

Don Chin, GRI

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Forget the shell game - it's hip to be a Hamster

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While the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles continue to clean up at the box office, the underground is already rumbling with the Next Big Thing.

Parents of the world, brace yourselves.

Would you believe the Adolescent Radioactive Black Belt Hamsters? In 3-D?

That's right - now that adults finally have learned the total Turtle history, including the subtle yet important differences between Donatello and Leonardo, youngsters are already starting to move on to the way cool adventures of those wacky, wisecracking hamsters - Clint, Chuck, Jackie and Bruce.

More than 500,000 Hamsters comic books have been sold around the world. A New Jersey toy company is planning a line of plastic figures for the Christmas season; another company is mass-producing T-shirts featuring the ratty little likenesses of the Hamsters. And one of the producers of the Turtles movie has been talking about bringing the furry quartet to the big screen.

How hip are the Hamsters? They've been on a David Letterman Top 10 list (as one of "Tom Brokaw's Favorite Reading Materials") and they were a question (that is, an answer) on "Jeopardy." (The question was, "What is a group of comic book superheroes?")

Don Chin, of Eureka, Calif., created the Hamsters in 1986 as a one-shot satire of the Turtles. But when the first issue sold 77,000 copies, Eclipse Comics launched a Hamsters series, which has included several 3-D issues.

"I just took the Ninja idea and went even further with it," Chin said.

"Ripoff" might be a better way to describe it, but in any case, there's a good chance the Adolescent Radioactive Black Belt Hamsters will be coming soon to a bedsheet and a lunchbox and a Christmas list near you, so here's a quick rundown on their history:

In 1977, NASA sent the Hamsters into space to investigate a hovering mass of radioactive cosmic Jell-O. They blew up the mass, and the explosion sent them back to Earth, where they were found by Himalayan monks who

revived them and then schooled them in the martial arts.

The Hamsters are 4 feet tall. They crack wise, appear on talk shows, are featured in magazine articles and do battle with villains such as evil Girl Scouts, sumo wrestlers gone bad and a group of psychotic white supremacists who worship Colonel Sanders. That last group is know as "The 'Coo Clucks Clan."

This summer, the Hamsters will acquire superpowers. They will be able to fly, throw glowing "power-punches," shoot laser beams with their eyes and transform themselves into 2-ton creatures known as "Toe Jam Monsters from Atlantis."

How do they suddenly develop these superpowers?

"They hit puberty," Chin explained.

That'll happen.

I recently strapped on a pair of blue-and-red lensed 3-D glasses and read the latest Hamsters adventure. A few observations: This is fairly sharp satire. In one adventure, the Hamsters poke fun at Mike Tys! on, "Late Night with David Letterman," gossip publications, televangelism and heavy metal music.

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TALES FROM THE CREVICE: BOOKS THAT FELL THROUGH THE CRACK

By Vroom Socko

Well, this week saw the release of yet another reworked 80's concept. This time it's Robotech. Does the comic do justice to its origins? Don't ask me, I didn't read it. I'm more of a Star Blazers kinda guy anyway. Why am I bringing this up, then? Well, this whole veneration of any concept of the Reagan era is just a little much for me. For every good, like Marvel's TPB's of GI Joe, there are at least two bad. Hell, I even hear Marvel is planning something for the 20th anniversary of the New Universe. Okay, that's just a rumor. All right, fine, I'm the one starting that rumor. My point is this: when is someone going to get around to doing Adolescent Radioactive Black Belt Hamsters?

What? While the rest of you were off reading X-Men, I was pouring through the Ninja Turtles, Samurai Penguin, and those crazy Hamsters. Encompassing nine issues, plus four in 3D and a two part miniseries featuring Clint, these were some of the wildest, funniest comics this side of Evan Dorkin. Hell, the Clint mini managed to make fun of Jay Leno, Apocalypse Now, Frank Miller, and the Kingpin all in one panel! Throw in a homicidal hamster that's the bastard lovechild of Mr. T and Mrs. Voorhees, and you've got the sort of comic that most psychologists would consider a cry for help.

The rest of the team is just as loopy as Clint. There's Chuck, the Kwai Chang Caine wannabe, Jackie, the immature G. I. Joe fiend, and Bruce, who's only there because there were four Turtles. The four of them were launched into space as infants in order to prevent the destruction of Earth by radioactive cosmic Jello. The Jello ended up mutating them into a human-like state, and after crashing in Tibet they were taken in by a Shaolin temple. After years of study under the monk Master Lock, they were sent out into the world to do good. Or, in Clint's case, to do drugs.

I have a sneaking suspicion that the book's creators, writer Don Chin and artist Parsonavich, were also doing some sort of chemicals. How else to explain the presence of villains like the Coo Clucks Clan, a group of racists devoted to extra crispy chicken. Or the two plant-like superheroes that try to help the Hamsters out of a jam, only to be told thanks, but this is our comic. Then there are the moments when the two creators make their presence known in the book, such as when Bruce calls Parsonavich up to ask

him to draw a smaller number of enemies to fight. It's sorta like what Byrne did on She-Hulk; only it's actually funny.

This is a book that you need to seek out. It has humor, action, wild non-sequiturs, and in the latter issues some terrific early Sam Kieth art. I mean EARLY Sam Kieth, before his work became so wonderfully insane. I'd love to see Adolescent Radioactive Black Belt Hamsters relaunched today...that's an 80's revamp I'd buy in a second.