

# The Second Coming

Tony Marine

cis180marine@bigfoot.com

## Introduction

When writing about “Artists of the Fantastic Four”, it’s impossible not to have Jack Kirby spring immediately to mind. After all, he was co-creator and did the best work of his career while on the title. That’s saying something when you look at the body of work he produced. I was too young to read Kirby’s FF run when it was being published, but I was introduced to his fantastic creation years later when another important writer/artist took over the book – John Byrne.

Byrne’s run on the title was both a critical and commercial success. While it may not be as significant as *The Dark Knight Returns* or *Watchmen* (from the same period), it is a successful string of well-written stories that holds up remarkably well today. Nothing mind-blowing; just good clean fun on a monthly basis – something of a rarity in the 80’s as I recall. At around 62 issues, his run now stands as one of the best by any writer/artist on any title in the history of comics. Byrne was able to stay true to the history of the characters as laid out by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, all the while bringing a fresh approach to the series. Like Kirby, Byrne would also do the best work of his career on the title.

Some would argue that Byrne’s “peak” period is on *The Uncanny X-Men*, and if we were to pass judgment based solely on art prices, then the X-Men stuff would win hands down. But art prices aside, FF is where Byrne really hit his

stride. Byrne’s collaboration with Terry Austin on *Uncanny* results in art that is pretty to look at to be sure, but there are some flaws. I find that some of the anatomy is a little “off” at times, and the storytelling and panel/page layouts are cumbersome (I also have a preference for Byrne’s own inks). Don’t get me wrong; I enjoy the stuff as much as the next guy, but artistically, Byrne gets better on FF. Sales during the Claremont/Byrne run on *Uncanny* were around 190,000 per month, but it wasn’t too long into his tenure on the FF when sales began to stick at around 250,000 - an indication that he must have been doing something right.

In sitting down to write this article, I wrestled with the dilemma of trying to separate the artistic elements of Byrne’s work on FF with his writing on the book. As is often the case in the world of funny books it’s difficult to judge an artist without having some bias with regards to the quality of the writing. I’m sure my high opinion of Byrne’s work on this title is slightly skewed because I enjoyed the writing so much. Maybe that’s fair in this case since Byrne really is a writer/artist. At any rate, it’s no exaggeration to state that after the Lee/Kirby run on the title, Byrne was the most significant and successful artist and/or writer on the title.



234

236



262

269

*The many faces of Reed Richards*

### The Early Years

Issue 232 heralds the beginning of Byrne's run on the title. While it's not the first issue that he ever worked on, it is the first one that he wrote, penciled, and inked alone. This would be the case from this point forward all the way up until issue 273 (with the exception of issue 266 which was guest penciled by Kerry Gammill). This issue is certainly not the best work of his career from an artistic viewpoint. As a matter of fact, it's a step backwards when compared to his previous work on *Uncanny*. The art seems a bit amateurish, and faces seem distorted and, especially in the case of Reed Richards, very angular. One gets the sense that at this point; Byrne doesn't have a good feel for how he intends to draw these characters (that, or he just hasn't adjusted to wearing the 3 hats required to complete the book). These early stories are often over laden with both too many panels, and too

much dialog. Fortunately, subsequent issues would see Byrne synthesizing his work into a more refined style with briskly paced stories and an economic use of panel and page layouts.

### The Mid Years

As the series progresses, Byrne's skills in writing, penciling and inking all improve. By the time he's into the 240's, we begin to see a more refined style with crisp inking and briskly paced stories. I would argue that somewhere in the late 240's, Byrne reaches his zenith on the book. Looking at these issues sequentially, it's fairly easy to see the progression and improvement both in Byrne's line-work and storytelling abilities. While it would be difficult to draw a line down a single issue and indicate where a change occurred, one could look at issue 247 as an example and see that Byrne's made a lot of nice advances in these areas. There are fewer panels per page, and the flow of the pages is a lot better. There's plenty of detail in both the characters and the backgrounds, with good spotting of blacks and Byrne's great use of cross-hatching.



*Flame On!*

I read an article recently, which stated that fans did not like Byrne inking himself. I found that hard to believe. Not only did Byrne do a wonderful job inking himself at this time, he made a lot of other artists look great as well. His use of line weight is superb, and his cross-hatching especially works amazingly well. It lacks the stiffness that Terry Austin's inks brought to his work on Uncanny, and mirrors in some ways, Neal Adams' style, although in a more controlled manner. I've always been a fan of Byrne's inking, but have to admit that in later years, when he abandons the nib (crow-quill), I lose interest.



Is it Clobberin' Time yet?

### The Later Years

At some point, though it is difficult to say where, Byrne makes a transition away from more detailed line-work, in favor of a simpler style. This new style, which in print is barely discernable from the old, features a more consistent line in his inking. This is largely due to his use of markers. Ever the economist, Byrne must have looked at the printed product and realized that he didn't need to put so much detail into a page to make it look nice in print. He was right. I've seen early originals from the 240's and have been fortunate enough to own some from the 260's. The differences are stark, yet

in print, they are often hard to notice. As I mentioned above, issue 247 looks very nicely detailed, but as early as issue 250, it's evident that markers are in use.

Aside from the inking tools and their effect on the art, storytelling skills continue to evolve. Byrne has a real flair for storytelling, and really hits his mark on this series with art and stories that just take you along for a joy ride. This stuff is fun to read, and there are lots of big panels which are chock full of action (ala Kirby).



Mr. Fantastic gets scientific.

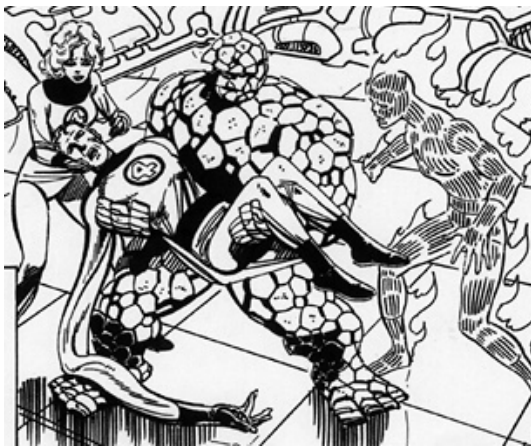
### End of the Line

Issue 273 marks Byrne's last as inker. Interestingly, a somewhat ominous note appears in the letter column to issue 272. It's signed by Byrne and reads:

*Over the next few months you're likely to be seeing some changes in the pages of the books I illustrate. Some will be so minor you might not even notice, while others will be more obvious, and I thought I'd just warn you in advance. I've been drawing comics professionally for the past ten years...and in that time I've continually strived to make my work the best it could be. And to be perfectly honest, I'm not satisfied yet... I know when I do a good job, but I'm also*

*aware of my short comings. I've been working hard to make my penciling and inking the finest I am capable of, but I think the hard truth is that if my work is to keep growing and improving, I must focus my attention on one aspect at a time...and I think the penciling is where I have to start. So, the John Byrne of old is about to mutate into something else, hopefully for the better...and I know I can depend on all of you to let me know if I start heading in the wrong direction. Thanks!*

“Wrong direction” is an understatement when one looks at the butchering that takes place to the pencils from this point forward. There are some inkers who do a passable job, but on the whole the stuff looks plain bad, and pales in comparison to Byrne’s own inks. The list of culprits includes Joe Sinnott, Al Gordon, Bob Wiacek, Jerry Ordway, P. Craig Russell, and Terry Austin. These guys may be brilliant in their own rite, but don’t really work well over Byrne.



*There's no "I" in TEAM!*

## **Personal Opinions and the Market**

Byrne the man is an interesting character. I can't think of another comic book creator who is reviled as much as he is. Whether he deserves it or not, I have a theory that people have a resistance to liking his work because they don't like the man himself. I don't have a real issue with the personality of any particular creator, and I won't let it affect my opinion of the work they produce. It's been interesting to me as a collector to see so few people getting excited about Byrne's work on the Fantastic Four. The statistics show that the book sold well, yet somehow I can only find a handful of people that will openly praise the work. I firmly believe it's the result of so much animosity being directed at the man.

While I've only been collecting art for less than 5 years, I'm still amazed at how little of Byrne's work on the Fantastic Four is in circulation. When I first began collecting, all I really wanted was a nice example from this run. My preference is for Byrne inked pages, and by my estimation, there are approximately 1,000 pages in existence. I know of several collectors (some are members of this organization), who have many pages in their collection, but on the whole, I can only account for about 20% of the originals (and it's not for lack of trying!).