

# the one & only TOM SUTTON

**LEGENDARY COMICS ARTIST-WRITER TOM SUTTON** died on May 1, 2002. Details are still uncertain, but Tom probably suffered a heart attack and was found in his apartment, reportedly at his drawing board.

I learned of Tom's death as I was wrapping up the second issue of this magazine for press. At once I started making plans for a Sutton tribute, sending out the call for contributions from those who'd known or worked with him. Over the next year the memoirs, letters, phone calls, art, and photos came rolling in, and I began to get a better idea of the enormous respect Tom had earned from his peers and fans during his long career. This issue of *Charlton Spotlight*, then, is largely a tribute to the life and work of Tom Sutton.

We want to look at as much of Tom's art as we can, because he was a giant of pictorial storytelling. But we also want to learn about the man behind the pictures. There is enough room only to outline his biography (for fuller details, see the resources on page 45). Briefly: Tom Sutton was born April 15, 1937, in North Adams, Massachusetts, and grew up there. Like many other cartoonists, Tom turned to drawing as an escape from a world that was not as interesting as those he discovered in books, movies, comic strips, and comic books. Early influences included Milton Caniff, Alex Raymond, and Hal Foster. By Tom's own admission, the classic E.C. horror and science fiction comics of the 1950s had a profound effect on the budding comics artist: Wally Wood, in particular,

Tom at the board in 1989. Photo © 2004 J. Shelby Gragg.



remained one of Tom's personal comics gods.

After high school graduation in 1955, Tom enlisted in the Air Force and saw tours in Wyoming and Japan, eventually being assigned to the Tokyo offices of the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper. Tom made his first forays into sequential art there, creating and producing adventure strips *F.E.A.F.*, *Dragon* and *Johnny Craig*. Tom was discharged in 1959 and returned to Massachusetts to win a scholarship to the School at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, where he advanced life drawing and painting skills and gained exposure to the larger fine arts

world. He was a freelance commercial artist during this period and was animation art director for an industrial education firm. Tom married in the early 1960s and fathered two sons.

In 1967 Tom rediscovered comic books and broke into the field with a story intended for Warren's *Famous Monsters of Filmland* (diverted to an issue of *Eerie*), beginning a long and fruitful association that would result in classic stories and covers for *Creepy*, *Eerie*, and *Vampirella* magazines. At the same time Tom began working for Marvel Comics, drawing backup western stories for *Kid Colt*, *Outlaw* and humor strips for *Not Brand Ecch!*. His accounts grew to include DC, Skywald, Atlas/Seaboard, and Topps.

The mid-1970s saw the Charlton Comics Group's last and best flourishing, the apex of its long struggle from obscure, small-time beginnings in the 1940s to industry third-tier leader of the 1960s. It was a time of exciting new creative leadership of the neglected comics line under executive editor George Wildman and managing editor Nicola Cuti, spawning the company's first new superhero characters in years and its highest annual total of published issues since the 1950s. Stagnation gave way to fresh growth, due in no small part to the arrival of Tom Sutton.

We don't know how Tom first made contact with the Derby outfit, but his earliest identifiable Charlton story is "One Man Air Force!" in *Attack* #9 (Dec. 1972). Tom showed equal facility with war and fantasy material and would eventually come to dominate the pages of *Ghostly Tales*, *Fightin' Marines*, and other genre titles. His highly individualistic style and approach put him in the company of fellow innovators Steve Ditko, Pat Boyette, and Joe Staton. Tom painted some of Charlton's most memorably horrific covers during his four-year Charlton hitch (examples of which we offer in our cover gallery). He enjoyed the latitude Charlton offered to freely interpret scripts and to paint covers. "It was what you wanted to do!" he said the first time I talked to him. "George would call up: 'Tom, I need a six-page weird story'—he called 'em 'weird stories'—'by Friday.'" And Tom would do it, in the late hours after attending to more lucrative accounts, because of the artistic freedom—and the regular Charlton checks.

The lack of editorial interference was attractive, and Tom



Tom's irreverent contribution to John Carbonaro's *Phase* #1, 1971. © 1971, 2004 Estate of Tom Sutton.



Stefan Petrucha and Tom Sutton, 1989. Photo © 2004 J. Shelby Gragg.

began to both write and draw his own material for Charlton, sometimes painting the cover also, occasionally producing the entire book. Memorable examples of Tom's book-length stories are "Mountain of Fear" (*Haunted* #20, Feb. 1975) and "The Devil's Lies" (*The Many Ghosts of Doctor*

*Graves* #50, Mar. 1975). Occasional stories would be designed for black-and-white printing. A classic case is "Through a Glass Darkly" (*Ghostly Tales* #113, Feb. 1975), accompanied by one of Tom's most bizarre painted covers. He even tried his hand at two intriguing series ideas, neither of which went beyond their first appearances: *The Knight* (*E-Man* #1, Oct. 1973) and *The Ghost Train* (*Billy the Kid* #111, Feb. 1975).

Along the way, Tom drew the cover for the *Comic Book Guide for the Artist • Writer • Letterer*, a small pamphlet produced as a subscription premium. Nick Cuti was the mastermind behind this still-useful little item, whose tongue-in-cheek cover gives us much insight into how much fun Tom seemed to be having with his Charlton stories in those days. But he was never under any illusion that this work would make him rich. "There were so many different people, so many different styles, so many different, shall we say, degrees of ability demonstrated in those magazines, it was really fascinating in its own weird way," Tom said. "They were one of the cheapest outfits I ever worked for."

All that came to an end with Charlton's implosion in 1976, when 90 percent of the comics met the chopping block. By late 1977, the line had dwindled to a couple of dozen reprint titles. With one exception, Tom did no more original work for Charlton after 1976. His stories and covers continued to be reprinted for years.

By mid-1979, Charlton had reprinted the entire six-issue run of *Doomsday+1*, the innovative post-apocalyptic SF title written by Joe Gill and drawn by a young John Byrne from 1975 to 1976. Apparently the early sales results for reprint issues 7-12 were good enough for

Wildman to consider continuing the series with new material. He commissioned Tom to write and draw a new 15-page story and cover for a brand-new issue 13. As reported in *The Comic Reader* #166, Mar. 1979, however, by the time later sales figures were in, Charlton executives had changed their minds and canceled the series, leaving the new material in limbo.

Tom Sutton moved on. Over the next twenty years he had work in Marvel's *Planet of the Apes* and *Doctor Strange* and a long run on DC's *Star Trek*. He did odd series for the new publishers that cropped up in the 1980s, such as his work with Stefan Petrucha on *Squalor* for First Comics. By the mid-1990s Tom had embarked on the final phase of his career, creating erotic books for Fantagraphics' Eros comics line.

In early 2000, while assembling *Charlton Spotlight* #1, I called Tom to talk about Pat Boyette. That first conversation lasted almost two hours. I asked Tom if he would draw a cover for the first issue, and he readily agreed. I sent off a package of reference materials, and in short order Tom delivered a delightful, personalized depiction of Pat at the drawing board, characteristically talking on the phone while wielding a pencil, surrounded by some of the icons of his cartooning, film, and historical interests. For all I know, this may have been the last time Tom drew any of the Charlton characters.

We last talked in mid-February 2002. Tom sounded a little tired; maybe he was run-down, maybe he'd just gotten up from a nap and was still groggy. Or maybe my memory is colored by the fact that, barely three months later, Tom would be gone. During those months I was busy producing *Spotlight* #2. I kept meaning to call Tom and I kept putting it off. I was eager to hear his reaction to the new issue. Just days before I would deliver it to the printer, I got the news that he had died. Bill Pearson may have been the last person to talk to Tom.

Tom's Charlton work is now decades old, but there are still a great many of us who've never forgotten it. I thank the many contributors for their help in creating this tribute, and I invite you now to turn the page and join our celebration of the one and only Tom Sutton.

—Michael Ambrose



The aborted *Doomsday+1* #13. © Charlton Comics Group.

