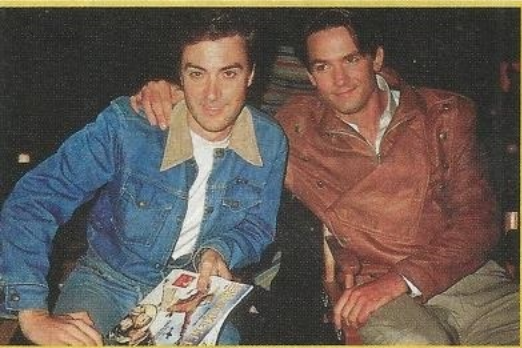


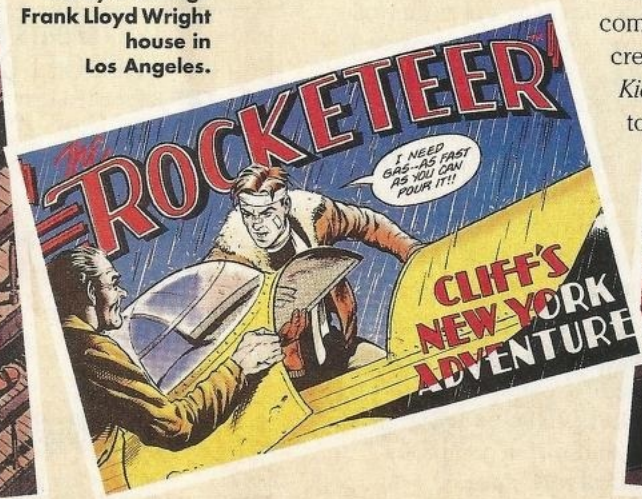
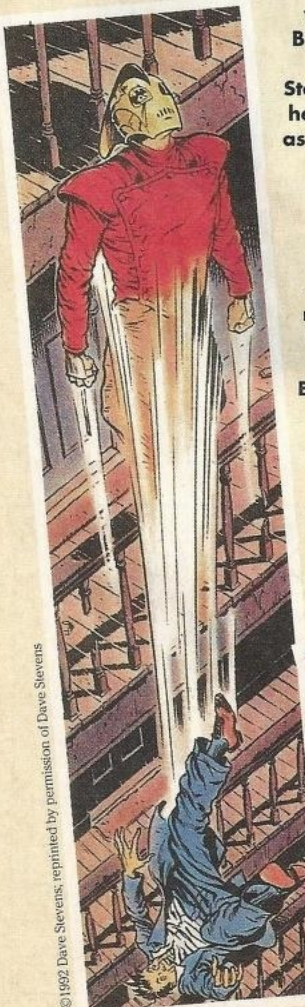
Welcome to RETRO WORLD

FROM COMIC BOOK TO FEATURE FILM,
CAPTURING THE LOOK OF LOS ANGELES IN THE 1930s
WAS THE KEY TO BRINGING THE ROCKETEER TO LIFE

By Jamie Simons



Above: Dave Stevens with Rocketeer star Bill Campbell. Below are scenes of Stevens's comic book hero in action. "Even as a kid I had a deep affection for the industrial look of prewar America." On the opposite page: Production designer Jim Bissel recreated Stevens's vision on film, including the Bulldog Cafe, a '30s ballroom, and villain Neville Sinclair's home, in reality a vintage Frank Lloyd Wright house in Los Angeles.



By his own admission, Dave Stevens was one very weird kid. While other eight-year-olds were trading baseball cards and turning gum wrappers into love chains, the future creator of *The Rocketeer* was busy clipping. He clipped pictures of '20s and '30s flyers, their outfits, banners, ribbons and planes. He saved photographs, hundreds of them, of Depression era air shows, airplane hangars, viewing stands, even employee costumes, because, as he says, "I knew I would use them one day."

And so Stevens did. When, at age 26, Stevens began work on *The Rocketeer* comic strip, the images from those clippings cropped up all over the place. The real Chaplin field, for example, which was the spiritual home to heroes Cliff and Peevy in the comic, once sat near the movie studio run by Charlie Chaplin, and the field was owned by Chaplin's brother Sid. Likewise the comic strip's Bulldog Cafe once existed: Stevens's aunt was a regular there. And though he was four when it came down, Stevens tucked its image away.

It is no coincidence that these images of another time pepper Dave Stevens's drawings. He's a man with a mission. "Even as a kid I had a deep affection for the industrial look of prewar America. I loved the sweep of art deco, the streamlined look of old locomotives, anything having to do with air shows, air races, power, speed, Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon, high-powered action and flying. When I started the comic strip, I wanted to expose a whole new generation to these things."

Stevens even put autogyros and his favorite "fat little bumble-bee looking Gee Bee planes" into the strip in the hopes that if the comic ever made it to the screen, kids would get to see them. Of course, Stevens didn't really entertain any hope that the comic would become a film. "Too expensive," he says. But then Dave Stevens hadn't figured on The Walt Disney Company.

When the studio decided to turn *The Rocketeer* comic into a film, director Joe Johnston (whose credits include the smash hit *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*) was adamant about one thing: the movie had to be true to the "look" of the book. To accomplish

this, Disney brought on Jim Bissel, production designer for such blockbusters as *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* and *Arachnophobia*. It was Bissel's job to take Stevens's vision and interpret it for film, overseeing the design of everything from sets to props to costumes.

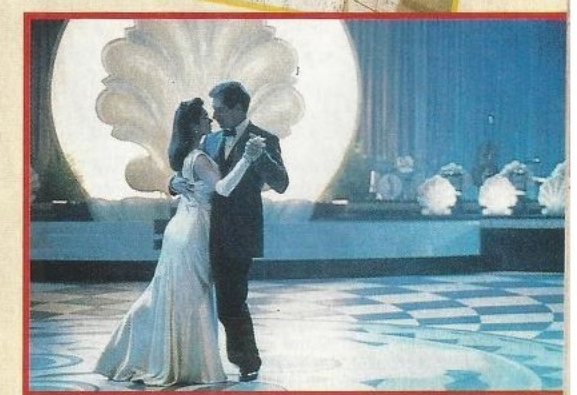
Naturally, Bissel started with the clippings. Recalls Stevens, "At the start of the film I turned my library, all my photographs, even blueprints from the 1937 National Air Races, over to Jim to use." And Bissel and his staff used them all. Every billboard, every graphic, every pen, button, photograph and bottle is true to the period of the film. For Stevens, it was the vision in his mind given three-dimensional life. "The sweetest moment for me," he says, "came on the first day of shooting. I'd been watching the Bulldog Cafe go up, bit by bit for weeks, but when I got out of my car that morning, there was the Bulldog, just the way I'd seen it in my mind, right down to the flowers around the dog's feet."


Bissel claims the sweetest times are when his designs give context and texture to a character, "adding resonance and, hopefully, some wit." Take the home of the film's villain, movie star and Nazi spy Neville Sinclair. "When you have a '30s movie star, the first thing people do is put him into a Tudor mansion. But in this case you want to underscore the fact that Neville is both decadent, that's his Hollywood side, and rigid, that's his Nazi side. The early Los Angeles designs of Frank Lloyd Wright seemed ideal for making this point. They are all vertical lines, but with a seriousness as well. Perfect for a Neville Sinclair."

Ironically, the helmet and the rocket pack, designs that everyone associates with *The Rocketeer*, gave Bissel his biggest headaches. "The three-dimensional designs needed for a film are infinitely more complicated than the two-dimensional images in a comic," Bissel says. "When Dave drew the helmet and the rocket pack, his only consideration was that they look good. Unfortunately, it's not that simple in film. If we designed something rounded, like the rocket pack in the book, it didn't fit the human body. If the actor was able to move in it, it looked too small and inconsequential. If it was big enough to see, the actor couldn't move. We went through prototype after prototype, finally deciding on a NASA-like double thruster design, then streamlining it so it had a retro look. It was the same story for the helmet."

As for Stevens, he liked the rocket pack better in the film than "the toy bomb" design he drew in the comic. In fact, he liked the designs for the entire movie. "When this thing began, I worried that the design part would be the most frustrating. But it turned out to be a wonderful collaborative experience. I feel very fortunate that we ended up with something so close to what I put down on paper. In Hollywood, it doesn't happen that way very often."

About the author: *Jamie Simons is a freelance writer for film and print. She resides in Los Angeles.*





THE ROCKETEER

A world television premiere on
The Magical World of Disney
Sunday, September 27,
at 7:00 p.m.
(Eastern/Pacific Time) cc