

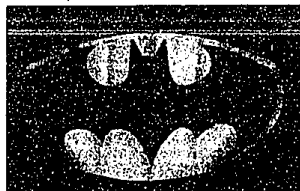
STREET SCENE

Inside **S²**

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Bat at 50: Still 'big' with fans

By Kelih Postler
staff writer

The streets are dark. Tires squeal in some corner of the city, unable to grip the rain soaked pavement. It could be any city — yours, mine. But it's not. No, this time, it's Gotham City. Along one of its main avenues, a woman wrestles with an umbrella that has been grabbed by a gust of wind. It tugs at her arms, gently dragging her into a darkened alley where laughs and heckles suddenly melt into silence. She doesn't see her attackers. They have waited for her — in the shadows. Soon, they are upon her. . . . A winged creature, dressed in black, swoops down from a fire escape. It is huge. Several of the attackers tumble to the ground. They can hear it breathe. "Hey, man it's . . . one of them says. 'It's the Bat!' In an instant, they are gone. Their feet pound the pavement. They are lucky. They escaped. The creature — really only a man — fades back into the night. This is Gotham City, a smoldering hot bed of crime and corruption. It is also home for the legendary crime fighter, Batman.

THIS YEAR marks the 50th anniversary of DC Comics' caped crusader, the Batman. It also highlights an unprecedented wave of popularity for him — a

surge in sales of comic books, T-shirts, posters, and the release of the much anticipated Batman movie. "My friends like him, and I like him because he's a dark character," said Chris True, a 14-year-old Batman fan from Redford Township. But where did it all begin?

Avid Batfans know the answer. They can probably recite it for you religiously. The story began in 1939 when an 18-year-old artist named Bob Kane was asked by the editor of DC Comics to create a character that would rival its Action Comics' Superman. Kane, a fan of pulp magazines and old Zorro movies, sat down one weekend and whipped up a mysterious, cape-draped figure modeled after a bat.

But unlike Superman, Kane's character, named the Batman, would be vastly different. No leaping over buildings or clapping away a volley of bullets. Batman would possess no super powers, nor would be a law-abiding citizen who happened to bag criminals and hand them to the police.

He is a dark, brooding character, obsessed with stopping crime before it destroys Gotham City and its citizens. His alter ego, billionaire Bruce Wayne, is haunted by ghastly visions of his parents — murdered before his eyes when he was only a boy.

That scene, played over in his mind when he is least prepared, was the impetus that launched his career. Driven to avenge his parents' death, Wayne trained his body and mind to become hard, almost indifferent.



JOHN STORMZAND/staff photographer

Doug Henderson of Detroit checks out a free "Batman" poster in a fan magazine. He believes the caped crusader has "that sense of part revenge and a drive for justice regardless of whose toes he has to step on."

HE BECAME the Batman and adopted the black and blue costume (originally black and gray) as a means to frighten criminals. He is a vigilante, driven by revenge.

The Batman, by all accounts, is a man in great pain, whose actions teeter on the edge of psychosis. Criminals push him, but the memories are the real force.

"He's got that sense of part revenge and a drive for justice, regardless of whose toes he steps on," said Doug Henderson, 37, of Detroit. "With him, the end justifies the means, and the end is always justice. Politics don't enter into it."

But why is he so popular? "I think it really ties into what's going on in America today," said John Curtis, manager of Livonia's Classic Movie and Comic Center. "People are sick of crime and drugs and corruption, and I think secretly they'd like to be able to be Batman and fight crime."

Batman works mostly at night. He combats the tops of skyscrapers like a vulture swooping over a tree, waiting for helpless prey. His methods border on criminal acts, but as one fan said recently, "he gets the job done."

Rob Horn, president of Comics Archives Inc. in Detroit, said Batman is so popular because he is different.

"Everybody has some sort of criminal act done to them, and Batman can take action about it," Horn said. "He beats the snot out of people and makes them pay in his own way. I think his vigilante image is what attracts people, even if it is outside the law."

BATMAN'S ETERNAL nemesis is the Joker, a nameless villain who covets crime as much as a normal man covets oxygen. The Joker, too, is a borderline psychotic.

In the comic books, he was a failed stand-up comedian blackmailed into being a criminal. He was set up, fell into a vat of paint used to decorate playing cards and became Bruce Wayne's darker side.

Together, they are shadowy reflections of one another. One obsessed with crime, the other with stopping it. Both have been pushed over the edge.

"I think he fits the times more now as a vigilante, a loner out on the streets," said Joe Rzezniak, 27, of Redford Township. "If you look at the police, they can't seem to do anything right. Even if he is a comic book character, people can still believe in what's right."

"I think Batman always had a different impact than Superman. Superman is an icon, pure," Rodger Shome, owner of the Right Stuff in Westland said. "Batman went through a tragic change when he was a child. I heard someone say once that Bruce Wayne died when his parents died, and he's been Batman ever since. Batman is only playing Bruce Wayne, it's a psychological thing."

"He's a little nuts, schizophrenic, basically," Curtis said.

Fifty years later, Batman is one of comics great success stories. He is enduring because his battles reflect reality — about what average men will do, if hit hard enough.

Batty for 'Batman' business

By Charlene Mitchell
special writer

Pow! Zap! Holy Batman! The dynamic duo of Batman and Robin, along with their foe the Joker are back, but this time instead of being on television, it's "Batman" the movie, now showing at theaters across the country.

But Hollywood producers aren't the only ones smiling about the anticipated millions of bucks expected at the box office. The makers of Batman clothing are also geared up to rake in lots of cash.

From T-shirts, hats and dolls to pajamas and suspenders, "Batman" apparel is where it's at. Early shipments of merchandise focused more

'I couldn't believe it. If I had known this 'Batman' thing was going to cause such a frenzy, I'd have ordered lots more!'

— Cindy Obron-Kahn
Kiddywinks

on adult than kid sizes, an indication that the baby boomers who watched the original TV show and its reruns on television will be the first to buy. "We're getting such great response from all 'Batman' items," said Jackie Gordon, public relations manager for Jacobsons. "We'll prob-

ably have to re-order just to keep up with demand." At Kiddywinks children's store in downtown Birmingham, the "Batman" clothing for little tykes sold out the first week. "I couldn't believe it," said owner Cindy Obron-Kahn. "If I had known

this 'Batman' thing was going to cause such a frenzy, I'd have ordered lots more!"

Not to worry, there are plenty of shops with loads of "Batman" items to choose from. Brody's in West Bloomfield has decorated the entire front window with the merchandise. Even the major discount stores like Mervyn's has a wide array of "Batman" items, including sun visors and boy's underwear.

A fad? A flash in the pan? Well, perhaps . . . but for now "Batman" clothes are the hottest trend going and sales are booming.

One retailer said he's expecting this fall's Halloween costumes to focus on "Batman" characters. When you're hot, you're hot!



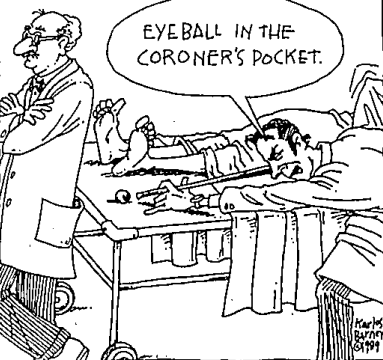
JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer

How about a Joker shirt, or maybe "Batman" boxer shorts (\$13 at Jacobson's), complete with "zap" and "pow" written all over them in hot pink and white.

Warp Factor

Karlos Barney

A SLOW DAY AT THE MORGUE . . .



Say 'YES' to balloons, festivals

By Iris Sanderson Jones
contributing travel editor

Balloons. Bikes. Festivals.

The fun events of summer are coming through my mailbox and piling up on my desk so fast that I may soon disappear under a great mountain of paper — which makes it hard to answer the phone that keeps ringing with questions like: "How do I take a bike tour?" "What should I do on the way to New York?" "When is the balloon festival in Traverse City?"

We've all been waiting a long time for summer, and now we're raring to go. So let's start in Michigan.

The Battle Creek balloon festival is over, but the colored canopies will be flying high over Traverse City on the weekend of the Fourth of July. Two hot air balloons from China will be there, along with 24 American balloon pilots, for the second annual TV 9 and 10 Hot Air Balloon Classic July 1-3.

The festival will be held at Grand Traverse Resort, six miles

north of the city, and at the Cherry Capital Airport. The Chinese were invited by avid balloonist Scott

Lorenz, manager of Plymouth's Mayflower Hotel. If you miss them in TC, they'll be flying high at the

Brighton Hot Air Balloon Festival July 7-9.

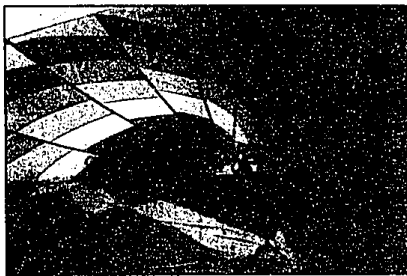
THE TRAVERSE City balloon festival will be launched July 1 at the Cherry Capital Airport with an air show and futuristic exhibits from the Michigan Space Center. The day ends with a laser light show by Image Engineering of Troy. They've done spectacular things for Walt Disney World, the Los Angeles Olympics and the rededication of the Statue of Liberty.

The balloons will lift off at 8:30 a.m. July 1, 3 and 5.

And while we're in northwest Michigan, let's not forget the 33rd annual National Cherry Festival in Traverse City July 8-15, or the 16th annual International Cherry Pit Split in Eau Claire.

Contact Grand Traverse Resort at (818) 935-2100 or the Grand Traverse Convention and Visitors Bureau toll-free at (800) TRAVELERS.

By the way, Grand Traverse Resort is now offering horse-drawn



MICKEY JONES

The colored canopies of hot air balloons will be flying high over Traverse City on the weekend of the Fourth of July for the second annual TV 9 and 10 Hot Air Balloon Classic.

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