

WEIRD! WONKY!



The

DEFECTIVE COMICS

Story

... and the Secret Origin of the Sketch Card



by Mark Voger

It's an underwhelming tale involving pornography, serial-killer comics, a Goth-metal band, and the mercifully brief emergence of bottom-of-the-barrel "talent," set amid the Great Comics Boom of the early 1990s...which inevitably culminated in the Great Comics Bust of 1993.

I was just a guy who, since I could hold a crayon, dreamed of becoming a comic-book artist, but instead became a writer-designer for newspapers. Not a complaint. The work was good, and after all, I was no Ross Andru.

But there I was in January 1993 at Jacob Javits Center in New York City, hawking my oh-so-cleverly-named Silver Age "spoof" comic book, *Defective Comics*. I was a guest at the booth of Comic Zone Productions, an indie publisher based in my home state of New Jersey, which honed a niche doing parody, pornographic, and serial-killer comic books that would make Estes Kefauver spin in his grave like a construction drill.

(One, a bio of convicted serial killer John Wayne Gacy, featured a cover self-portrait of Gacy wearing a clown costume. Inside was an ad for Gacy's original paintings, with sales benefiting his defense fund. You can't make this stuff up.)

Comic Zone was run by Rich Rankin, an artist who operated a comic shop of the same name. (Rankin was a prolific inker for DC and Marvel.) I had already illustrated two books for Comic Zone, both of them "adult" spoofs. I justified these sleazy ventures by comparing them to the

work of my hero, R. Crumb. "I'm not doing porn per se," I convinced myself. "I'm doing explicit humor in the tradition of the underground comics of the '60s and '70s."

Still, since my byline appeared regularly in newspapers, I coined a *non de plume* especially for my newfound "blue" assignments: Mad Mark.

When Rankin, to my eternal gratitude, greenlit my non-porn comic-book idea *Defective Comics*, I felt like an actress who paid her dues in X-rated films before finally landing a legitimate role. (Yeah, this was a less-enlightened time.)

Meanwhile, back at the Javits show, Comic Zone was situated directly across from the theatrical Goth-metal band Gwar (who were pushing their own comic book). These guys were lunatics! They had an elaborate setup like something out of a Rob Zombie movie, and were decked out in full makeup and costume, loudly pontificating in character.

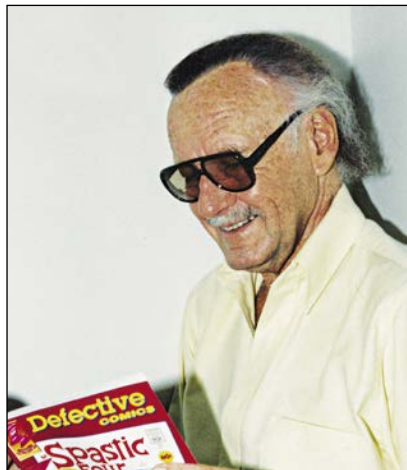
A female Gwar member, with the charming moniker Slymenstra Hymen, wrapped a long chain around the throat of fellow member Techno Destructo, and took him for a walk, like a dog, on all fours. (In my recollection, the shirtless Mr. Destructo could have used a bit of Speed Stick.)

Folks passing by at the con would slow down to gawk at this circus. As a result, the Comic Zone booth got some bonus eyeballs. Did I owe my next career development to Gwar?

From the Comic Zone to Your Happy Home

Defective Comics Trading Cards boxed sets, foil packs, and point-of-purchase displays from 1993. (background) A montage of cards.

© Mark Voger.



GOOD SIGN

Defective Comics—which, in my heart of hearts, was more tribute than spoof—was a “flip” book with two covers. One was a DC spoof (*The Lame and the Old* #28), the other a Marvel spoof (*The Spastic Four* #1). I had the original art for both covers on display at our booth. People were laughing at them while walking by, which I took to be a good sign.

Then a fella spotted them who was representing Connecticut-based Active Marketing International, publishers of the *Hustler* and *Hustler II* trading card series. (Was there no escape from porn?)

Long story short, this gentleman and I began a discussion that led to Active Marketing’s release of *Defective Comics Trading Cards*, for which I illustrated 50 cover spoofs in the spirit of the classic Topps series *Wacky Packages*.

I’d wanted to call the set *Kooky Klassics* and make all the cover parodies “vintage,” but Active Marketing insisted I do two-thirds vintage, one-third contemporary. As it turned out, they were right and I was wrong. Sure, the chronology of the set is lop-sided. But there’s no mistaking what era it was produced in. *Defective Comics Trading Cards* is firmly a creature of 1993.

I drew parodies of the earliest comic books (*Famous Funnies* #1, *Action Comics* #1); hallmarks of the ‘40s (*All-American’s All Star Comics* #3, *Timely’s All Winners Comics* #1) and ‘50s (EC’s *The Haunt of Fear* #12 and *Crime SuspenStories* #22); and Silver Age milestones (DC’s *Showcase* #4, Marvel’s *Amazing Fantasy* #15). In the then-contemporary realm, I spoofed *X-Force* #1, *Spawn* #1, *WildC.A.T.S* #1, and *Bloodshot* #1.

These were the caveman days, before Photoshop and Wacom tablets were in popular use, so I created the 50 illustrations the old-fashioned way. I penciled the art onto Bristol Board; delineated it in ink with a zero-width Koh-I-Noor Rapidograph pen (a crutch from college); gently erased the pencil; colored in the art with Design brand markers; finished the inking using Rapidographs in various widths; shaded it with Berol brand Prismacolor and Verithin colored pencils; and added highlights via gouache applied with brush. (My wife, the photographer Kathy Voglesong, did uncredited coloring on certain cards.)

Then I actually *mailed*, not *emailed*, the original artwork (yikes!) to Connecticut.

Naturally, my aim was to make the spoofs look like the original covers at first glance (à la *Wacky Packages*). So I immersed myself in the styles of the old masters: Joe Shuster, Everett E. Hibbard, Alex Schomburg, Harvey Kurtzman, Graham “Ghastly” Ingels, Curt Swan, Kurt Schaffenberger, Mike Sekowsky, Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, Frank Frazetta. The visual gags were inspired by another hero, founding *MAD* artist Will Elder, who jam-packed his *MAD* and “Little Annie Fanny” panels with yuks.

Admittedly, the humor in *Defective* wasn’t exactly Noel Coward; it was done in the nostalgic vein of *MAD*. But the humor got edgier when ridiculing the overblown, self-serious ‘90s stuff, something I did with particular glee.

Famous Fans

(top) Julius Schwartz with *Defective Comics* #1 in 2001 and Stan Lee with a copy in 1994. Photos by Kathy Voglesong. (center) 1993 Voger art of Julie, Stan, and Jack Kirby cameos from *Defective* #1, newly colorized. (bottom) Mark’s *FF* #1 spoof.

© Mark Voger.

This was a ton of work on a tight deadline. When stress set in, I'd reflect on Norman Saunders, the great pulp-fiction cover artist whose exquisite acrylic paintings of Batman, Robin, and the Gotham City gang beautified Topps' *Batman* trading card series of 1966. At the tender age of eight, I bought those cards, chewed the stale bubblegum, and fell in love, irrevocably, with Saunders' art. Now, I was following in his footsteps.

Well, not exactly, it turned out.

HUNGRY FOR CONTENT

Y'see, I wasn't working so steadily in the medium because I was such a fabulous artist. During the '90s boom, fly-by-night publishers were popping up to cash in, and they were hungry for content. This opened the floodgates for hundreds of "iffy" artists who had their brief day in the sun, and were never heard from again. (Although some accomplished artists got their start during this period. Eisner Award winner Michael Avon Oeming is a fellow Comic Zone alumnus.)

Gimmicks, not necessarily quality, were all the rage during the boom: hologram covers, foil covers, variant covers, foldout covers, die-cut covers, polybagged premiums, superhero makeovers, "death of" issues, inter-publisher crossovers, unauthorized celebrity bios, celebrity-created properties, #1 issues, #0 issues, and, *ahem*, spoof books.

Never fear, the guys at Active Marketing were on it. *Defective Comics Trading Cards* would be sold in complete boxed sets or individual eight-card foil packs, with each pack containing one foil card (in silver or gold) and a sweepstakes entry, plus randomly inserted Autograph Cards signed by me. Anything to create buzz.

Still, the Active guys—*anxious for Defective to be a hit*—were fishing for one more gimmick, and they asked if I had any ideas. I cooked up two proposals. One was a double-sided puzzle. (I fondly recalled that Topps' second *Batman* series of 1966 had puzzles on the card-backs.) That went nowhere.

But Active was intrigued by my second idea. I proposed to draw original artwork on blank cards, which Active could randomly insert into the foil packs, kind of like Autograph Cards on steroids. At the time of my pitch, I christened the concept—as God is my witness—the "Sketch Card." But this wasn't uncanny prescience on my part. The term was a natural. It was just a logical, intuitive variation on the established term Autograph Card.

(Disclosure: I'm aware that at least two other artists are purported to have created the Sketch Card. I objectively believe I was there first, but my story never got out. The clock is ticking—I'm 61 as I write this, and already, certain cognitive functions are noticeably waning—so I'm finally reporting my version of events. Of course, I'm open to further evidence and testimony. We now return to our narrative.)

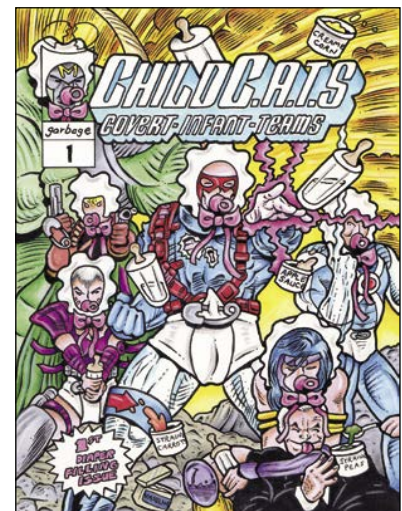
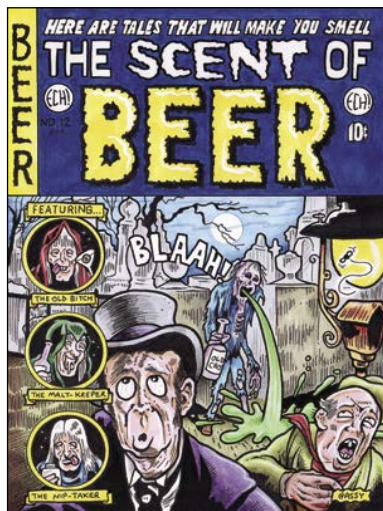
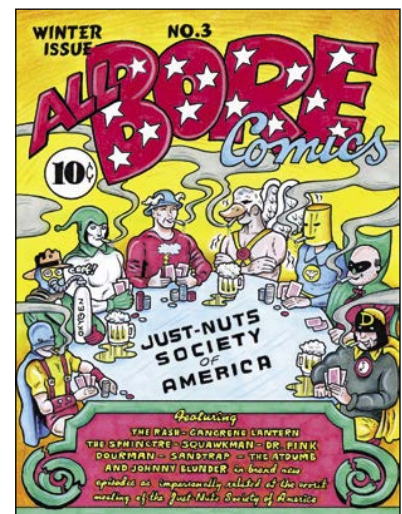
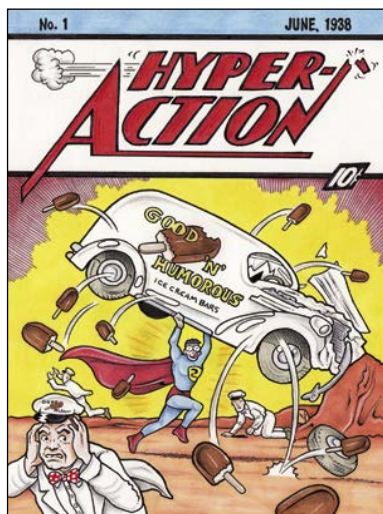
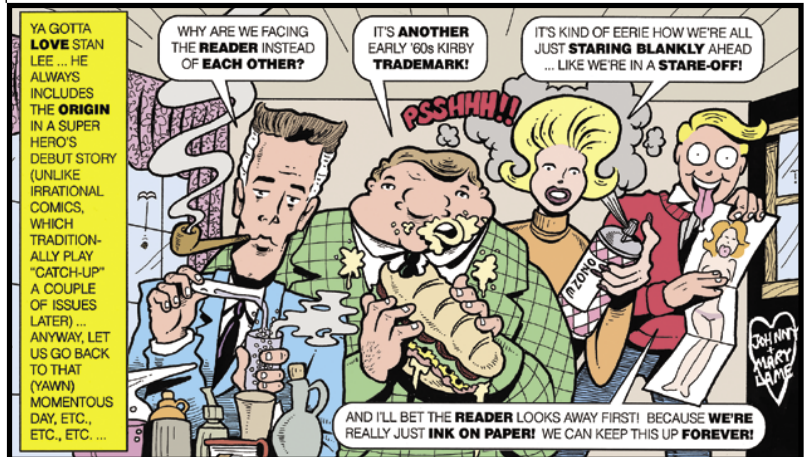
I made the insane suggestion that I draw 500 Sketch Cards. I further suggested that, to make the idea seem more "official," Active should print up 500 cards on flat-white stock that are blank on one side, and on the other side are marked "Congratulations! You are now the proud owner of a *Defective Comics* Sketch Card!" I would draw, sign, and number the 500 cards, and ship them back to Active for insertion. And that's just what we did.

Drawing 500 Sketch Cards—I decided that no two should be alike—was a trip in itself, a mad rush. Top-of-the-head topics included Silver Age tableaus, classic-rock lyrics, pop-culture musings, and many scenes featuring Spikey, the *Defective Comics* mascot loosely based on the subterranean monster from Jack Kirby's iconic *Fantastic Four* #1 cover. I'm guessing it took me about two weeks to complete the cards. Card #1/500 declared itself the "first ever Sketch Card in the universe!" The 500th card showed a skeleton at a drawing table, tossing a Sketch Card onto a tall pile and saying, "Done." On instinct, I photocopied all 500 cards for posterity.

The FF Faces Front!

(top) Panel parodying Marvel's *Fantastic Four* #1, from *Defective Comics*, the comic book, #1. Art by Mark Vogler, newly scanned from original art and colorized. First published in 1993. (bottom) A crazy quartet of trading cards spoofing landmark comic covers.

© Mark Vogler.





Sketchy Characters

(top) Examples of the 500 Sketch Cards drawn by Mark Vogler in 1993 for his *Defective Comics Trading Cards* series. No two were alike. (bottom) Sketch Card #1 and #500.

© Mark Vogler.

In tiny type on the foil-pack wrappers, buyers were told their odds for obtaining a Sketch Card within: one in 4,320 packs.

I sent press releases hyping *Defective* to all the major publications in the comic-book “trades”—*Comics Buyer’s Guide*, *Comic Shop News*, *Wizard*, *Comics Scene*, etc.—but didn’t get a single bite. That was discouraging, but I recognized that in ‘93, there was an unprecedented glut of product. The bubble had yet to burst, and the trades couldn’t possibly cover it all. (Besides, as a newspaper guy, I was often on the opposite side of the equation.) But I still have copies of those releases, which tout “an original concept entirely new to the world of trading cards, the Sketch Card.”

After all that effort, I sat back and waited to become a superstar. C’mon—I had a comic book *and* a trading card series of the same name coming out, from two different publishers, yet. I was on *fire*, yo!

Alas, poor Yorick, superstardom was not in the, um, cards.

The distribution for *Defective Comics Trading Cards* seemed good; I saw the boxes and foil packs at stores and shows. The printing was gorgeous, and there were die-cut point-of-purchase display boxes. But if I remember correctly, Active was disappointed in the orders overall. Certainly, plans for a *Defective II* series were never again broached. Likewise, there was never a second issue of *Defective Comics*, the comic book.

TIPPING POINT

This probably had something to do with the aforementioned Bust of ‘93. Halfway through the year, the appetite for gimmicky comic books and related ephemera reached a tipping point, and the industry had one of its periodic implosions. Those fly-by-night publishers were vanishing as quickly as they’d appeared. Even the majors felt the pinch.

This left many “speculators”—folks who bought comics in hopes of escalating resale value—sitting on boxes of unwanted books. Does anyone out there need a copy of *Eclipse* #1? I know a guy.

At Javits that January, I remember feeling like a dude with a promising career in comics. By the June ‘93 show at Javits, I couldn’t get arrested. I was not alone. Fellow low-rung creators, who had also been riding high in January, were in a growing state of panic, stumbling around trying to pitch stuff, with nobody listening. I remember hearing people say, “What’s going on?” There was talk of declining sales and tighter standards

for soliciting product to stores and vendors. And there was no Comic Zone booth to sit at and pretend to be a famous comic-book artist.

(Sigh) It was fun while it lasted.

I faded back into a deserved obscurity. But within the ensuing ten years, friends started noticing *Defective Comics Trading Cards* popping up on eBay (where they’ve been ever since). Once a year or so, I’d get an email from a collector asking if I was “that” Mark Vogler.

Still later, I discovered that over the years, Sketch Cards had officially become a “thing.” I had no idea. I finally learned this when I was among artists invited to draw Sketch Cards for auctions benefiting the March of Dimes and Be a Superhero For Babies.

(The organizers said DC and Marvel characters were fair game! I jumped at the chance, since I’ll probably go to my grave never drawing for either publishing giant. Silver Age nut that I am, I drew interlocking cards of DC’s Metal Men and Inferior Five, and swipes of favorite Kirby panels from old Marvel books.)

I was heartened to see that the term Sketch Card stuck. But I’m under no illusion that it was literally carried over from *Defective*. Like I said: The term was just a natural.

Recently, I had a series of email exchanges with a Sketch Card expert and collector who wishes to remain anonymous, so as not to inflate the cost of his future purchases. I respect his privacy, but will share some of his conclusions. According to this gentleman, other claimants to the Creator of the Sketch Card throne also set their origins in 1993, but the exact chronology remains elusive. In any case, he identifies *Defective* as, pure and simple, the first series to name, produce, and market the Sketch Card, which he considers the “big bang” of the format.

Curiously, this person added that since 1993, only two out of the 500 *Defective Comics* Sketch Cards have turned up within the Sketch Card-collecting community. (I’ve heard from both owners.) While there are still thousands of unopened foil packs out there—I’m sitting on several hundred myself—I have no way of knowing whether Active inserted all 500 cards. But, by gum, I *drew* ‘em.

A few times over the years, collectors have mailed me full boxed *Defective* sets with return postage, requesting that I sign every card. I am only too happy to do so. It’s nice to be remembered for something you did a long time ago. Unless, of course, it’s for being a serial killer.

MARK VOGER writes extensively about this period in his book *The Dark Age: Grim, Great & Gimmicky Post-Modern Comics* (TwoMorrows Publishing). Reach him at MarkVogler@gmail.com. Any further evidence or testimony collected will be posted on his blog at MarkVogler.com. And yes, he will sign your *Defective Comics Trading Cards*—as long as you include return postage.



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