

# My Day at Discon

by Rich Lynch

I like Worldcons, I really do! And one of the main reasons is seeing familiar faces – Worldcons are usually the only events where I can cross paths with fan friends from far-off places. But Discon III was different. Being staged, as it was, in the year of a global pandemic no doubt caused many people to reconsider their plans to attend. As did a several convention committee actions which angered many of our Southern Fandom friends (Nicki and me too, for that matter). Heck, if the convention was any farther than about an hour’s commute away, we might also have given it a pass. But we decided to go there anyway so that we could drop off some fanzines at the giveaway table and to pick up convention publications (including the Souvenir Book). And yeah, also try to find some of those familiar faces.



part of Discon’s concourse

were familiar faces to be seen there. But it was a lot more difficult than usual to identify them because everybody was wearing masks.

Discon III did several things egregiously wrong in my opinion (and I’m not going into them here), but one of the things it did right was to take extreme measures to minimize attendees’ potential exposure to the COVID-19 virus. This included making it an absolute requirement for everyone to show proof of vaccination. And also to be facemasked at all times except when eating or drinking. So there we were, at the Washington Science Fiction Association’s information table near the entrance to the concourse, when a big fellow walked over to say hi. It took me several seconds, as well as some timely clueing-in from Nicki, before I finally figured out who he was: Warren Buff, who had been the Chair of the 2010 NASFiC.



Nicki and the difficult-to-recognize Warren Buff

We've known each other for probably the better part of 20 years but wearing his facemask made it damn difficult for me to recognize him. The previous time we'd seen each other was in April 2016 at the FanHistoricon that was held in Williamsburg, Virginia. My memory is that back then he was living somewhere out in the wilds of western North Carolina, so it was a pretty big surprise when he told me he had relocated to the D.C. area. If and when this world health crisis finally abates to the point where social distancing stops being the new normal, he and I will have a lot more catching up to do. Over craft beers somewhere, no doubt.

Someone who was much easier to recognize was my friend from Los Angeles, John Hertz. I knew he'd be at Discon because we'd been corresponding prior to the convention and he'd gotten me to agree to be the Official Editor for the 46<sup>th</sup> collation of the Worldcon Order of Faneditors, which is usually better-known by its acronym WOOF. It's an amateur press association, or 'apa', and is one of the lesser-known features of a Worldcon. Prior to last year, WOOFs had been collections of printed fanzines that were laboriously collated into individual packets, or 'mailings', with one of each fanzine to a mailing. But with the onset of the COVID pandemic, the 2020 Worldcon had to be transitioned over into a completely online event so the annual WOOF distribution also transitioned – from print to PDF. This was all orchestrated by John, in his annual role of WOOF's behind-the-scenes organizer-in-chief, and it was successful enough that PDF became the preferred way to proceed for 2021. And that was just fine with me.



me and my old school friend John Hertz

was celebrating the 72-year anniversary of its presence at World Science Fiction Conventions. And may there be many more.

But again I digress. John and I only crossed paths one time, as it turned out. He was mostly frequenting other areas of the convention than the concourse, and that we met up at all may have been because I had left him a message that I was looking for him. What I had wanted to do was show him the glorious cover that artist Tim Kirk had emailed me for the new WOOF but I was less than successful in finding it on my iPhone (that's what happens when an email is archived in the wrong place). But while I was haplessly scrolling through various folders, I took the

But I digress. I didn't have any trouble recognizing the esteemed Mr. Hertz because I knew exactly what to look for – his propeller beanie. In many ways John is a traditionalist in his fan activities, and that includes paying homage to what used to be a “universal symbol of fandom” (according to *Fancyclopedia 3*) by wearing one of those throwback caps at every science fiction convention he attends. The propeller beanie has been around a very long time – it dates all the way back to 1947, when a fan named Ray Nelson first made one for a Michigan science fiction club meeting. The propeller beanie's first appearance at a Worldcon happened a couple of years after that, so John (whether or not he was keeping count)

opportunity to try to find out more about John's ability – or *non*-ability, make that – to receive and read electronic communications. My belief has been that John is so firmly embedded in the era back where interconnected personal computers were the stuff of science fiction that email is a total anathema to him. To me, corresponding back and forth via postcards and letters is admirably traditionalist and very old school, but it's also damned inefficient. I wouldn't do it for just anyone, so you can use that as an indication of how strong I consider my friendship with John to be. But at any rate, I was once again unsuccessful. I didn't learn anything new, other than that he reads PDFs at **efanzines.com** using a computer at a branch of the L.A. County Public Library. I guess that's where he's gonna finally get to see Tim Kirk's WOOF cover. As well as the rest of the apa.

No doubt I wasn't the only one who had trouble recognizing masked-up friends – I imagine that I wasn't any easier to recognize than Warren Buff was for me. Probably even less so, given that I'd grown a full beard in the many months the pandemic has been raging. So it was maybe a tiny bit of a surprise when my anonymity was pierced by Andy Porter when he purposefully strode up and said hello. (And yeah, on further consideration it's entirely possible that it was Nicki, not me, who he recognized from about halfway across the width of the concourse.)



at lunch with Andy Porter

After Andy and I spent what Nicki must have thought was an excessive amount of time chitchatting about cameras and indoor photography, we all decided to do lunch in the hotel's restaurant. And nice guy that he is, he picked up the bill. As we'll do for him when we see him next, hopefully in Chicago for the 2022 Worldcon.

Even not counting lunch, Nicki and I didn't spend 100% of our time in the concourse area – being a repurposed car park, there were no restrooms in there so once in a while we needed to take our leave into the hotel proper. It was on the way back to the concourse from one of those pit stops that I spotted someone who's been my friend for more than 30 years – Mike Walsh. I'm pretty sure he was one of the first fans I met and talked to during my first Washington Science Fiction Association meeting, at the end of 1988. And although our fan interests are not identical (he's a small press publisher and bookseller as well as a past Worldcon Chair, while my interests gravitate toward fan history) we've had so many enjoyable conversations in the decades since then that we're about to the point where we consider each other almost-brothers. And we'd even look nearly the same, now that I've grown a beard, if he ever decided to shave his head.

Discon III was all about camaraderie, as far as I was concerned. Nicki and I attended no programming at all, preferring instead to spend quality time with out-of-town friends whenever we happened to find them. We had a very pleasant extended conversation with Chris Barkley and Juli Marr, who had come from Cincinnati, on topics ranging from Worldcon site selection



voting to the 2022 Major League Baseball season (assuming there is one). Pat Molloy, whom we'd first met when he was a student at Western Kentucky University, had come up from Huntsville, Alabama apparently to spend most his time processing ballots at the site selection table – he was so deeply embedded there that it took a bit of effort to pry him away for a few minutes. And Brad Lyau, all the way from California, surprised us not so much with his presence at Discon as by his ability to quickly recognize people through their facemasks. Maybe that's his superpower.



Brad Lyau and Mike Walsh

Those moments were a far better use of our limited amount of time at the convention than attending programming panels could ever have been. And also, no doubt, safer from a 'staying healthy' perspective. In spite of Discon's strict proof-of-vax and masking requirements, there were still more than 25 positive tests for COVID from convention attendees – just about all of them for people who had been in much smaller rooms than the concourse where various programming events had been held. Nicki and I are both triply-vaxed so I hadn't thought we were in jeopardy of contracting the virus at the convention. But after reading the convention's infection statistics I'm now considering it a real accomplishment that we avoided becoming ill with COVID.

Maybe the world will head back toward at least a degree of normalcy in the coming year, where just being out in public doesn't make one be concerned about personal well-being. Let's hope so. In the end, Discon proved to be a memorable experience but not one I'd ever want to repeat. Attending future Worldcons under such surreal circumstances should only take place in science fiction. ☀

*Photo of me and John Hertz ©2021 by Andy Porter.  
All other photos were taken by me.*

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