Ultimate X-Men, Vol. 6 (v. 6) by Aaron Lopresti

Bkv's Second Year...Brilliant!

This deluxe hardcover collects Ultimate X-Men Vol. 12: Hard Lessons and Ultimate X-Men Vol. 13: Magnetic North, plus the rare 1/2 issue and other DVD-style extras. In Hard Lessons, Ultimate Wolverine makes his explosive return! Storm travels to the Great White North to find her missing friend, but there's no time for celebration for the tempestuous and troubled duo! They're about to take on an all-new threat to the Ultimate Universe... Lady Deathstrike! Plus: When a dangerous young mutant immune to psychic control takes Charles Xavier and the rest of a Manhattan bank hostage, the Professor must lead a diverse group of humans in a risky bid to end the siege! And finally, witness the return of Ultimate Juggernaut! Juggie makes a play for the Gem of Cyttorak, the jewel that will make him truly unstoppable. Only two small things stand in his way: Rogue of the X-Men and Ultimate Gambit, the new prince and princess of thieves! This story will change the X-Mens status quo forever! And in Magnetic North, Magneto returns! Emma Frost, Alex Summers and the X-Mens greatest enemy star in an epic new storyline! When teenage mutant Lorna Dane accidentally commits a horrific crime, will the X-Men protect her, or leave her to the fury of S.H.I.E.L.D.? Its mutant against mutant - brother against brother - as Cyclops and his X-Men risk their lives to take down Havok, who has unwittingly become a pawn in Magnetos deadly game. Guest-starring the Ultimates! Collects Ultimate X-Men 58-65, Ultimate X-Men Annual 1 and Ultimate X-Men Â½.

My Personal Review:
This volume reprints the second year of Brian K Vaughan's UXM run. His first year redefined the characters and point of the book, while simultaneously preserving the character and plot developments that earlier writers established, but deepening the characters' personalities and motivations and relationships, making the action more realistic, and toning down the absurd levels of bravado, braggadocio, and bombast that made the first 4 years of this title completely overblown and absurd. He focused the book on the idea that these are teenagers. He fleshed out their
personalities and tied them to particular motivations and struggles based on their emerging relationships with each other, and their powers and identities.

When you read this second volume, keep in mind you are reading reprints of monthly comics, ok? So it is natural that a collection like this will contain multiple stories and have work by various artists. You can't expect a continuous, self-contained story in a compilation such as this.

Ok, let's get to it. The first story gives some face time to Xavier, who was mercifully relegated to the background in the previous year. He had become way too dominant a figure in the Millar run. He was also poorly written: he was unpredictable; his character traits seemed to change with every issue, he was absurdly dictatorial, and as written, prone to wild errors in judgment that everyone around him inexplicably ignored! BKV still keeps him freaky and frigid, but tones down his tendency to lecture ad nauseum. The highlight of this issue is the hilarious artwork by Steve Dillon. The "villian", an absurd conjoined twin mutant, is mutant comedy gold.

The next story, "Shock and Awe" further explores the character of Storm and the relationship between Storm and Wolverine. These two make a great team, and Vaughan is obviously paying homage to the original and very deep relationship as written by Chris Claremont back circa issues 190-250 of Uncanny X-Men. I love that Storm's character continues to develop. She was being completely wasted by Millar and Bendis. The action here is excellent. It has always been difficult for artists to deal with Storm's powers. Check out the X-men movies for some particularly lame attempts at that. Millar just basically had her dropping lightning bolts on Sentinels, then stuffed her back in a minor role. But BKV and Immonen do her right, using her powers in an inventive, believable manner. Some criticize artists Stuart Immonen's cartoonish style, I personally love it. But one of his indisputable strengths is his ability to create dramatic compositions: the placement of the characters, objects, and the point of view to heighten the action and drama of the scene he is depicting. He consistently changes the size of the panels, the angle of the viewer, and the depth of the pictures to maximize the impact of the exciting action. This story is no exception, he does a great job with Deathstrike vs Storm & Wolverine. In what is probably a clever, subtle homage, this scene is set in the snow, a shout-out to the original Deathstrike vs Wolverine story by Claremont and Barry Windsor-Smith from Uncanny 205?

The story "Ultimate Sacrifice" makes a major change in the Rogue/Gambit story. The pencils, by Tom Raney, could have been a disaster, but the skillful inking and coloring save the situation. The Rogue character is also handled well by BKV--the reader really cares about her. In Millar's hands, she was just another tool of Weapon X, a throwaway "dude, look how we changed things up in the Ultimate Universe!" type of character. This story has some real emotional weight and interesting ramifications for the
character, and pulls and interesting twist and homage to the original Rogue/Ms Marvel power/personality drain story from back in the day.

Finally, the showstopper, Magnetic North, fleshes out Emma Frost's Hellions/New Mutants rival school, reveals the Mystique character, features a confrontation with the Ultimates, and the return of Longshot, the return of Lady Deathstrike, the blow-up of the Lorna Dane/Havok/Cyclops conflict (genius--the Havok/Cyclops relationship is another homage to the original, and it works even better than the original!), and the return of Magneto. It all comes together here: tight, suspenseful plotting, exploding character conflicts and interpersonal drama, exciting action and clever battles, goddamn it is awesome!

Magneto, as written by Millar in issues 1-36, was a JOKE. Constantly spouting unbelievable bullcrap. This criminal genius and wannabe messiah was simply a blustering, overpowered jackass. But in this writer's hands, he is depicted as a cunning, clever manipulator. His ridiculous rationalizations of his mutant supremacy agenda are shown to be just tools to further his personal goals of control. Awesome.

There are so many battles in this arc, I can't discuss them all, but be assured they are all handled with the inventiveness and surprise that BKV and Immonen have always brought. They gleefully throw the X-Men, the Ultimates, the Hellions, and the Magneto crew in a blender and hit the chop button. This is what comics are all about.

Somewhere in all these arcs, all the characters get their face time. Cyclops and Jean, Angel and Dazzler, Iceman/Kitty/Rogue, Colossus/Nightcrawler, all have their compelling and witty stories fleshed out. Finally, the very sensitively handled gay Colossus story is further developed here. A well done reinterpretation. Decent handling of a gay character is long overdue in super-hero comics.

I haven't even mentioned the hilarious and dead-on naturalistic dialog, which had me laughing out loud quite a few times.

This is great comics. This is what the Ultimate Universe is all about. No, the Ultimate Universe is NOT about "dark", "realistic" stories--that's the Marvel Knights, or the Marvel MAX line!! The Ultimate Universe is about resetting the continuity, using teen or young adult characters, and reinterpreting the original material in inventive ways that do honor to the source material but are vigorous and fresh in their own right. This run meets all those expectations and then some--genius, genius, genius!!!

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