

State of the Art

BY STAN BARKER

Good news for cartoonists.

1987 may be remembered as the year that comic strips were emancipated. The liberation began this January when Richard S. Newcombe launched Creators Syndicate, Inc., with a novel proposition—that cartoonists should own the work they create.

It's a simple, sensible idea, but a radical one for comics. For years, most cartoonists have had to hand over all ownership rights to their strips in order to sign with a syndicate. Artists wanting to change syndicates did so at the price of leaving their creations behind. Milton Caniff left *Terry and the Pirates* in 1947 for that very reason. Rick Newcombe points out, "It's been 40 years now, and the industry's still the same."

Newcombe proposes to change this feudal way of doing business. At Creators Syndicate, artists retain ownership of their strips, sign shorter-term contracts (five to seven years versus 10 years or more at other syndicates), and have free-agent status—every few years they can renegotiate their contracts, or leave for another syndicate if they choose.

With a deal like that, of course, few artists would want to leave—and that's exactly what Newcombe has in mind. Former Vice-president and General Manager of the LA Times Syndicate and former President of News America, until its sale to King Features last December, Newcombe sees no reason why a syndicate can't make money and treat its talent fairly at the same time.

Which is why he turned down King's offer to make him head of the re-named North America Syndicate. "We have strong philosophical differences regarding talent. King believes in owning the material they syndicate. I believe that creators should own their work."

Newcombe's philosophy seems to be paying off—since January, advice columnist Ann Landers and *B.C.* cartoonist Johnny Hart have signed with him. As both have circulation in some 1,100 papers, Creators Syndicate has entered the field with a bang.

In a statement released by the syndicate, Hart said: "I applaud Ann Lan-



"One day," says B.C. cartoonist Johnny Hart, "all syndicates will honor the talents they pridefully represent and allow them their rightful choice to control their destiny." For now, though, Creators Syndicate is one of the few doing so.

ders for her bold move to support an idea. I join with her in the hope that one day all syndicates will honor the talents they pridefully represent and allow them their rightful choice to control their own destiny. After all, even a baseball player, when he is sold, gets to take his glove with him."

Other cartoonists echo Hart's sentiments. Mell Lazarus, creator of *Miss Peach* and *Momma*, calls CS "a marvelous idea whose time has come . . . Artists have to own their inventions. It absolutely insults me that more artists don't." *Dennis the Menace* creator Hank Ketcham feels that CS will "help get some sense into the business end" of comics, and hopes it "might shake some of the old boys out of their lethargy." Ketcham speaks from experience, having once sued for ownership of his feature.

Another artist who relates personally to the issues CS raises is Bil Keane, creator of *The Family Circus*. When Keane tried to get ownership of his comic in 1978, his syndicate threatened to have another artist take over the strip. Keane was especially outraged because his characters are based on his own wife and kids.

"I could see myself out here in the desert," said the Southwest-based artist, "and someone in Des Moines or New York drawing my family!" He had no

choice but to give in to the syndicate's demands, and feels CS will cause industry-wide changes. "Other syndicates will have to have as good an image of being fair with the people they're making money from . . . Right today, there are young cartoonists drawing the next *Peanuts*. They'll go nowhere near another syndicate if they can go to CS."

The battle over ownership is as old as the medium itself; when Rudolf Dirks, creator of the first real strip, *The Katzenjammer Kids*, left the *New York Journal*, William Randolph Hearst hired another artist to continue the comic—and won, in court, right to the strips's title. Artists have been losing such fights ever since. It's ironic, then, that the Hearst Corporation owns King Features . . . whose purchase of Rick Newcombe's old syndicate prompted formation of Creators Syndicate. Perhaps the wheel has finally turned full circle. ■

Stan Barker is a contributing editor to *The Artist's Magazine* and a student of the cartoon genre.

Cartoonists interested in Creators Syndicate should write Creators Syndicate, 1554 S. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles CA 90025.

Courtesy of the artist.