



FROM COMICS TO TV

Comic book writers didn't get credit for the shows their work inspired.

By Joe Desris

For some fans of the BATMAN television series, especially those who collect the Caped Crusader's comic book adventures, it is old news that certain episodes began as comic book stories. For those unaware of this (a much larger group, I suspect), it will probably come as a surprise just how much material originated in the comics.

Credit for comic book authors on the BATMAN TV series was nonexistent. There are no on-screen acknowledgments whatsoever of *any* comic book author's contributions. Borrowing from a panel or two is one thing, but several stories were clearly and in large part heavily influenced by and/or taken directly from someone else's work, all without any apparent recognition. It was common policy however to give story by" credits to others who provided outlines or scripts that were heavily rewritten.

During the period of the show's demand for scripts (about September 1965 through roughly November 1967), National Periodical Publications usually bought comic book scripts and art on a work for hire basis. There were no contractual obligations on the company's behalf for reprints or any other subsequent use of the material since N.P.P. (today known as DC Comics) owned the work outright.

In addition, the TV series aired during a period when DC's books generally did not publish creative credits. Julius Schwartz, editor of the Batman titles, was noting creative credits in the letter columns at the time and within a few years, all of DC's output carried such listings, often at the beginning of the story.

Information about original authors was available to the TV people, but only if requested. Not only did such records exist at DC at that time, but most stories in question were only a few

years old, not *decades*. Editors would likely have remembered who did what and most writers were still around to ask.

In any event, even if they wanted to, TV writers had no easy method for ascribing comics scripting to anyone except perhaps Bob Kane (even though he was actually an artist), since his was the only name on most stories. If comics had handled credits as they do today, perhaps the original writer's names would have made it to the screen.

As a side note, DC's current position regarding reprints and royalties is more generous. The original creative staff normally receives compensation and credit for reprinted work.

Comic book writers would seem likely prospects as scripters of BATMAN series teleplays. They already had to think visually in order to write comics. However, Bill Finger appears to have been the only regular comic book writer who



Detective Comics #196 (l), art by Win Mortimer, inspired episode #105, "The Londinium Larcenies. Batman #121, art by Kurt Swan, inspired episode #7.



had a script finally air, and may indeed have been the only such person to write for the show. In a November 9, 1965 letter to Bill Dozier about the teleplay for BATMAN episodes #9/10, Lorenzo Semple, Jr. noted, "It took a good deal of brain-power to adapt flimsy mag-story to our pattern." And in a November 15 letter, Semple observed, "I realize increasingly the gulf between comic-book Batman stories and our own."

Semple was generally referring to budgetary constraints and some of the more outlandish elements of comics which were easy to draw yet difficult or expensive to film. Indeed, unlike most other series

writers, Semple often retained many comic book elements when transferring the books to teleplays.

Overall, Hollywood has generally not looked fondly upon comics. It seems as though most of those involved feel previously published comic book material with a successful, lengthy track record somehow requires change, not continuation. The last half century indicates a general disdain for comic book material on Hollywood's behalf. From the movie serials to television to feature films, only selected translations have been successful at retaining the heart of the original material (examples: the 1989 and 1992 Batman movies, portions of the BATMAN TV series, 1940s Fleischer Superman cartoons, many of the Fox network's animated Batman episodes, and some of Linda Carter's WONDER WOMAN episodes).

Although never acknowledged, much of the TV show direction was in a way the work of Bill Finger. He co-created Batman along with cartoonist Bob Kane roughly a quarter century before the series. It was Finger who had originally scripted all those methodical patterns, oversize props and deathtraps as well as the big clocks, aiming Batman and many of the villains in their proper directions. Robin's jokes

and puns (translated to the series as "holy whatever") can also be found in Finger's early material. With time, other writers added and modified, but Finger was the one who laid the foundations for Batman which were followed by subsequent comic book, television and feature film writers.

Material from *Batman* #176 (December 1965) was used so often it could almost be considered a bible for the show, a ready reference early in the series. On sale in late-September 1965, it was available while many scripts were being written.

Episodes inspired by this reprint anniversary issue included #5 "The Joker is Wild," based on "The Joker's Utility Belt," originally printed in *Batman* #73 (October 1952); #7 "Instant Freeze," based on "The Ice Crimes of Mr. Zero," originally printed in *Batman* #121, shown above (February, 1959); #27 "The Curse of Tut," with Tut's rock on-the-head origin inspired by "The Caveman at Large," originally from *Batman* #102 (September 1956) and Egyptian motifs in "The Fox, The Shark and the Vulture," originally from *Detective Comics* #253 (March 1958); and #37 "Hot Off the Griddle," which uses a life-saving device from a Saturday newspaper strip reprinted in the issue (originally from May 12, 1946). □

Filming stummen Victor Paul and Huble Kerns for episode #79, "Batman's Anniversary," based on "Batman's Deadly Birthday."



Bill Dana's Batclimb cameo as Jose Jimenez in #47, "An Egg Grows in Gotham," and spotting Dick Clark in #35, "Shoot a Crooked Arrow."



The splash page for "Batman's Deadly Birthday" by Bob Kane from *Batman* #130, March 1960, a giant cake story written by Bill Finger.

