

## Chapter Nine: Popular Rituals

"Thousands upon thousands of fans discovered a most marvelous fact: they were *not* alone."<sup>i</sup>

The last room of the House of Popular Culture we enter into focuses on popular rituals and it is one of the most visible and recognizable part of popular culture. Popular rituals take in the established myths, icons, stereotypes, and heroes that are combined into a popular formula and become a "celebration of highly valued ideals and myths. They are regularly repeated, patterned, social events which help us to shape our relationship with other people and to our culture as a whole."<sup>ii</sup> What makes rituals so important is that they are a gathering of people who share cultural values and beliefs. They serve a number of functions including reminding participants of the past and reaffirming a sense of togetherness.

There are three types of rituals: rite of passage, rite of season, and rite of unity. A rite of passage is "designed to publicly mark a transition in the social status of a person or group" such as a wedding, or a confirmation of faith.<sup>iii</sup> Christmas and Oktoberfests are rites of season which have their roots in prehistory and pagan cultures and also reflect the life and death cycle of the Earth. Unity rites are often associated with parties and conventions where "the individual's feeling of alienation or loneliness" is eliminated by "[celebrating] the togetherness of [a] social group."<sup>iv</sup> Some of the more recognizable rites of unity are Super Bowl parties and family reunions.

It is the rite of unity that has perhaps made *Star Trek* the popular

culture phenomenon that it is. The fandom kept *Star Trek* alive for over 25 years and it relied heavily on the conventions. The first convention was held in 1972 and for the first time, *Star Trek* fans had a place to meet others like them instead of underground clubs and basements of their homes. They could be out in the open, recognized, proud of what they enjoyed, and converse with other *Star Trek* literate fans who saw the *Star Trek* universe as the ultimate final frontier. Fans came out in costumes, ranging from Vulcan high priestesses to admirals in Starfleet to some of the more unique alien races featured in the series, and no one ridiculed them. They were among friends.

From 1972 to 1975, there were only two or three *Star Trek* conventions each year and they were held in New York and Los Angeles. Twenty-one conventions were listed in the April 1991 issue *Star Trek: The Next Generation The Official Magazine* for the months of February to June of that year, and that was only by one national promoter.<sup>v</sup> Annual fan run *Star Trek* conventions such as LaGrange Con in LaGrange, Ohio, and Starbase Indy in Indianapolis, IN number over 400 and grow every year.<sup>vi</sup>

Conventions vary from promoter to promoter, and fans prefer conventions, or cons as they are more often referred to, run by local chapters of fan clubs than by the larger promoters such as Creation and Trekfest. Creation cons, for example, have a set formula that they use for almost every convention which are generally on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. Videos feature the original series and *The Next Generation* episode clips set

to popular music play throughout the day. Some of the more popular are "You're a Friend of Mine" by Jackson Brown and Clarence Clemmons which focuses on scenes between Kirk and Spock, "Mr. Roboto" by Styx which focuses on Data, and "Sisters" by Aretha Franklin which focuses on the women in *Star Trek*--Uhura, Christine Chapel, Beverly Crusher, Deanna Troi, Tasha Yar, and other dominant female characters.

Besides the music clips, behind-the-scenes footage and previews from soon to be released science fiction/fantasy/animation films are shown. The *Star Trek* blooper reels are shown, although it is only the out-takes from the original series not *The Next Generation*. Sometimes behind-the-scenes workers/technicians such as Guy Vardaman from *The Next Generation* give out information on upcoming *The Next Generation* and *Deep Space 9* episodes and *Star Trek* movies, often called spoilers, and have a slide show.<sup>vii</sup> Also standard fare are costume contests where the audience members dress up like their favorite characters and sound-alike contests where members of the audience go on stage and do their best imitations of *Star Trek* characters and technology, from Kirk to tribbles to the warp engines.

Fan run conventions are usually three day events starting with a welcoming dance or an evening social on Friday night. Saturdays start off early in the morning with breakfast/brunch and then workshops on editing newsletters, makeup and costume design, and acting are sometimes featured. Trivia contests as well as panel discussions on episodes or movies are popular. Masquerade dances and costume contests finish the evening

and sometimes the dancing does not stop until early into Sunday morning. Sundays feature more workshops, previews of upcoming events/movies/episodes, and usually an ending ceremony. The vendors selling *Star Trek* merchandise are open on Saturdays and Sundays only.

The biggest draw of both types of cons is the question and answer sessions with the *Star Trek* actors. The stars appear on both Saturday and Sunday usually for an one-hour appearance, but autograph sessions are solely dependant on the guest star. For instance, the original series's James Doohan (Scotty) does sign autographs but Leonard Nimoy (Spock) and William Shatner (Kirk) do not. *The Next Generation's* Marina Sirtis (Deanna Troi), Michael Dorn (Worf), and John deLancie (Q) sign but Gates McFadden (Dr. Crusher) and Jonathan Frakes (Riker) sometimes do and other times do not. A general observation made about McFadden and Frakes is that they only sign autographs at fan run conventions.

The fan run cons, such as LaGrange Con and Space Station Cincy, are sponsored by local *Star Trek* fan clubs, Starfleet International's USS LaGrange chapter and Starfleet Command's USS Yorktown.<sup>viii</sup> It is the fan clubs that are the biggest part of the *Star Trek* phenomenon, going beyond the media blitz of merchandise and spinoffs. The fan clubs bring *Star Trek* into everyday life of the members as they work on projects to raise money for charities or scholarship foundations which are sponsored by the stars of the series (such as the Patrick Stewart [Captain Picard] Scholarship and the James Doohan [Scotty] Scholarship).

These people have taken Roddenberry's dream of peace and harmony between humans as well as his view of science and technology and put it to use in the 20th century. The USS Aquila, a chapter of Starfleet International based in Northern Kentucky, donates canned goods and clothing to the church where their monthly meetings are held. They have also been involved in the MDA telethon and in the 1992 Florida Hurricane Relief effort.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup>Joan Winston, *The Making of Trek Conventions or How to Throw a Party for 12,000 of Your Most Intimate Friends* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday and Co., 1977), p. 9.

<sup>ii</sup>Christopher Geist and Jack Nachbar, "Part Five: Popular Rituals," *The Popular Culture Reader* Third Edition (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), p. 263.

<sup>iii</sup>Geist and Nachbar, "Rituals," p. 265.

<sup>iv</sup>Geist and Nachbar, "Rituals," p. 266.

<sup>v</sup>Advertisement for Creation conventions, *Star Trek: The Next Generation The Official Magazine*, April 1991, p. 23. Creation, based out of Mineola, New York, hosts the largest number of conventions per year in cities across the United States and in Canada.

<sup>vi</sup>Michael Logan, "Star Trek XXV," *TV Guide*, 31 Aug 1991, p. 12.

<sup>vii</sup>Vardaman has made several Creation con appearances. He stands in for the actors when the director is setting up a scene or a shot when the actor is not available on *The Next Generation*.

<sup>viii</sup>There are over one hundred ST fan clubs in existence today, ranging from the highly organized Starfleet International with chapters spread out in the United States, Canada, Japan, England, Germany, Australia, and other countries and Starfleet Command whose membership in the United States and Canada alone is over 1,500 people. Space Station Cincy was a joint effort of the USS Yorktown and the Andromeda Group, a local group of science fiction fans affiliated with other science fiction clubs.