

Tony Isabella: Black Thought

Tony Isabella wants you to know he's ticked off.

For years the industry veteran has championed positive portrayals of black heroes in the pages of comic books. In his *Comic Buyer's Guide* column, "Tony's Tips", and on the internet he's raged about the lack of ethnic diversity in comics publishing and the stereotypical treatment of minority characters.

So it should come as no surprise that the seasoned writer has taken issue with events in the recently released **Green Arrow #31**. In his eyes, his most beloved creation -- Black Lightning -- was transformed into a cold-blooded murderer.

Black Lightning/Jefferson Pierce sprang from Isabella's imagination in 1977 to become the first African-American superhero at DC to get his own title. Gifted with electro-magnetic powers, along with a strong sense of community and Christian morality, Jefferson Pierce was designed to be an enduring symbol of justice. But over the years Isabella has watched his original character become distorted, even as he continually slipped on and off DC radar.



Black Lightning's debut series, written by Isabella, only made it to issue #11 before it fell prey to massive cutbacks in 1978. A string of guest appearances in other books such as **Detective Comics** and the **Justice League** followed before Black Lightning found a new home with **The Outsiders**, a street-level superhero team led by Batman, in the mid-1980's. After **The Outsiders** ended in 1988, Black Lightning was again downgraded to guest star status.

It wasn't until 1995 that Jefferson Pierce became a consistent player in the DC universe again. Isabella was given a second opportunity to write a Black Lightning series. Teamed with newcomer Eddy Newell on art, Isabella took the character back to his roots. The new book was greeted with enthusiastic praise, good sales, and won the CompuServe Comics Forum award for best single comic book award for issue #5, but soon differences between Isabella and DC led to the writer's dismissal. Issue #8 was Isabella's last. Without the book's creator at the helm, **Black Lightning** ended with issue #13.

Once Isabella's second series was cancelled, Black Lightning fell into the shadows, rarely making appearances over the next seven years, until he finally popped up as a guest star in the 2003 maxi-series **Metropolis**, and the Judd Winick-penned books **Green Arrow** and the revamped **Outsiders**.

Some people say Isabella should just be happy Black Lightning has been revived. Others say he has no right to complain about a character owned by DC. But for Isabella it goes deeper than that. For him it's a matter of responsibility. As Black Lightning's creator he holds a vested interest in maintaining the character's integrity. He wants Black Lightning to be a role model for your children. But above all he wants DC and other comic book publishers to treat characters of color with more respect.

I talked with Tony Isabella about his perceived mistreatment of Black Lightning and other minority characters over the years, his personal discussions with **Green Arrow** writer Judd Winick, and why the comic book industry seems reluctant to discuss his concerns.

Markisan Naso: In **Green Arrow #31**, Jefferson Pierce (Black Lightning) fatally electrocutes the C.E.O. of the Elevast Corporation in cold blood, to avenge the murder of his niece Joanna. You've been very vocal about your objection to this scene in your column, "Tony's Online Tips," and also on message boards, letting people know the act contradicts the character's morality. How did you envision Black Lightning and his mission, and why you feel this action compromises him?

Tony Isabella: Jefferson Pierce is a reluctant hero, always has been. He became Black Lightning because his sense of morality, his sense of social responsibility, wouldn't allow him to withhold his gifts, all his gifts, from his community. He comes from a background that tells him that, if you can help, you must help. He's a devout Christian who puts his belief into deeds.

His mission is just that: to help people. He's not a world-saver.

He's the hero who lives down the street, the guy you hope your own kids grow up to be like. He chose the name "Black Lightning" to express pride in his heritage and to serve communities overlooked by the rich and the powerful.

Over the years, I've taken flack for the "Black Lightning" name of the "Why doesn't Clark Kent call himself 'White Superman'?" sort, but Jeff carries the name with pride and to inspire his community. Superman and Batman and other white heroes don't carry that load. Look past them and you see a hundred other Caucasian super-heroes. Look past Black Lightning, especially at the time of his creation, and you see very few super-heroes of color.

Here we have Jeff Pierce, a real deal Christian and one of the few super-heroes -- DC or otherwise -- who was shown to be a church-goer. How can anybody think he could/would murder someone in cold blood? Even though the act happened off-panel, Judd Winick left no doubt that Jeff had, indeed, committed it. He admits it to Green Arrow.

How can Jeff reconcile this brutal and criminal act with his faith? What kind of message does that send to the young men and women for whom Jeff and Lightning have been role models?

It's an unconscionable betrayal of everything Jeff has always stood for. It's the thoughtless twisting of a positive character and one which smacks of cheap shock value.

MARKISAN: In some of your message board posts you say you spoke to **Green Arrow** writer Judd Winick about Black Lightning prior to the events in issue #31. How did you two start talking about the character? What was discussed?

TONY: When I learned...online...that Judd was using Jeff Pierce in **Green Arrow** and **The Outsiders**, I e-mailed him in the hope that I might be able to alleviate some of the damage. I explained to him that Jeff couldn't have a niece named "Pierce" because he was an only child, but that, as a guy who always builds families around himself, it was very possible he would remain close to his ex-wife's family and maintain an "uncle" role with her niece. I also opined that, if he really did have a natural daughter, he would have dropped his Black Lightning activities to concentrate on being a parent. This goes back to my concept of Jeff as a guy who focuses on the situations closest to him. Save a child. Educate his students. Clean up the neighborhood. We also discussed why Jeff might have taken the job as Luthor's Secretary of Education. During these exchanges, Judd never mentioned he was planning to have Jeff murder someone.

Judd said that this was a retcon, which I took to mean that, in the current DC Universe, Jeff wasn't an only child (which removes much of his underlying psychological motivations) and had always had a daughter (who he saw on weekends). To Judd's credit, he did reject the DC editorial suggestion that Jeff never knew he had a daughter and that Thunder was born of a brief liaison he had in his Olympic athlete days.

As for the Secretary of Education gig, Judd's explanation was that Jeff took the job to keep an eye on Luthor. Because we all know the Secretary of Education is one of the key checks on Presidential misuse of power. Excuse the sarcasm, but this whole "Secretary of Education" thing could have been an incredibly interesting story if it had ever been addressed seriously.

At this point, unaware of the murder, I hoped I could preserve the story relationships Judd wanted while also remaining true to Jeff's established character and morals. Judd's response was that he knew in his heart he was doing right by the character.

Judd didn't respond to any of my subsequent e-mails and we haven't "talked" since. Not that we had ever exchanged more than a handful of e-mails prior to this exchange, with those usually coming after I reviewed one of Judd's books or comics in my *Comics Buyer's Guide* column. This wasn't a betrayal of any close friendship. It was a betrayal of a great character...and what that character had always stood for.

MARKISAN: In response to your comments, Winick released a statement to [411 Mania](#) in which says he's just begun to develop Black Lightning in **Green Arrow** and **Outsiders**. Winick also has a history of writing and creating strong minority characters. Are you jumping the gun by saying he's ruined your creation? Is it possible that Winick's Black Lightning story will eventually address your concerns?



TONY: Given that Judd clearly doesn't understand Jeff Pierce...or else he never would have had him commit murder...I don't think I'm jumping the gun here. I also don't recall saying he's ruined my creation, though, admittedly, I haven't gone back through all my statements to know that beyond a shadow of a doubt. Even now, I think I could set Jeff Pierce to rights.

Will Judd's Black Lightning story eventually address my concerns? Anything is possible, but, as I said, by having Jeff commit murder, he showed he didn't understand the first thing about the character. In light of that, I don't think anyone can reasonably expect me to be optimistic.

MARKISAN: You are also concerned about the portrayal of Jeff Pierce as Secretary of Education in President Lex Luthor's administration. You mention that DC hasn't really given Pierce a reason to serve. Why doesn't this appointment work with the character, in your opinion?

TONY: I looked at Jeff's appointment from as many different angles as I could, trying to find some way to make sense of it. From Luthor's standpoint, assuming he knows Jeff is Black Lightning, I can see him wanting to co-opt a super-hero. That's the only way Jeff could even be on Luthor's radar. I had problems with no one questioning Jeff's lack of credentials/experience for the position, but those problems seem minor in a world where Arnold Schwarzenegger becomes governor of California.

The more interesting question is why Jeff would take the job. He's not a dummy. He knows who and what Luthor is. He has to realize he's making a deal with the devil. But...just suppose...he weighs his concerns against the good he believes he can do in the job and decides it's worth the risk. You could get some great stories from Jeff's friends thinking he's betrayed them and ostracizing him from their super-hero community. You could get great stories from Jeff dealing with a president and politicians who merely pay lip service to the concept of "no child left behind." The possibilities could have carried a series -- Mr. Pierce Goes To Washington -- but no one at DC thought it through to that extent.

MARKISAN: In his statement Winick also claimed complete responsibility for the current direction of Black Lightning. What are your thoughts on this? How much responsibility do you attribute to DC given this statement?

TONY: I think he was trying to be a good soldier, which he'll eventually learn is loyalty which won't be reciprocated. From his e-mails and from other sources, I'm reasonably confident there was DC editorial involvement in this direction.

How much responsibility do I attribute to DC in this? More than I attribute to Judd, despite his claim. For the time being, DC owns Black Lightning and are thus wholly responsible for what they allow to be done with my creation.

MARKISAN: Much of your anger over DC's portrayal of Black Lightning is centered around events in **Green Arrow #31**, but you've also been disappointed with the way DC has handled Black Lightning in the past. In fact you said, "everything DC has done with the character since I was fired from the second series has taken the character away from the mission that gives him meaning." What other incidences have occurred and how have they strayed from the "mission"?

TONY: That statement was an unfortunate heat-of-the-moment exaggeration, if only because I haven't read every DC comic which featured Black Lightning since my stories. My fans have told me the second series issues not written by me blow chunks. I remember he appeared in an issue of **JLA** and his one line was totally out of character for him. I know they've given him a different costume from the really cool one designed by Eddy Newell. Believe it or not, I don't go looking for new reasons to be pissed off at DC. They just keep getting in my face with this stuff.

It was the "Secretary of Education" thing which really started the downhill slide and, again, that was mostly because no one at DC was able to recognize the possibilities of that incredible development. But it's the current stuff -- the daughter, the murder -- which have demeaned the character the most.

I could make a case that Jeff's mission expanded when he was given the opportunity to serve as Secretary of Education, but that would have required DC to actually show him doing something to help kids and school and teachers...and not just giving him cameo appearances when they needed an extra super-hero.

But that mission, whether on a local or a national scale, could not remotely encompass an act of cold-blooded murder. Here's someone who was created to be a role model, someone who tried to bring hope and inspiration to his community, and now his message is basically "an eye for an eye" regardless of the law, regardless of his moral code, regardless of his Christian faith.

Ironically, I'd planned a second series story where Black Lightning would have killed Tobias Whale to save the life of Lynn Stewart. It would have been a clear act of self-defense, which as my buddy Bob "The Law Is A Ass" Ingersoll will joyously inform you, is not restricted to defending your own self, and there would have been no other options but for him to kill Tobias Whale or let Tobias Whale kill Lynn.

Following this event, Jeff would have turned himself in, revealed his identity during the booking process, made his statement of the events, and been prepared to stand trial if the authorities decided to press charges against him. Because, even in self-defense, you can't kill with impunity. It's up to the legal system to determine if you acted properly in taking a life.

MARKISAN: According to DC's February solicitation, Black Lightning will be fighting alongside The Outsiders. Obviously we don't know the circumstances of his involvement. But in your opinion, how would Jeff react to the team's new proactive, take the fight to the enemy stance? And how do you feel about the upcoming changes to Black Lightning's costume?

TONY: I haven't read **The Outsiders** since Mike W. Barr stopped writing the series, so I can't give you an informed answer about the proactive thing. His reaction would probably depend on how the team defines "proactive." In the first issue of the second **Black Lightning** series, I had him blow up the headquarters of a street gang, which I would consider going on the offensive. But, in that case, he was absolutely sure of his target and made sure the building was cleared before he took it down. That kind of "proactive" wouldn't bother him or me. However, if you're talking "proactive" as in not having any actual evidence of wrongdoing...and not being sure of either the target or the aims of the mission...then he'd probably be against it. Jeff, as least as I've always written him, isn't prone to shoot first and ask questions later. As for the costume, I don't think it looks as dramatic or as unique as the one Eddy Newell designed for the second series.



MARKISAN: By my count, DC has only published four ongoing super-hero comics with African?American leads. Two of them, **Green Lantern** and **Steel**, were spinoffs of books that starred white characters. Only **Black Lightning** and **Xero** were original characters. Why have there been so few, in your opinion? Why hasn't DC put more effort into creating quality black heroes who can carry their own books?

TONY: These are questions more properly asked of DC management. However, if I must opine, I think it could be because when a super-hero book with a white lead fails, they DON'T say "oh, there's no market for white super-heroes," and when a super-hero book with a black lead fails, they DO say "oh, there's no market for black super-heroes."

Based on my information, the first **Black Lightning** series came very close to surviving the DC Implosion of the 1970s...and the second series was profitable while I was writing it. If they ever give me a third shot at my creation, I suspect I could turn a nice profit for them and me.

In the case of **Green Lantern**, I think much more could've been done with John Stewart. He needed more of the personality he had when he was first introduced. When he finally got more play, it wasn't long before he screwed up and failed to prevent the destruction of an inhabited planet. After that, he was damaged goods for a pretty long time. But, looking at the new **Justice League** series running on Cartoon Network, I think the time is ripe to make John Stewart a headliner again.

In the case of **Steel**, I think he never quite got out from under the shadow of Superman and that DC lost interest in the character when the **Steel** movie turned out to be a major bomb. If it's me, I don't let a title that's reached the 50-issue mark get canceled without a fight. There was something to this character, but DC never took him beyond being one of Superman's pals. Once a character becomes just one of the main hero's pals and not his own man, it's too easy for writers to make him a victim.

I never read **Xero**, so I have no opinion on that one. From what I could determine from *Overstreet*, it came out just as the speculator boom was crashing down around the industry. Maybe DC should put it in a trade paperback to see if there might be more interest in it these days. That's what I suggested DC do with the **Black Lightning** stories I did with Eddy Newell. At worst, I figured we'd all make a few bucks. At best, DC would have something to hand to Hollywood types looking for properties to develop.

MARKISAN: It's apparent you feel DC has mistreated black heroes over the years. How has DC mishandled black characters in your opinion? And why?

TONY: We have the most recent example of Black Lightning committing cold-blooded murder, following decades of the company doing practically nothing to promote my creation and refusing to allow me to promote him on my own. In fact, when the **Static Shock** crew wanted to guest star Lightning in an episode of that excellent series, DC refused to license him for the appearance, which wasn't a problem they had with Superman, Batman, and the Justice League.

We have John Stewart causing the death of millions by screwing up, becoming disabled, standing by helpless as his wife was murdered by Star Sapphire, and generally being cast as a victim. Fortunately, John's star is shining more brightly these days, thanks to Cartoon Network's **Justice League** series.

We have **Steel** -- and here I'm going by what my readers have told me -- getting "killed" and being resurrected as a servant of Darkseid and/or the slave of some alien armor, becoming disabled, and giving up his heroic identity to serve as a armorer/tailor to some other hero or heroes. It's almost like DC editorial blamed the character for the bad box office of the **Steel** movie.

These are the headliners. I know there are some black characters who are members of super-teams. Marv Wolfman's and George Perez's Cyborg is a great one, but he went through a period of being used as a victim/menace. I've heard very good things about the various black members of the JSA, but, in every case I have heard of, they assumed the identities of white heroes. (Geoff, buddy, if you're listening, I swear I'll get current on **Hawkman** and **JSA** before you leave those books.) I'd also give high marks to Skyrocket from Kurt Busiek's and Tom Grummett's **Power Company**. But, again, none

of these are headliners...though I certainly would buy their solo titles if they were written by their creators.

"Why?" is a question the DC folks should be asking themselves. If asked to opine, I think the reason is an ingrained, unintentional insensitivity to racial issues. They really, really do not get it. I don't believe I get it entirely either, but at least I've picked up enough clues for my work to be generally well received by the black community.

Here's the thing. If you have a hundred black super-heroes...and DC has at least that many white super-heroes...then you can allow some of them to be bastards and promiscuous and even cold-blooded killers. But, when you only have maybe a dozen black super-heroes, then I think they should be positive characters.



MARKISAN: You mentioned John Stewart's strong portrayal on the **Justice League** cartoon. But about a year ago, Judd Winick also returned Stewart to Green Lantern status in the comic series. In fact, he spent considerable time developing, and essentially, redeeming the character. Now he's a member of the JLA. What are your thoughts on Winick's revival of Stewart?

TONY: I haven't been reading **Green Lantern** or **JLA** on more than a sporadic basis, an issue here, an issue there. If Judd did make Stewart as positive a character as he is in the cartoon series, that's great. It doesn't excuse his mishandling of Black Lightning/Jeff Pierce, but it's great for Stewart and Stewart's fans.

MARKISAN: DC did support Milestone, an imprint featuring black super-heroes written, drawn and edited by African-Americans creators. What are your thoughts on this line and DC's involvement?

TONY: It should be noted Milestone featured super-heroes of different creeds, races, and sexual orientation. While the company got big press as a "black" company, while it was certainly founded by black creators and businessmen, and while it published some of the best super-heroes of the time, many of them African-American, it never was and it was never meant to be an exclusively African-American company. It was a company which truly celebrated diversity in its characters and its creators. I wish there were a dozen companies like Milestone in the comics industry.

I was a huge fan of Milestone and its comics. Had the opportunity to be part of the company ever come my way, I would have joined in a heartbeat. The Milestone roster included dozens of great writers and artists. I like tough competition.

DC's involvement? I think they bailed too soon when the speculator boom crashed. Moreover, considering how often DC is willing to go back to the well for so many other characters and titles, no matter how many times they fail, I find it incredible they haven't given Milestone another chance.

Fortunately, though they currently control the rights to the Dakota Universe characters, that control is not absolute and will expire eventually. My sources tell me the only interest DC has in these characters is as supporting characters and team members in various DCU titles. If that happens, I hope it only happens with Milestone retaining full control of how the characters are used. For rather obvious reasons, I don't have much faith in how DC editorial would handle these characters without such guidance.

However, I would prefer Milestone take the characters back from DC as soon as possible. The Dakota characters deserve to be stars and not just background lighting.

MARKISAN: Many people say you don't have a right to criticize the direction of Black Lightning because DC owns the character. Why do you continue to speak out?

TONY: I believe "some people" would be more accurate than "many people," but my answer would be the same either way. I continue to speak on these issues because speaking out is the right thing to do.

There aren't enough heroes of diversity in the DCU comics...and that is also true for Marvel Comics and virtually every mainstream comics publisher.

When heroes of diversity do appear they are rarely headliners and are far too often portrayed as victims.

In the case of Black Lightning, DC has taken a character created to be a positive role model and turned him into an absentee father and a murderer.

In the case of their dealings with me, DC has violated the spirit of their agreements with me time and time again.

Those four issues are listed in order of importance. We need more heroes of diversity and we need them portrayed in a positive way.

We need a Black Lightning who lives up to the values he was created to champion. And, though I wish someone else had the job, we need a Tony Isabella to remind creators that their best interests and the best interests of their creations are not always going to be a high or even any kind of priority for their publishers and their other business partners.

MARKISAN: It seems DC hasn't consulted you when making decisions on Black Lightning, although you've been clear that you'd like a say. Why have they closed you out? And given your stance on the company's portrayal of Black Lightning over the years, do you think they will ever consider discussing direction with you in the future?

TONY: You would have to ask DC's management why it doesn't make use of my knowledge of Black Lightning and comics writing in general, things I'd willingly share to preserve the integrity of my creation and to increase our mutual profits from that creation.

A dear friend of mine, who is also one of the most respected men in the industry, thinks DC editorial/management is afraid that, if I am involved with Black Lightning and the property is successful as a result of my involvement, it makes them look bad. I understand that kind of reasoning -- it's common enough -- but, to me, DC having the insight and intelligence to get past such a petty concern would be far more to their credit than any Tony Isabella-inspired success could be to their detriment.

I've seen so many crazy things in my 30-plus years in comics that I don't believe in the word "never." So while I think it's highly unlikely DC would willingly reunite me with my creation, I wouldn't rule it out either. For my part, as I've stated many times in the past, I stand ready and eager to work with them on Black Lightning at any time. I would have gladly written Black Lightning stories for the rest of my life; it's wasn't my decision to be separated from the creation and work of which I'm proudest.

MARKISAN: Along with creative reservations, you have also expressed some financial concerns about Black Lightning's future, saying you have no faith in DC to make the character profitable. What exactly are the details of your contract with DC? In your opinion, what will make this character successful?



TONY: I have the contractual right to share in any/all non-comics profits made from my creation, though DC has, on occasion, interpreted this in a manner to deny me royalties or a portion of the royalties I'm owed. That's as detailed an answer as you're going to get from me at the present time.

So many clueless fans are going to jump on this next answer, ignore every other issue I've raised and statement I've made, and claim it as "proof" that I'm only doing this because I am not writing comics any more. So be it. I knew this interview was gonna be dangerous when I agreed to do it.

DC's first and best step towards making Black Lightning successful would be to get past their territorial posturing and bring me back in on this property. I might not have all the answers, but I know more of them than DC does...at least where it concerns this special character.

Think about it. The entertainment industry is constantly called on the carpet for not featuring more non-white faces in movies and on TV...and to show them as headliners and in roles not restricted to the usual sitcoms and sidekicks. It's constantly being challenged to show more positive non-white characters...and to provide greater opportunities to non-white creators and performers.

Black Lightning could be a dream come true for the industry, but DC never promotes the property. In the 26 years since I created the character, the company has sold exactly one option on my creation.

That was to Lorimar, a sister company, and for the bargain basement price of \$3,000...of which I received \$300.

On receipt of that check, I contacted DC and asked for details on the option. I have no particular interest in writing television, but I wanted to make myself available to whoever had purchased the option and help them however I could. I was told they had no idea who was in charge of the project. As near as I could determine, no one at DC ever followed up on the option. The company's lack of interest in the success of Black Lightning was as obvious then as it is now. You can imagine my frustration and understand why, once a year or so, I write to DC inquiring about buying Black Lightning back from them or, at the very least, licensing the character from them for my own projects. This crass negligence in promoting Black Lightning devalues my contractual rights in the property.

MARKISAN: Do you think you made a mistake creating Black Lightning for DC? If you could go back, would you do things differently?

TONY: Yes and no. If I hadn't created Black Lightning for DC, DC would have published the Black Bomber and set back the cause of non-white super-heroes for a generation. It was that offensive.

However, if I could go back to 1976 and somehow manage to be much smarter and less trusting than I was back then, I would've made DC put their signature where their promises were in a contract which would have protected my creative and financial rights. They would have been better off as well; they lost a cooperative and energetic partner by proceeding as they did.

I don't hold myself entirely blameless in this. I knew what DC had done to Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, and so many others. I should've gotten it in writing. But, much to my eventual chagrin, I actually believed there was a bright new spirit at DC and not just a couple of coats of new paint on the walls.

There is a flip side to this. DC doesn't have *any* work-for-hire contract with me predating my 1976 creation of Black Lightning. In fact, the earliest contracts with me of any kind which they have do not even predate the end of the first Black Lightning series. This could make things interesting in times to come.

But, to get back to the original question, yes, if I could go back in time and get those protections, I would have absolutely created Black Lightning for DC. It was the home of Superman and Batman and Wonder Woman, three of the greatest, most influential comics heroes ever created. I thought and hoped my Black Lightning would be as much of a pioneer as those characters, as much of an

inspiration to young readers as those characters had been for the kids of my and earlier generations.



MARKISAN: There are rumors going around that the events of **Green Arrow #31** were a deliberate attempt to remind you Black Lightning belongs to DC and not his creator. Do you think this is possible?

TONY: Sadly, I do. It's petty and it's counter-productive, but I've been told this by too many people who have no reason to lie to me for me not to give it credence. And, to cut your follow-up question off at the knees, no, I won't name names.

If I never write another comic book the rest of my life, I'll still have a damned wonderful life. But some of my sources are dependent on their comics income and I would kiss a DC editor before I would jeopardize their livelihoods.

MARKISAN: In one of your early statements you said readers should be outraged "that one of DC's painfully few black superheroes (and the first to have his own title) has been turned into a cold-blooded murderer." What kind of fan reaction have you seen in the last few weeks since the issue shipped?

TONY: It's been mixed. Some readers share my outrage while others seem to think it was okay or even cool for Jeff to have commit murder.

And we mustn't leave out those who think I'm a bitter old crank who should shut up and let them read their comics in peace and without thinking about any larger issues.

It appears to me that my positions have as many or more supporters than detractors, but I haven't been keeping count. Of late, I've been avoiding almost all of the message boards I was reading when **Green Arrow #31** hit, preferring to limit my comments to my columns or interviews such as this.

MARKISAN: There doesn't seem to be a lot of media coverage on your reaction to events in GA? Why do you think this story isn't receiving more press?

TONY: That's a question better asked of those who could be covering this story and aren't. I think the story isn't what Tony Isabella has to say but the issues I'd like to raise: the lack of super-heroes of color, the minor roles given to existing super-heroes of color, the demeaning of a pioneer African-American character, the comics industry's poor record of fair treatment for creators, and even the plight of older creators in today's industry. All of these issues are far more newsworthy than the rants of that bitter old bastard Isabella. On the other hand, in the right light, I do make for an adorable poster child.

MARKISAN: You mention you may attempt to address DC's overall treatment of African-American heroes through the media. Given the lack of press thus far is this something you still plan to pursue? If so, how?

TONY: Yes. However, on reflection, because of my personal involvement, I don't believe I'm the right person to address this issue. It's too important an issue for me to risk it being dismissed as just another Isabella rant. So, instead, I plan to encourage others to discuss and speak out on this issue and not merely as it applies to DC Comics. None of the mainstream publishers should get a pass on this one.

MARKISAN: It seems very unlikely that you'll ever have the opportunity to write Black Lightning again. But if you did, how would you restore the character's integrity?

TONY: Hope springs eternal, so I'm not going to answer this one. I will say that I keep coming up with new ways I could go with this...and I like each one better than the last. I never been one to shy from a challenge in my comics writing and cleaning up this mess would certainly be that.

MARKISAN: You mentioned that there is an issue concerning whether or not Black Lightning was truly created on a work-for-hire basis. Are you looking into this now? What have you turned up?

TONY: Black Lightning was not created on a work-for-hire basis and there is no contract which would substantiate that. There are two later agreements, but they were conceived after the original series had concluded. I am not personally looking into the ramifications of this, but it is being looked into. Areas of interest have turned up and, once those are more fully explored, I'll have a better idea how to proceed or if I can/should proceed.

My preference would be to come to a true partnership agreement with DC on this property. I think that would be best for all involved parties. I still have some dear friends at the company and, even though we may disagree on this matter, I would delight in working with them once again.

MARKISAN: You have insisted you created Black Lightning because DC couldn't. In your own words, you say, "Their idea of a black superhero was a white bigot who took part in experiments to help him blend into the jungle better and who turned into a black man in times of stress." This idea seems.. well, ludicrous. How did you convince the company to go a different route?

TONY: As I recall it, I told DC all the things I thought were offensive in the two scripts they had bought for the series, which they had asked me to rewrite prior to taking over the book with the third issue. I told them they should not publish this book. I told them that if they did publish this book, angry protestors would come to their offices with pitchforks and torches and that I would be among them. Then, I went for the logical approach. I asked them if they really thought it was a good idea that their first black super-hero to star in his own title should be a white racist. To this day, I think Paul Levitz suggested me for the rewrites and the assignment because he knew I would react that way and talk his bosses out of publishing the book.



I created Black Lightning over a period of three weeks and mostly while I was in Cleveland. Shortly after leaving staff at Marvel, I moved back to Cleveland, but I was preparing to move back to New York to take a job as a DC editor...which is a whole other story of things not working out. I created Black Lightning before going on staff at DC and did all of the actual writing after leaving staff.

MARKISAN: Ultimately how do you want Jefferson Pierce to be perceived? How would you like yourself to be perceived?

TONY: I had the highest hopes for Jefferson Pierce and still do. I want him to turn the Big Three (Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman) into the Big Four. I always thought there needed to be one more hero in that pantheon.

I see Superman and Wonder Woman as parental and religious figures. Father and mother. Power, knowledge, compassion.

I see Batman and Black Lightning as symbols of justice. Batman is the protector. Black Lightning is the teacher.

I want Jeff Pierce to be seen as a man who is a hero, not because of his powers, but because of his moral convictions.

As for myself, I'd like to be perceived as a guy who never phoned it in. Who always tried to give every job the best he was capable of. Who always tried to do, as much as he could figure it out, the right thing. If I can be a better writer, a better man, tomorrow than I was today, then I've accomplished something.

I still have great stories in me and, God willing, I'll find a way to bring them to the readers.

MARKISAN: Have you given any thought to creating a new African-American character, possibly for a creator-owned series?

TONY: Eddy Newell and I have done some preliminary work on a new character and even had a publisher interested in the project. But that publisher went under after screwing around with us for almost a year. For me, the problem with a creator-owned series is...how do I make sure Eddy (or another artist) gets paid? I can afford to write a few scripts before the money kicks in, but a working artist can't. The companies who can afford to pay an artist a decent wage usually want to retain too many rights to the material. Look how long DC has managed to tie up the Dakota Universe (Milestone) characters.

As for doing another African-American character, which I would like to do, you know the usual pundits and trolls will either castigate me for ripping myself off or for not doing something exactly like **Black Lightning**. That challenge doesn't scare me off, but it is something I have to think about as I proceed.

I'll be going back to full-time writing in 2004. I plan to create/write comics. However, I don't expect to sell these comics and will then turn them into novels and screenplays. It's my three-strikes plan. I'd love to get back into writing comics. But, even if I never write a comic book the rest of my life, I still have a great life with a great family and lots of ways to use my skills.

MARKISAN: How has DC reacted to your recent comments about Black Lightning? Is there any chance that you can work with the company to portray the character you envisioned?

TONY: DC hasn't reacted at all. I doubt the company will have anything to say unless and until they have to respond.

On my part, I would have no problem working with DC to portray the hero I created and envisioned, assuming, of course, we could come to a mutually beneficial agreement.

On DC's part, you would really have to ask a representative of the company. Even at this late date, I would welcome their interest in working out the problems between us and in portraying my creation in a more positive manner than has been the case in recent years.

For the time being, the ball is in their court.



*Tony Isabella is a featured weekly columnist in The Comic Buyer's Guide. His thrice-weekly column "Tony's Online Tips" can be found at **World Famous Comics**. It appears every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. The first two are new columns, the third is a CBG reprint with quite a bit of new material added. Check it out.*

You can talk with Tony via his message board at www.comicscommunity.com.