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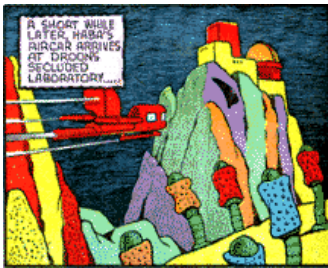
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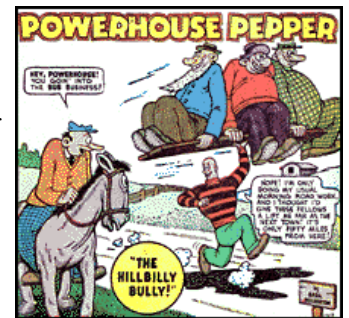
Basil Wolverton was born in 1909, so when comic books began to look for original material in 1936, he was ready and willing. Self-taught, he tried to sell his first newspaper strip at the age of 20. Unfortunately some other strip beat him to the punch. *Marco From Mars* could have captured the public's fancy the way *Buck Rogers* did.

Wolverton was one of the earliest creators of new material for the new comic book market. He lived in Vancouver, Washington and was one of the very few comic book artists who *didn't* live in New York. Working totally through the mail, Wolverton took his s-f strip concepts and turned them into *Spacehawk* and *Space Patrol* and *Meteor Martin*. Unfamiliar comic companies like *Centaur* and *Novelty* produced anthology comic titles in the Thirties and Forties. *Spacehawk* appeared in *Circus* comics in 1938 with a reincarnation at Novelty's *Target Comics* in 1941-42.



The art was both controlled and organic at the same time. Aliens lived on strange worlds in dwellings that resembled nothing as much as a cross between medieval castles and Earthly observatories. The landscapes were dotted with flora that often resembled earthworms in muffs, yet the basic building blocks of alien technology were the rivet and the steel panel. What Wolverton lacked in imagination he more than made up for with enthusiasm and drawing skills. Both the sample upper right and at left are from *Target* V2:1 from March 1941. By the middle of 1942, *Spacehawk* was earthbound, fighting Nazis and by the end of the year he'd been replaced.

Always a comedian, Wolverton had toyed with vaudeville and radio in his younger days. Taking his unique brand of alliterative, punny humor, he got in touch with another comic book company (*Timely*, later to be *Marvel Comics*) and created one of his most endearing characters, *Powerhouse Pepper*. Powerhouse was a bald little runt in a striped turtleneck who could out-muscle Popeye. The strips were laden with silly signs and wacky dialog that are the obvious inspiration for much of the tom-foolery in which *Kurtzman* and *Elder* were to indulge a decade later at *Mad!* Throughout the forties, he created and illustrated a cadre of weirdos that peppered the pages of practically all the *Timely* humor and teen titles. Indicative of things to come was the occasional side by side appearance of a Wolverton and a Kurtzman contribution. (*Harvey Kurtzman's* most famous pre-*Mad* creation was *Hey! Look*, also for *Timely*.)



Also during the Forties, BW worked for *Fawcett* and *Gleason*, two of the larger comic producers, doing strips with silly titles like *Bing Bang Buster*, *Scoop Scuttle*, *Mystic Moot*, etc. It was in 1946 that Basil got his greatest publicity break when he won the *Lena the Hyena* contest. Al Capp had created a character in his *Li'l Abner* newspaper strip named *Lena the Hyena* who was supposed to be too ugly for Capp to show in a family newspaper. Her every appearance was marked by an editorial disclaimer covering her features claiming that her face was being suppressed for the greater good of mankind. Well, this was surely a great running gag, but Capp had pretty much painted himself into a corner when the readership demanded that her face be shown. Nothing that Capp could come up with was likely to be horrid enough to justify the gag. So he started a contest to have readers submit what they thought *Lena* looked like and a celebrity panel comprised, supposedly, of Boris Karloff, Frank Sinatra and Salvador Dali would determine the winner. Wolverton submitted his entry along with a half a million others and he won! *Lena* (above, at the right of his signature) netted him \$500 and she appeared in the *Li'l Abner* strip and on the cover of *Life* magazine. You can read all about it in the *Kitchen Sink Li'l Abner* reprint series, volume 12.

His drawing of *Lena* marked the origin of a new school of art: The Spaghetti and Meatball school of design. It'd be nice to say that his career suddenly took off, but the printed evidence shows continual contributions to the same customers. What did change, though, was the comic book market. Horror became a fast-selling genre, and who but Basil Wolverton was better to depict true horror? Oddly enough, no matter how horrible his panels were, there was always such an element of the absurd present that they never went totally overboard. Spaghetti and meatballs are somehow intrinsically non-threatening. (left is from *Robot Woman* in *Mister Mystery* from 1954, right is from *Weird Mysteries*, 1953.) He did horror stories for *Atlas* (post-*Timely*, pre-*Marvel*) where he illustrated two stories in 1952 written by Daniel Keyes. Keyes went on to write the Nebula Award-winning *Flowers for Algernon*, which was the basis of the film classic, *Charlie*.

In 1954, he also did a *Lena*-inspired cover for *Mad Comic Book* and inside that issue he did a feature on what the readers of *Mad* looked like. He did a couple more contributions to *Mad*, then retired from comics in 1955.



The remaining years of his life were devoted to illustrating **The Bible Story**. In six volumes from *Genesis* to *Samuel*, Wolverton adapted the text of the **Bible** for simplicity and clarity and provided hundreds of b&w illustrations for the work. These six volumes were published from 1961-68 by Ambassador College. In the early 80s they were reprinted and the rest of the Old Testament was added with newer illustrations by Wolverton. Wolverton had died in 1978, so he must have been working on these for years before they saw publication. (Thanks and a tip of the hat to Stuart Ng for pointing this out to me. He also notes that the textual adaptations suffer from not being done by Wolverton.) Volumes four-six of the new series - indicated by the black covers with a colored BW image - contain material not available in the original series. As you can see by the image above, even the **Bible** wasn't immune to the spaghetti. Some images from the *Book of Revelations* appeared in a 1971 fanzine, but we've never seen the source book where they were originally published. [4/24/2001 - Thanks to Mark Lerer for pointing out the [HollywoodJesus](http://HollywoodJesus.com) website with the full and complete story of these 16 disturbing images.]

Wolverton's art style isn't classical, but it *is* unique. He influenced a generation of artists in the Underground Comix field. As he got older, his ability to manipulate the pen and brush diminished considerably. The style took a great deal of control and when he came back into comics for a while in the seventies (covers for DC's *Plop* comic), he could still make you laugh, but he didn't leave you in awe of the finished product. Fortunately there's a lot of his work out there in comics and some few collections may still be available. Whatever he drew, he put his heart and soul into it. And he makes me laugh. He died in 1978.

REFERENCES

To learn more about Basil Wolverton, see:

The Who's Who of American Comic Books
The Vadeboncoeur Collection of Knowledge

Jerry Bails & James Ware, 1976
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