
The Phantom illustrator Sy Barry on the spirit of an artist... and why you just can't beat a comic strip



The wedding of The Phantom.

- Troy Bramston
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As a kid growing up in New York City in the 1930s and '40s, Sy Barry dreamt that one day he might get to draw The Phantom. In 1961, Barry was invited to fill in for artist Wilson McCoy and went on to illustrate the adventures of the world's first comic strip superhero until 1994. He is the longest-running of The Phantom's artists.

“No other comic strip character had this concept of a 400-year legend that The Phantom will live on forever and his spirit will never die,” Barry, 93, tells Review. “I thought that was a very clever idea. Villains knew that he had no special powers but they still feared him because of the mystery. I think that is the secret to The Phantom's popularity.”

Created by Lee Falk, The Phantom was introduced to audiences 85 years ago, on February 17, 1936. It was several years before costumed superheroes with secret identities such as Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman appeared in comic strips and comic books.

The legend of the 21st Phantom was immortalised in the first story. Christopher Walker's father was murdered by pirates at sea and he washed ashore as the lone survivor of the ship's crew. After being rescued by the Bandar pygmy tribe, he swore an oath on the skull of a Singh pirate to fight “piracy, greed and cruelty” wherever it exists. This 16th century mission is passed on from eldest son to eldest son.



The Phantom illustrator Sy Barry.

Wearing a purple outfit inspired by a demon idol, eyes hidden behind a black mask, with side pistols and assisted by a wolf (Devil) and horse (Hero), The Phantom is known to be rough on roughnecks everywhere. His skull ring is imprinted on evildoers' chins when he lands a punch. He lives in the Deep Woods of Bengali, in Skull Cave, with wife Diana and their twin children.

Unlike most other superheroes, The Phantom relies on physical strength, intelligence and judgment to outwit criminals. The legend of The Man Who Cannot Die comes in handy. So do his pistols and knife. But there are no otherworldly superpowers to aid his crime fighting mission.

When Barry took over drawing The Phantom from McCoy, he had already worked in comics for 16 years, spanning the legendary Golden and Silver ages of comics. After graduating from the School of Industrial Art, he assisted his brother Dan on the Tarzan and Flash Gordon daily strips. It was not a happy experience.

“He was very difficult to work with,” Barry recalls. “He was very demanding. I was very serious about my work and worked very hard at it, so it hurt me very badly when he ran me down and said I was not good enough. He was a very tough brother and it was hard to get really close to him.”

Barry worked for National Comics (which became DC) and Timely Comics (which became Marvel), drawing and inking a range of characters, including the Man of Steel and the Caped Crusader. His personal favourite was Hal Foster’s artistically drawn

Prince Valiant. It was this realistic style that Barry wanted to introduce to The Phantom. But it did not go down well, at least initially.



A new Sy Barry print of The Phantom.

“After I had delivered the first week, the editors said it looked too much like Flash Gordon,” Barry recalls. “The style and technique were much too striking and so I had to do it all over and do it in a more simplistic style with less black and less drama, and less variation of shots and perspectives.”

But Barry wanted to modernise the look of The Phantom and make it look more true-to-life, with greater depth and detail, and make the characters more dramatic in their movement and reactions. The style of The Phantom was transformed. It brought in many new readers. Soon more than 100 million Phantom Phans were reading the daily strip.

“I began to work the strip into my own technique, my own style, but it was a difficult transition,” he recalls. “I tried to introduce more emotion. The Phantom, under Ray Moore and Wilson McCoy, always had a stony face with no expression. I wanted to get anger, laughter, even momentary expressions of fear, into the strip. I wanted it to look exciting.”

Falk, who scripted the stories, embraced the new look for a new era. Barry is generous to Falk – who also created Mandrake the Magician – but often found him infuriating to work with. He forgot about characters, misspelt names of places and altered the plot mid-strip. Falk even tweaked The Phantom’s origin story and changed his surname from Standish to Walker.

“How could he possibly think that people would forget what he originally wrote into *The Phantom*?” Barry laughs. “Getting him to understand that you could not leave a character stranded somewhere on an island and move on was very difficult. It seems like I spent my life dealing with egotists.”

During Barry’s run, *The Phantom* began wrestling with social and political issues that mirrored the real world. They explored the backstory of *The Phantom*, taking readers into the world of earlier incarnations. They introduced new characters in Bengali, which became a democracy, such as President Luaga and General Bababu. Diana began working for the United Nations.

Barry’s favourite story is *The Founding of the Jungle Patrol* (1964-65). But perhaps the most popular was the wedding of *The Phantom* and Diana in 1977-78.

“Lee and I were worried about what impact that would have but people not only accepted it, they really loved it,” Barry remembers. “We also got a good reaction on the twins, Kit and Heloise, and it opened up new stories for *The Phantom*.”

Over 33 years, Barry illustrated more than 10,000 newspaper and magazine comic strips chronicling *The Phantom*’s adventures. While much of Barry’s work has been collated in comic books, he regrets that so few people today read comics in strip form.

“I do have a preference for it to be a comic strip because the idea is that it is followed every day and Lee wrote with that in mind,” Barry says. “In a comic book, the panels are different and sometimes drawings have to be changed to fit the size of the pages. I am disappointed when I see that happen to my work.”

A few years ago, Barry was unmasked as the artist behind a celebrated comic book that inspired many young men and women to join the civil rights movement: *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* (1957). It illustrated the story of Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat on a bus, and explained the non-violent protest movement pioneered by Gandhi and promoted by King.

Barry was asked by Elliot Caplin how he felt about King and asked if he would illustrate the comic book. He immediately agreed. It was distributed to schools and motivated civil rights leader John Lewis to later tell his life story in the *March* trilogy of graphic novels.

“The story of his life, and what he was trying to achieve, impressed me a great deal,” Barry recalls. “I signed the first page and for some reason my name came off the second printing. I was more surprised and elated than disappointed when my role in it was rediscovered.”

Superheroes are big business these days as audiences gravitate to movies, TV and video games. *The Phantom* (1996) movie, starring Billy Zane as the eponymous hero, was a moderate success. There have also been a *Phantom* movie serial (1943), a TV show (2009) and two animated series: the 1980s’ *Defenders of The Earth* and 1990s’ cult classic, *Phantom 2040*.

Barry, who loves seeing superheroes on the large screen, agrees it is time for another big-budget Phantom movie. “It’s marvellous that comics are now in that medium,” he says. “The sound and visual effects give comics another depth and perspective. I would love to see The Phantom in a new movie. I wish I was still attached to it; I would love the royalties from that.”

Frew Publications, which has been producing The Phantom comic books in Australia since 1948, continues the run of new and old stories with an established readership.

To mark this milestone year, The Phantom’s 85th Anniversary Diary is available from Mallon Publishing. A numbered limited edition of the diary includes a print of a new Barry illustration (Email: info@mallon.net.au). It is a beautifully written and illustrated history of The Phantom, including for those who came in late.

These days, Barry enjoys painting watercolour portraits and landscapes. And he still draws and inks The Phantom, which remains popular around the world, especially in Sweden, Australia, New Zealand and, increasingly, in India.

“I loved drawing The Phantom and never regretted it for one moment,” reflects Barry. “And now I love my painting and the time I can spend with my family. I’ve had a good life and I’ve enjoyed my career enormously. I think very few people can say that – but I can.”

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