



Living Comic Art Legends

I think there are a few real legends still walking this funny book earth. A few come to mind: Jack Davis. Mort Drucker. Al Feldstein. Joe Kubert. John Severin. Robert Crumb. Steve Ditko. All 100% legends, no doubt about it.

And I think Berni Wrightson, Richard Corben and Jeff Jones will soon be there.

Some of you reading this crap are probably wondering, “What are you basing this on?”

Good question.

Body of work and quality of the work is a determining factor.

But the rules in this column are if I think they are legends, then they are.

I guess Jim Steranko and Neal Adams should make this list too. These two guys dominated my comic book purchasing dollar in the ‘60s and early ‘70s, that much is sure. But both have done very little quality work in the last 20 years. Ditko falls into that category too, but Steve is “the Man” so once again, I bend the rules in my world.

And most of the guys that are real legends—and I love their work—have passed on. I know I have a very narrow view, but that’s the way I’m built and think about things.

It takes a lot to be a real legend in my opinion.

And I should list Frank Frazetta too but I always thought that his middle name was “the living legend” so that would be redundant.

So my choice as *the Living Legend* is the great Al Williamson.



From the collection of John Hitchcock.

Copyright Al Williamson

The first time I ever saw Al's work was in some odd EC reprint fanzine and I became an immediate fan. Then I got my hands on his King Features' *Flash Gordon* work and I began to put together that this one guy did a lot of my favorite comics. It's funny when you first begin to recognize an artist's style. The legendary EC science fiction run to the legendary Warren artwork from *Creepy* and *Eerie*, to the legendary *Flash Gordon* books, to *Secret Agent X-9* to the *Star Wars* newspaper strip, this becomes a chain of brilliant work that was done by one guy.

Yeah, I know, *one* guy did all that amazing high quality work. It just messes with my head that one guy could be this good for so long. If I listed just one of the above great art periods in Al's career, he would still be considered a legend.

Funny thing is, Williamson has seemed to take a back seat historically lately with criticism about his use of photographs and that his early work he had help with his stories from other artists like Roy Krenkel, Angelo Torres and Frank Frazetta. And the real killer fault that he is a rip-off of Alex Raymond.

Let me take these on one at a time:

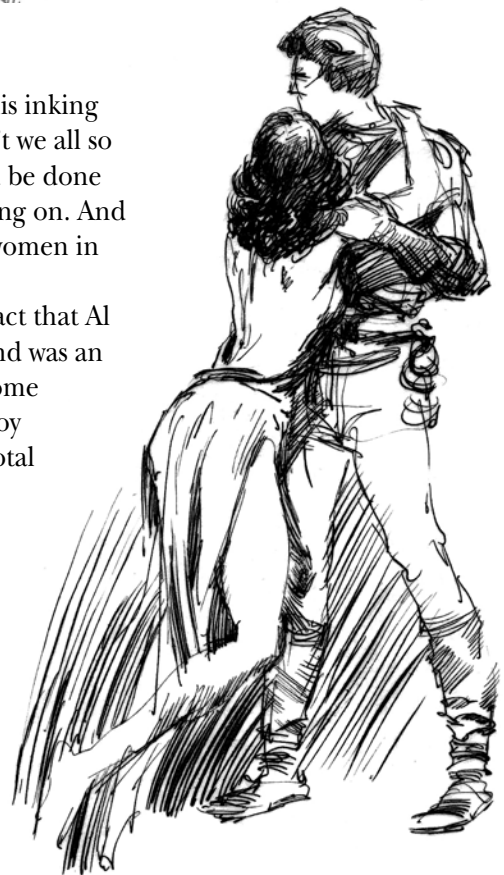
Photos. Well, like it or not, everybody uses them and very few use them as well as Williamson. And if that's the way he works and does that terrific work, well good for him and good for us.

Using other artists to finish his work. Well, Al was very unsure of his inking back in the '50s so he asked for help from his friends. And aren't we all so much richer for that? Al wanted the best quality work that could be done and put his ego in check for the better of the story he was working on. And I love those Krenkel cities and Frazetta inks on those beautiful women in Al's stories.

Alex Raymond rip-off. Well, a lot of folks don't seem to get the fact that Al Williamson is our (comic art version of) Raymond. Alex Raymond was an icon in the '30s through the '50s. For 40 years Williamson did some of the finest art in comic book history and in my book, and as Roy Krenkel has said, he passed Raymond a long time ago. I am in total agreement. I'm ready for you people to start throwing stones at this glass house but that's the way I feel about it. If you look at Williamson's art in the '50s and then look at the '60s, there is tremendous growth and confidence shown. And that confidence continued growing for another 20 years.

And to think I became one of his good friends makes my life very sweet.

I first met the great Al Williamson in the mountains of North Carolina in 1983. There was a small comic convention in Asheville, N.C., and they advertised that THE Al Williamson was going to be a guest. I saw this show advertised on a flyer at another small convention at the Four Seasons mall in



From the collection of John Hitchcock.

Copyright Al Williamson

Greensboro. A guy named D.W. Howard was throwing this show and he told me to my face that Al was going to be there.

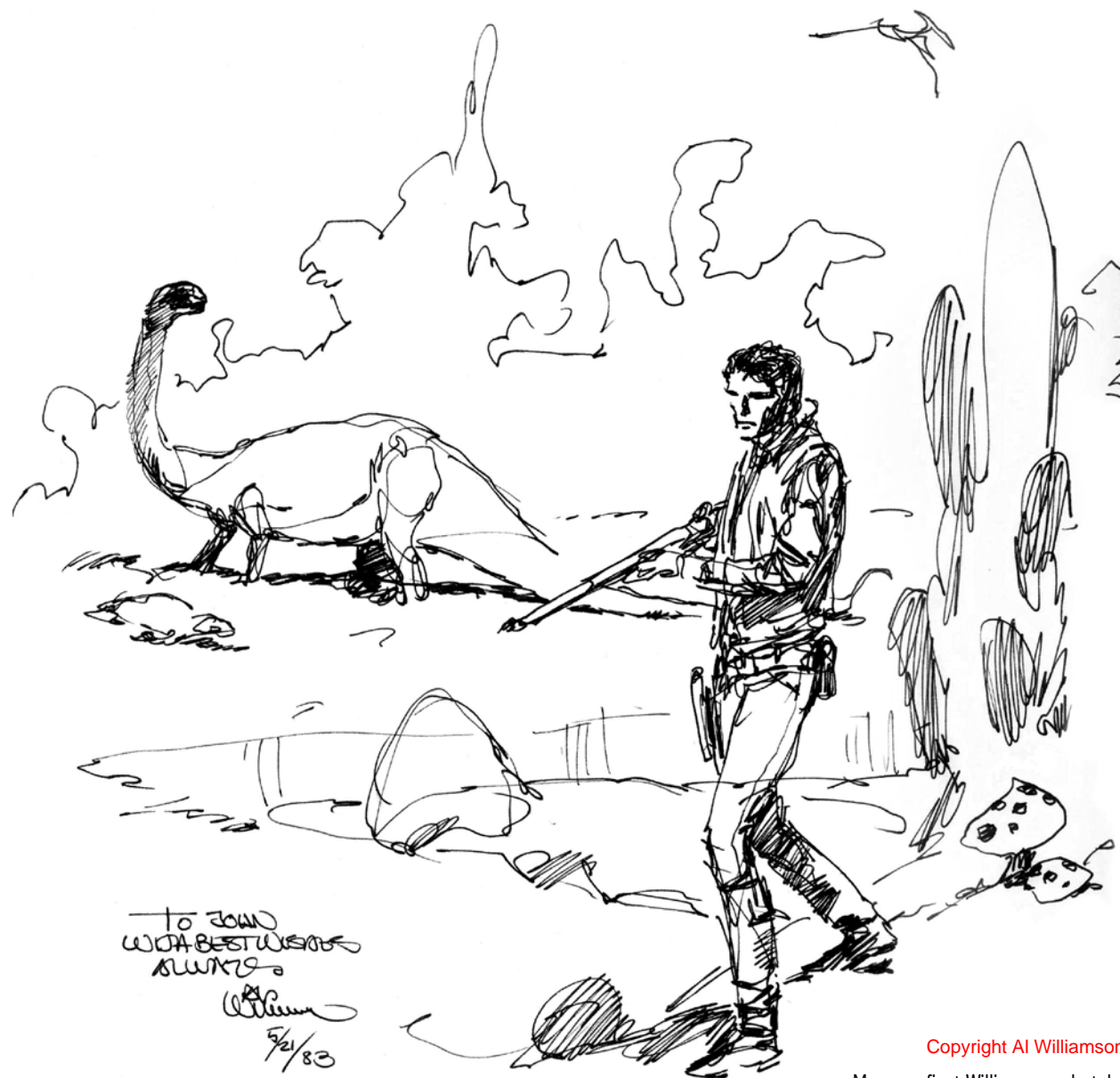
He promised. He had to.

I told him I would be there, snow or no snow. I *had* to meet this guy. And so Bill Ruth, Tom Wimbish and I jumped into two cars and headed to Asheville. It was about a four-hour drive and we left at around 2:00 a.m. I was never as fired up in my life as I was then going to meet Williamson. Bill and I talked about Al's amazing career the whole way. We would start laughing and yelling out stories about this brilliant artist. Williamson was one of the early artists that I could identify by his style. And I would save up my newspaper money to buy comics with his art in them. That was a very big deal back when I was a teenager, but Williamson's art never let me down. The quality of Al's work—and the work of Wally Wood—was what turned me into a comic fan. Man, I was crazy about the artist that signed his work in a box. We finally did make the show. I was working for Acme Comics for that time and we had purchased two dealer tables so it was time to unload both cars of funny books. The set-up deal is a real pain in the ass. And I hate being a beast of burden for little or no pay. Anyway, I was carrying a box of comics into the convention room when I saw Williamson. I swear, I froze in mid step and couldn't believe I was really seeing the real Al Williamson. Al was wearing a Lucasfilms jacket and Flash Gordon



From the collection of John Hitchcock.

Copyright Al Williamson



Copyright Al Williamson
My very first Williamson sketch.
From the collection of John Hitchcock.

boots. They weren't really Flash's boots but they looked like the ones he drew. Bill and Tom were both very impressed but we were all scared to death to talk to the guy. Legends do that kind of stuff to you.

So I gritted my teeth and finally found my nerve and approached Williamson. Al was walking around the dealer's room with his wife, Cori, and his very young son, Victor. Victor was about two years old and holding on to a baby stroller. I had brought with me a British black and white book reprinting the *Secret Agent Corrigan* newspaper strips. It had the last few months of Alex Raymond's art and the beginning of the John Prentice run. So I walked up to Al and told him if I ever met Al Williamson I wanted him to have this book. Al was impressed by this and said he didn't have that book and thanked me. He then opened this book and began telling me the history of Raymond's run on the strip. Needless to say I was floored by his interest and kindness. As we were talking his young son Victor somehow grabbed me by the leg and I swear, he wouldn't let me go! The Williamsons were kind of embarrassed by this but it didn't bother me at all. I just kept walking and dragging Victor down the aisle as we talked. What can I say, the kid had good taste and I was lucky the kid wasn't teething. At the end of the aisle we had to use a crowbar on Victor to get him to let go and Williamson said we would talk later in the show.

When I got back to our table the guys wanted to know what was said. Really, all I could say was Williamson's a very nice guy. When you meet one of your childhood heroes it's so wonderful when it turns out he is

a very sweet guy. I was lucky I guess to pick the right guy, at the right time and place. But Williamson is in real life a very kind and humble guy.

Anyway, I lined up to get Williamson to autograph about a dozen books. It wasn't that long of a wait and Al would tell you stories about certain issues as he signed them. A little later in the day, Al started sketching for twenty bucks a sketch. Man, I watched in stone silence as Al sketched sword fights and *Star Wars* scenes with incredible speed. Williamson drew with a confidence that I have never ever witnessed by anyone. The guy was just playing around with his pen, a line here, and a line there and suddenly, you could see it too. Al turned to me and asked me if I wanted a *Flash Gordon* sketch. I said I wanted an EC "Sound of Thunder" kind of thing.

"Are you sure you don't want Flash?" Al said.

No, I wanted an EC deal instead.

Another lesson learned here. If an artist wants to draw something, let him. You will get a better sketch if you do. But I was a smart-ass and asked him to do a few mushrooms on the drawing. Al wasn't very happy with that request and bashed out this quick little 'shroom and then said he was not going to sketch anymore.

So, I pissed the guy off and everybody behind gave me shit for it. (You can see my first Williamson sketch on the previous page.)

The next day, Al was selling a few *Flash Gordon* prints. I wanted one really bad but was spent out except for twelve bucks and some change. So I asked how much they were. Al smiled and said that they were not for sale. That he would give me one for free.

As I said before, Al Williamson is one hell of a nice guy. I still have the print and it hangs in my comic book store to this day for good luck.

Dragon*Con

Somewhat I got Al's phone number and decided to call him to let him know I would be at the Dragon*Con held at The Omni in Atlanta, Ga. He was very nice and told me to stop by and say hello when I got to the show. So everything seemed to be planned perfectly for me to really get to talk with him. The first day of the convention, all the artists and writers were lined up against a wall with a huge crowd milling about in lines. I had organized a Greensboro show a month before this and Julie Schwartz was one of the guests. Julie ran into our motley crew and took matters into his own hands





and began pushing his way with us in tow. It was a little embarrassing to say the least but it was the first time I ever got a VIP treatment so I figured what the hell. I remember being introduced to Howard Chaykin and Archie Goodwin, and we then get to Al Williamson. Al stands up and graciously talks to everyone and then Julie Schwartz introduces me last and says, "And this is John Hitchcock."

Al suddenly looks my way and says loudly, "Hitchcock? Hitchcock!? I don't want to talk to him!"

Julie sensed bad blood in the air and began to back away from Al's table.

And off the cuff I shot back, "Williamson, just because I said that you haven't drawn anything good since 1958 is no reason to get mad at me."

Al then shouts, "I have never been so insulted in my life! Get him out of here!"

I turned away and shouted back something about him being a hack or something along those lines and went off to the convention.

Now understand, we both are very poor actors and we both were kind of smiling when this went off but well, everybody thought we were very serious and hated each other. (Matter of fact, I am scared to go back to Atlanta fearing a bunch of *Star Wars* fans will chase me down with burning torches wanting to get a piece of me to this very day.)

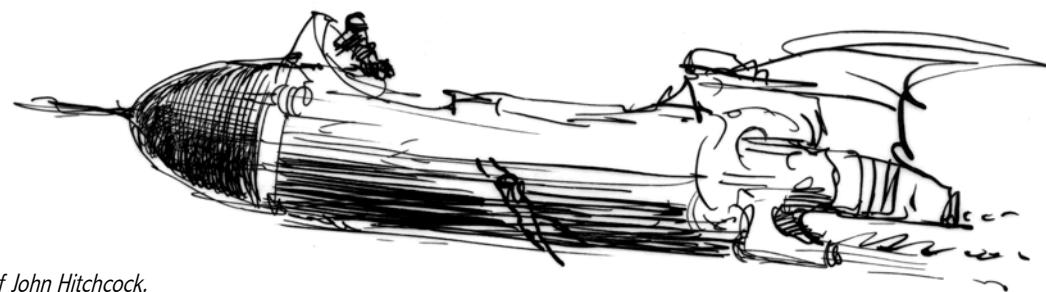
It seemed at this show every time I turned around Al was yelling at me and I would fire right back as fast as I could. We ran into each other at the escalator once as he was on his way to do a signing. Al looked right at me and said, "Hitchcock? You again! Why are you following me?"

I wanted to change the direction of this staged feud so I asked him if he brought his family with him to the show.

"Yes, I did. All twenty of them."

And I fired back, "Catholic right?"

Al threw up his hands and yelled out, "Hitchcock, You're driving me crazy!"



From the collection of John Hitchcock.

Then he laughed and said, "Let's do lunch."

We didn't seem to notice that there were about 300 to 400 hundred people hearing all this at the time. But no one heard the line about lunch.

So the feud went on and on for two days.

Once Al was sketching a *Star Wars* scene with Luke and Darth Vader in a lightsaber duel. He was using a red sharpie and really drawing fast as only Al can do. Anyway, I walked behind his table and began singing the *Lone Ranger* TV theme as he sketched. Al, I swear, began to draw to the theme music! It was amazing!

Then he suddenly shouted out, "Oh my God! I totally screwed up this drawing and it's all your fault! Hitchcock, will you please leave me alone!"

So I ran away staying something like I was only trying to make it better.

Now I don't know what the poor guy who paid Al for the sketch thought. (Yeah, I know, he is one of the *Star Wars* guys still carrying a torch wanting a piece of me.)

So as the convention went on, Al and I continued this poorly acted feud. Saturday night I was with my friends down near the elevators. I mentioned how Williamson was really funny. Then John Butts, who was beside me said, "That's funny, I think the guy hates your guts."

"You gotta be kidding," I said.

"All I know man is every time you see Al Williamson he screams at you to leave him alone."

I tried to explain it was all a joke but the whole group just told me to leave the poor guy alone. Maybe I was a better actor than I thought! Anyway, I told everybody that the next time we saw Williamson I would pull him aside and show them it was all a gag.

As soon as I said that the elevator door opened and there was Al and Cori and Victor standing right in front of us.

With out missing a beat Al screamed, "There's Hitchcock again! Run for it!"

Cori put a newspaper over her head and the three of hem ran for their life from me!

I turned to my friends and they looked at me like I had the black plague and said, "See, we told you Williamson hated your guts!"

What could I do but turn and really yell at Al and family to stop. They did (thank God!) and I explained to them that all my friends think this is for real. Everybody broke up laughing and I then introduced Al and family to my friends.

Everything was cool, right?



This photo was taken on my first trip to visit Al at his studio in 1984. Photo by Mike Shields.



Wrong.

This truce was off to the side and nobody but the few of us even saw us being friendly.

So at the end of the show Al and I talked briefly and he invited me to visit him at his house. I told him not to say that unless he meant it because I would take him up on the offer. Needless to say, the visit came about a month later and man, what a mind-bender of an experience that was.

So we now flash (no pun intended) ahead to Monday morning at my house where I was trying to catch up on some much-needed sleep. You guessed it, the phone rings and it is good ol' Wally Harrington.

Wally: "How did Atlanta go?"

Me: "Oh fine. Williamson is really a great guy."

Wally: "That's not what I heard."

Me: "What?"

Wally: "Look John, Al Williamson has a reputation as being one of the nicest guys in comics. And all I heard from that show was that you and Williamson were yelling at each other the whole time! I want to know what you did to piss the guy off because I don't want that to happen to me!"

Me: "Wally, it was all a joke."

Wally: "No way! It's the talk of the whole convention that Williamson hates your guts!"

Me: "Wally, it was all a put-on! It was really bad acting! Al and I are really friends."

Wally: "No way!"

Me: "Wally, why don't you just call the guy and he'll tell you the truth."

Wally: "I am not calling him about that! He might think *we're* friends."

Needless to say, I called Al first and I swear, he laughed for five minutes straight!

Al kept saying that fans take everything so seriously and we must have been better actors than we thought. Later I called Wally and he called Al and everything was very cool after that. Of course Wally and I never talk anymore but that is really no big loss to me personally. (Now, *that* was a joke.)

But Al and I have been friends now for 25 years and counting. He drove down with his family to Greensboro five times to be a guest at my comic book conventions. You read that right, they drove down and that's about 11 hours one way! And come to think about it, I made that drive to Honesdale twice a year for at least 20 years straight. Everybody in Greensboro that attended those shows all fell in love with Al and his wonderful family. And that is a good thing.



Top photo: Al hard at work in his studio laying down Zip-A-Tone on an art job. Above: the drawing table where the magic happens. Photos by Mike Shields.



Al signs for a fan at the 1990 Parts Unknown comic book convention.

Just Al.

I know what you want to ask me. How could I be a friend with a legend like that? I mean, it has to be incredibly intimidating to spend that much time with an honest-to-God genius. Well, Al helped me solve that problem.

One day, Al and I were driving in his car to have some lunch and I turned to look at him and I got a gander of that famous Williamson profile. I began to get real nervous about just talking with him. Al asked me what the problem was. So I told him I have a problem with the fact that he is the real Al Williamson. The Al Williamson that I collected my newspaper money for weeks to send off to New York to get his comics with his stories in them.

The guy who drew "Sound of Thunder." The guy who drew those *Flash Gordons*.

The Man. *Al Williamson*.

Al turned to me and told me he had lost a lot of friends because he was that Al Williamson and he wanted me to get over that stuff.

"From now on just forget that I'm that guy," he said. "When we're together I am just Al."

So I thanked him for that and then told him I thought he made a real mistake.

"Why is that?" Al asked.

"Because now I don't have to show you any respect," I replied.

Funny, looking back we went to New York together a few times. And San Diego and Dallas. But most of the time we just hung out at his house looking at art and talking about comics and illustration. Al is a hell of a teacher and gave me a great gift of educating me about that world.

Now Al is slowing down but he is still Al and I hope for many more good times.

On the following pages are a few of the holy grails from my collection for all of you fine folks to enjoy. And before you ask, no, they're not for sale. Enjoy!

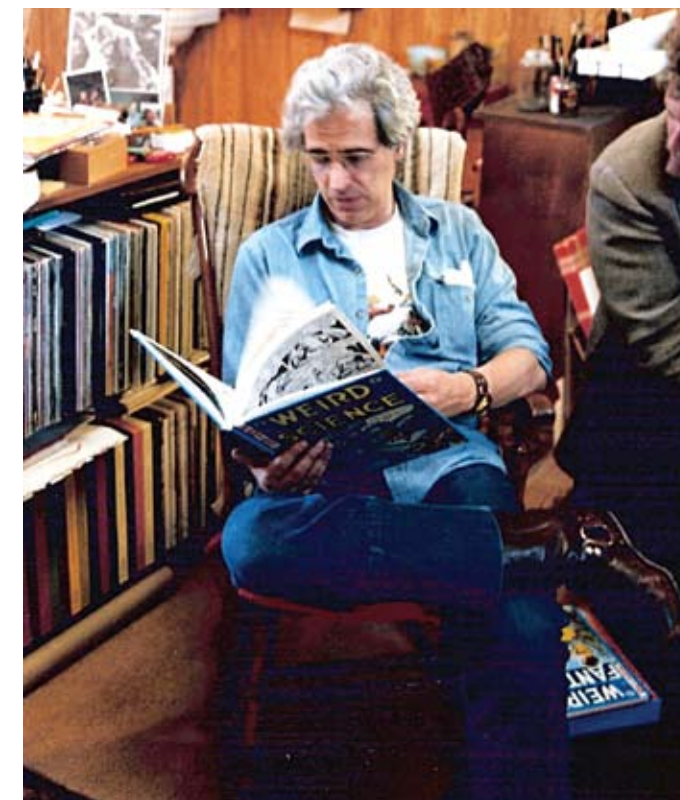
Update: Al Williamson passed away June 12, 2010.

He was my dear friend and will be greatly missed.



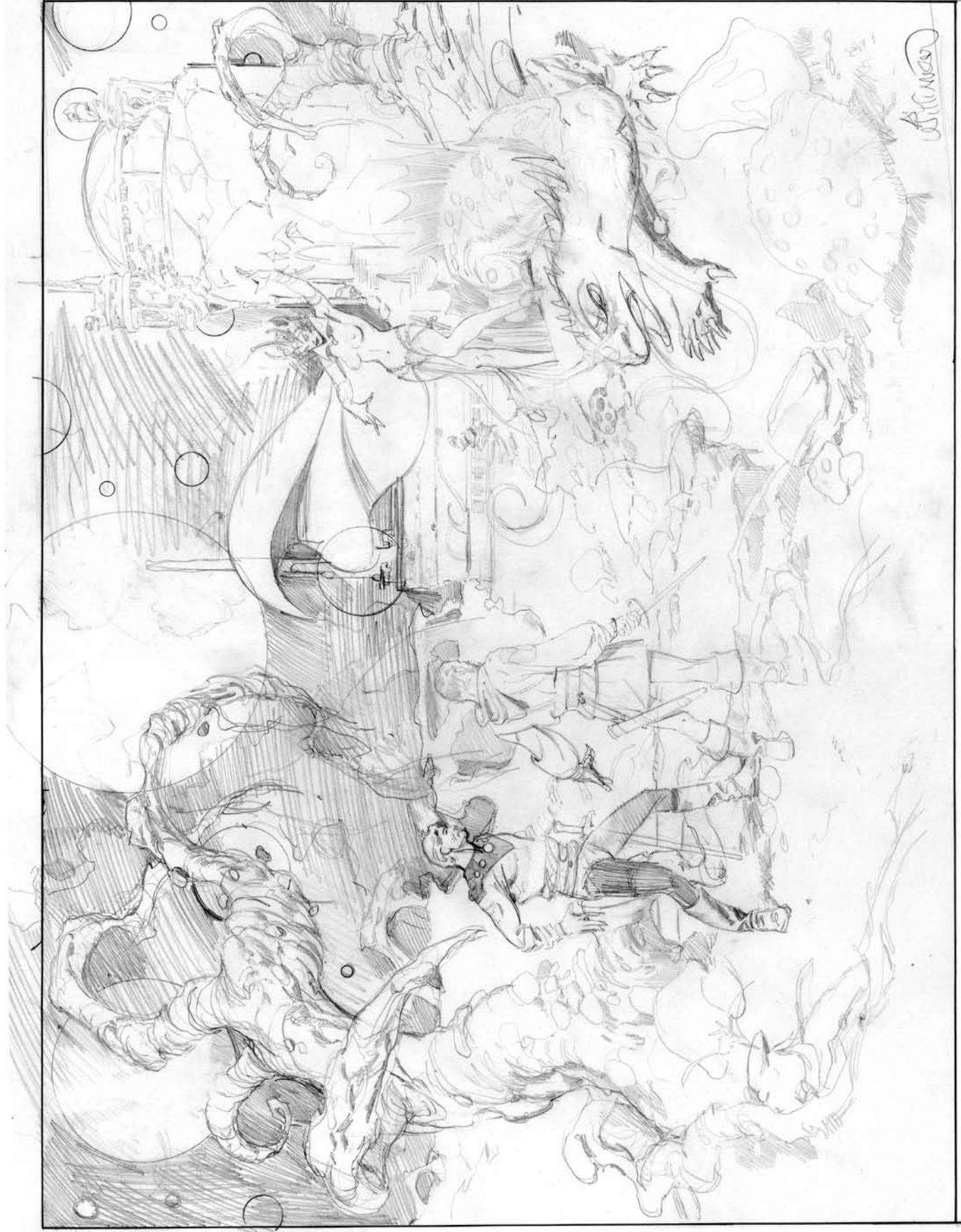
Above: Al, the late Archie Goodwin and yours truly at a panel during the 1988 AcmeCon comic book convention.

Below: Al checks out some of the classics in a black & white EC reprint hardcover he signed for me. Photo by Mike Shields.



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"Flash Gordon" by Al Williamson preliminary sketch. This was done for a print for The National Cartoonists Society Portfolio in 1977-78. From the collection of John Hitchcock.



"Flash Gordon" by Al Williamson final inked original. By far the best thing I own. From the collection of John Hitchcock.



Williamson
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To JOHN HITCHCOCK
WITH WARMEST REGARDS
from Tom
AP. 12/31/84

A fantastic Christmas gift from Al, circa 1984. From the collection of John Hitchcock.

Copyright Al Williamson



WE DO NOT KNOW FOR CERTAIN, BUT MY SCIENTISTS THINK IT MAY BE FIFTEEN OR TWENTY YEARS BEFORE WE BEGIN TO AGE AGAIN.

I COULD NEVER IMAGINE YOU ANY OLDER, FRIA.

OH I CAN, FLASH, THAT IS WHY I FIND THIS EXPERIMENT SO INTERESTING.

I'LL HAVE DR. DAVRO PREPARE SOME OF THIS SOLUTION FOR YOU AND DALE... AND, OF COURSE, ZARKOV'S BRILLIANT MIND MUST BE KEPT ACTIVE AS LONG AS POSSIBLE!

LATER THAT EVENING...

HAVE YOU FOLLOWED INSTRUCTIONS, BELLAM?

YES, COUNT TRIVAL... DR. DAVRO HAS POISONED THE ENTIRE SOLUTION. BY MIDNIGHT THE KINGDOM SHALL BE OURS.

AHHHH... THEY ARE ABOUT TO DRINK THE SOLUTION...

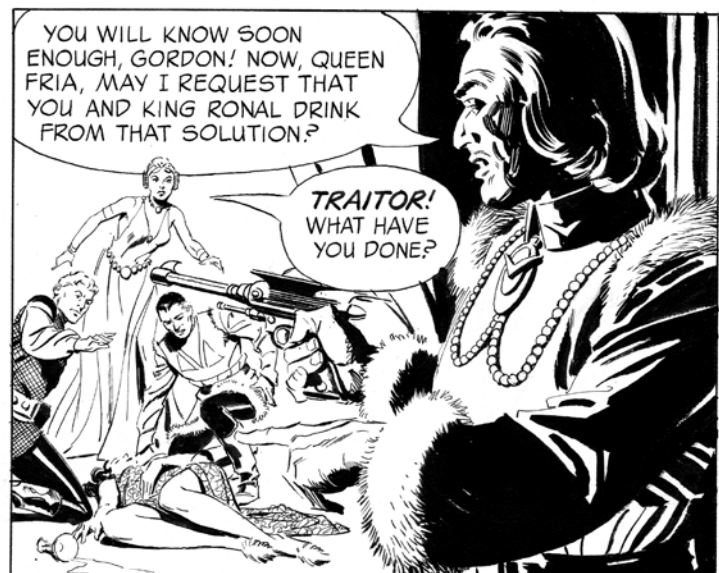
FLASH GORDON - July on-sale - page 11

Flash Gordon #1, page 11. Got this one in San Diego. From the collection of John Hitchcock.



OH FLASH, I FEEL FAINT!

DALE! WHAT'S WRONG?



YOU WILL KNOW SOON ENOUGH, GORDON! NOW, QUEEN FRIA, MAY I REQUEST THAT YOU AND KING RONAL DRINK FROM THAT SOLUTION?

TRAITOR! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

TRUE TO HIS NAME, FLASH TAKES ACTION...



TELL ME, WHO ARE YOUR ACCOMPLICES... OR YOU DIE TOO!

IT WAS ALL BELLAM'S DOING! HE AND DR. DAVRO POISONED THE SOLUTION.



YOU LYING COWARD!

FLASH GORDON - July on-sale - Page 12 To JOHN HITCHCOCK, A GOOD FRIEND AND A HERO OF A GUY. W. Williams

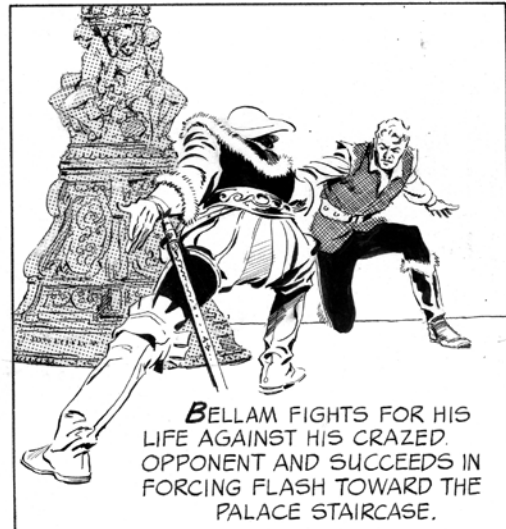
Flash Gordon #1, page 12. Got this one years ago from Wally Harrington. From the collection of John Hitchcock.



IGNORING THE NUMBNESS SPREADING THROUGHOUT HIS BODY, FLASH DRAWS TRIVAL NEW ANTAGONIST.

NO, RONAL, HE'S MINE! HE KILLED DALE!

GUARDS! ARREST THAT MAN!



BELLAM FIGHTS FOR HIS LIFE AGAINST HIS CRAZED OPPONENT AND SUCCEEDS IN FORCING FLASH TOWARD THE PALACE STAIRCASE.



YOU CAN'T LAST MUCH LONGER, GORDON. YOU'RE WEAKENING ALREADY.

BEFORE I DIE I'LL HAVE THE SATISFACTION OF KILLING YOU!



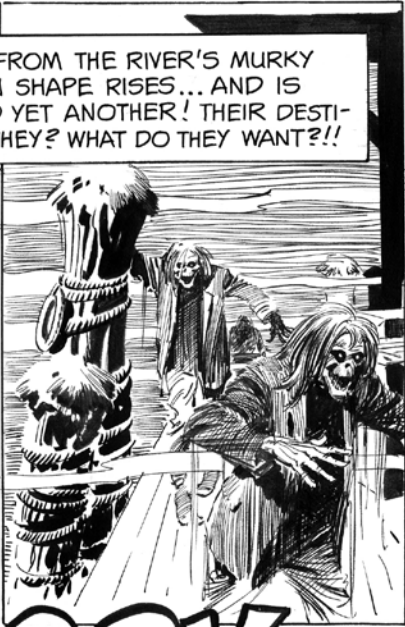
AS BELLAM RUSHES IN FOR THE KILL, FLASH GATHERS HIS REMAINING STRENGTH INTO A DECISIVE THRUST.

FLASH GORDON - July on-sale - Page 13 To JOHN HITCHCOCK, A GOOD FRIEND AND A HERO OF A GUY. W. Williams 1990

Flash Gordon #1, page 13. Al gave me this one at the 1990 Parts Unknown comic convention. From the collection of John Hitchcock.



HEH, HEH, HEH, WELL, MY LITTLE FIENDS, DID YOU LIKE THAT LAST YARN, OL' UNCLE CREEPY SPUN FOR YOU? WELL, IF YOU DID, I KNOW YOU'LL REALLY GO FOR THIS DILLY. IT'S A KILLER....!



THE WATERFRONT AT NIGHT! FROM THE RIVER'S MURKY DEPTHS A NO-LONGER HUMAN SHAPE RISES... AND IS FOLLOWED BY ANOTHER...AND YET ANOTHER! THEIR DESTINATION: THE SHORE! WHO ARE THEY? WHAT DO THEY WANT?!!

THE SUCCESS STORY

BALDO, THE SUCCESS OF YOUR COMIC STRIP HAS BEEN PHENOMENAL! I SPEAK FOR THE REST OF THE SYNDICATE WHEN I SAY WE'RE PROUD TO BE DISTRIBUTING IT FOR YOU!



ALL DUE TO BALDO'S GENIUS! START TO FINISH IT'S HIS DOING!



The great Baldo at work in the splash from "The Success Story" from *Creepy* #1. From the collection of John Hitchcock.