



Redstone Science Fiction

August 2010

#3



Rahul Kanakia • Gray Rinehart

Cover by Liz Self

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Contents

[Editor's Note](#)

by Michael Ray

Fiction

[Death's Flag Is Never at Half-Mast](#)

by Rahul Kanakia

[Memorial at Copernicus](#)

by Gray Rinehart

Essay

[Clothes Make the Man \(or Woman\): Techwear and Character in SciFi](#)

by Henry Cribbs

Interview

[An Interview with Voltaire](#) - musician, video artist, and convention performer

by Paul Clemmons

Editor's Note for Redstone Science Fiction #3, August 2010

We want to live forever. Get us off this rock.

Those two desires are at the heart of how we think about science fiction.

What scientific advances will change the world next? How will they affect our lives? Will advances in biology and technology prolong our lives or even allow us to move beyond our bodies?

Can man move beyond earth and near earth orbit? Can we live on the Moon and Mars and push even farther out? Can we overcome the vast expanses of space? Are we willing to even try?

The stories we present this month consider many of these questions and we are pleased to bring them to you. Rahul Kanakia's "Death's Flag is Never at Half-Mast" takes a traditional British naval tale and projects it into a space opera underpinned by cloning and 'mining' the timestream. Could we live forever?

Gray Rinehart's "Memorial at Copernicus" rewrites a page of history that frustrates so many of us, the end of the Apollo program, and considers how moving into space could change our own world (and get us off this rock).

As for our nonfiction, Henry Cribbs is back and this month he'll take a look at techware and its pivotal role in some of science fiction's most influential works, including *Starship Troopers* and *Neuromancer*.

Our interviews will kick off with Voltaire, a popular musician at speculative fiction conventions. Paul Clemmons caught up with him at a con and had a wide-ranging and entertaining conversation. Well worth taking a look.

Thanks for coming by, and we hope you find something you enjoy in this month's Redstone Science Fiction.

Yours,

Michael Ray

Editor

Death's Flag Is Never at Half-Mast

by Rahul Kanakia

The two newest nelsons were young enough to believe that they would be the next Heroes of the Nile or Trafalgar or Ceres or Alpha Centauri. All those places were well in the future for the boys, who'd been plucked from the Portsmouth of 1771 only a few months ago.

Lieutenant "Halfacre" Nelson strode down the corridor, surveying them via the video-feed routed through his left eye. These children kept getting more contemptible and arrogant and the Zeta Alpha class was the worst. They were reading to each other from Churchill's *Lives of the Ten Nelsons* as if the whole thing hadn't been crash-downloaded into them during orientation surgery.

As the cabin door dilated, the boys scrambled to attention, and Halfacre could see the way they struggled to place him. He was older than any of the nelsons in the book. Though the hundred strands of a manipulation apparatus dangled from his left sleeve, signifying the command track, he was only a lieutenant and was by far the lowest-ranked nelson for his age that they had encountered.

Halfacre snapped the ganglia towards the ensigns, making one flinch, "Looks like we've already found the next batch of fertilizer." He pointed to the other and said, "Mr. Forty-Two, report to berth nine in ten minutes." As the door closed he saw Forty-Two patting the first boy on the shoulder. He'd need to break that one quick. All he needed was another damned horatio.

It always came back to the French. The splintered remnants of the Russian and German nations had long ago reverted to their natural place scrounging at the midden-heaps of civilization. Similarly, the Americans shook off their brief bout of youthful vigor and collapsed with a decadence that surpassed the Romans.

The nations of what had been Asia proceeded, as always, on a vector orthogonal to that of the West. Their massive junks and dhows barely deigned to notice the ragged frigates and men o' war which sparred around them. Indeed, those inscrutable peoples had long since realized that the West had nothing of value to offer them, not even in the realm of ideas.

But the patchwork French realm, styling themselves a republic, kingdom, or empire at wholly predictable intervals, dragged itself into the stars. Its territories waxed and waned with the vicissitudes of military defeat, but always remained culturally united, even when politically independent.

And they remained yoked to Its Majesty's Empire, as allies, rivals, and mortal enemies, throughout that long span of history. The two nations were alternately attracted to and repelled by each other. Their millennia-long shared history provided fertile ground for any manner of shared enterprise or destructive crusade. And indeed, no matter their relationship, the British could flourish only so long as the French were in good health; a temporary ascendance by one was always balanced by its resulting decline.

So it was no surprise that, when the technology became available, both nations took to mining the time-streams with equal gusto. France was over-run with Charlemagnes, Joans of Arc, Marshal Neys, and De Gaulles, (and even a Napoleon or two, whenever madmen gained control of the apparatus), and whirled through governments as fast as its citizens could read new constitutions, producing brilliant military results intercut with dismal routs.

But Britain adopted a different course. Though the Isles agreed on the necessity of a few Churchills, for the speeches (though that fellow from the BBC actually did them quite a bit better), and perhaps a Marlborough or Montgomery for whenever the distasteful business of land-combat was unavoidable, there was no question as to who should fill the spacefaring officer corps of Its Majesty's Navy.

"Get out of there," Halfacre said, giving the green slop another dose of electricity from his ganglia. He stared at the beslimed strands and longed for a washcloth.

Even as Forty-Two stood knee-deep in the muck, his tunic was spotless. "God damn them to hell; if they even have the soul for it," Halfacre said, enjoying Forty-Two's reaction to the blasphemy. The lieutenant pulled a charge-rod off the wall and handed it to the ensign. "Wade in there until you find one and deliver a dose to the skull. That ought to rouse them. Call me once you have them all activated."

That should rub a bit of the orientation shine off the boy. Halfacre pulled himself out of the nutrient bath and headed for the neutralization chamber.

As the chemical shower's door dilated, one of the grunts was waiting with a freshly laundered uniform. Disgusting things, the grunts, hulking neuters with no clothing but the instrument panels embedded in their arms.

After changing, Halfacre saw the young nelson conversing with the grunts in their abbreviated dialect. How the devil had he gotten them to clean themselves and line up in front of the training receptacles, docile as anyone could want?

He had the boy now. “How dare you dose them without orders,” Halfacre shouted. Forty-Two must have cut corners, altering their performance cocktails.

“Begging your pardon, sir, but their glands haven’t been cracked yet.”

Swearing under his breath, Halfacre quickly replayed video of the scene in the berth while he’d been away. The boy had just wiped down the charge-rod and put it back on the wall, then spent a few minutes singing out in gentle tones. Before long they started to rise out of the mess.

“You went wireless,” Halfacre said, horrified. A nelson with his receivers open would be easy prey for French cryptographers. He pulled his side-arm. The boy could already be infected.

“No sir, it was just a song. They let them keep memories of the crèche, so they feel safe in the baths,” Forty-Two said. “That’s one of the nonsense rhymes they use to implant language.”

“But I specifically ordered you to shock them.” Good, another young horatio off to the renderer; with any luck, they’d be feasting on him by noon. Halfacre’s ganglia interfaced with two of the nearest grunts. Using the nerve endings of his phantom arm, he over-rode their basic programming and instructed them to take the ensign to the captain. “You disobeyed orders,” Halfacre said. “Its Majesty’s Navy will not stand for insubordination.”

Captain “Firefight” Nelson looked flushed when he accepted them into his cabin. The entire ship knew that he was playing an ancient and dangerous game amongst nelsons, wooing Minister Nelson’s hamilton. That was one reason admiralty had sent them out to the fringes of the war, doomed to play out tiny trafalgars around Barnard’s Star, little skirmishes where disgraced nelson fought disgraced tourville.

“Another one, Mr. Halfacre?” he said.

“He disobeyed orders. The punishment is clear.”

“We’ll let admiralty decide that.” He let the boy have the hint of a smile and said, “Go to the brig, Mr. Forty-Two.”

Once the boy had left, he said, “Why do you persist in this, Halfacre? Rear Admiral Nelson keeps pardoning and reassigning them. It’s only more work for you.”

“They never obey.”

“The technicians surely miscalculated their temporal dynamics when they plucked you out of your timestream.”

Halfacre fought to ignore the comment. He’d heard similar from far more well-regarded nelsons. Let them carp. He knew his duty.

In his first engagement, he'd gotten no farther than a yelled, "England expects..." before the French boarders cut down everyone in his engineering station. When his implants were finally ransomed and he was resurrected, he'd learned his lesson. If only he'd had someone to disabuse him early on, he might have avoided these endless years of shame. That was his duty now.

A few days later, Halfacre dined on the French cruiser, only hours before it came to kill them. The tourville who was his opposite number played a fine game of whist, and it was their custom to idle away the hours with wine and complaints. The Frenchman had been very gracious when the pronouncement crashed through the network, even offering Halfacre one of the bottles he had brought from 17th century France, before putting the now-enemy lieutenant on a shuttle.

Within moments of arriving on the bridge, his eye informed Halfacre that war had been declared. His ganglia instantly snapped into the closest gun-ports, amphetamine flooded his system, and his neural functions were suborned by the targeting meld.

Even at such a close distance, it would be nearly impossible to destroy the other ship. The pinpricks of their laser-heads were no match for meters of spider-steel. Instead they would need to scour the surface of the ship for weak spots. First they slagged scanners, gun-ports, ion scoops, and reaction thrusters, then closed to board. The lasers could hit anything with perfect accuracy, but the surfaces of frigates were pitted with false targets: decoys, signature emitters, and the like. And even the most complicated targeting algorithm could be analyzed and beaten by enemy minds within moments.

But the fuzzy logic centers of a chemically-enhanced human mind were not so easily gamed. Halfacre's intuition gelled with the pattern recognition circuits as he was asked to instantly prioritize thousands of objects as potential targets and determine, for instance, whether a given puff of mass was just the venting of air or the spewing of a thruster. Two other nelsons were performing the same function, and the captain was furiously arbitrating their choices, deciding on the final targeting solutions.

But one by one Halfacre's eyes fell silent. Although they could still control most of the lasers, there were broad banks of sensors missing. The images coming to him lacked depth, and much of the accompanying data was missing. Forced to operate on less data, he knew he must be making mistakes, and it was evident from the way the number of contacts from French lasers, sharply in decline since the beginning of the engagement, had stopped decreasing.

Soon they'd be blind. The French would dispatch cutters full of grunts to slowly laser through the meters of bulkhead. They might be able to disable enough of the grunts in hand to hand combat to eke out a draw while engineers restored engine and sensor function, but that would be a lop-sided game.

Suddenly Halfacre began to receive high-resolution pictures of the cruiser's surface. But they were from odd angles. The unusual parallax increased his odds of successful identification, and British lasers increased their rate of fire as target priorities were passed on more quickly.

But why were the images coming in bursts? Where were these sensors? Halfacre identified one of the images as... a grunt, whirling naked through space. He re-routed some of his neural capacity to investigate.

Forty-Two was in the brig, but the guard grunts were gone. He had stretched out his phantom arm and managed to jack one of his ganglia into a socket.

Holy God.

The ensign was wirelessly receiving images from the grunts that had launched themselves into space, on his orders, and was downloading the images in compressed spurts directly into the captain.

Horrified, Halfacre ordered the socket to shutdown before the boy compromised the captain.

"Belay that," Firefight commed.

"But he's opened himself up. Their codecrackers must be working double-time."

"I'll firewall him before the viruses reach ship systems."

"But what if you blow..."

The captain upped Halfacre's amphetamine drip and reconfigured his programming. With new dedication, Halfacre set himself to the task.

The minutes passed in furious calm.

An automated subroutine cut off the drip and nanites began to iron the drugs from his system. Suddenly, Halfacre had access to the captain's overrides. He quickly surveyed the scene, determining that French rate of fire was dropping, and partitioned himself back into the real world.

He diverted neural capacity back to processing sensory information and became aware of a burnt smell in the air. The captain was lying on the bridge with smoke pouring from several of his ganglia.

"Kiss me, Nelson," said the captain as he lay on the deck. The hundred ganglia of his navigation implant writhed. A rogue virus had blown the capacitors in his implants. Lieutenant "Halfacre" Nelson grabbed an undamaged strand and slotted in a ganglion, but it was an empty gesture. The captain was cut off from his information apparatus.

Forty-Two had fully opened his wireless channels, and was pouring raw waves of devotion into the grunts as he minutely adjusted their chemicals. Below the broadcast there were individual messages for each grunt, exhorting them, making sure that no strap was left untied, power-pack discharged, or catalyst reservoir left at half-capacity.

Halfacre reached out and shut the boy down before the French could crack him as well. The grunts on the bridge roared when they felt the ensign disconnect from their minds, and began to manipulate the panels on their arms, trying to find the right combination of narcotics to wash away the loss. Several miscalculated and fell dead.

Halfacre felt the pressure on his phantom arm and found himself jacked into the few bridge sockets that were still functional.

Beneath him the captain breathed his last and fell silent. The remaining grunts stared at him in narcotic awe, tired, but poised to rush forward in angry vengeance against the ship that lay blind and disabled before them. The ship that had cost them their beloved captain and so many of their fellows. All he had to do was unleash them.

Forty-Two, already christened “Shouter” by the bored nelsons in Personnel, didn’t see Halfacre receive his citation. Shouter was at Lorange Portsmouth, overseeing the retrofitting of the French prize. Halfacre had no choice but to put him in command. The virus had impaired almost all his nelsons to one degree or another. It was only luck that the French had decided to keep the boy as an undamaged conduit.

Halfacre stood expressionlessly as the Admiral beamed him the citation. At least this time they didn’t try to press a promotion on him.

“Another fine victory and a fine officer,” Admiral “Dodge” Nelson said. “How do you do it?”

“He just needed a little polish,” Halfacre said, dully. If admiralty knew what he really thought, he’d never fly again. Why did it always turn out this way? Was he the only failure in the fleet? “It was nothing to do with me.”

“Now, now, Shouter spoke very highly of you. Says your encouragement really brought out the steel in him. He was quite voluble in his praise, as are they all, as are they all.”

The End

Rahul Kanakia was born in Redwood City, CA, but he grew up in the District of Columbia. He returned to California for college, but after getting a B.A. in Economics in 2008, he came back to the D.C., where he currently works for the World Bank on environmental operations in South Asia. He has sold stories to Clarkesworld Magazine, Nature, and Lady Churchill’s Rosebud Wristlet. Visit him at his website, [Blotter Paper](#), and follow his [Twitter Feed](#).

Memorial at Copernicus

by Gray Rinehart

Machek stopped the skimmer a few meters from his holy place. Its lights shone on the low wall around the Apollo-18 landing site.

Machek knew the layout intimately. The lower half of the Lunar Module, the antique Lunar Rover, the nearby experiment packages—and the holy of holies, more important than the old Luna-2 site or Neil Armstrong’s footprint: Deke Slayton’s grave.

It was August 10, 2024, the fiftieth anniversary of Slayton’s death. Fifty years since the Spartan astronaut with the funny name rescued Valeriy Edemskoi, Machek’s grandfather, from bleeding and starving on the lunar surface.

Tomas’s voice crackled in Machek’s speakers, and stirred him from his contemplation. “How long do we have to stay here?” his son asked.

“Quit whining,” Machek said. “No one made you come.”

Tomas’s voice had the distinct tone of being forced from a sneering mouth. “No, Papa, but you couldn’t come by yourself.”

“I would if I had to.”

“How, Papa? Mr. Roycroft won’t sign out a skimmer for one person.”

It was true. Bryan Roycroft had been quite adamant. “Mack, I can’t let you go out that far by yourself.”

It was only 100 kilometers. A skimmer could get there and back by itself. “What is the worry?” Machek had asked.

“My job is to worry. No deal.”

“What if I take Tomas?”

“He passed his EVA certs? Sure, that’d be okay.”

“I’m not sure he will want to go.”

Roycroft had the final word. “Anybody could go with you, it doesn’t matter who. You’re just not going solo, that’s all.”

So Machek had brought Tomas. Machek sighed, and said, “I wouldve found a way to come. But I am grateful you are here with me.”

Tomas said, “I just don’t understand why you couldn’t wait for the ceremony.”

“It is not the same,” said Machek.

His joints creaked as he stepped off the skimmer. Outside the skimmer’s beams, under only the light of the earth, Machek could barely see his feet in the thin, grey dust. He shivered involuntarily, though his ultra-light skinsuit kept him warm.

At Copernicus crater, the sun would not rise for three more terrestrial days. The inexorable regularity of celestial mechanics would not allow a daylight ceremony on the actual anniversary, and no one else minded the wait. The sunrise would be brilliant, lighting the rim of Copernicus and reflecting off the Apollo memorial, when Mayor Paul Fabian of Slayton Crater held the ceremony with the NASA administrator. Many of the 3200 residents would ride out from the Slayton Crater base—once known to astronomers as “Gay-Lussac A”—and virtually everyone on the moon would watch on video. But that wasn’t right for Machek.

“I’m going to look at the LVRS,” Tomas said.

Machek looked northward. The Lunar Vibration Recording System that Slayton and Lunar Module pilot Gerald Carr had set up was about half a kilometer away, over a slight rise. “Very well,” Machek said. “But stay where you can see the skimmer lights.”

Machek walked into the light from the skimmer. He stood next to the low wall to hold his vigil alone. He wished Tomas understood; he owed his life to Slayton as much as Machek did. But, accustomed to life here, with friends from every terrestrial continent, Tomas had lost all awe and wonder at where he was and the life he lived.

Machek glanced up at the partial earth. His stomach tightened and his eyes watered. Let the politicians have their pomp and circumstance; let his son forget. He would have his private remembrance.

He turned on his hand lantern. The gold foil on the base of the LM was brilliant against the backdrop of night. About twenty meters to the left, the long-distance rover sat idle. Midway between the two, the mound and simple marker that the Apollo-20 crew had erected looked as pristine as if Slayton had just been buried yesterday.

Machek resisted the urge to step over the low wall, to step into history.

Deke Slayton drove off in the lunar rover on the 7th of August, 1974. Gerald Carr waited in the tiny Lunar Module cabin.

Carr fretted about Deke's heart: only recently reinstated to flight status, Slayton had used his NASA clout to bump Fred Haise off the mission roster. Their flight was supposed to have been Apollo-Soyuz in 1975; but the Soviets backed out early, intent on their own Luna launches after Apollo waned. The U.S. quickly re-commissioned the once-cancelled Apollo missions, -18 through -20. The space race tightened. Then, disaster.

Machek imagined Slayton's long drive in the rover, north to the edge of Mare Imbrium, to the doomed Luna-25 expedition. He heard whispered voices, echoes of a half century ago, more static than signal—no, they were real voices. He turned the volume up on his suit radio.

“...must return to origins. Units that cannot return by 1745 local must shelter in place. Repeat, this is Slayton Central Control. A class M solar flare is in progress. All surface units must return...” The broadcast cycled through the instructions once more.

Machek looked at his chronometer: plenty of time. Central is very protective; we are in no great danger on the night side. Although the magnetosphere may funnel some particles our way.

“Tomas, are you on your way back? We must return.”

Machek walked back to the skimmer. He called again, and still Tomas didn't answer. It made no sense: he must be receiving. As long as his suit had power, the radio should work; it had no “off” switch.

Machek called a third time.

No response.

Deke Slayton switched off the transmitter. Command Module Pilot Vance Brand had pinpointed the Luna-25 landing site. Houston reported all contact lost with the cosmonauts. “They're in trouble,” Slayton said.

Gerald Carr nodded. “Precious little we can do about it.”

“Yeah, there is. I'm going to find them.”

They argued for a few minutes, but Slayton held firm against all objections. He acknowledged that the Soviets were probably dead already. He acknowledged the danger. He admitted he'd be taking the rover far beyond even its extended range, and his suit wasn't meant to sustain him that long.

“You remember Gene Cernan's script from -17?” he said. “‘We leave as we came and God willing as we shall return, with peace and hope for all mankind.’ What does ‘peace and hope’

mean if it doesn't mean trying to rescue a shipwrecked crew, no matter what flag they fly? If I was out there, I'd want someone looking for me."

Machek drove the skimmer to the LVRS site. The seismic detector looked brand new, even though it had quit detecting four decades ago.

Machek turned the skimmer in a slow circle, casting long, low shadows behind the rocks. There: a spot of high-visibility orange, 200 meters to the west, halfway up a small ridge. He called again on the radio.

"Papa?" Even in line-of-sight, the boy's voice was barely audible.

Machek sped toward the spot. "Tomas, what's wrong?"

"Rocks turned under me. Broke my high-gain antenna, I think." In the next few seconds, Machek reached the bottom of the ridge. "Broke my leg, too."

Machek parked the skimmer and sweated up the hill with what tools the vehicle carried. Tomas was lying on his back, his left leg twisted and lodged under a boulder that probably massed a thousand kilograms. Machek worked for twenty minutes to find the right purchase to prize away the rock.

He moved the boulder a few centimeters, but while Tomas tried to pull out his foot a cascade of smaller rocks turned the big one and trapped him again. Machek thought about trying to prop up the boulder and dig around the boy, but refused to accept the risk of tearing Tomas's suit or further damaging his leg. Instead, he dug out some smaller stones on the side away from Tomas and tried to pry the boulder up again. This time the angle was wrong: it moved, but not enough.

Slayton Central Control repeated the flare warning.

Machek dug and pried until sweat filmed his eyes and he thought his muscles would snap. Finally: two, three, five centimeters of movement, and Tomas stoically dragged his foot out.

No time to rest—no time to gather the tools—Machek led the way down the hill.

Tomas ground his teeth during their slow descent, but otherwise his radio broadcast only his breathing. He leaned on Machek and hopped, one-legged, down to the skimmer. The boy cried out only when he twisted himself into the seat. Machek's heart, near bursting with exertion, swelled even more with pride.

Machek noted the time. They would miss Central's deadline now, but he couldn't shelter in place. Tomas needed medical attention.

They started on a slow ride back. Beside him, his son breathed raggedly. Machek imagined his grandfather Valeriy's labored breathing as Deke Slayton drove him back to Apollo-18.

Gerald Carr contacted the rover as soon as he saw it. "About damn time, Deke. Houston's mad as Hell. Get on in here and let's go home."

Slayton's reply was drowned in static, but Carr heard, "one survivor." He used the zoom lens on their Hasselblad camera to verify that another space-suited figure was riding next to Slayton. He loosed a series of epithets NASA would never have approved.

"Start prepping the LM for launch," Slayton said.

"What do we do with the Commie? Fold him up and stow him with the rocks?"

"No, this guy's hurt. There's blood all over the inside of his faceplate. He'll ride in my seat."

Carr opened his checklist. "Deke, that's suicide," he said. The rover got closer and closer as he went through the first steps, and Carr was about to transmit again when Slayton replied.

"No, it's not. There's a difference between suicide and sacrifice, but I don't plan on either one. I'll recharge my suit, rig a connection to the oh-two, and eat until I'm stuffed. If I ration my water, I should last long enough . . . if they can get -19 off the ground fast enough." Slayton paused. "Or if the Russkies can get Luna-26 on its way."

"You know they can't do that, Deke."

"Tell them to try," Slayton said. "They have to try."

Machek walked beside the gurney. Tomas showed the effects of the sedative. His face had relaxed. Now and then his head rolled from side to side.

Machek brooded. His wife would blame him for Tomas's injured leg. Central would censure him for their late arrival; those two hours could cost him his license. All because of my foolish devotion to the calendar—

Machek felt a hand on his. Tomas moved his lips, but no sound came out. Machek bent close. He smiled when he heard his son's whisper. The boy understood at last.

"Thanks," Tomas said. "Thanks, Deke."

The End

Gray Rinehart retired from the US Air Force after a rather odd career. He kept rocket propulsion research operations safe, fought fires as head of a Disaster Response Force, trained AFROTC cadets, refurbished space launch facilities, "flew" Milstar satellites, drove trucks, processed nuclear command and control orders, commanded the Air Force's largest satellite tracking station, and wrote speeches for top Air Force leaders. Gray's fiction has appeared in

Tales of the Talisman and Zahir, and he has written a variety of nonfiction works. He is a Contributing Editor for Baen Books and a writer/extension specialist for the Industrial Extension Service at N.C. State University. His web site is [The GrayMan Writes](#).

Clothes Make the Man (or Woman): Techwear and character in scifi

by Henry Cribbs

Earlier this year I was listening to an interview with Jeremy Brenner, star of *The Hurt Locker* (you know – that film which beat out *Avatar* for the Best Picture Oscar), and something he said about preparing for his role reminded me of something I’ve noticed in a lot of scifi. Brenner plays a staff sergeant in charge of a bomb squad unit in Iraq. He spends a good part of the movie inside a protective Kevlar suit, so he can get up close to analyze explosives and defuse them. The host, Terry Gross, asked him how he was able to get into the frame of mind of a character for whom “taking risks and living in the moment is the only life he’s good at” ([Gross](#)). Here’s Brenner’s reply:

“...the bomb suit, putting that on. I had no idea what that would be like, but there’s a certain walk that came out of that. There’s a certain mentality and philosophies that sort of came to my mind about how peaceful and almost beautifully poetic that is inside the helmet, and outside is chaos... I definitely wouldn’t have chosen to have it be a fake suit, even if I had that choice, because the suit was such a big part of that character, a massive part of that movie – visually, and then just physically. If it was a fake suit without all the Kevlar in it, I would have not walked the way I walked. I wouldn’t be able to move the way I moved in it. Something very sort of lunar...” (Ibid.)

I immediately thought of the armored suits in Robert A. Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers* (1959).

RAH’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* was one of the first scifi books I read as a juvenile, and after that I immediately devoured everything by him which I could find, eventually amassing an award-winning collection of his corpus. (If only I could afford on my meager public school teacher’s salary the \$1500 for the recently published Virginia editions, I’d be collecting still). So instead of grabbing my Kindle, I simply pulled *Troopers* off my shelf.

Rereading *Starship Troopers* reminded me of what I both like and dislike about RAH’s novels. What I like is that he has an uncanny ability to put you so deep in the mind of a character that you are able to completely suspend disbelief about the incredible world into which Heinlein has dropped you headlong like an trooper in his capsule, and the verisimilitude of his voice also allows you to swallow multiple paragraphs of technical detail like a spoonful of sugar, leaving you wondering when the medicine’s coming. Forgive the following long quote, but it illustrates my point (which means you won’t even notice or mind how long it is), plus it describes the suit (which is what I really want to talk about):

“An M.I. lives by his suit the way a K-9 man lives by and with and on his doggie partner. Powered armor is one-half the reason we call ourselves ‘mobile infantry’ instead of just ‘infantry.’ (The other half are the spaceships that drop us and the capsules we drop in.) Our suits give us better eyes, better ears, stronger backs (to carry heavier weapons and more ammo), better legs, better intelligence (‘intelligence’ in the military meaning; a man in a suit can be just as stupid as anybody else – only he had better not be), more firepower, greater endurance, less vulnerability.

A suit isn’t a space suit – although it can serve as one. It is not primarily armor – although the Knights of the Round Table were not armored as well as we are. It isn’t a tank – but a single M.I. private could take on a squadron of those things and knock them off unassisted if anybody was silly enough to put tanks against M.I. A suit is not a ship but it can fly, a little – on the other hand neither spaceships nor atmosphere craft can fight against a man in a suit except by saturation bombing of the area he is in (like burning down a house to get a flea!) Contrariwise we can do many things that no ship – air, submersible, or space – can do....

Maybe they’ll be able to do without us someday. Maybe some mad genius with myopia, a bulging forehead, and a cybernetic mind will devise a weapon that can go down a hole, pick out the opposition, and force it to surrender or die – without killing that whole gang of our own people they’ve got imprisoned down there. I wouldn’t know; I’m not a genius, I’m an M.I. In the meantime, until they build a machine to replace us, my mates can handle the job – and I might be some help on it, too....

But while they have not yet built a machine to replace us, they’ve surely thought up some honeys to help us. The suit, in particular....

The ‘muscles,’ the pseudo-musculature, get all the publicity but it’s the control of all that power which merits it. The real genius in the design is that you don’t have to control the suit; you just wear it... Two thousand pounds of it, maybe, in full kit – yet the very first time you are fitted into one you can immediately walk, run, lie down, pick up an egg without breaking it (takes a trifle of practice, but anything improves with practice), dance a jig (if you can dance a jig, that is, without a suit) – and jump right over the house next door and come down to a feather landing.

The secret lies with negative feedback and amplification....The suit has feedback which causes it to match any move you make, but with great force....You jump, that heavy suit jumps, but higher than you can jump in your skin....

And that is the beauty of a powered suit: you don’t have to think about it. You don’t have to drive it, fly it, conn it, operate it; you just wear it and it takes orders directly from your muscles and does for you what your muscles are trying to do. This leaves you with your whole mind free to handle your weapons and notice what is going on around you... which is supremely important to an infantryman who wants to die in bed.” (ch. 7, pp.79-83)

Makes you want to go pick up a copy now and read the parts I left out, doesn’t it?

Now what I tend to *dislike* in most of Heinlein’s writing is that he’ll draw you into a great character and describe a wonderfully imagined world – providing you with engaging exposition and suspenseful rising action for seven-eighths of the novel – and then he’ll rush the climax, pretty much skip over the falling action, and jump straight to a mere page or two of denouement.

It just seems as if Heinlein suddenly hit his publisher's word quota and just decided to stop writing. It happens in *Troopers*, and it happens in many (most?) of his other novels. And it drives me crazy every time. But in a way, this complaint I have in fact winds up being a compliment, because what I'm really saying is that after I've put down one of Heinlein's books I'm always left wanting more.

But back to the suit.

Like Brenner's bomb suit in *Hurt Locker*, Rico's powered suit was not just a major part of the story, it played a major part in defining the character. The opening chapter is as gripping as the initial sequence of *Saving Private Ryan*, and in it you first learn about Rico through watching what he does with his suit. If you didn't see the world through his helmet, you wouldn't understand what it means to him to be M.I.

Such wearable technology often plays a significant role in characterization in scifi. Heinlein's vision of powered armor obviously inspired similar powered suits in later science fiction, including Ripley's wearable forklift in *Aliens*, scads of Battletech material, Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War*, and John Steakley's *Armor*. In *Armor* (1986), the "title character" almost takes on a life of its own.

Steakley's novel is clearly an homage to *Starship Troopers*. His power-suited protagonist, Felix, fires a "blazer" instead of a flamer, and fights "Ants" instead of Bugs, and deploys via a Transit beacon instead of a drop capsule, but in both novels an interstellar war begins when arthropodic aliens bomb South America, and Earth's retaliatory strike against the enemy's home planet is fubared. But Steakley does something quite different with his military scifi novel than Heinlein does with his. Rather than glorifying war and providing sociopolitical and philosophical arguments for why war is an unavoidable and even necessary aspect of any civilized society, *Armor* instead focuses on the horrors of war and its psychological effect on the combatants.

Steakley's novel includes two separate yet inseparable storylines. Felix is the hero of the first, who in the tragicomical spirit of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is doomed by a paperwork snafu to be forever sent right back into the thick of combat after each mission. The antihero of the second story is Jack Crow, a legendary space pirate who might well have been the source for Johnny Depp's Jack Sparrow. What ties the two tales together is a black suit of powered armor.

The black armor for Felix represents the horror, insanity, and futility of war, and his attempts to shed the suit reflect his desire to escape the war and to come to terms with his own tragic past. The external suit is also mirrored internally by a part of Felix's mind he calls the "Engine", a survival instinct which controls his actions in combat, as if a machine is controlling him rather than the other way around.

The suit and what it represents is inseparable from Felix's character, but also thus becomes its own character, an antagonist even. It is and at the same time is not a mere machine mindlessly

obeying his commands; it is instead something he fears and with which he must negotiate: “It was a machine. It did not care. It would work if told to. It would not if not. It was no serpent. It would not crush him. It would not crave his flesh. But still he feared. And later simply breathed and stared and felt relief. This time, as at other times, the suit had chosen to obey him.” (p.13)

For Crow, however, the suit starts as an antagonist, and only later becomes (literally) part of his character. He treats the empty armor at first as mere loot, but it quickly turns into an obstacle to be overcome as he and his historian friend try to come to terms with the war it represents, but which they know little about. They fear the suit, which is seated in the lab as if it were alive, but nevertheless they continue to return to it. The suit both influences Crow’s character and is a character.

But techwear need not be a complete body-covering suit in order to inform character. Sometimes a simple pair of sunglasses will suffice. The cyberpunk movement introduced a whole new assortment of techwear and implants, but the most prominent symbol is undoubtedly sunglasses.

In William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1986), dubbed “the quintessential cyberpunk novel” by Bruce Sterling, the protagonist, Case, meets one of the most memorable recurring characters in sci-fi. Molly, first introduced in “Johnny Mnemonic” (1981), has a pair of mirrored lenses surgically affixed to her face, completely covering her eyes. “She wore mirrored glasses... He realized her glasses were surgically inset, sealing her sockets. The silver lenses seemed to grow from smooth pale skin above her cheekbones, framed by dark hair cut in a rough shag” (*Neuromancer*, p.24). These lenses augment her sight, providing night vision and heads-up (eyes-up?) digital readouts. She also has Wolverine-style retractable razor-sharp claws installed in her fingertips, which are handy in a fight and earn her the nickname “Steppin’ Razor” from the Rastafarian inhabitants of Freeside, but it’s the sunglasses which are the most interesting in terms of character and symbolism.

In his [preface](#) to the cyberpunk anthology *Mirrorshades*, Bruce Sterling explains:

Mirrored sunglasses have been a Movement totem since the early days of '82. The reasons for this are not hard to grasp. By hiding the eyes, mirrorshades prevent the forces of normalcy from realizing that one is crazed and possibly dangerous. They are the symbol of the sunstaring visionary, the biker, the rocker, the policeman, and similar outlaws. Mirrorshades, preferably in chrome and matte black, the Movement's totem color, appeared in story after story, as a kind of literary badge.

Case sees nothing but reflections in Molly’s shades. If there’s a romance in *Neuromancer*, it lies in Case’s struggle to connect with Molly, to gain insight into who she really is, what sorrows she has buried in her past which makes her so hardened now. But if eyes are the windows to the soul, Molly certainly doesn’t want anyone peeking in. Indeed, when she had them installed, she her tear ducts relocated to the inside of her mouth. So Molly doesn’t cry; she swallows her sorrows instead.

Sometimes Molly even wears an actual pair of sunglasses over her inset lenses, to hide her identity. But the fact that she can never actually take her own shades off symbolizes her inability to share her feelings and connect with other human beings. Ironically, with all her vision enhancements, it's a blind ninja and a man who sells illusions who finally manage to best her. When an antagonist shatters one of Molly's lenses, an accomplice remarks that they'll finally "see what color her eyes are" (p.221). But even though Case actually gets to see directly *through* Molly's eyes – experiencing things from her point of view while jacked into a live simstim feed – he never really truly sees *her*. He never does find out the color of her eyes. Nor does the reader, though we get occasional glimpses of her true colors from the bits of her past she confides to Case. Mostly, what we know about Molly is that she's hiding something. And we know that from the first moment we see her in her shades, and you also know she's not wearing them because her future looks bright. Her lenses aren't rose-colored. They're black.

In science fiction, where one's attire can be so technologically advanced as to take on a life of its own, it's easy to see how techwear plays a prominent role not just in establishing the scifi-ness of the setting, but in developing character, too. Whether it's a complete suit of armor, a fancy pair of shades, or something else, what a character wears can tell us a lot about who they are.

You maybe shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but sometimes clothes do make the man. Or woman. (Or unique nonhuman entity.)

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About the Author: Henry Cribbs somehow managed to sneak his science-fiction poem about Schrödinger's cat into the literary art journal Lake Effect, and has also published book reviews for Philosophical Psychology, Chicago Literary Review, and Black Warrior Review. He taught philosophy and creative writing at the University of South Carolina for several years, and now forces his high school English students to read Ray Bradbury. He currently serves on the editorial board for Nimrod International Journal of Prose and Poetry.

An Interview with Voltaire

by Paul Clemmons

Last month, I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to sit down with the King of Con Concerts...Voltaire. If you've watched Cartoon Network, if you've been to DragonCon in the past several years, or if you're a guy who has worn black nail polish of your own free will, chances are that you have heard Voltaire's music. Impossible to categorize, he has a die-hard following of science fiction fans, vampire-wannabes, filk-fanatics, and Goths who can take a joke. In addition to his music (bawdy gypsy pirate geek folk) Voltaire is an award-winning maker of short films, a toymaker (what kid wouldn't want a Deady-Bear), author, and a comic artist. A self-managed, self-promoted entrepreneur, Voltaire has been cited as a preview of the future of the music business and of publishing.

Some of our readers may not have heard of you and your work. When someone asks, how do you answer the question "what do you do"?

I figured out long ago to not even try to describe my work, because...I'm not really sure what I do. When I meet someone who hasn't heard of me, I ask them if they've seen "The Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy". If they say yes, I tell them that I sing the song "Brains" from that show, in which I am an evil meteor that eats people's brains. If they are still blanking, I tell them I'm a musician who sings funny songs about spooky things. I also make comic books that tend to be dark and humorous. I'm a human being, and there's more to me than that, but I just haven't figured out how to describe myself and my work to someone who doesn't already know who I am.

How did you get started in the music business?

My first show was a dare. This guy that I knew, God he was a giant tool, he was promoting a Goth night at a local club, and he invited me to see one of his shows. It was billed as a solo acoustic Goth performer. I cracked a lot of jokes about the lack of drum machines, but I went. I didn't remember a single melody, not a word...it was completely unmemorable. Afterwards, the promoter asked me what I thought. In all of my pomposity, I told him that I do a better show every night in my living room. Well, he said "next Sunday night, you'll be doing the show". I was stunned. What I'd just said was so arrogant that there was no way that I could back out. I was so nervous that I had diarrhea for the whole week, but I survived. I had gotten an acoustic guitar just a month earlier, and taught myself how to play it, and I'd written a few songs. I did "Ex-Lover's Lover", a song about jealousy, angst, and fantasizing about killing the lovers of one's ex. This went over much better than I'd expected. I told the crowd how nervous I was, and they just started cheering. After that, the nerves died down, and I have never been nervous since. This was 1995, and there was no sort of humor in a Goth club. You went there to be a vampire, stand in the corner, and look mysterious. The crowd spent the first half of the show trying to

figure out if I was making fun of them. I wasn't, not really. Then, one by one they started covering their mouths so that their equally mysterious friends didn't see them smiling. Then, they were all laughing with me. What made it even better is that there had never been more than, like, twelve people show up for one of these things. Because I'd talked so much shit for the past ten years, and everyone wanted to see me make a fool of myself, there were 150 people in this tiny bar to see this show. The guy who booked me thought that he was really on to something, and talked me into letting him be my manager.

There are a lot of people who don't really have a talent, or a skill, but who really, really want to be the center of attention. A lot of these folks end up becoming Goth club promoters, or some other sort of promoter, hoping to get attention by putting an event together. Well, anyway, this was one of those guys, and after a series of misadventures, I struck out on my own. Directing commercial spots and promos helped me make some contacts, but for the most part it's just been doing what I love to do, and finding people who will pay money for it.

I've got a friend who's an uptight accountant type. She's never heard of you, but I think she'd love your show. What should I tell her about you and your music to get her there?
I'm not sure she should come (laughs).

Her husband says the same thing.

Well, depending on how you're spelling the word, that could be a problem (laughs). I don't know if my shows would be for her. My shows are very bawdy. There's a lot of dark humor, sexual humor, and there's a tremendous amount of geek culture. If she's not into Star Wars, Star Trek, vampires, werewolves, zombies she probably won't "get it". There is a lot of "inside humor". Well, if she's not a fan of sci-fi, horror, fantasy, AND if she can't appreciate bawdy, dark humor, she might not be in to what I do. Maybe she should stay home...or maybe she should come, I'd like to think she'd have a good time.

Your live shows primarily feature your humorous material, but you have a great many "serious" songs that come dangerously close to being "art". Do you have any plans to market your non-comedic material to those outside of your usual Spock-eared fan base?

I have songs that are funny, songs that are really serious, songs that are about Star Trek, and some songs that aren't about Star Trek. A lot of musicians feel that they have to have become a persona, and only do one type of thing. From a marketing perspective that's probably really smart. As I'm learning, it's very hard to market yourself to corporate decision-makers if you can't sum yourself up in a few words. An example is Marilyn Manson: Heavy Metal Goth, looks scary, Antichrist. You can sell that, it's totally gettable. But, I've never been a fan of posturing. I like to write songs about what interests me, so that's what I do. Star Trek and Werewolves interest me, so I write songs about those things. Being a human being, walking through life, that interests me, too, so I write about those things—anger, break-ups, wild stories I hear, these things catch my attention and end up in some of my songs...just not the songs that people seem to want to hear at Cons. Cons are about fun and good times, so I play fun and funny songs. I still love writing the serious songs, and I'll keep recording them, as long as I still enjoy doing it.

It's clear from watching you perform that you love being on stage, and you seem so engaged with your fans. How big an audience is too big for you? Is there such a thing?

I don't know how to answer that. I play at DragonCon to four-thousand people a night, and that feels like a damn large crowd. I can see the first two-hundred people, maybe. Then of course, it falls off, becomes harder to see people as they get further away, especially if the room is dark. But as long as the people that I can see are smiling, if they are laughing at the jokes and look like they are having a good time, that works for me. I will assume that the rest of the room is feeling the same way. I've never played an arena, somewhere like Madison Square Garden, don't know if I ever will, but if I can see the audience, and if I can see if what I am doing is entertaining them, then I think that it won't really matter if it is one person or twenty-thousand.

Spanish is your first language, and you've established a passionate fan base in Central America and in Mexico. Do you have a Spanish-language fan base in the States, and do you do any Spanish-language shows here?

I would have to say, no. I haven't noticed that phenomenon, but that's because "normal people" don't come to my shows, so normal rules don't apply, I think. If I was Justin Timberlake, with access to the data resources of a label, I might be able to say "Yes, I've sold more CDs to Spanish-speaking people this year than the year before". I can't really measure those sorts of things. Inevitably, the question will be whether or not there are more Hispanics going to sci-fi conventions, or to Goth clubs, because, generally, those are the only places where someone will be coming in contact with my music for the first time. I'm thinking that the Hispanics in America that are coming to cons, going to Goth clubs, are probably English-speaking as well, so all my shows north of the border will be mostly in English. Mostly.

Morrissey has said that he felt the more connected to the fans at his Mexico shows than anywhere he'd performed. And it's surprising that he has such a huge fanbase amongst Mexican tough-guy gangster-types. Is your experience with your Mexican fans similar in any way?

Now, I love doing shows in Mexico, and you are absolutely right. Morrissey, the singer from the gayest band in the history of the world—and I say that in a good way, I love the Smiths—is a hero to some really scary chollos. Guys who would cut your throat for a nickel will comb up their pompadour and go cry at Morrissey shows. It's strange, but Mexican people, and we Hispanics in general, are very passionate. Morrissey's songs are very emotionally charged, and that makes a connection with passionate people. Also, I think that Hispanic culture is more appreciative and respectful of artists and teachers—anybody who is sharing or teaching something, than typical "American" culture. As an example, I teach animation at the School of Visual Arts in New York, and virtually every Hispanic student that I've had has called me "Professor". There is just a different sort of respect in those cultures, and it makes performing there very rewarding.

Anyway, yes, I love doing shows in Mexico. I'll have five-hundred fans packed into a small venue, many of whom can't speak English fluently, but they still sing along. I do more songs in

Spanish, of course, and I do feel a great connection, a great energy performing in front of those crowds. Of course, it is somewhat depressing walking through the marketplace the next day and seeing so many pirated versions of my CDs there—many of them being sold with my name written on the blank disc in Sharpie. (laughs).

I guess the fans that came to my show spent enough money on the ticket that they couldn't afford to spend more, and hey, I understand that. The economy has been tough all over. But, there is good news. The last trip that I made down to Mexico, I actually sold a lot of merch, actually, everything that I had. So, apparently, people are working, and the economy is doing a bit better. Next time I go down, I'm carrying a lot more CDs. Oh, and I won't eat burritos from the street vendors again. Trust me; you do not want to do that.

Well, at last night's show, every person was singing along, and it was great. It let me know that I was among "my people", but it left me curious: When was the last time that you sang to an audience who didn't know the words to your songs?

Hmmmm... Maybe twice in... like, ever. Maybe that's a problem (laughs). I may have once or twice played a show where people were less familiar with me.

How did those people react?

You know I wish could remember a specific example, but I know that I've done a show or two... I got one. The New York Horror Film Festival is a good example. There were not a lot of people there who had heard of me, and, of course, not a lot of people who had heard my songs. It was humbling, because I realized just how accustomed I had become to preaching to the choir, so to speak. A Dark Choir, mind you, but preaching to the choir, none the less. People didn't laugh as readily to the jokes, they weren't singing along—not to say that they weren't being won over, but they weren't already fans and I wasn't connecting in the same way... at least, not at first. It was a bit unsettling, but, in a way, it was nice to be reminded of what it was like in the beginning, and it made me appreciate, even more, what it's like now. It's like having a child who's a teenager, which I do, and running into a friend with a two-year-old, or a three-year-old, or a four-year-old, and being able to go "Oh yeah, that's what it was like back then". It's nice to be reminded that it could all go away at any moment.

You are working on a country album, and last night's crowd seemed to really get into the three country songs you performed. While it's hard to imagine Johnny Cash or Earnest Tubbs singing songs with the exact same content, you really captured the feel and sensibility of "old-school country". What prompted this new direction, and how have you been enjoying it?

I should start out by saying that, stylistically speaking, making country music is not new to me. Vampire Club is a straight-up Rockabilly song, and Cantina is a country song. You just don't think about it being a country song because Luke is getting anally raped with a lightsaber. It doesn't bring to mind images of the South, the West, or country music in general.

Well, we have anal rape in the South, too, just-

Not with lightsabers. (laughs) You got a purty mouth boy.

But, stylistically, making country-style music isn't new to me. Making country-style songs that aren't about zombies and spaceships has been such a fun exercise. I am having such a good time, because I realized something while working on these country songs that has been so exciting for me. There are certain conventions to country music. If I sing about a certain subject matter that brings to mind "country", that's okay. If I sing in a certain key, or with a certain chord-structure that brings to mind country music, that's okay. And it's so liberating to be making a song that doesn't have to fit my usual practice of writing a song that is as original and different as it can be and not remind the listener of another song. For example, "Cannibal Buffet", was a concept song, and writing it was a unique process for me, particularly with all of the body part puns. Writing a song about a zombie prostitute, like, say "Zombie Prostitute" for example, and all that sex with a zombie would entail, that's a concept unto itself, and, for me, is a lot of work. I realize that I work really, really hard, maybe I end up working too hard, trying to write something that is original, and something that doesn't sound like or remind me of some other work. Writing the country album has been so liberating, because it is okay if it sounds like Johnny Cash, it is okay if it sounds and feels familiar. It's been just so much fun. Country music, as a concept, is very accepting and inclusive.

But your country songs, despite the "real country" feel, still are unmistakably Voltaire. I could almost imagine Roy Acuff singing "Nobody Will Miss You When Your Dead". I'll bet very few members of last night's crowd had Merle Haggard CDs in their cars, but your new songs went over great with them.

I think it's the subject matter. The dark, twisted, laughing, way that I look at things come across in everything that I do, and I think that's a big part of what the crowd liked about those songs.

Maybe it had something to do with me, I don't know (laughs). I have a friend named Jason Miller, who is the lead singer of a band called Godhead, which is like a Goth Metal band, and he's also become interested in recording country songs. He's making a country album. We met up after a show that I did in Nashville, and he said "The songs are good. Sounds kinda like Voltaire". I don't know what it is that makes it sound that way, perhaps it's just my twisted view on things. You know, honestly, I feel like, at the end of the day, what I'm trying to do, zombie songs aside, what I try to do, lyrically, is to talk about the things that everybody thinks about, but people don't generally voice. And, truth be told, that's what a good comedian does. A comedian talks about all of those things that we all understand, but that no one really talks about, and I think that country, maybe more so than any other type of music, is about that, very often about that. It's just been a really beautiful experience for me.

Do you have any advice for aspiring writers and artists who are pursuing a career, as you have, outside of the corporate structure of agents and publishers, and bears...oh my?

First of all, to quote Nike, "Just Do It". There are more people who will not succeed from never taking the first step, than there are people who are trying to show their work. There really is a

giant problem, when it comes to artists, regardless of what they want to do, so many will talk about these things that they want to do but they never write the first word, or draw the first frame, because they are waiting on someone to come along and dub them a writer, an illustrator, a musician, whatever. For me, my mantra is that I have to be doing what I'm doing because I love it, and because I have to do it for my own sanity and for my own enjoyment. If it makes money, if I can pay the bills doing it, well, that's just icing on the cake. It's kind of a Zen way of looking at it, and if the act of doing it, in itself, is enough, then you have succeeded. Now the next step is that once you've done the work, you have to get it in front of people. If you are a musician, you must play in front of people as often as you can, because it is night and day, the difference between sitting at home making music and playing in front of people. Coffee houses, open mikes, whatever it takes. You will learn how to perform, how to deal with hecklers, how to take the energy that the audience gives you and give it back to them in a way that is entertaining for them. If you are an illustrator, most comic conventions have portfolio reviews. Go to those, and take it well when they tell you that you aren't good at anatomy, or that the characters' hands don't look right.

You're not there for them to tell you how good you are, you are there for them to point out what you need to work on. They are providing you a window into what reviewers or potential employers are looking for. If you are "discovered", and someone who reviews your portfolio wants to hire you to draw something, all the better. If you show your book to DC, and all you come out with is "they didn't want to buy it", then you've learned and accomplished nothing. Expert feedback, especially when it's negative, helps you to be a better artist. With writers it's a lot of the same thing. Submit, submit, submit. Hit that submissions button. Hell, ninety percent of the jobs that I've gotten, the deals that I've made, came after I hit the "Contact" button on a website. Get your work in front of writer's groups, have a [Deviant Art](#) website, you have to work hard, and you have to sell yourself. The chances of someone stumbling over you and thinking you are wonderful and wanting to give you loads of money are pretty slim. You have to spend more than twice the time showing your work, shopping your work, and selling your work than you do actually making the art. That is the rule, really, when it comes to being an independent art professional of any sort.

You have worked most of your career without an agent. You've sold a great number of records without a label, and books without a big publishing house deal. Many of our readers are trying to break into writing speculative fiction, or illustrating. You've said, you are in the business of selling yourself—

That's right. I sell myself, usually on a street corner (laughs). I am the world's worst accountant, but I believe that I have been paying the bills. I think. At the end of the day, I feel like I've reached a sort of glass ceiling, as if I've gone as far as I can without making a big change, be it an agent, a label...I don't know. I'll have to make that decision eventually, though, if I want to reach a larger audience. I had wanted to get Tom Waits to do the narration on one of my short films, but, part of being an independent entity is being largely shut-out from access to

established artists. The agents perpetuate their position, their value, by preventing people from getting into contact with their client without working through another agent, or through a big company. Without an agent, I couldn't get across the walls Tom Waits' agent had around him. It was crazy and frustrating.

There's been a movement within the science fiction community where an ever-increasing number of writers are doing more and more things for themselves, and depending less upon agents and publishers. E-publishing seems to be slowly getting more of a foothold.

What has your experience been with self-promoting?

I confuse and confound agents, because I do so many different things, and I'm so hard to categorize. To again use the example of my friend Jason Miller, he has different agents for his music, his voice-over work, and his acting. With the agent, you're giving at least ten percent of what you earn to them, and in return, in theory, you're buying access to work or access to people that you couldn't get to without having an agent. Then you have the percentage of the revenue sucked off by whatever corporate entity you are dealing with. You've brought up an excellent point about the movement away from agents. That is happening everywhere, much to the chagrin of record labels, publishers, et cetera. The internet is an engine that has empowered people to the point where you can find a way to communicate with one, two, ten-thousand people or more people. They can see your work and, if they are interested in buying your work for a dollar, or any amount of money, you've just bypassed the whole system. I self-released my last album, "To the Bottom of the Sea", in 2008, and I made more money self-releasing it than I ever made with a record label, because I'm making ninety percent of the profit.

Independent artists need to learn how to use social networking. My first "professional" social networking experience was with mp3.com, and they were sending me checks! People could find out about you, communicate with you, and buy your songs. I was getting checks for a thousand dollars some months. That business model ended up not working, and people ended up leaving it almost overnight. Then MySpace came along—what a Godsend! I didn't know HTML, so here was an opportunity for me to create a website, a destination, where people could go, hear my music instantly, see photos, see my show dates. I could add them as friends and then send them emails about what I was doing—what a fantastic thing! When Facebook came along, there was a huge exodus from MySpace. I had something like fifty-thousand MySpace connections, many of whom now never check their accounts. Facebook has a limit of 5,000 friends, and I hit that over a year ago. I can't add any more. They won't let you switch a personal account over to a business account, which really sucks. I don't want to switch over and start a music, or business page or whatever, that would be awful, to have to start over. I'm just going to wait until the Facebook folks change their minds, because, I know that, eventually, they will allow users to make that change.

Of course, now a lot of folks have moved away from Facebook to Twitter and are all about the twittering. The social networking dynamic is going to change. If you want to succeed independently, you must have your own website, and you must keep up with the social networking trends, and you must keep finding ways to drive traffic to your own website. You

should have your parties at your own house, if you see my point. It's taken me awhile for me to figure that out, and I'm now working at trying to make my website into more of a destination.

And that website is?

Voltaire.net (<http://www.voltaire.net>) My online store is currently down, so I also use the iTunes store, and Amazon.

You've got a children's album coming out, in addition to your country album. What are the titles, and when will they be available?

The children's album is called "Spooky Songs for Creepy Kids". It should be ready in time for DragonCon. It will have "Goodnight Demonslayer", which is a lullaby that I wrote long ago for my now-teenage son, some re-workings of my not-so-kid-friendly songs into kid-friendly, lightsaber rape-free versions. There will be a "Twilight" version of "Vampire Club", as well as songs that I did for Cartoon Network and an online game called Adventure Quest Worlds (<http://www.aq.com/>) .

The country album is still coming together. I've been playing with the cover art whenever I can, which is mostly only when I'm on an airplane. I'm leaning towards having the title be that of one of the songs, like "Hate Lives in a Small Town" or "All Women Are Crazy". I had some loser ideas when it came to titles, like "Entering Voltaire Country", and some other real dogs.

Tell us about your film work.

My childhood obsession was stop-motion animation. Ray Harryhausen's movies were a big inspiration to me, like Jason and the Argonauts. That got me started, and as I grew up I kept trying new and different things. A lot of people who follow me don't know that I directed a lot of the early MTV station IDs circa 1987. I'm currently working on a series of short stop-motion animation films. They are all weird as Hell, and all narrated by singers. The four that I have finished and that have made the festival circuit are narrated by Debbie Harry of Blondie, Richard Butler of the Psychedelic Furs, Gerard Way of My Chemical Romance, and, most recently, Danny Elfman. I hope to keep making these films as long as it makes sense to make them. There's no way to make money making short films, that I'm aware of, so it really is a tremendous investment that I make, just to express myself in this bizarre way (laughs). I may enter forty or fifty film festivals, and with entry fees of fifty dollars each, this adds up, and becomes extremely expensive to do this stuff, but I just love doing it.

Glass Eye Pix, the horror film production company that commissioned me to make my third film, X-mas Detritus, have asked me to make another film for a project that they are doing, a radio show called "Tales from Beyond the Pale", so I may be working with them again, which is great.

I hope to continue to be able to keep making these films (you are going to be writing a lot, transcribing all this-laughs). It is a privilege to be able to make something with no commercial value, just because I love it, just because I want to see it come to life.

I so much appreciate you taking the time to speak with me. Are there any words with which you'd like to leave our readers?

I have a really, really, truly wonderful life. I feel really, really privileged because my childhood daydreams are what occupy my daily adult life. All the things that I wanted to do for fun as a kid are the things that I do professionally today. There isn't a moment that goes by that I don't realize that it could all go away. People could cease to be interested in what I'm doing; I could stop producing work that people find entertaining. So, I just cherish the moments, which is probably why you'll never see me backstage. The people that buy a ticket to see my show, the people who buy a CD at the merch booth, those are the people that enable me to keep doing this. That's why I'm always front and center before and after the shows, because I want the people who buy my CDs to know how much I really appreciate that they have given me the opportunity to do what I love for a living. It's been a pleasure talking with you.

Voltaire was a true gentleman, and a great joy to interview. His website is in the process of overhaul/moving, but you can find it at Voltaire.net (<http://www.voltaire.net>), and you can buy some of his merch here (<http://www.deadybear.net/products.html>), but you can also find him on Amazon and iTunes. While his site is being overhauled, you can check out some of his music (there are embedded players with different content at both the top and bottom of his page), see his tour dates, and see some of his short films on his MySpace page (<http://www.myspace.com/voltairenyc>) and there is a [Facebook fan page](#).

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