

Peter David: Operation Angel

Ever since Peter David's critically acclaimed series, **Fallen Angel**, debuted, it has been searching for a larger audience. Peter's done his part. **Fallen Angel** is an expertly crafted and unpredictable story about Lee, a troubled super-woman who helps people in the strange city of Bete Noire. Her origin is a mystery, her emotions are violently unstable and she's surrounded by scoundrels who want nothing more than to take her down.

Although **Fallen Angel** has received glowing reviews for its intriguing blend of the supernatural and the superheroic, it is all but invisible to retailers and unknown to many comic readers, including longtime Peter David fans. In an effort to call more attention to the series Peter and DC Comics have recently started offering incentives for retailers and readers, such as free issues of **Fallen Angel #1** and signed bookplates for the 1st trade paperback.

I talked to Peter David about the dark complexity of **Fallen Angel**, the marketing disadvantages the series has faced and why Batman won't be stopping by Bete Noire anytime soon.

MARKISAN NASO: Since it debuted *Fallen Angel* has been highly praised by fans and critics. In fact reviewer Randy Lander of **The Fourth Rail** recently gave issue #15 a 10 out of 10. Along with the critical acclaim, you've also declared that **Fallen Angel** is the best work you've done. Why is it your best work? What are you offering readers in this series that you haven't with your other books?

PETER DAVID: For starters, it's the longest comic book series I've ever worked on solo that's entirely characters and concepts of my own invention. (**Soulsearchers and Company** has been around for over 10 years, but that's a collaboration with Richard Howell.) So it's allowed me to indulge in the sort of world building that's simply not possible in other comic book venues. Consequently, it's got a depth and texture that I think surpasses anything else I've done. Lee, the Angel herself, is probably the single most complex character I've ever worked on.

NASO: *Fallen Angel*/Lee is definitely complex. She tries to make a difference in people's lives, but she acts like she doesn't care. Almost like she doesn't deserve to be a hero. She punishes herself.. There just aren't a lot of lead female characters in comics like Lee. We usually get strippers with guns. Did the typical portrayal of women in comics factor into the creation of Lee?

DAVID: I am now going to make a stunningly obvious statement: Women are complex. Far more complex than men, I think. Women will fight when they have to, and they'll do it quite well, but they tend to see more shadings and sides of a question than men do. Lee was created to be the antithesis of how I, at least, see women typically portrayed in comics, which is one of two ways: Victims, or men with breasts. And scantily clad men with breasts at that. The Angel's costume is very enveloping. It covers her, hides her. It symbolizes Lee's persona because she wants to reveal as little as possible of herself as she can.

NASO: There's a great supporting cast in **Fallen Angel**. Dolf, Asia Minor, Black Mariah, Boxer, Juris.. A lot of these characters also have mysterious pasts they don't necessarily want to reveal. But even though Lee isn't very close to any of them, the other characters do seem to help her from going over the edge simply by being involved in her life. How crucial are these characters to preventing Lee from just giving up and completely breaking down?



DAVID: I think they're instrumental in that they keep Lee focused on the notion that everyone in Bete Noire has a part to play. They play theirs, she plays hers. For a woman as lost as Lee is, they're her anchors to what small bit of reality she can cling to.

NASO: The city of Bete Noire seems to have a part to play too. It's almost like a character in **Fallen Angel**; like it's an entity that draws people to it. Where did the idea for Bete Noire come from and how important is its "presence" to your story?

DAVID: I've always described Bete Noire as Casablanca if it were situated in the Twilight Zone. You're exactly right in referring to it as an entity, and that will be made more and more clear in issues 15-18, right up to the idea that it gets "into" you in a variety of ways...some of them beneficial, some not-so-much. For instance, many fans have speculated that Dolf is actually Hitler, but the stumbling block to that is that Hitler would be about 115 years old by now. Doesn't seem likely. Well, in issue #17, it will be revealed that Dolf has been in Bete Noire for about 60 years. That would certainly time out to the end of World War II. But there's still the age thing, and Dolf doesn't look or act 115. And then it's revealed that Doctor Juris has been running Bete Noire way before Dolf showed up. Look at Dolf, look at Juris. That alone tells you something about Bete Noire.



NASO: Yeah, it tells me Bete Noire is one freaky city. Let's shift gears a little here and talk about marketing. For months you've been trying to create a buzz for **Fallen Angel** by thinking up creative promotions and urging fans to support the title. When **Captain Marvel** was cancelled you asked people not to try and save that book but instead champion **Fallen Angel**, for example. Why do you think it's so difficult to get comic buyers to pick up **Fallen Angel** or other new titles? Given the way the industry operates, is this kind of self-promotional effort becoming an automatic requirement for low selling series?

DAVID: It's difficult because many readers are loathe to make any sort of long-term emotional investment in any character they didn't grow up with. If a character was created post-1975, and is non-mutant, non-Spider, non-Super, or non-Bat, then fans will either give it a very short leash or not even bother to sample it. Some fans claimed they read the first two, three issues of "**Fallen Angel**," didn't know where it was going, and dropped it. Meantime fans complained for three, four years about the endless mysteries of Bruce Jones's **Hulk**, but they kept on collecting it. Fans don't want to invest time and money in a series when they don't

already have a built in interest in the character...perhaps because they simply assume that the book will not succeed and, therefore, they shouldn't bother getting attached to it, thus making it a self-fulfilling prophecy. Now I'm not sure whether self-promotion is a requirement, but it's sure a tough slog without it unless the publisher gets 110% behind the work. And most of the time, they won't.

NASO: When it comes to saving quality comics from the axe, the internet has become the place for fans to rally behind their favorite titles. However, internet response doesn't always seem to make a difference in sales. The recent cancellation of **Wildcats** despite an explosion of online support is just one example. Do you think **Fallen Angel** fans are making a dent with their word-of-mouth campaign? What do you think fans of **Fallen Angel** should do or continue to do to help keep the series going?

DAVID: The Internet represents, to my mind, the very vocal minority. While people on the Internet complain that they want to see stuff that's new, different and challenging, the buying majority is plunking down money for what they're accustomed to. Jim Shooter correctly, I think, observed that fans keep saying they want to see modern opera, but what they REALLY want to see — or at least what they'll most eagerly support — is the 38th production of "Carmen." Probably the most constructive thing fans can do on the internet is convince retailers that there's a demand for the series.

NASO: A lot of people have said retailers aren't carrying **Fallen Angel**. Not even one copy. Why aren't they taking a chance on the book?

DAVID: I've never seen such a bizarre disconnect as I'm seeing with this series. I've got retailers telling me, "Well, we order it, but people don't pick it up" and I've got fans telling me, "I went to five stores today, and no one had it." And I'm left tearing my hair out, and believe me, I don't have that much left to tear. They're not taking a chance because more and more retailers are staking the entirety of their orders on new series to advance purchase. It's the next step from publishers printing only to order; retailers ordering only for instant sale. They want to make sure to have plenty of what they see as the sure thing, and why bother with the risk? It doesn't occur to many of them that, once upon a time, **X-Men**, the bi-monthly revival of a somewhat-popular-but-canceled fringe series with a bunch of new characters including an annoying runt named Wolverine whom fans couldn't stand, wasn't a sure thing.

NASO: In an effort to get these shop owners interested you are now offering a free, signed bookplate to retailers and fans who purchase the **Fallen Angel** trade. How much retailer interest has this bookplate generated so far?

DAVID: Some. It's much too early to tell. But at least retailers seem interested in it.

NASO: Retailers also had an opportunity to receive free copies of **Fallen Angel #1** as part of DC's recent effort to promote the book. Like you said, you don't often see this kind of effort from publishers. What prompted DC to try and get people interested in your comic?



DAVID: It came out of discussions I had with Paul Levitz and Dan Didio at the San Diego Con. I told them how I had countless fans coming up to me and telling me they loved my work, loved everything I did, were huge supporters of my material. And to every single one, I'd say, "Are you reading **Fallen Angel**? At least 90 percent of them, maybe more, stared at me blankly. **Fallen Angel**? What's that? When is it coming out?" And the book had been coming out for a year. I asked Paul and Dan how the hell I was supposed to make the book a success when the first, best audience for the series — people who were fans of mine — didn't know the book existed. And, not to put too fine a point on it, but every single one of those fans DID know about **Madrox**, which hadn't yet come out, and they knew about my upcoming work on **Hulk**, the announcement of which was barely days old. So don't go telling me, "Oh, well, gee, I guess people just aren't interested," when word of the book's existence simply isn't getting out there. So they agreed to get some marketing going for it, and the actual plan for the free copies of #1 came from Bob Wayne, who I think had wanted to do it for a while and saw **Fallen Angel** as a good test case.

NASO: Do you think the fact that DC has witnessed a few online uprisings to keep critically acclaimed books alive — most recently with **Wildcats** — has helped the company become more sympathetic to cult-favorite titles and the readers who fight to save them?

DAVID: I think they're always sympathetic to such titles, but business is business, and they're watching the bottom line. But my contention is that the bottom line will always support the old standards, which is where publishers will then pump their money...except that sooner or later the old standards become just, well...old. When Marvel put out **Amazing Fantasy #15**, no one knew what they had or what it would become. No one knew **Sandman** would wind up giving birth, in sideways fashion, to the entire Vertigo imprint. Sooner or later the publishers are going to find that the old standards aren't getting it done, and meanwhile they won't have any fresh arms to bring up from the Triple-A league because they weren't nursing them along.

NASO: What other promotional ideas do you and DC have up your sleeves for **Fallen Angel**?

DAVID: Nothing that's yet been approved by DC, although I'm thinking of producing **Fallen Angel** key chains with these neat sliding puzzle things. Considering what a puzzle the lead character is, I think having her picture on one of those and you get to try and put it together would be cool.

NASO: A puzzle keychain would be sweet. Speaking of things that are "cool," the comic book industry tends to focus a lot of its attention on the new guys; the next hip creators. Was it at all difficult to get **Fallen Angel** greenlit, given that you're a seasoned professional and not a "young gun."



DAVID: Actually, it was surprisingly easy to get it greenlit, because it dovetailed with several other books that DC wanted to launch that involved the concept of pushing the envelope of unlabeled mature material featuring strong female characters. Unfortunately the other titles quickly got canceled and then we got slapped with "For Mature Readers" so, y'know, so much for that plan...

NASO: When the "For Mature Readers" label got slapped on, **Fallen Angel** became a book that kind of straddles the line between content acceptable for the regular DC Universe and content suitable for DC's mature imprint, Vertigo. How has this weird otherspace affected the book in terms of marketing and reader perception?

DAVID: Oh, it's hurt it tremendously. I mentioned **Sandman** earlier. I swear to God, if **Sandman** had launched with the kind of obstructions we faced, it might well have been canceled by issue #12. Imagine it: "Here's this new book, **Sandman**. Let's stick a 'For Mature Readers' label on it so that many stores won't sell it to anyone under 18. Let's make sure to tell people it's not part of the DCU, and mandate that no DCU

characters can appear (**Sandman** guest starred John Constantine, the Demon, Mister Miracle and the Justice League, and the Kirby-era Sandman, all in the first dozen issues). Oh, and let's jack up the price a few times in the first year." I'm not saying DC had this scheme to throw up roadblocks just for giggles, but I am saying that we've had balls-and-chains clapped to our feet practically from the beginning. It's made it almost impossible to market the title. The "Mature Readers" label keeps the younger readers away, the strict Vertigo readers are kept away by the presence of the DC bullet and the lack of "Vertigo" label, and the lack of connection to the DCU keeps the superhero fans away. There's several marketing reasons right there for readers not to bother with the series, and the only thing we've got going for us is that we're turning out a book that the critics and reviewers laud up one side and down the other. And although that might prompt some readers to try it, others won't sample a book specifically *because* critics love it. Or they'll say, "I've heard great things about it, and will wait for the trade paperback."

NASO: Since you mentioned **Sandman**.. has DC ever showed any interest in moving **Fallen Angel** to Vertigo? Would you take the book to that imprint?

DAVID: I'd do it in a heartbeat. But Vertigo wasn't interested. To be perfectly honest, I've no reason to think they even read the series before rendering a decision on it. Go ask them yourself.

NASO: I definitely will ask, Peter. But can you say what reason they gave for their decision? I heard that Vertigo told you **Fallen Angel** was too similar to other titles in the line...

DAVID: Yeah, that's what they told me, too. Personally, I'm not sure I see it.

NASO: Me either. Well, how about moving **Fallen Angel** closer to the DC Universe.. at your website you mentioned that you'd love to have DCU characters guest star in **Fallen Angel** but DC wants to keep the book in its own little world. Seems like a strange thing to do when a guest star or too could possibly boost sales. And quite frankly, just putting **Fallen Angel** in the DCU would probably pique reader interest. What's the deal?

the reader. As for the second part, I know how it COULD end. But it's designed to be open-ended.

NASO: Many people have commented that **Fallen Angel** is a different kind of book for you, as if they are surprised you had the ability to write a darker, more complex series. Are you at all taken aback by this reaction to **Fallen Angel**? Does it bother you that your abilities as a writer are underestimated or questioned despite the fact that you're an award-winning author in various media?



DAVID: It doesn't surprise me at all, because there is a tendency to pigeonhole writers. That's why so many adopt different names under which they produce different material. People like to peg you, to figure that they know what to expect from you. Many also have memories like fruit flies. My earliest comic book work was "The Death of Jean DeWolff" [**Spectacular Spider-Man #107-110**] So I was pigeonholed as the dark, grim and gritty guy. But then I wrote some more lighthearted, humorous material, such as **X-Factor**, and suddenly I was the guy who wrote funny stuff. It's a tag that I've never quite shaken, because so few people it seems mix comedy and tragedy, even though I feel it's a very potent combination. Especially when you consider the words of Steve Allen who said that comedy is simply tragedy plus time. And comics fans are VERY aggressive in hewing to the comedy line. To many fans, it seems, putting in a little humor is like being a little pregnant. One or two jokes and suddenly you're telling a comedy, even though the vast majority of the story is comedic.

So in order to get the tone I was looking for for **Fallen Angel**, I had to ruthlessly make sure that humor was almost absent. And when it was in there, it had to be bleak and depressing and, ideally, someone suffered as a result of it. I have to admit, I was a bit nervous that people would not accept such a thing from me. And indeed, many haven't.

NASO: I think it's safe to say that most comic book readers haven't heard of penciller David Lopez or inker Fernando Blanco. But these guys have illustrated all 15 issues of **Fallen Angel** and they just keep getting better every month. And this in an age where most comics feature fill-in artists every 4-6 issues. What does it mean to you to have a consistent and talented art team on **Fallen Angel**? What does it mean to the story?

DAVID: For a writer, a regular artist is a God-send, because over time you can see what he can do, what he can't, and play to his strengths. For instance, **Fallen Angel** is very plot-and-dialogue driven. But for issue #15, the first of the four-parter, I went for mood, mood, mood. I gave Dave and Fernando tons of silent panels, the two page spread of Bete Noire itself, the minimally dialogued arrival of Mr. Kind of the Hierarchy and his face-off with the Angel. Basically I threw fastball after fastball right into their wheelhouse, and they knocked every single one out of the park, as I knew they would. Go look at the reviews. They all rave about the artwork more than they ever have before.

NASO: Obviously the trade (collecting #1-6) is a good way for interested readers to get into **Fallen Angel**, but what recent monthly issues would you recommend as good jumping on points for new readers and why?

DAVID: Issues 12, 13 and 14 are all stand-alones, designed specifically for new readers to come aboard. Issue 12 is pivotal in that it gives vital backstory as to how Juris and the Fallen Angel first met, and reveals some major story points that will come into play subsequently. Issue 13 is a straightforward revenge story, a "typical" outing for the Fallen Angel if someone so atypical can have such a thing. And issue 14 takes great pains to introduce (or, if you will, reintroduce) every major player in Bete Noire, as well as having a major revelation at the end of issue #14 that presents a major change in the Angel's status. Any or all of those



are good jumping on points.

NASO: Given the fact that Lee is a more realistic female character, do you think there's a potentially untapped female audience out there for **Fallen Angel**? If so, how can they be reached?

DAVID: Well, guys can buy the trade paperback as gifts for their girlfriends/wives who don't read comics. That would be a terrific start.

NASO: I am optimistic about sales picking up for **Fallen Angel** because I've know people who became regular readers after hearing how good the book is. But I have to ask — if DC were to cancel **Fallen Angel** would you try to continue it elsewhere? Would you ever consider self-publishing the series?

DAVID: Self-publish? No. But I've already had other publishers inquiring after it should DC cancel it. Hopefully it won't come to that.