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SHOP LOCAL

Taking up her space
Kelley Moseley’s daring accessories will not go unnoticed.

By Isa Giallorenzo

“M y designs are unapologetically bold,” says Kelley D. Moseley, 42, about K-FLEYE, her accessory line. Pronounced “kay fly,” Moseley’s label offers handcrafted jewelry, reclaimed leather bags, hats, and other kinds of adornments. Her designs feel organic and earthy, yet very festive, exuding a sense of joy and adventure in each item. “I like to have fun when it comes to creating and designing,” Moseley says. “I don’t like looking like everyone else, and that is why I create unique pieces.” The materials she uses are unique as well: “I reclaim, repurpose, and reimagine materials that may have been discarded but were once loved. Working with reclaimed materials is challenging and rewarding. The materials often dictate what they want to be.”

Freedom permeates Moseley’s work, inspired by “conversations, music, and nature.” “I love to dance, so oftentimes you will find movement in my work,” she says. Her signature mismatched earrings clearly reflect that aesthetic. Moseley’s creative process begins with prayer and positive affirmations, in order to clear her mind. She makes her accessories in a home studio in Bronzeville, and mostly does everything by herself—with a little help from Vision, her four-year-old son who loves to create objects with her.

Founded in 2004, K-FLEYE was a way for Moseley to make some extra money to buy a couch: “I relied on my skills and talents and created jewelry. I then sold it at a family reunion—fast forward almost 20 years later and I am still happily creating and doing what I love.” She has since collaborated with Nike, sold her collection at Macy’s, and received the FashionNEXT People’s Choice award at the Chicago History Museum. But Moseley says her biggest success is that after all these years as a full-time artist, she is just getting started. “So many great things happen to me daily. It is not easy but it is so worth it.” She says she wants to encourage and inspire others to take up space, and to keep going and growing. “People can be discouraging, but as long as you are clear with who you are and what you want, you can and you will make it happen. If you don’t see what you want, create it. Build a community that supports your dreams and goals and be supportive of others’ dreams and goals. I will find a way or make one.”
RESTAURANT REVIEW

Boonie Foods imagines Pinoy food past, present, and future

Former Arami chef Joe Fontelera’s pandemic pop-up settles in at Revival Food Hall.

By Mike Sula

No, there is no vegan sausage on the menu at Boonie Foods, but I wasn’t the first person to imagine there was. “Yeah, I get a lot of that,” says Joe Fontelera, the former executive chef at Arami who in early March made his Filipino pandemic pop-up permanent at Revival Food Hall.

The “Vigan longganisa” instead refers to the sausage found around Vigan, the capital city of Ilocos province in the Philippines, where his grandmother was born. Fontelera is hardly the only chef who turned from fine dining to the familiar food of their mothers or grandmothers during the pandemic, and he’s also among the growing number working to subvert the characteristically American stereotype that the food of the archipelago is a monolith.

Take the longganisa at Ukrainian Village’s modern Filipino Kasama, which he maintains is the best in the city right now, and which is more in the style of the sausage from the Pampanga province: bright red from annatto, sweet and garlicky, whereas Vigan longganisa is heavy on black pepper, soy sauce, and the cane vinegar Ilocos is known for.
Vigan longganisa is actually an exception to the general profile of Ilocano food, which Fontelera says, “in my experience is a lot more simply prepared compared to any other region in the Philippines. It’s very technique-driven versus being ingredient heavy.”

Fontelera has plenty to say about Filipino food—where it’s going and where it’s been. Both of his Instagram accounts (@joefontelera, @booniefoods) are dense with culinary, political, and personal history, but prior to last spring, not as much. “I started using it around my grandmother’s birthday in 2020 when she turned 100,” he says. “As the global situation started to deteriorate, I felt the collective ‘everybody is going back to what’s comforting because it’s a messed-up time.’ And seeing what was going on with the rise of anti-Asian sentiment in the country, I was sick of not saying anything about it. I don’t even know who I was talking to, I was just like, ‘I’m gonna post all the stuff I really like that I’ve silenced and minimized throughout the years.’ And it felt good. So I just kept doing it.”

Fontelera was furloughed briefly then worked carryout and delivery at Arami, which gave him time and space to conceive Boonie Foods—named for U.S. soldiers’ bastardization of “bondoc,” the Ilocano word for mountain, which also happens to be his grandmother’s original surname. He mounted a series of pop-ups over the summer, and then a monthly three-course dinner series for pickup out of Arami over the fall, kicking off the first menu with a “mangangan,” a salad of unripe mango with fermented shrimp paste, and chili vinaigrette; and a “lococ mocon longganisa,” a rice and egg plate drenched in the gravy his grandfather taught him to make when he was a kid.

The Mexican and Hawaiian influences that crept into this menu foreshadowed another growing preoccupation with the way Filipino food is perceived in the U.S. “You see a lot of this in Chicago: immigrant food tends to be time-capsule food. It tends to look exactly like what it was when that first wave of immigrants left their country. I’ve had conversations with Vietnamese American folks who tell me that the food on Argyle looks exactly like it did in the ‘70s when that wave of Vietnamese immigrants left. Filipino food is exactly the same. In the U.S. there’s this pressure: if I’m gonna open a Filipino restaurant, I need to hit these different markers. I want to be part of that movement that’s pushing Filipino food forward.”

As he came around to these ideas, Fontelera was beginning to imagine what a brick-and-mortar Boonie Foods might look like. But then when the second shutdown descended, Arami went from a five-day carryout operation to daily, and Boonie Foods went on hiatus.

“I wanted to put my best foot forward with this,” he says. “As BIPOC creators we unfortunately get turned into ambassadors for whatever it is we’re doing. Even though I don’t think that’s fair, it is kind of what happens. I decided to pause so I could do it right and bide my time and continue to manage Arami. But I guess I got into kind of a shit-or-get-off-the-pot moment. It was killing me that I wasn’t doing Boonie Foods anymore, and I felt like I really needed it.”

Fontelera describes the Revival incarnation of Boonie Foods as “Ilocos-inspired,” balancing garlic rice plates (aka silog), mostly centering on dishes such as chicken adobo, coconut milk shrimp, eggplant stew, or bagnet, along with a trio of flour-tortilla tacos swaddling the same. The latter aren’t clumsy fusion afterthoughts: the original taco he developed, the “bomba iloko,” with pickled papaya and Vigan longganisa, is based on an annatto-tinged rice flour empanada specific to Ilocos.

The most seductive dish at Boonie Foods is the sisig, a sizzling, crispy, chewy pork belly hash that appears in taco form, as silog, and in a supersized portion that feeds two. Fontelera describes it as “Chipotle but for sisig.” Traditionally sisig is made with all parts of the pig head and liver, bound together with pig brain. Fontelera subs egg for the latter, not because he’s playing it safe, but because breaking down pig heads isn’t feasible given the time-sensitive requirements of a food hall, which is just one indication that Boonie Foods continues to develop into an even broader, more permanent concept.

Fontelera is still thinking brick and mortar but “it’s constantly evolving and changing in my brain,” he says. “I really value accessibility, so the dinner menu I’m running at Revival would remain for lunchtime, but then at dinnertime I’d like to do some funkier stuff, some things that would take a little bit longer than what I can pump out at the food hall. There’s more to Filipino food than just the five dishes that everybody knows.”

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Chris Classick: Managers’ Special came together because we realized there were so many managers in Chicago working with amazing talent, but they weren’t really connecting with each other. We thought, “We should get all the managers together for a little brunch.” It became a place where managers could talk about all the stuff managers go through. We realized the things we had in common created a kind of spectrum, but we felt disconnected from each other. We needed to create something where we could work together and share all the ideas we have for our artists.

Love Graham: Chicago historically is a segregated place—it’s probably one of the most segregated cities in America. Anyone who’s been around for a decade-plus in the music scene has felt that on a microcosmic level. Over the past several years, there’s been more of a spotlight on Chicago’s music scene, but as managers, we’re challenged by not having the infrastructure to be able to leverage one another’s resources. Chicago has just as much of a pool of talent as New York or LA, but on the coasts, they’ve been able to build out the infrastructure to be able to control the marketplace. With Managers’ Special we’re pushing back against that way of doing things; we’re creating a new marketplace so that we can work within our own pool and have more control of our city’s narrative and the things we do in our city.

Tamika Ponce: As a manager, a lot of your days are spent figuring out how to do things, and things are always changing. With Managers’ Special, you get to connect with people and see what everyone else is working on. When something comes to your table you have different people to pull from. “What was your experience like? What should I expect?” And as you get to know what a brand or a label is looking for, you’re able to connect them with others in the city. A lot of people are interested in working with home teams. They want to work with local photographers and artists, or they want to record at Classick Studios or Complex.

Von Harris: You can’t really pinpoint a manager’s tasks; you might be the booking manager, you may be doing digital marketing, or anything else until you find your team. I work with a lot of artists at the beginning stages of their careers. For me, Managers’ Special has been about building my network so that I can take some tasks off of my shoulders.

LG: When the pandemic hit, there was a need to find the resources to help carry people through this emergency. We’d been doing brunches and events, but we decided, “Let’s turn this into a non-profit organization, pool our resources, and find ways to give grants to artists and managers in this time of need.” A lot of artists we work with—a lot of artists, period—come from poverty, but a lot of managers come from poverty, too. We’re all trying to make it with nothing. If Managers’ Special can help people get their feet off the ground, that’s what we want to do.

TP: We hope to make our grant program available every year, not just to give money to artists or managers, but to give them a crash course into the music industry to make sure they have all of the fundamentals in place, whether it’s providing a soundboard, or connecting them to distributors, studios, or other artists. We want to help build a community they can lean on while preserving some financial freedom. Getting into your first deal can be very intimidating; we’re trying to take some of that pressure away.

Merk: It’s great to have a platform like Managers’ Special where you have this sort of “Angie’s List” of resources and you can ask questions. This job presents its problems, and your problems as a manager are pretty much designed by your environment—an up-and-coming artist from Dolton might have different issues than an up-and-coming artist from Wicker Park. A lot of artists have very small networks, and when they come to our lunches or meet-ups they’re able to see manifesting their talent locally is much more of a reality than it is a dream.

CC: Let me put the mike down. As managers, we’re here to serve our artists and do everything in our power to help them get to the next level. The biggest legacy I want to leave Chicago is to show that we don’t have to leave Chicago. We all feel the same about that. The power is in the people, so the power is in our hands. We do want to bridge the gap between Chicago and New York, or Chicago and LA, but our biggest problem is bridging the gaps within our city. So our biggest purpose is to keep sharing with each other.

Managers’ Special builds connections

Managers’ Special is a collective of Chicago music managers who strive to support emerging artists and music industry executives through community building and strategic collaboration. The board members of Managers’ Special are passionate about finding ways to give grants to artists and managers in this time of need.

Photo courtesy Nosidam (@no.sid.am), Managers’ Special Brunch, Classick Studios.

Bull Horn is an avenue to give wings to the stories that matter most. This series, from Red Bull in partnership with the Chicago Reader, invites guest writers, artists, activists, and community members to share their ideas and amplify timely, crucial topics they feel are important now.
Taking a bite out of TikTok

How going viral became the restaurant industry’s most crucial ingredient

By Kayla Huynh

Jack Gillespie has what any teen or 20-something could only dream of: a lifetime supply of boba tea.

When the 19-year-old student from Arlington Heights posted a TikTok of the new Hangout Cafe in Palatine, his eight-second clip raked in tens of thousands of views. People began flocking to the place. The owners took notice, sliding into his DMs to offer unlimited boba.

Since creating his account (@visuals.by.jack) last April, Gillespie has garnered nearly 282,000 followers and 13.9 million likes. The app has become a burgeoning platform for the restaurant industry’s most crucial ingredient.

Unique storefronts and cuteys foods to garner attention online. But as whimsical cafes become more common, some have taken to TikTok to highlight the restaurants that aren’t as video-worthy—from mom-and-pop diners without social media pages to hidden family-owned stores lacking adequate advertising.

Launched in 2016 under the name Musical.ly, TikTok has seen significant growth in a short span. More than 689 million people used the app in January, making it the seventh largest among social media platforms—ahead of Snapchat, Pinterest, and Twitter, all of which have existed longer than TikTok.

Drenten has seen young people increasingly use TikTok to help inform their purchasing decisions, especially when it comes to choosing where to eat—62 percent of the platform’s U.S. audience is between the ages of ten and 29.

Though no one really understands how the app’s algorithm works, the “For You” page, TikTok’s personalized and curated feed, is known to be creepily attuned to users’ tastes. That makes content creators trustworthy sources on the city’s eats, Drenten says. As of May, the hashtags #chicagorestaurants and #chicagofood have a total of nearly 100 million views.

Drenten says TikTok users, especially those who are in the Gen Z and millennial generations, are attracted to the fact that anybody—no matter how young, old, or unequipped—has the potential to go viral.

On TikTok, “authenticity” is prioritized over the skin-smoothing filters and “hey, look at me” culture of Instagram. To enter influencer territory, Drenten says “it’s all based on the persona” that a user creates. Gaining legitimacy as a TikTok foodie doesn’t mean one has to know about food—one just needs to know how to be a good, and honest, storyteller.

The platform glamorizes the everyday, ordinary person, putting them on a level playing field with seasoned professionals. “There’s a bit of a pushback against experts, where expertise is actually seen as a bad thing—it’s seen as an ivory tower and pretentious to some extent,” Drenten says. “The New York Times food editor isn’t any more legitimate than a 16-year-old who goes around the south side of Chicago taking people to their favorite hot dog stands.”

Many creators are either students or just starting their careers. The account @explorechicago is run by two sisters from Harwood Heights, Yasmeen and Leen Alqaissi, who are 17 and 19 years old. Their faces are rarely shown onscreen, but the sibling duo has captured 2.7 million likes on TikTok, featuring businesses with extravagant menus. In their video of Brothers Restaurant in Avondale, they show off a shamrock shake topped with ice cream sandwiches and rainbow Airheads candy.

Gen Z’s especially anti-power ethos has cultivated an atmosphere on TikTok that rejects the hierarchical system of what it means to be “legitimate, to be reputable, to have a right to be in a certain space,” Drenten says. What matters is making content that proves to be valuable.

“Gen Z is like, ‘Everyone can come to the party! And you don’t need to prove yourself,’” Drenten adds, laughing. “They’re going to uplift voices of people just because they find them entertaining or fun or interesting—not because of the credentials that previous generations have placed value on.”

Erin Byrne, the thumbs behind @312food—an account with 1.5 million likes—shifted to TikTok as a way of expanding her already-popular Instagram account by the same name. The 36-year-old, who lives in Lakeview, says TikTok can reach audiences in ways that Instagram cannot.

“When you follow somebody on Instagram, that’s most of the content you see. Almost everybody you’re reaching as an influencer is somebody who has chosen to follow you and opt into your content on a regular basis,” she says, pointing to a TikTok clip of hers that has been watched by 13 million people. “On TikTok, the majority of your content is seen by people who don’t follow you, so it’s almost the opposite in terms of the reach that you get for any particular post.”

Though a restaurant’s menu is important, some popular Chicago TikTok creators look for more than just dishes that are pleasing to the palate. They want the “vibe” that will get them likes and engagement—bars with mini golf courses, cafes with sparkly mat cha lattes, bakeries with rainbow walls.

The videos are seamless. “Welcome to my life in Chicago,” says Dana Joelle (@danajoelle. )—the TikTok creator whose bio says she’s “keeping Chicago hot”—in a series about...
her “fabulous” city escapades. The 24-year-old who grew up in the Gold Coast works in the cryptocurrency and blockchain industry, but like many other foodies, calls TikTok a “side hustle.”

Clad in a hot pink blazer, Joelle shows her Valentine’s Day brunch at Terrace 16 in Trump Tower, recommending the lobster omelette and bottomless Veuve Clicquot champagne. In another video, with nearly 50,000 views, she heads to the Metropolitan Club for date night. “If you have not been to the restaurant on the 67th floor of the Sears, I mean Willis, Tower, then you’re simply not dining correctly,” she says as the video flashes between shots of short-rib wagyu, goat cheese cheesecake and the building’s classy interior. “This place is never crowded and I don’t know why. It’s the definition of fabulous.”

Joelle knows her content isn’t for everyone. It’s tailored for those who enjoy a sophisticated atmosphere and the chance to dress up. “For the most part, since I grew up here, this is the life that I was always living,” she says. “The following I do have is a really strong one because they’re people who are like me.”

Michael Loumeau, 28, runs the @bestdatefood account with his partner Aly Bainbridge. After biking in July to visit one of their favorite patisseries, Maison Marcel, they were instead greeted by the newly opened Beacon Doughnuts in Lincoln Park. Located in a nondescript alley, they advertised the “hidden gem,” with its splashy floral mural and picture-perfect doughnuts, on TikTok. As Doja Cat’s “Say So” plays, the text “Check it out before it gets too popular!” flashes onto the screen.

The place did, in fact, get popular. “Nobody was there when we went,” Loumeau says. “We made our video, got over a million views, and based on what the owner was messaging us, they sold out literally every single day after that. They couldn’t keep up with demand and the line became 30 to 40 people, open to close.”

At the end of April, Loumeau quit his job at an insurance company to take on @bestdatefood full-time. He plans on eventually monetizing some of his videos as he builds an audience, as well as creating merch, seeking out licensing some of his videos as he builds an audience, as well as creating merch, seeking out

FOOD & DRINK

While food content can attract millions of eyeballs, small businesses in Chicago have been slow to hop on the TikTok bandwagon, instead pumping time and dollars into Facebook, Instagram, and traditional advertising.

Byrne, who runs her own marketing company for small businesses, has seen the hesitation firsthand. “I’m trying to get my clients on there, but even I’m kind of struggling with it because it’s time-consuming,” she says. Making an account is easy but “understanding how to make the types of content that do go viral and to justify the time put in it” is a different story.

TikTok does not provide the same detailed analytics as other social media apps do, making it difficult for businesses to pinpoint whether viewers become patrons. The app can also feel inaccessible to restaurant owners who lack the knowledge, and often hours, to create viral content.

But Byrne and Drenten say now is the time for local companies to jump ship from aged apps. “Those who do, will do very well as a result of it,” Byrne says. Just as MySpace became the new Facebook became the new Instagram, older platforms have become too saturated with restaurants “spamming you all hours of the day.”

One Chicago restaurant that has caught onto the TikTok trend is The Budlong Hot Chicken. The shop, which has four locations in the city, has its own TikTok specialist, Caitlin Hendricks. In its most popular clip, Hendricks wakes her dad with a hot chicken sandwich from Budlong. After blinking sleep out of his eyes, he takes a giant bite, relishing in the tastiness. The views: 1.1 million.

Other owners let the TikTokers do the talking, reaping the benefits of customer-generated reviews on the app. But Drenten says the best way for businesses to take advantage of the platform is to make their stores as TikTok-able and “thirst trap-able” as possible, prompting people to share their own pictures and videos online. “There’s just a ton of power for local companies to jump ship from aged apps. “Those who do, will do very well as a result of it,” Byrne says. Just as MySpace became the new Facebook became the new Instagram, older platforms have become too saturated with restaurants “spamming you all hours of the day.”

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“I think for local businesses, if they figure out how to jump on here at the right time, it can make a really big difference.”

Nick Jennings, who opened the bar Big Mini Putt Club during the end of March, the only nine-hole mini golf course in the city, says he and his business partner crafted the space to be photogenic and eye-popping for this very reason. Customers love modeling in the club’s vintage Yamaha golf cart and posing in front of the neon sign that illuminates the words “I like big putts and I cannot lie.”

The free advertising works. “Anecdotally, the reach we’ve gotten from that is really impressive,” Jennings says. “We already have a slate of regulars that have come back four or five times, and I think the benefit is the stickiness of the TikTok customers. It gets them in the door, and I don’t think these are one-and-done customers by any means.”

Another recently opened store in Lincoln Park called Matchacita, co-owned by Bianca Pearson, has picked up on the same trend: TikTok traffic begets customer traffic. When a video of her café’s Purple Haze latte, a combo of matcha, lavender, CBD, and oat milk, went viral, she was unsurprised.

The store was designed to be pretty. The café has a wall of fake grass draped with pastel flowers, alongside a glowing pink “Squeeze the day” sign. The TikTokers stand out, people who are “definitely going in to take photos,” Pearson says. On one April day, high school and college students lined up outside the door, waiting to give the drinks they saw on the Internet a try. “Truthfully, I think that social media has almost all the power nowadays,” she says. “I feel like you only use social media now to see what you like out there.”

But what about the businesses that aren’t made for portraits?

Such is the downfall of TikTok, Drenten says. Despite boasting delicious dishes, new and established restaurants that aren’t located in “trendy,” heavily gentrified or majority white neighborhoods, like Lincoln Park and Wicker Park, may not be able to attract foodies looking for an aesthetic akin to the Hampton Socials and Summer House Santa Monica’s of Chicago. Businesses owned by people of color, and menus with foods that may not fit Western standards of attractiveness, are especially impacted.

“TikTok has definitely been in some hot water for privileging white creators on the ‘For You’ page over creators of color,” Drenten says.

Michele Thompson, an auditor at Kraft Heinz, manages @chelethefoodsnob, a TikTok account with more than 90,000 views. The 31-year-old moved from Alabama to Rogers Park in 2019. She is one of the few creators who specifically highlights Black-owned restaurants in the city. “Right now, I really feel like everyone’s trying to go to places that look expensive and fancy to try to give the illusion that they can afford it, like they’re bougie,” she says. “I’m all for it, I love it, I really do. But I think that’s what they think people want to see.”

Thompson fell in love with TikTok because the videos don’t “make it look any extra than what it is,” and people, in turn, fell in love with her for her realism. “They saw I wasn’t really trying to sell them anything, I wasn’t trying to sell the ambiance,” she says. “I was just trying to sell good food, I was trying to sell good businesses.”

“These videos show you exactly what you’ll get,” Thompson adds. You can dress up an Instagram post with vignettes and filters, but you can’t fake video footage.

Shifa Zhong, a 24-year-old Bridgeport resident, showcases the best of Chinatown. He recently declined an offer to work for the global ad agency Leo Burnett to start his own digital marketing company, geared specifically to Chinatown businesses. Zhong educates owners on the benefits of advertising through social media. “Most of their mindsets are that once they establish the business, they don’t need to do anything else and that people will come,” he says. “But that’s not the case, especially with this pandemic.”

Over the past decade during which Chinatown has been his “playground,” Zhong has watched as businesses have shuttered and the number of tourists has dwindled. In an official survey, he asked ten Chinatown owners where they were located. All named the same three stores, though the neighborhood has more than 50 unique businesses. That led him to his own personal mission: to bring life, and money, back into Asian-owned shops.

To learn more about TikTok, he started his own account @chinatownshifa, posting content of his favorite restaurants in the area. Despite having about the same number of followers on Instagram, he says TikTok’s algorithm has gotten him more reach.

Instagram is where “you always want to post the best version of yourself,” Zhong says, which he thinks pales in comparison to TikTok’s rawness. “Gen Z kids are really smart. If you look at a video, we can see if it is faked, staged, or posed in an authentic way,” he says. “If you put some bullshit out or try to fake some stuff, people will call you out.”

As a firm believer in the impact of short-form video content, he knows TikTok can make or break a local business. The possibilities and options within the app, he says, are endless.

“This is our generation, and there’s literally nothing that can stop us right now,” Zhong says. “TikTok is like our reality TV show—I’m talking about a Kim Kardashian level of production.”

@kaylahuynh
FOOD & DRINK

Overflow can’t be contained
South Loop’s Overflow Coffee carries on the legacy of Vee-Jay Records.

By Angela Burke

All of us have been witness to the slow erasure of a once legendary building. Often these structures appear to have been resuscitated by their inevitable transition into something vapid like a boutique dental office, a pet grooming salon, or a chain restaurant, when really, they’ve entered the dental office, a pet grooming salon, or a chain restaurant, when really, they’ve entered the

Often these structures appear to have erasure of a once legendary building. A feature wall showcasing the label’s record covers designates a comfy lounge area that feels like an Instagram prompt on the surface; but a deeper dig reveals it’s actually an homage to the original aesthetic of the building, which filled its windows with Vee-Jay album covers. They mark a homecoming. “As soon as we found out the history of the space the team started going online and buying stuff. Brian started buying album covers every week if he found something on eBay.” The covers are artifacts that illustrate the range of Vee-Jay’s artists which included: The Beatles, Jerry Butler, the Dells, Betty Everett, Dick Gregory, Jimmy Reed, the Spaniels, and more.

Baked goods are made in-house by Pendleton. She found a knack for baking as a child fully equipped with an Easy-Bake Oven, and now she owns the online bakeshop Bakes by Kari. Through Entrenuity’s program, she’s able to build her business and eventually grow it into a brick-and-mortar bakery of her own. Pastry chef is just one of the many hats Pendleton wears at Overflow. She runs the day-to-day operations and heads up the coffee program, pulling from her extensive background as a barista and manager at cafes overseas and in Chicago (Ipsento, Julius Meinl, Bridge Cafe). For her, baking is about nourishment while coffee is about building connections. “Living in Chicago, a city that’s always moving and very much has the hustlers’ mentality, and being an entrepreneur myself, there’s this feeling of constant motion, and coffee creates a space of pause. While it fuels you to do what you need to do, it also gives you the opportunity to slow down, to connect, and to rest.”

Considering the cultural impact of third places and how they show up for the communities that they serve, it’s befitting that Overflow Coffee would evolve into a harmonious hybrid that’s part coffee shop, museum, and business accelerator. Pendleton says the response to their opening has been overwhelming. Even Calvin Carter’s son has visited and was moved by the tribute paid to his heritage. “Everybody’s been so kind. Someone brought us a plant as a welcome back to the neighborhood gift. The response has been really affirming.”

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Overflow Coffee opened on Michigan Avenue in South Loop in early 2021 after a two-year-long renovation, but the cafe isn’t new to the neighborhood. Owned by Entrenuity, a not-for-profit business incubator founded by L. Brian Jenkins with a mission to support Black, Brown, and women entrepreneurs, Overflow thrived for many years in a shared multiuse space on State Street before its lease was terminated in 2019. With little time to relocate, the Overflow team swiftly sought new dwellings that would house Entrenuity’s headquarters, a coworking space, and the coffee shop. “We found this location on 14th and Michigan and I think as a team, we got the consensus that this is something we could grow into and offer things that we couldn’t in the space before,” says Overflow coffee director, Kari Pendleton. “And then we found out the history of this building.”

In the 50s and 60s, Vee-Jay Records founders Vivian Carter and her husband James Bracken were notable fixtures on Record Row, setting up shop at 2129 S. Michigan before relocating to 1449 S. Michigan at the height of the label’s popularity. At the time, Vee-Jay Records was the largest Black-owned record label in the U.S.—before Motown, there was Vee-Jay. The opening line of a 1961 profile in Ebony magazine offers insight into the label’s significance: “Among America’s top record manufacturers—the men who know recordings best—Chicago’s hit making Vee-Jay Record Co. is fast becoming the biggest little giant in the industry.” Yet, while much has been written about Chicago’s own Chess Records, the cultural contributions of Vee-Jay Records has largely been overlooked. It’s a story that Pendleton and the team at Overflow are bringing to light.

The meaning of “overflow” has become a mantra of sorts for Pendleton, a Chicago native who grew up in Beverly but spent much of her childhood in Scotland with her parents and siblings. For her, the word puts into context how persistence and Black entrepreneurship—both past and present—exist in this building. “Figuring out that history and realizing there’s always been a legacy of Black-owned businesses here, and that they too had to create their own space because no one could accommodate them,” she says. “And that’s so much of our story. We were unable to be accommodated by an available space. We had to create our own.”

Inside the shop, music plays once again. A melodic mix of classic soul and R&B grooves along with the sibilants of a steaming espresso machine that pumps out locally roasted Metric. Exposed brick with “Overflow Coffee” painted in black sets the backdrop for the seating area, which is open currently. A piano rests near the back wall where a majestic, black-and-white image taken at the label’s office in 1959 of the Vee-Jay team is prominently displayed: Carter and Bracken, their business partner Ewart Abner, and Carter’s brother, Calvin Carter, who was a producer and manager.

“We wanted to do something to honor the history and the space and let people know what this used to be. We want Overflow to have its own presence and tell its own story, but at the same time, we want to give honor to the history that this space does have,” Pendleton says.

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@burkefandb
In the last few days, we’ve been having one of those feeding frenzies in which the powers that be who run our fair city create some manufactured crisis so we open our mouths and they collectively shovel in some bullshit.

As if to say—eat up, Chicago! It’s good for you.

In this case, the crisis is the uncertainty created when Janice Jackson, the Rahm-appointed CEO of the public schools, revealed she was stepping down at the end of the school year.

Or as she announced—in not so many words—see ya’, wouldn’t want to be ya’…

With that, Janice Jackson joined the ranks of exalted mayoral appointees whose tenure we, the ordinary citizens, must forever praise with gratitude. ‘Cause without them, we’d be lost.

Think Paul Vallas, Gery Chico, Garry “Big Mac” McCarthy.

Eddie Johnson might be on that list. Except he made the mistake of getting caught in a bar kissing a woman who wasn’t his wife. Resulting in a messy departure for which our city’s mythmakers have yet to figure out a narrative. So, we’re sort of supposed to forget he was ever among us.

Back to Janice Jackson…

She was heralded as an only-in-Chicago success story. A woman who rose through the ranks from teacher to principal to CEO—exalt ed ruler of the public-school universe.

And what is the lesson to be learned from Jackson’s time as school boss? Easy, the same one to be learned from when Vallas and Chico ran the show in the late 90s.

Our leaders are wise and benevolent. Especially our mayors—who’re right, even when they’re wrong.

Also, we must never listen to that evil teachers union, which is run by leftist ideologues. And we must never ever move from an appointed school board to an elected one.

No, no—must not do that. Because that means more democracy. And democracy is so political and so messy. As opposed to mayoral rule, which is clean and free of politics.

Got that, Chicago?

So, forget for the moment that Mayor Rahm appointed Janice Jackson as CEO after her mayor-appointed predecessor, Forrest Claypool, got caught in a scandal in which special education money was used for things having little to do with special education.

And that Mayor Rahm appointed Claypool as CEO when his mayor-appointed predecessor, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, got caught in a scandal that eventually sent her to federal prison.

That’s the one in which Byrd-Bennett convinced the mayor-appointed school board to sign a $23 million principal consulting contract with a bunch of grifters who promised to kick her back a little of the good stuff.

So she could play the slots and take care of her grandchildren’s college education. Or as she put it in an e-mail uncovered by federal prosecutors: “I have tuition to pay and casinos to visit.”

A line that’s arguably the greatest contribution any mayoral appointee has made to Chicago—at least in this century.

Byrd-Bennett proved her usefulness to Mayor Rahm by being the front person when he closed 50 schools, mostly in Black communities.

And Jackson proved her usefulness to Mayor Rahm by being the front person in his political feud with Troy LaRaviere, then the principal of Blaine Elementary School.

LaRaviere had made a name for himself by taking strong stands against Rahm’s privatization schemes, endorsing Jesús “Chuy” García for mayor, and then making a 2016 commercial for Bernie Sanders in which he said: “The chief politician standing in the way of us getting good schools is our mayor.”

Soon thereafter, Jackson came to Blaine to assure the school’s community that LaRaviere had done something so egregious that CPS had to suspend him. LaRaviere later resigned.

Jackson refused to say what he had allegedly done. But she suggested that one day we’d all thank her for punishing him for having done it. Whatever it was.

She never did get around to revealing just what it was that LaRaviere did—probably because there was nothing to be revealed. And LaRaviere went on to get elected president of the Chicago Principals and Administrators Association, which, as the name suggests, is an association of principals and administrators from Chicago’s public schools.

And so, Jackson spent much of her four-year tenure as CEO not getting along with the leaders selected by the principals and teachers. Apparently, open hostility to the groups that represent your employees is seen as great leadership in Chicago.

Jackson didn’t mention LaRaviere when she announced she was stepping down. But she made a point of taking a few veiled shots at—who else? —the Chicago Teachers Union.

She rued about the “ugly politics” our system had become. As if her very public dismissal of LaRaviere wasn’t exhibit A of the long-standing politicization of Chicago’s schools.

To help drive home the message, both downtown papers used her departure to bash CTU and warn against an elected school board.

They cite many reasons for opposing an elected board, but my favorite, for irony, comes when they declare the importance of making sure the mayor is free to appoint business leaders who understand finances and can act as wise stewards of the public purse.

Never mind that mayoral appointees from the business community signed on to Byrd-Bennett’s consulting scam and some really dumbass borrowing schemes that squandered millions in bank fees and interest payments.

I know about these schemes thanks to the painstaking efforts of Heather Gillers and Jason Grotto from their days as investigative reporters for the Chicago Tribune.

Apparently, editorialists don’t read the articles that their reporter colleagues dutifully write.

Well, enough of my jaded observations for the day. It’s feeding time, Chicago.

Open your mouths. Bite down. Swallow. Enjoy your meal. If you’re well-behaved, they’ll feed you dessert.
INCANTATIONS OF CORPOREALITY
By Xandria Phillips

I am in the business of naming abstract things and you, my darling, are not love. I know this because the director ordered slave hair for this shot with a modern take of course, but for these purposes the hair would need to be knotted around itself. How beautiful and violent each intersection of hair, no strand can get a word in before another member of its triptych cuts it off. One’s hair is her trajectory, watch, the more autonomy you embody the looser and looser your hair will flow until it’s sourced clean off your head. It’s the way he won’t touch it. What an unloving story, sustained with the ruptured syntax of a poorly researched vernacular. For every code switch there is equal corporeal descent. During your lowest point, your scalp is denied hair entirely while you choke on a curl in your character arc.

You are much more than yourself in your robe of blood and omniscient pain. You are the act of love turned inside out, the ugly that one endures for it. You are a crusade on loneliness. Imagine throwing open the palace doors and finding it’s been ransacked already. All that loneliness someone else’s finally, and still you languish there in the mouth your name leaves open.

Poem curated by Xandria Phillips: Xandria Phillips is the author of HULL (Nightboat Books, 2019), and the recipient of a Whiting Award. They have received fellowships from Brown University, Oberlin College, and The Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, and are the 2021-2023 Poetry Fellow at the Center For African American Poetry and Poetics.

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CULTURE

Jahn is gone
Will the Thompson Center survive?

By Deanna Isaacs

W e didn’t need the death of architect Helmut Jahn to bring the plight of the James R. Thompson Center to our attention. The state’s May 3 request for proposals to buy the iconic structure—minus any stipulation that it not be torn down—had already drawn widespread notice.

But the bicycle accident that killed Jahn just five days later put an exclamation point on the arguments of architects and preservationists who want to save it.

They’re asking Governor J.B. Pritzker now, as they were before Jahn’s death, to make the building’s sale contingent on its reuse, and they’re asking the city to give it the landmark designation that would protect it from demolition.

The Thompson Center is Chicago’s premier example of Jahn’s work, and the project that made him famous. Born in Germany in 1940, but a Chicagoan since coming to IIT in 1966, he’d been a Miesian modernist (working, for example, on McCormick Place’s Lakeside Center) before then-governor “Big Jim” Thompson gave the green light to this postmodernist design that put government offices atop a busy food court, shopping center, and major CTA hub, all open to the city’s most striking indoor space—a towering 17-story metal and glass atrium.

The building was controversial before it opened in May, 1985 (as the State of Illinois Center), and more so afterward. From the outside, it resembled nothing so much as a spaceship improbably plunked down (at 100 West Randolph) across the street from the classical City/County Building. Its color scheme of aqua blue and salmon pink was immediately despised. State workers complained about leaks in the glass-panel exterior, a cooling system that proved woefully inadequate for summer heat, and noise and odors wafting up from the lower-level restaurants. Jahn blamed the state for substituting inferior building materials for what he had specified, and, later, for decades of blatantly deferred maintenance.

Intended to take government from distant to literally transparent and accessible, it became a vital and diverse, if increasingly shabby, space; its spectacular atrium was the apparent inspiration for Jahn’s later, massive Sony Center in Berlin.

In 2015, Governor Bruce Rauner stood in that atrium and announced that he wanted to sell the building. He thought it could go for $300 million as a teardown, in spite of the fact that the CTA station wouldn’t be going anywhere. Rauner couldn’t get it done, however, and now, with pandemic uncertainties still hanging over the future of urban centers, and remote work taking the air out of the downtown office market, Pritzker’s talking about a major rehab project, even if the building is only deemed eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and is not yet officially listed. It usually just means the developer hires a consultant to do the final nomination. It’s done all the time.”

This is deliberately misleading, DiChiera says. “Every developer that does historic rehab knows that you can be looking at historic tax credits as a potential financing tool for a major rehab project, even if the building is only deemed eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and is not yet officially listed. It usually just means the developer hires a consultant to do the final nomination. It’s done all the time.”

Landmarks Illinois has already commissioned a consultant (Preservation Futures) to write the Thompson Center nomination for the National Register listing; it was submitted in April. But the best protection from demolition would come from a City of Chicago landmark designation. Last week, Preservation Chicago posted a petition at Change.org, asking the city to give the Thompson Center landmark status.

A request for city landmark designation from the governor could move that along, says Preservation Chicago executive director Ward Miller: “The Thompson Center has a great architectural legacy, and, as a public space, a great historical legacy. The state should step up to the plate.”

Chicago’s global calling card—apart from its longstanding renown as a shoot-'em-up hub of gangster activity—is its architecture. Signatures are still being collected.

@Deannalsaacs
Western Governors University makes going back to school easy and affordable.

Western Governors University—a fully online, nonprofit university serving nearly 10,000 current students and alumni throughout Illinois—is committed to providing high-quality, career-boosting degree programs to working adults who want to further their education.

The university’s competency-based education model allows students to leverage previous education, training, and work experience to earn their degrees faster. Students advance as soon as they demonstrate they’ve mastered the subject matter.

More than 60 undergraduate and graduate degree programs in business, K–12 teacher education, information technology, and health professions are available. Faculty members work one-on-one with students as mentors, offering support and individualized instruction.

Scholarships are available, and the university also recently launched its Equitable Access Initiative to help remove financial barriers that might otherwise keep adults from pursuing their education and career plans. As part of this effort, $6 million in grant and scholarship funding is available. The financial support includes the following:

- The WGU Resiliency Grant, which assists new students who are experiencing unforeseen financial struggles due to the pandemic by offering them up to $4,000.
- The WGU Opportunity Grant, which supports new students who lack access to federal or state financial aid by offering them up to $10,000.
- WGU’s Online Access Scholarship, which provides students who lack reliable broadband access with free high-speed internet service and refurbished laptops for the duration of their degree programs.

To learn more, visit wgu.edu/access.

Recovery Centers of America (RCA) provides individualized, evidence-based addiction treatment. RCA has eight inpatient facilities located in Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and now St. Charles, Illinois. RCA treatment centers have been named by Newsweek Magazine as the Best Addiction Treatment Centers of 2020 in their states.

To learn more visit RecoveryCentersOfAmerica.com
866-407-1399
Gardening keeps Milton Sewell grounded. The 56-year-old North Park resident embraced the isolation brought on by the pandemic by leaning on his hobby. Throughout the spring and summer, he’d scout backyards belonging to friends and church members, converting bare, patchy spots into small fruit and vegetable gardens.

The days between planting seedlings and harvesting can seem long and tedious. Over-watering, garden pests, or even the slightest change in weather can throw the plants off course. But Sewell lives for these moments. He enjoys lugging his tools around, shuffling back and forth between yards, working hours in the sun. To him gardening is more than just tracing the circle of life. It’s about rebirth. Once the gardening season ends, all that’s left is the foundation of new beginnings.

“Life rejuvenated over and over,” Sewell told me. “I love to see that.” These thoughts on death and resurrection, however, first stemmed from a much darker place.

In his 20s, Sewell was diagnosed with stage 4 Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a cancer of the lymphatic system, which helps the immune system fight infections. He spent the summer of 1988 cooped up at the University of Chicago Medical Center, recovering from a bone marrow transplant and pushing through rounds of chemotherapy. The treatments were tough on his body, and Sewell felt trapped inside the hospital. Cancer had already robbed him of his future: he was unable to have children of his own someday.

“I was always in constant fear that I would come out of remission,” he recalled. Sewell talked about being physically exhausted and mentally drained, until he reached a breaking point: “I just cannot go back to another hospital. I just can’t do it anymore. I just feel like I don’t want to live anymore.”

He said he confided in his doctor during a checkup, but he didn’t expect that sharing those emotions would jolt him into another traumatic experience. “They comfortably led me down the hall,” Sewell remembered. “Got
Sewell was 12 years old when he was attacked at knifepoint and raped near his home in Bronzeville. He remembered that the attacker, who lured him into a vacant alley with candy, threatened to kill him and his family if he told anyone. Decades passed, and Sewell kept quiet, his secret blooming into alcoholism, drug use, and depression.

“I had to live with that. Any time the thoughts would come to my head, I would shake my head and try to shake them out—I still do that today,” he said. Unsure of where to turn for help, Sewell kept himself. Twelve-step programs led him to learn about mental health, but even then, he didn’t know how to start therapy and thought treatment programs were exclusive to hospitals.

There are currently three public mental health centers on the south side. Sewell isn’t aware that one of them is located in his old neighborhood. The Greater Grand/Mid-South Mental Health Center is on East 43rd and South Cottage Grove, inside the Dr. Martin Luther King Community Service Center. Its services are hidden in a brick building, surrounded by a few apartments, churches, and restaurants. “A lot of people are not even familiar that it exists there,” Gannett said. “If you go by, it’s not as if there’s lots of publicity about the mental health center on signs.”

The King Center is known for city services, including housing, job training, and food pantries. “I never knew that they offered those [mental health] services,” Sewell said. “If I did, it would have changed my life.”

Amando Cuzan has lived in and out of Bronzeville for the last several decades, before finally settling in his childhood neighborhood in 2000. Cuzan, now 64 and the chairman of the Bronzeville Alliance’s communication committee, said he has visited the King Center dozens of times, but never knew about the public mental health programs. “When Emanuel closed those mental health facilities, I was deeply upset and stressed by that, because I know how many people need those kinds of services,” said Cuzan. “Fragile as they are, I mean, that was not even adequate, what was already in place. But then to go and close those facilities was just criminal in my mind.”

Since 2014, the Kedzie Center has offered free mental health services to residents like Sewell from Chicago’s Irving Park and surrounding north-side neighborhoods. The center on North Kedzie was the first neighborhood tax-funded mental health clinic created by the Coalition to Save Our Mental Health Centers, which formed in 1991 to fight the city’s closures of public mental health centers. In 2011, the coalition championed the Community Expanded Mental Health Services Act, a state law allowing communities to vote on a binding referendum and establish mental health programs by increasing taxes. Today there are four neighborhood tax-funded mental health clinics across Chicago. More may be on the way.

Last November, Bronzeville became the first neighborhood on the south side to increase property taxes to fund free mental health services. The south side famously lost four public mental health clinics nine years ago when Mayor Rahm Emanuel closed half of the city’s 12 clinics to save roughly $3 million in the annual budget. Critics warn that neighborhood-funded public mental health centers are only a piecemeal solution to the mounting crisis. Black communities are a reflection of citywide divestment, and the absence of safe spaces such as those clinics leaves residents vulnerable.

On the ballot, residents vote on a 0.025 percent property tax increase, which translates to about $4 per $1,000 paid in annual property taxes. Nearly 88 percent of Bronzeville voters signed off on a $16 to $24 increase to support an expanded mental health program to serve the south side. The coalition had opened two different sites since 2012, in Irving Park and East Garfield Park, and they wanted to build on the south side, said Robert Gannett, executive director at the Institute for Community Empowerment, the coalition’s partner organization.

“Bronzeville was an area that we have worked with people on a variety of issues, and people said that mental health is essential,” Gannett explained. “It was important, from our point of view, to get started on the south side also. Eventually, the hope is that every community in Chicago will have a new [community-funded] mental health center.”

This fall the coalition expects to open another mental health center, which will serve residents in Logan Square, Avondale, and Hermosa.

The fight to sustain resources, which have already been cut to their “bare bones,” isn’t new, said Roderick Wilson, executive director of the Bronzeville-based Lugenia Burns Hope Center. A new mental health clinic in Bronzeville comes when residents were on the verge of losing another resource: In February, Mercy Hospital, one of Chicago’s oldest hospitals, filed for bankruptcy, and addition to counseling.

“How do you treat, how do you care for, how do you help save the conditions of those who are vulnerable?” Wilson asked. “That’s how you determine a world-class society. And that’s what we don’t do in America. We don’t do that in Chicago, on the south side, in the Black community. So, we have to make it happen for ourselves.”

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When Joyce Zick first started at North River Mental Health Center in North Park more than 30 years ago, she worked alongside 15 therapists and ample administrative employees. Back then, the city had 19 public mental health centers. A 1978 map from the Chicago Department of Public Health showed that 11 of these centers were located on the south side, while the rest were scattered around the city’s far north and west sides. A bright-eyed young clinician, Zick’s only mission was to help people. She helped manage a day treatment program and worked with individuals with mental illnesses who were preparing to transition home after being hospitalized. Even now, she can recite the advice she received from a former supervisor about working in the public sector.

“Don’t let it spoil you,” she said. “I didn’t know what she meant at the time, and I didn’t care. My commitment was, as always, to the clients.”

City-run clinics like North Center are mandated to serve all individuals, particularly those who are uninsured, undocumented, and low-income. Dani Adams, a member of the Collaborative for Community Wellness, said privately operated mental health centers, and even nonprofits, can turn people away based on their inability to pay or the severity of their illness.

To understand how these city-run clinics are funded, you first have to understand why community mental health centers were created in the first place. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy signed the Community Mental Health Act, radicalizing how mental health services were delivered. He sought to move away from the “cold mercy” of state psychiatric hospitals and replace them with the “open warmth” of community-based mental health centers. The goal was to build up to 2,500 centers across the nation using federal grants, to provide people with mental illnesses and learning disabilities with inpatient and outpatient care, emergency services, and mental health education.

While the act proved key to the deinstitutionalization of state psychiatric centers, it was also flawed. Matt Spitzmiller, an assistant professor at Syracuse University, said only about 700 community mental health centers were built. In 2003, psychiatrist Sally Satel wrote in the *New York Times* that the centers “could not handle the huge numbers of fragile patients who had been released after spending months or years in the large institutions,” and “there were not enough psychiatrists and health workers willing to roll up their sleeves and take on these tough cases.” The centers were understaffed and under-resourced.

Medicaid and Medicare emerged at the same time the act was established. Medicaid is the nation’s largest funder of mental health services. “Today’s state mental health agencies rarely have direct responsibility for patient care, instead contracting services out to a variety of private entities, both for-profit and nonprofit, privately and publicly operated,” wrote Adams for *South Side Weekly*.

President Jimmy Carter carried Kennedy’s vision in 1980 by funding more community centers and creating the first presidential commission on mental health. But that all changed when Ronald Reagan was elected. Reagan signed the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act in 1981, repealing Carter’s efforts to support community mental health centers. That meant funding for mental health services competed with other public needs such as housing and food banks, which were typically prioritized. The shift in federal fiscal spending put cities and states more at risk to piece together the funds for their mental health services, making them “vulnerable to neoliberal political whims,” wrote Adams. That led to annual budget cuts, including hiring freezes, trimming administration costs, and reducing services.

In the 1990s, Mayor Richard M. Daley closed seven of the city’s 19 public clinics, and Zick noticed the North River center’s staff size shrinking, leaving her and her coworkers to pick up other duties. Periodic training in social work, an added bonus to the state-mandated continuing education courses required for most license holders, was cut.

But, what hurt Zick most was how she often scraped for money to keep the day treatment program going. Strapped for funds, the center opened a thrift store to help alleviate other expenses. “I operated as much as I could within the confines of the city,” she said. “They want you to do the job without the money.” Zick remembered the city’s push to find “community partners,” a buzzword that paved over the lack of commitment toward funding its public mental health centers. “There was never a commitment.”

In 1990, the Chicago Addiction Treatment Center, one of the city’s many public health facilities, was closed and contracts were given to two private firms, according to a 1991 *Tribune* story. It was one of the first substantial moves toward the privatization of mental health services. Daley told the *Tribune* that the private firms would be able to serve more people and provide better treatment at a lower cost. The treatment center initially saw 1,445 patients a year for $4.2 million, and under those contracts, it could see roughly 200 more clients for $3.8 million.

Representative Danny K. Davis, a Cook County Commissioner, spoke out against Daley. Davis believed it was “an admission of failure to manage government effective-ly,” and funding city mental health services should be treated as an investment, not a cost-saving measure. Thirty years later, his opinion hasn’t changed. Neither has the city’s pattern of privatization. “There are some things that demand and require public interest,” Davis told me. “Our mental health needs is one of those areas that require and demand public intervention, public perception, and public service.”

Davis’s concerns about privatizing public health programs resurfaced in 2012, as activists protested the closure of six city-run mental health facilities. Illinois had already slashed a whopping $114 million from its state budget to support mental health services, and Daley had blamed the state for shuttering four south side mental health clinics.

For many public health advocates, dwindling citywide mental health resources meant one thing: people won’t get the help they need. In East Garfield Park, where Davis’s district office is located, he called pock-ets of California, Fifth, and Madison avenues that were littered with vacant lots “no man’s land.” “We could really stand to have a mental health center on every corner,” he said.

In 2019, the coalition celebrated the opening of the Encompassing Center that serves residents in Garfield Park, North Lawndale, and the greater west side. Davis said the minimal property tax increase was worth the benefits of the coalition’s neighborhood tax-funded model. “I know we’re talking about a low-income community, and I know
"IF YOU DON’T WANT TO GET COMPLAINTS, IF YOU DON’T WANT TO DEAL WITH THE HASSLE, IF YOU DON’T WANT TO PAY A DECENT WAGE FOR DOING IT, THEN YOU WALK AWAY. YOU PULL A RAHM EMANUEL AND JUST WASH YOUR HANDS OF IT ALTOGETHER."

—Jo Patton

we’re talking about people who don’t have much to spare. And I know we’re talking about what some folks would call socialist tendencies,” he said. “But, we are also talking about democracy. We’re talking about engagement. We’re talking about involvement.”

But the solution here seems to be a ripple effect, born out of a seemingly broken system. To Davis, it doesn’t matter who the mayor is, “the systems have become the systems.”

In 2012, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 31 partnered with Southside Together Organizing Power to stop Mayor Emanuel from closing half a dozen public mental health facilities. Located on the south and west sides, those centers saw over 5,300 residents, most of whom were Black and Brown.

Emanuel viewed the clinic closures as a way to save an estimated $3 million in the city budget—a “pitiful” effort to save “just pennies,” Jo Patton, a former director of special projects at AFSCME, said. Nearly half of the patients served were forced to find resources elsewhere fast as the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) looked to shut down five facilities within a two-month span (one of the centers, the Roseland Neighborhood Health Center, was privatized). “Those people ended up really falling through the cracks.”

Patton said privatization removes the city from its responsibility to provide access to health care for its people. Nonprofits, she said, are still held accountable by the foundations that support them and must bring in enough clients to keep their doors open, “and that can frequently mean making business decisions.”

Following the six closures, CDPH sought to lay off 30 employees and cut additional vacant positions, while the remaining clinics saw a huge spike in clients, AFSCME Council 31 reported. In 2018, the Collaborative for Community Wellness reported that there was at least one licensed clinician available per 1,000 residents in the south, southwest, and west sides. And, since 2012, the city has allocated only $817,730 of its corporate funds to mental health salaries and positions, compared to its $3.6 million budget in years prior.

“The need is always greater than the capacity, and given that need, there’s a responsibility for the city to step up and make sure it’s met,” Patton said. “If you don’t want to get complaints, if you don’t want to deal with the hassle, if you don’t want to pay a decent wage for doing it, then you walk away. You pull a Rahm Emanuel and just wash your hands of it altogether.”

During Mayor Lori Lightfoot’s campaign, she promised to reopen the clinics Emanuel closed. None of these shuttered clinics have reopened. Since taking office, Lightfoot has instead poured millions of dollars into the five remaining facilities by allocating funds for renovations, creating telehealth services, and hiring more staff such as psychiatric nurse practitioners and community outreach coordinators, said Matthew Richards, deputy commissioner of behavioral health at CDPH.

This year, Lightfoot announced several initiatives to expand the city’s mental health services, one of which awarded $8 million in grant funds to help 32 organizations, 20 of which are on the south and west sides, develop their trauma-informed programs. The effort is part of Lightfoot’s Framework for Mental Health Equity, a joint plan with CDPH to rebuild Chicago’s mental health system. While many believed in allocating funds to those community partners, they thought the city, once again, missed the point: it’s long overdue for sustainable investment in public mental health centers.

“If that funding goes away, what is to say that private providers will have the capacity to continue offering services?” asked Caitlin O’Grady, an evaluation manager at the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council. “If that money is going to hiring staff, what’s to say that nonprofit providers are going to have those funds to be able to continue hiring staff, after that funding goes away?”

T this winter, Sewell shifted his focus away from his garden. Like many people, the pandemic has given him time to be with himself and learn more about himself. He bought a fish tank, something that had been on his wish list for a while. He’s a rock collector, and often asks friends to bring him back stones from their trips. Scattered all over the bottom of the fish tank, these rocks make up his pet fish Thug’s home.

Sewell laughed as he told me the story behind the name. He bought ten goldfish and Thug, who happens to be just slightly bigger than the rest, killed the other nine. He said Thug reminded him of his younger self, “just butting heads with people and running them out of my life. You know, I just killed all the relationships.”

For Sewell, therapy has been a godsend, a way to finally move forward and take the next step in his life. “Unprocessed trauma will damage you for life,” he said. “It really will, and unless the trauma is processed and the damage is talked about, it’s going to be like running in mud. It really is. It’s living life running in mud.”
When Chevon Linear looked up at the sky as darkness descended over Wyoming’s Grand Teton National Park in August of 2020, she unwillingly began to cry. As her partner Kameron Stanton chuckled at her reaction, Linear tried to rationalize her response. As she sought to blame anything from light sensitivity to dust, she simply could not get past her shock at nature’s display. “I’ve never seen anything so vibrant, so beautiful. We literally saw parts of the Milky Way,” says Linear, gazing upward as though she can still see the stars in her mind.

Stanton and Linear both grew up city kids in Chicago’s West Englewood neighborhood, and despite living a block away from each other, they had vastly different relationships with nature. Stanton says for him enjoying the outdoors came down to what he could discover amid his surroundings. “It’s just finding any bit of nature. A little brook there, a little waterfall here,” he says. For Linear, programs like Girl Scouts and Phoenix Military Academy helped make outdoor recreation a staple of her childhood and teen years, serving as a welcome escape from other struggles growing up. Be it through visiting the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum every week or “roughing it” in the woods as a teenager, those experiences made her intrinsically curious, pushing her to seek further adventures as she grew older. By the time she was 28, Linear had visited around 16 different countries. When the pandemic hit, the self-described “world traveler” was heartbroken to cancel all her plans. To raise her spirits, Stanton decided to appeal to her roots and planned a camping trip as regulations eased in the summer. With camping materials borrowed from a friend, they struck out on their first trip as a couple, driving from Denver to visit Wyoming’s so-called “Mountains of the Imagination.” The journey reawakened Linear’s love for the outdoors, and once the couple commenced crossing sites off their bucket list, they found no reason to stop.

On their initial trip to the Tetons, driven by a desire to document their surroundings and goof around, the pair began recording their trip in a series of short, candid videos, unknowingly laying the foundation for their joint TikTok account @black.people.outside. As their love for outdoor excursions grew, so too did the couple’s awareness of the fact they were often the only two Black people in the spaces they were inhabiting.

“We named it @black.people.outside because of the lack thereof,” Linear says. “A lot of people think, Camping? That’s for white people. Hiking? That’s for white people. Rock climbing? That’s for white people. And it kinda is, but we out here too.”

In an effort to send out a signal of sorts to fellow Black adventurers, Linear began editing random clips from their adventures and uploading them to TikTok, hoping it would reach like-minded people and get people like her outside. Now their account, which the couple runs together, boasts a follower count of more than 60,000 users. Their content features both urban and outdoor adventures, all to the background track of short, irreverent voice-overs talking viewers through their experiences.

However, running the account has not been without its challenges for the couple, especially as their audience has grown in size. Despite an overwhelmingly positive response from the general public from the beginning, Linear, who was doing most of the editing in the beginning, saw her views drop as random users reported her video for unsubstantiated claims such as “hate speech” whenever she spoke about racism or exclusion on the account.

“We already personally feel like our page is under attack,” says Linear. “I’ve never intended on being a social justice warrior, that wasn’t my intention. @black.people.outside [it] was never meant to be controversial.” As fighting the algorithm became increasingly exhausting, Linear chose to take a step back to conserve her energy, with Stanton taking over the bulk of the front-end work. Despite the challenges, this shift will help to keep the page active, which Stanton feels is important to encourage the shift they hope to see within the outdoor community. “I feel as a culture, we might lose out on what we can offer if we don’t continue to push back and represent ourselves how we know we should be represented,” Stanton says. “That’s why I feel the need to keep going.”

Along with increasing the visibility of Black people outside overall, taking the intimidation factor out of outdoor exploration is something both Linear and Stanton aim to do through the videos they share. “People of color have been constricted to these walls in their hoods, where that’s Bible, that’s all we know,” says Linear. “We’re sure about what’s on the block and in our neighborhood, but we’re not sure about what’s in the Tetons or Joshua Tree, so we won’t go. Our goal here is to tell people [that] just because you’re uncertain about it as we were, it doesn’t mean that you can’t experience that. Because those experiences are also there for us, the outdoors are for everyone.”
Frances D’alessio: Thank God I have been well; I haven’t gotten COVID, and that is a win in itself. Mentally, it’s been a little bit of everything. I’ve been without work and I’ve stayed in my house for a long time. I’ve dealt with a little bit of depression, and that’s the only thing I can say that I’ve dealt with, mentally.

So, La Cueva is still closed?

March 15, 2020, was the last day we worked at La Cueva. They originally told us it was only going to be closed two weeks—and we’re still waiting for it to open. But the decision is the owner’s.

So you’ve put on virtual performances and performed at private parties?

Yes. We started doing virtual shows at the end of March and early April [2020] because everything we did, including private parties, were canceled. It was only recently that private parties have resumed.

And these parties are safe?

The danger is there. I’ve had to take care of myself and maintain distances with people. But we definitely have taken precautions—not just with COVID, but with other respiratory illnesses as well.

The main precaution involves social distancing, but one thing I have done—and it seems a little bit funny—is that I spray myself with Lysol before going out into the [performance] space. I also spray myself after I’m done. And when I’m handling the tips I make, I wash my hands and I use hand sanitizers.

Has La Cueva not reopening made you reflect and think about doing something else so you’re not in a similar situation in the future?

Yes. I haven’t talked about this very much, but on the weekends, I have started cooking Mexican food for my friends and family. This has generated income for me, and I’m thinking about partnering with someone to start a business. I really, really like cooking.

These shows won’t last forever. One day I’ll have to look in the mirror and realize that it’s time for something else—so I’m definitely preparing for that.

Mental health is a big issue, of course, and you mentioned dealing with depression. Have you found any sort of support system?

More than anything, I’ve learned not to give up, and I would have video calls with my family. I would do anything to not feel so alone at home, because I do live by myself. I couldn’t visit my family and friends, so I tried to contact them as much as possible.

What would you say to people who don’t want to get vaccinated?

I would tell them to get vaccinated, so we can get out of this quicker and achieve herd immunity as soon as possible so we can move on to our new normal.

What unique problems do you feel the trans community has had to face this past year?

Well, I want to talk about my personal case. The work I depended on—being at nightclubs—is the biggest difference from other communities. The entertainment was our stream of income. If we had to work somewhere else, they would prioritize people who already had experience.

Do you see any similarities between the HIV/AIDS and COVID pandemics?

In the 80s, I was so young; I didn’t really find out about HIV/AIDS until the 90s. In Mexico, we really didn’t talk about it; it was taboo—especially in the schools.

Where I’m originally from, we didn’t really experience HIV/AIDS the way other communities did, or the way we’re experiencing the COVID pandemic now. The only similarity I see is that we need to take care of each other and be well-informed.

What would you say you’ve learned about yourself this past year?

I have learned that I’m not as fragile as I thought I was. I’ve had to believe in myself so that I wouldn’t fall into a stronger depression, because my parents and siblings are all in Mexico. It was hard not to be able to work or even enjoy the day, like we used to. I just had to learn to be a stronger person.

Is there anything you’d like to add?

No one expected this [pandemic] to happen—but thank God we’re advancing with the vaccine and that it’s more accessible to people. It’s definitely been a hard year, but we’ve had no other option but to move forward.

This coverage is made possible by support from the Chicago Foundation for Women. This story was written in collaboration with ALMA Chicago to share and archive the stories of LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals in Chicago during the COVID-19 pandemic. For more information, visit ALMAChicago.org. Thanks go to Emmanuel Garcia for help with questions and translations during the interview. D’allesio can be reached/seen on Facebook.
SCI-FI FABLE

E. Faye Butler brings the Goods

The Chicago musical theater star helms a virtual feminist space drama.

By Kaylen Ralph

Sometimes, we just don’t give ourselves the space.

That’s something E. Faye Butler, in her new capacity as the board president of Artemisia Theatre, as well as the director of Goods, Artemisia’s first production of the year, has been thinking about a lot lately.

It’s hard not to these days—think about space, that is—as the pandemic lingers, and a sizable chunk of everyone’s mental space is reserved for navigating everyone else’s personal space, while still protecting our own.

Written by Lauren Ferebee, Goods (streaming through May 30) is a feminist sci-fi adventure about two female intergalactic trash collectors, Marla and Sam (played by Artemisia executive artistic director Julie Proudfoot and Shariba Rivers, respectively), who are tasked with one final, unplanned, devastating disposal job before concluding their anniversary tour around the asteroid belt. It takes place in the year 2100, entirely within the confines of a small, dilapidated spacecraft, but the subject matter is as contemporary as you can get.

“The spacecraft’s green screen, when viewed through Zoom, lends a vintage, 1960s-esque, Star Trek-era vestige to the play, an effect that also serves as a reminder of just one of the many ways the concept of shared space has shifted, even as a return to in-person theater feels nearer than ever (fingers crossed),” Butler says.

Garnering space for women is at the crux of Butler’s goals for Artemisia’s development within her new role as board president.

“My fond wish is that Artemisia have a space of its own, so that women can gather,” she says. “I want Artemisia to have a space, because right now they float from space to space, and we’re blessed to do that when we can go back in person, but to have a space where women can have that collective together... that’s what I want for Artemisia. Because those are the conversations, the dialogue, the experiences, that will keep the plays coming, and they come from everywhere, and I want to make sure that women can connect with one another. That is my greatest wish for Artemisia—that we keep allowing those voices to be heard and that we are the catalyst to make sure that they’re heard, not only through plays, but for programming through the community.”

Butler has been one of the most prominent musical theater performers in Chicago for years. But Goods, in all of its galactic glory, is the perfect inaugural performance for Butler’s new chapter with Artemisia.

The spacecraft’s green screen, when viewed through Zoom, lends a vintage, 1960s-esque, Star Trek-era vestige to the play, an effect that also serves as a reminder of just one of the many ways the concept of shared space has shifted, even as a return to in-person theater feels nearer than ever (fingers crossed).

“The thing that really excited me about Goods is that it’s very well written, Ferebee did an amazing, bang-up job with this script, and it speaks to something that we haven’t endeavored before: the future, space, our goods, what we do with them, how we look at life now, moving forward after the pandemic with social justice and change happening all around us, and we have a whole new medium of theater right now, Zoom, and that’s never going to go away.”

In directing Goods, Butler embraced the challenge of keeping this two-hander performance feeling like the conversationally driven story that it is, without relying on all of the “pizzazz, flashlights, and LED screens” that might typically accompany a performance set in a 22nd-century spacecraft.

“We’ve been consumed with so much magic around us in the last 20 years of theater that sometimes we forget that we’re storytellers,” she says.

Butler’s focus on storytelling suits her well for the new role she’s taking on at Artemisia, a company which since its founding in 2011 has not only prioritized storytelling generally, but specifically women’s untold stories, in homage to the company’s namesake, Artemisia Gentileschi, a great feminist painter who was forgotten by history until she was rediscovered during the modern era—a mission not so dissimilar from Ghostlight Ensemble’s For Your (Re)Consideration series.

While writing Goods, Ferebee—who has always been a fan of science fiction—was rewatching Star Trek: The Next Generation, a series she grew up watching with her sister.

“I was engaged in rewatching a lot of 90s science fiction and kind of looking at it with a more critical eye now, and it was kind of interesting to think about the ways in which science fiction can be used as feminist discipline, because it’s sort of like imagining a different world, and then looking at different versions of the way we’ve imagined that world over time.”

In her career as a playwright thus far, Ferebee, who is currently an MFA candidate in playwriting at the University of Arkansas, has not shied from feminist subject matter. In her current capacity as an artist in residence at Artemisia this season, she’s had the opportunity to explore her feminism, and the way it impacts her art, through a broader lens.

“This is Black, as is Butler.) “Being able to work with E. Faye was so amazing, because she kind of really took the helm on the rehearsal process and brought a lived experience to Goods that I don’t necessarily know. So I think [the residency] has enabled me to delve into having to really deal with where I sit in relation to women across the world and then how to expand what I talk about, and what I do, in a responsible and fuller way, which is definitely a process, probably a lifelong process, I think.”

Goods, which won the 2021 Planet Earth Arts Playwriting Award from the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival, is the first of two plays Ferebee will stage virtually with Artemisia this year. In October, the company will premiere Into a Blaze: The Triangle Shirtwaist, a commentary on current workers’ rights campaigns contextualized by the deadly 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist fire.

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Live at the Goodman is ready for its close-up

Three livestreamed plays cap a year of loss and reinvention.

By Melissa Perry

Between a robust national vaccine effort and Broadway recently announcing its September reopening, the return of live Chicago theater seems imminent. But starting May 13, the Goodman Theatre’s Live series hopes to give its patrons the next best thing. From May 13-July 18, this series will premiere three plays that will be performed on the Goodman stage for the first time, filmed by a professional camera crew and livestreamed to audiences at home.

Robert Falls, artistic director of the Goodman since 1986, says he was inspired to curate this series after witnessing various European theaters adapt to livestreamed performances last summer. “I became enamored by a couple of viewing experiences I had as an audience member, particularly a theater in London called the Old Vic,” Falls says. “I thought the experience was very close to being in the theater.”

The three plays set to be performed in the Live series are I Hate It Here by Ike Holter, Ohio State Murders by Adrienne Kennedy, and The Sound Inside by Adam Rapp. The three directors each point out how the intimate and contained nature of each play lends itself well to this medium.

“Everything can just be so much more detailed,” says Tiffany Nichole Greene, director of Ohio State Murders. “I don’t need to be in the back of the audience to make sure that I’m taking care of all of my audience members. I can be three feet away from someone.”

“I wanted to do something nonlinear because I felt like it would take a lot of advantage of the medium that we’re performing in, which is a three-camera situation on a soundstage,” says Lili-Anne Brown, director of I Hate It Here. “We could really be crazy and get real weird, and to do something nonlinear gives me the most options of doing something out of the box.”

Collectively, these three works profoundly touch on themes such as illness, hopelessness, and racial trauma—all of which can resonate deeply with audiences following a year of immeasurable loss and despair.

The first play set to premiere on May 13 is The Sound Inside by Rapp and directed by Falls. Rapp’s work first premiered on Broadway in October of 2019 (directed by former Chicagoman David Cromer) and received six 2020 Tony nominations. This psychological thriller takes place within an academic setting as it details a peculiar friendship that develops between a professor and her student.

“It’s two characters and I think a very beautiful play… a meditation on loss,” Falls says. “It has a very suspenseful quality of mystery. You don’t quite know what’s going on, so I think you’re going to be really drawn into the screen.”

Ohio State Murders, the second play of the series, is set to run June 17-20. Similar to The Sound Inside, this play takes place in academia as the main character, Suzanne, an accomplished writer known for her use of violent imagery, recalls a chilling set of tragedies that she endured as a young Black woman at Ohio State.

“I’m just struck by the fact that she [Suzanne] was able to take that trauma and use it in her art,” Greene says. “The request for access to someone’s trauma, I think that that is very relevant to us today. We are all dealing with a certain level of trauma just from this pandemic.”

Falls, who chose Ohio State Murders as one of the featured plays, notes that Kennedy’s work has often been overlooked. “Adrienne Kennedy is a writer who I’ve always wanted to see produced at the Goodman. She’s one of the great American playwrights,” Falls says. “I’m just really excited about this play, which is rarely produced.”

The final play, set to premiere July 15-18, is I Hate It Here by Chicago playwright Holter. Originally released as an audio production last December through Studio Theatre in Washington, D.C., Holter’s play features a series of nonlinear vignettes that reflect on the year 2020. Brown, who has worked with Holter before and describes him as a “hometown hero,” says that when she first listened to the audio of Holter’s work, she could already visualize how the script would translate onstage.

“I had a really great time listening to I Hate It Here, so when Bob was like, ‘What are you thinking?’ it was just in my head already,” Brown says. “I like to always say Ike writes like I think and that’s the best way of putting our relationship.”

The filming and production of this series is led by Christiana Tye, an experienced television producer who shot Conor McPherson’s solo show, St. Nicholas, starring Brendan Coyle for the Goodman in 2019. While the livestreamed nature of Live is designed to enhance the viewing experience, Tye points out that this format is also unpredictable.

“There are no redos,” Tye says. “This is a really intense first play and we have to be super quiet. A cameraman could trip. A light could fall. I could take the wrong camera angle. There’s so many things that could go wrong and that’s what’s so cool about live theater.”

While Chicago’s artists and audiences alike are excited about the prospect of finally returning to the theater, the pandemic has clearly pushed the arts community to take better advantage of technological resources that were previously neglected, Greene says.

“I love theater, but we needed to shake it up. Before the pandemic, a lot of people were holding on to old things, because they were like, ‘We know this works and we don’t have time or money to risk to find out if that works,’” Greene says. “Now we have to find out if that works. It’s the only way through.”

For Falls, he’s seen the positive impact of virtual productions firsthand, as it has allowed the Goodman to make their work more accessible to audiences across the globe.

“We’ve gotten responses from people as far away as New Zealand, who are like, ‘Oh, I’m so thrilled to have seen this production,’” Falls says. “It’s never going to recreate that experience of live in the theater that an audience has with performers, but until then it’s a way to stay in touch, and I think that’s a pretty great thing.”

@melissaperry99
Leor Galil
Staff Writer

Leor Galil became smitten with alt-weeklies in the late-90s when he first picked up a copy of the Washington City Paper in his hometown, Bethesda, Maryland. After graduating from Brandeis University and completing a year as an AmericCorps volunteer, Leor moved to the midwest in 2009, where he earned his Master’s in journalism at Northwestern University. In 2010, Leor made his Reader debut as a freelancer, and in 2012 he joined the paper as a staff music writer. “Working at the Reader affords me the ability to write detailed, holistic stories about local artists while simultaneously arguing for their importance, which is a rare opportunity in the dwindling culture media ecosystem bent towards covering the best-known musicians with the most power,” he says. By championing local music in all its forms and documenting the city’s musical legacy, from its biggest innovations down to its most esoteric subcultures, the Smash Mouth fan and Scorpio has become a Chicago “All Star” in his own right—and not just in the mortal realm. He’s been voted among Chicago’s five best pizzas in three of the Reader’s “Best of Chicago” issues, and he’s broken the top three twice. In 2020, Leor celebrated his first decade with the paper by publishing a collection of his writing, Chicago Pop Stars, Hardcore Heroes, and House Legends: Ten Years of Chicago Reader Music Features. We’re already looking forward to a part two, but in the meantime, we’ll look for Leor at his favorite Chicago hotspots, which include the Harold Washington Library, the Hideout, Hyde Park Records, Intuit Gallery, and Logan Square ice cream joint The Freeze.

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Janaya Greene
Social Media Coordinator

As the Reader’s social media coordinator Janaya Greene is responsible for sharing what happens at the paper with the digital world, which is no small task considering the number of stories, projects, podcasts, and events spinning in our orbit at any given time. But like the true Taurus she is, Janaya is intelligent, dependable, and driven, and she keeps the Reader’s online community engaged and informed, even when the general chatter in social media spaces seems like it’s about to go off the rails. Born and raised on Chicago’s south side, Janaya attended Gwendolyn Brooks College Preparatory Academy and earned her Bachelor’s degree in public affairs journalism and in media and production analysis at Ohio State University. She further developed her skills at the New York Times Student Journalism Institute and Vice Media before returning to Chicago, where she completed a reporting fellowship with City Bureau before joining the Reader in 2019. When asked what she likes most about working at the paper, she replied that she likes “seeing Reader stories of the past remaining relevant and shared online in the current day.” In addition to her talents for journalism and community engagement, Janaya is also an accomplished visual storyteller, and screenwriter (she’s won several awards for her 2015 short film, Veracity). Outside of work you can find her unwinding with her cat Juniper (Junie for short) and a great book (her favorite novel is These Ghosts are Family by Maisy Card), visiting the South Shore Cultural Center, relaxing at Promontory Point, or grabbing a bite at Morgan Park sandwich shop, Home of the Hoagy.

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As we look forward to our 50th Anniversary on October 1st we celebrate the staff of the Reader who make the paper possible.
Next to normal

Pivot Arts Festival “reimagines utopia” with a mix of live and virtual events.

By Sheri Flanders

Recently, several articles appeared about the phenomenon of “Hygiene Theater”—the focus on largely ineffective COVID-19 safety measures like Clorox wipes and plexiglass dividers designed to give people a false sense of security indoors. Some in the theater industry are rapidly signing up for this new brand of drama, such as Broadway announcing that it will reopen at 100 percent capacity in September, eager to trade profits for the safety of its patrons and casts.

So when a press release arrived boldly stating “2021 Pivot Arts Festival Safely Returns to Live Events,” a skeptical eyebrow was arched. Running from May 21 to June 6, this year’s festival is titled “Reimagining Utopia,” and in order to live up to the bold claim, the artists—presenting works in genres including theater, dance, video, music, and puppetry—have had to completely reconceptualize what a “festival” could be.

Pivot Arts founder, director, and festival cocurator Julieanne Ehre sheds light on this

volved in the festival does have to get tested.” She adds, “Our audiences are going to be very small and we are not going to have indoor events with more than 15 people at a time.”

Like many other arts organizations, tackling COVID has been difficult for Pivot. However, their long history working with site-specific art lends them an extra level of flexibility. Says Ehre, “We are not tied to doing, for example, plays that have multiple actors in them in a space where lots of people have to sit together for a couple of hours. We’re an inventive arts organization so we can invent the model of the festival in order to make it possible this year.” To that point, some festival events will be held in a “walking gallery tour” style at the Edge Theater called the “Utopian Performance Tour.”

Ehre paints a picture: “We’ve reimagined the space so that it’s like a gallery installation in various rooms, and that audiences of 15 people at a time are going to be led through. Like in the first room there’s a ten-minute video installation, then they are going to be led outdoors into the loading dock area where there will be a garage door open with lots of ventilation, and there’ll be another art installation happening that’s not live, and they’re going to move into another space where there’s one indoor three-person performance that’s happening . . . and then there’s a solo dance piece, and a solo theater piece . . . None of them are longer than 15 minutes, and the audience moves through almost like they are walking through a museum.”

Ehre quips, “Frankly you know, I think it’s safer than going to the grocery store.”

In addition to changing safety guidelines, the festival has also changed its curatorial model. Historically, Ehre has been the sole curator; however, this year, Ehre shares, “We had a group of four curators including myself, and our artists applied under the umbrella theme for the festival which is ‘reimagining utopia,’ so artists had to respond to what their vision of utopia is after the themes of 2020, including both the BLM movement and of course the pandemic . . . We have some really interesting artists involved with that, including Propelled Animals doing a video art installation [state(d)]. They are a group that really looks to bring people of different races together in conversation with each other.”

The gallery tour is centered on themes of repair and self-care, a thoughtful artistic reflection of the current state of our broken world. A sample of other works include the Ishii Collective’s work Prana, “an invitation to rest and recuperate,” while SoIAR® presents Portal to New Earth by Nefertiti Abdulmalik, which is a video installation that “combines animation, story and sound to illustrate a reality in unity with nature”; a live dance performance called Granular Peripheries by Danielle Ross with Mike Treffehn, which, according to the website description, quite poignantly “invites audiences to consider who has passed and continues to pass through the spaces we inhabit”; and Come Over, a multimedia experience by Maggie Kubley and Minnie Productions, which explores “one woman’s attempt to still satisfy her sexual urges in spite of the fact that she’s currently living alone through a global pandemic.”

Younger audiences and those seeking outdoor performances can experience The Puppet Wonder Wagon (cocreated and cocurated by Will Bishop, Samuel J. Lewis II, and Grace Needelman), featuring live large-scale puppets and outdoor puppet-building workshops. Live music fans will enjoy KAIA’s live string quartet performance. Ehre says, “Their focus is on the rich tradition of music from Latin America, which is really exciting.”

COVID has delivered some unexpectedly positive changes. Ehre excitedly shares, “We have something we call a Live Talk Show which has—pun unintended or intended—pivoted into a podcast.” The podcast has helped drive an unprecedented amount of traffic to their website—some of it from international locales. “Last year we had 3,000 people visit our website during the festival month,” Ehre notes. “We don’t even have space for 3,000 people normally during the ten-day festival.”

COVID has also spurred Pivot to offer original video programs online this year. “It’s really pushed performing arts organizations to have digital work online, so we do want to continue that because we feel that increases access to people who physically can’t get to our events for disability or geographic reasons.”

Despite these successes, Ehre, like many theatermakers, seems to hold the digital frontier as a less desirable corner of their artistic utopia. Says Ehre, “As much as everyone has relied on streaming from various platforms this past year, it is so important that we gather with strangers and have experiences in live spaces. That’s how we come to know people that are different from ourselves; that’s how we create community with each other, and that just can’t happen if you’re sitting alone in front of a screen.”

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Code of the Freaks highlights Hollywood’s ableism

The Chicago-made documentary tells stories of disability that aren’t shown on the silver screen.

By Colleen Morrissey

“It’s all the same movie,” says writer Susan Nussbaum in the opening moments of the 2020 documentary Code of the Freaks. “It’s all inspiration.” A Chicago-based collaboration between Nussbaum, director Salome Chasnoff, and scholars Alyson Patsavas and Carrie Sandahl, Code of the Freaks shines a searing light on ableism in mainstream film. During the age of the OscarsSoWhite and #MeToo movements, when Hollywood’s discriminatory practices are coming under increased scrutiny, Code of the Freaks gives much-needed voice to the myriad ways disabled people’s lives are directly impacted by these stories. The documentary takes its title from the infamous 1932 film Freaks, in which members of a band of circus “freaks” adhere to a simple code: “Offend one and you offend them all.” Code of the Freaks runs with this motif, embracing the subsersive power of the bond found among the titular “freaks” in one of the very few films ever to portray an “outsider collective” of disabled people. Featuring a diverse cast of disabled writers, actors, activists, and other commentators, Code of the Freaks not only taxonomizes in striking detail the long list of Hollywood’s ablest sins but also defiantly does what Hollywood often refuses to do: tell unique, fully human stories.

Code of the Freaks exposes Hollywood’s homogeneity as it deconstructs trope after trope, clip after clip repeating the same scenarios: A blind white woman in a bathtub is stalked by a serial killer (Jennifer 8, See No Evil). A disfigured villain plots against a world that rejects his ugliness (The Phantom of the Opera, Wonder Woman). A mentally disabled Black man becomes a moral guide to the white, nondisabled characters (The Green Mile, Radio). “[Movies] function, for a lot of people, as the place where they learn about disability,” Patsavas remarks onscreen, “and then they think they know . . . what disabled people themselves want. And that is what’s so dangerous.” This misapprehension can have horrific implications, such as when a disabled character’s institutionalization or death is cast as a “happy ending” (Million Dollar Baby, The Elephant Man).

All these tropes coalesce into the “same story”: the inauthentic “inspiration porn” narrative. Sometimes the disabled character “overcomes” their disability, sometimes they are cured, and sometimes they simply inspire the nondisabled characters (and audience members). This narrative culminates yearly on Oscar night, when able-bodied actors triumphantly accept their awards for playing disabled characters. In the documentary’s climactic sequence, Code of the Freaks intersplices clips of the many iterations of this pattern as orchestral music swells in ironic grandeur. “In a way,” Nussbaum says, “it’s like a cure.”

When I ask some of the filmmakers behind Code of the Freaks about their take on this year’s Oscar nominees, Chasnoff points out that this year a significant number of the Best Picture nominees for the Oscars “once again” directly portray disability with limited involvement from actually disabled people. Anthony Hopkins won Best Actor for playing a man with Alzheimer’s disease in The Father, and multi-nominee Sound of Metal, a story about a drummer losing his hearing, stars a hearing actor. Sound of Metal does feature some deaf actors, but the story oversimplifies the debate about cochlear implants, effectively “flattening,” in Sandahl’s words, the diversity of opinion within the deaf community.

In addition to these overt portrayals, Patsavas points out that Hollywood’s power in shaping how we see disability can also obscure our ability to recognize it when it is not sensationalized. For instance, in Best Picture winner Nomadland and nominee Promising Young Woman, trauma and mental illness are folded into layered, multifaceted contexts rather than singled out as “disability stories.” Even conditions of indie production are affected by the narrowness of Hollywood’s vision: Chasnoff explains that Code of the Freaks struggled for funding for many years “because we didn’t want to make ‘a hero’s journey.’ We wanted to depict a community.”

In that spirit, Code of the Freaks defies easy solutions. Reception to the documentary, the creators report, has included anger. “People are shocked that we’re critiquing movies that are just beloved,” Sandahl says. “We don’t present a progress narrative.” Patsavas adds, “We are telling a horror story of the impact of these images on disabled people’s lives . . . and, much like some horror films, we leave the audience feeling terrible, and that’s the intent, that frustration of a happy ending.” And so even as the Academy seems, self-consciously, to be expanding its representational scope in some ways, Code of the Freaks demands better, asserting that the real “code of the freaks” is a community that demands truth from its stories.

★★★★★ EXCELLENT ★★★ GOOD ★★ AVERAGE ★ POOR ★ WORTHLESS

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**Endlessness**

Reportedly the director’s final film, this compendious tour de force from Swedish master Roy Andersson (the “Living Trilogy”) is a fittingly befuddling denouement to his wholly idiosyncratic oeuvre. Its composed of 32 distinct vignettes, which consider both the absurdly trivial (as when a group of young girls randomly start dancing to music in front of a café) and the intensely profound (like the recurring segments about a priest who’s lost his faith), with little apparent reason to the individual sequences or their relationship with one another. Each is its own cinematic diorama—a meticulously constructed, living tableau that evinces Andersson’s unconventional aesthetic of muted colors, costumes, and settings that arouse a simultaneously particular and generic time and place, and a fixed camera that observes what’s happening from a measured distance and often via a continuous take. Andersson’s use of music throughout adds an emotional tenor where irony might otherwise overwhelm the potential for a sheer emotional impact. As with the director’s previous films, the theme is being itself, in all its magnificent, distressing, and banal glory. This supposedly final effort, however, is especially ambiguous; one feels that it could go on and on, and that it in fact does, even when it’s over.

—Kathleen Sachs 76 min. Gene Siskel Film Center From Your Sofa, Music Box Direct

**Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba The Movie: Mugen Train**

Exquisitely animated with a plot wound tightly enough to keep you on your toes, this film is the finale to the first season of Demon Slayer, an anime series about a young boy named Tanjiro on a quest to learn how to kill demons and save his sister, who has become a demon. Mugen Train follows Tanjiro and his friends as they board a mysterious train upon which 40 passengers have mysteriously disappeared. There, they encounter a villain who sends his victims into an endless sleep—a neat plot device that uses dreams as vehicles for sentimental vignettes to highlight each character. The action scenes are flawless, even as the emotion sometimes leans toward the saccharine. While the film is best enjoyed after first finishing the series, director Haruo Sotozaki notably walks a neat tightrope, at once creating an exciting stand-alone feature film and a sequel to the existing story. Japanese with subtitles or English dub. —Nina Li Coomes 107 min. In wide release in theaters

**Fried Barry**

On the surface, Barry (Gary Green) isn’t the most charming protagonist. He’s addicted to heroin, a poor father, and an even worse husband. But on the night of his latest bender, Barry gets abducted by aliens—who decide to take him on a journey through writer-director Ryan Kruger’s version of South Africa’s seedy underbelly. Kruger’s debut feature is not for those looking for a calm and cohesive experience, but if a manic and disgusting joyride is more what you’re after, Fried Barry is for you. Barry only says a handful of words over the course of the film’s runtime, but the energy of this film lies in Green’s wide-eyed, piercing stare that says everything for him. Once Fried Barry steps on the gas, it only gets more intense and unbelievable at every turn, even if it leaves whatever plot there was in the dust. Paired with an acid- and cum-stained visual aesthetic and a pulsing score, Kruger makes you revel in the chaos—blurring the lines between Barry’s drug-induced brain chemistry and the alien taking control of him. —Cody Corrall 99 min. Shudder

**The Human Factor**

Israeli nonfiction filmmaker Dror Moreh (The Gatekeepers) engages a hyperspecific political epoch as he features six U.S. negotiators who were working to broker peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors during the tailend of George H.W. Bush’s presidency and for the duration of Bill Clinton’s two terms. This 2019 documentary is as straightforward as that—and surprisingly engrossing, as the negotiators recount their experiences in an accessible and even entertaining way that makes the subject matter sound like the stuff of prestige television dramas as opposed to the warroom theater of the global political stage. The envoys recount behind-the-scenes stories that reveal politics as being inane and often arbitrary: one of them talks about how venerated Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin required that PLO chairman Yasser Arafat not show up to their first meeting in a military uniform and kiss him on the cheeks. He then details the back-and-forth that went into making it happen, just one of many inconceivable tales that cast international politics in a new light. Less charmingly, the documentary examines the events of the 2000 Camp David Summit, when Clinton, Arafat, and then-Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak struggled to reach an agreement that would effectively end the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The negotiators speak honestly and even emotionally about their successes, failures, and all that went on in between—ultimately politics is just people, and Moreh’s captivating documentary epitomizes that “human factor.” —Kathleen Sachs 108 min. In wide release in theaters

**The Killing of Two Lovers**

It’s the most famous rule in dramatic writing: if someone brandishes their pistol in act one, somebody’s got to shoot it (preferably in someone else’s general direction) by the end of act two. Only, other than Chekhov and all those books on how to be a screenwriter you see at Goodwill, who says? How come the gun David (Clayne Crawford) has thrust toward his sleeping wife Nikki (Sipideh Moafi) and some guy from her law office (Chris Coy) in the first minute of the movie has to go off at all? How about, in 4:3 format and a patient array of long takes, we get semi-rural Utah, its yawning streets and vacant lots and looming snow-capped Palvant mountains, into the frame a little first, then worry about the gun. Let’s check back in about the gun when we see how hard David is trying to make Nikki’s need for flexibility in their marriage not feel like death, and when Nikki has finished weighing her responsibilities against her boredome. Gun movies with no gunselector, or rather an inept and conflicted one: this is the mold we are working in, recalling films like Blue Ruin (2013) and parts of No Country For Old Men (2007) or Shotgun Stories (2007).

Drama is one thing, vistas are another. And there are inward vistas to counter the outward ones, values and priorities that can crumble as the snowy mountains shadow them from an eternal past. All does not hang on the report of a firearm. Until, suddenly it does. From such simple beginnings—an angry man, his gun, a sleeping wife, and another man—through to all the complexities life can throw at a family, then back to the primal struggles anew, director Robert Machoian’s first solo feature achieves technically what it sets about to portray emotionally, a rare feat. —Max Maller 85 min. In wide release on VOD and in theaters

**Profile**

The “screenlife” genre has boomed in recent years. From Levon Gabrielyan’s Unfriended series, to Aneesh Chaganty’s Searching, and Rob Savage’s Host, audiences and filmmakers are seeing the value of using our screens to tell engaging stories. Timur Bekambetov’s stab at screenlife—after producing many of the standout films that shaped the genre—puts its focus on ISIS recruitment on social media. Profile is loosely based on the true story, a broke freelance journalist (Valene Kane), desperate for a story and a paycheck, goes undercover to expose an ISIS recruiter on Facebook during a spike of young European women converting to Islam and starting new lives in Syria. Profile is less concerned with the destination as it is with the journey: the long con of building a relationship over Skype, putting on a new persona every day, forgoing your personal relationships and responsibilities for the thrill of a story. There are times when Profile can feel gimmicky and overly reliant on jump scares, but it finds a dark sense of reality when it interrogates how far someone will go to meet a crushing deadline—even if the ethical questions are off-kilter. —Cody Corrall 105 min. In wide release in theaters

**Wet Season**

Set against the backdrop of Singapore’s moody weather period, Anthony Chen’s Wet Season unpacks the melodrama of a language teacher at an emotional crossroads. Ling (Yeo Yann Yann) has a lot on her plate: she’s trying (and failing) to go through IVF treatment, she’s taking care of her sick father-in-law, there’s political unrest in her native Malaysia, and she’s trying to get her Mandarin students on the right track as final exams creep around the corner. In the midst of her various crises, Ling finds solace in one of her students, who has an equally sad and confusing home life. Wet Season is a quiet and gorgeous ticking time bomb, but when the clock hits zero, there’s not enough time allowed for anyone to truly reflect. Wei Lun (Koh Jia Ler) feels hollow compared to Ling’s lush and textured turmoil, but that could also be the result of them being at drastically different stages of life. While Wet Season often revels in the predictability of the student-teacher relationship trope, there’s a profound earnestness just under the surface. —Cody Corrall 103 min. Gene Siskel Film Center From Your Sofa, Music Box Direct
The Chicago goth trios new album, Arena, invites you to dance on straight white capitalism's grave.

By Micco Caporale

In the world of Chicago goth dance trio Pixel Grip, “the arena” is more than a literal venue where spectators gather to delight in competition—it refers to any context our society envisions as a zero-sum game, where no one can win without someone else losing. The bands sophomore album, Arena, proposes the club as a sanctuary.

Over ten darkly electrifying tracks (“Alpha-pussy,” “Dancing on Your Grave”), singer Rita Lukea describes what they call their “villain origin story”—that is, why theyve come to play a commanding hard femme in a queer electro band. Arena speaks powerfully to the frustration and anger of people who are unwillingly sexualized, overworked, underpaid, and generally exploited. These themes are also personal to Lukeas bandmates, Jonathon Freund and Tyler Ommen—in fact theyre common sentiments among young queer creatives who value autonomy as much as safety. Thats most evident in Pixel Grips video for “Demon Chaser.”

The video opens with Lukea dressed like a disco Karen O, striding up to the doorway of a club, flanked by a masked Freund and Ommen—but they cant get in. Two imposing, leather-clad bodies stiff-arm Lukea to protect what looks like a cross between a fun-house entrance and a hellmouth. The pair wear matching programmable LED masks whose flat surfaces display uncanny, glamorous doll faces—as though theyre trying to seem lovely while doing the ugly job of rejecting people. Its funny that theyre policing the door so intently, since no one is waiting to get in—the space outside is empty, save for this new-wave dominatrix and their space-cowboy bandmates.

Then a glamorous woman saunters past. Played by Black trans nightlife fixture Cae Monae, she’s a picture of confidence, a silhouette draped in black taffeta that moves like breath expanding and collapsing. You cant see her face, but Pixel Grips heads all turn. Before she approaches, the uncanny bouncers have already pulled back the velvet rope, allowing her to descend into the belly of the beast. Witnessing this is a revelation for the trio. They scamper after her, eager to see where she—and this feeling she’s given them—will go.

Chasing the forbidden is the premise of “Demon Chaser.” Directed by Todd Diederich and filmed at the Co-Prosperity Sphere in Bridgeport, the video was released two weeks ago as the third single from Arena, which is due May 21 on Chicago indie Feeltrip Records. Freund, 29, and Ommen, 28, create haunting, danceable beats with synths and drum machines; Lukea, 26, delivers authoritative but ethereal vocals about how being seen as a villain makes them feel sexy and cool. (See also: Ursula, Maleficent, Jareth the Goblin King.) Beginning in their early teens, when
they began making music, Lukea experienced objectification and sexual violence from older men in the scene, who took advantage of their eagerness to learn and participate. As a result, much of the album focuses on reclaiming power and agency. But “Demon Chaser” places that reclamation in a richer, queerer context.

Lukea uses their breath to create a rhythm—the breathlessness of chasing someone or fucking them. Monâe plays the demon being pursued. One possible surface read of the video positions Pixel Grip as “chasers”—that is, cis people who lust after trans people as fetish objects, even using them as props for clout—but its dreamlike logic makes clear that a different dynamic is in play. What gets Monâe into the club is her sense of queer agency—and because it’s also what inspires Pixel Grip to follow her, its power rubs off on them. At the end, Monâe drones “You gotta go” like a command to get away, then “You gotta” like an encouragement—insistent, then playful. Welcome to the party.

“A lot of my music centers the reclaiming of power within the trans femme/cis male interaction,” Monâe writes in an e-mail. “For most trans people, discussing trans fetishism as a part of your sexual experience is inevitable. Ironically, Pixel Grip and I never discussed it specifically, but I don’t think we had to.”

So much about the video will feel familiar to artsy weirdos of a certain inclination. It’s naughty and absurdist in a way that echoes Richard Elfman’s Forbidden Zone, the 1980 cult film whose dark Dada energy Elfman’s brother, Danny, later refined in the band Oingo Boingo (Danny also plays Satan in the movie). Parts of its aesthetic borrow from Weimar cabaret, whose visual vernacular has long been favored by queer artists because of its connection to a history of performers forced to entertain the same Nazis who condemned queers and many people they loved as “degenerate.” The video fuses this with trappings of acid house and 90s raves, which are rooted in a culture created by queer people, people of color, and women: black-light paint, furry textures, oversize objects, smiley faces.

Weimar cabaret was about using minimal resources to maximum effect, in large part because the interwar years in Germany were marred by profound deprivation, which the Nazis exploited in their rise to power. Cabaret became a way for fantasy to overpower reality: it prized glamour and androgyny, but it had to code them in ways not legible to authorities. Pairing this with 90s rave culture suggests a desire to escape through ego-destroying collective euphoria: Being in communion with others. Getting lost in a rhythm. One among many adding to the vibe. The visuals nod to state repression as well as to the pursuit of happiness (or at least distraction) by sharing something, even if it’s just dancing.

All in all, “Demon Chaser” seems like an appropriate response to the present moment. We’ve been locked inside for a year, losing jobs, housing, friends, and family to the mismanagement of a pandemic that has disproportionately ravaged people of color and low-wage earners. For all practical purposes, you have to work a full-time job (or marry someone who does) to afford health insurance. Last summer people marched and rioted to protest state violence, especially against Black people, and then our presidential election replaced a wannabe dictator with someone who merely uses better etiquette to defend white supremacy. With so much to be angry about, dancing can be an act of rebellion when it’s in the right space with the right company.

Pixel Grip began writing the material on Arena in 2019 and entered the recording studio in spring 2020. The band had already chosen sides before the pandemic, but its inequities only hardened Lukea’s opinion of landlords and the rich. “People who hoard wealth, they sicken me,” they say. “I got pissed off when the rich got richer during this pandemic, and I got pissed off seeing celebrities in their pool being like, ‘You guys, we’re gonna get through it. We just need to do this together!’ It’s like, no, you’re in your pool drinking a margarita that somebody made for you, and we are in our stinky studio apartments. We’re alone, and we’re poor, and we’re going to stay poor during this entire thing. You’re not.”

Because Arena is largely a product of pre-COVID days, it feels like a fantasy of club life we’re clambering to get back to. “We wrote the songs envisioning a sea of people and what we wanted them to do on the downbeat,” Lukea says. “It’s about pure energy. What’s going to make them push each other and sweat and twerk?” Pixel Grip’s music celebrates the idea of the club as a queer space where all it takes is the right outfit, song, or pill to transport you to a different life—a key reason Lukea, Ommen, and Freund began playing together as teenagers in Crystal Lake, then formed the band in 2017.

“Rita’s our art director,” Freund says, acknowledging the role Lukea plays in crafting Pixel Grip’s image. He and Ommen take the lead in world-building through sound.

Freund learned the power of dance music around the time he met his future bandmates. “I was 16 and washing dishes at my first job at Panera,” he says. “My friend played me Aphex Twin. I heard a different world that was so beautiful and dreamy and new and refreshing and intriguing. After that, I knew I had to save up all my measly little paychecks from food-service grunt work to buy drum machines and synthesizers. I had to know what was happening in the song to make it so enjoyable and fun to listen to.”

“Demon Chaser” is a song for all sorts of marginalized people, and it reminds us of our obligation to treasure and protect those more vulnerable than we are. It flips the toxic dynamic of the “chaser” 180 degrees.

Queer gatekeeping is a real thing, and if you’re part of any queer communities online, you might even feel like you’ve done it—especially if you haven’t adopted an attitude of “the more, the merrier” toward the deluge of inspirational images and infographics about how valid you are.

The “Demon Chaser” video might look at first like it’s dramatizing queer gatekeeping. What it’s actually doing, though, is pointing out that by allying with the most marginalized members of the community, queer people can transcend internecine arguments and recognize the real enemy—the white capitalist heteropatriarchy that forces us to constantly negotiate between our private truths and our public selves and denies us material and emotional support.

Federally legalized gay marriage is only six years young, but it’s long been a symbol of queer assimilation—a capitulation to familiar ideas of family and to a state that decides who’s worthy of health care, citizenship, and last rites. Anyone under 30 grew up in a media climate that said, “Look at these gays! They’re just like us!” This might’ve been a well-intentioned attempt to fight stigma, but it encouraged a relationship to queerness that elided the painful parts.

Monâe represents the possibility of resistance to assimilation. Like many queers today, Pixel Grip among them, she insists, “Actually, we are not like you. And further? We do not want to be.”

To be queer is to nakedly face the ways you and your loved ones do not (or cannot) organize your life around the cis straight white nuclear family—and imagining other possi-
requires knowing where artifice ends and reality begins. Actually living out the plot of 9 to 5 would be more terrifying than thrilling—but watching Dolly Parton, Jane Fonda, and Lily Tomlin dom Dabney Coleman is fun because we viscerally understand all the psychosexual reasons to chain up your boss in a garage. We need a space and a soundtrack where it’s safe to imagine this sort of thing—not because we’re going to do it, but because the imagining itself is cathartic.

“The venue or club or disco is the only real respite from the arena,” says Lukea. “And if you have venues that aren’t offering you that feeling of, ‘OK, this is the one place where I’m safe,’ it actually continues to oppress you. That doesn’t work for me. It needs to be a utopia. And it can’t be a fucking boys’ club. A boys’ club is an arena.”

One of the ways Pixel Grip work toward creating a utopia for audiences (and for themselves) is by screening venues. What do they look for? “It seems small,” Lukea says. “But bathroom neutrality.” The band also seek out show spaces that are not only run by queer people and women but also have a track record of putting them onstage. Any little thing that indicates their fans are welcome goes a long way.

“Tides are changing, and people are starting to give a shit,” Lukea says. “But ultimately, I really feel like it’s a systemic thing that’s happening. We’re not playing for all straight white male audiences. We’ve facilitated a really diverse crowd where people feel safe and a lot of people show up.”

Pixel Grip also try to perform or collaborate with boundary-pushing artists such as Monâe. “Demon Chaser” isn’t their first time working with her—in 2019, she opened Pixel Grip’s release party for their first album, Heavy Handed. As the saying goes, a rising tide lifts all boats.

“Cae is a fucking assassin,” says Lukea. “She’s like a mistress of mania. That’s what she calls herself. She’s like a quadruple threat with makeup and visual art and performance and music. She does all the production herself. She has a song called ‘Cisphobic.’ That’s such a strong, visceral statement. It has this vibe of commentary and anger that I resonate with.”

“We reached out to her to open for our album-release show,” Lukea says, laughing, “and she was like, ‘Yeah, gorge’”—it was such a gorgeous idea, the entire word wasn’t necessary.

“Rita reached out about the collab,” Monâe writes. “I wasn’t sure what to expect, but like any bad bitch, I’m versatile and always ready. When they sent the track and Rita’s lyrics, I immediately knew I wanted to chant a rhythmic, sadistic poem of my sexual fantasies (reality). It wasn’t until I showed up to the studio that they heard or even knew what I was going to say. But the whole recording process was a dream, especially it being my first time in a studio. (I produce all my tracks on my phone and record vocals in my bathroom.) The way everyone encouraged and highlighted what I do was truly so incredible.”

Pixel Grip’s approach places them in a long lineage of industrial musicians building on the legacy of the genre’s LGBTQ+ pioneers—and in Chicago, that means Wax Trax! first and foremost. In the three decades since that famous label’s heyday, a lot has changed, and unlike so many of their Wax Trax! ancestors, Pixel Grip and their peers—performers like girlboifriend, Fee Lion, and Club Music—don’t have to be even the slightest bit coy about who they are and who they’re playing for. This creates more flexibility in who can join the scene and how they can contribute. An openly queer-accepting community will always be richer than one where aggro edgedgels are poisoning the well.

“You might be the only person who listens to techno or goth music at your job or in your class or high school,” says Lukea. “But then you come to the show of your favorite artists, and you’re just surrounded by friends instantly. You’re surrounded by that feeling of love and connection and intimacy where literally everyone that’s around you is your family.”
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NNAMDI

MAY 13, 2021 • CHICAGO READER 33
PICK OF THE WEEK

Nez draws from house, hip-hop, and R&B for his invigorating Midnight Music

Nez, Midnight Music
The Wild Children/Three Six Zero/Sony
ord.co/midnightmusic

CHICAGO ARTIST NESBITT “NEZ” WESONGA broke out in the early 2010s with hip-hop production crew Nez & Rio. By 2014, they’d helped make a bona fide hit album: Schoolboy Q’s Oxymoron features three Nez & Rio tracks, including the triumphant single “Man of the Year.” Q had previously enlisted the duo for 2012’s “Druggys Wit Hoes Again,” which contains flashes of Chicago house—and nearly a decade later, Nez is still finding ways to express his love of house music. On his new solo EP, Midnight Music (The Wild Children/Three Six Zero/Sony), he even recruited Chicago dance legend Felix da Housecat for the mood-setting kickoff track, “Lift Off,” which gradually intensifies its lean, flawless club production into a volcanic bounce. Midnight Music makes its home on the borders of hip-hop, house, R&B, and brooding electronic music, and Nez draws on these styles in whatever proportions he pleases—his only rule is to create pristine pop that encourages people to make the most of a dance floor’s dark corners. The debonair “My Love” echoes the great 12-inches that turned house into a global phenomenon and demonstrates Nez’s keen understanding of where to take it next. —LEOR GALIL

ASTRACHAN, ASTRACHAN
Self-released
astrachanmusic.bandcamp.com/album/astrachan

Chicago multi-instrumentalist Ben Astrachan was born nearly two generations after 1967’s famous Summer of Love, but he understands the whimsy, grace, and joy of that era’s music so well you’d think he helped make it happen. He impressed me with his contributions to a rough-around-the-edges 2020 album by freak-folk duo Berta Bigtoe (where he plays with Austin Koenigstein), and he’s now branched out into further flower-power experiments as a solo artist. He’s performing and recording under his last name, and he’s just self-released his self-titled debut as Astrachan (he’s also crowd-funding a vinyl version via Qrates). The album spins youthful reveries into technicolor chamber-pop songs that feel designed for summer—though Astrachan’s multitracked vocal harmonies and perfectly placed flourishes might convince you that warm weather was actually made for these songs. The carefree “Scandal” drifts along at a leisurely pace, its tiptoeing bass line, relaxed percussion, and layers of gentle, sun-dazed guitar resolutely unperturbed by the latest wave of bad news roiling our world. Listening to Astrachan won’t magically improve your life, but it’ll give you the equanimity to deal with the problems it can’t fix. —LEOR GALIL

CUMBIE, EP
Self-released
cumbie.bandcamp.com/album/ep

Cumbie front man Aaron O’Neill says his three-piece isn’t a “real band”—they’ve only ever performed publicly once—but on their new self-released debut, EP, they rock like road-tested veterans. O’Neill started writing the record’s sleek, rowdy songs a couple years ago, when he lived in Saint Louis (he played in several bands there, including Shady Bug, a touring indie-rock group on respected indie label Exploding in Sound). To realize the material he was creating for Cumbie, he recruited bassist-vocalist Reid Maynard, who still lives in Saint Louis, and drummer Zach Simmons, who lives on a farm outside Bloomington, Illinois. O’Neill moved to Chicago in October 2020, and since then Simmons’s home has served as Cumbie’s de facto headquarters. O’Neill has quickly ingratiated himself into Chicago’s scene—he now plays in country-infl ected power-pop group the Deals with all three members of Moontype, and Cumbie recorded EP with local indie-rock engineer Seth Engel at Pallet Sound in Bridgeport.

So far, Cumbie are basically just a studio band, but they’re so tight it sounds like they’ve spent months touring basements, dive bars, and lofts. Their new record grafts metal and hardcore aggression onto the kind of sugary melodies that indie rockers write when they want to make pop. This combo brings Cumbie closer to grunge than to any other alt-rock hybrid, but they don’t stick to a discernible formula—on “Inside,” for example, they invigorate a downcast tune with occasional guttural burps and a metalcore breakdown. O’Neill frequently pitches up his vocals like he’s been sucking helium, which gives the band an extra kick of giddy energy—and the gargantuan guitars and galloping drums on “Pretty” propel his chipmunk singing

—LEOR GALIL

NEZ, MIDNIGHT MUSIC
The Wild Children/Three Six Zero/Sony
ord.co/midnightmusic
Beyond the group’s first two postreunion records, 2007’s ace heart-on-sleeve tunes. But those records (and inspired ear destroyers, and Barlow writes a couple croaks and whines to sludge-bathed, Neil Young-ly overwhelmingly studio albums. (2012)
pandemic hit) and released four solid if not exact-
gernauts have since toured nonstop (well, until the welcomed back with open arms. The indie-rock jug-
sic Dinosaur Jr. lineup improbably reunited and was changes, the band dissolved. But in 2005, the clas-
Barlow, who shifted focus to his indie-rock project Sebadoh, and in 1997, after a couple more lineup 
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deeply unshakeable at the center of the music’s life. “I-the band’s dramatic quiet-loud dynamics 
edit the band.” Michael Azerrad may never write a sequel to his 2001 book Our Band Could Be 
ese in an instant, and their copious hooks are near-
longer. These unwavering indie-rock lif-
Sweep It Into Space
—Leor Galil
DINOSAUR JR., SWEEP IT INTO SPACE
Jagajuguwar
dinosaurjr.bandcamp.com/album/sweep-it-into-space
Dinosaur Jr.’s second act is a feel-good gift that keeps on giving. These unwavering indie-rock lif-
ers seem to have access to a bottomless well of arena-ready solos and riffs, brain-sticking melo-
dies, and hurricane-force noise. In the late 1980s, 
the powerhouse trio—guitarist and singer J Mas-
cis, bassist and singer Lou Barlow, and drummer Murph—became a revolutionary force in the Amer-
ican rock ‘n’ roll underground. Then in 1989, Dino-
saur Jr. went through an acrimonious breakup with Barlow, who shifted focus to his indie-rock project Sebadoh, and in 1997, after a couple more lineup changes, the band dissolved. But in 2005, the clas-
Dinosaur Jr. lineup improbably reunited and was 
welcomed back with open arms. The indie-rock jug-
sic Dinosaur Jr. prove
From start to finish, Sweep It Into Space gushes with crushing earworms, catchy choruses, and Mascis’s punk-driven guitar heroics. Play any track and you’ll find yourself singing or humming along, slaying on air guitar, or breaking into your most ridiculous rock face. “I Met the Stones” features a heavy metallic chug and layers of guitar work, and Barlow’s “Garden” takes the band’s dramatic quiet-loud dynamics to the next level. Vile even contributes country-fried 12-string guitar licks to the epically twangy should-
be hit “I Ran Away.” Michael Azerrad may never write a sequel to his 2001 book Our Band Could Be 
Your Life, which documents the bands who shaped alternative and indie rock in the 80s and early 90s, but with Sweep It Into Space, Dinosaur Jr. prove once again that they deserve their chapter in it—and simultaneously add another one to their own trium-
phant story. —Brad Cohen
LES FILLES DE ILLIGHADAD, AT PIONEER WORKS
Sahel Sounds / Pioneer Works
lesfillesdeillighadad.bandcamp.com/album/at-pioneer-works
Fatou Seidi Ghali is surely not the first person to become enamored of an older sibling’s guitar. When she was about ten, her older brother, Ahmadou Madassane (who currently plays rhythm guitar for Mdou Moctar), brought a guitar from Libya back to their home in Illighadad, Niger. Since Tuareg girls 
aren’t encouraged to pick up the instrument, she had to dodge disapproving parental eyes to give it a try, but she proved to be a natural. Chris Kirkley of the Sahel Sounds label sought her out in 2014 after seeing a video of her playing on YouTube. He sub-
sequently released Les Filles de Illighadad, which consists of stunning open-air recordings that showcase two different sides of Tuareg music. (Tuaregs apply the word “Tamasheq” to themselves and their language, but it’s not as widely known in the West.) The album opens with Ghali and singer Alamou Akrouni playing lilting, hypnotic songs; then on the flip, they’re joined by friends for a rowdy side-length performance of tende, a local style of communal chanting and drumming.
By 2019, when Les Filles de Illighadad made their first tour of the U.S., they had evolved from an informal, communal endeavor to a road-tested, professional quartet. On At Pioneer Works, recorded in Brooklyn during that tour, Ghali and Akrouni are joined by Amaria Hamadalher, who also pro-
duced the session, on percussion and electric guitar, and another of Ghali’s brothers, Abdou-
laye Madassane, on rhythm guitar. The group’s Tuareg contemporaries—notably Mdou Moctar and Bombino—are prone to flashy guitar heroics, but Les Filles’ tart picking functions as the founda-
tion of a rhythmic matrix that also includes ensem-
bles vocals, handclaps, and loping patterns beat out on a calabash. When they want to turn up the intensity, they do so by pulling an element out of their insistent grooves. Unlike a traditional tende 
gathering, which happens at someone’s home with no division between partiers and perform-
ers, this performance occurred in front of an audi-
ence at a Brooklyn cultural center—but the album’s six tracks are up to the task of getting a bunch of non-desert dwellers up and dancing. —Bill Meyer
MONOBOY, COMMA
Sooper
monobody.bandcamp.com/album/comma
Instrumental five-piece Monobody have the tenac-
ity and vision to add to Chicago’s storied postrock legacy, and they proved it with 2018’s Raytracing, which borrowed its frenzied energy from punk and metal. On their new third album, Comma (out on Sooper, the label co-owned by Monobody drummer Nnamdi Ogbonnaya), the group maintain the seat-
of-the-pants spirit of their previous records while softening their touch and redirecting their energies toward a sound more reminiscent of jam-band music and jazz. Monobody tether frothy keyboards and ostentatious guitar solos to clean, breakneck acro-
continued from 35

batics that teeter on the edge of aggression; they constantly remind you they’re capable of busting out the kind of ferocious breakdowns you’re more likely to hear among hard and heavy bands whose chosen genres end with “-core.” But Monobody carefully avoid pigeonholes and cliches while they do it, which makes their brief forays into dental-office smooth jazz sound as brazen as their gnarliest riffs. —LEOR GALL

MATT SWEENEY & BONNIE “PRINCE” BILLY, SUPERWOLVES
Drag City

When wolves form a pack, they form bonds that last a lifetime. A similar feeling of familiarity and connection suffuses the duo project of Will Oldham (aka Bonnie “Prince” Billy) and Matt Sweeney. Each musician is an indisputable titan in his field: Sweeney made his name as a guitarist for 80s cult favorites Skunk and math-rock stalwarts Chavez, while Oldham has endured as one of folk’s most disarmingly frank songwriters. In 2005, they joined forces for Superwolf, a collaborative album intended to mirror the working alliance between Jerry Garcia and Robert Hunter, and on the new Superwolves, they continue to meld lovely, stripped-down arrangements and forthright lyrics. Where Superwolf was unapologetically and sometimes uncomfortably sparse, on Superwolves Oldham and Sweeney aim an array of Americanana upward into the cosmic planes. Opener “Make Worry for Me” has a syrupy, bluesy lilt punctuated by clapback snare drum, and Oldham’s voice burrows under your skin and into your heart. Throughout the album, Sweeney strikes a balance between emphasis and restraint like an impassioned conductor guiding the pace and volume of an orchestra, while Oldham weaves tales of godless women, friendless drunks, and philandering housemaids. Oldham and Sweeney provide the core of Superwolves, but it’s hardly an insular album, and the duo are at their best when other musicians stoke the flames of their soaring melodies. “Hall of Death,” cowritten by Mduq Moctar guitarist Ahmadou Madassane and performed with Moc-tar and his full ensemble, is a rambling showcase of Tuareg desert blues and Oldham’s salt-lick twang. The record also includes tempered folk-rock covers (“There Must Be Someone” by the Good Brothers) and absurdist lullabies (“My Popsicle”). Written throughout the decline and death of Oldham’s mother from Alzheimer’s disease, Superwolves is tinged with several shades of loss—narrators crawl toward bright white lights, memories are lost to the wind, and blazing skies swallow the world whole. While the album could have served admirably as an elegy to the departed, Oldham and Sweeney also find celebration in suffering and strength in each other. —SHANNON NICO SHREIBAK

VARIOUS ARTISTS, ARC MOUNTAIN
Hausu Mountain and Deathbomb Arc

Like doesn’t necessarily breed like—just ask all the friends for whom I’ve tried (and failed) to play cupid. But similarity is bliss for underground labels Deathbomb Arc and Hausu Mountain, which collaborated to release the compilation Arc Mountain on May 7. Based respectively in Los Angeles and Chicago, these eclectic, irreverent labels might be separated by geography, but they’re soul mates aesthetically; Arc Mountain only proves it: three years in the making, it pairs an artist from the DBA roster with another from HausMo on each track, and in doing so manages to sound fizzily spontaneous. The album, which benefits drug-policy-reform organization Last Prisoner Project, peaks with a disquieting twofer in its latter half: the doo-eyed aesthetic of “Good Boy (Proud),” by bedroom sound collagist Margot Padilla (of DBA) and industrial-experimental musician Khaki Blazer (of HausMo), belies its disturbing commentary on radicalization and gun violence, and the fun-house fever dream of “Wicked Thoughts” (with vocals by Bay Area-based Sarn and production by Mukqs, aka HausMo cofounder Max Allison) presents a four-minute horror story set in the speaker’s own mind. After a few spins, however, I found myself stridently disagreeing with the liner notes’ claim that Arc Mountain “ris[es] above the ranks of a grab-bag ‘compilation’ to pursue a cohesive album-length statement.” And why should it have to? The only through lines in DBA and HausMo’s catalogs are that they have no through lines, and the songs on Arc Mountain come together more like a potluck than a chef’s tasting menu. The opening “Scen[ed]” (Chicago genre shredder Fire-Toolz and Tampa-based rap duo They Hate Change) charges out of the gate as hot as the most breakneck tracks by DBA alum JPEGmafia, buzzy bass, relentless verses, and all. “The Reaction” (Khaki Blazer and Brooklyn-based R&B vocalist Fielded) forms the lyrical heart of the album, swelling with swaggering grandiosity; and on “Hausu Nis Now? 4/25/19 Greensboro,” Cooling Prongs (aka Clipping. collaborator Christopher Fleeger) and MrDougDoug (aka Doug Kaplan, HausMo’s other founder) blend up and reassemble a live show by LA comedian George Chen into a ricocheting stereo treatment. Might the album be more cohesive if all 21 artists (13 from DBA, eight from HausMo) had put their heads together to create a unified product? Sure, but it’d be a lot less fun. Let the kaleidoscope tumble, and long live the kinetics of music’s underground. —HANNAH EDGAR

Yautja, the Lurch

Relapse

Nashville metal trio Yautja are a great example of how the old adage “less is more” doesn’t always apply. For ten years now, these three dudes—who band name is also the species name of the fictional extraterrestrial hunters in the Predator franchise—have been throwing everything into their maximalist music, and getting better and better results. Every song Yautja creates is likely to contain a dizzying mix of bombastic sludge, furious hardcore, brutal grind, and nauseating noise rock. On The Lurch, the band’s second full-length and first for Relapse, Yautja hone and perfect their craft—they keep their “more is more” spirit alive, but they also make every part, transition, and lead stand out on its own. Engineer Scott Evans gave the album a wall-to-wall production job at Chicago noise-rock haven Electric Audio, so that for the first time Yautja have a sound massive enough to match their giant riffs. The Lurch doesn’t let up once across its nine tracks—it’s all guttural vocals, mind-bending drumming, and nasty, noisy guitars, without a second of relief. This is extremist metal made by one of the most brutal bands out there today. —LUCA CIMARUSTI
A local R&B favorite by the Fabulous Turks gets resurrected after half a century

Chicago singer-songwriter RJ Griffith has released a cover of the most popular song by his uncle's old band.

By Steve Krakow

When I learned in March that the newest single from Chicago singer-songwriter RJ Griffith would be a cover of his uncle's old R&B band the Fabulous Turks, my ears pricked up—I hadn't heard the group's name before. After making some inquiries, I quickly convinced myself I'd found an untold story. Griffith and his manager, Tom Segal, kindly initiated the slow process of relaying my questions to the band and passing answers back to me. As a result, the Secret History of Chicago Music can bring you the tale of the Turks, as remembered by Griffith's uncle, singer Thomas Williams, and his songwriting collaborator Willie Weems.

Thomas Williams was born November 11, 1943, in Tallahassee, Florida, and moved to Chicago at age three. “At 13 years old, I saw a performance from a R&B group at a social club, and I saw how they were dressed and professional,” he says. “From that moment on I wanted to be an entertainer.” Tragic R&B boy soprano Frankie Lymon (of the Teenagers fame) was also a huge childhood influence. Williams was a teenager himself when he joined his first vocal group, the Fascinators, with friends from his neighborhood—and they had a brush with success thanks to a southside Chicago label.

“Bombay Records sold us a dream and gave the red-carpet treatment with limousines and five-star restaurants,” he recalls. “We recorded a song for them, and it was never released due to tax purposes.” Bombay, owned by soul songwriter and producer Bob Catron, did in fact put out a Fascinators single in 1964 (“Gonna Miss Me” b/w “In Other Words”), but few seem to have been pressed—it’s now rare enough that a fairly clean copy fetched $1,900 in 2019.

Williams joined the Fabulous Turks in the mid-60s, when they were already well-established and gigging around Chicagoland. According to Williams, the group recorded at the Columbia Records studio in 1961 and at the One-derful label’s Tone Recordings in ’64, but he doesn’t remember any resulting releases (and I can’t find any evidence either). The Turks went through many lineup changes, but by the late 60s the roster had stabilized with Williams, Willie Gladney, Willie Crowley, and Andy Herron.

In 1967 the Fabulous Turks met songwriter and guitarist Willie Weems—they’d been booked on a show produced by Chicago band the Dontells, with whom Weems was working. The backing band Weems led with the Dontells began playing with the Turks, and they forged a lasting relationship.

In a perfect world I’d do a whole Secret History on Weems. He seems to have had fingers in a lot of pies (sometimes credited as “Weams”), but he’s not even mentioned in Robert Pruter’s authoritative Chicago Soul. Weems was born August 2, 1941, in Brookhaven, Mississippi, and moved to west suburban Maywood at three years old. He remembers hearing Louis Jordan back in Mississippi, and after the move he was inspired by blues and R&B artists such as Muddy Waters and Ray Charles.

In high school Weems had a band called the Downbeats, and in the early 60s (after a stint in the army in Germany) he started writing and performing with the Dontells, who released their first Weems song, “The Old Man,” in 1963 via Witch Records. The group continued issuing singles till the early 70s, on labels such as Beltone and Vee-Jay, and in 1970 they appeared on Soul Train. Weems formed a songwriting team with Dontells bandmate Leroy Dandridge, who owned the Ambassador and Dan-dy labels—they wrote for Weems, for singer Edith Brown, and for Dandridge (who recorded as Singing Sam and in the duo Sam & Kitty with Weems’s ex-girlfriend Kitty Grove).

Weems also wrote the bangin’ 1968 tune “Girl You Lit My Fire” for blues harmonica master Junior Wells.

The Fabulous Turks released only two 45s, both in 1969, and all four songs were Weems compositions. Billed simply to the Turks, they were released by tiny south-side label DJO, a division of the Daran Recording Company—an early home of the group that became the Chi-Lites. The second single, “Let It Flame” b/w “The Bad Brought Out the Good” (misprinted as “The Bad Brought the Good” on the hub label), is now considered a smooth soul classic by collectors, and often sells for $200 or more.

The B side of the first single, “You Turn Me On” b/w “Generation Gap,” features a jumping full-band groove that echoes the Motown sound of the day. The A side is a slow, sublime weeper—and that’s the track RJ Griffith chose to remake. Williams says “You Turn Me On” was a local favorite that got requested a lot on WVON and on radio stations in Gary—and Griffith’s press materials for the remake claim it was picked up by 35 radio stations nationally. This success didn’t translate to money, though. “We signed a contract with DJO Records that stated four guys were to split a penny and a half per record that sold,” Williams says. Weems adds, “The Turks were released from their contract with DJO Records in 1969 due to lack of promotion.”

The Fabulous Turks performed at Chicago’s very first Black Expo, organized by Operation PUSH in 1969, sharing the bill with James Brown, Aretha Franklin, B.B. King, the Supremes, and many more. (The event was held here annually till 1976, and the Turks also played in 1970.) Most of the band’s gigs weren’t nearly so glamorous, of course—they often toured the chitlin’ circuit, which could be a grind. Thomas recalls having to change his clothes on top of beer cases, and Weems remembers a chaotic gig at a club called the Bucket of Blood: “A big fight broke out and bottles and tables were being thrown, and we continued to play and dodged objects at the same time.”

The band petered out in or around 1970. “The Turks broke up due to family and personal problems, fatigued of pursuing a dream for so long and it never amounting to stardom,” Williams says. He carried on with a reconfigured group called the Four Shades, who released “Something Special” b/w “My World” in 1972 and split up in the mid-70s.

Weems stayed in the biz till the 80s—he mentions the group Table of Contents, who have a 1985 single listed on Discogs—and he continues to write music today. He’s happy about Griffith’s reinterpretation of his tune. “I was amazed at the remake of the song that I wrote, because it was about a woman I liked, and I was a little nervous,” he says. “But RJ really delivered and brought the song to life!” Williams is similarly pleased: “I think it’s amazing that someone could take something that was made 50 years ago and bring it up to date. I’m excited for the world to hear the remake.”

May 13, 2021 • Chicago Reader 37
Beau O’Reilly, 68, has been a fixture on Chicago’s fringe theater and music scenes for decades, most notably with the Curious Theatre Branch (coproducers of the annual Rhino Fest), Maestro Subgum & the Whole, and the Crooked Mouth. During the pandemic, O’Reilly recorded a new album, Thrifty (Uvulittle), that features 14 tracks created at a distance with collaborators around the country. He’s throwing a release party at Constellation on Saturday, May 15, at 8 PM.

I grew up with nine sisters and four brothers, and it was very much a theatrical family and a singing family. So my mother and my father both sang and sang well, and they loved to get us all to sing and teach us parts. We grew up singing folk songs around the table. By the time I was about 15 or 16, I had deeply fallen into listening to a lot of recorded music—early Dylan and the Doors and the Beatles and that kind of stuff. And my brothers had some of that, but mostly I scrimped and did paper routes and shit so that I could just buy records. So in my family, the joke always was that 90 percent of the records in the house were Beau’s, which was true.

And my mother, bless her heart, was great about it, because I often in high school slept in the living room because we lived in a tiny place. So I slept in the living room just because the stereo was there and I could listen to music late at night, and she never, never told me not to. She would object when I listened to “Why Don’t We Do It in the Road?” She hated that song.

I think around that age, my father [James O’Reilly] did this production of The Threepenny Opera at the Court Theatre in Chicago, where he was then the artistic director. And I went and saw it and it really blew my mind. We’d listen to a lot of musicals and that kind of stuff in our house, but that particular piece was just so tremendous—it really altered my sense of theater and songs in a way that stayed with me, pretty much since then.

When I was in my teens, I was in folk groups, big folk groups with lots of singers. And I was often the guy who would do the stories and introduce the songs. We played at county fairs and coffeehouses, but we were way too big really for any of that—12 or 13 people. I got introduced to Phil Ochs that way and Richard Farina and those Village folk people who were not Bob Dylan. I learned from those guys and was very into them. Then in my early 20s, I was with this group of people that included two of my sisters and Court Dorsey, whose song [“Love Around the Corner”] I do now.

We had an experimental theater company. And we worked out of this little club in DeKalb, Illinois, called Juicy John Pink’s. And when the owners decided to leave, they basically gave us this club. So we had this folk-music club with a reputation. We ran that club and I did all the booking, and Michael and Barbara Smith and Greg Brown and Bob Gibson and people like that came and played. And again, every night I just soaked that stuff up. I was really into the songs. We had this theater company that came out of that group of people, and at a certain point, we had some disagreements about things and three of us split from the theater company to do our own thing.

And that thing became Maestro Subgum & the Whole. So that was the first version of Maestro Subgum. It was me and my older sister Cecilie and a pianist named Kit Keasey. It was very stripped-down. You know, we didn’t have a band, but it was a cabaret act. I developed this character, Lefty Fizzle was his name, and he was this old vaudevillian that lived in a
trunk at the back of the stage that they would pull out when it was time to do a show. And he would come out and he would tell stories and introduce the songs. And mostly in that band, I was like the third voice. They were the more sophisticated musicians. I occasionally wrote lyrics, but not that much.

That was the first version of Maestro Subgum & the Whole, which lasted on and off for about 25 years and had lots of different incarnations. And the only consistent thing the whole time was me and this Lefty Fizzle character. It was interesting to live with the character that long. And so over the course of that, eventually I started to write with different musicians in the band. I would write the lyrics and they would write the music, mostly, to keep new songs coming at first. There was a version of the band that was probably the best-known version of the band in Chicago, and we made five or six records together—that was with Jenny Magnus and Miki Greenberg. The three of us wrote a lot and for that band. We wrote together often, but we also wrote separately. And again, I was mostly the lyricist. And then that band really broke up for good after a while. And there was a period of no music, really, for me. I wrote one song I think in five years during that period, after having written dozens. And then I decided I really was missing the music. So I put together the first version of the Crooked Mouth, which was called the Crooked Mouth String Band. The first incarnation, it didn't have a drummer. Jenny came to see the band and said, “Well, the band is good, but you really need a drummer.” And she was a drummer. And so I asked Jenny to be in the band, and the Crooked Mouth has been a band now for a little over ten years. We’ll play as often as we can. We mostly play galleries and theaters and some music clubs. They’re very good musicians and really good friends. And most of us have worked together on theater pieces as well.

I've always written more than people can keep up with. I write a lot of plays and I write a lot of lyrics. I just write all the time. The band could never quite keep up with the amount of lyrics I was writing. We were making a record, the next Crooked Mouth record, a few years ago. And then Ryan [Wright], who was the guitarist in the band, died. And it took us some time to recover from that. And we still haven’t finished that record. We were right on the verge of finishing, it seemed like, and then the pandemic hit and people in the band just felt like they couldn’t rehearse together or be together in order to do a recording, which I respected.

I felt that as well. So that was where Thrifty started. I had ideas for some songs and I had some lyrics already written. But the songs didn’t exist and the band was not going to be playing for a period of time, it was obvious. So I put together about a dozen sets of lyrics and sent them out to specific composers or musicians that I liked working with. I would send them one or two things to read and choose from.

And miraculously, people started to do it. It surprises me. Not everybody did it, but most people did. And again, you know, because of the pandemic, people had time. So somebody could sit and work on a song for hours that they might not have been able to do in their real life. I certainly benefited from that. So the songs started to come in, and I had access to the ESS studios, where we’ve done a bunch of recording. It was very quickly problematic to get a whole band of people together at the studio at the same time to do any recording. I was interested in the more bare-bones arrangements anyway. So if I was going to make a record that was not a band record, what would that feel like?

Stephanie Rearick did a piano track for her song (“The Hook”), and I had that piano track and I agreed to the piano track, but there was no variation possible. I couldn’t remix it or alter it very much. So I had to learn how to sing it to the track. And sometimes it was very much in the moment, and that was interesting and it was hard. I worked pretty closely with Ralph Loza, who was the engineer on that whole record. He’s pretty much a technological wonder, and he can do things that most people can’t do, or at least I can’t do.

The idea of writing with other people always intrigued me pre-pandemic and always will. I’ve now written lots of single one-off experiments with people over the past four or five years. And this was the most complete experience I had of that. 🎵
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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.

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IN THE YEARS since Gossip Wolf covered the live debut of experimental postpunks Facs in January 2017, they’ve become one of the best bands in town, dropping dense albums at least yearly and playing consistently high-caliber concerts. (The Sleeping Village website for Void Moments last spring, with Melkbelly and CB Radio Gorgeous, would’ve been great if COVID-19 hadn’t canceled it.) On Friday, May 21, top-shelf Chicago label Trouble in Mind releases Facs’ fourth album, Present Tense, where drummer Noah Leger, bassist Alanna Kalaba, and guitarist-vocalist Brian Case marry the dark, rumbling energy of their earlier efforts to a broader and more melodic songwriting template—this wolf, it sounds like a light at the end of a long tunnel. On Friday, May 14, via Bandcamp, the band streams a performance of the album recorded at the Metro’s Top Note Theatre in January. Tickets are $5.

Gentrification began washing away visionary spaces in Wicker Park even before its 90s peak as an arts mecca, but the majority-BIPOC organizers at Equitable Arts hope to stem the tide by implementing a community-minded model for sustaining cultural venues—including their creative hub at 1542-1550 N. Milwaukee, which includes Heaven Gallery and LVL3 Gallery. On Thursday, May 13, they host the free online talk Monuments Out of Movements: Redefining Community Spaces, which features Metro owner Joe Shanahan, Silver Room proprietor Eric Williams, Honey Pot Performance director Meida McNeal, and Heaven Gallery’s Alma Wieser. AMFM founder Clera McKissick moderates. Registration via Eventbrite is required.

Last week, electronic trio Purelink (aka Millia Rage, Kindtree, and Concave Reflection) dropped a delightful ambient EP, Bliss/Swivel. It’s on Bandcamp now, and with any luck it’ll be on wax soon!

—J.R. NELSON AND LEOR GALIL

Got a tip? Tweet @Gossip_Wolf or e-mail gossipwolf@chicagoreader.com.

GOSSIP WOLF

A furry ear to the ground of the local music scene.

NEW

Ryan Joseph Anderson /5/22, 7 PM, Fitzgerald’s, Berwyn

Ashnikko /5/15, 7 PM, Concord Music Hall

René Avila’s Afro Cuban Trio /5/20, 6 PM, Fitzgerald’s, Berwyn’s Dine

Tab Benoit with Whiskey Bayou Revue featuring Alastair Greene /6/4, 7 PM, City Winery

Bingo at the Bottle featuring Old Timey /5/30, 6 PM, Empty Bottle

Ronnie Baker Brooks /5/21, 6 and 9 PM, City Winery

Zac Brown Band, Teddy Swims, Ashland Craft /8/8, 7 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park

 Bulgarian Open Throat Single workshop with Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares /5/25, 11 AM, livestream at oldtownschool.org

Cosmic Country presents Planetary Access TV /5/20, 8 PM, stream hosted by the Hideout at noonchorus.com

Cosmic Pastoral Guitar workshop with William Tyler /5/19, 7 PM, livestream at oldtownschool.org

Coyote Riot /5/23, 4 PM, Fitzgerald’s, Berwyn’s Dine

Lee DeWyze /5/20, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston

Disney Princess: The Concert featuring Christy Altomare, Susan Egan, Courtney Reed, Syndee Winters /3/19/2022, 7:30 PM, Rosemont Theatre, Rosemont

Kevin Eubanks /5/15, 5-30 PM, Tack Room

Facs /5/14, 8 PM, stream at bandcamp.com

Facs /7/15-7/17, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle

Fine Ass Friends featuring DJ Fine Ass Fest, DJ QT /5/22, 9 PM, the Promontory

Ganser /7-8/7-9/70, 9 PM, Empty Bottle

Girls Love R&B Paint & Drank featuring DJ Unstable /5/20, 7:30 PM, the Promontory

Gorgon City /5/26, 7 PM, City Winery

Greley with Alex Greffe, Ike Holter, Näämi, Hot Kitchen Collective, Alyssa Gregory, Erin Klumis, Glamhag, Tia Monet Greere, and more /5/29, 8 PM, stream hosted by the Hideout at noonchorus.com

Grupo Firme /5/31, 4 PM, Seat-Greek Stadium, Bridgeview

Heartfield /5/22, 7 PM, Fitzgerald’s, Berwyn’s Dine

Helen Money /6/17-6/19, 8 PM, Empty Bottle

Henhouse Prowlers /5/29, 6 and 9 PM, 5/30, 12 and 5 PM, City Winery

Griffin House /6/20, 4 and 7 PM, SPACE, Evanston

Lemonheads, Sofi Kill, Heyroc05 /6/21, 8 PM, Thalia, Evanston

Hollow House Prowlers /5/29, 6 and 9 PM, 5/30, 12 and 5 PM, City Winery

Rachael & Vilray /5/21, 6 PM, livestream at citywinery.com

Rainheart /5/22, 1 PM, Fitzgerald’s, Berwyn’s Dine

Bebe Rexha /5/20, 8 PM, live-stream at bebereveehave.com

Rhythm & Booze: After Dark II with DJ Jay Illa, DJ Joe Koelle /5/21, 9 PM, the Promontory

Isaiah Sharkey /5/23, 4 and 7 PM, City Winery

David Singer & the Sweet Science /6/4, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston

Bette Smith /5/8, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston

Soccer Mommy, Squirrel Flower /5/9, 8 PM, Thalia, Evanston

Spencer /5/13, 9-30 PM, Empty Bottle

Sylvan Esso /5/11, 8 PM, live-stream at bandsintown.com

Jeanne Tanner /5/20, 7 PM, City Winery

Louis Tomlinson /2/25-2/26, 8 PM, Chicago Theatre

TV Girl, Jordanu /10/25, 8:30 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+

Tweedy /5/24, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston

Dale Watson /6/24-6/25, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston

Western Elstons /5/21, 7 PM, Fitzgerald’s, Berwyn’s Dine

Jamila Woods (DJ set) /5/7, noon, livestream at vans.com

Pete Yorn /5/15, 7 PM, livestream at peteyorn.com

UPDated

NOTE: Contact point of purchase for exchange or refund information.

Gary Allan /11/4, 7:30 PM, Rialto Square Theatre, Joliet, rescheduled

ARC Music Festival featuring Camelphat, DJ Heather, Derrick Carter, Luttrell, Zhu, Morena /5/14-5/15, 7 PM, Rosemont Theatre, Rosemont, rescheduled

Love on the radio 8:45 PM; 6/27, 4 PM, GMan Tavern

Facs /6/24-6/26, 9 PM, Empty Bottle

Beat Troupe with Natalie Chan & Whitney Johnson /6/2/21, 8 PM, Thalia, Evanston

The Yetti /6/25, 8 PM, Empty Bottle

Megan Thee Stallion with M83, The Juan MacLean, and more /6/4-6/6, 7:30 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, rescheduled

Primus /6/18, 7:30 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park, rescheduled

National Tap Day Chicago with Reggie “the Hoof” M & Tuna C. Hosted by Sid Brown, and more 6/4-6/6, 7:30 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, rescheduled

Primus /6/25, 8 PM, Thalia, Evanston, canceled

Ramstein /5/22, 9:30 PM, Chicago Theatre, rescheduled and lineup changed

Rammstein /5/23, 7:30 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park, rescheduled

Backstreet Boys /7/20-22, 7:30 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park, rescheduled

Banda MS /8/13-20/22, 8 PM, Allstate Arena, Rosemont, rescheduled

Marty Stuart & His Fabulous Superlatives /5/15/2022, 4 and 8 PM, Pacer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, rescheduled

Tiny Meat Gang (Cody Ko & Noel Miller) /7/11, 7 PM, Chicago Theatre, canceled

Transviolet, Lorelei Marcell /10/12, 7 PM, Schubas, lineup updated

Tony Trischka /10/2, 5 PM, Szold Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, rescheduled

Watkins Family Hour, Courtney Hartman /12/15, 7:30 PM, Huntington Bank Pavilion, rescheduled

Yam Haus 6/25, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, postponed

CHICAGO SHOWS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT IN THE WEEKS TO COME

ALL AGES FREE

Early Warnings

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5/3, 7 PM, Genesee Theatre, Waukegan, rescheduled

Jay Electronica 12/3, 9 PM, the Promontory, rescheduled

Jazz Hoofing Quartet featuring Jumaane Taylor /5/28, 7 PM, the Promontory, rescheduled

Jinjer, Suicide Silence, All Hall the Yeti 11/7, 7:15 PM, House of Blues, lineup updated, 17+

Liz Longley, Anthony da Costa /6/4, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston, canceled

Megadeth, Lamb of God, Trivium, in Flames 9/7-9/6, 6 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park, rescheduled

Alastair Greene /5/20, 4 PM, Fitzgerald’s, Berwyn’s Dine

Grodo /5/20, 6 PM, SPACE, Evanston

Mauger Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, rescheduled

Joe DeWyze /5/21, 7 PM, City Winery, canceled

July 16/2022, 7 PM, Huntington Bank Pavilion, rescheduled

5/11, 7:15 PM, House of Blues, rescheduled, 17+

July 17, 8 PM, Thalia, Evanston, canceled

Shallou 10/9, 9 PM, House of Blues, rescheduled

Southern Hospitality 6/18, 7 and 10 PM, SPACE, Evanston, show added

Linleys, Mang, Kissa /8/10, 7 PM, Huntington Bank Pavilion, lineup updated

Marty Stuart & His Fabulous Superlatives /5/15/2022, 4 and 8 PM, Pacer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, rescheduled

Tiny Meat Gang (Cody Ko & Noel Miller) /7/11, 7 PM, Chicago Theatre, canceled

Transviolet, Lorelei Marcell /10/12, 7 PM, Schubas, lineup updated

Tony Trischka /10/2, 5 PM, Szold Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, rescheduled

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Yam Haus 6/25, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, postponed, 17+

MOYAR

May 13, 2021 • Chicago Reader 41
Mikki Kendall  
*Hood Feminism: Notes From the Women That a Movement Forgot*  
Author Talk: Oct. 22, 2020

Sonali Dev  
*Recipe for Persuasion*  
Author Talk: Nov. 19, 2020

Riva Lehrer  
*Golem Girl*  
Author Talk: Dec. 17, 2020

Emil Ferris  
*My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*  
Author Talk: Jan. 28, 2021

Eve Ewing  
*1919*  
Author Talk: Feb. 25, 2021

Nnedi Okorafor  
*Remote Control*  
Author Talk: Mar. 25, 2021

Natalie Moore  
*The South Side*  
Author Talk: Apr. 22, 2021

Rebecca Makkai  
*The Great Believers*  
Author Talk: May 26, 2021

Fatimah Asghar  
*If They Come for Us*  
Author Talk: June 24, 2021

Kayla Ancrum  
*Darling*  
Author Talk: July 22, 2021

Jessica Hopper  
*(TBD)*  
Author Talk: Aug. 26, 2021

Precious Brady-Davis  
*I Have Always Been Me: A Memoir*  
Author Talk: Sep. 23, 2021

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Fatimah Asghar  
Author

Fatimah Asghar is a poet, filmmaker, educator, and performer. Her work has appeared in many journals, including *POETRY Magazine*, *Gulf Coast*, *BuzzFeed Reader*, *The Margins*, *The Offing*, *Academy of American Poets*, and many others. Her work has been featured in outlets like *Al Jazeera*, *Elle*, *W Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *PBS*, *NPR*, *Time*, *Teen Vogue*, *Huffington Post*, and others. She is the writer and co-creator of *Brown Girls*, an Emmy-nominated web series that highlights friendships between women of color. In 2017, she was awarded the Ruth Lily and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation and was featured on the 2018 Forbes 30 Under 30 list. Asghar’s debut book of poems, *If They Come For Us*, was released by One World/Random House in August 2018 to much acclaim. Along with Safia Elhillo, she is the editor of *Halal If You Hear Me*, an anthology that celebrates Muslim writers who are also women, queer, gender nonconforming, and/or trans. She is a frequent collaborator with singer/songwriter Jamila Woods, directing music videos for “Eartha” and “SULA (Paperback).” Asghar directed Jidenna’s “Sufi Woman” as well as wrote and directed her first narrative piece, a short film titled *Got Game?* that was released in May 2020.

Sujay Kumar  
Moderator

Sujay Kumar is co-editor in chief of the *Chicago Reader*. He also fact checks for Columbia Global Reports. He previously edited at *The Daily Beast*, *Newsweek*, and *Fusion*.
I can’t escape my porn persona

Being famous for adult films doesn’t mean everyone knows who you are.

By Dan Savage

Q: I’m someone who does gay porn for a living. How do people who do gay porn meet someone who doesn’t just sexualize or fetishize them? I can’t eat, sleep, and breathe my work constantly, but the guys I meet want me to live out the “porn persona” version of myself all the time. How does someone who does porn know who you can be yourself with? —AIDEN WARD (@AIDENXXWARD)

A: “Living with two identities is definitely a balancing act,” said Devin Franco, an award-winning gay porn performer. “Being in porn means juggling the ‘real world’ person I actually am—a person who has to navigate rent, health care, bills, and a social life—and a porn star alter ego. And these days our porn alter egos don’t just have to perform. We also have to do a lot of our own shooting and our own PR while maintaining our images. It’s a lot. And reality always comes knocking no matter how much fun you’re having. The bills always come due.”

Franco’s first bit of advice is to remember that you are not your alter ego. “It’s a beautiful and sexy part of you that you have the opportunity to show to the world,” said Franco. “But it’s not all of you. That will help you stay grounded.”

It also helps to remember that being “porn famous” doesn’t mean everyone knows who you are.

“A lot of people you meet will have no idea who you are,” said Franco, “which means a lot of the time you’ll get to choose when you want to introduce yourself as your porn alter ego or when you want to just be yourself. This makes it easier to create boundaries between your real life and your porn life. Knowing you get to decide when or even if you want to introduce yourself as your actual self or as that fantasy version of yourself—your alter ego—means you can control how a lot of people perceive you.”

So even if you get as porn famous as Franco is, Aiden, you’ll still have lots of opportunities for people to get to know the real you—not the porn persona—before you tell them what you do for a living. As with so many things (being HIV+, being trans, being kinky, being polyam, etc.), when you tell a guy you do porn, Aiden, you’re telling him one thing he needs to know about you—but his reaction will tell you everything you need to know about him. If he starts shamming you about what you do—or if he goes from seeing you as a person who is also an object to seeing you as just an object—that’s really all you need to know: don’t see him, unfollow him, block him.

“Now lots of the people who fetishize and sexualize you are your fans—they’re your audience, they’re the ones who pay your bills, and you have to recognize that and you do have to keep them interested,” said Franco, “but you don’t have to give them all of your time and attention. Because at the end of the day, it’s your work and you’ve got other shit to do. You will meet people both in and out of the industry who recognize that you are a real person, with a real life, and who will get to know the real you,” said Franco. “And you’ll sometimes find that some of the people who fetishized you at first don’t anymore once they get to know the real you.”

Franco shared your question with CagedJock, another high-profile porn star that Franco works with regularly, and CagedJock shared his strategy for finding guys he can be himself around: “I like to hang out with people who work in the same industry,” said CagedJock, “because they don’t sexualize me. Devin and I have been friends since 2019. He’s super sexy and I adore him. While other guys might only see him only as a fantasy figure, I don’t. Because I know our work doesn’t define us 24/7. We’re friends.”

Send letters to mail@savagelove.net. Download the Savage Lovecast at savagelovecast.com. @fakedansavage
RESEARCH
Have you had an unwanted sexual experience since age 18? Did you tell someone in your life who it was also willing to participate? Women ages 18+ who have someone else in their life they told about their experience also willing to participate will be paid to complete a confidential online research survey for the Women’s Dyadic Support Study. Contact Dr. Sarah Ullman of the University of Illinois at Chicago, Criminology, Law, & Justice Department at ForWomen@uic.edu, 312-996-6508. Protocol #2021-0019.

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PERSONALS
Interscope Insight Lady GaGa was seen with Tracy Guuns & Britney Beach Spears at the World party. We laugh when M Crue, B Sabbath, Aerosmith told jokes. Biber & Halley came with Blake & Gwen, what a fun night. Buy CD’s, Guns N Rose Love Hollywood Rose GNRports & Rock Star Bunny

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