

Jay Faerber: Cause & Effect

Believe it or not, it was Jay Faerber's love of soap operas that helped him break into the comics industry. After sending a submission packet to Marvel Editor and daytime television aficionado Frank Pittarese, Jay was soon offered a writing gig on issue of **What If...?**. Since then Jay has written a bunch of material for the House of Ideas, most notably **New Warriors** and **Generation X**. He also wrote the fan-favorite DC series **Titans** for two years.

In 2002 Jay unveiled his celebrity superhero book **Noble Causes** for Image Comics. Beloved by critics and creators, **Noble Causes** injected a giant dose of family drama and unpredictability into comics. Previously a series of mini-series, **Noble Causes** will be relaunched this summer as an ongoing title. Jay has also begun to diversify his portfolio with the recently released mystery, **Dodge's Bullets** and the Top Cow hero-for-hire revamp **Strykeforce**.

I talked to Jay about the struggles of keeping a creator-owned book on reader radar, reviving characters from the dead and debated the survival rates for nude girls in the jungle.

MARKISAN NASO: **Noble Causes** seems like it's been trying to find its footing since it debuted. First it was a full-color bi-monthly miniseries, then a monthly color mini-series, then it switched to a black and white format for the four-issue story "Distant Relatives." Now **NC** is going to be a full-color ongoing. How much of a struggle has it been to keep the book going? And how do you think the move to an ongoing **NC** will benefit the book?

JAY FAERBER: I admit, the book's had a shaky publishing life. We really have tried everything, and that's mainly because I didn't want to give up on the book without having tried everything. I didn't want to look back and think, "Maybe if we'd gone to b&w ..." or "maybe if the book was just a mini-series." So, we tried stuff. If it didn't work, we examined why, and tried something else. This time, we're trying the format that super-hero fans like best — the ongoing, color, monthly series. I think that if you do anything less than a monthly, too many fans will just decide to wait for the trade. But super-hero fans have a special relationship with monthlies — I think that, generally speaking, it's their format of choice. They like hitting the store every week, and getting their stash, and reading *Previews*, and seeing which book their favorite character is going to guest-star in. All that stuff. And I don't want it to sound pompous when I say "they." I guess I should say "we," because I'm still a big super-hero fan myself. I get to the store almost every week, and spend at least \$20 each time. So, I'm hoping that by being on the stands every month, in color, fans will realize that they can rely on us to provide some kick-ass entertainment.

MARKISAN NASO: **Noble Causes** has gotten a tremendous amount of creator support. Greg Rucka, Mark Millar, Geoff Johns and others have all expressed how much they love the series. In fact they are quoted on some of **NC**'s front covers. You'd think a big name guy like Geoff Johns telling people the book is cool would help give it a sales boost, but it seems like this hasn't helped all that much. Why haven't more comic readers given **Noble Causes** a chance?

FAERBER: I think it's because we never really gave them the proper chance. In the past, we were always doing mini-series, so even if buzz was good, I think a lot of readers would think, "Well, the book's only four issues, and it's already on issue number two. I'll just get the trade." And a lot of them



have - our trade paperback sales are quite healthy. So hopefully more folks will check us out once they realize we'll be sticking around.

NASO: The recent cancellations of well crafted but poor selling comics like **Stormwatch: Team Achilles** and **Wildcats: Version 3.0** has spiked a bit of online speculation about the future of titles facing a similar fate. There's also been a lot of discussion on what can be done to increase readership. Word of mouth doesn't seem to be enough these days. Creators like Ed Brubaker have to do more proactive promotion like arm wrestling fans to get people to pay attention. What the hell else can be done to try and promote great books that fly below reader radar? What can fans of these books do to attract other readers? And finally, how much fault lies with publishers who don't seem to do much in the way of creative advertising for these titles?



FAERBER: God, man, if I had the answers to any of those questions I'd be doing something about it, rather than talking about it in an interview, you know? I will admit that it is depressing that when a story about Cyclops changing the color of his visor from red to blue goes up, there's eighteen pages of posts following it. Meanwhile, any stories about books from companies other than Marvel or DC get only a handful of responses. It's the same on most comic book message boards — the stuff people talk about it is all related to characters that have been around for decades. If you look at acclaimed-but-low-selling books like **WildCats**, **StormWatch**, **Sleeper**, **Runaways**, **Invincible**, etc. — they're all relatively new characters. The million dollar question is how to get the overall comics readership to really embrace new characters. It's possible. Look at **Powers**. That book's doing just fine. But it is a severely uphill struggle, and I wish I had a solution. I guess I'm still of the naive belief that if you build it, they will come — that if you do good work, it'll get noticed.

NASO: **Powers** is definitely good example of a well-received, new comic book. And it's a great one. But I think the book owes a lot of its success to the star power of Bendis, who writes the adventures of well-known superheroes for Marvel. Other big time writers like Mark Millar are also carrying over their popularity from mainstream superhero books to new indie efforts. Do you have any plans to work with Marvel or DC? If not, would you like to get back to writing for the big two? And do you think working on a popular superhero title would help raise the profile of your other projects?

FAERBER: My timeline could be off, but I'm pretty sure that **Powers** was at least moderately successful before Bendis started getting Marvel work. That said, I have nothing in the pipeline at Marvel or DC. I'm not actively pursuing work there, but if the right project came along, under the right circumstances, sure, I'd be interested. Unless the book became a huge hit, though, I doubt it would have any real impact on my creator-owned work.

NASO: Getting back to **Noble Causes**, one of your characters from the initial mini-series - Race — was killed early on. But at the end of the last arc, "Distant Relatives" you brought him back.. sort of. He's Race, but he's an alternate reality version of the guy readers first met. A classic complaint from fans is that comic characters never really stay dead. Was this a concern when you started thinking about resurrecting Race? Why'd you ultimately decide to bring him back?

FAERBER: Yeah, I knew I was running the risk of falling into the comic book cliché of bringing my dead character back. But the pros really outweighed the cons in this instance. And, if nothing else, this entire episode has taught me never to say "never." See, I really, truly intended to have Race stay dead, forever. We'd see him in flashback stories, but that would be it. So every time I told readers he was dead for good, I meant it.



I only brought him back when it looked like "Distant Relatives" might be the end of the series for good. Number weren't great (which is why we published it in b&w), and I was looking for a way to give the last issue some sort of finality. Since the entire arc had revolved around alternate worlds, I came up with the idea of reuniting Liz with Race — a different Race, but indistinguishable from our own. And then, as soon as I had Race back in the fold, I started getting tons of story ideas with him in the mix. Plus, Robert Kirkman, Jim Valentino, and Eric Stephenson were all encouraging me to bring the book back as a monthly series. They really believed that if the book was in color, and came out on a monthly basis, we'd find our audience. So, with their encouragement and my own renewed interest in the book, I decided to give it a try.

NASO: Man, it's interesting (and actually a little depressing) to hear you say you thought **Noble Causes** was done after "Distant Relatives". When a book is critically acclaimed but sells poorly, how does it affect you as a writer? Do you feel any pressure to change the way you approach your stories?

FAERBER: It gets depressing, sure. But I guess I can take solace in knowing I'm in good company, because there are plenty (too many, in fact) good books that go unnoticed, while rehashed stories sell strong.

When I really thought that **NC:DR** might be the end, a little part of me was relieved to no longer be thinking about it. But then, as soon as I had the idea to throw Race back into the mix, the juices started flowing again.

I never really thought "How can I change this so that more people will read it?" But when preparing the new series, I did decide to change some stuff — but only because I realized that there were elements to the Nobles that were crystal clear in my head, but had never really made it to the page. So I'm making a concerted effort to show more of what they do with their day-to-day lives. In past stories, there was a lot of standing-around-and-bitching. Now we'll see Gaia in meetings at Noble Industries, and Liz working at her bookstore, and that sort of thing.



NASO: Creating alternate worlds and alternate reality characters as a means of jumpstarting new stories with old or dead characters reminds me of another Image book — Savage Dragon. Will the new **NC** series settle your characters in a new reality like Dragon did, or will readers see more leaps between worlds? Will we now be following different versions of the main cast?

FAERBER: The whole alternate universe-thing will barely even be mentioned in the new series. Having Liz land in this new dimension — one where Race is alive but her own counterpart is dead — was just a way to get them reunited. We won't be dwelling on the fact that people have jumped universes. Also, all the existing **NC** characters are there, exactly as you remember them, engaged in the same subplots (Zephyr's still pregnant, Krennick's still obsessed with her, Rusty's still dating Cosmic Rae, etc.). I'm not saying I'll never go down the alternate universe route — because I don't use that word anymore — but I have no plans to, at this point.

NASO: Will there be new characters?

FAERBER: There will be new characters, however that has nothing to do with the fact that we're on an alternate world. I just wanted to bring in a few more wild cards, to spice things up. They'll be introduced within the first six issues. Other Image heroes, like Venture (from my short-lived book with Jamal Igle), Firebird (from my upcoming one-shot), and Lightning Rod (the hero Geoff Johns & Brent McKee created for the first **Noble Causes: Extended Family**) will all be enjoying an extended stay in the book, too.

NASO: Now that **Noble Causes** is an ongoing, will events in the book affect or be affected by other characters and events in the Image universe?

FAERBER: The Nobles live on the same Earth as Savage Dragon and Invincible, and all the other Image heroes. So yeah, there's a chance you'll see them pop up in each other's books. A good number of Image heroes (including Dragon and Invincible) show up in **Noble Causes: Extended Family #2**, for instance.

NASO: I remember reading about a possible **Noble Causes** television show a while back but I haven't heard anything since. What's happening with that?

FAERBER: It's dead. The book was optioned twice for television, but it never got off the ground.

NASO: Along with **Noble Causes**, you're also writing is **Strykeforce**, a revamped version of the old, Top Cow series. Your **Strykeforce** is much more of a straightforward superhero action book than **Noble Causes**. It's definitely more plot driven. What flavor are you're going for with this series? And is it difficult to switch to a plot driven series after writing all that character drama for **NC**?

FAERBER: **Strykeforce** is definitely more of a straightforward superhero action book. It is, in fact, very plot-driven. I wanted it to be as different from **Noble Causes** as it could be. It's probably more difficult to write **Strykeforce** than **NC**, only because plotting has always been more of a challenge for me than just throwing two characters in a room and seeing what happens. And because I know plotting doesn't come naturally to me, I tend to overcompensate, and I outline extensively. I also want the action in **Strykeforce** to be top-notch, so I spend a lot of time choreographing the various fight scenes.



NASO: Speaking of fight scenes.. I've actually been to the jungle and it was abundantly clear to me that it's never a good place to be naked or even half-naked. But in **Strykeforce #1** you've got a completely nude girl running over sharp sticks and shrapnel, and brushing past poisonous plants sans pants. Snakes and monkeys are probably snapping at her and she doesn't even have a sock on.. I know it's a comic book, but damn man, that's pretty dangerous. What's the deal?

FAERBER: Hey, Tarzan runs around the jungle damn-near naked. Why aren't you on his case?

NASO: Dude, Tarzan was raised by gorillas since he was a baby Greystoke! He's been conditioned to the harsh elements of the deadly forest. The bottoms of his feet are like alligator hide and he's probably immune to poison snake venom. He can deal. But if you drop some random, nude girl into the jungle, she wouldn't be able to walk two steps without takin' a twig to the toe, let alone fight. For God's sake at least give the woman some sandals!



FAERBER: I just think it's great that you're getting so worked up over the fact that it's not "realistic"; that the girl who can turn invisible would walk around the jungle naked.

NASO: I always get worked up over naked girls, Jay. But I'll calm down now.

Strykeforce is only scheduled for 5 issues. If sales are good will the book continue? What kind of stories would you like to tell with these characters?

FAERBER: Yep, if sales are good, we will definitely continue. If we get to do a 6th issue, it will most likely be a stand-alone, "day in the life"-type issue. One of the disadvantages of having such a complex, plot-driven introductory story is that I haven't been able to spend a whole lot of time just letting the readers get to know the characters. I mean, obviously,

their actions can define them, but I'd like to do an issue where we just see what they do on their day off, to really cement their personalities in the readers' minds. Issue #7 would then be the start of a new, mission-driven arc. I don't know what it would be yet, but I've got a few ideas.

NASO: Along with **Strykeforce** and **Noble Causes** you also have an original graphic novel out now called **Dodge's Bullets**. It's a mystery, which is a bit of a departure for you. Can you describe what this book is about for folks who may have missed it?

FAERBER: **Dodge's Bullets** is a straight mystery story — no sci-fi or super-heroes or magic. It's a straight genre piece, born out of my love of TV detective shows, like *The Rockford Files*, *Magnum, PI* and *Spenser: For Hire*. That kind of stuff was a huge influence on me, and this is where I'm finally able to let it loose. The title character is Webster Dodge, a 20something Seattle musician who dreams of making it big. But until that day comes, he's gotta pay the bills, so he works as a private eye. It's taking the sort of private eye/reluctant hero archetype and updating it for the 21st century.

The book itself is an 80-page b&w graphic novel set very firmly in Seattle. James Francis (the book's artist) and I both live near Seattle, and we went to great lengths to make sure we got all the details right. It's got wry humor, a compelling mystery, some cool fight scenes, and lots of atmosphere.

NASO: Do you plan to write more stories in the original graphic novel format? What's the appeal of creating a single, self contained story? And do you have more mysteries to tell?

FAERBER: James and I already know what the next **Dodge's Bullets** mystery is going to be about (we've already got a title, too — **Dodge's Bullets: Against the Law**). We're just waiting to make sure the first one is successful enough to warrant a sequel — which would be another graphic novel.

The appeal of that format is simply that it's the way of the future. It's the best way to reach the audience that doesn't frequent the comic book store each week. Sure, we could break the story into a mini-series (which is how the first one was originally conceived), but we realized that a good portion of the intended audience would just wait for the collection anyway, so why make 'em wait? We just decided to do it all up-front. And I gotta tell you, holding that book in my hands for the first time, with its nice, thick cover ... it was damned satisfying.

NASO: You've also got a 48-page one shot about a mother daughter superhero duo called **Firebirds**, coming out in September. Can you talk some more about what this book will be like?

FAERBER: I don't want to say too much yet, but **Firebirds** is about Rebecca and Emily, an estranged mother and daughter who are learning things from one another. Rebecca is learning how to be a mother, and Emily is learning how to be a super-hero. It's a toss-up as to which lesson is harder. The first 25 pages, or so, of this book wrote themselves. I've heard writers talk about that sort of thing before, and never put much stock in it. But it happened here, for me. These characters were both so alive, right from the get-go. And the way the story unfolded was crystal-clear, right from the start. It's one of the most satisfying things I've ever written.

Like **Noble Causes**, it's very character-driven. But it's not over-the-top, like that book. This one's very subtle and intimate. There is some super-hero action, but the foundation of the book is the relationship between Rebecca and Emily. I really hope people like it.

For more information about Jay and his work visit <http://www.jayfaerber.com>

