

## **“BATMAN AND ME”: BOB KANE**

**By John C. Tibbetts**

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**Robert Kahn (1915-1998) was in his early 20s when he created the DC Comics superhero Batman. The Caped Crusader, of course, has gained everlasting fame, and Kahn, who changed his name to Bob Kane, fairly basked in the notoriety ever since. Batman debuted in *Detective Comics* #27 (May 1939), and soon Kane was joined by other artists in envisioning and elaborating the costumes, exploits, and additional characters. In later years, Kane enjoyed a postcomics career in television animation and exhibited his paintings in art galleries.**

**This interview transpired in North Hollywood at the Registry Hotel on June 14, 1989. The occasion was the release of Warner Bros. *Batman*, directed by Tim Burton and starring Michael Keaton. Kane had just written his autobiography, *Batman and Me* (a second volume was published in 1996).**

**Tibbetts: Okay, to begin with, is it “Bob” or “Robert” Kane?**

Bob Kane: In the beginning it was Robert. For the first Batman comics I wanted some dignity at the time, so I called myself Robert. Now, the only ones who call me Robert are my ex-wives. When they need a lot of money they say, Robert, or when they’re angry at me! Otherwise, it’s generally Bob.

**Tibbetts: We’re here in Hollywood right on the heels of the release from Warner Brothers of *Batman*, starring Michael Keaton and, of course, Jack Nicholson as the Joker. I take it you have not yet seen the film.**

Bob Kane: Ironically no, because actually the powers that be at Warner Brothers want me to see it in 70 mm, which is the theatrical release for the screen, and so far the press and part of the public have seen it in 35 mm, and it wasn’t quite the finished version. So I can understand that. It’s like having a blind date and you walk in an hour early and the woman doesn’t have her full make up on. And she says, “Boy but you oughta see me an hour later when I have my makeup on, I’m really beautiful!” So I understand the reason

**Tibbetts: Take us back to 1938-1939. You were in your early 20s?**

Bob Kane: In 1938 I was 18 years old. I just knocked off seven years conveniently! That was a year after Superman was created, in 1938. I have been with the same comic book outfit now for the last 50 years, DC Comics Group. See I can’t really stay at one job, that’s my problem. But anyway, I was having a drink with the editor Vincent Sullivan at the time and he said, can you come up with another superduper character, because we’re looking for one. So I said, how much do [Jerry] Siegel and [Joe] Shuster make—Siegal and Shuster were, of course, the creators of Superman [which first appeared in DC’s *Action Comics* in June 1938]. And they were making about \$800 a piece, which is like \$1600 a week. And I was doing fill-in cartoons for DC Comics and I was making only

about \$25 or \$30 a week. I said, “Listen if I can make \$1500 a week I could draw anything!” So believe it, it was on a Friday; I said by Monday you’ll have a new superhero. That’s the truth.

**Tibbetts: I suppose the idea of a caped crusader, as we’ve come to know him, doesn’t just come overnight. There must have been some things in your youth, some models or precedents, that you were able to draw upon.**

Bob Kane: Actually I think we’re all influenced by other influences in our lives. And then what you do, you interject a lot of your own individuality into anything you might see. The thing is we all see the same things at the same time, but yet interpret them in our own individual way. I saw when I was 12 or 13 a book of inventions by Leonardo Da Vinci. And, as you know, he was the forerunner to most of the inventions that we have today. He foresaw the first man in flight, a helicopter, a machine gun, steam engines. One did really catch my attention at the time, and that was a man on a sled with large bat wings. It was the first glider in flight, actually, 500 years ago. And Da Vinci had a quote that I recall, the quote was “your bird shall have no other model than that of a bat.” So, looking at these large wings and reading the quote, it kind of germinated a Batman in my mind. But I wasn’t ready to create Batman yet, and I just put it away in an old trunk and I went to the movies. At the movies I saw *The Mark of Zorro* with Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. who was my idol as a child, a kid growing up in New York, in the Bronx actually. Zorro was the most swashbuckling dare devil I’ve ever seen in my life. He out-acrobated Batman a thousand times, but he gave me the idea of the dual identity. During the day he posed as a foppish bored Don Diego Vega, the son of one of the wealthiest families in Mexico around 1820. But they were under the domination of the Conquistador government at that time, and they robbed the poor and levied the high taxes and really caused all sorts of terrible injustices against the poor people. And Don Diego happened to be very altruistic, and he decided to become a crime fighter. So at night he donned this mask, kind of a handkerchief mask with slits in the eyes; and he’d attach a trusty sword to his side and he’d exit from a cave on a black horse. I think the black horse’s name was Tornado. And actually there you can see the reference where many years later to the idea of a bat cave and the bat mobile, instead of the horse. That had a profound influence on me, on the dual identity. There are other dual identities, like the Scarlet Pimpernel, but I got mine mainly from Zorro.

**Tibbetts: This is in the spring 1939?**

Bob Kane: May 1939 was the first issue of Batman. There’s one more influence, and that was the movie called *The Bat Whispers*, a famous movie from a story by Mary Roberts Rinehart, the mystery writer. And Chester Morris played the part of the villain. He wore a bat head, it looked like a bat and he had kind of like bat wings. So all throughout the movie you would see shadows of this bat on the walls. And at one time there was a circle with a bat in it, which was reflection on the walls of the house. And of course I got that idea for a bat signal so many years later. So that was another influence on me. Those were my three influences. Now, many people have seen what I saw, but they didn’t create Batman, did they?

**Tibbetts: Some of the developments in the character occurred rather gradually; for example, at first, there's no bat mobile, there's no cave.**

Bob Kane: I was very naïve, actually. Let me add another influence, which could have been the comic book character of The Phantom, 1934. He was a crime fighter in Africa. He kind of wore a gray uniform, a Union suit with a mask, and I kind of got a little bit of that. The first cover of Batman in 1939 had just kind of a gray figure with a cowl and he had stiff bat wings that were kind of attached to the back of his arms, on his arms. The reason I came to revise that a bit was, I realized that when he would fight, they were too cumbersome. So I made a cape with scalloped wings and so forth. So it did progress as I went on the first several months, and I started to make a lot of changes on the character in each successive strip. If you've seen other comics characters from the beginning, including Blondie, the first incarnations were very different and crude from the time you develop them into the more mature form. So actually, Batman started to mature very quickly, just a year later. The drawings were better, the bat wings flowed better, so forth.

**Tibbetts: Talk about your technique. Did you work first in pen-and-ink, did you work on an easel or drawing board?**

Bob Kane: At the beginning, I always had a drawing board. When I was a kid and I was too poor to afford a drawing board, I had a bread board. I took my mother's bread board and just took it out from the shelf and leaned it against the table. But when I became affluent at \$35 a week in the early days, before Batman, I bought a drawing easel. So I always had a drawing easel, and I remember black Higgins ink was the drawing ink that all the famous cartoonists used. My dad—god bless him—he used to work for *The Daily News* in New York as a printer, and as a printer he came in contact with a lot of *Daily News* cartoonists. And when I was very young he used to bring my drawings down and showed it to many of them, like the creator of Popeye, E.C. Segar, and they all said, gee your son has a lot of talent. And when he brought the drawings down I would emulate Popeye or Moon Mullins, so it would look almost as good as the originals. They said, my goodness, maybe we can use him someday as a ghost artist. It gave me the confidence that I had a lot of ability even as a kid. I was a great copycat.

**Tibbetts: What about the various action poses, did work from your imagination, did you study anatomy, did you have photographs to work from?**

Bob Kane: As I just said I was a great copy cat. All I did was copy Flash Gordon figures all over the place. Every neophyte cartoonist at the innovative days of the comic book industry, we all used what we called the morgue swipes. And we would swipe like crazy. And the two most famous artists we'd swipe from were Milt Caniff, who did Terry and the Pirates and later developed Steve Canyon. Alex Raymond was probably the greatest illustrator that ever lived, other than Prince Valiant, which was drawn by Hal Foster. But we did swipe a lot at the beginning and I didn't use photographs. I never wanted to make Batman too illustrative, I wanted him more like Dick Tracy. The Penguin is very

cartoony and the Joker's rather cartoony. So I always kept a little bit of the Dick Tracy flavor in my comic strip.

**Tibbetts: How soon did it become apparent that the Batman character was going to survive past that one story?**

Bob Kane: Well, it sold rather well. It was only six pages, in Detective Comics. But it had a pretty good reception. Then on the second book, it started selling very well. Actually it sold even better when I introduced Robin. The reason for that was, adding a Boy Wonder into the comics was a great touch of genius, because I visualized that every child in their own imagination and wish fulfillment thinking would like to tag alongside of a super hero. So when I interjected Robin into the script, the book sold 100%. That was a year later and they came out at Detective Comics and that was the start of Batman and Robin. I drew consistently from 1939 to 1966. I drew him with the help of assistants, but I did all the penciling on Batman for the stories I did. They had ghost writers on other stories. I didn't ink it after awhile and I did mostly pencils. Finally, I was bored and I was tired of it. And when the TV show came out I decided, well I'll rest on my residuals, just quit actively drawing a comic book.

**Tibbetts: The image of Batman changed a lot over those years, didn't it?**

Bob Kane: I kept Batman dark and moody and brooding, mysterious; but when Robin entered it, everything became a bit lighter, because he had such a colorful outfit. And today with the advent of the new *Batman* motion picture in 1989—at least from some of the reviews and some of the critiques I've read about the movie—is that the influences were back to Bob Kane's original lone, dark vigilante style. So it's now gone a complete circle back to whence it came. In the mid-60s they had a TV show, as you all know. It was real campy, but that was great for the era, it was the era of pop art.

Tibbetts: Batman came to the movies a lot earlier than that.

Bob Kane: Sure, in 1943 Columbia Pictures made a serial in Hollywood. I went out to Hollywood at that time just to visit the set. It was a cheapie and I was on the set standing in front of a gray convertible and I naively asked the director, "Well where's the Batmobile? He said, "Batmobile! You're standing in front of it!" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "This gray convertible is the bat mobile!" And I said, "I don't believe it. I know it's a low budget, but this is ridiculous. I'll tell you what though, why don't you just get a black limousine and put a fin on it and you'll have a bat mobile. Forget about the masthead. You don't have to put that on the front!"

**Tibbetts: You had some involvement in the television series?**

Bob Kane: Unfortunately, at that time I did not. You see I wasn't in Hollywood then. And Bill Dozier produced it without me being as creative consultant on the film. And I should have been here to stake my claim, but I didn't. I stayed in New York. In fact when I did come out to Hollywood again, the series was just cancelled. There's nothing

as dead as yesterday's cancelled series. So no, I was a little disappointed that I didn't put a stake into my claim at that time. But anyway, this year in 1989 has made up for it. They were supposed to start *Batman* many times in the last nine years, but we didn't have the right ingredients. We needed the right script, the right director and the right actor. When we had a script we didn't have the director, when we had a director we didn't have the script. We never had the right actor. Finally, we finally had all the ingredients a year and a half ago and a new script by a new young writer. It was written in the vein as if I written it, dark, dramatic and moody and mysterioso. And Robin was not in it. They had him in the first draft at the very end. But I think the reason they left him out is partly because they didn't want to camp it up at all. And plus because we didn't have time to create the origin of Robin again, because we have the origin of Batman in this movie and the Joker and we just didn't have time to establish another origin.

**Tibbetts: Did you need any convincing about Michael Keaton as the title role?**

Bob Kane: Well, candidly I had my reservations when they first mentioned Michael Keaton, because I didn't think he would fit the Batman mold.

**Tibbetts: Did you base that on yourself?**

Bob Kane: If I showed you early photographs, I was very handsome in a mold of young Bruce Wayne. Now, I had a young Robert Wagner in mind. Michael Keaton was the antithesis. He was rather slight—he's gotten a little heavier lately—but he certainly didn't fit the mold of Batman. He's like Pee-Wee Herman, in a way. I'm not knocking him, because all's well that ends well. Warner Brothers suggested I see a movie Michael just did called *Clean and Sober*, where he played a drug addict. He won awards, critics' acclaim for being a marvelous dramatic actor. So that was the first time I started to think of him seriously. But the mold still wasn't there, but as Tim Burton explained to me, this time around he was not looking to do a comic book character. He was not looking to do the Adam West version of the 60s. This was not a story "about a chin," as Tim Burton says, but about a three-dimensional, tortured Bruce Wayne, who because of the trauma he experienced as a child when his mother and dad were shot down before his eyes that he became an obsessive-compulsive human being. So when I saw Keaton's performance in *Clean and Sober*, I saw that edge. Then, of course, there was the uniform. They built practically an armored uniform that even Pee-Wee Herman would look great in!

**Tibbetts: Tell me what life is like for you these days. Is the phone ringing off hook?**

Bob Kane: Well you know Hollywood, when you're hot, you're hot and when you're cold you're very cold out here. This year Batman is big again. Every twenty minutes it rings. *20/20* called, I'm on that. *Entertainment Tonight*. I'll be going on the *Johnny Carson Show* and *David Letterman*. Every newspaper in the world, the Associated Press has taken my story worldwide. It's just been unbelievable the attention I'm getting at the moment. In 1966 Batmania hit the world when the TV show came on the air; even though it was campy comedy, it certainly took the country by storm and the people rediscovered Batman and the kids discovered it for the first time. But this year the hype has been like

a rolling stone, a snowball rolling down a hill and it just seemed to get bigger every day. I attribute that to a couple of things. I think basically most people have mundane lives and they would like to escape from their world of boredom by becoming a superhero or a famous baseball player. It's also nostalgic throwback to their youth. And the fact that Batman is kind of like a Jesus almost, where he's fighting all the injustice in the world for the people by putting himself on the line where he can be killed at any moment when he's out there fighting the criminal element. So I think he's fighting for the little man and the little man appreciates that. It's a world of fantasy and everyone would like to escape and have a bat mobile and escape into a bat cave and just live a world of fantasy, do daring deeds, meet beautiful women and so forth.

You know, I was supposed to have a small part in the new movie, a vignette as Bob the cartoonist in the newsroom. But I got the flu, and by the time they shot the scenes I never got to play Bob the cartoonist.

**Tibbetts: At least in the film there's a scene where we see a drawing signed with your name.**

Bob Kane: Well, yeah and that's also misleading now. People who see that will think the actor who played it is Bob Kane. Tim Burton called me and said he needed a drawing of Batman. So I drew it and signed it and mailed it to Pinewood Studios, London. So, in a way, I am in the picture! Hopefully I can go on many more years doing my oils and paintings. And there'll be a sequel and I'll be creative consultant on the sequel. I'll write the bible for it, which is the blueprint for the script, which I did on the last movie. Maybe in the sequel I'll play Bruce Wayne's father. Who knows? And now I'll close with saying, thank you Leonardo, where ever you are!