

# READER



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Loved ones reflect on the loss of partners, parents, siblings, joy givers, caretakers, and secret keepers.

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TO CONTACT ANY READER EMPLOYEE, E-MAIL: (FIRST INITIAL)(LAST NAME)@CHICAGOREADER.COM

**PUBLISHER** TRACY BAIM  
**EDITORS IN CHIEF** SUJAY KUMAR, KAREN HAWKINS  
**CREATIVE LEAD** RACHEL HAWLEY  
**MUSIC EDITOR** PHILIP MONTORO  
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**EDITORIAL ASSOCIATE** S. NICOLE LANE  
**GRAPHIC DESIGNER** AMBER HUFF  
**LISTINGS COORDINATOR** SALEM COLLO-JULIN  
**CONTRIBUTORS** ED BLAIR, NOAH BERLATSKY, LUCA CIMARUSTI, MARISSA DE LA CERDA, MARI COHEN, NINA LI COOMES, JOSH FLANDERS, SHERI FLANDERS, JACK HELBIG, IRENE HSAIO, BECCA JAMES, CATALINA MARIA JOHNSON, MONICA KENDRICK, STEVE KRAKOW, NOËLLE D. LILLEY, JEFF MALLER, ADAM MULLINS-KHATIB, J.R. NELSON, MAX NICHOLS, MARISSA OBERLANDER, ARIEL PARRELLA-AURELI, KATHLEEN SACHS, CATEY SULLIVAN

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# CITY LIFE



## STREET VIEW

### Make it different

Customization is key in this student's wardrobe.

By ISA GIALLORENZO

Style this well coordinated doesn't come ready; marketing student Allison Roa, 20, adapted most of her garments to create a cohesive look in which even the shoelaces were accounted for. "I decided to put on green laces with pink and green beads just to match my hair, and then the outfit as a whole," she says. "The bag, I thrifted it and added a heart pom-pom because it looked too simple on its own." Secondhand pieces comprise the majority of Roa's wardrobe, and that includes a few hand-me-downs from her mom, such as the 90s top she was wearing—Roa is really in-

spired by that decade and Harajuku from that era. The skirt, a birthday gift from a friend, seemed too plain to her, so she painted some stars on it. Roa also dyed her mask pink, one of her favorite hues. "I feel like it's good to have a variety of masks, or just a mask in your favorite color—that works too. My friends also put sequins on their masks, and try to customize them in their own way. You can dye them with fabric dye, or just scribble on it with a Sharpie." Whatever you do, she encourages people to "just put yourself out there, and convey who you are," even when your face is covered. **FI**

ISA GIALLORENZO

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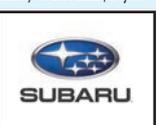
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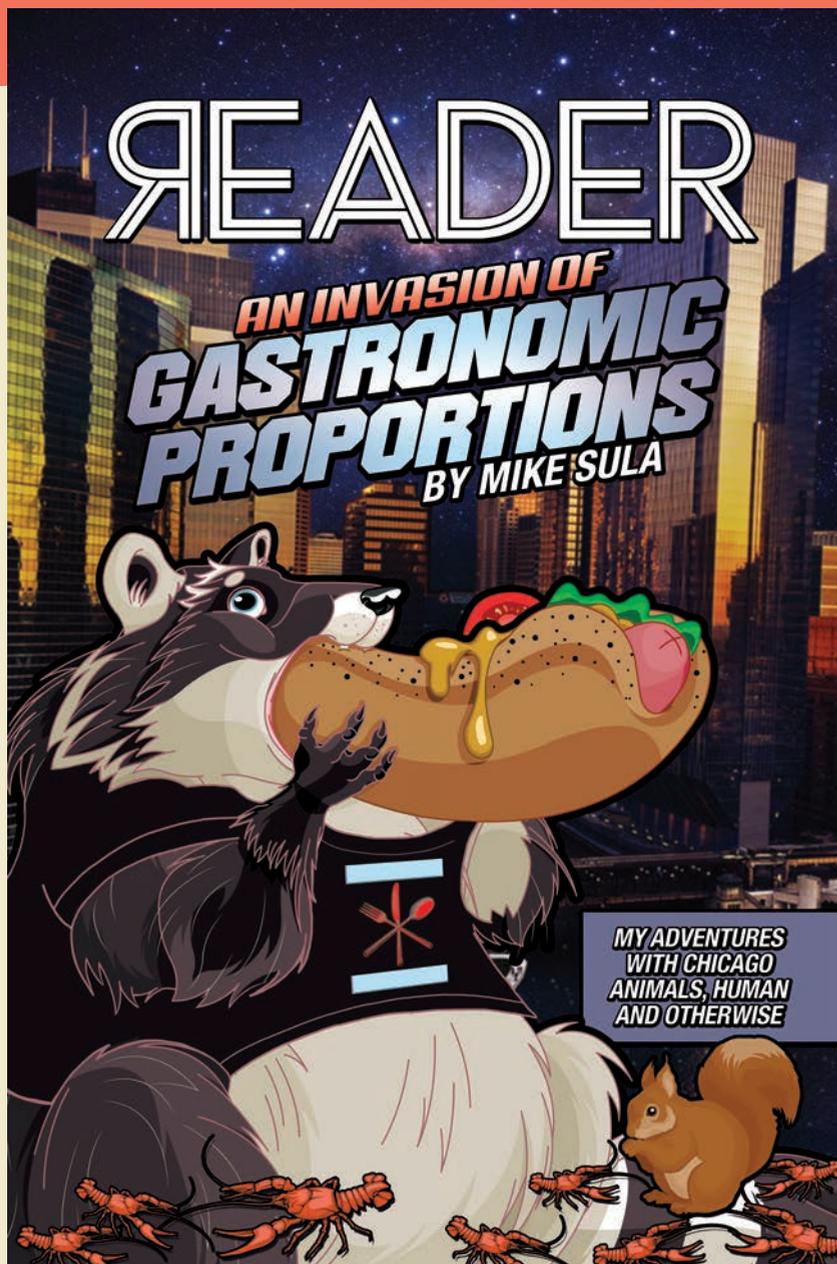


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## FOOD & DRINK



### PANDEMIC POP-UP

## Yuta Katsuyama is the once and future rice ball king of Chicago

His Onigiri Shuttle Kororin rolls to a stop next week—but he'll be back.

By **MIKE SULA**

When Yuta Katsuyama landed at the Illinois Institute of Technology four semesters ago, in the very real food desert of Bronzeville, he couldn't find anything to eat.

"In my campus there is only 7-Eleven," he says "And they sell super oily sandwich. Every time I eat that sandwich, I feel bad."

Convenience stores in Tokyo, where Katsuyama's from, had everything he needed, so he couldn't understand the absence of *onigiri* in Chicago. There was plenty of ramen and sushi in the city. Where were the rice balls?

In Japan, *onigiri*, or *omusubi*, are picnic and lunchbox staples. Pressed pyramids, or balls, of steamed, unseasoned rice, wrapped in crackly nori and stuffed, commonly, with

various seaweeds, salty seafoods, or pickled plums. Samurai carried them into battle. They're everywhere, eaten by everyone, all the time.

For overworked professionals such as Katsuyama, who was a management consultant in the food tech industry, their absence would be unthinkable. "Onigiri is really handy," he says. "You can eat with just one hand. You can eat while working." Besides that, they're tightly knit into the emotional fabric of the nation. Katsuyama's mom, like everybody else's, made them for him when he was a kid. "This is kind of stupid," he says, laughing. But "when I was an undergrad student I had a girlfriend, and when I have time, I always make onigiri for her."

“Onigiri is really handy. You can eat with just one hand. You can eat while working.”  COURTESY YUTA KATSUYAMA

Katsuyama, who’s 30, came to Chicago to study business and design at IIT, but like many of us, he found himself with plenty of time on his hands during quarantine. And his first two years of onigiri deprivation led him to the inevitable: founder of Ongiri Shuttle Kororin, Chicago’s rice ball shadow pop-up.

For a class project during his first semester, he designed a small triangular rice cooker that stuffed and wrapped individual onigiri. This was popular enough among his Asian classmates, and those who had traveled to Asia, that he saw a spark of potential. He followed it up with an onigiri breakfast meal kit, but was discouraged by the numbers of his peers who turned up their noses at the idea of fish and rice first thing in the morning. Besides that, most of them didn’t own rice cookers.

He was reinspired the following year after a seminar at the west-side food incubator the Hatchery, when he realized that onigiri didn’t have to be just breakfast. He entered the Hatchery’s six-month Sprouts Incubation Program, and though he got busy with grad school, the rice balls came to term in quarantine.

His test subjects from the meal-kit prototype weren’t much into the minimalist qualities of traditional onigiri; strong fish and pickles amid relatively unseasoned rice. “I realized I needed to localize my onigiri,” he says. He settled on grilled, or *yaki* onigiri, the exterior of the rice balls taking on a toasty golden crust, their interiors tossed with bonito flakes and soy, salmon and butter, sour pickled plum tempered by cheese, and miso sparked with *shichimi* peppers. While none of these are too far off the mark, there’s the corn-cheese-pepper onigiri: shredded mozzarella and sweet corn with a slice of bruleed swiss on top.

He designed menu cards decorated with Edo-period woodblock prints by Katsushika Hokusai, and chose biodegradable packaging, with each onigiri separated by wax paper, a neatly ordered row of them wrapped in bamboo skin. COVID-related licensing delays set him back a few weeks, but by July 19 he was taking orders on his website and posting weekly pickup schedules in different neighborhoods on Instagram, nimbly switching locations in the shuttle, a silver hybrid Chevy Volt, according to demand or lack of it.

Working from a shared kitchen in the

Hatchery, he and a classmate start forming 150 onigiri in plastic molds each morning at 6:30, before packing them in coolers, and heading for the day’s drop five hours later. By request, he’s already added vegan options, and he launched a braised pork belly collaborative version with Ramen Tatsunoya, a Pasadena-based *tonkotsu ramen-ya* operating out of the Kitchen United ghost kitchen, on the near north side.

Because the possibilities seem endless, Ongiri Shuttle Kororin is rolling to a stop this Sunday, August 23. Katsuyama’s fielding requests from restaurants and retail outlets that want a steady supply of onigiri, and he’s taking a break to retool his model. He’ll be back in three weeks or so, working with a third-party delivery service while he expands the concept. But the shuttle will ride again.

“This shuttle delivery model—I wasn’t sure about how this works,” he says. “There’s Uber Eats—you can order 30 minutes before your lunch, the driver brings the meal to your place. So why would people order the day before, and also they need to pick up at the locations? But it seems like people are enjoying picking up food and talking with us.”

He’s envisioning a mobile convenience store showcasing a number of different uncommon products. One of his friends who’s helping out wants to market a particular salsa unavailable outside of Mexico. “There are a lot of people here that want to start this business,” he says. “It’s easier for them to test their concept. They don’t have to have a physical location. [They can] test the location as well. Because of the preorder system they can control the amount of ingredients for the day.”

And it’s flexible enough for him to test his bespoke onigiri idea. “Onigiri is just the rice, so it can be Chinese onigiri or Indian onigiri or Mexican onigiri, right? If we can collect the data of people’s preferences and create customized onigiri, for customers it will be fun. But that’s just imagination.” 

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# NEWS & POLITICS



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## POLITICS

# Unwelcome news

The unfairness in Chicago's TIF program continues.

By **BEN JORAVSKY**

**A**s fate would have it, I sat down last week to write about inequity in Chicago a few hours after looters poured into the Gold Coast and Loop, busting windows, and, in some cases, clashing with police.

A visibly angry Mayor Lightfoot—joined by police chief David Brown and Alderman Chris Taliaferro—held a hastily convened press conference last Monday to denounce the looting and demand immediate consequences for those who perpetrated it.

"I don't care whatever justification was given for this," Lightfoot said. "There is no justification for criminal behavior, ever."

So, yes, I realize this might not be an opportune time to talk about the need to address ongoing social injustices. And yet, that's exactly what I'm about to do.

Coincidentally, the looting occurred just

a few days after Cook County clerk Karen Yarbrough released this year's tax increment financing report, in which she revealed how much the city's TIF program stands to collect in property taxes and where the city intends to spend most of the money.

The revelation is \$926 million—up ten percent from last year—to several wealthy and rapidly gentrifying communities on the north, near west, and near south sides.

The TIFs are a surcharge added to the tax bill, ostensibly to fund development in blighted neighborhoods that need it the most.

As such it's a monumentally important program—a lifeline, you might say—because it's the largest pool of discretionary income the city has to even out inequities by fairly funding development in communities that desperately need it.

## NEWS & POLITICS

Building bridges? Nope, in Chicago, we raise 'em.  
SAMANTHA BAILEY

And yet the program perpetuates the inequity it's supposed to erase.

The moment the city creates a TIF district, all the extra property taxes paid by property owners in that district get funneled into a bank account the mayor can draw down from to pay for everything from new roads and sidewalks to subsidies for private developers.

That would be great if the program were limited only to neighborhoods that desperately need assistance.

But because of loopholes in state law, virtually every neighborhood, no matter how rich, is eligible for TIFs. As a result, rich neighborhoods will always benefit over poor ones in receiving TIF dollars.

There's no way around this, folks, it's the nature of the TIF beast.

The key to how much money a TIF district gathers is based on the growth in property taxes. If you allow TIFs to be created in gentrifying areas—like the West Loop or the near north side—they will always generate more money than poorer neighborhoods where property values are stagnant.

That's a flaw that will exist unless we pool all TIF funds into one economic development pot and equally distribute them throughout the city—as former Alderman Tom Allen once suggested.

As Yarbrough's report reveals, the biggest winners (as in the communities collecting the most money) are the West Loop, South Loop, Pilsen, and the near north side. As they were last year, and the years before that.

And the biggest losers (that is, getting the least amount of money) are Englewood, Roseland, Austin, and many other struggling south- and west-side communities.

It's all in Clerk Yarbrough's report. Read it yourself.

Every time the city creates a new TIF district in an already gentrifying neighborhood—like the ones the council created last year for Lincoln Yards and the 78—it just exacerbates these inequities. Year after year after year.

Obviously, this is not the first time I've pointed this out. Probably won't be the last.

In many ways, I have empathy for Mayor Lightfoot, who's getting slammed from all sides in the aftermath of the looting. In par-

ticular, Alderman Brian Hopkins was almost apocalyptic, telling the *Tribune* . . .

“Literally, the future of Chicago hangs in the balance . . . If this continues, how can Chicago survive? What will be left downtown after Water Tower Place gets boarded up and the for-sale signs go up on all the condos near Michigan Avenue? People who live around there have had their sense of safety badly shaken. This is our tax base, by the way. We count on tax revenue from this area of the city to fund all number of other programs we count on.”

There's painful irony in Hopkins's comments.

He was the council's most enthusiastic cheerleader for the creation of the Lincoln Yards TIF deal, which will consume about \$1.3 billion in property tax dollars.

That's a lot of “tax revenue” that could fund “all number of other programs”—like, to cite just one, the police overtime we've kept accruing every summer.

But as I said, a lot of people may not want to talk about inequity at this moment in time. It's funny—back in high school, most of us (maybe even a baby-faced Brian Hopkins) studied *Harlem*.

That's the poem where Langston Hughes famously asks: “What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun . . . Or does it explode?”

But when the explosion occurs, it's like inequity has nothing to do with it. And it's—shut up with the TIF talk and bring in the police!

As painful as it is to listen to Hopkins's rant, it's going to be even worse when Donald Trump weighs in, as I know he will. He'll be looking to exploit the situation in order to scare more people into voting for him, even though his massive tax cuts have fostered more inequities than all the crummy TIF deals in Chicago.

I don't blame Mayor Lightfoot for the unfairness in our TIF program. It began under Mayor Daley and was carried on by Mayor Rahm.

And now the mayors most responsible for these inequities are nowhere to be found as Mayor Lightfoot is held accountable for the consequences. It's not fair.

Just as it's not fair to take money intended for poor neighborhoods and spend it on wealthier ones—year after year after year. 📺

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## NEWS & POLITICS



Kesha Pate KESHA PATE

came to an impasse in March, she says, when the board rejected her proposal to create a COVID-19 emergency fund that could help dance professionals with expenses beyond health care costs—things like housing and food. She also charges that the Dance for Life event, which is expensive to produce, is “an exclusionary, discriminatory facade that misrepresents its intentions and the distribution of the funds it raises to both donors and volunteers.

“What they tell you they raise to help dance professionals and what they actually spend to help dance professionals is vastly different,” Pate wrote in her letter. When she calculated the philanthropic “return on investment” for Dance for Life, she told me, it was only about 26 percent.

CDU’s 2018 tax filing (the most recent publicly available) appears to roughly confirm her estimate, at least for that year: the organization reported taking in a total of nearly \$235,000 in contributions and grants, while giving out \$58,000. Of that, \$25,000 went to the AIDS Foundation of Chicago, which provides CDU with free office space and services. Donations to individual dance professionals in 2018 amounted to just 11 grants totaling \$33,085.

Board members, however, note that, since 2015, when CDU, which had been part of the AIDS Foundation, became an independent nonprofit, it has given out \$378,527 in grants to individuals and to the AIDS Foundation, while producing a much-loved event that unifies and celebrates the Chicago dance community. So far this year, in response to COVID-19, they say they’ve given \$23,000 to individuals, and have temporarily expanded what they’ll cover to include not only critical illness costs, but routine medical expenses like health insurance and co-payments for dance professionals financially impacted by the pandemic.

Vice President Julie Burman Kaplan says they’re taking Pate’s post “very seriously,” and have had a series of virtual meetings with dancers about it. “Many arts organizations have found, because of COVID, that they needed to restructure,” Kaplan says. Given the unknowns, she adds, “we simply could not afford to maintain a salary. It was our fiduciary responsibility to protect the fund and make sure we could give to the people in need. We did not fire Kesha. We restructured. COVID changed the narrative.”

@Deannsaacs

### CULTURE

## Dancing around the money

CDU’s former executive director calls the Dance for Life benefit a “facade.”

By DEANNA ISAACS

COVID-19 couldn’t stop the 2020 Dance for Life. But it did turn the annual benefit performance, produced by Chicago Dancers United to raise money for its Dancers’ Fund and other charities, into a Zoom event.

Instead of gathering under the glowing arches of the Auditorium Theatre, and then, for some, heading to a gala after-party at the Hilton, viewers (who’d already had a week to enjoy archived performances from previous years) hunkered down in front of their computers Saturday night for some introductory remarks and a performance of a new work that, in the pre-virus world, would have been the event finale.

What they saw was a perfect-for-this-moment, no-contact ensemble piece choreographed by Hanna Britson of Seal’s “Get It Together,” performed by 23 jean-clad, mask-wearing dancers who’d had to learn their steps in isolation. They convened only once, on the day it was filmed, but managed to look like they’d been moving to this music as a unit forever.

Following the performance, CDU announced that the virtual event had raised \$170,000—with expenses expected to be no more than \$50,000. This was especially relevant news because, for the two previous months, the

29-year-old organization, which provides financial aid for medical bills to dance professionals facing critical illness, had come in for some intense criticism about its Dance for Life spending from someone who should know—its recently released executive director, Kesha Pate.

Pate’s position, as the organization’s only staff member, was abruptly eliminated May 19. On June 9 she posted a “Dear Chicago dance community” letter on Facebook, suggesting that the entire CDU board of directors resign, to be replaced by a smaller board with financial and operations expertise, plus an advisory board of dance professionals.

According to Pate’s letter, the current CDU board is “toxic and dysfunctional,” and she was terminated after only nine months on the job because she “challenged their privilege.” She elaborated, at length, and when the post elicited a cease-and-desist letter from CDU’s lawyer, she posted that too. Then she followed up with a July 25 Facebook video in which she doubled down on everything, seeing it as her duty “to speak out.”

Pate says she was hired to change CDU, in part by expanding its services, but found that the leadership didn’t want to change. They

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## IN REAL LIFE

# Stitching ourselves back together

Protesters today are only just beginning their transformative journey.

By ANNIE HOWARD

In an undated clip that recently surfaced on Twitter, poet Gil Scott-Heron explains his intentions behind the song “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.” “The first change that takes place is in your mind,” Scott-Heron said, at ease in casual conversation. “You have to change your mind before you change how you’re living and how you move. The thing that’s going to change people is something that no one will ever be able to capture on film.”

As the video came onto my feed, sandwiched between endless footage of mass revolt, it felt surreal; accompanying visual evidence of bountiful radical changes in motion left me a bit dizzy. Still, it helped explain a question that’s been on my mind: What does it mean for millions of people to return to social life in the name of racial justice?

Should one choose to ignore Scott-Heron’s

explanation, social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram would still attest to something remarkable taking place. Within days of the first mass demonstrations across the world, protest videos reached millions of views, marking a rupture from the unending churn of quarantine baking pics and coronavirus nihilism. Yet in taking to the streets, and witnessing the sense of social camaraderie and political comradery that’s permeated my interactions, it’s clear that the real transformations are only vaguely reflected on our screens, a pale imitation of the life-affirming experience of being surrounded by thousands of masked protesters, finding new ways of living beyond the myopia of heavily surveilled platform capitalism.

The hours spent scrolling and clicking between browsers, whether for work or plea-

sure, remind us of the depressing status quo of late-capitalist life. While distant socialization through Zoom happy hours seemed like a dismal, if necessary, stopgap early in the pandemic, being reunited with others and protesting in solidarity with Black lives has felt enlivening, even with the violent police retaliation against organizers and marchers. Where once I felt resignation and a grim hope that the obvious failure of our government would prompt change, the spontaneous return to sharing physical space with strangers and friends reveals both a disapproval of police brutality against Black communities *and* the unbearable slog of life being run through our phones.

I started taking estrogen on November 10, 2018, my 24th birthday. Before then, I constantly struggled to feel alive in my own body; something always seemed to slip in between my surroundings and my lived emotional experience. Despite the myriad upheavals that came from graduating college and moving to Chicago, amongst many other shifts, my body never seemed up for the task of moving through these events with the vulnerability they necessitated. Trans author and biologist Julia Serano captured these frustrating experiences perfectly in her book *Whipping Girl*: “When testosterone was the predominant sex hormone in my body, it was as though a thick curtain were

draped over my emotions. It deadened their intensity, made all my feelings pale and vague as if they were ghosts that would haunt me.”

On many occasions, these absent feelings were heightened by cell phones, ever present in daily life. I’ve written elsewhere about struggling to be present at concerts, held doubly at a distance from the performers onstage by my body’s ghostliness and by the many other spectators filming the show in front of me. I could also see my absent emotions poorly reflected on the screen. The perpetual impetus to gain attention through social media, performatively offering goofy childhood photos and naive college-inflected social justice hot takes, perpetually overrode the misery I refused to let myself name and change for far too long.

Before transitioning, protest was one of the only spaces where I felt my body in resonance with its surroundings. In those moments, the act of uniting in righteous anger, bound to the common cause of liberation, broke through the barriers put up by my own biology. As I wrote in my journal on August 7, 2016, after attending a protest organized by Youth for Black Lives, following the police murder of 18-year-old Paul O’Neal: “There was a real magic in occupying State and Lake, marching down Michigan Ave., and seeing the city in a crowd, trying to make it a peaceful place for all people.” (Ironically, I later found myself in a photo from the demonstration, the side of my head faintly but unmistakably present in a sea of raised hands. I cherish the image, despite any potential contradictions, because my presence within it is only possible in the context of the other brave demonstrators willing to show up that day.)

In a recent Facebook Live event, activist, scholar, and prison abolitionist Angela Davis made the connection between the trans community and abolitionist thinking explicit. “I don’t think we would be where we are today,” she argued, “encouraging ever-larger numbers of people to think with an abolitionist frame, had not the trans community taught us that it is possible to effectively challenge that which is considered the very foundation of our sense of normalcy.”

Unsettling the damage that a “normal” reality had inflicted on my body was crucial to my own political evolution over the last several years. Before starting estrogen, “normal” meant inhabiting a body that only felt alive to the world when a sense of collective justice was in the air; otherwise, I constantly felt depleted and disconnected, no clear path available even within the bounds of my privileged identities: white, male, college-educated.

As I've watched more white friends become activated in the last month, doing mutual-aid food distribution or helping other protesters with jail support, I've come to sense my transition within the larger disruptive spectrum that Davis describes, witnessing growing numbers of people recognize that bedrock assumptions defining collective reality are more contingent than previously imagined. None of these shifts are visible in my Instagram feed, clogged as it is with documentation of protest schedules and links to petitions. Instead, I sense movement in conversations. Unsurprisingly, COVID-19 has ruptured whatever lingering sense of social disconnection had been fed to us: before the outbreak, it was easier to ignore our interdependence with every other member of society, even as the virus forced us to physically separate from one another for months.

Now, to know that Black trans activist and author Raquel Willis could lead 15,000 New Yorkers in the chant, "I believe in my power. I believe in your power. I believe in our power. I believe in Black trans power," is to appreciate a profound social and internal reckoning taking place, as even the most privileged individuals come to sense that lasting power can only be found in collectively uplifting the lives of those most marginalized. Watching these events on my phone in isolation would offer limited pleasure. What makes even the recorded facsimile of another protest linger in my thoughts is the time spent in action these last two months, a reminder that millions in cities around the world all find themselves linked in common struggle.

None of us know what will come next. Despite that uncertainty, people continue to show up, recognizing that more has changed in just a few weeks of mass revolt than in years of more gradualist efforts through electoral and legislative reforms. Staying open to the unknown and unforeseen is one of the most essential challenges in this moment. I'm reminded of a quote shared by Kim Hunt, executive director of Pride Action Tank, a group that fights for LGBTQ+ policy change: "You do the right thing, and you keep doing the right thing until the path emerges."

As companies like Zoom collaborate with law enforcement, and the FBI tracks down protesters through microscopic details captured in photographs, our claustrophobic sense of free expression has only grown narrower. The strangeness of knowing that one is already being watched at every turn is not new to

Black liberation struggles, of course. When tens of thousands of Black and Latino Chicago public school students went on strike in 1968, student leaders were carefully monitored by CPD's notorious "Red Squad," tracked from meetings all the way back to their home addresses. This treatment has become standard for leaders of radical movements, hoping to make a better world. Gradually, the rest of us have gained a taste of the invasive watchful gaze of the surveillance state.

For white protesters who are disproportionately less likely to face consequences for protesting, intentionally disrupting the dopamine-hit attention economy of posting photos that merely promote one's involvement is one of the most obvious, and perhaps most difficult, changes that must be made. Unsettling this normalized behavior forces us to question our true motives, and forces us to recognize that the only groups profiting from our addiction to viral recognition are the companies seeking to keep us glued to our phones, not building relationships that exceed surface-level interaction.

Still, however much the everyday surveillance of platform capitalism makes our present actions doubtful, tech companies cannot head off people's frustrations indefinitely. No level of social-media- and quarantine-induced isolation can prevent the surprising movement that can remake the world in an instant, unpredictable even to those companies selling total predictability as a normative social good.

The uncanny mix of overdetermined prediction and perpetual novelty was well captured in *Transformation Scenario*, a film by German video artist Clemens von Wedemeyer that I first encountered at last year's Chicago Architecture Biennial. The film is narrated by a set of nameless, faceless corporate beings; their vision would be not far off from that of companies like Amazon and Google that dominate life today. The narrators discuss the effort to engineer perfectly mirrored simulations of real life, which may anticipate all possible futures. "Instead of fantastic elements from an invented world, we could feed our agents real-time data in order to produce a very realistic crowd," the female narrator suggests. "We were receiving constantly updated data from millions of devices, which allowed us to make the simulation plausible and seamless."

This vision of total control is already sold to us today through every microtargeted Instagram ad, attempting to convince us that our best life is just one perfect purchase away. "Our modeling algorithms can help you find a safe way through life, the best possible out-

come of your data," the female narrator beckons. "Who wouldn't be happy to be navigated through life, according to their character, their friends, their beliefs, without fatal accidents or personal problems?"

Yet the fiction that such coercion can ever be comprehensive is unraveled in an instant. "My satnav reroutes me to avoid traffic," the male narrator intones. "Would I also be diverted if a rebellion begins, or will the revolution be simulated?"

Can the revolution be simulated? The events of the last few months suggest otherwise. Coronavirus has made clear that those in power have far less control over reality than they'd admit; the bravery and defiance of Black organizers in the face of police brutality has pushed untold numbers of people out of resigned quietude and into the streets. We are together only just beginning to learn what it means to become fully embodied social beings once more, no longer held at a distance through a screen.

To dive back into intimate social contact in protest after months of separation is to feel the complicated emotional state of surprise. The immediate disruption of coronavirus, and the swift changes in attitude brought by recent protests, reminds us of the inherent unpredictability of the world, however much those in power would wish otherwise. Responding to the unexpected is one of life's fundamental challenges, and while the ruling class has leveraged the shock of the pandemic towards their further enrichment, the unexpected resistance of so many gives me hope for outcomes once unimaginable.

Surprise has been one of the defining factors of my experience while transitioning, and of the last two months of social upheaval. A sheet of the expected effects of hormone replacement therapy, shared by my doctor in November 2018, listed with precision the changes that would soon come my way. But that doesn't make any of the last 21 months any less unsettling, the perpetual subversion of any expectations I may have had—whether unexpected tears while listening to a Daft Punk song about dancing with strangers, or the deeper sense of gravity that I feel with every tough life decision—making every day an invigorating challenge. This year, that sense of heightened unknowability has only broadened into an all-encompassing state of exception to a tired and malfunctioning status quo. The loss of shared reality that came with having to go into quarantine made it seem like every single

one of us was left on our own terms to make sense of what will be perhaps the most communal experience of our lifetime. Now, in protest, we attempt to stitch ourselves back together, however unevenly, into a more coherent sense of being part of something larger than isolated beings.

In protest, surprise is many things. For me, it was the first major gathering in Daley Plaza in late May, a spontaneous coming together to protest the killing of George Floyd. The presence of innumerable strangers in all directions, already a shock after months of averring any shared physical presence, only grew more surreal as unmasked police officers began swinging their batons and firing tear gas canisters. To assimilate the competing pressures of maintaining social distance and avoiding the police, all while marvelling at the massed presence of so many people lacking common purpose just a week earlier, was a shock that only began to clarify in the demonstrations that followed.

There was also spontaneity at the Pride Without Prejudice march in late June, the incongruous sight of unmasked people dining outside of Wrigley Field leading one marcher to shout, "No justice, no brunch!" A collective laugh rolled through the crowd, followed moments later by an uptake of the chant, the offhanded cry of a single person amplified more rapidly than even the most viral tweet. In conversations afterwards, that chant has since linked me with countless others who were elsewhere in the crowd, fostering a sense of shared reality that seems to slip from view inside of our ever-narrowing filter bubbles.

In this long, hot summer of unrest, a new world is being born in our city streets, day after day, week after week. I've felt it at every rally I've attended, but most tangibly at the No Brakes protest on the Fourth of July, shutting down the South Loop with hundreds of other bikers and skaters. There was plenty of pain and anger, yes; but so too was there playful defiance, masked smiles, and a chance to move freely in space, surrounded by strangers. I felt at ease amidst so many caring people, a sense of loving attention radiating inwards and outwards from my body to those around me, amplified in the cavernous echo of the skyscrapers surrounding us. The open city streets were a harbinger of better days to come, I am convinced, because their openness was mirrored in every participant, ready to live through every revolution yet to emerge. 

 @annie\_howard

# THE



# TOLL



# OF

Loved ones reflect on the loss of partners, parents, siblings, joy givers, caretakers, and secret keepers.

**As TOLD TO MAYA DUKMASOVA, KERRY CARDOZA,  
AND MATT HARVEY**

# CORONAVIRUS

**Jada Judkins, 20**

**Lost sister Resheeta Boyd Thompson, 30, on April 22**

[Resheeta] was my older sister on my mother's side. She was a home care aide, she made sure she'd be there for her client, who lived in an apartment. A couple weeks before she passed away, [my sister] got word that the whole entire building tested positive. She didn't have insurance. Her insurance came a month after she passed away. Her [employer, Addus Home-Care,] they don't do medical insurance. Funny part about this situation is she was already quarantined for two weeks. She was at her two weeks' peak. She was about to get over the COVID and then she had breathing problems around 11 o'clock at night. She went to the hospital. They told me she's on her way to the ICU, she's doing fine. At 12:30 they called to tell me she's going into cardiac arrest and what's her medical history. In a panic I gave them her medical history, she was diabetic. Around 1:30 they called [to tell] me that my sister had passed.

It was very rough for my mom. I had to be the one to tell her when my sister isn't coming home. It was shock in her face, like she didn't hear what I said. Then she spent nights and nights and nights crying. She couldn't eat. And me and my mother had the COVID-19. We had the mild symptoms, my mom's diabetic too but we've recovered. My mom had to figure out how to get the money to bury my sister. I didn't have a job because of the pandemic, it was a seasonal job with the White Sox. [Resheeta] had very few friends. On my mom's side the family is kind of small—most of who came to her funeral really was my friends, my mom's friends, and she had two or three friends who bring their friends.

I feel like people are taking it more serious than before, but I do honestly invite people to not fall for the phases, like everything is peachy cream and rainbows. Wash your hands and care about your hygiene. It's fine the state is opening back up, but stay home if you feel sick. It's like you're driving, you have to keep yourself safe and other people as well—do the same when you go into the store. Someone else might have to go through what I went through because you don't know if you have COVID.

For the last couple of months I've been trying to stay as busy as possible. You can't let this bottle up inside, because it'll make you crazy. Whether it's working, sleeping, grieving, just do it. You have to live every day as if it's never changed because the person you loved would want you to do that, they want you to go on. Being around other people that are just here with me, cooking and gardening [has been most comforting]. She was into cooking. She

wanted to actually start a vegetable garden, so I decided to do it. Right now I'm doing succulents. And my best friend gave me a spider plant that makes different vines. And I have lilies her aunties gave me for her funeral.

**Maggie Hennessy Underwood, 47**

**Lost brother Daniel Hennessy, 48, on May 15**

My brother was diagnosed with lung cancer in January, so as soon as we realized COVID was coming to the United States there was a huge concern. He was at such high risk and we knew that if he got this it would most likely be fatal. He was going through chemo and responded very well to it. He was in an extended care facility because he had medical complications from lung cancer. They had called prior to the shutdown and said they weren't taking any visitors. They had tight restrictions, you couldn't even drop anything off. He was calling me and asking me for Sprite, and I couldn't bring that. It was challenging but I commended [the facility] for taking the necessary steps for keeping the residents safe. As he stated, they had the place locked down like Fort Knox, and I felt he was in safe hands.

When we got the phone call that he was taken to the emergency room they didn't say what was wrong, but the hospital called the next morning and said he tested positive for COVID. He went to the emergency room on a Sunday, and Thursday I got a call that he was moved to the intensive care unit, and on Friday he texted me "I'm still alive." He had a great sense of humor. He passed away that evening, it was so quick.

I couldn't go to the hospital to be with him, I couldn't go to the nursing home to be with him. I think it magnifies the loss, you're so isolated and have no family members to comfort you. When he passed away we couldn't get together. We have a large family and you couldn't do any type of wake or funeral for him. I'm an extreme germaphobe and I still don't think it's safe to have a funeral for him. Having to put the closure on hold has been particularly trying, and already in a place when you're not in the best mental state when you're stuck at home. The things that give you stress relief, a lot of that was taken away from us. And you put a loss of a family member on top of it—it's hard.

What helped me was when information about his death was published and people reached out to me. He had moved to the city from the suburbs in his 20s, to Wicker Park when it was an artist community. He worked at a coffeehouse called Urbus Orbis, and the owner of it reached out to me. People who hung out in the coffeehouse and smoked cigarettes together reached out to me. It was nice to hear

**“On Friday he texted me ‘I’m still alive.’ He had a great sense of humor. He passed away that evening, it was so quick.”**

*—Maggie Hennessy Underwood*

their stories. One of them had described him to me as the wheel of the artist community. He worked as a graphic artist but he went to the beat of his own drummer. He'd carve our soap into a mouse.

The thing that has not been helpful is people with the opposite view on face masks, and polarizing and politicizing the coronavirus, people thinking it's a hoax. I'm not a person who likes to get into political conversation but when people put stuff [like that] on Facebook I'll respond that I lost a family member. Those workers picked it up in their community, not because the nursing home necessarily did something wrong. [This experience] has made me more of a spokesperson against rushing reopenings. I'm speaking up more than I ever have before. Anything we can do in our personal power to stop the spread of the virus could save a life. People are saying it's their constitutional right, they don't have to wear a mask—where in the Constitution does it say that? It's just infuriating to me. It's a piece of cloth. We all wear seatbelts because it could save a life. No family should have to go through what we went through, being so alone and isolated and trying to deal with a loss and not being there for people that you love.

**Renee Heath, 57**

**Lost brother Wilbert Reynolds, 81, on April 1**

[Wilbert] was in the service and one of his friends invited him to go home with him to Chicago when he had shore leave. When he got there he liked it so much that he called my mom and said, "I think I'm gonna move to Chicago." He'd been in Chicago over 60 years, so it was more of his home than Detroit was. The rest of us are in Detroit. He was a computer programmer. He put himself through school after the service. He really enjoyed his retirement. He walked two to three miles a day. He fished, he would travel. For my mom's side of the family [Wilbert] was the keeper of our history. He was born in Alabama. My mom had him very young so he grew up being able to tell us stories about our family and our cousins. He was the keeper of our secrets too. My mother told him something on her deathbed and it's been 35 years and I still don't know what it is. They were best friends, even though they were mother and son. He treated my mother like she was a queen.

I think he was called away too soon. I believe he got sick walking to the store. He frequented the bowling alley. So he could have picked it up anywhere. That was way before the lockdown. I had called him and he sounded like he had a cold. He sounded terrible. I was listening to the news, they had just started talking about the [coronavirus] symptoms. I said, "No, I

continued from 13

don't believe you have the flu, could you just call your doctor and see what he says." I spoke to him one more time, the day he went [into the hospital].

The experience was gut-wrenching. My brother was the oldest of the five of us and there was a 24-year age gap between he and I. He didn't have any children and he was never married so I was sort of like his daughter. Any time I called him he was always there for me. I was in Detroit and helpless, there was nothing I could do. The hospital notified me every single day about his progress. He was just too far gone. He did come off of the ventilator and he seemed to be stable. And later his stats for his oxygen started dropping. That's when I got the call to make the decision of what I thought would be best for him. My brother and I had talked for years about what he wanted. He never wanted to go into a nursing home, he never wanted to be a burden. They had already explained to me how long you can stay on the vent. He had signed a DNR and so I honored his wishes and let him go peacefully.

It was early during the pandemic, they weren't doing funerals. And he had asked to be cremated. He wanted me to take him to a fishing hole and release his ashes in Lake Michigan, so that's what I did. I didn't actually have an opportunity to say goodbye in a physical sense. The hardest thing was that I could not hold his hand or tell him I love him. I would call every day and I would tell [the nurses] to whisper in his ear that Sweetpea called. They would let me know he heard them.

Our family gets together at my aunt and uncle's house on Sundays and they cook a huge dinner and someone had the virus and they contracted it [in the spring]. My aunt ended up on a ventilator at the same time as my brother and they couldn't pull her off. My aunt passed in April and my uncle passed away just a week ago. He was home in hospice. His liver was gone. My aunt was in her 60s and my uncle was 82. They were all healthy. They just didn't know that they had it and by the time they got help it was too late.

I still can't believe my brother is not here. Even though he was 81 years old, I think he had many more years to live. We didn't know about this virus until he caught it. I think if he had known he would have taken more precautions. It was five siblings. He was the oldest. It's only two of us left. [My last living brother is taking it] hard. They were extremely close. He wants to pick up the phone and call and talk to him. We're a sports family and we'd get on the three-way to talk about the Bears, the Lions.

I appreciate everyone's prayers, and I

appreciate everyone's thoughtfulness and saying they're praying for me and my family. That's the blessing. The part that hurts is that it doesn't bring back my brother. I can't get him back. Even though people have been so kind and so understanding I still can't get over that he's not coming back. And I won't see him again. To be taken by a virus is a little bit harder than just having a heart attack. Yes he was 81, but I don't know when his time was and I think he was taken from me way too soon.

I argue with people all the time. Everyone says sorry for your loss and I say, "Yeah but are you protecting yourself? Are you doing what it takes to ensure you and your family don't get it?" I don't understand why a mask is an issue. I don't understand why distancing is an issue. You're told to have a driver's license and a social security card. But you're told to put a mask on and suddenly you say, "You can't tell me what to do?" That irks me, that you would walk around and endanger not only yourself but people around you. It's not just statistics, there's real people behind these numbers and over 150,000 families are going through the same things I'm going through right now.

**Tenesha Rawls, 37**

**Lost mother Arlola Rawls, 81, on April 10**

My mom had just gotten out of the hospital from a 15-day stay. With my mom being older, having dementia, I never left my mom in the hospital. So the entire time she was there, I was there. [A few days later] my mom had a fever. I took my mom [back] to the hospital. I just figured maybe it was some type of infection.

The hardest part is hearing daily that your loved one is gonna die. And your mind is racing, wondering if you're doing everything that you could for them. You can't be there. It was never any good news . . . they stopped giving her dialysis. They told me that she had an infection at her catheter port. I just had to trust the people that were around her. That was hard. I still go back and wonder if I did everything the right way. If I should have kept her at home. Honestly I never felt like [the doctors] gave me any sense of hope.

I think the people have gotten really lax now. And want to get back to some normalcy, as though [the virus] is nonexistent. This is real. It is really real. It's probably the most devastating experience that you will have. I mean I lost a nephew, too, but this, for me, I cannot make peace with. The doctors have their own way of doing things and everyone has their different beliefs about death. Some people feel like, why suffer? Your quality of life will never be the same. Initially, my thing was to do everything

**“Everything that used to soothe me or help me get through things don't work anymore.”**

—Tenesha Rawls

that you can, put her on a ventilator. Then I was told that if she was to be intubated she would never fully recover. She would have to have a [tracheostomy], she would have to be in a nursing home the rest of her life. I know that that's not what my mom would have wanted. But I was still not sure if they were telling me that because of how they felt or if that really was my mom's last option.

I often feel like, did I give up on her? [What I'd say] to someone else is really just do what you feel first when it comes to your loved ones. Keep fighting. I don't know. It just felt like a lose/lose situation. We still have not been able to have a memorial for my mom. At the time [of her passing] I couldn't be around individuals, family members, so I have to grieve alone. I have to deal with all of this in my house by myself.

Everything that used to soothe me or help me get through things don't work anymore. Initially I couldn't pray, I couldn't talk to God. I couldn't do anything. For me, it was like, wow, my mom just came through two weeks of being in the hospital and she made it through that, just to come to something like this. You have people who tell you "She's in a better place, you wouldn't have wanted her to live through this," and none of that means anything to me. It's not soothing at all. Especially listening to people be conspiracy theorists about this whole COVID. That's not helpful because at the end of it, I felt my mom was a casualty.

My mother was a woman who helped everyone she could with the little bit she had. She never complained. My mom was like the oldest in our family. My mom had me late in life. She was 44. The only time I've been away from my mom is when I went away to college. Slowly she became dependent. But I have to say that was the greatest joy of my life, being able to do for her. And that's what kept me going, knowing that she counted on me. I have no children of my own so my mom was my responsibility and she was my best friend. Not having her, just, it's a complete void. I woke up this morning just feeling like I want to be wherever she is. I still have to live in the house. I don't know if that helps or hurts. My mom was my life so I'm trying to just figure out my life beyond her now. Everything I did, even with my job, where we lived, everything in my life was set around my mom. So it's like starting life over again. And honestly I don't feel like I want to, it's just, it's hard. It is. Death is hard anyway but to lose someone this way it is probably one of the most devastating feelings.

I don't think that she understood what was happening. And they did allow me to come to the hospital, probably two days before she

passed. My mom wasn't herself. And to know that my mom had to leave this earth by herself, that will not sit well with me. I can only imagine just how scared she may have been, and she had dementia, so even just her understanding why I couldn't be there with her. . . . I hope that [now] they have a better system for that because no one deserves to die alone. I don't feel any closure. I don't.

**Juwan McDade, 26**  
**Lost wife Kiara D'Leesa Anderson-McDade, 25, on April 26**

I never thought "until death do us part" for me would come so early. We just got married last year, May 25, 2019. My relationship with Kiara, I believe it was something that was heaven-sent. We brought out the best in each other. We've known each other our whole life. Grew up in church together. We started dating when I was 17. When I proposed, we had been together for seven years. So, a decade, a decade, with one person. She held a very special place in my heart. It'll be a long time before I'm alright.

She worked as a registered nurse. She worked at nursing homes. She was passionate about senior citizens and kids. For her side of the family, she was the designated person that you take with you to all your doctor's appointments. Kiara was all about living life. She was adventurous. She helped me develop myself, the man I am today. She kept it honest with me. Our relationship was very intimate. I walk around feeling like there's something missing. I know it's her.

March 15 she got sick. I picked her up from work, and when [we] came home she almost collapsed on the bed. I had to help her take her uniform off and put her pajamas on. And she was wheezing. She had asthma. But how she was breathing that night—I've never heard her breathe like that before. We found out that she was pregnant back in January. So not only is she suffering with side effects from being pregnant, now she's wheezing uncontrollably. She can barely keep her eyes open. Her entire body shut completely down. I had to help her up, I had to cook for her, I had to help her in the bathroom. Two weeks before Kiara passed, she came home from the hospital. She was able to walk around without being dizzy or without being short of breath. She was able to laugh and joke.

April 26 was a Sunday. I went to church but she had stayed [at home]. I had been telling myself that when I get back home, I'm gonna go out for some exercise, go for a nice walk, get some fresh air, because ain't no telling how long we're gonna be on shutdown. So [after church]

I had grabbed some food, brought it back to the house. We watched some movies. And I see it getting late outside and I was telling myself I really need to go do this walk. I was gone for like two hours.

Before I left she had texted me saying bring back some chips or something like that. [When I came back] I came in the house, I changed my clothes, drove to the gas station. When I came in the house the first time the lights were off, but the TV was on. And she was laying back against the arm of the couch. When I left and came back the second time she was still in the same position. So I'm like OK, Kiara, Kiara, baby wake up. When I had walked up on her, the first thing I noticed were her lips were very pale. Her hands were blue. I call 911 and I'm on the phone with the operator and they're telling me how to properly do CPR, try to get the blood flowing back to her heart and her body. When they got here, they were trying for like a good ten minutes and they called it at that point.

The first thing I did was grab a rolling chair that I used as a barber chair and I tossed it to my room, about six feet. A bunch of things flashed into my head, seeing the face of her mom crying and sisters and all that. And the first person who walked towards me was one of the firefighters. And I felt like punching him in the face. Not because he didn't do his job or he didn't try hard enough. I was just mad. I got a table in my living room and about broke it in half. I was heated. I've never hurt like that. I've never felt like that before a day in my life.

Everybody always asks me, "How you doing?" Sometimes I honestly don't know how to respond to that question. Sometimes I feel like I tell people I am alright, just so they won't ask me any more questions. Because I don't always be wanting to talk. If somebody ask me questions like how I feel, my energy behind it won't be good. I'll start to get upset. If I tell you that I'm not alright, you should just take it at that and just say, "I'm praying that it gets better."

Cutting hair keeps me distracted. She actually encouraged me to cut hair. So I told myself that from this point on everything good that I do in life—and that's regardless if I ever get married and start another family again—everything good that I do is in dedication to honoring the memory of her and my baby. I plan on going back to school and get my associate's then if this barber thing take off get my own spot, be my own boss.

Some days her and the baby cross my mind and I have a moment where I don't want to think about it because I'm in a house with nothing to do. And then I have those moments where I'll go to my gallery and just look at all

**“I never thought ‘until death do us part’ for me would come so early.”**

—Juwan McDade

the pictures, all our videos, all our snaps. And I feel like me doing that is more so me accepting it. I'm thinking man like man, like, my baby really not coming back. I'll never hear her voice again. I'm never gonna find out the gender of my baby. I'm never gonna hear my child's voice.

You got to live on and if that person that you're mourning truly loved you they will want you to live your life to the fullest, they won't want you to just soak in this and be sad. Surround yourself with good energy. Focus on finding something constructive to do. Don't just sit in the house. Live. However, you're going to feel or whatever you want to feel. Feel it. Let it out. If you want to scream, scream. If you want to punch something, punch something but don't hurt yourself. If you want to just lay out and have a fit, do it because it's way better than keeping all those emotions and other energy bottled up.

There's not a day that goes by that I don't think about her or think about my baby or just wish like they both could be here. But I mean, I come to learn, you know, growing up in church my whole life everything happens for a reason. Like there's no such thing as a coincidence. These are the times you will really find out like what love is. Just love on your family, your friends as much as you can. I feel good knowing that I loved my baby till she left.

**Gladys Frieson-Lucas, 68**  
**Lost sisters Patricia Frieson, 61, on March 16 and Wanda Bailey, 63, on March 25**

Pat, the first one to pass, she had double pneumonia when she was about one. And Wanda, the second one to pass, is the one right over Pat in age, she had pneumonia way back when she was three. We grew up in a household together. All nine of us, mother, and father. We had a close-knit family. We were all raised up here in Chicago. My mother had college education. My dad just had eighth-grade education but went to the military at a young age. He was a tall man so he got away with it. My mom, they say she could fix the mole on Lincoln's face on a penny. So she made a way for us to have play clothes, school clothes, church clothes, every last one of us. And only on daddy's salary, cause mama did not work until after the ninth child was well in school. So we lived a pretty good life. Christmas we always got two toys. My mom made those things happen.

When Pat was about 12 years old, my mother's father passed. That left my grandmother, Mother Gladys, down in Arkansas all by herself. My mother was the only one [of her children] that lived to adulthood. Now mama, since she had nine kids, I don't know maybe she

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continued from 15

thought she could spare one to go down there and be with her mother. Pat moved down there. Twelve to adulthood, she lived down there until my grandmother passed. She went to nursing school and became a nurse and made all that money. So she was glad that she stayed down there with Mother Gladys, and had that kind of southern lifestyle. She had some job nursing where she'd run across country making *beau-coup* money, you know as a traveling nurse. She enjoyed that too. She enjoyed life, she got all she could out of life.

Within the last 12 years she got this condition called lymphedema, people call it elephant leg syndrome. She grew large bags filled with fluid on the back of both of her legs and so she walked with a walker and two canes. But she loved life, she would go on a cruise ship with us, me and other friends. I'd put her in a wheelchair and push her around on that cruise ship. We were close, we'd play together, we'd have fun together. My father had these rules for us about always staying together and he had charged another sister of mine, Charmaine, the one right under me, to always keep the family together even after he was gone.

Both of [my sisters who passed] were very strong women of God. They had good faith, they lived, moved, and had their being in Christ Jesus. Wanda's husband was the minister of the church. They would not drink and smoke or anything. They lived good Christian lives, both of them together. And so that's one reason I never would've thought they would get a virus. My sister Wanda would give everyone gifts on Christmas even when we say we're not going to do all that gift giving this year. Wanda, she would go into her basement and get things that she had overstock in: deodorant, soaps, toothbrushes. She would get a whole, big shopping bag full of things that she had excess of and put it together, and put a bow on and give it to me, and I needed everything she gave me. I'd be so happy. Did that for a couple of Christmases. She's very generous. I think that's a strong word for Wanda. Good word for her, generous.

Patricia was a ministering person, she could talk to people and make them feel better about themselves, on the telephone. That was Pat: she was encouraging and inspirational to people. She sewed, sometimes we would take her things to alter for us. One year after dad and mama had passed, she took pieces of mama's robe that she always wore and daddy's robe, and she made pillow cases out of the robe material. And then she used some of the sheets from their bed and covering. She made clothes, pillowcases, and pillow jackets. She gave everyone in the family one. That's what Pat did.

Sometimes, I go down and we just get into talking and she would always be a blessing to me. She gave wise, good advice. Pat, I think she was sort of a seer. Sometimes she said the Lord would give her warnings if somebody was going to pass. So and so is having a baby, somebody might be going—you know the Lord would let her see some things in advance. And I don't know if she had seen her own passing. She might have, but she was encouraging us on the phone the day after we visited her [in the hospital]. She said they wanted to put her on the ventilator. She gave us hope that she was going to get off of the ventilator.

We heard about the virus and stuff but no way we thought something like that would get around in our family or to Pat because she's a Christian and Wanda, she was a beautiful Christian. That was the roughest thing for me. How did they get this when the scripture says "No plague shall come nigh thy dwelling"? God just let me know that he's merciful God. And that it was his doing, bringing this virus. He helped me to say amen to his will. Those were two beautiful sisters. He took the best of us. He took Pat and Wanda.

The Lord is the one that comforted me in losing my sister. Chronicles 7:13, He said, "If I cause a plague or famine, or pestilence in the land, if my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will heal their land."

Now, God is saying this. I believe he brought this pandemic to get us to turn away from our idols and start to keep His commandments. Because He is the one that's really in control. I heard Trump say, "Well, I think we oughta go back to work." And then the next day God doubled the numbers of deaths in the state of Illinois. What is [Trump's] response to the numbers going back up? He has none. I don't think he cares, because most of them are Afro-American. Trump doesn't care about us, so, "let 'em go back to work," and then that makes us the guinea pigs. Latinos and Blacks. But God was saying He's not ready for us to go back to work. He wants us to rest at home and we should get back to him, get to obeying our God.

I'm still a stickler for staying socially distant, wearing a mask, and frequently washing my hands with soap and water. Hand sanitizer is real. I'm in the best place I could be in having lost two sisters to this virus. My grief is consoled. And I'm comforted. I have talked it out pretty much, I'm at a good place with my grief. And so talking to you is good. Nothing wrong with that. Besides, you get to hear. It's therapeutic too. My sisters were some fine people. ❏



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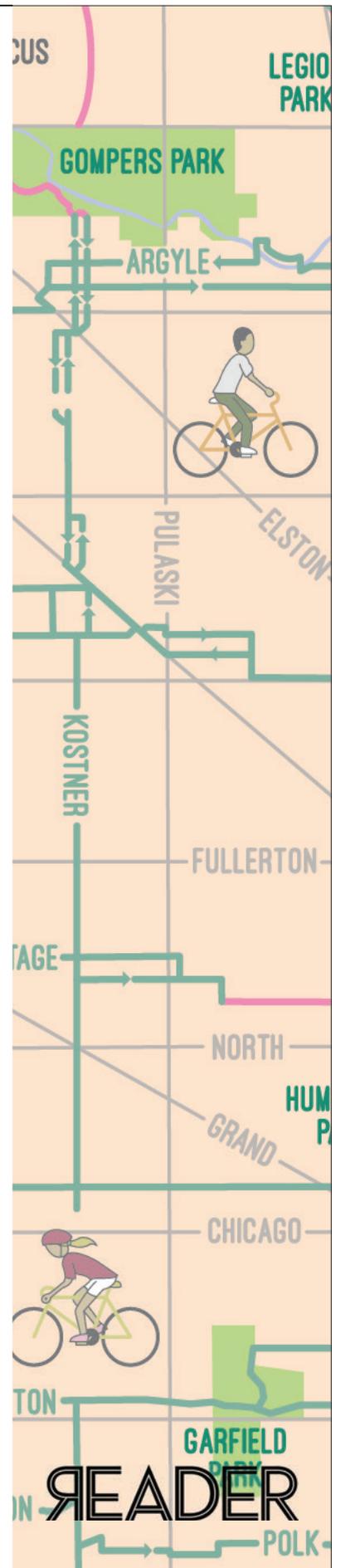
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# ARTS & CULTURE



## DOCUMENTING

### Black photography magic

Black Archivist aims to get cameras into the hands of Black people to better document their communities.

By **ARIEL PARRELLA-AURELI**

One day, when Uptown resident and freelance photographer Paul Octavious was shooting in his apartment, he saw young Black children walk by his window and stare at him while he worked. As a self-taught photographer who wasn't exposed to the art form as a child, seeing these children watch him lit a light bulb: How could he help open the door of photography to Black folks wanting an outlet to be creative and document their communities?

His idea became very real when the George Floyd protests erupted worldwide. Seeing protest documentation—and the misplaced desire from some white photographers to capitalize on capturing the movement—inspired

him to start Black Archivist, a donation-based photography project designed to get cameras into the hands of Black people all over the country so Black communities can accurately tell their own stories without worrying about barriers like equipment access or formal education.

"This is for Black people living in America. They don't have to be a photographBer per se—if you have the urge, the drive to want to learn photography, that's all you need to apply," says Octavious, who started documenting with his first camera in 2005 and has been a full-time freelancer since 2008. He launched the project on Juneteenth, and since then, Octavious says he has received more than

Paul Octavious  AGATHA THERESA

50 camera donations, 300 applications from Black photographers, and more than \$3,000, which will be used for shipping and purchasing new cameras if necessary. Through word of mouth and social media, the project has grown bigger than he ever thought it would.

The outpouring of community support speaks to the appetite for this kind of work in a time when protests for Black liberation are on center stage. Octavious thinks the movement reinvigorated folks to take action and see the disparity between Black and white communities in a new light. And part of that is credited to the power photography can bring to communities historically left out of the mainstream narrative.

"As a human race, we are more visual," he says. "That's what happened with George Floyd: People saw this Black man not breathing, with someone's knee on his neck. I think people had to see it in order to [believe it]."

This witnessing of history and documenting the humanity of Black life is seen through the work of 18-year-old Kaleb Autman, an organizer, photographer, filmmaker, and artist from the west side who has documented Black Liberation movements since he was 12 years old. After a recent protest at Mayor Lightfoot's house, Autman's camera, lens, and phone were destroyed after liquid spilled onto his bag. To replace this equipment essential to his documentation and organizing work, he created a GoFundMe that raised more than \$7,000 in less than 24 hours. "It felt humbling to understand that folks do see my work, and not even from the donations but from the messages of people I didn't know who had seen my photography, to my peers saying, 'I stand on your shoulders. You allowed me to do this and we are the same age,'" Autman says.

Octavious was one such person who reached out to the young photographer, offering a donated camera. But once the fundraiser goal was met, Autman decided to decline the offer so that the camera could go to a documenter who could not afford one. Having surpassed his goal, he paid it forward, giving \$500 to five organizers on the ground to help pay for rides to and from protests, a logistical matter not often acknowledged that is just as important as the action.

The role of documenting has opened opportunities for Autman—at 13, his work photographing Black Lives Matter marches in 2014 was published online at BET and NBC, making

him one of the youngest people in the U.S. to have photographs featured on a national media platform. While this fact is padded by his humility, it's a testament to how photography can build trust with the media and the community—and hold accountability. He says stripping away the financial barrier for Black creatives is key. It took Autman seven years to raise money for his first camera. "The power of photography is narrative building, documenting history, and it is humanizing the folks on the other side of the lens, as well as humanizing yourself," he says.

Vashon Jordan Jr., a 21-year-old photographer and Columbia College senior from West Pullman, wants more Black documenters out on the streets. The television student gained notoriety on social media as of late for covering recent unrest through an unfiltered and honest view that has allowed him to amplify Black voices, an approach which stems from his own experiences. But he doesn't want to be put on a pedestal for his work—it should be the norm, he says.

When he was a junior in high school, he bought his first DSLR camera and taught himself how to use it. He then won a sponsorship from a photo and film rental company to produce a short film about a trans woman wrongly accused of sexual assault to highlight how the justice system disproportionately affects transgender people. Since then, he has been documenting his community and beyond for the last five years. He recently gave his first camera to a friend, also his photo assistant, whose camera was stolen. "If you give a camera or a tool to the source, magic is guaranteed to be made because our lives and our experiences are magical," Jordan says.

That magic is what Octavious hopes to spread with Black Archivist. Aside from providing documentation access, the project is a way to uplift Black photographers, share their work, and create a network of support. Since Black Archivist began, he's been sharing beautiful photos on Instagram to highlight the variance of Black art and give these artists a bigger audience. And it's a reminder that anyone—regardless of race, education, or class—can do anything they want if they are drawn to it. "Not being a photographer and then becoming a photographer, I learned that I can become a photographer," Octavious says. "You have to believe it to make other people believe it." 

 @ArielParrella



## MUSEUMS

## Plague time at the Art Institute

What it's like to explore a familiar place under unfamiliar circumstances.

By **DMITRY SAMAROV**

When it was announced the Art Institute of Chicago was reopening I swore I wouldn't go. Museums are severely restricted places in the best of times. Would there be anything left to enjoy while masked, distanced, and subject to mandatory directional signage? Can art, which can give a window to the infinite, be appreciated despite the new and necessary scrims and barriers? Yet, when my old college friend Frank asked if I wanted to go, I was among the first in line outside the entrance to the Modern Wing a few minutes before noon on Thursday, July 30, waiting for the doors to open.

The first hour was limited to museum members and inside there was a receiving line of employees welcoming us back. We went up to visit an old friend first. Frank and I were students at SAIC at the start of the 90s. We have both been to this museum hundreds of times these past 30 years and have rarely missed a look at Willem de Kooning's *Excavation*. Curators have moved it several times as the museum has expanded and reconfigured, but

to us it is a touchstone the way Georges Seurat's *A Sunday at La Grande Jatte* or Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* is to the general public. *Excavation* is currently in a room which is a little too small for it, but at least it's got a couple other de Koonings to keep it company.

In the week prior to reopening the big art world tabloid news item was local billionaire Ken Griffin's announcement that he'd parked the Jean-Michel Basquiat he'd recently purchased for \$100 million on one of the museum's walls. A few minutes after leaving de Kooning we found it. There were a couple other viewers in the gallery straining to see what \$100 million looks like. I couldn't see it either. The painting, *Boy and Dog in Johnny-pump*, is certainly big enough to pretend to be important, but without the famous dead artist's name, if encountered, say, at a regional art fair, it wouldn't rate a slowdown to one's pace. Its importance has less to do with art than with the state of the world, where a rich guy can display his latest status symbol purchase in a public place for the envy of others.

The lions were getting lonely. COURTESY OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

One thing I noticed, which marked this visit as different from any previous one, is how much interaction there was between visitors and guards. They are usually just part of the scenery. The only time one talks to them is to ask for directions or be admonished for coming too close to the art. But this day every guard was acknowledged like a long-missed friend. It was like greeting distant relations at church after not having attended in years.

New signs were all over. Arrows, Xs, squares, and circles form a now-familiar Hobo Alphabet to everyone living through this plague time. The museum's floors and doors bore the telltale markings. Movements through rooms I know by heart are now micromanaged and regulated. Strolling through the Old Masters galleries we encountered a guard who pointed out an X on the floor and told us to turn around. Not being able to choose one's path is a sure sign of a drastic realignment.

It was just after 1 PM when we wandered near the Michigan Avenue entrance to see a stream of visitors slowly filing in. The public was here, it was time for us to leave, but out of the corner of his eye, Frank noticed something new. Gustave Caillebotte's *Paris Street; Rainy Day, 1877*—practically a mascot for the museum—didn't look like its old self. We came closer and noticed little differences; bits of color now popped, where once they'd receded, contrasts were now accentuated where they were once blurred. Restorers had obviously spent serious time deep cleaning the painting during the shutdown. It was like seeing an old movie in hi-def; perhaps more crystal clear than it needs to be.

I don't know when I'll return. For now, the first hour of every day—the museum is closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays—is restricted to members. Even before COVID, I had no love for crowds, so the chance to spend time with paintings I've loved for decades without being oppressed by groups of audio tour zombies staggering about is tempting. On the other hand, wearing a mask and being ever vigilant of breaking new rules is no way to lose oneself in the moment. This is our lot now. We have to take our respites and pleasures wherever they're offered, no matter how circumscribed or limited. □

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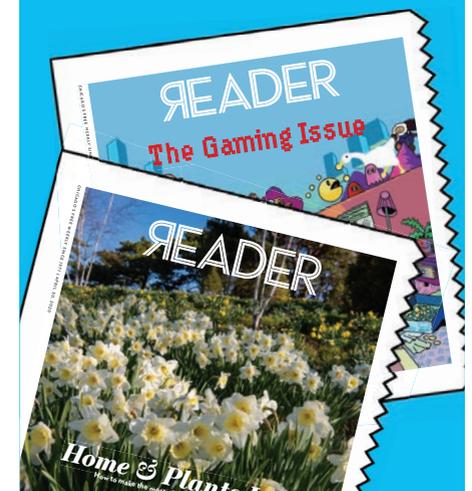
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## ARTS & CULTURE



### VISUAL ARTS

## Artists still run Chicago

The Hyde Park Art Center is bringing back the spaces we've all missed.

By S. NICOLE LANE

In a recent survey published in the Singapore-based paper the *Straits Times*, “artist” was labeled the top nonessential job during the pandemic. Folks flocked to social media to push back and criticize the results—and rightfully so. Just because museums have been largely closed and art openings have been put on pause doesn’t mean art is absent from our everyday experience.

Art spaces are trickling back with shows, events, and exhibitions since we entered phase four of the reopening. That’s why “Artists Run Chicago 2.0” makes so much damn sense. Because they do—and they always will—run Chicago (pandemic or not).

I don’t frequent the Art Institute or the Museum of Contemporary Art all that often. I’m more of an ACRE, Heaven, Franklin kind of gal. So it’s a relief to know that the Hyde Park Art Center’s exhibition is inviting all of my favorite artist-run, DIY galleries to feature work all over the building. No need to travel up to Oak Park and down to Pilsen to try and catch several openings in one night—they are all going to be in the galleries, hallways, and even the kitchen space of HPAC.

There are 50 galleries involved in “Artists Run Chicago 2.0,” and those are just a handful of the spaces that exist in the city’s DIY art scene.

Chicago thrives off of alternative art spaces. There’s even an exhibition space, Clutch, that takes place inside of a purse. Whether it’s in a backyard, a garage, or storefront, all of the spaces involved in the show are artist-run.

The Hyde Park Art Center is commemorating the anniversary of the original “Artists Run Chicago” show in 2009. Some of the galleries like 65GRAND, Julius Caesar, and Devening Projects overlap with this year’s show, but many of the galleries included in the 2.0 edition have popped up since 2009. Like many DIY spaces, some have come and gone, while others have transformed into a new gallery or project space.

In 2010, LVL3 started as a live-work space which has now turned into an inclusive exhibition space. LVL3 celebrated its ten-year anniversary in February, which is a large part of their selection of work in “Artist Run 2.0.” Vincent Uribe, the director of the gallery, says, “It’s an honor to participate alongside so many of our favorite artist-run spaces. It’s a bit surreal to think we’ve been doing year-round exhibition programming for the past ten years, having interacted with so many different artists from all over the world.”

The pieces at HPAC are work and ephemera that LVL3 has collected and archived over the

# ARTS & CULTURE

Work curated by LVL3 as part of “Artists Run Chicago 2.0”  COURTESY OF TRAN TRAN

years. “There are notes from artists, instructions, fragments of things left behind but they have a distinct memory tied to them to help us recognize the work we’ve put into LVL3 with so many different people involved,” Uribe says.

When I did a walk-through of the show with Allison Peters Quinn, the director of exhibitions at HPAC, she mentioned how different this opening will look compared to the 2009 exhibition. Artist-run gallery openings are known for their after-parties and the in-person connections made from artist to artist and gallery to gallery. She says that excitement will definitely be missed here as folks will have to view the show with limited capacity.

While the opening may look different, it’s still a way to engage with new galleries and project spaces. I was drawn to the library project space, Chuquimarca, and its display of a selection of Native, Caribbean, and Latinx art and history books that take a closer look at HPAC’s archive and library. Above the installation are the words “Decolonize Zhigaagoong, Defund CPD, and Defend DACA,” which, as John H. Guevara explains, acknowledges “Chicago’s Indigenous legacy and racist colonial systems. The assemblage of the statement and library installation hopes to encourage Chicago’s art communities to evaluate their principles and operations with social and political issues and laws.”

Guevara says while Chicago’s independent art spaces and projects are important, “initiatives that slow down, problematize, and workshop art-making, and are vocally working to be anti-racist and anti-colonial are more imperative.” So while folks may miss gallery openings, the connections made, and professional networking, it’s all trivial in the grand scheme of reality. Folks like Guevara are utilizing this exhibition to provide education and he explains that to make art for the “visibility sake becomes secondary,” and community and healing come first. “We aren’t able to speak on other cities, but that may be the juice of Chicago’s artist-run spaces and projects.” 

*The public can attend the Art Center’s opening of the exhibition on September 1 which takes place in Gallery’s 1, 2, 5, the Cleve Carney Gallery, the Kanter McCormick Gallery, and the Jackman Goldwasser Catwalk Gallery.*

 @snicolelane

## POETRY CORNER

### Make The Order

By Mojdeh Stoakley

I.  
This rank is holy  
I can baptize myself  
with each cloak of The Heavens  
royal blue Huntsville flight  
suit, custom patches,  
“Commander...” Like

a title given  
to me  
by men  
or God  
or men  
who think  
they’re Gods

but men will never be Gods  
even if Marshall men mistake  
themselves for Masters.  
Compliance does not  
concede permission  
rights or privilege.  
Their hands cannot control  
These Heavens,  
though they try.

I have landed safely  
now.

Stationed bravely  
in the mission. In the  
I own this crater! In the  
Respect my rank  
private! In the  
Ask me first! In the  
I know This!  
now.

II.  
I tell my students  
they can call me,  
Commander.

It’s an excuse  
to have soft  
conversations  
about gender  
identity, chosen  
names, self-  
assurance,  
and fighting  
Imposter  
Syndrome.

It didn’t start  
that way, but turned  
out to be The Answer  
to  
No Miss, please,  
No Ms, please,  
No Mr.

Please,  
Commander.

III.  
This rank was earned  
after suborned  
and sanctioned.  
I have made myself  
from the push-ups and  
exercise in not-drowning  
under the weight  
of the institution’s  
compulsory components  
g-force spin, in this  
royal blue Huntsville flight  
suit, custom patches. Say  
“Commander...”

IV.  
I know this is cosplay.  
It didn’t start  
that way, but turned

royal blue Huntsville flight  
suit, custom patches. Say  
“Commander...”

IV.  
I know this is cosplay.  
It didn’t start  
that way, but turned  
out to be The Answer.

I know that these rank pips  
and embroidered letters  
and heat embossed wings  
are merely things I design  
and make-to-order. No one  
makes ceremony or appointment  
or offers me purple hearts  
for my PTSD.

Is it so different when requesting Social Security  
remove a husband’s or father’s or slave master’s  
surname so that your documents are no  
longer branded? Or when you ask for the police  
report to read: assault  
instead of: simple battery?

Sign the paperwork.  
Make the order.

Mojdeh Stoakley is an internationally touring and award-winning writer, performer, educator, and producer. They’re a genderqueer Afro-Persian who’s two parts social practice artist and one part space cadet.

*Poem curated by Nikki Patin, who holds an MFA in creative non-fiction from the University of Southern Maine, is a recipient of a 3Arts Make A Wave award in music, and was recently named one of “30 Writers to Watch” by the Guild Literary Complex. Patin is the community engagement director for the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation and the founder and executive producer of Surviving the Mic, a monthly live podcast and writing workshop series based on the south side of Chicago, where she lives with her six-year-old son, Tobias.*

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David Zak; Donterrio Johnson BOB EDDY/ZEKE DOLEZALEK

## CHANGES OF THE OLD GUARD

# Pride goeth forward after David Zak's fall

What can be learned from the departure of Pride Films and Plays's founder?

By **KERRY REID**

**T**here are no shows to speak of happening on Chicago stages, but the offstage drama has been at a fever pitch in recent months.

Victory Gardens Theater underwent a very public dressing-down from the playwrights ensemble and others in the theater community after the board announced that Erica Daniels, the executive director, was replacing departing artistic director Chay Yew as the executive artistic director, sans the national search the board had promised. Daniels subsequently resigned in the wake of protests, and Roxanna Conner was named acting managing director; the board has announced a new search process for the next artistic director, including a call for public comment.

Andrew Alexander, the longtime owner, CEO, and executive producer at Second City, also resigned after social media criticism about institutional racism at the comedy behemoth, with Anthony LeBlanc named interim executive producer. Charna Halpern, the owner of iO, beset with financial difficulties exacerbated by COVID-19 and facing ongoing allegations about

a culture of racism and harassment at her comedy theater, decided to close it down for good.

The release of the “BIPOC Demands for White American Theatre” from the coalition We See You, White American Theater (We See You W.A.T.) last month has also focused attention on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion across the country. Locally, the collapse of Profiles Theatre after many longstanding allegations of sexual abuse and harassment came to light in the *Reader* in 2016 has led to a national push to adopt standards for safety and accountability, especially in non-Equity venues, piloted by Not In Our House through the Chicago Theatre Standards.

In late June, David Zak, executive director of Pride Films and Plays and one of the pioneers of Chicago off-Loop theater with the long-gone Bailiwick Repertory, faced a wide-ranging series of Facebook allegations. These encompassed stories of unsafe physical conditions in both the two-venue PFP home (for those who like irony, the theaters were formerly occupied by Profiles) and the company's Uptown rehearsal space, as

well as allegations about Zak engaging in patterns of abuse and harassment toward actors and others involved with PFP, or ignoring such abuse from others associated with the company.

On July 3, the 64-year-old Zak issued a public statement announcing his departure that read in part: “It pains me that my actions and words have hurt many others in our Chicago theatre community and for that I apologize greatly. I would not intentionally offend, hurt, or exclude anyone in our arts community, which plays such an important role to build understanding and bridges in our community. But it has happened, and I am sorry.”

The PFP board simultaneously announced the appointment of Donterrio Johnson as artistic director. Johnson is an actor and director whose lengthy list of credits includes his Jeff-nominated 2019 staging of the musical *A Man of No Importance* at PFP. The board also announced that JD Caudill and Robert Ollis will continue as company artistic associates.

So what happened? And why did it all come to a head now?

I heard from well over a dozen people who were involved either with PFP or with Bailiwick Repertory—detractors of Zak, champions, and those who fall in between. What emerged was a complex portrait of how much things have changed, in both Chicago theater and the gay community, since Zak first opened doors for LGBTQ theater artists at Bailiwick in the 1980s. (Zak was inducted into the Chicago LGBT Hall of Fame in 2013.) The recent calls to rename “Boys Town” illustrate some of those changes, as does the increased attention in recent years to the racism and harassment young LGBTQ people of color face in the neighborhood.

Some of the conflict seems driven by generational shifts, as the old paradigms of putting up with whatever you have to in order to be in a show have thankfully broken down in the wake of #MeToo and so many other heightened calls for justice inside and outside theater. But there are also lessons here for going forward; about board accountability for the actions of artistic leaders, particularly when those leaders are the organization's founders; about how even theaters that champion work by marginalized communities can continue patterns of bias, neglect, and abuse toward others; and finally, about what a theater community wracked by the pandemic and facing societal reckonings on several fronts can and should be in the future.

## FROM BAILIWICK TO PFP

**I**n 1982, Zak started Bailiwick Repertory. Initially identified primarily as a director's theater (as opposed to a company with a standing acting ensemble, like Steppenwolf), Bailiwick produced an annual directors' festival (full disclosure: I directed a piece for the 1991 installment). An early hit was the Zak-directed 1987 musical adaptation (by Sir Peter Hall) of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which won seven non-Equity Jeff Awards.

But by the end of the 1980s, Bailiwick became increasingly identified with work by and about LGBTQ people—particularly gay men. Among many other shows, the company produced the Chicago premiere of Robert Chesley's *Jerker*, about two gay men connecting via phone sex, in 1988, and the world premieres of *Hannah Free* by Claudia Allen, *Trafficking in Broken Hearts* by Edwin Sanchez, and the long-running hit *Party* by David Dillon. Long before rising to national fame, Alexandra Billings (*Transparent*) explored life as a transwoman in her 1996 solo show at Bailiwick, *Before I Disappear*.

Eventually, Bailiwick's annual Pride series became a showcase for LGBTQ work. *Jerker* was a harbinger of things to come, so to speak: over the years, Bailiwick offered a slew of shows highlighting gay relationships, often with men in various states of undress, including the long-running *Naked Boys Singing*. Alongside the more overtly sexually charged shows, Bailiwick also won acclaim for its musical productions, such as its 2004 Chicago premiere of Jason Robert Brown and Alfred Uhry's *Parade*, based on the 1913 lynching of Leo Frank, a Jewish foreman accused of murdering a young girl who worked in his factory, and the American premiere of Richard Thomas and Stewart Lee's *Jerry Springer: The Opera*.

Bailiwick primarily operated out of two Lakeview spaces: the long-gone Jane Addams Hull-House Center at 3212 N. Broadway (which housed Steppenwolf in its early days) and then the old Chicago Filmmakers space at 1229 W. Belmont (now the home of Theater Wit). They moved out of the latter in 2008, and dissolved in 2009. (Another company, Bailiwick Chicago, which had no association with Zak, arose from those ashes and produced until 2015 under artistic director Lili-Anne Brown.)

Pride Films and Plays, Zak's next venture, formed in 2010 and was itinerant for a few years before taking over the old Profiles venues in 2016 and renaming them the Pride Arts Center. According to the last tax forms on file, covering

the fiscal year of July 2017-June 2018, PFP's annual revenues were \$361,446, against operating expenses of \$348,249.

But a common thread in the histories of both Bailiwick Repertory and PFP has been ongoing financial problems. A 2008 *Time Out Chicago* piece by Jake Malooley noted that various theater blogs were calling out Bailiwick for failing to pay artists, and that playwright Jim Provenzano was suing over nonpayment of royalties for his play *Pins*. "There are two really popular misconceptions about the Bailiwick," Zak responded. "One is that people are always naked on stage, and the other is that no one gets paid. And that's just wrong."

Nicholas Patricca, a playwright and former artistic associate at Bailiwick Repertory, praised Zak in an e-mail (one of several pro-Zak missives that landed in my inbox last month) as "one of the most important artists of our contemporary Chicago Theatre movement," adding, "David has a rough and ready style that suits him and that keeps the theatres he heads 'up and running.' His genius and his style overcome great obstacles and often produce great theatre."

But that "rough and ready style" is precisely what others found objectionable.

## THE CALL OUT

On June 26, director and choreographer Jon Martinez, who worked on two shows at PFP (as choreographer for 2017's *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* by Stephan Elliott and Allan Scott, codirected by Zak and Derek Van Barham, and director for 2018's *It's Only a Play* by Terrence McNally) made a public post on Facebook that began, "People have recently asked me if they should work for PFP. PFP is not a place I think any Chicago artist should work and here is why."

Among the six bullet points Martinez listed were sets that featured "exposed sharp edges of wood," and a rehearsal room "that was dirty and had roaches and rodent feces." He also called out PFP staff for "not swiftly dealing with a robbery in their theatre when in production or providing alternative measures to help the cast feel safe" as well as lack of marketing support for productions and the fact that PFP, at the time of the post, had been without an artistic director since 2018. (Zak's official title was executive director. Nelson Rodriguez served as artistic director from 2016 to 2018. He could not be reached for comment for this article.)

That post opened up the floodgates. Over 260 comments were posted, with many commenters amplifying Martinez's complaints and adding

stories about verbal sexual harassment from Zak and other associates at PFP, body shaming, lack of respect for nonbinary and trans artists, and marginalization of women's work at PFP. Subsequently, a petition on change.org to Not In Our House (which has no regulatory authority over theaters) and other organizations circulated, calling for Zak's resignation.

Reached for comment on Martinez's post and the subsequent allegations, Zak said, "I'm not denying anything. I apologize to the people who got hurt. But I also think that we wouldn't have lasted this long if there was not a lot of good stuff going. And that's what's interesting about reading comments from people who worked here, in some instances for four or five or six shows."

In a follow-up interview, Martinez noted that the precipitating event for his post was that he had been asked by Zak to direct a two-person musical, *Girlfriend*, inspired in part by Matthew Sweet's 1991 album of the same title and originally slated to open live this month (it has since been canceled). After the McNally play, Martinez said that Zak and some of the PFP board members "asked for my feedback on the experience and I gave my feedback honestly on how I felt the experience was." That e-mail from Martinez ended with, he said, "And that is why I will never work for PFP again." He never received a response or heard from the board or Zak, until the offer to direct the musical arrived.

In addition to his unease in directing even a socially distanced live two-person show amid COVID, Martinez said he was discomfited that his earlier complaints were never acknowledged, and that he felt the message was "all is forgotten, because I have this opportunity for you."

"I think in particular in Chicago, there is this sort of mentality to forgive and forget without actually receiving an apology or anything because of the opportunity," Martinez said. "I did not have David in my mind whatsoever in terms of listing these grievances. Because I didn't see him as the sole person that was part of this . . . I'm not calling for the termination of anyone. I'm not calling for the theater to be burned to the ground."

Martinez added that as the comments piled up on his post, along with private messages he received, "All of them started to focus on David. And what became apparent to everyone, which is what I assume prompted the petition that was started, was that it's not the company. It is stemming from this one person who has all of this power, logistically, with how the company is set up." He added that no one from the current

board reached out to him after the post went public.

For Martinez and others to whom I spoke, the fact that PFP is one of the few queer-identified theaters in the city made their experiences even worse. "For myself as a gay man, as a queer person, as a queer-identifying person, you live your whole life hardly ever seeing examples of things on TV or in movies or in your real life of people like you. . . . To have this place that not only exists and produces plays, but they have their own actual space, specifically in Chicago? That is so incredibly cool."

Martinez added that being in the COVID shutdown has led him to reevaluate what he wants in an artistic collaboration. "I refuse to go back to a world where [actors] have to ask me if it's OK to work at a company because they've maybe heard some stories, but they really need to audition because it would be a great opportunity for them. . . . I think I didn't say anything before because I was afraid for me."

## WOMEN'S WORK

Like Martinez, director Iris Sowlat was drawn to PFP because of its mission. "I applied to be the assistant director of a show in 2015. The show was going to open in 2016. At that point I had not heard any whisperings about David. I was 22 and had just finished college. So I was just like, 'Oh, there's a gay theater. I'm gay.' And that one show alone [*Raggedy And* by David Valdes Greenwood, directed by Cecillie Keenan] from my perspective was a good experience." (That show was produced by PFP at Rivendell Theatre in Edgewater, prior to the company taking over Profiles.)

Sowlat said that her first negative experiences with PFP came in 2017 with (*For the Love Of*), or, *The Roller Derby Play*, a world premiere by Gina Femia and directed by Rachel Edwards Harvith, on which Sowlat served as production manager. Nelson Rodriguez, then the artistic director, hired Sowlat for the job. "He was a great mentor, he encouraged my theatrical pursuits, and he was the main reason I accepted company membership when it was offered to me," she said. But though Rodriguez was the artistic director, Sowlat found that necessary production questions she had—involving everything from budgets to contracts to schedules—ended up going through Zak, who, she said, "basically positioned himself to be the one who had all the information. But I think he also definitely distanced himself from people or things that he just didn't care about nurturing as much."

In Sowlat's view, those people and things

often involved work by and about women.

Sowlat directed Corinne J. Kaweck's lesbian drama *The Days Are Shorter* in 2018. Around the same time that play was running in PFP's smaller venue, the Buena, *Flies!*, a musical parody of *Lord of the Flies*, was playing in the larger Broadway space. "It was abundantly clear that *Flies!* had more advertising than *The Days Are Shorter*," Sowlat said. She also noticed that posters for her show were left sitting in boxes in the theater, undistributed, while posters for *Flies!* were on the street, and that her show didn't get the same social media profile from PFP as the musical. In an itemized statement Sowlat prepared for a community meeting on PFP (one that never happened in light of Zak's resignation), she said that Zak told her a separate company handled poster distribution. Zak said that he thought "Iris, like everybody else, knew that people in many ways marketed their own shows because we didn't have a full-time marketing staff at that point."

Sowlat noted, "There were many conversations where [Zak] would say, 'Oh, we'd do more stuff about women if we had the money for it, but we don't have the money for it.'" She also said that Zak "started treating me as though I was in charge of the women's program," even sending her lists of the "wealthiest lesbians" and asking if she could coax any of them to join the PFP board. She added in an e-mail, "The way that David viewed and treated women, including asking me to go search for lesbian board members, was his way of creating a false problem where there really shouldn't have been one at all."

Zak attributed some of the problems with the women's program to a dearth of available lesbian-themed plays with significant audience appeal. "It's a national trend, even a worldwide trend, that few lesbian plays are being produced. That creates a vicious circle in which writers, seeing a limited market for lesbian-themed plays, are discouraged from writing about those themes. . . . That's as old as time. We attempted to overcome this by instituting our LezPlay competition and in fact *The Days Are Shorter* was a finalist in our 2016 LezPlay Contest."

Part of the management problems at PFP Sowlat also attributed to an overambitious production schedule. "They ended up growing to a point where they easily had eight or nine shows a year," she said. "It definitely looked like they were biting off more than they could chew because for most of those shows, the quality was not that good."

"It may be fair to say we were overly ambitious in our production plans," said Zak. "After

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moving into the Pride Arts Center spaces we felt financially pressured to keep both stages busy. Sometimes outside tenants canceled on us and we responded by planning productions of our own on short notice to fill in the gaps the cancellations created. I'm proud of all our work—much of which was recognized through awards and positive critical reviews—but we may have spread ourselves thin in our ability to market all the shows.”

Like Martinez, Sowlat said that attempts to involve the board in discussions about concerns she and others at PFP had with Zak's management style and “general rude behavior,” as her community statement characterized it (she claimed that this behavior included comments on actors' body types and “sex appeal”) went nowhere; when one board member found out that she was collecting some stories from other artists concerned about what they had experienced, “he sent me this really nasty e-mail.”

But Keenan, who worked with Zak for many years at Bailiwick Rep, paints a slightly different picture. “Many of us owe our careers to him,” she noted in an e-mail. “He is part of our community and has given thousands of people work. He is complex and complicated but I have more ‘problems’ with others who have less heart and gobs of money.”

Reached by phone, Keenan expanded on her comments. “I feel like we're starting to kick babies out with bath waters, as opposed to ‘who is responsible for this particular thing?’ It's the board. The board, when I was there . . . with few exceptions, never ever stepped up. And it's not just these boards. It's every board. It's always the fricking artistic director, executive director, whatever you want to call them, who has to get down on their hands and knees and scrub the floor.” But she also noted that both she and Zak “come from a different generation where we really didn't expect anybody to give a shit, you know? That doesn't take away from what other people are wanting now.”

## STRUCTURAL FLAWS

The lack of board oversight is something others who worked with PFP noted. Derek Van Barham, who served as associate artistic director at PFP and directed eight productions there (two as codirector with Zak) before leaving in November of 2018, first met Zak as a grad student at Roosevelt University. “I'm very grateful for the opportunities that I was given, and I'm very proud of a lot of the work

that I created there,” he noted in an e-mail. “Like many directors at PFP, I realized that part of the job was incubating the cast and team, protecting the process.” He added, “There's a disconnect between the award-winning shows and the experiences of the artists working on them. And that's not just a PFP thing.”

Barham shared his 2018 resignation letter from PFP with me, in which he wrote, “As AAD, I was often the recipient of people's frustrations, concerns, and disappointments. And I just don't have the energy to hold the dam anymore, especially when I don't know how to justify or defend the decisions from the top.” In an e-mail, Barham noted that he did receive responses from some members of the board, but there were no “no action items, or attempts to rectify anything.” The board has turned over completely since Barham's resignation.

In a phone interview, Barham noted, “There are a few areas of concern being expressed. There's David as a problematic figure in a queer organization because of insensitive things that he says, and working methods that may feel dated or old school. Then there's David just as a challenging, difficult person to work with. And then there's the safety of the building that needs to be addressed.”

Zak attributed many of the problems with the move into the old Profiles space and the subsequent expansion of programming. “We were trying to do all the letters of the LGBTQ and more. We were trying to bring in racial diversity as much as possible. And looking back on it, that's not something that any organization could have done, no matter the size. Unless you're the Royal Shakespeare Company or the National Theatre of Great Britain.” He also said that the artistic associates, who were supposed to help fill the gap between the fundraising of the board and the day-to-day operations, didn't always step up to meet those demands.

John Nasca, 62, a director and costume designer who began working with PFP in its earliest days in 2010, was an artistic associate with the company for several years. “I think there were nine of us [artistic associates],” he said. “And basically we were there in name only as we came to realize that we didn't really have a voice. We had monthly meetings, but it never really came to much because it was what David wanted to do.”

Nasca also attributed internal conflict to changing tastes for gay theater audiences. “Every show, we have to do shirtless publicity photos, and it's like, these don't sell tickets anymore. They might have back then in the

early days of Bailiwick, but it's not enough to get people in the seats anymore. Could we be a little bit more creative rather than doing the same old thing over and over and over again?”

Nasca noted that he wasn't alone among the artistic associates in feeling that his concerns were not heard by Zak and the board. “David was telling the board one thing and he was telling us another thing. . . . When we did personally talk to the board, it just felt like they didn't have any position of power.” Nasca finally left PFP in 2018, and he said, “There were like 18 people who left in the same span of two weeks.”

James Anthony, who joined the PFP board in 2014 and also worked as audience services director until they too left in 2018, noted, “Sometimes, it was difficult working with David because cofounders tend to have a way they like to do things.” Anthony, who is nonbinary, said, “There was quite a bit of sexual harassment and disrespect towards people, not just in pronouns, but just in the tone of voice and how things were run and operated.” They added, “That was a recurring theme for me, too. I had conversations with David about it as much as I could when I was there, and it never seemed to stick.” They also said, “PFP, technically, the whole company was just David.”

But Anthony, who has extensive experience in equity, diversity, and inclusion training, cautioned that the problems with PFP, both in terms of EDI and structural soundness, aren't unique. “Most boards of directors are white folks,” and too many companies are “trying to become something that they're not too quickly without developing a strategic vision and plan to put it into action.”

## WHAT NOW?

As the new artistic director, Donterrio Johnson is understandably focused on the future. “The first thing is—I spent quite some time reading over all the comments and things that were both on Facebook and the petition—and the first thing is really the inner structure of the company, making sure that we have representation for everybody, both on the board and the artistic associates, making sure that our theater looks like the world that is outside. I know a lot of people have issues with the rehearsal space and dressing rooms and just the upkeep of the theater, so we've already started gutting the space and making sure it can be presentable when the doors open again.”

But Johnson, who is Black, also wants to overhaul the kinds of shows that PFP has been

best known for. “I think the big thing now is about inclusion. I want every story to be told within a season.” He added, “We're really looking to broaden what we're doing and not just focus on the five great gay plays that exist, but kind of go into the world and go ‘OK, how can we tell these well-known stories in different ways, with different genders and different color and all that kind of thing?’” As an example, he cites his dream project: an all-female/femme-identified *Sweeney Todd*.

Dan Hickey has been on the PFP board for two years, and though he said he was unaware of any “interactions” between artists and the board regarding conditions at PFP or Zak's actions, he emphasized that actor safety is a priority now for the company. “When I heard that there were actors who didn't feel safe, or that there were certain things within the theater that made them feel unsafe, that concerned me a lot.” Hickey also noted that the Martinez Facebook post came shortly after PFP was taken to task by a BIPOC actor for announcing a virtual staged reading in their “Pride in Place” series of Brad Fraser's *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* that featured an all-white cast. (That reading was canceled.) “That, in my estimation, was what gave people pause to look more closely at Pride as an arbiter and as [an organization] that doesn't operate within full representation. So that I feel was a precursor.”

The board seems to be making the right noises about encouraging diversity and overhauling both the physical environment of PFP and its vision, which Johnson describes as “rebrand, restructure, and reignite.”

But what still remains unknown is what resources will be available for Johnson and his team to fully remake an organization that has for so long carried the imprimatur of its founder. As with Victory Gardens and Second City—as well as other organizations across the country that have started handing over leadership to BIPOC artists and administrators just as American theater is facing its worst financial crisis in living memory—one wonders if the new generation will be fully empowered by their boards, as well as foundations, audiences, and the larger community to move forward with the changes that are desperately needed.

Creating an atmosphere where artists feel they can speak out about their working conditions and have those concerns heard and addressed would be a welcome first step. 

 @kerryreid



Agnès Varda in Chicago for 2015's CinéVardaExpo  MATT LANG

## FEATURE

# (Re)discover Agnès Varda

A new Criterion Collection box set encompasses the filmmaker's work—and reminds of her time spent in Chicago.

By KATHLEEN SACHS

What's a resilient auteur to do when their movie flops? After her 1966 film *Les Créatures*—now finally available for home viewing in a new Criterion Collection box set—failed to engage critics and audiences alike, Agnès Varda took figurative lemons and made lemonade: she later used 35mm release prints of the film to create an installation called *Ma Cabane de l'Échec, or My Shack of Failure*, a rough-hewn hut with translucent walls made out of the salvaged film strips. Speaking of this structure in her 2008 film *The Beaches of Agnès*, Varda said, “In here, I feel like cinema is the house I live in,” adding in voice-over, “it's like I've always lived there.”

As a stand-in for the home she found in cinema, a residence literally made of film is an aptly lyrical expression of this impish master's devotion to the medium. Similarly, the Criterion box set represents a home for Varda's body of work. At the risk of waxing poetic, I felt euphoric when I first held *The Complete Films of Agnès Varda*, the weight of the object in my hands an implausible proxy for the totality of her. It's a beautiful piece of physical media,

containing 15 Blu-ray discs with 39 of her films (21 features, 17 shorts, and one documentary miniseries), several hours of illuminating special features, and an exquisitely designed 200-page book with writings by Michael Koresky, Amy Taubin, So Mayer, and others, as well as depictions of her photo and installation work. The discs themselves are grouped by theme—“Early Varda,” “Around Paris,” “In California,” “Her Body, Herself,” and “Jacques Demy” among them—which contextualize her biography (for instance, Varda was married to fellow New Wave director Jacques Demy, and they lived in California for several years) and the themes she explored through her work up until her death in March 2019.

Varda was at the center of one of Chicago's most joyful cultural events of the past decade when, in 2015, she attended a celebration of her work called CinéVardaExpo at the Logan Center for the Arts, organized in part by Dominique Bluher, lecturer in the Department of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago; a personal friend of Varda, Bluher also appears in the miniseries *Agnès de ci de*

*là Varda* (2011). It was an ecstatic celebration, where Varda spoke about many of her films and appeared with an accompanying exhibition called *Photographs Get Moving (potatoes and shells, too)*, which featured several of her photographs and installations. People traveled from across the country to see Varda, including two young women who came wearing potato necklaces in homage to her 2000 documentary *The Gleaners and I*; Varda loved the girls' spirit. Another woman brought her cat (Varda being known for having loved them), to the surprise of Varda and most everyone else. “It was like every event where she is present,” Bluher says of the visit, “it is something that people do not forget.” Less enchantingly a man in the audience during Varda's opening-night lecture asked whether she preferred Jean-Luc Godard or François Truffaut, a question I wouldn't advise anyone inquire of a venerated female auteur, but which she handled gracefully nonetheless.

The Belgian-born Varda was 26 when she made her first film, *La Pointe Courte* (1955), an auspicious debut that arguably heralded the French New Wave before Truffaut made his seminal ode, *The 400 Blows* (1959). Varda was a key member of the so-called Left Bank Group, along with Demy, Alain Resnais (who edited *La Pointe Courte*), and Chris Marker, among others; she's considered to be the only woman filmmaker associated with the movement. Her body of work is varied, ranging from feature-length narratives (*Cléo From 5 to 7*, *Le bonheur*, *Vagabond*) and documentaries (*The Gleaners and I*, *The Beaches of Agnès*, *Faces Places*, which she codirected with visual artist JR) to a collection of uncommon short films that represent some of her best efforts.

*Uncle Yanco* (1968), an offbeat portrait of one of her Greek relatives, is a fan favorite; *Black Panthers* (1970), as timely now as it was on first release, is an outsider's look at the revolutionary political organization. One I especially love is *Ulysse* (1982), a self-reflexive essay in which Varda examines her photograph of the same name, a stunning piece that exhibits her compositional mastery. While going through the box set, I revisited *Les dites cariatides* (1984), originally made for French television, a lyrical tour of the shapely columns scattered around Paris complemented by selections of poetry by Charles Baudelaire, which Varda recites. Whether one is seeing

a certain Varda film for the first time—per the Criterion Collection, this marks the U.S. home-video premieres of *Les Créatures*, *Jacquot de Nantes*, *One Hundred and One Nights*, and *Les 3 boutons*—or revisiting it, the idea of discovery is essential both within Varda's work and to appreciating it.

Former *Reader* critic Jonathan Rosenbaum, who led a Q&A with Varda after *Cléo From 5 to 7* screened at the Music Box Theatre during her 2015 visit and who will be teaching a course on her this fall at the School of the Art Institute, remarks about this extensive compilation of work that “the main value, in her case, is to show how versatile she was, rather than show continuity . . . to show that she tried a lot of different things.” Rosenbaum specifically cited Varda's short film *Plaisir d'amour en Iran* (1977), pointing out that Iran was just one of many places, literally and figuratively, that she went to in her practice. “Part of the value of having a lot of her work drawn together is to show how many different worlds she managed to encompass,” he says.

There's little in the set that doesn't reflect Varda's singular waggishness. Even the menus for each disc are evocative of her charm and whimsy; scores from her films provide the background music, and the design choices recall her own colorful eccentricity. The special features are fantastic and too many to list here, but standouts include *Nausicaa* (1970), a television film once banned because of its criticism of the Greek government; other hard-to-see works, such as segments Varda directed for the 1983 French television program *Une minute pour une image*; illuminating video essays; and, finally, bountiful footage of Varda herself, introducing the films, attending festivals, and generally imparting her wisdom on film, on art, on life.

After *Faces Places* (2017), Varda became a different sort of cultural icon, her diminutive stature, two-tone bowl cut, and discernible *joie de vivre* became emblems more of an admirably joyful person than a rigorous artist. It's understandable why she sparks a desire to connect with her on a personal level (as Rosenbaum notes, “a lot of filmmakers have ways of integrating their own lives in their work, but she went further”), but there's also something to be said about appreciating her as the venerable auteur she was, whose work challenges us in imperceptible ways, its receptiveness and vulnerability radical in terms that are difficult to articulate. To put it succinctly, as Bluher says, “She's an artist. Period. And one of the most important artists, period.” 

# NEW TIMES REQUIRE NEW THINKING

Better read this if you are 62 or older and still making mortgage payments.

It's a well-known fact that for many older Americans, the home is their single biggest asset, often accounting for more than 45% of their total net worth. **And with interest rates near all-time lows while home values are still high, this combination creates the perfect dynamic for getting the most out of your built-up equity.**

But, many aren't taking advantage of this unprecedented period. According to new statistics from the mortgage industry, senior homeowners in the U.S. are now sitting on more than 7.19 trillion dollars\* of unused home equity.

Not only are people living longer than ever before, but there is also greater uncertainty in the economy. With home prices back up again, ignoring this "hidden wealth" may prove to be short sighted when looking for the best long-term outcome.

All things considered, it's not surprising that more than a million homeowners have already used a government-insured Home Equity Conversion Mortgage (HECM) loan to turn their home equity into extra cash for retirement.

It's a fact: no monthly mortgage payments are required with a government-insured HECM loan; however the borrowers are still responsible for paying for the maintenance of their home, property taxes, homeowner's insurance and, if required, their HOA fees.

Today, HECM loans are simply an effective way for homeowners 62 and older to get the extra cash they

need to enjoy retirement.

Although today's HECM loans have been improved to provide even greater financial protection for homeowners, there are still many misconceptions.

For example, a lot of people mistakenly believe the home must be paid off in full in order to qualify for a HECM loan, which is not the case. In fact, one key advantage of a HECM is that the proceeds will first be used to pay off any existing liens on the property, which frees up cash flow, a huge blessing for seniors living on a fixed income. Unfortunately, many senior homeowners who might be better off with a HECM loan don't even

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bother to get more information because of rumors they've heard.

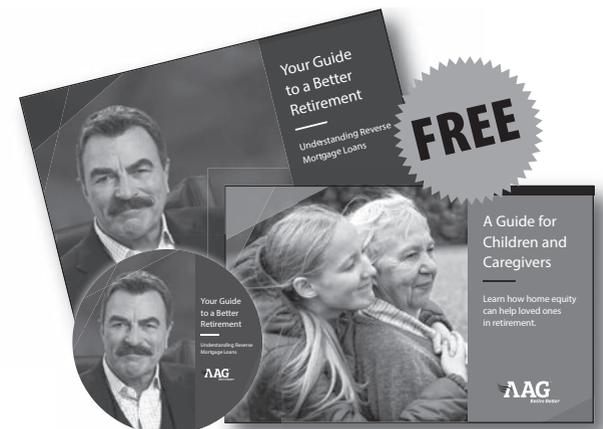
In fact, a recent survey by American Advisors Group (AAG), the nation's number one HECM lender, found that over 98% of their clients are satisfied with their loans. While these special loans are not for everyone, they can be a real lifesaver for senior homeowners - especially in times like these.

The cash from a HECM loan can be used for almost any purpose. Other common uses include making home improvements, paying off medical bills or helping other

family members. Some people simply need the extra cash for everyday expenses while others are now using it as a safety net for financial emergencies.

If you're a homeowner age 62 or older, you owe it to yourself to learn more so that you can make the best decision - for your financial future.

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\*Source: <https://reversemortgagedaily.com/2019/12/17/senior-housing-wealth-reaches-record-high-of-7-19-trillion>

Reverse mortgage loan terms include occupying the home as your primary residence, maintaining the home, paying property taxes and homeowners insurance. Although these costs may be substantial, AAG does not establish an escrow account for these payments. However, a set-aside account can be set up for taxes and insurance, and in some cases may be required. Not all interest on a reverse mortgage is tax-deductible and to the extent that it is, such deduction is not available until the loan is partially or fully repaid.

AAG charges an origination fee, mortgage insurance premium (where required by HUD), closing costs and servicing fees, rolled into the balance of the loan. AAG charges interest on the balance, which grows over time. When the last borrower or eligible non-borrowing spouse dies, sells the home, permanently moves out, or fails to comply with the loan terms, the loan becomes due and payable (and the property may become subject to foreclosure). When this happens, some or all of the equity in the property no longer belongs to the borrowers, who may need to sell the home or otherwise repay the loan balance. V2020.06.30

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Retire Better





Amulet

NOW PLAYING

RR Amulet

*Amulet* takes its time revealing its terror. Following Tomaz (Alec Secăreanu), a displaced man who arrives at the dilapidated home of Magda (Carla Juri), a peculiar woman living with a nun and looking after her dying mother, the movie builds alongside their budding relationship. As the two grow close, Tomaz notices increasingly strange occurrences related to the mysterious mother who never leaves her room. The former soldier sees an opportunity, though, and believes if he can release Magda from her malevolent mother, he can relieve himself of his sins. Pairing this plot with creepy sound cues, chilling set design, and captivating performances creates spellbinding suspense, while the sexually charged imagery embedded throughout begins to point to the truth—if one exists. Culminating in an otherworldly conclusion that calls to mind H.R. Giger visuals, *Amulet* won't answer all the viewers' questions, but it will keep their attention as it possesses them. —**BECCA JAMES** 99 min. [Music Box Theatre Virtual Cinema](#)

RR Creem: America's Only Rock 'n' Roll Magazine

Established in 1969 as a Detroit counterculture rag, *Creem* was named after the British rock band as a snub to what its founders viewed as the coastal elitism of *Rolling Stone*, which had launched the year before. By the mid-70s *Creem* had become the second-best-selling rock magazine in the country, and its irreverent, subversive, and not-always-PC journalism helped not just cover, but define rock and punk culture. This documentary gives you the good (pioneering/badass women editors and managers), the bad (behavior, mostly), and the bonkers (staff commune in rural Michigan) behind a publication that was ahead of its time, and the drive, vision, and dysfunction of the groundbreaking team who made it. There's plenty of nostalgia to go around, some from rock stars who grew up reading it—or who were lauded and/or panned in its pages. But in true *Creem* fashion, there's

more straight talk than rose-tinted glasses. *Creem's* hey-day is long gone, but its influence continues to resonate more than half a century since it reigned as "America's Only Rock 'n' Roll Magazine." —**JAMIE LUDWIG** 75 min. [Music Box Theatre Virtual Cinema](#)

RR Desert One

Acclaimed documentary filmmaker Barbara Kopple (*Harlan County USA*, *American Dream*) applies her refined partisanship to this thorough examination of Operation Eagle Claw, a failed 1980 rescue mission ordered by President Jimmy Carter to bring home 52 Americans taken hostage in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. It's straightforward but engrossing nevertheless; through interviews with many of those concerned—including President Carter himself—and provocative archival footage, Kopple organizes a compelling narrative, exhibiting her talent for working with knotty subject matter that begets an abundance of ancillary media and nuanced perspectives. Especially interesting are interviews with Iranians either involved with the hostage situation or who were present at the remote desert location known as Desert One, where a series of tragic events resulted in the deaths of eight American soldiers and the mission being aborted. Kopple seems to posit that this situation, combined with his inclination toward diplomacy rather than militancy, resulted in Carter's loss to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election; some have even speculated—and it's more or less been confirmed—that the Reagan campaign helped negotiate a delay in the hostages' release until after the election. Kopple's knack for contextualizing events while exploring their emotional and sociological implications makes for a captivating investigation into this chapter of American history. —**KATHLEEN SACHS** 107 min. [Gene Siskel Film Center From Your Sofa](#)

RR Guru-guru Gokil (Crazy Awesome Teachers)

Effusive, light and charming, this film follows a cash-

strapped man played by Gading Marten who becomes a schoolteacher in rural Indonesia, reluctantly following in his father's footsteps. What seems a straightforward campus story turns into a screwball comedy when the teacher's salaries are stolen by gangsters, causing the school to come together to track down the thieves. Diandra Sastrowardoyo's performance as the stern, beautiful principal with hidden depths is particularly winsome, complimenting Marten's bumbling hero. Though the storyline is a tad predictable, each frame is saturated with sumptuous color, making for a heady, lush viewing experience. Directed by Sammaria Simanjuntak, this is the second Indonesian film to stream on Netflix. Indonesian, with subtitles. —**NINA LI COOMES** 101 min. [Netflix](#)

Peninsula

Many critics noted something about South Korean writer-director Yeon Sang-ho's 2016 zombie thriller *Train to Busan*—there were no guns fired in it. Lest anyone think that was some kind of statement, this loose sequel is rife with them; in Romanian fashion (Yeon has cited *Land of the Dead* as an inspiration), the filmmaker redefines the world he created four years earlier as a postapocalyptic hellscape placed in indefinite quarantine, with little opportunity for escape. Having found refuge in Hong Kong, former Marine Captain Jung-seok (Gang Dong-won) is lured back to the Korean peninsula, where he's tasked with locating a truck full of cash. He finds more than he bargained for when he crosses paths with a cadre of rogue survivors and a scrappy family (including two resourceful young girls, their mother and grandfather) who save him from the miscreants; it turns out the mother, Min-jung (Lee Jung-hyun), is the woman who Jung-seok declined to rescue in the film's opening scenes. The action largely stems from each group of survivors attempting to make it back to the ship that brought Jung-seok to Incheon, plain-dealing zombie action taking a backseat to a *Mad Max*-esque (another inspiration) society where the militia-knaves imprison "wild dogs"—human survivors not part of their group—and make them fight off the zombies for sport. Yeon perhaps tries too much here; many of the action sequences are phenomenal, and the two young girls are charming as all get-out, but the compelling simplicity of the previous film has been forsaken. In English and Korean with subtitles. —**KATHLEEN SACHS** 115 min. [Music Box Theatre](#)

Project Power

The latest pandemic-ready offering from Netflix, *Project Power* is a largely entertaining and competently choreographed action flick that wastes little time on extemporaneous background details or complex character arcs. Art (Jamie Foxx), a former soldier on the hunt for his missing daughter, is forced into an uneasy alliance with local cop Frank (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and teenage drug dealer/aspiring rapper Robin (Dominique

Fishback), to track the source of a new superdrug decimating the streets of New Orleans. The hot new drug, nicknamed "power," provides the user with five minutes of superhero-like ability that differs from user to user. The downsides are that you don't know what your power is until you take it, and every once in a while, the user explodes. Our trifecta of good guys is quippy and compelling enough to root for as they attempt to get to the bottom of things, fighting their way through a series of scheming villains pumped up by their various temporary abilities. *Project Power* even squeezes in a little timely moral metaphor on the nature of power for, as Art expounds on the corrupt forces behind the new superdrug, "Power goes to where it always goes, to the people that already have it." —**ADAM MULLINS-KHATIB** 111 min. [Netflix](#)

RR Spree

*Spree* is a joyride through the sinister side effects of social media. Meet Kurt (Joe Keery), also known as @KurtsWorld96, an amateur streamer looking to go viral with his newest venture, #TheLesson. As a driver for the rideshare company Spree, he outfits his car with cameras *Cash Cab*-style and begins recording his passengers. It seems mundane until Kurt raises the stakes with a series of slapstick murders. The movie keeps viewers tethered to Kurt's equally cringeworthy and creepy antics by visually mimicking a livestream. What starts as a surprisingly smooth ride for a killing spree gets bumpy as Kurt encounters repeat roadblocks in the form of his father (David Arquette) and a stand-up comedian (Sasheer Zamata) who refuses to follow for follow. And while a hero emerges in the end, it's difficult to discern whether they aimed to help humanity or just themselves in this satire-meets-slasher. —**BECCA JAMES** 93 min. [In wide release in VOD](#)

RR Tesla

Tesla, much like Nikola himself, struggles to sell big ideas, asking the audience to value intent over impact. Juxtaposing Tesla's (Ethan Hawke) immigrant inventor with Thomas Edison's (Kyle MacLachlan) American industrialist, the film employs Hawke's brand of brilliance and brooding well. It's one of the many factors that electrifies an otherwise recognizable story. The other and most notable is director Michael Almereyda's penchant for adding a fantastical edge to historical tales. Like Almereyda's 2015 film *Experimenter*, the narrator (Tesla's associate Anne Morgan, played by Eve Hewson) breaks the fourth wall to deliver history as it's unfolding, but references such modern-day inventions as Google. This use of artistic license is sure to agitate some, and admittedly, it creates an unevenness. Still, certain surreal scenes harness as much staying power as the luminary's legacy, including Tesla karaokeing Tears For Fears's 1985 hit "Everybody Wants To Rule The World." Like the film, it's just bizarre enough to work. —**BECCA JAMES** 102 min. [In wide release on VOD](#)

## GIVE YOUR MONEY TO MARY LANE



The 84-year-old Chicago blueswoman should be a legend. She can barely pay her bills.

By **KATIE PROUT**

*This story was originally published by Belt Magazine on June 26, 2020.*

I was looking for Mary Lane because I owed her 20 dollars: ten for the CD, and another ten to apologize for the year it took me to get the first ten to her.

It started one winter night in 2015, at Rosa's Lounge in Chicago. I was there on accident; came for a storytelling show, stayed for the whiskeys, and danced for Mary, whom I'd never before heard sing, and her husband, Jeff Lebon, whom I'd never before heard play. Mary came down off the stage and began working the crowd, limping slightly. She shouted flirty, dirty things back and forth with the men, hugged the women, and reminded both that she had a CD for sale. Later, after the show,

Mary sat at a table with Jeff, drinking water and counting her cash. I went over and told her how much I'd liked her voice. "Thank you, baby," she said, "but why don't you buy my CD?" She pressed a copy of *Appointment With the Blues* into my hands, even after I told her I had no cash. It was a quick decision on her part, and I saw it go down on her face: the smile while I gushed, the drop of that smile when I asked if she took card, the bare exhaustion beneath her bones and skin. Then she looked at me and turned her light back on.

When I woke up the next morning and remembered her face, I felt bad. Work is done for pay, and Mary had *worked*. "Lemme get closer to you," she'd said the night before, and then she had. The band was good and her voice was great, but it was the sharp heat of Mary

herself—getting right down and dirty with the crowd, calling us *baby*, calling us other names too and laughing, asking if we wanted it and how bad, talking just enough shit about her band to make them play harder, faster, just because they loved her so—that compelled me up and out of my seat. "I said, do you want me to tell you all about it?" Mary asked, holding the microphone to her face like a bouquet of roses, peering out into the dark of the bar with a slight lift in her mouth and eyes as the crowd hooted and whistled and stomped and gave her the answer she already knew. "Tell us, Mary!" a woman to my right begged. And so, for the next two hours, she did.

I could not stop thinking about that moment when she gave me her album for free: the hesitation, the take-it-anyway vibe, and then her request. "Just tell your friends about me,"

she'd said. I promised her I would, and when I scrolled through my texts, I could see that, on my bus ride home, I had. Hungover at work, I googled her, hoping to find a way to pay online, but I was more surprised by what I didn't find than what I did. A *Chicago Tribune* article from 1997 popped up, as did a Facebook page for Mary Lane & the No Static Blues Band. But there was no website, no e-mail, no other way to track her down.

On my lunch break, I called Rosa's, and when the manager, Tony Mangiullo, picked up, I could hear his frown through the phone. "You want to leave cash for Mary Lane?" he asked.

"Like, in an envelope," I said.

It wouldn't work, Tony said. He'd been manager since 1984. Mary was too unreliable, too hard to pin down, tough even to book. "I don't know when she'll be back next," he said. She

Mary Lane in the 2018 documentary *I Can Only Be Mary Lane* © COURTESY JESSECA YNEZ SIMMONS

was “like the wind,” blowing in and blowing out. And no, he didn’t have a number or an address. He wished he could help me. He sounded sincere. I made him take down my number anyway, just in case she did come through.

“But let me tell you something,” Tony said. “She should be famous.” If she wasn’t so unreliable, he said, she would be.

For the next five years, I’d hear this over and over from every man of any race I talked to about Mary—that she should be famous, that she was one of the greats, and that the reason she wasn’t better known outside of Chicago was because she was difficult, ornery, domineering, paranoid, impatient, afraid of flying, afraid of trains, afraid of travel, and generally getting in her own way. They’d lay out examples, almost as many examples as there are men in her orbit: club owners and bouncers, harp players and drummers, Grammy-winning producers and blues magazine writers, band members.

A year later, I took a bus back to Chicago from Iowa, where I had moved for grad school, to find Mary and pay what I owed, plus interest. Her band aligned behind her in the shape of a C, Mary moved on and off the stage, a little older, a little more tired than I remembered. During a break in the show, I gave her the money and she gave me another thing free. This time it was a shirt, fire truck red. On the front, in black letters:

THE NO STATIC BLUES BAND

On the back, in the same:

MARY LANE

AIN’T NO MAN TELLING ME WHAT TO DO

This is the part of the story of Mary Lane that gets mentioned most often in the write-ups that have peppered Chicago papers over the last few decades she’s been singing: how she knew or knows Junior Wells, Howlin’ Wolf, Buddy Guy, Otis Rush, and other near-mythic Chicago bluesmen. Mary is from the Arkansas Delta. Before Howlin’ Wolf made his 1952 move up to Chicago, he sang every week for years at the White Swan in Brinkley, Arkansas, where Mary’s uncle worked. Eventually, her uncle asked if Wolf wouldn’t mind giving his niece a listen. Or maybe Wolf had

heard her before, one slow afternoon when he came by for a beer and passed Mary out front, singing for money, something she learned to do before she learned to read. No one now remembers exactly how the beginning began, but soon, while Wolf sat back and wailed on his harp, Mary Lane went up onstage to sing. She wasn’t yet 13 years old.

This is the part of the story that goes Discovery and Authenticity, then Hardship, then Grit and Survival. If you get all five in, you’ve got a Blues Article Bingo. At 16, Mary sang while Robert Nighthawk played slide guitar at her side. She followed Howlin’ Wolf up from Arkansas, during the second wave of the Great Migration, before she was 20. She landed in Waukegan, then Chicago, living and singing in the Blackest parts of the city’s south and west sides. She had eight kids. She sang with Elmore James just before he died. She sang with James Cotton. She tended bar at the legendary Theresa’s, under the table, while a young Buddy Guy played guitar and Theresa herself reportedly kept a gun in the fur she sometimes wore to work. She is repeatedly, proudly described as “a staple” who has worked so hard and has nearly made it so many times. Always, this litany of men’s names, of men who became famous after their deaths, a lucky few famous in their lives, provided as the backstory to her backstory, proof of her Authenticity, her Grit. Except for Buddy Guy, Mary’s outlived them all.

Writing about, and appreciation of, blues music—especially, I think, when it is written about and appreciated by white people, and when the singer or musician is Black—praises suffering. The writer/reader/listener wants details of the pain as proof of the “realness” of the blues, but they also want to know that the artist is OK, at least OK enough for them to read or listen without discomfort or guilt.

There is a format to these stories, as standard as the blues song itself. Popularly, the blues are sung in three-line stanzas. In the first line, you mean it; in the second line, which is roughly the same as the first, you really mean it, and throw your voice a certain way to open up new understanding to the listener’s ears. In the third line, you bring it home. Like so:

*Bad luck and trouble, they run hand in hand  
I say bad luck and and trouble, they run  
hand in hand  
You got to treat me right, if you wanna be  
my man*

Many of the stories that have been written

about Mary over the years, the stories I’ve been able to find in the Harold Washington Blues Archives, have this arc—they tell about the blues artist’s pain in the first third, repeat that pain in the second. The final third is the twist, where the theme is survival, and words like “perseverance” are used. For example, write-ups on Mary mention her picking cotton, a signifier of pain and a particular kind of southern Blackness, without going into the suffering, or without asking if she did suffer. It’s uncomfortable to wrestle with the real pain that, like bad luck and trouble, comes hand in hand with the pleasure blues artists provide. White listeners want enough pain to prove it’s real, but not enough to implicate us.

I’m not trying to shit all over other writers or lovers of the blues, or claim that, in this sentence, I am doing the writing and appreciating right. I started writing this essay four years ago and have more than 40,000 words in various files with various names, all dormant. I’ve pitched this story, had it accepted, and let that acceptance die, because the version I pitched followed the format I’ve described above, and it didn’t feel true or fair to the Mary I know. Writing the truer version would be harder, and scarier, and would require me to engage with Mary in all her complexity and pain, by which I mean it would require me to practice a kind of love, and I wasn’t sure if I was strong enough to do it. But last year, I moved back to Chicago and thought of Mary every time I saw her shirt folded in my drawer, as tucked away as a secret, as red as a fire truck wailing an alarm. I wanted to be braver for her. I needed to try again.

I tried again because of guilt and love, death and money, the stuff of the blues itself. I also tried because, years after hearing Tony say “she should be famous,” I still had questions to answer about that, and as it turned out, when we did speak again, so did Mary. “I can’t live on my name,” she told me. “I’m Mary, I’m good at this, I did that, but I got to eat.” What is the profession of ongoing love from a community worth if it doesn’t come with ongoing money?

A few months ago, Mary and Jeff’s old mattress finally busted. Now, he sleeps on the couch in their humid apartment, and she sleeps in a recliner. And so the question that needs asking, amid all the accolades, is this: What is appreciation worth if it doesn’t come with cash? Why, at 84, can a musician who is universally admired, who has been called the “real deal” and “the voice of experience,” not afford to buy a new bed?

Since I came back to Chicago to find Mary, four years ago, I’ve spent a lot of time with her. I started by helping her hawk CDs for money and explaining to white women my age and demographic that no, Mary’s music doesn’t come on vinyl, and no, the shirt doesn’t come in small. Sometimes I slept over on the couch at Mary and Jeff’s overheated Melrose Park apartment. The first time I did that, she told me a little bit about her childhood in Arkansas, a place she’s only been back to three times since moving north more than 60 years ago.

On summer mornings, back then, Mary woke up slow. Before opening her eyes, she’d stretch her child limbs across the side of the bed recently vacated by her sister, Mary Helen. Across the room, Mary Helen might be up and at the stove, eating the biscuits their father left for them, made each morning when it was still dark. The kids knew the rule: they were to stay in the house and play with each other “till the dew dropped off the cotton and the train that run from Elaine to Helena came by and blows.” That was their signal: once the whistle sounded and the dew was dry, Mary, Mary Helen, and their brother, Charlie Jr., headed out to join their father, Charlie Sr., in the field to pick. It was the early 1940s in the Deep South, and, from what I understand, the family worked together for a sharecropper. Over the years, it’s possible the kids were joined by any of Mary’s other siblings, of which there were eventually 20 in total.

“[Charlie Sr.] was a great father,” she said to me one summer day in 2016. I was painting her toenails before a show. Her right ankle—broken in 1985 and never set right due to Mary’s phobia of hospitals—tends to swell, making her foot hard to reach. “He used to sing all the time. And he was funny, because every time it would start stormin’, he would put his boots on, overcoat and everything, and he would go out and sit on the porch. And when there was a high wind blowing, he’d be still out there, holdin’ onto the pole. . . . He would sit out on that porch and sing gospel.”

Following the 2019 release of Mary’s second album, *Travelin’ Woman*, more than 20 years after *Appointment With the Blues*, NPR wrote: “Lane remembers her earliest days performing in Arkansas, where she would sing for the workers in the cotton fields. ‘I used to go to the field and all the people were out there picking cotton and everything. I’d always be behind. I’d be back there just singing and everybody say, ‘Come and sing, Mary. Go on and sing.’ And I kept on doing it for years and years as

continued from 29  
I came up.”

Mary is a professional singer, a business-woman. She knows what stories sell, what lines of her life people want to hear. She also knows that sometimes, it doesn't matter what she says—people will hear what they want to regardless, taking what they find inspirational or appealing and leaving the rest.

Besides stories about her dad, Mary rarely shares specific details with me about what her life was like growing up sharecropping in the Arkansas Delta. Even questions I think are banal are met with a kind of rebuke. “What did it *look* like?” Mary said to me, incredulous, the first time I asked her to describe the house she grew up in. “It looked like a house. Sittin’ on the ground.” Later, when I ask her to describe the land she’s from and farmed: “You always asking what it *look* like, what it *feel* like. It was the country; wasn’t nothin’ there.”

Maybe she isn’t used to being asked how she feels, maybe she finds the questions boring, maybe the world taught her a long time ago to put her feelings somewhere deep inside of herself, where no one, especially not a nosy white writer, can reach. As a writer, it’s my responsibility to walk an uneven line between minding my business and asking questions that allow Mary to make herself a little more known, if she wants. For example: Cotton harvest in Arkansas continues through at least late fall. If Mary Lane was singing, or picking, in the field, how did she go to school?

The three times Mary’s been back to Arkansas: to bury her mother, Ada; to bury one of her brothers; and, in autumn of 2019, to sing at the King Biscuit Blues Festival in promotion of *Travelin’ Woman*. Mary is terrified of flying and was reluctant to go in the first place, so she, her manager Lynn Orman, and the rest of the No Static Blues Band rented a van and made the trip from Chicago in a day. When Charlie Sr. died years back, Mary—grief-stricken, sick, and broke—decided not to make the trip back for his funeral. “Up here,” Mary told me, “I never say yassir or nossir to no white person or nobody. See, when I was down there, you had to do that. It’s a big difference. It’s like I say: I don’t wanna go back down there.”

That’s what singing “for the workers in the cotton fields” means. There’s the version that offers Grit and Authenticity for a white audience, and then there’s the story of a child working so much in a cotton field in the Jim Crow south that she never did have the chance

to finish elementary school. That’s a little harder to comfortably bear.

One night in 2017, I was in Chicago, at Buddy Guy’s club Legends, watching Mary sing, when Buddy himself showed up. He joined Mary onstage; this wasn’t long after his seventh Grammy, so more tourists were in on a Tuesday than usual. Within seconds, iPhones shot up. “No recordings!” shouted a bouncer. Mary was grinning so hard I worried the top of her head was going to fall off. Buddy put his arm around her and, after a brief, profanity-laden banter, the two began to sing, tossing verses back and forth as lightly as silk scarves. Buddy was tall and comfortably, perfectly dressed.

Halfway through, Buddy held up his hand and pointed to the tip jar. The band went quiet. Buddy turned to Mary. “Mary,” he said conversationally, “What does that look like to you?” Mary squinted into the jar, where a few bills floated, and then looked away as though she had just witnessed someone doing something rude and probably unsanitary. “It don’t look like shit to me,” she said, and shrugged. The crowd, pressed close to the stage now, giggled nervously.

“Well,” said Buddy, as he slowly opened his wallet and pulled out some green. “Ain’t that a motherfucking shame.” The crowd collectively looked at its hands. “People these days don’t have the *decency*”—and here, his voice grew louder—“to *pay*”—the bill dropped into the bucket—“a hardworking *artist*. But they’re *happy to take*.” With each emphasis, the crowd squirmed. Then, a rush: folks pressed forward, and money came out. Later, after the show, I asked Mary how she was doing. She sighed. “It just feels good,” she said, “to have some bills in my hands.”

After my second visit, in 2016, Mary called and asked if I’d be visiting her for Mother’s Day, though, she said, she’d “understand” if I was going to spend time with my own mom. I could do neither, seeing as I was a broke grad student in a different state than either woman, but our calls continued, and the visits when I could. One hot night, we watched movies in her bed in front of a fan as she dozed. One day, I ran across the street to buy her lotto tickets and helped her fill them out via a complicated system of numbers she keeps written out on cardboard scraps. “When you find somebody, I want you to find somebody with some money, ‘cause you can starve by your goddamn self,” she said to me. It’s one of her favorite bantering lines to sing out from the stage, because it always brings

in a laugh—and with that laugh, tips.

I watched her sell her food assistance card for cash. I bought her groceries. She hates most of the food I like, but I like all the food she does, so it worked out. She wouldn’t let me cook, but she would let me do the dishes. We mopped the floor. I held her hand while we walked down her apartment stairs. Her eyes aren’t great, so when her son Elvis sent her letters from prison, I read them to her. She dictated her replies to me, and I mailed them. She asked me about my mom, my dad, my brothers and my sister. She asked me to describe our yard. “I’d like to visit them sometime,” she said. Another time, looking up at me sideways as she set food on the table: “Do your parents know you have a Black friend?”

We talked about sex and love. I asked her about having her first child at 13. The father was 26, 27. “He was an asshole,” she started, then stopped. Sometimes, Mary told me never to have kids if I could help it. Other times, my phone rang and it was one of her daughters on the phone, introducing herself to me, Mary shouting in the background with pride.

Jeff has been with Mary since the early 90s. They met at a show where he was playing bass and she was looking fine. “I love that woman,” Jeff said to me. “We fight, we argue, but I have never hit her and I’d walk out before I ever would. That’s not what love is.” Besides “that woman,” I only ever heard Jeff call Mary by her first and last name both: “Mary Lane, ain’t you doing an interview?” “Mary Lane, ain’t these your earrings?” I asked him why, and he winked. “That’s what they do when you’re famous.”

Mary Lane rarely drinks, except for a single shot of whiskey sometimes, before a show if her throat is sore, but she gave me tallboys before I asked. Also beads, signs printed with prayers, statues of angels. Her favorite words are “motherfucker,” “money,” and “I don’t need that pressure.” She believes in God but doesn’t go to church. She still dreams about Ada, her mom, especially when it storms—and when it storms, even now, she lays shaking on her floor until it passes. She talks about what she calls her “nervous,” about getting so “jitterous” that she can’t sleep, can’t breathe. I asked her once if she’d ever been diagnosed with anxiety, depression, PTSD. “No,” she said.

It was probably after my second visit that we started ending our phone calls with “I love you,” though I don’t remember who said it first. It was around the same time she started asking to borrow money until she got paid after a show. The first time or two, she paid me back,

insisted on it. After that, if I had it, I gave it; if I didn’t, I couldn’t. It didn’t feel good. Each time she asked, there was such pain and urgency in her voice that my heart jumped; each time I couldn’t pay, I felt guilty, and her disappointment dropped into me like a stone.

She talked a lot about her death, about how it was coming, soon, she just didn’t know when and that terrified her. Sometimes when she called me and asked to borrow money, she was crying. Sometimes she said I didn’t love her. Sometimes she said no one did, that the whole world had screwed her round, and proceeded into such a fiery litany of accusations against everyone she knows that I grew to dread her calls, feeling like I already had mother figures in my life I disappointed, like all I wanted to do was write about a woman I admire whose music I like. It’s too hard to witness her pain, sorrow, fear, and rage, or to know what I’m responsible for. Our boundaries are all tangled. She told me she hoped that, when this story finally got published, I could split the check with her. I didn’t think she was wrong, but I need money too. It was too hard to parse what I felt, so I started to shrink.

Our calls got fewer as the years passed, and our visits. She stopped calling me, though later she’d say I stopped calling her. When I did call, every few months, she yelled, “Oh my God, I thought you forgot all about me! You ain’t gone and got married or anything, did you?” and ended every call with how she might die before I see her again, but if that’s that, that’s that. One time, I couldn’t take it anymore. “For fuck’s sake, Mary,” I said, “stop threatening to die! I hate it!” There was silence, then her laugh, amber and low, started up. For a little bit, it felt like it used to.

In the fall of 2018, she told me about recording her new album, due out early the next year. She was happy but worried, and concerned that everyone else who was part of the album’s production was already making money on it and hiding it from her. (Later, I interviewed the team, and they showed me numbers that demonstrated losses in the record production.) Money from a GoFundMe for the album’s production went to costs associated with the production, not to Mary, and even though that had been the plan all along, she felt betrayed. “I’m still broke,” she said, “trying to make it day to day.” And then: “It’s been a long time since I heard from you. I was starting to think you’d forgot me.”

It would be a year and a half before we spoke again.

One day, during a rainy fall visit, I asked Mary where she got her ideas for her songs. Mary shrugged. “From my own mind,” she said. “Things that have happened.”

Mary’s first songs were recorded in Chicago in the early 60s. After that, there was a near 30-year gap. When I asked one Chicago blues historian why he thought Mary wasn’t more well-known, more successful, he pointed to this gap with a shrug in his voice. It wasn’t like she was out there recording music all the time, performing much, he told me. This was at odds with Mary’s own recollection of hustling and playing in the late 70s and early 80s, even with the time she took off to raise her eight children. When I pointed this out to the historian, he shrugged. Well, I never saw her, he said. She recorded with Morris and disappeared.

Morris Pejoe originally hailed from Louisiana, and brought some of that brassy Cajun sound with him: you can hear it on his recordings with Cobra Records, a short-lived but influential label run out of Chicago’s west side from 1956 to 1959, and Chess Records. Morris never featured with Chess, but is credited with guitar on a number of tracks to come out of its recording studio on South Michigan Avenue; he recorded more regularly with Checker, a Chess subsidiary. In the early 60s, Mary and Morris recorded two jump tunes together, “He Don’t Want My Loving No More” and “I Always Want You Near.” On the tracks, Mary’s voice shocks me. She sounds so young.

I didn’t hear about those tracks, or about Morris, until one afternoon when she mentioned his name in passing. Tell me about Morris, I said. “He was jealous, Morris, he was so jealous, girl, I couldn’t talk to nobody, not even women.” For the next few minutes, I listened in silence as she spoke.

*“He used to jump on me all the time, he the one who used to keep my face all swelled up, black-eyed and everything. I couldn’t go to the club; if I go to the club and go to the bathroom, he be sending somebody to the door, knocking on the door, telling me to come out, and anybody who say anything to me, when he come down off the stage? He be ready to fight. And the kids? He had the kids so afraid and everything, ‘cause when we go out and when we come to the house and knock on the door at night, they all start running to the closet, runnin’ up under the bed and hidin’, cause they knew we were gonna be fightin’ when we come home.*

*“One night, I got tired of him jumpin’ on me,*

*you know. He had me really afraid of him: ‘If you leave me, I’m gon’ kill ya, if I catch you with—’ He wasn’t gonna catch me doing nothin’ ‘cause I know how he was! And then he lost two jobs, he was so jealous. He would go to work, come back to the house, ease the key in the door and everything—this is the God’s truth, I wouldn’t lie to ya—he’d come on in the house, and then he’d keep on through to the back door, talkin’ about somebody run through, run out the door, somethin’ like that? Girl, I went through treacherous, I went through hell, for a long time.*

*“One night he jumped on me, had me up in the little closet, in the pantry, and he was beatin’ me. I had a big old long kitchen fork, you know, one of these forks you turn the chicken over with, and I grabbed that fork and I stuck it in him like that [motions to her abdomen] and blood shot out and everything, and then he grabbed his side and run, and fell on the bed, and I just took that fork and stuck it in his ass.”*

Their relationship had lasted eight years and brought about three children, but after that, it was over, no matter how much Morris cried. He never hit her again.

Mary writes her own lyrics, or rather, she sings them out until she’s got them down and until Jeff has found the right tune to go with them, because her cataracts make it hard for her to read and write. One of my favorite songs of hers is “Candy Yams.” On *Appointment With the Blues*, it’s about four minutes, but live, Mary lets it linger for longer. It’s a song, to my ears, that’s about oral sex:

*I’ve got brown candy yams to slap across  
his face  
They tell me when you feed ‘em like that,  
girl  
You don’t have to worry about him going no  
place*

But also, for one line at least, it’s about violence:

*Shot my man five times to make sure he was  
dead  
But when I raised my leg, that man, he  
raised his head*

Mary’s never asked me why we stopped talking. When I called her in May 2020 and told her it was me, there was a beat, and then she said my name.

Mary and Jeff haven’t worked since March. Coronavirus has canceled all their gigs in the

city, and with them, all of Mary’s album promotion. Touring is key to promotion, and thus to sales, and because she’s so afraid of travel, it would’ve been difficult to make money even without the pandemic sweeping clubs and bars shut, some for good. But still, what money could’ve been made is gone.

In the last year, Mary’s been on local television, been nominated by the Blues Foundation for the Koko Taylor Award, given to a “Traditional Blues Female Artist,” and been inducted into the Chicago Blues Hall of Fame. “A white girl won [the Koko Taylor Award] over me,” she said. “They don’t want an older person. They want a young person, somebody they can put in and make a lot of money on. They don’t think we been out here putting the blues how they supposed to be.” But she doesn’t care, she tells me, about awards. This spring I asked her what she needs to be OK. “I need some money, I need some food, and I need a peace of mind,” Mary said, “and I don’t have it.”

Before COVID-19, Mary’s manager had been constantly promoting her, setting her up for interviews. *Travelin’ Woman* has gotten a few good reviews in blues mags. Mary’s profile is arguably higher than it ever has been, but she’s poorer. “I done gave interviews. I don’t understand why they be, you know, telling the inside of your life, give them interviews, and when you go to them for somethin’, they can’t even reach out and help you. I don’t understand that one,” she said.

Mary believes she should get paid for interviews, for every time she tells the inside of her life, and the more I think about it, the more I think she might be right. Praise and appreciation don’t pay the rent. Her job, all her life, has been to craft her story in such a way that other people want to hear it, on repeat, when they’re dancing and drinking and holding someone close, or when they’re sitting on their porch wondering where to go from here. By detailing the blues of her life, Mary’s lyrics and voice guide other people safely through their own swampy feelings. In her company, they don’t have to move through their pain alone. Why should she?

“You know how I been doing all these interviews, dealing with the peoples, that wasn’t right. If I live to see November, I’ll be 85 years old, and I ain’t got nothing to show for it. Nothing [but just] a name out here for doing music,” Mary said. “But I’m still broke.” Once again, she had brought up the possibility of her death, but this time it wasn’t funny or aggravating. She’s right: she doesn’t have forever left, and should

be able to spend that time, after working so hard all her life, sleeping at night in a good bed. Before we hung up, she asked me if I was in a spot where I could give her some money. I’m not, but I e-mailed some friends who were and asked her if I could apply to some COVID relief grants on her behalf. She said yes.

The blues are not linear; they circle around the listener like smoke or spiral stairs, returning again to the same rounded corner, or what feels like the same. For that, they can sound repetitive, deceptively simple. But it’s not the same stair; you and your ghosts are one floor up. It’s not the same line; there’s a stronger chord, an “I said” where there wasn’t one before, which acts as a streak of lightning in the same dark and illuminates, briefly, the world around you and your place in it.

After all, Mary and I have been here before. This isn’t the first time a year has passed where she and I didn’t talk. It happened the year after I first saw her at Rosa’s, tried to pay her for her CD, failed, moved to Iowa. Then one day, her Facebook page, which I’d messaged before with no luck, flicked back on. A post sharing information about another blues singer’s death referenced Mary and her band; the band shared information about a show they were playing at Buddy Guy’s Legends; and so I decided to be there too. I took a Megabus that later caught on fire to watch Mary sing to a room two-thirds empty and drowning in a dark blue light. When I walked to the bathroom, I passed more than a hundred framed photos of blues artists, Chicagoan and otherwise, spanning a time line 90 years long. All these artists were men. Everyone in Mary’s band was a man. Everyone in Mary’s band wore a T-shirt with her name on it, and soon, though I didn’t know it, I’d be wearing one too. Mary was also wearing a T-shirt with her name on it, along with glittering, ruby-red pumps on her feet that would make it impossible for her to stand in the morning. But that night, she turned carefully and smiled as I approached her on her break.

“Miss Mary Lane,” I said, a letter and a twenty clutched in my right hand. “My name is Katie, and I’ve been looking for you. I owe you.” 

*Readers are encouraged to donate to Mary Lane via this GoFundMe organized by her friend Lisa Burris Arthur, wife of blues musician Michael Bloom, who’s played with Mary and her band: [gofundme.com/f/maryl-lane-covid-relief-fundraiser](https://gofundme.com/f/maryl-lane-covid-relief-fundraiser).*

 @katie\_proud

## MUSIC

### PICK OF THE WEEK

## The generation-spanning *Fountain of Time* is an intriguing peek into Chicago new-music lab the Grossman Ensemble



© GRITTANI CREATIVE

**GROSSMAN ENSEMBLE, *FOUNTAIN OF TIME***  
 CCCC  
[arts.uchicago.edu/content/fountain-time-album](https://arts.uchicago.edu/content/fountain-time-album)

**THE GROSSMAN ENSEMBLE COULD** be thought of as a new-music incubator. The resident ensemble of the Chicago Center for Contemporary Composition (CCCC) at the University of Chicago, the 13-piece group—which comprises some of the best contemporary players in the city—rehearses extensively with composers over the course of several weeks. Some of their commissions emerge collaboratively from a nearly blank page, with composers drawing on the group's input to flesh out their ideas. Others arrive on the members' music stands with every staccato dotted and tremolo crossed. No matter how the compositions arise, they must fit the ensemble's idiosyncratic instrumentation: flute, saxophone, clarinet, oboe, horn, piano, harp, percussion, and string quartet. *Fountain of Time*, the ensemble's debut release (out on the CCCC's own label), collects five of the 24 pieces commissioned by the center during the Grossman's first two seasons. Casual listeners may be put off by the homogeneity of the works; not only do they share the same instrumentation, but many of them also bank on somewhat clichéd whiz-bang contrasts. But the record rewards repeat listenings. Shulamit Ran's glittery *Grand Rounds* chases its own tail before whirling itself into lassitude; Anthony Cheung's sinuous, often ambiguous three-movement work, *Double Allegories*, is similarly intoxicating. David Dzubay's *PHO*, whose title is an astronomical abbreviation for potentially hazardous objects whose orbits could put them on a collision course with Earth, is appropriately taut and cinematic. Even so, the most indelible contributions on *Fountain of Time* come from younger composers. Clay Mettens's hypnotic and lithe *Stain, Bloom, Moon, Rain* constructs a riveting drama out of humble building blocks, while Tonia Ko—a ubiquitous name on local new-music marquee for the past few seasons—offers a sensuous petting zoo of sounds in *Simple Fuel*. —HANNAH EDGAR

### EXOTIC SIN, *CUSTOMER'S COPY*

Blank Forms Editions  
[blankformseditions.bandcamp.com/album/customers-copy](https://blankformseditions.bandcamp.com/album/customers-copy)

The instruments of some musical icons end up displayed in museum exhibits or auctioned off for charity at vast sums. Others get handed down to the younger generations to do with as they wish. In the case of Exotic Sin, the London-based duo of multi-instrumentalists Naima Karlsson and Kenichi Iwasa, that's been a good thing. Karlsson is a grandchild of Don Cherry, who played pocket trumpet with Ornette Coleman as well as a variety of non-Western instruments on records that predicted the evolution of world music, and his wife Moki, who accompanied Cherry on tambura and executed the colorful and powerfully vibe-inducing artwork for their album covers and stage banners. In *Exotic Sin*, Karlsson plays acoustic and voltage-dependent keyboards while Iwasa wields synthesizers, percussion, and three of Don's old horns—one trumpet and two "saxophones" made from reed mouthpieces attached to plastic plumbing components. On their debut LP, *Customer's Copy* (Blank Forms), Karlsson's bold piano flourishes bring to mind the playing of Alice Coltrane, and the duo's lengthy, layered compositions and repetitive keyboards hint at Don's work with minimalist composer Terry Riley. But this isn't some revival outfit; the duo's music also contains digitally distorted voices and spasmodic, electronic percussion, which make far more sense in a world well acquainted with glitchy failure than in one where electronics represent the hope of a progressive future. —BILL MEYER

### GULCH, *IMPENETRABLE CEREBRAL FORTRESS*

Closed Casket Activities  
[gulch.bandcamp.com/album/impenetrable-cerebral-fortress](https://gulch.bandcamp.com/album/impenetrable-cerebral-fortress)

Santa Cruz hardcore outfit Gulch cover a lot of ground in the brief 16 minutes of their new *Impenetrable Cerebral Fortress*. The four-piece leave no punk or metal stone unturned; they cram every possible take on dark, heavy, and mean into the album's eight tracks, which all grind to a halt just as quickly as they start. *Impenetrable Cerebral Fortress* is so wildly intense and varied it's nearly impossible to do it justice in print. Gulch can kick off a track with explosive D-beat hardcore, settle into tectonic sludge, and cap it all off with grindcore fury—on the album's closer, a twisted cover of Siouxsie & the Banshees' "Sin in My Heart," they even tap into some goth appreciation. The band masterfully handle all these styles, and streamline them to bring everything seamlessly together. The players in Gulch are ridiculously skilled, and beyond being shredders they're able to capture a mood better than most of their peers: the eerie dissonance and gloomy energy of *Impenetrable Cerebral Fortress* make it one of the creepiest, darkest blasts of music to emerge this year. It's hard to find a band with the ability to do heavy music so right, but here we have Gulch, taking all sorts of hardcore and metal to the next level at once. This album's going to be hard to top. —LUCA CIMARUSTI

# TIX READER

**SAT** AUG. 22 @ Online  
**Sophia Lucia Presents:  
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 (EVENT REPEATS WEEKLY)

**SAT** SEPT. 19 @ North Bar  
**Nesh and Lee Lee Live**

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## MUSIC



Imperial Triumphant © ALEX KRAUSS

### HIEROGLYPHIC BEING, *THE PLEIADIAN AGENDA*

Self-released  
[hieroglyphicbeingofficial.bandcamp.com/album/the-pleiadian-agenda](http://hieroglyphicbeingofficial.bandcamp.com/album/the-pleiadian-agenda)

Over the past few years, futuristic Chicago producer Jamal Moss, aka Hieroglyphic Being, has built a healthy Bandcamp catalog: between 2016 and the end of 2019, he released 17 full-lengths of previously unreleased compositions, demos, and archival tracks. But since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S. this spring, Moss has kicked his Bandcamp release schedule into an even higher gear. Between mid-March and early August, he dropped a dozen digital albums—it wouldn't surprise me if you're looking for a window into Moss's recent output, you can't go wrong with *The Pleiadian Agenda*. On the sprawling progressive-house track "Creating Realities From the Future," Moss enlivens limber, funky synth bass with blown-out electroclash hi-hats that crescendo in tandem with what sounds like a barrage of sci-fi laser fire. By adrenalizing the track so slowly and methodically, Moss draws you into his interstellar dance music just as inexorably as if he'd found another use for an unidentified flying object's tractor beam. —LEOR GALIL

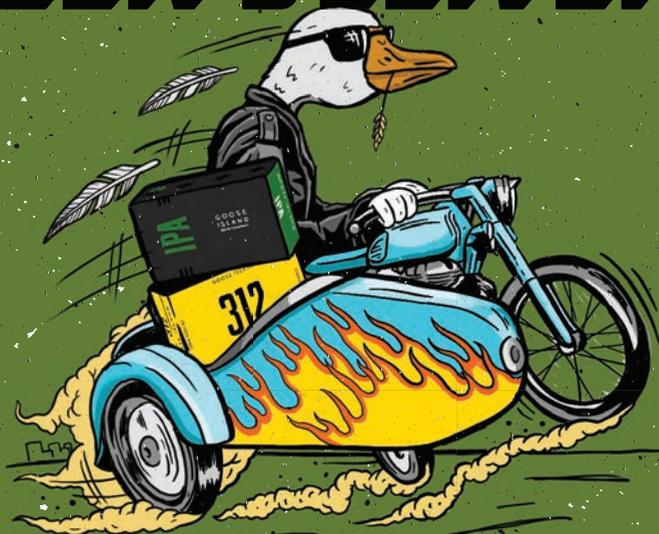
### IMPERIAL TRIUMPHANT, *ALPHAVILLE*

Century Media  
[imperialtriumphant.lnk.to/Alphaville](http://imperialtriumphant.lnk.to/Alphaville)

The overlap between extreme metal and avant-garde improvised music is admittedly slight, but that tiny patch of ground produces some extravagantly bizarre fruits—among them New York City trio Imperial Triumphant. Drummer Kenny Grohowski frequently collaborates with downtown-scene

daddy John Zorn, most notably performing his music in Simulacrum with guitarist Matt Hollenberg of Cleric and organist John Medeski. And bassist Steven Blanco not only has a history as a jazz pianist but also plays bass in PAK with guitarist Ron Anderson of Molecules and Rat at Rat R fame, alongside Cleric drummer Larry Kwartowitz. The dissonant, shape-shifting tangle of black and death metal on Imperial Triumphant's new fourth full-length, *Alphaville*, uses improvisation only in its details—these are unmistakably composed pieces—but it does adopt the avant-garde stance of insisting that you come to it. Frenzied, decadent, and spring-loaded with unpredictable shifts in mood and intensity, this chaotic but tightly controlled music has no special interest in catchy riffs, and it doesn't care if you're tired of waiting for a chorus—it's not going to meet you on your terms. Grohowski, Blanco, and guitarist and front man Zachary Ilya Ezrin used a producer for the first time on *Alphaville*, working with Trey Spruance of Mr. Bungle (who's also enlisted Grohowski for his band Secret Chiefs 3). The resulting arrangements are the most jarring and florid of the band's career, incorporating an elegant unaccompanied piano-and-trombone duet, delirious choral vocals, an interlude of nonidiomatic taiko drumming, corny silent-film organ, and even a barbershop quartet that's draped in static like a dusty old 78. Blanco's bass takes the stairs three at a time, indulging in gymnastics and convolutions that might read as "jazzy" if it weren't for his weird harmonic choices; he constantly changes his angle of approach to Ezrin's spindly, laddering riffs, whose high-wire act is broken up by nerve-wracking wobbles of tremolo and tense, queasy intervallic leaps. Grohowski's formidable drumming almost makes the music's metrical oddities comprehensible, even as he shifts between light-footed, impossibly fast blastbeats, snarled tech-death, and loose, splattery fills. Even in black and death metal as bastardized as this, misanthropy is de rigueur, and Imperial Triumphant give theirs a special New York flavor. Their lyrics, which Ezrin delivers in a clotted howl,

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**continued from 33**

convey a bilious contempt for the city's wealthy parasites—and the cover of *Alphaville*, with its sinister art deco imagery, links their amoral excess to America's civilizational suicide by capitalism in the 1920s. Our own self-immolation is well under way—U.S. billionaires have grown more than \$600 billion richer during the pandemic, while almost 40 million Americans have applied for unemployment—and it promises to leave the country uninhabitable for everyone but the white-collar criminals who've persuaded the world they're its elite. To indict this towering corruption, Imperial Triumphant enact a furious boiling over of the human energies it exploits. —PHILIP MONTORO

**EIKO ISHIBASHI, HYAKKI YAGYŌ**

**Black Truffle**  
[blacktruffle.bandcamp.com/album/hyakki-yagy](http://blacktruffle.bandcamp.com/album/hyakki-yagy)

Japanese multi-instrumentalist and singer-songwriter Eiko Ishibashi has spent a couple decades working in a multitude of idioms, including art-pop, jazz, postpunk, and free improvisation. It's been thrilling to hear her move among styles and ideas from album to album, and her latest, *Hyakki Yagyō* ("Night Parade of One Hundred Demons"), is one of her most arresting to date, replete with tantalizing, haunting atmospheres conjured by electronics, acoustic instrumentation, and field recordings. Made with two of Ishibashi's frequent collaborators, Joe Talia (percussion) and former Chicagoan Jim O'Rourke (double bass, mixing), *Hyakki Yagyō* feels uneasy right from the get-go: synth tones flicker patiently and ominously, a faint clanging arises in

the distance, and soon we hear dancer and choreographer Ryuichi Fujimura energetically whispering a tanka by 15th-century poet Ikkyū Sōjun, adding to the alluring mystique and horror suggested by the album's title. The image of otherworldly spirits in an uproarious gathering is apt, given that *Hyakki Yagyō* presents a dizzying assortment of noises: chiming bells and rattling metal, wheezing flutes and rushing water, screeching strings and warbling electronics. Ishibashi has always used extreme dynamics for dramatic effect in her experimental works, and here they're at their most theatrical and breathtaking—the quietest and loudest moments feel equally important in keeping you on your toes. Despite how cacophonous the album can sound, it's clearly constructed with meticulous care—every note and sound and texture has a purpose. Once you pick up on that, each new development makes you curious about what will come next and how the piece's narrative will unravel. Ishibashi has accomplished a marvel with *Hyakki Yagyō*: it combines the intimacy of a ghost story told at a campfire with the grandiosity of one presented onstage. —JOSHUA MINSOO KIM

**LIL ROMO, KING WITHOUT A CROWN**

**The Programm/Empire**  
[store.empi.re/products/lil-romo-king-without-a-crown-download](http://store.empi.re/products/lil-romo-king-without-a-crown-download)

In a recent Illanoize Radio interview, south-side rapper Lil Romo said he started to approach his music more professionally in October 2018, after he dropped "Realla (Scrilla Remix)," where he raps like he's trying to outrun the anxious, zippy instrumental. Since then, his career has seemed to draw on the energy of that track. He's dropped four singles

since February, and most of them have racked up at least 100,000 YouTube views. His most recent video, for the forlorn "Long Time," hit 10,000 views in less than two days—and I imagine it'll reach ten times that soon, given how expertly Romo and rapper Duke Da Beast slather their verses in Auto-Tune sweetness. The song exemplifies the pop proclivities that color Romo's new debut, *King Without a Crown* (The Programm/Empire), where he leans into the euphonic wave of drill that's come to the fore over the past couple years. The bulk of the album uses refined, gentle melodies that seem to console him as he raps about his fallen friends. But Romo can sound harsh too, when the feeling moves him—he really bares his teeth on "Let's Do It," where his terse lines hit hard enough to raise welts. —LEOR GALIL

**WILLIE NELSON, FIRST ROSE OF SPRING**

**Legacy**  
[shop.willienelson.com/collections/first-rose-of-spring](http://shop.willienelson.com/collections/first-rose-of-spring)

Melancholy shoots right out of the gate on Willie Nelson's new full-length, *First Rose of Spring*. The album opens with its title track, a sweet but ultimately tragic love song by a trio of stalwart Nashville songwriters: Allen Shamblin (Bonnie Raitt), Marc Beeson (LeAnn Rimes, Blake Shelton), and Randy Houser (who hit number two on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart in 2009 performing his own "Boots On"). Nelson's no-frills singing and plaintive solo on his trusty acoustic guitar, Trigger, make "First Rose of Spring" an anchor for the wistful, contemplative songs ahead. Like Nelson's other recent releases, including 2018's *Last Man Standing* and last year's *Ride Me Back Home*, the new album is filled with end-of-the-road thoughts and tributes to compadres who have passed away. Who better than the Willie Nelson to deliver such reflections? At 87 years old, he still sings with a pointed clarity, as though he wants you to truly hear every word. Nelson and longtime cowriter and producer Buddy Cannon keep up the elegiac tone with heartbreaking songs such as "Blue Star," but there are also a few uplifting moments, including covers of Toby Keith's "Don't Let the Old Man In" (written for a 2018 Clint Eastwood movie of the same name) and a timely resurrection of Billy Joe Shaver's 1981 "We Are the Cowboys," a dissection of the cowboy-as-hero mythology that centers white men as saviors. "Cowboys are average American people / Texicans, Mexicans, Black men, and Jews," Nelson sings, his intimate, uncomplicated vocal approach helping the message speak loudly—he's just one average cowboy, speaking on behalf of others like him. *First Rose* is full of perspectives that only a man with Nelson's lived experience can offer. It's a collection of good old-fashioned country songs, delivered with the soulful spirit of a true country great. —SALEM COLLO-JULIN

**PRIMITIVE MAN, IMMERSION**

**Relapse**  
[primitivemandoom.bandcamp.com/album/immersion](http://primitivemandoom.bandcamp.com/album/immersion)

In one of Chicago's most tumultuous 24-hour peri-

ods in recent memory, the city withstood a night of momentous civil unrest followed by a day of unsettlingly violent storms. By coincidence, I spent much of the duration listening to an oddly suitable soundtrack: *Immersion*, the latest full-length by Denver metal trio Primitive Man. Plenty of bands make music that feels overwhelming, but Primitive Man really earn this album's title, plunging you so deep in the muck you have to dig yourself out. They've been doing that since 2012, when they emerged from their city's underground music scene with a bludgeoning, oozing wall of sludge, noise, and death metal imbued with the struggles, turbulence, and decay of humanity. It can be tempting to paint the band as entirely fatalistic, and maybe they are in their view of power structures and man's capacity to inflict suffering and injustice on others (though they'd probably say they're "realistic"). But on *Immersion*, recorded in early March as the country first came to grips with the enormity of the COVID-19 pandemic, they're also concerned with how hardship impacts people on an individual basis, and with the drive to resist and rebel—even when doing so feels burdensome in itself. The tense opening track, "The Lifer," casts a light on how the desire to create can be an Achilles' heel when it comes to establishing security and creature comforts. "Menacing," which alternates between a maelstrom of drums and guitars and chugging doom punctuated by the cavernous howls of front man and guitarist Ethan Lee McCarthy, speaks to how a person's character is shaped by challenges endured, and to how standing your ground and walking your own path can come at the price of loneliness. As dark as the album gets, though, it maintains a sense of strength and steadiness, and of speaking truth to power. Sometimes facing the vortex head-on can help lighten the load for someone else. —JAMIE LUDWIG

**SPUN OUT, TOUCH THE SOUND**

**Shuga**  
[spunoutband.bandcamp.com/album/touch-the-sound](http://spunoutband.bandcamp.com/album/touch-the-sound)

Ne-Hi formed in 2013 and subsequently became one of the most revered Chicago indie-rock bands of the decade. The four-piece called it quits in May 2019, but I imagine their reputation will only keep growing—partly because all four members continue to play in remarkable groups. Jason Balla always juggled a few projects while in Ne-Hi, chief among them postpunk trio Dehd, which he's helped lead since 2016; their recent *Flower of Devotion* is one of the most celebrated indie albums of 2020. The rest of Ne-Hi—Mikey Wells, James Weir, and Alex Otake—re-emerged last summer as Spun Out, molding a dance-friendly indie pop that draws on 1980s UK postpunk and leaves a lot of room for synth flourishes. Their new debut album, *Touch the Sound* (Shuga), also bears the influence of the Madchester scene; the exquisite piano melody and hypnotic percussion on "Off the Vine," for instance, make it sound like a long-lost *Screamadelica* outtake. But Spun Out transcend mere pop bricolage—they can adapt their fluid style to whatever grabs them. And as you'd expect from a band with this pedigree, the hooks on *Touch the Sound* are ironclad. —LEOR GALIL



## GOSSIP WOLF

A furry ear to the ground of the local music scene

**TO EASE THE** surreal feeling of watching baseball games with no fans in the seats, Gossip Wolf has been searching out new summer pastimes—like laughing at conservative sticks-in-the mud as they freak out about **Cardi B** and **Megan Thee Stallion**'s hilariously raunchy smash “WAP” (and its hilariously raunchy music video). Ben Shapiro's epochal self-own (keeping his wife's “p-word” dry to own the libs!) is even cringier than the clean version of the song, which replaces “wet ass pussy” with “wet and gushy.” Last week, legendary Chicago juke and footwork producer **Traxman** reacted much more constructively to “WAP”—he remixed the bejesus out of it! In his inimitable style, the master packed the track so full of frenetic, hammering bass drops and clapping, stop-start percussion that it sounds like three amazing songs all blasting at once. “WAP Juked Out” is available free via Bandcamp—bucket and mop not included.

Poster artist **Frank Okay** has appeared in the *Reader's Gig Poster of the Week* series, and they've done great illustrations for the paper too. Okay also plays music—they used to be in the band **Strawberry Pegasus**, and lately they've been working on solo material. Last weekend they dropped an album called **Errors**, most of which they've written and recorded during the pandemic. *Errors* is a delightful mish-mash of brazen electro-punk and flamboyant new wave, with a hint of second-wave ska. “**Dumkee Frains**” sounds like a collaboration between Atom & His Package and LCD Soundsystem—and as unlikely as that combo sounds, Okay nails it!

If you're looking for new music to get your blood pumping, **Heavee** has just the thing. On the August 7 “Bandcamp day,” the **Teklife** producer dropped **Trakpak Vol. 5**, where he reassembles fragments of footwork, drum 'n' bass, Baltimore club, and Jersey club into kaleidoscopic cuts that crackle with more energy than Thor's socks straight out of the dryer.

—J.R. NELSON AND LEOR GALIL

Got a tip? Tweet @Gossip\_Wolf or e-mail gossipwolf@chicagoreader.com.

WOLF BY KEITH HERZIK

CHICAGO SHOWS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT IN THE WEEKS TO COME

ALL AGES FREE



Bonelang COURTESY OF AUDIOTREE

### NEW

- Peter Bradley Adams** 3/25/2021, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston
- Melody Angel** 8/28, 7 PM, American Legion Hall Post 42, Evanston
- Armor For Sleep** 7/23/2021, 7 PM, Metro
- Bad Bad Hats** 9/3, 8 PM, livestream at audiotree.tv/staged-show/bad-bad-hats
- Bonelang** 9/24, 8 PM, livestream at audiotree.tv/staged-show/bonelang
- Toronz Cannon** 8/28, 8 PM, City Winery
- Toronz Cannon & the Chicago Way** 8/29, 7 PM, FitzGerald's, Berwyn
- Chandelier Swingers** 8/29, 4 PM, FitzGerald's, Berwyn
- Chi-Town Blues Festival featuring Pokey, Theodis Ealey, Nellie Travis, Chic Rodgers, Lenny Williams, Bobby Rush** 3/27/2021, 8 PM, the Venue at Horseshoe Casino, Hammond
- Chicken Bone** 8/29, 7 PM, American Legion Hall Post 42, Evanston
- Destinos al Aire featuring Cielito Lindo Family Folk Music, members of Agujijón Theater, Repertorio Latino Theater Company, and more** 9/17, 6 PM, ChiTown Movies
- Diamondback** 8/21, 7 PM, American Legion Hall Post 42, Evanston
- Ekali** 8/21, 7 PM, Adler Planetarium Parking Lot
- Eve's Twin Lover, Van Lawless** 9/26, 7 PM, American Legion Hall Post 42, Evanston
- FitzGerald's Community Truck Concert featuring Ron Lazeretti** 8/29, 3 PM, a concert on a truck moving

- through Oak Park and Berwyn from 3-5 PM
- Fozzy, Through Fire, Royal Bliss, Zero Theorem** 10/22, 6:45 PM, the Forge, Joliet
- Jonas Friddle, Anna Jacobson & Andrew Wilkins** 8/30, 1 PM, FitzGerald's, Berwyn
- Funkadesi** 8/22, 7 PM, American Legion Hall Post 42, Evanston
- Future Islands** 10/9, 9 PM, livestream at noonchorus.com/fi-jam
- Garden of Souls** 10/2, 8:30 PM, Constellation, in-person show with concurrent livestream at youtube.com/user/constellationchicago
- Tom Holland & the Shuffle Kings** 9/5, 7 PM, American Legion Hall Post 42, Evanston
- Insane Clown Posse** 9/19, 7:30 PM, the Forge, Joliet
- Jam in Place featuring Hamish Anderson** 9/1, 7 PM, livestream at facebook.com/martinguitar
- Donald Kinsey** 9/4, 7 PM, SPACE, Evanston
- Lakeshore Drive-In presents Henhouse Prowlers, Way-down Wanderers** 8/28, 7 PM, Adler Planetarium Parking Lot
- Luke Malewicz Orchestra** 10/21, 8:30 PM, livestream at facebook.com/jazzrecordart-collective
- Bill MacKay** 9/10, 7 PM, Firecat Projects, space will be limited; contact gallery for required rsvp
- Ian Maksin** 8/29, 8 PM, City Winery A
- Metallica, Three Days Grace (drive-in broadcast)** 8/29, 8:30 PM, Chicago Drive-In at SeatGeek Stadium, Bridgeway, Elgin Cinema, Elgin, and Sears Centre, Hoffman Estates, a pre-filmed concert broadcast exclusively at drive-in theaters

- MFA Trio** 8/29, 1 PM, FitzGerald's, Berwyn
- Michigan Rattlers** 8/27, 6:30 PM, livestream broadcast from the Kalamazoo State Theatre; link provided after ticket purchase
- Motoblot Drive-In featuring Hi-Jivers (duo), Three Blue Teardrops, Crombies, Bailey Dee, Black Angus, Aweful** 8/30, noon, Chicago Drive-In at SeatGeek Stadium, Bridgeway
- My Sweet George (George Harrison tribute performance) featuring Big Hair Big Trouble** 9/4, 7 PM, American Legion Hall Post 42, Evanston
- Carrie Newcomer/Gary Walters/Allie Summers** 9/12, 6 PM, livestream hosted by City Winery; link provided after ticket purchase
- Dave “Medusa” Shelton memorial** 8/22, 7 PM, Medusa's Elgin, Elgin, recorded mixes from a variety of DJs that played at Medusa's will be played throughout the evening, limit of 50 people in the club at any given time; event will be livestreamed for those that cannot attend in person, see facebook.com/events/354177782255698 for further details
- Spektral Quartet album release party for Experiments in Living** 8/28, 7:30 PM, Zoom link provided after registration
- Spektral Quartet presents “The Floating Lounge: The Outrageous Arnold Schoenberg” featuring Lucy Shelton** 8/23, 7:30 PM, Zoom link provided after registration
- Sueños** 8/27, 7 PM, FitzGerald's, Berwyn
- Sunday Jazz on the Green with Luciano Antonio Quartet**

- 8/23, 7 PM, American Legion Hall Post 42, Evanston
- Swallow the Sun, Infected Rain, Wheel** 3/22/2021, 6:30 PM, the Forge, Joliet
- Tech N9ne, Rittz, Krizz Kaliko, King Iso, Maez 301** 10/10, 7:30 PM, the Forge, Joliet
- Terrapin Flyer** 8/27, 7 PM, Adler Planetarium Parking Lot
- Two Feet** 8/29, 7 PM, Adler Planetarium Parking Lot
- Ben Watt** 2/18/2021, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston

### UPDATED

**NOTE: Contact point of purchase for information about ticket exchanges or refunds.**

- Align, Tvvin, Levity** 5/13/2021, 8:30 PM, Schubas, rescheduled, 18+
- Thomas Anders & Modern Talking, Sandra** 8/12/2021, 8 PM, Copernicus Center, rescheduled
- Black Pumas, Seratonos** 4/27/2021, 9 PM, House of Blues, rescheduled; tickets purchased for original and previously rescheduled dates will be honored, 17+
- Christopher Cross** 3/19/2021, 8 PM, Genesee Theatre, Waukegan, rescheduled; tickets purchased for the original and previously rescheduled dates will be honored
- Steve Dawson & Funeral Bonsai Wedding featuring Quartet Paraplue, Louis Bardsales** 5/2/2021, 7 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, rescheduled
- Dead South, Chance McCoy** 9/29/2021, 8 PM, House of Blues, rescheduled, 17+
- Dirty Knobs with Mike Campbell** 10/6/2021, 8 PM, Park West, rescheduled; tickets purchased for original and previous rescheduled dates will be honored, 18+
- Dreadwolf, Kill Scenes, Black Sam Malone, Lack** 9/10, 9 PM, GMan Tavern, postponed until a date to be determined
- Greg Dulli, Joseph Arthur** 9/14, 9 PM, Metro, postponed until a date to be determined, 18+
- Julia Fordham** 9/4/2021, 7:30 PM, SPACE, Evanston, rescheduled
- Front 242, Consolidated** 4/4/2021, 8 PM, Metro, lineup changed, 18+
- Greer** 5/8/2021, 7:30 PM, Lincoln Hall, rescheduled; tickets purchased for original date will be honored
- Heartstrings Project** 8/30, 1:30 and 4 PM, SPACE, Evanston, 4 PM sold out
- Hunny** 8/28, 8 PM, Subterranean, canceled
- Kiss, David Lee Roth** 9/4/2021, 7:30 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park, rescheduled
- Lady Gaga** 8/27/2021, 7:30 PM, Wrigley Field, rescheduled
- Los Chicos Del 512: The Selena Experience** 1/29/2021, 8 PM, Genesee Theatre, Waukegan, rescheduled
- Taj Mahal Quartet** 5/6/2021, 6 and 9 PM, City Winery, rescheduled
- Gerald McClendon: The Soulekeeper (trio)** 9/6, 4:30 and 7 PM, SPACE, Evanston, 4:30 PM show added
- Melkbelly, Facs, CB Radio Gorgeous** 4/3/2021, 9 PM, Sleeping Village, rescheduled
- Monochrome Set, Jetbeats** 10/17/2021, 6:30 PM, Bananna's Comedy Shack at Reggies', rescheduled
- Haru Nemuri, Air Credits** 9/5, 9 PM, Sleeping Village, postponed until a date to be determined
- Miles Nielsen** 9/12, 4:30 and 7 PM, SPACE, Evanston, 7 PM sold out
- Peter Bjorn & John** 10/3, 10 PM, Empty Bottle, canceled
- Peter Rowan's Free Mexican Airforce, Los Texmexians** 5/20/2021, 7 PM, SPACE, Evanston, rescheduled
- Smells Like Nirvana, Tomorrow** 9/5, 9 PM, Cubby Bear, canceled
- Square Roots Online 2020 featuring O'My's, Dehd, Frank Waln, Bomba Con Buva, Andrew Sa & the Cosmic Country Showcase Band** 8/29, 6 PM, time and lineup updated; livestream at squareroots.org
- Robin Trower** 9/11/2021, 7:30 PM, Copernicus Center, rescheduled
- Watkins Family Hour, Courtney Hartman** 5/15/2021, 5 and 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, rescheduled

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UPCOMING

**Adult, Body of Light, Plack Blague** 11/13, 10 PM, Empty Bottle

**Shamarr Allen & the Underdaws** 10/7, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston

**Chris Knight, Joe Stamm** 11/5, 8 PM, City Winery

**Knuckle Puck** 11/20, 8 PM, Subterranean, 17+

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# OPINION

## SAVAGE LOVE

### You're going to need a bigger butt plug

Cucumbers in condoms, ageless kinks, and questions of all sizes

By DAN SAVAGE

**Q:** I'm a 35-year-old woman. I recently discovered I'm a size queen. (Is it OK for me to use this term?) This has been brewing for a while as I have dabbled with purchasing larger and larger cucumbers and fucking myself with them after a good wash. I use a condom and tons of lube and it's been amazing. Are there any safety or health concerns I should be aware of? I'm moving away from fucking produce and purchased my first sizeable toy. I see safety tips online for men who like large toys in their butts, but I wanted to know if there is anything I should be aware of as a vagina-haver. I mainly partner with men but am expanding to date women, and I've been fisted only once by a woman and absolutely loved it.

—FINDING I LATELY LOVE ENORMOUS DILDOS

**A:** So long as you're taking it slow, FILLED, so long as you're using lots of lube, so long as you're playing with toys that have flared bases and were designed for insertion play, and so long as those toys are made of body-safe materials like silicone, then you're doing everything right. And yes, FILLED, you may use the term "size queen" to describe yourself!

**Q:** I'm a longtime fan of

your column and your podcast. Recently a discussion came up on Facebook about diaper play: A group of people seem to think that enjoying this kink is the same thing as being a pedophile or engaging in "pedo-lite" behavior. Another group—myself included—believes that it is simply an expression of a kink between two consenting adults, and therefore isn't the same as pedophilia at all. I was curious as to what your take on the situation was, or if you had any suggestions on how to approach this topic with the first group? Thank you, wishing you all the best! —WANDERING ETHICAL TERRAIN OF NAPPIES EMPLOYED SEXUALLY

**A:** Does fucking someone who's wearing a dog collar count as bestiality? Of course not, WETONES, because dog collars no more turn consenting adults into dogs than diapers turn consenting adults into infants. And the disapproval of strangers on the Internet not only won't stop an adult who wants to wear diapers from wearing diapers, WETONES, that disapproval makes wearing diapers all the more arousing because the transgression and "wrongness" of wearing diapers makes wearing diapers arousing—not for everyone, of course, but for

most people who are into wearing diapers. Which means your disapproving friends are playing right into the pervy hands/crinkly rubber shorts of all the diaper lovers out there. And while it's true that some people who are into age play are also into diapers, WETONES, it's not true that everyone into diapers is into age play. For most people who get off on diapers it's the humiliation of being a diapered *adult* that turns them on, not the fantasy of being a child.

**Q:** My husband and I recently watched the fantastic 70s porn *Alice in Wonderland: An X-rated Musical Fantasy* (we got to it by watching *Meatballs*). It was everything I've ever wanted in a porn. Perhaps you or your readers could recommend something similar to put in our rotation? —LIKES TO WATCH

**A:** Check out *Caligula*. This intermittently pornographic 1979 film probably isn't as lighthearted as the version of *Alice in Wonderland* you stumbled over, LTW, but it doubtless has a much more interesting backstory and far bigger stars. A young and sexy Malcolm McDowell as the mad Roman emperor with Peter O'Toole (!), John Gielgud (!!), and Helen Mirren (!!!) in supporting roles. Even

## OPINION

better, this amazing train wreck of a movie is based on a screenplay by Gore Vidal. (Got a 70s porn recommendation for LTW? Share it in the comment thread!)

**Q:** Here's a quickie: If a woman is attracted to cis men and nonbinary humans (who can have either a penis or vagina) but that woman is not attracted to cis women . . . would that woman be bi or pan? Labels are not super important to me, Dan, but I'm calling on my friendly neighborhood sex advice columnist for help just the same! —**LOVES ALL BODIES EXCEPT LADIES**

**A:** While bisexual was once commonly understood to mean "attracted to both sexes," the Human Rights Campaign's online glossary now defines bisexual as "emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender or gender identity." That same online glossary defines pansexual as "the potential for emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to people of any gender." While on the first read there doesn't seem to be much daylight between those two definitions, LABEL, there actually is some difference between being attracted to "more than one [gender]" and being attracted to "people of any gender." And while a lot of people use bi and pan pretty much interchangeably these days, the bi label is probably a slightly better fit for you, LABEL, seeing as your libido disqualifies all members of one gender—your own—from emotional, romantic or sexual consideration.

**Q:** I'm a queer man who's starting to bottom again after ten years of being on top. I have a butt plug that my anus keeps pushing

out, even though I've tried relaxing and lots of lube. It feels great when it's in, and then there it goes! I need tips! But not just the tip please. —**EXCITING XXX TOY OR PROJECTILE?**

**A:** The butt plug you're using is too small. Like other recovering tops before you, EXTOP, you made the mistake of purchasing a small plug because you didn't think your ass could handle a medium or large one. But butt plugs are held in place after the widest part slides all the way into your ass, past your anal sphincters, and then your sphincters close around the neck of the plug, aka the narrow part before the flared base. But if the wide part isn't much wider than the narrow part—if you bought a plug that looks more like a finger than a lava lamp—then the anal sphincters will push the plug back out. Or, even worse, they'll send the plug flying across the room when your sphincters contract at the moment of orgasm. Do yourself and your wallpaper a favor, EXTOP, and get yourself a bigger plug.

**Q:** I am an avid reader, and I incorporate much of your advice in caring for my patients. I have tremendous respect for you and your column. Nonetheless, I must raise a concern about a small comment in your response to COVET, the woman who was wondering about getting together with a new partner for sex despite social distancing: "Life is short," you wrote, "and this pandemic is going to be long." The lockdown is indeed difficult, Dan, but the concept that "this pandemic is going to be long" leads too many of us to feel as if the pandemic will never end. Impatience is driving some people to

risky behavior that can be otherwise avoided. With attention to safety measures, we can reduce our risk of infection, as well as emotionally survive until a vaccine is available. Patience with the pandemic is analogous to the perseverance that Londoners used to get through the bombings of WWII. —**PRACTICE ALL NECESSARY DEEDS ESPECIALLY MASKS ISOLATING COVID-19**

**A:** Thank you for sharing, PANDEMIC!

**Q:** I got into my Lyft at 6 AM this morning to go to the airport. My driver was an older man with a southern drawl. The Savage Lovecast was playing on the radio when I entered his car and I thought he was going to turn it off when he realized it was still on. I've had some heartfelt, beautiful, and rich conversations with my Lyft drivers and I thought we would bond over our shared love of your show. I was literally sitting in the backseat thinking, "This is so great, we are so different but we have at least one thing in common, I wonder how long he has been a listener, and could he be a Magnum subscriber too?" Then I realized the episode playing was the one I was listening to the previous night as I fell asleep . . . and then I realized my phone was connected to his car's Bluetooth. Oops. Love you, Dan! —**SHERYL IN TEXAS!**

**A:** Thank you for sharing, SIT, and thanks for turning a new listener on to the Savage Lovecast! 📻

Send letters to mail@savagelove.net. Download the Savage Lovecast at savagelovecast.com. 🐦 @fakedansavage



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**Corporate Law Assistant - Italian Law (Chicago, IL - Downtown)** Duties: Analyze matters and assist in negotiations involving Italian Business Association law under the supervision of a partner admitted to practice law in Illinois (to the extent permitted by Article VIII of the Illinois Rules of Professional Conduct (Rules 5.3 and 5.5)) Requirements: Master's Degree ("Laurea Specialistica") in Italian Company Law from an accredited Italian law school, with specialization ("Cultore Della Materia") in Business Association Law; and Corporate Mediator Specialist Certification ("Spezializzazione per Mediatori") for Professional Mediator ("Conciliatore Professionista") Submit resume to: imbrannon@bcplaw.com

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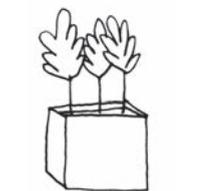
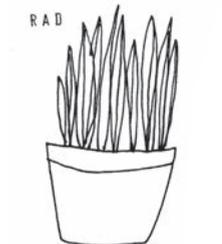
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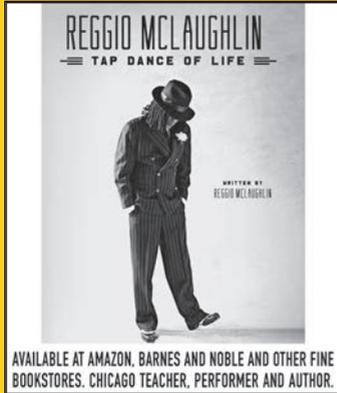
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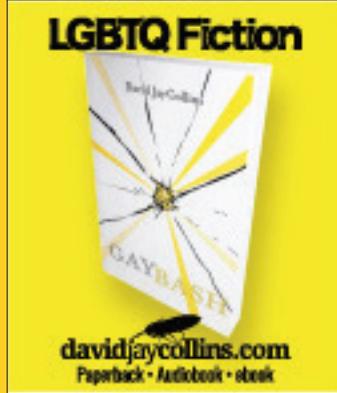
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