

interview

THE VALIANT BULLPEN SPEAKS OUT!



*In the first part of a 2-part interview, Steve Bond talked with Bob Layton and Barry Windsor-Smith recently about the upcoming **Unity** crossover storyline, which involves almost every character in the Valiant Comics Universe. More than anything else, Bob and Barry repeatedly expressed a great deal of enthusiasm about the expertise and comradery of the creators working together for Valiant Comics.*

SB: What are your job titles and responsibilities at Valiant Comics?

BL: My official title is Senior Vice President and Creative Director. What I really do is oversee production. I do quality control on the books and I'm in on most of the creative sessions in terms of plotting storylines. I deal with difficult freelance types and do inking and writing here.

BWS: He makes it sound very simple. Every

time I go to the office, he's doing fifteen things at once!

SB: Barry, what are you doing for Valiant?

BWS: Well...I'm sort of the token limey! DC's got Neil Gaiman, and Marvel's got Alan Davis, so they [Valiant] figured they had to get a Limey in there! I draw.

BL: Actually, Barry's official title is Creative Consultant, which is exactly what Barry does. There's very little that we come up with around here that Barry doesn't have a hand in.

SB: So both of you are involved in the brainstorming behind what happens in all your titles?

BL: Very much so.

BWS: We do as best we can. Frankly it's more Jim [Shooter] and Bob because they sit

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next to each other and are throwing ideas all over the place all the time.

SB: How did you come up with the idea for the Unity crossover storyline?

BL: We wanted to do something this summer that would get us attention, that would introduce our characters to a bigger audience. I've been pushing the idea to bring the characters all together for one big story, and it turns out that was always Jim's intention. So we figured this has to be something monumental. Jim created the crossovers to begin with, the ones that Marvel does now, but they've become contrived. What we really wanted to do was do a storyline that crosses over all the books, that really has an impact on our universe, that changed things, that meant something to every character involved and left them, at the end of this, dramatically changed by the conflict. This is our universe and we're not tied in to toy manufacturers and t-shirt people... we're not a merchandising house. That's the freedom of Valiant. While we're in a large growth period, like the one we're currently in, we can take the time to really shake some things up. We can make some changes and really make this story significant. The lives of the characters will be changed forever.



UNITY

TIME IS NOT ABSOLUTE

BWS: And some of it was marvelous serendipity. It wasn't as if we planned this whole thing from the start. I think the idea came up about four months ago. We'd been working with different characters for different reasons and in different ways, and it turned out that, (I don't know, maybe there was some

magic in the air), but we found that certain paths and directions we were giving these characters as individuals all started to flow together even before the plotting of *Unity* was fully formed. And when we were sitting down working all of this out, there was just some marvelous "cosmic coincidences"

where we had actually been leaning toward this all along and didn't really quite know it. It was actually a very exciting story conference!

BL: When you think about it, it makes sense because most of the storylines and character developments really come from three or four people here. And all of us work really closely together, so it stands to reason that we tend to move in the same directions. The first issue [of *Unity*] will be a sixteen-page story that will be distributed free of charge. It will be done by Jim [Shooter] and Barry and myself.

SB: Your crossover seems unique because it isn't mostly contained in a limited four or six-issue series, with minor tie-ins with the rest of the titles...

BL: Exactly. There's two *Unity* books, a prologue and an epilogue. The adventures take place with the characters in their own books.

SB: I can't think of another comic company that has done a crossover storyline this way...

BL: Neither can we, and that's why we're doing it! Not to give anything away, but I'll tell you, we're going to have major events of importance happen in the lives of these characters. In fact, we're going to do

something unprecedented and we're going to...

*This concludes Part One of our two-part interview with Bob Layton and Barry Windsor-Smith. Look for the conclusion of this interview in next month's Previews and find out just what unprecedented occurrence will take place in Valiant's *Unity* storyline!*

interview

THE VALIANT BULLPEN SPEAKS OUT! PART II

*The first half of interviewer Steve Bond's conversation with Bob Layton and Barry Windsor-Smith of Valiant comics (presented in last month's Previews) ended with Bob about to make an important announcement about their **Unity** crossover storyline...*

BL: We're going to have major events of importance happen in the lives of these characters. In fact, we're going to do something unprecedented.. .and we're going to kill one of our characters! There will be the introduction of some new super heroes as well.

SB: Will these new characters spin-off into their own titles?

BL: That's up to the general public. So far, the response to everything we've done has been great. So, we'll see. Some of the characters were designed specifically for this storyline. My hope is that they will be well-received, and perhaps we'll do something with them on their own.

SB: I've heard that each title stands alone, even though this is a crossover, and that you can read each title individually and have a complete story, while reading them all gives you the whole picture...

BL: Exactly.

BWS: I didn't realize we were so clever!

BL: I think where a lot of other companies screw up is when they assume that everybody has read everything they've ever done. A good story should stand alone, even if it leads into something else. It should have a beginning and an ending, and this is the way we are going to approach **Unity**. Each **Unity** crossover issue is an individual battle of the overall war, and the war is the entire eighteen-issue saga.

SB: What's the major difference between working for Valiant and one of the Big Two (Marvel and DC)?

BWS: I'll just talk about Valiant because I don't want to get into comparisons. It's fun working for Valiant. Valiant is sort of like Marvel was back in the '60s.

BL: You would know, Barry. You were there!

BWS: It was open and straight and fun at Marvel back in the '60s, certainly in comparison to Marvel today where everything is like the bloody Roman Senate! [At Marvel] it's all political. You really can't get to talk to anybody who's in power, and you really don't know what's going on. ..you don't get a straight bloody answer from anybody. I wasn't going to put Marvel down and I just did. I've been with them off and on for 25 years. At Valiant, it's a different thing. Everything's open. We're all straightforward with each other. We can debate stuff openly. There's no closed or locked doors anywhere where you feel like some sort of conspiracy's going on. If you have questions, you ask them and you get answers. And, furthermore, it's a great bunch of people! I know that really sounds icky, like I'm making it up, but they're a great bunch of guys. It's actually fun coming in to the office!

BL: Let me tell you something about Barry. We have a lot of young, very talented kids working here who worship Barry, they're in awe of him. He'll sit with these guys and spend hours going over their drawings and teaching them how to tell a story better and it sticks in their head. Nobody else in this business is doing that, really teaching young talent. I feel we're the only place doing that.

SB: Barry, are you working exclusively for Valiant?

BWS: Ostensibly, that's my plan. I still have some loose ends to tie up with other companies, and they will be tied up this year. Generally speaking, I'm doing everything I can for Valiant. I've got so much work to do [for Valiant] that even if I wanted to work for somebody else, I can't! They've got so many bloody ideas,

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and I'm supposed to draw every one of them and it drives me crazy!

BL: Valiant is unique because the business people here are just as involved with the product as the creative people. That's really rare.

BWS: It's virtually unknown!

BL: It's no accident that all these great people are together. They were all hand-picked.

SB: Can you tell us what you are currently working on?

BL: A nervous breakdown?

BWS: The hottest thing we're working on right now (but that's just this week, because next week we'll probably be doing something even hotter), is *Archer and Armstrong*. Bob is scripting it, I'm drawing it (and it's coming quickly!), and Ralph Reese is inking it. In the past I've been known as a somewhat slow worker, but now I'm with a team I can trust. It's also known about me that I'll take somebody's plot and really screw with it, and change this and that, but *Archer and Armstrong* is a terrific story and I didn't need to change a thing! It's an absolute treat for a storyteller like me. These characters know what to do. They're not super heroes. They're a whole new slant on adventure, and there's humor in it. It's a real piece of excitement for all of us working on it.

BL: This is a unique comic. It definitely has a different slant. We're trying to create something different, but as exciting as all the other stuff that you love. We can't compare *Archer and Armstrong* to

anything in comics because it hasn't been tried before!

SB: What "big name" artists would you like to see working for Valiant in the near future?



BL: There's a lot of "big name" artists I would tell need six months more of drawing class! I'm surprised at what passes as exciting artwork these days. Frank Miller is a guy we do want on our team. He's doing the first batch of covers for our **Unity** crossovers.

BWS: And we hope, for Frank, that it's just the beginning.



BL: It is just the beginning. We're discussing some limited series work with Frank. And many other artists have expressed an interest in doing something for us, but they're still tied up with other commitments.

SB: Do you think any of your characters, like X-O or Solar, will achieve the popularity of famous creations like Superman or Spider-Man?

BL: Why not? Our characters are more likely than anyone else's, because our books can be read by the general public, and that's who usually elevates characters to a superstar status. I gave some copies of Valiant titles to a corporate lawyer on a plane, and he read them, and was hooked. It was one of the biggest victories I've had since I've been here. When I can get someone who doesn't read comics interested and excited, then we've done our job.

SB: To wrap up, why would you tell comic fans to read the **Unity** crossover storyline titles?

BL: This is the sort of event they've been wanting to read for a long time, and the kind of thing they've been short-changed on a lot in comics. The promise of a big boom in the universe, the promise of major events happening. To experience and watch change along with the characters. When readers go through **Unity**, we want them to feel that anything can happen. They won't know how this unprecedented, major event is going to end. Along with a great read, this is a great chance for readers to get in on the ground floor [of the Valiant Universe] again (for those who weren't wise enough to jump on the first time).