

# L'Affaire du Punk: Excerpts from a Mad Victorian



It was the silvery colored guy carrying a harpoon and stiling his way high above the top-hatted and be-bustled crowd that made me realize I was at quite the event one weekend last May. Especially when, shortly after, I could hear the crackle of a two-way radio as security came through, describing this very creature that I—and everyone else waiting on line for the 2:00 absinthe tasting—saw. See, Mr. Stilts' harpoon was sharp, and if he took a tumble in the crowd, anyone—even the Hello Kitty wearing goggles and a pilot's cap—could be speared. And an unauthorized spearing at the Steampunk World's Fair would not be a good thing.

This because, as its co-creator Jeff Mach told me in a phone interview about a week before the event, the Steampunk World's Fair is one of the friendliest events of its kind in the world, with all sorts of people coming together to celebrate the mish-mosh of Victoriana, science fiction, burlesque, clockwork and cephalopods that make up just a small part the steampunk world.

## STEAM WHAT?

I'm still learning about and forming my own definition of steampunk, and haven't been impressed with my sad attempts of explaining it to the uninitiated. So I asked Jeff—who said someone once referred to him as a Steampunk Dadaist—if he could assist me in pinning it down.

"Just a mad Victorian fantasy," Jeff said. He was in his early teens when he read what he said is arguably the first steampunk book—K.W. Jeter's *Infernal Devices*. (Though at the time the book came out, Jeter hadn't coined the genre's name yet, at least not in a public way). And from that time on he's been adding to his knowledge. "That's my favorite definition of Steampunk," Jeff added. "But I wouldn't go around and give anyone an absolute definition..."

My friends and I spent much time in recent months educating ourselves and plotting the logistics for our weekend, and Jeff appreciated that, but also wanted to stress that people who were just curious were welcome to join in on the fun, too.

"We're big on the idea that you don't have to know a lot about steampunk to come in and enjoy it," Jeff said. "As long as you're open minded, creative, and would enjoy spending a weekend with thousands of weird people, you're probably going to have a lot of fun here."

I can vouch for that.

*Photos By Ryan Doan*

# Fantasy in the Jersey Suburbs

*By Joanne M. Austin*

## ANACHRONISM IN ACTION

The effort my friends I put into our looks, with trips into the city, scavenging backs of closets, and last-minute sewing sessions, could be its own story, but I'll spare you. But one thing it did was give us a huge sense of appreciation for the personas that our fellow fairgoers were presenting to the world—and the appreciation people had for our own efforts. In fact, one of the most fun, and sometimes jarring, experiences at the Fair was simply watching people dressed in Victorian duds, tempered with dieselpunks, airship captains, and westernpunks, walking about in the modern landscape of office parks and suburban hotel chain decor.

For example, there was a gentleman practicing with a whip in front of a neighboring office building—how many weekday occupants of said building resent being whipped by the corporate grind? And people with parasols, large hats and elaborate weapons, riding up to their rooms at the Embassy Suites in clear glass elevators, like dolls in cases. Or any of the people wandering in and out of hotel rooms and conference rooms that were converted to tiny storefronts, lecture halls, and music arcades, where one could whip out plastic to pay for goggles, elaborate corsets, and absinthe screens; or listen to people who will tell you all about things like Victorian math and Dandyism; or play fantastic music for you or perform a trick.

And then there were steampunk versions of superheroes: Batman, Poison Ivy, Cat Woman, and Superman. While we were waiting for a costume contest to start, a steampunk Spiderman climbed into one of the small trees that was planted in the Radisson courtyard/Midway and hung upside down, shooting a non-sticky web substance from a device located on his wrist.

It was better than a suburban mall or an amusement park, because most of were trying, often impressively, to sport the look and to live the fantasy of being in another place and time, but enhanced and maybe a little romanticized. To travel back in time, but with better teeth, vaccinations, and smart phones.

## A WORLD BEYOND PERCEPTION... AND CONFERENCE ROOMS

The Carnival Obscura is “an entity,” as Fair literature described it, that “appears intermittently and without warning, leaving its actual existence subject



Sideshow Terror Wyck, from *The World of Wyck*, captures his hand in a painful old trap.

to speculation.” And amazingly, it did appear on Friday night, in the confines of a lower-level Embassy Suites conference room that probably never saw such dark delights before. My friends and I entered and were almost immediately off in different directions.

A young man, his face painted a stark white that popped out at me in the gloom, took me to a fortuneteller named Gretchen. I sat down and Gretchen looked at my palm and told me that I was going to have a lot of fun that night. Then she pulled out a length of brown yarn and started to tie a 12 and a half centimos coin to it—an amulet, she said, that would protect me for the next few hours (from what, I did not dare to ask). She also wrote something on a piece of paper, folded it carefully, and told me to find Dolly, a woman wearing a heart-shaped eye patch who, she said, was a pirate, “but not really.”

I thanked Gretchen for the fortune and the amulet that I now wore around my wrist, and started to search the room for Dolly. This was no easy feat because the room was dark and loud, with most of the light focused on the burlesque dancers gyrating and twisting pasties on the other side of it. But I found Dolly, who looked at me with her one good eye and asked what was the last really ripe fruit that I ate.

“Pineapple,” I said, thinking of the pineapple that came in my yogurt that morning. Okay, it wasn’t that ripe.

But this was good enough for Dolly, who told me that something good would happen to me in about six to eight weeks. Never had I consumed such a promising tropical fruit!

That was the end of my journey around the room looking for fortunes, so I spent some time talking with Denny, the curator of the Museum of Interesting Things, who had a few thematically correct items on display, including an Edison phonograph, a stereoscope, and an electrode machine that exhibited a purple-blue electric current and delivered a negligible shock. Plus just for this event: an old vibrator. You know, because Victorian ladies suffered from a lot of neck pain.

## PLEASE DON'T POINT YOUR STEAM-POWERED LASER GUN AT ME!

A guy named Joe from Penny Dreadful Productions was walking around in an elaborate deep-sea diver/robot/samurai warrior outfit that looked incredibly heavy and hot. He casually tossed me his weapon so I could feel that it was light—both it and his costume were made of some kind of foam. It was one of the more user-friendly weapons I'd see: other people walked around with heavier items of destruction, mostly things that looked like laser guns powered by vacuum tubes, hoses spray painted the color of old pennies and ashtrays, and bits of clockwork, all tied in with bits of leather and



copper piping. If a weapon was actually usable, the Fair's "peace tie" policy prevented it from going into action.

Some people put this to the test. On Saturday, one of the security guys who manned what I'd call the "Steampunk Central" desk at the Embassy Suites told us that at least one attendee showed up the night before with a working flamethrower that used small camp propane tanks as its fiery source. The owner was asked to disarm the weapon or leave, as policy required.

And then there was the aforementioned guy on stilts with a harpoon, apparently one of several roaming the Fair's stratosphere. But that's not to say that everyone walking about that weekend was packing "punk, though in a pinch, I learned that my trusty parasol could be used to defend myself.

#### IN SEARCH OF THE GREEN FAIRY

Up until the Steampunk World's Fair, my only experience with absinthe was a bottle affiliated with Marilyn Manson—Mansinthe—that I had purchased some time before. My attempt to rig the proper experience with a fork, a sugar cube, and

some cold water dripped from above into an old champagne glass resulted in an okay beverage, but I figured I did something wrong and wanted to experience the drink made properly.

Enter the Absinthe (and Mead) Tasting, where my friends and I were seated with six strangers who would soon become our mildly tipsy compatriots. Under the capable hands of our host, Milly Wonka, we started off with a shooter of mead called Zombie Killer, by the B. Nektar Meadery in Detroit. A troupe of Green Fairies brought the beverages to us, and the Mead Fairy soon joined them. Where the absinthe fairies were delicate and green, the Mead Fairy presented a more Viking princess/Conan the Barbarian vibe as she went around the room getting people to yell "Mead mead mead!" while keeping time with a club. As people started getting woozy from the afternoon's tastings, the Mead Fairy kept them on their toes.

Also on the menu were two absintnes: an Edward III absinthe, which was also served in a shooter, and was mostly what I expected: cold, cloudy white, and reminiscent of Good and Plenty, which isn't such a bad thing in my book. The second a Kübler absinthe, was served in a glass and a bit stronger

than the first absinthe. If anything, I was happy to see that I hadn't deviated too far from the desired effect with the Mansinthe at home, and planned to use an absinthe spoon I'd bought earlier that day to try it again.

The ambrosial experience I was hoping the absinthe would provide occurred with the second mead: Evil Genius, also from the B. Nektar Meadery. It was light and hoppy and as close as I'll ever get to enjoying beer as a beverage. It beats any mead you've kicked back at a Ren faire (well, except the Wicked Faire, also in Jeff Mach's world of events).

Toward the end of the tasting, Voltaire came onstage and entertained us with a few songs. Voltaire—a "maker of music, films, books, toys, and mayhem"—spent his formative years in New Jersey, and like many of us in the same boat, he didn't exactly relish them. But I saw him open up for Rasputina once, playing music that's basically "dark cabaret," and was grateful for his ability to liven up a room full of warm and tipsy steampunk devotees.

#### A CREATIVE AND FASCINATING SPACE

The Steampunk World's Fair has grown in popularity for the past three years, and this past May, over 4,000 people attended. Jeff said that it's the world's largest steampunk event, with the largest collection of entertainment of any festival its size anywhere. Acts this year included Emperor Norton's Stationary Marching Band, the Burllesque Poetess, a guy sticking nails into his face, belly dancers, fire breathers...and more. Though I did miss the 20,000 LEGO® pieces under the Sea.

"Steampunk is a creative, fascinating space you can use to jump into all kinds of amazing places," Jeff said to me before the fair, and added that he wasn't concerned so much with what it is or isn't. "I'm much more concerned with saying, 'What can you do with steampunk?'"

Well, what do you think you can do with a world full of gears, high teas, clockwork, top hats, and the power of water vapor? If it intrigues you, the 2013 Steampunk World's Fair will take place from May 17 through May 19, at the same location as this past year: the Radisson and the Embassy Suites in Piscataway, NJ. You can find more info at [www.SteampunkWorldsFair.com](http://www.SteampunkWorldsFair.com).

## THE DEFINITIVE DANDY?

The Steampunk World's Fair was peppered with top hats of all kinds, as well as well-dressed gentlemen, and it reminded me Lord Breaulove Swells Whimsy: one of the most aesthetically-oriented people to ride a hi-wheel in the Mount Holly, NJ area. Lord Whimsy was nice enough to allow *Weird NJ* into his home a few years back, where we ate homemade hummus, viewed his collection of meat-eating plants, and talked at length with him and his lovely wife, Lady Pinkwater, about much weirdness. We'll be posting the interview on the *Weird NJ* website, and this is the perfect opportunity to mention his book, *The Affected Provincial's Companion, Vol. 1*. It is a paean to a higher form of Dandyism, and if you enjoy steampunk and all of its variations, or just love to learn, you will appreciate his intelligence, his humor and his ability to classify the many ways in which you can knot a necktie. You can find out more about him at [lordwhimsy.com](http://lordwhimsy.com).

