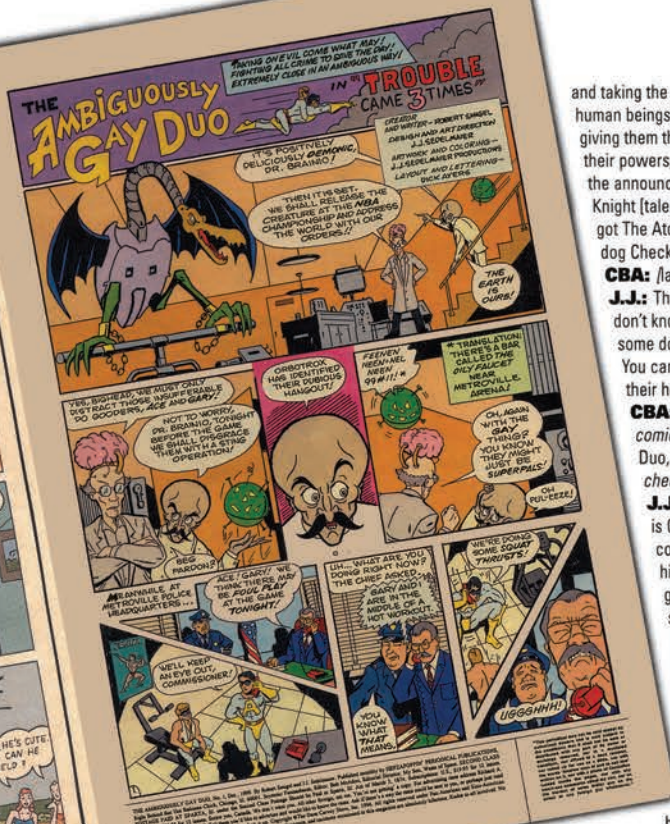


OK, WHAT WOULD YOU DO IN A MOVIE?

I'LL GO TO A MEETING AND SAY THAT I'M NOT SHOWING MY BREASTS IN A MOVIE, SO IF YOU WANT ME, YOU'LL HAVE TO CUT THAT PART OUT OF THE MOVIE.



TOP: This Esquire story goes from Win Mortimer-type art to John Romita, Sr.-like rendering, all with a "Fun With Real Audio" flavor. Courtesy of JJSP. Spider-Man ©2003 Marvel Characters, Inc. ©2003 the respective copyright holder.



and taking the absurd idea that these relatively normal human beings are capable of astounding feats and giving them the opportunity to save the world using their powers, and it's really a Filimation approach. Even the announcer (voiced by Robert) sounds like Ted Knight [talent from *Super Friends*]. George Bush has got The Atom's powers. Bringing back Nixon and his dog Checkers was great.

CBA: [laughs] Still kicking Tricky Dick!

J.J.: The sad thing is, half the people watching don't know who the hell Checkers is, and maybe some don't even know who Nixon is! [laughter] You can just hear some references flying over their heads sometimes.

CBA: Do you have an appreciation for bad comics? Obviously, in *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*, there's at least an influence of pretty cheesy '60s comics.

J.J.: Yeah. To me, the epitome of Superman is Curt Swan. I love Swan's drawings, but I'm conscious of the fact that the reason I love his work is because I'm steeped in nostalgia. Nostalgia sometimes can be pretty spooky, because people start interpreting things as good art, good design, and so forth, when all it's just a fond feeling for something you remember from being a kid. You get warm, gushy and all that, and end up saying Walter Keene's a great artist or something (He was the painter who did the big-eyed kids standing in alleys or the cat with the big eyes and light, dilated pupils).

Sometimes I'll do a commercial that harkens back to something out of the '50s and I'll even do it in black-&-white. I'm taking something that originally had absolutely no sense of humor to it — the look of the drawing and the sensibility of it — and using it in a humorous situation. It pushes the humor that much farther, because you're conditioned to feel that this stuff doesn't have a sense of humor.

Curt Swan's drawings, and the context of DC in the '60s and Superman, was really a real base-level thing that didn't have a lot of excitement to it. Marvel was doing some interesting stuff, but Swan's work was pretty mundane. So I try to use it as a device for humor and open up all sorts of possibilities. So, yes, I'm greatly influenced by the stuff. I know it inside-out and love to poke fun at it because that just wasn't something you were supposed to do.

CBA: The reason that we're talking right now is because you sent out this self-promotional comic book to me (which was flattering, as I am in no position to ever give you work), and I realized how astute it was concerning comics. I mean, it even had an Alex Ross cover painting featuring *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*!

J.J.: Well, that came directly out of having done a four-page TAGD comic story for *Playboy*. After doing that, I thought, "What else can I do with this?" Because I really enjoyed taking Ace and Gary and using them in a different realm. I was thinking to myself, "What can I do to make this complete?"

I had gotten to know Chris Ware just by contacting him and telling him I love his work and would love to do something with him someday, if he's got ever any ideas he wants to investigate in terms of animation. I said, "Just call me, I'd love to talk about it and go through the process with you." Somehow I found out he knew Alex Ross, and I asked him for a contact. I called Alex and told him, "Someday, at some point, I'd love to do a little self-promotion thing for the studio, to show what the studio's done in print. I'd love to have you paint an old comic book cover starring *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*." He just loved the idea, because it not only poked fun at what he does, but also pokes fun at the people he does the work for. Alex really

association with *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*, and if they're gay, they love it. It's very hot with the high school kids, they just love it. I'll overhear stuff if I'll be taking a bus or a train sometimes and if there are a group of kids together sometimes I'll overhear them talking about it or even doing the theme song. It's just great.

CBA: How is *Standards and Practices* to deal with at NBC? Have they actually said no to certain things? Do you skirt a line, right?

J.J.: Yes, absolutely. They have asked for things to be modified, but it's been pretty easy overall. *SNL* is in a unique position because they've been doing satire and parody for 30 years, let's say, and as a result, there's this built-in insulation process they have from really getting in trouble, because if it's on *Saturday Night Live*, you automatically know it's satire and parody. But no, there hasn't been a lot of problems that way. Also, Robert knows the whole structure of the thing. He's not going to delay the approval process by purposefully doing something that's not going to get through *Standards* pretty quickly.

CBA: He's not a *Kricfalusi*?

J.J.: Well, he does it more with the structure of his writing and the message that he has. His stuff is very powerful. And it's also very powerful because it's animated. First of all, it's the type of animation, too. If it were well-animated and beautifully designed, it wouldn't have the impact and edge to it. Also, I think with animation you loosen or warm people up and you can "come in through the back door." [laughter] You can come through and hit them when they're not ready for it. Just the fact it's animated and in a realm of fantasy provides you with this way of telling a story and getting a message across that live action can't do.

CBA: What's the genesis of *The X-Presidents*?

J.J.: It's playing off the idea of giving each X-President his own powers

TOP RIGHT: Comic book veteran Dick "Sgt. Fury" Ayers contributed to this spot-on *Playboy* comics satire starring *Saturday Night Live*'s *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*. Courtesy of JJSR. ©2003 The Dana Carvey Show.

seemed to get off on it and he did a couple designs that helped us get to the point where we could find something he could do that wouldn't be over-the-top. We wanted to do something that was going to be all Ace and Gary but was obviously going to be him, too. To take all of the self-important, humorless...

CBA: Smugness?

J.J.: Smugness... and put it in there. I can't, for the life of me, think of what could have been done better than what Alex did. Because you don't get the codpiece/package aspect right away. You see the title, you see it's Ace and Gary, and then you get the joke... The other thing that's nice about it, too, is that, okay, if you get it, that's great, and if you don't get it, you're lost.

[laughs] I'm not going to try to take it too much over the top because it just won't have confidence in the work.

Then I started doing more print work and I got a Charles Atlas parody ad that we did for *Playboy*, too, and suddenly I started realizing, "Oh, this can be something!" It really was a lot of fun to do, a lot of fun to do. It took a long time just kind of gathering everything together and so forth, but...

CBA: Was there a kid-like enthusiasm for it, that you could do your own comic?

J.J.: [Sighing in joy and relief] Ohhh! [laughter]

CBA: I don't know how we write that out. [laughter]

J.J.: Well, it's like coming full circle after all this time

to finally do the @#%*ing comic book. And

then also starting to expand on the

studio's involvement in print. We

started getting print work that

was separate from any TV we

were doing. I mean, we'd

always been available to do

print aspects of TV

campaigns, but we started

getting advertising print

work separate from

anything having to do with

television that we had done.

And it really became, and it

still is, an exciting aspect of

the stuff that the studio's doing. We're

doing a quarterly thing now for *Texas*

Monthly. I put you on hold because Tom

Stabler called from *Playboy* again, and they want

to do now a photographic piece where it would be using

three-dimensional characters that we'd photograph in a strip form...

CBA: Fumetti?

J.J.: Yeah! And everybody in the studio loves it, too, because they're not going to get exposure to this kind of stuff anywhere else. So it's turned into just an overall art/design kind of studio, and I'm getting involved in all sorts of really cool things.

CBA: You did "The Amazing Kirsten Dunst"... I think what's so endearing about the material is that to look at it, it hearkens back to Spidey Super Stories, you know? It had Winslow Mortimer kind of adequate art, yet still cheesy...

J.J.: That was fun, too, because *Esquire* called and said they had this interview with Kirsten, and if they didn't put something in there that had something fun about it, it was just going to be a bore. So they said, "We've got two pages and we'd love to do a *Spider-Man*-like comic, and we'd like you to do something like you've done with *Saturday Night Live* with the *Real Audio* stuff using a washed-out drawing style." Then I said, "Well, what if the drawing starts to transform like *Spidey* from just being this real washed-out approach, even in terms of color, this kind of boring, washed-out caricature, and we moved closer to a Johnny Romita look towards the end. Do everything: the type, the panels, and evolve the look as it went along. I think we did it in, like, a week, too. There wasn't a lot of time. But it was a lovely thing to have to put in the comic book. There's a nice texture to the comic, because it includes all sorts of designs, all sorts of approaches, and it

does, I think, really nicely show what the studio can do in print form. Even down to the poster article in *Print* magazine about the old railway posters.

CBA: What's the response been from your comic book promo?

J.J.: Oh, just phenomenal! It was nice to get a call from Arlen Schumer [CBA logo designer and co-partner of Dynamic Duo Studio, which produces comic book art for advertising], who said, "Oh God! I didn't know you were doing this kind of stuff. This is fantastic!" I also sent a copy to Dick Ayers, who helped us out on the *Playboy* "Ace and Gary" piece. People in the animation and advertising industries just love it, as well. We sent the packets out so they looked like *Speed Racer* promotional pieces, you don't really know what it is, and then you open it up to see this great Alex Ross cover. [laughter] I think everyone really found it a really nice treat.

CBA: Well, obviously, the cover had this referential DC look down to the square box with "12c," which actually precedes you a little bit, doesn't it?

J.J.: No, the "12c" was definitely during my heyday. Twelve cents came in, what, like '62.

CBA: Yeah, but they had it in the square box for about three months or so.

J.J.: Yeah, but that was the icon for me. It's funny: You look at the cover and that little round circle [faux DC/National Comics logo] in the upper left just really takes you back. That whole structure just takes you back

completely, although they never did fully rendered covers like that.

That was more along the Fawcett days, when every once in a while they'd do this highly-rendered

Captain Marvel cover of the hero standing there or the Marvel Family flying around the Empire State Building.

I think they did five or six of these highly-rendered, painterly covers. DC never did anything like that.

That's the only thing that conflicts with the whole DC idea.

CBA: But certainly the smugness, the seriousness of the characters fits right in.

J.J.: Oh, right! The color of the sky, everything about it. And Alex [Ross] liked it, too, which is very cool.

He's got it on his Web site [www.alexross-art.com].

It was very happy with it as well.

CBA: Are you still a comics reader?

J.J.: Yes. I'm fortunate to have probably one of the best comic stores in Westchester, if not on the East Coast, down here, Comic Book Heaven. It's on Court Street in White Plains. It used to be run by a guy named Morris Seitz. Then he passed away and his wife Irene runs it now. It's really good, and they've got back issues, too.

Today, I love Mike and Laura Allred's stuff! Oh! *X-Statix* is just so... I'm trying to get the Allreds involved in an animated piece now, trying to interest some people into animating them, because I love the way he's taken, again, that kind of boring DC approach, but really distilled it down and given it a really strong graphic look. I love the drawing.

CBA: Have you ever met Allred in person?

J.J.: No, I've just spoken to him on the phone.

CBA: Michael's one of those guys, like Neal Adams, who looks like his drawings. He's beautiful to look at. [laughs]

J.J.: I saw a picture once of Mike. Yeah, he looks very dashing.

CBA: He's just so enthusiastic, so boyish, "I love comics!" He's a guy who has a million ideas.

J.J.: Do you know who Peter DeSeve is?

CBA: No.

J.J.: He's the designer behind the computer animated feature film *Ice Age*. He's designed a lot of animated motion pictures, but he's also done a lot of *New Yorker* covers. I think you'd probably recognize his stuff. You look at his work and say, "This guy has got to be about 60 years old. He's gotta be very



seasoned. He's obviously been around." Probably pretty gregarious, he's got a great sense of humor that comes out in his art, but he's got a very classic kind of layered watercolor and vellum technique and he goes back in it with pen-&-ink, and it's just beautifully well-drawn stuff. The first time I met him, I just wanted to hit him. Because he's, like, 30 and right off the cover of *GQ*. [Jon laughs] Plus he's the nicest guy you'd ever want to meet in your whole *\$#@~ life! It's just, like, "How the hell does that come in that package?"

CBA: [laughs] That's not fair!

J.J.: That's not to be allowed!

CBA: R. Crumb... yes. [laughs]

J.J.: Exactly. What I do is wander through the comic stores and look for stuff that just grabs me, that looks interesting. Often I look at an interesting cover and then open up the inside and it's a bore. At first I resisted Alex's stuff, because it was just so illustrative and it was so self-important. But then I started getting into the fantasy world that just came through, and it's almost like it has no business working. But it *does* for me.

CBA: You could characterize it as "over-rendered" approach, and yet there's a sincere and abiding earnestness, a true enthusiasm and intelligence behind it that is irresistible... Ross gets comics.

J.J.: Yup! I knew that if I had tried to use or propose Alex Ross to anyone in the art community — the people I know who are artists, designers, illustrators — they would think I had lost my mind. Yet using him on the cover for *The Ambiguously Gay Duo* comic, then they get it. That was something I wanted to do: be able to say, "You can like this. You don't have to poo-poo this. This can work."

You look at those live-action *Batman* movies and look at how much money was spent on them. Yet, I don't think those people really understood comics, because... In particular, there's a shot in the first one, where he's running with Kim Basinger down the street and they're going to the Batmobile. They took a long shot of him, but you can't take a long shot of Batman, because he looks like a silly guy dressed in a costume running down the street.

If Alex Ross wasn't sensitive to comic books, what makes them effective and what makes them work, his stuff would just look like a bunch of silly people dressed up in costumes. You've got the wrinkles, you can feel the Lycra. You almost can smell the material that the costumes are made of. But if he didn't stage it, if he didn't pose it, if he didn't art direct it and direct it the way he does, it would just fall flat on its face. But, for me, that's what works. I love the idea of actually being able to see the characters as actual people. It's almost as far as I can go. (Although *Spider-Man* worked very well. *Spider-Man* was a great film. I really did enjoy what they did with that).

CBA: Can you rattle off some names of people from the comics industry whom you have worked with?

J.J.: Well, I said Neal Adams and Dick Ayers...

CBA: We were talking about M.K. Brown the other day.

J.J.: Oh, so we're talking cartoonists, too?

CBA: Sure.

J.J.: George Booth, David Levine, Garry Trudeau... Who else? Craig Yoe. Peter DeSeve. Sue Rose (who created Fido Dido and Pepper Ann), Philippe Weisbecker (who's a French illustrator), Isabelle Derveaux, Doug Fraser, a very heroic kind of WPA mural sort of artwork. A lot of these people, or some of these people you might know by seeing their artwork. Gary Baseman. Do you know Gary Baseman's stuff?

CBA: No.

J.J.: You'd probably recognize it. It's kind of like... Have you seen *Teacher's Pet* on television? It's a kid's cartoon, and it's really actually got quite a lot of

energy. It's coming out as a feature soon, so you'll know him after that. Barry Blitt does a lot of stuff for *Esquire* and *The New York Times Magazine*. Bonnie Timmons designs all the Quilted Northern Quilters commercials we've been doing. Kind of like a Blechman disciple, this squiggly, vulnerable quality to her work.

CBA: These aren't the bears, are they?

J.J.: No, it's the quilters, women sitting around quilting. The bear commercials are kind of addressing the quilters, because the quilters were animated first, and then the other company got into animation by using the bears.

CBA: The bears are animated very nicely, I think.

J.J.: Again, that's the illustrative kind of British animation that you'd never see here before the early '80s or so.

CBA: Right! Like the breakfast cereal commercials, when all of a sudden, *Toucan Sam* and *Fred Flintstone* really looked well-animated?

J.J.: Right. Even Tony the Tiger started having this very well-drawn, rendered quality. A lot of it had to do with Roger Rabbit, too, because... incorporating animation and live-action together and trying to make the animation look like it's more a part of the live-action than ever before.

The other really cool thing that came up a year or so ago was the golf commercials that were a direct spin-off of *The X-Presidents* sensibility.

The fact that an agency saw the *Saturday Night Live* stuff we'd done and could reinterpret and understand and get it that by taking something like golfers and elevate them to godlike status was just brilliant. A great idea and really fun.

The fact they also understood the importance of actually using the golfers' voices, who can't act themselves out of a paper bag, lend that much more of an uncomfortable quality to it. It's great.

CBA: So you're having fun?

J.J.: Yes.

CBA: Are there any comic book people or cartoonists whom you'd really like to work with?

J.J.: Well, Mike and Laura. I would love to do something with Chris Ware, but that's a real challenge to translate and do justice to his stuff. But I would love to somehow incorporate the grid and the structure of his stuff. Whether it's his advertising, his pseudo-advertising pages, or just his stripwork. Try to find out how to translate that to film, what language, what kind of new vocabulary do we have to develop to make that work. That would be really exciting, and I know the collaborative process with him would be really juicy. He's got great ideas, got a great spin on stuff. You know, I pattern my involvement based on what the artist wants to do, and I would just love to sit back and see what starts to evolve with him. I wouldn't want to try to steer him; I'd let him try to steer me.

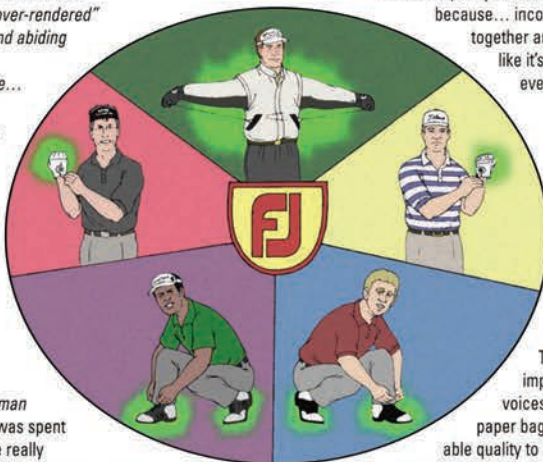
CBA: Forceful, Ware's not. [laughs]

J.J.: No, but still, twice as much impact.

CBA: Y'know, what would come to mind is *Quimby the Mouse* or that great little peanut character that he had. I wonder if someone could use that... You know how he does those elaborate Winsor McKay kinds of layouts, and I wonder if you could animate the character moving between the panels, you know what I mean?

J.J.: I just think there's something out there with Ware's stuff that would really surprise both us.

I love the fact Bill Watterson is very conservative with his characters. I would never want to see *Calvin and Hobbes* animated. I don't want to hear someone's version of what the characters sound like. There's just something about that strip making it so unnecessary for animation. It's so full, so rich without being animated, and Bill is very protective over that whole realm.



Look at what happened to *Peanuts*, as successful as it's been... and, again, talk about nostalgia! It's crept into so many peoples' beings. If you read his stuff from the early to mid-'60s, he's got such incredible timing. It's so economical, but so well done. To have timing on a printed page with two or three or maybe four panels? Oh, man! Once you lock it in on film, it's there forever, and there's no fun to it at all. Plus, it's *lethal* in a theater. I remember walking in and seeing these huge, round, flesh circles on the screen, and going, "Ugh!"

CBA: Right. I remember the Summer Vacation movie just not working.

J.J.: Yeah, just totally lethal.

Again, to hear Vince Guaraldi's music, it's wonderful. To see the characters dancing on the screen and all that. That was cool but it really had nothing to do with the comic strip other than the basic structure. The wryness didn't translate like Schulz did on the printed page.

I used to get one of those paperback *Peanuts* collections every time I got a grade above a "C." I still have them. They're great.

CBA: Do you have any other comic book-oriented material that will be coming out in the future?

J.J.: Well, I would like to move *Captain Linger* along. *Captain Linger* is taking Curt Swan and playing with it a little bit. It was Stuart Hill's idea to do the character

(Stuart's the guy at Cartoon Network I had mentioned before). He was going for a kind of Jay Ward/Bill Scott approach, a *Rocky and Bullwinkle* kind of approach. He started telling me about it, and I felt, well, gosh, it sounds like what you want to do — because this is a super-hero who's a little dim. I felt that if you drew him like *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, if you drew him silly, you knew something silly was going to happen. So I thought, well, what if we drew it like a comic book, a real straight ahead comic book look? I had mentioned Curt Swan as someone whose work you could look at to get what I was trying to say. Then you got people, I think, a little off balance and you might get more mileage out of the gags. So far they've only been interstitials, we've done eight of them for Cartoon Network and they show them on *Adult Swim* once in a while. Stuart and I have been trying to figure out a way of how to get him into the next level, maybe something a little longer than a minute and a half.

CBA: Do you like the current environment for animation?

J.J.: Well, it's better than it has been, and I do like the Paul Dini/Bruce Timm, the DC/Warner animated stuff... It's pretty cool. Again, some of the close-ups are a little hard to take because there's so little detail. But the *Batman* show has got one of the best title sequences I've seen in a long time. I also think *Iron Giant* is one of the best animated features ever!

There's still a big glut for silly, stupid kid stuff. After *Ren and Stimpy* came out, this kind of toilet humor thing was really overdone. I mean, I love

the design of things like *Sponge Bob*. I think the design is great, though I can't really get into the cartoon, but I love the look of all the color. And you can see the influence of the '50s type stuff in *Dexter's Laboratory*. I think Cartoon Network has done some good stuff and has also made a point of trying to get people to think of animation differently with some of the adult stuff they've done, which is good. And now MTV's getting into that, to they have, on TNN [Spike TV]. So it's pretty good, but I'm just waiting for this sort-out process to finish, with CGI and 2-D and everything else. Oh, and *Invader Zim!* Brilliant!

CBA: Before we wrap-up, any other comics-related anecdotes come to mind?

J.J.: Yeah! Let me tell you a neat story: When my dad was working at Clinton E. Frank, an agency in Chicago — 1966-ish — he told me he had run into [Batman creator] Bob Kane at a lunch. Now, I flipped when I heard that because I was in the midst of "Bat-Mania" like the rest of the country at the time, due to the popularity of the TV show. He said that he'd probably see Kane again because of another conference that was being held in a few weeks. And, sure enough, about a month later, my dad said not only had he run into Kane again, but asked to get a sketch for his son. My dad knew I'd always loved the portrait of the Batman on the back cover of #1, so he suggested Kane draw that pose. It seemed like forever, but probably a couple months later, my father gave me a large flat package to unwrap. I opened it and found a water color piece of my favorite hero just like the back cover. There's a word balloon saying "Crime Doesn't Pay!" and it's got Bob Kane's signature/logo at the bottom. But — BUT — it's person-

alized to me as well. Only one problem: It's inscribed to "JAY-JAY"! My name is spelled wrong!

It took awhile to get through that, but what the hell, right? Fast-forward about 15 years, and my dad and stepmother are visiting New York City and we're out to dinner. I'm psyched to tell him about a friend of mine, who runs the rare book room at B. Dalton's in Manhattan, who's having an autograph show in the gallery and, after I told this friend about the Batman painting, he said he'd LOVE to have it in the show. I tell Dad at dinner and he kinda blanches... my stepmom says, "Joe, you've got to tell him." I ask, "Tell me what?" I ask. Then my dad says words that gave me the impulses of a homicidal maniac and an affectionate teddy bear all at once. He said, "I did that painting. I did it for you, not Kane." Cute, huh?

