



SMALL SCREEN SUPERHEROES

THE HULK

A look at the development of the comic book superhero on the small screen, from its science fiction '50s stars to its latest top rating Incredible Hulk.

Recent years have seen a veritable army of superhero-type characters jostling for a position on the tv screens. Their success has varied depending on the show. Some have been phenomenal hits like *The Six Million Dollar Man* while others have faded into obscurity almost overnight like the David McCallum version of *The Invisible Man*.

The formative years of the science-fiction hero go back to the 1949-1955 period when the infant television in America began adopting themes and genres from radio, theatre and the movies, applying them accordingly to the small-screen. These early shows (*Captain Video*, *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet*, *Superman*, etc.) were mainly derived from the world of the comic-book and the cinema sub-division of serials—themselves founded on 1930s pulp literature.

The most way-out, bizarre characters that 1950s tv offered were *Buck Rogers*, *Rocky Jones*, *Captain Z-Ro*, *Flash Gordon* and *The Invisible Man*—all of which are pretty tame by today's standards.

The 1960s saw the advent of such spectacular folk as Britain's *Doctor Who* and the American tv series that brought Bruce Lee to the world's attention, *The Green Hornet*. The sixties also marked the

by Mark Fallon, Derek Hackett and Alan Bodger

debut of the now-classic superhero tv series *Batman*. *Batman* was a somewhat strange way of adapting characters and themes from the comic books to the weekly format of television. The series began as an earnest, if juvenile, attempt to transfer the character to the small screen. The result was a hilarious blend of 'camp' humour and self-parody which attracted not only the very young but the college crowd as well. The show was a success which enjoyed a long run, and even had a rebound effect on the original comic books. The comic version of *Batman* was revamped into the same style of satire and rode high on the crest of the faddish wave which made the tv series such a hit. Unfortunately, as the wave receded and the show began to falter, the publishers of *Batman* comics were left with an outdated fad—a superhero character that had become, in effect, a parody of a parody.

Then came the swing in a different direction, as *Wonder Woman* began to generate a more serious interest from the tv companies in the comic-book to television superperson. Back in 1967, *Batman* producer William Dozier assigned writer Stanley Ralph Ross (one of the better tv

Batman writers) to draft a *Wonder Woman* script. This script, unfortunately, never went before the cameras, and the idea retired to the limbo-land of forgotten projects.

It wasn't until some years later when Warner Bros decided to work on a *Wonder Woman* pilot of their own (that Ross was brought back to write another pilot script. Ross' idea was not to ridicule the character, as the *Batman* show had done, but to produce an exciting and 'realistic' adventure series.

Warners rejected Ross' ideas and went ahead with their own, turning out the abysmal tv movie *Wonder Woman* (1975), starring Cathy Lee Crosby. The producers had apparently decided that the best way to present super-powered characters in an adult fashion was to first dispense with the 'ridiculous' costume, then get rid of all the other comic-book devices like invisible planes and magic lassos. Unfortunately the superpowers of the character taken out of the comic-book framework only served to make the tv version of *Wonder Woman* even more ridiculous and this first pilot was a disaster.

In desperation Warners brought back Ross and he patterned his version of *Wonder Woman* directly after the original

AS THE HULK CLOSES IN ON THE YOUNG COUPLE HIS ANGER BEGINS TO BUILD--



--AND THE Madder HULK GETS, THE STRONGER... HEY! WAIT A MINUTE!



HULK IS NOT STUPID HUMANS!

IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE THE MONSTER IS GETTING STRONGER TO US!



HULK DOESN'T LIKE PEOPLE TALKING ABOUT HULK THAT WAY!

IF ANYTHING, HE SEEMS TO BE CHANGING BACK TO--



AND HULK ISN'T GOING TO TAKE IT ANYMORE!

--ROBERT BRUCE BANNER?!



HULK WILL SMASH YOU ALL!



The Hulk looks for something to destroy. Right: Dr Banner and friend, Bixby and Ferrigno pose for a publicity picture.

Charles Moulton story, setting the character in the World War Two period. The New Original Wonder Woman, featuring the lovely Lynda Carter, was (initially) a perfect rendition of the comic character—opening up the way for further comic-to-tv superheroes.

Pretty soon the tv screen was filling up with strange 'heroes': The Gemini Man, The Bionic Woman, Man From Atlantis, Spiderman . . . and The Incredible Hulk.

The character of the Hulk came from the amazingly creative mind of Marvel Comics chief Stan Lee back in 1962 and was based very much on the success of Marvel's Fantastic Four comic-book, specifically the Ben Grimm/Thing character. Extending The Thing's surprisingly popular "hideous hero" role, Lee created his second misunderstood monster, The Hulk—essentially a composite of the Frankenstein monster, Notre Dame's Quasimodo and Dr Jekyll/Mr Hyde. Stan Lee (in his *Origins of Marvel Comics*, Simon & Schuster, 1974) said: 'I've always had a soft spot in my heart for the Frankenstein monster. No one

could ever convince me that he was the bad guy, the villain, or the menace.' Thus, the Hulk has become ' . . . big and brutish enough to make him feared by all who met him and yet with a certain tragic appeal . . .'

The Hulk appeared for the first time on American tv in early '78, via two feature-length pilot movies which were produced, directed and written for the small-screen by Kenneth Johnson. Johnson, working through Universal Studios, had set both the Six Million Dollar Man and The Bionic Woman on their successful paths and was the appropriate talent for launching The Incredible Hulk.

At first, Johnson didn't want to take on the task of transforming the successful comic-book character onto tv, having already spent many years operating out of the Bionic bureau, and at first believing the Hulk format to be an unsuitable tv subject. However, after familiarising himself with the sympathetic Bruce Banner character and his bizarre alter ego, Johnson accepted the assignment and turned in what has become one of the best shows in the tv

superhero strain. Johnson eventually began to see all manner of plot and character development in the theme: ' . . . I began to be intrigued by the fact that with The Hulk there could be a non-comic book context—a real man with a very real handicap.'

Most other characters that become 'afflicted' with super powers which they can't really understand, and are somewhat afraid of, are basically too intrigued with their new-found 'magic' and are reluctant to dispose of the powers. Bruce (re-named David) Banner really has a problem—he doesn't want the 'magic' of being able to turn into The Hulk, a green-skinned brute with superhuman strength.

The Incredible Hulk, in a way, has been 'blended' to suit television and certain elements show through; the format strongly corresponds to The Fugitive (through Banner's quest theme) as well as Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.

Yet one major difference can be seen in the Incredible Hulk tv show. Unlike the Batman, Spiderman and Wonder Woman format, which limit themselves to the

Enter the Hulk! A dynamic two-frame sequence from the Marvel comic strip, The Incredible Hulk.





Above: Lou Ferrigno relaxes as the latex face-piece of his Hulk makeup is positioned and attached. Below: Bill Bixby has a similar face-piece applied so that the all-important transformation can be filmed, resulting in a smooth transition from Banner to Hulk.



superhero & loving juvenile market, a wider audience is being aimed at by Hulk producers Universal Studios.

The usual superhero tv series tends to set up a storyline which revolves around the costumed hero figure, thus making the final story as bizarre as the central character (ie a larger-than-life hero needs even more absurd villains). But in *The Hulk* the idea is to take a basic plot that could work equally well for *Kojak*, *Starsky & Hutch* or *The Rockford Files*: kidnapping, terrorism, robbery or murder. Develop the theme, flesh it out, inject David Banner into the situation and then the only fantasy angle is inserted in the form of the Incredible Hulk.

This way, the whole family can easily get involved with the plot and its characters before the absurdly fantastic Hulk appears. Even then, the title character makes only three somewhat brief appearances per episode, leaving the younger viewer craving for more, and the older viewer willing to accept the slight touch of fantasy.

The viewer identification and softer approach is taken even further away from the standard superhero concepts by introducing that sure-fire hit ingredient, *romance*. The pilot show you may recall bore a greater resemblance to the movie *Love Story* in its opening ten minutes than an action/fantasy programme. This aspect being continually played up by allowing the excellent starring actor, Bill Bixby, some

human emotion (through romance set against the constant knowledge that he cannot risk emotional involvement because of his radioactive "burden", his destructive alter-ego).

Whether the concept will become formulaised in time, with the standard three appearances of the Hulk plus Banner's quest for a way to lose his alter-ego plus



"You won't like me when I'm angry!"

his romantic entanglement/standoffishness every week we have yet to see. Many fresh, original shows have received great praise for their first few episodes, only to deteriorate into monotony over the season(s), as scripting and shooting schedules tighten, budgets shorten, top writers leave, and originality fades. *Star Trek* was a classic example of this.

Yet both Stan Lee and Kenneth Johnson are quite satisfied with the series and with Bixby's David Banner and Lou Ferrigno's Hulk characterisations — although Lee openly admits wanting *The Hulk* to speak—as does the comic's version. The human elements, the basic reactions in an abnormal setting are the more interesting features in Johnson's treatment of the show. *The Incredible Hulk* is, happily, not intended to be a superhero-versus-creatures-from-outer-space show, which has been the base of many similar series.

Originally *The Hulk* rights were bought by MCA/Universal as part of a package deal which included the Marvel characters *Dr Strange*, *The Human Torch*, *Captain America* and *Ms Marvel*.

Initially MCA planned to produce a pilot for each of the superheroes in turn but the overwhelming success of the *Hulk* convinced them that they should develop *The Hulk* into a regular series before giving the green light to the next character for the small screen treatment.

The *Dr Strange* pilot tv movie was aired in early September in the United States and starred Peter Hooten (last seen in *Orca—The Killer Whale*) as the Greenwich Village based sorcerer.

So with superheroes crashing into the worlds of cinema and tv, let's hope the *Incredible Hulk* series proves as strong as its title star!



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