

# Comic Con celebrates diversity

Motor City event is a place you can be different

By Julie Hinds  
Detroit Free Press

This weekend, more than 50,000 people are expected to put aside their differences to celebrate tolerance, truth and justice, and, of course, kick-butt space aliens, supernatural creatures and superheroes.

The Motor City Comic Con, running Friday through Sunday, is a celebration of art and stories from film, TV and comic books that inspire as much as they provide escape.

In an age when social media can be corrosive and political discord isolating, a comic-book convention can feel almost like a secular religious service for those who put their faith in the meaning and messages of pop culture.

Says Wil Wheaton, a.k.a. Wesley Crusher from "Star Trek: The Next Generation," one of the great things about a comic con is "having an environment where we can all come together to celebrate worlds where the things that divide us now are so petty, they don't really matter anymore, or where we can rely on people to do the right thing."

And in 2017's fractious times, we may deserve a comic-con break now more than ever. "It's one of those times everybody needs to care for themselves and take a weekend to just enjoy the good things that are entertaining in life," says Wheaton, who's making his first appearance at the Detroit event as a celebrity guest.

Unfolding at Novi's Suburban Collection Showplace, the annual Motor City Comic Con features more than 250 comic book artists and writers, more than 50 actors from fan favorite movies and TV shows, and vendors offering a million-plus comics, toys collectible items and gear, crafts and gaming products.

Among this year's buzziest guests? "Guardians of the Galaxy: Vol. 2" cast members Michael Rooker and Sean Gunn, "Sons of Anarchy" biker boss Ron Perlman, "I Dream of Jeannie" icon Barbara Eden, "Freaks and Geeks" alums John Francis Daley and Martin Starr, " Gotham " baddie Robin Lord Taylor, former Detroit Pistons bad boy Dennis Rodman and "Lord of the Rings" trilogy essential Sean Astin.

But the real stars include the fans, who increasingly arrive in elaborate, affectionate cosplay costumes. As you roam the main hall and pop into panel discussions, expect to see a six-pack or so of Iron Men, a squad's worth of Wonder Women, or maybe a small army of web-slinging Spider-Men.



The Motor City Comic Con costume contest brings out humor as well as authenticity. Costumes come from comics, science fiction and fantasy.

Motor City Comic Con founder Michael Goldman says he's seen an explosion of interest in the event since launching it in 1990.

"The past five or six years have seen tremendous growth, both for Motor City Comic Con and for comic cons around the country. I guess it's just that the stuff that we need has always been into has become more and more mainstream with the plethora of films and TV shows that are coming out. It's just ubiquitous. It's everywhere."

Ten years ago, attendance was a third of what it is today, according to Goldman. Back then, the main cosplay costume contest might draw 75 entries and the kids version maybe 20 or 30. Last year, 300 people competed in the main contest. This year, the kids competition is moving to a larger speaker's room because it's reached three digits and outgrown its former location.

Several factors have sparked the comic con phenomenon. Goldman notes the "exponential growth" in women's attendance, which has probably increased five times in the past decade.

Goldman also thinks the movies and TV series adapted from comic books have improved dramatically in terms of writing, acting and production values. Indeed, Hollywood is obsessed with adapting graphic novels and making both DC and Marvel superhero franchises the tent poles of the summer movie season. Perhaps that's because studio heads as well as top producers and directors are often themselves lifelong comics buffs.

And don't forget the importance of marketing synergy. Comic Con International: San Diego, which runs July 20-23 this year, has become a veritable mecca for fans, drawing more than 130,000 people and turning the southern California city into a campus of related events. But it's also a corporate necessity for hyp-



The event includes a costume contest just for kids that is expected to have more than 100 entrants this year.

potential blockbuster films and new TV series with star-studded panels that receive international coverage.

"The Walking Dead" television show is the prime example. The people who are fans of the show are invested in the characters, almost emotionally invested in what happens to these characters in a fictional show," says Goldman. "That translates into them coming and getting in lines and wanting to get autographs from their favorite actors."

This year's "Walking Dead" guests include Scott Glenn, who played the late, beloved veterinarian Hershel.

For frequent Motor City Comic Con visitors, the weekend is as much of a friends connection as a consumer one. Chris Marshall, who does the locally made Collected Comics Library podcast, has to skip this year because of a family commitment. But he's a regular at the Detroit event and also the C2E2 Chicago Comic and Entertainment Expo, both for the comic book artist lineup and the socializing.

"That's why I go to Chicago, to see old friends. It's a

great place for catching up," says Marshall. "I just got a text from a guy yesterday, who's a friend I rarely get to see, asking if I was going to be at Motor City Comic Con."

Unlike the early decades of comic cons, current gatherings draw entire families as mothers and fathers pass their entertainment lore onto their offspring. To make things easier for younger families, Motor City Comic Con makes Sunday free to children 12 and younger with a paid adult. Goldman says it's an easier day for moms, dads and kids to navigate, crowd-wise, than Saturday.

Wheaton, a veteran of "cons," as he calls them in shorthand, will be greeting fans interested in variety of his works. There are likely to be many "Star Trek: The Next Generation" die-hards, along with aficionados of "The Big Bang Theory" who enjoy his guest spots as a much more irritable version of himself.

He'll also be hearing from viewers of his online "Tabletop" series, where he plays board games with other celebrities, and readers of his fiction. His latest work, a supernatural horror novella,

"Dead Trees Give No Shelter," is available through his website and in Kindle stores.

"I'm noticing over the last year or so, teenagers are discovering 'Stand By Me' for the first time," says Wheaton of a new fan base for the 1986 film by director Rob Reiner. "I'm meeting young women who are coming to cons and they're cosplaying characters from 'Stand By Me.' It's very cool, and it's validating to know that this thing I did when I was 13 years old has endured in a really positive way."

Wheaton knows about comic cons because he's been attending such fan conventions since he was in fifth grade, long before being cast as Wesley on "Next Generation."

"I get to meet people who care about my work, who've been positively affected by my work in one way or another. But then I also get to meet people who have created or performed in things that are meaningful to me. That's really really fun," he says.

Wheaton considers comic cons a sanctuary for enthusiasts of all sorts of entertainment. Events like Motor City

## MOTOR CITY COMIC CON

12:30 p.m.-7 p.m. Fri., 10:30 a.m.-7 p.m. Sat., 10:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Sun.

Suburban Collection Showplace, Novi  
Tickets range from \$25 for Friday to \$75 for 3-day pass and \$199 for VIP Fan Pass. Children 12 and under are \$10 Friday and \$10 Saturday with a paid adult, while kids 5 and under are free each day with a paid adult. Sunday is a free day for children 12 and under with a paid adult.  
Parking is \$10 for regular vehicles, \$30 for large vehicles at site and \$5 for grass lot options. A round-trip shuttle ride from Novi High School is \$2. Cash only, first-come, first serve.

For more information on guests, vendors, panels, contests, tickets and parking maps, go to the Motor City Comic Con website.

Comic Con have anti-harassment policies that are detailed and lengthy.

"One of the things that's so wonderful about comic book conventions is that for three days in a row, people who love more or less the same thing are provided a location and an opportunity to come together and love something in more or less the same way," says Wheaton.

"They don't have to worry about being made fun of or feeling weird or feeling like they have to apologize for anything... It's an environment where the things that make us a little weird in our normal day-to-day lives make us part of a tribe. I absolutely love that."

It's an ethos in keeping with the outlook of franchises like "Star Trek," which is about exploring, not conquering space, with a diverse crew, and "The Walking Dead," whose characters fight to maintain humanity in an awful, inhumane landscape.

And the boundaries for comic con topics continue to broaden to areas like pro wrestling, nongenre TV and music. Wheaton recalls his excitement at getting to meet Run-DMC rapper Darryl McDaniels, who has a comic book line, at an event.

Wheaton hopes his own acting, writing and hosting efforts can help inform and entertain others and provide a little comfort when necessary. It's the sort of big-picture goal that helps bond stars and fans into one loyal congregation.

"It's really wonderful to meet people across a very, very broad demographic who like and who care about the things I've made," says Wheaton. "Especially the people who are finishing grad school in science and engineering because they watched 'Next Generation' and wanted to be Wesley Crusher when they grew up."