
Big Deal on Big Boy Street: An Interview with Craig Yoe

Written by Steven Heller

Published on May 1, 2007.

Filed in Voice: Journal of Design in Off the cuff.

The Adventures of Big Boy is the official comic book of the Big Boy Restaurants chain, as well as the flagship of the Big Boy character. For the past decade, Craig Yoe—comics artist, editor, and publisher—has been the brawn behind the boy. The proprietor of YOE! Studio—which counts Kellogg’s, Disney, Nickelodeon, Marvel and D.C. Comics among its clients—took over *Big Boy* when poster designer Lucian Bernhard’s son Manfred gave up the franchise after over 400 issues. We caught up with Yoe between double-deckers to talk about how the restaurant began, who the Big Boy character was modeled after, and what keeps this icon of American fast food fresh today.

Heller: When was Big Boy founded?

Yoe: Bob Wian started the original Big Boy [restaurant] in L.A. in 1936. It only had seating for 10 diners! Bob soon invented the double-decker hamburger for a jazz musician sitting at his counter who wanted something different—and the rest was history.

Heller: Where did the character come from? Who or what was he based on?

Yoe: Warner Bros. animator Benny Washman was one of the early customers. One day he sketched 6-year-old Richard Woodruff, who wore droopy overalls and used to sweep up the restaurant in exchange for hamburgers.

Heller: Has the icon changed much over the years?

Yoe: Big Boy’s overalls are a little less droopy, and he’s aged—he’s probably 7 or 8 now!

Heller: When did the comic book begin? And who was the original artist?

Yoe: In 1956, Timely Comics, the forerunner of Marvel, created a comic for the Big Boy restaurants. It was written by—are you ready for this?—Stan Lee! And it was drawn by Bill Everett, the artist who created *The Sub-Mariner* in comic’s Golden Age. Lee and Everett were, of course, the team that created *Daredevil*.

Another notable artist on the book was Dan DeCarlo, who beautifully drew Betty and Veronica [of the *Archie* comics] for a number of years. Dan's rendition of Big Boy's girlfriend, Dolly, looks not unlike a young Betty Cooper!

Heller: What is the concept behind the comic? Is there a formula?

Yoe: Pure entertainment, with a handy menu on the back. The kids order from the back page and then dive into the comics, celebrity interviews, puzzles and riddles while they wait for their food.

Heller: I understand that the pioneering German poster designer, Lucian Bernhard, was involved in the design of the *Big Boy* comic back in the '50s, and occasionally his son Karl would alternate between designing comics and ads. What I'd like to know is, how long was his son Manfred involved as the chief writer?

Yoe: For an amazing 35 years, from the first issue to no. 466. We took over with no. 467—[he was] a tough act to follow. We're up to issue no. 527 now, giving it our best shot. It's one of the longest running comics in the history of the medium.

Heller: That's quite a while since you've been doing the comic. Exactly how long has it been a YOE! Studio creation?

Yoe: We just celebrated 10 wonderful years of producing *Big Boy*!

Heller: It must feel good to reach that milestone. What is your role in the *Big Boy* comic today?

Yoe: We produce everything from start to finish. We interview celebrities from Britney Spears (when she was more wholesome, remember?) to SpongeBob SquarePants. We produce the comic stories that are still the heart of the publication. Luke McDonnell, another Marvel graduate, is our staff artist at YOE! Studio. Luke is an incredible visual storyteller who gives Big Boy and friends a delightful modern flair. We get freelance writers Craig Boldman and Bob Supina to do the scripts. When she has time, my business partner, Clizia Gussoni, pens some of the stories with her own magic.

Heller: How is it distributed? And what has been the response? Do you get much feedback?

Yoe: It goes from our printer right to the warehouse that houses all the food and napkins, then is trucked to the individual restaurants across the country. The kids love 'em. We get many enthusiastic letters and incredible drawings of *Big Boy* that we include in each issue. There are no bigger fans of the comic/magazine than we ourselves, though—it's one of our very favorite projects! The Big Boy people are great to work with, and we love the whole process and end product.

Heller: How has the comic book changed under your tutelage?

Yoe: We've tried hard to be inspired by the great comics we read when we were kids—from Carl Barks' *Uncle Scrooge* to John Stanley's *Little Lulu*, not to mention the wacky [*Superman's Pal*] Jimmy Olsen stories of the '50s and '60s. Along that line, a couple of years ago I came up with Bob Boy as a superhero: Bigger Boy. We often feature Bigger Boy, and now he's part of a superhero group with Dolly, his friend Zack, and Nugget, his dog. Assembled, they are the Big League!

The celebrity interviews were a new wrinkle we brought to the publication. It's been fun interviewing super stars from music, movies, sports and animation. I hope the *Big Boy* publication is as much fun for our kid readers as it is for us big kids doing it.

By the way, I was a reader and collector of the comic during the Dan DeCarlo years, and I always cross my fingers that our giveaway is as valuable to the current kids as it was to me.

Heller: What will and what could never change about the character?

Yoe: Who knows? *Big Boy* even had an alternative reality in his early days. Some of the restaurants in the '50s wanting their own identity had special printings of the Big Boy comic that changed his iconic red-and-white checkered overalls to striped ones.

Hmm, maybe Big Boy's Elvis pompadour-style hair can never change—though, come to think of it, when Big Boy is Bigger Boy, a zapping ray emits from it.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).