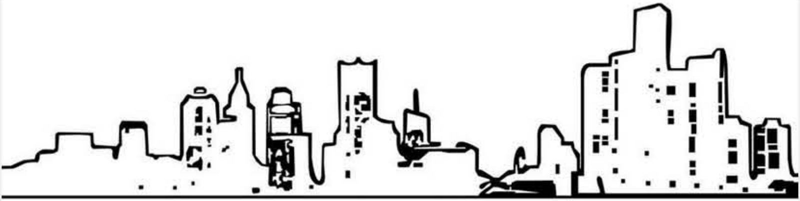

MOTORCITYBLOG

11/9/11

CSICon 2011: Best. Assignment. EVAR. By DC-in-Detroit

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DC is a longtime contributor to the MCB.
She can be reached at DC-in-Detroit [at] MOTORCITYBLOG.net

CSICon 2011
27-20 October 2011
New Orleans, Louisiana

In my never-ending quest to bring my MCB buddies the best of culture, worldwide, I begged the MCB credit card off Blogdaddy and dragassed down to New Orleans for the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry's CSICon 2011. And some other things.

Who is CSI? You might know them better as CSICOP. ...No? Does this help?

> *The mission of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry is to promote scientific inquiry, critical investigation, and the use of reason in examining controversial and extraordinary claims.*

To me, one of the most important points they make regarding their mission is this one:

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To carry out these objectives the Committee does not reject claims on a priori grounds, antecedent to inquiry, but examines them objectively and carefully.

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In other words, what CSI is all about is ***investigating*** the stranger claims and reports in the world, neither simply believing nor rejecting them without doing the legwork. By and large, the people involved in organized skepticism are *very* interested in The Weird, and find it even more intriguing when they get to the bottom of it (or at least near the bottom). Does that seem counterintuitive? It really isn't; I've found the more I know about a thing, the more interesting it gets, although sometimes in ways I didn't expect. For instance, UFO abduction stories draw clear parallels with well-documented sleep disturbances. (Okay, that one wasn't really out of my hat: I have direct experience with this.) It's not the story I THOUGHT I was getting, but it goes several levels deeper, and is thus that much more compelling. Mysteries are fun! And which is more fun, saying, "I dunno, space aliens?" or "Complex neural pathways gone horribly AWRY!"?

I landed in New Orleans the morning of Thursday, 27 October 2011, and back at dear old DTW the evening of Tuesday, 1 November. That's five days of tales, and one of the best vacations ever. In the interest of keeping this column under a billion words, let's walk through the calendar, shall we?

THURSDAY
27 October 2011

11am-1.30pm: I got to NOLA with plenty of time to check in at the con hotel (the New Orleans Marriott right on Canal St in the French Quarter: perfect location, great hotel), have a little wander, and grab lunch before the opening remarks at 2.30pm. *Or so I thought.*

After declining a $20/night upgrade to a "river view" room, I unpacked my 49.5-lb. suitcase atop one of the two beds, each generously outfitted with down comforters, down mattress pads, and piles of feather pillows. Ahh, how luxurious... for someone without feather allergies. On my way to check in with con registration, I stopped by the front desk and asked them for a change of linens.

"Yes, ma'am, we could absolutely do that for you. *[tackity-tackity-tackity]* Or if you prefer, we can move you to the River Tower where all of the rooms above the 17th floor are feather-free."

Bravo, Marriott. Bravo. I've never heard of feather-free rooms in all my years of allergen hunting.

"But wouldn't that be an extra charge?"

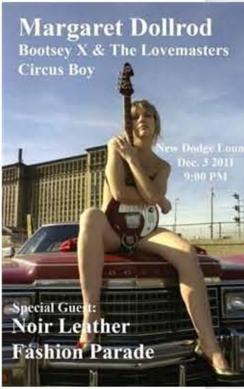
"Oh no, ma'am. *[tackity-tack-tack]* Not if it's something you require. Would you like assistance changing rooms?"

Two hours in New Orleans and I've already learned a new trick.

Re-settled in, I made my way to the con registration table to grab my credentials and finally get something to eat. *Or so I thought.*

As a respected member of The Media, I can't tell you how many door lists I'm supposed to be on which have never heard of me. "*D-who in-the-what now?*" Prepared for this, I had the name of the media contact immediately accessible, and within moments, I was surrounded

Wild at Heart



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Detroit Revealed - DIA 10/16

by Michelle Blackley, CFI Communications Director; Julia Lavarnway, managing editor of the Skeptical Inquirer and assistant editor of Free Inquiry magazine; and CSI Director Barry Karr, confirming that I exist, and hand-delivering a badge and tickets for extra events for which I'd registered. They were apologetic but cheerful, harried though they were, particularly since this was their first con since 2003.

By now, there was less than an hour before the opening remarks. So much for getting my bearings and having a casual lunch. I stepped across Chartres and directly into Jimmy J's Cafe for one of the best sandwiches ever. And only one rum drink. (Helps with jetlag, dontcha know.)

Oh, and had my first Utilikilt sighting. (I could do an entire photoessay on Utilikilts at conventions.)

2.30pm-3pm: "Opening Remarks"

Ronald A. Lindsay
Barry Karr
Kendrick Frazier

Once I finally made it into the main room, I was pleased to see the way it was laid out. Tables! Genius! Yes, all right, I'm easy to impress, but I really did think I was going to be spending several days trying to juggle my iPad, iPhone, and camera on my lap. (Yes, I'm also a dork, SHUT UP.) I set up the iPad for note-taking, the iPhone for audio-taking, and my brain for information-cramming.

Barry Karr: "I want to meet all of you people, and I also want to make more people like you."

3pm-5pm: "The Investigators"

Amardeo Sarma
Joe Nickell
Massimo Polidoro
Karen Stollznow
Benjamin Radford

This was a great session to start with; right at the heart of what CSI is about. The very first scheduled speaker was one of the only professional skeptics I recognize on sight, Joe Nickell. If you've watched many documentaries on haunted houses, cryptozoology, etc., you've likely seen Joe Nickell in the last 5 minutes of the program. Nickell has actually testified against "psychics" in court. He's been everywhere, and seen (or not seen) everything, written a book on it, and is happy to tell you all about it. For hours and hours.

Also of note: Massimo Polidoro, the music-voice Italian heartthrob/"sorcerer's apprentice" to James Randi; and Karen Stollznow and Benjamin Radford, cohosts (with Blake Smith) of one of my favorite podcasts, Monster Talk. This was a great start.

Joe Nickell: "Don't dismiss, but go out in the field and investigate. You can't do this from your armchair."

Benjamin Radford: "Vortex Portal! To another dimension!"

5pm-7pm: Dinner Break

After the giant sandwich at Jimmy J's, of which I should only have eaten half, dinner was pretty far from my mind. Vodka, however, was calling to me from across the street. Grabbed a bottle for the room, and a couple of soda and energy drinks to stock me up, and headed

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back to Feather-Free HQ to shower and change into my leopardy finery for the evening mixer.

7pm-9pm: Opening Reception

I listen to several podcasts and read the sites/blogs of a few of the speakers, so I put on my (figurative) reporter hat and wove through the room, looking for any familiar faces. Much to my surprise, before I'd even rubbed my first elbow, I heard my name off to my right.

When I'd committed to attending the conference, I'd posted on the CFI/CSI forums, asking what other members would be attending. Julie, from New York, said she'd also be traveling alone, and we should get together for a drink while we were both there. Sure, I'd love some fellowship with my fellowship! She recognized me moments after I'd walked into the room ("look for the goofy kid with the sideways haircut"), so we got that drink and evaluated the room. As expected, there weren't a ton of women there -- although there were certainly a few, and well-credentialed. Julie and I speculated on why it is that women seem more susceptible to "woo" ways of thinking. Spotting him across the room, I said, "You know who I bet has something interesting to say about this? Ben Radford. I'm gonna go ask him!"

In my defense, Radford does have a background in psychology and has published articles on gender/sexuality issues. On the other hand, yeah, it was probably as dorky as it sounds.

It's probably not really true that women are more prone to superstitions and the "paranormal"; we just have our favorites. Women dig psychics, men dig UFOs. We're all pretty silly.

I wound up in high-spirited conversation with Ben, Julie, Blake Smith (Monster Talk host) and his wife Kathleen, with various others phasing in and out, one of whom awesomely suggested I was sexist. Even though he was joking, it slays me when people say things like that! *(Last month I was called racist, sexist, ageist, sex-negative, and a troll. Sums ME up!)*

At the end of the opening remarks earlier in the day, Barry Karr exhorted us to stay off Bourbon St.: "We want you to make it back for tomorrow!" And so naturally, the second the mixer cooled down, I tucked my wallet into my bra and hightailed it the couple of blocks down to Bourbon St.

New Orleans is, of course, famous for its music. Every city has street bands, right? But not too many of them have 10-piece jazz ensembles, with full horn sections, knocking it out on a pedestrian throughway. If you find 10 guys gathered on a street in Detroit, you don't stop to see what they're doing. Ever.

For 9pm on a Thursday, I'd say there were quite a lot of people out. Then again, using Detroit standards. I stepped into one bar just to sit with a drink for a moment. Some motion to my left caught my eye, which is when I discovered what I can only guess was a mechanical orca. It was *like* a bull, but... it was an orca. There's really nothing else to say about that (except no, I did not).

FRIDAY
28 October 2011

7.30am: I actually woke up in time for breakfast, knowing that my brain was going to need the protein, or amino acids, or whatever it is that would keep me from going face down on the table.

8.30am-10.45am: "Death from the Skies!"
Leonard Tramiel
Phil Plait
David Morrison
Seth Shostak

Phil Plait was one of the speakers that I recognized on sight -- and it isn't just my all-encompassing love of All Things Ginger; Plait is both well-known and very engaging as a speaker. He came on to wake us up with the news that everything in all of space wants to kill us. Thanks, Phil! He was followed by David Morrison, who announced, "I'm going to tell you exactly the opposite of what Phil Plait told you."

Oh good, because I'd already used my brain more before 9.30 that morning than I had through all of October, so asking me to entertain contradictory ideas was just what I needed!

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- Origix
- Sara

> *Seth Shostak: "There's little worry that you'd all go non-linear."*

"Non-linear" becomes my favorite new way to call someone crazy.

11.00am-12.30pm: Panel 2: "Feeling the Future"
Scott O. Lilienfeld
Ray Hyman
James Alcock

(Not seen: Panel 1: "Science and Public Policy")

All scientific studies are not created equal. In fact, not all scientific studies are scientific. As some speakers had already displayed a bit of academic elitism, I was pleased to see a critique of the system from within the system. Of course, it's always the *other* guy, but still. Point made that some research doesn't live up to its premise, which is a damn shame when the subject is "precognitive detection of erotic stimuli."

Julie sat in this session with me, and the company was welcome. The term "quantum mechanics" floated through the room, met with a vague groan from all those present. Can't explain something? Quantum mechanics! Just sciency-sounding enough!

> *James Alcock: "All four reviewers decided the paper met the journal's editorial standards, even though there was no mechanism by which you could understand the results."*

12.30pm-2pm: Lunch Break

The French Quarter being a small area, I never had to walk far for good chow. Friday was red beans and rice with smoked sausage at Mena's Palace on Chartres (which debated how to pronounce... turns out it's Charter). Advice from the waitress: "Make sure you go down to the gay area on Bourbon, Halloween night. They wear some interesting things... and ***don't*** wear some interesting things." Consider it inked in!

2pm-4pm: "Sleights of Mind"
Sandra Blakeslee
Stephen Macknik
Susana Martinez-Conde
James Randi

This session was a pretty big deal because it featured the appearance of James "The Amazing" Randi, one of the Grandfathers of debunkery. If skeptics can be said to have idols, this man would be high on most lists.

Before Randi were Susana Martinez-Conde and Stephen Macknick, who presented brilliant parallel talks about what really goes on in your brain -- your actual, physical brain -- when you're being fooled. It's worth pointing out that good "magicians" aren't just working faster than you can see them; they are often exploiting physiological blind spots. Things you cannot overcome even when you *know* what's happening. They showed some excellent effects -- I want to call them optical illusions, but they're more like wacky brain responses. Martinez-Conde had this effect on the big screens behind her while she was speaking, and instructed us to watch it while she spoke. After a minute or two, she said, "Now look at the person next to you." Go on, do it. It's awesome.

Julie joined me again, and just before the session began, she handed me a note which said, "Randi asked me to help with a trick... Will you take pictures?"

Dan Sultana
Jane Fader
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What followed was this "mentalism" demo:

Now, I don't know Julie that well, but I'm willing to bet she's not *that* good a liar. When she told me she wasn't in on it, and wanted to know how it was done as much as anyone did, I believe her. (I also have some theories.)

> *Ray Hyman: "There are measurable neurological differences between people like you -- skeptics -- than the general believing public. You...are all mutants."*

> *Stephen Macknick: "Now, use your free will, if you still think you have any..."*

4.15-5.45: Panel 2: "Superstitions and Hauntings"
Stuart Vyse
Joe Nickell

(Not seen: Panel 1: "Creation and Evolution")

Ah, here's another good topic: Hauntings. Did I mention I spent a night in Lizzie Borden's bedroom? Most haunted house in America! (The joke there is, as Karen Stollznow pointed out, how many places make exactly that claim.)

Superstitions are another pervasive set of beliefs of which we are frequently not even fully cognizant. They fascinate me in exactly the same way as patterns do -- they have the same foundation, in fact. We are pattern-seeking animals, there's no way to doubt that. Many of our superstitions and folklore are clearly traceable to our climate or our geography. And then we migrate, and, as Joe Nickell said, "Wherever people take themselves, they take their folklore with them." And so we wind up with "beliefs" that are traditional and make no sense. Tracking them back to the source is where the satisfaction lies.

After this talk, I spoke personally to Joe Nickell for a few moments, and I think I actually shared with him a bit of information he did not already have. Go me.

> *Stuart Vyse: "Superstition is largely a story of managing anxiety."*

6pm-7pm: Pre-Banquet Reception
7pm-9.30pm: Conference Banquet

The Friday night social event was the awards banquet for Bill Nye and Steven Novella.... For which I did not register (i.e. pay). But all my new friends were going! On the other hand...all my new friends were going! Someone's gotta be able to sneak me in under his jacket. One well-placed email later, and I had a seat at the dinner. A coveted seat. (Does it count if I am covetous of myself?)

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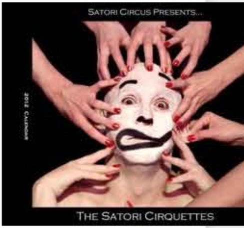
A Dialogue with Music

Satori Circus 2012 Calendar



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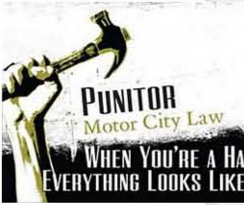

Most People Are DJs by Mikel O.D.

I had just enough time to scurry upstairs (oh so much scurrying!) to shower and change (I'm so glad I brought two nice dresses) and meet my date in the lobby. We made a quick appearance at the reception on the 41st floor and then fought for elevator space back down to the second floor banquet room.

Julie met us at the banquet, and we established the Kool Kids' table at the back of the room. We were shortly joined by the previously-mentioned Karen Stollznow (and companion Matt), and Blake and Kathleen Smith. The final chair at the round table is taken by Julie's invisible boyfriend. Awards were awarded. Poodle-sized steaks were served.

Bill Nye gave a beautiful and humble speech. Anyone who has ever been a fan of Bill Nye The Science Guy would have been moved by his humanity.

The post-banquet entertainment was provided by David Willey, "The Mad Scientist," who gave us the demos he'd normally give junior- or high-schoolers. I'm the first one to admit that being 12 years old sometimes is fun. And even though I KNEW that trash can was going to explode, I jumped out of my skin anyway.

When the room was officially being cleared by the staff, I noticed a cluster of people around a table, and just knew that James Randi was involved. Sure enough, he sat holding court, mostly to a hugely-grinning Bill Nye. All I could do was try to position myself for a good photo op. This turned out to be my favorite shot of the weekend.

Bill Nye and James Randi chat, surrounded by admirers.

My date and I were still up for some fresh air, so we took a stroll around Canal and Bourbon St. (again). Friday night, and more people were out getting their Halloween on. We came across Marie Laveau's voodoo shop, and after I was chastised for taking a photo (it's a good one though!), we set to finding Things of Interest. I have a small but interesting collection of juju dolls, and was looking for something traditional to add to their number. Sadly, Marie Laveau's is more tourist trap than traditional. However, I did find the most awesome lucky three-legged Chilean pig that I've ever met. I'm tellin' ya, that thing is ***magic***.

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I'm surprised at how many cute girls are at CSICon. Maybe I'll find my next ex-wife here. #csicon2011
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@CeaSerin Yes, we ARE adorable, aren't we? #CSIcon2011
28 Oct

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SATURDAY
29 October 2011

7.30am: After a late night, morning came lightly, and I was up for breakfast. This was a helluva streak I had going. I txted a couple of people first thing, already having no idea what day it was. A good feeling.

8.30am-10.45am: "Alternative Medical Claims"
Ronald A. Lindsay
Steven Novella
Harriet Hall
Edzard Ernst

I could use some alternative medicine right about now.

Harriet Hall began the morning with a talk about acupuncture. By 9am, I was starting to fade. Daydreaming. I don't quite understand why acupuncture keeps getting studied over and over and over. And after all that, there's still controversy about the efficacy. People who argue against it tend to play both sides of the field: it does nothing ***and*** is potentially dangerous.

I was going cross-eyed, but Steven Novella, one of last night's award-winners, was up next, and I wanted to see his presentation.

Novella's Skeptics' Guide to the Universe is a podcast that has been a big influence on many people, myself included. In some ways, I've moved past it, but there is no denying his influence (as well same other SGU hosts). He tells me I have a lousy brain. (Well, not me specifically.)

Edzard Ernst, a man with a phenomenal pedigree, was up next. Pretty sure I was hallucinating by then. I looked at my watch to see it was 9.45. *I'm fucked.*

> *Steven Novella: "This is what used to be called health fraud. It's now called alternative medicine."*

9.45am-10.45am: NAP!

Oh what a difference an hour makes. I awoke, a new woman.

I woke up with just enough time to dash to the party store for a couple of Diet Cokes. Julie met me at the next session and said, "Your hair looks cute!" Yes, napping and then sprinting through a wind storm improves my looks in all ways.

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11am-12.30pm: Panel 1: "UFO Claims"

Leonard Tramiel
Robert Sheaffer
James McGaha

(Not seen: Panel 2: "Skepticism and the Media")

One of the things I realized more and more through this conference is that I seem to be missing the gene which accounts for wide-eyed credulity. When James McGaha said many UFO sightings are down to astronomical effects -- dazzling, scintillation -- I realized that that IS my assumption. When I see something my eyes find strange, my instinct leads me to "optical distortion," not "little green men."

> *Robert Sheaffer: "What this means is that more people believe in UFO conspiracies than believe in UFOs."*

> *James McGaha: "I've been struck by lightning 7 times -- no jokes about that, please."*

12.30pm-2pm: Lunch Break

My small radius of wandering may make it appear as though I really didn't look for new and interesting places for chow. But the truth is, all the places I wanted to hit were in easy walking distance. Saturday's lunch spot was the Napoleon House at Chartres and St Louis.

The house was crowded, but one of the occasional advantages to being a party of one (woo! party party!) is they can fit me into awkward spaces. With many apologies, the hostess parked me in the corner, but unlike Baby, I didn't mind at all: I had a good view of the house.

As a fan of accents, I have to say that Cajun is one of my favorites in the US. Having a dark haired boy with cafe au lait complexion call me "my dear" is just so lovely.

I had a half-muffuletta and a famous Pimm's Cup. I could have sat for two more -- everything about that town was languid. But I needed to get back for...

2pm-4pm: "Conspiracy Theories"

Dave Thomas
Robert Blaskiewicz
Ted Goertzel

Now that's a topic that could support its own weekend. In fact...
The Truth Con!

Focusing on "alternative knowledge." Such as Jesus, the first alien. ***That*** sounds like a party: Stay tuned for DC at TruthCon 2012!

> *Robert Blaskiewicz: "The New World Order is a remarkably flexible and durable global antagonist, and as a result, the NWO conspiracy literature reads like a library full of copies of the same edition of Mad Libs, each copy filled in by a different obsessive neurotic."*

3.45pm-4.30pm: Ice Cream Buffet

Featuring hand-rolled, fresh-made sugar cones. I didn't have any, as I was certain the sugar crash would prove disastrous.

4.15pm–5.45pm: Panel 1: "IIG (Independent Investigations Group)"

James Underdown
Blake Smith
Melody Hensley

(Not seen: Panel 2: "Grassroots Activism and Outreach")

There are a couple of groups offering bounties on provable "special" skills (The James Randi Foundation's Million Dollar Challenge being one of the most famous). IIG's $50,000 challenge is smart in that there is an attached $5,000 finder's fee for anyone who can bring in the big winner.

> *James Underdown: "I've seen two exorcisms. That's fun Thanksgiving discussion!"*

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6pm: Dinner Break

I managed to break out of the French Quarter and go aaaaalll the way into the American Sector (which is right across Canal from the hotel) to some random diner, the name of which escapes me. Ben joined me for dinner again, and we had a conversation which proved one of the defining moments of the entire conference for me. It went something like this.

Me: I don't know, the more I hear people talk, the more I think... whatever it is that makes people credulous is just missing with me. I don't SEE the same things they do. The Nazca Lines, for example. The first time I saw them, I immediately thought irrigation, not... aliens scratching in the dirt.

[There's an extremely brief moment where I recognize this is the point when I would normally explain what the Nazca Lines are to the average person with whom I'd be having dinner... and quickly realize I don't need to.]

Ben: Sure, and what they say about them only being visible from the air? It's just not true. There are hills nearby where you can clearly see the designs. I know, I was there.

Of *course* he's been there. He's Ben Muthafuckin Radford.

7.30pm-8.45pm: Special Conference Address: Bill Nye "The Science Guy"

It was a very difficult decision for me to skip this, but it was necessary in order for me to adequately prepare for...

9.15pm-12am: "Smarti Gras" Parade and New Orleans Halloween Party

I brought with me some pieces I made which could better be described as "fancy dress" than costume. If you say "costume," everyone wants to know "what are you?" I was just... ruffly. And Day of the Dead-y. I brought some good theatrical makeup with me (Ben Nye, seriously, if you're going to do this kind of thing, **get that stuff**) and gritted my teeth while painting all over my face. That's a weird feeling; I don't know how some women do this regularly. (I'm looking at you, Kabuki-face.) And thank goodness for Julie who stopped by my room to strap me into my corset just before the parade. (Don't ask how I thought I was going to get into it without help.)

In full makeup and DC-made costume, we paraded (with jazz band and police escort) through the Quarter to Tipitina's on Napoleon Ave. Beads were worn, drinks were drunk, nerds were dancing, spirits were high. After a hurricane that was a little too sweet for me, I asked the smokey Cajun bartender for something nice that was a little less sweet. I think what I got was a hurricane with the simple syrup swapped out for...more rum. Bullseye!

The costume contest, emceed by Rebecca Watson, was as expected: there were punny/thematic costumes, such as The Atheist's Nightmare on Elm Street, Creationist Homeschool Mom, and "Best Skeptical Costume" winner, the unsung hero of logic, Occam's Shaving Cream (aka Blake Smith).

After I've cleaned up back at my room, it looks like a film noir crime scene.

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Ben Radford and Blake Smith

SUNDAY

30 October 2011

7.30am: Somehow, I'm up for breakfast again. It's the last day of the conference itself, although I'm staying for another couple of days. Bittersweet, but my brain needs the break!

9am-9.40am: Sir Harold Kroto

There's a rather clearly-defined black hole in my memory where this session should be. That's all I can say about that.

9.45am-10.25am Richard Saunders

Richard Saunders is unstoppable. Knowing Saunders was going to be doing a physical demo, I had the foresight to record the whole thing:

10.30am-11.15am: PZ Myers

Myers is something of a rockstar on the skeptical atheist scene. He was here to, among other things, refute the claim that atheists don't like stories. As an example, he pointed to the existence of PZ Myers/Richard Dawkins slash fiction. Erm...

> *PZ Myers: "The Bible is a great book for making atheists. Seriously, read the book of Genesis sometime, and you'll see what I'm talking about. It is CRAP. It really is! It's not even a good story!"*

11.15am-12pm: Lunch Break

I didn't want to risk going out for a full lunch and missing any of the Houdini seance, which I was specifically looking forward to, so I grabbed some pretzels and a soda and waited for the big show.

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MOTOR CITY BAR

12pm-1.30pm: Houdini Seance
Joe Nickell
Massimo Polidoro
Ray Hyman

CFI has been doing a Houdini seance every Halloween for... well, I don't know how long, but I've heard several of them on Point of Inquiry. Because of circumstances, two of the people scheduled to be involved in the seance, DJ Grothe and James Randi, were not in attendance. Therefore, someone got the great idea to just give Joe Nickell the mic and see what happened. Talk about people who enjoy storytelling!

Ray Hyman also performed a few "tricks" for us, and Massimo Polidoro gave a sort of book report on Houdini specifically.

After all that, Houdini had the audacity to not appear.

1.30pm-5.30pm: Jean Lafitte Swamp Tour

The conference was officially over at this point, but CSICon had arranged a bus out to Jean Lafitte for a couple of hours on a flatboat under the blue sky. The weather was idyllic -- this is why I take that week off work every year. October is beautiful everywhere. Even though I'm a lifelong Michigander, I haven't spent much time on the water, and can't exactly... swim. Knowing that were the boat to capsize I could *walk* to either bank was unquestionably a comfort.

I brought a new camera with me on the trip, so I took about a zillion pictures. Three-quarters of them look like my back yard.

On the drive back to the hotel, our bus passed Mulate's restaurant, which I remembered visiting 15 years ago. With *my* brain, the fact that I remembered it was enough inspiration for me to want to visit again. It was as I recalled: Delicious food and spirited live zydeco music and dancing. Then more walking around the American Sector. An extremely pleasant evening, and not a single Devil's Night fire in sight. (*SORRY*, Angels' Night.)

MONDAY
31 October 2011

??am: I don't even know what time I woke up, because for the first time, I didn't need to pay attention. I showered and dressed at a leisurely pace, then delved into Google Maps to plot out the places I knew I wanted to see on my "day off."

Hey, did you know that most of the shit in New Orleans is closed on Mondays? Yeah, me neither. CATHOLICS.

There were still two good options for me: the French Market flea market and the item at the very top of my list, St Louis Cemetery #1.

I grabbed lunch at the only rerun of the entire weekend, Jimmy J's on Chartres. In fact, I had exactly the same sandwich. I'd been thinking about it, fantasizing, *for daaayyyys*. It did not disappoint. Then a brisk walk through the thin fall air, taking a winding path through the Quarter to St Louis and Basin.

Halloween day, in the most famous cemetery in New Orleans. I really wasn't sure what to expect. To my relief, there were only a couple of tours on the grounds with me, and the mausoleums are so tightly packed around narrow little pathways, with one quick turn, one can feel completely solitary. Even the goths were thin on the ground.

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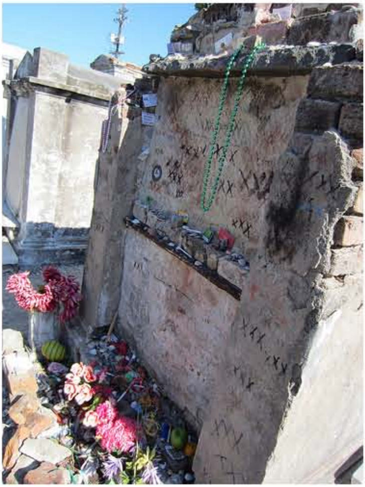
SOMETHING
LIKE A WAR

If New Orleans is a Grand Dame, St Louis #1 is her big creepy hairbow. By which I mean, it's an incredibly picturesque place. (What, I'm not a poet.) If I lived in the area, I could see this being a place I'd visit regularly. There are just so many nooks, crumbling markers, weird little details... There might be one perfect steppe tomb directly next to its sister, deteriorated to little more than a pile of bricks. Then there are the "voodoo tombs." The tour guides made a point of mentioning that the ritual marks on the three significant tombs are "real voodoo," but the residents therein were not necessarily practitioners. There was also Marie Laveau's tomb... maybe. Three different guides told three different stories regarding whether this was legitimately Laveau or not. I'll leave that to Joe Nickell to settle once and for all.



I meandered the grounds, taking another zillion pictures, until closing time at 3pm. I could have stayed another three hours. Instead I was forced to hit the bricks and make my way to my next destination, the flea market.

No pictures there; I had already kilt my camera at that point. The flea market is what you'd expect from a flea market, except possibly with more alligator heads. (I don't know, how many alligator heads to you get in *your* local flea market?) I found some select trinkets for friends, and bought my one and only juju doll of the trip, a handmade felt affair, from the artist herself.

By 5 or 6pm I was so exhausted, I couldn't expect to stay vertical for the parade that was expected through town shortly. I took as direct a route as possible straight into a nap, to store up for the big night itself.

9pm: Halloween on Bourbon St.

Over the long weekend, I'd been down to Bourbon St already several times; among other things, I was interested in watching the build-up to the 31st. There were people in costume out every night -- I knew Halloween was a **thing** in New Orleans, I just didn't know it was a four-day thing. There were even more people on the street that Monday night than the three previous days. People-watching heaven.

You may have noticed, I am sometimes a drinker. In NOLA, it's almost hard *not* to drink. I stopped at a vendor stall at the flea market for an orange drink, and was gravely informed "there's no alcohol in it..." Okay, good, I was just thirsty! Halloween night, presented with an unavoidable drunkucopia, what I really had my sites set on was an absinthe drink.

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Normally I would never pay what this cocktail cost. Don't even ask, I'm embarrassed to admit. But the time and the place were right, and it simply had to be done. I have a lot of opinions about absinthe, but since this is already the column that ate New Orleans, I won't pontificate. I'll keep it short and say absinthe is gross. The good news is, after that one drink and a shot of Jager (oh my darling, how I've missed you!) I didn't need -- or want -- much else for the rest of the night.

With empty hands, I found myself suddenly face-to-face with a crazyfaced Aussie in white zentai, inviting me to write on his bod. Well, okay, if you insist, mate. I started teasing him right away about being a Kiwi (Aussies hate being mistaken for New Zealanders almost as much as the reverse is true). He said, "I'm from Adelaide, which is --" "I know where Adelaide is!" And like an idiot Michigander, I habitually pointed to a spot on my hand as though it were a map of Australia. He laughed and said, "You're the only person I've wanted to talk to for more than 20 seconds so far -- let's get a drink!"

One turtle and one... I-don't-even-know-what later, and we were being yelled at by the police for unintentionally wandering through a homicide scene. Oh, uh, so that was a real blood puddle? Hard to discern, honestly. I had been ready to call it a night, but Davey and I continued to explore, winding up in different neighborhoods where I wouldn't probably have ventured on my own. And probably shouldn't have. (See: homicide scene.)

Another clean-up job using every towel in the hotel room, and I was down for the count.

TUESDAY
1 November 2011

Get-Away Day

I made big plans to get up early, pack, and see a couple of the places I couldn't visit on Monday (CATHOLICS!). The problem is, there's also no "early" in New Orleans. Establishments routinely open at 10am or later, and my shuttle was coming at noon. Plus I, uh, didn't get up as early as intended. Just wasn't going to happen. I was left with enough time to pack all 49.75 lbs and get back to the airport.

This was, without a doubt, one of the best vacations I've ever had. I cannot remember any other week that more fully engaged every part of my personality:

- *Listened to smart people talk about smart things.*
- *Listened to smart people talk about WEIRD things.*
- *Met a couple of new people with whom I became fast friends.*
- *Enjoyed a high level of fellowship, between the conferences, the parties, the breaks, even tweeting #CSICon2011. Really felt like I was part of a happening.*
- *Halloween in one of the most excellent and* ***appropriate*** *cities in the country.*
- *Got to dress up in things I made and go overboard.*
- *Drinking! Eating! Acting like a goofball!*
- *Wearing my MCB hat throughout, taking notes and documenting everything with an eye toward sharing this with all of you.*

The official word from CSICon HQ is that there were about 300 attendees at the event, which was enough of a success that they plan on doing it all again next year; same bat time, same bat channel.

And you can bet I'll be there again. I mean, just for *you*.

MCB HISTORY

- ▼ 2011 (1150)
  - ► December (10)
  - ▼ November (107)
    - Saturday: Adam Faucett at PJ's Lager House
    - Noel Night, Midtown Detroit, Dec 3
    - Stirling's Rock n' Roll Birthday Party - Friday 12...
    - CASTING CALL: Survivor - MJR Westland - Wed 12/7/1...
    - MCB PICK OF THE WEEK: Margaret Dollrod - New Dodge...
    - MCB meets the 100 Millionth Chevy Small Block Engi...
    - UPCOMING EVENT: Rock and Rummage Holiday Shopping ...
    - Girl in a Coma @ The Magic Stick
    - FREE TICKETS: Bear Lake - Magic Stick Detroit - Fr...
    - Glassblowing and Holiday Cheer!
    - Baar Bazaar @ Majestic 17 December
    - Wild At Heart
    - TONIGHT: Friends - PJs Lager House Detroit - 11/28...
    - Detroit Derby Girls: D-Funk Allstars vs. Detroit P...
    - Concert Review: Peter Murphy, She Wants Revenge an...
    - A Pnueumatic Sound Installation - Detroit Sun Nov...
    - TONIGHT: Black Friday at North End Studios
    - Celebrate Black Friday with Hussle Club,