



Jerry Robinson, 1972. Photo: Kristen Robinson.

The Dynamic Jerry Robinson

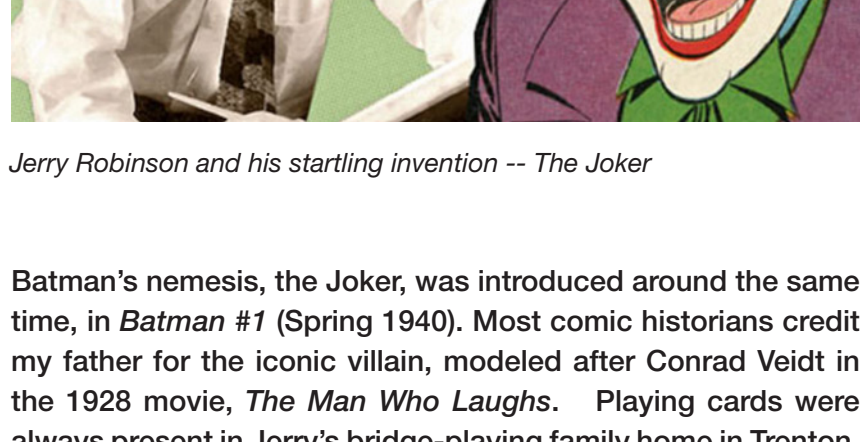
By Jens Robinson

My father, Sherrill David Robinson, known as Jerry Robinson, was born in New York on New Year's Day in 1922 and died on Pearl Harbor Day in 2011. In between, he did a lot of historic things.

BATMAN

Jerry was a 17-year-old journalism student at Columbia University in 1939 when he was discovered by *Batman* co-creator Bob Kane, who hired him to work on that fledgling comic as an inker and letterer. Kane, with writer Bill Finger, had just created the character Batman for National Comics, the future DC Comics. Within a year, Jerry became Batman's primary inker, with George Roussos inking backgrounds. Batman quickly became a hit character and Kane rented space for Robinson and Roussos in Times Square's Times Tower.

By early 1940, Finger and Kane discussed adding a sidekick. Jerry suggested the name "Robin" after Robin Hood books he had read during his boyhood, saying, in a 2005 interview, that he was inspired by one book's N.C. Wyeth illustrations. The new character, orphaned circus performer Dick Grayson, came to live with Bruce Wayne (Batman) as his young ward in *Detective Comics* #38 (April 1940). Robin would inspire many similar sidekicks throughout the remainder of the Golden Age of comic books.



Jerry Robinson and his startling invention -- The Joker

Batman's nemesis, the Joker, was introduced around the same time, in *Batman* #1 (Spring 1940). Most comic historians credit my father for the iconic villain, modeled after Conrad Veidt in the 1928 movie, *The Man Who Laughs*. Playing cards were always present in Jerry's bridge-playing family home in Trenton, New Jersey. Inspired by the Joker playing card, Jerry drew the initial concept sketch and excitedly showed it to Bill and Bob who both immediately loved it. To flesh out the character, Bill, a movie buff, brought in a photograph of Conrad Veidt from *The Man Who Laughs*, a movie based on the Victor Hugo novel.



Robinson's original sketch for the Joker's business card.

Jerry introduced a "Joker" playing card as the super villain's business card, an important addition to his visualization of the character. Jerry's inspiration was two-fold. First, he wanted to introduce an antagonist worthy of Batman, a strong nemesis for the hero and not another forgettable minor league crook. He wanted a strong antagonist to test the Dark Knight's mettle — a Moriarty to Batman's Sherlock Holmes. Secondly, he loved the counterintuitive idea of a villain with a sense of humor.

MIAMI

My father visited Miami many times during his lifetime, most recently in 2006 when the exhibition he curated on the origin of superheroes, *The Superhero: The Golden Age of Comic Books 1938-1950*, was exhibited at the Jewish Museum of Florida — FIU. Below is Jerry's description of one visit to Miami.

"For a few weeks one summer in the early 40s, ahead in my *Batman* deadlines, I was hanging out in Miami. Except for the sun and beautiful beaches, there was none of the excitement and ambiance of today's trendy South Beach. Art Deco hotels were there but in disrepair. The entire area was rundown: cheap rooms and drab apartments, wood cottages for the working poor at the elegant hotels up the beach, and elderly retirees surviving on meager incomes. The average tourist shunned the area despite its natural beauty. In those pre-air conditioned days, almost all of the hotels were boarded up for the summer. The better restaurants and shops closed, including those on chic Lincoln Road. It was definitely not the all-year mecca of today. For me, one of the prime attractions was the excellent public tennis courts at Flamingo Park where I played most days even in the intense summer heat. My routine was to follow tennis with a tall glass of fresh fruit topped with vanilla ice cream on Ocean Drive and a refreshing dip in the surf off South Beach. What was not to like?

Few nightspots survived in the summer. I often accompanied my friend, Fred Brown, a nightclub photographer, on his gigs. One of his favorite clubs on his regular rounds featured former world boxing champions: the heavyweight Max Baer, and Slapsie Maxie Rosenblum, the champion light heavyweight (more so in pounds than brainpower). Slapsie earned his reputation after too many rounds in the ring, although he was rated a savvy boxer in his prime. Baer, from Livermore, California, was an idol of mine as a kid. Sporting a Star of David on his trunks, he knocked out the champion Primo Carnera after flooring the giant former circus strongman eleven times to win the title. The Baer-Rosenblum nightclub act was slapstick, mostly involving Slapsie's cultivated persona of being a cauliflower-eared, punch-drunk slugger and it was only half untrue. The act was corny but brought in enough patrons of the pugilistic arts to keep the club open.

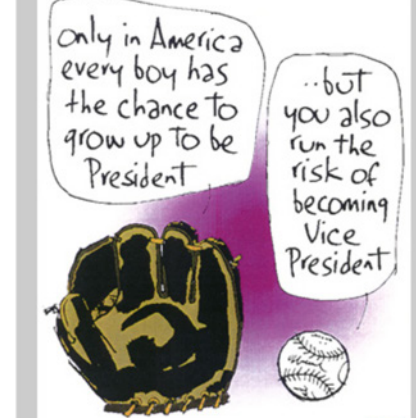
Max Baer managed to escape the ring with most of his marbles, rugged good looks and one of the finest physiques in the ring, all intact. A dedicated playboy, he always had one or more beautiful women with him between sets at the club. Baer, by the way, had a Hollywood career of sorts and gave a credible performance in the title role in the film *The Prizefighter and the Lady*. The lady, as I recall, was played by Myrna Loy. Incidentally, one day Max asked me for drawings of Batman and the recently debuted Atom for his four-year-old son, Max Baer Jr. As an adult, Max Jr. became known for playing the role of Jethro on the popular TV series, *Beverly Hillsbillies*."

A favorite Robinson family story was that my father, Al, to see the fight between Baer and Joe Louis. They were a little late getting to their seats and missed the first three rounds. At the beginning of the fourth round, Dad bent over to pick up his program from the floor. By the time he looked up, Baer was already being counted out and the fight was over.

After leaving superhero comics, Jerry became a newspaper cartoonist and created *True Classroom Flubs and Fluffs*, which ran during the 1960s to 80s in the *New York Sunday News* (later incorporated into the *Daily News*). My Dad also did a political satire cartoon panel feature, *Still Life*, which began national syndication on June 3, 1963. It evolved twenty years later into *Life With Robinson*, a better outlet for his artistic ability because the feature no longer confined him to exclusively drawing inanimate objects.



"Jerry Robinson sees the modern political cartoon as a capsule essay in humor. The unique use of dialogue instead of captions restores to the cartoon that structural device first used by Hogarth, Rowlandson, and Gilray that involves the reader in an illustration of immediacy."
— Graphics Today



My father never saw himself as just a comic-book artist. In the 1950s, he started drawing cover illustrations for *Playbill* and tried his hand at political sketches, producing what he considered his best work: "I did 32 years of political cartoons, one every day, six days a week. That body of work is the one I'm proudest of. While my time on *Batman* was important, exciting, and notable considering the character that came out of it, it was really just the start of my life."

Jerry was president of the National Cartoonists Society from 1967 to 1969 and served a two-year term as president of the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists starting in 1973. These organizations provided a powerful platform for my father to meet cartoonists from all over the world, which eventually led him to create a global cartoon syndicate and publish *Views of the World*. In 1978, Jerry founded Cartoonists & Writers Syndicate to distribute his own work. Six years later, after I joined the company, we launched CartoonArts International as another outlet for many dozens of the finest political cartoonists working with the most influential publications worldwide. In all, we have represented over 650 artists from 75 countries. We later expanded to include freelancers (a nod to the declining number of newspapers and magazines) and humor panel cartoonists — works from the feature *Wit of the World*, for example, appear in *The New Yorker*, *Mad*, *Punch* and the satirical magazines of many other countries. We also created other features, e.g. caricature or symbolic illustration, and features on topics such as business cartoon selections.

We have partnered with organizations as varied as Hallmark and the United Nations to create cartoon projects from books and calendars to exhibitions at world conferences such as the Rio Earth Summit and the Vienna Conference on Human rights. In 2004, CartoonArts International teamed up with the syndication arm of the New York Times Company. For a dozen years, we have supplied the cartoon talent and the *New York Times* has brought its sales and technical infrastructure. The web site is www.nytsyn.com. All CartoonArts International content also appears on the world's largest cartoon web site, www.go-comics.com, backed by the Universal Uclick agency, the people who bring the world *Doonesbury*, *Peanuts*, and other favorites. Jerry's own artwork is displayed at www.jerryrobinsonart.com.

During the mid-1970s, my father was a crucial supporter of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in their long struggle with DC Comics to win full recognition and compensation as the creators of *Superman*. With comics artist and rights advocate Neal Adams, Jerry organized key support around Siegel and Shuster, to whom DC, in December 1975, granted lifetime stipends and a credit in all broadcast and published *Superman* works.

In 1999, Jerry created an original manga series, *Astra*, with the help of Japanese artists Go Nagai, Shojin Tanaka, and Ken-ichi Oishi. This was later released in English through Central Park Media by their manga line CPM Manga as a comic book mini-series and then a trade paperback. *Astra* was based on a “comic book opera” my dad co-wrote with Sidra Cohn.

My father was a tireless ambassador for comics. He was one of the early and constant champions of the medium’s artistic value, and created some of the first high-end gallery and museum exhibitions for comic art. During his lifetime he amassed a considerable collection of original comic drawings and watched the values rise to over \$500,000 for iconic black and white works to over a million for painted comic art. Even while working in the earliest days of the industry, his understanding of the aesthetic value of the work led him to demand from publishers the return of his own artwork as well as request the same from other artist colleagues.



There’s no doubt that my father was a major force in the world of comics. He was voted into the Comic Book Hall of Fame in 2004. Throughout his long life he managed to elevate comics from pulp fiction to a recognized form of art. His tireless devotion to a wide range of pioneering activities not only benefited his own career, but the lives and careers of his colleagues worldwide as well.