

Even crazier than being a Juggalo—a diehard fan of Insane Clown Posse—is not being one but going to the Gathering of the Juggalos. Our reporter spends four days

Inside the Dark Carnival.

BY CHARLIE CONNELL
PHOTOS BY SHANE MCCAULEY

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IT IS 5:15 A.M. SATURDAY MORNING and I'm standing in a tent with a can of Stroh's in my hand, my eyelids getting heavy from the time and the drink. To my left is a heavysset girl wearing nothing but a bikini bottom. To my right is a shirtless man taking a hit out of a bong shaped like a human skull. On the stage in front of us Vanilla Ice screams that he still loves the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and he doesn't give a fuck what people think, thus whipping the crowd into a frenzy as everybody screams "Go ninja, go ninja, go!" I'm inside the Gathering of the Juggalos, and I'm in deep.

Juggalos are the fiercely loyal fans of Insane Clown Posse. The Insane Clown Posse perform a genre of music known as horrorcore, which is a form of rap that consists of lyrics mainly about murder and mayhem. The two members of ICP, Shaggy 2 Dope and Violent J, perform while wearing black-and-white clown makeup. Those not in the scene may have become aware of ICP after *Saturday Night Live* did a parody of the band based on their recent single "Miracles." My perspective is that the song is either ignorant people marveling over elementary science (for instance, one choice lyric is: "Fucking magnets, how do they work?") or a genius debate between faith and reason. Either way, few people with a 401(k) take the two middle-aged men who resemble Kiss as dressed by P.T. Barnum and produce songs such as "Imma Kill U," "Murder Go Round," and "Bitch Slappaz" seriously. Yet thousands of others vehemently disagree. If Insane Clown Posse is the ringmaster of the dark carnival, the Juggalos are the carnies.

My journey to meet the Juggalos started a few weeks ago, when a friend of mine was online and found a 17-minute-long infomercial about the Gathering of the Juggalos that promised a four-day festival of helicopter rides, wrestling, dudes on stilts, comedy, seminars, a screening of *Big Money Rustlas* (a Western starring ICP), performances by others on their label, Psychopathic Records, the imminent possibility of getting laid, carnival games, Vanilla Ice, Tila Tequila, Method Man, and the comedian Gallagher. They had me at "dudes on stilts."

Did I decide to go for a laugh? Undeniably. Was it to laugh at the pageantry of ICP? Perhaps. But more than anything I wanted to figure out the fandom. Jimmy Buffet's Parrot Heads make sense to me; who wouldn't want to wear a Hawaiian shirt and drink daiquiris? But why, with so many fringe subcultures out there, does this seemingly ridiculous one thrive? The only way to find out would be to drive seven hours south of Chicago to a remote location in the woods and gather with upward of 10,000 Juggalos. Family, most friends, and my gut plead with me not to go, but my one buddy George was intrigued. So we packed a car with camping equipment, clothes we wouldn't mind ruining, and what we hoped would be enough beer to last the weekend, and took off.

ABOUT A HALF HOUR OUTSIDE OF CAVE-IN-ROCK, IL, the "town" of about 300 people that is closest to the Gathering, our cell phones—our connection to the outside world—lose their signals. Then the trees open up to reveal an endless parking lot packed with cars and tents. The license plates aren't homogeneous, but nearly every car has at least one sticker depicting a Hatchetman, the logo of Psychopathic Records and ICP, and many have more than one. By the looks of the vehicles, the stickers might be holding the bodywork together.

After obtaining our bracelets and maps of the sprawling grounds—on which I make sure to note the location of the "Burrito Man"—we take a lap of the environs. The initial Juggalo color comes from a couple of topless women, a guy with a sign offering to trade pot for pain pills, more than a few painted faces, and countless people yelling "Whoop whoop!"



George and I set up our camp, and I arm myself with a small cooler full of Stroh's for a walk toward the main stage. On the way I pass a bunch of carnival rides—a Tilt-A-Whirl, a Ferris wheel, and that thing with the swings that spins around. Across from the Tilt-A-Whirl a couple of people have set up a card-table lemonade stand. It seems a little quaint for this crowd, so I take a second look at the cardboard sign leaning against the table. Out in plain sight it reads "Mollies and Dro" (i.e., MDMA and hydroponically grown marijuana). I look back toward where I think George still is and realize that even perfectly sober and with a map, it will be an impressive feat of navigation to find my way back to camp through the maze of tents—and it will be a minor miracle if impaired by drugs and alcohol. Damn leaving bread crumbs.

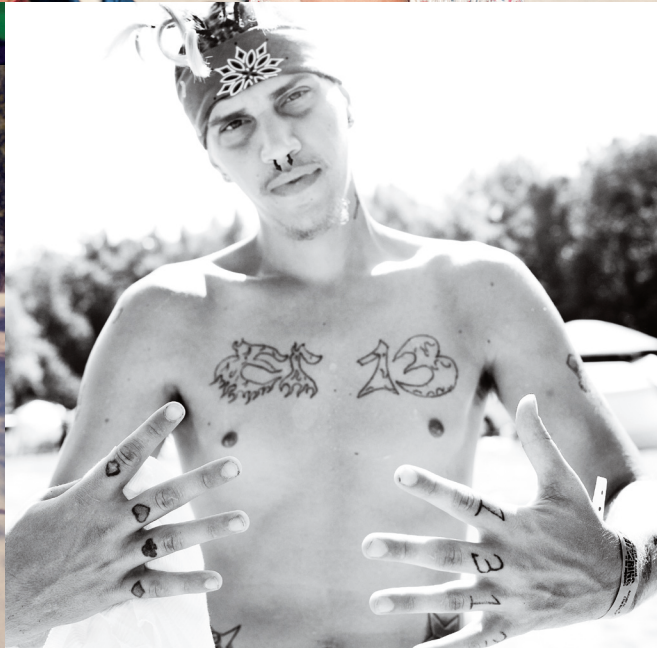
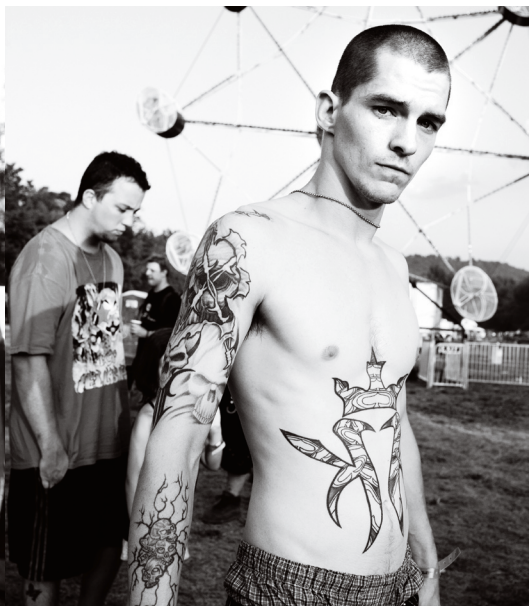
I continue on to what the Juggalos uncreatively call the Drug Bridge. Lit up by searchlights on both sides and teeming with dealers, it serves as an open-air pharmacy. As I cross the bridge I'm offered every drug I have ever heard of and a few that I haven't. A kid who could be no older than 17 holds up a Ziploc freezer bag half full of coke and offers a bump for \$5. Next to him, a girl is selling pipes while someone who may be her lover sells the pot to smoke out of them. I see a member of the security staff coming toward the bridge in his golf cart and expect the crowd to scatter. But they don't and he just drives on, minding his business.

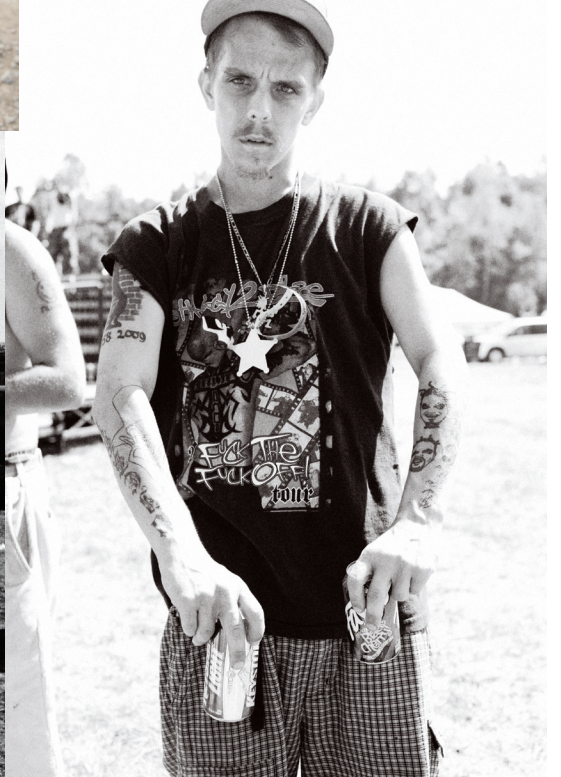
A few nights later I witness the comedian Gallagher buying pot in the middle of the night off the Drug Bridge. Shocking? Not at all, considering that he's a man who makes his living destroying food with a giant hammer. But it was surreal. Also surreal is the fact that Gallagher is on the Gathering bill at all. From all appearances he is the prototypical hippie, and I figure that someone from the peace and love generation wouldn't have a lot in common with ICP fans. Boy, am I wrong. For starters, there isn't much "peace and love" left in Gallagher's act. Have you noticed how he isn't on TV very much anymore? So has he. Being out of the spotlight seems to have made him really bitter. At least half of his act turns out to be him complaining about how he is "too real" for the establishment, and the crowd eats it up. Then it takes a turn toward the unexpected, and Gallagher gets incredibly racist, raunchy, and offensive. There's a joke about Ted Kennedy being happy about getting brain cancer so that he could die with a hole in his head like his brothers. This is followed by a joke about how there aren't any Mexicans in the audience, at least not until everything needs to be cleaned up. When he smashes a plate full of collard greens that he mentions should contain some slices of pineapple to represent our president, I'm left wondering if smashing watermelons during his act has actually been a metaphor for all these years. Crude "humor" aside, watching someone take the Sledge-O-Matic and smash a plate of creamed corn mixed with sauerkraut in person is exactly what you would imagine: totally fucking awesome.

My next celebrity run-in is also jarring. It's late and I'm talking with a Juggalo from Arizona who has saved up all year to make it to the Gathering. His buddies from home weren't able to take the trip, so he is making a video for them. As we are talking, Ron Jeremy sidles up to us, looks at me for a second, and asks, "Hey, you're the Jewish guy I was talking to last night, right?"

"No, and lapsed Catholic," I say. I begin to ask him if he will be at the Miss Juggalette contest, but he slips into the night like a hedgehog.

The Miss Juggalette contest is just one example of the odd air of permissiveness and sexuality that hangs over the entire Gathering. If one wanted to make the argument that objectification of women is a staple of hip-hop culture in general, attending the Gathering would not dissuade him. Some of the more popular daytime activities include wet T-shirt contests, oil wrestling, and dirty tent sex. Breasts





are currency at here. Many girls have cardboard signs offering to flash certain body parts for certain prices, and on multiple occasions girls walk up to me and offer to show me their boobs for a dollar, a beer, or a bottle of water. I feel like a bizarro Joe Francis, the *Girls Gone Wild* guy.

When it is eventually time for the Miss Juggal-ette contest I assume it will be much like spring break in that I will see some boobs, people will hoot and holler, and that will be about it. Again, I am wrong. Eight girls are seated on stage, all of them dressed quite provocatively with short skirts and revealing tops; most have dyed hair, piercings, and tattoos. The MC starts the contest off with a mundane challenge: Each girl is asked to showcase a secret talent. The first girl immediately pulls down her panties and masturbates for the crowd. About 15 seconds later it becomes abundantly clear what her secret talent is.

FOR THE MOST PART it's all love at the Gathering. At one point I find myself bullshitting with some people (they broke down near Indianapolis, hitchhiked the rest of the way, and don't seem too concerned about how they will get home) when a twaker runs up on us. "Ya'll have got to be careful!" he says. "There are some little ninjas walking around here and cutting into people's tents and stealing their shit." Then he grabs the arm of one guy next to me and points to the Hatchetman tattoo on his forearm: "Don't fucking trust anyone without a tattoo!" he says. Seven out of every 10 Juggalos has a Hatchetman tattoo or one of ICP's albums on his body, and all in all the Juggalos are a well-inked tribe. I spot tattoos ranging from skulls to crosses to text reading "Cravin Asian."

If the twaker is a prophet, then Jesus, the "Burrito Man," turns out to be my savior. Jesus has spent his last 14 summers on the road following bikers around the Midwest, and whenever they set up to rally for a few days Jesus is there cooking burritos out of the back of his truck. It is tough to find food that is edible and affordable at the Gathering, but for a mere five bucks Jesus offers the "Jumbo Combo," a sizeable burrito stuffed with onions, peppers, meat, potatoes, sour cream, hot sauce, and an American cheese slice. Don't question the American cheese; just have some faith in Jesus.

The only thing with which to wash down the burrito is the Faygo. For the unfamiliar, Faygo is a cut-rate soda from ICP's hometown, Detroit. And for some damn reason, Juggalos love Faygo—both to drink and to spray all over each other. Grape Faygo tastes just like liquefied Pez, it is undeniably the best of the 40-something flavors. On Saturday there is even a wet T-shirt contest utilizing Faygo. I also find another use for Faygo when I happen upon a small, dirty pond a couple of hundred yards north of the Drug Bridge that the Juggalos and Juggalettes are treating as the beach. Unlike the bridge, this area has a clever moniker, Hepatitis Lake. A group on the shore are playfully pelting people in the water with empty bottles of Faygo, which they fill with pond water and throw right back. As I watch, one man gets hit in the face with a full bottle of pond water then, in one motion, he picks up the bottle, drinks from it, and throws it right back.

Throwing things seems to be another favorite pastime of the Juggalos, and, in the end, one that will gain them a great deal of notoriety after this particular Gathering. I was not at Tila Tequila's performance when it was halted after fans reportedly pelted her with bottles, rocks, and, according to the blogosphere, feces, but descriptions of the incident were all over the internet. And as I read them it seemed to me they were remarkably biased against the Juggalos, putting me in a very strange spot. I had wanted to write about what a shit show the whole Gathering was. I wanted to report lightheartedly about what a strange group they are, but I find myself in the awkward position of wanting to defend a whole subculture. What happened to Tequila is indefensible. A crowd acted badly, as crowds often do, with the anonymity of the mob encouraging people to behave in ways they never would by themselves. However, more than one



media outlet reported the Tequila story with the point of view that no one should be surprised that this happened because ICP fans represent society's lowest common denominator and they are stupid, rude, and violent people who would attack anyone for no reason whatsoever. But the bloggers weren't there.

During my trip to the Gathering I did not witness a single fight or act of violence that wasn't in a wrestling ring. Not one—and I can't think of the last time I sat in the so-called Friendly Confines of Wrigley Field for more than four innings without seeing fisticuffs break out. In fact, the vast majority of people that I meet at the Gathering are polite, welcoming, and warm. I might go so far as to call them sweet under all their clown makeup. And it's not like they take me for a fellow Juggalo, but they are gracious nonetheless. They want to know why I have come to the Gathering and make sure that I am having a good time, and they usually offer me something to drink or smoke while we shoot the shit. Cricket, one woman I

encounter, turns out to be one of the nicest people I've ever met. In fact, when one of her friends fell on hard luck and became homeless, Cricket took her in and paid for her ticket to the Gathering. Although the friend has since stolen most of Cricket's money to buy drugs, Cricket says the most egregious act this "friend" committed was telling her, "The Juggalos ain't got no love."

BY MIDAFTERNOON SUNDAY, after three days of temperatures in the mid-90s mixed with booze, lack of sleep, and general debauchery, George and I are running out of steam. I'm sitting outside of our tent in a tiny sliver of shade with a wet towel on my head and a thousand-yard stare while giving myself a pep talk to make it to the culmination of The Gathering, ICP's performance at 11 p.m. On my way to the main stage, sans passed-out George, I decide it would be a great idea to get my face painted. I scramble to find someone willing to transform me into a Juggalo for the evening, to no avail. I am told by a few people that if they were to paint my face it wouldn't be genuine. I haven't earned it. I would just be a poseur. I'm disappointed, but I do see their point.

As I wait for ICP to take the stage, I'm charged by the energy, surrounded by people who have come from hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away for this very moment. The chaos that ensues once ICP hits the stage is fever pitch. Glow sticks fly into the air, Faygo is spraying in all directions, fireworks are being shot off in the crowd, and everyone is hooting and rushing forward. Up on stage a bunch of guys in clown makeup spray the audience with more Faygo and make chicken feathers rain on the crowd (the ol' "Faygo and feather") while Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope rap around them.

Toward the end of the performance, while ICP plays "Fuck the World," a girl puts her arm around my shoulders and screams the words in my face. Such a pretty face and smile shouting such grotesque lyrics makes something click. Sure, I can't stomach horrorcore rap or Faygo, but it's not about me for once. Although dudes on stilts are pretty excellent, what makes the Gathering of the Juggalos so special is that this is their family reunion. For 361 days a year Juggalos are, for the most part, on the fringes of society. They have a fanatical devotion to a band that has never even come close to having a mainstream hit or the slightest critical acclaim. These are the kids who spent their high school years being beaten up and the rest of their life being avoided. Yet for these four glorious days they congregate in a field in the middle of nowhere with thousands of their family. For four days they all get together without being hassled for doing drugs, getting drunk, listening to their music, wearing face paint, talking in Juggalo slang, being naked, and showing off their tattoo-covered skin. They are family, and with family you can be yourself and know that the family unit will have unconditional love for the real you. It is a miracle that the Juggalos found themselves. ■