

ENTERTAINMENT TODAY

Book Report

by Stephen Lemons

Fantasy Land
Marc Lo Porto
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Venice Beach is "Fantasy Land" in Marc Lo Porto's delightful new book of the same name — a place where eccentrics thrive and folks are unafraid to shed their inhibitions and be whatever the hell they want to be. This folio-sized tribute to the freedom-loving denizens of Venice contains scores of photos and some 27 interviews with guaranteed California originals like "The World's Greatest Wino" Bobby Brown; Anthony Hale, the hookah-smoking cop who believes in the legalization of drugs;

Jerome Coleman, the pint-sized dancer with the heart of a lion; Cherie, the flamboyant erotic dancer who spends her days roller-skating; rock star Perry Farrell; and a number of other individuals who make Venice Beach the electrifying cornucopia of humanity that it is.

Lo Porto's focus is on the people of Venice Beach, and his interviews pose similar questions to each person he zooms in on. Open-ended queries such as "What is your philosophy in life?" or "What do you think about this society?" allow the people of Venice to tell the world who they are — a thoughtful, intriguing array of personalities, each of whom is determined to march to the beat

of a drummer different from the one most ordinary persons follow. The so-called "average American" would no doubt label these folks as freaks, dopefiends and bums. But through his interviews with them, Lo Porto reveals these characters to be intelligent, well-spoken iconoclasts with something interesting to say about how they see the world. Under Lo Porto's genteel scrutiny, these captivating nonconformists defy the dismissive labels with which society at large attempts to tag them. Instead, they become colorful examples of Americana — funky, '90s versions of Norman Rockwell portraits wherein the homeless man or the street performer takes the place of the Rockwellian dentist or fireman.

Each Lo Porto interview is a refreshing escape from the "follow the rules" mentality that the media rams down our throats on a daily basis. Take, for example, the Q & A with Isaac Fields, the Korean War veteran and "ordained peacemaker" who for the last 30 years has ridden his tricycle up and down the Venice boardwalk whispering messages of peace through a microphone. "I'm a flier," Fields laughingly tells Lo Porto. "And what I'd like to do is fly through the



ravines of Yugoslavia and Bosnia whispering in their language 'God is watching your asses.' [or] 'Give love and peace a chance... It is up to you... The whole world is waiting on you, fucker!'" Fields also relates how the police stopped him a couple of times and put him in handcuffs because he wouldn't get off the boardwalk with his tricycle. "The law reads that you can't ride a unicycle or a bicycle on the boardwalk," Fields says. "But it doesn't say shit about a tricycle. So I went to court, and I won."

The one-on-one with Fields is a gem, but it's just one of many in Lo

Porto's book. In addition, there's the street rapper/wordologist Doctor Geek, who wears a Cat-in-the-Hat T-shirt and a black-sequined stovepipe chapeau with the words "Venetian Paradise" written on it. He sums up his philosophy of life by telling Lo Porto that "We've all got to wipe our behinds with toilet paper, so that means that everybody is the same. Queen of England, President of the United States, we all got to wipe our butts." There's Vincent Foster, a break-dancer/comedian who admits that "At night time, I wouldn't walk in Venice Beach, but in the day time, it's wonderland, it's Disneyland." And there's Jeffrey Stanton, a self-proclaimed loner who says about Venice, "This is not the

real world. It's like all the weird people from the U.S. came to Venice for the day."

In *Fantasy Land*, Lo Porto has done something few have done before — he's let the residents of an "alternative" community define themselves without the condescension or sneering they usually get from journalists or writers exploring similar terrain. One learns a lot about humanity by just turning the pages of this rare social document. At turns amusing, enlightening and touching, it's the best book about Venice ever and the best book about L.A. this year. Anyone interested in life should read *Fantasy Land*.