



THE ORIGINAL

A 51

# BURNING DESIRE

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Why playing with fire isn't such a bad idea after all.



**Hours after the last rays of sun have vanished over the horizon, one grassy slope in Pittsburgh's Frick Park is ablaze with light.**

From afar, only pinpoints of flickering orange can be made out against the darkened hillside. Stepping closer, the pulsating dots turn into trailing streaks of luminescent patterns etched into the darkness, weaving their way around human silhouettes. Low drumbeats accompany the friendly murmur of laughter and jovial voices, as people gather to watch and participate in the evening's featured activity: playing with fire.

A tribal atmosphere permeates this hangout, called a "fire jam," an open event where every Thursday night (unless it rains), Pittsburgh's collected amateur and professional fire artists come together to practice, perform, teach one another, and socialize. More than just a round of fire stunts, however, it is also a drum circle and a loosely organized community gathering where hugs are often exchanged between both friends and those meeting for the first time.

The fire jam began four years ago, when fledgling fire spinners Erika May, David Doyle, Jessica Kennedy, and several of their friends decided to start meeting weekly at Frick Park to practice their shared hobby. Since then, the fire jam has grown to dozens of attendees and become the weekly junction for Pittsburgh's "burn community," as they refer to themselves.

In recent years, interest in fire arts has become an "exploding phenomenon," says May. "I've seen so many new people show up since we first started. It's just a great activity. People find it fun to watch, fun to participate in and fun to drum along to. It's a form of dance, and it's a community too—that's the one thing that developed that was never intentional, it just happened. None of us have to be here, but we keep it going because we want to, and that's the sign of a good community—when you can just step back and appreciate being in good company."

The varieties of performances that are seen at the weekly fire jam are dazzling. In fire poi, the most popular form of fire spinning, flaming balls are swung from chains in circular patterns. There is also fire staff, fire breathing, fire fans, fire sword, fire rope dart, fire hula-hooping, and endless variations of the above. A crowd favorite is "sparkle poi," a poi variation that uses steel wool in place of a consistently burning fuel to produce a cascade of spark-like fireworks, except twirled on a chain.

The history of artistic fire manipulation dates back thousands of years, and most forms of fire art originate in Asia and the Pacific Islands. Some, such as fire poi, are derived from forms of dance (poi is a traditional dance of the indigenous Maori people of New Zealand), while fire staff and fire rope dart turn weapons into art.



*Interested in becoming an audience member, participant, or drummer at the fire jam?*

*Fire jams take place every Thursday night in Frick Park at 9:00pm (unless it rains). Attendance is open to the public.*

*For more information on fire spinning lessons or booking Steel Town Fire, contact Erika May through her website, [www.ErikaMay.com](http://www.ErikaMay.com).*

*Also visit [www.SteelTownFire.com](http://www.SteelTownFire.com).*

Most spinners at the fire jam cite cultural festivals such as Burning Man as the occasion when they were first introduced to the fire arts. Burning Man is an "art event and temporary community based on radical self expression and self-reliance in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada," according to its website. Although not the main reason for Burning Man's existence, fire artistry has been a characteristic feature of the popular yearly festival since its inception in the '80s. What is the burn community at Burning Man like? "Imagine thousands of people spinning fire at once," says May.

When not attending festivals, many fire spinners bring the strong sense of community instilled in fire culture with them back to their home city. Although fire jam participants take safety precautions very seriously when practicing their potentially hazardous past time, they are eager to teach each other new tricks or even show a newcomer the ropes if they want to try spinning for their first time. Sharing one's experience and knowledge is common in the fire community based mostly on informal teaching between friends, a bond that is easy to forge with people at a fire jam. Erica May also offers organized classes.

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For some fire jam participants, however, their unconventional craft has developed beyond just leisure time. About a year ago, the fire jam's founders and some of its regulars started "Steel Town Fire," a professionally performing fire troupe. Steel Town Fire and its members have performed at numerous gigs around the country and internationally, including Pittsburgh's First Night (the city's New Year's Eve celebration), Renaissance fairs, museums, private weddings, and even Pennsylvania Congressman Mike Doyle's inaugural picnic.

Each member has their specialties: Erika May concentrates in fire poi, flaming palms, fire fan, fire sword, and fire eating, David Doyle in fire staff and fire breathing, Christian Tsu-Raun in fire rope dart and staff, Vicki Kerestes in fire poi and staff, and Doug Staas and Jessica Kennedy in fire poi. Several members are also professional entertainers in other mediums such as music, dance, acting, and magic, in addition to their day jobs. A Pitt alum and current CMU graduate student, Tsu-Raun is not the only one of Pitt's own that you may encounter at the fire jam. Pitt junior Brianna Williams describes fire poi as her source of meditation, while PhD student (and instructor for "Myth and Science") Julia Bernstien has wowed the author with her fire hooping moves. ●

