

John Byrne

STORYTELLING IN COMICS

"Storytelling" is one of those confusing misnomers we occasionally encounter in the comic-book field. In fact, when we say storytelling, at least in the context of the art, we are talking about something that has very little to do with the over-all telling of the story. It is the job of the writer and artist in tandem to actually tell the story, each proving elements that, together, form a cohesive whole.

Ideally, if the artist does his job of storytelling to the best of his ability he will make life a lot easier for the writer, but when we speak here of storytelling we are not really talking about the artist putting the writer out of work altogether.

No, a better term for what we conventionally call "storytelling" would be the much simpler "clarity". If there is anything like a number one rule in drawing comics, clarity is it. The artist can be as clever, and dynamic and cosmic as he likes, but he must never be so clever, nor so dramatic, nor so cosmic that he confuses the reader, even for an instant.

The language of comics depends heavily on a willing suspension of disbelief. You have to allow that **SUPERMAN** can leap tall buildings with a single bound, or that **SPIDER-MAN** can cling to the walls of those buildings. You know in your heart that such things are absolutely preposterous, but you willingly accept

them, for the sake of the story. It's rather like reading an old science-fiction story. The science may be all bolloxed up, based on our present knowledge, but if you're out to enjoy HG Wells or Jules Verne you generally overlook this. Of course, if Mr. Wells or Mr. Verne tells you the sun rises in the west, or that the moon is triangular they cross that invisible line, and willing suspension of disbelief vanishes in the face of untruth.

Patent absurdity we can deal with. Untruth is another matter.

So, too, the job of the comic-book artist is to help in the telling of our own Great Lie, to not do anything that will cause the reader to pause to think about what he is seeing. If the reader has to pause to think, you've lost him, because you have allowed him to step outside the comic-book world, and that will allow reality to intrude. Few comic-book stories can withstand too many intrusions of reality.

This is not to say we cannot write and draw stories which will cause the reader to think. Rather we don't want him thinking in the wrong way. We don't want him trying to figure out what the heck is going on in any picture (unless we are being deliberately obscure as part of the story, in which case we are obliged to let the reader know, somehow, that we are doing this. The "Mysterious Shadowy

Figure" is a classic example of deliberate obscurity. The reader knows he is being kept in the dark for a reason, and while he may delight in trying to guess the identity of the mysterious shadowy figure, doing so will not pull him out of the story.)

So, onward with trying to explain what **STORYTELLING** is all about, as far as being a hotshot comic artist. My experience is that the best way to show someone how to do something **RIGHT** is by showing them how not to do it **WRONG**. To this end I've prepared a number of cartoons illustrating mostly how not to do it. Since this chapter is not called "How to Draw Like **JOHN BYRNE**" I've kept these pictures childishly simple. They represent the misadventures of **CAPTAIN EXAMPLE**, and with them we should be able to get a clear picture, so to speak, of comic-book storytelling.

Let's begin with one of the most glaring errors most novice artists make, that of improperly cropping figures.

Now, obviously it is impossible at best, and boring at worst, to populate a comic book with nothing but full-figures. It's very nice to see the tops of peoples heads, and their hands, and their feet, and all of their capes (if they're wearing capes), but every so often we want to zoom in for a close-up of our heroes left eyeball, or his hand, or his foot, or maybe just a shot from the waist up. It is fine, and recommended to do so. The trick is in picking just when and how we zoom in.

Let's take a standard comic-book shot, the flying pose. I have illustrated three ways to do this wrong. **FIG 1** is a flying pose only if we say so. That Captain Example is flying may be clear to the artist, and even the writer, but if this is the first shot of him flying this issue, and unless we have a real good reason for chopping him off at the waist like this, he could be just leaning out of a window. There's nothing wrong with this shot *per se*, and I've done many like it, but almost never as the first shot of a figure flying. First we need a good, clear **ESTABLISHING SHOT**, with all the figure's various limbs and accoutrements inside the panel borders. Having clearly established that

Captain Example is not leaning out a window, or standing on a rooftop, or hanging from a helicopter I am free to zoom in for a cropped shot.

FIG 2 suffers from the same complaint. This is fine for showing that Cap is leaving in a hurry, but not as a first shot. There aren't enough comic readers who are heavily into feet to justify this kind of shot as an establishing shot.

FIG 3 makes another basic mistake. This time Cap is nicely clear of the panel borders, and we can see that he's not suspended by ropes. Unfortunately, we cannot see that this is not a giant Captain Example statue on top of a building. So be careful with the figure in relation to the background, too. If he's making contact with the wrong background objects he can look like he's attached to them. Photographers have to be on the look-out for the same thing, in principal. It's all too easy to create a picture of Uncle Fred with a telephone pole growing out of the top of his head.

Be careful, too, how you pick your angles. In **FIG 4** Cap is also nicely clear of panel borders etc, as he flies into the air away from his faithful companion Brenda. But, is he really flying? If you've never read the adventures of Captain Example you might, for just a moment, wonder if he has become a giant, or if Brenda has shrunk.

Improper cropping doesn't only apply to flying figures, either. Take a look at **FIG 5**. There is no reason in the world that Cap should be chopped off at mid foot, or that he should be reaching beyond the panel borders. The imaginary camera could have been backed up a few feet, and Cap would have been shown in all his glory.

One of the best ways to remember how not to crop figures is this: Whenever you crop a figure, imagine that someone is going to crop you in the same way. It won't take long to get it right.

While we're on the subject of keeping the figures clear of the panel borders, take a peek at **FIG 6**. Cap is meeting Brenda for lunch, and in his usual super-heroic fashion he is calm and cool, unlike his cringing alter-ego Stanley Schnook. He is, however, also breaking what would be a hard-and-fast rule, if we could sub-

Fig 1

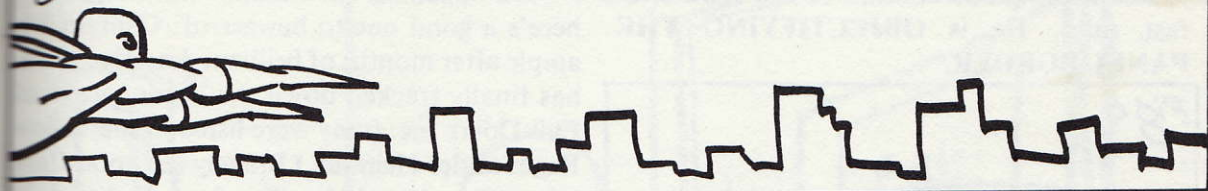


Fig 2

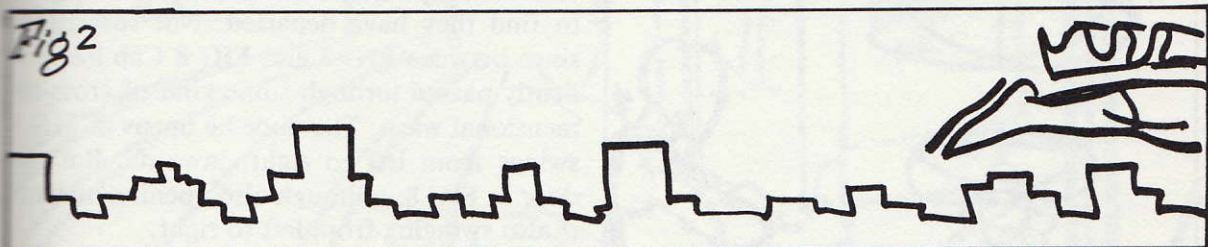


Fig 3

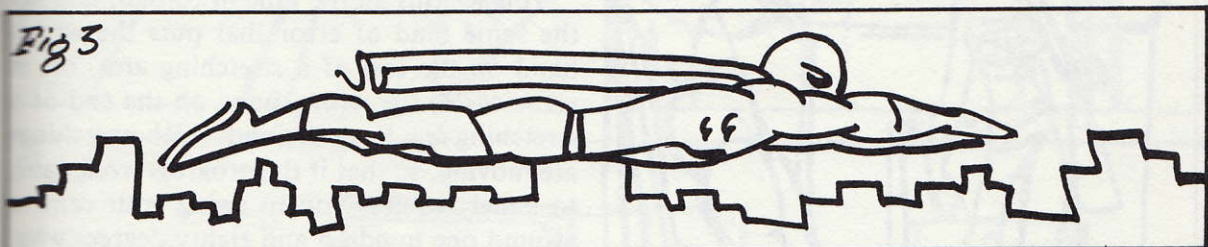


Fig 4

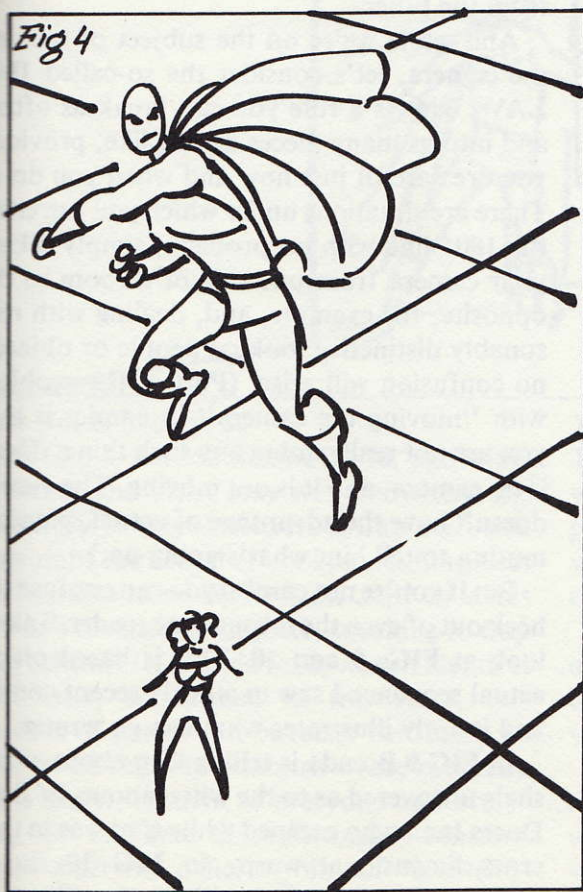
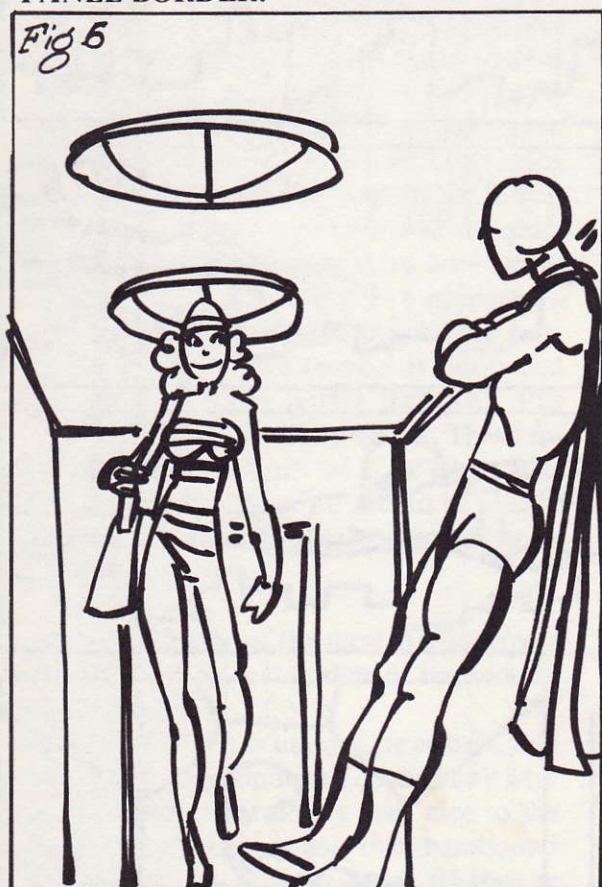


Fig 5

ject something like artwork to any hard-and-fast rules. He is **OBJECTIFYING THE PANEL BORDER**.



Don't fall into this trap. The panel borders are not really there. Our heroes do not walk and fly about with a constantly shifting white area surrounding them. Nor will they ever bump into the panel border this side of Fred Hembeck.

What Cap is doing is both leaning against, and standing on the panel border. This is one of these little subconscious things that reminds the reader that he's in a comic book, that these people aren't real.

This is also a "rule" honored more in the breach than the observance. Old pros and new kids alike do it all the time, and as no one really complains it's hard to say this is absolutely **WRONG**. But if you can avoid it, by so simple a thing as a slight shift in perspective, or the arbitrary laying in of a black space to separate the hero's feet from the panel border. . . Well, it won't totally compromise your artistic integrity to avoid it, will it?

And speaking of changes in perspective, here's a good one to beware of: Captain Example after months of brilliant detective work, has finally tracked down the headquarters of Evil-Doers Inc. (they were listed in the Yellow Pages under Heinous.) Bravely the good Captain walks up to their office door, and steps in to find they have departed. Not surprising, since between **FIG 7** and **FIG 8** Cap has evidently passed through some kind of cross-dimensional warp. The door he opens in **FIG 7** swings from left to right, inwards. But the door in **FIG 8**, although also opening inward, is also swinging from left to right.

You see this all the time in comics, and it's the same kind of error that puts the wrong hand on the end of a stretching arm, or, in some cases, the wrong hand on the end of a stretching leg. Keep in mind which way things are moving, so that if the progress from panel to panel requires you to swing your camera around one hundred and eighty degrees what we see from one side will match what we saw from the other.

And while we're on the subject of moving the camera, let's consider the so-called **180° LAW**. This is a rule you can break as often, and into as many pieces as you like, provided you are careful just how and when you do it. There are situations under which you can cross the 180° line with no problem, simply taking your camera from one side of a room to the opposite, for example, and, dealing with reasonably distinctive looking people or objects, no confusion will arise. (Part of the problem with "moving the camera" in comics is that you are not really doing any such thing. There is no camera, and it is not moving. The viewer doesn't have the advantage of actual, physical motion to tell him what's going on.)

But if you're not careful you can confuse the heck out of even the most astute reader. Take a look at **FIGS 9** and **10**. This is based on an actual sequence I saw in a fairly recent comic, and it aptly illustrates what can go wrong.

In **FIG 9** Brenda is telling Cap about a clue she's uncovered as to the whereabouts of Evil-Doers Inc., who escaped while Cap was in that cross-dimensional warp. In **FIG 10** she is continuing with this exposition, after Cap says



a few words back in 9.

But Cap is not visible in **FIG 10**, and while the writer and artist may well know that the camera has simply shifted from Cap's left side to his right the actual effect is something else. Has Brenda turned her back on Cap? Or is this Brenda's identical twin sister, speaking to Cap from behind? (If Brenda really *has* an identical twin sister, established in this story, this sequence of panels can be *really* confusing.)

Try at all times to establish where everyone is in a panel, relative to everyone and everything else, and keep that relationship constant as you shift the panel's point of view. (Remember the graffiti Terry Austin put all over the walls of that teen-age drug-den in the

X-Men? The only reason that worked is that Terry kept the same graffiti appearing where it was established from panel to panel. If the graffiti had changed we wouldn't have known where anyone was, or where the camera was relative to them.)

The easiest way to deal with this is to simply avoid taking your camera across that 180° degree line until you are so brilliant at this that you will absolutely never get it wrong.

Speaking of moving the camera, we can also tilt the camera, can't we? But where and when we do so can have an important effect on the viewer's perceptions of this mini-reality we're trying to generate.

Look at **FIG 11**.

Fig 9



Fig 10



Is there a good reason for this room to be tilted relative to the viewer? Is it **REALLY** tilted? Or is this just for dramatic effect. If it's for dramatic effect you'd better look for ways of subliminally telling the reader this (hanging stuff is good). And you'd better not do it too often. My own early work is nothing **BUT** tilted shots, and it's confusing as all get out to look back on it from my wiser vantage now.

Something else to consider in much the same context is what we think of as "normal" in our world. Tilted panels can be confusing because we do not normally view the world with our heads tipped to one side. By the same token, we *do* normally read from left to right, and that can generate other problems, storytellingwise.

See **FIG 12**. Beautiful Brenda has been captured by the villainous lackeys of Evil-Doers Inc., and they are going to hurl her from Whataspan Bridge if Cap doesn't get there in time. Unfortunately, Cap was exposed to his dread nemesis, Waxy Yellow Buildup, and has lost his flying powers. Fortunately he's still got

super-speed, and so he races across town to Brenda's aid.

Or does he?

Multi-figure shots are rapidly becoming a staple of comics, and they are creating their own problems vis storytelling. Because of our habit of reading from left to right the multiple figures of Captain Example shown in this **FIG** can, rather than showing the reader how Cap is racing across town, do just the opposite. These images are moving to the right, away from Cap's back, and can easily give the impression that he is running backwards.

Like most of the **RULES** I've listed, this one also falls under the break-it-only-with-great-caution guide. Don't hesitate to do all the multi-figure shots you want. Just remember how the eye moves, and set your camera accordingly.

SIDE-BAR: I've made a number of references to the imaginary camera thus far, and in some of the classes in drawing I've taught I've found that such a reference can occasionally confuse the pupil. Obviously we are not talk-

ing about a real camera. We do not have to consider ourselves as being physically present, clicking away like mad, tripping over lamps, chairs, bookcases, crashing into walls, or dying of oxygen starvation deep in space.

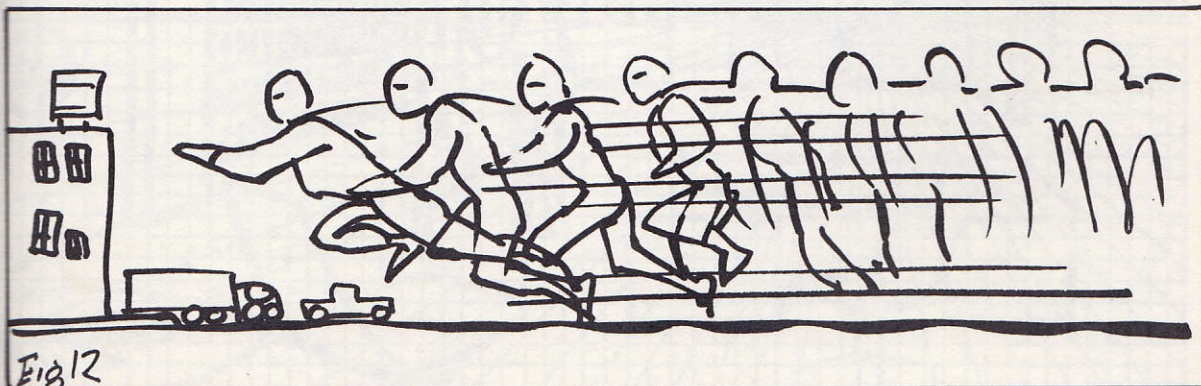
We, the artists, are not there. Only the participants are there. The camera is not real, and can pass freely through walls, floor, doors, parts of people or their costumes, or whatever. I recently did a sequence of the villain **ANNIHILUS** holding up at arm's length the Victim of the Month, **ALICIA MASTERS**. It was a tight shot from behind Annihilus, and, if I had been treating my camera as a real object, his huge, leather wings would have been in the way, blocking most of the action. For the sake of the shot I simply made his wings go away from that panel, but I was careful to crop the shot in just such a fashion that I did not have to show where his wings should have been.

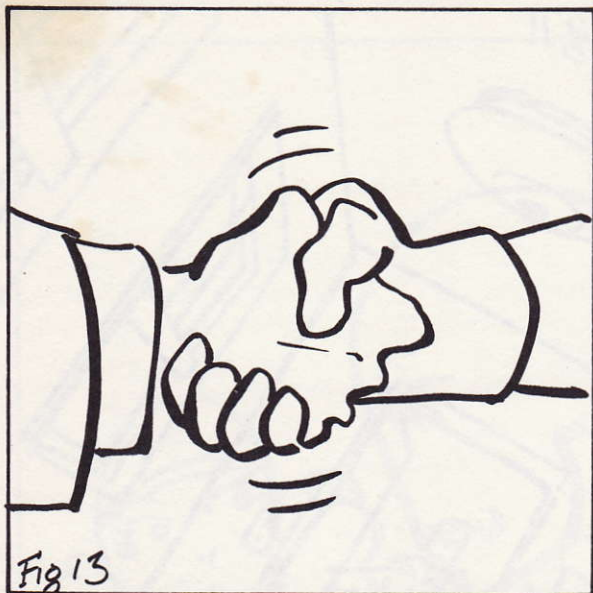
You can do the same with walls, buildings, furniture, people, or whathaveyou, needing only to avoid instances where whatever it is we're looking "thru" actually intersects with the "front" of the picture, the imaginary sheet of glass that prevents everything from spilling out of the panel into your lap.

Sometimes it can be the simplest things that trip us up when it comes to storytelling. We're so used to Jim Starlin, or Neal Adams, or Michael Golden giving us great vistas or cosmic scope, or Frank Miller giving us disgusting close-ups of smelly feet, that we forget that ol'debbil Establishing Shot. Before they get cosmic, before they get disgusting, the good artists give us the who, what, and where. Sometimes the why. If they're real good maybe even the when.



But the first three always. Let's illustrate with a simple, boring situation, two guys shaking hands. **FIGS 13 and 14** illustrate the two most extreme ways not to do it. **FIG 13** is not quite so wrong as **14**. You can start with a tight shot in a situation like this, if you're planning to pull back to that establishing shot sometime in the immediate future, say within two panels. The other longshot is a trifle extreme, and





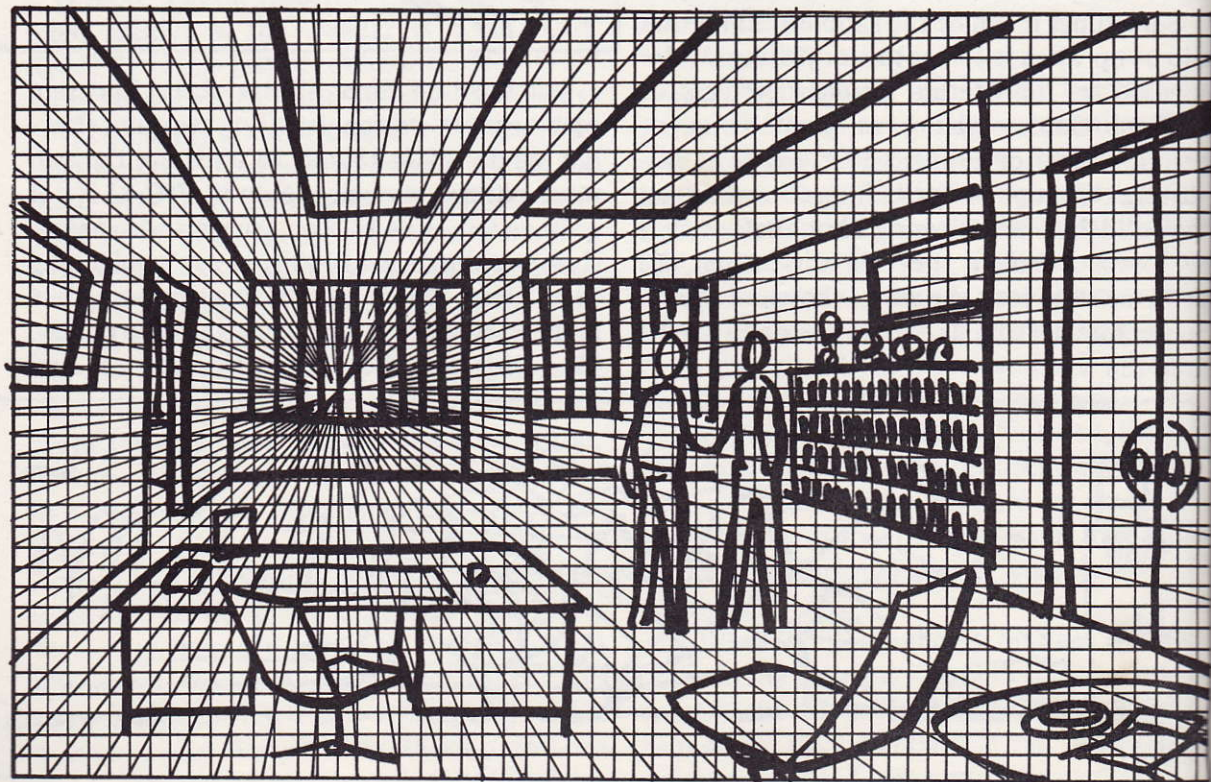
Jack Kirby is the only man on earth who's ever made it work. Any longshot that takes us out of view of the participants is wrong, though, if our intent is to show these guys shaking hands.

I've included the big shot of **HOW TO DO IT RIGHT** for a couple of reasons. First to show the grid system I stole from Walt Simonson, and which has shaved all kinds of time off my page-speed. This does fall somewhat under the heading of How To Draw Like **ME**, but



what the hey, you paid your nickel, you get your nickel's worth.

Laying in, very lightly, in pencil, a grid setting up your desired perspectives, can greatly speed up your work, since it allows you to rough in your walls, floors, furniture, people, etc. freehand, only later tightening with a ruler if necessary. Keep the guide lines light, so as not to confuse an inker or finisher, but try it, and see what it does for you.



Second, and more importantly, this is a good example of an Establishing Shot, showing clearly the two guys shaking hands, the room they're in, and their relationship within the room to each other and the objects around them. With this out of the way we are free to let our camera roam for all kinds of fun shots.

I might touch here on something else that has a little more to do with the actual telling of the story. Let's say these two guys shaking hands are Captain Example's father, the crusading District Attorney, Anthony Example, and the syndicate crime boss Luigi Fettucini, who DA Example is out to nail. Fettucini has come solely and wholly to kill DA Example, and in fact this is page one of **CAPTAIN EXAMPLE #1** (see Overprice Street Guide page 159078), so we've never seen either of these guys before. And we're not going to see a whole lot of DA Example, either. By panel three of page two he's going to be dead meat, and young Stan will have a **MISSION**.

A good writer will make sure that, although DA Example will only be alive for a page and a half, tops, he will be something more than a two dimensional springboard for our hero's adventuring.

He will make sure that DA Example is real to us, so that when Fettucini sticks a shiv into him next page we will **CARE**. And a good artist can help.

This is DA Example's office. He's worked a lot of hard years to get here, and he didn't just move in yesterday. In other words, the office should look lived-in. Few things bother me more in the work of novice comic artists than the sparseness of clutter in their backgrounds. Know when to stop, by all means. Don't make

the background so busy it overpowers the figures, or diminishes the apparent depth of field, but let's try as hard as we can to give the impression someone has a life in this room. Let's think for a moment who DA Example is, what his life has been like, what his interests might be.

If there are pictures on the wall, what are they pictures of? If we see the top of his desk, what does he have there? Picture of the wife and kids? A shopping list tucked under his blotter? A pen set with a commemorative inscription?

If there are magazines on the table, what are they? Hustler, or Newsweek? Does he have books? Does he have plants?

Make him real. He's gonna be dead in four panels, and it's got to be important enough for Captain Example to be born out of it.

And this is true in every picture you draw. Sure, some of them have no backgrounds, and some of them are necessarily sparse, but when the background is there we must believe it, for it is one of the major contributors to the verisimilitude that helps us with that ever-important Willing Suspension of Dis-belief.

If Captain Example flies through a city without garbage in the streets there better be a reason there isn't any garbage, or we won't believe it.

Verisimilitude. The second most important thing after Clarity.

And that's as good a place as any to end, right back where I started:

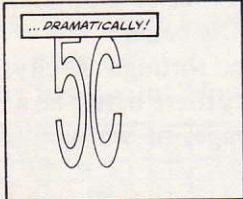
CLARITY.

CLARITY.

CLARITY.

Good luck.

Two pages demonstrating the importance of incidental detail in establishing the identity of a character. Even a first-time reader will get a strong sense of who that lady is from such minor details as the “j” mug, the stuffed “Garfield”, the funny animal calendar, even the cozy over the tea pot.

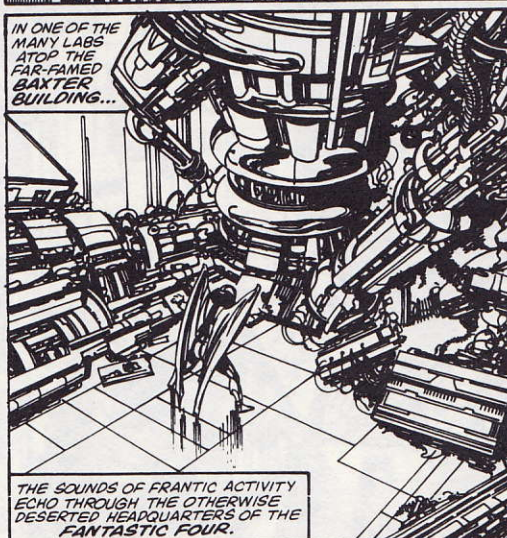


AND, IF "MEANWHILE" HAS ANY VALUE WHEN PASSING FROM ONE DIMENSION TO ANOTHER...

ON OUR OWN PLANET EARTH, DEEP IN THE HEART OF PERHAPS HER GREATEST CITY...



IN ONE OF THE MANY LABS ATOP THE FAR-FAMED BAXTER BUILDING...



THE SOUNDS OF FRANTIC ACTIVITY ECHO THROUGH THE OTHERWISE DESERTED HEADQUARTERS OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR.

DONE! I HAVE STRIPPED AWAY THE POWER-CORE TO THE NEGATIVE ZONE ACCESS PORTAL, AND ADAPTED THE GENERATORS.

I NEED NOW ONLY CLOSE A SINGLE SWITCH...



EYES NOT REMOTELY HUMAN MARK THEIR PROGRESS, AND GROW TIRED...

ENOUGH!



AGAIN MUST I CONTENT WITH THE CREATURES OF THIS TINY WORLD. THEY WHO, ALONE IN ALL CREATION, HAVE STYMIED MY WILL.*



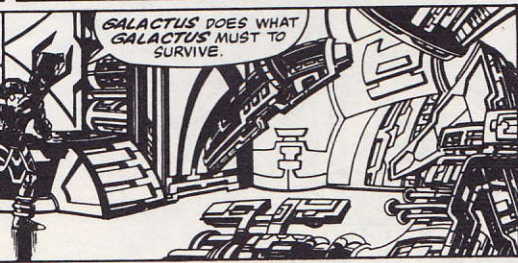
YET DOES GALACTUS WEARY OF THIS ENDLESS CONFLICT, FOR WHAT MORE DO I DO THAN THAT WHICH ANY LIVING CREATURE MUST?

*MOST RECENTLY IN DAZZLER # 10-11 AND ROM # 26, 27. -- STAR-SPANNING SALICRUP.

HE MOVES THROUGH THE VAST CHAMBERS OF HIS SHIP, AND A WEIGHT BEYOND MEASURE SEEMS TO PRESS UPON HIM.



GALACTUS DOES WHAT GALACTUS MUST TO SURVIVE.



Two kinds of establishing shots. The long (here very long) shot, moving in to a close-up. This is important when segueing from bizarre locals to reality, or vice versa.

The reverse, a "pull-back-to-reveal", starting with a close-up, ending with a nice, clear establishing shot.

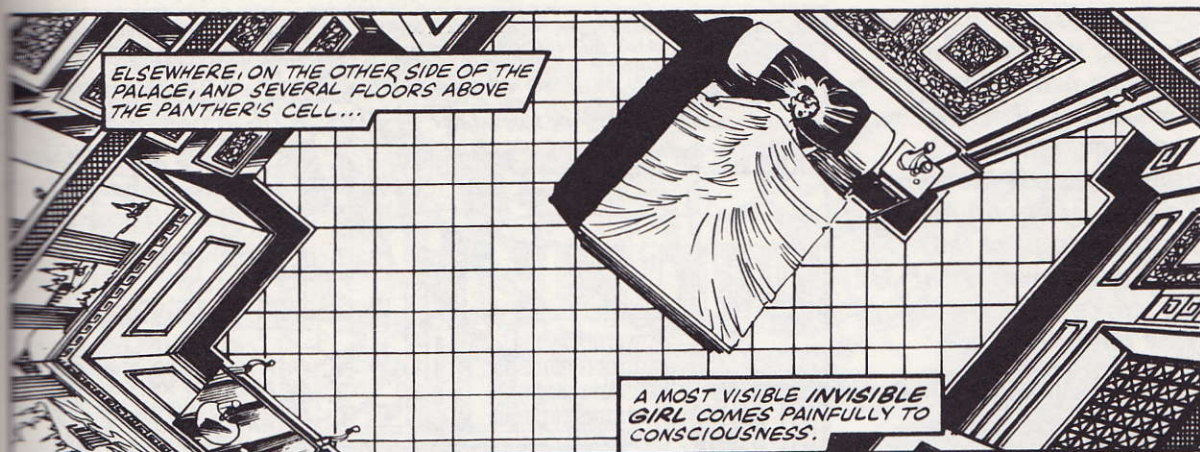
A full page splash—the ultimate establishing shot. Do this and you can cheat quite a bit on the backgrounds on subsequent pages, provided you remember that such a shot must contain all the necessary information the reader will need to carry him for those next few pages, and that, should you cut away to another scene you will need to re-establish this shot.



NO MAN OR WOMAN
WAS WITHOUT
EMPLOYMENT. NO
CHILD WENT TO BED
HUNGRY.

UNTIL ZORBA'S
FOLLOWERS STIRRED UP
DISCONTENT IN FACTIONS
OF THE POPULACE, THERE
WAS NO CRIME, NO CIVIL
STRIFE.

LOOK UPON MY
NATIVE COUNTRY
NOW, OUTLANDERS!
LOOK, AND TELL ME
WHAT YOU SEE!

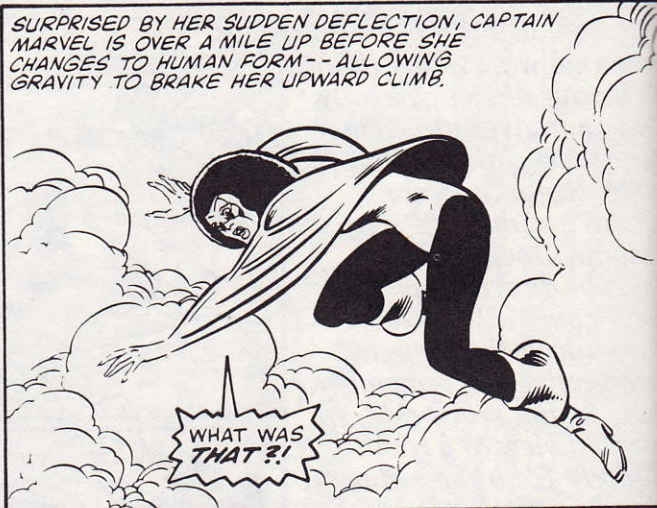
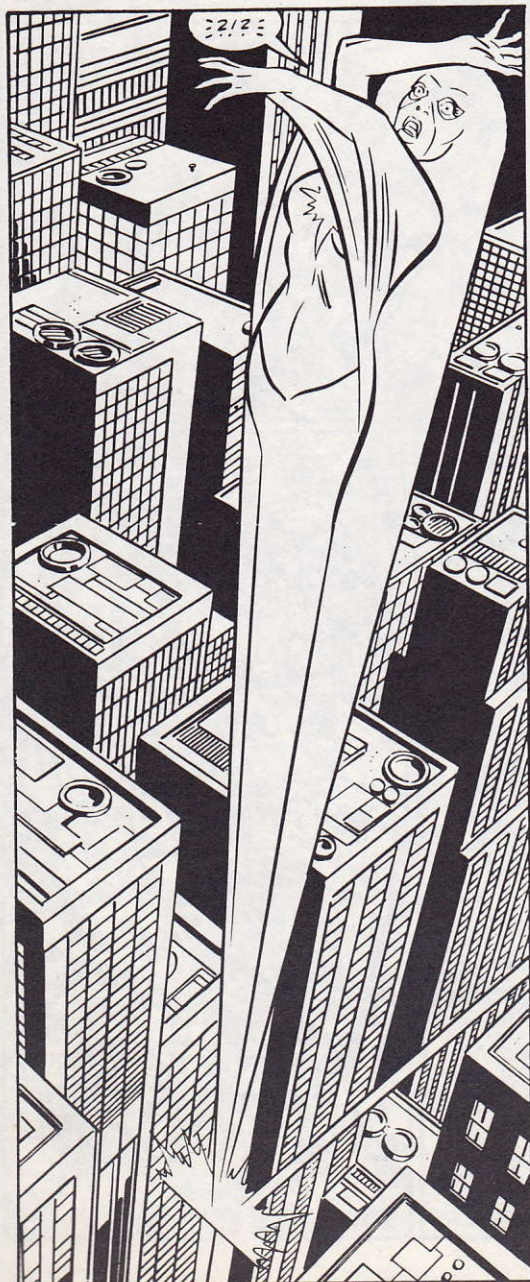
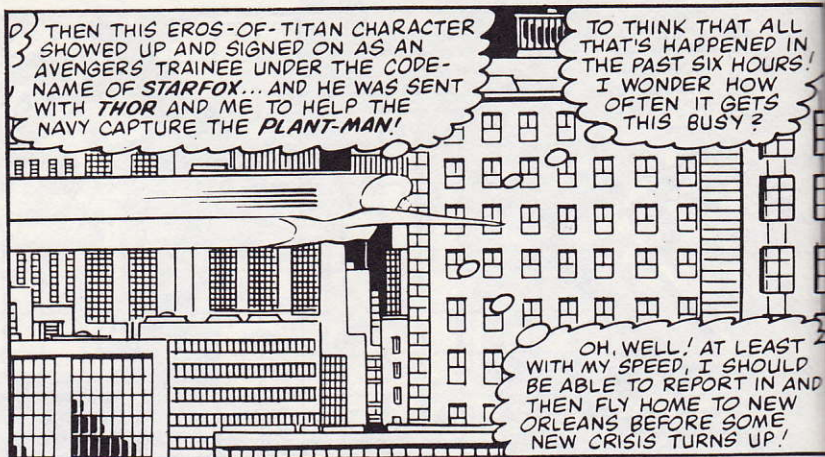


The type of establishing shot that works only if you pick your angles carefully. This shot gives us all the necessary information as to size and decor in this room, and our heroine's location, but it can be disorienting if the "camera" is too high, too low, or angled incorrectly. Just remember that, in the real world, our first view of a room is rarely from the ceiling!

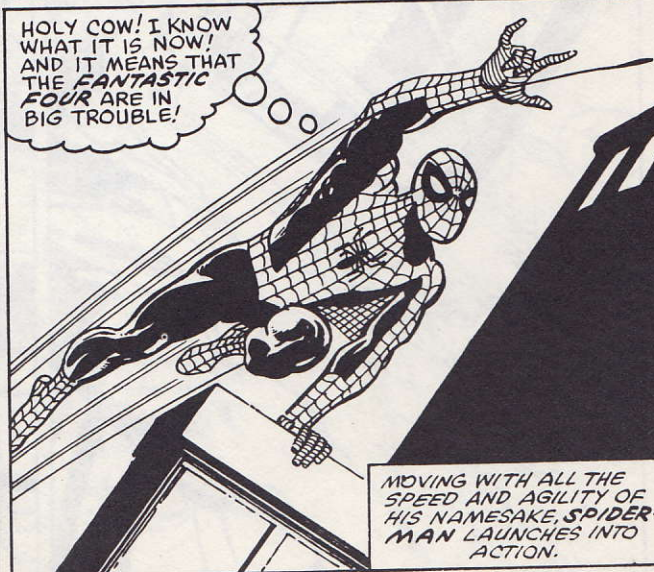
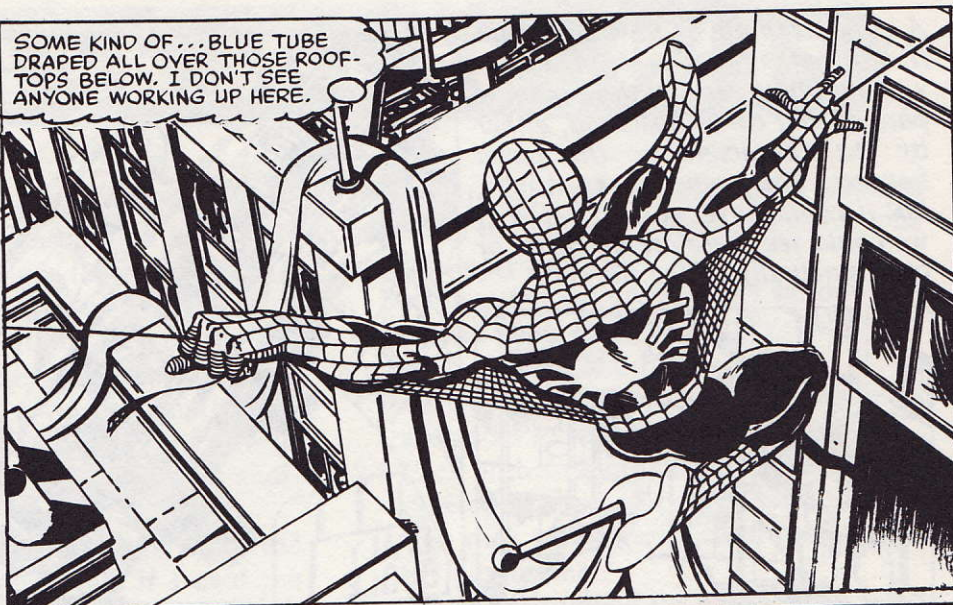


The importance of establishing shots cannot be overstressed, especially in a fight scene. At some point, preferably close to the start, fix in the readers mind those important elements of location and character positioning. (Notice how panels 2 & 3 also break the 180° rule. Oops!)

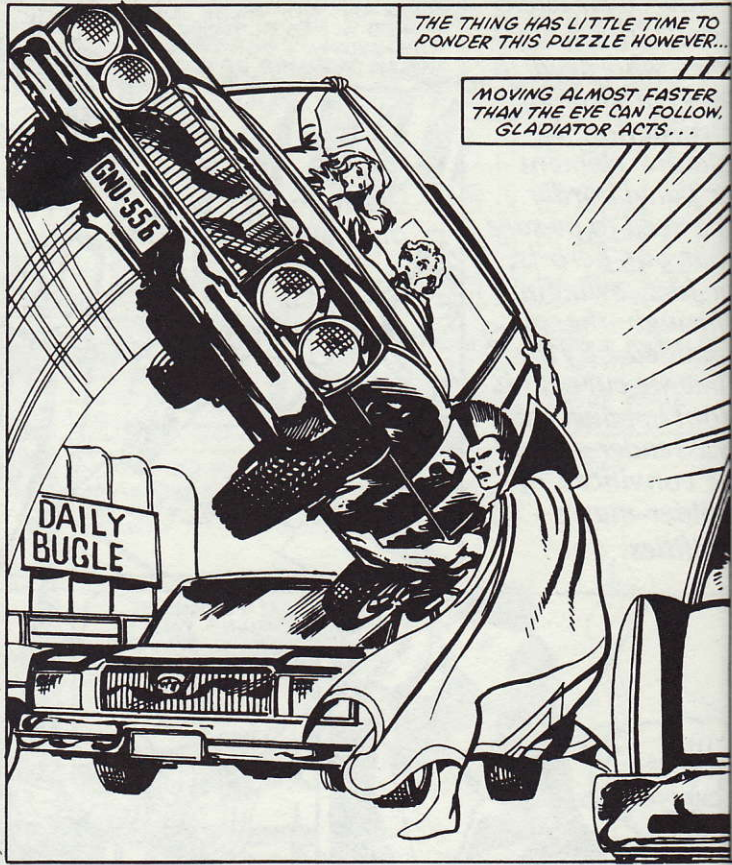
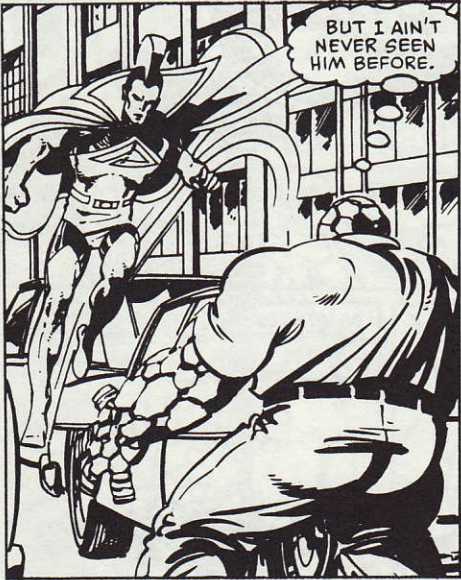
Keeping flying figures clear of obstruction. Captain Marvel leaves a visible trail when she flies, so it's almost impossible to keep all of her on panel. But the moment that trail goes away (Pnl 3) we make sure she's free and clear.



Flying characters aren't the only ones who need to be kept clear of obstruction, be it picture element or panel border. We need to be sure that our hero is, in fact, swinging through the air unaided. By the time we cut off his foot in panel six, the reader should be convinced of Spider-man's abilities.



A good example of how not to do it. Notice that in all three panels involving the tossing of the car some part of that car is obscured, either by the characters or the panel borders. This scene works alright, but it could have worked better if we could see there are no ropes or chains actually lifting the car.



FRANK McLAUGHLIN

Quite often people we know (friends, relatives, etc.) become an inspiration for a caricature-type cartoon usually for a birthday or a get-well card. I'm sure you've been asked to make up one of these at one time or another and probably had a great deal of fun doing it. I get a big kick out of drawing my impressions of a close friend and often wondered how to apply this in order to appeal to a wider audience.

When I first met **Billy Dee** and the rest of the **Big Edsel Band** I realized that if I used the members of the band as they really look and act, it just might work. The trick would be to convey my impressions to the reader of a comic book.

In a lot of cases we are hard-pressed to

"hang our hat" on an outstanding physical feature of the person because he or she may be very ordinary-looking.

Such was not the case when I sat down to draw these guys. Each of them was easy and fun to do for two reasons:

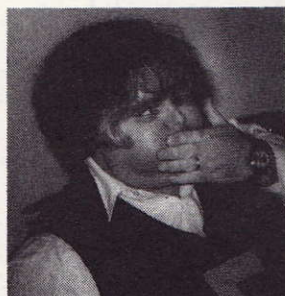
- 1.) Each had many distinct and separate characteristics to work with.
- 2.) Each of them was quite different from the others in looks and personality and I saw that they would easily contrast or "play off" each other.

It was a natural all the way.

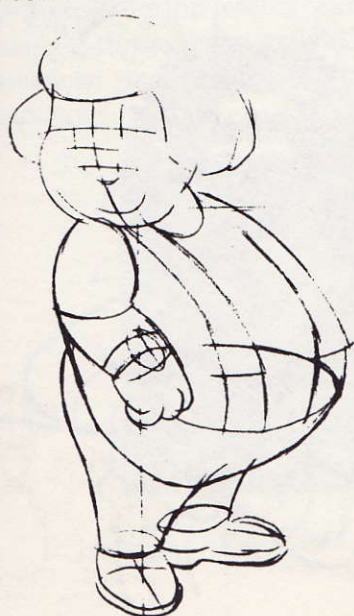
Immediately I began to draw up each one and assign him a role or a framework in which to exist.

My first impressions were as follows:

Billy Dee.—Lead singer, probably the easiest to do. Short, round, short arms and legs and he sports a buster brown type haircut. It was easy to exaggerate his round face by moving all his facial features toward the center. A small mouth and a small slightly-up-turned nose complemented large, half closed eyes. With a little fudging here and there I had him cold.



BILLY





ARTIE



Guitarist **Artie Ebert**.—almost as easy to capture. I just had to be careful not to make him too heavy-looking. (In contrast to **Billy**), curly mop of hair, ever-present shades and a distinctive nose and chin which I of course exaggerated. Corny-looking sport shirt and a placid non-expressive look and I had him.

Tom Seeseburg, drummer.—Tom is a big teddy-bear of a guy who certainly marches to the beat of a different drummer, to say the least. To give you an idea of what I mean, Tom ate thirty chili dogs and smoked an old wicker chair over the weekend. He wears his mustard well and occasionally ties his shoes but will never make the list of the ten best-dressed men in America. I re-named him **Gonzo DeBlurr**, the world's fastest drummer. Look at his odd hair-do and the shape of his face. Not as easy to deal with as the first two, but still no major problems.



GONZO



Allan Wallace, guitarist. — tall, lanky and much more outgoing than the others. His hair-do is a combination afro and D.A. in the back. Again a very distinctive feature. Re-named **Flash** in keeping with his personality. Oddly enough, Allan is basically shy and quiet when he's not performing but I chose to ignore this and go with his stage personality instead.

Up to this point things were going very smoothly and I felt confident it would be easy to complete my model sheets and script ideas and make a presentation to the prospective publishers. I should have known better. The two remaining band members left the band and I began hearing bad things about the big-foot cartoon market.

Newsstand sales were down and the direct sales market tends to appeal to the super-hero field. At this point I decided to include super heroes and design the book as a one-shot for the Christmas market. As of now, veteran writer **Joe Gill** and I are feverishly working as a team to set things right and make it work. Only time will tell whether the Big Edsel Band will finally become a regular comic book, but I must admit it's been a heck of a lot of fun and hard work. Wish us luck.

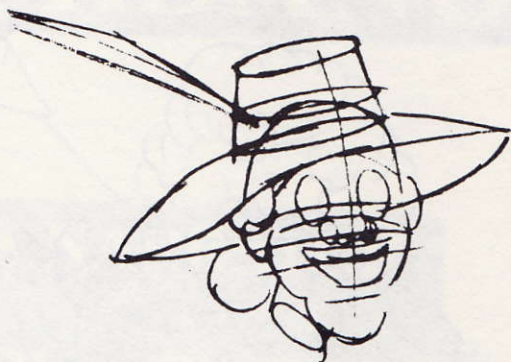
After loosely putting the shapes together of Billy's caricature on tracing paper, I began to tighten up the drawing by placing another sheet of tracing paper on top of the first one and refining the drawing. I did this three or four times until I had what I wanted and then transferred the top tracing onto good board by tracing it through on the light box. I used this procedure on each of the remaining band members.



FLASH

In the group drawing I tried to keep each individual in character and yet show a relationship amongst them.

I did many thumbnail drawings first until I was completely satisfied with the composition before I tightened up the final pencil drawing.





Frank McLaughlin

Known primarily in the comics industry as an inker, he has "ghosted" for strip artists as well as his own strip "Tennis Tips" with player Stan Smith. Frank has produced many commercial comics through his company, Quick-draw Studios, as well as many other diverse projects dealing with film strips, slide presentations and magazine illustrations.