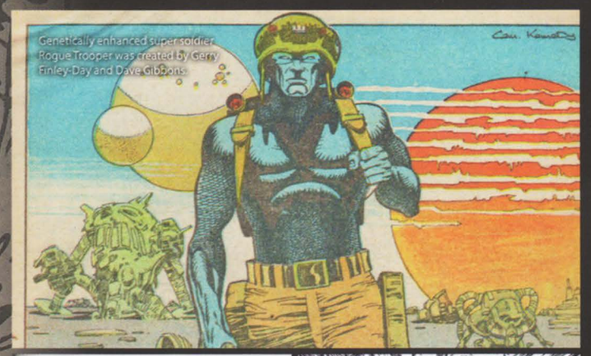
2000 A.D. IT CAME FROM THE FUTURE

MyM's Scott Snowden explores weekly wonder *2000 AD*, home to a universe full of action, adventure, aliens and anti-heroes, created by an impressive list of contributors that includes Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Garth Ennis and Brian Bolland.

During the 1970s, comic-book characters in the US were still relatively light and fluffy. Wholesome heroes like Superman and Batman would triumph over evil, occasionally punch a Nazi in the mush and continually fight for truth, justice and the American way. Meanwhile, over on the other side of the pond, quite the opposite was happening. An underground anti-establishment movement was gathering momentum.

Britain in the '70s was a troubled country, to say the least. The so-called swinging '60s were long since gone, replaced by political tension, a mounting series of economic crises and strikes. There was growing dissatisfaction among the young, many of whom were unemployed, and there was a belief that the establishment was ripe to be overthrown. This feeling significantly influenced music, magazines, fashion and ultimately pop-culture in general, the result of which was a new era in comic-book stories and characters.



As 1975 came to a close, the thoughts of Kelvin Gosnell weren't on seasonal frivolities, he was thinking instead about a new wave of science fiction films he'd been reading about. He was a journalist at IPC – a UK publishing giant that also gave the world *NME* and *Loaded* – and he was wondering how they could jump on this bandwagon.

London's main newspaper, *The Evening Standard*, had recently printed a story about a couple of up-and-coming Hollywood directors who were investing heavily in sci-fi – a genre that hadn't been taken seriously in the cinema since the '50s. Gosnell pitched a few ideas and IPC asked Pat Mills, a freelance writer who had created boy's comics *Battle Picture Weekly* and *Action*, to help develop it.

"Comics in the '70s, particularly boy's comics, were going through a really bad time, they weren't selling very well," says Mills. "Up until then, comics had been written by people who really didn't want to be writing comics, they wanted to be writing novels or articles for proper magazines," adds artist Dave Gibbons, whose impressive portfolio includes *Rogue Trooper* and *Watchmen*. "The artists really wanted to be proper magazine illustrators instead of largely slumming it in comics, and the editors were all waiting until they could get onto a proper job like being editor of *Practical Gardening*."

COUNTER-CULTURE CRUSADE

Mills took the helm and knew immediately the direction he wanted to go in. "The people that were chosen to work on the comic had to have a certain counter-culture attitude," he says. Fellow writer John Wagner was brought on board and they all began to develop characters. A number of different ideas were considered for the title, but the futuristic-sounding *2000 AD* was chosen, which in 1975 was 25 years into the future, far enough into the future for IPC to be confident that the comic wouldn't last that long.

For his model, Mills wasn't looking to America. He didn't look at superhero material, because he didn't like superheroes. He was looking at France, where magazines such as *Metal Hurlant* (literal translation: *Screaming Metal*) had launched only a year previously. These contained visionary artwork and science fiction and fantasy stories by the likes of Jean Giraud and Jean-Michel Charlier, which had never been seen before anywhere in the world.

Tapping heavily into cinematic culture from the period, including *Rollerball*, *Jaws* and *The Wild Bunch* – all movies that kids weren't allowed to see – Mills did not hold back on the amount of violence in his stories. "It was the '70s, that's what culture was like, you just have to look at the sheer level of nihilism and brutality in cinema at the time," he remembers.

"One of the big appeals for me for *2000 AD* as a child was the fact that it was insanely violent," laughs former *2000 AD* editor-in-chief Andy Diggle. "We don't call it violence in comics, we call it action," adds *Strontium Dog* writer Alan Grant.

Such an example was *Flesh*, one of the first strips developed for the comic, set in an age where cowboys time travel to harvest the meat from dinosaurs. And then there was *Judge Dredd*. Wagner had written various *Dirty Harry*-inspired no-nonsense cop stories for other comics and suggested a character that might take that idea to its logical extreme. The name Judge Dredd came from a combination of concepts and the task of visualising this new character was given to Carlos Ezquerra, a Spanish artist who had previously worked for Mills on *Battle Picture Weekly*.

Ezquerra was given a poster for the film *Death Race 2000*, showing the character Frankenstein clad in black leather on a motorbike, as a starting point. Ezquerra made some adjustments and created the world of Mega-City One. Artist Mike McMahon drew the first strip for *Judge Dredd*, which appeared in *Issue 2* of *2000 AD* on 5 March 1977. Before long, Dredd became the most popular character in the comic and has appeared in almost every issue since.

JUDGEMENT DAY

Set after the Atomic Wars of 2070, the entire population of the USA is contained within three enormous 'Mega' cities, each home to about a billion citizens. The only thing that prevents this dystopian civilisation from descending into chaos and destroying itself is the savage arm of the law. Called the Judges, they are the police *and* the military. Judge Dredd is a law enforcement officer in Mega-City One, which covers the entire Eastern seaboard, from the Canadian border to the southern tip of Florida and stretching as far inland as Atlanta. He is a 'street judge', empowered to summarily arrest, convict, sentence and execute criminals.

Judge Dredd was ultimately a fascist, but the more authoritarian Mills or Wagner made him, the more the readers loved him. He might work for a totalitarian state, but he was the good guy. "The good thing about Dredd is that he does have a strong moral code. Albeit not one that we would necessarily agree with," says Wagner.

WHAT THE DICKENS?

In addition to its unique portrayal of extreme right-wing life under the Judges, *2000 AD* tackled other important issues of the time. "Just like many other kids my age, I read Dickens, and he is talking about the social evils of his day. So why shouldn't we talk about the social evils of our day?" says Mills.

Johnny Alpha – AKA *Strontium Dog* – was another popular character in the comic, and his story leant heavily on themes of Jewish persecution, as well as apartheid and racial segregation, which was a prominent issue in South Africa during the '80s. As a mutant, Alpha is hated by the 'normals' in his world, thanks to their politically-induced paranoia. Considered a second-class citizen, becoming a bounty hunter and tracking criminals across the galaxy is the only job available to him and his kind.

"People were engaging with politics. With social circumstance, with poverty, with segregation, but in a really fun way. It didn't feel like watching the news.

Sylvester Stallone committed the ultimate sin in the 1995 film by removing his helmet!

Karl Urban's 2012 film Dredd is more faithful to the character.

It got around that whole 'issue fatigue'," says South African-raised Lauren Beukes, author of *The Shining Girls* and *Broken Monsters*.

Nemesis the Warlock actually went further and cast the entire human race as the bad guys. Created by Mills and artist Kevin O'Neill, the title character was a fire-breathing demonic alien, fighting against the fanatical Terran Empire and its attempts to exterminate all alien life in Earth's distant future.

"*Nemesis the Warlock* is about xenophobia and racism," says artist Matt Brooker. "It's all broad brushstrokes, but I think it is great that that kind of stuff is dealt with on some level. Even if it's as simple as, 'hating people is bad'.

"What becomes plain in the later books is that he's taken his war too far and in the end the difference between Nemesis and [the Terran Empire] is shown as being next to nothing. They both end up trapped in this cycle of hate, one no better than the other. I thought that was a fantastic ending, but again, it doesn't actually give you a sort of comfortable moral conclusion that good prevailed. It doesn't even tell you what good was."

MISSING THE MARK

2000 AD has given us many other memorable characters, some of whom co-exist within the same totalitarian timeline as Dredd, including Judge Hershey and Judge Anderson – both very strong female leads – as well as genetically enhanced super soldier *Rogue Trooper*, comedy duo *D.R. & Quinch*, *ABC Warriors*, *Halo Jones* and *Bad Company*.

Why then, with such a strong stable of storylines, has *2000 AD* not made its mark like Marvel and DC? While two attempts have been made to bring the iconic character of Dredd to the big screen, neither were big enough successes. *Judge Dredd* (1995) starring Sylvester Stallone is mostly disregarded by fans and generally considered a farce; while Karl Urban's *Dredd* (2012) is highly regarded and more faithful to the character but has not been followed up with a sequel.

"It's because [Marvel and DC] came out from America. If *2000 AD* characters had actually come out from Marvel or DC, we'd have a whole studio full. It's that British label. Look at France, right? *Valérian and Laureline*. All these great French characters, which influenced the look and feel of *Blade Runner* and *Star Wars*, but it's got to go through that American filter," says Mills.

It might not have conquered Hollywood, but *2000 AD* recently celebrated its 40th birthday (see *MyM Issue 60*), testament to the fact that its characters remain interesting, relevant and beautifully illustrated. Few weekly compendiums of science fiction can honestly say they've survived for four decades and had such an influence on contemporary culture – *2000 AD* can lay claim to both.

From *Watchmen*, *RoboCop*, *Mad Max* and *Preacher* to Batman as we see him today, we owe the gutsy, gritty reflection of our world in modern storytelling to the men and women of *2000 AD*. MyM