

WORDS JENNY COONEY CARRILLO ADDITIONAL REPORTING KEVIN HARLEY PORTRAIT LORENZO AGIUS



“I THINK YOU NEVER
OUTGROW YOUR
LOVE FOR STORIES
OF PEOPLE WHO ARE
BIGGER THAN LIFE”



STAN LEE

He's the comic-book icon who helped pioneer the golden age of superheroes. As a writer and editor, he co-created icons including Spider-Man, Hulk, Fantastic Four and the X-Men - characters that have generated \$16.5bn at the box office - and his cameos are the stuff of pop-culture legend. Total Film meets the spry, witty 93-year-old.





A

sked recently to name his favourite superhero film, Stan Lee plumped for a warm, relatable zinger-flinger: Sam Raimi's 2002 *Spider-Man*. This year, ol' web-head returned to the Marvel-verse as a young teenager, a decision that recalls how Lee rewrote comics history by making Spidey an adolescent in 1962. Between those three points in time lies one reason why Lee still seems so youthful and present at 93. It's because he's in the DNA of today's movie-making mode, a mode refreshed in the early 2000s and at its freshest today when it honours the ideas forged by Lee (with co-creators including Steve Ditko, Jack Kirby, John Romita Sr.) from 1961-72 on Marvel Comics titles that still dominate billboards. You know the ones.

A sympathy for the little man might have come naturally to the New York born

Stanley Lieber, son of Romanian immigrants who were hit hard by the Depression. Living in poverty in the Bronx, Lee gravitated to books and films before turning to writing: obits, PR material... He got a break when a relative employed him as a gofer at Timely Comics in 1939, where he shortened his name for a byline on a Captain America comic. Why? He wanted to keep the real one for a grand ambition to write 'The Great American Novel'.

He went one better: he wrote *The Great American Comics*. An editor-in-chief by 1941, Lee survived the comics decline and industry-troubling moral panics of the '50s to hit paydirt in the early '60s. Responding to DC's *Justice League of America*, he engineered a dazzling mutation for the newly-renamed Marvel Comics with the Fantastic Four, heroes etched in the stuff of raw humanity. "And it caught on," said Lee, who went on to co-create outsider heroes the X-Men, a soulful scientist in the Hulk and a certain geeky teenager struggling with relatable troubles: money, family, romance, peers, bullies, squirry stuff...

Without a tough-guy meathead among 'em, Lee's brainy, emotional and very human heroes resonated with readers. He reinvented comics language by making characters talk like teens do: a slangy, quippy and self-aware hipster-speak. And he spoke directly to his readers through

columns and letters pages, arguably co-birthing geek culture and expanding on it through the creation of black superheroes (Black Panther, Falcon, Luke Cage), trippy titles (*Doctor Strange*) and the ingenious creative/business conceit of shared universes (*Avengers*).

Even if Lee's career flagged after leaving Marvel in the '90s, he kept working and remained an instantly recognisable industry figurehead, especially after the eruption of comic-book movies in the early 2000s. A pop-culture pioneer and a generation-spanning geek Pied Piper, he's known to fans and mainstream movie-goers alike from convention appearances and multiple movie cameos.

Despite struggling with his hearing and vision, Lee's quick wit proved intact in our encounter with him. Even with a friend/translator on hand for his hearing issues, he's still fast, still oh-so funny. And he still creates; his recent work includes the James Nesbitt-starring series *Lucky Man*. Whether or not luck helped get Lee where he is, one thing is sure: the best modern superhero movies wouldn't look so fresh without him.

How did the tradition of the Marvel movie cameos come about? Bryan Singer claims he started it...

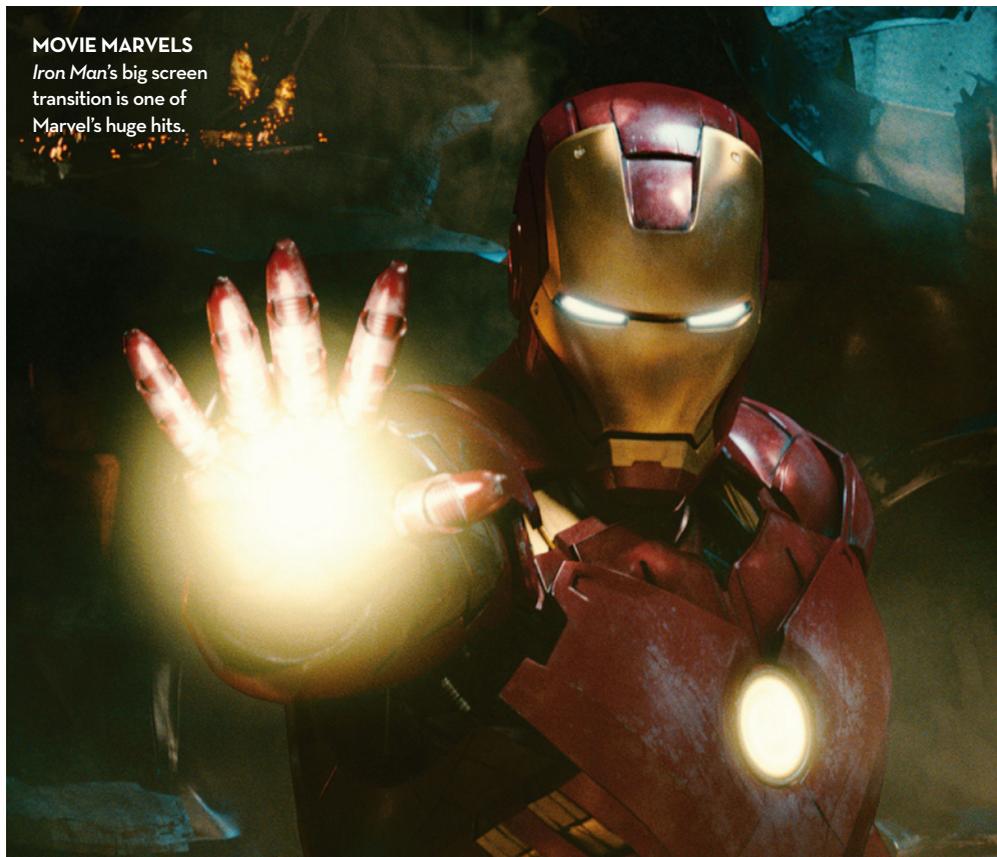
It all came about accidentally. They gave me a cameo and I think the first one was in an *X-Men* movie years ago, Bryan Singer did that. Somebody was coming out of the water on a beach, and he wanted people on the sand to look at the person who was a freak and look at them like, "Oh wow". So he had me, he said Stan, "Why don't you stand there? You are selling hot dogs on the beach, so hold the hot dog and when the man passes, just go 'Ooooh...'. Which took a lot of acting. [laughs] So I did that. And then when they did a *Spider-Man* movie, the director said, "Hey you were so good in the *X-Men*, I will give you a cameo in *Spider-Man*." And then after a while it just became like a habit.

What led you to start creating superheroes? Were you bullied as a kid?

You know, it would make such a great story if I could tell you people picked on me when I was a kid and that's why I wanted to invent superheroes. I had a very peaceful childhood. If anybody wanted to start a fight with me, I would talk them out of it. I would talk so much that they would forget what they wanted to do and leave me alone. [laughs] No, I love to read about superheroes or about regular heroes and I love to read Charles Dickens and Mark

MOVIE MARVELS

Iron Man's big screen transition is one of Marvel's huge hits.





Twain and all the good writers, and to me, all of the heroes of every story, they were superheroes and I was interested in them. My favourite was Sherlock Holmes. To me, Sherlock Holmes was the greatest. And then after Superman came along, and I am ashamed to say I did not create Superman, [laughs] but the superheroes caught on and my publisher said to me, "Why don't you do some superheroes?" So that's when we started with the X-Men and Spider-Man and Hulk and all the others.

Where did the inspiration for all of your superheroes come from?

I don't know. I don't know if it was inspiration or just thinking. For example with *Spider-Man*, it's really a funny story. I had already done the *Fantastic Four* and the *X-Men*, I think, and I worked for a publisher who said to me, "How about coming up with another superhero?" So I was trying to think, when you do a superhero the first thing you have to think about is what is his or her super power? So I saw a fly crawling on the wall and I said, "Boy, wouldn't it be cool to have

a hero who could stick to walls?" So then I needed a name. So then I thought Fly Man? No. Insect Man? Nah. Mosquito Man? And then I thought of Spider-Man, and it sounded dramatic. And then I thought I would make him a teenager, because there were no teenage superheroes, so that would make him different. And finally, I thought I would give him a lot of personal problems,

because again, the other superheroes I knew didn't have personal problems. So I got so excited, I ran into my publisher and I said I have a great idea for you! And I told him and this is the

reception I got: "Stan, that is the worst idea that I have ever heard." [laughs] He said first of all, people hate spiders, so you can't call him Spider-Man. You can't make him a teenager, because teenagers can only be sidekicks. And you want him to have personal problems? Superheroes don't have personal problems, that's why they are superheroes! So boy I was an unhappy man when I left the office. But we were killing a book, *Amazing Fantasy*,

and when you kill a book, nobody cares what you put in the last issue. So to get it out of my system, I had the strip drawn and I put it on the cover, and I forgot about it. A month later the sales figures came in, and my publisher came running over to me and said, "Stan, Stan, do you remember that Spider-Man character of yours that we both liked so much?" [laughs] He said, "Let's do it as a series." And I think that was a very long answer to a very short question.

How would you respond to being referred to as the king of comics?

I think I would be embarrassed. No, there are so many people writing comics who were really good. I think I was lucky. I did it at the right time. There weren't very good comics written when I was writing them, 'cause most of the writers were conscious of the fact that comics were read by very young children. When I started doing the comics, I decided I am going to write these things for grown ups, for me, the kind of story I would like to read. And I wanted to use a vocabulary, a college vocabulary, and I figured if a kid didn't know what I had meant, he would understand by the use and the sentence, or if he had to go to the dictionary, that wouldn't be the worst thing

I THINK I WAS LUCKY. I DID IT AT THE RIGHT TIME

in the world. So the main thing was, I tried to write the kind of stories that I would want to read. Most writers write for someone else. But I don't consider myself king.

Federico Fellini was a fan. He wrote in his book that you were unique in taking personal problems and humanising these characters and no one had done that before...

He came to visit me once, and I had that office in New York City, and it was so funny, he came with five assistants and they were all dressed the same way, with black raincoats. The difference is, Fellini had his raincoat over his shoulders. No director would have ever had his hands in the sleeve and it's always over his shoulders. But the other guys all had their hands in the sleeves and we had a narrow little walkway, so we came in single file and Fellini was first, and the next tallest and the next tallest, and it was like a scene in an animated cartoon played out. But he was a great guy, and when my daughter went to Italy a few years later, he showed her around, and he was very nice. Very great director and a very nice man.

Was there always a rivalry with DC Comics?

Has there always been a rivalry? Well you can't be rivals with somebody [when] you are so much better than they are. [laughs] No, I used to joke, I knew them very well of course and we are all friends. But I was always teasing them, I will give you an example how dumb they are. [laughs] We used to be called Atlas Comics, and when our books became really popular, I said we ought to get a new name. And I thought of Marvel Comics, because I like advertising, and with a name like Marvel, you could say, welcome to the Marvel Age of Comics, or Marvel Marches On, and there were so many things you

could do with that word. Now they had been called National Comics. When we changed our name to Marvel, they decided to change their name. So I want you to get this, we became "Marvel" and they became... D... C... [laughs] Need I say more? [laughs]

Did you ever foresee these comic books being turned into movies? Especially as all of the action and superpowers were unfilmable at the time.

I never in a million years thought that these things would become the movies that they were. The only thing on my mind and everybody's mind, the artists and the writers, we hoped that the books would sell well enough so that we would keep our job and be able to pay the rent. And in a million years, we never had thought that they would become so big and they would turn into great movies.

Which of the Marvel movies has really caught the essence of the comic character?

I thought they were all good. *Iron Man* I think really caught it. They were lucky to have Robert Downey Jr. play the role. I think the first *Spider-Man* was very good. I really think most of them were pretty good. The *X-Men* were good, and I don't even remember all of them and there are so many now. I remember my cameos, beyond that... [laughs]

The trend of comic books and superheroes seems like it's never going to end. Do you follow the new ones, and where do you see the future heading?

We hope they never end, at least I hope they never end cause I am in that business. But I think, one reason people like these superhero stories so much is just about everybody reads fairytales when they're young. Well, when you become older, you don't read fairytales anymore, but I think you never outgrow your love for stories of people who are bigger than life and can do things that normal people can't do. And along come the superhero stories, and to me, they are really fairytales for older people, cause they have that same appeal, yet somebody who can fly. And speaking of flying, this is funny about DC also. [laughs] When *Superman* was first created, the writer said he can leap over tall buildings, and that made sense cause his

WE BECAME
"MARVEL" AND THEY
BECAME... D... C...
[LAUGHS]



FIVE
STAR TURNS

THE TRIAL OF THE INCREDIBLE HULK 1989

Lee made his movie debut in Bill Bixby's TV movie as a jury foreman. Good shock-face served as the Hulk destroys the furniture.

IRON MAN 2008

After guest-list problems in *Rise Of The Silver Surfer's* cameo, Lee looks money at a party in Tony Stark's debut. "Look great, Hef," quips Stark, punning on Hugh Hefner.

THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 2012

Lee plays a librarian blissfully cocooned beneath his headphones during the school-trashing fight between Lizard/Spidey. Mind that flying desk...

BIG HERO 6 2014

Lee gets his geek-father due in Disney's Marvel riff. When comics-loving Fred finds a secret room hidden behind a family portrait, a familiar old man emerges to talk pants...

DEADPOOL 2016

After bartending in *Ant-Man*, Lee plays emcee at a 'gentlemen's' joint for the 'Pool. "I wish I had spent more time in the strip club," Lee grumbled. There's always the sequel...





planet had heavy gravity. But the people at DC decided that wasn't enough. So all he does is go like this [*arms thrust forward*], and with no visible means of propulsion, he flies. [*laughs*] Now I am going to show you how scientific Marvel Comics is. I wanted Thor, the God of Thunder to be able to fly, but I wanted it to be done in a scientific way. So he has this hammer, with a leather thong that is attached to his wrist. So he spins the hammer around as fast as he can like a propeller, and then he lets go. Well the hammer goes flying and it's attached to his wrist, so he goes with it. So there you have a perfectly scientific way of flying. [*laughs*]

You've created almost 600 characters. Which of the ones that hasn't had a movie yet would you most like to see on the big screen?

Well they haven't done *Doctor Strange* yet, although they are working on him. And they haven't done the *Inhumans* yet, and when they do that, that is going to be incredible, wait till you see that. They are doing the *Black Panther*, and I think they have done all the others. I'd better come up with some new ones or we won't have anything to talk about. [*laughs*]

There are a lot of TV shows based on your Marvel characters – do you watch any of those?

I know about the shows and I wish I could watch them but I don't hear well enough. See, I have a funny kind of hearing. I have that problem with television. Also, [*laughs*] I hate to sound like I have one foot in the grave, but I don't see that well either. [*laughs*] So it's hard for me to see what is on the screen and I can't hear it, and rather than do that I don't watch. But I read about them and I know how they are doing and I think I have done a cameo or two in some of them. Which is of course why they are so successful. [*laughs*]

You had an *Agents Of S.H.I.E.L.D.* cameo...

Right. In fact, I have a little company called POW Entertainment. Of course you figured out that stands for Purveyors of Wonder. [*laughs*] And we do movies there too, I have a new one coming out called *The Annihilator*, in about a year. But we also have a television show in the UK called *Stan Lee's Lucky Man*, and I think it will be coming [*to the US*] pretty soon. But I am sorry to say I can't even enjoy the movies. And I go to the screenings, when they have a red-carpet opening, and I sit there and I see the pictures on the screen, but I can't make out who they are really and I can't make out what they are saying. And so I sit

**STAN LEE
IN NUMBERS**

18

Stan Lee's age when he became editor-in-chief at Timely Comics.

2,428

Lee was awarded the 2,428th star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2011.

3

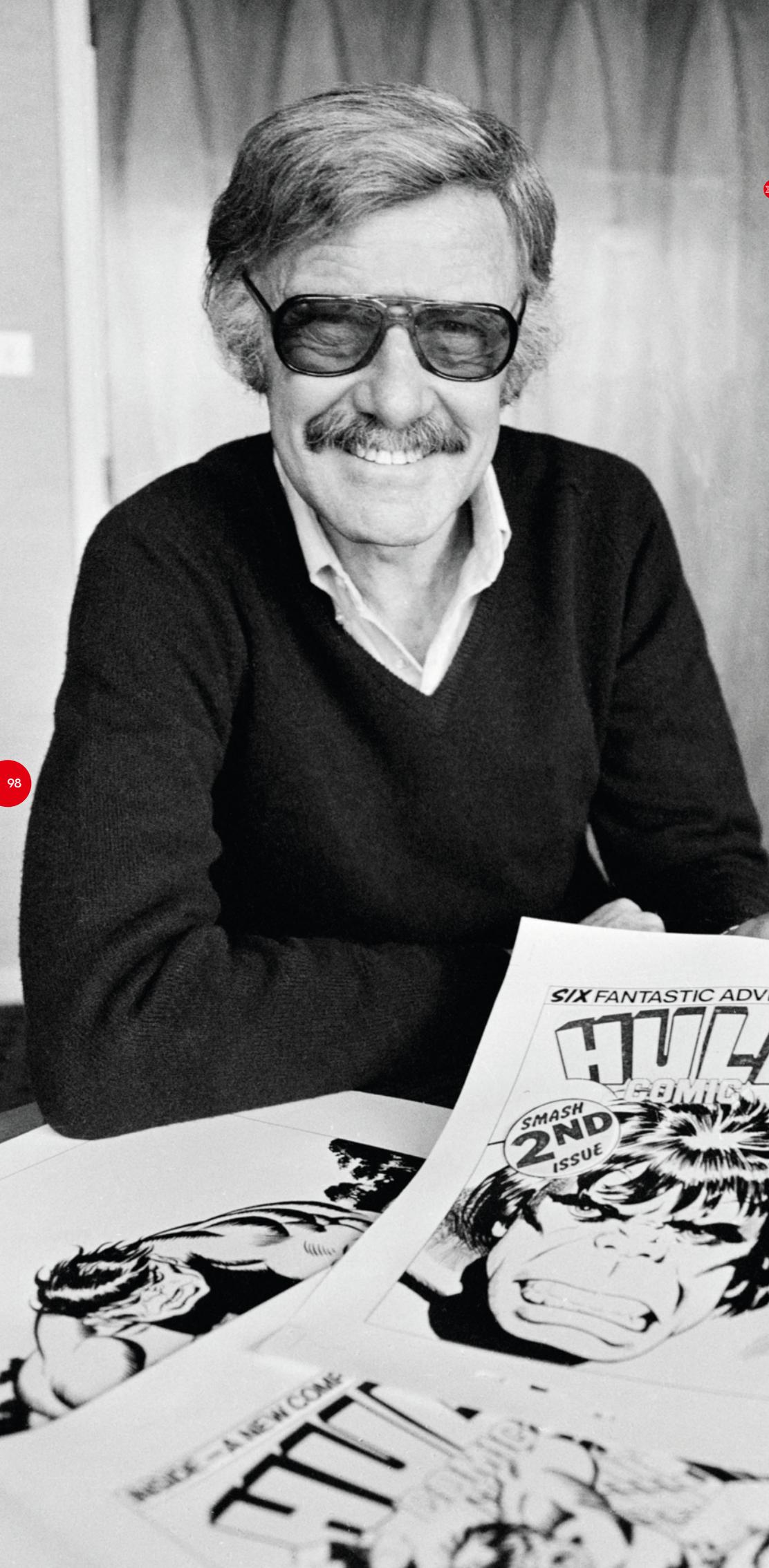
Years spent in the Army from 1942-5 as part of the Signal Corps: writing manuals, training scripts and slogans on the homefront.

35m

Estimated number of Marvel comics sold a year by 1965.

32

Number of Lee's cameos across Marvel-based TV shows and movies.



there and when it's over I applaud like crazy, and I don't know what I was looking at. [laughs]

Many of your characters have some basis in real science, and change with the political landscape. How informed are you politically and scientifically?

I try to keep myself up. I listen to the radio a lot, to the news so I know what is going on a little bit, and whatever is happening in the world, we try to let those things touch on our stories too, so the readers feel like they are reading something that has some meaning to it. Always. That was another thing we did that hadn't been done before. If you think about it, Batman lived in Gotham City, and Superman lived in Metropolis. But I had our characters living in New York. But we tried to keep everything realistic and whatever was happening in the world at the time, we tried to make mention of it in the stories. So even though these were comic book pages, they should have some little authenticity to them.

Did you consult any scientists, or was it pure imagination?

I try to make things sound scientific. For instance, the Fantastic Four, they got their power because they were bombarded by cosmic rays. And Bruce Banner became the Hulk because he was subjected to gamma rays. Now I have to be honest with you, I have no idea what a cosmic ray is. [laughs] I wouldn't know a gamma ray if I saw it. But it sounds scientific. So I imagine people think I am this great scientist.

Comic-book superheroes have changed the movie industry, and according to some, not necessarily for the better – it's difficult to get smaller, more intimate movies produced today. How do you view this division?

I think there's a place for superhero stories. There are always going to be people who want their imaginations tickled and see things that are bigger than life. But by the same token, there is room for normal stories with normal people with normal things in their lives. Many of my favourite movies are just movies about people and situations, realistic things like *Inherit The Wind* [1960 Spencer Tracy film] and there are so many great movies that have nothing to do with superheroes. So the nice thing I think is that there is something for every taste. The only thing is, it seems as though there are more superhero movies than anything. But that will level off. And it's just like westerns. Years ago, you couldn't turn on the TV

without a western. Now they still have them, but there aren't as many of them. And I think the superhero movies will be that way too.

So do you think that there will be superhero fatigue?

Yes I think if there is too much of anything, there can be fatigue in that area. And there might be a time where people go, "Oh, another guy in costume running around, I don't need that." I can't talk about any other company, but the people at Marvel are clever enough to do them in such a way that most fans want to see them. Like *Civil War*, to pit two heroes of our superhero teams against each other, that was a clever idea and it worked well. And they keep coming out with new ones like *Deadpool* and so forth. And I think as long as the public is interested, you get those kinds of movies. The public is the ultimate judge and when the public feels like they have had enough, the movies won't rake in as much money and they won't make as many of them.

What's the highest and lowest point of your career?

I think the highest point for me was when that *Spider-Man* comic book sold after my publishers had said how terrible the idea was. And the lowest point was years ago, and Marvel has had a number of different people who have owned the company over the years. Some years ago, I said to whoever was the owner, "We ought to make movies of these characters." And that idiot said to me, "When people don't like the movie, then they won't buy the comic book anymore. So I am not going to take a chance." So we had to wait. DC got there first, but we had to wait until we had somebody who was smart enough to figure we ought to do movies too. So that was the high and the low for me.



SON OF A GUN. IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE A SECRET

When will your Chinese superhero movie, *The Realm Of The Tiger*, come out? When did you hear about that?

It's on the internet.
Son of a gun. It's supposed to be a secret.

[laughs] It is going to star Li Bingbing. And we are working on it, we have a director now and we have a script and it will probably be rewritten, and as

long as it takes to do a movie, that is how long it will be.

So it's happening?
Oh yes. I am not sure that will be the final name. *The Realm* is happening, *The Annihilator* is happening and a couple

of others that we don't have names for that are happening and it's going to be fun.

Are superheroes a kind of mythology for people?

In a sense, yeah, you might say so. The Greek gods had their powers and in fact we are doing a movie about the Greek gods that I can't talk about. But yeah, the answer is yes.

Spider-Man says, "With great power comes great responsibility." If Donald Trump becomes President of the United States would you remind him of that?

I never thought of that, but that might be a good idea. [laughs]

DOCTOR STRANGE, THE NEXT MARVEL MOVIE, OPENS ON 28 OCTOBER.

STAN LEE FAN CLUB

"Stan Lee [brought] his personality to Marvel... they had flaws, and it was that subversive humour that defined Marvel."

Director Jon Favreau

"The strength of Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's creation has always been that *Spider-Man* is one of us."

Director Sam Raimi

"I'd say [Stan] put 'superhero' into the language. *Superman* did it first, but Stan brought the breed to maturity."

Author Tom Wolfe