

Sham Rock: Fake Ireland Better Than the Real Thing



U2 Tribute band U2 Zoo

I love when the historical identity of an entire culture is whittled down to the most stereotypical elements in the interest of a festival. I'm not saying *I love* sarcastically, rolling my eyes and yearning for a more complex society where the subtle nuances of a people are presented with accuracy and care. I mean I love it! It's fun!

In school, Black History Month meant Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech played over the intercom while someone's mom in a dashiki and Angela Davis afro dished out familiar helpings of southern fare called "soul food" (immediately provoking students to feel infused with enough groove to enact a Soul Train dance line). Our social studies teacher would detail the contributions of George Washington Carver who invented three-hundred applications for the common peanut. The pop quiz asked, "Name 3 ways George Washington Carver used peanuts." The papers passed to the front were similar: 1. peanut butter 2. [blank] 3. [blank].

Hispanic Heritage celebrations featured a Mexican food table. The school secretary in a foam novelty sombrero encouraged us to "Have another taco (pronounced TACK-oh)." A piñata allowed litigious parent-helpers to daydream, "Stand closer to the blindfolded kid with the bat and Daddy gets that riding lawnmower."

Women's History Month introduced us to industrious Rosie the Riveter and selfless Florence Nightingale. Usually a local businesswoman would speak at an assembly about rising above gender discrimination to achieve success. I recall a divorcee with smoker's cough and a bristle-haired brush cut peddling dreams: If we believed in ourselves, one day we too could become assistant district managers for a Midwestern chain of Carpet Kings.

Needless to say, I am restless with toe-tapping anticipation for the Oshkosh Irish Fest at the Leach Amphitheater (May 29-31) where all the trappings of the Emerald Isle will be distilled (yes, distilled) into a weekend of merrymaking. My arms are rigid at my side and I am Riverdancing with excitement!

Bummer aspects of Irish history are cheerfully edited out of the celebration. There is no famine potato salad contest. You don't have to dodge bullets because the Leprechaun dunk tank is located on the Northern Ireland side of the festival. It should be a four-leaf clover, green beer, Erin go braless good time.

Friday night offers the Irish pub stylings of Seamus Fitzpatrick and the McNally Boys along with Dublin City Ramblers. The highlight of the night is U2 Zoo, a tribute band that promises to "replicate the experience of a real U2 concert with a dead-on accuracy and precision." Tribute bands are always superior to the original artists because they don't try to put a creative spin on the songs. They sound just like the record. If U2 Zoo can deliver an arrogant, strutting, self-important Bono in ridiculous sunglasses, then my entry fee is emotionally refunded in full.

Irish food booths promise loaves of soda bread to sop your colcannon, boxty, and coddle. It doesn't matter if you don't recognize the names of these foods. Nine Guinness beers later when the fare comes back up, it will look just like it sounds.

On Saturday, Celtic-inspired musicians perform as Cashel Denney dancers kick up their heels and jostle fetching ringlet wigs. Ce, Leahys Luck, The Fuchsia Band, Blarney, Derek Byrne and Sean Begland, Tantrum featuring Kathleen Keane, and Gaelic Storm attempt to fulfill our dreams of bagpipes and Danny Boys. The Shamrock Club Color Guard promise men in kilts.

All year long your family and parole officer badger you about committing to Alcoholics Anonymous, but for three glorious days of Irish Fest, you're just being multicultural. "Get off me back, it's not a relapse. Methinks this flagon of Meade is just kickin' it Celtic style."

Drink a beer. Buy a "Kiss Me I'm Irish" button and wear it all night. Drink a beer. Point to your button and repeat the slogan over and over as strangers politely turn away. Drink a beer. Peruse the vendors and pick up a druid's shield t-shirt and rune stone necklace to compliment that ill-advised Celtic cross tattoo you got in the early 90s. Drink a beer. Sign up for the 5K run/walk/drunken stumble to benefit cerebral palsy.

Sunday's bands include Athas, more Leahys Luck and Tantrum, Rising Gael, and Celtic Nation piping and drumming. By the third day of the festival, you will have convinced yourself that your Michael Flatley parody moves are hilarious and the Caledonian Scottish and Glencastle Irish performers will smile tightly as you clear a circle in the crowd and become Lord of the Dance.

I suggest stashing your Uncle Ray in the culture tent where his antics can be monitored. It is best if he is in an enclosed environment that shields children as he improvises pelvic thrusts during the Irish jig lessons or interrupts Gaelic language instruction to ask, "How do you say 'Me so horny' in Irish talk?"

I will see you at Oshkosh Irish Fest. I will know you by your "Kiss Me I'm Irish" button. You will find me in the front row of U2 Zoo, my bottom lip trembling as faux-Bono presses against The Edge doppelganger while they sing a fake, but ultimately more recognizably real, version of "Pride In the Name of Love." Together, we will know Ireland.

For a complete calendar of events visit www.oshkoshirishfest.com.