

# Tom Sutton Speaks

interview conducted by **Mark Burbey**

**TOM SUTTON** was one of the most talented and original comic book artists ever to set pen to paper, and his passing in April 2002 gives us an opportunity to celebrate his unique gifts.

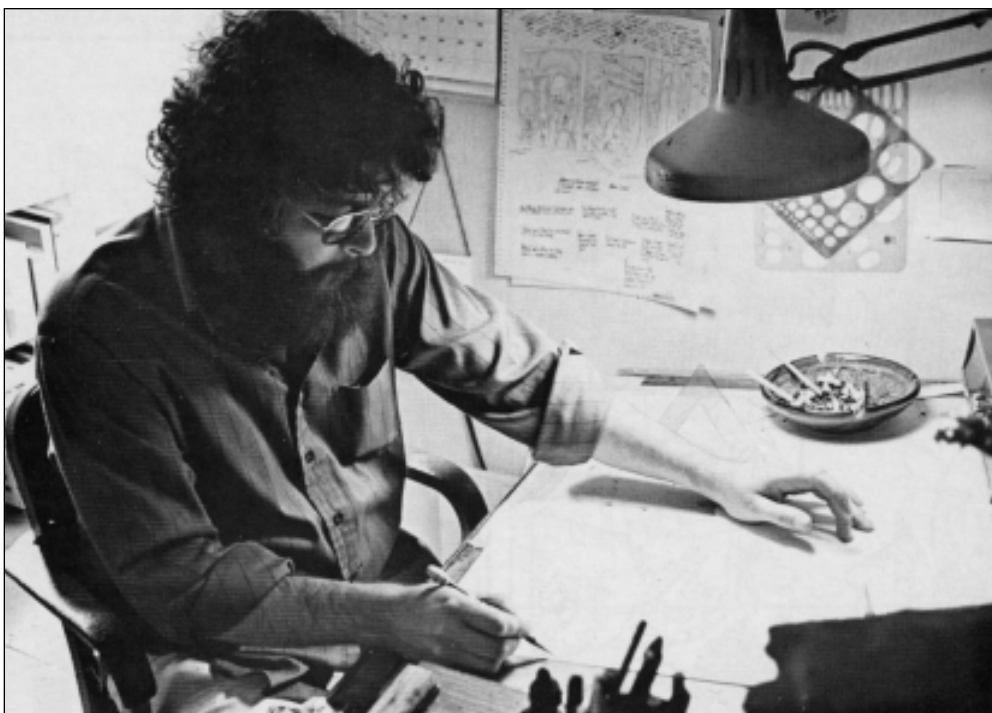
Tom had many fans, but he was never what one would call a “fan favorite.” His art was not as seductively macabre as Bernie Wrightson’s or as bombastically bold as Jack Kirby’s, and it certainly wasn’t imbued with whatever it is that draws fans to the Todd McFarlane/Jim Lee generation of artists. Instead, Sutton’s art had an organic dynamism more closely aligned with Ivan Albright, famous for painting the decaying picture of Dorian Gray for the MGM film of the same title. The depth of detail in Sutton’s work drew the reader into a strange world beneath the surface of the page, and he understood the language of comics as well as Will Eisner or any number of great artists beside whom he has earned a place in comic book history.

In the winter of his career, Sutton’s art retained the vitality of his earlier work. Unfortunately, not a single comic book publisher saw fit to employ Tom Sutton to do what he did best. At the end, it was Sutton’s work as “Dementia” for Eros Comix that kept him occupied and fed. Any editor with an ounce of imagination or insight, however, would have cut Tom loose on

an adaptation of an H.P. Lovecraft novel, a project he would have embraced and turned into his magnum opus. In truth, he wasn’t treated much better during the prime of his career, put to work on everything from inking Paul Gulacy (whose work he never liked) to churning out *Star Trek* adventures. Tom produced some brilliant work for Marvel, including “Future History Chronicles” in *Planet of the Apes* magazine, Man-Thing in *Marvel Premiere*, and various stories in *Vampire Tales* magazine. But it was primarily when he worked for Warren Publications (*Creepy*, *Eerie*, and *Vampirella*) and Charlton that Sutton’s genius truly shined. Sutton did some great western, war, and humor stories, but his gift was in creating palpable environs of flesh-crawling horror.

Some have questioned why Sutton worked for Charlton, particularly with that company’s fabled low wages, but he did it for the same reason that Steve Ditko and many others did: Charlton allowed him the freedom to do what he wanted. If inspired, he could turn out a six-page ghost tale over a weekend and send it to Charlton with the knowledge that it would be published and he would be paid. No pressure and few limitations. Just pure artistic freedom. It might not have always resulted in award-winning work, but very often Tom would be awash in ideas and inspiration and a mere six-pager for Charlton would become an atmospheric masterwork of horror. He was also allowed to do painted covers for Charlton, something few other publishers used. So if you wonder why anyone would work for such little pay, think about it from the artist’s point of view. DC and Marvel Comics paid Tom to draw what they told him to draw. Charlton Comics paid Tom for what he *wanted* to draw.

I came to know Tom Sutton in the late ’70s after writing to him for advice about breaking into Charlton as a writer. He was very forthcoming with his suggestions, and even though I never made it into the pages of a Charlton comic book, something much more significant resulted: I forged a relationship that only his death brought to an end. I began to buy original art from Tom, and by 1978 I had published his portfolio of limited-edition prints based on H.P. Lovecraft’s *Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, a novel he’d long wanted to adapt to comics. I’d hoped it would be the first of many such publishing ventures, but publishing is a business and my business acumen in 1978 was in short supply. Still, the portfolio broke even and remains a sought-after item today. Over the years, I continued to enjoy his work as well as the occasional phone call. I spoke with Tom



Tom Sutton during the time of his classic Charlton work. This photo accompanied Mark’s original interview with Tom in *The Rocket’s Blast-Comickollector* #135, Apr. 1977, and appeared earlier in *Cartoonist PROfiles* #24, Dec. 1974. Photographer unknown; © the respective copyright holder.

only a few months before his death, and he remained as opinionated and as fervent a supporter of the comics medium as he'd been in his youth.

This interview was conducted through the mail in 1977 and published in *The Rocket's Blast-Comicollector (RBCC)* #135, April 1977. With another 25 years of writing experience under my belt, I've taken this opportunity to copyedit a few of the questions for clarity, leaving their intent intact. I've also altered the sequence slightly and deleted a couple of redundant questions. Not a word of Tom's answers has been changed.

When this interview was conducted, Charlton had announced it was canceling all of its comic titles, so the nature of the questions and answers presumed that Charlton was down for the count. Charlton later announced that it would resume publishing but with fewer titles. There are a lot of questions I wished I'd asked, but beyond anything else, this interview reveals an artist who, despite his cynicism about the industry, loved the medium of comics till the end.

—Mark Burbey, 2003

**Mark Burbey:** *To start with, a lot of fans are very curious about what happened at Charlton. What happens to artists like you, Wayne Howard, and the remaining staffers now that the company has folded? What are the possibilities of doing similar work for DC's horror books?*

**Tom Sutton:** Things with Charlton went from bad to worse, but why they finally quit completely, I don't know. I was hoping they would continue as the last outlet for weird story material, excepting Jim Warren, of course. Naturally, everybody was upset by it, artists looking for work everywhere. [Joe] Staton was working for Marvel and had quit Charlton before the end came, and Nick Cuti had gone to Warren months before. Wayne Howard was the only other artist I knew anything about down there and he has work from other sources.

As far as doing weird material for DC, they are overloaded according to [Joe] Orlando. They have a vast inventory. I cried, that weird stuff was my favorite work. I used to love to draw out six-to-seven page yarns, pencil them out rough, shuffle the panels around and finally write the finished dialogue to the finished pencils for Charlton.

Only when Nick was around could I get anything back. Despite the reputation Charlton earned, I liked some of my stuff done for them better than anything; I guess it must have been the freedom. There was a time when you could do a six or seven or even ten-pager right off the top of your head, just do it and send it in and get the check. That was fun and usually allowed for a freedom of working, an attitude quite different from other jobs. Naturally, there were many, many times when scripts would arrive that should have gone right down the toilet, but you drew them anyway; you needed the bread.

If I would defend Charlton for nothing else, it would be for just being there. The idea of having just TWO companies to work for is a terrible hang-up; very bad for the artist and the fan-reader. It is a bad thing to have just two companies, no matter how good either one is. It just is not healthy.



Tom's downright chilling cover to **Ghost Manor** #23, May 1975. © Charlton Comics Group.

**Mark:** *What assignments are you currently working on to make up for work you would have been doing for Charlton?*

**Tom:** Of the moment, I'm not working on any comic book assignments. I have a couple of small advertising accounts that keep things going.

Oh yeah, there is an inking job or two to do for Marvel.

**Mark:** *Now that Charlton has folded, perhaps you can talk a bit more freely about your personal feelings toward the company. Despite receiving many scripts that "should have gone down the toilet," you produced a lot of excellent work for Charlton. Ghost Manor #23, for example, had a great cover based on a story inside called "Terrible Teddy."*

**Tom:** I like to think the more interesting stories that I did for Charlton were the ones I wrote myself. Once in a while, something else would come along that I could get into visually. "Teddy" was a cover I painted when they first started using