

JOHN STEVENTON FREELANCE CARTOONIST



When people learn that I'm a Cartoonist, they invariably say "Wow. That must be fun!"

I, of course, immediately think of all the hard work cartooning is; the late nights meeting deadlines, the various clients I have worked with, the years it took to learn my craft, the times I have had to redo work because my computer crashed, or because my pen decided to spew ink across something I had just spent 3 hours drawing... the list goes on, and flashes before my eyes in mere seconds. But then I smile and say, "Yes, it IS fun." And it really is. I've been Cartooning for a very long time now, and only recently would consider myself a success. (Of course, one measure of success is being asked to write for CARTOONIST PROfiles, which is indeed an honor. Thanks, Jud!)

It's been a long, hard road, but one I wouldn't trade for anything.

There's nothing like the smell of ink, or the feeling you get as a cartoon comes together and you have just opened a window into another world, bringing life to characters which until that moment have only lurked within your mind. And it is even better when others respond to your work, with a laugh or an appreciative comment.

There are so many options for a Cartoonist, and I have been involved in many of them, giving me a varied and always interesting career. Currently I have my comic strip 3

Knights in India that runs weekly in a national newspaper, my website that not only features my comic strips *The Inquiring Minds* and *Knight and Day* but also acts as my portfolio, and in addition I have my successful freelance career.

Being a Freelance Cartoonist has been fun, profitable, and best of all has helped me to develop my skills by forcing me to work with others, to see things in new ways, and to especially try things I may not otherwise have thought of.



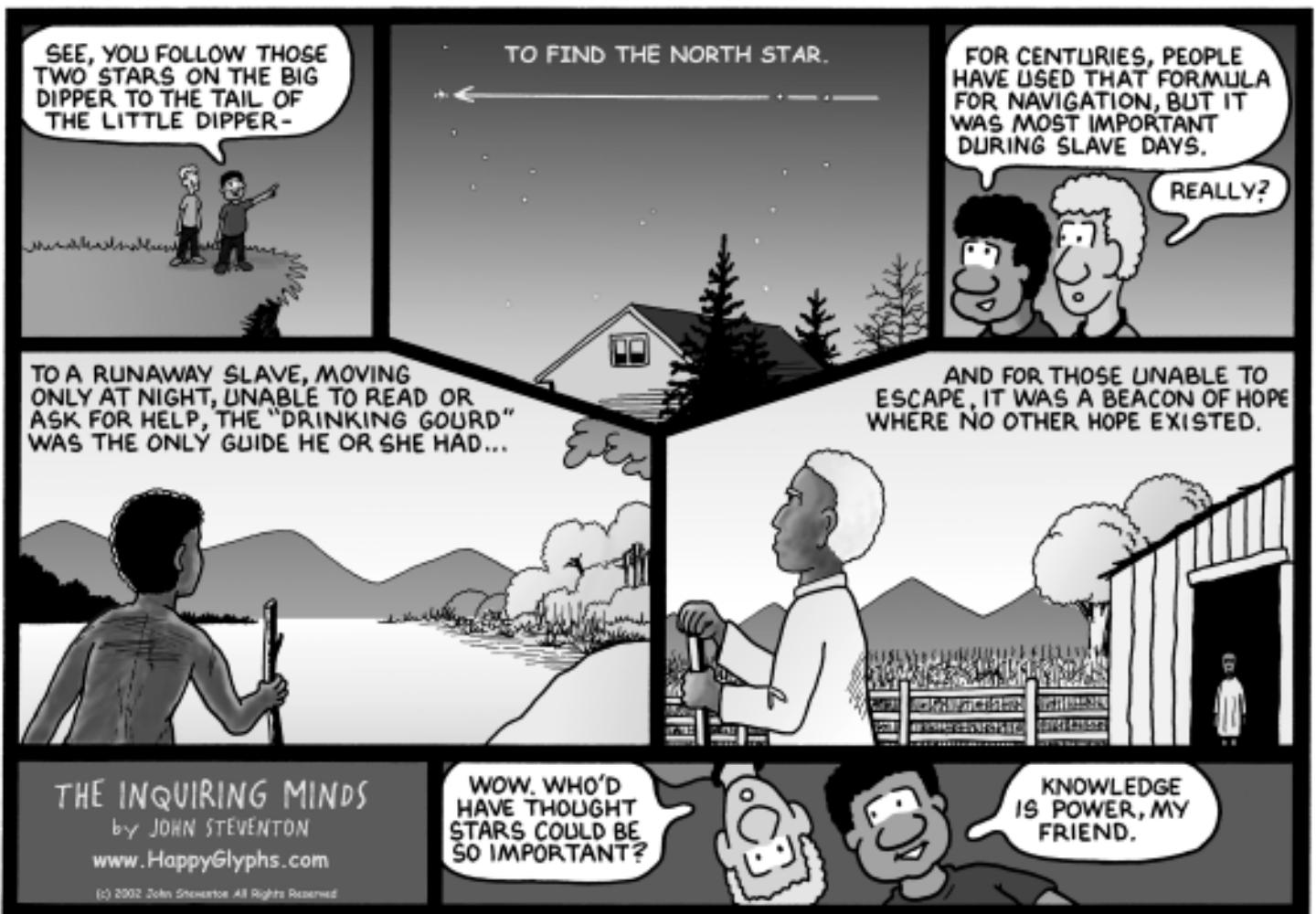
In the spirit of CARTOONIST PROfiles, I will share some of what I have learned in this business, while telling you about myself.

My first word of advice is this: be happy with what you're doing. If you're in this for the money, then get out now! You can make a living being a Cartoonist, and even be very successful financially, but you've really got to love what you're doing! There's a lot of competition out there, and Cartooning can be a lot of work, and there may be times when you will have to make great sacrifices to 'make it'.

Follow your heart! If you have passion for your work, your audience will respond to that.

I have always had a passion for history, especially dynamic stories about heroes who did things their own way and never gave up. I loved stories about John Henry, the Steel Driving man, the heroic fighters who defended the Alamo, and tales of the Underground Railroad. It was only natural then, that when exploring the background of a character I was developing, that I give him an interest in the Underground Railroad. This inspired me to create a large Sunday strip cartoon in which my characters, *The Inquiring Minds*, discuss aspects of the Underground Railroad in a thought-provoking way. This is now one of my favorite cartoons, but the truth is I almost didn't draw it!

I actually mulled it over for a few months, wondering if I had the right to discuss this topic. I also wondered if anyone else would even be interested in such a strip. It would be a lot of work, without any financial reward, and there was no guarantee that anyone would even care to read it.





Me in my studio. Photo by Anitha Steventon

Snoopy and Pogo and other delightful characters I found each week in the Sunday Funnies. In High School I drew a comic book about my friends. Eventually, though, you have to start creating your own characters, giving them a life of their own. It's a wonderful experience when your characters start telling you what they want to do, and begin creating their own dialogue.

In this day and age, it is vital to realize that Websites are a tool, not the end-all. The most successful websites are those for Harry Potter, or the X-men... commodities that already exist in print, and in the public's conscience. There are a lot of talented people who worry more about website hits, and how flashy their websites are, than about their Cartooning. They spend valuable time at discussion boards discussing the latest games and movies, and hardly a word is ever mentioned about Cartooning!

We all need time to relax and unwind, but the World Wide Web can become a spider's web that can draw you in, hold you, and waste a lot of your time.



A scene from 3 Knights in India, demonstrating 'write what you know' (Exchange 'cartooning' for 'writing').

I eventually did draw it. It took me two to three days to complete, but I was driven. It was important to me, and something I was passionate about, and so I drew it for myself. And people responded! I got a lot of fan mail for that strip, and the strip now appears in the Smithsonian Press book, "Passages to Freedom: the Underground Railroad in History and Memory", edited by David Blight.

Following your own path is important... emulating other Cartoonists is a good way to learn, but not a career in itself. We all start out by copying other characters. I myself used to try drawing

The web is what you make of it, though. A portion of my website is set aside as my portfolio. People from all over the world can view my work any time of the day, and I sometimes post work in progress so that clients can monitor a job. I also deal with many clients using email, which is quite helpful if they live in different time zones, or are hard to reach by phone.

It is possible to build up an audience over time, and to get feedback on your cartoons, but it takes a lot of time and patience before people find you. I started running my comic strip *Knight and Day* at my website www.HappyGlyphs.com back in May 2000. Eventually people started tuning in to see what was happening, and a few of them gave me some useful feedback. I regularly submitted this material to the Syndicates, and a few showed interest. Although *Knight and Day* was passed by, I gathered all of the strips together and self-published my first comic strip collection “Take Me Away From All This!!”.

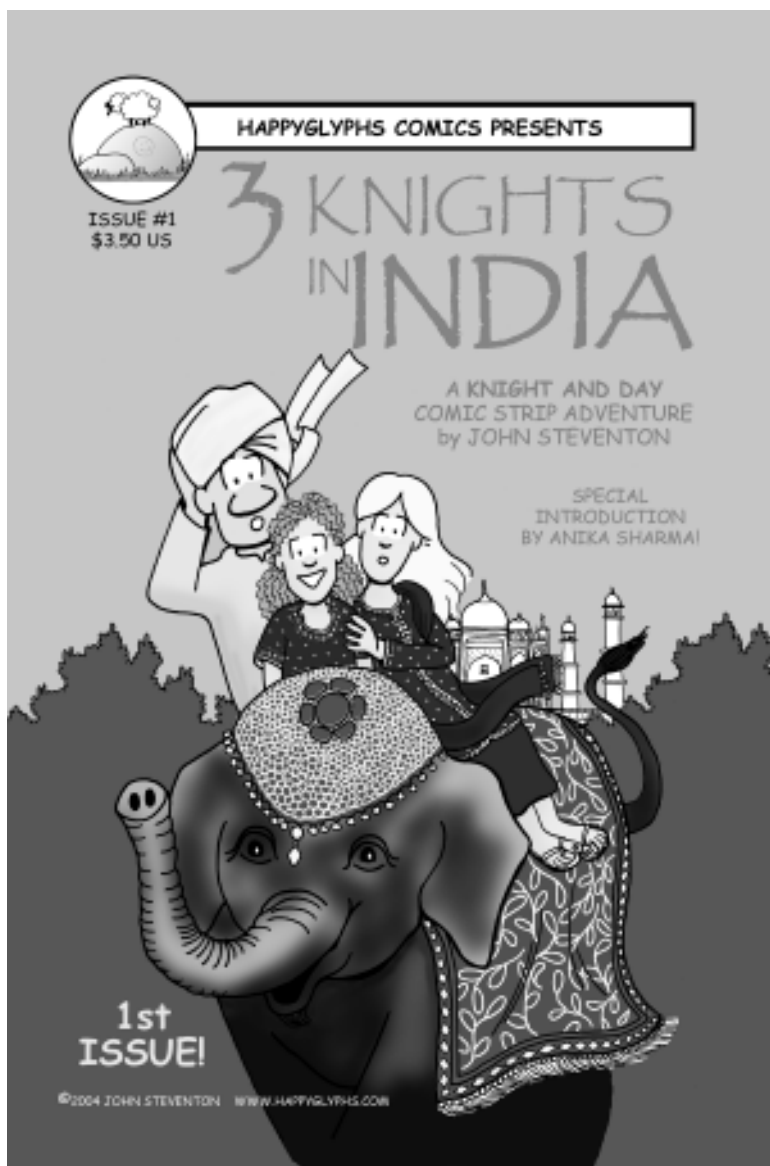
If you have the time, energy, and money, self-publishing can teach you so much! My first daughter was born at this time, so I volunteered to stay home and take care of her. While she napped, I was able to put the entire book together in about two months time.

Some frown on self-publishing, but I had a lot of fun with that book, learned so much useful information, and sold more copies than I ever expected. Of course, you won't get rich with self-publishing, but I found the rewards well worth the effort.

The number one bit of advice that I have learned from reading 15 years of CARTOONIST PROfiles is this: You have to draw... every day. All the Pros say this. The more you write, the more you draw, the better you become.

You must also challenge yourself. I started my comic strip adventure **3 Knights in India** because I loved the design, textures and colors found in the Indian culture. I knew I could learn a lot by emulating the art of India, and incorporating elements of Indian culture into my own work.

We all need to pay the bills, but my advice is to choose the jobs you take. Work on jobs that you know you can do well, but that you also know will teach you something. And if the work isn't coming, then give yourself assignments. Just keep working and learning, because you never know where it will take you. Each year I send out my own Holiday cards to friends, family, and clients, and those cards lead to work illustrating cards for others. I started publishing my own comic books just because I wanted to do it, and now I am creating comic book safety manuals for a huge international company. Always push yourself; take classes, study art and the world around you, and write and draw every day.



The cover to *3 Knights in India*, a *Knight and Day* comic strip adventure. © 2004 John Steventon

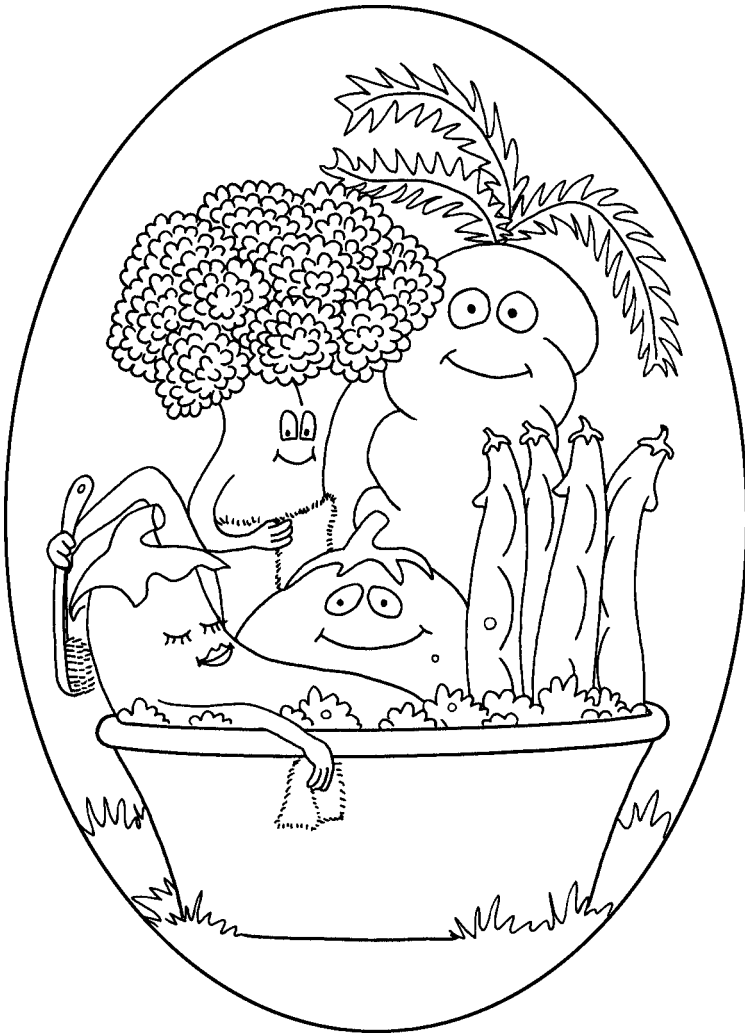


Illustration for a product label: You should see this in color! © 2003 Applemill Cottage™

Of course, any project that has deadlines can put you into a rut, where you might take shortcuts to get things done. This is a big danger if you don't have an Editor to watch your back. That's where Freelancing can help. In one year I had over a dozen different clients, each with their own ideas, needs, and styles. I did t-shirt designs, product labels, book illustrations, military postcards, a website portal, lawn signs, stationary, a children's activity book... and do you know what? Each of these varied projects involved cartoons! I hear of other Freelance Cartoonists doing game design, television or movie storyboards, product design and packaging... the list goes on. A Cartoonist can find work with greeting card companies, toy companies, magazines and other publishing endeavors, and so many other places, including of course, Syndication.

Now many see Syndication as the ultimate Cartooning experience, and others... well, we all know the arguments. For me, my goal is still one day to be a Syndicated Cartoonist, but I am approaching it realistically. Right now my two kids are young and require a lot of my time, which I am happy to spend with them. I realize that right now I don't have the time to develop the next great comic strip, so I am instead focusing on becoming a better

Cartoonist. I am learning to work with different clients, and how to push myself as a writer and an artist into new directions. I am becoming a better artist, and a tighter writer, and studying others to see how to make my work stand out from the crowd

I have also recently followed in the footsteps of Cartoonists like Michael Jantze, Paige Braddock, Tom Beland, and others by publishing my work in comic books. This is a new market for me, and one that is very open to Cartoonists. It is also a new format, and one with a lot more freedom of design than the rectangle you get with newspaper comic strips. It's fun, and there is so much to learn.

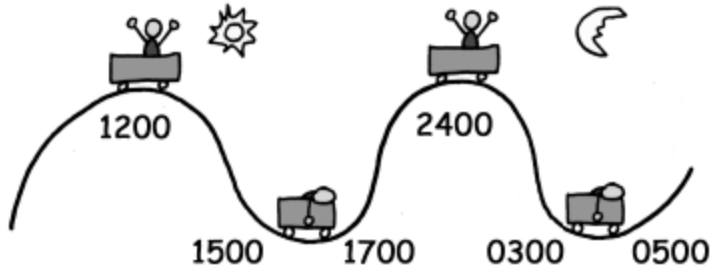
So right now I have my newspaper strip, my freelancing, my website, and my comic books to keep me busy. I figure working 20 hours a day is perfect practice for that day when I become a Syndicated Cartoonist!

So watch out Reuben. Here I come :0)

John Steventon
www.HappyGlyphs.com

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