

# **SUBSTANDARD SUPERHEROES**

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## **Midnight Facts for Insomniacs**

### **Podcast Transcript**

**(Note: transcript  
consists of episode  
outline)**

Ok, so we could spend this entire episode making fun of superheroes that were created intentionally as jokes. Many of which were hideously offensive. Like Marvel's big Bertha, a supermodel with the ability to conjure fat from another dimension and

transform from a thin, beautiful woman into into an obese giant. When she wanted to return to her model form, Bertha would vomit out the extra weight. Yup, a bulimic superhero. Or the Marvel villain "leather boy," the BDSM enthusiast with assless chaps and zero super powers who had replied to a classified ad, hoping to join the Great Lakes Avengers because he thought it was an S&M fetish group. He also famously killed Monkey Joe, one of squirrel girl's favorite squirrel sidekicks. Did I mention squirrel girl? Or "fat man the human flying saucer." You get the idea. There's a lot of nonsense and silliness, so we're going to focus on superheroes who were intended to be badass and just misfired.

Except for one.

Any comic book nerd worth his spandex will be deeply annoyed if I don't bring up perhaps the most famously bizarre superhero ever committed to paper. Arm Fall Off Boy was an actual DC superhero whose superpower was the ability to rip off one of his own limbs and use it to bludgeon enemies. And again I'm going to mention the caveat that, while he WAS an actual superhero and did appear in a comic, he was clearly not a serious attempt at a real superhero. In fact, he was an homage to an even bigger not-serious superhero. It was all very meta. It was comic book inception.

So Arm Fall Off Boy made

his first appearance in the legion of heroes series; the LOH was a DC supergroup with a shifting roster that variously featured superboy, super girl, ultra boy, the karate kid—unrelated to Daniel-san—shadow lass—are you sensing a theme here? They were young. There's nothing intimidating about heroes with "boy" and "kid" attached to their names. If you're a super villain and you get your ass kicked by a time named kid or lad or lass, that's rock bottom. In the iconic issue "secret origins #46," the legion of super children held tryouts for membership. One of the comic book writers used the opportunity to pay homage to a character from a parody comic called ear-fall-off-Floyd. Whose power was self

explanatory.

Arm fall off boy initially lasted all of 8 panels in one comic, during which he demonstrated his power by yanking off his arm with a "plorp" sound and dropping it triumphantly onto the table in front of the horrified legion. his moment in the DC spotlight ended with this quote from a legion member: "thank you for your interest in our organization. And best of luck finding a group suitable for your talents." Floyd briefly re-emerged in an alternate universe timeline in which he called himself splitter, and he was rejected all over again. Rejected in multiple universes. A loser in every reality. Writer Ian Rowland commented, "Can you imagine a comic book

artist coming up with this idea? Discussing it with the guys down at the office? Isn't it majestic that someone actually gave the go-ahead for this character to appear? Life is more wonderful than we can ever imagine."

issue #46 of the legion of heroes is iconic in a number of ways...it also includes one of the most bonkers storylines of all time, featuring another honorable-mention shitty superhero: Fortress Lad. You just kind of have to Google this one. Fortress lad had the ability to turn into a fortress. Here's fortress lad's backstory via comic vine: "Fortress Lad is an alien from the planet Fwang. Because that planet is constantly besieged by meteor storms, all Fwangian boys, at puberty, gain the ability

to transform themselves into metallic fortresses for the protection of others." So fortress lad was also rejected by the legion along with arm fall off boy, but he was more persistent, and he just kind of hung around. And at that same tryout was yet another honorable mention: mnemonic kid. mnemonic as in device, or Johnny. Memory-related. Mnemonic kid was actually a fully grown woman with the ability to steal memories. When she was likewise rejected at the tryout, she didn't take it well, and she attacked the legion. Fortress lad sprang into action, doing his fortress thing, shielding them from harm, but at the cost of his memories. He forgot he was a lad, and was forever stuck in building form.

Meanwhile the legion members regained most of their memories, except for the last fifteen minutes or so, and as they recovered they were delighted to find that a brand new empty building had appeared nearby. They moved into fortress lad and made him their permanent headquarters. I would say you can't make this shit up, except someone did. Incidentally, a group of superheroes rejected by the legion eventually formed the aptly named "league of rejected heroes," which included Color Kid, a superhero capable of changing the color of any item.

Ok so the rest of these heroes were actual attempts at serious heroism.



## Cypher

Marvel's X-Men was easily the most popular superhero team in history. Wolverine sported razor-sharp claws, cyclops wore cool shades to contain the searing laser beams bursting from his eyes, storm harnessed the power of lightning, and cypher...could translate stuff. He was a hero whose superpower was the ability to help the team find the restroom in any foreign country on earth. Or the library. *Donde esta la bibliotheca.* Cypher, aka Doug Ramsey, was a childhood friend of Kitty Pride, a fellow X-Man with a stupid name but at least some decent powers that don't involve conjugating verbs. Doug was unique among Marvel's New Mutants in that he never

disclosed his powers to his parents. He never came out of the superhero closet, so to speak.

Probably out of embarrassment.

Honestly, what was there to disclose? He was the only X-Man who *could* hide his powers. Cyclops didn't have a choice, he'd be blasting the dining room apart when his mom forced him to take off his shades at the dinner table. Cypher's powers were interchangeable with any European person I've ever met. They all speak like fifteen languages.

Cypher's power was "being Dutch."

To be fair, Cypher could translate any spoken or written language, any form of communication including body language. Which I guess is useful. That way, he would know

when other mutants were silently mocking him. For his bullshit powers.

## **The Red Bee:**

In the pantheon of superheroes, perhaps no animal-themed character was less intimidating than the Red Bee. You have your badass animalheroes like Spider-Man and catwoman and Batman, and then your second-tier animalheroes like ant-man, who at least had an iconic superpower. The red bee was less iconic, more ironic. Because he wasn't super at all, and he wasn't much of a hero. In fact he had no superpowers of any kind, but he did have a trained bee named Michael that he carried in his belt buckle. A regular, normal sized bee. But Michael was a *trained* bee,

so that's cool. He was an attack bee. Like an attack dog, except shitty.

The red bee was first developed in 1940 by Quality Comics and was later obtained by DC.

Quality Comics—that's generic AF, those are some bargain-basement superheroes. That's the superhero equivalent of those giant bags of cereal like "fruity Os" and "breakfast flakes."

the Red Bee was the alter ego of assistant District Attorney Rick Raleigh, and first off, the ASSISTANT DA? A second tier superhero who is also a second tier lawyer? I just want to say to the author...you realize this character is fictional, right? How low is your self esteem when you can't even imagine a hero who is the most important person

in his own office? Forget about superpowers, how about you conjure this guy a promotion?

Everything about this superhero is wrong. Like, the creators made the most surreal choice at every juncture. For instance, Superman is the champion of metropolis, Batman had Gotham, Spider-Man kicked ass in NY, the Red Bee was the guardian of Superior City, Oregon. See what I mean by surreal choices? Like, you call it "superior" city and then place it in Oregon. I lived in Oregon, it's beautiful, and deeply irrelevant. It is a wonderful place where it rains nine months of the year, it's very beautiful and very green and very unexceptional. Oregon's one big claim to fame is lack of sales tax. That's

Oregon's super power. And I guess the ducks are a decent college football team. Oregon doesn't even have an NFL team. The Red Bee brandished a weapon called a stinger gun—get it?—and fought crime wearing yellow-and-red-striped tights (you would think it would be yellow and black, again: surreal choices) and knee-high boots. With a prominent belt buckle of course. To accommodate Michael. Was there honey in there? What was Michael doing all day? Was it like a genie in a bottle situation, and the inside of the belt buckle was some kind of extra dimensional condominium, with like five rooms and a pool? I have unanswered questions.

The Red Bee never achieved much popularity

and was killed off after 24 issues by the evil villain Baron Von Blitzkrieg, an indestructible flying nazi with laser-beam eyes.

That's a fair fight.

Superhuman laser-nazi vs. Michael the bee. Hopefully Michael gave that nazi a good buzzing, and maybe an irritating welt.

Poor Michael. You're chilling in a comfy belt buckle and then all of a sudden your dumbass owner tosses you at a superhuman nazi. better hope that nazi is deathly allergic to bees and also doesn't have access to an epipen. An epipen is like the Red Bee's kryptonite.

## **NFL Superpro**

No list of terrible comic book characters would be

complete without discussing one of the most cynical, pathetic money-grabs in superhero history. I present Marvel's "NFL Superpro." Aspiring football player Phil Grayfield's career was cut short by a knee injury that he sustained while attempting to save a falling child, of course. Which was his favorite hobby when he wasn't rescuing puppies from highways and cats from trees. So he defaulted to a career as a sports reporter for the program Sports Inside, which would be a good name for sports magazine about sports that take place inside. Like dodgeball, or squash. I don't know. Is chess a sport? Inside Sports would make sense. Anyway he ended up interviewing an eccentric genius who



developed an indestructible football uniform. That's what we want our eccentric geniuses focusing on. Sportswear. During the interview a gang of thieves broke into the house and stole some of the inventor's valuables, but not the one-of-a-kind indestructible five million dollar supersuit nor a bunch of rare NFL merchandise. They then set the house on fire, and in the process spilled a bunch of experimental chemicals, which, along with fumes from the flaming football souvenirs, coincidentally combined in the perfect proportions to create a superpower concoction. Phil donned the suit, escapes the house, brought the criminals to justice, and NFL Super pro was born!

In fact the actual origin story of NFL Superpro involves a comicbook writer named Fabian Nicieza who wanted free tickets to football games. That's not a joke. It's also not completely fair...Fabian was a huge NY Jets fan and did enjoy the brief petals of writing the series, but the character was assigned to him by marvel corporate, who were obviously trying to cash in on the crossover appeal of comic book fans and...NFL fans? This was a bad idea from day one. NFL Superpro lasted 12 issues, and is almost unanimously considered "perhaps the worst comic book ever created," and not just because of the football pandering. The comic featured a field-goalkicker-turned-evil ninja named Quick Kick, and a

time-traveling assassin named Instant Replay. According to a Vice article, "The dialogue in the comic rarely passes up an opportunity to cram in a reference to football. In one issue, after successfully landing on a car during battle, Grayfield screams, 'Touchdown!' In another, a character remarks, 'I hope coach ain't upset cause we're late, delay of game is a serious penalty about here.'" Additionally there were jokes about concussions, and "head hunting," and look, even in 1991 we knew there were issues with the NFL concussions and long-term brain damage, but today those jokes come across as especially cringe. And then there was the racism. (NFL racism? The hell you say.) in issue

#6, the new writers— Fabian Nicieza had wisely bailed by now—introduced a psychotic tribe of native Americans (specifically Hopi Indians) who sported highly caricatured Hopi-themed costumes and weapons, and it was so bad that Marvel eventually recalled the comic. Nicieza later justified the failure of the comic by explaining that it was “a professional assignment done for professional reasons. One clearly lacking in the passion necessary to make it emotionally resonate with readers.” That’s one way of putting it. I would have said it was cynical, sellout, exploitive trash but hey, tomato tomahto.

## **The Black Condor**

Oh man, this is a good one. The first version of

DC's Black Condor was created way back in 1940, before political correctness or rationality or decency or coherence. He shows up for the first time in a series called "Crack Comics," which didn't have the same drug-related connotation back in 1940 but also apparently kind of did. Because that's the perfect name. This was another superhero initially created by Quality Comics, further undermining that brand name. I feel like it was intentionally ironic. The black condor was Richard Grey Junior, whose parents were killed while the whole family was on an archeological expedition to Mongolia. Young Richard was subsequently adopted and raised by a condor, and he learned to fly, "by studying the movement of

wings, the body motions, air currents, balance and levitation of his avian siblings." Let that sink in. The Black Condor technically had no powers, he was just a dude who taught himself to fly. The 1940s was a very confused time in this country.

Incidentally, there are no condors in Mongolia. They live exclusively in the Western Hemisphere.

## **Vibe**

In my opinion, almost as shameful as pandering to corporations is pandering to pop culture trends. Superheroes based on fads don't tend to have much of a shelf life. Such is the case with Vibe, a DC superhero created in 1984.

And this is the problem with superheroes based on trends. Because trends change. What was cool in the 70s isn't cool in the 2000s, and nothing was cool in the 1980s. Not the dancing, not the fashion, not the dancing...did I mention the fashion and the dancing? Those were the main things. So in retrospect a breakdancing superhero seems like the terrible idea that it clearly was. But the brilliant trendspotters at DC assumed that headspins and windmills and red vinyl jackets with shoulder pads and fingerless gloves were the wave of the future.

Vibe, aka Francisco Ramone, initially used his metahuman powers of sonic vibration and extreme agility to become a super breakdancer, as well as the leader of a

Detroit street gang called Los Lobos, because of course. "It's the 80s and we need some diversity in these comics...here's a vaguely Hispanic breakdancing gang member." Vibe would eventually become a member of the iconic Justice League and quickly become the first Justice League member killed in action. So not just a bad stereotype but also a token sacrificial lamb. Like how horror movies always kill off the black guy first? Vibe would be resurrected in various incarnations, including on TV shows including the CW network's the Flash, sans his sweet breaking moves.

For me the worst superheroes are the ones you get when the writers



are just lazy. Are you familiar with the Marvel superhero "strong man"? It's actually an ironic name; he's super skinny, to the point of being almost two dimensional, so when he turns sideways, he essentially disappears from view. That's not true. He's just super strong. He's just a big dude. The ironic name would actually have been cool. I mean flattening yourself would be a terrible superpower but at least it's creative. 2D Man.

Honorable mention: just throwing this out there, but Hawkeye effing sucks.

### **Gin Genie:**

A marvel superhero with Seismokinesis: Gin Genie had the power to generate vibrations in proportion to

the amount of alcohol in her system. She was an alcoholic who literally emanated bad vibes. That's not a power, that's a syndrome. That's a character flaw. I was gin genie all through college.

## **Uncle Sam**

During the 1940s Golden Era of comic books, DC's Uncle Sam was a personification of the mystical "Spirit of America," in the form of the famous caricature of an elderly man with a top hat and striped slacks. Except yoked. He was a patriotic, geriatric, ass-kicking stud. Not sure why an old man in a stovepipe hat and candy-cane-striped pants didn't resonate with the kids. Btw this was another acquisition from Quality comics, the geniuses

behind Black Condor, the Red Bee, plus a bunch we'll leave for next time like Bozo the Iron Man, Doll Man, and Atomictot.

<https://listverse.com/2014/10/16/10-of-the-most-offensive-superheroes-in-the-history-of-comics/>

<https://adventure247.blogspot.com/2010/04/arm-fall-off-boy-man-myth-legend.html?fbclid=IwAR0vYXBDiN8S0jyn1H9Q949wzv3pv6PN3TwlJEpNpEnVI6BgjNreus33sU&m=1>

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