



**My Back
Pages 31
Rich Lynch**



My Back Pages 31

articles and essays by Rich Lynch

Okay, let's get this over with. Trump won. That really sucks, but he did. And now we're in a *Groundhog Day* kind of situation where we're probably going to basically replay much if not most of the crapola that characterized the first Trump regime. On Inauguration Day back in 2017, Nicki and I got away from it all for a few hours by going to the cinema to see *La La Land*. Wouldn't surprise me if we decide to see it again via streaming while the Trump II inauguration is in progress. To repeat what I wrote at the end of my recent *MBP* letterzine *You're Still on My Mind* #7, let's all stay strong and do whatever we can to make it through the next four years.

As for this issue of *MBP*, much of what's in it also looks toward the past, and a lot further than 2017 – back to the 1930s to remember a fan who was active during the dawn of fandom and also to the early 1970s to tell you all about a fan who might have been a notorious criminal in the extreme. But we'll start by reacquainting ourselves with the concept of 'timebinding'. For me it's a powerful driving force and it has induced me to become involved with the ongoing Fanac Fan History Project, which is digitally preserving all aspects of the history of science fiction fandom one page at a time (and perhaps soon, one photograph at a time). And as you'll see, timebinding was ever so present while I was scanning for **fanac.org** all the fanzines in the 204th mailing of the Southern Fandom Press Alliance (SFPA).

Rich Lynch
Gaithersburg, Maryland
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My Back Pages now has a companion letterzine: *You're Still on My Mind*.
All issues of both zines are archived at **efanzines.com** and **fanac.org**

Timebinding with SFPA 204

Most of you here in SFPA are aware that I am working with The Fanac Fan History Project to digitally preserve fanzines for online archive at its fanac.org website. Over the past several years I've scanned and OCR'd hundreds of fan publications, everything from one-page convention fliers to 120-page genzines, some of them dating all the way back to the 1930s and '40s. It's been fulfilling and each time one of my scans gets archived online there's a sense of accomplishment.

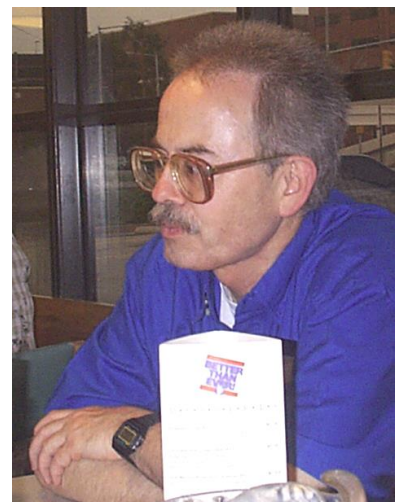
And there's also a sense of *timebinding*, which in the context of science fiction is the passing on of knowledge and lore to future generations of the genre's fans, and also the receiving and marveling over such lore. It's a two-way process that connects different generations of fans, and digital archiving is one way of doing it. The OCR procedure is usually not 100% accurate, so for each scanned fanzine I do quality control the old-fashioned way – I read it. And in doing so I become transported back in time.

It's fascinating and maybe even a little bit surreal each time it happens. Clubzines and fliers which describe upcoming meetings and conventions make me really want to attend them, if only I could. Genzines with essays by fans and pros start me thinking about articles I could write for those issues, if it were only possible to get them to the editors in time for publication. Personalzines make me want to open up my email app and write letters of comment, if only I could turn back the clock to soon after they were published. Perhaps the most timebinding aspect of all is that these archiving activities have allowed me to get to know or, in some cases *better* know, people now deceased who were involved in fandom before I was even born.

SFPA is part of this equation. It was about a year ago that Fanac's Chairman, Joe Sielari, asked me to undertake a task that I'd first thought might be above and beyond the call of duty – digitally preserving old Southern Fandom Press Alliance mailings. He knew I'd located a couple of boxes of them, all dating back to the late 1990s and early 2000s, and when I'd asked him if there were any SFPazines in particular he wanted for the archive he told me, "All of them!"

That turned out not to be possible because three people who were apa members back then did not want to participate and I honored their wishes. But it still turned out to be several thousand pages of scanning to finish the first box and it took me a few weeks to get it done. And now I'm starting on the second box, beginning with SFPA 204 which was collated and posted in July 1998 by then-OE Liz Copeland. I was about halfway done scanning that mailing when it occurred to me that I should perhaps take this to the next level. The timebinding was well underway at that point and as I proofread the OCR for each SFPazine there were many times that I had to stop myself from composing mailing comments. So instead, I decided to write an essay that described the mailing, as mostly told in their own words by the SFPAs who had zines in it.

One of them was **Ned Brooks**, who provided everybody in the apa an unusual bit of information about himself: "*I am often mistaken for the staff in thrift stores.*" This out-of-context little nugget was a comment on one of my European postcard diaries



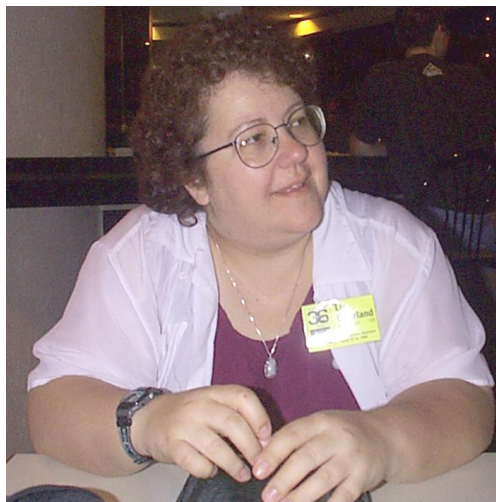
Ned Brooks

that I'd reprinted in my previous SFPazine, where I'd been bemused by someone who'd come up to me and had asked (in Polish) for directions.

Ned had just completed a move from Newport News, Virginia down to the Atlanta suburbs following his retirement from NASA, and presumably had not needed to ask anybody for directions on how to get there. He'd taken his very large library of books with him, about 50,000 pounds in all, which had caused **Jeff Copeland** to write:

"As for Ned's move, I make two observations: The first is that he has ten thousand volumes, which is more than three times as many as Thomas Jefferson had in his personal library when he donated it to jump-start the Library of Congress after it was burned in the War of 1812. Second: fifty thousand pounds is more than twice the maximum of any of the moves our family of four has made."

Also, **Liz Copeland** commented from experience on the enormity of it all by mentioning: *"I hope the moving is going well; I have finally finished the unpacking ... and it took only 3.5 years. I'm sure you'll be faster."* Meanwhile, since Ned's SFPazine title was *The New Port News*, Binker Hughes, David Schlosser, and **Gary Brown** all asked the obvious question: Was Ned going to keep that title? Gary even offered a suggestion: *"Are you going to change the name of your zine to The De Catur News?"*



Liz Copeland

That turned out not to be the case. But concerning fanzines in general, **Gary** had wondered about the overall state of the art concerning how they are produced: *"How long do you think it will be before zines will be online only?"* It was a comment that was ahead of its time, since it would be another two years before **efanzines.com** came into existence.

By the time of SFPA 204, personal computers had become a necessity for most fanzine publishers. Indeed, every fanzine in the mailing was composed with computer assistance. **Guy Lillian**, who was living in New Orleans back then, described the one he was using, which he'd acquired in a somewhat unorthodox way: *"[It's] an IBM PS/2, Model 70 386. I know – so old it should print out in Sanskrit. I got it from a guy named Curtis who was operating out of an open garage on Bienville Street in the French Quarter."* **Steve Hughes** took the use of personal computers a step further by test driving a new IBM speech recognition program. Perhaps as expected, it did not go very well. But he still looked on the experiment as a glass-half-full exercise:

"If anyone had told me 10 years ago that I could sit in my home office and dictate to my computer using a \$75 program and get anything even half as good as the test text, I would not have believed them."



Guy Lillian

SFPAns seemed non-committal about IBM and its PC technology. Or any other hardware manufacturer, for that matter. But that was not the case concerning a certain software producer.

Jeff Copeland pulled no punches when he stated: *“The fact is that Microsoft has been using it’s hegemony in operating systems to force hardware vendors to preferentially push its other products. Netscape and web browsers are but one victim of this strategy. I’ve gotten pretty tired of hearing folks who produce mediocre products claim that they’re forcing them down our throats via illegal business practices for the good of the public and competition.”* **Janice Gelb** seemed to concur, citing a panel about technology from the 1998 Westercon: *“The panel turned into a discussion not of whether Microsoft is evil, but just how evil they are!”*

But not everybody in SFPA was anti-Microsoft. Steve Hughes was so much a Microsoft power user that he was one of the early adopters of Windows 98 and had some good things to say about it. And **Robert Lichtman** seemed satisfied with the antiquated Microsoft operating systems he was using: *“I run WordPerfect 5.1+ in a DOS shell (on Windows NT 4.0) and it works just fine. ... At home I use an 11-year-old XT clone running WordPerfect 5.0 and DOS 2.1. I suspect I may be the last person on the planet using that version of DOS. Nothing has ever crashed and burned; it does what I need; and so I see no particular reason to replace it.”*

Other popular technology-related topics in the mailing were email accounts and personal websites. Concerning the former, **I** opined that: *“[Nicki and I] got email, lessee, back in 1993, and back then we were probably among maybe 1 percent of the population who had. Now I’m guessing it must be between 10 and 20 percent who do. It’s starting to become almost as common (and as useful) as a telephone.”* Gosh, who woulda thought?! There was similar shortsightedness about personal websites and storage memory available for them. **Irv Koch** boasted that: *“I now have 6 meg of web space coming from Earthlink as a result of their deal with Sprintmail”*, while **Richard Brandt** informed us all that: *“One can more easily than ever accumulate twenty or thirty megs – certainly far more than most of us will ever use.”* Hah!



Irv Koch

But **Gary Brown** was the least forward-looking of all when he described some Internet connectivity issues he was having: *“I’m sitting here sans modem and Internet connection at the moment. About a week ago, I came home and turned on the computer only to discover that I could not connect to America OnLine. My modem didn’t work.”* 2,400 baud was still pretty hot stuff back then.

SFPA is nominally an apa about science fiction but commentary in everybody’s zines ranged far wider than just that. There’s a adage, perhaps originated by Don Markstein during one of his times as SFPA’s Official Editor, that an apa is essentially a mail-order cocktail party. In other words, everything that happens anywhere is a valid topic for discussion. And that was certainly the case for SFPA 204. **David Schlosser**, for example, seemed philosophical (in a roundabout way) about not getting a promotion at work: *“I didn’t get the nod. ... But even though I wasn’t 100% sure I wanted the job, it bothers me a bit that I didn’t get it. So now I’m not sure if what bothers me is not getting a job that I wanted or just not coming out on top in the selection process, or a bit of both. ... I’m almost as much bothered by the fact that it bothers me as by the situation itself.”* And **Richard Dengrove**, in a moment of navel gazing, was not hesitant to share some information about himself: *“I have never been a hermit ... but my circle of friends is usually very small. I have my wife, a few acquaintances at work, a few acquaintances in far-*

flung places, and now my relatives. But that seems to be it. I used to hate myself for being so unpopular but more and more it has dawned on me that all along I preferred solitude to interaction.”

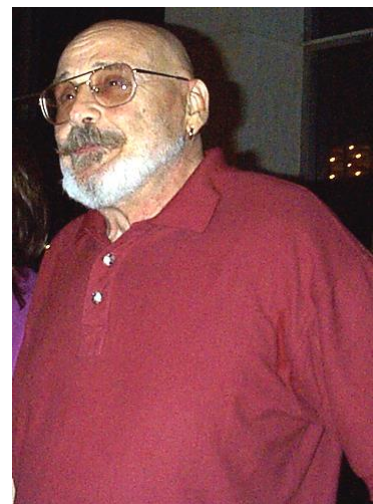
Other SFPAnS were much less averse to interactions with ‘outsiders’. **Gary Robe** and his family were, in fact, very welcoming of them: *“We are hosting two of the players for the [baseball] rookie league Kingsport Mets in our house. ... Our two players are David Wheeler, a right handed pitcher from Spokane, and Tom Paciorek Jr., outfielder from Atlanta, and son of former major leaguer Tom Sr. The main advantages of having them here so far is to keep*



Gary Robe (and son)

Corlis company while I’m travelling, and Dave has volunteered to keep the grass cut for the next month! Oh, and we get free admittance to the K-Mets home games.” And **Robert Lichtman** provided a bit of autobiographical information about his life back in the early 1970s when he lived on The Farm, a commune in Tennessee where everybody surrounding it were outsiders: *“I ran the Farm Grocery for over a year before I got pulled off to become the Promo Guy for the newly-formed Farm Band. This was because of my experience back in 1969/70 working for Columbia Records in San Francisco.”*

Money and economics are historically common topics in SFPA. The 204th mailing was collated and mailed about a year before the so-called dot-com stock market crash, and back then it was high times in terms of making a profit from investments. In particular, **Eve Ackerman** showed a lot of optimism: *“I just took a chance on an offering for some high tech med research stock investigating new treatments for diabetes and renal dialysis. Hey, my Pfizer stock has made me happy the last couple months so I’m willing to try again.”* But **Steve Hughes**, on the other hand, had an observation about a downsides of making money from the stock market: *“Taxes are just too painful a topic for me right now. I’m coming up on my second quarterly payment and I’ll have to have a few drinks before I sign it.”*



Hank Reinhardt

Besides all this there were also the inevitable discussions about politics. SFPA 204 was collated and mailed right in the middle of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal which, following an lengthy investigation by so-called ‘Independent Counsel’ Kenneth Starr, led to President Bill Clinton’s impeachment by the Republican-led House of Representatives on four counts, one of them perjury. SFPA’s political leanings were (and still are) mostly leftward but back in the late 1990s there was a prominent conservative, **Hank Reinhardt**, who often made appearances as a ‘guest columnist’ in

Toni Weisskopf's SFPazine. And he could be pretty blunt: *"Clinton is a liar. I do not mean the 'normal' political lies, such as promising one thing and doing another. But an outright liar."* However, **Gary Brown** had an alternate take: *"They couldn't beat Bill Clinton, so they are going to hound him out of office. ... The voters don't buy it and the GOP just can't understand why. If there is a Clinton legacy, it well may be he outsmarted the entire Republican Party time and time again."* And **Guy Lillian** made it pretty clear that he thought it was all, in the end, little more than pointless political theater: *"Starr is not the model of the modern major prosecutor. He didn't start with a crime and try to figure out who committed it. He started with a perp and tried to find something with which to nail him. Didn't work, shouldn't have worked, and Starr should be out of work."*

All this might give the impression that SFPA is an apa about everything *except* science fiction, but that's not the case. A good example of this was **Liz Copeland**, who'd been using some of the summer to catch up on her reading: *"Jeff finally got tired of me griping about it, and went and found all of the Hugo and Nebula nominees (and winners) since 1980. I turned it into a spiffy little list with room to check them off as I read them."* Which she included in the mailing. And there was also an observation by **Norm Metcalf** about written science fiction: *"While the atomic bomb gained science-fiction a certain degree of acceptance, library acceptance became more widespread in the late 1940s and early 1950s. And one of the chief reasons was Robert A. Heinlein with his nominal juveniles for Scribner's which were in many (possibly most) school libraries in the U.S."* **Norm** went on to say that: *"Possibly the worst single blow sustained by quality science-fiction was equating Star Trek with good science-fiction. While total sales rose, quality was highly diffused and sloppy thinking and gobbledygook became even more common."*

Star Trek didn't much enter into commentary in SFPA 204, but there were some recently-released movies that did. **Jeff Copeland** offered his take on two of them: *"Deep Impact was our first summer movie this year. It's got characters, a plot, a quickly-solved minor mystery, plot, subtlety, and only once did I lean over to Liz and say 'Bzzt!', the dreaded sign that they'd blown a point of science. ... On the other hand, most of Armageddon is simply wrong. The science is bad. The characters are cardboard. ... But things go boom a lot."* **Ned Brooks**, on the other hand, seemed to be looking forward to a rumored film adaptation of a terrible SF novel: *"I will be interested to hear which novel The Clones was filmed – there are at least two. Both bad, but only one of them bad enough to be funny. If some ham actually has to say 'Keep your hands off my clones, you slut!', you have the right one."*

The science fiction topic of greatest interest in SFPA 204 was conventions. One of them was the 1998 International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, an academic conference in Orlando whose Guest of Honor was Peter Straub. There were plenty of scholarly papers about writers who were active in the genre. And also a panel about one author who no longer was. As **Arthur Hlavaty** described it, *"In the evening, John Clute and Gary K. Wolfe discussed Thomas M. Disch's forthcoming nonfiction book The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of, apparently the latest and greatest chapter in Disch's continuing flow of bile and derision aimed at the field he once belonged to. The discussion made me more eager to see what Disch has come up with this time, preferably without paying for it."*

Another was CorsairCon, which had been held in Phoenix. **Don Markstein** gave a brief summary of this pirate-themed convention which had been chaired by his partner GiGi Dane: *"Attendance was about what we expected; and by careful management of the funds ... we came*

out well in the black. Pirate groups from Nevada and California were represented. And if anybody had anything but a wonderful time, I sure didn't hear about it!"

There was also a convention report from **Janice Gelb**, who had attended the 1998 Westercon out in California. She described it as an event filled with interesting panels but even more so as a nexus for meeting up with friends: *"It took us over an hour to travel more than 15 feet or so inside the [hotel] lobby thanks to meeting Las Vegas fans Aileen and Ken Forman and LA fan John Hertz. We talked fanzines and other non-fannish stuff until finally going to various room parties. I ended up mostly hanging out at the Hawaii in 2000 Westercon bid party which featured an amazing array of tropical decorations, including fake trees. I answered the chorus of 'Janice, you just got lei'd' on my entrance by saying, 'From your mouth to God's ear', which convulsed at least one partygoer."* **Janice** had also found that the convention's business meeting was way more interesting than she'd expected: *"It was one of the most entertaining events of the whole weekend, weird as that may sound. I generally have stopped going to business meetings but this one was worth it. DUFF winner Terry Frost made a motion that Australia be included in the possible sites for Westercon and for the next 40 minutes or so lively debate and preposterous amendments ensued. Finally, official wording to be added to the Westercon bylaws now will say that Westercons can be held in Australia once it is annexed to the United States or vice versa."*



Janice Gelb

The convention that got the most coverage, by far, was the 36th DeepSouthCon which had been held in Birmingham, Alabama about a month before SFPA 204 was mailed to its members. More than a dozen then-current and former SFPA members attended, but I was not one of them. As **I** explained in my SFPazine: *"I'm now out from under two publishing projects, the new issue of Mimosa and the Souvenir Book for the [upcoming] Baltimore Worldcon. Could not attend DeepSouthCon, mostly because of the Souvenir Book project; it was just too close to the deadline with too much yet to do. Nicki and I had been to all the other Birmingham DeepSouthCons (we received the Rebel Award at the 1981 B'HamaCon, in fact), so it was disappointing to break that string."*

Comments from SFPAnS who did attend described the hotel as a not-fun experience. **Guy Lillian** pretty well summarized the situation when he wrote: *"Entering the city, it was easy to find the Ramada, site of the convention: last time, the hotel was a ruin; this time, it was worse."* **Jeff Copeland** was even blunter: *"As I put it in Gary Robe's hearing, 'Normally, you have to go to a third-world country to find a hotel this bad.' He agreed."* As for what some of the problems were, **Steve Hughes** offered that: *"The public part of the hotel was extremely hot! Which is more than I could say for the food at the coffee shop / bar."* Towels were also a source of complaint. **Gary Robe** wrote that: *"I don't recall ... a hotel more dismally supplied with towels than this one. Someone suggested ... that they must steal towels from the*



Steve Hughes

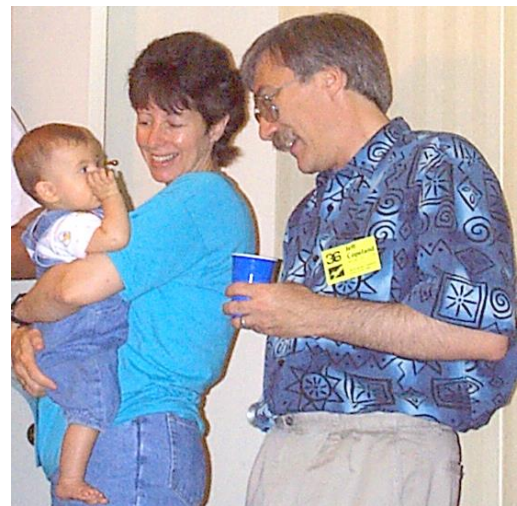
*hospital up the street!” But on the other hand, **Binker Hughes** decided early on that the ‘good’ about the convention far outweighed the ‘bad’ of the hotel: “*Sure, people were calling it ‘Deep Sweat Con’ due to the iffy main-area air conditioning; sure, those with rooms were complaining about the minimal (and miniscule) towels; but the People were there – and that’s what matters.*”*

The ‘people’ Binker was referring to were friends she’d known for years, both within and outside SFPA. And other SFPAnS obviously thought the same. One of them was **Guy Lillian**, who was happy to see fans he’d not recently crossed paths with: “*Larry & P.L. Montgomery appeared – Larry looked hale and hearty, but P.L. was wheelchair-bound, and is in the midst of hand therapy. Stven Carlberg showed for his first DSC in four years. He’s married now*



Larry Montgomery

– and though he didn’t get to play in the Hearts tourney, he did get to serve me a Margarita. I did know that Steve Hughes had married lovely Suzanne, and Suzanne covered the con taking electronic photos, a 21st Century tourist.” It was the same for **Liz Copeland**: “*I got to chat with George Inzer and it’s been almost literally decades since we did that, met Janet [Larson] and her hunky husband Kyle and the new baby (I never did see the older two kids), painted my toenails gold thanks to Corlis [Robe], listened to the Ned & George [Wells] show, and a myriad of other delights.*” But **Janet Larson** seemed a bit more philosophical: “*Going to DSC after all those years is a pretty intimidating thought. I’ve changed, you’ve changed, new faces there, old faces gone.*” She hadn’t attended a DSC since 1981, and this resulted in an amusing meet-up: “*‘Guy, I’m Janet,’ I said, and he did a double take. It’s not often you see Guy Lillian speechless, and I was trying hard not to laugh out loud.*”



Janet Larson (and son) and Jeff Copeland

Stand-alone DeepSouthCons typically have programming with greater content about Southern fandom than do DSCs that are add-ons to existing conventions, and DSC 36 was a case in point. One example of this was a panel about Southern Fandom anecdotes. As **Guy Lillian** described it: “*Janice Gelb moderated Bob Tucker, Buck Coulson and I on the subject of Southern fandom, ... which neither Tucker nor Buck knew anything about. Still, Janice managed to keep me from dominating matters with my tales of DSC history and Ned Brooks making water by the side of the highway (as Al Fitzpatrick and I hid our faces in shame) and so forth; Gelbo simply tapped my shoulder when she wanted me to shut up. She didn’t swat me in the chops –*

for our relationship, progress.” Perhaps not surprisingly, **Janice**’s take on it was a bit different: *“Guy managed to convulse the crowd with a tasteless anecdote about a road trip featuring Ned Brooks.”*

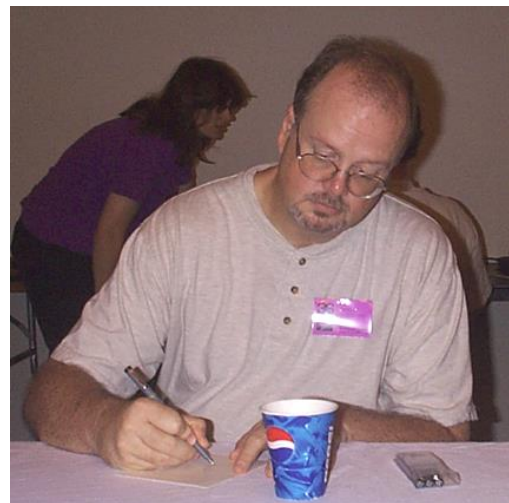
Janice also described another program item, a more informal one not in the program, that often happened at DSCs back then: *“A bunch of us left the party to go out to the pool deck to hear dramatic readings of Really Bad Science Fiction picked out by our own George Wells and read with feeling by Hank Reinhardt. The stars were Galaxy 666, The Clones, and that famous feature run through SFPA, Werewolf vs. the Vampire Women, plus a hilarious song ditty read by George from Queen Kong.”* And there was also a dance. Although not exactly a Southern Fandom tradition, it did provide lots of afterhours entertainment. So much so that **Janice** changed her shut-eye plans that evening: *“I passed by the dance on the way upstairs: big mistake as far as my sleep plans were concerned since they had finally gotten to the Good Stuff and were playing ‘Mony Mony’. I stayed and danced until about 2 a.m., and it was worth it just to see Dennis [Dolbear] do ecstatic knee-drops to ‘Born to Be Wild’.”*



George Wells

Another not-a-Southern Fandom tradition was the art auction. There were some very good paintings and prints that sold, as well as something (whose proceeds benefited charity) that was a bit more unusual. As **Steve Hughes** told it: *“Did you ever bid on having someone kill you? ... I bid on and won the fictional death because it seemed like a cool idea. Now I’ve got to pick up a couple of [David] Weber’s books and see what kind of universe I’m going to get killed in.”*

An actual DSC tradition (of sorts) is the ‘one shot’, a fanzine created while the convention is in progress. One of those happened at DSC 36. It was assembled by **Steve Hughes**, who had this to say about its genesis: *“At the last DSC Toni [Weisskopf] ran a panel on fannish one shots. The idea behind the session was not to talk about one shots but to actually produce one during the panel. It was a lot of fun so she decided to do another panel at DSC 36. Last time the technology used to produce the one shot was a mixture of Guy’s portable typewriter and my notebook [computer]. This time we had three notebooks and no primitive mechanical imprinting devices. Toni got Wade Gilbreath and Randy Cleary to do art for the zine.”*



Wade Gilbreath (illustrating the One-Shot)

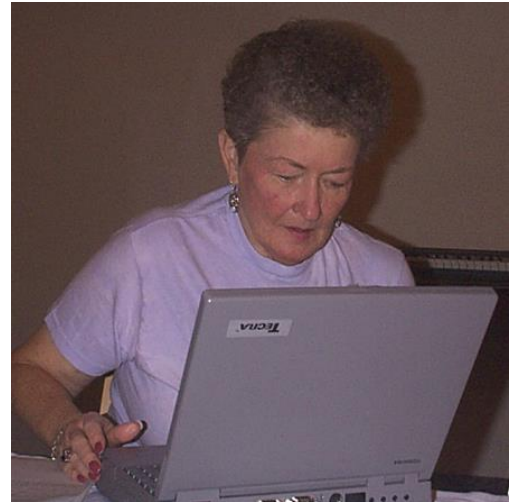
The joke title for the one shot was *Janice and Tucker ... Their Wild Night of Passion in St. Louis*. Janice, on her way to Birmingham from the West Coast, had an unanticipated one-night stay in St. Louis due to a flight cancellation. She had discovered Bob Tucker, also on the way to DSC as one of its guests, was in line at the airline service desk and in the same situation. They’d had a nice dinner together, but unlike what the

one shot title suggested they'd had separate rooms at the layover hotel. Toni was aware that Janice seldom participates in one shots, and was able to get it all printed and collated before Janice was even aware. **Steve Hughes** noted that the repro cost, at an office supply store, wasn't cheap: *"The tab, almost \$70, reminded me why I print all my zines at home! Still, the look on Janice's face when she saw the cover was well worth the price."* And indeed, Janice was a good sport about it.

The DSC 36 one shot had been open for all convention attendees to participate, and quite a few of them did. There were some amusing exchanges, including one about beverages. It started when **Nancy Tucker Shaw**, widow of the late writer and humorist Bob Shaw, mock-complained that: *"What is fandom coming to? An insidious disease is creeping across conventions. NO BHEER IN THE CON SUITE. ... Bob Shaw is turning over in his grave, and he will be back to haunt us."* To which **Gary Robe** agreed: *"An SF con without ethanol is like, ah phooey, my metaphor subroutine doesn't seem to be loaded this morning."*

The most DSC event of all was its business meeting. And the most DSC part of that meeting was the presentation of the Rebel and Phoenix Awards. The Rebel is a lifetime achievement award which (to quote Wikipedia) is presented to a fan "who has done a great deal for Southern Fandom" while the Phoenix is a counterpart lifetime achievement award for a professional writer or artist. They both originated more than a half century ago – the Rebel in 1965 and the Phoenix in 1970. DSC 36 continued the tradition by honoring two fans (Tom Feller and Bob Tucker) and one pro (David Weber). There is no year-to-year uniformity of what the actual awards consist of, and for DSC 36 they turned out to be a stained glass wall hanging for Weber and full-size swords for Feller and Tucker. They both took the opportunity to brandish them for the inevitable photo op, and as **Steve Hughes** described it: *"I imagine [Tucker] had fun getting [it] on to the plane for the trip back!"*

Besides these there was one other award presented – the Rubble. Unlike the Rebel, which honors a fan or fans who has done a lot *for* Southern Fandom, the Rubble goes to the fan (or in some years another entity) that has done a lot *to* Southern Fandom. It's all tongue-in-cheek, and the 'awardee' is usually chosen by the award's originator, Gary Robe. But not this time. For DSC 36, a fateful decision had been made to let previous Rubble recipients decide who the 'winner' would be. And the fix was in. **Guy Lillian** described the overall plan: *"We would fool Robe into thinking we had chosen some apt target, then present the award, instead, to him, to Gary, as reprisal for his having given the award to us."* **Toni Weisskopf** wrote that: *"Amazingly, this incredibly complicated, secret plot, conceived of & executed by a bunch of drunken fans,*



Nancy Tucker Shaw



Toni Weisskopf

came off!” Gary was informed that the reason he was chosen as the ‘honoree’ was because he was the inventor of the Rubble. And also because, as it turned out, there was no way he could stop them from doing so. As for the award itself, it turned out to be an ‘authentic’ fast food meal from Krystal. Gary had seemed genuinely surprised and **Guy** wrote that: *“It was this DeepSouthCon’s Great Moment.”*

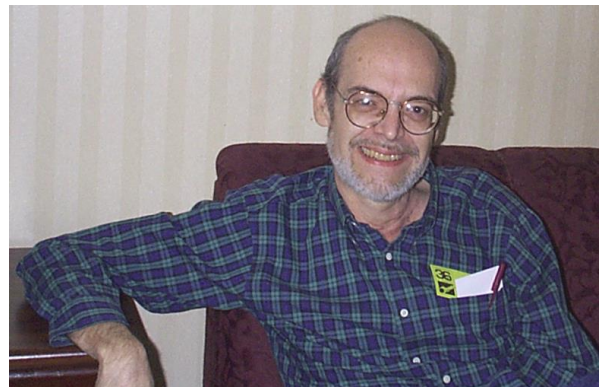
So in spite of the issues with the hotel, in the end the convention turned out to be memorable. **Liz Copeland** wrote that: *“DSC was great fun, even if the hotel was an abyss of incompetence.”* **Binker Hughes** related that: *“[It was] the kind of Con that makes me think DSCs ought to go on for a week, without any particular increase in programming, or until we all got sick of each other. Definitely good.”* And **Steve Hughes** provided a good wrap-up description: *“There were a lot of things that don’t fit into a neat heading: Justin Winston with a Minox B spy camera on a key chain. A two hour discussion with Jeff Copeland, Frank Love and others on the effects of the Justice Department’s Microsoft lawsuit and how their lawsuit against Intel is probably more significant. A similar discussion with Hank Reinhardt about whether the U.S. is becoming more diverse or more cohesive. I’m on the ‘more cohesive’ side of the question. Dinner with a whole gang at Shoney’s one night and a fish place that looked like a dive but had great food the next. A guy in the costume party made up as a traffic cone and I’m not kidding. Toni’s Baen Books presentation showing covers for future books. And last but not least, buying Suzanne and my memberships in the next DSC so we can do this all over again next year!”* And **Binker** added an afterward about the relationship between DSC and SFPA: *“It’s events like this one that put an end to any foolish thoughts of being sensible and getting out of SFPA – I’d miss entirely too much fun!”*



Binker Hughes

SFPA 204 consisted of 34 different fanzines and one convention flier, which came to a total of 415 pages. Back then there were 24 members on the roster and all but three of them had fanzines in the mailing. It’s now been a quarter of a century since SFPA 204 was collated and mailed to its members and in that time we’ve lost many SFPA members and DSC 36 attendees whose names appear in this essay. **Binker Hughes** was one of them – she died of cancer in

2016. **Buck Coulson** died in 1999 following a lengthy illness. **Nancy Tucker Shaw** had a debilitating stroke just three months after DSC 36 and died in 2000. **P.L. Caruthers-Montgomery** died of a stroke in 2003. **Irv Koch** died in 2005 from a heart attack. **Bob Tucker** died from congestive heart failure in 2006. **Hank Reinhardt** died in 2007 from a bacterial infection following open heart surgery. **Don Markstein** died in 2012 following a series of strokes. **Dennis Dolbear** died from pneumonia and septicemia in 2013. **George Inzer** died from a heart attack in 2013. **Ned**



George Inzer

Brooks died in 2015 from a fall while doing repairs to the roof of his house. **Norm Metcalf** died in 2019 from renal disorder. **Robert Lichtman** died in 2022 after a long bout with myeloma.

Larry Montgomery died of a stroke in 2022. All of them, in their own ways, enriched the genre of science fiction and its fandom with their activities. But to me they are still alive via timebinding. Reading their words, reading about things they said and did, it's almost as if they're still out there. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, there were many times during my digital archiving that I actually had to stop myself from composing comments on fanzines in the mailing. There were so many things I had wanted to say.

The next SFPA mailing was published in September 1998. Whereas the July mailing had much coverage of the 36th DeepSouthCon, SFPA 205 contained several reports on the 1998 Worldcon, Bucconeer. I don't know yet if I'm going to do a lengthy essay similar to this one – it takes a lot of time to do the research and writing, and that's after all the scanning and OCR – but the siren song of timebinding certainly makes it tempting. And I won't at all be surprised if that wins out. ☀

Note: All photos included in this essay were taken in June 1998 at B'Hamacon 4, the 36th DeepSouthCon.

Afterword:

In the time since that essay was written we've lost **George Wells**, whose health had been in decline for many months prior to his death back in June. And, unbeknownst to me while I was writing the essay, **Frank Love** had died in 2015 – a brief obituary is online but there wasn't a cause of death listed. A DSC 36 attendee not mentioned in this essay was former SFPA member **Penny Frierson**, who died in 2021 – I couldn't find an online obituary for her, but at least she was remembered in the File770.com newsblog for her co-chairmanship of the 1986 Worldcon and for her many years of activity in Southern Fandom.



Frank Love



Penny Frierson



Meade Frierson

Of the three SFPA members who hadn't had a fanzine in SFPA 204, two are also now deceased: the aforementioned George Wells and a SFPA mainstay who had unfortunately managed to miss the mailing: **Meade Frierson**, who departed this mortal realm back in 2001. I'm absolutely certain I'd have found *numerous* quote-snippets of his to use in this essay if only he'd had a fanzine in the mailing.

This next essay is also SFPA-centric, and describes an almost-member who has since become notorious for events he may have been involved in that happened outside of fandom. Put on a sweater, it's chilling...

We'll Never Know For Sure

It's fascinating what you can find in old fanzines. They really *are* a treasure trove of historical information and bravo to **fanac.org** for creating a digital archive which makes these decades-old fan materials available online for all of us to marvel at. Fanzines have documented not only things that happened within science fiction fandom itself but also stuff about how fandom has had crossovers with the quote-unquote real world.

A good and perhaps startling example of this can be found in Don Markstein's *Timebinders I*, a mini-history of the first 49 mailings of the Southern Fandom Press Alliance. SFPA is an amateur press association that came into existence in 1961 and during its first two decades included many prominent fans in its membership. Two of them, Joe Staton and William Gibson, went on to find professional fame and fortune as an artist and an author. But there was one other SFPA member who has achieved fame of a different and more notorious kind. His name was Paul Doerr.

He was in SFPA very briefly and is listed on the membership roster only for mailing 39 (January 1971). And he has a somewhat unusual distinction. Markstein was the Official Editor for that mailing and as he described in *Timebinders I*:

One of the five new members was one Paul Doerr, who performed the almost (but not quite) unprecedented act of appearing on the SFPA roster without once, ever, contributing. He accomplished this remarkable feat by sending in 21 copies of a genzine, *Unknown*, just before he found out that the copy requirement for the 39th Mailing had been raised to 23. I wrote him immediately to tell him that he needed two more copies, so he sent them along – but they didn't arrive until after the deadline, when the mailing was already out. Meanwhile, the roster had filled and I'd upped the copy requirement to its old level, 25. He dutifully sent two more, but meanwhile, I found out that the zine had had distribution long before the deadline for the 39th, so I couldn't accept it as required activity. And I told him so. He wrote back irately that it had been new when he sent it, even tho it was distributed before the deadline, and that I should have asked the members to vote on the matter. I didn't bother to answer. I don't think he ever caught on that not all apas are as incredibly lax about activity requirements as FAPA. I threw him out as of the 40th Mailing and just kept the 25 zines around. About a year later, I gave away as many copies as I could (not bloody many) and threw the rest away.

But that little episode isn't what made Paul Doerr notorious. Nope, not at all – it's for something much, much bigger than that. He's become one of the prime suspects for being the Zodiac Killer.

It's been described as “the most famous unsolved murder case in American history”. In 1968 and 1969, five serial killings happened in the San Francisco Bay Area. During the spree, the killer, who referred to himself as ‘Zodiac’, sent taunting notes to regional newspapers. And also four ciphers, two of which still have not yet been cracked. He was never apprehended and even now, more than a half century later, the five murders are still considered as open cases. Over the years there have been many potential suspects but thanks to research by writer Jarrett Kobek



composite police sketch of Zodiac based on eyewitness accounts

(which was described in detail by an article in the 22 September 2022 issue of *Los Angeles Magazine*), Doerr is now considered as one of the more prime. It was all summarized in a section of the Wikipedia article about the Zodiac Killer:

In 2022, novelist Jarrett Kobek published *How to Find Zodiac*, in which Kobek named Paul Doerr as a suspect. Doerr was a North Bay resident with a post office box in Vallejo, where the first murders took place. Born in 1927, Doerr's age in 1969 (42) as well as his height (5' 9") was consistent with witness estimates. He was an avid fanzine publisher and letter-writer throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and many of his writings exhibit circumstantial parallels with the Zodiac. For example, Doerr was interested in cryptography; in Doerr's own Tolkien fanzine *HOBBITALIA*, he published a cipher in Cirth three days after Zodiac sent the Z13 cipher (Kobek in fact argues that the solution to the *HOBBITALIA* cipher is one of only three possible solutions to Z13). In Doerr's own fanzine *PIONEER*, he references the same formula for an ANFO bomb given later by the Zodiac, which Kobek argues was not widely known before the Internet and the publication of *The Anarchist Cookbook* in 1971. In a letter to [the N3F fanzine *TIGHTBEAM*] in 1970, Doerr advocated using solely 1¢ stamps to spite the U.S. Post Office, a practice the Zodiac employed on some of his letters. Doerr hinted in a 1974 letter to fanzine *GREEN EGG* that he had previously killed people, and revealed in a different letter that he knew that mail to the [*San Francisco Examiner*] would be delivered without a street address, just as the Zodiac sent them. Doerr's daughter read Kobek's book with the intent of suing for libel, but came away impressed with Kobek's research, adding in interviews that Doerr had at times been a violent and abusive father. Paul Haynes, a researcher for [the HBO true crime documentary series] *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, called Doerr "the best Zodiac suspect that's ever surfaced."

Timebinders I was recently added to the **fanac.org** archive (it's so far the only fanzine digitally preserved from SFPA's 50th mailing) and there's lots more of fan history interest in it than just the paragraph about Paul Doerr's ghost membership in the apa. It's a good read.

And as for Doerr himself, the overall timeline leads to a chilling realization. If he actually *was* Zodiac (and it should be noted there is at least one other prime suspect besides him) then the five murders occurred prior to his very abbreviated time on the SFPA roster. And not only that, there were other killings that some investigators suspect had been committed by Zodiac and they all happened after Markstein booted him.

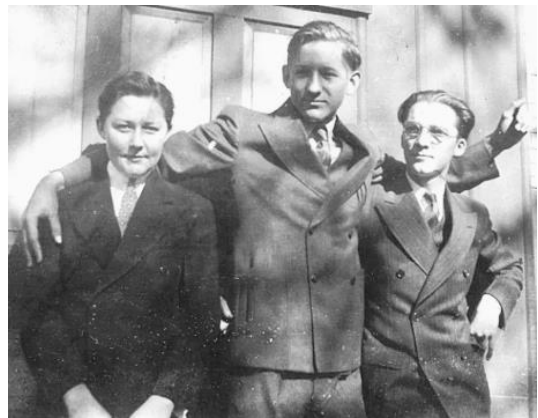
A Google search on Doerr's name, as you might expect, brings up scads of links about the Zodiac Killer mystery. And besides all these there's also one to **findagrave.com**, which shows a photo of his headstone (he died in 2007 and is buried in the Sacramento Valley National Cemetery). Doerr had been a military veteran, which had induced one of the two people who commented to write the usual "Thanks for your service." But the *other* commenter wrote something that's much more to the point as far as the Zodiac Killer mystery is concerned: "Did you do it?" Guess we'll never know for sure. ☀

Afterword:

I'd really like to find issues of Doerr's fanzines *Pioneer*, *Unknown*, and *Hobbitalia*. They need to be available online for crime historians to peruse. A non-SFPA timebinding essay is up next, a remembrance of a good friend who had a looooooong and well-lived life.

A Living Time Machine

There have been many times, during my nearly 50 years in science fandom, that I have wondered what it must have been like to have been a member of the very earliest fan organizations. To have attended the very earliest science fiction conventions including the first Worldcon. To have been friends with famous fans and pros when they were young men and women. What would it have been like to have been a part of the forefront of fandom back then? What would it have been like?



l-r: Jack Agnew, John Baltadonis, and Bob Madle (ca. 1935)

I was fortunate to have had a friend who had done all of those things and more. Whenever I met or corresponded with him, whenever I sat in on a convention panel where he was a participant, whenever I read from some of his many fan publications that described previous eras of fandom, it was like I was in the presence of a living time machine. His name was Bob Madle.

I had known of Bob even before my first days in fandom back in the mid-1970s. But it was my great misfortune not to have met him in person until shortly after I had moved to Maryland in 1988. By then I had taken a strong interest in what had happened in earlier eras of fandom and this had manifested into me becoming co-editor, along with my wife Nicki, of a fanzine (*Mimosa*) whose very reason for existence was the need to preserve bits of fan history, especially from the First Fandom ‘dinosaur’ era, that were then only fragilely kept in the memories of some of the older fans. After our relocation to Maryland it seemed almost too good to be true that one of the most prominent fans of all lived just a short distance away.

I don’t have a lot of memories about my first meeting with Bob except that he was warm and welcoming when I showed up at his front door one afternoon. He took me down into his basement to see all the science fiction books and magazines that he had for sale in his mail order business, and I *do* have a strong memory of that. It was awesome. It was like a miniature version of the Area 51 warehouse where the *Lost Ark of the Covenant* ended up, except that there were stacks of books instead of wooden crates. I must have looked dumbstruck because when I looked over at Bob he had a big grin on his face.



Bob Madle (age 100) with a small part of his mail order inventory

It was only a bit more than two years after arriving in Maryland that I had taken on a big fanhistory project as editor of Harry Warner’s 1950s fanhistory book *A Wealth of Fable*, and Bob was an invaluable resource who I called upon frequently. He was everything from a fact checker to a provider of photographs for the book to a source of anecdotes and stories about fandom of the ‘50s. I didn’t actually need the latter since it

was Harry's manuscript, but it allowed me to plant the seed that he really ought to preserve these tales, either in print or on tape. And eventually he did.

It was at the 1998 Worldcon, held in relatively nearby Baltimore, that I finally got the opportunity to do a taped interview with Bob. It was unfortunately not very well attended and held in a room where there were distractions going on outside, but it still resulted in a transcript which was published in two parts in *Mimosa*. In the first part Bob described his personal odyssey, starting with his discovery of science fiction from futuristic pulp magazine covers in the early 1930s, to the first-ever science fiction convention in 1936, to the beginnings of the Worldcons, through the war years of the 1940s, to the first Philadelphia Worldcon in 1947. In the second, he brought the narrative into the 1950s where he was involved in the invention of the Hugo Awards, the origination of First Fandom, a very contentious Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund election, and even a less-than-successful attempt to bring fandom to another part of the country. Wonderful stuff.

Come the new millennium, my contacts with Bob became fewer and fewer with the passage of time. We still crossed paths every so often, but usually it was for only relatively brief instances. The final time I visited him at his home was in 2009, and it turned out to be a memorable encounter because it was the only time that I ever had my picture taken with him. I remember that we had an extended chat about fan history and, more specifically, the 1939 Worldcon. And I also remember that I wished it could have gone on a lot longer than it did.

Bob was 102 when he died, and we're all wishing his life could have gone on a lot longer than it did. It was a life well-lived, filled with many memorable events that he'd participated in. I feel honored that I was his friend and that he'd shared many of those events with descriptions vivid enough that I could almost believe I was there. So I'll end this remembrance by paraphrasing Dr. Seuss: "Don't be sad that it's over, smile because it happened." I'm sad, but all my pleasant memories of Bob are making me smile. I think he'd have liked that. ☀



me and Bob, at his home in 2009

Afterword:

As mentioned in the essay, Bob was one of the founders of First Fandom, whose membership was limited to those who could document fan activity of some kind as of January 1, 1938. (This was later changed, unnecessarily, to the first Worldcon, in July 1939.) It was a so-called 'Last Man' organization (even though there were many women who were members) and as far as I'm aware, Bob was the Last Man. Legend has it that there was a bottle of good-quality whiskey that the final member of First Fandom was to open and do a hearty toast to salute all the departed members. That bit of performance art never happened, though, because even assuming such bottle did exist, it would quite likely have been consumed in one of the First Fandom meetings which were held at Worldcons and Midwestcons during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s.

Performance art is the theme for the remaining essays in this issue, starting with a description of Nicki's and my most recent early January mini-vacation to New York City. There was much performance art to be found there, and all of it was very entertaining.

The Lights Are Bright on Broadway

“I guess it *does* need a road.”

That had been my first thought as Nicki and I exited the Winter Garden Theatre, after seeing with some surprise what was parked on Broadway next to the theatre. It was Emmett Brown’s DeLorean. We’d just seen the entertaining new musical adaptation of *Back to the Future*, which had accomplished the feat of staying faithful to the movie’s plot while incorporating a slew of new songs. And it also kept a lot of the original dialog, including Doc Brown’s line near the end of the show: “Where we’re going we don’t *need* roads!” Even though they obviously do in New York City.



Doc Brown’s DeLorean

My second thought had been: “Where the heck were they keeping that thing?” The section of Broadway alongside the Winter Garden doesn’t have any car parks or garages so there’s gotta be some non-trivial logistics involved to get the car there before the end of every show. It must have been worth it, from the large number of theatre-goers crowding around to take photos. There were even people across the street taking it all in, and I’d not be surprised if some of them had their interest piqued sufficiently that they’d decide to see a performance. But that hadn’t been necessary for Nicki and me – *Back to the Future* had already been high on our list of shows we’d wanted to see. And it hadn’t let us down.

“It should be a good show.”

That was my comment to Nicki after we’d gotten our tickets at the TKTS booth to see *Kimberly Akimbo*. None of the five shows we saw let us down, though we were at first a bit ambivalent about seeing both *Kimberly* and *How to Dance in Ohio*. We were in the Big Apple for our annual early January mini-vacation which always includes plenty of Broadway performances, but this year there had been relatively fewer shows than usual on our ‘must see’ list. *Kimberly* hadn’t been our first choice the evening we saw it (I’d been desperately hoping that seats for *Merrily We Roll Along* would somehow be available, even though every performance looked to be sold out). But it *had* won five Tony Awards including Best Musical, and that had led to my comment to Nicki,

The main reason we’d been ambivalent about *Kimberly* was because of its subject matter – a hereditary disease which has aged the main character, 16-year-old Kimberly Levaco, at 4½ times the normal rate. We’d not wanted to sit through a downer of a show



outside the Booth Theatre
on January 3rd

and it turned out we didn't have to. It was actually uplifting, with Kim determined to make the most of what little time she knew she had left while, along the way, coping with an illegal get-rich-quick scheme by a kooky ex-con aunt, emotionally reconnecting with her dysfunctional parents, finding a friend who wanted to be part of most likely her final year of life, and in the end, finding happiness even in her desperate situation. I came away really liking the show a lot.

I think I also used that same "It should be a good show" mantra the next evening when we went to see *How to Dance in Ohio*. Once again, it hadn't been our first choice but it did have the best seats available of the shows we were interested in that were listed by TKTS. Like *Kimberly Akimbo*, it's a musical about coping with adversity – in this case, autism. But unlike *Kimberly*, this one was based on a true story – a 2015 documentary about seven autistic high school students in Columbus, Ohio who, with guidance from their group counselor, set out to improve their social skills by preparing for and staging a 'Spring Formal' dance. The show became newsworthy because the autistic teens were played by autistic actors and actresses.

Because of this, as you might expect, *How to Dance in Ohio* has received critical acclaim for the subject matter and how it was handled. But it did not get great amounts of love from the theatre critics for its musical score, which they unfavorably compared to other notable modern-day musicals such as *Dear Evan Hansen*. That didn't stop people from coming to see it, though. The night we were there it was pretty much a full house. We noticed that special attention had been paid toward making sure the show was sensory-friendly for the autistic, with no sudden loud sounds or flashing lights. There was even an area of the theatre's foyer set aside as a hypersensitivity cool-down space (with a video feed of the performance) for anyone who felt overwhelmed from being amongst a large crowd. Like *Kimberly Akimbo*, it was, in the end, uplifting though it wasn't all that hard (for me, anyway) to figure out where the plot was going. But even with that I still came away liking the show, almost as much as *Kimberly*.



outside the Belasco Theatre on January 4th

“This is the most Broadway-centric New York trip we’ve ever done.”

I made that remark to Nicki after the realization had set in that we'd not be setting foot outside the Theatre District for the entirety of our stay in New York. Even the one museum visit of the trip was theatre-themed – the Museum of Broadway.

It's located on West 45th Street, half a block from Times Square, and has only been in existence since November 2022. We hadn't gone there our previous



trip because there'd been special exhibitions at two other museums we'd really wanted to see. The museum's website describes a visit there as "an immersive experience" and that seems pretty accurate to me. The Wikipedia page about the museum describes it as "the first permanent for-profit museum dedicated to documenting the history and experience of Broadway theatre and its profound influence upon shaping Midtown Manhattan and Times Square. The museum covers more than three hundred years of Broadway history, including costumes and props from more than 500 productions." All this in a compact four-story 26,000 square foot structure.



Nicki with Milky White the cow from *Into the Woods*

There was a lot to see! The museum is divided into three sections – a viewing room that shows a short film chronicling the history of theatre in New York, a timeline walk through that history which highlights prominent shows that have been staged during the 20th and 21st centuries (starting with what's considered the first American musical, the 1927 production of *Show Boat*), and an area where various



"The Lifecycle of a Broadway Show" mural in the museum

aspects of staging a show are shown and described in detail. For me, it was a revelation of sorts to learn more about the overall complexity of theatre productions. This was displayed in considerable detail by a mural in the museum that was so large I couldn't capture it all in a photo. But the most visual parts of the museum were all the costumes that were on display. And also some of the props, such as the puppet of a cow that had a starring role in a terrific musical we'd seen the previous time we were in the city. It was a good photo-op.

Visiting the museum was absolutely a great way to spend one of our mornings, but I'm not sure we'll be back anytime soon because the place doesn't have enough room to do special exhibitions. There's so little available space remaining that they probably can't even much increase the number of things in their permanent exhibitions, and what they already have are from shows so famed, iconic, and in many cases groundbreaking that it seems doubtful to me that they'd ever be changed out.

"That really was spectacular!"

Nicki said that as we were leaving the one matinee we attended. And she was right. As was the case for our previous trip to New York, we saw five shows in the four days we were there. But unlike the 2023 trip, one of them was not either a play or a musical (though it did have a lot of music). We buy most of our show tickets at the discount TKTS booth at the top end of Times

Square, and they'll sell you next-day matinee tix as well as ones for same-day evening shows. So it was a pleasant surprise when we found out that the Radio City Music Hall's *Christmas Spectacular* had not yet ended its run. And an even more pleasant surprise that we were able to get seats for the next afternoon's show just a few rows from the stage (and literally almost within spitting distance of Radio City's talented organist) for the unbelievably low price of \$45 each. Radio City, with a seating capacity of nearly 6,000, is a cavernous venue for seeing a show (as a comparison, the largest Broadway theatre seats not quite 2,000). There are two balconies, way in the back, and from what I could see they were filled. Which meant that everybody back there must have bought their tickets online, before the turn of the year, at whatever the full price was. This reinforced my belief in the Law of Conservation of Karma – our bad luck at not being able to get tix for *Merrily We Roll Along* was offset by our good luck in scoring those excellent seats at a rock bottom price.



Radio City's talented organist

The *Christmas Spectacular* is easily the highest profile show in New York. With all the hoopla I had very high expectations, and it was so terrific that it exceeded them. They packed a lot into 90 minutes – an immersive 3-D sleigh ride with Santa that swooped through the city and ended up on the stage, a nativity story with live animals (including a camel), lots of holiday music by the Radio City Orchestra and Chorus and, of course, the world-famous Rockettes.

Especially the Rockettes. They were on stage for much of the show, and I lost track of how many dance routines they did. It was certainly a lot, all of them intricately choreographed and so aerobic that I was in awe of the dancers' stamina and athleticism. And they did a lot more than just their various high kick routines – tap dance, precision marching, and even some Broadway-style stuff.



the Rockettes, from about the same angle and distance as our seats

There were also numerous costume changes, which must have ramped up the overall complexity for staging the show. It was easily the best of the five shows we saw, and that's much more a compliment to the *Christmas Spectacular* than disrespect to the others – they were *all* good. The only peeve we had was that there was no *Playbill* for the show – we're never gonna know the names of all those great dance routines!

“The Holiday Season isn't ready to end just yet.”

That was my observation after seeing all the holiday décor that was still spread throughout midtown Manhattan. It was just a short walk from Radio City over to Rockefeller Plaza and sure

enough, the big Christmas tree was still there in all its glory. We'd actually been looking for the Lego Store, which had moved from a relatively small space bordering the Plaza to a much bigger one over on 5th Avenue, so that we could see the championship build from the recent season of *Lego Masters*. But it wasn't there yet, as we found out from a store attendant who was shepherding the line of people waiting to enter the place. Instead, directly across the boulevard was Saks Fifth Avenue and what it had on display was much more impressive than any Lego construct. Saks and Christian Dior had teamed up to transform the Saks storefront into a huge "Carousel of Dreams" which showcased some of Dior's designs and (for whatever reason) all the signs of the zodiac. It was really colorful, and I only wish we'd been there in the evening when it was the centerpiece of a light show.



Saks-Dior "Carousel of Dreams" storefront display

There was more to it than just that, though.

All the street-level display windows had been transformed into small-scale depictions of iconic buildings from New York and Paris, all of them created by expert miniaturist artisans from around the world. The concept was to celebrate Monsieur Dior's 1947 journey from Paris to New York, with each window showing a notable building or structure in those two cities.



miniature recreation of Rockefeller Center ice rink and Christmas tree

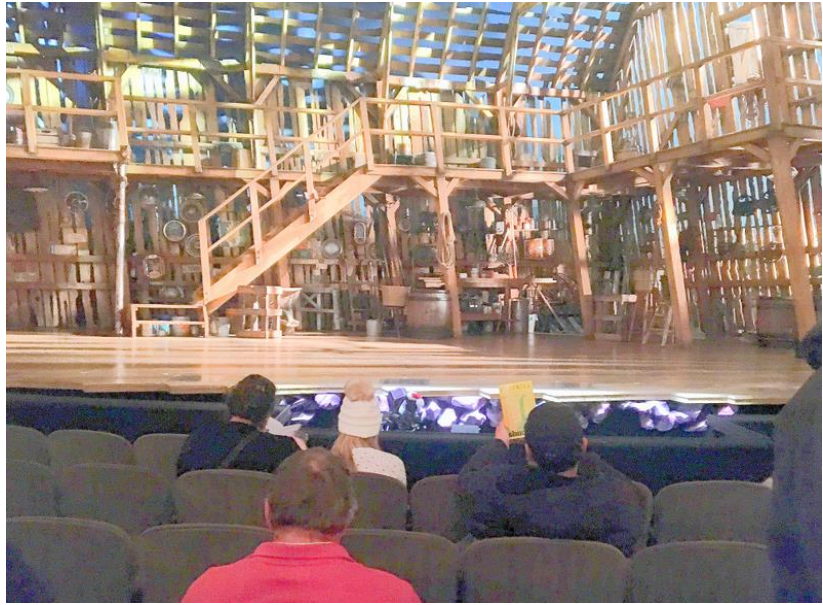
All in all it was pretty amazing and I could almost believe from all this that Christmas was not yet upon us instead of almost two weeks in the past. Timing does matter. If we'd come to the city a week later all this would have been gone, as also would have the Rockefeller Center tree and the Radio City *Christmas Spectacular*. Back when Nicki and I were planning this trip, we'd gone back and forth a bit on which week to be in New

York before finally settling on the one right after New Year's Day. We made the right choice.

"It was really corny!"

That's my oversimplified four word review of *Shucked*. It was our favorite musical of the trip, laugh-out-loud funny with lots of good songs. The plot revolves around a small town in rural Cob County, which seemed like it might be somewhere in central Iowa. The people there

are mostly stereotypical country yokels who greatly depend on the annual corn harvest to sustain their local economy. So when the corn crop starts to fail due to unknown causes, it's time to seek help from an outside expert. And that turns out to be a Florida Man – a fake podiatrist con artist who the main character, Maizy, naïvely believes is a 'corn doctor' in an agricultural rather than medical sense.



inside the Nederlander Theatre on January 2nd, prior to the show

Overall, the show is somewhat similar in structure to *The Music Man* in that an out-of-town huckster tries to scam local townspeople in order to make some fast money and depart the scene before anyone gets wise to him. But then realizes he's fallen in love with one of them, and... well, you can probably guess where it goes from there.

The songs were really good, with music and lyrics by two Nashville veterans, Brandy Clark and Shane McAnally. But what really made the show entertaining was the humor – there were *lots* of jokes. (Think of what *Hee Haw* might have been if it was hard-PG13 instead of suitable-for-all-ages and you'll be reasonably close to how the show came off.) There were all kinds, ranging from subtle to knee-slappers, with many of them delivered cornpone deadpan by the secondary character Peanut. A sampling:

Brother, remember when we were kids, building sand castles with grandma – until grandpa told us to put her back in the urn.

It's an unsolved mystery... which is just a mystery.

He was head over heels... which is just standing upright.

I think if you have time to jump in front of a bullet for someone, they have time to move.

I just passed a huge squirrel... which is odd because I don't remember eating one.

I chopped down that Christmas tree and you asked if I was going to put it up myself. And I said no, I'd probably put it up in the living room.

If I had a crystal ball, I'd probably walk different.

Okay, I guess you had to be there – this is a case where context really matters. Or maybe it was comedic delivery – what read like groaners seemed pretty funny when they were tossed out at the audience. But whatever. I really liked the show and one of the reasons was that even though it was over-the-top corny, it wasn't condescending. Most of the townspeople were naïve, yes, but except maybe for Peanut they weren't dumb. Or, as one of the characters puts it: "There's a cornfield of difference between simple and stupid. That's a simple mistake stupid people make." Words to live by?

“This was a great way to end our trip.”

That was our consensus after seeing *Back to the Future: The Musical*. It had gotten around to our final day in New York and we’d not been able to score tickets for the show at TKTS, so we decided to be proactive and paid a visit to the Winter Garden Theatre’s box office. It turned out there were two really good seats available, center section on the aisle and about ten rows back from the stage – it was almost as if they’d been waiting for us to claim them. They were more expensive than other tickets we’d purchased during the trip but it seemed clear that this was the only way we were going to be able to see the show. In other words, it was worth it.

And how! We’re probably all familiar enough with the *Back to the Future*’s plot that I don’t need to describe it, and as I mentioned earlier this musical version took great pains to be faithful to it. Which I guess is no big surprise seeing as how the show’s book was written by Bob Gale, one of the movie’s screenwriters. The intent was that if you liked the movie you were also going to like the musical. Which we did.

The ‘staying faithful to the movie’ thing even went as far as having the musical’s main and secondary characters resemble their counterparts in the movie, in both appearance and voice. Hugh Coles, who played Marty McFly’s father George, looked and sounded so much like Crispin Glover from the movie that you’d think that the clock had been turned back nearly four decades to snag him for the show. The biggest name in the cast, Tony Award winner Roger Bart, successfully channeled Christopher Lloyd as Doc Brown, though Casey Likes as Marty seemed like he was maybe trying a little too hard to sound like Michael J. Fox. ‘Staying faithful’ also carried over to the musical score. There were a lot of new songs in the show, all co-written by the great Alan Silvestri, but I was happy to see that they kept the two by Huey Lewis that were in the movie. As well as the one sung by ‘Marvin Berry and the Starlighters’. It wouldn’t have been the same without them.

There were a lot of excellent acting chops on display in the show, but you could argue that the biggest star of all was the DeLorean time machine. There were two versions of it – the one we saw out on the street after the show and the one that appeared on stage. And also *off* the stage – there was a special effect involving the car, right after Doc Brown declared “Where we’re going we don’t *need* roads!”, that was just incredible. Which made me glad we’d seen this show last – there’s absolutely no way that could have been topped!

“No subway rides! This was a first for us!”

I said that to Nicki as we were re-packing our suitcases for the trip home. None of the things we’d done were very far from our hotel and our rides to and from Penn Station were by taxi instead of underground train. After last year’s trip, we’d decided we were finished lugging suitcases through subway stations.



outside the Winter Garden Theatre on January 5th

As usual, the long train ride back to Maryland provided plenty of time to ruminate over the previous four days. There were certainly more things we might have done, such as another museum visit, but what we did do pleasantly filled our days and evenings without being overly tiring. And we'd made a good decision to return to our favorite hotel in the city, the Marriott Marquis. They'd done some renovations during the pandemic and it was even nicer than it had been before. Even better, it didn't cost us – we'd done the stay using Marriott points.

It was a good mini-vacation. I'd had an idea it was going to be when I'd spotted a Bald Eagle soaring over a Chesapeake Bay inlet during the train ride toward New York. It was the first time I'd ever seen one in the wild, and right then and there I decided if there was ever a good luck omen, that was it. Hey, maybe I'll see another one on next year's trip! ☀️

Afterword:

I can't resist showing you all a few more photos of what's on display at the Museum of Broadway. There were lots and lots of costumes, of course, including the dress worn by Carol



Joel Gray's and Jill Haworth's costumes from *Cabaret*

Channing in the original (1964) staging of *Hello, Dolly!* and the nightclub attire worn by Joel Gray and Jill Haworth in the original (1966) staging of *Cabaret*. And there was also much in the way of descriptive material (such as a diagram that explained and exemplified all the different types of so-called Jukebox Musicals) that provided a better understanding of how Broadway shows come to the stage. As I mentioned in the essay, our visit to the Museum of Broadway was a great way to spend a very

chilly Times Square winter morning.

I'm staying with the performing arts for this next essay. A year ago the Signature Theatre over in Arlington, Virginia staged a cabaret of its own titled *Both Sides Now* that featured the songs of Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen. It's probably the closest thing so far to a musical about Mr. Cohen, which I hope will someday happen. A few years ago there was a documentary movie about him, which Nicki and I saw, that played in art house cinemas. And that inevitably led me, as you'll read, to compose an essay about his music.

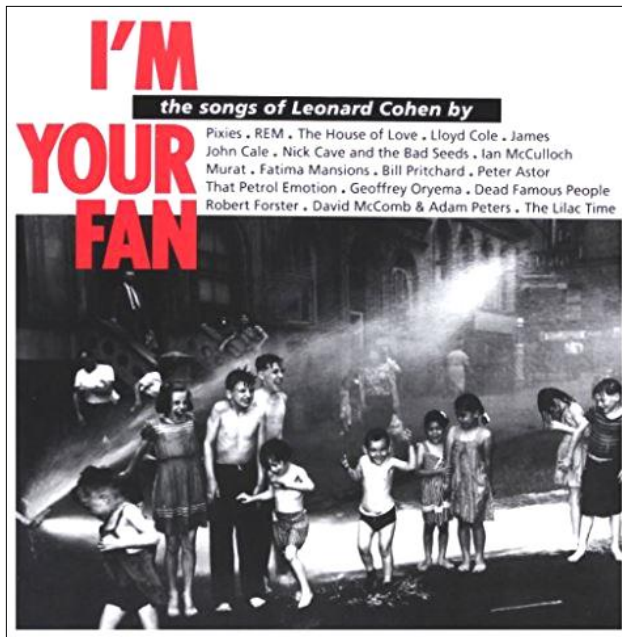
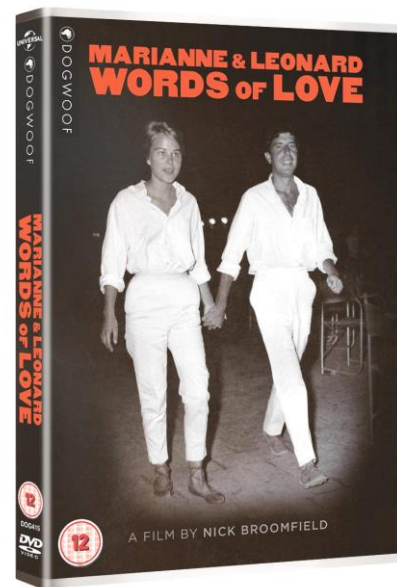


Carol Channing's dress from *Hello Dolly!*



My Favorite Leonard Cohen Song

There was an interesting documentary film about the great singer/songwriter Leonard Cohen a couple of years ago, and I hope you've all had a chance to see it. *Marianne & Leonard: Words of Love*, from English director Nick Broomfield, was ostensibly about Cohen's continuing relationship with his lover and muse, Marianne Ihlen, and their life during the 1960s on the Greek island of Hydra. Ihlen was the inspiration for several of Cohen's songs, including "So Long, Marianne", but the movie seemed actually more about their unhurried and rustic existence on a gorgeous Mediterranean isle than the music that resulted from that existence and also, in a larger sense, about the 1960s culture which nurtured that kind of living. The soundtrack for the film unfortunately does not contain that song, or any other Cohen compositions, but I can point you toward one of those ubiquitous tribute albums which does: *I'm Your Fan*. And it's a good one – possibly the best collection ever of Cohen songs that are not sung by Leonard himself.



It was originally produced by the French cultural and music magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*, the album title a wordplay on Cohen's song "I'm Your Man", and was released way back in 1991 by Atlantic Records. Many of Cohen's most famous songs are on it, some of them performed by well-known musicians. R.E.M., for instance, does a cover of "First We Take Manhattan" that, to me, is the definitive version while John Cale's cover of "Hallelujah", in my estimation, ranks only slightly behind k.d. lang's superlative recording of the song.

My favorite song on the album and, indeed, my all-time favorite Cohen composition is "Tower of Song", whose lyrics start out relatively autobiographical ("*Well, my friends are gone and my hair is grey / I*

ache in the places where I used to play") and then, bit-by-bit, veers off into fantasy ("*And there's a mighty judgment coming, but I may be wrong / You see, you hear these funny voices in the Tower of Song*"). Cohen apparently liked it a lot, too, as he recited the lyrics in their entirety during his 2008 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony. The main reason I think as much of it as I do (in addition to Cohen's clever lyrics) is because of all the inventive arrangements the song has received over the years. As an example, there are two considerably different covers of "Tower of Song" on the album, one of them a "brutal blues and gothic

nightmares” version (as Wikipedia puts it) by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds that’s all over the place. The other one is an up-tempo rockabilly version by Robert Forster (the Australian singer, not the American actor) that really stands out as maybe the best track on the CD.

It turns out there are *many* different arrangements of “Tower of Song” which have been recorded, and just for the fun of it I tracked some of them down. **SecondHandSongs.com**, which describes itself as “a database of originals, cover songs, sampled songs and sampling songs” lists 16 of them, including audio links. The two from *I’m Your Fan* are there, as well as a bluesy 1960s coffeehouse version from Christine Tobin, a more-folksy-than-rock version by the Phil Beer Band, a straight-up blues version from Gee Gee Kettel, and a nice piano bar version by Annie Reiner (daughter of the famous actor Carl Reiner). And there are also versions by several other notables: Marianne Faithfull, Martha Wainwright (sister of Rufus), and U2. Tom Jones even has a cover of the song! But the most out-there version, by far, is a remarkable heavy metal cover by The Jesus and Mary Chain. That the song is robust enough to endure and even transcend these varied treatments sets it apart from the vast majority of pop music compositions. And maybe that’s what Cohen had intended: the Wikipedia entry for the song mentions that Cohen, as he wrote it, was describing “the aging songwriter, and the necessity to transcend one’s own failure by manifesting as the singer, as the songwriter.” That would seem to apply to any number of musical genres, as all the different versions of the song attest.

I never had the pleasure of attending a Leonard Cohen concert but I did watch (via YouTube) a video of him performing “Tower of Song” that was recorded late in life at one of his shows. And it’s actually one of my least-favorite versions – it’s about as middle-of-the-road (in a pejorative sense) as is possible to be. He seemed to be mostly growling through the lyrics to a bland synthesized soundtrack. Other than it’s Leonard Cohen doing the singing, there’s very little to recommend it.



Cohen passed away in 2016, the same year that another outstanding lyricist, Bob Dylan, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The announcement was made about a month before Cohen died, so it seems reasonable to wonder why it couldn’t have been shared between the two of them. Maybe, in the end, it just came down to a numbers game – the plethora of Dylan songs which display his amazing command of language is no doubt far greater than what Cohen penned during his lifetime. But then again, none of them is “Tower of Song”. ☀

Afterword:

I really hope Springsteen someday does a cover or live performance of “Tower of Song”. That would be awesome.

One more essay to close out this issue. It’s also about performance art, but this time on a vast scale that was visible to billions of people. All we had to do was wait until dark and then look upward. But in my case, it helped a lot that I had a couple of cameras with me.

Stay strong, my friends. And keep watching the skies.

Stalking the Wild Comet

We had a prominent celestial visitor back in mid-October – a bright comet with the unwieldy name of ‘C/2023 A3 (Tsuchinshan-ATLAS)’. Didn’t take very long for observers to more simply refer to it as ‘Comet A3’, especially since most of us had no idea how to correctly pronounce ‘Tsuchinshan’.

The news media referred to it as “the brightest comet in 27 years” – in other words, all the way back to Comet Hale-Bopp. That made for some lofty expectations and for the most part the new comet met them. For us here in the northern hemisphere A3 was quite the sight not long after sunset. Where I am in the never-completely-dark skies of suburban Maryland it was easily visible to the naked eye the early evening of October 14th, even with a waxing gibbous moon that was worsening the light pollution that was already present.

I’ve always been somewhat of an amateur astronomer, so for me the urge to view and photograph the comet had been pretty much overwhelming. The previous time a supposedly naked-eye comet had graced our skies was back in 2020, during the pandemic, and long story short, it wasn’t. There was nothing at all to see with the naked eye. I *was* able to capture it on pixel, but it took a bit of post-processing to get a usable image. This time was different.

A brief beginners’ guide on how to photograph a comet: You don’t need very expensive equipment. Nope, not at all – a stationary digital camera works just fine. I used my dependable Nikon D-3100, a bottom-of-the-line model that they don’t even make anymore, with a 50-mm manual-focus lens. (A manual focus lens is much simpler to use than an autofocus one for night sky photography because of the necessity to set the lens to ‘infinity’ focus, which an autofocus lens seems incapable of easily doing.) Almost any F-stop will work, and the lower you go the more light gathering power the lens has. (I compromised at F4 to reduce the effect of light pollution on the image.) For ISO (the film/pixel ‘speed’), I’ll save you some trial-and-error: ISO-1600 is as ‘fast’ as I could go, here where I live, without light pollution fogging over the image.



Comet A3 on the evening of October 14th

So, with all that out of the way, you set up the camera on your trusty tripod and point it at the comet. And then comes the critical question: What’s the correct exposure time?

Here’s where a bit of math creeps in. For stationary camera night sky photography, exposure is determined by the so-called ‘Rule of 500’. Simply put, the maximum exposure time (in seconds) is 500 divided by the focal length of the lens. (More than that and you get noticeable star-trailing instead of crisp points of light.) For my 50-mm lens, that works out to be 10 seconds. I never push it that far, though, because if you want to enlarge the image it will in

effect increase the lens focal length. And at some point star-trailing (or in this case, comet-trailing) will become evident.

But enough tutorial. As I mentioned, this time was different than what happened in 2020 because the comet was much, much brighter. On that night it was bright enough that it was plainly visible even before twilight had completely faded. And I wasn't the only one who thought so. A short distance from where I live is a middle school which has an expansive athletic field with a mostly unobstructed view of the western horizon. And best of all, there's a paved basketball court which provides a nice, level surface devoid of any animal droppings (specifically geese and deer) – a *perfect* place for comet viewing. Three other people must have come to the same conclusion, as they joined me there before I'd even finished setting up my tripod. Two of them were using hand-held binocs and the other guy had a camera so much nicer than mine that it figuratively made my mouth water.

It was a chilly evening and I was there only for about 45 minutes or so. In that time I got about a dozen photos of the comet, but unfortunately all but one of them were largely ruined from photobombing by earth satellites and airplanes. *That* one is spectacular – it shows a long primary tail and a much shorter and fainter opposite-pointed secondary tail, with the comet partially framed by clouds that reflect light coming up from suburbia. It's maybe the best astrophoto I've ever taken.

Before I left, just for the hell of it, I decided to see what would happen if I took a photo with my iPhone's camera. I had no idea what the focal length was, so I just held the phone firmly against the camera tripod and pressed the virtual button, hoping for the best.

I'm actually amazed that it worked! The comet is easily visible on the image, and so are Venus (to its left) and the bright star Arcturus (to its right). And in the foreground the pattern of lines on the paved area adds to the interest of the photo. All in all I've decided it's maybe the *second*-best astrophoto I've ever taken.

I guess the moral of the iPhone story is: Forget everything I told you about comet photography with a stationary camera. You don't need it! A late-generation mobile phone seems to work just fine!

I've read that there's going to be another really bright comet in January. The good news is that Comet C/2024 G3 (ATLAS) – and let's just call it 'Comet G3' – will be so bright that it reportedly may even become visible in the daylight sky. But the bad news, at least for me, is that it will be entirely a southern hemisphere event. Feh!

There's not expected to be another northern hemisphere naked-eye comet for at least the next three years. But nobody knows for sure. Comet A3 was discovered only 20 months before it became a very bright object, and there are all kinds of icy objects out there from the Oort Cloud that could be dive bombing their way toward the inner Solar System. So when – not if – that happens I'll be ready. And until then I'll keep watching the skies! ☀️

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my iPhone photo of Comet A3

