

## The Marvel of Stan Lee

"What would the world be like without Stan Lee?" is a question I would ask myself often, as I watched and re-watched some of the biggest block buster Marvel films of our time, and got lost in the excitement and adventure of his creations. I happily ignored the fact that all things are finite. Stan Lee seemed to be able to continue on forever – even each of his new movie cameos was captivating. As I watched depictions of his heroes and villains on screen, I often forgot about the fact that this real-life hero had lived during World War II, was inspired by his experiences and adventures serving as a writer and communications specialist in the war, and that he had come out of that time uniquely positioned to deliver entertainment to millions in the comic book world and beyond. Without real people and average heroes, who have huge imaginations and spacious treasure troves of creativity to draw on, we would have less to marvel at in this world.

Stan Lee drew on all sorts of unusual background experiences to become an undisputed king among comic book writers and editors. He was born in New York City to Romanian immigrant parents, who steeped him in their Eastern European cultural traditions. He worked part-time writing obituaries for a news service; delivering sandwiches for a Rockefeller Center-based pharmacy; worked as an office boy for a trouser manufacturer (his father was a fabric cutter for clothing companies); and ushered part-time at the Tivoli Theater on Broadway. He sold subscriptions to the New York Herald Tribune Newspaper, and won essay contests that they sponsored. At the urging of the Tribune, he joined the post-Depression, New Deal-sponsored federal works program Federal Theatre Project to write creatively, and worked alongside the likes of a young Burt Lancaster.

In response to the call for soldiers, he enlisted in November 1942 with the U.S. military, and received his basic training in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey in the Signal Corps. The Signal Corps provided him the opportunity to work with radar, radio waves and communications lines. He hoped that if he did well there, he would be transferred overseas to active combat. But Lee's superior officers soon enough discovered that Lee was a talented writer and comic book editor, and instead of offering him an overseas assignment, they gave him to the Training Film Division in Queens, New York. Lee became a film maker, a poster writer, a manual editor, and wrote highly effective war propaganda. In this role, he worked in a newly renovated building that received new equipment that could rival any of the major film production companies of Hollywood at the time. Frank Capra and Dr. Seuss were among his fellow writers.

Lee once said in an interview with *The Big Issue* that "The world always needs heroes, whether they're superheroes or not. Since time immemorial there were stories and legends about evil people who had superpowers and some human being had to find a way to conquer them. It seems to be part of the human condition." Lee certainly found a world of evil doers in the world that informed his ideas and themes. From Hitler to Stalin, to the Rosenbergs carrying out clandestine missions spying for Russia, Lee grew up in a time when the evil doers and heroes were cast in black and white, this or that roles, never terribly complex, where it was clear who you should side with at all times. People who did bad things needed to be overcome by people who did good. Justice and restitution was always fighting for predominance, and that was that. That clear-cut look at all that was good and bad in the world was a satisfying thing for many people. From Superman to Spiderman, Cat Woman to Bat Man, Iron Man to Ant Man, the comic book world screamed "Save the World From Evil" and that's what Lee's characters did – with lots of action and exclamation points and fervor.

That crystal clear rhetoric changed as his ideas about transforming his comic books onto movie screens changed. He reveled in the special effects that were possible with newer technology. With the introduction of Black Panther to the movies, we see characters who struggle with all sorts of shades of complexity – from the rich meaning of true loyalty and friendship, to tests of character under duress, to willingness to sacrifice, to layers of bad and evil that are not always what they seem at first glance. Black Panther inspired a new generation of children of color like me to appreciate anew the genius of Stan Lee’s adventurous worlds of super heroes, and we loved him all the more for it. I never fully realized what Stan Lee was to me until he was gone. He’s more than the man who made Captain America or Marvel - he was and is our Captain America, and he was an inspiring source of endless imagination.

The sources I used for my background information on Mr. Lee’s life include the web sites for the Federal Project and the *Big Issue* Stan Lee interview, as well as Wikipedia sites on Mr. Lee himself.