



Escape Artists

Rennies stay on after the gates close at the Texas Renaissance Festival each night, living lives from centuries ago

BY CRAIG MALISOW

Out here, it's darker than you can imagine.

There are tiki torches and Coleman lanterns in the camp, but outside of their range, you're blind. Standing at the camp entrance, a figure beckons newly arrived Celtic Rogues toward him. Off in the distance, drums.

The Rogues lug tents and coolers into the camp, delineated by low-slung yellow chains and medieval-style flags. Closer to the flames, objects slowly reveal themselves: a space alien mannequin in leather armor, propped against a tree; a grill; a man in a do-rag assembling demonic mechanical wings.

And even the waving figure himself is illuminated by a nearby lantern: He is Santa Claus. No, wait. Squint, adjust, focus: He is Jerry Garcia. Wrong again. *Who is he?*

He is a Rennie -- one of hundreds of hard-core Texas Renaissance Festival enthusiasts who camp outside the festival grounds after the gates close and everyone else drives home. At night, the campground belongs to them, the separate clans with their own flags who light campfires and wander around meeting new people and old friends they haven't seen since the last festival. They dress up in period garb during the day, and drink and laugh and tell stories all night. They aren't paid to be part of the festival, but without them, it wouldn't be nearly as fun.

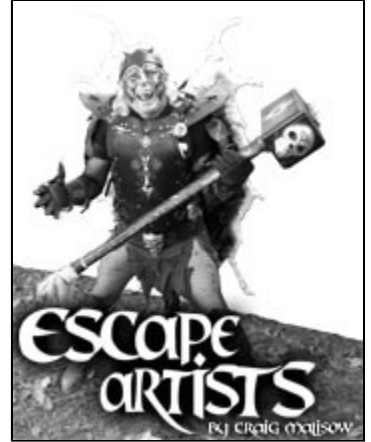
This Rennie is Lord Dragonhawke, revered leader of the Celtic Rogues, and he is wearing a yellow-and-orange tie-dyed shirt and khaki shorts with suspenders. A multicolored brimless cap rests atop long gray hair that flows into a beard. He's laughing, and his arms, as always, are open. He is here to hug, to share, to welcome friends and strangers to the Texas Renaissance Festival, near Plantersville, about 70 miles north of Houston. It's the biggest in the country. *Huzzah.*

And now he awaits two figures approaching the lantern's glow; one thin and impossibly tall, one of average size. The bongos in the distance are still pounding a hypnotic drone. *Dum-dum-DUM-dum-dum-dum-dum-DUM.* No one knows which clan is playing the drums. Could it be Chaos? Word for Mundanes at faire is stay away from Chaos. No one says why, and somehow that makes it even worse.

Now the figures step into a finger of light, and the impossibly tall one is revealed as a woman. Is it a trick of the dark? Must be. But no. Has to be six-four. Twirling a silver cup on a long, strong finger. In reality, it's probably a bucket; in her hands, it's a thimble. She is Katatzrophe the Amazon. She has a flask in her jacket pocket. She is loaded.

Her partner? That's another story. Sexy. Curvy. A two-piece belly-dancing dress prominently displaying a pair of breasts that could only have been dreamed up by

Daniel Kramer



Rayvan, a.k.a. Charles White, is a festival favorite.

Daniel Kramer



Katatzrophe (left) and Melissa are welcomed to the camp by Lord Dragonhawke.

Daniel Kramer



Beer, bongos and belly dancing are Rennie staples.

the world's horniest high-schooler.

And it's between these Eighth and Ninth Wonders of the World that Lord Dragonhawke slips a cold bottle of Kahlúa White Russian.

She is Melissa, and, answering a question about her getup, she says, "What am I? A woman in search of her more tribal instinct feelings."

Dragonhawke doesn't miss a beat: "Get the drums, somebody!"

But Kataztrophe and Melissa bid the Celtic Rogues adieu and drift off toward the bongos. They walk past a phalanx of RVs, their feet crunching along the gravel road leading to the fairgrounds. Away from the Celtic Rogues, the only light is from the stars. There are about a billion more stars than you can see in Houston. But their light is only a reminder of how dark it truly is here.

Kataztrophe says she's a computer-graphics artist who also teaches graphic art at a Fort Worth university. She's attended the Texas Renaissance Festival for at least the last eight years. She's been into faire culture for the past 12. She says she gets a year's worth of hugs at faire.

"They'll open the door and treat you like kith and kin," she says, her words partly slurred.

Kataztrophe and Melissa veer away from the road, past a large empty fire pit, and the bongos grow louder. Then they're gone, swallowed by the darkness.

And then, they reappear, strobe-lit by a bonfire beneath a gigantic spider-shaped parachute spread among the trees, where a ring of drummers feed rhythm to belly-dancing sirens. Dozens crowd under the parachute, staring at the dancers. Pirate flags abound. In the firelight, there is a refugee from the Island of Dr. Moreau, pounding the bongo. A human being with a pig's snout.

A black-haired siren breaks from the dance circle and gyrates in front of a drum, beer in hand. The drummer pounds out the same mesmerizing pattern.

Who are these people? Is this Chaos? Will babies be eaten, virgins sacrificed?

The best thing to do at this point is find out who's in charge. Miriam, with cloak and staff, and Violet, with dagger, are two of the friendliest faces around. But they don't know the leader. It's like *Apocalypse Now*, when Willard asks the grunt on the bridge, "Who's in charge here, soldier?" All the soldier can say is "Ain't you?"

Where's Kataztrophe? Where's Melissa? Where's the path back to the Celtic Rogues?

When the fire goes out, the drumming stops. There's only one thing to do, and that's to press on.

First of all, it's not just the Renaissance we're talking about.

You've got your Dark Ages, your Middle Ages, your pixies and your demons. You have one serious preoccupation

Daniel Kramer



Iggy sheds some light on Naughtyham.

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Chaos member Firestone attends faire with his dad, Satan.

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Charles and Robin White put the wings up for the night.

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Rayvan is the second-most-photographed Rennie, according to the Rogues.

with boobs, pumped-up, pushed-out and painted.

And let's face it: That stuff is cool. Sure, these Rennies who spend hundreds of dollars on historical garb may look weird to some, but if you're going to escape from what they call the Mundane World, why not transport yourself to a fantasy-based Renaissance that exists for only a month and a half in the middle of nowhere?

Spread out over 54 acres, the festival attracts about 300,000 visitors a year, according to the official Web site. This year, the festival celebrated its 30-year anniversary, a milestone that will also unfortunately be linked with the only murder in the festival's history. On the night of October 16, shortly after the festival gates closed, a fight broke out between two groups of Mundanes. Brandon Smith, 23, and his 21-year-old sister, Kristen, were navy sailors on leave, enjoying faire with their mother and stepfather. But as the Smith siblings were trailing their parents back to their car, 19-year-old Brent Noland and a group of his friends started harassing Kristen. Brandon, brother and sailor, intervened. For his trouble, Noland's group knocked Brandon to the ground, where they kicked him and stabbed him 19 times, mostly in the back. According to Grimes County Sheriff Don Sowell and longtime Rennies, Smith's death was as freakish as it was tragic. The festival simply has no history of significant crime.

That's because, for the most part, faire culture is peaceful. The festival attracts families and it attracts Rennies, neither of which has any interest in getting rowdy on festival grounds.

Day-trippers go for the food, the shows, the colorful characters. But for the Rennies it's a lifestyle -- at least for the weekend. They camp out, sing, drink, tell stories. They wake up in tents before the first cannon shot announcing the opening of the gates and they slip on their leather, sheathe their swords and eat their bagels. They spend all day walking around the fairgrounds in searing heat, return to camp, sing, drink, tell stories, and then do it all over again the next day.

Faire "is a magical world" says Dragonhawke, a.k.a. Stephen Rose, industrial supplies salesman. "You could be a ditchdigger, president of a company, a housewife, student. I've even got an aerospace engineer in my group...[W]hen you walk into faire, you can be anything you want to be. If you want to be a king, you can be a king. If you want to be a beggar, you can be a beggar."

Dragonhawke formed the Celtic Rogues with his then-ten-year-old son and a handful of friends nine years ago. Rennies are open to begin with, but Dragonhawke's naturally gregarious demeanor and friendly laugh attracted more and more people to his clan.

"I like people coming to my camp to have fun," he says. "I like to hear laughter...I love laughter, and some people say I have a pretty loud laugh. They can zero in on my camp simply from my laughter."

Despite their fondness for mead and bawdy talk, the Celtic Rogues are a family-oriented bunch. Many clan members bring their children to faire. So Dragonhawke imposed a few basic but important rules: Absolutely no drugs in his campground. And prospective Rogues must camp for four weekends before induction. Dragonhawke figures that at some point during those campouts, the prospective Rogue is going to get hammered, and the clan needs to see just how he acts. Dragonhawke doesn't want any bad drunks.

"I've got a damn good crew of people," he says, adding, "I like to say that we put the 'fun' in 'dysfunctional.' "

Kim Guarnaccia, founder and editor of *Renaissance Magazine*, traces the history of faire to late-'60s Berkeley. What started as a costume party blossomed into the California Pleasure Faire, and soon festivals popped up throughout the country. Nearly every state has at least one faire. Friggin' *Alaska* has a faire.

As popular as these festivals were, it wasn't until 1996 that Guarnaccia launched the only nationally distributed magazine covering faire culture. Guarnaccia, who lives in Massachusetts, attends faire as Lady Kimberly. Her husband is Sir Louis. And her dogs are Sir Jerry and Sir Puccini.

She says Rennies are drawn to faire for three reasons: to feel connected to their European heritage (which is

probably why there aren't many African-Americans at faire), to role-play a character that is usually different from their Mundane personality, and to "immerse themselves in a culture of chivalry."

Guarnaccia writes in an e-mail, "At a Ren faire, for instance, women, whether they be wench or queen, are treated with courtesy and devotion by their male counterparts; capes are spread out on the ground so that women not get their feet wet, doors are opened for them, hands are kissed in greeting, poetry (or bawdy limericks) are recited on bended knee to their lady-love, etc. And a man's honor and word, both on and off the battlefield, is held in great regard."

Ancestry, dress-up, escape. That and a cold bottle of mead is good for what ails ye.

"You have bankers and accountants that play these outgoing, rambunctious cavaliers or pirates," Guarnaccia says from her home. "It gives them an opportunity to become...a completely different person."

Beyond the spider-parachute is darkness, and beyond the darkness is a group pounding nails into a wooden castle. And a man shooting flames from his mouth.

This is Clan Naughtyham.

About 30 yards from the castle is a booth with a lamp where a woman in a black cloak cradles a baby. Besides the fire-breather, this is the only light.

Drawn from afar by the napalm bursts, crowds gather around the booth and watch as the fire-breather, clad in a black T-shirt with *fuck it* in white lettering, drops on bended knee like he's about to propose. *Check out Iggy*, someone says. And even if he weren't spitting billowing clouds of fire from his gullet, Iggy would be hard not to check out. He's got glow-stick earrings and three studs just below his bottom lip.

Iggy takes a swig of God-knows-what from a big clear bottle, tilts back his head and holds a flaming baton above his mouth. *Woosh!* And Naughtyham is illuminated.

The black-cloaked woman smiles. Without the kid, she'd look a hell of a lot scarier. But with a tot in her arms, how bad can she be?

Turns out she's the Blood Goddess. And why, you ask? Good question: Some Rennies ask her to bite them, and she draws blood. Oh, and the kid's name is Rainbow.

Then, from the direction of the castle, a guy in a beard and overalls makes his way toward the Blood Goddess. A camera hangs from his neck. He introduces himself as Sir Boob.

"I'm the biggest boob out here, and I take the most pictures of boobs," he explains. Sir Boob is Naughtyham's tribal leader and Blood Goddess's fiancé (Rainbow is another member's child). Blood Goddess is the secretary. She says she keeps things straight for the clan's 106 members throughout the state.

And then, a flash of light: A bone-thin, red-haired teenage boy is tracing incredible arcs of fire with a baton burning at both ends. He flips the stick so fast that the fire tricks the eye. He paints zeros, parentheses, halos. He says his name is Firestone. He's in Chaos. That's his dad over there. His name's Satan.

Carlos Santos is nervous.

Less than a week away, on Halloween, he's getting married. Right now, he's talking on his cell, waiting for the

mechanic to put four new tires on his truck. After that, more errands. Pulling out more hair.

At faire, the 31-year-old Friendswood resident goes by Solrac, proud member of the Celtic Rogues. His fiancée, Heidi, goes by Naveah. They were former high school sweethearts who rekindled their relationship four years ago. And Carlos is such a genuine, no-BS kind of guy that he can say, "The love never left us; it was still there," and not make it sound cheesy.

Solrac and Naveah met the Celtic Rogues while camping at the festival last year. Dragonhawke walked up, introduced himself, and invited the couple to camp with them. After the requisite four campouts, the two were given clan daggers and necklaces and officially made Celtic Rogues.

They had wanted to get married for a while, but time and money put the brakes on that. Then, last year, doctors diagnosed Solrac's mother with primary liver cancer. Three months later, at 2 p.m. on Christmas Eve, she passed away. But not before making a final request.

"She had always told me and my dad that she wanted to take care of the wedding," Solrac says. "And she took care of it for us. That was her last quest."

The money was enough to cover an elaborate wedding at the King's Chapel at the festival. Horses, swordplay, traditional Celtic garb.

Solrac's attraction to faire is no surprise: He likes the escape. He likes the connection with the clan, who will be there for the wedding. He and Naveah are the first Celtic Rogues to marry at faire.

Safe, and back with the Rogues.

They've got a fire going, and mead, and a bottle of wine is making its way through the circle.

Angus "The Red" MacEwan, clan bard, is strumming a guitar and singing a clan favorite, a song about a stuffed green dragon named Fred. Naveah dances around with the eponymous stuffed monster, waving him in the air. To Angus's left is his wife, Thystlyn Graham, clan secretary. Their seven-year-old daughter races around the camp perimeter on her bike.

"You live life for faire and every day is simply waiting," Angus says during a smoke break. When he's doing desktop publication work, he's Larry Moon, Houstonian, and he's a victim of mind-numbing monotony like most of the rest of us. A Rennie for the last 16 years, he was inducted into the Celtic Rogues last year. He says the clan allows him to revel in his ancestry, and he peppers his speech with the occasional faux Scottish accent.

At faire, he says, "Larry Moon gets left back at the apartment. Angus is in charge and he doesn't give a *shite* about anything."

And now, two strangers approach. Dragonhawke leaves his seat to offer hearty hugs, mead, food.

The guy, clad in a black Queensrÿche tank top with two sheathed daggers hanging from black jeans, introduces himself as Hurricane of Chaos. His companion, Raven, is bedecked in a black leather miniskirt. From out of nowhere, Hurricane produces a wineskin of Jack and Dr Pepper and passes it around.

The two strangers, now friends, grab seats, and it doesn't take long before Hurricane ruminates on the instant connections of faire life. He says he met Raven about two hours ago and will be sleeping in her tent tonight. No, not like *that*. They will literally be sleeping. She has a boyfriend back in San Angelo, where she's a biology major. Hurricane, an architecture major in San Antonio, is simply looking out for her, just like he'd want someone looking after his girlfriend.

"Wouldn't life be better like this?" he says, revealing the stud in his tongue. He takes a swig from the wineskin that's made its way back. Peacefully drunk, he says he'll attend faire every weekend, every year, for the rest of his life.

But he's in Chaos. Shouldn't he be out pillaging?

That's a myth, he says. Chaos has about 350 members throughout the state, and then there are Chaos wannabes. With so many people running around calling themselves clan members, it's hard to keep track of who's who.

The fire crackling, Hurricane tells a story: On his way back home from faire a few years ago, his car blew a tire in the middle of nowhere. He had no dough and saw no way to make it home. But before long, a car pulled over and a few of his Chaos brothers from another part of the state emerged. They saw Hurricane's Chaos bumper sticker and had to stop. They called for a tow, which they paid for. They paid for a new tire and slipped him a care package of smokes and pocket money for his ride home.

"That's the way it is out here," Hurricane says. "And that's the way it should be."

It's finally morning.

About an hour before the first cannon will sound, Charles White, tall and blond, stands by the dead fire sipping a Coke. In a few hours, he'll grab his mighty war hammer and slip into black leather armor and fishnets. He'll attach huge battery-operated demonic wings to his back, wings constructed out of PVC pipe and epoxy putty that spread with the tug of a cord. He'll cover his face in intricately evil black squiggles. He'll become Rayvan, the second-most-photographed figure at faire, according to the Rogues. With the festival's permission, he and a few other Rogues stroll around the grounds in character all day, entertaining the Mundanes in exchange for the occasional tip. Mostly, they do it for fun, for the pleasure of enhancing kids' experiences. But right now, Rayvan is still Charles White, who works maintenance and security jobs from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. every day to support his wife and son.

White's wife, Robin, emerges from a van across the gravel road from the camp, with two small black horns stuck to her forehead. She shakes dry her freshly black-lacquered nails. Soon she will be Starrfyre, one of the clan's two playful, mischievous pixies.

White follows his wife back to their tent, where they get ready for the day. Starrfyre emerges before Rayvan, purple wings on her back and a studded black leather top.

By noon, Starrfyre and Fia (Heather Batson) have lost Rayvan. They canvass the grounds, asking fellow Rennies if they've seen a winged demon in fishnets. Each Rennie says the same thing: He was here about an hour ago.

The pixies approach children along the way, handing out plastic spider rings from a pouch on Batson's shoulder. One little girl, clad in pixie wings, a red dress and sneakers, breaks from her Mundane parents and runs right up to Starrfyre and Fia. Staring, smiling, she reaches for Fia's wings, and Starrfyre playfully admonishes her. Pixie wings are expensive and delicate -- they're not to be handled.

"She's ticklish," Starrfyre says, and the little girl withdraws her hand.

Starrfyre and Fia carry on. Briefly slipping out of character, Fia says that wearing leather in this heat is absolutely suffocating. The pixies are melting in their suits.

"Leather -- it's the medieval Jenny Craig," she says.

After circling the grounds, the pixies need a rest. Sitting on a stone planter beneath a tree is a demon who gives Rayvan a run for his money. His head is shaved and covered in Greek writing, his back adorned with huge red wings, his hands hidden in three-clawed gloves, his feet sealed in platform hooves filled out by ten-pound blocks of

wood.

His mouth crammed with capped fangs, Love in Vein says he needs a break. His hooves are killing him. A tiny bird skull that may or may not be real hangs from his black goatee. He translates the writing on his head: *Your offer is intriguing, but how much is the rent?*

They press on, past the Fairy Godfather, a fat man in a ballerina skirt chomping a cigar. "You look-a a-beautiful!" he shouts as they pass. "I like-a those wings!"

They continue, past big-breasted beer wenches, a naughty chain-mail fashion show, a maypole dance, a barefoot and brain-damaged peasant rolling in the dirt, hammering the ground with a frying pan.

And then there he is, Rayvan, statue-still, leaning on his war hammer to keep from crumbling in exhaustion. Starrfyre jogs to a nearby booth for Gatorade. The demon needs to replenish those electrolytes. He's got a few bucks in tips pressed beneath his breastplate. The cash is nice but inconsequential. He doesn't do this for the dough -- he earns enough money busting his hump working two jobs, 16 hours a day. He does this because here at faire, he's a star. He's Rayvan the demon, and he can't walk two yards without a child or adult wanting their picture taken with him. He lives for it -- at least a hundred times a day, he puts on his sinister scowl and bears his fangs, and the Mundanes click their cameras and walk away with a souvenir.

Now the three press on. There are thousands more Mundanes to entertain today. And they'll start with these two, these little boys in a wagon drawn by their mother. They look up at Rayvan, not quite sure if this creature before them is way cool or scary as hell. Rayvan motions to Fia, who plucks two spider rings from her pouch and slips them onto Rayvan's claws. The winged demon bends low toward the boys. They look up at Mommy and Daddy. *Go on!* they smile.

The boys reach up, and with their little fingers slide the rings off Rayvan's claws. They can't stop looking at him. They've just made friends with a demon.