

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

I was out in Los Angeles last year, moderating a series of panels with industry executives. I hadn't been there in a while, and I was struck by how often they were throwing around the term IP – which is short of intellectual property.

IP used to be a wonky term that I'd come across in a Hollywood Reporter article. But these execs were saying IP like it was sexy, like it had gold dust drifting off those two letters. "We own the IP," "They've got great IP," "They're sitting on IP they don't know what to do with it."

And I realized what was really going on was they were talking about the way Marvel has changed the entertainment industry. Because Marvel was sitting on a gold mine of IP – but only Marvel understood that IP was gold.

Now, there's another conversation happening among Marvel fans about that golden IP. Who was responsible for creating it? Because if you read The Avengers or Black Panther comics in the '60s, every time one of those comics said at the top, "written by Stan Lee." But those four words -- "Written by Stan Lee" – are the most controversial words in the history of comics.

When all these superheroes were created, Stan Lee was more like an editor who would talk to the artists about what kinds of stories and characters they were going to create. The artists would go home, plot out the narrative, figure out the emotional beats, check back with Stan for notes, and then draw the entire comic – sometimes inventing characters Stan Lee hadn't seen until the artists gave him the final drawings. Then Stan would fill in the narration and the dialogue – which he was great at doing. He really was the voice of those characters. Hence, "written by Stan Lee." The artists got a "drawn by" credit, but a lot of them felt they should have gotten a "story by" credit, or a "characters by" credit. And in the media, Stan Lee was getting all the credit for Marvel's success.

Some of the artists quit – like Wally Wood who had a big hand in creating Daredevil. And Steve Ditko, who many comic book historians believe was the real creator of Spider-Man and Doctor Strange. But one artist stuck it out for years. And he's the artist that many Marvel fans believe is truly

responsible for creating the characters that dominate the Marvel Cinematic Universe today: Jack Kirby.

In fact, Kirby's family eventually sued Marvel – around the time they were bought by Disney. This could've been ground breaking case that could've redefined how much money corporations should give the creators of their IP. But before the case could go to the Supreme Court in 2014, Marvel and Disney settled with Kirby's family for an undisclosed amount of money.

But it's true that all these Marvel characters we've become so familiar with in the last ten years are really the creation of Jack Kirby, I wanted to know where is the artist in his work? And what can we learn about the man by looking more closely at his characters?

> BREAK

To understand Jack Kirby, you have to go back to his childhood. So I did, -- sort of.

On a cold Spring day, my producer Stephanie Billman and I visited the Tenement Museum in the Lower East Side of Manhattan – which is very close to where Jack Kirby grew up, back when Kirby's name was Jacob Kurtzberg.

Our tour guide was Jason Eisner – who is not related to Will Eisner, the other great comic book artist I profiled last year. Jason brought us to an apartment that was owned by a Jewish family, to give us a better sense of what's Kirby's childhood home might look like.

The apartment was tiny. Today it would feel small for one person, but entire families lived in these rooms, sleeping anywhere they could.

Jason pointed out the window to a wide street and said that used to be a noisy elevated train.

JASON: And under that elevated train was the red light district for New York City, you wanted a taste for anything, you come down to the Lower East side and find it, and that criminal element, the center of it was something the neighborhood related to constantly.

EM: I know famously he got into so many brawls, what was it like for kids?

JASON: That spans the gambit, from all the sources, you get a sense the kids, the big fear among progressive reformers was that those kids were going to be lost to the streets, they're going to go into crime, newsboy that's a first step to being a gangster, you're going to be lost so the street. There was truth to that, the period of time Jack Kirby was living down here was a wild moment for the LES, there's a lot going on.

What about running on rooftops?

Oh yeah! Kids when they went out, fire escapes, roof tops, the roofs were also strategic place in fight, get to roof top, you could be thrown whatever you found at enemies, or police, throw water on the police.

SB: So also stories about how he'd take charcoal and he'd draw on tenement walls, something typical? Kids draw on walls?

JASON: Of course! Kids draw. They're going to draw on everything, they will be unstoppable, Jack Kirby was so prolific hated by the super, I can imagine we're in the super's house, what's the matter with you, Jack?! Give him paper.

SB: He couldn't afford paper, he was so curious, he would draw on actual walls and his mother was impressed, okay don't do that!

EM: And Stephanie winked.

JASON: I saw it! She winked!

As someone who grew up on Marvel comics, those images of fights in the alleyways and chases on rooftops feel very familiar to me.

Randolph Hoppe runs The Jack Kirby Museum and Research Center – which is actually a website, it's a virtual museum. He says Kirby's childhood was perfect training for drawing superhero slugfests.

RANDOLPH: And Kirby really took to the fighting and started analyzing it and he noticed that when he was in the midst of it that time would slow down and he would he could he could kind of see what was going on even to the point where he got on a subway went up to the Bronx just to see if they fought any differently up there.

What really made Kirby's heroes stand out was that every punch they threw packed a wallop.

RANDOLPH: People will make lots of jokes about Kirby in a way because of the - huge fist that's on the drawing and then you know it goes to an arm and then you know the fist is two times larger than character's head.

I remember as a kid trying to copy that style of the giant Kirby's giant fist and then the arm and the body flying you know like in deep perspective and I was just like why does this never look right?

RANDOLPH: Yeah! It's something that he developed after at least 25 years of drawing every day.

So then he had no formal training right?

RANDOLPH: Not really no. The joke was that he went to Pratt, I believe it was for a week or a day and he would say that he drew too fast for them and then the sad story is that he was in art school and then his father lost his job so he couldn't go to art school anymore and he had to go and get some work to help support the family.

MARK: Jack understood anatomy as well as any artist working in comics – he just didn't let it stop him from drawing an interesting body.

Mark Evanier worked as an assistant to Kirby in the '70s. He says Kirby's lack of academic training allowed him to approach drawing superheroes in a way that no one had done before.

MARK: If you look at a lot of DC comics in the '50s when pasteurized the product the way you know emotion in his mind is to read word balloon and tell you I'm annoyed or despondent, he will tell you and Jack's people acted with whole bodies, and that made the moments that were tender or sad all the more effective -- the contract was more extreme and that was quite intentional on his part.

So his first big break came in 1941. He was collaborating with a guy named Joe Simon around the time when everyone was trying to come up with the next Superman. So they came up Captain America, whose alter ego was Steve Rogers. But Steve Rogers wasn't from another planet like Superman, he wasn't a billionaire like Bruce Wayne. Steve Rogers was a scrawny, scrappy fighter from the Lower East Side, just like Kirby – at least until Steve Rogers got the super soldier serum that makes him big and strong.

Arlen Schumer is an illustrator and comic book historian. He says its no coincidence that two Jewish guys created Captain America – who was famously punching Hitler cover after cover -- at a time when a lot of Americans didn't want us to enter the war.

ARLEN: And he appears in the spring of '41, seven months before we enter the war with Pearl Harbor, and he's an overnight success. In Cap movie in 2010, paid homage to the reality that they would dress up actors as Cap to stump for War Bonds and this is happening immediately after he's created.

CAP CLIP

But not everyone loved Captain America. In fact, here is Jack Kirby from a radio interview from about 30 years ago.

KIRBY: I once had six Nazis call me up and say we're waiting for you downstairs and we're going to beat the daylight out of you, you know? These were New York Nazis, they had a camp on Long Island.

If this were a Marvel comic, there would be an asterisks (as-TER-iss) and an editor's note saying, "See episode 55 of Imaginary Worlds, Man in the High Castle -- American Nazis on Long Island."

KIRBY: And so I says hold on, guys, I'll be right down. Etc.

After the war, the industry went into a slump. Comic books were being attacked for spreading juvenile delinquency. Kirby drew anything he could to keep working. When he joined Stan Lee and Stan uncle Martin Goodman – their company Atlas comics was about to go under. They renamed the business Marvel comics and started cranking out superhero after superhero. The Marvel formula was that the characters were set in the real world, they lived in New York, not Gotham or Metropolis. They had real world problems, they dealt with real life political issues even if it was in a comic book way. Eventually all of this would make the characters very adaptable to film. But it was during this time that Kirby brought back his first big character, Captain America.

And Captain America has been literally frozen and defrosted, so he's a man out of place. And that reflected what Kirby had gone through. He created this character from a place of youthful optimism. Randolph Hoppe says now Kirby was a veteran, who had been through hell and seen many of his friend die, like Steve Rogers.

RANDOLPH: A lot of those guys my dad included. I mean just you just didn't it was like you know let's just get the G.I. Bill get that house with the picket fence

and have this happy family and they really did not talk about that stuff. And but Kirby did he was you know deeply, deeply affected by it and I think that's where Captain America is kind of you know deep affectation of you know not having acclimated to us you know the life for the last 15 years or whatever it was at that time and suddenly coming out of it and still you know realizing his body has passed away and the world has changed as you know -- I can kind of get that.

The older soldier character that Kirby created was Nick Fury, who ran the spy organization Shield. In the movies, Nick Fury is played by Samuel L. Jackson but in the comics, he looks like a taller, muscular version of Jack Kirby, with a shock of white hair over his ears like Kirby, and always smoking a cigar, like Kirby.

RANDOLPH: I believe that Jack Kirby was what I'd call a method cartoonist. One of the reasons why his characters are so relatable is that he actually did put them on himself into a lot of them as he drew them. I believe sometimes he felt he was Nick Fury, and then other time he was Ben Grimm.

Ben Grimm was the streetwise, tough talking member of the Fantastic Four, who turns into a rock monster called The Thing, also very fond of cigars. In fact Arlen Schumer found this quote from Kirby:

ARLEN: And according to Kirby himself, the way the Thing talks and acts, you'll find that The Thing is Jack Kirby. He has my manners, my manner of speech, and he thinks he way I do, he's excitable, very active among people and he can muscle his way through a crowd. I'm that sort of person.

Charles Hatfield wrote a biography about Kirby called Hand of Fire. And he always thinks of The Thing in the same category as The Hulk – another monster-as-hero character that Kirby had a hand in creating.

CHARLES: But when you get to the thing and the Hulk you really arrived at a at a new conception of what a superhero can be a grotesque blocky golem like character infused with pathos filled with ungovernable anger great fury. And even though Kirby's superhero comics remain kind of bright moralistic and positive there's a lot of angst and a lot of ferociousness kind of embedded. That's something that superheroes might have always had potentially in them because the characters are freaks and outliers and outcasts. But boy Kirby really turned up the juice on that quality, I think when people respond to The Hulk in Thor

Ragnarock or The Avengers, they're seeing some of what Kirby enthused those characters with.

CLIP: THOR RAGNAROCK

Again, here's Kirby from that old radio interview.

CLIP: MOTHER AND CHILD

Now Kirby was never that interested in the lonely hero characters. He really liked to develop superhero teams – but they were not super friends.

That also came from personal experience. Of course, he grew up in a neighborhood that was incredibly crowded. Everyone was nudging each other for space, getting on each other's nerves. And the Lower East Side was divided by ethnic groups, and ethnic gangs.

But he was also amazed when he got to World War II, that he was serving in a platoon with all these different guys from around the country who he never would've met otherwise, everything working together towards a common goal.

So Kirby was really good at developing these charmingly dysfunctional superhero teams like The X-Men, The Fantastic Four and The Avengers. And that's another quality that translates really well to the movies like The Avengers.

CLIP: WE'RE NOT A TEAM, WE'RE A TICKING TIME BOMB

Charles Hatfield says another Kirby trait, which we see in the movies, was his knack for mixing different sci-fi and fantasy elements together.

CHARLES: And I think we see that in Kirby so much. You can look at the lineup of The Avengers a book that he started or started where you have a mechanical Iron Man and a Norse god and a shrinking Ant Man and so on and see this kind of reckless blending all these conventions from different genres.

And I think these characters get really interesting when they move away from Kirby's life experiences to his ultimate fantasies. Kirby didn't have a lot of schooling but he read everything he could, and was particularly

interested in science. And so he liked to imagine himself not just as a tough guy street fighter, but as brilliant inventor like Reed Richards, the leading man of the Fantastic Four, who also looks remarkably like Kirby with a shock of white hair above his ears.

But Kirby said his ultimate fantasies lead him into the cosmos. He created The Silver Surfer, and he said he liked to imagine himself as Thor, this tall blonde, Nordic god-man. Charles Hatfield says we can really see Kirby's influence on Thor in the way he blended the ancient and the futuristic on Thor's home planet as Asgard.

CHARLES: When you're reading a Thor comic by Kirby Thor Odin Loki and all the rest in the mid '60s you're seeing a kind of science fiction comic in which the gods of Asgard look into computer monitors or similar instruments.

In fact, if you look at the production design of Thor: Ragnarock, the director Taikia Waititi constantly Kirby's signature graphic imagery, which looked like computer circuits, designed by ancient Aztecs.

The flip side to Asgard is Wakanda, the home of Black Panther. Like Asgard, Wakanda is a blending of the ancient and the futuristic. Also Jack Kirby really loved the idea of a hidden world that only few people knew about.

CHARLES: And you see that translated into Ryan Cooglar's recent blockbuster film, which is so adaptable the kind of Afro Futurist aesthetic that the Black Panther film now represents.

Arlen Schumer showed me concept art that Jack Kirby created when he first pitched the character that would become the Black Panther to Stan Lee and Stan's uncle Martin Goodman.

ARLEN: He doesn't look what you'd think Black Panther, his costume and cape are more like Captain Marvel but fully exposed black man, not mask, like black superman. Now how does he wind up a year later published in 1966 with full-face mask? We have surviving evidence that shows Black Panther with half mask like Batman and that was rejected. Now we don't have written paper work explaining why it was rejected but all evidence either Lee or Goodman afraid of Southern distributors in '66, that putting black man on cover, they couldn't get away with it. Now if you notice in Black Panther movie poster every chance they take, he

doesn't have that mask on but Kirby never intended the Black Panther to be fully masked, period.

But as I mentioned before, Stan Lee was the public face of the company. He had a great rapport with the readers. He gave good quotes to journalists. Kirby was very uncomfortable standing in that kind of spotlight.

Did he talk about Stan Lee and the frustrations of Stan Lee taking too much credit?

MARK: Incessantly, he talked about it a lot

Mark Evanier met Jack Kirby in the early 1970s. That's when Jack Kirby let Mark in on a secret. DC Comics was wooing him. Kirby was ready to jump ship, and he asked Mark to be his new assistant at DC.

MARK: It was one of the most important yeses I said in my life.

But DC didn't give Kirby the kind of relief he was hoping for. It was a huge coup that they stole him away – but DC had built a culture among the rank-and-file that was very anti-Marvel.

MARK: There was this shock wave through the company wait a minute we don't like his work, that's not the style we want for DC, some hostility I don't think anyone sabotaged him but can't be yourself, do your own work, people aren't rooting for you to succeed.

At first, Kirby was given a huge canvas to work from. So he created four interlocking comics in a series called the New Gods. And this was a theme he was really interested in at this point in his career, humans that were like gods, and god-like humans.

You might have read that Ava DuVernay was just chosen by Warner Brothers to direct a New Gods movie. I'm not going to explain who the New Gods are because they're unfamiliar to the most people. But if developed right, I'm sure they'll be household names in a few years just like all the other "IP" that Kirby worked on.

But back in the '70s, there were two problems with the New Gods. First, Kirby had never written dialogue or narration before. Stan Lee had been the voice of all of Kirby's characters, and Stan was a natural at dialogue and

narration. Even fans like Arlen Schumer were disappointed when they discovered how clunky Kirby's writing was.

ARLEN: Remember description of him as Thing? That's what his writing was like, people who like Kirby writing, looking at glass half full exactly what he was like, instinctual from the gut, everything in italic bold caps, you know when people on Internet write in all caps, they're shouting? All of Kirby like that.

The other problem -- the New Gods weren't selling very well. Although Randolph Hoppe thinks they may have been selling better than DC realized -- the business model was changing and the distributors weren't getting accurate information. But either way:

RANDOLPH: They weren't getting good sales numbers. So after what was it two and a half years or something like that they pulled the plug on Kirby's grand intertwined mythology that that was a serious blow.

Kirby realized he would never find the freedom and respect he was looking for. So he went back to the devil he knew: Marvel. But going back was worse than he expected.

Marvel put him on Captain America and Black Panther, but he made his name creating new characters -- and he wanted to keep inventing new stuff, but his style was becoming outdated. The man who used to be called "The King of Comics" was getting a new nickname: "Jack the hack." By the 1980s, he was fighting Marvel just to have access to his own artwork.

His fans couldn't believe he was being treated this way, but they also couldn't believe he was still willing to work at Marvel. Again, Mark Evanier.

MARK: The number one motivating factor to understand that he wanted to feed his family very important for him to pay the mortgage afford groceries pay doctor bills, dental bills -- when you are that successful you shouldn't be sweating that, if you made your employer that much money you shouldn't worry about doctor bills, you should be free at his age and he was still struggling with that.

Kirby died in 1994, but a few year earlier, he gave an infamous interview were he bitterly claimed to be THE creator of every Marvel character he worked on, claiming that Stan Lee was the real hack.

Fans took sides. Even now, the arguments online are brutal. And I've noticed people in both camps saying, "Look I'm willing to acknowledge this was a creative partnership between Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, it's the other side that wants to claim their guy should get ALL the credit!"

But this leaves us in a strange predicament. We don't know exactly who came up with what in those early story meetings between Kirby and Lee. They weren't taking notes for future historians. They were just trying to crank out comic books. His family got a lot of money in the settlement – although arguably not as much as the characters are worth. There is no shortage of fans showering Kirby with love and appreciation, and he's still not around to hear any of it.

But I think the best way to honor his legacy is to keep telling the story of Kirby and Lee – with the emphasis on "and." That little word "and" should be honored as much as the names of the two men on either side of it. There's a whole world inside the word "and," and Kirby loved hidden worlds.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Arlen Schumer, Randolph Hoppe, Charles Hatfield, Jason Eisner and the whole staff at the Tenement museum, and Mark Evanier – who says we shouldn't go too far assuming that Kirby identified with every character that he developed.

MARK: Yeah, someone wrote this article how Jack must have identified with Ant Man because he was short. Jack's attitude who fanaticize about being the size of an ant? Whose dream is that? If you're short, the last thing you want to be is shorter.

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