

The Vaudevillians

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Step right up, ladies and gents, and feast your eyes on the most dazzling and entirely outrageous performers to grace these United States. These folks are no shrinking violets and embody the very definition of dichotomy: Tattooed punks wear bloomers and top hats. Victorian dandies sport more piercings than watch fobs. Men look like ladies, women dress like men (and sometimes like something in between). They are the vaudevillians, and they could be coming to a town near you.

The Billing

From New England to southern California, there is a revival under way, led by talented men and women enthusiastically reenacting—and reinventing—the culture of the traveling road shows that set up camp across Asia, Europe and the U.S. in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Although elaborately costumed, decorated and painted, they are more than another set of fashion plates recycling the styles of a bygone era. These modern vaudevillians walk the walk, often traveling the country in groups on shoestring budgets, producing their own shows and introducing audiences to the artistry of circus culture. But instead of abandoned lots and canvas tents, performances are held in rock clubs and old theaters, and might include song and dance, aerial and fire acts, burlesque, belly dancing, clown antics, theatrical skits, sideshow attractions and jug band music. Along the way, vaudevillians attract bands of followers and groupies who imitate their style of dress, itself inspired by a hand-to-mouth existence and thrift-store foraging.

These performers part ways with the “carnies” of yesteryear when it comes to attitude. The new vaudevillians exude an in-your-face brand of sexuality and confidence that draw audiences. Vaudevillians may choose to adopt a traditional outsider lifestyle, but with such bravado and moxie, they ultimately make it cool to be a freak.

“Decades of MTV has a lot to do with it,” says Eric Glaser, a San Francisco–based cabaret performer who designs costumes and clothing under the label Hissy Fit. “The more you’re exposed to freaks and countercultures, gay people and outlandish imagery, it all becomes less threatening and shocking.” In a “trickle up” effect, road show culture is thriving beyond small venues. Supper clubs, such as The Box in New York and The Velvet Hammer in Los Angeles, draw A-list celebrities upon opening and, for large-scale examples, thousands pack theaters for Cirque du Soleil and last year’s circus-themed stadium tours of singers Pink and Britney Spears. This year, the Olympic torch traveled North America accompanied by the Zero Gravity Circus, a troupe that performed 189 shows over 106 days.

“In hard economic times, the bold colors, rebellious stripes, the sense of fantasy, rebellion and humor [of road shows] are particularly attractive,” says Steven Ra\$pa, an artist, sought-after event producer and year-round special-events producer for Burning Man, the annual art and performance festival in Black Rock, Nevada. “The aesthetic has crossed over to Top 40 acts and major fashion runways.”

The result is that circuses are operating in both high and low cultures simultaneously, serving as mutual inspiration to one another while creating their own styles and brands of followers.

below: Artist Sullivan Giles uses Victorian design and medical illustration in her work.



Harper's Bazaar's December 2009 “Carnival of Fashion” story, photographed by Peter Lindbergh.

PHOTOS: 1: LILLYWARNER.COM
2, 4: BRUCE DUGDALE, THECANCAN.COM
3: MARINA MILLER, REDHEARTPHOTO.COM
3, 5: ROCKNROLLBRIDE.COM
5: OLIVIAGIRD.COM



The Main Event

Road shows and circuses have never lapsed in America, insists Keith Nelson, who, with Stephanie Monseu, founded Bindlestiff Family Circus in New York in 1994. "After traveling circuses, there was Vegas-style cabaret of the 1950s and '60s," he says, "and Ringling Bros. Clown College was big in the '70s and '80s. The big changes now are the venues: The tents became rock clubs. The other change is that folks are no longer born into it; they choose it. Young people are coming to us to learn vaudeville instead of adopting skills handed down from generation to generation."

The modern history of road shows began with a band of extroverted eccentrics in Seattle during the early 1990s. A self-styled showman named Jim Rose created The Jim Rose Circus Sideshow, toured the country as part of Lollapalooza, and is now generally credited with introducing piercing, tattooing and shock-value anomalies to young people across Middle America.

Around the same time, Burning Man was growing from a makeshift party to a highly organized collection of freaks, artists and outsiders, many of whom adopted the drag show costuming and theatrics of San Francisco, where the first "Burn" began. Likewise, cocktail, swing and tiki cultures began picking up steam in dance halls and clubs, and were quickly followed by the rockabilly scene, a tougher, tattooed, blue-collar version of cocktail culture. From these mash-ups of influences emerged the traveling vaudeville and circus shows at the turn of this century.

"The whole idea of trend is nonexistent. Everyone is always reinventing," says Zebu Recchia, a founder of The Yard Dogs Road Show, one of the first of the modern variety acts to tour the country. Recchia lived as a hobo for six years, riding the rails around North America and finally holing up in a motel in Las Vegas to write *Hobo: A Young Man's Thoughts on Trains and Tramping in America*. He helped found the rotating Yard Dogs troupe of burlesque dancers, jug band musicians and circus performers in 1997. "You might have thought this would be a fleeting fad, but instead it's gotten stronger," Recchia continues. "Our culture and economy has changed, and people are becoming more loyal to art forms and core belief systems."

Nelson, whose extensive circus includes Wild West shows, vaudeville and burlesque, concurs: "As more people plug into electronics, live entertainment is going to become crucial to humanity. The public is going to continue to find the need to share something beautiful and intimate with each other, and that's what we provide."

left: Zebu Recchia is the author of *Hobo: A Young Man's Thoughts on Trains And Tramping in America* and a founder of The Yard Dogs Road Show.

POSTERS: BUNDLESTIFF FAMILY CIRCUS, PHOTOS: YARD DOGS ROAD SHOW



PHOTO: BILL PHELPS

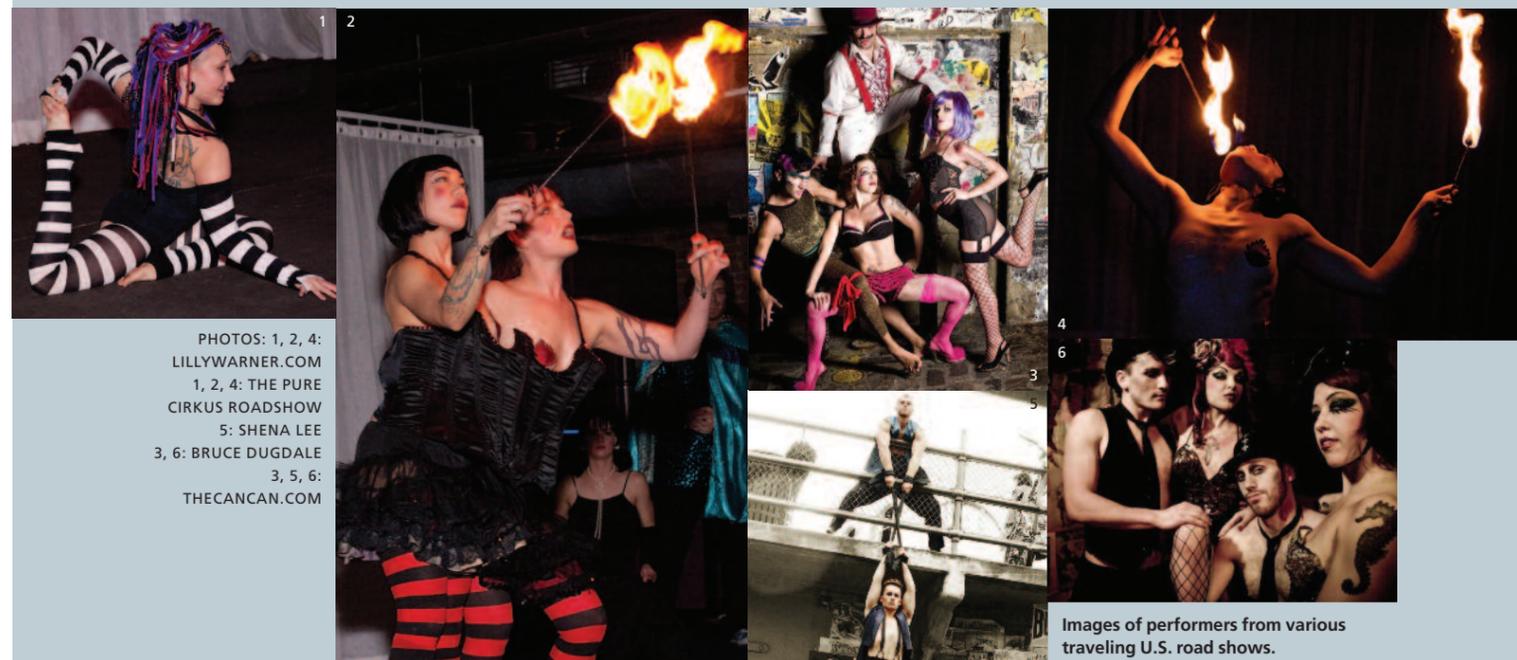
BURNING MAN PHOTOS: NEIL GIRLING, THEBLIGHT.NET



Every year, nearly 50,000 freaks, performers and artists of every stripe gather in a remote Nevada desert for Burning Man, a community festival that encourages freedom of expression and doesn't allow commerce or sales of any kind.

below: Artist Steven Ra\$pa works year-round to coordinate the event, which is celebrating its 25th year in 2010.

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PHOTOS: 1, 2, 4: LILLYWARNER.COM
 1, 2, 4: THE PURE CIRCUS ROADSHOW
 5: SHENA LEE
 3, 6: BRUCE DUGDALE
 3, 5, 6: THECANCAN.COM

Images of performers from various traveling U.S. road shows.

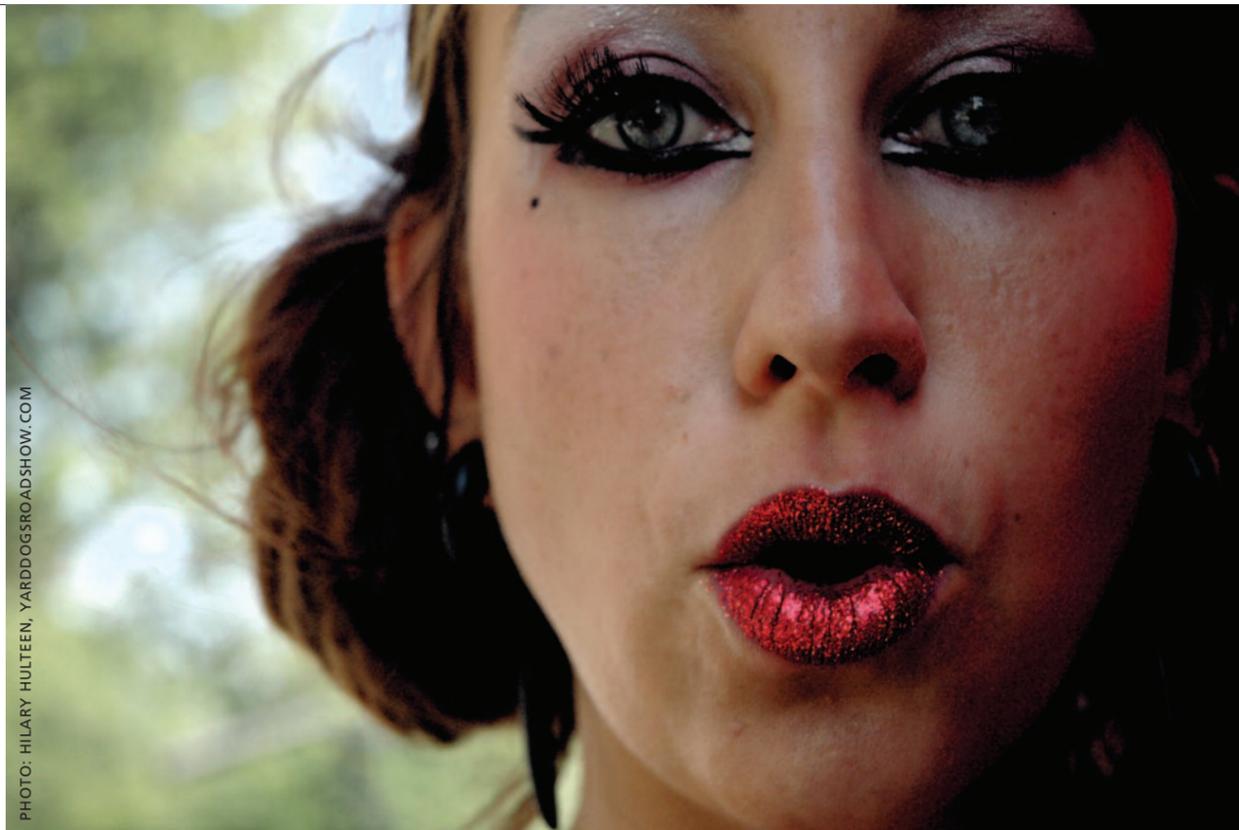


PHOTO: HILARY HULTEEN, YARDDOGSROADSHOW.COM



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The Look

At Five and Diamond in San Francisco, customers can outfit themselves head to toe in gypsy-punk or steampunk clothing (the terms most often associated with the costumes worn by road show performers) without ever learning to juggle or play the accordion. The look is a mix of formal Victorian, Depression-era hobo and circus clown: “Phileas Fogg meets Woody Guthrie” for men, and “Madame Curie meets an Edward Gorey femme fatale” for women.

“It’s about bringing the turn-of-the-[20th]-century style into modern style,” says Phoebe Minona Durland, a former member of The Yard Dogs Road Show who founded Five and Diamond with Yard Dogs cofounder Leighton Kelly.

“[Steampunk] has a timeless elegance that delivers the whole package: the magic of the music and the dancing and bohemian lifestyle of that time. That raunchy Barbary Coast energy still exists here.”

Steampunk mixes innocence and brawn, whimsy and sex appeal. Men wear three-piece suits, jodhpurs or knickers,

spats, bowlers and aviation goggles, and trim their mustaches to pencil-thin lines or grow them into bushy caterpillars. Women cinch their waists into leather corsets over crinolines and motorcycle boots, and perch tiny hats on their wild hair. A key element is an appreciation of old-school innovations; watch mechanisms and compass dials, for instance, are repeated motifs in tattoos, silk screens and jewelry. Some steampunks adopt a Wild West look, while others resemble London apothecaries.

This elaborate costuming style has been popularized in particular by bands noted for playing tortured orchestral rock and punk cabaret, such as Boston’s Dresden Dolls and Los Angeles’ The Red Paintings.

“There’s a freedom and adventure to the look that says, ‘I’m going to run away and join the circus,’ that has been a dream for kids for a hundred years,” says Nelson of Bindlestiff Family Cirkus. “Dressing the part is the first step in shutting that door and running away from home. It gives a sense of adventure that few other fashions will allow.”

The Reveal

Perhaps with the exception of sideshow acts, nothing draws bigger cheers during a road show than burlesque dancers. But unlike burlesque superstar Dita von Teese, “indie” burlesque dancers don’t necessarily possess flawless skin and 21-inch waistlines. These women are of every age and size, and they often opt to cover their body in tattoos rather than talcum powder. “Burly-q,” as it’s sometimes called, differs from conventional stripping in that dancers strip down to pasties and panties for audiences that are made up primarily of women. “Burlesque is by women and for women,” says Alan Parowski, who launched Tease-O-Rama, a burlesque festival, with dancer Baby Doe in 1999. “They come to see how to look sexy and not give up their feminist ideals. It’s a mash-up of riot grrrl and punk rock: women comfortable with being sexual and not having men define it.” Burly-q dancers often choose a cheeky moniker (such as Roxy Twirls or Kitty Diggins) and a theme (anything from a corn-fed dame to the Grim Reaper), and take at least the length

of a song to undress, often performed with a hearty dose of humor. Costumes are made by hand or found at vintage, lingerie or costume shops and Web sites. “[Burlesque] has replaced quilting and crafting as a feminine outlet,” says Trixie Lane, “The Queen of Shame,” who is a former dancer and founder of Trixie Lane’s Kindergarten of Burlesque how-to classes, and a partner with her husband, Lance Wagner, in Old School Pin Ups, a retro makeover and photography studio. “I also believe we are sick to death of sexuality that objectifies women. Women want to take back their sensual side in a way that removes the misogyny. Our jobs focus on women’s empowerment and self esteem!” Dancers from Lane’s burlesque classes echo this confidence: “You...feel like you can take on the world...plus flaunt your awesome femininity,” says recent student Kelley Murphy. A crossover can be seen in pop music, with performers like The Gossip lead singer Beth Ditto, who proudly flaunts every curve of her 5-foot, 170-pound frame and in doing so, throws out the challenge: This is sexy, too. Deal with it.



Love magazine, premiere issue 2009. Beth Ditto, lead singer of The Gossip, embraces a burlesque-style of confident sexuality that challenges conventional ideas of beauty and seduction.

PHOTOS: 1, 2: KELLYMOOREPHOTOGRAPHY.COM; 3: SEQUOIA EMMANUELLE; 4: JENELLA BROOKS; 6: SPENCER HANSEN; 3, 4, 6: FIVEANDDIAMOND.COM; 5: MARINA MILLER, REDHEARTPHOTO.COM; 7: TRIXIE LANE’S KINDERGARTEN OF BURLESQUE POSTER; 8: OLDSCHOOLPINUPS.COM