

Introduction

In 1974, Aquaman was a man without a country. After a decade that saw him as the headliner of his own title, a founding and active member of the Justice League of America, the star of his own cartoon series (the back half of Filmation's



Superman/Aquaman Hour of Adventure), and, for the first time in his three decade history, the subject of mass merchandising, the 70s crashed down on the Sea King like the pounding surf.

It started in 1971, when his solo book, coming off an extraordinarily successful run by writer Steve Skeates, artist Jim Aparo, and editor Dick Giordano (known affectionately as "SAG") was cancelled, a move so abrupt it didn't even give

Skeates time to finish off a continued story he had planned. Strangely, *Aquaman*, as a title, was actually selling fairly well, the book being a victim as much as anything of inter-office politics.

That left Aquaman with no regular home, so he could only be found in the pages of *Justice League of America*. By 1971, however, that book had changed significantly from its early issues: gone were the days when Aquaman participated in every adventure, with marquee stars Superman and Batman relegated to minor appearances (not wanting their



characters to be overexposed, the Superman and Batman editors of the time asked their characters only appear sparingly in *JLA*; a move that seems charming in its innocence nowadays). By this point, the League had added members, and many of the newer recruits were given more "screen-time" than the Sea

King. While his fellow JLAers were building up their rich histories in solo titles, Aquaman was relegated to guest appearances or one-off team-ups.

In 1973, DC's venerable *Adventure Comics* book was coming off a long run of unusual characters as the star: The Vigilante, Captain Fear, and Black Orchid were all given their shot, none of them lasting longer than few months in the lead. In early 1974, the book was handed off to the Golden Age character The Spectre, for a run of stories still considered shocking even today: writer Michael Fleisher and former *Aquaman* artist Jim Aparo had the supernatural hero mete out harsh justice to crooks, turning them into glass, melting them, or converting bad guys into wood and running them through a buzzsaw. In an age when the Comics Code still had a lot of power and rendered DC's mystery titles were mostly toothless affairs, The Spectre feature harkened back to the heyday of EC Comics, where bad men got what was coming to them (indeed, *Adventure's* editor, Joe Orlando, worked on those self same ECs). The strip was gutsy and unsentimental; and of course it didn't last.

In *Adventure Comics* #435, Aquaman returned to the title had been his home for years (running nearly uninterrupted from issue #103 to #284) as a back-up to The Spectre. He was once again written by Steve Skeates, but drawn by an artist new to comics looking to make an, ahem, splash: Mike Grell. Grell was thrilled at the opportunity: "He [legendary DC editor Julius Schwartz] looked at my portfolio and called Joe Orlando in. By now I had told this guy my story, and he told Joe this guy moved with his wife and his dog, and he was looking for work, and is there anything you can give him?"

Joe looked at the stuff very carefully and said, 'Yeah, come on into my office.' And he gave me my first assignment, which was the Aquaman story, 'As The Undersea City Sleeps.' It was the launch of my career. It was one of the biggest breaks I ever got."



By the third segment, Skeates has been replaced by another writer, Paul Levitz. Like Grell, Levitz was a newcomer to superhero comics, and didn't really care who it was he was writing: "I have to say, it wasn't, 'Oh my God, I can get my hands on Aquaman.' It was much more at that moment in my life and career, 'I can write a superhero and not these mystery stories which I really liked to read as a kid? Please, sir!'"

Aquaman then disappeared from *Adventure* for a couple of months. When he returned, it was as the star of the book, featured on its cover (for the first time!) and again drawn by Jim Aparo. Co-written by

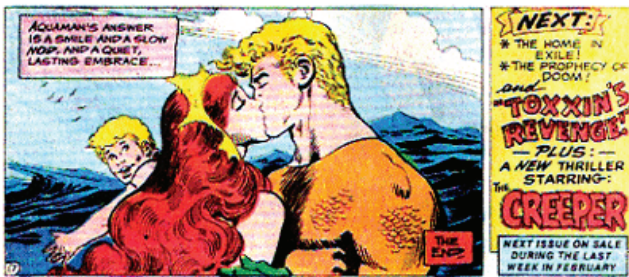
Levitz and David Michelinie, "The Pirate Who Plundered Atlantis!" is a fast-paced, brightly-lit sea-going adventure, with Aquaman alongside his bride Mera.

In the next few issues, Levitz (helped by a revolving door of co-writers, like Michelinie, Gerry Conway and Martin Pasko) brought in members of Aquaman's supporting cast (Aqualad, Aquagirl, Aquababy, Vulko), trip-hammered through the Sea King's Rogues Gallery: The Fisherman, Ocean Master, and Black Manta, developed ongoing subplots, and introduced the greatest playset Mego Toys Never Made, The Aqua-Cave. Steve Skeates

returned for an issue, giving Aquaman a new foe, the Marine Marauder. With *Adventure Comics* #450, co-writer David Michelinie took over the strip, drafting established DC villains to take on the Sea King, like Starro the Conqueror and The Weather Wizard.



Despite the high turn around in writers, these stories maintained a generally consistent tone and feel, much of it due to the work of Jim Aparo, operating at the peak of his artistic powers. A master at both character expression and slam-bang action, he made



Aquaman look as iconic as he ever had. The sun always seemed to be shining in these stories, and with his family of solid supporting characters, it felt as though the rough patch Aquaman went through a few years earlier was now over, and he was about to reclaim his proper place in the nascent "DCU."

But then something happened.

In *Adventure Comics* #452, writer David Michelinie, had Aquaman's most fearsome opponent, Black Manta, deliver the most personal, shocking blow any supervillain has ever dealt a superhero: the murder of his son, Arthur Jr.

The story, "Dark Destiny, Deadly Dreams" still stands out, some thirty-odd years later, as one of the most startling moments in a superhero comic: never had a superhero suffered so greatly at the hands of one of his arch foes. Aquaman was the first "mainstream" superhero to even have a child. Now the character was breaking the mold yet again, this time in the most nightmarish way possible.

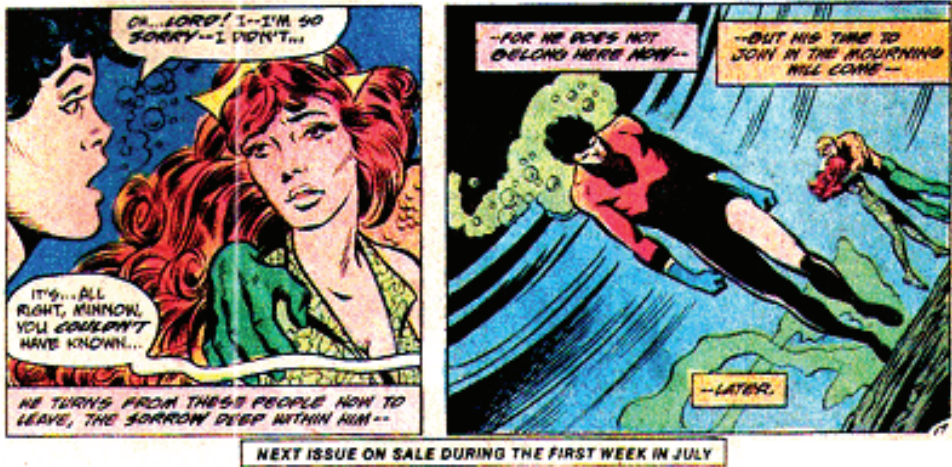
Amazingly, this move was not even considered particularly controversial in the halls of DC at the time. According to Michelinie, he was most likely simply paying off something Paul Levitz was building towards: *"I don't think it was my idea--that possibility doesn't ring any bells. But I can't officially deny it, either. Paul Levitz was plotting the book for a while and I and other writers were doing scripts from his plots. So the most likely scenario is that the death storyline was something Paul was building up to and I just carried it through when I took over plotting the book."*

While Aquaman was suffering the worst defeat any hero could imagine, as a character he was never in better shape: after this issue, it was announced he was being returned to his solo series, picking up where it had left off, at *Aquaman #57!*

Featuring the same creative team, *Aquaman* picked up right where *Adventure* left off: with the Sea King chasing after Manta, in a quest for vengeance. Over the next few issues, Aquaman history was made with several firsts: Mera was given her first solo shot as a back-up feature (written by Paul Kupperberg; remember that name), and artist Don Newton took over for Aparo, giving the character and book a different, but just as dynamic, look. At the same time, over in *Adventure*, Aqualad was starring in his own strip (also written by Kupperberg), another first in Aqua-history.

After a tussle with Kobra, the Mera strip ended, and Kupperberg took over the book from Michelinie. Mera rejoined her husband, the death of their son threatening to tear their seemingly-bedrock relationship apart. *Aquaman #63* was a real family reunion: Aqualad returned to the fold, and Aquaman's half-brother Ocean Master showed up to again be a thorn in his brother's side. It seemed like all the various Aquaman Family strips (*Aquaman*, Aqualad in *Adventure*, and the Mera back-ups) were all coalescing around some big pay-off, a pretty coordinated piece of comic book scheduling, in an era before the advent of regular summer crossover "events."

Aquaman #63 ends on a down note, with Aqualad only then realizing Arthur Jr. was dead. In some ways, even more cruel was the little commercial paste-up DC put at



NEXT ISSUE ON SALE DURING THE FIRST WEEK IN JULY

the bottom of the page: "Next issue on sale during the first week of July."

This author waited a long time for *Aquaman* #64. But the infamous "DC Implosion", a financial catastrophe that led DC to abruptly cancel dozens of titles, forced *Aquaman* off the schedule, never to return. It seems that readers weren't the only ones surprised that the book was cancelled; its writer was, too! Paul Kupperberg: "*I didn't know the axe was about to fall! Aquaman was my first regularly assigned gig when I took it over with #62 (July '78) from David Michelinie, a writer whose work I tremendously admired. I knew it wasn't the healthiest title on the schedule, but I really did expect to have a longer than two issue run on it. I didn't know the book was dead until after I turned in the script for #63.*"

While *Aquaman* kept swimming (back into the safe, warm waters of *Adventure Comics*), he would not return as the star of his own book for another eight years, and even then in just a mini-series. DC wouldn't deem the Sea King ready for another ongoing until 1991. After some moments of true success, and even more moments of failure, *Aquaman* would continue to struggle to prove he could be a solo star again. Now, thanks to his participation in high-profile "event" series such as *Brightest Day* and *Flashpoint* and a stable of talented writers and artists who love the character, *Aquaman* is ready to reclaim the throne as DC's premiere seafaring superhero, and one of the strongest pillars of the DCU.

It was the stories contained in this volume that helped cement *Aquaman* as a hero a loyal and brave man of action, to a new generation. We hope this look back at some of his finest moments will do the same for you.

--Rob Kelly, July 2011

Rob Kelly is the creator and EIC of The Aquaman Shrine, an online daily devotional to the Sea King since 2006.