My Back Pages #13

Rich Lynch

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articles and essays by Rich Lynch

I'm resigned that this 13th issue will inevitably lead me to the topic of triskaidekaphobia, so I might as well get it over with now. The number 13 as a bad omen dates all the back to the time of the Vikings where the mischievous Loki was the 13th god in the Norse pantheon and even before that, back to the time of the Roman Empire when the disciple Judas was the 13th person to sit at the table of The Last Supper. Throughout the ages the number 13 has been associated with all kinds of terrible events. Relatively recent cases in point are the 13th Apollo mission to the moon in 1970 which nearly met disaster, and the death of Princess Diana in 1997 in a car crash at the 13th pillar of the Pont de l'Alma tunnel in Paris. And for a brief time in 2004, it was believed that the newly-discovered asteroid Apophis had a very real chance of smashing into the Earth in 2029 on the 13th of April.

I can assure you there's nothing nearly so ominous about *this* #13, but what I'm really leading up to is that the number 13 being a portent is mostly a western civilization phenomenon. As you will see in the first essay of this issue, on a trip to Korea earlier this year I was surprised to learn that a *different* number is considered a cultural bane.

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Gaithersburg, Maryland
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The Peninsula

Prolog: Tough Way to Get an Upgrade

The United agent at the gate had just told me the one thing that airline travelers *never* want to hear: "I'm sorry, sir, but your flight has closed out."

a view from the busy San Francisco International Airport

I had been afraid that was going to happen. The flight in to San Francisco from Seoul had been almost on time, but it had been a big 747, almost entirely filled, and I had been seated toward the back. It took a while just to leave the airplane, and then there were very long, slow lines at baggage re-checking and customs. If the departure gate hadn't been all the way at the end of the farthest concourse, about as far a walk as possible once I cleared customs, I might still have made it. As it was, I missed the connector flight to Washington by less than five minutes.

What followed was an extra eleven hours in the airport. After the first hour or so, there really isn't a whole lot to do in an airport, even a busy one like San Francisco International. I had my iPad and there was free wifi, which helped, but I eventually gave in to impatience and explored what seemed to be every square foot of the concourse, including the ubiquitous gift shops. They had plentiful stocks of something that I had tried but was unable to find during my week in Korea – picture postcards.

It wasn't until about midnight that I was able to continue my trip back home. The United help desk lady had re-booked me on a red-eye to Houston, and from there back to Washington. The one silver lining from this misadventure was that for those two flights, I was given a free promotion up to business class. But it was a tough way to get an upgrade.

CCS, Gangnam Style

I had never been to Korea before, and what had brought me there was a business trip. The multinational organization for which I plan and organize meetings (as its Secretariat) held its 2014 technical meeting there. The planning for this year's event was more frenetic than usual because the continuing reorganization-in-progress at work had reduced support for the Secretariat from two people down to just me.

at the CCS meeting in Seoul

The purpose of the meeting was to work on technical issues involved with carbon sequestration, sometimes referred to as 'carbon capture and storage', or 'CCS'. If and when the world ever gets serious about climate change mitigation, these technologies will still allow

fossil fuels, and specifically coal, to be used for power generation because the carbon dioxide would be captured before it can be released to the atmosphere and instead permanently stored deep underground. But it's expensive to do. The past few years have seen the first few large-scale demonstration projects that will generate enough information so that the next generation of projects will be much cheaper. And that's why this multinational organization exists – to facilitate the development of newer and more affordable CCS technologies. The people who attend these meetings are world-class experts and it's been a fascinating experience just to be around them, let alone being able to work with them.

one of the many street sculptures in Seoul's Gangnam District

We had been hoping to hold a meeting in Seoul for the past several years, and the stars had finally aligned. The Korean hosts had found us a very fine venue hotel in the swank Gangnam District of the city, whose wide boulevards are adorned with interesting sculptures and where many of Korea's largest corporations are headquartered. This section of Seoul gained some prominence back in 2012 when it was host to the G-20 economic summit. But the Gangnam District has become even more renown for a different reason entirely – in 2012, the Korean pop music star Psy became famous for his song "Gangnam Style", whose viral video smashed the record for total number of viewings on YouTube.

Of Pavilions and Foreign Invasions

There was just a single free day available to see what I could of Seoul, so I and two of the others who were there for the meeting went to see Gyeongbokgung. It's an extended complex of buildings, many of them reconstructed in the aftermath of the wars and occupations of the 20th century, that once was the main palace of the Joseon Dynasty which ruled the Korean peninsula for nearly 500 years starting at the end of the 1300s. There are many large colorful structures that once were offices for palace officials and the residences of kings and their families.


at the Hyangwonjeong Pavilion

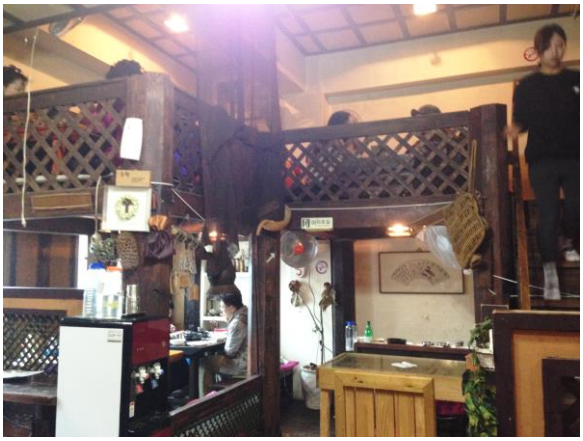
The signature image, though, is a small hexagonal pavilion on an island in the middle of a lake. The name of the place loosely translates to "Pavilion of Far-Reaching Fragrance", which describes what we might have experienced if the meeting had been held a few weeks later when all the trees and flowering shrubs would have been in bloom.

I perceived from these early Spring conditions that Korea's climate is pretty similar to where I live in Maryland. The late March temperatures were a bit chilly, though not excessively so, and winter was mostly just a fading memory. The big difference was the haze. It seemed to be an omnipresent feature of Seoul, though it turned out that it's really as much an outsider to Korea as I am. The stuff blows in from farther west, I was told, some of which probably caused visibility problems in Beijing the day before. Sometimes it gets even worse, when dust storms kicked up all the way over in the Gobi Desert invade Korea.

hazy Seoul from my hotel room window

Seoul Food

The day at Gyeongbokgung included lunch at a small restaurant located in a little alleyway just off a busy tourist shopping area. And it was there I discovered that, hey, I *like* Korean food! I had been afraid that I wouldn't, after reading about some of the things that are in the cuisine. But it's not overly spicy, at least when eaten with rice, and it's very flavorful. The little restaurant appeared to cater more toward the locals than to us tourists. There was an upstairs loft that looked to have seating on cushions, and diners removed their shoes before going up there. And the menu was all in Korean. Now *that* would have caused some problems, were it not for the accompanying photos of the food selections.



lunch inside the small restaurant

The four day meeting provided many other opportunities to discover Korean cuisine. There were group dinners every evening, one of them with a menu that included eighteen different courses! Not everything was of interest (I kept the sashimi at arm's length) but there were certainly some foods I'd never experienced before that were very tasty. My favorites were the japchae, made from sweet potato noodles stir-fried with vegetables, and also the smoked duck breast. But I didn't get very much of that, as it turned out to be *everybody's* favorite as well.

one of the many courses at the big dinner event

What the F?

I didn't think for a moment that the Gangnam District of Seoul was the "real" Korea. Online travel guides often refer to it as the Beverly Hills of Korea, or Korea's Silicon Valley. To have any chance of discovering the "real" Korea, I would need to see more than just the Seoul metropolitan area. And, as it turned out, I was able to do just that.

The overall meeting included a field trip to see two pilot plants that are testing new technologies for capturing carbon dioxide from utility power plants. But neither of these was located anywhere near Seoul, so after the close of the technology workshop on the next-to-last day of the meeting we boarded a chartered bus that was headed south. The immediate destination was the city of Daejeon, and it was about a two hour ride to get there.

Our hotel in Daejeon wasn't quite as nice as the one in Seoul but it was also a lot less expensive, probably because its business consisted more of in-country guests than rich foreigners like us (hah!). There was no 4th floor. Instead, there was an "F" floor. We were scratching our heads over that until someone pointed out that this was because of 'tetraphobia' – there is a superstitious practice in East Asia of avoiding direct contact with the number 4. In many of the East Asian languages, the word for '4' sounds very similar to the word for 'death', so in hotels, hospitals, and other public buildings floor number 'F' replaces '4', or parallel to the practice in North American hotels, floor 4 is just skipped altogether.

toilet controls in my hotel room in Daejeon

There was an even bigger "What the F?" moment when I checked out my hotel room. In addition to the standard flush handle, the commode had a set of controls that resembled a TV remote. When I mentioned this to one of the delegates from Australia, he laughed and said that my Korea experience would not be complete without giving that a try. But I decided I wasn't brave enough. There are some kinds of experiences that are better left un-experienced.

set-up for the 'domino bomb'

Of the many group dinners in the trip, the one at the hotel in Daejeon was the most memorable. But not because of the food nor the camaraderie. On second thought, maybe it *was* because of the camaraderie, as we were all having a good time now that the long days of meetings were all behind us. It was near the end of the dinner, after lots of alcohol had been consumed, when the host (the President of one of Korea's energy research institutes) introduced us to the 'domino bomb'. Simply put, it's a serial version of a mixed drink known as a 'depth charge', where a shot glass filled with vodka or some other

hard liquor is dropped with a splash into a glass of beer, then the whole thing consumed as fast as possible. If you set up several glasses of beer in a line and align shot glasses of the hard stuff up on the rims of the beer glasses, one little nudge to the first shot glass results in a domino-effect spectacle that truly fits the definition of a photo-op.

aftermath of the 'domino bomb'

Daejeon is home to several of the Korean energy institutes, but they were all out at the edge of the city. The hotel where we stayed, however, was down in the center of the city, in the midst of a neon-and-LED jungle that was amazing to behold. It seemed like every building had its exterior covered with lighting advertising whatever services or businesses were within. After the dinner, several of us walked around the city center to see what was there and there seemed to be a lot of walk-up second story establishments that featured karaoke. At least, that's what we thought – the signs next to their doors depicted young women with microphones in hand.

After passing by a few of these places, somebody finally suggested that all this walking around was getting boring and: "Let's go up there and give it a go!" We looked at each other, waiting for somebody else to talk some sense. But nobody did, so we all trooped up the stairs to see what awaited us. It turned out to be a featureless small lobby, and it was only a moment before a young woman came out to greet us. She gave us a once-over look that seemed to say "Really?", and motioned for us to wait as she walked into an adjacent room.

some of the lights of downtown Daejeon

At that point it finally dawned on us that we had made a mistake. We weren't hearing any music, and when I turned around and looked at the sign on the upstairs entrance door I saw that the woman depicted holding the microphone was topless. When I pointed this out to the others we quietly and expeditiously made our departure, and at that point decided that maybe it was time to head back toward the hotel.

It might well have been that the place actually *was* just a karaoke bar. But after I was back in my hotel room I checked online and found out that some of the karaoke bars in Daejeon have been described as offering *other* kinds of services.

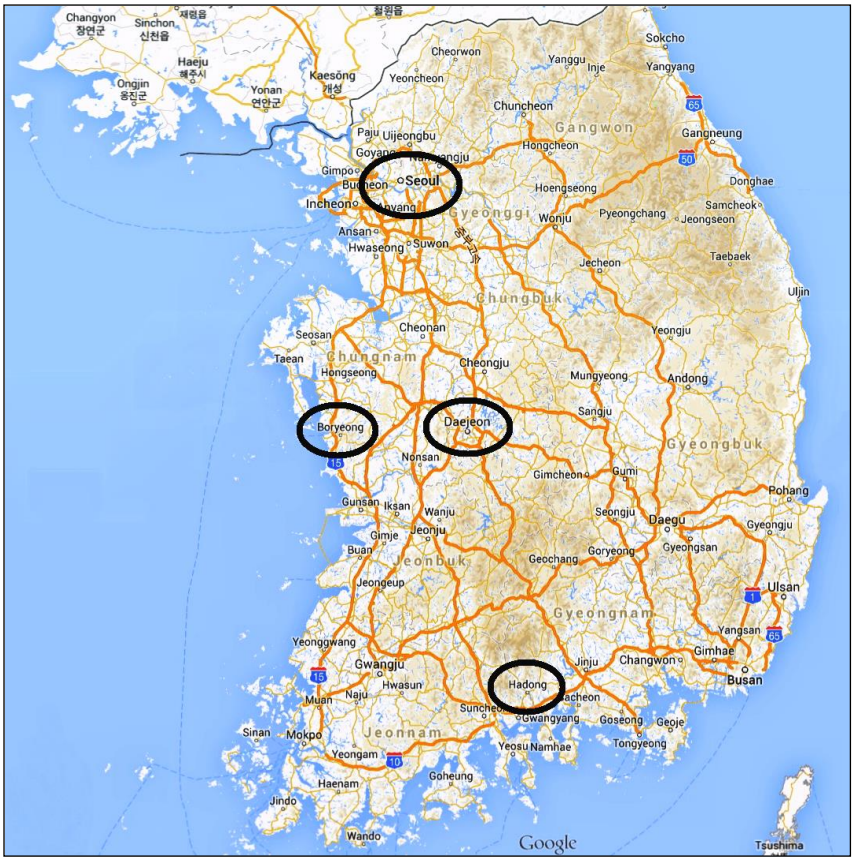
Discovering the "Real" Korea

Daejeon was only the jumping-off point for the tour of the two pilot plants. Early the next morning, the bus took us south, all the way to Hadong at the south end of the country. It was

mountains and greenhouses in rural Korea

about three hours to get there, and along the way I saw some of the "real" Korea. It's a place filled with the kind of mountains you'd find in the Adirondacks in New York State or the Smokies along the Tennessee-North Carolina border. In the southern part of the country, almost all available valley land is farmed. So much so that in some places, what at first I thought to be small lakes turned out to be large expanses of temporary greenhouses, each covered by milky-white plastic sheeting.

After the visit to the Hadong ended, it was another four hour bus ride back upcountry to Boryeong, on the coast of the Yellow Sea. And during that ride I discovered even more of the "real" Korea. It's a place still under development, with expressways so new that there were not yet even any oil stains from vehicles on the pavement. On the way to Boryeong we passed through many tunnels carved through the mountains, so many that I lost count after about twenty and some of them a mile or more in length. The word 'impressive' does not even begin to describe the amount of engineering that's gone into building this new infrastructure.



It was a *very* long day, and we didn't arrive back in Daejeon until after 10:00pm. The following morning, an express bus took me on yet another long ride, this time back to Incheon Airport for the trip home. It was a short week – so much was going on that the time flew past. And it was a long week – it's not often that I log so many in-country miles on a business trip.

On the ride to the airport there was plenty of time to revisit, in my mind, all the things that happened during the trip. And it really didn't take me long to finally decide that I *had*, in fact, discovered the "real" Korea.

For the entire time I was there – in Seoul, in Daejeon, on the road – it had been all around me.

Epilog: A Postcard from Korea

Whenever I'm on a business trip, I always try to send my sister Beth a picture postcard. She's a cancer survivor, and during the months of her radiation and chemotherapy treatments following the surgery I sent her postcards from all the places I visited to help her keep a positive outlook.

But times seem to be changing. Picture postcards are becoming difficult to find, and in Korea I came up completely empty. So here is my personal postcard to her and, for that matter, to all of my friends. I took the photo on the night of the 18-course dinner – the restaurant featured graceful dancers in colorful, traditional costumes. Truly an extraordinary evening, truly an extraordinary trip. ☼

Afterword:

The Seoul and San Francisco airports are a very long 14 hours flying time from each other but in some ways they are further apart than that. The best thing I could find to do with myself during the extended layover at San Francisco International was to surf the Internet. But Seoul's Incheon International Airport was *filled* with interesting stuff, including small cultural museums and a performance by a symphony orchestra. Just before I passed through the customs and security checks there was a very accomplished solo pianist, and I'm glad I had enough time to linger and enjoy the recital. In addition to the obligatory Chopin and Mozart short pieces, she ended her set with something I hadn't expected – a rag by Scott Joplin. And as you'll read in the next essay, I'm a real fan of his music.

A Provisional Happy Birthday, in Syncopated Time, to a Great American Composer

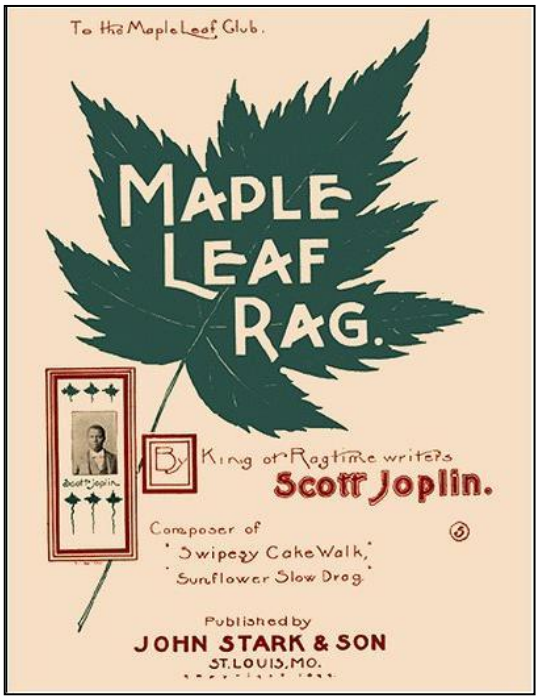
It's November 24th, and the great American composer Scott Joplin (1868-1917) may have been born on this day 136 years ago in rural northeastern Texas. No one is quite sure of either the date or the place because of poor recordkeeping back then. His father and mother were former slaves; his mother was a domestic and when Scott was a young child the family moved to Texarkana where Mrs. Joplin found work in the homes of middle class white families.

Scott Joplin

It turned out that some of those homes had pianos, and so Scott learned how to read and play music at a very early age. He displayed enough talent that through word-of-mouth he became noticed by a German-born music teacher, Julius Weiss, who was living in Texarkana. Weiss provided Joplin the equivalent of a music education, instructing him in composition and music theory, including opera. From this, Joplin gained an appreciation for classical music, and this actually formed the basis for his growing desire for recognition as a composer.

It wasn't until the late 1890s, however, that Joplin first gained the success he desired. In the years prior to then he had lived in St. Louis for a while, and worked as an itinerant musician in various places in Missouri, Arkansas, and even as far north as Chicago at the time of the 1893 World's Fair, where he was a cornet player in a local band. After that he settled down in Sedalia, Missouri, where he worked for several years as a pianist at local clubs for black men there. One of these places was The Maple Leaf Club, and it became the inspiration for one of Joplin's first compositions, "The Maple Leaf Rag".

It was probably Joplin's time in St. Louis that gave him an interest in 'ragged time' music, which had become better known as 'ragtime'. It was based somewhat on European classicism, but with African-inspired rhythms and harmonies. The main feature of the music, its syncopation, was what made it different, and Joplin turned out to be the right person at the right place and at the right time to make it transcendentally popular beyond its Midwestern roots. Joplin sold "The Maple Leaf Rag" to a local publisher which resulted in a modest but steady royalty for the rest of his life. Buoyed by this success, other compositions followed; by the time of his death, he had composed about 60 now-famous rags and rag-inspired serenades, including "The Easy Winners" (1901), "The Entertainer" (1902), "The Pine Apple Rag" (1908), "Solace" (1909), and "The Magnetic Rag" (1914).



Joplin was not so successful with other aspects of his life. He never became wealthy and never truly achieved the recognition during his lifetime that he so much desired. His one opera, *Treemonisha* (1911), was a failure and was performed only once in his lifetime. Two marriages ended badly, one in divorce and one with the death of his wife from pneumonia only weeks after the wedding. Joplin himself died of disease, from the effects of terminal Syphilis, in what could be considered his prime, but by the late 1910s, ragtime was beginning to lose its appeal to a newer form of American music, jazz.

The ragtime musical form is usually considered as situated somewhere on the border between classical music and jazz, and it is not at all unusual for classical music radio stations to include Joplin piano rags in their playlists. Even though he is known as the "King of Ragtime", Joplin actually did write classical music – he composed both a symphony and a piano concerto, but the music has not survived for either. It is easy to trace Joplin's influence on American music, but not so easy to understand why he fell into near obscurity from about the time of his death until 1973, when his music experienced a revival after being included in the soundtrack of *The Sting*. Since then it has been different – in 1976, Joplin received a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for his contribution to American music and there is now an annual music festival in his honor in his home town of Sedalia.

One of his biographers described Scott Joplin as "intelligent, well-mannered and well-spoken [with] few interests other than music," while another described him as a multi-talented genius: "He had a kinesthetic gift, as seen in the movements he created for his dramatic productions. It was often said that if times were different and not so segregated, he could have been a great choreographer." Joplin's influence has turned out to be extensive in both jazz and classical music, serving as inspiration for composers as notable as Irving Berlin and Claude Debussy. For us, Joplin's clever melodies and rhythms from a century ago have turned out to be timeless, and the universal recognition he did not achieve a century ago will still be evident a century from now. Would that we could all aspire to such heights. ☼

Afterword:

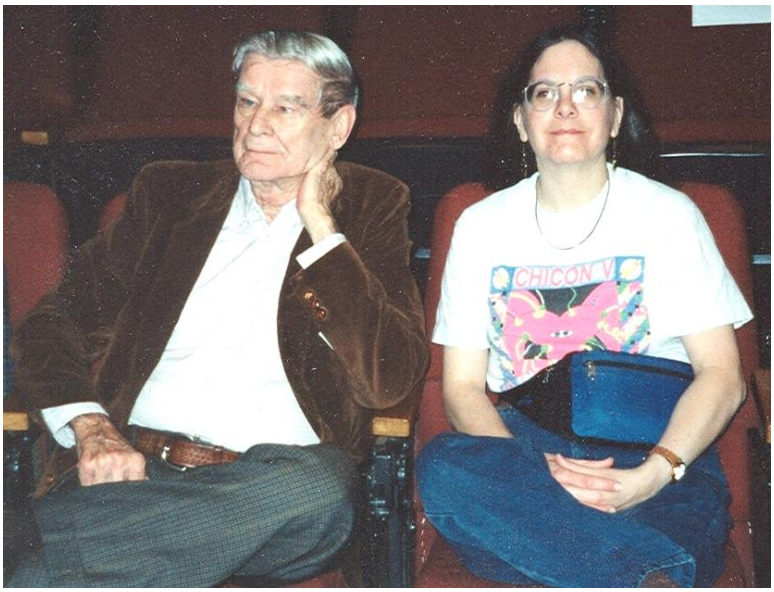
This was one of a series of appreciations of classical music composers I wrote about a decade ago, partly for my own entertainment and partly because back then it was difficult to find short biographies of composers on the Internet. Nowadays we have Wikipedia.

Almost exactly 46 years after the birth of Scott Joplin, another memorable composer of a different sort was born. Wilson "Bob" Tucker came into this world on November 23, 1914, and in the 92 years of his life he wrote many exceptional novels of mystery and science fiction. But he was even better known as a science fiction fan and, indeed, was one of fandom's founding fathers back in the early 1930s. For me, he was a friend and mentor, and I was honored to write a remembrance of him for a fanzine that was published on the 100th anniversary of his birth.

The Final Time I Saw Bob Tucker and Other Remembrances

The final time I ever saw Bob Tucker was in his hometown of Bloomington, Illinois. It was in October 2001, a month and three days following the nine-eleven attacks, and the most difficult part of the trip to Illinois from Maryland was getting through all the ramped-up airport security.

But it had been worth it. Nicki and I had traveled to Illinois to take part in the 14th "Ditto" fanzine fans' convention, which was also the 11th FanHistoricon. Bob was the unofficial Guest of Honor, but there were several other notables in attendance from science fiction fandom's earlier days including Jack Speer and Forry Ackerman. The convention's program was loaded with panels, remembrances, and show-and-tells that not only helped to better preserve the oral history tradition of the genre, they were also as entertaining as hell.



Bob Tucker with Nicki Lynch at the 2001 Ditto/FanHistoricon

There was a group dinner the last evening of the convention and as chance would have it, I was seated next to Bob. I don't remember what we talked about, but I do remember that we were both laughing a lot. Afterwards, Bob and his wife Fern made a brief visit to the convention's hospitality suite before heading off to home. Just outside the suite there was a balcony overlooking the entrance to the hotel, and as Bob was leaving with Fern I could see that he looked contented.

* * *

The first time I ever saw Bob Tucker was 23 years earlier, at a small convention in Little Rock, Arkansas. Back then, Nicki and I were living in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and our main fanac was editing a small newszine (titled *Chat*) for the local science fiction club. The result of that encounter was a four-page interview that appeared in the sixth issue of *Chat* but in retrospect it wasn't as interesting as later things involving him that appeared in *Chat* and its successor, *Mimosa*. We asked him what his favorite novels were and he told us; we asked him how he came to be a writer and he told us; we asked him what he was working on and he told us. It is to his credit (and his wit) that the interview came out as well as it did – we didn't ask him a single question about any of his fannish hijinks he'd been involved in over the years such as the Staples War or the Tucker Hotel. The nearest thing of fan historical interest was his account of his airplane trip to Australia for the 1975 Worldcon. He must have thought we were just a couple of neos. And he would have been mostly right.

We did a much better job a few months later, when we caught up with Bob in Louisville, Kentucky at the 1978 Rivercon convention. By then we had discovered the delights of fan

history which eventually led us to the idea for publishing *Mimosa*, a fanzine much more steeped in the preservation of the history of fandom. *Chat* was just completing its first year of existence, and the 12th issue featured a three-way interview with us, Bob, and Rivercon's Guest of Honor, Robert Bloch. It runs only a bit more than three pages, so the total time we spent with them must have been just 15 minutes or so. But I remember that, subjectively, it seemed to go on for an hour or more. This time we did explore some of their combined fannish roots, which resulted in several amusing anecdotes. It was all hugely entertaining and enjoyable, and not just for us. We had staged the interview in Rivercon's consuite, and by the time we wrapped we were surrounded by an audience of about a dozen other fans.

But even that wasn't my most memorable time with Bob. During the 1980s he was a frequent guest of the local convention, Chattacon, and would come into town a day early and leave a day late so that he could stay at our house. Some years it was longer than that, due to the vagaries of early January weather which in some years delayed his return flight by an extra day or more. Bob's visit for the 1980 Chattacon was particularly memorable because he came to Chattanooga with his friend Lou Tabakow, who had his own claim to fame as co-founder of one of science fiction fandom's most important organizations, the Cincinnati Fantasy Group. Lou was already in the early stages of Lou Gehrig's Disease which would eventually claim him, but the time they spent with us before the convention were two of the most fun days Nicki and I have ever had. There were dinners each evening with local fans that morphed into mini-conventions in our home. Those two nights were filled with engaging and thought-provoking conversation that usually started with science fiction and transitioned into many other topics before we all finally ran out of steam.

* * *

If I had to single out a "signature moment" in my friendship with Bob, it would probably be the Saturday evening banquet of one of the Cincinnati Midwestcons, a few years before Nicki and I moved north to Maryland. There were only about 20 people who partook of that particular food function, and everybody was seated at one very long table. Bob was seated near the middle which allowed him to chew the fat with just about everybody else, and it was obvious that everyone were very much enjoying themselves. It was perhaps the best fan dinner I've ever experienced, and it went on a lot longer than had been scheduled. As it was finally about to conclude I thought to myself, "Freeze it here. Freeze this image in my mind. I want to remember this for the rest of my life."

As everybody was getting up to return to the convention, Bob turned toward me and smiled. I could see that he looked contented. ☼

Afterword:

Wilson "Bob" Tucker is known for his activity as both a professional author and a science fiction fan, but he also had a career as an theater electrician and even worked on a few Hollywood movies back in the 1940s. There have been many such instances of science fiction fans having successful careers outside fandom, including the subject of the next essay, Dean A. Grennell. He became successful in his professional career and dropped out of fandom at about the end of the 1950s. After that he made so few appearances at conventions and in fanzines that his passing in 2004 went totally unnoticed inside the science fiction community. Here's a remembrance of him.

Remembering the 'Dean' of 1950s Fandom

Dean A. Grennell

Back in April, the ten year anniversary of the death of one of science fiction fandom's best writers passed by totally unnoticed. Dean A. Grennell was truly a giant in the microcosm that was 1950s science fiction fandom. Harry Warner, Jr. described him as "the closest thing that the universe came to creating a new Bob Tucker" and that's probably true. Grennell, like Tucker, was a humorist and had the ability to amuse and entertain his readers, first in letters of comment to fanzines and then as publisher of his own fanzine, *Grue*.

Warner also stated that Grennell was "curiously unknown to later generations of fans" and that's *certainly* true. Reprints of his writings are difficult to find and his fanwriting output dramatically diminished after the end of the 1950s. About then he began a long career as a professional writer and expert on firearms, eventually becoming managing editor of *Gun World* magazine. He was more than just a writer, though – he was a tinkerer and an inventor, coming up with ideas on new types of ammunition cartridges for small arms, and he built the desk on which his friend Robert Bloch wrote the famous suspense novel *Psycho*.

In addition to all this, Dean Grennell was also a skilled photographer and that's how I eventually met him. At the beginning of the 1990s, I was editor for Harry Warner's history of the 1950s, *A Wealth of Fable* (SCIFI Press, 1992). During the late stages of the project, Dean answered my call for loan of 1950s-era images and I ultimately used 21 of his photos in the book. This developed into an exchange of correspondence, and he became a recipient of *Mimosa*, a fanzine devoted to fanhistory that my wife Nicki and I were editing back then.

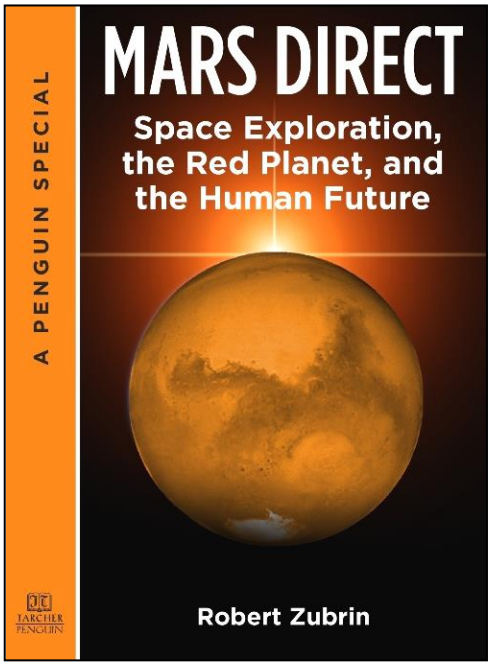
Dean eventually wrote an article for *Mimosa*, a remembrance of Robert Bloch which appeared in the 17th issue back in 1995. But before that, I had my only in-person meeting with him. It was in 1992, out in Los Angeles at the Corflu fanzine fans' convention, and he was only at the convention for a short while. I remember that we talked for only a few minutes as he had another commitment to attend to, and we didn't really delve much into his recollections of the 1950s. And worst of all, I didn't even get the one keepsake that I would have really treasured – a photo of me and him. That may have been his last appearance at a science fiction convention. He returned to his life outside fandom and after his death in April 2004 there was not even a mention of his passing in any fan publication.

I've been unable to write a good ending for this essay, so instead I'll paraphrase the one that Dean Grennell wrote about Robert Bloch: he was an inveterate humorist, a great writer, and a good friend. And yes, I am missing him a lot. ☼

Afterword:

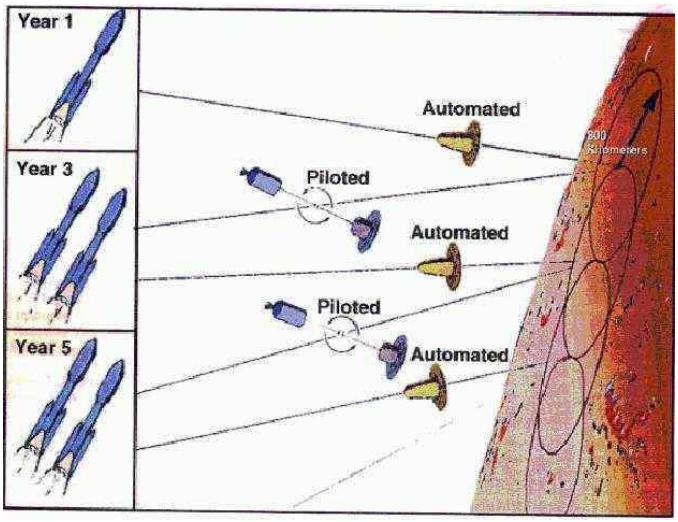
Something else I've been missing over the past decade are the various luncheon lectures that were a frequent part of my existence back when I worked down in Washington. Most of them were hosted by conservative think tanks which were pushing their own agendas, but once in a while, as happened in December 2005, one would take place at a much more neutral venue.

Mars Indirect?



There was an interesting lecture about the planet Mars today at the National Institute of Standards and Technology. I heard about it from a retired NIST person who apparently is still connected into what goes on there. The speaker was Dr. Robert Zubrin, the founder and president of the Mars Society (which will have its annual convention in Washington, D.C. next year), and he has written a book titled *Mars Direct* that is promulgating the idea that a manned mission to Mars is possible (given a national commitment and about $30 billion of funding) within a decade.

The idea is that the mission would use a new launch vehicle (named "Ares") that is based mostly on existing Space Shuttle technology. It would have the capability of putting about 120 metric tons of payload into low earth orbit (about six times of what the Space Shuttle can do) or about 47 metric tons on a "lift and throw" six-month duration trajectory to Mars during the once-every-two-years window when such a launch would be possible. Zubrin claimed his idea would work, because the mission would be broken up into several parts, with the first part an unmanned lander that would manufacture methane fuel and liquid oxygen for the return trip from "jelled" hydrogen (and I admit I don't know what that is) brought along and carbon dioxide from the Martian atmosphere. (The power source for this process would be a 100-kilowatt mini-nuclear reactor.)



Zubrin was a very entertaining speaker, and his proposal for going to Mars was actually a lot more realistic than what was originally proposed, back in 1989, during the Bush-the-elder presidency. But it's probably still a non-starter because of the marginal justification ($30 billion to mostly just explore for evidence of past life, or to prepare for "future life" there) and because of the amount of risk involved in such a mission plan.

Zubrin touched upon these mission safety risks involved near the end of his talk, and when the opportunity came for questions, I asked a follow-up on that point:

"From a risk standpoint, your plan includes many untested mission-critical steps and technologies, any one of which could possibly cause an Apollo 13-like crisis, which given the extended duration of the mission, could very well result in a much unhappier outcome. Whether

or not this level of risk is acceptable is no doubt debatable, but the fact of the matter is that, because of perceived risk, we can't even service a valuable scientific instrument that is just a few hundred miles away. So what makes you believe that there is going to be a change in this mindset, where something like what you've planned becomes a realistic possibility?"

Zubrin's response was that he agreed that the NASA mindset is a large part of the problem. The money could perhaps come from the existing NASA budget, over the next decade, but the mindset has to change that space exploration has to be a 100% safe endeavor. Rescuing the Hubble Space Telescope, for example, ought to be a NASA priority – the Space Shuttle has at least a 50:1 success rate, and pending fixes will make it safer yet. The Hubble itself, over its own successful lifetime, has cost about the same as a fully-equipped nuclear aircraft carrier, and Zubrin made the comparison that a fleet admiral would obviously take the very slight 1:50 risk on seven lives to prevent such a carrier from sinking. And many firefighters had already taken what is probably that amount of risk to save an earthbound observatory in Arizona that had been threatened by fire.

Robert Zubrin

So the message was that things have to change before something as far out as a manned Mars mission, or as do-able as a telescope servicing mission is likely, or even possible. But that's something that everybody in the auditorium no doubt already knew. Until then, what we'll have is entertaining seminars like this one by speakers who have their heads in the clouds, or in this case, way, way above the atmosphere. ☼

Afterword:

As the saying goes, the more things change the more they stay the same. It's now almost exactly nine years after that lecture and interest in establishing a colony on Mars is burgeoning. There have even been thousands of volunteers to take part in a one-way trip to Mars, which (as it was in 2005) remains "about a decade away" according to the hopeful.

Meanwhile, as we know, the Hubble Space Telescope was finally upgraded one last time and the Space Shuttle fleet has been retired. Development of the Ares launch vehicle was canceled in 2010 in favor of a less expensive system also based on Shuttle technology and the recent successful test launch and recovery of the next-generation Orion spacecraft seems to indicate that NASA is getting serious about manned space missions beyond low earth orbit. But that NASA is not planning to have any manned missions with the Orion capsule for about another seven years speaks volumes about the overall financial feasibility of sending humans to Mars. It's obvious that NASA just won't have the budget to move things along faster. The more things change the more they stay the same.

But we can still go to Mars, and even beyond, on the wings of our own imaginations, thanks to all the science fiction stories and films about space exploration. All it takes is some suspension of disbelief.

On the Suspension of Disbelief

A friend of mine, in the pages of a recent SFPA mailing, made this comment about a recent horror-genre film: "Being prepared for some suspension of disbelief for a F or SF film is fine, but *Cabin in the Woods* was built from the base of horror/slasher flicks and seemed to fit the trope for them quite well."

Watching a fantasy or science fiction film or television show requires a suspension of disbelief. There do not exist any world-saving superheroes, nor any newly-discovered killer asteroids the size of Texas, nor any sexy vampires who speak with a southern accent (or any other kind of accent, for that matter). And yet, we are prepared to accept such a premise for the sake of entertainment. Up to a point, anyway.

A really good genre film won't go past that point. It will posit a single fantastic element of some kind, such as a flying saucer being discovered under arctic ice, and everything will follow from that. People behave in believable ways, and hardly any known laws of science or principles of engineering get violated. In the end, our willingness to suspend our disbelief to accept that single fantastic element will, we hope, be rewarded by an enjoyable movie.

It occurs to me that we do not, and should not, have a single standard for suspension of disbelief for all fantasy and science fiction movies. I know *I* don't. For any film based on a comic book, it pretty much requires that you have a tremendous level of suspension of disbelief in order to enjoy it. A guy in a metal suit which flies around rocket-propelled? Come on, now! And yet, it was enjoyable because the movie had some style to it, and we all pretty much gave it free pass that it was non-believable. But for films that are based on well-known science, like that stinker of a movie whose title begins with the letter 'G', there should be a much higher standard. Movies like this should not insult our intelligence by depicting story lines that fly in the face of the 'science' the film is purportedly based on. That *Gravity* went on to win the Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation at the 2014 Worldcon can only be attributed to that most potent of beverages, the CGI Kool-Aid. With all its wonderful computer-generated effects, *Gravity* was beautiful to behold. But the premise and plot were as smelly as a fresh pile of dog doo.

The success of *Gravity* probably means there will be more films of its ilk, filled with beautiful special effects and bogus science. (Do we *really* want to see another *Armageddon*?) But it's been demonstrated, many times, that it's possible to make a movie that is compelling, gorgeous to experience, and has believable (or at least plausible) science. I hope that the upcoming *Interstellar* will be that kind of movie, especially since it's a project of Christopher Nolan, who brought us such quality genre films as *The Prestige* and *Inception*.

But I am not getting my hopes *too* high. ☼

Afterword:

A couple of years ago there was need for some real-world suspension of disbelief because of the damage caused by Superstorm Sandy along the coastlines of New Jersey and New York. It's sobering to realize that if the hurricane had turned inland 12 hours sooner than it did, Maryland would have been the storm's anvil. Nine years previous to that, Hurricane Isabel came up the Atlantic coast and we in Maryland were *not* so lucky. But as I found out, even natural disasters can sometimes provide a degree of serendipity.

The Big Storm

Much of Washington, D.C. closed down the afternoon of September 18th in preparation for the arrival of Hurricane Isabel. Metrorail quit running because it was feared that high wind gusts would make the system unsafe (the trains run aboveground, for the most part, once they're out of the city) and many of the commuters, especially U.S. Government workers, take the Metro to get to work. This was probably a bit of an overreaction by Metrorail to shut down so early, as there wasn't any significant wind or rain until well after dark. But when it *did* finally arrive...!

Hurricane Isabel

The next morning was the storm aftermath. We live in an area where the power and all other utilities comes in underground, and as a result, we were not among the thousands of homes in the county that lost power. The main culprit for those who did was all the damage to the trees, and it was terrible to see. There are ornamental pear trees planted all along our street; they don't bear fruit but they do have thousands of white blossoms that transform the street into a tunnel of white during the week or two they bloom in the spring. The limbs of those trees tend to grow into a tangle, though, and act like a sail whenever there's a strong wind. But the branches and trunks also do not have very much flex in them. I looked out the upstairs window to the street the morning after the storm and saw that our driveway was temporarily blocked by an ornamental pear that used to grow across the street; the trunk (probably eight inches in diameter) had broken in two as if it were a twig. There was carnage all up and down the street – in one stretch, near the middle school, four trees in a row had suffered that fate. In many others, the trees had been badly damaged when large lower limbs had broken off. The next few days were filled with the sound of chainsaws as city crews came to take away the broken trees; there will be far fewer blossoms next spring.

It took several days for many of the areas of the county to get their power turned back on, as it turned out. One of them was in Germantown, where one of the strip malls has a Dutch Market with specialty food stores owned by the Pennsylvania Amish who come down to Maryland on the weekend. We stopped by there two days after the storm, and as we thought, the place was closed. Except...

Some of the Amish food vendors were in there taking stock of their losses. We arrived just in time to be recipient of two large containers of ice cream that had gone soft (but not melted). But they were just fine after we found room for them in our freezer. One (a gallon of chocolate chip cookie dough) we forced ourselves to consume over the next week or so; the other (two gallons of cookies and cream) was just too much of a good thing, so we took it to a WSFA meeting where we could share the wealth.

I guess the old adages are true – it really *is* an ill wind that doesn't blow somebody any good. And the dark clouds of this storm *did* have a silver lining. Or at least a frozen one. ☼

Afterword:

There haven't been any major storms that came through this year, but around here even the garden-variety thunderstorms can wreak enough havoc where it's disruptive to travel and utility services. And, as I found out back in 2003, such storms can also be disruptive of one's ego.

My Brief Career as a Rainy-Day Stuntman

It wasn't one of my finer moments...

Another afternoon thunderstorm was blowing through and the rain was sheeting down; just a few hours earlier there hadn't been a cloud in the sky. I'd gone out to the front porch to check out how well the house's downspouts were getting water from the eaves away from the house and was surprised to see that much of the water wasn't even making it to the downspouts – it was overflowing the eave and running down the side of the house.

At that point, I made a mistake – I decided to quickly charge, through the rain, over to the corner of the house to see if the downspout was blocked. But there's the downslope of a hill there (more than a bit muddy from all the rainy weather we've had lately), and I was wearing smooth-soled sandals. Yup, you guessed it – when I reached where the downslope began, both feet went out from under me and I went down flat on my back.

the hill and the downspout

If you've ever seen the movie *Romancing the Stone*, there's a scene early on where more or less the same thing happens to Michael Douglas's character, and he's carried about a hundred feet down a muddy slope before he slides to a stop. My slide was only a foot or two, but for about a half second it was no less exciting. I don't know if any of the neighbors were watching or not, but when I got back to my feet (soaked and muddy), I decided, "Oh, what the hell," and did the old Tricky Dick Nixon arms-raised double-vee pose. (I think I might have missed my calling as a movie stuntman.)

Oh, yeah – the downspout appeared to be working just fine... ☼

Afterword:

It wasn't long after that all of the downspouts and eaves were replaced with larger capacity ones, and there has not been any overflow problem since then. But just to make sure, I do go up on the roof every November to clear out all the dead leaves.

There's room for one last essay, so with the beginning of 2015 just a few weeks away it's not long until Nicki and I will be taking our annual winter mini-vacation in New York City. Last year's, as you will read, was a very chilly experience.

A Cold New York Interlude

Prolog: Hot Jazz on a Cold Evening

Brooks Atkinson Theatre marquee for *After Midnight*

"We didn't come to New York to sit in the mezzanine," Nicki had said to me.

And she was right. It was the last evening of our annual winter mini-vacation in midtown Manhattan, and we had our sights set on better seats than were available for *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*. The musical had received lots of good reviews, which had gotten it onto our shortlist of shows to see. But that changed after we'd received the bad news at the TKTS ticket booth that all the lower level seats were gone.

So instead, we switched over to *After Midnight*, actually more of a revue than a true 'book' musical, which celebrates the golden age of Harlem's Cotton Club back in the 1930s. And it was a good choice. The show featured a 17-piece hot jazz orchestra, The Lincoln Center All-Stars, right up there on the stage as accompaniment to a cast of more than twenty very talented singers and dancers. Tying it all together was a master of ceremonies who led us through the evening using the prose of Langston Hughes. There were about thirty musical numbers from that Duke Ellington era, some of them songs and some dance. But the show was a homage rather than a true recreation – there was quite a bit of modern-day staging with B-Boy, Hip-Hop, and modern jazz dance interspersed among the tap.

And all of it was highly entertaining. I really like hot jazz, and it only took a few minutes for me to realize, for that cold evening, it's *exactly* where I wanted to be.

New York in the Round


Nicki and "Three Flags" by Jasper Johns, at the Whitney Museum

What a difference a year makes! The weather had been very spring-like on last year's early January trip to New York. So much so that it wasn't a problem to trek all the way across Central Park to get to a museum from a subway station. But this year a plan like that was a non-starter. The first two days we were in New York it was brutally cold, going down as low as about 8°F with a nasty north wind to add to the misery. So we narrowed our options on museum day trips to those no more than about a 10-15 minute walk from the subway and in the end, decided to visit The Whitney.

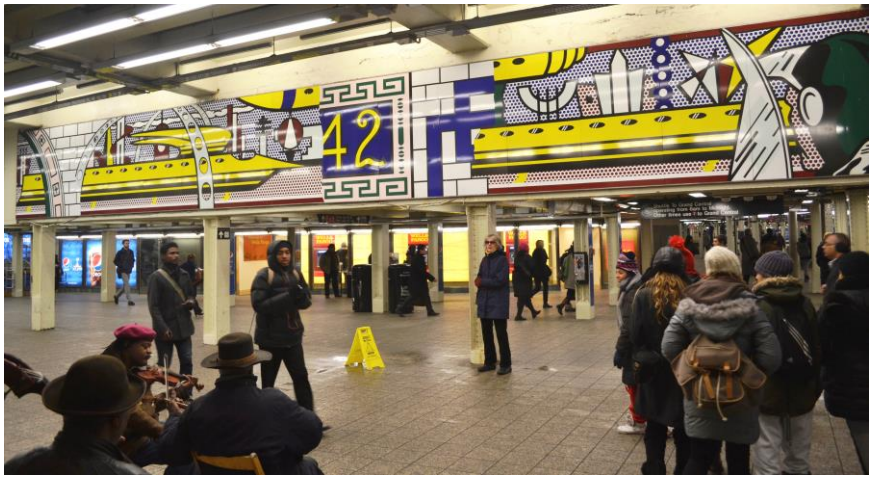
The Whitney Museum of American Art is located on the Upper East Side, a block or so from the edge of Central Park at 75th Street. Its focus is on 20th Century art and has a permanent collection that includes works by such famous artists as Jasper Johns, Edward Hopper, Georgia O'Keeffe, Andrew Wyeth, Alexander Calder, and Roy Lichtenstein.

But the featured exhibition was *In the Air*, a panoramic cinema-in-the-round view of lower Manhattan from a vantage point about 16 stories up. The filmmaker, a local artist named T.J. Wilcox, made the movie by setting up ten cameras each angled 36° from one another to capture a full 360° view of New York from the roof of his building. The cameras were synched at one frame per second, and the resulting thousands of images were stitched together and assembled into a movie that compresses a 15-hour day into about 30 minutes. The end product was being displayed on a 35-foot diameter 7-foot high circular screen. And it was mesmerizing. The cityscape shows prominent buildings in the distance – the Empire State Building to the north and the new Freedom Tower to the south – as well as nondescript buildings closer in, including one with a rooftop water tower. The sun rises, clouds sail past, airplanes whiz by in the distance, dusk eventually falls, and the lights of the city appear.

T.J. Wilcox's *In the Air*

Wilcox also filmed six vignettes, each a few minutes long and themed around some aspect or event of New York, that were superimposed onto a section of the panorama as movie progressed. The two we saw were *Manhattanhenge* and *John*, the latter a stark recounting of the 9/11 attack by Wilcox's building superintendent who witnessed it all – explosions, people jumping to their deaths, structure collapse – from the building's roof.

On our way back to the hotel, we found out, via an advertisement in a subway car, that there was another Roy Lichtenstein work of art on permanent display in the city, one that was much, much larger than any of his paintings at the Whitney. And we had walked right past it, on last year's trip to New York, without really noticing it was there. It's a 53-foot long porcelain enamel wall mural at the 42nd Street subway station, a whimsical vision of a possible future for the New York public transportation system. Turns out that the New York subway system is *filled* with artwork – about 200 different stations showcase commissioned artwork of various designs from nearly 300 different artists. It's all part of an 'Arts for Transit' program begun in the mid 1980s that has made the New York subway system, in effect, the world's largest art museum.



Roy Lichtenstein's "Times Square Mural" at the 42nd Street subway station

And how do you find out, specifically, where it all is located? Well, there's an app for that.

In Search of Buried Treasure

There was not only an app for finding all this subterranean art, there was also a guided tour available. But Nicki and I didn't find out about that until we were back home in Maryland. Instead, on our next to last morning in New York, we decided to hunt for some of these buried treasures ourselves.

with two of "The Revelers"

The obvious place to start was the 42nd Street station, where many different subway lines come together. The station is huge, with lots of places for artwork, and it took a while to discover them all. Besides the Lichtenstein mural, there are dozens of really nice mosaics by Jane Dickson collectively titled "The Revelers", depicting a New Year's Eve party that apparently never ends. They were probably not designed specifically for photo ops, but we were not the only ones posing with the mosaic party-goers that day. Elsewhere in the station was a series of small framed glazed ceramic panels by Toby Buonagurio collectively titled "Times Square Times: 35 Times", each one no larger than about half a square foot and depicting some stylized aspect of New York City. They were all bright and cheery, a welcome contrast to the cold weather up at street level.

one of the "Times Square Times" ceramics

Our quest to locate and view this expansive collection of public art, in the end, turned out to be mostly unrealistic. We had set our sights fairly low and had only wanted to see what was on the 'C' and the no. 1 subway lines, but even that turned out to be way too optimistic. There were so many individual pieces to browse and enjoy that after we had visited just three stations, we had run out of time and needed to head back toward the hotel. The two other stations we did visit, though, were very much worth the effort to get there. The 34th Street station had several very large mosaics that were circus-themed, and the 81st Street station featured a menagerie of mosaic creatures, both living and extinct, that complemented the exhibits in the American Museum of Natural History just a few minutes walk from there.

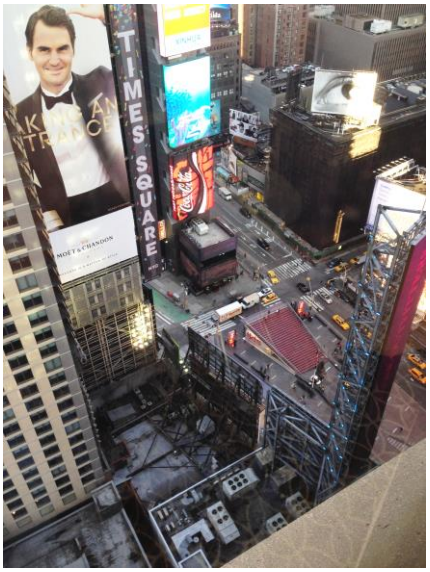
mosaic crocodile and Stegosaurus at the 81st Street station

There are other treasures to be found at New York subway stations besides the purely visual. The Arts for Transit program also approves musicians to perform within the system, currently at 30 different stations. We happened across three different ones just within the spacious 42nd Street station. A guitarist and a violinist were both late arrivers and were just getting set up, but the Ebony Hillbillies were going strong with some very enjoyable mountain bluegrass. I've read that the take for buskers in high traffic areas can be as high as $50 per hour, but the Hillbillies looked to be doing even better than that. Talent had a lot to do with it, for sure, but they were also taking full advantage, in real estate jargon, of the three most important things: location, location, location.

Ebony Hillbillies busking at the 42nd Street subway station

Epilog: The Micro-Universes of Times Square

And speaking of great locations, Nicki and I were once again, thanks to credit card points, able to stay at the New York Marriott right there in the heart of Times Square. It was even better this year, as we had enough Marriott stays over the past year to qualify for the concierge level on the 30th floor. From up there, we could look over into an office building across Times Square from the hotel and see into a cluster of micro-universes – offices with people working late into the evening, none of whom were aware of what was going in other micro-universes just above and below them.



view from our hotel room window down toward Times Square

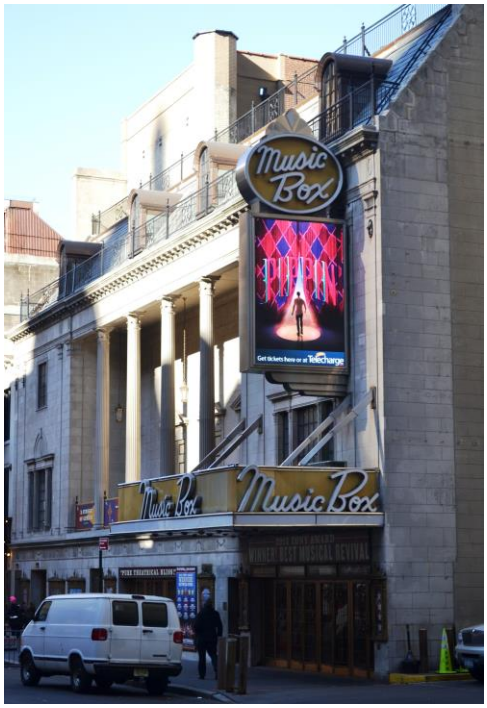
As for me, I suppose I live in my own micro-universe as well when I'm at work. My office door is often closed and I have no real idea of what goes on in many of the other offices near me. And I also have been known to work late into the evening – but *only* when it's really necessary!


some of the micro-universes of Times Square

I don't think I would have the endurance to live in Manhattan. It's a place that's fueled by some inexhaustible energy that makes it a 24/7 human kaleidoscope, and it would wear me down very quickly, I suspect. But you know what? For a few days every January, it's *exactly* where I want to be. ☼

Postscript: "Make it so!"

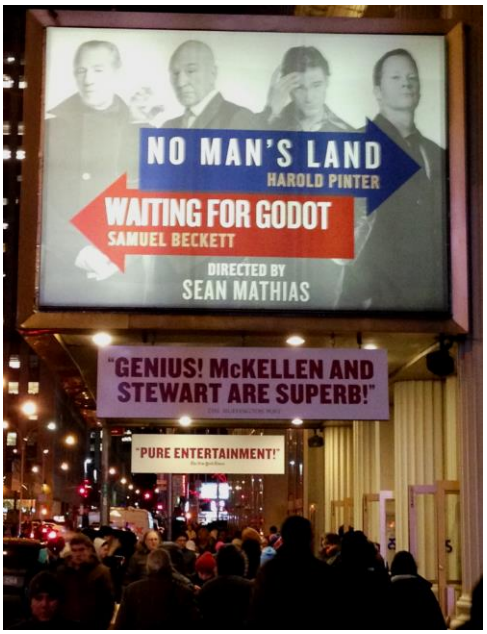
Nicki and I saw two other Broadway shows besides *After Midnight*. One of them, *Pippin*, was a musical re-telling of the life of the eldest son of Charlemagne. It was originally a Bob Fosse production back in its original run in the early 1970s, and this revival has kept enough of Fosse's choreography to make its provenance quickly recognizable. The story is set within the backdrop of a circus performance troupe, complete with acrobats, jugglers, and aerialists, and some of the stunts they did were breathtaking.



the Music Box Theatre on West 45th Street

Nicki and I had the good fortune to be sitting next to one of the investors in the show, a woman about my age who had brought her nephew to the performance. I asked her where they found all the performers and she replied that some of them had come from as far away as Canada to be in the cast – the auditions had brought in more than a thousand people to find the right ones they wanted for the show. Whatever process they used has paid dividends, because it was a greatly enjoyable musical.

But the other production we saw *wasn't* a musical! In all of our previous stays in Manhattan, we had never gone to *anything* but musicals, so you can safely assume that it would take something quite extraordinary to lure us into a play. This one qualified – it was a restaging of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. What put it on our short list was the cast, which featured Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen.



outside the Cort Theatre on January 7th

The play really isn't about very much – two vagabond paupers spend most of both acts dithering around while waiting in vain for someone named Godot to appear. It takes some very good acting to make it interesting. Stewart and McKellen took it to the next level, making it entertaining.

Stewart and McKellen were also concurrently headlining a second play at the same theatre – Harold Pinter's *No Man's Land*. As we trudged back to the hotel, through the teeth of the bitterly cold Polar Vortex that had turned the streets of Manhattan into a for-real no man's land, we debated whether we should see that one as well. But in the end we decided it was just too much of a luxury, as we were already trying to narrow down choices for musicals to see. And we also decided we needed to come to New York more often so that we don't even have these draconian choices in the first place. We'll take our cue from Patrick Stewart's alter ego, Capt. Picard:

"Make it so!" ☼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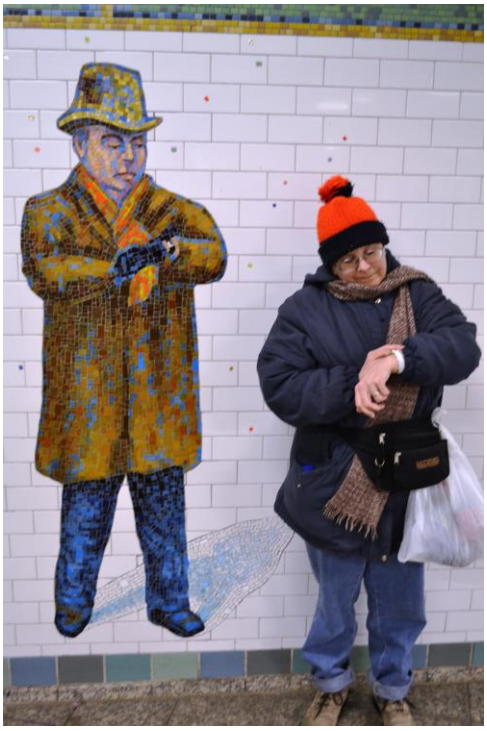


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