

# H-Net Reviews

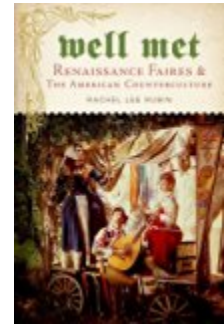
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rachel Lee Rubin. *Well Met: Renaissance Faires and the American Counterculture*. New York: New York University Press, 2012. xiii + 346 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-7138-9.

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## Tracing the History and Legacy of the Renaissance Faire

Jimi Hendrix's elaborate stage costumes, the sexual politics of body hair, Americans' discovery of dark ales, the revival of klezmer music, Johnny Depp's Captain Jack Sparrow character, and other examples too numerous to mention connect to the subversive web of the American Renaissance faire, argues Rachel Lee Rubin, professor of American studies at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. Not only a history but also a consideration of the meaning of fifty years of Renaissance faires for the performers, the participants, and even their detractors, Rubin's book moves regularly between the faire's countercultural origins and its manifestations in modern lives and culture. The first faires of the 1960s loom large in Rubin's telling, but for the author, the faire is not just a vehicle for historical inquiry. She is equally interested in the faire as a vital, living space; to this end, many chapters begin with faire origins and end with the current faire, interviews, anecdotes, and even selections from blog posts. Readers who had always intuited a connection between the sixties counterculture and the faire, but who lacked the details, will find their curiosity sated. Those hoping for a holistic appraisal of a faire network that remains rambunctiously alive will be even more pleased.

At least two questions drive the narrative and analysis of *Well Met*. One concerns the potential centrality of the Renaissance faire to our understanding of the counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s. Is the faire essential to the story of hippie explorations into communalism, antimodernism, and craft revival, as well as rock and folk music revivals? Rubin gives a resounding, and rather

persuasive, yes. Another question that the author specifically poses in her introduction is, "To what concrete personal, political, and cultural uses can a group of Americans put a past that, for the most part, is *not* their own?" (p. 3). Answers to that question have evolved over the faire's history. Rubin pursues the question from the first faire's spontaneity and self-discovery to its current incarnation as a widespread institution. She employs a satisfying and full array of sources: canonical histories on anti-modernism and bohemia, the writings of pop music critics and ethnomusicologists, websites, television shows, and above all, extensive interviews. Even the hotel elevator operator and the car rental agent near two faire sites have their say (and two very different takes).

One refreshing aspect of the Renaissance faire tale is how Rubin traces a countercultural history that takes a different route than the familiar "City Lights to the First Human Be-in" trek. Instead, the genesis involves the mid-twentieth-century bohemian enclave of Laurel Canyon and the dissidents at Los Angeles Pacifica radio station KPFK. In 1963, the station needed money and enlisted for a fundraiser the popular backyard children's theater program that recent Laurel Canyon transplant Phyllis Patterson had begun. Together, the young commedia dell'arte enthusiasts, some blacklisted Hollywood talent, and the Pacifica community developed the idea for the first faire. The enterprise made money and several strands of L.A. subculture convened. By 1964, attendance and revenue were up, and a soon-to-be institution was accommodating increasingly growing interest. Students

of the decade's underground press will be intrigued by Art Kunkin's path to launching the seminal *Los Angeles Free Press (Freep)*, the first issue of which appeared under the headline of *Faire Free Press*. Kunkin and friends hawked copies of the first issue in costume at the faire and generated the revenue and interest to launch a regular paper. Other scholars have traced *Freep's* genesis through the faire, but by refocusing the story, Rubin effectively utilizes the tale to emphasize the festival's centrality in forging new communities and institutions.[1] The author is persuasive in contending that the faire's emergence in mid-1960s L.A. made the event a significant countercultural germinating ground and that the world entertainment capital's concurrent discovery of its own bohemia was not coincidental. In Rubin's words, the faire soon became "a place of expansive countercultural possibility" (p. 38).

The troubles that disrupted the 1967 Southern California Renaissance Pleasure Faire provide Rubin with a story that turns, depending on the reader's disposition, either bitterly ironic or sublimely absurd. Regardless, the tale of the '67 faire connects a number of threads running through sixties historiography into a useful whole worthy of wide retelling. The first four successful faires sent the Pattersons, Pacifica, and their growing cohort in search of a larger staging site in Ventura County. Less than a month before the faire opened, the Ventura sheriff's office demanded that all participants making sales at the event would have to be fingerprinted by the following evening. After faire makers had overcome that obstacle, town fathers began to threaten withholding the faire's permit. Though the city council granted the permit, opponents appealed the decision. Lobbying the Ventura County Board of Supervisors to rescind the faire's permit, conservative activist Ruth Brennan (wife of outspoken actor Walter Brennan) led an anti-faire group in an effort to shut down the event just before opening day. Reactionary radio personality Joe Pyne took up the cause, using his pioneering, confrontational program to agitate against the "Reds" in "red tights." Pending appeal, the faire opened, but Brennan's troopers succeeded in shutting it down for its second weekend.[2]

The United States Information Agency (USIA), the Cold War propaganda department responsible for collecting and distributing images of American freedom to an international community debating the merits of the Soviet and American systems, entered the scene at this time. USIA representatives had made plans to film the faire's second weekend, anxious for the footage of costumed pageantry that would communicate liberty and

frivolity to a global audience. The agency succeeded in opening the faire in a limited fashion—not to the public but to filmable faire employees. As Rubin puts it, "no sales were made, but the participants came in costume so that the faire would live even if the public was excluded" (p. 59). Crafters lost money, having prepared for a longer period of sale, but the USIA filmed on the closed faire "set" and captured their sought-after depiction of unfettered American freedom. In her three-way exploration of California counterculture, conservative warriors, and the always fascinating exploits of the USIA, Rubin powerfully encapsulates the collision of contrary social movements and media diplomacy that have enlivened recent historiography.[3]

Rubin structures her monograph thematically, addressing in different chapters crafters, theatrical and musical performers, regular attendees, those who actively despise the faire, and the faire as a literary landscape. Often connected by associative thinking, most chapters begin with some portion of the faire origin story, wind their way to the modern faire, and pause regularly to consider potential connections between the faire and its wider impact on popular culture. The structure of each topic is largely successful, and Rubin demonstrates that she has contemplated the usefulness of narrative: "In short, it is not only difficult but inherently inadequate to craft the Renaissance faire's music story in a linear fashion. Yet ... in the tracing of history, even cultural history, there remains something to be said for linear narrative" (p. 122). This understanding guides most of the text, but occasionally, circuitous ruminations obscure portions of her story.

As the faire's beginnings coalesce in the first chapter, Rubin separates her telling of the first faire of 1963 and the second the next year with four pages tackling the thorny issue of authenticity. A discussion of the several meanings of "authentic" is absolutely useful to any work on revivalism or recreation, but placing the meditation in the middle of an origin story that falls under the ebullient chapter heading "Welcome to the Sixties!" seems unusual, despite Rubin's explanation that individuals associated with the '64 faire pushed for a more "authentic" experience. When tracing the faire's trajectory from Pacifica fundraiser to national phenomenon, *Well Met* becomes a bit scattered. We hear from modern faire workers who lament "an excessive level of rationalization and a policy of playing it safe" before the author detours into some writings from the 1990s on the Renaissance faire as a model of experiential shopping (p. 68). She then rejoins the faire narrative circa the early

1970s. The themes that she explores on these pages—“Disneyfication” and the possible declension of the faire since attracting corporate interest—are topics that seem fully explored and better placed in “A Place to Be Out,” a chapter about identity discovery and the potentially liberating space of the faire. Fortunately, such scatteredness is only occasional, not typical. Rubin remains an engaging raconteur as well as analyst, mercifully streamlining theoretical frameworks, eschewing jargon, and keeping the voices and experiences of people at the center of the story.

Like countercultures in general, Renaissance faires have provided enthusiasts a place to let their freak flag fly and a community that, ideally, celebrates difference. More than any other theme, the faire’s protective shield for “irregulars” and “freaks” unites the original faires and their modern incarnations (even when those faires are corporately owned and profit driven). For many people whom the author interviews, whether about early or current faires, the Renaissance faire has been a place to discover new sexual behavior; to dabble in apparel and costumes that would feel outrageous elsewhere; and to emphasize the freedom that “playtrons” (regulars at the faire, patrons who have come to “play”) experience when off the clock. A remarkable discovery from the interviews is that, in contrast to the stereotype of socially awkward, suburban role-playing gamers, many attendees describe themselves as full-time “blue collar” workers, who find a sense of freedom and community during the faire season. Often “playtrons” create characters to teach a history lesson (the Moor from Spain); rewrite possibilities of the era (a prosperous merchant of color); or force uncomfortable collective memories (the African American man who attends in chains). The range of possible play, dress, and behavior that attracts devotees to the faire is the same mixture of qualities that repels those who despise the events. In a short chapter scrutinizing “haters” of the faires, Rubin finds that the most persistent detractors emphasize the attendees’ nonconformity in dress and behavior. More recently, the blue-collar orientation of many participants has resulted in increasingly class-based denigration, the faire as a “white trash ... festival” (p. 252). The author is particularly interested in the potential for the study of identity formation based on rejecting, rather than embracing, a cultural phenomenon: “antifandom.”

Rubin attempts to prove that “the history of the American Renaissance Faire ... yields fascinating and sometimes astonishing insights into the construction of the American counterculture” (pp. 5-6). In many ways,

Rubin is persuasive when she asserts that the faires “created” the sixties, sweeping as that claim may be. Throughout the book, she finds writers and memoirists of the period who often conflate “Renaissance faire people” and “hippies.” Many relationships between faire and 1960s phenomena appear as much casual as causal, such as the similarity between the faires and the outdoor music festivals that served as gathering places for “tribes.” But the fact that Renaissance and counterculture happenings were arguably parallel in development does not undermine her major thesis. In examining renewed interest in “ethnic” and folk music at the faires, Rubin successfully locates a significant source of the decade’s hallmark revivalism that was well removed from Greenwich Village and the Newport Folk Festivals. Her sartorial connection between faire garb and hippie costumes as well as the medieval and dandyish clothing of many popular musicians is an evocative one. Rubin is clearly a knowledgeable enthusiast of the decade’s popular music, and the like-minded will wish that she dwelled on the topic more extensively. She dutifully explores the David Crosby composition about the faire that he recorded with the Byrds, but mentions the hordes of English medievalists (Steeleye Span, Fairport Convention, the Pentangle, the Incredible String Band) in only one perfunctory paragraph.[4]

The book’s discussion of the faire’s recent decades inevitably brings up the topic of sanitization. Has profitability robbed the faire of what made it unique? As Rubin puts it, many first-generation participants fret about faire declension, remembering “a utopian outpouring of countercultural creativity at its inception ... gradually overtaken by commercialism, rigidity and corniness” (p. 198). While some of the earliest “Rennies” have found the recent incarnation of the faire too antiseptic to be worth attending, most who spoke with Rubin seem to view the faire as less free than it was but still more open than the world outside. Certainly, the author still finds much to celebrate about the faire’s “collective, jovial mayhem” and is undisguised about her attraction to the faire’s charms: its distinct character, openness, and sense of community (p. 112).

Rubin wins over readers who begin the book wondering if a three-hundred-page monograph is perhaps a bit indulgent for an institution most associated with displays of jousting, men in tights, and of course, turkey legs. She argues compellingly, though, for the faire’s significance. Her reworking of the story of Southern California’s counterculture, investigation of conservative opposition, insights into medievalism in sixties youth culture and popular music, and sensitive reading of the Re-

naissance faire as a living institution, whose participants produce experiences with multiple meanings, rescue the faire from stereotype. Even the historian who shudders at the thought of donning apparel and participating personally will have to pause before declaring the faire incidental or slight. Rather, *Well Met* should provoke consideration of whether the faire deserves the same attention as some of the more well-worn countercultural tropes. Rubin can take pride in having written a work that Patterson, Crosby, Brennan, and the many people whom she interviewed all deserve.

#### Notes

[1]. Earlier scholars have noted that Kunkin disseminated the first Los Angeles Free Press at the 1964 Renaissance faire, usually in a way that adds color to their narrative or reads the Robin Hood garb Kunkin wore as a bohemian-Marxist metaphor. These approaches take for granted the faire's very existence. See Laurence Leamer, *The Paper Revolutionaries: The Rise of the Underground Press* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 27; and Abe Peck, *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press* (New York: Citadel Press, 1991), 21. In his recent work, John McMillian does interview Patterson about her arrangement with Kunkin. See John McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 39-40.

[2]. Rubin's story of the 1967 faire recalls seminal

works about the roots of the New Right in the American Southwest of the 1960s, such as Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

[3]. For more on the USIA from an American perspective, see Nicholas Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy 1945-1989* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For a perspective on the USIA as seen from abroad, see Seth Fein, "Producing the Cold War in Mexico: The Public Limits of Covert Communications," in *In from the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 171-213.

[4]. In a mistake that reinforces Rubin's point that the significance of Renaissance faires in countercultural history has been forgotten, widely read music criticism site allmusic.com claims that despite its literal title, the song "Renaissance Fair" by the Los Angeles-based Byrds was not about the actual Renaissance Pleasure Faire in Southern California but rather the widely chronicled "First Human Be-in" in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park! The explanation of the song on the website calls the Be-in "the real Renaissance Fair." Such a statement appears to make patent the need for *Well Met* as a popular corrective.

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