



Unimaginative as they frequently are, comic writers spend most of their time ripping off their predecessors. Take, for instance, Jack Cole's **PLASTIC MAN** spent almost two decades in the limelight. When he faded and retired into the land of forgotten super-heroes, less ingenious comic writers picked up the Cole idea and created a spate of imitators—ranging from Marvel's Mr. Fantastic to National's Elongated Man.

But no imitator has ever matched the sheer comic genius and artistry of Jack Cole. His Plastic Man remains one of the comic book's few highpoints. Here to fill us in on the illustrious Mr. Cole (and his premier creation) is Doug Moench, a fine comic writer in his own right. And now, without further ado, here's the longest arm of the law himself...

In a pose that sent anatomy students scurrying to their textbooks, **PLASTIC MAN** finishes off a villain of epic proportions. There was never any limit to the stretching powers of **PLAS**; he could elongate eyeballs, fingers, nose, ears, anything.

PLASTIC MAN

Almost without exception, comic book companies have chosen corporate titles which have been about as self-effacing as a drunken butler on the eve of his retirement. There's **MARVEL**, the **MIGHTY COMICS GROUP**, **ENTERTAINING COMICS**, **GOLD KEY**, **TOWER COMICS**, **TIMELY**, and **FILL IN THE BLANK COMICS**.

But the comic books which emanated from **QUALITY** were just that. There was Will Eisner's **SPiRiT**, a character whose somber yet humorous exploits were chronicled in a style so inspired and innovative that Eisner's spirit was perpetuated long beyond his active participation in the field of commercial comic books.

There was Reed Crandall's elegantly rendered episodic saga of a non-super but still heroic team of universal soldiers, known as **BLACKHAWK**.

And there was Jack Cole's **PLASTIC MAN**. The **Plastic Man** character has had many imitators, but none of the Elongated Men, Mr. Fantastic, Elastic Lads, or

"The Game of Death" marked Plastic Man's first appearance in a comic book and came out back in 1943. The satirical superhero lasted well into the 1950's, was reprinted and finally reincarnated by National in the mid-60's.



Metal Men Mercurys and Platins have duplicated the sheer genius of the original **Plastic Man**.

Plastic Man was mercilessly exploited by Jack Cole. Every tensile tract of possibility was explored, utilized, and discarded only when its inherent supply of viable gimmickery, plot advancement, and sheer ribaldry had been completely depleted by Cole's obliquely imaginative mind. But exploitation, in Cole's dictionary, was a word to be used in every imaginable way—excluding the derogatory. The comic book reading public of the forties and early fifties could scarcely ask for anything better than an optimally exploited **Plastic Man**.

The groundwork gimmick, contrived in parody of the legions of contemporary four-color super-crusaders, was simple—and simultaneously designed to make the most complicated and convoluted of comic strip panels seem logical. **Plastic Man** could stretch ... any part of his body. Actually, the effects of **Plastic Man's** inadvertent bath in the cliched vat of

mysterious chemicals was a little more complex than that: As well as possessing the ability to stretch all portions of his body, **Plastic Man** retained full control over his miraculously malleable body. Sort of like an amoeba.

A STRETCH IN TIME

Like this: Suppose that **Plas** was perched on a five-story rooftop and that he desired to eavesdrop on a bunch of bad guys holed up in a kitchen on the third floor of a building across the street a half-block down. He'd merely elongate his ear—and propel it down the convenient chimney to the first floor, out the window, slithering over the sidewalk, down a sewer, along the drainage system to the subject building's drainpipes, up the pipes, and out of the kitchen faucet. Voila!—expert wire-tapping without the necessity for so much as a wire. The only hazards were the possibility of fastidious villains—it wouldn't do for that ear if, say, the baddies were doing the dishes—and the chance encounter with any lit fire-



This early PLASTIC MAN cover showed the tremendous influence Will Eisner (of THE SPIRIT fame) had on Cole and the Quality line. Quite unlike the Jack Cole insides, the cover was slickly Eisner-ish, and the girl looks like a direct steal!

places on the way down that chimney. However, assuming no such calamities had transpired and that Plas's elongated ear had picked up the proverbial goods on the despicable desperadoes, Plas—an FBI agent, it should be noted—would then retract his overextended ear, step down to street level (it's a wonder Plas EVER bothered with all those tiresome STAIRS), and with one half-league stretching stride hie himself to the hide-out, there to collar the criminals—perhaps literally, by stretching his collarbone into an ersatz lasso. More likely—and more legitimately faithful to his absurd character—Plas would simply leave his ear in the faucet, using it to pull the rest of his ductile body down that chimney to the first floor, out the window, down the sewer...and out the faucet. THEN he'd collar the crooks... if they weren't already unconscious from shock. Somehow, they

never were, preferring instead to accept all manner of incontrovertible incongruencies with a stoicism surely envied by poker players everywhere. Which, of course, left them conscious and kicking for some delicious fracas scenes.

POSITIVELY PLASTIC

Pliable Plas was perhaps the epitome of the archetypal dapper darling in costumed hero comic strips. Adorned in a crimson body-shirt with black-and-yellow waist stripes and a slashed V-neckline accentuated by black cross-strings, his legs and feet were either bare or sheathed in a skin-tight, flesh-colored leotard affair. An eccentric pair of sunglasses (more like those cardboard goggles distributed with 50's 3D comics) completed the ensemble. A curious facet of Plas's appearance was, if indeed his feet were bare and not encased in stocking-like apparel, that his toes were not articulated. But then, with feet as flexible as his, the intrinsic function of toes become, in comparison, ludicrously ineffectual.

Plastic Man's (mis)adventures were narrated throughout the forties and into the mid-fifties (comprising an unusual longevity for a "super-hero" of that period) in POLICE COMICS and, appropriately enough, PLASTIC MAN Comics. Will Eisner is frequently credited with the creation of the unique character, but even the most fanatic of Eisner advocates would be hard-pressed to repudiate the assertion that it was Jack Cole who was responsible for the strip's unqualified success both in terms of quality and commercial profits. QUALITY abandoned its comics line in the mid-fifties, selling the rights to all its strips and characters to NATIONAL PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS, INC. Hence the immediate continuation of BLACKHAWK, the 60's (altered) version of PLASTIC MAN, and the recent spate of direct reprints—all from NATIONAL.

PLASTIC'S PAL

With a character as flagrantly hilarious



POLICE COMICS was the other magazine PLASTIC MAN and Woozy Winks appeared in regularly. After the departure of the comedy team, POLICE was turned into a private eye comic. No one ever thought of using policeman in POLICE COMICS.

as Plastic Man, a comic relief sidekick would patently seem to be gilding the plastic lily. But WOZZY WINKS came off just fine. The direct antithesis of the ever-changing, normally thin Plastic Man, Woozy was ponderously fat and slow. Further, he was constantly attired in a green shirt whose polka-dots only served to emphasize his rotundity. Drawn by Cole with ridiculously short arms and an immense girth, it would have been physically impossible for the bungling fatman to so much as reach his shoelaces. But who's worried about as trivial an impossibility as that after witnessing Plas's credulity-stretching antics? Suffice to say Woozy perpetually immersed himself in trouble from which Plas constantly extricated him. Woozy also engaged in a relentless series of attempts to secure a position with the FBI, just like his hero Plas. His pitiful heroics were the source of a back-up feature in Plastic Man's own comic.

Similarly unlikely, and despite Harvey Kurtzman's fondness for lampooning every target in sight, it would appear to be pointless for a comic like MAD to satirize Plastic Man, a comic book already wallowing in self-satire. Still, the parody, PLASTIC SAM, was brilliantly carried off by Kurtzman in conjunction with the lamentably ignored artist Russ Heath, who here demonstrated talents not normally within the range of his usually ultra-realistic domain. The strip may be found in the Mad paperback reprint anthology, SON OF MAD.

PLASTIC SAM



This PLASTIC SAM parody appeared in MAD MAGAZINE back in the days when Harvey Kurtzman was still editor. Drawn by Russ Heath, one of comicdom's most underrated geniuses, the MAD takeoff succeeded in stretching the reader's credibility even more than the original... no easy task, that!

old every-picture-tells-a-story was never truer than it was in Cole's comic. Here's a hypothetical example from my own noggin: Plastic Man has just been walloped in the puss by some heavy and his head is flying backwards with the full force of the brutal blow, causing his neck to stretch—and stretch and... Following the stretching neck we see it's traveling at lightning rapidity through an open window on one side of a building and out another window on the other side, wrapping itself six times around a telephone pole, then zooming in one side of a car's open window and out the other, wrapping around a fire hydrant, bouncing off a brick wall over there, which upsets a window washer's platform which causes his water bucket to plummet down onto the head of someone hanging out a window one floor below, with the neck meanwhile tying up another telephone pole, and ultimately upsetting a fruit dealer's apple cart, sending the careening apples down the street so that Woozy, over there in the corner of the panel, has his opportunity to characteristically make a buffoon of himself by slipping on one of them. Wheh, folks, that was one panel. Kurtzman calls that sort of thing "eyeball kicks," and I've yet to meet someone who would deny that their eyeballs had quite a kick following the erratic path of Plas's wayward neck.

Besides these stories-within-an-isolated-panel, Cole similarly excelled in narrative panel progressions, wherein each panel is like a single drawing in an animated cartoon. And just as one had to be sharp



"I AIN'T GOT NO BOD-EEE..."

This is the most famous of all Jack Cole cartoons for PLAYBOY magazine, and it appeared in several of their later cartoon collections. Cole, along with Charles W. Miller and W. Simms Campbell, were PLAYBOY's premiere artists until early in the 1960's.

eyed to follow the jumbled chaos of interconnected events occurring within almost each and every single panel, an equivalent facility of perception was necessary to fully appreciate Cole's successive panel continuity. For example: First panel shows crooks entering a room, guns drawn menacingly (or at least as menacingly as possible within the confines of Jack Cole's levity-branded style)—but notice that red rug with the black-and-yellow telltale stripes over in the corner? Remember it. Next panel: Crooks stepping on "rug" which begins to tremor slightly. And third panel: Surprise, surprise, the "rug" is a pancake-flattened Plastic Man who even now is elongating the edges of his body to seal the crooks up in a rubberized sack. Perhaps he uses his tongue for a drawstring at the top.

Or, how about a crook looking around frantically for a suddenly vanished Plastic Man? See that red tie he's wearing with the black-and-yellow stripes on it? Yes, the crook is choked blue-in-the-face by his own tie in the very next panel.

And a whole comic book of these things were once on sale at the corner newsstand for ten cents a copy... *sigh*

FROM PLASTIC MAN TO PLAYBOY

Just where does one go after the phenomenal popularity of Plastic Man? Well, Jack Cole went to Playboy.

On the near-north side of Chicago, in the

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This was the revived Plastic Man, drawn by Gil Kane for National Comics. Despite an obvious attempt to copy the Cole style and humor, it was a total failure and lasted only ten issues. One of its greatest flaws was National's decision to use a crew-cut, ivy-league partner for Plas, rather than the unsavory—but very funny—Woozy Winks.

"EYEBALL KICKS"

Although Cole's Plastic Man work virtually defies analysis, a recent attempt to analyze it brought to light one irrevocable truism. The more you examine a Cole Plastic Man panel the more you fully comprehend the wealth of narrative detail embodied within the drawing itself. The

PLASTIC MAN

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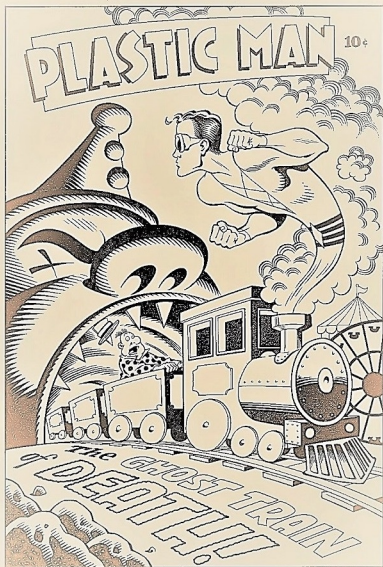
patalian mansion that Hef built (well, at least bought and furnished), there are suits-of-armor, pantries larded with the dreams of gourmet connoisseurs, swimming pool grottoes, circular beds, a private movie theater, a game room replete with free pinball machines, bars, books, and herives of beautiful bunnies ... and complete collections of Elmer's Spirit and Jack Cole's Plastic Man. Himself a frustrated cartoonist, it's little wonder that Hefner has been quoted as listing Jack Cole his favorite cartoonist. If Plastic Man was somehow deficient in the stuff of which legacies are nurtured, shaped (and reshaped), then Cole's series of (usually full-page, color) cartoons for **Playboy** should preserve his genius as long as rec rooms and attics are stuffed with the prides and joys of devoted comic collectors.

Paradoxically, Cole's **Playboy** cartoons were simultaneously more sophisticated and "cartoony" than his **Plas** line drawing work. Strikingly delineated buxom beauties with a flair and appeal theretofore unseen in "cartoony" work. The same ribald sense of humor earmarking **Plastic Man** was in abundance (albeit in an "adult" vein prohibited by consideration of **Plastic Man's** intended audience), as was his unflagging determination to tell a story with a picture. I don't have the required thousand words to retell even one of the cartoons, but they're available in full force and undimmed by time within the covers of the first four editions of **Playboy Cartoon Album**.

I hate to resort to this, especially in closing, but all praise and clichés aside—Jack Cole may be dead...realists and pragmatists. But to me and anyone else who still delights in **Plastic Man**, the **Biro-Wood Crime Does Not Pay** stories, or the **Playboy** cartoons...realists and pragmatists are liars.



"With YOU Dealer, I take BOTH please!"



"Open up, Pal! It's only groceries!"