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English 205T

30 April 2021

Matt Baker Critical Review

Baker's contribution to comics, social reform, and contemporary pop culture cannot be understated. Baker was the first successful black comic book artist when the career was a very lucrative one. Newsstands were ubiquitous and printed media was the prime method of news and entertainment. Working in an all-white environment, Baker worked in a "comic shop" (art studios where a team of artists produced comics) and was revered by his all-white peers. Shops rarely hired black artists, but famous publisher Jerry Iger was so impressed with Baker's drawing of a beautiful woman, that he was hired on the spot, thus breaking the color barrier in the shop.

Black representation was virtually non-existent in the realm of comics. With considerable risk to the publishing line, Baker unveiled Voodah, the first black hero. His first appearance was subversive as Ken Quattro writes "In a striking dichotomy, the racist cover depicts a smiling young White boy attacking a black native with a spear... However, in the interior, the dark skinned Voodah appears" (131). The publisher pulled a "bait and switch" on the unsuspecting white readership. Inclusion and representation are *still* a topic of discussion, and Baker was actively trying to break that dogged barrier over 75 years ago.

His ability to draw beautiful women made him the top artist in "good girl" comics, the genre specializing in drawing attractive women. A new readership of the returning postwar veterans, were now seeking and buying comics with more mature content. This genre allowed for

Baker to be a part of molding the first heroines in comics. Baker drew various jungle girl comics where the heroine was a strong, beautiful, independent woman with the intellect and strength to outwit her villainous adversaries. Although one could make the argument that some themes were problematic, these were the proto-heroines, preceding that of Wonder Women, Batwomen and the Storms of our time.

Baker also worked with one of the few women in the comic industry, Ruth Roche, to create *Flamingo*, a Nazi-killing gypsy heroine. His anti-fascist work also consists of *Canteen Kate* which would appear in *Fightin' Marines* comics. Baker would also be the artist to the very first graphic novel *It Rhymes with Lust*. His biggest artistic accomplishment would be in the romance genre. A fashionista himself, he was more than capable of drawing his characters with a keen fashion sense.

Not only did race separate him from his peers, but his sexuality as well. Matt Baker was gay. A very private man, perhaps this was part of his quiet and reserved nature. Sadly, the senate committee would later “cancel” comics and impose a Comics Code in 1954, stripping the ability to discuss any subject matter even remotely deemed inappropriate and nearly destroying the industry altogether. Matt Baker died at the age of 37, never having the chance to potentially be a part of Marvel or DC.

E.C. Stoner Critical Review

Emil Cecil Stoner's career would intertwine with the artistic circle within the Harlem Renaissance and, just as important, provide art pieces for white businesses. Stoner helped bring black artistic merit and validity to the white audience as well as actively creating a social commentary of inclusion, unity, and anti-fascist commentary.

Stoner's success is also a testament to the feminist notions of inclusion and providing opportunities to marginalized communities. Morgan Kirby, co-founder of the Woolworth stores, would take great interest in the potential of Stoner. Kirby would go on to pay for Stoner's full four-year tuition to art school (Quattro 30). In 1922, the "Exhibit by Negro Artists" exhibition in Harlem was created by a white librarian named Ernestine Rose. Quattro writes, "In recognition of the growing black community... Rose integrated Blacks into the staff positions and worked to make the branch a source of cultural pride" (32).

Stoner would marry Vivienne Ward, a close friend to Nella Larsen. This would allow Stoner the opportunity to network his art within the black community. Stoner would later remarry Dr. Henriette Stoner, a woman of Jewish descent.

Stoner's work would depict notions of peace between races as well as be the first black artist to depict black people in a positive light within the comic genre. Lacking any positive black representation in the media, Stoner would create comic biographies depicting black peoples' positive contributions within the American fabric (*Rev. Ben* is available to read on the comic table). Stoner would also actively help other black artists break into the business, allowing them to get an important foot in the door as well as addressing the issue of underrepresentation within advertisement and comic workplaces. Stoner was well-versed in both fine arts and cartoonist, both giving him access to work for media companies that were predominantly, if not

exclusively, white. Advertisement art was lucrative and Stoner's abilities and inclusion within the white circle, allowed him the opportunity to have a successful career within ads (Franklin automobile ad displayed).

Stoner also worked for the Christian comic book *The Challenger*. A collaboration between a protestant publisher, and the head of the Anti-Fascist Catholic Committee as the editor. The content would address topics of racism and antisemitism. From being part of the creative team of the first issue of white owned *Detective Comics*, to garnering respect from black artists within the Harlem Renaissance through his fine art, Stoner was successfully capable of working through both worlds, as well as worked to bridge the social gap between the two by fostering black artists and giving them the best chance of success in an underrepresented field. His message for peace, and fight against fascism has just as much value for the peace movement within his comic books, than any art piece found within museum galleries.

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