

THE SPIRIT

WILL
EISNER

OF NOIR

AN APPRECIATION
BY EDDIE MULLER



In high school I avidly enrolled in the first “Film Literacy” course offered within the curriculum of the San Francisco Unified School District. For my term final, I offered the class a presentation on the corollary between cinema and comic-books, utilizing one of those old-fashioned overhead projectors and an array of pages from a unique 1940s comic-strip/comic-book hybrid called *The Spirit*. Soon after, an updated version of *The Spirit*, guest-starring (in highly unflattering portrayals) members of my school’s faculty, written and illustrated by yours truly, appeared in the Yearbook—expediting my exit, triumphantly, from 12 years of academic captivity. I was one precocious teenaged smartass.



My love of film noir directly corresponded with my discovery of, and devotion to, *The Spirit*. I had always been a comics-loving kid, and my childhood was filled with blissful escapes into pitco-fiction of all types: Marvel, DC, Archie, Classics Illustrated (later, my beloved ECs), as well as venerable newspaper strips such as *Steve Canyon*, *Dick Tracy*, *Rip Kirby*, and more. Amazingly, it wasn't until I read Jim Steranko's mind-expanding *History of Comics, Vol. 2* that I learned about the greatest and most influential comics artist of all-time, Will Eisner, and his deathless hero, *The Spirit*.

What still amazes me about *The Spirit* is that its creation, development, peak, and demise all corresponded to the same arc as the original



Portrait of the young man as an artist: Eisner is the 1940s



The author in his studio today, displaying pages he created in high school as a tribute to Will Eisner's *The Spirit*

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American film noir era. It was not an homage to noir. Eisner was creating his own version of it, simultaneous with the release of *The Killers* (1946), *Crossfire* (1947), *T-Men* (1947) and all the rest. Few comics were as spot-on in nailing the noir zeitgeist. Eisner wasn't emulating or satirizing, he was doing the same thing, at the same time, in a different medium. He was *part* of the movement, not a commentator on it.

Late 1940s comics such as *Crime Does Not Pay*—which *should* have been the “funny book” equivalent of film noir—were, oddly enough, some of the most graphically pedestrian titles on the stands. Despite the lurid covers, the interior art was usually rushed and amateurish; these were the pulp-paper dop-pelgangers of Poverty Row's no-budget Bs, filled with flat lighting, flatter dialogue, and unimaginative visuals.

By contrast, Will Eisner was a genuine artist—more so in my opinion than, say, a legendary director such as Fritz Lang. While Lang searched for projects that fit his particular skills, and often took megalomaniacal advantage of others' hard work, Eisner anchored



Femme fatale “Skinny Bones” seemed a Sunday funnies version of vixenish Veronica Lake ...

his ass at the drawing board, every single day, to create entire *films noir*—eight-page masterworks spilling over with comedy, pathos, action, intrigue, love and pain—using nothing more than India ink on white Bristol board.

Starting in 1940, at only 23 years of age, Eisner’s studio began producing a 16-page digest-sized supplement for syndication to 20 American Sunday newspapers. It was a way of placing a “comic book” within the cherished “Sunday Funnies.” In addition to the seven-page feature that led off “The Spirit Section,” Eisner also wrote and edited the two four-page backup features, *Mr. Mystic* and *Lady Luck*.

“When I created *The Spirit*,” Eisner once said, “I never had any intention of creating a superhero. I never felt *The Spirit* would dominate the feature. He served as a sort of an identity for the strip. The stories were what I was interested in.” The silly domino mask worn by Denny Colt (*The Spirit*’s real identity) was Eisner’s sole concession to the Syndicate that gave him the contract—they’d specifically requested a superhero. But Eisner was more interested in drawing tales from life in his lower-middle-class New York Jewish neighborhood, which he rendered as a noir milieu more vivid than *Naked City* or *Cry of the City*: crumbling tenements, rain-slick streets, smoke-filled crime dens. Skip McCoy’s wharfside shack in *Pickup on South Street* is straight out of Eisner’s New York. *The Spirit*’s cast of characters, from vicious hoodlums to impossibly shapely femme fatales—and an endless array of sympathetic but doomed losers—was more colorful than the cast of any Hollywood crime meller.

It was after Eisner returned from WWII service¹ that *The Spirit*, like the film noir movement, really hit its stride. Eisner was no

longer an illustrator, he was a cartoonist.² His drawings evoked the gamut of action and emotion, from slapstick comedy to heart-rending tragedy. If “Expressionism” is a photographic technique used to make exterior environments reflect the inner lives of characters, *exaggeration* is the cartoonist’s essential tool, and few “sequential artists” (the term Eisner eventually settled on) used it better than Eisner. He also crafted the most sonically conceived comics ever—weaving in graphically rendered music, songs, and sardonic snippets of advertising from the radio. It was a fully formed milieu in which rubber-boned, baggy-pants characters ricocheted through a dank and dreadful city of endless shadows and sudden death. Reading *The Spirit* was at times like watching Red Skelton, Oscar Levant, and the Three Stooges careen through a film directed by Robert Siodmak—with Cary Grant (see: *Arsenic and Old Lace*) as the dumbfounded, double-taking Denny Colt. And nobody—nobody—created better femmes fatales, all of them bewitching blends of Ava

Gardner and Linda Darnell, Lauren Bacall and Veronica Lake: P’Gell, Sand Saref, Dulcet Tone, Flaxen Weaver, Silk Satin, Autumn Mews, Thorne Strand, Wild Rice (a masochistic rich girl!), Powder Pouf, and even Olga Bustle (“The Girl with the Big, Big Eyes”), a parody of Jane Russell in *The Outlaw*.

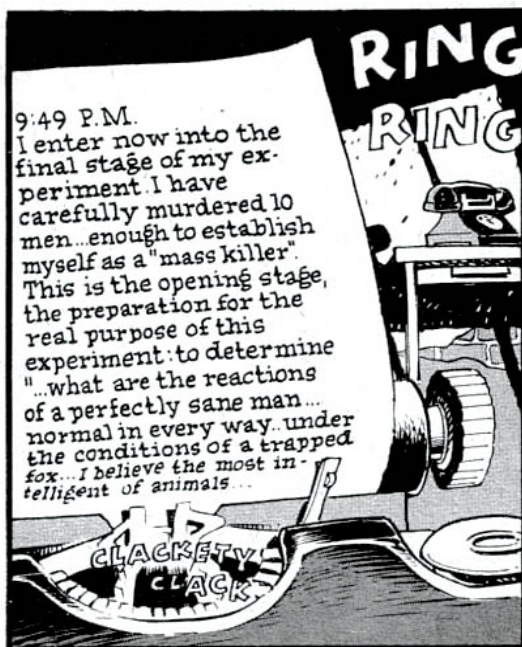


... and it was easy (for me at least) to imagine Cary Grant as the undead Denny Colt

1 During those three years, Eisner employees such as Bob Powell and Lou Fine handled most of the illustrating chores.

2 In the interest of accuracy, it must be noted that Eisner, even postwar, had able assistants aiding in the creation of *The Spirit*: John Spanger, Klaus Nordling, Jerry Grandenetti, Andre LeBlanc, Manny Stallman, Jules Feiffer, and Wallace Wood.

For they are the last ten minutes
in Freddy's life.



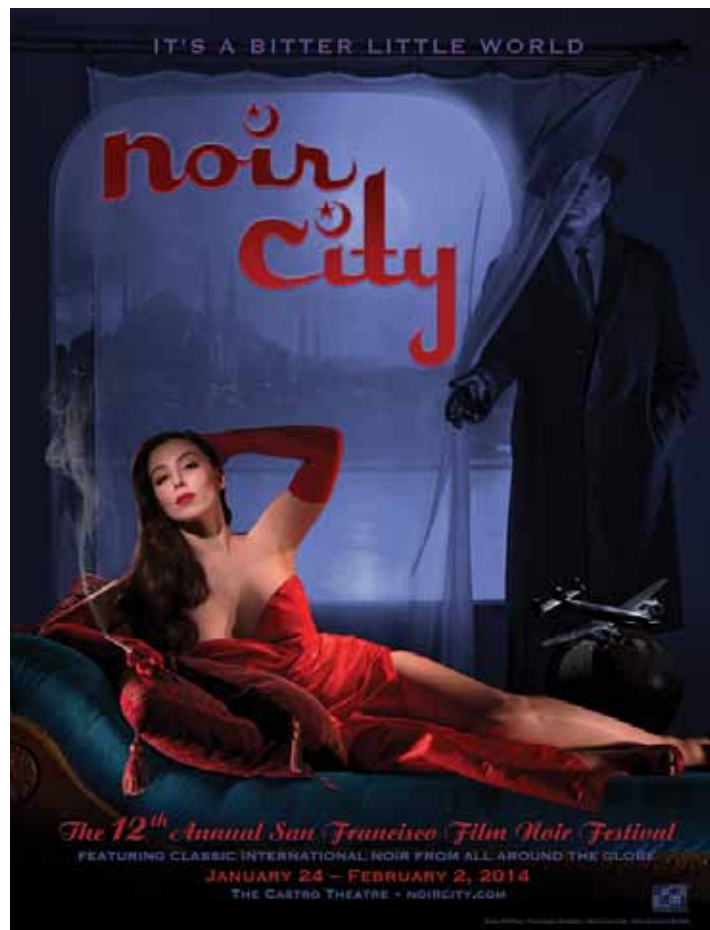
Selected panels from some of my favorite *Spirit* stories: "Ten Minutes" (left); "Fox at Bay" (center, right)



One of Eisner's strongest (and graphically bizarre) stories, "The Killer," put the reader inside the head of a traumatized WWII vet.



The fate of "Gerhard Shnoble" (left) might have traumatized young readers, but the recurring appearances of the notorious P'Gell (right) no doubt perked them back up



Eisner continues to exert his influence: the 2014 NOIR CITY poster was an homage to the splash page of “The Spirit Section” from October 6, 1946

Eisner’s specific genius was crossing those deep Germanic shadows with a particular type of Jewish morality play—embodying in a single artist the cultural DNA that spawned the entire film noir movement. Here’s a cross-section of Spirit stories that shows the full range of Eisner’s approach and ambition:

“Ten Minutes” (September 11, 1949)—a perfectly executed short story (in which The Spirit barely appears) that explores the crucial decision in a man’s life to “cross the line” and becomes a criminal. Fate exacts immediate comeuppance. Eisner makes the petty robbery of a candy store feel like a mythic analogy for every bad decision ever made.

“Fox at Bay” (October 23, 1949)—a doctor takes his study of aberrant behavior and its effects on the human nervous system to the extreme—keeping scrupulous notes on the murders he commits solely for “scientific research.” No noir film of the era offered a villain this daring.

“The Killer” aka “Henry the Veteran” (December 8, 1946)—told its tale of a murderously vengeful GI in the first-person—in some panels literally through the eyes (eye-sockets!) of the title character—more than a year before Robert Montgomery pulled his subjective camera stunt with *The Lady in the Lake* (1947).

“The Story of Gerhard Shnobble” (September 5, 1948)—Eisner the fantasist spins the tale of a small, anonymous man who one day defiantly decides to reveal to the world his special power—he can fly.

And he *does*, in a breathtakingly rendered sequence ... only to be hit in the crossfire of a shootout and left to die as anonymously as he’d lived. Remember—these were comics! *For kids!*

“Sand Saref” and “Bring in Sand Saref” (January 8 & 15, 1950)—a two-part thriller that Eisner originally created to introduce a new non-masked character, John Law. Reworked as a Spirit story, it’s a Sunday funnies version of *Cry of the City* with the added punch of Denny Colt (cop) and Sand Saref (crook) sharing an unrequited (and sexy!) love going back to childhood. In 14 pages, Eisner crafted his own pitch-perfect film noir.

Of course, when Eisner was in his creative prime he was largely unappreciated. Funny books were for kids; no one granted his kind of genius the appreciation it deserved; his masterpieces were tossed out with the trash every

week. But Eisner wasn’t only an artistic genius—he was a savvy businessman. His deal to produce “The Spirit Section” specified that he retain all rights to the work—the character, the stories, the art. And when the kids who loved *The Spirit* had grown to adulthood (see sidebar), Eisner finally

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got his due—unlike other noir titans like John Alton and Jim Thompson, who died bitter, never knowing their work would one day receive worldwide recognition. Not only was Eisner eventually revered—he was *paid*. Every time one of his stories was reprinted—he got paid again. Such is his reputation, the comic-book industry equivalent of the Oscar® bears his name: The Eisner Award.

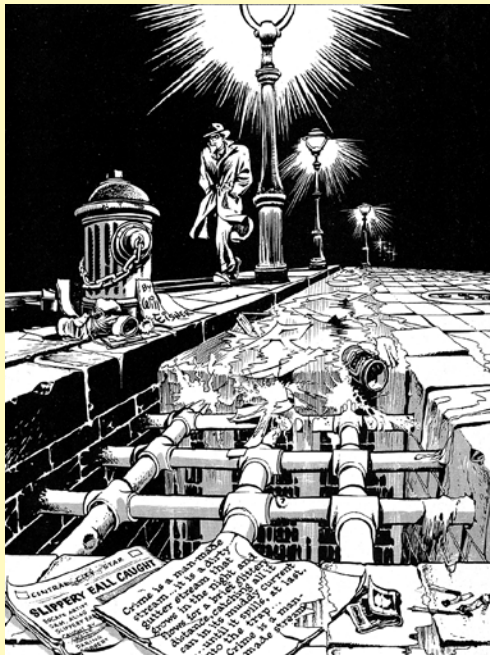
Even more significantly, Eisner continued to create into his eighties, producing an astounding body of work and amassing a legacy second to none. *A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories* (Baronet Books, October 1978) was an early example of the graphic novel,

combining several thematically linked short tales into a single volume. He went on to produce a series of graphic collections detailing the history of New York's immigrant Jewish communities, including *The Building*, *A Life Force*, *Dropsie Avenue* and *To the Heart of the Storm*.

Not to discount this later work, but Eisner's legacy will always be *The Spirit*, a masterpiece that was an essential part of an era that featured the best work of many talents forever inked with noir: Weegee, Raymond Chandler, Orson Welles, John Alton, Robert Siodmak, Humphrey Bogart.

In my book, Will Eisner is as great as any of them. ■

WARREN PUBLISHING'S SPIRIT REPRINTS



Eisner's splash pages were often the epitome of noir style

Will Eisner's newspaper supplement *The Spirit* ended in 1952. But in 1974, Eisner had two potential suitors call him about resurrecting *The Spirit*: Marvel Comics publisher Stan Lee and Warren Magazine publisher Jim Warren. Lee wanted to restart *The Spirit* and have the character be part of the Marvel Universe, while Warren wanted to reprint the original *Spirit* sections that he read as a youth in Philadelphia. Eisner had no desire to lose creative control and see his character fall into the hands of a large comic book publisher. So, in April 1974, Jim Warren began reprinting *The Spirit* as a black and white (with an eight-page color section) bi-monthly magazine.

Comic-book readers coming of age in the 1970s discovered Eisner's work through Warren's reprints. Fans of Warren's *Creepy* and *Eerie* saw *The Spirit*'s beautifully drawn, vibrantly colored covers on newsstand shelves and were compelled to buy it. The stories were more complex and interesting than most of the comics being published at that time. And one of the most memorable features of Warren's *Spirit* was the full-color section in each issue, several of which were colored by comic-book legend Richard Corben.

The magazine's first letters column contained missives from a veritable "Who's Who" of comic-book artists: Alex Toth, Wally Wood, and Neal Adams all lauded the return of Eisner's masterpiece. Adams wrote: "Finally, Will Eisner is back on the scene to teach us how to draw and tell a comic-book story. For those new to comics, his approach is fresh and original. For those who have forgotten, his unique style is a gentle reminder of the way comics *should* be." Frank Miller

also discovered Eisner through the Warren reprints. As a 13-year-old, he thought the stories were new, because they were so far ahead of anything else being published.

The Warren reprints lasted only 16 issues, but they revived Eisner's legacy for a new generation.

—Michael Kronenberg



Eisner's original art (left) and Richard Corben's painted colors (right) for the finished cover of Warren's *The Spirit* #3