

# The Greatest Show on Coney Island

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FORAGING

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**O**N a recent blazing Saturday afternoon, it seemed as if Coney Island had reversed its long slide into unimaginative decay and was beginning to turn around. One source of the energy was the 11th annual Coney Island Mermaid Parade, a gaudy event that celebrates the mermaid fantasy for both sexes. Another reason could be that many residents of the East Village in Manhattan have made the historic seaside neighborhood in Brooklyn their summer playground.

"I have never seen more tattoos in my life," said Sue Stahl, who was buying T-shirts with Coney Island iconography from a boardwalk vendor.

Mrs. Stahl, who lives in Texas and was visiting her husband's relatives, wasn't referring only to Michael Wilson, who has 25,000 tattoos covering his head, face and body. One man had spider webs on his shoulders, and another had antlers across his back. There were women with arms permanently inked with elaborate floral cuffs and vines.

Because of the parade, Side-

shows-by-the-Sea, a theater that features a fire eater, escape artists and Mr. Wilson, the "Illustrated Man" (\$3 admission for adults, \$2 children) was closed. But the attached gift shop, with a selection of T-shirts (\$15), postcards, books, original Coney Island admission tickets (\$5) and brass bathhouse key chains (\$10), was open.

A chief engineer of Coney Island's redemption is Dick Zigun, artistic director of

Coney Island U.S.A., a nonprofit group that has run the Mermaid Parade since 1982 and operated Sideshows-by-the-Sea since 1985.

"We like to think we are the national center of Americana bizarro," said Mr. Zigun, who marched with a bass drum at the head of the parade. "Coney Island is patriotic and completely understandable."

At the gift shop, Rhonda Bennett, a singer who lives in Manhattan, was interested in

buying the official Mermaid Parade poster, which cost \$25. "I collect mermaids, but I'm very picky," Ms. Bennett said. "I don't just buy mermaids because it's a mermaid. I totally identify with them. Some people dream they're flying. I dream I breathe underwater."

Merrill Friedman, who is in the film business, bought a postcard for 75 cents. "I come here Friday nights for the music," he said.

"Some place," he said, "has to be the capital of tattoos, sideshows and inaccessible rock-and-roll."

*Sideshows-by-the-Sea, its souvenir shop and a small museum of Coney Island memorabilia are at 12th Street and the boardwalk; (718) 372-5159. They are open Wednesday through Sunday, from noon to sundown.*

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Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

Michael Wilson, the "Illustrated Man," is an attraction at Sideshows-by-the-Sea at Coney Island.