

# Of Stargates and Superheroes: Detroit and Detcon 1 in Words and Pictures

## Prolog: But I *haven't* been everywhere!

Several years ago there was a television ad for the Choice Hotels chain that used the Johnny Cash cover of an iconic country music song titled “I’ve Been Everywhere”. The lyrics are mostly toponyms – names of cities, towns, and states visited in an open-ended, everlasting road trip. I’ve also, in my travels, been to many different places...but not *everywhere*. In keeping with the cadence of the song: I’ve been to Cape Town, Moscow, Bangkok, Singapore. Montreal, Paris, Glasgow, and Baltimore... (Maybe I should write a few new verses!)

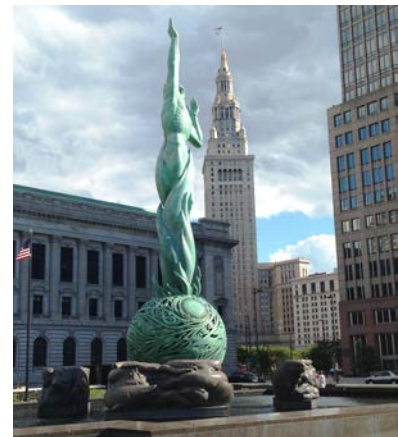
Anyway, I can really identify with that song because although I *haven't* been everywhere, sometimes it almost seems so, especially here in the United States. At one time or another I’ve visited just about all of the large cities, from Boston to San Diego, from Minneapolis to San Antonio, from Orlando to Seattle, from Washington to San Francisco.

But until this year, I had *never* been to Detroit.

## The Road to Detroit Passes through Cleveland

It was Detcon 1, the 2014 North American Science Fiction Convention (or NASFiC), which brought about my first-ever visit to the Motor City and it seemed appropriate to travel there by automobile. The driving distance to Detroit is just about 500 miles, which for Nicki and me is easily do-able. But that makes for a very long day. Instead, we decided to break the drive west into two days and stop in Cleveland. Yes, Cleveland!

Cleveland has acquired a less-than-sterling reputation over the past half century as a city in decline with large amounts of pollution, epitomized by the Cuyahoga River catching fire back in 1969. But it’s not that way now. Nicki and I found it to be a clean and intriguing place to spend a day, with parks and open spaces in the city center and a thriving theatre district. We had been there only once previously, in 2000, as a stopover on the way to a Chicago Worldcon, but



Cleveland city center



ongoing restoration of Caravaggio's  
"The Crucifixion of St. Andrew"

all we had time for then was a morning visit to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. This time we were able to spend several pleasant hours at the Cleveland Museum of Art, which has been ranked as one of the top art museums in the country. The collection is eclectic, including a large amount of Asian and Egyptian art, but what we came to see were works by Renaissance artists such as Rembrandt and Hals, and more modern paintings from famous artists such as Dali, Picasso, and Warhol. The most interesting exhibit, though, wasn’t really an exhibit at all. It was the ongoing restoration of Caravaggio’s 1607 masterwork “The Crucifixion of St. Andrew”. It wasn’t being done in some closed-off basement workshop – the museum had

set up a studio in a glass-walled gallery adjacent to the main entrance atrium where visitors could view the conservator as he painstakingly removed layers of brittle, cracked varnish from the painting, square millimeter by square millimeter.

### The City of the Giant Fist

Nicki and I also made sure to visit the Detroit Institute of Arts, another of America's top art museums, on our first full day in Detroit. It also has a large collection of Renaissance and 19<sup>th</sup> century European art, including van Gogh's superb "Self-Portrait with Straw Hat", but for me the signature pieces in the collection were also the largest – five fresco murals by Diego Rivera collectively known as "Man and Machine" that surround the inside entrance court of the museum.



inside the Detroit Institute of Arts, in front of the Diego Rivera mural

We had wanted to visit the DIA, as the museum is known to locals, because it had been described in news reports as on the verge of being D.O.A. – Detroit filed for bankruptcy in 2013 and had been looking for ways to pay off creditors. An audit had shown that the holdings of the museum were worth more than \$1 billion, making the DIA the city's single most valuable asset. There had been a very real possibility that some of the most important works would be deaccessioned, to use the museum-speak euphemism, in order to raise money. But then Michigan's Attorney General came to the rescue and issued an opinion that the holdings of the DIA are actually held in charitable trust for the people of Michigan, and therefore no piece could be sold to satisfy debts or obligations.

However, it might turn out that this opinion is not legally binding, and that would be tragic. Nicki and I found the DIA to be a treasure. But treasures sometimes get plundered.



"Monument to Joe Louis" in downtown Detroit

There was more artwork out on the streets of the city, down near the Renaissance Center complex. That's where the headquarters of General Motors is located, so you might think that the any street sculptures there would have an automotive theme. Instead, we were greeted by a giant fist. Detroit was the home of the famed heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis, and there is a monument to him, a 24-foot long fist arm, in the median of one of downtown Detroit's boulevards. There have been reports that a statue is nearly ready in homage to another of Detroit's famous fighters – Robocop. Unveiling it during

the NASFiC would have been a nice touch but unlike its cinematic counterpart, it wasn't yet fully functional. That, and the city hadn't figured out where to put it.

### ˘Til it rang twenty-nine times...

There was more street art to see than just the big fist. Detcon 1 was held at the Marriott in the Renaissance Center, and not far from there is a large paved plaza that now occupies the site where, in 1701, the French explorer Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac founded the settlement that became Detroit. There are several large pieces of public art there, including the obligatory statue of Cadillac himself. But the one that stood out from the rest was the large monument to the unionized labor movement titled "Transcending". Its shape, a large circular arc with a break at the top, was perhaps meant to symbolize both the greatness to which the labor movement has aspired over the past century and its yet uncompleted destiny, whatever that may be. However, to all the science fiction fans who were present for the NASFiC, that huge metal sculpture emulated an alien artifact we all had seen many times in a popular television show. Nicki described it best: "Who knew Detroit had a Stargate?"



the "Transcending" monument

A bit more sublime were the stained glass windows in an Anglican church bordering the north end of the plaza. Some of them, such as the big rose window facing the plaza, have a nautical theme and for good reason. This place of worship is the Mariners' Church, made famous as



the Mariners' Church

"...The Maritime Sailors' Cathedral..." in the Gordon Lightfoot song "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald", about a 1975 Lake Superior ship sinking. One of the lyrics relates that "...the church bell chimed, ˘til it rang twenty-nine times for each man on the Edmund Fitzgerald", which is what actually happened when the church's Rector, Richard Ingalls, learned of the loss of the big ship earlier in the day.

This was picked up in an article in *Newsweek* about the sinking and its aftermath, which brought it to the attention of Lightfoot. And the rest, as they say, is history.

## Anecdotal Stories and Draconian Choices

History was one of the reasons I had been looking forward to Detcon 1. I was on four panels, two of them themed on fanhistory. One was fairly easy – all I had to do was to sit back and supply some prompts to the other panel participants, Roger Sims and Fred Prophet (who had co-chaired the 1959 Detroit Worldcon), for them to tell some anecdotal and amusing stories about what Detroit fandom was like back in the 1950s. But the other one, which chronicled the history of science fiction fandom within Michigan from the 1930s to the present, was maybe the most

complex panel in which I've ever participated. The event was two hours in duration and divided into several segments (corresponding to different decades), with different panelists for each segment. I had been asked to be co-moderator because



one segment of the Michigan fanhistory panel

of my previous activities as a fanhistorian, such as creation of an online collection of information about science fiction fandom in the 1960s. It served me well in preparing for the panel, and I was pleased that the entirety of the panel was recorded for use as a future fanhistory resource.

Nicki was also on four panels and as has been the case lately, hers had larger audiences than mine. The most successful one appeared to be the “Fanzines and Professional Writing” panel,

which featured two science fiction authors (John Scalzi and Jim Hines) and three fanzine editors (including Nicki). The panel was inspired by something that happened 65 years ago, at the 1959



"Fanzines and Professional Writing" panelists: John Scalzi, Jim Hines, Steven Silver, Roger Sims, and Nicki Lynch

Detroit Worldcon, when during a panel on amateur magazines, a question on “Why weren’t fanzines as good as they once were and why were their writers no longer becoming top quality pros very often?” turned the panel into an extended discussion that lasted for five-and-a-half hours. It was the longest-duration discussion panel in Worldcon history. This 2014 panel managed to stay within its 50 minute time window, but still came up with some succinct observations and conclusions on the current state of fanzines (thriving, though most are now e-zines) and their role in the career of professional writers (fanzines are good outlets for non-fiction essays that are not immediately saleable, and serve to give writers added visibility). One wonders what other revelations might have emerged if the panelists had had another four hours.

In total, Detcon 1 consisted of more than 400 program items, about par for the course for a convention its size, and there was no way to attend more than a relatively small number of them. And, as usual, there were draconian choices to make on which ones to attend. An example of that happened on the second day of the convention, when Nicki and I watched our friend Kurt Erichsen, who is an excellent fanartist, present an overview of the cartoons and other artwork he has created over past four decades (some of which we had published in our fanzine *Mimosa*). But that meant that we had to miss the panel about the life and works of science fiction grandmaster Robert A. Heinlein and also the panel where the convention's fan guests, Arthur Hlavaty, Bernadette Bosky and Kevin Maroney, talked about their lives in science fiction fandom. Later on there was a demonstration on making high-performance paper airplanes, and I'll concede it would have been fun to revert to childhood for an hour to participate in that. But it was opposite one of the panels I was moderating. Ah, the sacrifices one makes for the sake of fanhistory...

### The View from the 69<sup>th</sup> Floor

Just about all of Detcon's program was held at the function room level of the hotel, only a few floors up from street level. But the party suites, where all the evening room parties were held, were way up there, on the 68<sup>th</sup> and 69<sup>th</sup> floors. That made it very convenient for Nicki and me, as our room was on the 67<sup>th</sup> floor and we could just ramble up a flight or two of stairs instead of waiting on overcrowded elevators to arrive. It was, by far, the highest hotel room I've ever stayed in and I'll admit it took me a while to get over being intimidated by the view from the window. The Marriott, which occupies the central and loftiest tower of the Renaissance Center, is the tallest all-hotel skyscraper in the Western Hemisphere and from the uppermost floors it was possible to see north to where the Detroit River emerges from Lake St. Clair and south all the way to Lake Erie. Far below, big ships were a common sight and room parties often fell silent for a few moments as people crowded toward windows, cameras in hand, to capture the moment whenever one cruised past.



the Renaissance Center



the view from a room party on the 69<sup>th</sup> floor

There were plenty of room parties every evening to keep convention attendees occupied, many of them in support of various Worldcon bids. The one of most interest for Nicki and me was for the D.C.-in-2017 bid, which would result in a *much* shorter road trip for us if it wins. We are not part of the bid committee, but we were happy to help out at the party as best as we could. It was an easy choice, as many of the people representing the D.C. bid are friends we've known for years. That, and the party featured some *killer* desserts.

## Twenty-Four and Counting

Besides all the big ships, there was something of else of interest to me that was visible from way up on the 69<sup>th</sup> floor. The view to the west looked out over downtown Detroit and off in the distance was Comerica Park, the home of the Detroit Tigers baseball team who were in town and playing a weekend series against Cleveland. I've been a baseball fan for way more than half a century, and in that time had attended baseball games in twenty-three different major league ballparks. I'd been really looking forward to adding Comerica Park to that total, but the only day I had available for doing that was the Saturday of the convention and I was at first dismayed that I had a scheduled panel that would



Comerica Park as seen from the Marriott



at the game

prevent me from going to the game that afternoon. But then I discovered that due to a rainout earlier in the year, the Saturday game was actually a doubleheader and the second game would conveniently start in the early evening. My friend John Novak came with me to the game sporting a cap and t-shirt of his home town St. Louis Cardinals. This brought him some scowls from Tigers fans who were still in denial about Detroit being thrashed by the Cardinals in the 2006 World Series. We had to sit in different sections of the stadium because the game was nearly a sellout and single seats were all that were available. I bought my ticket at the stadium box office and ended up in the mezzanine. But John was a bit more adventurous and negotiated with a scalper. *He* ended up with a much nicer seat down in the lower deck, and for about \$10 less than what I had paid. I just know there's some karma in there somewhere.

While all of this was going on, Nicki was enjoying herself at the evening's room parties. But she had asked me to bring her a souvenir from the ballpark, and it turned out to be a more difficult choice than I had expected. In the end I settled on a plush toy rhinoceros with a Detroit insignia on its chest and a confident smirk on its face. It wasn't until I showed it to her back at the hotel that we realized it was more than just a keepsake – it had both a mask and a cape, which meant it was (gasp!) a *superhero*!



Nicki and her little superhero

## Epilog: Here There Were Legends

Comerica Park has been the home of the Detroit Tigers only since the beginning of the 2000 season. Before that the Tigers played at an eponymously-named ballpark that no longer exists. Tiger Stadium was one of the most fan-friendly places to see a baseball game, with even the upper-level seats close to the playing field. But in the mid-1990s, the team ownership decided that they needed a more contemporary ballpark that had lucrative amenities such as luxury suites that could be rented out at elevated prices. There had been some hopes to save the old stadium, or at least parts of it, but ultimately none of those plans came to fruition and it was razed during the late summer of 2009.



at the corner of Michigan and Trumbull Avenues,  
where Tiger Stadium once stood



the centerfield flagpole still exists!

I didn't want to go home without paying a visit to where Tiger Stadium once stood, and I found that even though the structure is gone, the playing field in its original configuration still exists, as does the flagpole that stood like a sentinel in deep centerfield. I later learned that following the ballpark's demise, a group known as "The Spirit of Tiger Stadium" has been maintaining the playing field and occasionally hosts informal baseball games at the site. In my mind's eye I could imagine what the place must have been like during its heyday. Many famous baseball players, legends of the game, once strode to home plate and ran the bases over the decades of the stadium's existence and I could not resist the temptation to do the same. It made my trip to Detroit complete.

I never did get to see a game at Tiger Stadium, though I had a chance during its final season, in 1999, when a friend who lived in the area told me he'd get tickets if I would haul my butt out there. That I did not is one of those "do over" decisions I

would gladly revisit if only someone would invent time travel. I regret that I am fifteen years too late for Tiger Stadium but I did not need temporal intervention to appreciate what I experienced in the rest of the city. I very much enjoyed my time in Detroit, and it will not take another NASFiC to bring me back to this fine city. ☀

*(Thanks to Joel Zakem for use his photo of the Michigan fanhistory panel.)*