

Will Eisner Tribute Panel: Return of the Artist¹



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In the *Steranko History of Comics*, Eisner is quoted as saying about his decision to discontinue *The Spirit*, “I decided I would rather be an entrepreneur than an artist.” (STERANKO, 1972, p. 116)¹ Eisner never totally abandoned the drawing board, but over a couple of decades his emphasis shifted from doing art to doing business. He approached business with the same energy and inventiveness he had poured into his early comics work. Eisner never regretted the decision. He discovered that he enjoyed the art of the deal and he had a knack for making money. His wife, Ann, has said she thinks “you could have split Will in half, and say one side is business and one side is art. Will loved the business end. He loved the excitement of negotiating.” Ann saw the two sides of Will as reflections of his parents. “His mother was more of a businessperson. His father was more of a dreamer, so he got something from both.” (EISNER, A., 2002) Ann loved both aspects of the man.

Theirs was a marriage that would have been highly improbable just a few decades earlier. Although Eisner was a successful cartoonist, he came from a markedly different social class than did Ann. Ann Weingarten’s family had immigrated to America in 1850 and had been wealthy for generations. Whereas Eisner had grown up in a Jewish ghetto, Ann’s family lived on Park Avenue. However, by mid-

century the barriers between classes were more easily breached. It helped that the Weingartens took a liking to Will. Will and Ann were married on June 15, 1950.

Melville David Weingarten was very fond of his son-in-law, but he felt Will should get a “grown-up job.” Weingarten, a prominent stock broker, wanted Will to join him on Wall Street. “Why don’t you come into a gentleman’s business?” he asked³.

Eisner did not leave comics for Wall Street, but he found a way to take comics into the corporate world. During his stint in the Army he had contributed to the war effort by using comics to train soldiers in the proper maintenance of their equipment. That experience was the impetus for a new direction in Eisner’s career. The work had gotten Eisner excited about the educational capability of the comics medium, and apparently some of the soldiers who were his audience also realized the effectiveness of the instructional comics they had seen in *Army Motors* magazine. After the war, Eisner went back to work on *The Spirit*, and did some of the most memorable stories, but there were distractions. “I occasionally received calls from former military types who were now involved in the publication departments of major corporations like General Motors and U.S. Steel,” Eisner once recalled. “They would ask if I could do any of their training material in comic form.

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3. Entrevista pessoal com Ann Eisner, 18 jun. 2005

Of course, being a New York City boy, I said 'Sure!'" (apud WAITER, BISSETTE, 1993, p. 277). Eisner discovered that corporations were willing to pay much more for a comic book than any comic book publisher was willing to pay. Always quick to capitalize on an opportunity that came his way, Eisner formed the American Visuals Corporation to produce instructional comics for corporate clients. Being able to tout the fledgling company as doing work for clients such as U.S. Steel and General Motors helped Eisner get a variety of work, from the cover of a Baltimore Colts 1950 souvenir booklet to a comic the United Nations intended to send to Pakistan to teach anti-soil erosion techniques.

Excited by these new challenges, Eisner had little enthusiasm or time left over for *The Spirit*. By 1950, "*The Spirit* began to become very burdensome." (EISNER, W., 1979, p. 19) He had essentially turned the strip over to his assistants, but he was seldom pleased with the result. Eisner felt that Jules Feiffer's approach to storytelling was quite similar to his own and that Feiffer's scripts usually captured the Eisner style and tone, but he found the work of the artists who illustrated those scripts to be serviceable at best.

In 1952, he brought in Wally Wood to do the artwork on the *Spirit* stories. Feiffer and Wood produced outer space adventures that, while they had a very different sensibility than what readers had been used to in the *Spirit's* earthbound adventures, were nonetheless intriguing and beautiful. The first work Eisner saw from Wood was stunning, and Eisner dared to hope that "Wally Wood was the artist who could handle *The Spirit* on a long-term basis," (apud HEINSTEIN, 1991, inside front cover) but then Wood, who was also contributing to EC's monthly *Weird Science* comic book, could not make his deadline for the fourth outer space story. It was soon clear that Wood could not produce seven pages a week so Eisner

reduced the *Spirit* stories to four pages. Wood was still chronically late. Wally Wood's heavy drinking and devotion to luscious, detailed artwork prevented him from producing pages with the regularity demanded by a weekly feature. Eisner and Wood "decided to shake hands and call it quits." (apud HEINSTEIN, 1992, p. 10). Wood's final *Spirit* artwork appeared in the September 28, 1952 story "Return from the moon." A week later, on October 5, in a bland story with mediocre artwork, the *Spirit* made his final appearance.

Eisner was loath to give up a source of income, but it was a dwindling source. Fewer papers were carrying the *Spirit Section*, and Eisner felt the Section's unique distribution system was going to collapse soon. The final nail in *The Spirit's* coffin was driven once Eisner secured a contract to produce comics content for an Army magazine. Originally, it had been on a twice a year publication, but once the Army decided they wanted a monthly publication the contract became lucrative enough that Eisner could afford to discontinue *The Spirit*.

Because the Army had been impressed with Eisner's use of the comics format to deliver preventive maintenance information in the *Army Motors* magazine during World War II, they turned to him to do the art when they began *P*S, The Preventive Maintenance Monthly*. Only this time he was being paid as a civilian contractor. (EISNER, W., 1979, p. 19) Eisner put together a complete prototype issue of *P*S*, and the Army spent about six months testing it against traditional training literature. Eisner was awarded the contract and the first issue appeared in June of 1951.

The main office for *P*S* magazine was in Lexington, Kentucky, where an editor and staff of writers devised the theme and wrote the articles for each issue. Eisner was responsible for creating the cover, spot illustrations, and the eight-page color comic that appeared in the center of

each magazine.

Eisner and his staff employed broad humor and sexy women to grab the G.I.s' attention, and dry, technical information was communicated by means of talking equipment and other visual gags. The mainstays were mechanics Connie Rodd and MSG Half-Mast McCannick and the equipment destroying Joe Dope, characters Eisner had created for posters and *Army Motors* magazine during his time in the Army. When Connie is in uniform her shirt is so tight the buttons are strained to hold it closed, and, in fact, occasionally pop off. It was not unusual for her to be out of uniform and scantily clad. In one two-page spread detailing submachine gun maintenance, Connie's shapely and apparently nude body is covered by a few strategically placed captions⁴.

Soon his work for the military expanded beyond *P*S*. In September of 1951, a Joe Dope strip by Eisner began running in newspapers at various Army posts. Once the Korean War began Eisner found himself involved in the creation of instructional materials for the South Korean army. The *P*S Magazine* contract became the cornerstone of the Eisner's American Visual Corporation and marked the beginning of a different phase of his career. With the *Spirit Section*, Eisner had been on the periphery of the comic book industry. By the time he discontinued *The Spirit* in late 1952 he was living and working in a totally different world. It must not have been long before the comics creators who had once worked with him began to muse "I wonder what ever happened to Will Eisner?" For his part, Eisner probably did not have much time to think about the old days as he was busy developing corporate clients that led to lucrative corporate mergers.

As he was bringing the *Spirit* strip to a close Eisner "got very involved in developing material for the then burgeoning industrial relations market, the reading rack market (EISNER, W., 1979, p. 20).

Deadly Ideas, a 1952 job safety booklet for General Motors employees, was one of the first of these ventures. Eisner often saved time and effort in the production of these pamphlets by "recycling" characters from his *P*S Magazine* work. For example, Connie Rodd and Joe Dope, appear, with minimal changes, as Connie Convertible and Argyle McSludge in one of Eisner's 1953 commercial ventures, *Hoods Up, A Magazine for Profit-Minded Fram Dealers*, done for Fram Oil Filter.

American Visuals was producing enough pamphlets for the reading rack market that they got the attention of their major competitor. In the late 1950s American Visuals merged with Koster-Dana Publishing, which was the parent company of the Good Reading Rack Service, the largest publisher of reading rack materials. As Eisner explains the reasons for the merger, "We had been coming up fast behind them, and most of the other companies had fallen away. So we decided that the two of us should merge. They had no creative force, they just had sales organization. We were all creative." (EISNER, W., 1979, p. 20) In 1962, Eisner was named executive vice-president of Koster-Dana Publishing Company. When Koster-Dana bought the North American Newspaper Alliance, which included the Bell McClure Syndicate, Will was made president of the syndicate. In an October 1963 letter Eisner wrote: "My role is confined, in the main, to the guidance and development of new features, rather than the actual personal creation." (EISNER, W., 1963)

Eventually, Eisner severed his relationship with Koster-Dana because he felt the publishing end of the conglomerate was beginning to atrophy (EISNER, W., 1979, p. 21). It was apparently a profitable leave-taking for Eisner, but Koster-Dana editorial director Jules Siegel remembers a different reason for the departure: "Will brought the booklets he produced a sense of humor that was almost as much fun

4. Vinheta da *P*S Magazine* n. 224, reimpressa em *The Comics Journal*, n. 46, p. 46, May 1979.

as *The Spirit*. Well, that went over like the proverbial turd in the punch bowl at Good Reading Rack Service, even after our booklets sold better than the old ones." Siegel claims "Eisner was later forced out and took American Visuals with him, but he made a great deal of money buying and selling his own company." (SIEGEL, 2005)

Will Eisner was still an artist and still occasionally spent time at the drawing board, but by all outward appearances he was a businessman. During the decade of the 60s the work itself has less and less to do with comics. Eisner spent much of his time putting together proposals and securing contracts for comics work his staff would produce. *Reward for fire Prevention at Home* (1960), an illustrated pamphlet for the National Fire Protection Association, and *Before You Cross* (1962), a safety guide for General Motors were typical of the comics work that appeared with the Eisner signature in the early 60s. Eisner even began to do some work that involved no cartooning. *A pictorial arsenal of America's combat weapons* and *America's space vehicles*: a pictorial review, put out by Sterling Publishing in 1960 and 1962 respectively, are typical text and photo reference books.

As the decade progressed, Eisner's business ventures diversified. American Visuals still employed the comics form to create materials for corporate and government clients, but by mid-decade Eisner had set up a group of companies to produce other types of work. IPD Publishing Company published hard cover books for schools. The IPD book for automotive mechanics was sold to military schools. Will Eisner Productions was producing the comics portion of *P*S Magazine*, as well as other instructional and semi-technical manuals for the military. His Educational Supplements Corporation provided multi-media kits for elementary social studies classes. Each World Explorer Program kit "contained a record, booklet, a map, and other little elements that

formed a very interesting package to the kids." (EISNER, W., 1979, p. 21) Michael Ploog, who became the chief artist on *P*S Magazine* a few years later, remembers the educational supplements business being run out of the back room of the American Visuals offices. "He used to bring in goofy things like pipes from Peru, and silk worms from Japan. They used to be stored in boxes all over the place." (PLOOG, 2005, p. 140)

Of course, Eisner never totally abandoned the comics form. For years, he had been trying to sell the Department of Labor on the idea of using comics to reach disadvantaged youth. In 1965, he got a research and development contract and began work on the Job Scene series. Over the next three years, Eisner's studio produced 25 Job Scene comics with titles such as *How to Use the System*, *Learn Baby Learn*, *Food Field*, *Electronic Worker*, *Auto Mechanic*, *You are Nowhere Baby*, *Power is Green Baby*, and *The Man for Me*. This led to additional government contracts. Eisner wrote the scripts and Andre LeBlanc did the art for *Pepe Obrero* and *Los Afortunados (The Lucky Ones)*, published by the United States Information Agency. *Los Afortunados* was intended to convince Latin American shop stewards that democratic unionism and The Alliance for Progress were good for them and their communities.

As Eisner was busy producing comics for governmental and corporate clients he began to be distracted by manifestations of a ghost, or rather spirit, from his past. In February of 1962, a seven page *Spirit* story was reprinted in *Help! 13*, a humor magazine published by *Spirit* fan Jim Warren. This one-time reprint had been suggested by *Help!* editor Harvey Kurtzman, one of Eisner's few close friends in the comics industry. There was no noticeable reaction from the comics community, and Kurtzman did not ask to reprint any more *Spirit* stories. However, the publication did have an eventual impact on Eisner's life. That issue of *Help!* was one

of the sources from which a young Denis Kitchen learned about the existence of Will Eisner and the Spirit.

It is doubtful that Eisner gave much thought to *The Spirit* at that time. It was a chapter of his life that had closed a decade before, and it did not seem likely to be opened again. Eisner's *Spirit* work was just a fond memory to older readers and unknown to the new breed of fans excited by the revival of the superheroes at DC and the unfolding of a new mythos at Marvel Comics.

Jules Feiffer, a former Eisner employee and Spirit scribe, corrected that oversight in an October 1965 *Playboy* article and then in *The Great Comic Book Heroes*, the book from which the article had been excerpted. Feiffer declared that "alone among comic-book men, Eisner was a cartoonist other cartoonists swiped from." (FEIFFER, 2003, p. 43) Perhaps most importantly, Feiffer provided comic book fans a chance to actually see Eisner's work when he reprinted the "Jewel of the Nile" Spirit story in his book. Dave Sim's perspective as a teenage comics fan in the 1970s is probably typical of the way Eisner was viewed between his rediscovery in the mid-60s and his reemergence as a creative force in the late 70s: "All of us were aware of Will Eisner and *The Spirit* as two equally legendary beings spoken of in hushed whispers." (SIM, 2005, p. 9) In 1966, when a new five-page Spirit story written and drawn by Eisner, with assistance from Chuck Kramer, appeared in the January 9 *New York Herald Tribune*, the comics world knew that Eisner was a living legend. This was followed later in 1966 by two magazine-sized comic books published by Harvey Publications that not only reprinted *Spirit* stories, but contained new work by Eisner.

Eisner was certainly aware of and did what he could to encourage a resurgence of interest in *The Spirit*, but, at first, he seemed to think it would be a passing fad. He was almost totally unaware of the

transformation of mainstream comics, the emergence of underground comics, or the development of comics fandom. Eisner was continuing to create comics, or at least supervise a staff of artists creating comics, but he worked in a realm far removed from the *Silver Surfer*, *T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents*, and Bat-mania.

As the decade of the 60s drew to a close the Eisners were leading a comfortable suburban life. With the educational supplement business, a salary from the Bell McClure Syndicate, and separate staffs of artists producing work for the Army contract and the Department of Labor contract, the Eisners were financially secure. And they had two great kids. At seventeen Johnny, who now preferred to go by John, was a son to make his father proud. He was smart, athletic and popular with his fellow students. He was "full of beans" his father proudly proclaimed. (ANDELMAN, 2005, p.130) Alice, a year and a half younger than John, was a compassionate girl who wanted her family to support every charity she saw advertised.

One day in 1969 Alice complained that her bones hurt. It signaled the end of the Eisner family's comfortable, idyllic life. Alice was diagnosed with myeloid cancer.

Ann was by her side almost constantly for the next eighteen months. As Ann embraced those last months with her daughter, Will seemed to be in denial. He insisted that no one tell Alice what was wrong with her. Once the cancer progressed to the point that Alice had to be hospitalized at Mount Sinai, Ann set up a cot and virtually lived at the hospital. Will continued to go to work in the city. Eisner biographer Bob Andelman relates the story that "A cartoonist in Eisner's shop during *The Spirit* days had a sixteen-year-old daughter who died of cancer. The grieving father came in the office the day after she died and sat at his drawing board, crying. 'Look at him,' Eisner said to his brother Pete. 'If that ever happened to me, I couldn't do it.'" (ANDELMAN, 2005, p.

130) Yet, as Alice was dying, Will did not know what else to do. Work had always been his comfort zone.

John did not know how to handle his sister's illness, and, as Eisner would admit years later, he and Ann, who were just barely holding themselves together, did not know how to help him. (ANDELMAN, 2005, p. 131) Initially, John continued to do well in school. He was elected president of his senior class and graduated seventh out of a class of 700. (EISNER, A., 2005, p. 54) Alice passed away shortly before John's graduation. Like the rest of his family he was shattered, but attempted to carry on with his life. He had offers from a number of top schools and started at Rochester the following fall. After a few months at school John had what his mother described as "a complete psychotic break." (EISNER, A., 2005, p. 54) John Eisner, a young man who had been brimming with potential, was never able to lead the kind of life that his proud father had envisioned for him.

Whether due to shock, denial, or a forced stoicism, Will Eisner never cried during the long months he watched his beloved daughter succumbing to cancer, or even at her funeral. The second blow was too much for Will; he broke down and cried. Will felt he had lost both of his children. He was filled with an anger and frustration he seldom expressed⁵. Nearly a decade later, Will Eisner found creative release for the anguish of losing his daughter when, through Frimme Hersh, the main character of *A Contract With God*, he railed against the injustice of God. In the story, after the death of his young, adopted daughter, a bitter Hersh turns his back on a life of piety and becomes a ruthless and successful businessman. Eisner also found escape, and perhaps even some comfort, in work, and at that point in his life work was more often the art of the deal rather than art produced at a drawing board.

As a young man, Will Eisner had been content to let Jerry Iger or Busy Arnold handle the business matters while he spend

long hours at the drawing board creating art. Once Eisner began the American Visuals Corporation he began a slow transformation from artist to businessman. Eisner has acknowledged that during most of the 1950s his "activity was devoted largely to designing the material, selling business, developing concepts, marketing – at the same time doing a certain amount of creative work." (EISNER, W., 1979, p. 20) By the late 1960s, with his energies focused on corporate mergers, starting new business ventures, and a resurgence of interest in *The Spirit*, he was doing less and less of the actual work on *P*S Magazine*. Eventually, Eisner was spending most of his time behind a desk and very little of it at the drawing board. The 1960s were a busy and lucrative time for Will Eisner the entrepreneur, but it left little time for Will Eisner the artist.

By 1971 Eisner's World Explorer Program had expanded and was taking most of his time. As he had done with his reading rack business, Eisner negotiated a merger with one of his leading competitors. His Educational Supplements merged with Croft Educational in New London, Connecticut, and Eisner became Chairman of the Board. And, much like he had done at Koster-Dana, in less than two years Eisner resigned from the Board of Directors and sold his equity in the company. No doubt it was once again a profitable move for Eisner, but there were other motives besides profit. Eisner had at least a vague sense that there might once again be opportunities for him in the world of entertainment comics. He was soon to learn how dramatically that world had changed in his absence.

A new phenomenon, the comic book convention, allowed at least a handful of fans in a few big cities a chance to meet the comic book creators they admired. The first convention, a small gathering of fans that was little more than a swap meet, was held at Detroit's Hotel Tuller in May 1964. The second convention was held in New York a few months later. One of the

5. Eisner, Ann. Personal Interview June 19, 2005.

dealers selling old comic books at the 1964 New York ComiCon was Phil Seuling, a high school English teacher from Brooklyn. With infectious enthusiasm for comic books, boundless energy, and a network of aggressively cultivated contacts Phil Seuling soon became "Mr. Comic Book in New York City." (NOLAN, Michele apud DUIN, RICHARDSON, 1998, p. 394) By 1968, Seuling was running the New York convention and had renamed it the Comic Art Convention. It was Seuling who gave conventions the now familiar infrastructure, the panels and other programming. With comic book publishing based almost exclusively in New York, he was able to get publishers involved and invite the most popular creators as guests of honor⁶. Seuling also tracked down comics creators from the past who were not connected to mainstream comics and had no idea there was a fandom movement. One of those creators was Will Eisner.

In an interview with Phil Seuling, Eisner told him:

Well, I came back into the field because of you. I remember you calling me in New London, where I was sitting there as a chairman of the board of Croft Publishing Co. My secretary said, "There's a Mr. Seuling on the phone and he's talking about a comics convention. What is that?" She said, "I didn't know you were a cartoonist, Mr. Eisner." "Oh yes," I said, "secretly I'm a closet cartoonist." I came down and was stunned at the existence of a whole world. That's where I met Denis Kitchen. This was a world that I had left, and I found it very exciting, very stimulating. That, plus a number of incidents that occurred, got me back. So you are responsible." (SCHUTZ, KITCHEN, 2001, p. 243)

It had become second nature

for Eisner to consider the business opportunities that presented themselves in every situation. He approached his first comic book convention no differently. In the decades since those early conventions, it has become common for comics professionals to approach conventions as a chance to network, pitch ideas, and close deals, but, as in so many things, Eisner was probably the first to do so. Spurred perhaps by the renewed interest in *The Spirit*, he had vague idea for a magazine that would reprint his Spirit stories along with the work of European cartoonists and American underground cartoonists. Eisner also saw the convention as an opportunity to learn about the relatively new movement known as underground comics, or sometimes comix to distinguish them from the mainstream fare that was still aimed primarily at youngsters. It was probably Phil Seuling who recommended Eisner talk to Denis Kitchen to learn more about the undergrounds. Seuling was an important east coast wholesaler for Kitchen's Krupp Comics and he and Kitchen had become long-distance friends. French comics historian Maurice Horn, whom Eisner had been talking to about his magazine idea, facilitated the meeting.

Eisner and Kitchen met in a hotel room away from the hubbub of the convention. Kitchen, like most cartoonists of his generation, knew of Eisner only through seeing a few examples of his Spirit work reprinted in *Help!* and the Harvey Comics. Eisner had not seen any of the books published by Kitchen's Krupp Comic Works and he only knew enough about underground comics in general to be curious. He was curious primarily about the business aspects of the undergrounds. He was interested in the alternative distribution system. He asked questions about copyrights, creator ownership of properties, and royalty payments. Eisner, thinking back perhaps to the incessant complaints and demands of Busy Arnold and the nitpicking oversight of corporate

6. Of course, most professionals ignored the conventions at first. Stan Lee did not attend that first New York con, but sent his secretary, Flo Steinberg, as a stand-in.

clients, was enthralled with the absolute artistic freedom enjoyed by underground creators. However, it soon became apparent to Kitchen that Eisner had no idea what sort of content the artists might create with that freedom. Eisner “confessed that the concept of underground commix intrigued him, but he had never actually seen any” (KITCHEN, 1995; 2005, p. 2) Kitchen escorted Eisner down to the dealers’ room to introduce him to the world of underground comix.

In retrospect, Kitchen realized that he should have carefully selected the works that were going to be Will Eisner’s first exposure to underground comix. Instead, he let Eisner wander up to Phil Seuling’s block of tables in the dealers’ room and pick up a comic by S. Clay Wilson. Kitchen describes Eisner’s reaction: “Will blanched. Then he scowled.” (KITCHEN, 1995; 2005, p. 3) As Kitchen recounted elsewhere, “Captain Pissgums and Ruby the Dyke were too much for him.” (KITCHEN, Denis apud SCHREINER, 1994) A struggling young underground cartoonist named Art Spiegelman was standing nearby, and when he saw how the balding, middle-aged man in a suit reacted to his beloved medium he began to ardently defend the validity of Wilson’s work and his right to artistic freedom. Kitchen understood that impulse. “Ordinarily I took delight when our hippie commix outraged or embarrassed middle-aged and middle class viewers – that was part of the point. But this was an artist that I respected and admired.” (KITCHEN, 1995; 2005, p. 3) He explained to Eisner that a wide variety of work was being done in the undergrounds and encouraged him to look at other examples. More people gathered around to debate whether or not S. Clay Wilson’s imagery was too extreme, and rather than join in the debate, Will Eisner quietly slipped away into the crowd. Kitchen did not get a chance to speak with him again during that convention.

Kitchen feared the experience had discouraged Eisner’s interest in

underground comix. Back home in Wisconsin, Kitchen put together a “package of various undergrounds, representing a fuller range of what was being produced” and mailed it to Eisner. (KITCHEN, 1995; 2005, p. 4) In the cover letter enclosed in the package Kitchen not only encouraged Eisner to give underground comix a second look, but expressed his interest in reprinting *Spirit* stories and perhaps even publishing new work by Eisner. Kitchen’s persistence paid off.

Eisner was cautiously receptive to Kitchen’s proposal; he was very skeptical about a market for reprints of *The Spirit*. In subsequent phone conversations they worked out an agreement for Kitchen’s company to reprint *Spirit* stories, with Eisner retaining the copyright, his artwork, and even getting a royalty. Then Eisner made the request that nearly ended the nascent Eisner-Kitchen business relationship and friendship. He asked to be sent a contract to look over. Kitchen considered contracts too bourgeois, and prided himself on treating artists fairly without having a piece of paper that said he had to do so. Eisner was adamant; no contract, no deal. Looking back on the experience when he was a bit older than Eisner had been at the time, Kitchen wrote:

Each of Will’s questions and objections on examination made perfect sense. My hippy-dippy and half-baked political arguments against contracts could not really be defended. I was an artist having trouble accepting that I was becoming a businessman. (KITCHEN, 1995; 2005, p. 5)

The *Spirit* was introduced to underground readers in early 1973 by an Eisner cover on the third issue of *Snarf*. The cover depicted the *Spirit* and police commissioner Dolan entering the “subterranean headquarters” of Krupp Comic Works. Some of the underground

artists might have found Eisner's depiction of hippie stereotypes condescending, and perhaps others were insulted by Eisner gently poking fun at the pretentiousness that can develop when an alternative stance becomes institutionalized. An editor warns "You're beginning to show establishment tendencies . . . watch it Hobart!", and an artist is lettering in a balloon that says "I have just discovered a horrible thing – we are the establishment!" But, the cover also displays Eisner's penchant for tolerance. The elderly Dolan's first impulse is to arrest the scruffy crew, but the Spirit's response is "For what Dolan?"

Later in the year, Denis Kitchen's Krupp Comics published two issues of *The Spirit*, generally known as *The Underground Spirit*. The head-shop owners who formed the core of Kitchen's distribution system did not readily embrace a comic featuring a quasi-superhero character created by a balding businessman in his mid-fifties. Certainly most of the underground artists and readers would have found Eisner's Job Scene comics for the Department of Labor, such as *You Are Nowhere, Baby!* and *Power is Green, Baby!*, to be pathetic attempts by a middle-aged conservative to sound hip.

It was true that Eisner had little contact with contemporary youth culture. His own children, coming into their teen years in White Plains, had few counter-culture tendencies, and there were seldom even any young artists in his studio. However, Eisner always grounded his work in the world around him. He had apparently learned a lesson from his own shocking introduction to underground comics. His original wraparound cover to *The Spirit* no. 1 provided s&m, bestiality, cross-dressing, drug smuggling, and bloody violence; a concession to what he thought an underground audience would expect

Of course, what Eisner had found appealing was not that the complete editorial freedom of the undergrounds could be used to depict graphic sex or excessive violence, but that the creators

could be unconstrained in their social commentary. Denis Kitchen was anxious to get new work out of Eisner, and Eisner obliged with four pages of *Spirit* vignettes. Each page is self-contained and ends with a punch line. At one level these pages are a preview of what is for many Eisner fans the most embarrassing aspect of his career – the often painfully bad gag writing he did for the *Gleeful Guides* and books such as *101 Outerspace Jokes*. These four pages are also Eisner's attempt to explore the values of the counter-culture, and in doing so Eisner reveals his own values.

While Eisner was becoming involved with underground comics, Michael Ploog, with the assistance of Ted Cabarga, Bob Sprinsky, Bernie Schwartz, Frank Chiaramonte, and others, was still producing the monthly comics component for P*S Magazine for a very different audience. Because of Ploog's knowledge of the military and ability to mimic Eisner's style, Eisner was able to give ex-marine Ploog most of the responsibility for producing the P*S comics content. Soon, Ploog and Bob Sprinsky, with Eisner's blessing, were taking over the P*S contract. Eisner and Ploog have slightly different memories of how the arrangement worked. Eisner relates that "I set up a separate company for the people who were on the staff and let them bid on the contract, and I would be sort of an advisor." (EISNER, W., 1979, p. 21) Ploog says "I picked up the contract, and Will became the shadow partner, and I moved across the street from Will's office into another office that he had." (PLOOG, 2005, p. 139) However, the schedule was becoming a grind and Ploog found there was not much money left after he paid the staff and his silent partner. Even though Eisner no longer had any direct involvement with P*S, according to their arrangement Eisner still received monthly income from the project. In explaining why the venture was not financially viable for him, Ploog has said "For one, Will's smarter than I am; smart as a whip, 'ol Will.

Part of his character is, if he can get the edge, he'll take it." (PLOOG, 2005, p. 139) Ploog began seeking ways to supplement his income. Ben Oda, who had been doing some lettering on *P*S*, introduced him to Jim Warren, who was publishing comics in three magazine format anthologies, *Eerie*, *Creepy*, and *Vampirella*. Because they were considered magazines rather than comic books, Warren's publications could feature the sex and supernatural horror prohibited by the Comics Code Authority. Ploog began doing freelance work for Warren. In 1972, Ploog gave up the *P*S* contract and began his long career as a freelance comic book artist. The contract was picked up by Murphy Anderson, who had earlier been the *P*S* chief illustrator in Eisner's shop. Eisner did not try to work out a shadow partner deal with Anderson. Eisner was ready to move on.

Eisner's interest in his various business ventures was waning. This was due in part to Eisner's inherent restlessness with doing any one thing for too long, but it was also a result of that 1971 Seuling comic book convention which Ann Eisner characterized as "an eye opener for Will." The experience had reignited his interest in doing strictly creative work

While Eisner was thinking about starting new work, he continued to be distracted with opportunities to make money off of his old work. Perhaps having seen the Krupp comics or the reprints of *Spirit* dailies that ran in *The Menomonee Falls Gazette* in 1973, Stan Lee, editor of Marvel Comics, contacted Eisner about reprinting *The Spirit*. Eisner had known Stan Lee for a long time, and though he considered him a friend he never had much admiration for the sort of work Lee was doing. However, Eisner must have given serious consideration to going with Marvel because in a March 1973 letter Eisner wrote "I am still struggling with Marvel over their distribution plan." (EISNER, W., Mar. 1973)

While he was considering Marvel's

offer, Eisner ran into Jim Warren at a convention. Eisner's teasing about how Warren had stolen away Mike Ploog soon gave way to a more serious conversation about who owned the rights to *The Spirit*. Warren had been a long-time fan of Eisner's work on *The Spirit*. He likes to tell the story about being nabbed by the police when he was eleven years-old for swiping the *Spirit* section from the Sunday edition of the *Philadelphia Record*. Years later, when he was publishing the humor magazine *Help!*, Warren was excited to be able to reprint a *Spirit* story; partly, he admits, because *Help!* Editor Harvey Kurtzman said he was a good friend of Eisner's and could get some cheap *Spirit* reprints. (WARREN, 2005)

Sometime after their visit at the convention, Warren called Eisner and invited him to lunch at the Friar's Club, hoping Eisner would be impressed by the presence of celebrities such as Norm Crosby and Frank Gorshin. It was Warren who was impressed when Frank Gorshin came over to their table anxious to tell Eisner how much he liked his work. Warren wanted to add a new magazine that would reprint *Spirit* stories. Warren told Eisner he would be just another cog in the machine at Marvel, but Warren would personally sign the pay checks and hand them to Will. They agreed in principal, and Eisner put together a contract that gave him editorial consultant credit and specified he would do the line art for the covers. Warren has characterized Will's decision to publish with him as another instance of Will always siding with the little guy. (WARREN, 2005)

Warren had a small, but successful publishing company. Fifteen years earlier the middle-class youngster from Philadelphia had taken out a \$9,000 loan to start the magazine *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. Drawing on his editor Forrest J. Ackerman's collection of 35,000 movie stills and penchant for puns, Warren created a magazine that was a tremendous

hit with youngsters such as Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Stephen King. (SWIERCZYNSKI, 2005) When he began his horror magazines, *Creepy* and *Eerie*, in the mid-60s Warren was able to attract talents such as Frank Frazetta, Reed Crandall, and Al Williamson. By the time Eisner met him, Jim Warren was dividing his time between a Manhattan penthouse, a beach house on the Hamptons, and jaunts to Europe on the Concorde. Warren was not exactly the “little guy”, but his company seemed to be the right fit for Eisner at the time.

Eisner feared that if he went with Marvel he “would soon lose any personal connection” with the project. (EISNER, W., 1999) Eisner was also concerned about the audience for the reprints. He had created *The Spirit* for a newspaper audience, not a comic book audience. The previous attempt to present the Spirit in the comic book format, by Quality Comics, Fiction House, and later Harvey Publications, had not been particularly successful. Many years later, Eisner told an interviewer, “Marvel didn’t offer me an adult audience and with the hope of Warren coming out with the format he did, I felt that I would possibly get a more sophisticated audience.” (EISNER, W., 1999) In an interview he gave to a young Dave Sim shortly after the first *Warren Spirit Magazine* had hit the stands Eisner said “The reason I entrusted this feature to Jim Warren is because I believe his standards are very high, and they’re equal to mine. In many ways, I think they are higher than any of the other publishers in this business because he has a small house and he must survive, largely, on his ability to put out a good quality magazine.” (EISNER, W., 1974)

Warren advertised his new magazine by running a re-colored version of the Christmas Spirit story of 1946 in issue 54 of *Eerie*. The sentimental story of a European war orphan who gives his last bit of food to a starving Santa Claus and then awakens to find himself in America,

where he spends a merry Christmas with the whole Spirit cast was quite a contrast to the “murderous witches” and monstrous creatures of the night that filled out the rest of the issue. A one page color ad at the end of that story proclaimed the Spirit to be “the greatest comic character ever created.” (EERIE, 1974, p. 46) The inside front and back covers of *Eerie* were devoted to promoting the *Spirit Magazine*. The text proclaimed “The Spirit is an American classic,” and promised “it is totally different from anything on your newsstand today.” (EERIE, 1974, p. 2)

The first issue of Warren Publishing’s *The Spirit* was cover-dated April 1974. Eight Spirit stories reprinted in each issue. However, the magazine did not sell as well as Warren had hoped it might, and *The Spirit Magazine* lasted only sixteen issues.

After Warren cancelled *The Spirit Magazine*, Eisner called Denis Kitchen to ask him if he thought there was “any life left” in *The Spirit* as a property. Denis Kitchen was able to get past his hurt feelings from being snubbed in favor of Warren and the two men worked out a deal, with a contract, for Spirit reprints with Kitchen’s new company, Kitchen Sink⁷. In addition to reprinting the Spirit stories Kitchen wanted to get new work out of Eisner. Eisner did new covers for each issue, but he was becoming less and less interested in doing new Spirit material. Eisner had in mind a bolder application of his newfound creative freedom, and, uncharacteristically, he even became more daring in exploring his own emotions.

Eisner’s Spirit work had always been more intellectual than emotional - clever takes on genre and experiments with the comics form. Eisner put little of himself in his early comics work. Of course, as a young man who had spent most of his waking hours in the studio he had little life experience to draw upon for the early Spirit stories. After more than fifty years of living and his recent heartbreak over his children, the Will Eisner of the 1970s had

7. KITCHEN, Denis. Personal Interview, August 18, 2005.

deep reservoirs of triumph and disappointment, joy and pain from which to draw his stories. The tears he never cried for Alice become the relentless rain in those opening pages of *A Contract with God*.

In the introduction to the first issue of the 1973 *Spirit* comic book published by Krupp Comic Works, comics historian Maurice Horn sought to establish Will Eisner's significance in the history of comics by proclaiming that "Twenty years after his self-imposed retirement, his influence is greater than ever." Horn had no idea that Eisner had yet to begin his most ambitious work. Soon after Horn wrote those words, Eisner was back at the drawing board full-time, and his efforts would soon result in a ground-breaking new work that would mark the end of the Eisner as businessman era and herald the return of Eisner the artist.

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