

It's hard to think of a bigger name in comic books than Stan Lee. In collaboration with people like Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, he created some of the most popular and long enduring superheroes in the world and remains the most beloved and widely known public faces of Marvel.

While DC were and still are one of Marvel's biggest competitors, the two companies have never been shy about working together, usually tied into a major event, such as Superman vs. The Amazing Spider-Man in 1976 and JLA/Avengers in 2003. One of my favourites was the Amalgam series in 1996 that actually mashed characters together like Captain America with Superman to make Super-Soldier or Wolverine and Batman to make the millennial wetdream - Dark Claw.

So the rivalry was friendly but the fact remained, DC did not have a Stan Lee. But what if they did. What if instead of creating Spider-Man, The Hulk or the X-Men... Stan Lee had created Superman, Wonder Woman or even Batman? Well thanks to a unique series of circumstances, in 2001 he had his chance.

["Fat chance..."]

In the 90s, Stan Lee drifted away from Marvel to pursue other ventures, although he was still getting paid one million dollars a year as an honorary chairman, [as well as a healthy settlement for the X-Men and Spider-Man movies in the early 2000s](#). It was then he was scooped up by DC to produce a year long series of books that proposed the unimaginable -

["Just Imagine Stan Lee Creating The DC Universe - change all of them around"]

For example, The Flash became a young woman powered by hummingbird blood and Aquaman became literally made of water.

It's not much more than a fun thought experiment, but this provides us with a unique perspective. By reimagining an iconic character like Batman, we can see how his version compares to the original and what that tells us about how Stan Lee creates characters the Stan Lee way. So Face Front, True Believers as we head to the batcave!

JUST TO BE DIFFERENT

["Made Batman black... you know, just to be different"]

Stan Lee's Batman recurs a few times across the Just Imagine series, but his origin story is about Wayne Williams, Stan loved his alliterative names, Wayne Williams, a young black man who is framed for a crime they didn't commit and sent to jail where they trained up to become a powerful fighter.

This isn't a very original origin story, it's pretty much exactly what happens to Luke Cage. [And the criminal justice system failing black Americans is something we've unfortunately heard before.](#)

But what was unheard of, [at least before now, was a black Batman.](#)

Originating from the 1930s, Batman came to exist in an internal effort to make the next Superman.

Bob Kane and Bill Finger created a character with heavy influences from The Shadow and The Mark of Zorro, characters who had wealthy playboy alter-egos while fighting injustices in secret disguises. There was also The Bat Whispers, a movie about a detective who disguises himself as a bat... ok we're pushing the definition of influence here...

But at least the drawing was original- a trace of Flash Gordon- goddammit...

But these pulp, noir and swashbuckle characters were all the rage in the 1930s, and like most heroic characters of the time, they were white.

By the time the 1960s rolled around, Stan Lee came to buck the trend. Black Panther and The Falcon were first of a kinds for comic books.

["It wasn't a huge deal to me.](#) It was a very normal natural thing," Lee says. "A good many of our people here in America are not white. You've got to recognize that and you've got to include them in whatever you do."

DC soon followed suit with their first black superhero self-titled series, Black Lightning in 1977 and eventually Cyborg joined the Teen Titans in 1980.

Racial diversity aside, Stan has always attempted to make his character different in some way. Perhaps the most apt example is the X-Men. A collective of superpowered mutants, all with unique abilities, but their presence is met with fear, anger and resentment despite them being essentially no different to any other superhero. This makes them the perfect allegory for minority groups, be it race, religion or sexual orientation and that by exploring the very concept of a superhero differently, Stan has created a heroic team with enough depth to keep them relevant to modern society decades later.

So perhaps it's fitting that Stan's interpretation of Batman, is someone more reflecting of the real world. Speaking of which

REAL WORLD

["Our heroes live in the real world"]

In Stan's Batman, there is no Gotham. We're instead in LA and the Hollywood hills which always comes conveniently with it's own subtitle. Batman doesn't start out as a billionaire, rather he is the son of a deceased police officer, struggling to make ends meet. After training his body and mind in prison he takes up wrestling which is how he becomes a billionaire. He ultimately has a parallel set-up as the regular Batman, so what's the difference?

The DC's heroes are often seen as Gods Among Us, all powerful beings who only through their benevolence don't rule over us. Be they alien, amazonian or billionaire. And for someone like Bob Kane who grew up in poverty, these were characters to admire and look up to. You wanted to be them, because you were not them.

Stan Lee had a different approach to his characters.

[Fantastic Four]

By giving his character flaws and vulnerabilities, it made his characters feel more relatable. You don't just look up to them, you could see yourself in them. Of course there are now thousands of DC stories across many years that show their characters to be flawed, complex and relatable, but Stan showed us that being gritty and realistic doesn't mean humourless.

[Satire]

Even Stan's very own God character Thor originally lived life as a human man who required a walking stick and had no memories of his godly heritage. He takes sympathy for an old fisherman who claims to have spotted aliens and his act of kindness leads him to the fabled hammer, having learnt humility before becoming the thunder god.

Stan uses this method again in his version of Wonder Woman, where Maria Mendoza, a heroic archaeologist, discovers the golden staff that fulfils her destiny of being the Wonder Woman.

Stan Lee's Batman is still a billionaire vigilante detective with no superpowers. He still uses stealth, gets gadgets and even has his very own Robin. Superficially, this is the same Batman, but his journey is different and this shapes the character in the most important way.

["Silver Surfer - philosophical observer of the world"]

PHILOSOPHY

Batman Begins, wait I mean, Wayne Williams's story begins after his father's funeral, when he spots some thugs, led by the gang leader Handz, beat up an innocent man. Despite his mother's pleas, he does not step in, choosing to protect self interests over others. But later, he steps in to save Handz's girlfriend from the cross-fire of a drive-by. This act ultimately winds him up in jail which leads to the training, the costume and the quest for vengeance. Vengeance, that reminds me of something:

[I am vengeance I am the night]

This is Batman's philosophy

Vengeance, referring to fighting for justice with unwavering integrity.

The Night to mean fear, a tool he weaponises to terrorise his enemies.

And I am Batman, to mean the self-destructing self-sacrifice he makes, often pushing away loved ones to protect them because he's less of a man and more of a symbol.

You can have grounded original characters with unique abilities, but Stan helped us think about the hero behind the mask? How do they feel?

Stan's characters evoke and embody themes like loneliness, disillusion or anger, emotions that doesn't take a gamma ray to know how to emphasise.

[Spider-Man quitting]

Stories like this show us that having powers doesn't automatically make you a hero. It's what you do with it that defines you.

What defines Wayne Williams is despite his disillusionment holding him back before, he saves a gangster's girlfriend at great cost to himself. He steps in to defend Dr Grant who'll go on to be his Alfred/Lucius Fox stand-in. And later, when a prison riot breaks out, he defies the mob mentality and protects the life of a warden earning him his freedom. Each time stepping in to do what's right, no matter the cost.

This sense of selflessness is just like our regular Batman, and in fact wanting vengeance on Handz is a major motivator for him.

Perhaps the most radical change comes in Batman's relationship to the Bat.

In Batman lore, the Bat has always represented fear because, well I guess they're kinda scary. Crashing into Bruce Wayne's life like an omen and this has been a consistent element in pretty much every interpretation of the character. It inspires him to become the terror of the night. It commands a heroic presence, when the crooks run around panicked while Batman looms over them cool and unfazed.

Wayne Williams however befriends his bat. It represents companionship, even in the moments it felt most isolating. There's a caring bond between them, he even keeps it after leaving prison. Here, the bat represents kindness towards outsiders, not fear.

Instead of pushing others away, he takes people into his home, joins their superhero team without hesitation, he invites his version of Robin under his wing. This isn't a brooding Batman jaded and warped. This is probably where Stan's Batman differs the most. This is a Batman with optimism, which might be Stan's defining trait.

So is Stan Lee's Batman better than the regular Batman? No, not by a long shot. And it was never the plan.

["Never set out to improve"]

Stan's take on the DC characters was canonically assigned it's own Earth in the DC Multiverse and the characters have cropped up on the rare occasion since, but it otherwise remains a quirky experiment.

Stan Lee has said that he doesn't base his characters on real people.

But Stan knew Bob Kane personally. He would have known about Bob Kane's struggle with poverty, his own rags to riches story. There's direct nods throughout the series to Bob Kane as well as his collaborators who had been historically uncredited for their work. Batman even ends his story throwing the gangster Handz off the roof, perhaps a nod to Kane's original vision of Batman's more extreme use of force before the growing young audience made DC remove them permanently. So maybe Stan Lee's Batman story is in a small way a Bob Kane story, a tribute to his old friend. Or probably not.

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