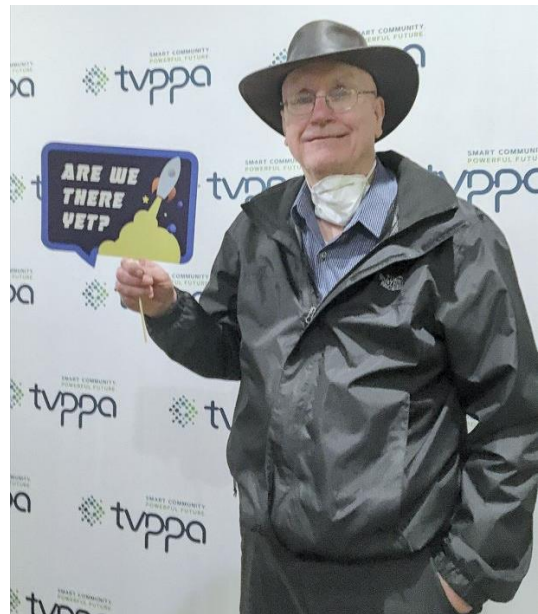


# DSC60 (and Other Destinations)

## Are we there yet?

It was Day 5 of our trip through the mid-South, and Nicki and I had finally reached what was about the farthest point from home – the Huntsville Marriott. We'd come to Alabama to attend a convention and had discovered one already in progress just down the hallway from hotel registration. There were information tables set up for various special interest groups, lots of giveaways (including badge ribbons), and even a place to take selfies. But this was not the convention we had come for – it was the autumn meeting of the Tennessee Valley Public Power Association. No, what we'd come all this distance for would begin the next day – the 60<sup>th</sup> DeepSouthCon.

But on that day there was a prolog event of sorts that we'd been very much looking forward to – a Biergarten featuring German cuisine, beer/wine, and live music! They're held on Thursday evenings at the



my not-a-selfie at the TVPPA meeting



the Biergarten event under the big rocket

Alabama Space and Rocket Center and we'd been alerted to it by our friends Pat Molloy and Naomi Fisher, who live in Huntsville. What made it special was its location: a huge pavilion which houses a giant Saturn V rocket. The thing was stretched out horizontally, supported by Brobdingnagian-sized scaffolding and what I assume are some very sturdy cables. It was so mammoth in size that it really wasn't a very good photo op – you just couldn't fit it all into a single picture. But there were other artifacts that would. Housing that big rocket, the pavilion by necessity had a lot of room available and it was being used to display other relics of the Space Race era.

One of them was the Command Module for the Apollo 16 expedition which, back in 1972, took three astronauts to the moon for what was the penultimate manned lunar landing mission of the Apollo era. It was an authentic piece of history from a half century ago.



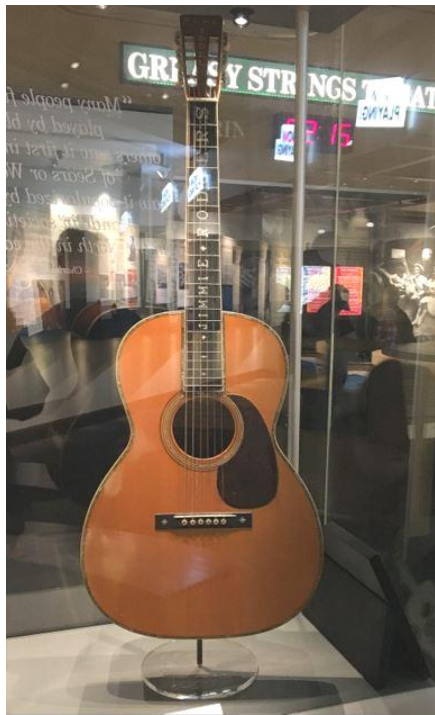
the Apollo 16 Command Module

## In the Beginning

Equally authentic, though in an entirely different way, were the many music-related artifacts that Nicki and I found at the Birthplace of Country Music Museum in Bristol (on the Virginia side of the city). Back in the summer of 1927, at the encouragement of Appalachian musician Ernest Stoneman,



artist Tim White's street mural homage to the Bristol Sessions. depicted (l-r) are Ralph Peer, the Carter Family, Ernest Stoneman, and Jimmie Rodgers



Jimmie Rodgers' 1927 Martin guitar (the "Blue Yodel")

record producer Ralph Peer came to downtown Bristol (on the Tennessee side of the city) to audition other local and regional musicians in an attempt to find new talent for his employer, the Victor Talking Machine Company. And did he ever! During that two-week session he recorded a total of 76 songs by 19 different singers and singing groups. Two of them, the Carter Family and the great Jimmie Rodgers, went on to become legendary recording artists. The Bristol Sessions, as they came to be called, were the commercial beginnings of the country music industry.

The Birthplace of Country Music Museum has done a great deal to both preserve the history of those sessions and to collect artifacts from that era for current and future generations to ponder and appreciate. It's not large as museums go, but there are many exhibits and video presentations which do a good job of presenting a narrative on what happened during those twelve days. There's even a radio station (WBCM) which broadcasts from a small studio inside the museum. There was much to see and marvel at, including a special retrospective exhibit about Johnny Cash's 1968 concerts at Folsom Prison, but I was particularly drawn to the display cases that showcased some of the musical instruments that were owned by famous singers from many decades ago. One of them, Jimmie Rodgers' 1927 Martin guitar that he played during the Bristol Sessions, appeared in such exquisite condition that I have no doubt that it could still be used by current-day musicians.

Bristol was the first stopover of our ten-day DSC60 trip and we'd intended to do more during our two days there than we actually did. But the weather was unseasonably cold and blustery, which affected our stamina a bit and made us mostly re-think our original plans. One thing I wish we could have done was to visit the Carter Family homestead, located maybe a half-hour's

drive away, over in Hiltons, Virginia. But other than the graveyard where members of the family are buried there was nothing open to the public on the days we were in Bristol. It's a major part of the so-called 'Crooked Road' heritage trail of southwestern Virginia, and there are concerts there every Saturday night. Next time we're passing through we'll make sure our schedule allows us to take one of them in.

## C-town

The road to DSC60 brought us through Chattanooga, and we took the opportunity to stop over for a couple of days. Nicki and I lived in the Scenic City for nearly 15 years, from the end of 1973 through most of 1988, and when we moved north to Maryland we left behind some good friends. So for our one full day in the city we used the time to reconnect with some of them.

It was really good to see Ken and Julie Scott again. Back in 1975, along with us and several other C-town science fiction fans, they were founders of modern-day Chattanooga fandom. We visited them for several hours at their home, and the big highlight for us was the opportunity to see Julie's studio. She is a really good artist, as can be seen by all of the illustrations she's done over the years for various fanzines – the scratchboard covers she did for us for *Mimosa* are so wonderful that Nicki and I have prints of them framed and hung above the mantelpiece in our home. As for her studio, we found it a marvel of efficiency. It encompasses the entirety of the upstairs loft and is set up so that she can work on several projects at once. At various places along the walls there were prints of some of the ones she's completed, including illos we'd seen in fanzines. Partway through our visit we were joined by their son Alex, who is now a burgeoning science fiction writer (you can find his books at Amazon). It had been so long since we'd last seen him that I don't think I could have recognized him in a crowd. I guess we weren't really surprised to find out that Ken and Julie don't attend conventions much anymore (they didn't go to Huntsville for the DSC and hadn't been to a Worldcon since the one in Glasgow in 2005), but when they discovered that the 2024 Worldcon will once again be in Scotland I could tell that it piqued their interest. Maybe we'll see them there.

We also spent a few hours with another good fan friend, Janis Johnson. She came into Chattanooga fandom a few years after it formed – she'd been a foreign languages teacher at one of the city's high schools and had discovered science fiction fandom via one of her students who was in the Chattanooga fan club. Over the years she's done plenty of fanac, everything from fanzine publishing to apa membership to convention attending, but nowadays she's retired and from what we could see obviously enjoys a laid-back lifestyle.

Some of the best memories I have of Chattanooga fandom are of all the foodie events – dinner meet-ups that happened during conventions and after Chattanooga club



Nicki with Janis at her home

meetings. So we made sure that there was one during our C-town stopover. Ken and Julie had made reservations at a really nice Greek/Italian restaurant that did not exist back when we lived in the city, and it ended up being a pleasant evening. Another fan friend who was also a Chattanooga fandom co-founder, Michelle Rogers, joined us and in between mouthfuls of food we all did a long walk down memory lane, reliving memories from so long ago.

### **Lunch Amid the Zombie Apocalypse**

That dinner wasn't the only memorable meal we had in Chattanooga. One of our 'can't miss' television series to watch was *The Walking Dead* and during one of its aftershows we learned that one of the stars of the show, Norman Reedus, and one of its executive producers, Greg Nicotero, had opened three restaurants – one of them in Chattanooga! It's located at the Chattanooga Choo Choo, which used to be a hotel but is now a so-called 'independent lifestyle community' with eating establishments, boutique stores of various kinds, and the obligatory souvenir shop. Nic & Norman's (as it's been named) took over the space that had formerly been the hotel's restaurant. There's some synergy here because the place looked in need of a rehab but due to the ongoing zombie apocalypse its slightly deteriorating appearance just fit right in.

The food there is good! None of it was themed to the TV show but Nicki really liked the soup and salad lunch special and my customized burger was tasty. I have to admit that I'd been half-hoping we'd see someone from the TV show also dining there, seeing as how it was filmed only about a three hour drive from Chattanooga, but it was not to be. When I asked the receptionist if either of the two owners had ever visited the place she told me that Nicotero did once, but Reedus has yet to make an appearance. But a poster of Norman was right there at the front of the restaurant, and that in the end proved to be an irresistible photo-op.



Nicki with the poster of Norman Reedus at the restaurant

### **At the 60<sup>th</sup> DSC**

The food was also good in Huntsville. Besides the Biergarten event we had a couple of good meals at a Cajun restaurant and ate dinner on the Saturday night of the convention at a pretty good barbecue place, neither of which we would have found without the assistance of my iPhone's GPS. Thank goodness for the conveniences of modern-day life!

This 60<sup>th</sup> DSC was a stand-alone convention, something that has become uncommon. The previous time that happened was back in 2014 and the time before that was in 2012. It was at the 2012 DeepSouthCon where we first met one of the guests at this current convention – Bill Plott. Actually, a lot of people who attended the 2022 DSC first met him at the 2012 convention because it had been his return to fandom after nearly a half century of gaffiation. His activity in Southern Fandom dates back to the late 1950s when he started publishing his first fanzine,

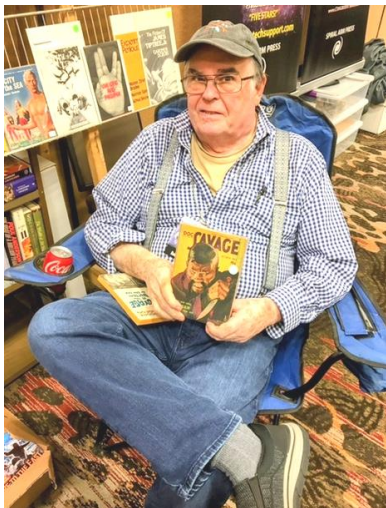
*Maelstrom*, which in the course of its 10 issue run included articles and correspondence from many now-famous fans and authors of that era including Jack Chalker, Marion Z. Bradley, Harry Warner Jr., Redd Boggs, Lloyd Biggle, Jerry Page, Lee Hoffman, Ray Nelson, and Joe Staton. He was one of the founding members of the Southern Fandom Press Alliance (SFPA) and attended the very first DeepSouthCon, back in 1963. It's about damn time that Southern Fandom finally honored him as a DSC Guest of Honor!

One of the first panels was a one-hour session with Bill, intended as a retrospective of his life in and outside of fandom. The interviewer was a friendly and personable science fiction writer, Stephanie Osborn. But it became clear from the get-go that it wasn't a good choice because she seemed not very aware about much of anything concerning Southern Fandom, or fandom in general for that matter. In the end it was the fans in the audience who did



Bill Plott and Stephanie Osborn

most of the question-asking. After a while, Ms. Osborne did seem to recognize that she was more than a bit out of her league and became, in effect, part of the audience. It all worked out okay, but it would have been so much better if the committee had thought to ask Guy Lillian or me to be the moderator. Either one of us would have been well-prepared.



Guy takes a break in the Dealers Room

renowned writer of 'hard' science fiction, but he is also – and has always been – a science fiction fan. From the mid 1950s through the early 1960s he was co-editor of a famous focal point fanzine, *Void*, and even today still contributes the occasional article to fanzines. We and Guy have been very grateful to have featured articles by him in our fanzines. But for DSC60, Greg mostly had on his scientist hat. He had a one hour informal sit-down, a so-called 'Kandyklatche', where the

There were other friends and acquaintances who attended DSC60. I knew that Guy would be there from email correspondence prior to the convention, but it was a pleasant surprise to learn that Greg Benford would also be in attendance. Nicki has known Greg for more than a quarter of a century. For me, even longer than that as he was one of the many contacts I had with 1950s fandom during the early 1990s when I was editing Harry Warner Jr.'s fan history book, *A Wealth of Fable*. Greg is a scientist and a



Greg (in the brown chair) holds forth at his Kandyklatche

discussion tended toward the technical, especially concerning global warming and climate change. He is a proponent of geo-engineering as a remediative action, which includes things like injecting sulfate particles into the upper atmosphere to reflect away a small amount of the incoming sunlight. But I'm more of a carbon-capture-and-storage guy, so Greg and I had a mini-debate on the pros and cons of each approach to close out the hour. It was some welcome mental stimulation.

A professional of a different sort was also at DSC60 – Norman Cates, all the way from New Zealand! He was the convention's Toastmaster, and it still baffles me how the DSC concom, operating on what must have been a tight budget, managed to bring that off. No matter, he was a welcome presence. Nicki and I first met Norman back in 2004 during his visit to the United States as that year's DUFF delegate. The Down Under Fan Fund, whose origins date back to 1972, was created back then as an effort to bring closer together the fandoms of North America and Australasia. Each non-pandemic year, DUFF holds an election to choose a deserving fan (and sometimes couples) to make a trans-Pacific trip underwritten by the Fund – alternating yearly between northbound and southbound – to visit other fan communities and attend a convention (usually either a Worldcon or a Natcon). Norman was the first and so far only DUFF delegate from New Zealand and during his trip Nicki and I hosted him for a couple of days on his swing through the D.C. area. There was one epic afternoon where I took Norman on a walking tour of downtown Washington and I remember that he took what I thought was an extraordinary number of photos. My assumption was, and I guess still is, that some of these were intended for his DUFF trip report – every DUFF delegate is encouraged to write one in order to preserve the experience for future generations of fans to ponder and appreciate – but as far as I can tell, that trip report has yet to appear. There's still time, so I hope he kept good notes as well as all those photos.



Norman and Nicki

But DUFF is really only a small part of what Norman is known for throughout fandom. Besides being DUFF delegate in 2004, he was also employed by Weta Workshop down in New Zealand – the company that created the special effects and prosthetics for the three *Lord of the Rings* movies. Norman's name is right there in the end credits for all to see, though with the myriad number of people who worked on the films it's a bit of a needle-in-the-haystack exercise to find him. But what Norman is *really* known



at the Norman Cates roundtable

for in fandom is that he was Chair of the 2020 Worldcon. There was a one-hour roundtable with him on the final day of the convention where we learned more about the difficulties of staging a

Worldcon in the middle of a pandemic – in the end it had to be done exclusively as an online event – and the kinds of decision making that had to be done in order to have any kind of event at all. But other topics discussed during the hour were a lot less serious. Norman was very informative about what there is to see in do in New Zealand, should any of us ever again roam that far from home, and he even enlightened us about the outcome of the country’s flag controversy. From appearances, about every decade or two there is a national debate of sorts about whether or not to change the national flag. The most recent time this happened was back in 2015-6, and was based on criticisms that the existing flag was too close in appearance to the Australian flag and that the inclusion of Great Britain’s ‘Union Jack’ design as part of the flag was no longer really appropriate. In the end, a two-stage binding referendum resulted in a consensus to keep the existing flag, but not before many, many new designs were proposed as alternates. The one that was the most amusing (as well as the most un-serious) featured a kiwi bird with laser beams coming out of its eyes. Truly inspired, and even science-fictional!

There wasn’t a huge amount of programming at DSC60, which left a lot of time to schmooze with other people we knew. One of them was Curt Phillips, himself a former fan



Curt, Naomi, Norman, and Pat at the Fan Funds panel

fund delegate (TAFF in this case). One of the most interesting panels of the convention featured him, Norman, and Pat & Naomi for a wide-ranging discussion of fan funds in general and their own fan fund experiences in particular. And at the end of it, I guess I should have expected that Nicki and I would be urged to stand for a future DUFF election. It was not the first time that’s ever happened, but our response is always the same: We really appreciate your consideration but

that kind of honor should be reserved for active fans who have never been trans-Pacific.



the Dead Dog party in the consuite

We stayed the night in Huntsville for the Dead Dog Party after the convention had ended, and a good one it was, with lots of pleasant conversation about the usual wide range of topics. The consuite was stocked with several types of barbecue-related food, one of them a very tasty stew that I had several helpings of. There was also a room party, hosted by Toni Weisskopf of Baen Books, where several kinds of uncommon Scotch whisky could be found. Now that

I'm on heart meds I'm not supposed to be drinking any significant amount of alcohol in a sitting, but there was one Scotch that was way too intriguing for me to ignore: Ardbeg Wee Beastie. As my friend Gary Robe described it, "Ardbeg is distinctive because it has notes of creosote and pine tar. The reason for its distinctive flavor is that the distillery gets its water from a nearby bog that had old railroad ties and fence posts as well as peat." I was warned before I sampled it that the flavor might be off-putting, and that proved to be the case – one sip was more than enough! And at that point, it was finally time to call it an evening. We later learned the Dead Dog didn't wind down until about two-in-the-morning but at this point in our lives we're no longer that kind of party animal. Not only that, we had to be on the road reasonably early the next morning so we could make it to Knoxville by late afternoon. Friends awaited there.

## K-ville

It had been a very long time since we had last crossed paths with Dorothy Tompkins and Lowell Cunningham. Back in the 1970s and 80s they were two of the fans and aspiring writers who were in a Knoxville-area writers group. We met and became friends with them at, I think, one of the Chattacons and eventually found out that they hosted a two-day/one-night sleepover they called 'Barbecon' every July. The one we attended in 1986 was a tiny but entertaining media-oriented relax-a-con, featuring good food and several vintage *Doctor Who* episodes.

That was the year when Halley's Comet paid the inner Solar System a visit. The night skies were dark where Dorothy and Lowell lived, so Lowell and I decided stayed up most of the night to look for the celestial visitor. It was about four in the morning when we finally spotted it, and by then we were so loopy that it was more of a relief than an accomplishment. About three years after that Lowell found success as writer of a six-part comic book series about a clandestine futuristic agency which monitors the activities of space aliens here on Earth: *The Men in Black*. Which, a few years later, became the basis for a hugely popular Steven Spielberg movie.

It's funny how things work out. My career in the federal government eventually allowed me to do extensive international travel while Lowell's brought him international success as a writer. But back then, all we wanted to do was see a bright comet. That was a memorable evening, and so was our all-too-brief meet-up with Dorothy and Lowell during our stopover in K-ville. They treated us to dinner at a very fine Chinese restaurant, one which was in no hurry to clear us out of there once the food was eaten and the dishes taken away. Time passed by slowly as we sat and relived a lot of old memories. It was good.

## Epilog

This was the longest journey from home we'd taken, in both length and duration, since prior to the coming of the coronavirus. The pandemic isn't over but it's now to the point, what with our multiple vaccinations and greater health awareness, where we're not so anxious about being amongst large crowds of people. There will now be more trips away from home in our future.



our name badges for the 1986 Barbecon



The long drive home day after our K-ville stopover gave us plenty of time to think back over the previous nine days, of all the many highlights of the trip. Of things we'd seen and done, of all the friends we'd reconnected with. One of the reasons I write travel essays like this one is to preserve the memories, to freeze them in time hopefully for future generations of fans to ponder and appreciate. And also to let people know what they missed by not being there. They missed a lot. ☀



welcome sign in DSC60 hotel lobby



DSC60 room guide



DSC60 opening ceremonies



Greg, Curt, and Nicki in dealers room



DSC60 charity auction