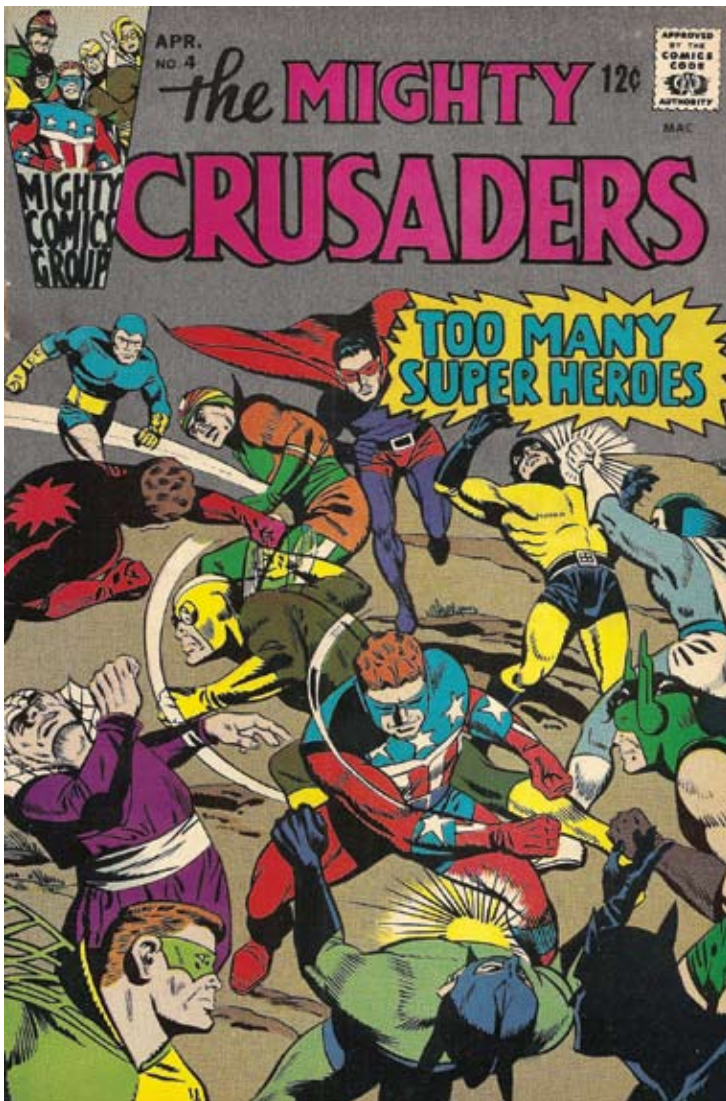


“Too Many Super Heroes” doesn’t really do this group justice

MILJ’s Silver Age revivals

by **CRAIG SHUTT**



MILJ’s Golden Age heroes joined in *Mighty Crusaders* #4 for a stupendous display of overcrowding called “Too Many Super-Heroes!”

Dear Mr. Silver Age,

I’m a big fan of *The Fly* and *Fly Girl*, and I understand they were members of a super-hero team. Do you know who else was a member?

Betty C.
Riverdale

Mr. Silver Age says: I sure do, Bets, and you’ll be happy to hear that a few of those stalwart super-heroes are returning to the pages of DC’s comic books. The first to arrive are *The Shield*, *The Web*, *The Hangman*, and *Inferno*. They’re being touted as the heroes from Archie Comics’ short-lived *Red Circle* line of the 1980s, but they all got their start much earlier than that, including brief appearances in the Silver Age. During those halcyon days, they all were members of (or at least tried out for) *The Mighty Crusaders*! And, if the new adventures prove popular, there are plenty more heroes awaiting their own revival.

The *Mighty Crusaders*, Archie’s response to the mid-1960s success of super-hero teams, got their start in *Fly Man* #31 (May 65). The team consisted of *The Shield*, *Black Hood*, *The Comet*, *Fly Man* (né *The Fly*), and *Fly Girl*. The first three were revived versions of Golden Age characters, while the latter two starred in their own Silver Age series.

The heroes teamed up for several issues and then began individual back-up adventures through #39. They also starred in seven issues of *Mighty Crusaders* starting with #1 (Nov 65) and then took over *Fly Man* in various combinations, when it became *Mighty Comics* with #40 (Nov 66).

The four revived heroes had been created in the Golden Age, when the publisher was known as *MLJ Comics* (for the first initials of publishers *Morris Coyne*, *Louis Silberkleit*, and *John Goldwater*). Here’s a quick rundown on their origins:

The Shield: *The Shield* arrived in *Pep Comics* #1 (Jan 40). The first patriotic hero, he had an impressive run, headlining in *Pep* until #65 (Jan 48) and also starring in *Shield-Wizard*

#1-13 from Summer 1940 to Spring 1944 as well as a few other MLJ comics.

This hefty career resulted from Joe Higgins, an FBI agent, using his scientist father's special formula to enhance six portions of his body: the Sacrum (or spinal center), Heart, Innervation (or nervous system), Eyes, Lungs, and Derma (or skin). Put them all together, they spell S.H.I.E.L.D. His costume was indestructible.

He was not the hero we met in *Fly Man* #31 (May 65), when The Shield helped The Fly defeat The Spider. But he kept his origin a secret.

We learned in *Mighty Crusaders* #1 that this Shield was Bill Higgins, Joe's son. (Joe had been turned into an iron statue by The Eraser's metalor ion-gun.) When Bill grew up, he donned his dad's suit to avenge him and restore his life. In his first two adventures, he wore a red cowl that reverted to its original blue color with #33. His costume's torso was magnetized and bulletproof, helping deflect bullets. In *Mighty Crusaders* #6 (Aug 68), he also gained the ability to shoot dazzling stars from the emblems across his chest, a handy gimmick that made no sense.

The Shield's key challenge during the Silver Age was holding onto a job. Bad luck and constant super-hero duties made him a pretty awful employee, and his constant job search and failure to retain employment became a running storyline.

The editors admitted he was their sentimental favorite, and he received star treatment. That included being prominently featured on *Fly Man* covers starting with #33 and usually highlighted in a back-up story. In addition to starring in *Mighty Crusaders*, he appeared in *Fly Man* #31-37, #41, #42, #44, #47, and #50.

Just to confuse things, a *second* Shield (with a domino mask) was introduced even before Bill had vowed to avenge his father's heritage. With a set-up suspiciously similar to that of another star-spangled avenger, the oddly named *Double Life of Private Strong* #1 (Jun 59) introduced readers to a somewhat different Shield: the son of a scientist who had taught him to use the untapped reservoirs of his brain. When dirty Reds killed his dad, he was adopted by the Strongs and created his Shield identity to fight commies and crime.

At issue's end, he was drafted into the Army and, in #2 (Aug 59), he began battling evildoers while dodging his irate superior, Sgt. Hardrock. That might sound like a rip-off, except that Private Strong was created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, who knew how to hide a red, white, and blue uniform beneath Army khaki. After his two-issue run, Pvt. Strong continued in Simon and Kirby's *The Fly* #1 (Aug 59) and also in #2 and #4. But when they left the title, Lance's Silver Age career ended.

The Web: The Web first appeared in MLJ's *Zip Comics* #27 (Jul 42) and continued through #38 but then faded into obscurity. We next saw John Raymond, a criminology professor, in *Fly Man* #36 (Mar 66), when an imposter motivated The Web to return to crime-fighting.

Sadly, his wife, Rosie, had made him retire, so John's Silver Age career was devoted to hiding his crime-fighting adventures from his shrewish better half and her mother.

The Web made Silver Age appearances in *Fly Man* #36, #38, #40, #43, #46, and #50, occasionally defeating foes but never avoiding a tongue-lashing from his wife. Ultimately, Rosie gained her own super-identity as Pow-Girl. (I wish I were kidding.) The Web had no real powers, so helping him fight crime wasn't difficult.

The Hangman: First appearing in *Pep* #17 (Jul 41), this grim hero had a different origin. Bob Dickering was the brother of John (The Comet) Dickering. That led crooks to kidnap Bob by mistake. When The Comet arrived to save Bob, John was shot dead! Bob vowed to avenge his brother's cold-blooded murder by becoming the killer's hangman. He used the silhouette of a hangman's noose to strike fear into criminals, who are a superstitious, cowardly ... oh, wait, wrong vengeful crusader.



The Shield was the most prominent MLJ super-hero to be revived, making many appearances after rescuing the title hero in *Fly Man* #31.

In 1959, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby created a new Shield for a two-issue run that continued into their *Adventures of the Fly* comic.



As shown in his origin story in *Fly Man* #36, The Web's return led to battles with many evildoers as well as with Rosie, his wife, who wanted him to retire.



loot. He returned to battle The Shield in #36 and pretended to reform to ambush The Fly (with The Wizard) in #37. The evil duo again battled the team in *Crusaders* #3 and #4, with Hangman disguising himself as The Dragon to battle Fireball, Firefly, and Inferno in the latter.

Then, with no explanation, he returned to heroing in *Mighty Comics* #45 (Apr 67), defeating Falseface, the master of disguise. Hangman returned in #48 (Jul 67) to confront The Prison Phantom, a gorilla-like creature with an odd iron mask. PP terrorized prison inmates until The Hangman confronted him, revealed The Phantom's real identity, and captured him. That ended his Silver Age career.

Inferno, the Flame-Breather: This hero, whose powers are pretty self-explanatory, made his debut in *Zip Comics* #10 (Jan 41) — as a villain. But, when Steel Sterling saved his life in the next issue, he became Steel's sidekick. He graduated to his own strip in *Blue Ribbon Comics* #13 (Jun 41) and continued there until #19.

His Silver Age career was even less auspicious than The Hangman's résumé. He arrived to help battle Hangman in *Mighty Crusaders* #4, riding on a motorcycle with Firefly, and he breathed his fiery breath onto Fireball, which didn't faze the guy. No doubt daunted by all those heroes (and his pitiful performance), Inferno laid low until *Mighty Comics* #50 (Oct 67), when he helped The Web defeat an Inferno imposter and capture a ring of art thieves. That was the final issue, so he went back into hibernation.

Just to confuse things, The Mighty Crusaders battled a powerful alien named Inferno the Destroyer in *Mighty Crusaders* #2 (Jan 66). But he probably was no relation.

Other MLJ heroes returned to check out the Silver Age for at least a few issues' worth of fun. They comprised:

The Black Hood: Beat cop Kip Burland was framed for a robbery after interrupting it, so he put on a black hood to fight crime. That's all it took to be a super-hero in the Golden Age, gang. His battle began in *Top-Notch Comics* #9 (Oct 40), where he ran until #44 (Apr 44), even surviving the name change to *Top-Notch Laugh Comics* with #28 (Jul 42), no mean feat. He also starred in the all-star *Jackpot Comics* #1 (Spring 41) to #9 (Spring 43) as well as the 11 issues of *Black Hood Comics*, which he took over from The Hangman with #9 (Winter 43). And he appeared in a half-dozen *Pep* issues between 1944 and 1947.

The Hood was actually the first Golden Ager to be revived in the Silver Age, providing karate and judo lessons in one-page fillers beginning with *Adventures of the Fly* #26 (Jul 63), taking over from the young Tommy (The Fly) Troy. Those ran through #29, and then he became a

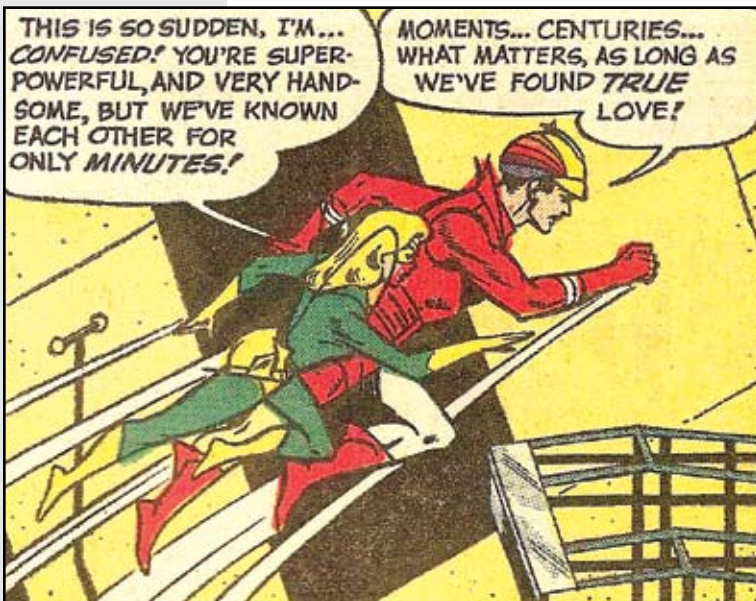


Inferno had a brief but hot Silver Age career, being showcased in only one solo story, in *Mighty Comics* #50, the final issue.

The Hangman's adventures ran through *Pep* #47 (Mar 44), as well as seven issues of *Hangman Comics*, beginning with #2 (Spring 42). Yeah, good luck figuring out Golden Age numbering. He also appeared in *Special Comics* #1 (Winter 41) and *Black Hood Comics* #9-10 (Winter 43-Spring 44), which was the new name for his comic book after he lost his headlining position.

The Hangman had a much less killer career in the Silver Age. He first appeared in *Fly Man* #33 (Sep 65), where he was invited to join The Crusaders. Instead, he decided he'd rather steal the recovered loot. With the help of his mental control over his rope and an additional assist from The Wizard (another revived Golden Ager), he escaped, albeit without the

The Black Hood first appeared in martial-arts fillers and then became a regular teammate to The Fly beginning in *Fly Man* #31.



The Comet made an inauspicious return to super-heroing in *Adventures of the Fly* #30, where he announced he intended to marry Fly Girl.

charter member of The Mighty Crusaders with #31 and continued into *Mighty Crusaders* #1 (Nov 65).

He had five solo adventures in *Mighty Comics*, starting with #41 (Dec 66), when he convinced The Shield to star with him in a movie, not knowing the producers were crooks who turned a hate-ray on the two stars in an effort to make them kill each other.

The Comet: John Dickering (Bob's brother, see The Hangman above) injected an extremely light gas into his veins that allowed him to fly. Kids, don't try this at home. The gas built up in his system until it allowed him to shoot destructive beams from his eyes when he crossed them. Kids, don't ... ah, go ahead and try it. The Comet made his debut in *Pep* #1 (Jan 40) and ran through #17, when he bought the farm to help create the aforementioned Hangman. Yowza!

The Silver Age Comet, as shown in *Mighty Crusaders* #2, was said to be the same guy,

minus that dying thing. While fighting crime in his swell black and red costume in the 1940s, The Comet was transported to the planet Altrox to battle fancy robots. After defeating them and becoming ruler (long story), he created a new costume with a spiffy rainbow-colored helmet-hat and returned to Earth with new powers. Fortunately, he hadn't aged as fast on Altrox, so he was still in fighting trim.

He was introduced in a back-up story in *Adventures of the Fly* #30 (Oct 64), in which he wore a red-and-white costume and announced he'd returned to Earth to marry Fly Girl. Although I admire the sentiment, Fly Girl was suspicious and ultimately cooled his ardor. Rebuffed, he vowed to return to Altrox but he was back next issue, informing The Fly that he'd resigned as Altrox's ruler to help Earthlings. He appeared in the next five issues, until the title split into solo stories. Sadly, he never gained his own solo story, but he was a key teammate in *Mighty Crusaders*.

The Fox: Wanting access to crime scenes before the competition arrived, photographer Paul Patten dressed up in a fox costume, drove the Fox-Car, and lived in the Fox-Den for 19 issues of *Blue Ribbon Comics* starting with #4 (Jun 40). Whatever works, pal.

The Fox made his Silver Age debut in the legendary *Mighty Crusaders* #4, asking for a tryout alongside The Web, Blackjack, and Bob Phantom. As the battle heated up, The Fox stole a kiss from Fly Girl, endearing him to her and infuriating The Fly. Rejected by The Crusaders, he returned in #5 in the Fox-Car, teaming with The Web and Captain Flag as The Ultra-Men. They helped defeat minions from Destruction Extortion Murder Oppression & Nefariousness (DEMON). Then he soloed in *Mighty* #49 (Aug 67) to defeat The Gasser.

Mr. Justice: Said to be the most popular character in *Blue Ribbon Comics*, where he first appeared in #9 (Feb 41), this Spectre-like character was the ghost of Prince James of England, who'd been killed during the 11th century Rogers Rebellion. It takes a heap of boredom to dress up in a costume, domino mask, and white cape, but that probably happens after eight centuries. He continued until title's end in #22 (Mar 42) and also appeared in the all-star *Jackpot Comics*, indicating his popularity.

He returned for a few panels of *Mighty Crusaders* #4, where he intercepted bullets by eating them. He then teamed with The Jaguar and Steel Sterling to become The Terrific Three in *Mighty Crusaders* #5, where he helped defeat The Nameless One. Those appearances led to a solo story in *Mighty Comics* #47, where he battled a giant alien force-being that could disintegrate matter.

Steel Sterling: John (Steel) Sterling headlined *Zip Comics* starting with #1 (Feb 40) and remained its star until the end with #47 (Summer 44). He also appeared in the nine all-star *Jackpot Comics* with Black Hood and Mr. Justice. This sterling career resulted from Steel's cunning calculations that, if he dipped himself in molten metal, he'd gain invulnerability and flying abilities. What do you know? It worked. Kids, leave this to the professionals.

Steel got a big build-up in his Silver Age return, working mostly as a loner. His first action came in a back-up solo story in *Fly Man* #39 (Sep 66), where he battled The Monster-Master and his monstrous minions. He made a cameo appearance in *Mighty Crusaders* #4 to thwart jewel thieves, then returned in the next issue as part of The Terrific Three with Mr. Justice and The Jaguar.

He soloed three more times as the headliner/cover feature in *Mighty Crusaders* #7 (Oct 66), which was devoted to individual heroes, and in *Mighty Comics* #46 and 49, where he defeated The Magnetic Menace and The Deadly Masterminds, a team-up of The Monster Master and Dr. Evil.

The Wizard: So popular that he headlined his own 13-issue team-up series with The Shield (*Shield-Wizard Comics*) in addition to appearing in *Top-Notch Comics* starting with #1 (Dec 39), The Wizard was actually Blaine Whitney, who'd practiced with his mental powers since he was a lad. Called "The Man with the Super Brain," he could tune into criminal activity and had basic magic-like powers until *Top-Notch* #7 (Aug 40), when he put on a costume and gained invulnerability. Clothes *do* make the man. He didn't survive the switch to *Top-Notch Laugh Comics*, ending with #27.

Like The Hangman, The Wizard was asked to join The Crusaders in *Fly Man* #33 and likewise decided that the treasure they'd saved was too tempting. He battled Hangman for the loot, and then they teamed up as a dastardly duo. They fought The Crusaders in *MC* #3 but escaped. They returned next issue and were beaten by Roy the Mighty-Boy, putting an end to their nefarious doings as well as any reputation they'd had as bad guys.



On top of those players, the roster for potential revivals expanded considerably with *Mighty Crusaders* #4 (Apr 66), in which a number of heroes tried to join the team (unasked, I should point out). All were based on Golden Age characters who had appeared primarily in *Blue Ribbon* (MLJ's first title), *Top-Notch*, or *Zip*.

The title, to give an indication of the issue's approach, was "Too Many Super Heroes." Although that may be a difficult concept for some fans to grasp, *MC* #4 may have achieved

After teaming with The Web and Captain Flag as The Ultra-Men, The Fox went solo to battle The Gasser in *Mighty Comics* #49.

GOLDEN AGE SOURCES

Information on these characters' pre-Silver Age history was gleaned from Mike Benton's "Superhero Comics of the Golden Age," Howard Keltner's *Index to Golden Age Comic Books* and *Grand Features Listing*, **CBG's Standard Catalog of Comic**

Books (4th Edition), Steve Carey's "Meet MLJ: Heroes Who Died Laughing" article in *Overstreet's Golden Age Quarterly* (Jul-Aug 94), and The Who's Who Handbook at the *Mighty Crusaders* website (www.mightycrusaders.net).

For more information on the Silver Age careers of some of these guys, you can read the "Ask Mr. Silver Age" columns in **CBG** #1399 (The *Mighty Crusaders*), #1454 (The *Web*), #1502 (The *Shield*), and #1589 (The *Jaguar*).

The Spectre-like Mr. Justice teamed with The Jaguar and Steel Sterling as The Terrific Three before going solo to battle a giant force-being in *Mighty Comics* #47.



Steel Sterling received a lot of headline play after he arrived in *Fly Man* #39 to battle The Monster-Master and his horrible henchmen.

it. Even so, it was named one of the *1000 Comic Books You Must Read* by Tony Isabella and will be included in his hardcover book on sale later this fall.

The Golden Age heroes who made that one Silver Age appearance comprised Black Jack, Bob Phantom, Captain Flag (and Yank the Eagle), Dusty, The Fireball, Firefly, Kardak the Mystic, Roy the Mighty-Boy, and Zambini the Miracle Man. For a full rundown on their Golden Age secret origins and participation in that extravaganza, check out the CBGXtra thread devoted to them in the "Ask Mr. Silver Age" forum at www.cbqextra.com.

A number of these heroes went on to further adventures in the 1980s Red Circle revival, and some have been revived since. The variety of



The Wizard was invited to join The Mighty Crusaders in *Fly Man* #33 but he decided being evil was more fun.



Way too many heroes tried to join The Mighty Crusaders in #4, including Bob Phantom, Kardak the Mystic Magician, and Zambini, the Miracle Man. Hoo boy.

MLJ heroes available for revivals is staggering, even if the new cast is limited to those who made their first attempt at a revival during the super-hero resurgence of the Silver Age.

Known to fans worldwide as "Mr. Silver Age," **CRAIG SHUTT** has waxed nostalgic about comics of old in **CBG** since 1992. His latest book, **Baby Boomer Comics**, is now out of print but remains available at online bookstores, eBay, and flea markets internationally. Send comments and suggestions to craigshutt@ameritech.net.

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