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tuesday

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Wow! Pow! Zap! Two stores court comic collectors

By ROBERT ALAN ROSS
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

TAMPA — Millions first felt inflation's flame licking at their pockets in the late '50s — when the price of a new comic book leapt from a dime to 12 cents.

Oh, the howl that sprang from allowance-bound pre-teens!

Oh, the pain that strikes now, 20-plus years later, when one learns how amazing an investment that extra two cents, spent on the right books, could have been!

Few of today's 30- to 40-year-olds don't weep inwardly when they recall the arm-long stack of full-color pulp that they once toted around the neighborhood. Ah, for another crack at those days spent swapping familiar *Action* and *Detective* comics for undiscovered issues of *Flash*, *Green Lantern* or *The Blackhawks*. The heart, not to mention the old wallet, pines for those simple times....

THE COMIC business isn't as carefree as it was — at least from the vantage point of adult years. The 12-cent cover price is long gone. Now a new edition sells for 50 or 60 cents — and collectors buy several copies of some issues, speculating on future popularity of new artists or characters.

A thriving mail-order community of comic-traders has been functioning for years. There's a reasonably standard price-guide catalogue published regularly, and some attic-sweeping grandmas now wonder about consulting a younger relative before tossing those dusty, juvenile tales into the trash.

And the comic industry itself seems to be flourishing on the local level — at least in Tampa.

The friendly competitors agree it is coincidence: Both Jack Schuster and Tom Bowles opened comic-oriented retail stores on Saturday. Each brought in a comic-book author or artist to talk to first-day customers, and each spoke optimistically about the burgeoning trade in new comics, old comics, portfolios, original comic art and those detailed newsletters known collectively as "fanzines." But there are differences in the way their stores are set up.

THE COVER painting of Donald Duck is a bit faded and frail now. But this 40-year-old edition of *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* — Volume I, Number 1 with a 10-cent cover price and a plastic bag sealed around it — will cost its next purchaser \$2,000. At least, that's the tag affixed by Schuster, who keeps the pricey collectors' item (and a few dozen similarly expensive books) literally under his nose — on the counter next to the cash register in his new store.

Schuster, who has spent the last eight years as a Clearwater-based wholesaler and distributor of comic books and related magazines, opened his retail outlet last weekend. The shopping-center storefront, Cosmic Visions — a defunct Denim

Den with dressing rooms and three-sided mirrors not yet removed — is at 1518 Fowler Ave. in north Tampa.

There is the high-priced display on the counter and a row of racks up the middle of the room. The rest of Cosmic Visions is empty — temporarily, says Schuster. Within three months, he said Saturday, a full newstand of current magazines will appear in the store, along with a few video game machines.

TO PUBLICIZE his opening, Schuster brought in Chris Claremont from New York. Claremont writes stories for Marvel comics, specifically the *X-Men* series. He has written the *X-Men's* adventures for six years now, since shortly after the series was founded. He spent six hours Saturday signing autographs and greeting customers and reporters.

For the current issue (No. 152) of *X-Men*, Claremont worked with a "guest penciler" named Bob McLeod. This means that Claremont's script was drawn by McLeod, who must illustrate the story and leave enough space for a "letterer" to insert dialogue and explanations.

McLeod and Claremont are scheduled to develop a new comic series for Marvel, one they hope will debut next spring. "That's one reason I came down here" for the new-store promotion, Claremont noted Saturday. "I have to get together with Bob" to discuss the new project.

How convenient. McLeod lives in Tampa. But as of 4 p.m. or so, the New York author had not yet spoken to his Suncoast colleague. Why not? Because McLeod was on the other end of town — signing autographs and greeting customers at the other new comic shop in town.

SEVERAL MILES to the south, near downtown Tampa but not near enough to be chic, a poster-sized painting of Spider-Man crouches toward Kennedy Boulevard. Inside, through a closet-sized foyer that shuts out most of the Saturday afternoon sun, Tom and Jean Bowles chatted merrily with visitors to their freshly opened Fandom Zone, 1708 W. Kennedy Blvd.

At a table in the rear — maybe five paces away from the front — sat Bob McLeod and Pat Broderick, both Tampa residents and comic-book artists. They sorted through their own collections of art-for-sale as they greeted fans and the curious.

Compared to Cosmic Visions, the Fandom Zone is small, dark and crammed with merchandise. Comic collectors themselves, the Bowleses are also interested in *Dragons & Dungeons*, a complex game popular among young people in colleges and a few high schools. They plan to conduct an ongoing "D&D" game in their back room. Schuster also says he plans to get a game going. (It's not like poker, parents. The players only meet every week or so and they don't play all night or gamble money.)

Last week, the area had no comic-book



Writer Chris Claremont, who creates the stories for Marvel Comics' *X-Men* series, visits Cosmic Visions to promote its opening.



Fan Kenneth Hillyard shops at Fandom Zone for favorite issues dressed as the "Human Torch," a character in "Fantastic Four" comics.



Artists Bob McLeod and Pat Broderick demonstrate how figures are created during a promotional appearance at Fandom Zone.

Photos By BILL SERNE
Of The St. Petersburg Times Staff

specialty store. Now it has two. While this won't change the face of comic-collecting *per se*, it will give local hobbyists a pair of places at which to compare news, notes

and prices. Schuster sees himself as the host of future comic-club meetings, and the Bowleses express similar wishes. Happiest will be those foresighted few

who saved all their comics and bought up everybody else's — back when new books cost a dime and old ones were thought to be worth even less.

A Florida band returns on crest of success

Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers with Joe Ely, 8 p.m. in the Bayfront Center Arena tonight. Tickets \$10. For more information, call 893-7251.

By KELLY SCOTT
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

LAKELAND — For a band stuck on the fraternity beer-bust circuit in a Florida university town, the Lakeland Civic Center looms over the orange groves like the Taj Mahal. The leap from the Gainesville Beta Theta Pi house to the largest hall in central Florida must defy the imagination.

But last Friday, in the middle of a national tour following the release of the band's *Hard Promises*, the lights came up and Gainesville's Tom Petty smiled his characteristically slow, toothy grin. "Hello Florida," Petty growled, to open the Heartbreakers' week-long Florida stand that includes shows here and in Jacksonville, Fort Myers, hometown Gainesville and, tonight, St. Petersburg's Bayfront Center arena.

In the years since Petty, keyboards, player Benmont Tench, guitarist Mike Campbell and drummer Stan Lynch left the state, the band has outlasted disco, survived an off-target New Wave label and ridden the resurgence of straightforward American rock 'n' roll.

THE VOICE that introduces the band makes that clear: "And now, from the United States of America, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers!" And this week, the band brings it all back home — to Florida.

"We are kind of saturating Florida," said Tench in a recent telephone interview from Atlanta. "It's a real comfortable state. It will all be fairly relaxed, not like one night in Louisiana and the next in Georgia."

"And the truth is, we haven't played Florida that much since we left. We've



Benmont Tench checks sound equipment before the concert at Lakeland. The pianist is talented at several keyboard instruments.

St. Petersburg Times — ERIC MENCHER

never played Gainesville (since gaining national success)," said Tench, whose parents traveled to St. Petersburg last July for the Heartbreakers' only Florida appearance. Tench's father is Benjamin Tench, a circuit-court judge in Gainesville. This year, his parents can see the band at the University of Florida's O'Connell Center.

(If Petty's rock needed certification as a hot item, tennis star Vitas Gerulaitis provided it at the Lakeland show. Gerulaitis, once a denizen of New York's flashy disco scene, wore jeans and a plain foot-

ball jersey to fit in with the Lakeland crowd. Apparently admitted backstage, Gerulaitis wandered through the audience drinking a Heineken.)

THIS IS a Florida band, but it has little besides geography in common with Florida products like Lynyrd Skynyrd, Molly Hatchett or the Outlaws. There's more of '50s and '60s rhythm-and-blues in the Heartbreakers' sound than what Tench calls "boogie and barbecue."

Leaving Florida in search of a record contract and a wider audience for their own music was imperative. Other Florida

musicians interested in forging a different sound — like Marty Girard of The Motels — have had to do the same thing.

"We had no opportunities to play our own stuff. When we left, it was getting a little bit weird, you know, disco was coming down there. Most places you played wanted five sets of somebody else's music," Tench said. "We never were a boogie and barbecue band." The cover versions the old Mudcrutch band (Petty, Campbell and Tench) liked to do weren't

See PETTY, 8-D



Tom Petty and his Heartbreakers are among the groups dominating album-oriented radio play.

Petty

from 1-D

the kind routinely done around Gainesville: songs by Bob Dylan, Gram Parsons, Jimmy Reed.

IN THEIR shows these days, the band resurrects a few surprising old rockers — their version of the old Isley Brothers classic *Shout*, spiced with Tench's hot organ work, has become their standard encore.

Not that they have to reach into the past to provide good, identifiable sounds for their audiences.

Of the successful rock groups that dominate album-oriented radio these days, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers are the cream: Their high-quality pop hits, spanning four albums, include *Breakdown*, *American Girl*, *Don't Do Me Like That*, *Refugee*, *The Waiting* and *A Woman In Love*.

The Heartbreakers have been all over the airwaves this summer, with a handful of songs from their *Hard Promises* LP and another hit with a song written and co-sung by Petty on Stevie Nicks' solo LP — *Stop Draggin' My Heart Around from Bella Donna*.

What distinguishes Petty's songs from the drivel that often tops the record charts is the clean yet tough musicianship, and phrases that stick in the mind, lines like *I'm not afraid of you running away, honey, I get the feeling you won't* and *You're the only one who's ever known how to make me want to live like I want to live NOW* — all sung in Petty's versatile mid-range, nasal growl. It's a great rock voice.

AND AT LAST week's Lakeland show, Petty, once the victim of temperamental tonsils, was in fine voice. Beginning with some memorable moments from Heartbreaker heritage, the band runs through most of the songs from *Hard Promises* and the highlights from their breakth-

ough album *Damn the Torpedoes*.

There is nothing glitzy about their shows: Petty wore a worn-looking flannel shirt, jeans and cowboy boots. There's little between-songs patter, no surprising effects and the band takes a while to warm up.

But if you're there for the songs, you'll get what you paid for.

NOTE: Make it a point to get to the show in time for Petty's opening act, Joe Ely and his band. Ely is a throwback rockabilly performer whose appearances as an opening act for Great Britain's The Clash and latest album *Musta Notta Gotta A Lotta* have gotten a lot of attention and critical regard in the current rockabilly revival climate in England. Ely is energetic, with a good, traditional, rockabilly voice and a tight, seven-piece band. They put on a strong — and fun — 35-minute set before Petty and his crew hit the stage.

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