

David Mack: Alchemist X

David Mack is the multimedia artist, writer and creator of the critically-acclaimed assassin drama **Kabuki**. For nearly 10 years he's been crafting his unique vision through a blend of pen and ink, paints, and photography. Now, 13 months after the one-shot **Ghostplay** was released, Mack will again pick up Kabuki's story with the **The Alchemy**, a six-issue series beginning this month.

Mack is also poised to take over the reigns on Marvel's **Ultimate X-Men**. He will be co-writing issues #40-45 with current scribe and friend Brian Michael Bendis. **Runaways** writer Brian Vaughan will pen issues 46-49, paving the way for Mack to begin his solo X-run with issue #50.

Over the last couple years, Mack has illustrated covers for Brian Bendis' MAX series **Alias** and has written and painted a five-issue arc of **Daredevil**. The critically acclaimed **DD** story featured the return of Echo, a character Mack created in 1999 when he wrote the masterful, six-issue **Daredevil** yarn, "Parts of a Hole".

I asked David Mack about sharing X-time with Bendis, what it's like to write another story set in Japan and if he'll ever work for DC.

MARKISAN NASO: Before you take over solo writing duties on **Ultimate X-Men #50**, you'll be co-writing with Brian Bendis on issues #40-45. How do you and Brian write together? What's the process and what is the difference between co-writing and writing solo?

DAVID MACK: It is a completely new experience co-writing with Brian Bendis. Which was one of the things that appealed to me about the offer to write **X-Men**. Brian and I have collaborated in many ways over the years, and long ago there was a project that we were going to co-write that fell through. And then later, when I introduced his work to Quesada, his first Marvel project was going to be a Nick Fury story that we were to co-write with Bill Sienkiewicz as the artist. That fell through when we attempted to bring Steranko on the team as the cover artist. Instead it turned out that Brian's first work for Marvel was writing **Daredevil** (16-19) after my stint as **DD** writer (9-15), and that was our first Marvel collaboration, with him as writer and me as artist.

Now we finally get to do a project that we co-write and it is a blast! It is very different from writing solo in that we tend to throw out ideas to each other over the phone, and things develop from that collaboration.

MARKISAN: Joe Quesada's art on your first **Daredevil** run seemed to be influenced by your work on **Kabuki**. Will David Finch's **Ultimate X-Men** be similarly influenced once you take over the book? How involved will you be in the art direction?

DAVID: I don't know if Joe's art on **DD** was influenced by **Kabuki**. But whenever I write for another artist, I tend to do layouts of the pages for them as a jumping off point. I don't do this to dictate how they should draw or layout the page, but I do it because my scripts and panel descriptions can be unconventional, so I give the artist a layout just so they understand how I am seeing it. Then it is up to the artist to take it from there.

I felt like Joe Quesada took the best parts of my layouts and integrated that with the best parts of his own unique approach. I feel that he did such a good job of integrating



our individual storytelling approaches that the merging created a new hybrid art and storytelling style between us.

We also did this with the covers of **DD 10-15**. I sent him cover layouts, and he penciled his version of it and then sent it back to me to paint on top of his pencils and add another layer of my perspective to it.

I presented a detailed stage by stage look into this process of our cover and story layout collaboration in the third issue of my four issue 48-page sketchbook series called **Reflections**. It includes many of my **Daredevil** story page layouts for those issues. Check out any of the **Reflections** books if you want to see how this process and my other art process work.

I've also done this process in **Kabuki: Masks of the Noh** when I wrote for such artists as Mike Oeming, Rick Mays, Dave Johnson, and Andrew Robinson. And in **Kabuki: Scarab** with Rick Mays. Both of these **Kabuki** volumes are in paperback and hardcover collections and show this process in the back of the collected volumes. It is very cool to see how these diverse and sophisticated artists interpreted my scripts and layouts in their own unique way.

I really like Dave Finch's artwork on **Ultimate X-Men** and think he is doing a great job. I'll probably include a good amount of my own layouts when I think it is helpful in clarifying my script, and how he uses that is up to him. I know his work on it will be fantastic.

MARKISAN: Your creator-owned series, **Kabuki**, is set to begin a new chapter -- "The Alchemy" -- early next year. Will your script work on **Ultimate X-Men** affect your ability to do **Kabuki** on a consistent basis? How do you/will you balance writing and painting **Kabuki** with writing **Ultimate X-Men**?

DAVID: I suppose I balance it the same way I did when I was writing **Daredevil** and writing and painting the **Kabuki** story that is called **Kabuki: Metamorphosis** in its collected form. I wrote a six issue **Daredevil** story in between issues #7 and #8 of **Kabuki**. Writing comes a lot more naturally to me. The artwork is something that I have to struggle at a little more, and is just a lot more time intensive. When I wrote **Daredevil** "Parts of Hole", and then Joe drew it and it was colored and lettered and turned into a finished book, I felt like after I had the fun of writing it, someone else did all the hard stuff.



The new **Kabuki** series, **Kabuki: The Alchemy**, is a brand new era in Kabuki's life. It is a great place for new readers to start because it is a brand new start for Kabuki that is very much its own story, not dependent on previous stories. You don't need to read the past to understand the primary thrust of the new story. But if you do, you will love the contrast and the oblique and subtle hints at her past. And you will see the fruition of many of the seeds planted in previous issues! Seeds that you didn't know were seeds, but now you will see them blossom into something spectacular and mind-blowing.

This era in Kabuki's life is its own story and it is not going to recap anything from the previous stories. I've made sure that all six **Kabuki** volumes are in print and available in paperback and hardcover collections. So I hope readers will use this as an opportunity to read the early Kabuki collections that have come before in preparation for this new series. But if they do not, they will still be able to begin with this story. Those previous stories are Kabuki's past. There won't be any flashbacks to it. No catch up.

For readers that have read all of the **Kabuki** volumes so far, after you read this new series, you will want to go back and read the previous stories again and you will see them in a new way that is going to make you appreciate them in a brand new dimension as well as the ways that they are already charming to you. They will still hold that charm, but you will have a brand new perspective to appreciate them from. It will be like looking at pictures of yourself as a child. You always appreciated

the pictures for what they were, but now that you are grown up, you can see how those moments shaped your present life.

The new series is specifically designed to be Kabuki's new life. And it is essentially an instruction manual on creating a NEW life, creating the life of YOUR OWN PERSONAL DREAMS AND INTERESTS, that should be practical and applicable to anyone who reads it. It is a recipe and blueprint for creating your own reality, your own career, and your own fresh start. It is a spell for creating your own magic. Taking the baggage of your life and turning it into something positive and useful. Turning your garbage into gold.

MARKISAN: *Kabuki* could be viewed as a team book, although it is presented in a non-traditional manner. How has your work on *Kabuki*, specifically on writing the various personalities of the Noh agents, helped prepare you for a book like *Ultimate X-Men*?

DAVID: That is a really good point. And an insightful one. You could look at it that way. *Kabuki* does have a lot of characters. And even a lot of main characters. Most of the books, like *Kabuki: Circle of Blood*, or *Kabuki: Metamorphosis*, have a few central characters that hold the spotlight, with several secondary characters that bring a strong presence even if they are not in center stage all the time. With *Kabuki: Masks of the Noh*, I really had to approach it more like a team book. It was a book that would spotlight each of the eight Noh operatives and give a deeper perspective to them.

Kabuki: Masks of the Noh (Volume 3 of the *Kabuki* collections) is also the first time I wrote for other artists. The idea behind this story is that the Noh is searching for Kabuki. And though Kabuki is the central character to this story, and holds the story together, she is often absent, and it is the fleshing out of these secondary characters that becomes the humanity of the story. So in introducing each of these characters, I write them each with a different tone and voice. But I also wanted each one to have their own distinctive visual personality that contrasts from the other. So that idea was that each of the characters would be drawn by a different artist. That way, each time they appear in the story, the reader immediately sees their own unique perspective. It was a bold experiment and a logistical nightmare, but in retrospect, it worked out very nicely. Each time Kabuki appears, she is drawn by me. Rick Mays draws Scarab and Tigerlily every time they appear, Dave Johnson and Mike Oeming drew Ice, Andrew Robinson drew Snapdragon, and so on.

MARKISAN: How does writing for an established property like the *X-Men* or *Daredevil* differ from writing your creator-owned series? Do you approach the work differently? What is your interaction with Marvel editorial X-group like?

DAVID: The difference is that I created *Kabuki*. And I have written every past issue of *Kabuki*. So nothing I do with *Kabuki* can be wrong or out of character. It is all a personal evolution. Whereas, with *Daredevil* and the *X-Men*, I am collaborating with the rich history of the Marvel characters, and I need to be respectful of the what the creators before me have brought to these characters. And yet, I still need to bring something new to the characters that only I can. Otherwise, why do it? Those are the two big challenges to consider when writing a character you did not create. It is a very collaborative effort, in that you are collaborating with the history and personality of the character.

All the editors that I have worked with at Marvel have been fantastic. Especially Joe Quesada and Nanci Dakesian who I have worked with the most.

MARKISAN: Your first solo arc on *Ultimate X-Men* will feature Wolverine on the hunt for missing moments of his past. His search will take him to Japan. Were you at all hesitant to write another comic book set in Japan, having written *Kabuki* for many years? What are the advantages of setting a story in a familiar place?

DAVID: I suppose I was a little hesitant about that at first. I feel like I have done a pretty personal



exploration of experiences in Japan through my **Kabuki** books. And I'm not going to repeat any of that. But because of Brian Bendis urging me to integrate the Japan story into it, I realized there is plenty of room to break new ground. And he had a great idea for the story, that also ties in with some of Mark Millar's ideas. I think Bendis and Millar have each brought a great individual approach to their runs. And I like them as writers and as people. I spent a couple weeks in New Zealand and Australia doing book signings and vacationing with Mark Millar and Frank Quitely and got to know them well, and really like them as people as well as artists. They are my two favorite Scotsmen!

MARKISAN: It seems like Wolverine has been the focus of the majority of **Ultimate X-Men** stories in the series thus far. How do you plan to flesh out the other characters during your run? Which X-characters are you most interested in writing and why?

DAVID: I like all of them. I like Storm. I like Nightcrawler. I see so much potential development for all of them. It is going to be fun dealing with them. Especially in collaboration with Bendis and with Dave Finch. Finch draws great X-Men action. It will be fun putting all the characters through some intense action and adventure with Finch doing all the hard work!

MARKISAN: What appeals to you about the X-Men concept? What made you decide to write the book?

DAVID: I read these characters when I was a kid. There is a feeling of disenfranchisement and outsider existence that the X-Men embody and all readers can relate to.

MARKISAN: You've said that you will only write **Ultimate X-Men** as long as you have stories to tell. Have you thought of any possible stories beyond your Wolverine arc?

DAVID: Of course. In fact, I don't really think of it as a Wolverine book. All the stories are very much about the entire team. There will be explorations of my Ultimate version of some Classic X-Men milestone events. That's the only hint I can give you! But think of all your favorite X-Men milestones, and imagine how cool they can be in the present day Ultimate universe with Finch drawing them.

MARKISAN: Will you illustrate any covers for your run on **Ultimate X-Men**? Is there any possibility of you illustrating a full X-issue down the road?



DAVID: I don't think I will be doing any covers, and I'm absolutely sure that I will not even consider illustrating any of the issues. All of my art energies are focused on the new **Kabuki** series. To do both **Kabuki** and write **Ultimate X-Men** requires a lot of self discipline. To write and paint just **Kabuki** requires a lot of self discipline. And one part of that discipline is to turn down 99% of the projects you are offered in order to deliver your best efforts to the projects you have committed to, and to see them through to their complete fruition.

And I'm not very interested in drawing action stories at this time in my life. I did a good share of it, and I feel like I have broke new ground when I did it. I don't need to retread that ground. I need to follow my interests. If I write a story with a lot of action, I will tend to write that story for another artist. Finch is perfect for it. And I did my share of action in certain scenes of **Kabuki: Circle of Blood**.

MARKISAN: How will your stories on **Ultimate X-Men** differ from the runs by Mark Millar and Brian Bendis? What can readers expect from your tales, and what kind of mark do you want to leave on the X-franchise?

DAVID: Millar and Bendis have done a great job. I will be picking up on some of their unresolved questions in the stories. And I will be bringing my own flavor to the team. That will include high octane action and adventure built on top of a sturdy foundation of character development, personal motivation, and social metaphor that the X-Men are so natural for. For some example of my work on this kind of thing, I suggest readers check out my first **Kabuki** volume **Kabuki: Circle of Blood**.

Though it is written and drawn ten years ago when I was only 20, it gives you a sense of this kind of action balanced with a foundation of internal motivation, philosophy, and social metaphor.

MARKISAN: Given that the "Ultimate" line was conceived in the late nineties -- almost five years ago now -- how will the line remain fresh and avoid similar continuity problems that the regular Marvel universe books generated?

DAVID: Well five years of continuity is nothing compared to 40 years of it. I don't think there is any problem in keeping it fresh. There are plenty of contemporary social themes to draw on. And there is great freedom in inventing and re-inventing the Ultimate characters for form to follow function of the philosophy of this line.

MARKISAN: Now that you have a few Marvel characters under your belt, have you given any thought to working on any established DC icons at some point in the future?

DAVID: DC, or specifically Bob Shreck, the **Batman** Editor, has very kindly told me that I have an open door policy to write or draw a **Batman** story when I have the time and inclination. I have given it considerable thought, and I'd like to do a **Batman** story for Bob Shreck sometime. But as Joe Quesada supported Kabuki very early on, and offered me to write **Daredevil** for Marvel even before it was publicly known that he was going to be at Marvel, I feel a personal loyalty and gratitude to Joe, and I won't do anything he would consider as direct competition as long as he is at Marvel.

MARKISAN: Any last words, David?

DAVID: I'd like to remind readers that all the **Kabuki** stories are collected in paperback and hardcover. If you have a chance, it will be rewarding to read them before **Kabuki: The Alchemy** ships in January. **Metamorphosis** is my favorite as it is probably the best presentation of my work in comic books. Each of the **Kabuki** books fits in continuity and builds on the previous story, but each book is also its own self contained story, with its own unique art style and storytelling tone that contrasts to the others. So you can start with any of them. Here is a list of the **Kabuki** books:



Kabuki Vol. 1
Circle of Blood
272 pages



Kabuki Vol. 2
Dreams
128 pages



Kabuki Vol. 3
Masks of the Noh
128 pages



Kabuki Vol. 4
Skin Deep
128 pages



Kabuki Vol. 5
Metamorphosis
288 pages



Kabuki Vol. 6
Scarab
288 pages

Those who read **Kabuki**, or want to try it, are welcome to give me feedback on it or my **Daredevil** work at my Kabuki message board at wfcomics.com or at my site at davidmack.net. These sites have news and info and offer prints, original art, trades and back issues, and links to all of the other Kabuki fan sites.

*Note: For a direct link to **Kabuki** story summaries for all six chapters visit <http://davidmack.net/comics.html>*