Introduction

Faire Grounds

> If theme parks, with their pasteboard main streets, reek of a bland, safe, homogenized, whitebread America, the Renaissance Faire is at the other end of the social spectrum, a whiff of the occult, a flash of danger and a hint of the erotic. Here, they let you throw axes. Here are more beer and bosoms than you'll find in all of Disney World.
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> —Neil Steinberg, *Chicago Sun-Times*

"This is our ethnic background!" William Shakespeare tells me, gesturing at a Southern California fairground filled with visitors and workers. Together we study the crowd for a moment. Some sightseers are wearing street clothes in the variety of trends and statements that make up Los Angeles style. Many others, however, are wearing some form of costumery; this "garb," as it is popularly called, encompasses a range of degree of elaboration and historical reference (velvet cloaks, high leather boots, drawstring money pouches), as well as some fantasy-inspired elements (satyr horns, wings, leather masks). A performing "guild" of Scotsmen in kilts is visible, practicing some kind of formation with pikes in hands. A group of Pilgrims wanders by, sneers etched on their faces, Bibles in hand, and several young women in bodices and skirts pause to flirt outrageously with them, enacting a sort of erotic version of the tradition of trying to make the guards at Buckingham Palace smile.

Functional paradox is the stock-in-trade of the American Renaissance faire, and this knowledge helps me appreciate what Shakespeare—a performer named David Springhorn who is playing the Bard at the forty-seventh annual Renaissance Pleasure Faire in Irwindale, California—wants me to understand. Those who have been devoted to the faire for a period of years—craftspeople and entertainers, patrons and volunteers—frequently use the language of relatedness to describe their community: tribe, family, clan. Indeed, an anthropologist could find much to study here, using Springhorn's deliberately improvised version of "ethnicity." Faire workers, often referred to by the shorthand "Rennies," celebrate their own holidays. Both regular visitors and faire employees use the term "faire family" or "faire-mily" to define their networks. The faire has its own traditional cuisine, best emblematized by the turkey legs sold at every faire regardless of where it takes place; these will be mentioned or pictured in pretty much all media coverage or publicity material. There were no turkeys in Renaissance Europe, but the turkey legs are traditional cuisine nonetheless: traditional to the Renaissance *festival*, rather than the Renaissance.

Standing with Shakespeare, I muse upon the festivals I remember from growing up in a big city during the "ethnic revival" of the 1970s, while scouring the Renaissance faire for evidence of kinship of spirit. In addition to the turkey legs, there are traditional handicrafts being sold. There are recognizable items of clothing that mark Renaissance faire "folk" distinctly. There are rituals of storytelling particular to the faire. There is a sense of generational continuity and a number of ceremonies and rites. There is even "ethnic humor"—both the mocking kind from outside and the self-identifying kind from inside. Certainly, there are linguistic particularities, including both specialized vocabulary ("garb" for period-specific clothing, "mundanes" for people in non-Renaissance apparel) and an extensive language system that novelist Peter S. Beagle has affectionately dubbed "castle talk": words and formulations that invoke Elizabethan English to the American mind without necessarily hewing to its rules of grammar, pronunciation, and social convention ("Well-met, Milady," and "Gramercy!"). There are first-, second-, and third-generation faire folk, who readily identify as such.

Renaissance faire adherents such as David Springhorn and the many others I have spoken to have given their own meaning to the term "usable past," a framework introduced to the examination of American history, and historiography, by Van Wyck Brooks in 1915. However, in the instance of these outdoor depictions of European village life, both "usable" and "past" take on doubled meanings. There is, unquestionably, more than a little to be learned about the history and culture of the European Renaissance (and, increasingly, the history and culture of other continents during the same time period) through historical performance, and the founding family of the faire, as well as a large number of its longtime participants, emphasize the educational payoff as the most important "use" of the faire's romance with the past. Indeed, school buses continue to transport students to the faires in groups, indicating that a considerable number of educators agree with this premise. In 1994, Teacher Created Resources produced a guide for teachers, *Renaissance Thematic Unit* (Larson); this pamphlet offers suggestions for creating a faire as the culmination of studying Renaissance history and culture.

But although the Renaissance faire founders have been invited over the years to share their expertise with several "living museums"—such as Plimoth Plantation and Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts and Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia—the Renaissance festival has never been limited to "straight" reenactment. ("There's reenactment and then there's Ren faire," pronounces a costumed member of the faire's "Scottish guild" who happens to be passing by while I am speaking to his guild chief. He hands me a very welcome wooden mug of cold water and continues on his way.) Indeed, the remarkable success of the Renaissance faire in the United States begs a larger, more slippery, and ultimately more interesting question: to what concrete personal, political, and cultural uses can a group of Americans put a past that, for the most part, is *not* their own?

Those uses, of course, have changed over the course of the faire's four-decade run, as the meanings of the faire have been contested, revised, updated and, in some cases, co-opted. In many ways, the Renaissance faire is a mainstream, family affair in the twenty-first century, a largely corporate institution whose "brand" extends far beyond California, where the faires originated, to almost every state in the United States.

Most faires set aside play areas for kids, with attractions such as pirate ships for exploring, games, swings, juggling lessons, pony rides, and storytellers. As if to emphasize the faire's turn toward the saleably "wholesome," the children's television show *Reading Rainbow* filmed a rather sweet episode there in 1987 ("Rumpelstiltskin"), and Mattel introduced a "Renaissance Faire Barbie" in 2011.

But in the early 1960s, as the faire first began to establish itself, it functioned as a resounding slap in the face of 1950s conventions of Cold War bellicosity, compulsory female domesticity, stifling anticommunism, and narrow ideals of nuclear family. From a historical perspective, this is not surprising, given that the faire's birthplace was Laurel Canyon, a neighborhood located in the hills above the center of Los Angels and long known by the time the first faires took place for hosting bohemian types: Louise Brooks, Orson Welles, and David Niven lived there, and Laurel Canyon was where film noir actor Robert Mitchum's infamous marijuana bust took place in 1948. During the 1950s, the neighborhood was known as a sanctuary of sorts for movie industry victims of the infamous Hollywood Red Scare (Ossman interview).

The faire's founders, Phyllis and Ron Patterson, moved to Laurel Canyon in the late 1950s as a young couple and found among their neighbors the talented cultural workers who helped them give the early festivals their recognizable character. Then, just as the very first faires were being imagined in the Canyon, the musicians (and their followers) who were to make up Los Angeles's high-flying rock-and-roll scene flocked there in the mid-1960s; included in this number were members of the seminal folk-rock band The Byrds, who shortly thereafter recorded (in 1967) "Renaissance Fair," a valentine to the sights, smells, and sounds that those earlier Laurel Canyon dwellers created:

> I think that maybe I'm dreaming
> I smell cinnamon and spices
> I hear music everywhere
> All around kaleidoscope of color
> I think that maybe I'm dreaming
> Maids pass gracefully in laughter
> Wine-colored flowers in their hair

Last call from lands I've never been to
I think that maybe I'm dreaming
Some flash on a soda of prism
Bright jewels on the ladies flashing
Eyes catch on a shiny prism
Hear ye the crying of the vendors
Fruit for sale, wax candles for to burn
Fires flare, soon it will be night fall
I think that maybe I'm dreaming

In the 1960s, when The Byrds were there, the Renaissance faire presented an intriguing mix of countercultural antimodernism and sophisticated avant-garde; it quickly became known as a locus for challenging the staid suburban ideal. "Renaissance Pleasure Faire—Why the Establishment Howled," shrieks the headline of a 1967 issue of *Adam*, a soft-core girlie magazine (Rotsler, front cover). Through its willful turn to the old, the Renaissance faire became a place to experiment with the new—new sexual arrangements, new ways of understanding and enacting gender roles, legal and illegal drugs (with LSD included in the "legal" category at this point), communal living, and ideals of art taken directly to the people. "A new way to relate to each other" is how Kevin Patterson, the first but not the last baby to grow up at the faire, puts it (interview).[1] "The early faire," pronounced influential faire musician Bob Thomas, "was given by one branch of the freak community for the rest" (Zekley, "Preston"). Hippies gravitated there, to take in the show, to be part of the show, to attend soon-to-be legendary after-hour parties—and, as in the case of Los Angeles "freak-scene guru" Vito Paulekas and his self-styled troupe of "freak dancers," to dance with abandon.[2] Aspiring artists arrived, finding in the faire a rare place to earn a living from their craft. Celebrities came, to be seen as well as to see. Vietnam veterans participated in large numbers, recruiting each other with the promise that the faire was a good and safe place for them in particular, as they returned to the United States dragging the heaviest of baggage.

The history of the American Renaissance faire—what went *into* creating it and how it has evolved over its more than forty-five-year lifespan—yields fascinating and sometimes astonishing insights into the

construction of the American counterculture. Excavating the faire's layers, its geological formations, as it were—from the perspective of labor, education, aesthetics, business, the opposition it faced, the key figures involved—reveals the way the faires immediately established themselves as a pioneering and highly visible referendum on how we live *now*—our family arrangements, our relationship to consumer goods, and our corporate entertainments.

Equally important, though, is what came *out* of the faire—the transforming gifts bestowed by the faire's innovations and experiments on the broader American culture, obscured as these roots often are in the twenty-first century. This book, therefore, is also concerned with the ways in which various forms of cultural expression "tried out" first at the faire became recognizable staples of American social and cultural life, even as their Renaissance faire pedigree has retreated from view. In this way, my framing of the faire reveals the role it played in creating what we have come to call the "Sixties." When we speak of the "Sixties"—in journalistic accounts, fashion rhetoric, academic histories, and so on—we often mean to call attention to a period of time that stretched from, say, late 1963 (with John F. Kennedy's assassination) through April 1975—when Saigon "fell." But here, I am less interested in concrete dates than I am in conventional wisdom and cultural memory. These reside, in part, in the shorthand signposts we use to invoke the "Sixties"—the flower in the rifle, Jimi Hendrix genuflecting over his guitar, the young woman weeping at Kent State—that obscure as much as they reveal. My goal here is to push past those acts of ritual summary by putting the Renaissance faire back at the center—as one point of origin—of much of the cultural activity that has contributed to our definition of the period.

In short, the Renaissance faire, I argue, helped to invent the Sixties—so much so that Tom Brokaw, in a 2008 television appearance, used his attendance at the faire as shorthand for his youthful gravitation toward the counterculture despite his "square" job and background:

> BARBARA WALTERS: When I met you 40 years ago you were pretty square.
> TOM BROKAW: Well, of course I had come out of the 50's. I was kind of a weekend hippy. I would take my kids, you

> know, my daughters. And on weekends, Meredith and I would, I'd put on my bell bottom trousers and my sandals, and we'd go off to the Renaissance Faire outside of Los Angeles . . .
> JOY BEHAR: Oh my God.
> ELIZABETH HASSELBECK: Are you serious? Tom!
> BROKAW: . . . and hang out there, and then on Monday mornings I'd put on my white button down shirt and my narrow tie and my jacket and then I'd go off and be a network correspondent and I looked like that. (Qtd. in McCarthy)

Once we put the faire back in its place (at the heart of the narrative of how the American counterculture transformed *all* of American life in the 1960s and 1970s) it will be much easier to see how it acted as a bridge between the Old Left of the 1930s (and 1940s and 1950s) and the emerging New Left of the 1960s and 1970s. Standard histories of the transition from Old to New Left have neglected thus far to trace out the faire's influence, and in doing so they have given short shrift to all the cultural energy donated to the surrounding culture by all these sexual noncomformists, these truly antibourgeois "freaks," all the *women* who were the denizens of this new polity. More particularly, I examine several important phenomena that began at the faire: the so-called underground press of the 1960s and 1970s; experimentation with "ethnic" musical instruments and styles in popular music; the craft revival of the 1970s; the Americanization of mime and other comic performance styles. Here, I also use interviews and oral history to "track" central figures who began or came into their own at the faire and then went on to have a lasting impact beyond the faire gates: among them are the mime Robert Shields (later of Shields and Yarnell), the comedy group Firesign Theater, the musical group Golden Toad, the countercultural journalist Art Kunkin, and the performance artist Rachel Rosenthal.

This book also plumbs the meaning of the faire to its devoted participants, both workers and visitors, across almost fifty years of its history and in its present articulation. Many people who earn their living from the faire "travel the circuit" to work at more than one festival

because each one's season lasts only a couple of months; indeed, some of these have no home base at all beyond the various faire sites. I draw on interviews with dozens of performers, crafters, booth workers, and food providers to explore what values and lifestyle choices have made "Rennies" of them: attracting them to some degree of communal life and leading them to develop their own culture, traditions, and—in the preferred locution of many of them—"tribal units." The faire's dedicated visitors, similarly, attend the faire every weekend it is open (buying season passes where they are offered), piece together elaborate costumes at great expense of time and money, and do their best to extend their faire-going experience through online communities, Renaissance faire publications, and their own treks (sometimes hundreds of miles) to visit other faires. Dozens of these dedicated faire visitors—"playtrons," in faire parlance—shared with me accounts of their involvement that ranged from moving to hilarious, and I allow them to speak for themselves as much as possible, as their testimony tracks both marked shifts in who has found the faire most useful—and why—and the ways in which the faire has enabled (perhaps paradoxical) strategies of resistance to the very forces of corporatism and cultural centrism that have inexorably resituated it in the American expressive landscape.

I also look at two other important ways in which the meaning of the faire has been established and codified: through the ways it has been pictured in literature, movies, and television shows, and through motivated opposition to it ranging from serious political attempts to block its opening to "haters" who publicly satirize the faire in ways that are more *self*-defining than anything else. Following an initial chapter that traces the founding and establishment of the first faires in California—up until their growth beyond these roots spawned a national "faire circuit" that performers, craftspeople, and other employees began to travel—the book is organized thematically, in order to highlight the faire's constituent elements: what their originary impulses were made of and how they changed with the faires over time. In all these ways, the deliberately pot-stirring "meaning" of the Renaissance faire remains in evidence while imagining a world outside the commercial marketplace becomes increasingly difficult, even as a lingering popular fascination with the 1960s indicates a continued, if distant, longing for an alternative.