

Fans' crazy little

Charlotte Heathcote meets Queen's most obsessive fans on the 25th anniversary of their fan convention



THERE'S nothing unusual about being a Queen fan. After all, their Greatest Hits compilation is the UK's best-selling album in history with 5.5 million copies sold to date. It's only the most hardcore contingent, though, who attend the annual three-day Queen Fan Convention, celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

Organised by fan club manager Jacky Smith, the convention is held annually at a holiday camp in Somerset. While all 1,100 attendees are united by a love of Queen best described as obsessive, the event is about more than the music.

"It's a family," says Mick, who has attended every convention for the past 19 years. "Everyone gets together to enjoy themselves and experience the friendship of Queen." In fact, he met his best friend, Richard, through the convention.

The event is often the only chance for people from all over the country, and in some cases, all over the world (Dave and Valerie are from Canada), to meet up. Without exception, everyone speaks enthusiastically of

the friendships they have made through the Queen fan community. Although members of Queen have attended in the past, it backed on the organisers. Fans simply trailed them everywhere they went, Fied Piper-style, instead of attending the events. However, on this occasion there's no shortage of volunteers to try the new Queen SingStar game on a PlayStation 3.

Fans also enjoy performances by acts inspired by Queen. Montreux Tribute from Switzerland, for instance, are performing orchestral interpretations of Queen tracks. "We're not a covers band, we're doing something original," insists lead singer Fabrice.

During a walk around the site, I discover Spanish singer Momo. He and his band welcome me into their chalet for some tortilla and Momo explains that he worked with Brian May when he played Galileo in the Spanish version of We Will Rock You. For him, it was "a dream come true".

The best-received band of the weekend is Rock 4 from Holland. Performing a capella, they use their voices to recreate the band's instrumentation. "I'd never heard

the ballroom that quiet!" marvels Jacky.

She has run the Queen fan club for 27 years and had the idea for the convention after hearing about a similar one for Barry Manilow. "Freddie loved the convention," she recalls. "I asked if he could donate anything to auction for the first one and he rang me up. 'Darling, darling, it's Freddie,' he said. 'This thing you're doing, darling, it sounds fantastic. Whatever you do, do it in style,' he told me."

Next day, Jacky took delivery of the white, diamond-studded leotard that he wore for a gig in Hyde Park.

The event takes fund-raising seriously. A guitar signed by Brian May goes for £630, a Christmas card signed by Freddie, Brian and Roger raises £500. The auction and raffle combined raise £4,500 for the Rainbow Trust and Vitalise, a charity offering holidays for disabled people.

Queen's success comes in part from their range. "They don't just make one type of music," says another fan, Debbie. "There's rock, pop, disco, opera and all the rest."

Debbie owns more than 100 Queen

T-shirts, some of which are pinned to her chalet window along with banners and scarves. "You wear your oldest T-shirt on the first night, buy a new one at every convention then wear it home," she explains. This is her 16th convention.

I meet Daleg from Poland at that night's Queen disco. "This is the first time I've been but I want to come back again and again!" he says.

About half of the fans on the camp have embraced the competition for the best-dressed chalet and this year's coveted prize goes to Denah and Alan.

For Denah, the nightly disco is the highlight. "It's being with like-minded people who don't think you're an utter loony, which of course you are," she says, laughing. "We are daft," agrees Richard, who attended the first fan club convention in 1986. "However, we're well behaved. This is the only event where you have proper glasses instead of plastic ones."

On Saturday afternoon former Queen bassist Barry Mitchell takes to the stage for a Q&A session that proves unintentionally comical. His interviewer tells the crowd

thing called love

Pictures: MARK KENNE



that Barry played 11 gigs with the band and his first question is: "So, Barry, what do you remember about the first time you performed with Queen?"

"Not that much, to be honest," says Barry.

"What do you remember about the second time?"

"Er, not much," says Barry apologetically. "It was such a long

time ago..." And so on, through to gig number 11 at Ewell Technical College, Surrey.

Freddie's PA for 12 years, Peter Freestone, is another guest star and we bump into him in the Queen Victoria pub. "I'm on nodding acquaintance with half the people here," he smiles. "It's wonderful."

At the disco on the last night, I realise I'm starting to feel

somewhat overdosed on Queen. Looking around me at the smiling dancers, though, it's clear that if I admitted it, they would think it was me who was mad.

For more information about the Queen Fan Convention, visit www.queenworld.com. SingStar Queens is available on PlayStation 3.

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FAMILY AFFAIR: Richard, who met his best friend at the convention, top left; Swiss band Montreux Tribute, top; 2008's promo poster, above; and best chalet winners Denah and Alan, right

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