Growing up in the 1960’s, I was a DC Comics fan: the Mort Weisinger Superman line, Julius Schwartz’s sci-fi superheroes, and, of course, Batman (the debut of the ‘66 TV series was a seminal event in my childhood). Marvel Comics didn’t appeal to me; they seemed too complicated, too busy-looking (too many words!) compared to the somewhat banal simplicity of DC’s line.

My brother, though, was a total Marvelite and an enthralled devotee of Jack Kirby (I was in awe of newcomer Neal Adams, who had every DC follower engrossed with his photorealistic work on Deadman; we would argue endlessly about who was “better”). So when the news broke in 1970 that Kirby was leaving Marvel for DC, my brother was just shattered. In the larger picture of popular culture, Kirby abandoning his partner Stan Lee was as monumental a breakup as Lennon and McCartney’s, and as much a signifier of the end of the Sixties. My brother’s dream was over; his favorite characters, The Fantastic Four, Thor and Captain America, would never be—or look—the same again. He couldn’t even bring himself to buy any of Kirby’s World War II books.

And neither could I. I detested Vince Colletta’s inks, having looked over my brother’s shoulder at Kirby’s Thor and even then disparaged Colletta’s scratchy hackwork, being fully enamored of Joe Sinnott’s slicker inks on Kirby’s Fantastic Four instead. By the time Mike Royer replaced Colletta as Kirby’s more faithful inker, I was long gone; the Golden Age of Jack Kirby had passed me by. Or so I thought.

I got older, and went to art school (Rhode Island School of Design), where, instead of majoring in Illustration (like recent RISD alum Walt Simonson, the reason I went there in the first place), I chose Graphic Design. As I sensed it at the time, illustration, painting,
photography, etc., though undeniably important and difficult to master, were simply individual disciplines, while Graphic Design seemed to be about the very nature of visual communication itself—or more specifically, verbal-visual communication, for Graphic Design encompasses the synchronous relationship between words and pictures. Just like comics, at their best.

The more I studied Graphic Design at RISD, the more I found myself drawn back to Kirby’s work. I began to see Kirby differently, more in the subtler terms of the graphic design of his work than in the overwhelming, overpowering superheroic drawing that is his hallmark and legacy. As I was learning in symbol and logo design classes to graphically portray abstract concepts like speed, power and energy, I studied Kirby’s mid-Sixties Fantastic Four work, his most fertile period, in which he developed the many artistic tropes and stylized delineations of the very same concepts that have since become graphic standards for generations of comic artists.

As detailed in past pages of this magazine, Kirby was probably inspired by the first quasar photographs published in scientific journals around 1965 to create his patented energy field of patterned black dots that has become affectionately dubbed “Kirby Krackle.” One of the first major displays of Kirby Krackle emanated from Galactus’ hands in the full-page panel found in FF # 50 (May 1966). But it was seven months later, in FF #57 (Dec. ’66), that Kirby codified all of his graphic power and energy ideas (including his trademark background “burst” lines) in the four-panel sequence of Dr. Doom transferring the Silver Surfer’s “power cosmic” to himself, climaxing with the staggering full-page portrayal of a triumphant Doom, aswirl in Kirby Krackle, astride the fallen Surfer: the most dramatic definition, in a single image, of victory and defeat in the history of comics—if not art itself.

Kirby’s machinery—a.k.a. “Kirbytech”—was never drawn to look functional; the moebius strip-like masses of mazed metalwork that were a mainstay of his oeuvre were simply stylized designwork, as much a recognizable architectural motif as Alexander Calder’s mobiles or Louise Nevelson’s abstract, sculptural boxes. The endpapers of the Jack Kirby sketchbook (Jack Kirby’s Heroes and Villains, Pure Imagination, 1987) are perhaps the purest examples of the graphic design of Kirbytech, unfettered by figures and word balloons.

Decorating Kirbytech—and everything else, whether it be flesh or fabric—was the omnipresent Kirby squiggle, a vertical stroke interrupted by, well, a squiggle. It could add shine to machinery or sinew to musculature; it was Kirby’s singular, graphic signature. The oscilloscope-like arrow shapes that Kirby frequently employed as well some say were influenced by the Art Deco designs prevalent in Kirby’s environment during his formative years, while others maintain they had an almost Aztec-like design quality—though how the son of European immigrants raised on the Lower East Side of New York City without a college education could’ve come up with those remains a mystery.

Another recurring graphic device of Kirby’s that bore no relation to reality were his shadows and spotting of blacks: artfully placed circular, curved and arched shapes that served to balance the black and white compositions of each panel and page more than they delineated accurate castings of light. Kirby always bent and exaggerated reality, like his square fingers and blocky knees, to suit his wishes as an artist; yet when he wanted
to portray the verisimilitude of real life—like in his autobiographical “Street Code” story (Argosy, 1980), or any of his Earth-interludes in Thor—the results were quietly breathtaking, the converse of his cosmic panoramas.

As a graphic storyteller, Kirby never really bothered with panel shapes and page designs that broke out of the traditional box format; he believed more in the proscenium-arch theory of comic book storytelling, in which what is designed in the interior of each panel is more important than the exterior shape of the panel itself. That stays constant—like a stage’s proscenium arch—so that the reader focuses more on what is happening within; the story itself. At a time when firebrands like Jim Steranko and Neal Adams (and Will Eisner before them) were radically redesigning panels and pages in the late Sixties to make them more “cinematic,” Kirby was content to let his drawing do the talking in standard four-, five- and six-panel pages, interspersed with random full-pagers and double-page spreads, which were often spectacular: the climactic full-page in “The Glory Boat” in The New Gods #6 (Dec. ‘71) is one of Kirby’s greatest examples of speed, power, and foreshortening, as Orion and Lightray ride a cylindrical colossus right off the page, like a 3-D image without the glasses.

The abstract photo collages that Kirby started to do in Fantastic Four around 1964 (his first collage cover was FF #33, Dec. ’64) were startling to his readers, for they were unlike anything any artist had attempted in mainstream superhero comics before; astute comic historians could recall photo collages used by Eisner in his Spirit stories and Harvey Kurtzman in the pages of Mad years prior, but they were nothing like Kirby’s. His were freewheeling, frenetic photo-fests that often subverted average objects culled from consumer magazines into imagery as otherworldly as his own drawings. “Collages were another way of finding new avenues of entertainment,” Kirby said in an old interview. “I felt that magazine reproduction could handle the change. It added an extra dimension to comics. I wanted to see if it could materialize, and it did. I loved doing collages—I made a lot of good ones.” Kirby’s Krazy Kollages led to the development of groundbreaking original designs like the alternative dimension the Negative Zone in the FF and Ego, the Living Planet in Thor.

These are among the graphic designs of Jack Kirby that rank him as high on the totem of 20th Century American Graphic Design as his hyperbolic drawing ranks him in the Comic Book Hall of Fame. To consider the latter without the former is to overlook some of the more uniquely artistic attributes that do indeed make Kirby “King.”

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