

# TRASH PIRATES

The Trash Pirates are a dynamic and ever-growing “Green Team” that emerged from the West Coast festival scene in the United States. This team of waste management enthusiasts, dedicated to sorting and recycling, is driven by a strong work ethic and a passion for sustainability. Known for their engaging and educational approach to waste reduction, the Trash Pirates actively promote upcycling and sustainable practices at festivals across the region. Beyond managing waste, they bring a unique, youthful, and fun vibe, making them a standout group in the festival circuit.

Join them in their mission to create a greener world and learn more about their efforts on their [Facebook page](#).

This interview was conducted by “Flo,” Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2017. Most of Flo’s questions have been omitted to improve the reading flow.



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**“We have an open door policy for anyone interested in creating a greener world.”**



Upcycled art. Photo credit: Moon Mandel, 2017.

## FLO’S FOREWORD

Most of the Trash Pirates featured in this interview transitioned directly from their participation in Burning Man’s Department of Public Works’ Playa Restoration 2017 (a full on-site cleanup) to their involvement as the “Trash Crew” at the Joshua Tree Music Festival (JTMF).

Having participated in DPW 2017 myself, I joined the Trash Pirates team at JTMF as a Trash Crew/Green Team volunteer. The Trash Pirates are tasked with setting up sorting stations near dumpsters on the festival grounds, collecting full trash bags, and sorting

them into large garbage dumpsters. They perform these duties through the heat of the day and the darkness of the night. While the core team of Trash Pirates is employed by the festival, most of the crew consists of volunteers recruited through green team networks, with additional help sometimes provided by the festival organizers.

At the general meeting on the first day, the Trash Pirates introduce their volunteers to waste reduction strategies and “no single-use” practices in a fun and engaging way. The team is particularly passionate about promoting “upcycling”—turning

waste into art. During trash collection, they frequently interact with festival participants, educating them on simple and practical ways to reduce waste.

Each Trash Pirate has a unique personality, but their shared passion for upcycling stands out. This passion is reflected in their resourceful attitude and the creatively decorated, nautical-themed vehicles they use, which contribute to the team’s captivating aesthetic. During my time with them, I was fortunate to witness one of their spontaneous concerts.

It was a fresh, windy night in the Joshua Tree desert. The official festival

music stages had gone quiet, and all the musicians had finished playing—except for two: Luke and Moon, core members of the Trash Pirates. Between three dumpster bins (commingled, plastic, and glass), they set up an impromptu music stage. Luke crafted mesmerizing electronic sounds, while Moon rapped over the beat. Nearby, the “burn barrel” blazed, offering just enough warmth to counter the chill of the desert breeze. Above us, the wind tugged at the shade cloth stretched over the dumpsters.

Luke wore a quirky hat decorated with spare cans, fully absorbed in his music. Moon, as always, sported

their signature cardboard sign reading “Smile” while rapping rhythmically in sync with the electronic distortion. The late hour, the industrial backdrop of dumpsters, the cool desert air, the salvaged car front repurposed as a chair, and the small, gritty crowd of six created a poetic—alternative scene—atmosphere. The Trash Pirates aren’t just recycling experts; they are genuine artists.

Overall, my time with the Trash Pirates was both an unforgettable educational journey into recycling and the most unique, improvised, and human musical performance I experienced at JTMF 2017.



**“We give people an opportunity to build themselves up and give them hope.”**



Luke (right) with a friend at the Joshua Tree Music Festival.  
Photo credit: Flore Muguet, 2017.

**STANLEY** I'm Stanley. But people call me Stanimal because I have a badass work ethic. My first role with Trash Pirates was at Desert Hearts during Fall 2015.

**MOON** I'm Moon. They call me Five-Mile out in Black Rock City. I do all the things. But, I'm mostly in charge of media, and recording photos and videos of us MOOPing to create a greener festival circuit. I entered Trash Pirates as a volunteer for Desert Hearts spring festival in 2016.

**LUKE** I'm Luke. I officially started in 2014 when I met Cartographer--our Admiral--at a festival called Northern Nights. I was just a volunteer floating around trying different departments and I landed on Green Team. It was an eye-opening experience to see that end everything. There was no going back from there. I'm very charismatic

and so I like to be considered an ambassador or representative who goes out and spreads the word, and talks to people. I guess preach the gospel, or the intention of what we all do.

I'm all about bringing more light and transparency to the whole kind of operation of these festivals and gatherings that we all love. But, I think that we all feel there needs to be more transparency. I'm already really trying to speak out about it. So I use that role to push the boundaries of what people find acceptable about their trash.

**MOOSE** I'm "Moose" Douglas. I started doing Trash Pirates back in 2015 when Stan did.

**STANLEY** There's also Dylan Sunshine, "Captain Kirk," and Tynann Scot

or "T-Town." And then there's Cartographer and Sun Bunny. Cartographer's been doing it for some time. He's the guy at the helm. The Admiral. And Sun Bunny I would consider to be the matriarch. He's the oldest one in the group and has a lot of knowledge and wisdom to give.

**MOON** The average age fluctuates from 18 to 60. We've had some old people. If you're interested in learning about trash, and going to an event and experiencing not just the event but what goes into it and also the culminating aspects of it, we're glad to have you. Open door policy to anyone interested in learning about creating a greener world. A lot of it comes down to what Luke was saying: being an ambassador and talking about how people's consumption can affect the level of MOOP. Instead of buying all



Moon at the "Trash Collection Station" at the Joshua Tree Music Festival. Photo credit: Flore Muguet, 2017.



Luke and Stan at the sorting station tables at the Joshua Tree Music Festival.

Photo credit: Flore Muguët, 2017.

these single-use metal cups, you could buy one metal cup and carabiner it to yourself, BOOM! All of a sudden, there's so much less garbage for us to have to deal with. And for certain events, plastic 1-7 will be recyclable, but at a lot of events we're forced to landfill things. We'd rather that people buy better products that last forever instead of just single-use stuff that'll end up in a landfill.

**LUKE** Technically we're just a group of volunteers. We're all really passionate people who have specialties that we bring to the table. It's been a conversation in the works for two years now with regards to being "official" ... Nonprofit, mutual benefit corporation, LLC and subsidiaries, etc. There's limitless potential with which direction we can go.

**STANLEY** Yeah. That discussion has really been within the last couple of months. T-Town and Cartographer are possibly the ones making those decisions. That's not to say being a volunteer group isn't effective. A quotation that Sun Bunny had in a video— a Desert Hearts video, and it's a great quotation—is that "We build people up." A lot of people in the festival circuit could be social outcasts, or just, you know, have rough lives and don't really have much to go from. We give those people an opportunity, a platform, to build themselves up and give them hope.

**MOOSE** As for our everyday routine... where we work is always similar. We usually have two large dumpsters. Then all other streams get diverted in small loads. We generally use the same signage, same bins. There's a lot of "day-to-day" things like that that are standard. We have "normal" days depending on the time of the event. At the beginning of the event you have a few things you go through: you know, Green Dot Thursdays and things like that. Then you go through the rest of the event and have various things

occurring that you'll have to deal with. Then at the end of the event you have all the hippies who don't know where they're going, and don't know how to get home, and they're just there forever and ever and ever until you shuffle them off. [laughs]

**STANLEY** Generally we also do a scout of the layout of the grounds too. We determine where speakers are and where we need bins allocated, and then we set up a sort station. We do collections, sort the trash, list streams; plastic, aluminum, scrap, co-mingled, cardboard. Then we'd sort all that into the streams, and everything would be allocated from the dumpsters from there. And then we clean up.

One thing that I take away from Burning Man in particular is that we could probably improve our routine by burning our paper. We can divert it from the landfill and cardboard. You can get a little bit of money from recycling cardboard, but generally it takes up a lot of space and it's not really worth the time. We can just burn it onsite and be done with it. I think we have the ability to do that, but we haven't really done it in the past. Like I said though, they do that at Burning Man and we did it once at Organic. It was beautiful.

**MOOSE** We're here not just to reduce consumption. We're also here to inform people about making more intelligent choices with consumption, so that you're living in a more cohesive fashion with your environment. To end single-use. That's our MO. We're trying to instill that not just at festivals and not just at events, but in the greater world. End single-use.

**LUKE** We say "Leave no Trash." Technically "Leave no Trace" came from another organization that has to do with backpacking and camping protocol: how to, you know, really erase every trace that you were there.



Upcycled paper notebook by Moose, Joshua Tree Music Festival, 2017.



## “End single-use.”

Once you take your tent up, you make it look like you weren't there. "Leave no trash" is just a moniker that I feel is more practical. It's just a more tangible thing whereas leave no trace is just a little more.

**MOOSE** Yeah, There's no way to leave no trace. Leaving no trace is impossible. Even the city of Gerlach that we're sitting in, which gets so much of its money from Burning Man org and has its operations here, is in itself a trace of Burning Man's existence. It's impossible to leave no trace. So we don't. The way we work trash at events

is that we don't do it behind the scenes. We're up in your face.

We put the transfer station where you can see it. We sort the trash where you can see it. We invite you to sort the trash, and we make a big show of MOOPing the dance floors and heckling the people around us about the trash around them to get them involved and picking it up.

**STANLEY** We've recently started doing public transfer stations as people are exiting. We're trying to have people be more accountable for their trash, because most people don't want to take their trash that they came with. So, if they're gonna leave it, we're gonna encourage them to sort their trash. We take their recyclables for free, but Cartographer has started adopting a system where you charge people \$5 a bag. We encourage them to take it with them, or sort their trash with us and educate them in that process. And inevitably we want everybody to be accountable for everything. We want them to take their stuff home and not just leave it by a portapotty.



Luke by the dumpsters at Joshua Tree Music Festival. Photo credit: Flore Muguet, 2017.

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“You could basically live off the trash.”



Sign-making workshop related to Trash Collection and Sorting at the Joshua Tree Music Festival. Photo credit: Flore Muguet, 2017.

MOON But that’s what happens! Someone--one person at 3 AM--will leave one bag of trash by a portapotty, and by 7 AM, 50 people have come and dropped bags off. It’s like, if they’re going to do that anyway, come over here. You can pay us with money or you can pay us by sorting. We encourage people over anything to spend some time sorting with us. We would much rather you pay in blood, sweat, and tears and check out what we do. Check out how to sort your trash! When you do, you find out that very little of this is actually landfill. There’s so much you could compost. Fruits, vegetables, produce: that’s compostable.

LUKE I think one of the issues is that people aren’t acclimated to the community or a level of accountability yet. So, they see that trash bag at 3 AM and think that’s what you’re supposed to do. From wherever they came from, because of the services that are provided for them, they’re used to being pampered. There’s usually a service for waste provided in your city, and so at festivals there’s this notion of “Why aren’t we compensating for that? Why isn’t this paid for and included in the ticket prices?” The rebuttal to that is that every event is different. They’re growing at different rates. Sometimes there just isn’t a budget for waste services.

MOOSE I’ve grown up always recovering resources—food as a child, toys and playthings, electronic devices, and things like that. Always behind the times but coming up on things in those ways. For me, being what I’ve always considered a “gutter rat,” I’ve always appreciated taboos.

STANLEY Yeah, dumpsters are treated like this dirty secret of society. We’re just trying to pull the veil off. Once you see past that veil and the resources that end up there, there’s no going back. So it’s in many ways it’s just a level of transparency that we’re trying to advocate.

MOON Yeah. I think if anyone were to volunteer with us or spend at least two days of a festival working, it’ll change your entire paradigm of what you see as “trash.” Because I know for me, once I started I just fell in love with these people’s passion and what was possible. You can basically live off the trash.

We even have trash that gets turned into art projects. We call that an “extracurricular stream.” That’s another way of reducing landfill. We get all these artists who would like to reuse bottle caps, whip-it, aluminum cans... and we can give them to [the artist] Shrine. Some of our aluminum cans and whip-it ended up Shrine’s exhibition at Lightning in a Bottle.

MOOSE I’ve recently been redirecting brown paper bags to turn into notebooks.

MOON I mean, at any given event we’ll take hundreds of pounds of clothes, linens, sleeping bags, tents, and donate them to other organizations. Other organizations that do waste management would see that as landfill. And in doing so, they’re putting all of this fine clothing, all these shoes, all these umbrellas, all these pool floaties... people leave behind the craziest stuff at music festivals. But we don’t. Because for us it’s not a job. None of what we do is a job. *Life is trash.*

