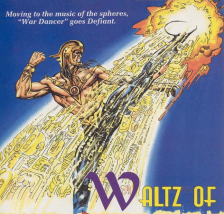


Moving to the music of the spheres,
"War Dancer" goes Defiant.



WALTZ OF DESTRUCTION

By S.C. RENNINGBERG

Alan Weiss is one of the best-kept secrets in the comics industry," says DeMatteis' Jim Strasser, Weiss' collaborator on *War Dancer*, the company's newest title. "He hasn't done a series for any extended length of time, but whatever he has done has been great. The time is now right for him to do a series in which he can really show the world what he can do."

Weiss is a comics veteran who entered the field in the early '60s, along with such legends and contemporaries as David Wrightson, Jim Starlin, Michael Kubert, Howard Chaykin and Frank Brunner. Weiss also happens to be one of the comic industry's most professional figures, a talented artist and writer who has collaborated with

some of the best-known creators, yet who hasn't achieved the level of recognition that his dynamic, occasionally-chthonic pages might seem to merit. He has drawn such characters as Batman, Solomon Kane, the Avengers, Warlock, the Sub-Mariner, Captain America and even the heavy metal group KISS for a comic, that at one

point was Marvel's bestselling title. Currently, Weiss is best known for his 1994 Eisner award entry, *The Blue, The Grey and the Red*, a Batman Civil War Western. His subject matter includes superheroes as well as Westerns, stand-alone adventures, horror and even romance comics.

War Dancer, which Weiss describes

as "a knock-down, drag-out, experimental, psychological love story with apocalyptic overtones," stars a totally new character, created by Weiss and developed for the Defiant Universe by Weiss and Shuster. The character is so important to Defiant's continuity that Shuster calls him "the linchpin of the Defiant Universe." War Doctor was great when it was Defiant title, thanks to his tremendous power to cross time and space—and to maintain good hair—on a will.

Shuster enlisted Weiss to work for Defiant for one simple, very powerful reason. "Was it probably the most creative man I've ever met," Shuster declares. "He's the most original thinker in the business and is credited by all of the conventions that many other writers get hung up with." The new collaboration in the early '90s saw several issues of *The Defiant* and an unpublished *Sab* magazine mini-series, while Shuster was Marvel's Editor in Chief. Shuster also greenlighted *Starlog's* *Monday Night's* counter-canceled *Epic Comics* mini-series. Two more Weiss creations—*BladeRunner*, a *Starlog* fantasy graphic novel, and *Arctic*/*Arctic Comics* featuring *Snarf* *Buffin*, *Arctic*/*Arctic* *Statistik*, a magazine spin-off—were to follow and may be revived at Defiant. So, was the origin of *Starlog's* *Starlog* as a Defiant title for the island? "A fair bit," Weiss chuckles. "I'm already laughing at the first time."

Although they only worked together on a few small projects after Shuster's exit from Marvel, the two kept in touch. "Then," Weiss says, "we both turned up at the opening of Chuck Rozanski's Mills High Comics store last February in Denver. I asked him what he was doing next after Valiant, and he said he was starting up a new company. At that point, he had only two books planned, *Planet* and *Dark Dominion*, and he had a little bit of artwork. We made plans to get together in New York City. Within two weeks, we met and he told me that the Defiant Universe was based on quantum physics and would deal with principles of uncertainty, multiverse, and the idea that the



Was Weiss being chased back into the Defiant Universe with War Doctor.

observer can affect the experiment's outcome. They were all very exciting concepts in getting a universe from... Expressing to be offered just a penning assignment, Weiss nonetheless asked Shuster, "What do you want me to do?" "I want you to help us build a universe," was Shuster's quick reply.

As part of his pitch to recruit Weiss, Shuster asked Weiss to read *The Tao of Physics*, one of many books Shuster had collected while hosting his Defiant Universe DCZ #981. "By the time I read the picture," Weiss notes, "I had the core concept for War Doctor. The key was an alliance to the Hindu god Ganesha, who's depicted in the overall shape of his trunk, or giant-tusked, The dance metaphor for the continual recreation of the universe has always resonated well with me.

"But this is not to say that War Doctor is a god, exactly," Weiss clarifies. "When he's dancing in quantum space, he's godlike because he's dancing on the music of the spheres. When he's in our space/time continuum, he's like the typical figure of the man who keeps his a god.

"War Doctor's power made it possible for him to be potentially the most powerful character in the Defiant

Universe. There's also an unusual interlocking element to him that takes the character into realms that make him different than all other characters. This element of uniqueness is going to affect all of the character's relationships."

Weiss agrees, citing directly from his creative resume on quantum physics. "War Doctor's power, in essence, are that he can, by force of will and the way dance, be anywhere or anywhere, which gives him the potential of being the greatest martial artist in the universe. But that's certainly not all that he's about."

Both Weiss and Shuster agree that grounding their character's power in quantum physics will not make War Doctor too shy and needed to be too. Using these advanced, difficult-to-understand concepts, Shuster means that we can't do some good old rip-roaring comic book stuff, either. "Weiss is quick to add.

Along with War Doctor's unusual powers come unique problems. "The more time he spends at one speed of life, which is very slow and thick and heavy to him, the weaker he becomes. Living at our speed, he has to feel human emotions, which he hasn't had in his 25,000 years, and they'll combine his power and make his will—so they do, sure."

"War Doctor fits squarely into the Defiant continuity; his origin is also the origin of the planet *Planet*. So because War Doctor at the very moment that *Planet* transforms, *Planet* changes from a beautiful, benign world into a hostile, all-devouring entity, not unlike a big cancer cell. There's a specific incident that occurred on *Planet* 25,000 years ago," Weiss says, "that was so monumental that it led to the totally toxic situation that we have today on the planet *Planet*."

In fact, War Doctor is a warrior, philosopher, scientist and prince named Alex Tealium. Alex lives through a supernatural, empire-collapse *Quantum Era* that's based on an *Arctura*-like continent on *Planet*. He gains his near-dimensional, transpa-

ness. He always knows where he is, as best he can, but he senses here when he's called with him that there's something weirdly, weirdly wrong."

Yes, despite Mr. Dancer's awesome detective potential, he has an enemy in the Defiant Universe who may be crucial to eliminating him before he can perform the last apocalyptic war dance. "He senses that he's right at the time Dancer is Characterized, and his main purpose is to kill Mr. Dancer and neutralize him," Weiss reveals. "We have a good idea of how it's going to come out, but Mr. Dancer could see anything go."

In creating Mr. Dancer's appearance, Weiss drew an influence ranging from Philip K. Dick to the new Western's cowboy style, to master fantasy painter Frank Frazetta, to Majin and Akira art. "When he dances," Weiss points out, "he leaves a trail of blue-white graphics. I just didn't want to do another American Indian character. Even though Mr. Dancer sounds like that like he would be that American Indian—and I was tempted because I love them—there were those at New York that the character around and I just wanted to take him in another direction and do something different."

"It's surprising how close our early character designs were to the current Mr. Dancer look," Weiss comments. "The helmet and necktie are basically cut out of his collar. At first, the helmet was more of a metallic war helmet, but it was too complex. And initially I drew him way past in different designs. I adopted a kind of circle and arrow-based design for the final character design. I liked the Kenner idea of that sort of metallic shoulder pieces that he wears like a necktie, with gears at all his character points. He wears gear to simulate a mask, but has no secret identity, so it's not necessarily a disguise."

Although he and Wheeler are officially working the script, Wheeler gives Weiss most of the credit for creating Mr. Dancer. "It's primarily Matt's vision," Wheeler admits, "and I think that what I've done is to show him ways that he can better fulfill his vision and fit it into what we're doing." At this point, the concepts and dialogue such collaborative contributions are evenly divided. After plotting the story together, Weiss does the pencils. After the pencils are done, each does a dialogue version on the script. "You should see how we do it, though," Weiss adds gleefully. "We talk for hours and hours. We get very excited. We sit out the scenes, including the choreography, right there in the office. We 'see dance' all over the office. We have fun, and frankly, that's the way it ought to be, because there are



According to his creator, Mr. Dancer is "a hard-core, drug-out, alcoholic, nihilistic loner who's got apocalyptic overtones."

visual books after all.

"That's the reason why I'm even taking on a script like this. Before Jim made his offer, I was reading over projects of several different publishers. Mr. Dancer seems to be right because of the timing and the creative latitude I have."

"The main reason that Jim and I are doing it together is because the Defiant Universe is his universe. And if this character's going to be the flagship, I want to do the best job I can the best way possible. And so far, Jim and I are having as much fun as when we worked on *The Avengers*, if not more."

A major strong motivation for collaborating with Wheeler is the fact that Defiant is a brand-new company. There's no complex history accumulated over decades. "Defiant, at this point," Weiss observes, "is very much like what it used have been like working at Marvel in the early '60s, when it was just a small company. Everything was being done for the first time. You didn't have to deal with 800 issues of continuity for every title. There's much less set-up, and there's very much a family, fun feel to it."

Weiss will definitely pencil at least the first story arc of Mr. Dancer. Afterwards, he may take over scripting while working on other projects.

Within the comics industry, particularly among artists, Weiss is noted as a meticulous craftsman with a very re-

alistic style. Weiss claims this traditionally considered dimension with Neal Adams, with whom he worked during his early years. "Neal Adams was the closest to the style I wanted to do," Weiss recalls. "What I wanted to see in my style was the ultimate blend of realistic gear like Al Williamson, Frazetta and Lynn Murray, combined with Jack Kirby's exaggerated dimensions. That, to me, was the best of both worlds. People say I'm a realistic artist, but I'm not. My work is dynamic exaggeration, rendered realistically so I can express the character's human quality."

During his career, Weiss has been more fortunate than most artists in being able to select his assignments, while working his time between advertising and at least one comic job a year. "I've been able to arrange my time, the time of my life, better than most people have the chance to and I don't regret that the one minute I've wasted every comic book I've done."

"Nobody usually deadlines can be quite a grind, but the less deadline pressure, the more enjoyable it was. And I don't mean that in round terms in anything," Kim Weiss notes, "but I tried to get as close as possible to the best art concept within the realm of commercial art. I don't see this as some sort of race, like who can produce the most pages. I was always more interested in drawing the best pages. I may not have done as many stories as other artists, but I'm proud of them all." **EW**