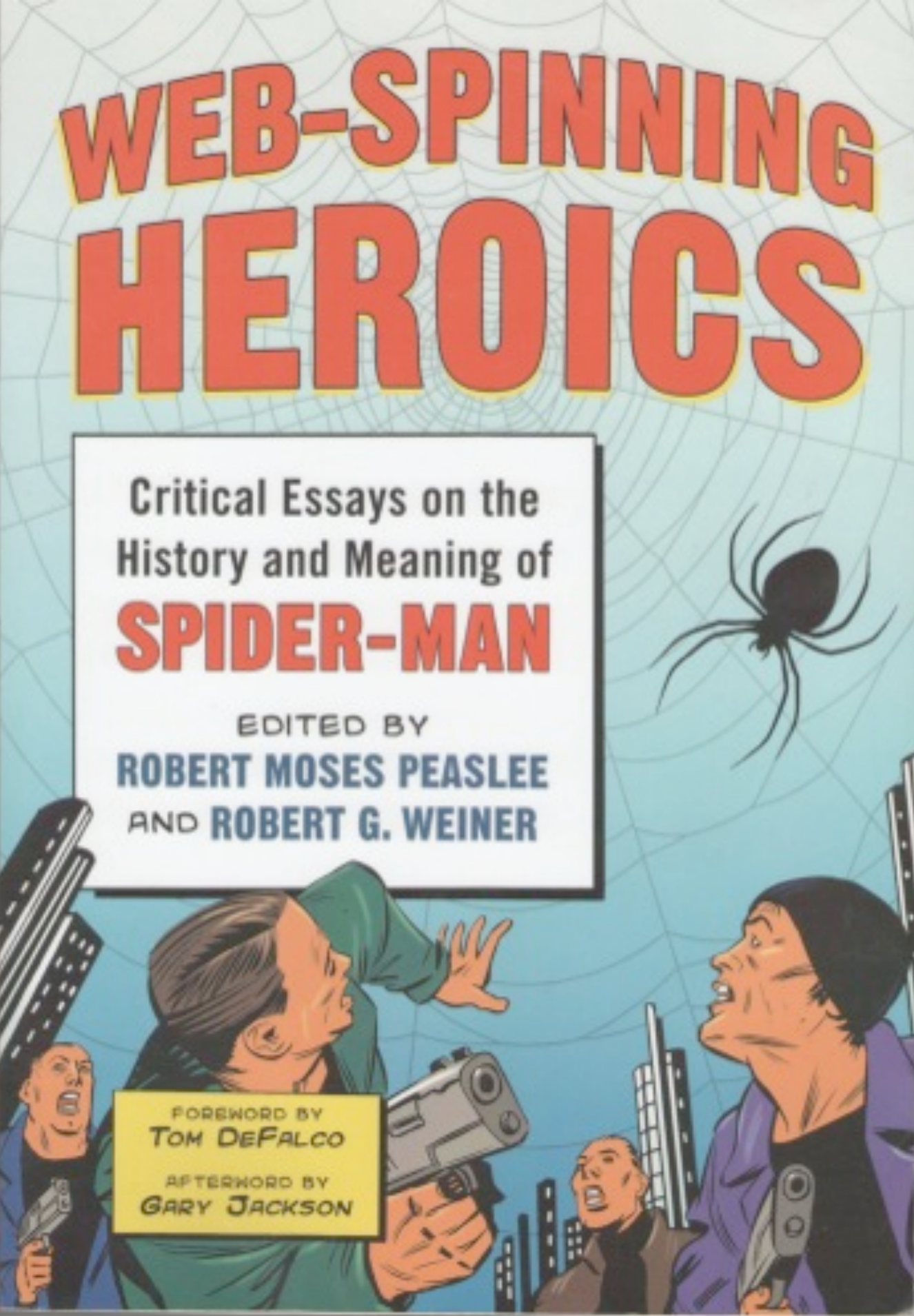


WEB-SPINNING HEROICS

The background of the cover is a light blue color with a white spiderweb pattern. A black spider is positioned on the right side of the web. In the lower portion of the cover, there is a comic book-style illustration of four characters in a city setting. A woman in a green jacket is in the center, looking towards a man in a purple jacket on the right. The man in purple is holding a handgun and looking back at her. To the left, another man in a blue jacket is holding a handgun and shouting. In the bottom right, a man in a brown jacket is also shouting. The overall style is reminiscent of classic comic book art.

Critical Essays on the
History and Meaning of
SPIDER-MAN

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Finding the Mileu of the *Spider-Man* Music LPs

MARK MCDERMOTT

With the Broadway musical *Spider-Man: Turn off the Dark* spinning through the news cycle at the time of this writing, it is surely appropriate to explore some of the previous cultural artifacts that set Peter Parker's story to music. It is not hard to find musical interpretations of the web-spinner. The theme song from the 1960s cartoon series remains one of the best-remembered of American Saturday morning TV themes in America, having been covered by fellow Queens natives the Ramones, referenced by Aerosmith guitarist Joe Perry in his theme for the 1994 animated series, and heard throughout the three theatrical films. The fourth season of PBS' *Electric Company* (1974-75) debuted a series of "Spidey Super Stories" skits with a funky theme song of their own. The skits were spun off into a juvenile-reading-level comic book, and to an album on the children's label Peter Pan Records, which later included Spider-Man in its "Book and Record" comic series on the Power imprint.

It is in the world of commercial pop music, though, that Spider-Man and the rest of the merry Marvel menagerie have gone mostly unrepresented. Since 1957, Marvel's newsstand distributor — which was owned by DC Comics — would only handle eight titles each month (Daniels, 1991; 80-81). In the 1960s, Batman got the prime-time TV series, Broadway got *It's a Bird... It's a Plane... It's Superman*, and Donovan's number-one hit boasted, "Superman or Green Lantern ain't got nothin' on me!" (1966). Lucky is the collector who today finds a 45 copy of the Traits obscure 1969 garage/psych record, "Nobody Loves the Hulk" (QNS 101). Spidey finally made his debut in the *Billboard* charts in 1976 with a jazz-dance single by Ramsey Lewis that asked the musical question, "What's the Name of this Funk (Spider-Man)?"

By the 1970s, though, Marvel had graduated from its cult status to the mainstream. After getting a new distributor, they finally saw *The Amazing Spider-Man* outsell the Superman titles. In 1971, Marvel won out in a standoff with the Comics Code Authority over their depiction of the consequences of drug abuse in *The Amazing Spider-Man* ("Green Goblin Reborn!" 1:96-98). On January 5, 1972, Marvel celebrated its cultural ascendancy with the "Marvel-ous Evening with Stan Lee" at Carnegie Hall, in which Tom Wolfe, French director Alain Resnais (*Hiroshima Mon Amour*) and other "clites" proclaimed Lee's eminence as a creator of modern culture. Among the show's participants was actor René Auberjonois, then known for playing Father Mulcahey in the movie adaptation *M*A*S*H* (1970). The event was recounted in a Bullpen Bulletin appearing in Marvel comics cover dated July 1972:

ITEM: January 5, 1972! Mark that date in your memory-book, faithful one — 'cause that's the night the batty Bullpen got it all together at Carnegie Hall, in the hectic heart of New York City!

As we told you last month, the whole magilla was called "A MARVEL-OUS EVENING WITH STAN LEE" — and it was a way-out compendium of music, magic, and madcap Marvel mayhem! Smilin' STAN himself was Master of Ceremonies — presiding over the frantic goings-on while images of mighty Marvel superheroes flitted across a giant movie screen. A trio of our titanic artists got into the act, too, as Jazzy JOHNNY ROMITA Happy HERB TRIMPE, and Big JOHN BUSCEMA did sensational sketches of Captain America, ol' Greenskin, and Thor — which in turn were projected onto that selfsame screen. (There was a passel of our cavortin' characters in actual attendance, too, including Spidey, Daredevil, Doc Doom, and even J. Jonah Jameson himself!)

The standing-room-only crowd exploded with applause, also, at the roster of famous names who had gathered to pay homage to the madness that is Marvel: World-famous film director ALAIN RESNAIS translated a few of the Silver Surfer's soliloquies into his native French; and there were also a few pungent paragraphs about our heroes which were intoned by radio personalities ALEX BENNETT and EARL DOUD, by actors RENE AUBERJONIS and CHUCK MCCANN (you've seen the latter a zillion times as the 'Hi Guy' neighbor on the other side of the medicine cabinet in those Right Guard commercials), and neo-journalist TOM WOLFE, resplendent in red, white, and blue as he read about — you guessed it — Captain America.

As for the music mentioned about, most of it was provided by the far-famed CHICO HAMILTON PLAYERS — but some more Marvel Madmen got into the act, too, as Hectic HERBIE and Bashful BARRY SMITH plunked a couple of wild electric guitars while Rascally ROY THOMAS belted out a rousin' rocker or two! Then, for the grand finale, just about everybody in the blamed Bullpen crowded onto stage to sing the Merry Marvel Marching Society theme-song — while, not to be outdone, dozens of cheering fans rushed onstage as well, and the show closed amid a revel of handshaking and autograph signing all 'round. And that was that! All in all, it was a wildly successful evening — and not necessarily the last of its kind, either! And, if there were a few bleary eyes and sore throats among the Bullpenners come the morning of the 6th — well, that's show biz, people!" ["Bullpen," 1972].

Indeed, in this era, Stan Lee or one of the Bullpen Bulletin writers would boast that Marvel was "gonna take over the world" by expanding into other media. With live-action television projects still some years away, Marvel's first cross media foray came from third parties wanting to exploit the comics in the medium of rock concept albums.

In 1972 and 1975, two LPs were released that attempted to re-imagine Spider-Man's story as a combination of audio drama and pop music; a rock opera comic book, even. Nearly 40 years later, and despite interest from both comics and music fans in these audio artifacts, it's uncertain whether someone at Marvel came up with the idea, or the record companies involved brought the concept to the publisher. Yet the albums remain, both of them reissued on CD with the requisite bonus cuts and available from the inheritors of their defunct record labels, or downloadable online.

***The Amazing Spider-Man: From Beyond the Grave* (1972)**

I remember when I first heard about this album. As a pre-teen music fan, I was a member of the Record Club of America, a record club whose appeal lay in its low prices and shipping charges, and no minimum purchase requirements. During 1972, its fliers has a listing for *Beyond the Grave*, on the Buddah label (the misspelling may have been deliberate, to avoid the appearance of exploiting Buddhism — when the trademark was reactivated in 1998 as a reissue label by the BMG/Arista group, its name was properly spelled "Buddha"), promising the unique

experience of a “Rockomic,” with contemporary-sounding song titles like “It’s a Groove to be Free.” While at the age of 13 I was still solidly in the DC Comics camp, I soon began to pick up on Marvel. I later found a remaindered copy of the LP in 1979, when a regional discount store chain went out of business and was clearing three aisles of vinyl at \$1 apiece.

The “Rockomic” aspect of the album was in the gatefold of its sleeve, which featured a wordless comic story, one row of panels for each song, accompanying the music on the disc. The comic was by Spider-Man artist John Romita, who also drew the cover showing Spidey in his familiar pose: crouching in a huge web, hand poised to “thwip!” his webbing at the reader. The cover was reproduced on a foldout poster also included in the record, and no doubt distributed as promotions at record stores. While the album announced itself as first in a series of “Rockomics,” no follow-up issue appeared.

Underneath the production credits on the back cover, next to a small Buddah logo, was the credit: “A VASHTI PRODUCTION: A licensee of the Marvel Comics Group. All material under the supervision and control of the Marvel Comics Group.” This may have indicated that someone at Marvel had the idea for this production, or it was their method of proclaiming copyright protection: all the figures drawn on the back cover — Spider-Man, Aunt May, the Green Goblin, and Kingpin, had their own TM symbols hovering nearby.

The cover credits include “Music and Lyrics by:” Stephen Lemberg, whose only other notable credit seems to have been Merle Haggard’s Bicentennial hit “Here Comes the Freedom Train.” Musical arranger Tony Camillo later won a Grammy award for his production of Gladys Knight & the Pips’ “Midnight Train to Georgia,” though he is best known publicly for the 1975 hit “Dynamite,” released under the name “Tony Camillo’s Bazuka,” which capitalized on Jimmy Walker’s catch-phrase from the TV comedy *Good Times*.

The only credit for the musicians involved was: “All tunes performed by: The Webspinners.” Another credits list on the back of the poster included the line “Spinner of the Web — Ron Dante.” Dante was a singer and songwriter, later Broadway producer, who had been the anonymous vocalist of the Archies cartoon band. After singing the original McDonald’s “You Deserve a Break Today” jingle written by Barry Manilow, he became Manilow’s producer in the mid- to late-1970s.

Other voice credits included Earle Doud in several small roles. Besides the Carnegie Hall appearance, Doud was a voice artist who had co-written and produced a string of political humor albums, starting with *The First Family* (1962). Chuck McCann was a veteran actor, puppeteer and kiddie show host. The performer that fans might most likely encounter at the next ComiCon, though, was the voice of Peter Parker: René Auberjonois, best known today as the shape-shifting Odo in *Star Trek: Deep Space 9*, and who shared the scenery being chewed by William Shatner in later seasons of *Boston Legal*. About this early credit in a lengthy and busy show business career, Auberjonois could only tell me, “Steve Lemberg was a classmate from my University days. He asked me, and I said yes. That’s really all I remember about that project.” (2010)

Reviewing the Album

The tracks alternate between “set piece” songs and dialogue: each episode played out as bits of audio drama leading into the songs. In “Episode I: Peter’s Nightmare:” Parker narrates a dream sequence in which he is pursued by police and tormented by visions of his major foes. The Green Goblin, the Vulture and the Lizard taunt Spider-Man with the knowledge of his secrets, and the

fact that he'll "always be a loser." It's hard to tell the villains apart here, as they all deliver their lines cackling like Macbeth's three witches. In this nightmare, Parker hears another voice calling out for help, just as he's awakened by the phone ringing. On the line is New York's crime boss, the Kingpin, with the kidnapped Aunt May. Knowing that Parker is the one who gets photographs of Spider-Man for the *Daily Bugle*, Kingpin demands that he take one more picture using a camera somehow rigged to kill the wall-crawler.

This segues into the first song, "Theme from Spider-Man," with some competent pop-funk in its instrumental backing. The first verse seems somewhat tuned in to the Spider-Man ethos: "Crawl like a spider, love like a man / Ev'rybody's talkin' 'bout that normal Spider-Man / Amazing! Amazing! / How does he ever win?" But a WTF moment comes in the very next lines, which calls Spidey "No one lady's sex machine / He makes all the little girls sigh!" The song has showed some staying power, though, by appearing in the soundtrack of *Austin Powers: The Spy who Shagged Me* (1999).

"Episode II: Spider-Man Remembers" opens with a scene in the Kingpin's office, with the strains of "Santa Lucia" in the background. The Kingpin's henchman Carlo tells him the time by calculating "The big hand is on the six..." and wonders if Aunt May could make a good pan of lasagna, all as if to ask the listener, "Am I Guido enough for you?" After the Kingpin obliges the listener with exposition on his place as head of the Maggia crime family, Marvel's equivalent of the Mafia, the soundtrack cross fades to Parker reminiscing the story of his own origin.

The following song, "Such a Groove to Be Free," has a Ron Dante vocal over an electric keyboard tuned to harpsichord, in the style of many easy-listening acts of the time, but especially, perhaps, the Partridge Family single, "I Think I Love You." "Episode III: Spider-Man's Dilemma" finishes the recap of Spidey's origin with the death of Uncle Ben. The album's Side One ends with a choir singing "Rock of Ages" at Uncle Ben's funeral.

"Episode IV: A Strange Ally" has Parker pondering whether he should let Spider-Man "die" after all, since his heroic identity has caused nothing but pain to those around him. The voice from his dream returns, calling for Spider-Man, and Parker realizes it's the voice of his Uncle Ben. He remembers that Uncle Ben would always remind him: "The stronger the man, the heavier the load. With great power comes great responsibility." Parker decides, "A man might quit. But Spider-Man is more than a man! I'm a super-hero! I must fight on, no matter the personal sacrifice! Because that's what being a super-hero is all about!" This succinct summation of Spider-Man's personal obligation suggests that maybe the album's writers knew the character after all, and makes up for the "sex machine" line. This sentiment is amplified in following track, "The Stronger the Man," a digestible piece of early 70s power pop.

"Episode IV: A Strange Ally (cont'd)" brings Doctor Strange into the story. Here his purpose seems to be to use the Eye of Agomotto as more exposition, to show Aunt May feistily fighting back at Kingpin's enforcers. Strange decides to help Spider-Man on this seemingly mundane crime-fighting task, to which Spidey declares "Let's head cross town!" and indeed, the next cut "Goin' Cross Town" is what Jackie Gleason would call their "travelling music," a slow boogie in which it's assured our heroes are going to "kick a tail or two."

"Episode V: From Beyond the Grave" has Strange and Spider-Man arriving at the Kingpin's secret lair, where the Sorcerer Supreme dispenses with the gunsels and allows Spidey to take on Kingpin. Spider-Man calls out "Maestro, if you will?" as cue for an instrumental version of "Goin' Cross Town" underlying a battle fought with sound effects. Kingpin attempts to flee, only to meet Doctor Strange who, apparently, casts him into Hell. No, explains Strange, he has only trapped Kingpin within an illusion. Strange further reveals that he was moved to act in Spider-Man's behalf because he heard Uncle Ben's voice calling for help as well.

Spider-Man: Rock Reflections of a Super-Hero (1975)

Most fans learned about this second Spider-Man album from a full page ad in Marvel comics headlined “The Biggest Rock Event of the Decade!” Beneath that banner is a caricature of Stan, ballyhooping:

Hi, rock fans! This is Stan (Music Lover) Lee soundin’ off! I’m here to tell you about a great, new album — “Reflections of a Super-Hero!” It’s not just for the younger set, either! No, it’s an honest-to-Aunt May Rock-and-Roll album that’s the answer to every disc jockey’s prayer! And every one of the sensational songs deals with another aspect of Spidey’s tumultuous life! Don’t miss this one, True Believer — be in on the beginning of a musical revolution! And if you’re wondering why I’m making like a Dee Jay here myself — guess who’ll be narrating the whole amazing album? Aww — someone musta told you! [Superhero, 1976].

The ad was actually run by Superhero Merchandise, a New Jersey store featuring comic book merchandise whose mail-order catalog was a design project of the students at The Joe Kubert School of Cartoon & Graphic Art. Superhero Merchandise later formed Heroes World Distribution, which Marvel purchased in 1994 and made its sole retail distributor.

The album was another studio project, this one on Lifesong Records. The label was formed in 1975 by the production team of Terry Cashman and Tommy West, with Philip S. Kurnit, attorney to the late singer Jim Croce. *Spider-Man: Rock Reflections of a Superhero* was only their second album release.

The album’s cover was a more finished version of the sketch shown in the ad: Peter Parker staring into his reflection as Spider-Man in a full-length mirror. The cover was laid out by Romita and finished by Nick Cardy, an artist known for his work on DC’s *Aquaman* and *The Teen Titans*, doing one of his few jobs on a Marvel property (Cronin, 2011). The back cover had the usual album production credits, but surrounded by inset drawing of various marvel characters also “performing:” The Incredible Hulk on drums; The Fantastic Four on Background Vocals; Conan and the Barbarians on strings; Captain America on tambouring, and Hand Claps by The Falcon.

Reviewing the album:

This album sounds like an unproduced Spider-Man musical of the 70’s, and “High Wire” the first cut, would have been Spidey’s introduction number. A decent rocking song with the chorus, “I’m a free flyer on the high wire / I’m a man, I’m the Spider-Man.” Following the number, Stan Lee begins to narrates the events of the story, setting up each song to follow.

“Peter Stays and Spider-Man Goes,” the introspective character examination, was written and sung by Mike Ragona, a Lifesong signee (and current *Huffington Post* music feature writer), with some psychedelic flourishes.

Stan then brings us the obligatory flashback to Spidey’s origin. And the musical narrative shifts to 50s style music, with a doo-wop style reading in “Square Boy.” The track’s composer/singer, Marty Nelson, was a member of the first incarnation of Manhattan Transfer (1969-71). The song recapped the familiar narrative of Peter and the radioactive spider.

“New Point of View” was another “this is what I’m feeling” number, describing with Spider-Man’s ill-fated television debut from his origin story. Nelson then sings “Spider-Man,” a song opening with some barrelhouse boogie in the style of Elton John’s “Hercules,” or more appropriately, Wings’ “Magneto & Titanium Man”: “Once I was helpless / Now I rescue those who

need me when I can / Spider-Man!” This song was released as a single to radio stations, with “Hero” listed as the artist on the label.

“No One’s Got a Crush on Peter” seems to return to a point already made about the pitfalls of Spider-Man’s dual life. Stan’s narration then has us turn the clock back again, this time to the Gwen Stacy romantic plot, described by “Gwendolyn,” another Marty Nelson doo-wop number, and “Count on Me,” a modern power pop number.

Then rather than establish a plot as *From Beyond the Grave* did, Stan continues into another “reflection,” relating that Peter has a dream of Dr. Octopus, sung by John Palumbo (lead singer of Crack the Sky). Doc Ock “counts the dozens” on Spidey and all his superhero colleagues in song, backed by a full rock orchestra and vocal section representing all of Spider-Man’s foes: “Power Man ... and you, Silver Surfer! You messed me long enough ... now I’m gonna hurt ya-a-a!”

After the dream sequence, describes the sudden appearance of the Green Goblin: “Tingling with anticipation, Spider-Man would be more reluctant to fight the emerald fiend if he could foresee Gwen Stacey’s body falling, as it will, out of his spider-reach.” So much for any thread of suspense here. Rather than dramatize Spider-Man’s battle with the Green Goblin and Gwen’s death musically, Stan continues to narrate the story as if he was reading a movie review. Spider-Man’s reaction to Gwen’s death is sung, though, to a string and choir backing somewhat recalling the Rolling Stones’ “Lady Jane,” titled “A Soldier Starts to Cry.” Stan wraps up by proclaiming, “He’s a hero, if you will. A hero whose dreams have turned to nightmares; who walks in step with tragedy and death. But still he perseveres! For such is the haunting fate...of Spider-Man!” Finally, we get a curtain-closer in Nelson’s “Time Will Show Me the Way.”

Critical Analysis

Having heard “Boy Falls from the Sky,” the first song publicly performed from the 21st-century musical *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*, I can’t say it’s that much better than anything done on LP 35 years before. Each of these albums has marked similarities and differences. The similarities mark them more as products of their times. Both were produced as special projects by small labels, with the involvement of label studio personnel or other talents that were well-known within the industry, but behind the scenes to the public.

In 1972, Buddah was one of the major suppliers of hit records. It was established in 1967 as a spinoff of Kama Sutra Records, then successful as the label home of the Lovin’ Spoonful. Buddah branched out from its early bubble-gum hits to a diverse range of artists from Bill Withers and Gladys Knight & the Pips to Captain Beefheart and Charlie Daniels (Hyde, 2000). *From Beyond the Grave* is the product of a company at a stylistic crossroads: Ron Dante brought a well-honed sensibility for bubble-gum to his production work, abetted by popular comedy and voice talent, while some of the songs involved R&B and funk leanings that would serve the label in the disco era. The funk elements in *From Beyond the Grave* were not entirely new to the Spider-Man oeuvre, either. The 1970s PBS show *The Electric Company* featured a heavy urban groove in its soundtrack, which carried over to the “Spidey Super Stories” segments. An *Electric Company* soundtrack album featured yet another retelling of Spidey’s origin story, with a contemporary R&B musical bed—the effect of which was somewhat marred by the nasal delivery of the voice actor attempting to play a teenaged Peter Parker. Auberjonois, on the other hand, went for a natural delivery which did not attempt to conceal his 32 years, and helped to expand the appeal

of the album beyond the confines of the Children's Records section. The Buddah project as a whole played like a modern radio drama.

Lifesong was a much smaller label than Buddah at the time of their Spider-Man project. Much more of the new label's personnel were involved, and the music overall had a more professional sheen. Every fan blogger who writes about the album takes aim at the Dr. Octopus song, among others, though it could be seen as no more over the top than the performances in *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, also released in 1975. The impression I got from listening to *Rock Reflections* in 2011 was of the pitch for a Spider-Man musical being presented to a group of potential backers: the songwriters are present to sing the show's songs, while Stan Lee lends his celebrity presence and narrates the show's book. This happened to be Stan's function when he moved to Los Angeles in the 1970s to pitch Hollywood on Marvel TV or movie projects.

It seems, though, that these projects were made with minimal involvement from Marvel Comics except for approval of the use of characters and artwork. Except for the paid ad for *Rock Reflections*, there was no mention of either album in Marvel's "Bullpen Bulletins" text pages of the time. Roy Thomas, Marvel's Editor in Chief from 1972 to 1974, wrote: "I've racked such brains as I have, but since I wasn't involved in either rock album, I'm afraid I don't know much of anything that might help you. I never got the idea that Stan was intimately involved in the albums, either ... in particular, I seem to recall that *Reflections* was readied by someone else and then brought to Stan for such participation as he may have had" (personal communication, 2010). In a later correspondence, Thomas noted that he had also tried his hand at a song: "Wish Gary Friedrich and I had been able to place our 'Spider-Man' recording, made with the vague blessings of Marvel, in 1966 ... but only our little private copies of the session remain. Maybe if Gary's lawsuit is ever settled, we can get permission to run it as a quasi-giveaway sometime" (2011). Friedrich filed a lawsuit in 2007 against Marvel and Sony Pictures, et al., claiming damages for Marvel's use of the Johnny Blaze Ghost Rider character he'd created (DeMott).

No matter whether Marvel's involvement in *From Beyond the Grave!* was peripheral or hands-on, the album seemed to be an attempt to create a new reader experience, albeit one based on juvenile "read-along records," a media form starting with Bozo the Clown's 1946 debut in *Bozo at the Circus* (Raymond, 2005). In the 1970s, the children's label Peter Pan Records started the Power Records imprint for a "Book and Record" line of complete comic book stories, sometimes repurposed from already published stories, accompanied by a dramatization on 7-inch disks. Power Records adapted not only DC and Marvel characters, but TV and movie properties like *Star Trek*, *The Six Million Dollar Man*, *Planet of the Apes*, and *Kojak*.

The popularity of these childrens' records is hard to compare, since their sales were not reported on music industry charts. *Billboard* did review *From Beyond the Grave!*, alongside reviews of albums by Pete Townsend, Elvis Presley and David Bowie, declaring:

There are many (mostly parents) who say that there are many similarities between comic books and rock music (both are abhorable non-functional destroyers of youthful brain tissue, or so they say).

Spider-man faithfully vanquishes the forces of evil and underground rock right before your very ears.

The songs are all buoyantly sung by (who else) the Wedspinnars [sic] ... [*Billboard*, 1972].

That same issue of *Billboard* carried a one-column ad for the album on its front page. The caption beneath the album cover graphic assured readers it would be "The Christmas smash of the year!" *From Beyond the Grave!* did appear in *Billboard's* "Bubbling Under the Top 200 LP's" chart, tracking for six weeks and peaking at #201 the week of January 27, 1973. This was the same level as an album of songs by the cast of *The Brady Bunch*. The Number One album of that time was *Seventh Sojourn* by the Moody Blues.

The 1975 *Rock Reflections* album seems to have been produced with a greater expectation of radio play, and many of my references suggest it did receive some play at college stations. The album's music tracks were separate from Lee's narrative segues, making airplay a little easier, whereas Aberjonois' narrations on *From Beyond the Grave!* often ran right up the "ramp" (the instrumental introduction) of the songs that followed them.

The Lifesong label released *Rock Reflections* before its brief string of mid-1970's hits: "Shannon" by Henry Groce, "Ariel" by Dean Friedman, and a few mid-charting posthumous releases from Jim Croce. Its main contribution to the pop culture arcana was co-founder Terry Cashman's 1981 release, "Talkin' Baseball (Willie, Mickey and 'The Duke')", which became a folk anthem during the 1981 Major League Baseball strike. Cashman would re-record the song with new lyrics to fit nearly every major league team. The best-known version of his song, though, was "Talkin' Softball," heard under the end credits of the 1992 *The Simpsons* episode, "Homer at the Bat."

From Beyond the Grave showed off its bubblegum pop heritage, while *Rock Reflections* strived some for credibility among both music and comics fans. Musically, its failure may have stemmed from its attempting to cover too many musical styles so it could play up the strengths of each contributing artist. "Gwendolyn" and "Square Boy" were too kitschy in revisiting 50s pop styles when compared to the more earnest "Spider-Man," and even the camp of "Dr. Octopus." Narratively, the production's error was in taking the "Reflections" part of the title too literally. Too many grooves are spent revisiting Spider-Man's origin in song. Then the death of Gwen Stacy, which could easily have dramatized in a tragic and dramatic way, was instead simply narrated by Stan between tracks, one of which was yet another dream sequence. Here, *From Beyond the Grave!* better succeeded in creating a dramatic narrative in the style old radio drama; even without the gatefold comic strip narrative and with the Kingpin's stereotypical Maggia goons. Its narrative still succeeds as a drama played out in the mind's eye.

The Marvel World of Icarus

The author's fanboy penchant for over-completeness and too much detail compels a mention of an album which is even harder to find in its original pressing than the two discussed above. In 1972, a British progressive band named Icarus recorded an album titled *The Marvel World of Icarus*. Rather than attempting a rock-opera style narrative, the band instead wrote and recorded twelve songs about Marvel characters. The album's front cover was a collage of comic strips, and the back showed photos of the band members' heads pasted over drawings of Spider-Man, Thor, Conan, etc. After a spoken "Prologue" that built in speed and intensity like the opening "Departure" from the Moody Blues' *In Search of the Lost Chord*, the album starts with "Spider-Man." Like the rest of the album, it brings in all the standard tropes of British prog and psychedelia: an instrumental backing including flute and clarinet, with organ driving most of the melody, punctuated by brief flourishes of guitar, flute or organ solo. Lead vocalist Steve Hart had a gravelly tone not unlike John Kay of Steppenwolf. The whole effect, though, was of a generic acid rock soundtrack to any exploitation "Mondo" documentary about hippies running wild. The lyrics to "Spider-Man" include couplets like "Gonna catch a fly / Right between the eye... He's always reeling in and out of town / Jonah's always trying to bring him down," and the chorus: "Spider-Man is on the prow! / Look out! The threat's behind you now!" (Plotel, 1972). Hardly a show stopper. The album has a few surprises, like an ode to the Iron Man femme fatale "Madame

Masque” which was a close simulation of any Rod Stewart ballad of that time. *The Marvel World of Icarus* was pulled shortly after its release, and legend claims that after initially approving the release, Marvel demanded more royalties than Icarus’ label, Pye Records, wanted to pay. Whether the story is true or not, the Icarus album never saw release in the U.S., and became another rare piece of Marvel ephemera, until it was re-issued in the 1990s. The writers of TV’s *Law and Order* franchise tipped their hats to this album as well. The June 19, 2011, episode of *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* featured Dets. Robert Goren and Alex Eames (Vincent D’Onofrio and Kathryn Erbe) investigating the apparent stunt-related death of the leading man in a long-delayed, injury plagued rock musical. The play’s name; and the title of the episode: *Icarus* (Ng, 2011: n.p.).

The Rock Opera Context

Although the dramatic and musical enactment of a comic book story would seem like a quirky project for a record label, there were plenty of similar recordings whose success could suggest that the Spider-Man LPs might have a shot to turn a profit. Foremost were the concept albums that defined the “rock opera” genre by combining music with a clear narrative beyond a collection of thematically related songs. Rock historians cite *SF Sorrow* by Pretty Things (1968) as the first true rock opera, but the genre was best defined by The Who’s *Tommy* (1969). *Jesus Christ Superstar* was first produced on album in 1970 before any idea of a stage production. *Superstar* was realized as a motion picture in 1973, and *Tommy* in 1975, perhaps fueling the hope that dramatic albums could profitably cross over into other media. Pink Floyd’s 1970s string of themed albums culminated in *The Wall* (1979), which itself became a motion picture. Other acts such as Rush, Frank Zappa and Jethro Tull also recorded whole albums around individual themes or stories.

Rick Wakeman’s *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (A&M, 1974), which followed the Yes keyboardist’s first solo outing, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (1973), was produced as an avatar for the entire progressive rock genre. This musical interpretation of Jules Verne had only four songs, banded as one continuous track on each side. It is the most successful LP on this list, having hit #3 in the *Billboard* Albums chart. Though the album showed signs of the self-indulgent pretentiousness that sank the prog movement before the decade was out, it may also have been one of the reasons Homer Simpson proclaimed “Everyone knows rock attained perfection in 1974. It’s a scientific fact!” (Forrester, 1996). The following year, Wakeman debuted his next album *The Myths and Legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*, with live performance of *King Arthur on Ice* at London’s Wembley Arena.

Flash Fearless vs. the Zorg Women, Pts. 5 and 6. (Chrysalis, 1975), which includes work from various artists, is a campy rock rendition of a sci-fi serial, which anticipates George Lucas’ trick with the *Star Wars* narrative by starting in the middle of its own story. The LP came with a comic book adaptation. Flash was played by one of that year’s hottest artists, Alice Cooper, with character or musical parts by John Entwistle and Keith Moon, “Jim Dandy” Mangrum of Black Oak Arkansas, Justin Hayward (The Moody Blues), Carmine Appice (Vanilla Fudge) and more. Unfortunately, the songwriting ability was not equal to the big-name cast. The project had been intended as a stage musical, but the album’s commercial failure sent the concept into hibernation until it ran briefly onstage in Los Angeles in 1981, retitled *Captain Crash Versus the Zzorgwomen, Chapters 5 and 6* (Joseph, 1995).

Considering the swath Wakeman laid across the musical landscape, it’s odd that so few other musicians mined literature as subjects for concept albums. Alan Parsons was a studio

engineer at London's Abbey Road, where his first credit was on *Abbey Road*. He significantly contributed to the sound of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, and formed his own studio group with songwriter Eric Woolfson. *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (20th Century, 1976) offered musical reinterpretations of Edgar Allan Poe works. Parsons eschewed the "all star" approach in the studio, working instead with members of 70s groups he had produced, Pilot and Ambrosia. First pressings of this album featured a lyric insert booklet by the Hipgnosis design studio, "wrapped" with a sheet of tissue guard, as was used to protect engraved plates in old books. Parsons continued to release themed prog rock albums into the 1980s.

Another various-artists studio project that failed to dent the charts was *Intergalactic Touring Band* (Passport, 1977). The concept was a performance set list by said IGTB on its tour of far-flung planets in a far-flung future. It featured an illustrated booklet, and yet another all-star collection of vocalists: Meatloaf, Ben E. King, Rod Argent, Arthur Brown, members of Status Quo, and Clarence Clemons on saxophone.

Jeff Wayne's Musical Version of The War of the Worlds (Columbia, 1978) has the most gravitas of any of these albums, due mostly to Richard Burton's narration gives this. Previously known largely for producing a David Essex album, Wayne was nonetheless able to fund production of this ambitious project and attract contributions from more of the 1970s' heavy musical hitters. Though it only peaked at #98 in *Billboard's* album chart and it spun off a Top 40 hit in Justin Hayward's "Forever Autumn." In Britain, it remained on the charts for over five years and was reissued in several anniversary editions — including a 7-CD box set. Its rock-classical-disco fusion kept it much sought-after by club DJs.

Variou artists: *White Mansions* (A&M, 1978) This album achieved some promotional buzz in its time as a County counterpart to *War of the Worlds*. Its narrative of the Civil War from a Confederate point of view involved a cast including Waylon Jennings and his wife Jessi Colter, and Steve Cash of the Ozark Mountain Daredevils, with guitar parts by Eric Clapton.

Conclusion

From a the perspective of the comics fan, the Spider-Man music projects do not add much to the "Spider-verse." Both of the narrative albums spend much of their time rehashing Spidey's origin story, while *Rock Reflections* also delves into the Gwen Stacey tragedy. Both albums also feature Peter Parker taunted by hallucinations of his many villainous foes. *From Beyond the Grave!*'s plot of the Kingpin having Aunt May kidnapped to coerce Peter Parker into killing Spidey does sound like an original story, but as with most non-comics stories, it has probably never been referenced in any Marvel comic — though if Grant Morrison ever writes *The Amazing Spider-Man*, bet on him making that story part of canon somehow.

A Spider-Man narrative on a long-playing album presents a different listening experience than the same narrative on CD or in an MP3 library. Just as in a live performance, the audience is obliged to listen to an LP from the start to finish — of each side, at least — with little chance to skip the bad parts or just delete unwanted cuts altogether, as today's music consumer can do.

Since its inception, the LP format has been explored as a medium for performances beyond the standard two-hits-plus-filler-songs format of most pop albums. Genres like classical and jazz could easily stretch out to an LP's up to 60 minute capacity, and well before the "rock opera," artists from Frank Sinatra on down recorded "theme" albums meant to stand on their own with the extraction of singles a secondary consideration. Millions of people experienced Broadway musicals from albums recorded by the cast one Sunday after matinees. Among the cast albums

and soundtracks atop the sales charts in the early 1960s were comedians like Bob Newhart and Bill Cosby, and *The First Family*, hinting at the LP's narrative potential. At the time, there was also a steady trade in albums of old radio shows, voice tracks from old movies, and spoken word albums, now called "audiobooks." Among many acts creating original narrative projects for LP was Stan Freberg, with his 1961 "Album Musical" *Stan Freberg presents the United States of America, Volume One: The Early Years*, and freeform radio performers the Firesign Theatre.

Placed against the history of "concept albums" — some deservedly successful, others deservedly obscure — we can see that perhaps the Spider-Man albums fit well within the parameters of the pop concept album, at least before it became the exclusive province of progressive rock bands. The packaging of *From Beyond the Grave!* went a further step in trying to re-integrate the album with its roots in comics' sequential narrative. The effect of trying to follow the album's action along in the gatefold seems to this Baby Boomer more like sitting through a filmstrip of the Easter story in Catechism, missing only the "beep" from the accompanying album to remind the presenter to advance the strip. Since the dialogue-less gatefold adds little to the story that isn't already told in the grooves, the album works out better as a musical performance than a new hybrid of music and comics.

The Spider-Man LPs can be seen as sharing a common thread: using the long-playing format to tell a narrative beyond the usual collection of pop songs. Whether rooted in progressive rock, kid's records, jazz or radio drama, the Spider-Man records can be seen as part of an effort to create a narrative form exclusive to the 40-plus minutes of a long-playing record.

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