

What the...!

As anyone who reads *BACK ISSUE* probably knows, the relaxation of the Comics Code in the early 1970s allowed comics companies to start filling their pages with all sorts of monsters previously verboten—vampires, zombies, werewolves, Richard Nixon, etc.

No one took more advantage of that new opening than Marvel, which in a short time flooded the newsstands with all sorts of monster mags, even giving the big three—Dracula, Frankenstein, and the Wolf Man—their own titles, albeit in the Mighty Marvel Manner: *Tomb of Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *Werewolf by Night*.

But monsters didn't just start showing up in Marvel's comics—no, sir, they became part of the company's regular roster of "stars." When it came to merchandise, Dracula, Frankenstein, *et al.* were treated just like Spider-Man or Captain America, and soon they started showing up on Slurpee Cups, stickers, and, most memorably, book-and-record sets.

Yes, when the kid-centric Peter Pan Records label started creating book-and-record sets starring various DC and Marvel heroes (under its "Power Records" imprint), they decided to produce a sub-group, called "The Monster Series," titled *Dracula*, *The Curse of The Werewolf!*, *The Monster of Frankenstein*, and *Man-Thing*. Each book was a reprint of a Marvel comic, accompanied by a 45 RPM record starring a full cast acting out the story.

I had these (and all the Power Records, except for that damn *Shazam!* one I could never find) as a kid, and when you're a kid, you sort of just accept stories told to you. You don't have the critical faculties to step back and wonder, *Wow, aren't these stories a little grim? Should I even be listening to these?* No, you just drop the



by Rob Kelly



Spin Again

Writer Steve Gerber and artist Mike Ploog's *Man-Thing* #5 (May 1974) was adapted, with audio, as Power Records' *The Man-Thing* book and record set (inset).

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ol' Tone Arm Cobra onto the wax, and for a few minutes allow yourself to be transported to a world of blood-sucking vampires, a man made from dead people's body parts, and suicidal clowns. So let's take a look at what the oh-so-innocent-sounding Peter Pan Records foisted on a whole generation of comics fans....

In *Dracula* (reprinting *Tomb of Dracula* #19), we find the Prince of Darkness lost in a harsh winter storm with his nemesis, Rachel Van Helsing. By page four, Dracula has attacked a nearby ram, and we get to see him dig his fangs into its neck and drink its blood. Fun! Later, even though Dracula has saved her life, Rachel tries stabbing him in the back (literally), only to miss, which causes Dracula to slap her in the face. Later still, another ram attacks Dracula, and Rachel shoots it dead. At the end, Rachel is rescued, and the story ends with her firing at Dracula from a helicopter, hoping she's killed the Prince of Darkness once and for all!

In *The Monster of Frankenstein* (reprinting *Frankenstein* #1), we open on Victor Frankenstein, about to be attacked by his creation, the Monster, who promises to kill his creator—but first, a *flashback!*

We see how the Monster was created, and his rejection by Victor. This causes The Monster to run out into the night, where he goes on a murdering spree, killing two innocent people. The Monster wanders in the snow-covered forest for days, alone, and only survives by attacking and eating a bear (the Monster chows down on a bloody piece of meat). Later, the Monster stops a wolf from killing someone by snapping its neck, and is then chased away by shoot-first-ask-questions-later villagers.

Eventually, the Monster wanders onto an ice floe, which gives out from under his feet, causing him to plunge into the freezing water below. It ends with the Monster freezing to death, as he "[S]ucked the freezing, salty waters inward ... and peace at last was his!" (emphasis Marvel's).

In *The Curse of The Werewolf!* (reprinting *Marvel Spotlight* #2), the cover alone is enough to make a little kid join the Rubber Sheet Brigade—it features a four-panel sequence, drawn by Neal Adams at his peak, of a wolf man about to attack a young woman. This can only get better!

Inside, the story opens with our hero (?) running away from police after being seen attacking someone. He wakes up the next day, in his alter ego of Jack Russell, who is tearing his family apart with his strange behavior (disappearing suddenly, killing and eating people, etc.). To make things worse, Jack's mother is hurt in a car accident while searching for him, which puts her in the hospital. Later, as she is dying, she tells Jack their family history—how his father was a werewolf, and how perhaps the answer to his curse resides in ... Transylvania! Yes, Transylvania—and you know what that means: Dracula will be showing up soon!

And indeed he does, with the story ending with a donnybrook between Drac and the Werewolf. They bite into each other, and Dracula, showing very sportsman-like behavior, decides to call the fight a draw, and takes off. As the narrator informs us, "Dracula rises into the night ... and the curse of the werewolf remains *bloodied ... but unbroken!*"

Has any of the above convinced you that the producers over at Peter Pan were the same guys that made Black Sabbath records? If not, then listen to what happens in the last of the Monster Series records, the Man-Thing in "Night of the Laughing Dead!"

In this story (reprinted from *Man-Thing* #5), we see Man-Thing stumbling through the swamp, as he is wont to do. At the same time, we see a sad clown, sitting on the bank of the river. He puts a gun up to his head, and Man-Thing hears the shot. Before I go on, let's recap: *This children's record opens up with a clown shooting himself in the head.*

Anyway, Man-Thing arrives, only to find the clown face down in the water. This makes Man-Thing sad, so sad he recalls his own tragic story—experimental chemicals, car crash, burning hatred towards that big show-off Alec Holland, all of it.

As Man-Thing scoops up the clown's body to give it a proper burial, we see what's going on in the nearby town. Two hippies overhear a carny talking, and it turns out the carnival's clown—named Darrel—has gone missing. A young woman named Ayla is very upset over what Darrel might do, and tries to convince the owner, Mr. Garvey, to look for him.

Garvey slaps her (!), which causes one of the hippies to intervene. After punching Garvey in his big, fat, handlebar-mustached face, they offer her a ride to help her find Darrel. On the trail, she reveals that she rejected Darrel's love, which caused the little clown to stop laughing.

They find Darrel on the riverbank, sort of—he bows to them and wanders off, across the water. Walking onto the main road, he causes Garvey and his Rondo Hatton-like henchman to crash their pickup truck!

This is where we get to hear Darrel talk for the first time, and he says stuff like, "You'll kill me haha make me die haha where's Garvey hahaha"—all without punctuation. Creepy!

The three young people discover Man-Thing with Darrel's body, and one of them notices the gunshot, and surmises that the Darrel they saw was ... a ghost!

Soon, the henchman finds them, gets in a fight with Man-Thing, which he of course loses, ending with the big galoot lying face down in the swamp. But they all manage to see something truly amazing: Darrel's spirit, rising from his body! He tells Ayla that "What does any clown want but to make people happy! But I could not go on making others laugh, when all I felt inside was pain ... when the love I gave was not returned! But now, my soul is free! I shall feel mortal pain no more ... and I can laugh ... laugh forever!"

The narrator—who has been speaking to Man-Thing throughout the story—says, "You look and listen to the spectator [sic] of a clown before you ... and all that you know, Man-Thing, is that *never has laughter made you feel so sad!!!*"

Wow.

So let's review: In just these four "children's records," we see three animals meet bloody deaths, two women get slapped around, two innocent people get murdered, one man under severe psychological trauma, a suicidal clown, and two stories that end celebrating the Sweet Release of Death. Yep, it was the 1970s, all right.

If there's any lesson to learn from these records, it's that there was a time, long before "Won't somebody think of the children!?" became a fixture of American discourse, when kids were allowed to encounter material that was way beyond what they might be ready for emotionally, to occasionally see the darker sides of life. And Marvel Comics and Peter Pan Records were there, ready to provide that kind of material. Why they chose such particularly *dark* stories, out of Marvel's entire "monster" catalog, to dramatize is a mystery lost to the ages. But they did.

And for that, I thank them.



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(above) Power Records' *The Monster of Frankenstein* and *The Curse of the Werewolf* entries.

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