

This Duck Gets Down

BY KENT MURPHY

A couple of years ago a new comic book character introduced himself in the otherwise undistinguished pages of a "creature" comic called *Man-Thing*: a duck, Howard by name, the feathered kind with a ruffled, ill-fitting sport coat that didn't quite cover his protruding tail. He carried a cigar and a jaunty air of confidence while, deep in the Everglades, light years from home, he was about to face a gang of goblins summoned by a master villain. Howard, in the manner of all great heroes, attracts trouble like a lightning rod.

The Duck wears his dockworker philosophy on his sleeve, a self-reliant figure in an execrable world populated by, as he puts it, "talking, hairless apes." Howard escaped his first encounter with Earth only to misstep on a celestial pathway home. He fell tumbling through the void, this time into a vacant lot in Cleveland. Depressed by his poor sense of direction, Howard resolved to dive from a height toward the smelly Cuyahoga River, which once in real life caught fire. But near the top of a slender tower on the river's edge, the Duck stumbled once again. This time a voluptuous redhead barely dressed in golden chains sobbed her despair and Howard made his move. Thus began his relationship with the delightful Beverly, a kind of love one who doesn't know Howard cannot hope to fathom.

Maybe four feet tall with wide flat flippers, the comic kingdom's newest hero looks no more the part than Bogey did. But Beverly Switzler, who could be Lauren Bacall's lush baby sister, fell hard for the tough little bird who came to her aid in what turned out to be a mad accountant's castle.

The celebrated first issue of *Howard the Duck* ends on a wan and pessimistic note. Two themes appear on its final page that follow through all his adventures. With Beverly at his side and not a dime in his pocket he listens to her ask "Where will you go now? What will you do?" The existential anguish comes to comics, voiced by a delicious babe dedicated to a duck. Howard's reply would have pleased Camus. "I dunno... but I could sure use a good cigar."

At times we all wonder about a parallel universe, some wheeling cosmos spinning next to ours separated by only an eyelash and a few laws of physics. Howard comes from one of those nearby worlds, flung into our own when the starry nexus rippled for a moment and he was caught in the crack. His must have been a world much like our own, full of wisecracking, acerbic macho types who posture to cover up a soft core that melts for happy dogs and dizzy blondes. Howard makes his way through our world with aplomb, startled only by the occasional observation, such as Spiderman's "Hey! You're a talking duck!" But Howard is not one to let these things pass without comment. "You're not exactly Mr. Normal, either, y'know," he retorts to the webslinger.

Howard is most recently involved with a wasted trio of weakly bred socialites, one of whom is a Barbara Walters sound-alike incapable of articulating an "L." The duck is appalled by the immaturity he finds among them. After a horrific misadventure in which he appears as a circus comedian, the duck delivers himself of a typically stern lecture. "Listen close Iris, cause here's a lesson obviously never taught you: Actions have consequences. All you hairless apes seem so self-possessed, I'm not surprised it never occurred to you, but mess with people's lives—and fate eventually messes back! You'll get yours, Iris."

Steve Gerber, a Marvel Comics writer, created Howard the Duck half a decade ago in his Brooklyn apartment. He was 26 and full of creative frustrations after working as an advertising writer and then a spinner of "sword and sorcery" genre comic book tales. Gerber eventually got together with Frank Brunner, an artist, who also wanted to do comics that appealed to the mind as well as the mindless. They teamed up for a pair of Howard adventures based incongruously in Cleveland, and Stan Lee, Marvel's publisher, knew he had a winner. *Howard the Duck* Number One hit the presses with much fanfare and once on the streets promptly disappeared.

Among comic collectors *Howard the Duck* is already legend. Although on the market for barely two years, issue Number One, featuring the first animal super-hero since Mighty Mouse, commands a mint-condition price of \$15 (if you can find a willing seller). In the South and on the West Coast the price may ease some, but supplies are lower in those places. One archive near Atlanta would say only that *Howard the Duck* back numbers were in stock. They most certainly were not for sale. Another dealer said, "Yeah, I got some. But they're buried. They're going to stay buried." One enthusiast tried to explain the comic's intrinsic appeal as he displayed a rare issue. "The drawing and lettering are high quality. They assign their best



writers and artists to Howard." While he talked he handled the pages as one might examine a fragile medieval manuscript. "It's the kind of book that people who care about comics would do. You get the feeling as you read it that the people who put it together really like what they're doing." A clerk at Fantasy Land Books in Chamblee, Georgia, believed that Howard was appealing because "It has more realistic dialogue than other comics."

But not all collectors are so thoughtful. "I'm keeping it because the price is going up," announced one. A grandmother said that she had bought the entire series for her grandson, now four, "So that he would have something for college." She updates the investment each month at a neighborhood grocery.

Overstreet's authoritative *Comic Book Price Guide*, published annually, pegs mint quality copies at \$.75 for most numbers, excluding of course the very early ones. Yet that's more than twice the cover price for comic books only a year or two old. Few stocks or bonds have appreciated so much.

Despite *Howard the Duck's* high flying collector's reputation, the Duck fell flat on his beak as a daily comic page figure. When Howard displaced Steve Canyon last year, in the Macon, Georgia, *Telegraph*, the readers howled. They protested so much that the editor had to respond with a piece defending his decision. "The comics page must keep up,"

he said in essence. The noble experiment was tried at almost the same time in Columbus, Georgia, as well. The Columbus *Ledger* made room for Howard and promptly felt heat from its readers. Howard endured for two months in Columbus, about three in Macon. A *Telegraph* staffer told the story of Howard's end. "We ran a survey to rank the comics by order of

preference. *Howard the Duck* came in last." Not only was Howard last, he was a distant last. "Folks just weren't ready for him here," sighed a newsman.

The college crowd that reads Howard is a varied one. To keep up with the Duck, it has to be. "Weirded out," complained a pre-med sophomore who had once read *HTD*. "I'll try again in a year or so. See what he's up to." On the other hand, a recent graduate in Political Science felt empathy. "I'm over-educated and can't find a job. So is Howard. He makes me laugh about it."

A self-educated polymath, Howard's a walking diatribe on social ills, but a commentator without a forum, an orator with no soapbox. His on-again-off-again affair with Ms. Switzler is an analogue for the mid-Seventies' uncertain view of affection. It hurts Howard when he thinks himself weak so he periodically shuns the attentions of those who love him and declares for rugged individualism. But he can't operate for long alone, he is by nature gregarious and concerned. These traits show up in his readers, the elements mixed in them in many ways. "People buy this one who don't read any other comics," says one bookseller. "They seem to be mostly college types."

As an anti-hero Howard has the appeal of one treated unjustly by life, a feisty soul down on his luck but determined to make his own comeback. And the women like him. Girls love him, want to mother him, want to make it with a duck. Because regardless of his intelligent bearing and smart mouth, Howard remains a duck. He never steps out of character. Once he was asked, "You rilly a duck? Lemme hear you quack." Howard takes the abuse in stride, the way we all learn to live with large noses or naturally curly hair.

Rumors drifting through the comic book underworld have it that Howard the Duck is dying, that it's a successful cult venture but a commercial failure. These rumors, in turn, spur speculative buying and Howard sales inch upward another month. The managers at Marvel Comics Group, Inc., in New York, Howard's publishers, are playing it close to the vest. Jim Shooter, consulting editor on *Howard the Duck*, said, "I know of no plans to end it," when asked about the rumors. But Gerber, Howard's creator, is gone and the new editor is Bill Mantlo. In the near future *Howard the Duck* will become a bi-monthly black and white publication, larger and more mature, they say.

Just so he sticks around for awhile longer.

Kent Murphy of Atlanta was advised two years ago to purchase all available copies of a new duck comic book. In the future he will take such suggestions seriously.