

Jordan Cole

[ETSU, ENGL 3130 Advanced Composition](#)

Dr. O'Donnell

April 24, 2017

What a Weekend: Yama-Con 2013 in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee

College student Jordan Cole recounts his first time going to an anime and multigenre convention back in December 2013. There is a first time for everything, and his "first time" was certainly memorable, to say the least. .

Everyone likes to talk about how you will never forget your first time doing certain things in life. Normally people bring this up when referring to something like your first adult beverage, your first tattoo, or perhaps your first time falling in love. Yet the same thing could apply to your first trip to an anime or comic book convention. If you consider yourself a fan of comic books, video games, animation, or anything roughly in the same ballpark, then you should consider giving one of these conventions a shot. You would be surprised just how fun they really are. However, do not just simply take my word for it.

My first time going to a convention all started in my hometown of Elizabethton, Tennessee on a late Saturday night in October of 2013 while hanging



Yama-Con

Genre:

Anime, Pop culture, etc.

Venue:

LeConte Center

Location:

Pigeon Forge,
Tennessee

Country:

United States

Inaugurated:

2012

Website:

<http://www.yamacon.org/>

out with some friends that were also into the sort of things that most people would consider as “nerdy.” We have all been friends since high school, and still to this day consider ourselves a family of sorts. By the end of the night, Alex, Eric, Zack and I became the only four remaining people that were still hanging out. The. Alex has always been our group’s court jester, in a sense, always finding ways to make us laugh. In that same comparative manner, Eric is like the bard who is always telling stories either to cheer us up or to caution us from doing something idiotic. Zack is definitely the young scholar of our little family, as he is always seeking answers, curious to know more. Together, every single one of us makes up the rather odd and goofy little family that we are. That night, my friends and I were talking about the last animated feature we had watched, what the last book was we had read, and what videogames we were currently playing when we suddenly got on the subject of anime, comic, and videogame conventions (known more properly as “Cons.”). Soon after the conversation had ended, I began to ask something that had been on my mind for quite some time during our discussion: “Hey guys, does anyone know what the name of that one convention is that takes place in Pigeon Forge?”

“You know, I’m not sure, but we can look it up to find out,” said Eric as he turned around to face the computer behind him. “I’m pretty sure they have a web page.”

“Hey, that looks like it right there.” I mentioned moments later while pointing at the computer screen. “What is it called? Yama-Con? I wonder why they call it that.”

“‘Yama’ means ‘mountain’ in Japanese,” answered Alex quick wittedly. “That’s a fitting name since Pigeon Forge is within the vicinity of the Great Smokey Mountains.”

“It looks like it’s an anime and multigenre convention,” said Eric who was still gazing at the computer screen. For those unfamiliar with either the term “anime” or “multigenre,” allow

me to elaborate. “Anime” typically refers to Japanese animation, which has become quite popular in the United States, and “multigenre” simply means that the convention primarily focuses on anime but also contains other genre elements like American animation, comic books, and video games as well.

“I wonder how much it is to go to one of these?” asked Zack curiously.

“It looks like it’s not too expensive,” said Alex as he peered over Eric’s shoulder. “It seems perfectly reasonable.”

“You know, why don’t we attend one of these?” I then asked. “It looks like something we could all enjoy and we haven’t really been on any kind of group trip in quite some time.”

“Yea, we should at least go to say we have been to one and dock it from our ‘Nerd’s Bingo card’,” commented Alex attempting to be humorous.

“Alright then, let’s all chip in for the group deal on tickets and set aside money for room coverage,” stated Eric. It was thusly so that we became dead set on attending the “Yama-Con: anime and multigenre convention” at the Smokey Mountain Convention Center in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

“So I figured it would be roughly \$25 for a ticket per person if we do the group deal for the whole weekend and only \$60 for room coverage per person if we all chip in since there are eight of us going,” I informed our group a few days later, “does that sound plausible?” Everyone (eight of us in total) at that moment agreed almost in unison. Soon enough, we all put together our money for the trip and strategized transportation, where we would stay, and how we would

spend the weekend in general. The convention itself was not until the first weekend in December that year, which gave us plenty of time to get things in order.



Before long, it was the Thursday night prior to our departing and we were ready, for the most part. We had agreed to take only two cars, Eric's car and mine, because we only had two working vehicles among us that we could rely on to get us there in one piece. Now some of you might know what it is like to go on trips with your friends and others might not. Going on a trip with friends can be like a two-sided coin. On one side, the trip will definitely be a lot more fun than going it alone. On the other side, however, nothing ever truly goes according to plan when departing. We had originally planned to leave early that Friday morning from our hometown in Elizabethton, Tennessee around nine o'clock. As I stated before, not everything goes according to plan when friends are involved, as some people either forgot a couple of important things at their house, needed to run to an ATM to cash a paycheck, or were so against following a formal plan that they refused to leave town without first getting something to eat for the road. With those issues finally out of the way, we managed to get Eric's car and mine loaded up, left Elizabethton roughly around twelve that afternoon, and were on our way to our first convention. It did not take long for someone ask in a joking manner, "But Jordan, what about stopping for ice cream?" "Don't make me impale you guys," I replied with a bit of frustration in my voice.

We somehow managed to make it, roughly one hundred and ten miles later, to Pigeon Forge, Tennessee that afternoon. If you have never been to Pigeon Forge, Tennessee then the best way to map it out visually would be to consider it a long strip of road with branching smaller ones on both sides like limbs on a tree. There are a multitude of shops and hotels located

on both sides of this main road and even further back on the smaller roads. The roads were always crammed with tourists from all over the place and were sometimes be a nightmare to drive. We were very fortunate to miss any major traffic throughout the entire weekend when coming and going.



The Smokey Mountain Convention Center in Pigeon Forge, TN. This is where the con was held back in 2013 but has since moved to the LeConte Center.

We instinctively sought out the Smokey Mountain Convention Center first, which is located near the end of this long strip before heading into the wooded areas soon after it straight towards Gatlinburg, Tennessee. By the time we arrived and got our pre-register badges with complementary bags for the convention, most of the panels were already over. These “panels,” are small and opened discussion rooms where people would share or talk about a particular subject or experience related to one of the genre elements featured at the convention. Knowing this, we decided it would be

best to check in to our room and unwind a bit before heading in completely for the remainder of the day.

Knowing the area quite well, we had decided to stay in a condominium that was only a mile away from the convention center instead of getting a few hotel rooms as advertised by the convention holders. We had no idea just what the room would look like, but were very surprised by how jaw dropping and surprisingly homey it was. The room was quite larger than expected. It had a full kitchen and living room area decked out with pristine furnishings, and had a working hot tub inside the main bedroom just inches away from the giant bed that was big and soft enough to sleep a family of four. It felt more as if we were spending the weekend in a luxury sweet than just a two-bedroom condominium.

Once we all settled in for a while, I began to rummage through my bags to get my cosplay gear out. You might have seen photos before of people walking around conventions and wearing costumes that make them look like a character you might have heard of at one time or another. Since this was my first time attending a convention, I had no idea just how fun it would actually be, especially since I made a cosplay costume of Obito/Tobi (from the hit manga series *Naruto*) out of material I already owned. Essentially, cosplaying at a convention is a lot like when you would dress up for Halloween as a kid. Many people will want to take photos with you, especially if you look a lot like one of their favorite characters. It can be just as enjoyable as being a kid again too, dressing up as your favorite superhero or other character from your favorite show, videogame, book, etc. The lists, and possibilities for costumes, are boundless. For my cosplay of Obito/Tobi, all I needed to do was wear a black shirt and black pants, a black scarf and black gloves, some arm wrapping tape, and some ninja boots I made out of the tape and some slippers. As stated before, all of the pieces that made my costume were from items I already owned, but someone could easily purchase the same items at a local convenient store as well. The only part that was a major necessity to complete my transformation was the signature one-eyed mask the character wears in the series, which I already had on a bookshelf next to my collection of the manga. Soon enough, I managed to get the last of my costume on just in time for everyone to be ready to leave.



My cosplay at Yama-Con 2013

As soon as we parked our cars and got our pre-registered badges on, we marched through the front door and became immediately overwhelmed by the sight of a huge crowd of people. If

you've ever felt somewhat alone because you believed that no one else found interest in the things as you that many considered "nerdy" or "outlandish," then the first sight of walking into a convention hall filled with people that are very interested in those same things will bring tears to your eyes or leave you somewhat taken back. Without getting personal, I can say that this was my first reaction when I walked into the convention hall that day. It simply brought me to tears in a very uplifting and beautiful way. Many people were running around in costumes from a Jedi (from the film series *Star Wars*), to a videogame character like Zelda (from the videogame series *The Legend of Zelda*), and even an anime character like Luffy (The main character from another hit manga titled: *One Piece*). Others were taking photos all around the main hall or were sitting down for a snack while waiting for a new panel to open up. There was so much going on, and this was just the first day too. Some of my friends decided to check out what sort of games were playing in the gaming tent across from the convention center entrance, and others were interested in walking around to get a better look at some of the cosplayer's costumes. I, on the other hand, had my eyes locked on the large doors that lead to the even bigger center room, for that was where the dealer's room was.



An example of what a dealer's room normally looks like.

In case some of you are unfamiliar with what that is then pay attention. The dealer's room is where many small and somewhat large shop vendors set up a booth in order to sell some of their products to potential customers. Some of the products they might sell could be collectable figures, movies or CDs, snacks, and other miscellaneous products one might collect related to a particular show, book, or film. Even a few local artists will set up a booth to display some of their work as well. In other words, this is what some may call a "nerd's Flea

Market.” To me, this is the best part of any convention. You never know what kind of cool and valuable things you may find at one. One does need to be careful though, as some vendors will try to sell things at a ridiculously high price. Some do sell things relatively cheap, but it is always a good idea to double check your prices before you purchase anything. That, of course, is a lesson I unfortunately learned the hard way. Oh and do be cautious that if you are an avid fan like discussed before, because you will spend a lot of money in one of these rooms. For instance, one minute I had a ton of money and in the next, I left with more weight my hands than what was previously in my wallet.

After spending several hours and more money than anticipated, we all decided to head back to our room for the night to drink a little and have some fun. About an hour after we got back, someone found out that there was an “eighteen years or older” midnight program. Of course being the young scholars that we are, we could not go against our natural instincts to chase after our own curiosity. Now you may be wondering just what an anime and multigenre convention could possibly have going on so late at night that warrants an age restriction. I don’t want to say too much about it, but let’s just say it had something to do with a particular form of dance performed by certain people and was kept in line by the state laws regarding nudity. If you are looking for something to “pique” your interests, well then look no further.

The next day we all woke up in time to go to some of the major events. We first went to a few small discussion panels then



An ad for Yama-Con that shows Sean Schemmel and some of the characters he has voiced.

made our way to the major “Q & A” panel. This convention was definitely like most other major ones in that it had a select theme each year. In 2013, the staff had decided to go with “Shōnen,” or “Fighting-Action,” as its theme. A theme would also reveal subtle hints as to who some of the special guests may be. I would have to say that we chose perhaps the best year to go, as the special guests that year were some of the English voice actors from the animated show: *Dragon Ball Z*. If you were a kid growing up watching Saturday night cartoons in the 90s and early 2000s, then you can understand how exciting this really was. Some of the voice actors present that day were Sean Schemmel (voice of Goku from *Dragon Ball Z*), Sonny Strait (voice of Kriilin from *Dragon Ball Z* and Usopp from *One Piece*), and Mike McFarland (voice of Roshi from *Dragon Ball Z*). Such panels as these had fans asking questions to the voice actors about their jobs and about themselves. Anyone who grew up watching a show or film and either

wondering what their job is like or grew up with unanswered questions at all related to that show will undoubtedly enjoy one of these panels as I have over many years. The one question that someone asked that day that still sticks with me, was “what sort of errors do you guys make in recording and do they all end up getting fixed before officially releasing the episode?” Sonny Strait’s answer to this was the best answer imaginable, as he exclaimed: “Well, there was this one time I accidentally said ‘Destruction Dick’ instead of ‘Destruction Disc,’ and I’m fairly certain that was not fixed later in the editing room. Everyone in the booth heard me say it by accident, but no one said anything. Chances are pretty high that there’s probably a DVD episode somewhere out there now with that line



An ad for Yama-Con that shows Sonny Strait and the some of the characters he has voiced as a voice actor.

being said.” It was a lot of fun finding out things about some of my favorite voice actors from my childhood. Soon after the panel was over, everyone was able to line up and get something signed by the voice actors or special guests. Once we got some of our collectibles signed, we immediately headed to the gaming room where we played multiple fighting games and watched others compete in a few tournament matches. The atmosphere in the gaming room was very competitive when it came to playing fighting games, but in the end, it was all in good fun and brought back fond memories of playing fighting games with some of my older friends when I was younger. When we finished playing games, and made one more sacrifice to the dealer room gods, we went back to our room to get ourselves ready for the rave party that would be happening later that night. In case you have never been to a rave, let me tell you that they are very loud, crowded, and can make you feel somewhat uncomfortable when you first entering the room. I am normally not the type to enjoy being in a large crowd or even dancing in public, but once I just got in there and threw all caution to the wind, I had the time of my life. There were many people still dressed up in costume, as was I, dancing as if we were all lunatics. It got so humid in the main hall from all of the people and dancing that we had to escort ourselves out in intervals of time to cool off with steam rising from our heads like an active volcano. It was perhaps one of the most incredible experiences of the entire trip.

I would like to tell you that we went back to the room that night and got a good night’s rest to depart next morning after going through the convention one last time, but then I would be lying. I do not wish to reveal too much of what had occurred that night, but I will highlight some of the ending details. One person decided to take his drunken rage out on an elevator, which resulted in a broken hand. Someone else became very sad and drunk which lead him to sleeping in the fetal position on the couch while locked on to his newly purchased body pillow. The

ringleader to the majority of these very strange events was stark naked and making a victory pose near a window with a beer in his hand. All of this was going on while the rest of us tried to either get some sleep or get things ready to leave in the morning. Although I was livid the next morning over what happened the night prior, I soon forgot why I was angry merely hours later and today look back at that night as one of the most hilarious nights of my life. Our adventure had ended and we all headed home having been on a trip that we would never forget.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank my many friends who went on this adventure with me back in 2013 and the many years that followed. No matter where we are or what we become as time goes on, we will always have Yama-Con to look back on and to look forward to at the end of each year.