

# READER

## Reasonable doubt

James Allen is serving three life sentences for murder. No one ever said he killed anyone.

By MAYA DUKMASOVA 10

### Gets 100 To 200 Years In Cop Killing Conviction

Criminal Court Judge Raymond G. Hall, setting an example for cases of attacks on policemen, Wednesday, sentenced 19-year-old James Allen to 100-200 years in prison in the killing of Del. Oliver Singleton, 41, who was allegedly wounded in a gun battle outside the

parole review board in 11 years and 11 months, according to the State's Attorney.

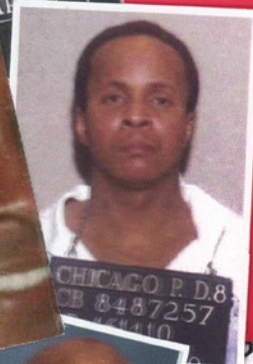
Judge Hall told the courtroom that he proposed the long sentence to show that the "murderer

Q What did he tell you regarding [redacted]

A He told me that he wanted me to kill [redacted]

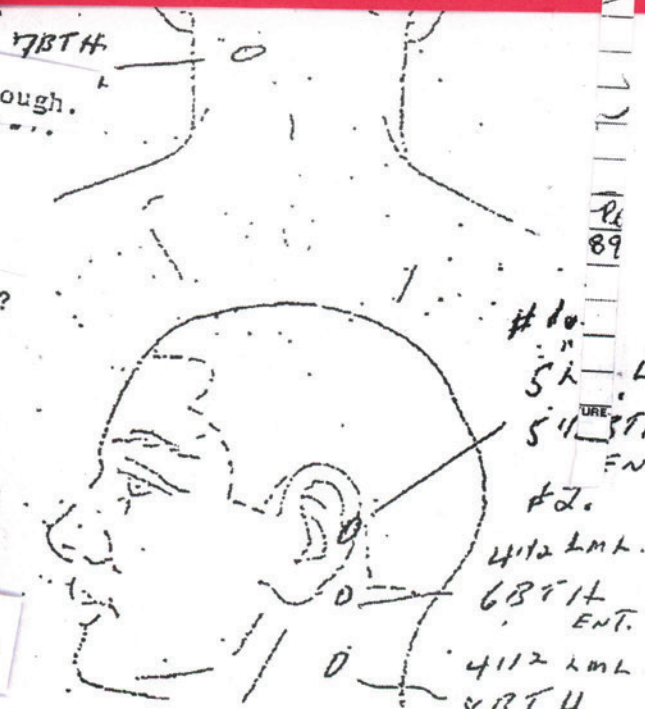
Q Did he tell you when?

A As soon as possible.



body else?

t through.



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## A NOTE ON THIS WEEK'S COVER STORY

IT SEEMS FITTING that my last major story for the *Reader* (at least for now) is one I've been working on for about half of my time here. I first wrote about James Allen for the May 24, 2018, issue, but that story, which was about a fifth of the length of this one, barely scratched the surface of all that's happened to him since the 1960s. About 400 of the 27,300 men and women incarcerated in Illinois are over the age of 70. Allen's one of just 93 people in this age group doing life. It costs about \$70,000 a year to keep him in a maximum-security prison. The state would have us believe that this is for your safety and mine.

While working on this story, I was scrutinizing two James Allens—a man my own age in thousands of pages of court documents, and a man old enough to be my grandfather

on the phone line. Journalism about criminal cases focuses principally on accusations, and to a lesser degree on trials (if they seem exciting enough to reporters), but we rarely encounter people on the other end of the sentences our courts impose. Part of the reason is because a crime story can be told in as few as 250 words, while the story of a conviction may require 25,000 words to unravel. When I spoke with other journalists who've written about wrongful convictions they would often casually mention that I'd probably never know what really happened. They'd also say things like “you don't want to spend all this time on a story if he actually did it.”

But the longer I worked to pick apart James Allen's cases, the less it mattered to me whether or not he had anything to do with the

murders he was convicted of. Instead, I was increasingly astonished by how little it took to make people believe that he had. Before DNA, and ubiquitous cameras, and the Internet, criminal cases were often built entirely on stories—claims about what happened made by cops, victims, witnesses, and defendants. All of Allen's trials were ultimately credibility contests. Credibility is a deeply subjective and fickle instrument for measuring the truth, and yet it's integral to our criminal legal apparatus. Who and what the public is willing to believe has shifted over the decades of Allen's incarceration. He, however, is stuck in a perpetual battle with what law enforcement, jurors, judges, and lawyers found credible some 40 years ago. Journalists have historically amplified the state's bizarre stories about Allen—it feels like high time to take stock of his stories about the state. —MAYA DUKMASOVA



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# BULL HORN



PHOTO COURTESY ADAM JASON COHEN

## Biking is mobility and power with Black JoyRide

Shawnee Dez

### How did you get into riding?

Growing up, biking offered me my first taste of freedom. I learned to ride around age six. Being allowed to ride my bike from one granny's house to another gave me a sense of independence. For me, biking has always been an integral part of community. Learning to ride not only expanded my physical environment, but also made it more accessible. My cousins and I would ride to the "Candy Lady's" house, to local parks, and to each other's homes, creating our personal network of movement. This movement is what ultimately inspired the Black JoyRide.

### Why was the BJR necessary?

In 2020, just two months after lockdown, the world saw repeated images of George Floyd's brutal murder. Exhausted by COVID-19 and anguished by the gross injustice of systemic racism, my community and I mobilized to respond—to begin a healing process for us. A joyride was in order. In just five short days, we organized the first annual Juneteenth Black JoyRide, calling folks to rise up just when we were feeling the most downtrodden. 300+ strong, we gathered at the Johnson Publishing Building and biked, bladed, and boarded down to the DuSable Museum of African American History, where we celebrated Jubilee Day in resistance to anti-Black violence, while creating haven for our mobility, amplifying our joy.

Considering the historical context of Black mobility in the U.S., having a Black body oftentimes limited one's access to movement. From Africans' very first arrival to the colonies, our bodies have been

policed. Movement was a privilege only experienced by white people. In my lived experience, I still see this manifestation today.

When traveling throughout Chicago, I am always struck by how segregated the city is. Recognizing cycling as an indicator species, I can always spot a more affluent neighborhood from those that are not. These neighborhoods would typically consist of a higher volume of people walking, jogging, and cycling at any given time of the day. While the three activities mentioned may seem like simple elements of everyday life for some, they are not always accessible for others.

To walk, jog, and bike your way through the city, you must have time. This time is typically leisure for folks with more economic resources. I very rarely see dozens upon dozens of cyclists throughout the day when I'm on home turf in the south-side neighborhoods of the city; this is a frustrating problem for me. I believe my community deserves access to leisure time and activities for both the mental and physical benefits.

### What is the BJR doing for the community today?

The Black JoyRide is a cycling community working to make biking safe and accessible for all Black and brown folks. It is our mission to get as many Black and brown folks as possible on bikes, promoting the physical and mental health benefits of biking, while also advocating for social and environmental justice in our neighborhoods. It is in riding in numbers that we are more powerful.

*Black JoyRide is an expanding cycling community whose mission is to make biking more accessible for Black and brown folks. They can be found on Instagram @blackjoyride.*

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.



## SHOP LOCAL

### Style is for every body

LuvSick Plus highlights size inclusivity in vintage fashion.

By SALEM COLLO-JULIN



Left: Britteny Riordan; right: a Luvsick display at Lost Girls Vintage © COURTESY THE ARTIST

Finding a good selection of clothes that not only fit but tell a style story is a challenge for most plus-size people. While mass-market retailers like Target and Macy's have a much better selection in extended sizes than they did just 20 years ago, some of us want to be able to find unique pieces and not just settle for whatever fits from the clearance rack. And finding vintage clothing in sizes larger than 14 or XL can seem completely impossible, as though each and every plus-size item that was originally sold pre-1995 was zapped from the earth.

"The vintage world, much like the fashion industry, has ignored and neglected plus-size people," said Britteny Riordan, the proprietor of Luvsick Plus, a Chicago vintage reseller that specializes in sizes 16 and up. "They made us think that these pieces didn't exist or that

dressing in vintage wasn't for us and that's just not true."

Riordan started Luvsick for a senior class project about ten years ago, while she was studying at Columbia College Chicago. "I was always in love with vintage clothing, and kept a stockpile of pieces, even if they didn't fit me," she told me via e-mail. "I created an Etsy account for Luvsick and in the first few days I almost sold out of everything! I was instantly hooked!"

These days, Riordan sells plus-size clothes from a variety of eras, accessories for all sizes, and some housewares on Luvsick's main site and Instagram. A few years ago, Riordan started attending and selling at local vendor markets, and made a connection with fellow vintage resellers Sarah Azzouzi and Kyla Embrey, who co-own Lost Girls Vintage shops in

West Town and Logan Square.

"The vintage community in Chicago has always been very tight knit," Riordan said. "If you're selling at markets consistently you are bound to meet and connect with other dealers. That's how I first met Sarah and Kyla . . . They always had the most unique pieces and really stood out."

Riordan counts herself as part of a network of plus-size vintage enthusiasts who have enjoyed the expanded ability to connect and find new stock through platforms like Instagram. She shouted out several like-minded businesses focused on plus-size vintage that she considers friends of Luvsick, like Bad Moon (run by a former Chicagoan now based in Seattle), the Brooklyn-based Berriez, the Plus Bus Boutique in Los Angeles, and the Utah-based Fatties Vintage. All have presences on Insta-

gram, and you can easily put together a mix of 80s and 90s work and party wear just based on their recent uploads.

For now, Luvsick is one of the few plus-size vintage resellers with a brick-and-mortar presence. When Azzouzi and Embrey from Lost Girls were preparing to open their first shop, a location on Chicago Avenue in West Town, they reached out to Riordan to do a pop-up at the store in an effort to be more inclusive for their customers. The collaboration was well-received, and Riordan's Luvsick wares now have a permanent spot within both Lost Girls locations, giving Chicago shoppers an in-person opportunity to debunk the myth that stylish and retro plus-size clothes just don't exist. [hollo](https://www.instagram.com/hollo)

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## POLITICS

### A mayor and her narrative

Mayor Lightfoot's got her story and she's sticking with it.

By **BEN JORAVSKY**



The story that Mayor Lightfoot is sticking with: you've gotta be tough to run a tough city.

📷 MAYOR'S FACEBOOK PAGE

Having finally got around to listening to Mayor Lightfoot's recent interview with Kara Swisher of the *New York Times*, I've come to the rather obvious conclusion that she'll probably get reelected.

Should she choose to run, that is. Which we all figure she will—no matter what she said to Swisher about “it's not a gimme.”

So, if I were a betting man, I'd go to Vegas and bet for her to win.

Not that she's doing such a bang-up job. On the issues that matter most to me—like redistributing the economic development pie—it's pretty much the same old, same old.

The rich get richer, and the poor get press conferences where the mayor brags about what a great job she's doing.

No, I think she'd win because she has a narrative that she's really good at purveying. As she proved again in her interview with Swisher.

Not that I'm criticizing Swisher. In fact, as far as *New York Times* interviews with Chicago mayors go, this was a triumph of bulldog journalism. Indulge me with this tangent . . .

What is it about Chicago mayors that turn *Times* writers to mush?

I still can't get over the love poems David Brooks and Thomas Friedman wrote to Mayor Rahm. One of which included this infamous

sentence by Brooks. Here goes . . .

Mayor Rahm is “a full human being, rich and fertile from the inside out.” Which probably makes more sense if you read it backwards.

Back to Mayor Lightfoot's narrative.

Having heard it twice in the last few months—once on a WTTW interview with Phil Ponce, the other with Swisher—I think I got it down pat. Goes like this . . .

Yes, she's occasionally disagreeable. And yes, she ruffles feathers from time to time. And, yes, she's tough. But . . .

You gotta be tough to run a tough city. And when you're tough, the same old, same olds who ran this city don't like it. And they push back.

Requiring her to remain tough. And to ruffle feathers. And so on and so forth.

Or as she told Swisher: “I came into office to push people out of their comfort zone. And I've done that. And I will continue to do that unapologetically. A lot of people don't think that's a woman's place.”

And: “Yeah, I'm tough. There's no question about it. You don't get to be a Black woman going to the places that I've been . . . by letting people walk all over you and not fighting for your place at the table.”

And: “Does that make some people angry and upset? It does. But I'm not gonna apol-

ogize for being an advocate for things that I think are really important in our city.”

And: “Early on, after I was elected, a lot of people came to me trying to cut the same old kind of deals. The backroom stuff. And I'm like, ‘No, no, no. That's not who I am.’ And they're like, ‘Wait, you actually meant that, what you said on the campaign trail?’ And I'm like, ‘Yes, I did.’”

And, finally . . .

“I wonder if we'd be having this conversation if I were a man.”

OK, let me just point out that many of the people Lightfoot is most disagreeable with are Black women. Such as Alderwoman Jeanette Taylor and Anjanette Young.

Not sure what “comfort zone” they inhabit.

Before she was alderwoman, Jeanette Taylor was a community activist from a low-income, south-side community. She went on a hunger strike to force Mayor Rahm, kicking and screaming, to convert Dyett School into a high school as opposed to closing it. Like he did to so many schools and mental health clinics in Taylor's neck of the woods.

And Anjanette Young is a social worker whose home was busted into by police on a no-knock warrant as she was stepping from her shower.

And so she was forced to stand naked while

a dozen or so cops raced through her apartment, looking for god knows what. Which wasn't there. 'Cause they had the wrong house.

And instead of moving heaven and earth to settle with Young, Lightfoot's lawyers are in court playing hardball with her.

And it was their hardball tactics that motivated Alderwoman Taylor to try to send a message of protest by briefly delaying council approval of the mayor's choice for corporate council.

Which caused Mayor Lightfoot to halt the meeting, walk down from the podium, and wave a finger in Taylor's face.

So how is that a case of standing up against backroom deals? Or meaning what she said on the campaign trail? Or fighting her way to the table? How is that anything other than being a bully?

I must concede Mayor Lightfoot is right on target when she says nobody seemed to care too much about mean and nasty mayors when it was men—like Mayors Rahm and Daley—doing all the nastiness.

Oh, no, Chicago worshipped them for being nasty. Which says more about Chicago than it says about Daley, Rahm, or Lightfoot.

Face it, Chicago—you're masochistic when it comes to mayors. The nastier the better.

Over the years, you've come up with all sorts of dim-witted excuses to justify the mayors you elect. Back in the day, Chicagoans would tell me things like, *Ben, you don't understand, we need a mean mayor to make the trains go on time.*

And they were saying this during those days of the Daley administration when the Red and Blue lines were breaking down, despite Daley's nastiness.

C'mon, Chicago, admit it. You're weird.

Anyway, that's Mayor Lightfoot's narrative. Which she's sticking to no matter who she offends.

Yeah, Chicago voters will probably lap it up. Just like they lapped it up with Daley and Rahm.

That said, Mayor Lightfoot: You know you owe apologies to Jeanette Taylor and Anjanette Young, no matter what you tell the *New York Times*. 📺

🐦 @bennyjshow

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## CULTURE

# Big pictures, tiny buildings

CAC celebrates the life and work of Helmut Jahn.

By **DEANNA ISAACS**

It’s sad but true that we’re never so much appreciated as when we’re newly dead. Especially if the death is sudden and unexpected.

Three months ago, as preservationists were sounding alarms over Governor J.B. Pritzker’s decision to empty out Helmut Jahn’s iconic Thompson Center and offer it up to the highest bidder for possible demolition (neither

Chicago’s status as an architectural center nor Jahn’s international reputation giving him pause), Jahn, 81, was killed in a traffic accident.

As that news spread through the city’s architectural community, there was quick agreement on the need for some sort of public tribute. An exhibit team gelled in two days, and “Helmut Jahn: Life + Architecture” opened

July 23 at the Chicago Architecture Center.

The exhibit is an overview, not specifically focused on the Thompson Center. But, as Aaron Betsky, director of the School of Architecture and Design at Virginia Tech, notes in a lyrical introductory tribute, “We better save the Thompson Center, which is not only one of [Jahn’s] greatest designs, but one of the few true celebrations of government as a public good.”

“With a burst of shattering, curving, and bulging glass in a rainbow of colors Helmut Jahn danced onto the international architecture scene in the 1980s, translating the discipline of Chicago Modernism into new programs and forms while melting and fragmenting its grids into a post-disco delight of shaped buildings . . . More than the designs of almost any other architect . . . Helmut expressed structure, space, and publicity as an interwoven whole that said: come here, be here, be part of this,” Betsky wrote.

Housed in CAC’s second-floor Drake Family Skyscraper Gallery, the exhibit features 15 tabletop models, a loop of short videos, some of Jahn’s drawings, and three large walls of photos and text, bookended by two timelines—one for significant personal events and professional honors, the other listing major projects. It’s a life/work history, fleshed out with testimonials and abundant, generously enlarged photos, including snapshots plucked from family albums and billboard-size, myth-making portraits. Jahn, athletic and elegant, was notably photogenic: we see him running, sailing (a model of his boat, the *Flash Gordon*, is also here), and gracing the cover of *GQ* in trademark fedora.

The models are a mix of international projects and local buildings, including two still under construction: the 73-story 1000M on South Michigan Avenue, and the Pritzker Military Archives, in Somers (near Kenosha), Wisconsin. You’ll also find models for University of Chicago projects and Illinois Institute of Technology’s State Street Village (now Rowe Village), but the two standouts among these Lilliputian displays are gleaming, glassy sculptural renditions of the landmark Sony Center, opened in Berlin in 2000, and the 1985 building that inspired it, Chicago’s Thompson

Center (never mind the ungainly potential tower grafted to its southwest corner).

The show, developed in a necessary hurry, could use a couple of tweaks. It would be good to have a few signs making it clear that the large white models of skyscrapers that dominate this gallery are a permanent exhibit and not part of the Jahn show. (“I don’t think Jahn did Petronas Towers,” I heard one visitor tell another.) Also, it could use a separate, quiet space with seating for the excellent short videos (where, for example, you can catch Jahn explaining that “I can only think when I draw,” and “I haven’t done the perfect building yet; that’s what keeps me going.”).

“This is not a retrospective,” CAC senior curator Michael Wood told me. “This is a celebration of Helmut’s work. It was put together very quickly, without the time to do the deep research a retrospective would require. We did that because we think it’s important that the public understand the place Helmut holds in the lineage of Chicago architecture history. He’s one of the last great designers going back to that iconic era of Chicago building in the International style of Mies. He starts his career there and he is incredibly productive in every decade up until his death. He worked all over the world, he represented us globally.”

Jahn, who was born in Germany and came here in 1966 to study at IIT, “chose us as his adopted hometown,” Wood added. “He immigrated to Chicago, we embraced him, and we’re the better for it.”

CAC does not have an official position on the Thompson Center “at the moment,” Wood said, “other than we think there should be more public discussion.” But in June, CAC partnered with the Chicago Architectural Club to launch a design competition for the future of the Center. The jury for this 2021 edition of the club’s annual Chicago Prize Competition will meet this week to select winners.

The competition had been in the works for a while, Wood said: “With Helmut’s death it seemed more urgent to get the ideas out now, while there would be a moment of appreciation.” Winners will be displayed in a pop-up exhibit in the CAC lobby.

The state’s deadline for proposals to purchase the Thompson Center is August 30. **FA**

“Helmut Jahn: Life + Architecture” at the Chicago Architecture Center, 111 E. Wacker, open daily through October, 10 AM-5 PM, \$15 general admission to CAC (free for members).

**@DeannaIsaacs**



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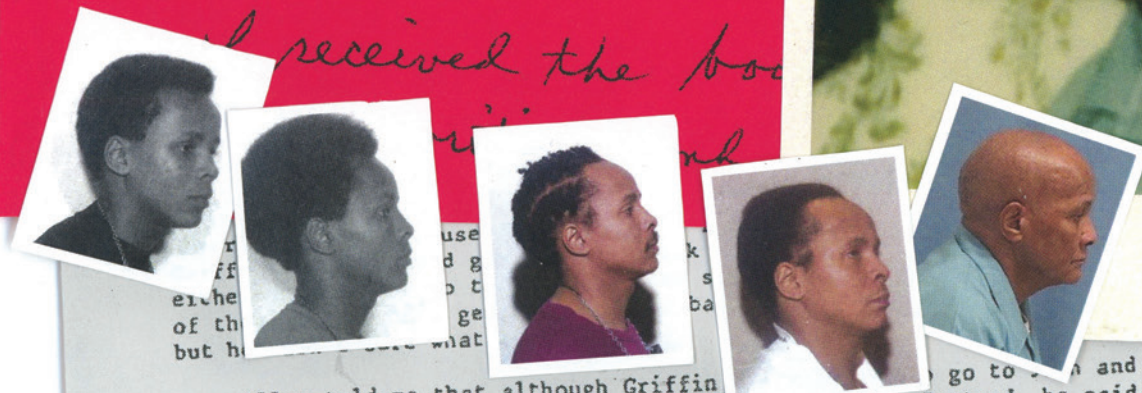
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RE: Statements of James Allen, Henry Griffin and Charles Ashley  
Regarding the Murder By Contract of Carl Gibson.

During the next approximately forty-five minutes  
in a conversation regarding his participation in the contract killing of  
Carl Gibson. No one else was present. We were both seated. We shared  
cigarettes I had brought with me into the room and denied. The conversation took the form of  
with me asking questions. I thought it was a fair appearance  
spoke lucidly.

Dear Maya,  
Blessed life to you  
I pray you will have  
leaves me well.



Allen told me that although Griffin  
Saginaw to pick-up the quinine from [redacted] he didn't. Instead, he said, he  
drove straight to the Chicago Skyway, entering on a southbound entrance ramp  
and turning around to go northbound at the toll plaza. He stated that it  
was while he was driving northbound on the Skyway that Griffin shot Gibson.

substantially the same statement to the detectives and myself as he had given  
me alone, with the exception that both detectives asked Allen questions  
during this conversation regarding what had occurred after the shooting of  
Gibson.

any handwritten p  
Official Department

Head

# Reasonable doubt

James Allen is serving three life sentences for murder.  
No one ever said he killed anyone.

By **MAYA DUKMASOVA**

*Warning: This story contains descriptions of physical, sexual, and police violence.*

Dear Maya,

Blessed life to you and yours, always. And I pray you will have a very good day. This leaves me well. I received the book with your letter. Thank you for writing and sending the book. Your letter came as a disappointment to me. And after re-reading it, I decided the time had come for me to relieve you of our agreement for you to write about my cases. Your letter explained to me your approach to writing about me. It explains a course of writing that I'm not interested in. It isn't what I first agreed on. I thought your writing would be about my wrongful convictions in the Gibson and Ciralsky cases. Your letter impressed upon me that you plan to write something of a mini bio of my life. And that is something I'm not interested in.

Yours Truly,  
James



When I received this neatly penned letter it had been nearly two years since I began corresponding with James Allen, a man serving two life sentences and an additional 100-200 years in the Illinois Department of Corrections for three murder cases. Allen is one of only 30 people in the state's prison system doing time for three or more murders. Most of the others are convicted either as serial killers or people who went on murder sprees in bouts of rage or psychosis, killing people they knew or random strangers in a series of acts (or alleged acts) that followed familiar, if shocking, trajectories. While many of their stories would be the stuff of slasher flicks or film noir, Allen's situation, at first glance, seems like something out of a mafia movie. He was the alleged getaway driver in two murder-for-hire schemes masterminded by south-side drug trafficking kingpins—while he was on parole for a cop killing.

Rather than being disappointed, I found myself awash in relief when Allen wrote that he no longer wanted me to write about him. The book Allen mentioned was *The Journalist and the Murderer*, Janet Malcolm's 1989 polemic on the emotionally dirty and morally suspect work of nonfiction writing. "Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible," Malcolm writes. "He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse."

My intent had been to short-circuit the dishonesty. When I sent Allen the book (which happens to take as its narrative backbone the story of a man who claims to be wrongfully convicted of murdering his wife and children), I hoped that we could have a conversation about my role in his life and his legal battle, what I could and could not promise. I thought I would eventually write something that he would consent to being published, even if he didn't like the process I undertook to get there. But instead of helping me ease my conscience, with the letter James gave me a moral loophole.

It is "only when a subject breaks off relations with the writer," Malcolm writes, that "the journalist is in a completely uncompromised position." She argues that the journalist can feel free from the guilt of betrayal because an uncooperative subject doesn't enter into the murky interpersonal dynamic masquerading as friendship that would otherwise define them. According to Malcolm, "you can't betray someone you barely know; you can only irri-

tate and anger him."

This logic is, of course, as self-serving as the duplicitous "friendship" the journalist develops with a cooperative subject. Publishing a story someone doesn't want out there is an act of betrayal even if you have no relationship to them. As a journalist, especially a white one, the way you justify it to yourself is by saying that the story is bigger than its central character, that his life experiences aren't really just his to publicize or keep private, that they belong to everyone. This line of thinking is particularly potent when you've already invested significant time and energy into a story—as though with that expenditure you've purchased a person's right to refuse or consent to be written about. I'd done a lot of digging by then. I decided to keep going, partially because it felt too late to turn back, and also because I believed what happened to Allen was wrong, even if I didn't fully believe him.

In the winter of 2018 I got a note from another writer, the sort of tip you follow up on out of respect for the person who sends it. The first source is often not the most important or reliable one, but because she is first, she becomes the story's spokesperson. Her ability to capture the journalist's attention can make the difference between someone's story being instantly forgotten or becoming an Oscar-winning feature.

"This guy, I know him, and he's been locked up since 1984 for a murder that he didn't commit," Debbie Wilson told me in our first phone conversation. She said that after the first conviction someone had come to see Allen in prison, when he didn't have a lawyer, and "put another murder on him that he didn't do." Her voice was plaintive but calm. She spoke concisely and with clear affection for the man. She told me Allen had evidence of his innocence and, after his convictions were "thrown out," he'd done three extra years in prison because his "documents" couldn't be found.

She hinted at a conspiracy. The authorities, she said, "keep this thing going hoping that he would just die in prison. He's had three attacks on his life." She made it clear that he wanted a reporter to cover his story.

Debbie's pitch was effective. I got on Allen's call list. Once I spoke with him directly, the actual, baroque complexity of his situation came into sharper focus. His convictions for the 1984 murders of Carl Gibson and Robert Ciralsky hadn't actually been overturned. The Illinois Supreme Court found in 2015 that he was entitled to a rare post-conviction eviden-

tiary hearing because another incarcerated man confessed to killing Ciralsky. He hadn't been granted a similar hearing in the Gibson case, but he said for that murder, too, he had evidence of his innocence.

Allen's attorney, a seasoned appellate litigator named Steven Becker, needed the original trial transcripts to prepare for the Ciralsky post-conviction hearing. But for three years the clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County couldn't find a box of his records in her warehouse.

I never had ambitions to investigate wrongful convictions, nor an appetite for true crime stories. But I've always liked to report on bureaucracy and the procedural mechanics inside legal cases—the more boring, the better. So I wrote a story about Allen's scandalously delayed access to justice and glossed over a lot of the mind-bending details of the two murders. The story, published in May 2018, allowed me to skirt around the edges of his cases, to transmit his narrative without the burden of independently verifying the minutiae of what he said happened. It helped that much of what he told me was substantiated by extensive records collected by one of the only other people in his life—a woman named Linda, who lives on the west coast and has been his devoted advocate and friend for over a decade. Without a formal legal education, she helped Allen write many of his petitions to the court. She believed absolutely in his innocence, and had amassed thousands of pages of documents, mostly through diligent use of the Freedom of Information Act, that she shared with me. She worries about her safety as a result of her work on Allen's behalf and asked not to be identified by her real name.

As soon as I asked questions about the lost Ciralsky case records, the clerk of the Circuit Court located them in her warehouse. The gears in the rickety local justice apparatus creaked along. Debbie called me to share how happy she and James and Linda were. And then she said something that I didn't write down, but I remember the gist of: "James was right about you. He told me to find a young person to do this story, a young reporter would do it right."

The comment stayed with me. After the rush of publishing the initial story dissipated, it floated back up from the depths of my mind like a drowned body inflated by decomposition. It made me suspicious of myself. In a city packed with investigative reporters who dedicated their careers to researching and writing about people railroaded by corrupt cops and prosecutors, why would a young, inexperi-

enced journalist be Allen's preferred choice? *A young reporter would do it right.*

I decided to retrace my steps.

The Pontiac Correctional Center is a maximum-security prison nearly two hours south of Chicago where the state houses 1,000 men at the cost of some \$70,000 per year each. For my first meeting with Allen in 2018, Debbie and I drove down through endless fields of crops one sunny Sunday morning. She was an easy travel companion, and told me her own life story with little prompting. She'd first met Allen through a prison pen-pal program her mother ran in the 1970s. When she saw him at a court appearance it was love at first sight. Though they'd had periods of rupture through the decades, he was always her one true love. She raised her son to think of him as a father figure.

Before we entered the gates of the old prison complex, Debbie took off most of her rings and watch and Bluetooth earpiece and left them in the car, keeping on a gold chain with a small cross. We placed our keys and wallets in a metal coin locker at the drab reception area and waited for pat-downs. After a while, the guards ushered us and a handful of other visitors through courtyards and hallways, past the names and portraits of former wardens, wooden cubbies where inmates receive mail, and several heavy metal gates. In the visiting room Allen walked toward us from behind a massive steel door, bent slightly forward, wearing a uniform of a light-blue button-down tucked into dark-blue pants. He smiled warmly and gave both of us hugs, reaching over a red line on the floor. Debbie got a longer one. A guard then escorted him and the other inmates behind a glass divider. We sat on folding chairs and spoke through black plastic phone receivers. For the next four hours Allen did most of the talking. The prison didn't allow visitors to bring in notebooks, but I tried my best to keep up and asked questions to help me remember our conversation.

Allen, then 68, was friendly and thoughtful. With his sharp nose, sparkling eyes, and easy smile, he reminded me of Harry Belafonte. He took pride in his fitness and health, and looked much younger than his age, but decades in the prison system had taken a toll on his body. He has a scar over his left eye from when a cellmate slammed a TV on his head while he slept. Touching the skin puts him in direct contact with his skull and he said he suffers from PTSD and can no longer live with cellmates. He sued IDOC over this and another attack and won; the money he got in damages pays for his

attorney. Despite the violence and monotony, his mind and memory hadn't been blunted. He had a remarkable penchant for recalling dates and was a methodical, if slightly disorganized, storyteller. He launched into anecdotes as if constantly picking up threads of an ongoing, unfinished conversation, but paused carefully through his sentences to make sure every detail sunk in. His sanity and faith in God remained intact through many bouts of solitary confinement, including more than eight consecutive years at the now-shuttered Tamms supermax prison in the southernmost tip of Illinois, where he said he made physical contact with another human being only twice, during a doctor's examination and when receiving communion. He was moved to Tamms as soon as it opened in 1998 with the other "worst of the worst" in IDOC because he was among six inmates who pulled off the largest prison escape in state history. In 1990, with the help of a guard, they cut a 9-by-14-inch hole in a second-floor window at the Joliet penitentiary and shimmied under a fence. Allen spent 12 days on the lam before being captured in Chicago.

Allen described his youthful forays into crime as conscious choices rather than inevitable mistakes or the result of impulsiveness or carelessness brought on by abuse, neglect, substance use, or peer pressure. He said he was born into a loving home in 1950, the youngest of three children. He never went hungry or felt embarrassed for the clothes he wore to school. His parents had come to Chicago from Clarke County, Mississippi, in the late 1940s. He said his mother's parents had been sharecroppers, but his father's family owned 60 acres of land—rare wealth for a Black family in the Jim Crow South. Allen's father served in WWII. After the war he got a job at the Chicago stockyards and worked long hours as a steak cutter. Allen said he was just like his father—stubborn, intelligent, a hothead with a big ego—which earned him the nickname Head. When he was about 13, Allen discovered communism. He read Marx and Lenin, but what really captured his imagination was Mao's *Little Red Book*. It was the mid-1960s and he was inspired by the Black nationalist thought of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. By 16, much to his family's chagrin, he dropped out of school to pursue what he called "revolutionary activity."

He painted a picture of his young self as a sort of Robin Hood. He and nine of his friends, calling themselves the Black Belt Rods, patrolled Washington Park and threatened pimps, drug dealers, numbers runners, and

dice players to get off the streets between 3 and 7 PM, so kids could safely play in the neighborhood after school. He said one time they grabbed some pimps in chokeholds and used kitchen scissors to cut off their long hair. The intimidation worked. Their numbers grew to some two dozen boys, and they graduated to robbing the people they considered to be a cancer on the neighborhood. Allen said they would redistribute the money to local churches and the Black Panthers' breakfast program. He was arrested for the first time at 17 for robbing a paperboy who he said also sold weed and ran numbers for a local racketeer. He was sentenced to seven months at the Vandalia juvenile boot camp in southern Illinois. After a few weeks he refused to shovel any more cow manure on the prison farm. He and a few other boys would soon stage a rebellion, pouring disinfectant into the cows' trough and giving them diarrhea. Allen was transferred to Pontiac to serve the remainder of his sentence with adults.

When he got out, he and his buddies transitioned from robbing criminals to robbing companies that didn't hire Black workers. One of Allen's friends worked in the personnel department at Bell & Howell, a camera manufacturer in Lincolnwood, and saw that very few Black candidates were getting hired. And so in early January 1969, 19-year-old Allen and two accomplices in their 20s tracked the route of the armored truck delivering the company's payroll and plotted a heist.

On the night of January 24, armed with tape, handcuffs, ski masks, small handguns, and an AR-15 robbed from a freight train, the three drove up to Lincolnwood in a stolen Buick for the real operation. But the armored truck never came. It turned out one of their friends had snitched. The cops had been watching them for weeks, and now, as 15 minutes passed and the crew was about to scrap the plan, a floodlight flashed onto their car. Allen said they never heard anyone yell they were police, just a gunshot and the thud of something on the door. He said he fired his rifle once, to take out the blinding light. Then, a hail of gunfire exploded from the darkness and the car rocked as bullets pierced through metal and glass. Ninety seconds later, his two friends were dead. Allen, who pressed his body to the floor of the back seat, was injured only in the buttocks.

There was a third victim. A Black police officer named Oliver Singleton was shot and paralyzed from the neck down. He survived for 11 months—long enough to testify at trial. Allen faced a slew of charges, including at-

tempted robbery, two counts of murder for the deaths of his accomplices (what's known as "accountability" or "felony" murder), and the attempted murder of a police officer. The state claimed that the police announced themselves and one of Allen's accomplices shot at the cops. Allen believes that Singleton was shot by a fellow officer. Ballistics analysis showed that the officer wasn't wounded by the AR-15 Allen had been clutching.

The *Chicago Daily Defender* noted the case as a "milestone" because Allen and another coconspirator who plotted the robbery were being held responsible for the deaths of their friends, even though they hadn't killed them. The paper quoted Sam Adam, then already a prominent defense attorney, who claimed that it was "the first time a defendant has been indicted and tried for the murder of his coconspirators in the state of Illinois."

At trial, Allen's attorney didn't put him on the stand and didn't cross-examine Singleton, the state's star witness. Allen said it was because his mother had begged the lawyer to do anything to make sure her son didn't end up on death row, and going after a paralyzed cop testifying from a stretcher would not have won Allen any favors with the jury. "The jury stared at Singleton with shock and dismay etched deeply on their faces," according to the *Defender*. "Their eyes were glued to the stretcher when attendants wheeled Singleton out of the chamber following his brief, five minute, statement." The newspaper also noted, however, that the trial hinged on a statement Allen gave police the night of his arrest, while at the hospital without a lawyer. The judge denied his lawyer's motion to suppress it, and when the prosecutor read it in court, "Allen shouted to Judge Philip Romiti: 'Your honor, I refuse to sit here and listen to any more of these lies.'" After his attorney silenced him, the reporter noted:

↘ "Allen stared at the floor and his entire demeanor changed. During the first three days of the trial, Allen was almost jubilant and a sly smile frequently creased his face. After the statement (confession) was read, however, Allen became openly hostile, glowering at the state's attorney and the bailiff assigned to guard him."

After a four-day trial and eight hours of deliberation, the jury (which included three Black women) acquitted Allen of murdering his friends, but found him guilty of the robbery charges and the attempted murder of Singleton. Less than a month later, before

Allen was even sentenced, Singleton died. The state quickly indicted him for the murder of the policeman. After the second trial, the jury found Allen guilty but spared him the death penalty. He was given 100-200 years—an "indeterminate sentence." The *Defender* quoted the judge telling the courtroom that it was meant to send a message that "the murder of a policeman would be considered a heinous crime."

Allen remembered standing in front of the judge, asking if he'd ever have a chance at freedom again. The judge responded that he might if he could demonstrate he was rehabilitating. Indeterminate sentences came with a possibility of parole after about a decade in prison. The *Tribune* looked askance at that. Allen "won't be locked away for the rest of his life," the paper lamented in their short article on the sentencing hearing. "The parole laws would appear to be loaded in favor of killers."

Allen spent his 20s in prison pursuing a slew of educational programs. He got his GED and was certified as a medical assistant, with qualifications in nursing, physical therapy, and surgical procedures. He completed a correspondence course for legal investigation and earned some credits through Joliet Junior College and Governors State University. He also spent a lot of time at the law library. In 1972 he was part of a lawsuit against the prison system for constitutional violations and unsanitary conditions in the now-shuttered Joliet prison's "special program unit." The SPU was segregated housing where prison authorities placed politically active inmates, gang members, and others they deemed "riot-prone" without due process. During federal court testimony in the case, Allen spoke of there being very little light in the unit, which made it impossible to read. "He had to drop out of a nearly completed correspondence course in accounting because guards took away his materials," the *Defender* reported. "He said his counselor accused him of wanting to study accounting so he could 'practice embezzlement' when he got out." The following year Allen helped establish a criminal law course for inmates at Pontiac. He said that he helped with the legal defense of the Pontiac 17, a group of inmates—chief among them Gangster Disciples founder Larry Hoover—charged with inciting a riot and murdering three guards in 1978. The cases against them ultimately fell apart, and Allen said his assistance earned him the respect of the Disciples and other prison gangs.

Allen didn't just earn a good reputation

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with inmates. As he began petitioning the Prisoner Review Board for parole in the late 1970s, letters of support and praise came from correctional staff who worked with him at the prison hospital, State representative Peggy Smith Martin, an executive at Motorola, lawyers from the People's Law Office (who represented the plaintiffs in the SPU lawsuit, and were the defense lawyers for the Pontiac 17), and from the board of the National Conference of Black Lawyers Community College of Law. There was even a letter of support from the president of a film production company that had interviewed Allen for "a law enforcement training film on officer survival." The filmmaker wrote that he "exhibited genuine interest and concern for police officer survival, and was most interested in cooperating with anything that might help save a life."

But officials from the Cook County State's Attorney's office and the Chicago Police Department vociferously opposed his parole. Every time Allen petitioned the board they wrote scathing letters in protest. "He has been a threat to society all his adult life and culminated his criminal activity by brutally murdering a Chicago police officer," State's Attorney Bernard Carey wrote in 1978. "It is the policy of this Office to vigorously prosecute police killers," he later wrote, and "to strongly oppose the parole of that type of felon." In 1979, CPD's acting superintendent wrote that the "vicious, wanton action of Allen in fatally wounding Detective Singleton while in the process of attempting to commit an armed robbery clearly indicates that he is a menace to society." It seemed to matter little that it was a fellow officer, not Allen, who had apparently shot Singleton.

Year after year he was denied parole until finally, in April 1983, the Prisoner Review Board agreed to let him out. Allen, then 33, was sent back to Chicago with the help of letters from people eager to employ him, and community petitions vouching for his good character. He was released to live in a South Shore apartment with his fiancée, Denise Mims, under strict supervision from a parole officer.

In a letter to me, Allen described the transition to parole after more than 14 years behind bars. He wrote that the day before he left Stateville, Disciples leader Hoover "offered me money to avoid returning to prison for committing a crime of finance." Other gang leaders did the same "in appreciation for my role in the defense of those gang leaders and members that were indicted" for the Pontiac riot. "I knew before the parole board released me

that money from gangs would be available for me," he wrote. He maintains, however, that he has never actually been part of any gang, and no prison or court record I've seen has shown otherwise. "I came to prison in October 1970 as a non-gang member, and I left prison April 13, 1980 a non-gang member. And for that gang leaders honored and respected me."

He also wrote that his relatives and friends, "and quite frankly, people I did not know," took up a collection of money and clothing on his behalf. He got a welcome home party, and soon after permission from his parole officer to travel to Mississippi to see his parents, who'd moved back in the time he was away. He said his father and paternal grandmother gave him \$5,000 and bought him a new green Volvo with velvet upholstery. The "economic support" he received didn't just take the form of cash and gifts. "In the first week of June 1983 in my hands I had over \$1,300 in food stamps," he wrote, describing in vivid detail how an old friend brought him five intact booklets in a little white bag. "I had so many food stamps I started giving food stamps to my neighbors."

Still, Allen said he wanted to work. He said he tried a job at the People's Law Office, but he didn't last long enough to even draw a paycheck. He recalled that police officers would follow him to the office and harass him and that he and the lawyers came to an agreement that it was better for them to part ways. Jeffrey Haas, one of the People's Law Office attorneys who'd written to the parole board that he was eager to employ Allen, had only the vaguest recollection of him more than 40 years later, but said it was plausible that Allen and the office were drawing a lot of unwanted attention from the police. Allen said after the PLO he tried and failed to get a job in the medical field. Finally, his dad was able to secure him a job with a lumber company in Mississippi, but the parole board didn't approve Allen's request to transfer out of state.

Allen said he faced regular surveillance and harassment from Chicago police officers who he said would show up in front of his house, follow him as he ran errands, and even arrest him periodically on bogus charges. In June 1984 he was arrested for illegally having a gun; he recalled being pulled by cops from the back of a cab and watching them extract a pistol from underneath one of the seats. The charges were dropped the first day he went to court. Allen took short trips to Mississippi as frequently as possible, and his mother, sister, and other relatives visited him in Chicago. He took his nieces and nephews and Mims's son to Six Flags Great America with the permission

of his parole officer. He played basketball, read books, and went to the movies, but though he was happy to be free, he described feeling unsafe and uncomfortable in a city that had changed a lot since he was 19.

He recalled that the conditions of the Washington Park neighborhood he knew growing up were "truly shocking . . . To see men and women in 1983 that I had worked closely with in the 60s, doing the very same things we had fought against to rid our hoods of was painful to my heart and mind." He was disturbed by the ubiquity of drugs. The streets were worse than when he went away. "I cursed the parole board for not considering my request to be granted parole release to Mississippi."

Seventeen months later, on August 9, 1984, Allen returned to his apartment with the paperwork to take another trip to Mississippi in his breast pocket. He found a swarm of police officers. His apartment was ransacked. His sister, fiancée, and their kids were confused and in tears. Allen saw a tall, corpulent detective in his living-room mirror as the officers handcuffed him. He said the detective—Michael Pochordo—squeezed in next to him in the back seat of a squad car and elbowed him in the chest every time they hit a bump on their ride to the precinct. Within a couple of days he was charged with the murder of Carl Gibson, who police said was shot in a car Allen was driving and dumped on an exit ramp off the Chicago Skyway. Later, he'd be charged with being the getaway driver in the murder of Robert Ciral-sky, which happened a week before his arrest.

There are two stories about what happened next and which one you believe depends on who you see as credible, and on how the impression of credibility builds in your mind based on your own beliefs, biases, and experiences. Did the state successfully bust James "Head" Allen, a sly hit man, for two murders he dared to participate in while on parole? Or did they successfully railroad him simply for being a paroled "cop killer"? Over the course of two years I puzzled over more than 4,000 pages of police and court documents, spoke with dozens of sources, and pondered his cases from every angle. The investigation left me with some unanswered questions about James Allen. But, more significantly, it left me questioning what journalists expect from people who claim to be abused by the state.

I'm writing this story at a time when the minds of an increasing number of people with no direct experience of police misconduct and prosecutorial overreach have stretched to accept that cops do hurt, torture, and kill people; prosecutors do build cases on false

testimony, false confessions, and a total lack of evidence; and America's law enforcement and criminal punishment systems are rife with violations of both the Constitution and basic human dignity. And yet, commonly held conceptions about the people on the receiving end of these injustices remain pretty rigid, and journalists help reinforce that. We may have made some progress since the *New York Times* proclaimed that Michael Brown was "no angel," but we still prefer to focus our coverage on victims of state violence who are unarmed, docile, and simple. We may not expect them to be innocent, but we expect them to be truthful and straightforward. We demand they establish their credibility by submitting themselves to scrutiny of their deepest wounds, patiently letting us poke them to see if they bleed, hiding nothing about themselves and satisfying our every curiosity. Doubt creeps in when they draw boundaries, perform, lie to make themselves appear better than they are. Doubt creeps in, in other words, when self-proclaimed victims of state violence act not as suffering and repentant martyrs but exactly the way we all do when we feel we're being evaluated. It seems that no matter how often we see the state cheat to win criminal cases with the help of deception, violence, junk science, and cascades of cognitive biases, it's still the state that is more likely to enter our mental courtroom with the presumption of innocence.

In one of her many dense and lengthy e-mails to me about Allen's situation, which sometimes came with explanatory cartoon animations that she designed herself, his friend Linda wrote that I was looking at the cases "the way I was in the beginning—in terms of what doesn't make sense." She said that eventually she had a "mind shift" that made her see things differently. "There are two crimes. One is the murder . . . and one is the frame job." If Malcolm is right that "what gives journalism its authenticity and vitality is the tension between the subject's blind self-absorption and the journalist's skepticism," what would it mean to direct the skepticism we reflexively have for convicts toward the state?

**O**n the morning of June 21, 1984, police arrived on the 73rd Street exit ramp off the Chicago Skyway to examine the body of a bearded, chubby, Black man. Thirty-eight-year-old Carl Gibson was found lying facedown next to the curb about halfway down the ramp, wearing a black leather jacket and cheap black sneakers. A blue bandanna was hanging out of the back pocket of his pleaded

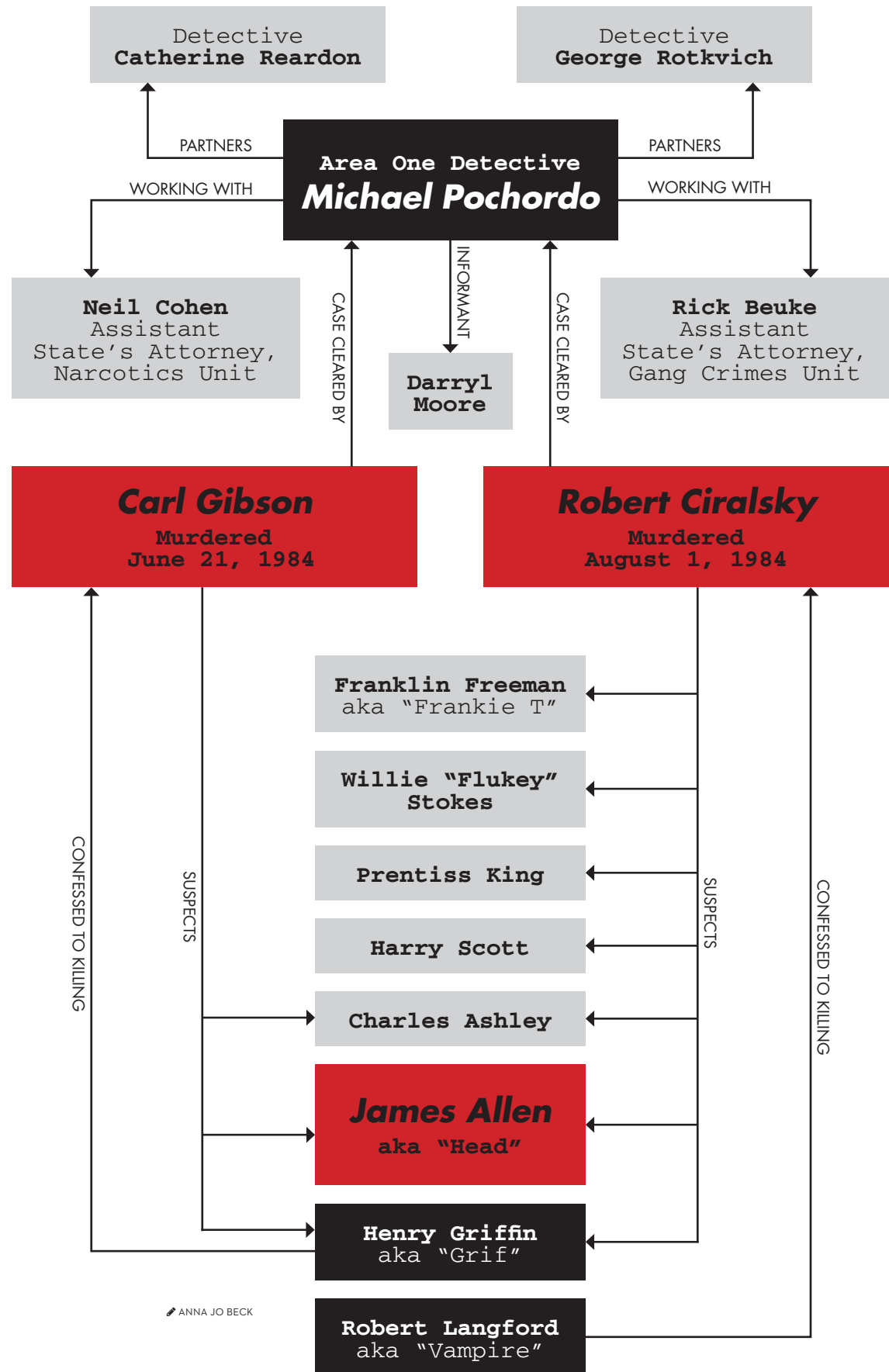
brown pants. His white shirt was soaked with blood. He wore a wedding band and a thin gold chain around his neck. He was found with his ID on him, a welfare card, and a copy of a recent criminal complaint charging him with selling drugs.

Four bullets had been fired at his left ear and neck, at least one of them from less than a foot away. There were two bullets lodged in Gibson's head (inside the ear and at the base of his skull) and two exit wounds on the right side of his face. One of the bullets had torn through his spinal cord, one through his throat. The medical examiner also noted "chronic needle marks" on Gibson's forearms but the toxicological report came back negative for alcohol, opiates, and barbiturates. Gibson's last meal was likely a cheeseburger. "An obese and young appearing male was gunned down on the exit ramp," the report summarized.

No bullets were found on the exit ramp near the body, but the blood on the scene suggested a story of movement. There were two trails—a short one close to the ramp's juncture with 73rd Street, and a longer one which flowed from Gibson's body. No reports confirm that the disconnected, shorter trail of blood belonged to Gibson, but in one of the first media accounts of the case the *Tribune* reported that Area One detectives believed Gibson to have been shot near the bottom of the ramp. Gibson's head pointed upward, as if he'd been walking or running up toward the Skyway when he collapsed from the bullet that hit his spine.

The narrative of the police investigation over the course of the next six weeks is based on a review of CPD detectives' "General Progress Reports"—mostly handwritten notes produced while working out on the street—and "Supplementary Reports"—typewritten summaries of investigative work filed after every day or two. This narrative may not reflect reality (because the department may not have shared all existing records in response to FOIA requests or subpoenas, because the cops could make up interview notes, because interviewees could be lying or wrong) and it may not even reflect the "facts." But the documents do tell a story that's worth remembering as one considers how James Allen came to be accused of being involved in Gibson's murder.

The first notes made on June 22 by the Area One detectives assigned to the case, John Robertson and Richard Kobel, were brief: "Victim shot for unknown reasons at this time. It should be noted the victim was involved in drug traffic in the area of 65th and Cottage Grove." One person interviewed said he saw



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Gibson drinking on the street around 9 PM the previous night. Gibson's girlfriend told the cops that he walked her home around 9:30 PM, which Sherman Overstreet, "a known dope distributor" in police custody, corroborated.

Both Gibson and Overstreet worked for 66-year-old Charles Ashley, the central target of "Operation Camelot," a months-long probe into his alleged narcotics operation. A few days before Gibson was killed, both men were arrested during a raid on one of Ashley's drug houses. The day Gibson's body was discovered, Overstreet checked into the Cook County State's Attorney's witness protection program. The detectives' first theory was that Gibson was killed because Ashley wanted "to silence any potential witnesses against him."

The next investigative report was filed on July 2. Detectives Robertson and Kobel had identified potential suspects: Richard "Dog" Wallace and George "Lookie" Lewis, who were usually together and riding around in a small black van, according to a confidential informant. The informant said that two days before the murder Dog was seen with Ashley, and that on the night of the murder Gibson was seen entering the black van to join "two unknown male blacks."

A week later the detectives interviewed Ashley. He said he didn't know anything about the killing, but that he'd seen Gibson talking to someone he knew to be a cop two or three times a week for "a couple of months." He mentioned that Gibson had a beef with someone named "Bull." Ashley also wanted to know whether detectives had made any progress on investigating the armed robbery he'd reported a few days earlier, when he was attacked in an alley behind his home.

On July 11, Robertson and Kobel interviewed Dog, who told them he'd learned about the Gibson homicide from the *Sun-Times*. He said he didn't own a car or have a driver's license or know anyone with a black van. Dog's lawyer objected to him answering questions about where he was the night of the murder, but Dog agreed to take a polygraph on the condition that his lawyer be allowed to see the questions beforehand. No more records related to this investigation were produced for nearly a month. Dog, Lookie, and Bull were never mentioned again in any records related to the Gibson murder.

**O**n Wednesday, August 1, Area One got hit with another homicide. This one happened in Hyde Park on the 4800 block of Kimbark—a leafy street lined by sprawling,

historic homes. The basic facts, per the first police report: Robert Ciralsky, the 60-year-old white owner of a drug and liquor store on 58th and Indiana in Washington Park, was accosted by two Black men as he was getting out of his car in front of his home around 11 PM. Ciralsky's wife Paula and 14-year-old son Robert Jr. heard two shots that brought them to the window. The boy grabbed a gun and saw the men standing over his father's body, which was sprawled in the front seat of his light-blue Lincoln. He yelled at them to freeze and fired a shot, which sent them running. Ciralsky died within the hour. The autopsy would later confirm that he succumbed to gunshots to the forehead and shoulder, which pierced his brain and lungs and left medium-caliber bullets lodged in his tissues. Among his personal possessions were tan slacks with a torn left pocket, an address book, some jewelry, and a wallet.

When interviewed by detectives Brian Regan and Steve Glynn that night, Ciralsky's wife, son, and son-in-law (who worked at his store) confirmed that he would take home cash from the register when he closed his shop, usually in a rubber-banded roll that he carried in his left pocket. The family believed that such a roll with up to \$1,500 was missing. The detectives noted that Ciralsky was "apparently shot during the course of an armed robbery" by assailants who either followed him home from the store or were waiting for him to arrive.

Several neighbors were interviewed about the killing. Two of them said that they saw two Black individuals inside an unfamiliar brown car (perhaps a Camaro) with California plates idling with the lights off on the corner just north of Ciralsky's house shortly before the incident. Three others saw a dark-colored car speeding off after shots were fired, driving north in reverse on Kimbark, and then east on 48th. No one could describe the assailants.

Detectives also interviewed the last people who saw Ciralsky alive—John Dorbin, who'd worked for Ciralsky for the last 30 years, and a CPD sergeant named James Moran who'd been friendly with the shopkeeper. Dorbin said he and Ciralsky closed up the store and as they left, Moran had pulled up and Ciralsky stopped to chat. Dorbin and Ciralsky both got in their cars and drove north on Indiana; Dorbin didn't see anyone following Ciralsky home. He told the cops that Ciralsky was fearful of assailants—in 1958 he had shot and killed three men attempting to rob his store in one week—and used to carry a gun home with him "but had stopped the practice after being arrested sev-

eral times for the gun."

The day after the murder, Paula Ciralsky told detectives that a few hours after her husband was killed she received a call from someone "she described as a [Black woman] with a southern accent." The woman asked to speak to her son, calling him Robbie—a name only family and friends used with Robert Jr. When she told the woman that her son was sleeping, "this woman then stated, 'If he could shoot at them then he is a witness,'" and hung up. The detectives noted that Paula immediately hired a security guard for the house.

Two days later, Area One detectives Robertson and Kobel (who had been working the Gibson homicide) filed a report after another conversation with Paula. She said that the money her husband's shop made the night of the murder was found safe in the cash register, meaning he probably had no roll of cash in his pocket—the new theory was that nothing had been stolen. "Apparently the offenders were interrupted in their robbery attempt," the detectives concluded.

The widow provided one more piece of information to detectives at the end of August. The Ciralskys' estate attorney contacted Area One to relay that Paula had come to recall that one of the two assailants looked like a man called "Irwin" who "hangs out at the garage at 48th and Indiana." Despite this new lead on a potential suspect, after that tip the murder investigation went cold.

**T**he big break in the Gibson case arrived unexpectedly between August 5 and August 7. Area One Detective Michael Pochordo—who until then hadn't been involved in the investigation—said he received a phone call from Darryl Moore. Moore, who would later testify that he did "enforcing" for Charles Ashley, was locked up on narcotics and weapons charges at the Cook County Jail. He told the detective he had information about the Gibson killing.

In a sworn affidavit to a judge, Pochordo claimed he'd known Moore for four years and that Moore had provided him with relevant and accurate information on ten other homicide investigations, which resulted in six convictions. Pochordo said Moore told him that Ashley first offered him \$2,300 and three ounces of cocaine to kill Gibson. When Moore refused, Ashley told him he would ask Henry Griffin and James Allen to do it. Moore said that Griffin and Allen told him a few days later that they'd accepted the contract and that Griffin showed Moore a .38-caliber revolver he intended to use. Moore also said Allen showed

him an ice pick that he would use to help kill Gibson.

Not only did the alleged killers apprise Moore of their plan and show him their weapons, but they also told him it was an "easy contract" when he saw them a couple of days after the murder. Moore said they told him they were now searching for Ashley to get paid and that Allen threatened to kill Ashley if they didn't get their money. Allen allegedly said he'd made a tape recording of the discussion they'd had with Ashley about the contract and that the tape would be sent to the cops if the "old man" crossed him.

Pochordo wrote in the warrant affidavit that, according to Moore, Allen and Griffin were driving in Griffin's black Chevy truck with wide gray stripes on the sides when he saw them before and after the murder. The detective cited earlier police reports about Gibson being seen entering "a black van" with two Black men on the night he was killed. But he didn't mention that the confidential informant who observed this said the men in the van were Richard "Dog" Wallace and George "Lookie" Lewis.

A judge approved the search and arrest warrants against all three suspects, in addition to a wiretap warrant for Griffin, whom Moore claimed he could engage in further conversation about the murder over the phone. The next afternoon all three men were arrested. Allen was taken from his South Shore apartment, Ashley was pulled over in Hyde Park, and Griffin was confronted by police while naked on the toilet in his nephew's Washington Park apartment. Along with him, police also arrested two women, Velores Brooks and Evon Knox, and recovered two guns (a .32 and a .38), 99 credit cards, 53 personal identification documents, and six driver's licenses belonging to other people.

**I**t's difficult to piece together what exactly happened inside Area One headquarters at 51st and Wentworth after these arrests. Chicago police and prosecutors didn't make video or audio recordings of interrogations in the 1980s. Arrestees frequently weren't given an opportunity to call a lawyer. Black and Latinx suspects sometimes disappeared in CPD stations for many hours and emerged bruised, bloodied, even electrocuted, having confessed to all manner of crimes.

The statement that would prove to be the linchpin in Allen's case for the next 35 years was dated the day of his arrest and signed by Pochordo's partner, Catherine Reardon. Though Allen has never claimed that he was



physically mistreated at Area One, he maintains that this police report about what he said was fabricated. In essence, the statement is a confession—not to knowing participation in the murder, but to being there when it happened.

Reardon's notes on the statement appear on several pages of a CPD "General Progress Report" notepad. Unlike every GPR produced on this case until that point, the space where a supervisor's signature is supposed to appear is blank. The first four pages are shorthand notes in wide scrawl, but subsequent pages are a highly detailed, typewritten narrative. Here's the story attributed to "Head":

Allen said that a few days before Gibson was killed, Griffin approached him and asked if he wanted to split \$5,000 in exchange for helping him lure some man out of a building who Griffin would then kill. Allen said he wasn't interested in being part of a murder, especially not for \$2,500. He also asked why the man was being killed, but Griffin refused to tell him more. The next day Griffin approached Allen as he was playing basketball and said that a man named Chris Walton had told him that he'd given Allen a gun to pass on to him. "I told Grif that I didn't talk to Chris and he didn't give me any gun," Allen said.

The night of the murder, Griffin had invited Allen to his home. Charles Ashley phoned and then came over. Allen said he remembered Ashley from before he went to prison and remarked that "it looked like his arthritis was killing his ass." Allen overheard Ashley asking why it was taking Griffin so long to "kill the two sons of bitches." Allen said that Ashley was referring to his own brother, who'd assaulted him a few days before that, and "the snitch." Ashley also wanted to see which gun Griffin would use on "the snitch," and said the pistol Griffin showed him was too rusty. He gave Griffin \$200 in \$50 bills and told him to buy a different one. "I want that son of a bitch dead before the morning," Ashley said, according to Allen.

After that, Allen rode with Griffin to Chris Walton's place. Walton clarified that he'd given a gun to someone else to pass on to Griffin, not Allen, saying, "This ain't the Head I'm talking about—I'm talking about Muscle Head." Darryl Moore was also at Walton's place, and Allen said he showed Griffin a couple of guns, though he never actually saw any weapons change hands. Griffin and Allen soon went back to Griffin's house, picked up three of his relatives, and drove them to a game room at 93rd and Stony Island. Allen stayed in the car and Griffin went inside the building with

the three relatives. He came out shortly after with only one person, whom he introduced to Allen as Carl. Griffin asked Allen to drive his car and sat in the back seat, which Allen said was "unusual." Carl rode shotgun. "I knew something was wrong," Allen said. Griffin told him to drive to 90th and Saginaw to get five pounds of quinine that "Doc" Ciralsky had sold to Ashley. ("He sold quinine and stuff for mixing up dope," Allen explained to the cops about Ciralsky, whose murder their colleagues at Area One had already been investigating for more than a week.) Then Griffin told Allen to take the Skyway back to their neighborhood.

As Allen drove north on the Skyway and they approached the 73rd Street exit, "three or four loud shots rung out. That's when I [dis]covered Grif had shot Carl in the back of the head . . . Carl had slumped over, the blood was all over the car." Allen said he pulled the car over on the exit ramp, his ears ringing. He jumped out and Griffin pointed the gun at him and shouted to get back in the car. Allen said he took off running and didn't stop until he reached his home about two miles away.

After the murder, Allen said Griffin made several more threats against him and that to protect himself, he recorded an audiotape describing what happened so that he could turn it over to the police. After learning about the tape, Griffin and Ashley approached him several times about buying it from him.

Reardon's typewritten narrative breaks here. But it's possible to glean the next part of Allen's story, because it was summarized in two other documents: a formal, typed Supplementary Report Pochordo and Reardon filed to clear and close the case, and an undated memo Cook County assistant state's attorney Neil Cohen wrote to his boss Kenneth Wadas. Cohen was a leading prosecutor in "Operation Camelot" and had been working for months to build a case against Ashley. In his memo, Cohen wrote that after Allen was arrested and brought to Area One, Allen actually spoke to him first, one-on-one, then agreed for Pochordo and Reardon to enter the room and repeated "substantially the same statement." Here's how the story Allen allegedly told them ends, according to Cohen's memo:

Sometime in July, Ashley and Griffin cornered Allen and he got into Ashley's car. During the conversation, Ashley asked Allen to pull a tire iron out from underneath the front passenger seat where he was sitting. The object was actually a gun. As Griffin menaced Allen with a .45 automatic from the back seat, Ashley told Allen to hold the gun like he was going to shoot and to really press his fingers

# GROWING FOR GOOD with Green Thumb

**Good Green: A first-of-its-kind cannabis product line dedicated to fighting back against the War on Drugs**

**A**s we mentioned in the first of this 13-part series, the Green Thumb team is very conscious that our business is built on a plant that has had a devastating impact on Black and Brown communities as a result of its criminalization.

In an effort to take affirmative steps toward diversifying the cannabis industry landscape, Green Thumb launched its first incubation program in 2019. Through the pro bono License Education Assistance Program (LEAP), the team provided best practices and lessons learned to Illinois social equity applicants. Numerous LEAP craft grower, infuser, transporter, and dispensary participants are now celebrating their successful entry into cannabis business ownership as the state of Illinois has begun the process of issuing licenses after a prolonged delay. On August 1, 2021, LEAP's Business Accelerator application will launch and at least one Illinois craft grower and one dispensary license-holder will be selected to receive six months of mentorship and loan funds to become operational.

In 2020, Green Thumb formally launched Growing for Good, the company's social impact program. Growing for Good is committed to incorporating diversity and inclusion, restorative justice, and social equity within the company's standard operating procedures.

## Good Green

On July 21, 2021, Green Thumb announced Good Green, a line of cannabis products dedicated to creating professional opportunities for marginalized communities impacted by the War on Drugs.

**Good Green is Green Thumb's largest-scaled social impact initiative yet. It is a first-of-its-kind product line that is 100 percent dedicated to promoting change.**

In the coming months, Green Thumb will begin the process of allocating Good Green profits to fund grants that support non-profit organizations focused on the brand's three key pillars:

1. Education
2. Employment
3. Expungement

A cannabis record creates significant barriers to opportunities many of us take for granted. Expungement and record-sealing reduce the impact of a cannabis record and improve access to education and employment—each of which leads to fruitful careers and a high quality of life. That is why Good Green profits will be awarded to non-profits that provide expungement-related legal services, cannabis career training, education, and sustainable employment opportunities for communities harmed by discriminatory cannabis policies.

Registered 501(c)(3)s working within the three pillars above can now apply at [www.good.green](http://www.good.green) to determine if they are eligible to receive funds from Good Green grants. Green Thumb will allocate at least \$1,300,000 in social equity grants through Good Green in the next 18 months.

The goal of Good Green, in addition to fundraising for these important causes, is to set an important precedent for other legal operators to go above and beyond supporting marginalized communities impacted by the War on Drugs.

Haven't been following along in this Growing for Good expungement series? Catch up on our discussions surrounding the War on Drugs with Cabrini Green Legal Aid, New Leaf Illinois, North Lawndale Employment Network, and more at [www.chicagoreader.com/growingforgood](http://www.chicagoreader.com/growingforgood).



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into the metal. With Allen's prints on the gun, Ashley had him drop it into a ziplock bag. Ashley then waved over a man whom Allen recognized as a CPD detective and gave him the bag with the gun. The detective also looked at Allen's ID and told him that if the gun was used in a crime he'd be arrested for it. Allen said that on August 3, Griffin called him and said that Ciralsky had been killed. Allen's prints were "on the gun that did the killing."

There are many strange things about the form and content of Allen's statement, which, according to Cohen and the Area One detectives, he gave totally voluntarily, without the presence of a lawyer, and almost without prompting even though he never signed the statement, or wrote anything himself, or agreed to go on the record with a court reporter. Allen had had significant experience with the criminal legal system—indeed his convictions related to the 1969 heist attempt hinged on statements he made to the cops after his arrest without a lawyer present. He'd been part of constitutional lawsuits against the Department of Corrections, was certified as a legal investigator, was presumably as well-versed on his rights as any criminal suspect could be. And yet he apparently spoke openly to law enforcement officials after being arrested for murder and even signed a waiver of his rights about an hour and a half after the interview concluded. Not only did Allen confess to being present during Gibson's murder, but he also volunteered information that could tie him to the murder of Ciralsky.

Reardon's handwritten notes on Allen's story sprawl across the wide-ruled GPR pad in a mess of abbreviations and incomplete sentences. On the last of the handwritten pages, a second, distinct handwriting appears next to Reardon's. It's angular and thin and slanted, and captures details of the story as though two people listening only had one piece of paper to take notes on. The pages that follow are typed and remarkable not only for their level of narrative detail, but for their fidelity to speech pattern. Both the handwritten notes and the typed notes start at the beginning of the story—as though the statement was first noted by hand and then retyped. A handwritten sentence such as "Told him it looked like his arthritis was killing him," becomes "I told Chuck that it looked like his arthritis was killing his ass," in the typed version. It seems likely that the handwritten notes were taken down as someone was speaking. But the typed ones—unless Reardon had a prodigious ability

to recall subjects' speech patterns or a tendency to embellish on her notes—read like they were transcribed from an audio recording. However, there is no record of Allen ever being recorded at the police station. He told me he never saw a recording device in the interview

arson out of 14-year-old Adam Gray in 1993. Gray was sentenced to life in prison for murder but was exonerated after more than two decades behind bars. I wrote a letter to Catherine Reardon, including a copy of her GPR and asking to talk about how murder investigations

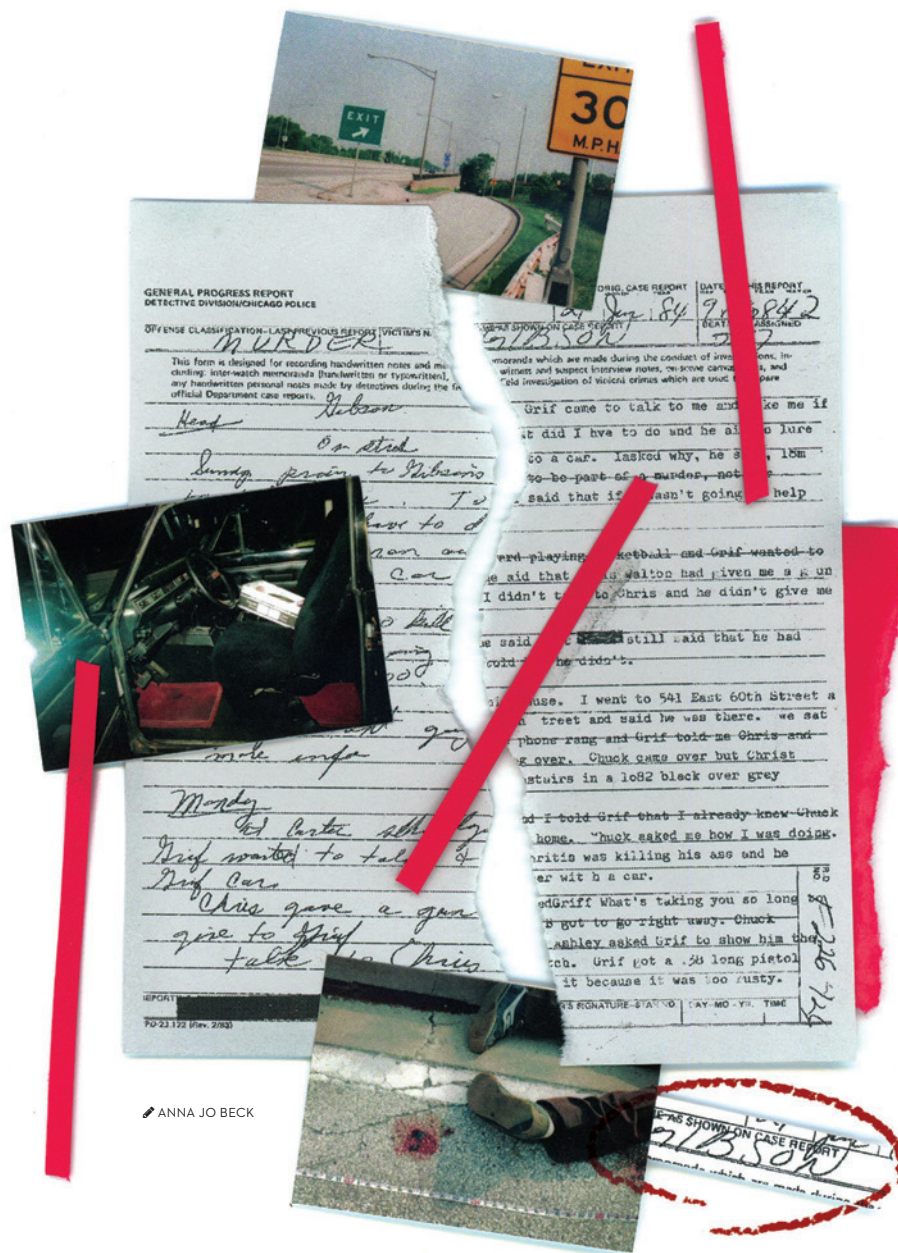
still alive returned my phone calls.

I showed the GPR to Bill Dorsch, a retired detective who worked at Area Five in the 1980s and was instrumental in exposing the corruption and abuses of his colleague Reynaldo Guevara.

"All I did was homicides, I don't recall anyone even having a tape recorder," Dorsch said. "They're putting everything from verbal conversation into handwritten notes," he said, describing detectives' typical interview procedures. "You use the GPRs to enhance your memory of what you learned. It wouldn't be unusual to add to the notes, but it's usually done in the Supplementary Report and not in a typed GPR." Though Dorsch said it's possible that a detective might take some "literary license" in depicting how an interviewee speaks, he found it strange that it would extend to information that had nothing to do with the matter at hand—such as remarking on someone's arthritis.

The lack of a supervisor's signature on the report also raised red flags, especially given the fact that this was a murder case involving a high-profile target like Ashley and the suspect being interviewed was a paroled "cop killer" arrested on a warrant. "I can't understand why a sergeant wouldn't sign" a report that represented a crucial breakthrough in a big investigation "unless the sergeant knew something was wrong and didn't want to put his name to it," Dorsch said. He concluded that the handwritten interview notes were likely "enhanced at a later date" with the typewritten pages. "There's no proof of when the report was written," he said. "They could have gone back after the handwritten GPRs and decided, 'We gotta make this better than it is.'"

Steven Drizin, a false confession expert and codirector of Northwestern University's Center on Wrongful Convictions, also found the GPR strange and said it was unusual that it was typed. Drizin confirmed that CPD didn't make recordings of interviews or interrogations in the 1980s. I also spoke to Andrea Lyon, a distinguished defense attorney with a long track record of acquittals in death penalty cases. Lyon was a public defender through the 1980s and handled many cases out of Area One. She had only the vaguest recollection of Pochordo as a detective with a reputation "for having done a lot of dirt," but she'd encountered Reardon several times. Lyon recalled that when Area One cases got to court, Reardon would often be the one testifying to confirm that the defendant confessed to the crime and denying that there was any coercion. "Reardon would play this role, like, 'I was there and



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room (and besides, he said he never made any statement to Pochordo or Reardon).

Michael Pochordo died in 2017. He and several other Area One detectives stand accused in a pending federal lawsuit of manipulating a lineup and coercing a false confession to an

were conducted at Area One. She wrote back that she wasn't comfortable discussing old homicide cases. She later declined an opportunity to respond over the phone. None of the other detectives and sergeants who worked at Area One with Pochordo and Reardon and are

I took notes and I know what happened,” Lyon said. “It kind of got to be a joke in our office, like, ‘Oh Reardon took notes? Then someone confessed.’”

Allen’s story as it appears in Reardon’s GPR, her and Pochordo’s final Supplementary Report, and Cohen’s memo to his boss contains a few noteworthy differences. For example, Chris Walton and the story of a gun and a mix-up between “Head” and “Muscle Head” is missing in the Supplementary Report and Cohen’s memo. Cohen also writes that Allen said he didn’t stop to pick up quinine from 90th and Saginaw. In the cops’ reports Allen doesn’t mention anything about getting on the Skyway southbound and then making a U-turn to go north. While Cohen notes in his memo that Allen signed a waiver of his rights after speaking to him and the detectives, the detectives wrote in their Supplementary Report that Allen signed the waiver before making his statement.

The portion of the story about a gun with Allen’s fingerprints on it being given to a cop and then being used to kill Ciralsky was also noted in a fourth document. After being briefed by Cohen on August 9, the commanding officer at Area One’s violent crime unit wrote a memo to CPD’s Internal Affairs Division asking them to investigate whether some officers might be working with Ashley. Strangely, even though the Area One detectives who’d been working the Ciralsky case had also been part of the task force that arrested Allen, Griffin, and Ashley that day, they didn’t file any reports to indicate a new lead on the case—not one, but two potential suspects. However, records show that Allen’s and Griffin’s fingerprints were run against those collected from the Ciralsky murder scene soon after their arrest: there were no matches.

The three documents that purported to capture Allen’s statements—Reardon’s GPR, Cohen’s memo, and the detectives’ Supplementary Report—were never introduced into evidence at trial. The detectives weren’t called to testify, either. Instead, the state put on their fellow prosecutor, Cohen, who testified about Allen’s statement using his own memo as a memory aid. The report produced by Reardon did make it into the hands of the public defenders representing Allen, but when they asked Cohen about it, he testified that he’d never seen it. His testimony was inconsistent with his own memo on several minor points, but the jury wouldn’t have known that since they never got to see it themselves. They wouldn’t have known that elements of the story that Cohen was attributing to Allen on the stand

were more in line with the confession he and the Area One detectives had obtained from Henry Griffin.

Besides Darryl Moore, Henry Griffin was the only other person to implicate Allen in Gibson’s murder. Cohen questioned Griffin in the presence of a court reporter beginning at 11:58 PM, nearly ten hours after his arrest. He didn’t have a lawyer and in the transcript he agrees to waive all of his rights. Griffin’s statement, unlike Allen’s narrative and detail-rich account, is essentially a Q&A, with Cohen asking specific, even leading, questions and Griffin responding mostly with one-word answers. On several points, this version of the story differs from Allen’s.

Griffin confirmed that the hit on Gibson was ordered by Ashley and he did it in exchange for \$2,500. He said that Allen was present when Ashley showed up at his apartment on June 20 and asked him to kill Gibson that night. Griffin said they went to Darryl Moore to get a gun. He also said that they were driving a blue rental car, while Allen had said they were in Griffin’s car but never specified its color or make.

Echoing Allen, Griffin said they left Moore’s and picked up three of his relatives and dropped them off at 93rd and Stony Island—where they picked up Gibson. He told Allen to drive, Gibson rode shotgun, and Griffin himself sat in the back. Cohen asked where Allen drove the car to, but Griffin doesn’t say anything about a stop to pick up quinine a few blocks away, instead he answered only: “Skyway.” He said they first got on it at 89th Street, drove south, then made a U-turn at the toll plaza and drove north.

Here’s the weird thing about this U-turn detail, which prosecutors would mention again and again during court proceedings: There is no entrance to the Skyway on 89th. And even if there was, driving south from there and then turning around at the toll plaza would have been impossible, since the toll plaza is at 88th—north of 89th. In Allen’s narrative (as captured by Reardon), there’s no mention of where they got onto the Skyway after picking up quinine, but he does say the pickup location was at 90th and Saginaw. The two streets don’t actually intersect, because of a park and the Skyway overpass cutting through the area, but there is a Skyway entrance ramp just two blocks from there, which would have allowed them to drive northbound, past the toll booths, and on toward the 73rd exit ramp. Even though Allen never mentions a U-turn in Reardon’s notes, Cohen wrote that he did in his memo.

Cohen and Griffin’s exchange about the murder is particularly laborious. Cohen asked what happened as they drove northbound on the Skyway.

\* Griffin: Carl Gibson was killed.  
Cohen: Who killed him?  
Griffin: I did.  
Cohen: What did you use to kill him?  
Griffin: A .38.  
Cohen: How did you kill him?  
Griffin: Shot him.  
Cohen: How many times?  
Griffin: Four.  
Cohen: How close, in what part of his body did you shoot him?  
Griffin: In the head.  
Cohen: Where in the head?  
Griffin: In the back of the head.

Cohen asked Griffin to demonstrate how close the gun was to the back of Gibson’s head by putting his finger to Cohen’s head. He then asks what happened to the body.

Griffin: It just sat there.  
Cohen: Could you see pieces of his head go flying?  
Griffin: No.  
Cohen: Was there any blood?  
Griffin: Yes.  
Cohen: Where was the blood coming from?  
Griffin: Back of the head.

Griffin didn’t mention his accomplice fleeing after the shooting. He said he pulled Gibson’s body out on the exit ramp and that he and Allen later dumped the rental car “out on 100-something [Street]” and gave the gun to Charles Ashley. Though Cohen wrote in his memo that the court-reported conversation happened after he’d talked to Allen, Cohen didn’t ask Griffin about Allen running away, making a tape about what happened, whether he threatened Allen after the murder, or about cops working with Ashley. He didn’t ask him anything about the quinine they were supposed to pick up for Ashley or the Robert “Doc” Ciralsky murder, either.

Before the interview ended, Cohen asked Griffin how he’d been treated while at Area One. “Nicely, nobody bothered me,” Griffin said. He confirmed that he’d been allowed to drink something and have cigarettes and use the bathroom. He confirmed that no one had beat him or forced him to say anything or made any promises in exchange for his

statement, and also that he wasn’t under the influence of any controlled substances. At the end of the transcript, however, Cohen made a handwritten note that Griffin had refused to sign the confession and asked to speak to a lawyer.

Griffin’s confession ultimately resulted in his conviction for Gibson’s murder. Judge Earl Strayhorn, who presided over the trials of all three codefendants, found Griffin’s actions so deplorable that he sentenced him to death. This was remarkable because Strayhorn, one of Cook County’s first Black judges, had been a staunch opponent of the death penalty, and had never sent anyone to death row in his 15 years on the bench. Speaking to reporters after the hearing, Strayhorn said he imposed the death sentence “strictly for punishment . . . I thought it was the only sentence that was warranted under the facts of the case. I never had facts like this before.

In the late 1990s, Griffin, having lost all of his appeals in the state court system, turned to the federal court to get his conviction overturned. After several high-profile exonerations of innocent men who’d been convicted on the basis of coerced confessions, there was also a massive statewide push by advocates to get Governor George Ryan to commute the sentences of all defendants on Illinois’s death row. Northwestern University’s Center on Wrongful Convictions represented Griffin in his federal court case and in his clemency petition to the governor. Eighteen years after his arrest, a grim new story about what happened at Area One on August 9, 1984, came to light.

In the clemency petition attorneys laid out Griffin’s background as the victim of severe neglect, abuse, and molestation in his childhood, his history of mental illness, and his hardcore drug addiction. (His original defense lawyer failed to present these mitigating factors before his sentencing.) “Griffin was under the influence of heroin at the time of his arrest,” his attorneys wrote. In fact, on the barely audible wiretap tape with Moore, Griffin’s speech was slurred and disconnected and he became “increasingly incoherent to the point where twice during the recording he lapsed into unconsciousness.”

The lawyers argued that Griffin “was easy prey for the manipulations of the police during interrogations.” At first detectives told him that they were only interested in Ashley and Allen, and that if he confessed to the murder they’d work out a deal. Griffin said “the police wanted Allen as much as they wanted Ashley because Allen had previously killed a police officer.”

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One of the women arrested with Griffin, Evon Knox, was his sister. When Griffin refused to make statements against Allen and Ashley, Pochordo threatened that Knox would be charged with the murder. While this was going on, Griffin could hear his sister screaming in another part of the Area One precinct. Like him, Knox had been “in and out of mental institutions” throughout her life, and Griffin feared that she “would not be able to psychologically handle being criminally charged.” Griffin also worried that if she was charged she’d lose custody of her children.

As he was faced with the choice of confessing and implicating two other people in the murder or seeing his sister charged, Griffin was going through heroin withdrawal and needed to use the restroom. The cops wouldn’t allow him to go, even after hours of interrogation, “until he eventually soiled himself,” his lawyers wrote. “Under the influence of drugs, humiliation, and threats to his family Griffin finally succumbed to the pressure and agreed to make a statement.”

According to Griffin’s clemency petition, the leading questions during the court-reported statement went hand in hand with “physical force” doled out by police officers “to make sure he answered correctly.” Whenever Griffin hesitated in his responses, the petition continued, “an officer standing behind him would dig his fingers into Griffin’s neck and shoulders, applying significant pressure that left bruises. When he did not know an answer to a question, the court reporter and other officers would leave the room, and leave him alone with the officer standing behind him, who would proceed to punch him about the body.” After each beating, Pochordo would come back into the interview room “and coach him as to the necessary facts.” After that, the court reporter and others would come back in and the on-the-record statement would resume.

Griffin confessed to the murder, his lawyers wrote, and implicated people who weren’t involved because he “knew that his statement could not be corroborated” and he thought that he would be “vindicated by the evidence.” But, rather than pointing away from him as the likely killer, his confession would only function as evidence of his guilt. Ultimately, Griffin was taken off death row when Governor Ryan commuted everyone’s sentences to life in prison. However, a federal judge declined to overturn his conviction.

Griffin made one last attempt to get a new sentence. During the hearings in 2011 and 2012, he was remorseful about having actually

killed Gibson; multiple relatives, friends, and a psychologist testified that he had been admitting he was the shooter for years. Though he’d had a record of violence and violations during his earlier years in prison, the witnesses and prison reports showed that his behavior and outlook had changed. Cook County judge James Linn wasn’t convinced that he deserved another chance and imposed a life sentence again. “I’m not sure that it is in the interest of the rest of our society to have [Griffin] walking around as a free man,” Linn said. “He always seemed to find the wrong people to associate with. I am not sure I have confidence he’s ever going to make good decisions about that.” Griffin continued to appeal Linn’s decision in subsequent years, arguing that the judge should never have been assigned to the case due to his familiarity with the Gibson homicide—a few minutes before Linn announced his decision, Griffin learned that Linn (an assistant state’s attorney in 1984) was captured in one of the Gibson crime scene photos, standing next to the body. But his quest to get free was doomed. After contracting COVID-19 at Dixon Correctional Center last winter, Griffin died in prison on January 14, 2021. He was 73 years old.

Allen and Griffin never testified against one another. Nor was Griffin’s confession used against Allen at his trial. But neither was evidence that Griffin exculpated Allen as early as August 13, 1984. Just three days after their arrest, Griffin signed a statement saying, “On June 21st 1984 I alone, without the knowledge of James Allen shot and killed Carl Gibson.” At trial Allen’s defense attorneys wanted to enter the letter into evidence and argued that it wasn’t hearsay, and was as admissible as Darryl Moore’s testimony. Judge Strayhorn didn’t allow it. Less than three months before his death, in a message to Allen discussing the case, Griffin once again said, “You was set up!”

**T**he Gibson case was classified as cleared and closed on August 12, 1984. The last investigative report, however, was filed by Reardon and Pochordo ten days later. An anonymous tip led the detectives to discover Griffin’s 1980 black International Harvester Scout (a two-door, Jeep-like vehicle) at a repair shop half a mile from the Skyway exit ramp where Gibson’s body had been found. The attendants at the shop told the detectives that the Scout had been there “for quite some time,” and identified a photo of Griffin as the owner. Evidence technicians noted “that the vehicle had been thoroughly washed.” No physical evidence of a murder was discovered

in the Scout, nor any evidence linking Gibson or Allen to the vehicle. As for the blue rental car in which Griffin told Cohen he’d killed Gibson and then dumped on “100-something” Street—presumably covered in blood, and perhaps having a bullet lodged in its trim or a bullet hole shattering its glass—it was never recovered. No evidence related to this car would ever be presented at trial.

In the absence of any real evidence the cases against Allen, Griffin, and Ashley (who never gave any statements to police) relied on the stories told by Neil Cohen and the state’s other star witness—31-year-old Darryl Moore. Moore’s credibility, unlike the assistant state’s attorney’s, unraveled quickly when he took the stand on June 25, 1985.

Nearly everything Moore has ever said about himself in court, to the press, and on paper has been contradicted or denied, either by himself or others who know him. But one can get a sense of who he was and what he was up to the previous summer by triangulating between decades of statements and records. A member of the Disciples gang who’d done time for rape and robbery, Moore worked at a drug house on 47th and Indiana. He knew Griffin and Allen, but not very well. He’d known Ashley since he was a kid, because Ashley was lifelong friends with Moore’s father. Moore claimed on the witness stand that he took contracts to beat and kill people from “whomever, you know, wish to hire me to break somebody’s legs or to murder someone. It is for profit.”

Moore’s testimony—often spoken or mumbled so incoherently that he was repeatedly asked to keep his voice up—was riddled with inconsistencies. He was impeached on the stand multiple times throughout the trial. (On one day of testimony, he both admitted to and denied being involved in the 1980 murder of a sex worker.) He denied telling Pochordo many of the details the detective had attributed to him in his warrant affidavit, including that he’d supplied him with information about other homicides. Information about the dates he allegedly met the defendants, what they talked about, who had which weapons, the money offered by Ashley to kill Gibson, and other details were scrambled.

Ashley’s defense attorney, Sam Adam, eventually brought in Moore’s mother and brothers to testify that they wouldn’t believe him under oath. Two of Moore’s brothers testified that he had bragged for several years that “even if he went to jail, he could always get out of jail by telling the big, fat honkie Pochordo any story.” Adam also tried to establish that Moore wanted revenge because he believed Ashley was

responsible for the murder of his 14-year-old brother.

Allen’s public defenders also painted Moore as having a vendetta against Allen. One witness testified that Moore had told him that Allen “had embarrassed him or did him some type of wrong,” and that Moore vowed to get even. (There was at least one other potential witness who could have testified that Moore was setting Allen up to take the fall for the Gibson murder, but he was never called.)

In exchange for his trial testimony in this case, the state had dismissed Moore’s pending drug and gun charges and allowed him to plead guilty and get time served for an armed robbery. It would later come to light that the state paid him more than \$65,000 in cash, rent, car bills, hotel stays, plane tickets, and even bought him a food truck. He said he lived a “lavish lifestyle” and continued to sell drugs while getting payments and protection from the police department and State’s Attorney’s Office.

Moore began recanting his testimony in the Gibson murder case a year after the trial. In a videotaped conversation with Ashley’s and Griffin’s attorneys, he said he never met with Ashley to discuss a contract hit on Gibson. He said he lied about meetings with Griffin to plan the murder, and about Griffin and Allen admitting to him that they killed Gibson. “I told the lie under oath,” Moore said on the recording. “Mike Pochordo told me basically everything to say.” Moore said the information in the sworn affidavit Pochordo submitted to get a warrant to arrest Ashley, Griffin, and Allen, which cited him as a reliable source, was “totally false.” When the lawyers asked if he knew why Pochordo wanted him to lie, Moore said that the detective “suspected Chuck Ashley of being behind about eight killings and he wanted a big bust.”

Moore also claimed that the prosecutors built their case on lies. He said that at one meeting with Pochordo and several assistant state’s attorneys, Cohen said “he would give anything up in the world to sustain a conviction against Chuck Ashley.” Years later Moore stood by the video recantation during federal court testimony.

Of course, since Moore’s own family members testified that they wouldn’t believe him under oath, there’s reason to doubt anything he said. As a result of this case, his unreliability as a witness—and the state’s willingness to pay him to get convictions—became notorious in Chicago legal circles. “Nothing good can be said of Darryl Moore. He is a hit man, drug pusher, robber, rapist, junkie, parole violator,

and perjurer,” a 1987 profile of Moore in *Chicago Lawyer* magazine began. Moore was also profiled as a “quintessential snitch” in a 2004 Center on Wrongful Convictions report on jailhouse informants’ testimonies being the “leading cause of wrongful convictions” in U.S. death penalty cases. Indeed, according to the report, “the first documented wrongful conviction in the United States involved a snitch” who, in exchange for his own charges being dropped, was placed in a cell with a murder suspect in 1817 Vermont. The snitch testified that his cellmate confessed to killing a man—the man was later found alive. The Center found that recanted and discredited snitch testimony accounted for nearly half of all death row exonerations since the 1970s. “When the criminal justice system offers witnesses incentives to lie, they will.”

In 2002 Moore, Pochordo, and Cohen were called to testify in Griffin’s federal case, during the course of which it was confirmed that the state spent tens of thousands on Moore to be a witness. Moore (who was then incarcerated for the 1987 rape of an 11-year-old girl, which occurred while he was living large on the state’s dime) continued to assert that he lied about everything and that the state knew that. Pochordo, meanwhile, stood by everything he’d written in his reports and warrant affidavit but repeatedly said he didn’t recall any details about the case. He claimed that he didn’t know Moore was being paid thousands by the State’s Attorney’s Office. Cohen also denied knowing anything about the specific payment arrangements his office had with Moore, and said he wasn’t the one responsible for his charges being dropped. He did admit that he knew Moore to be a liar. “Darryl would probably say anything to get more money out of the State’s Attorney’s Office,” Cohen testified.

Remarkably, Moore wasn’t the only jailhouse snitch deployed against Allen. Perhaps fearing that Moore wouldn’t be a solid enough witness on his own, the state also called 62-year-old Sherman Overstreet, who had been part of Ashley’s drug operation and became a police informant. He testified that just two weeks before the trial, while housed in protective custody at the Cook County Jail, Allen talked to him one-on-one about his involvement in the Gibson murder. Allen himself was briefly in the witness quarters because the state offered him a deal to plead guilty and take a six-year sentence, which he says he ultimately turned down because he didn’t want to go along with what he characterized as the “lies” from Cohen’s memo. And he was sure he’d beat the case. Overstreet said

Allen told him that he had been the driver, and that “he wore tight gloves, driving gloves, to keep from leaving fingerprints.” He said Allen described driving on the Skyway with Gibson and making a U-turn at the toll booth. When Allen’s attorneys cross-examined Overstreet,

hearings for informants testifying in murder and other high-level felony cases. Prosecutors have to disclose any plans to use trial testimony from jailhouse informants at least 30 days in advance. They also have to disclose what they offered informants for the testimony and

As was typical in the pre-DNA era, it was a case built entirely on stories. These stories, like all stories, hinged largely on the perceived credibility of the storytellers.

Allen didn’t testify at his own trial (neither did Griffin or Ashley). This was likely because his lawyers wanted to prevent the state from grilling him about his prior criminal record and murder conviction. Besides asking the judge to declare a mistrial at least five times during the proceedings, his attorney also filed a motion for a new trial after the verdict and was denied.

The only time that Allen spoke on his own behalf was at the sentencing hearing on August 26. For nearly two hours he tried to convince Judge Strayhorn that he deserved a new trial and that he had not been adequately served by his public defenders. Allen brought up illogical and contradictory elements of Overstreet, Cohen, and Moore’s testimonies. He read a statement from a witness his attorneys hadn’t called to testify about how Moore bragged that he’d get out from under his charges because he’d fed a cop friend information about the Skyway murder that he himself had committed. He expressed dismay that his lawyers hadn’t called other witnesses who were locked up with Moore in August 1984, whom he allegedly told that he was involved in the murder.

Allen said that during a pretrial meeting, one of the prosecutors assigned to this case, Larry Victorson, told him plainly “that had it not been for my prior conviction of a murder of a Chicago police officer that I would not even be tried or charged.” He said that Victorson admitted there was no evidence linking him to the crime except the “alleged statement” he gave to Cohen “which until this date I have not had the official opportunity to refute.” (When the judge asked Victorson for a response he said he had none “except categorically to deny any statement that Allen attributed to me.”)

Allen accused the state of moving him into protective custody right before the trial so that he could be in the same place as Overstreet to make his alleged confession more credible. He said Cohen gave a “totally different account” from Overstreet’s when the two testified about his alleged confessions. “Somebody is lying. Is Mr. Neil Cohen lying or Mr. Overstreet lying?”

Although Allen was represented by Jamie Kunz, a highly regarded public defender, he was unhappy with the quality of the defense. He thought Kunz’s partner, Marianne Burke, was sympathetic to him, but he suspected Kunz believed the account of the murder



ANNA JO BECK

he admitted that he had pending charges for selling drugs and that he’d made a deal with prosecutors to get time served in exchange for his testimony.

If Allen was on trial today, it’s likely that neither Moore nor Overstreet’s testimonies would be admissible against him. Since 2018, Illinois law has required pretrial reliability

any other cases in which the informants were used.

**D**espite the shakiness of the jailhouse snitches’ testimonies and the total absence of physical evidence tying him to the killing, the jury found James Allen guilty of the murder of Carl Gibson on July 2, 1985.

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allegedly collected from “Head” at Area One. In his closing argument, Kunz essentially told the jury that Allen wasn’t guilty because he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. “I have never told anybody that I was ever present in that car at that time of that murder because I was not,” Allen said.

He seemed to regret taking a jury trial rather than a bench trial, but said he was worried that Judge Strayhorn would have a bias against him because he had “served 14 years, two months, 19 days, 11 hours, 39 seconds in prison for the murder of a Chicago police officer.” He was outraged that his parole officer, Curtis Miller, hadn’t been called as a witness to testify and produce documents that he’d been harassed and threatened by police since the day he’d been paroled. Allen claimed that on the day he was released Chicago police officers arrested and held him for 23 hours, running him through four lineups before a witness to a neighborhood shooting said he wasn’t the guy. He said Miller could have testified that this happened to him eight more times in subsequent months, and that no charges against him ever stuck.

The transcript of Allen’s argument about why he deserved a new trial runs for 23 pages. The judge interrupted only once, to make an adjustment to Griffin’s execution date, which he had set earlier that day. After Allen concluded, Strayhorn promptly denied his motion. He then asked Allen if he had anything else to say before his sentence was imposed. Allen broke out into another long, impassioned monologue, which stretches across 21 pages of the transcript.

“I’m ashamed about the criminal justice system,” he began. “I’m ashamed of the vast majority of our men in blue who will not let bygones be bygones. Who have no regard or no meaningful attitude toward rehabilitation and who feel that a police officer’s life is more sacred than that of any other person that you might have residing in the streets of Skid Row.”

He pleaded with the judge not to impose a life sentence. “Life to me . . . is a death sentence in itself,” Allen said. “Surely, I will lose a great deal of things I regard as being invaluable to me. The support of family and friends who might even think I had something to do with this murder, who stayed with me throughout that 14-year period of time that I was in prison. Who believed in me to have been a changed person. I don’t know what it’s going to do [to] them, but I certainly know what it’s going to do for me. I think it would take away my will. I

have had a will, your honor, that was stronger than this building. That will was to regain my freedom and prove myself a responsible citizen upon my release back to society . . . I don’t know, your honor, if a life sentence will sustain that will. I don’t know, your honor, if it would make me a better person.”

Allen said that prison hadn’t turned him into someone who would “deliberately take a life without justification.” He said that his greatest wish was for Pochordo to be prosecuted for the “lies, deception and trickery that he did in this case.” He said there could be no justice with people like him working as cops. “He takes the only thing that differentiates this country from the Soviet Union which is justice and liberty and freedom, and makes a mockery out of it for the sake of saying, ‘I got Charles Ashley’ and saying . . . ‘we sent James Allen back to prison.’” Before he concluded, Allen also criticized the media and said that at least one reporter had been there for every day of the trial but had never written anything about the allegations against Pochordo.

No more moved by this speech than by the first, Strayhorn sentenced Allen to life in prison. A few weeks later he gave a life sentence to Charles Ashley, who was already fighting advanced colon cancer and would be dead by December. As Allen was settling back into prison life at Stateville and working on his appeal, he learned that the state wasn’t done with him yet. In early December 1985, Detective Michael Pochordo came down from Chicago for a visit.

**T**wo documented police narratives lead up to Allen’s indictment for the murder of Robert Ciralsky. One is loosely sketched out in a jumble of chicken-scratch General Progress Report field notes signed by Pochordo (though not by a supervisor) and dated between November 1985 and January 1986. The other is a typewritten Supplementary Report that Pochordo filed on February 19, 1986, to clear the homicide. The GPRs present an impressionistic investigative history and appear to have been written in real time as the detective conducted interviews, mostly with Allen, a man named Franklin Freeman from Rockford, and Darryl Moore. These notes would be easy to overlook if they didn’t include details that were later omitted or changed in the neat “Supplementary Report,” which told the following story:

At the end of November 1985, Pochordo, who hadn’t been involved in the investigation, received an anonymous phone call from a Black woman who said that if he wanted to solve the Ciralsky case, he should look closer

at the people who killed Carl Gibson. He didn’t report whether he made an effort to talk to Charles Ashley, who was then on his deathbed at Cook County Hospital. Henry Griffin, who was at the Menard penitentiary in southern Illinois, declined to be interviewed. Allen, however, agreed to meet.

Pochordo wrote that he also contacted Moore who said he had “direct knowledge” about the murder. Though the early police investigation had indicated that the shopkeeper had been killed in a botched robbery, Moore revealed that his murder was actually a contract hit ordered by some very powerful people. According to Pochordo, Moore was “extremely concerned” about his and his family’s safety and requested to speak directly to a prosecutor “so as provisions could be made for their safety.” Pochordo wrote that he arranged to meet Moore together with Assistant State’s Attorney Rick Beuke from the gang crimes unit.

Pochordo reported that Moore said that Ciralsky was killed because he’d stopped supplying quinine used to dilute heroin “to several south side dope dealers” and that one of them, Ashley, had asked Moore to start tracking Ciralsky’s whereabouts a few weeks before he had Gibson killed. Moore said he agreed to do this and enlisted Allen to help him. A few days after Gibson was murdered, Moore went to meet Ashley and a much bigger fish.

Willie “Flukey” Stokes belonged to a generation of Black midcentury drug kingpins who ran independent operations in America’s major cities. He was an Al Capone-type character who was notoriously flashy, notoriously wanted by police, and notoriously uncatchable. He flaunted his wealth as the proceeds of a prodigious gambling talent, as he had his own tables in Vegas. When his son was murdered he famously buried him in a Cadillac-shaped coffin, memorialized in a Stevie Ray Vaughan song. Flukey was beloved, the sort of old-time gangster who handed out turkeys on Thanksgiving, gave single mothers money to avoid eviction, sponsored prize fighters and Little League teams, and paid for neighbors’ expenses, even as his workers ran a vast drug and weapons trade in Chicago’s poorest neighborhoods. He wasn’t a gang leader, though, and wasn’t affiliated with anyone but himself. He’d been on local and federal law enforcement radars for years. Now Pochordo had a narrative that tied him to a murder.

Pochordo wrote that Ashley and Stokes told Moore that Ciralsky had to be killed, and they asked him “to provide some very reliable people to carry out this murder.” Moore recom-

**"They put together a case based on lies. They knew the whole case was a lie. I asked them to pay me to keep my mouth shut."**

—Darryl Moore

mended Allen and Griffin “due to the fact that they were very successful in the murder of Carl Gibson.” Stokes said the murder needed to look like a robbery “so as not to draw suspicion on himself and other drug dealers,” and asked that a third man be involved in the hit. Moore said he knew a guy—Franklin “Frankie T” Freeman.

According to Pochordo’s report, Moore said that a second meeting took place at Griffin’s apartment with Allen and Freeman. Not only were Stokes and Ashley there, but so were Harry Scott and Prentiss King, two more south-side drug dealers who had a beef with Ciralsky. Though he wasn’t there himself, Moore “later learned” that the squad would be paid a total of \$10,000, an ounce of heroin, and an ounce of cocaine for killing Ciralsky. Over the next several weeks, the three hit men tracked Ciralsky’s whereabouts and finally made their move: Allen drove, Griffin pulled the trigger, and Freeman went through Ciralsky’s pockets.

Pochordo and his partner George Rotkvich drove out to Stateville to see Allen on December 9, 1985. Allen was read his Miranda rights and—though he’d just been convicted of a murder he said he didn’t do on the strength of Pochordo’s police work—agreed to talk

without a lawyer. Pochordo told him he was accused of being involved in the Ciralsky murder. Pochordo wrote that he “declined to divulge the source,” but told Allen that the source knew that Ciralsky was killed for cutting back on quinine to some “well-known” dealers. Allen allegedly stated that this information “appeared very accurate” but that he needed time to think before speaking further. Pochordo apparently didn’t find it strange that Allen had told him after his arrest for the Gibson murder that Griffin was threatening and intimidating him throughout July 1984, but was now confirming the story that the two had worked together to kill Ciralsky.

The following week, Pochordo, his partner, and Assistant State’s Attorney Beuke went to the Rockford jail to interview Franklin Freeman, who was detained there on unrelated charges. Freeman also agreed to talk without a lawyer. Like Allen, he inquired about the source of Pochordo’s information and said, “I just can’t talk about it now because the type of people involved in this aren’t the type of people you can just talk on.” Pochordo told him to call if he changed his mind.

Sometime in the next day or two, Allen called Pochordo and said he wanted to meet again, but this time with an assistant state’s attorney present. Again, Allen agreed to talk without a lawyer. He told the investigators and Beuke that he’d been approached by “gang leaders” and questioned about his meeting with Pochordo. He asked about immunity from prosecution in exchange for his cooperation, but Beuke told him “that was entirely out of the question.” Allen then “asked to speak to Det. Pochordo alone” and for provisions to be made to protect his family because he was afraid of the people he’d be talking about. Then, with Beuke and an investigator from the prosecutor’s office back in the room, Allen discussed the contract murder. Pochordo notes that his story was “consistent” with the testimony he would later give to the grand jury.

Days before Christmas, Pochordo and Beuke went back to Rockford to speak with Freeman. He again spoke without an attorney. The detectives revealed that they’d had a long conversation with Allen. Freeman then told a story that would be consistent with his grand jury testimony. He repeated that he feared for his and his family’s safety. Freeman said that a \$25,000 hit had been put out on Allen inside Stateville penitentiary.

Allen called Pochordo again the day after Christmas, saying he was in danger and wanted to talk as soon as possible. At the meeting Allen told Pochordo and Beuke that “his

faction of the gang would not accept the ‘contract’ to kill him, but the Vice Lords had. (This is the first and only record I saw of Allen being affiliated with a gang.) Allen was avoiding the showers and asked to be locked in his cell. A few days after the conversation, Pochordo and Beuke helped relocate him to the Metropolitan Correctional Center, a federal detention facility in downtown Chicago.

Pochordo wrote in his report that shortly afterward he paid a visit to Prentiss King, one of the four alleged drug dealers who allegedly commissioned the murder of Ciralsky. King said he knew he was a suspect in the investigation because he’d received a letter from Allen “demanding some money for a lawyer.” Pochordo and Beuke spoke with Allen about the letter. He said that, fearing for his life and that of Denise and her son, he wrote the letter to help put the word out to other inmates that he wasn’t cooperating with the cops.

Allen wrote a similar letter to Harry Scott (which, unlike the one to King, I was able to obtain). It greeted him with “Dig Scotty” and continued in a brusque, conversational tone: “For your information both you and I along with Fluky [sic] has been accused of killing Doc,” Allen wrote. He said that he didn’t know about the murder and that since Freeman, a friend of Scott’s, had accused him, Allen wanted \$10,000 each from Scott and Stokes. If he didn’t get this money to hire a “decent” attorney, “then jack you are going to go down,” Allen threatened. “I am not going to take the weight for this murder I have been accused of committing. I have been charged [with] a second murder that I did not commit.” Allen said the state had made him an offer to become their witness, and in return he’d “get a break.”

After Allen, Freeman, and Moore’s grand jury testimonies in the first two months of 1986, Allen, Freeman, Griffin, King, Scott, and Willie “Flukey” Stokes were all indicted for the murder of Robert Ciralsky. By then Charles Ashley had died. Moore again escaped charges despite claiming he took part in the plot.

That was the Chicago Police Department’s official story. In his messy notes on the General Progress Reports, though, Pochordo logged several points that he never mentioned in this final report. The first was that, after getting this remarkably detailed story about the murder from Darryl Moore 15 months after it happened, Pochordo went to see Ciralsky’s widow and son with mug shots of the new suspects. Neither could positively identify them as the assailants. Allen’s black-and-white photo “looked like” one of them, but less so when a color image was shown. Pochordo noted that

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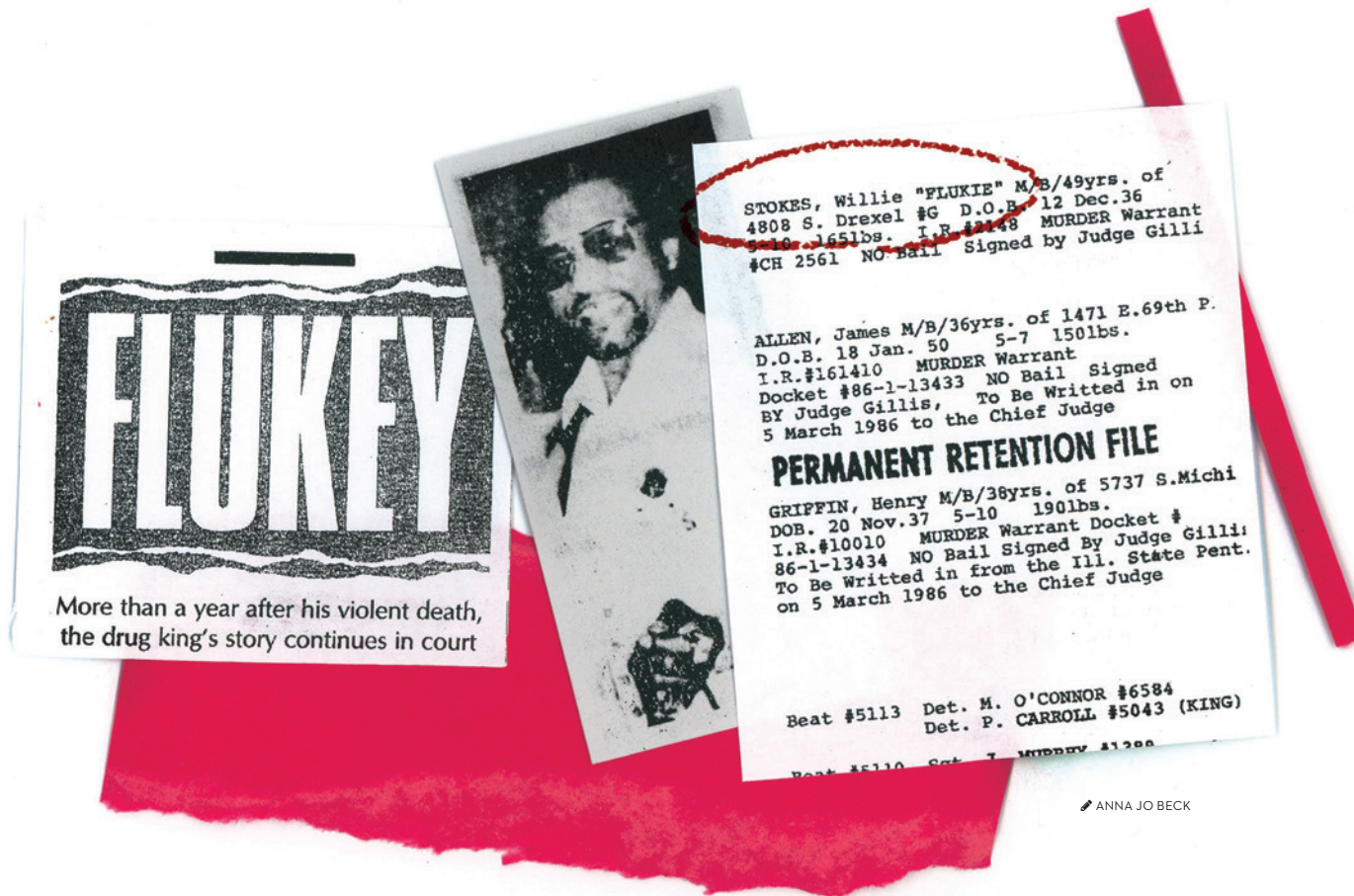
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they "can't be sure, want to forget."

The second major omission from the detective's Supplementary Report was that a lie detector test was administered to Franklin Freeman on the same day he had confessed to Pochordo and Beuke. The examiner concluded that Freeman told the truth when he said that he didn't know Ciralsky would be shot but said Allen and Griffin were at the scene. Freeman was lying, however, when he said he saw Griffin shoot Ciralsky. Lie detector tests, of course, are notoriously unreliable and inadmissible in court. The polygraph examiner told Rockford detectives that Freeman's responses could have been read as lies due to him being "nervous because he felt he was going to be charged with murder."

Pochordo also made no mention in the official report that on at least one occasion he visited Freeman at the Rockford jail with Moore, and that the two were left alone to speak for a while. Two additional details about the Ciralsky murder investigation didn't make it into Pochordo's General Progress Reports nor his Supplementary Report: Allen, Griffin, and Freeman's fingerprints didn't match any of

the ones collected from the crime scene; and on the day of his arrest in August 1984, Allen had claimed that a gun with his fingerprints on it, which may have been used to kill Ciralsky, might be in a ziplock bag with a Chicago Police detective who was working with Charles Ashley.

**T**he murder indictment against Willie "Flukey" Stokes was a media spectacle. Richard M. Daley, who then headed the Cook County State's Attorney's Office and was three years away from becoming Chicago's mayor, held a triumphant press conference about finally catching Stokes and the other "reputed drug kingpins" who were the "largest-volume drug traffickers on the city's South Side." Daley presented a narrative that mirrored the story Moore first told Pochordo, painting Ciralsky as a supplier of quinine used to cut pure heroin, and that he was killed in retribution for reducing his sales. Besides the fact that Allen was a convicted cop killer who had an early parole, not much was mentioned about the hired hit crew.

Though Ciralsky's murder had hardly garnered any media attention back in 1984, now

his name and connections to the drug underworld were widely publicized. A few days after Daley announced the charges, the *Tribune* reported that Ciralsky's widow, a Black woman living among mostly Jewish neighbors, "discovered a burning cross" in the front yard of the family's Hyde Park home. But the high-profile indictments proved to be a flash in the pan. The case against Stokes fell apart six months after he put on a show surrendering himself to a Cook County judge. In August 1986, Stokes's attorneys videotaped Moore recanting his grand jury testimony and shared it with local TV reporters. Allen and Freeman signed affidavits recanting their testimonies, too.

"I've been proven innocent," Stokes, bedazzled in diamond rings and necklaces, told the press when he was cleared. "I'm gonna try to go to Las Vegas and shoot some dice." Moore, meanwhile, was quoted in the *Sun-Times* saying he'd intentionally lied to the grand jury in exchange for some \$30,000 from CPD and the State's Attorney's Office. "I blackmailed the system," he said. "They put together a case based on lies. They knew the whole case was a lie. I asked them to pay me to keep my mouth shut."

Daley's spokesman denied they'd paid Moore that much money and said that despite dropping the charges prosecutors still believed Moore's testimony. "The story he told rang true and fits the available evidence," the spokesman told the *Sun-Times*.

"Richie Daley wanted Flukey big time," Kevin Bolger, who represented Stokes, told me. Bolger, a former cop and prosecutor who describes himself as a "street guy," and is still practicing criminal defense, said Daley's staff convinced him that getting Stokes would help him become mayor. He recalled Pochordo as a "bitter man who I thought was a racist and didn't like the fact that Flukey had a lot of money and nobody could get him." It didn't surprise Bolger that the detective was working with a "scumbag" like Moore because "he fit right in with Pochordo." What made the state's story about the Ciralsky murder so absurd was that Stokes just didn't do business the way they told it. He didn't use quinine to cut his cocaine and heroin, but opted for the infant laxative Mannitol. And he would never have been at a meeting with three other dealers voting to kill anyone in front of some hit men hired off the street. Flukey handled his beefs privately



with a “family” of close confidants, including an enforcer on his payroll who “enjoyed killing people. He would do it for fun.” Indeed, three months after being cleared, Stokes was killed by members of his own “family.”

With the whale out of their net, the state also dropped the cases against King, Scott, and Griffin. Allen and Freeman were the only ones left on the gallows. Prosecutors “wanted somebody’s blood and those guys were the ones whose blood they were gonna get,” said Craig Katz, who represented Allen at trial and now works as a political consultant. The state had Allen and Freeman’s grand jury testimonies to hang them with, despite their multiple recantations.

Just a year before, the most definitive and iconic thing to ever be said of grand juries was published in a *New York Daily News* interview with Sol Wachtler, chief judge of the New York Court of Appeals. Prosecutors “now have so much influence on grand juries that ‘by and large’ they could get them to ‘indict a ham sandwich,’” he said, arguing that the grand jury system for indictments should be abolished altogether. Unlike regular trial juries, grand juries are composed of citizens who determine whether there’s enough evidence to bring criminal charges against an individual. Grand jury proceedings are always secret, though court reporters make transcripts for prosecutors’ later use. The grand juries only hear what the prosecutors want them to hear. Witnesses testify under oath, but there’s no one there to cross-examine them, eliminate hearsay, tease out inconsistencies, and object to leading questions. Lying to a grand jury is perjury, and prosecutors could also theoretically face charges for knowingly putting on a lying witness, but any actual consequences for doing so are virtually unheard of—their own colleagues would have to hold them accountable.

Freeman had been the first to testify before the grand jury, on January 17, 1986. ASA Beuke (who would later testify that he never produced a single report about his meetings with Moore, Allen, and Freeman in the months prior) led the questioning. Freeman’s story about the plot to kill Ciralsky was substantially similar to Moore’s. But he made several statements that were at odds with existing state records related to the case.

Freeman misidentified the location of Ciralsky’s store twice. He described a *Godfather*-like scene in which Stokes, Ashley, King, and Scott voted on killing Ciralsky, each of the dealers taking turns saying “hit him.” Freeman testified that on the night of the murder, Allen

drove him and Griffin around in a “two-door, powder blue Buick” and stayed in the car as Griffin shot Ciralsky “and I guess it hit him in the head.” The next day Griffin’s girlfriend was sent to Stokes to pick up “a bundle of hundred dollar bills wrapped up in rubber bands” and the drugs the crew had been promised. Freeman testified that two days after the murder he ran into Stokes on the street and was told “that was a good job. You took care of us.” Freeman said that he left for Atlanta the day after that.

Moore testified to the grand jury ten days after Freeman and rehashed the story he told Pochordo months before.

Allen was the last of the three to testify on February 7, 1986. Beuke didn’t ask him anything about the story he told police in 1984 linking himself to the Ciralsky murder weapon. Instead, the story Allen told the grand jury generally mirrored Moore and Freeman’s. He, too, said that they carried out the hit on Doc in a light blue “1981 or 1982 Buick Regal.”

This two-door blue Buick is an especially curious detail. In the earliest police reports from the Ciralsky homicide, witnesses to the killing and its immediate aftermath said they saw the perpetrators get away in a dark-colored sedan. One couple saw two Black individuals idling on the block in what might have been a brown Camaro before they heard gunshots. While Camaros are also two-door models, the bullet-shaped muscle cars bear little resemblance to the boxy, elongated silhouette of the Regal.

Allen testified that on the night of the murder, after following Ciralsky home from the store, he parked the Buick, “maybe a half car length or a car length off 48th and Kimbark.” Allen said he could see Ciralsky’s car parked from where he was. He saw Griffin shoot Ciralsky twice with a revolver and Freeman kneel down to rifle through his pockets.

No one was there to point out to the grand jury that with the foliage at its fullest on that August night, it was highly unlikely that Allen could have seen Ciralsky’s car given its distance from where he claimed to be parked. Allen said the two accomplices rushed back when a third shot rang out, then he described their getaway route: east on 48th “to the block following Kimbark and made a right hand turn, went down 55th Street and from 55th Street I made another right turn.” The grand jurors probably didn’t know that this would have been impossible since the street following Kimbark is Kenwood, and if he’d made a right turn there he would have dead-ended at 49th. After the hit, Allen said, Griffin sawed off the barrel, took off the trigger of the revolver,

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and “placed it in one of those Crown Royal liquor bottle sacks with drawstrings,” and had it delivered to Stokes.

Allen also testified that after he got paid he ran into Stokes on the street and that the kingpin told him “he appreciated how well the contract had went.”

A few days before his testimony, Allen said he was going to lie to the grand jury. On February 3, 1986, he wrote a letter, which he addressed to the attorneys representing Stokes, Scott, King, and Griffin. He even got it notarized as an affidavit at the Metropolitan Correctional Center.

He wrote that on Pochordo’s first visit to Stateville, the detective told him that Moore and Freeman had incriminated him and those to whom the letter was addressed in the murder of Ciralsky (this contradicted Pochordo’s claim that he didn’t reveal the source of his information). On subsequent visits, Pochordo, along with Beuke, threatened to charge him with Ciralsky’s murder and told him that Moore, Freeman, and Griffin had “confessed.” Allen said he was promised “special considerations” if he cooperated and reminded that, because of his prior murder convictions, “the probabilities were great that I would be sentenced to death if convicted.” He wrote that his fears were “compounded” when he was, without explanation, transferred from Stateville to the MCC, where he was denied access to his personal property, books, writing materials, hygiene items, the commissary, and wasn’t allowed to smoke. He was also kept in solitary confinement for nearly a month (this contradicted Pochordo’s claim that Allen asked to be transferred).

Allen said he agreed to testify because he was “told that all I had to do was simply corroborate the statements” already made by Freeman and Moore. “I have no knowledge [if] what I will say is the truth or not,” he said. Allen wrote that he would tell the truth at a trial in front of a judge and jury: That he never witnessed Stokes, Scott, King, or Ashley discuss a contract hit on Ciralsky, that he had never been hired to kill Ciralsky, and that he didn’t know who killed Ciralsky and why. “This letter is part of my truthful testimony. I know that I will probably be tried for the murder of Ciralsky, a charge that I am innocent of, however I cannot give false trial testimony against Mr. Willie Stokes and any of the above mentioned.”

Allen carbon copied Reverend Jesse Jackson, then at the height of his political career,

and Father George Clements, a Black south-side Catholic priest famous for his social justice ministry.

Four days after his testimony, Allen wrote and notarized another letter to the same attorneys, which was later submitted to the court. “I took the witness stand . . . and gave false testimony,” Allen wrote. “Here and now I state that every word of my testimony was false.” Allen then went through every element

and to bring what he believed to be Pochordo and Beuke’s “unethical conduct” to light during an eventual trial. He hoped that the grand jury testimony would give him a chance to be a trial witness so he could finally “tell the truth.” Allen wrote that he knew he was opening himself up to perjury charges, but this didn’t worry him because he felt “a compelling desire to reveal to the media, the public, the court and the judge or jury the blatant

testimony in March. Several months later, both Allen and Freeman signed sworn affidavits that were presented by their codefendants’ lawyers in court, once again recanting their testimonies. Allen also wrote that Pochordo and Beuke gave him “inducements” in the form of “financial aid to my common-law wife.” Freeman swore that when Pochordo came to see him in Rockford, he was given police reports and images to study. He wrote that Pochordo threatened him, and that “inducements were offered to me in return for my providing false testimony.” These included dismissal of his pending felony charges.

Though Allen, Freeman, and Moore’s recantations were enough to destroy the cases against Stokes, King, Scott, and Griffin, Judge Michael Toomin didn’t allow them into evidence at the trials. Following the rules of evidence, Toomin also barred any mention that the cases of the codefendants had been dropped. Steven Drizin, of Northwestern’s Center on Wrongful Convictions, explained that “the courts are inherently suspicious of recantation evidence because of who is recanting—they’re either witnesses or snitches,” he said. Judges “are less likely to believe that intimidation by the police and prosecutors is a factor in the original statements,” than they are to believe that people were pressured to recant by defendants and their advocates later. Nevertheless, recantations “are often the bread and butter” that have led to the discovery of wrongful convictions from the pre-DNA era. “We know now that many people are pressured to lie under oath,” he said. “What happens is police officers will pressure a witness to agree to a certain set of facts. The prosecutors take that witness to a grand jury and get them under oath and that makes it even more difficult for that person’s recantation to be believed.”

Sixteen years later, during Griffin’s habeas corpus case in federal court, Freeman testified that Beuke and Pochordo told him that Allen and Moore had gone to the grand jury before him, and that he needed to just go along with the story Beuke would be telling. (He was actually the first of the three to confess under oath to being involved in Ciralsky’s murder.) To prove he couldn’t have been involved, he said that in early July 1984 he and Allen robbed Ashley, King, and Scott, and then he went to Atlanta until September. “How are they going to pay me for a contract when I stuck them all up,” he said. “It don’t make sense.”

When attorneys asked if it was Allen’s idea to stick up Ashley because he hadn’t been paid for the Gibson killing, Freeman said no.

**"I'm ashamed about the criminal justice system. I'm ashamed of the vast majority of our men in blue who will not let bygones be bygones. Who have no regard or no meaningful attitude toward rehabilitation and who feel that a police officer's life is more sacred than that of any other person that you might have residing in the streets of Skid Row."**

—James Allen

of the testimony and reasserted that he had lied. He again said that Pochordo and Beuke coerced him into testifying, and added that they showed him statements Moore and Freeman had given. Not only that, Allen claimed that Beuke gave him the transcripts of their grand jury testimonies to prepare. (Beuke would deny this at trial.)

Allen wrote that he testified to save his life

and callous miscarriage of justice that was being practiced by the prosecutor and investigating officers.” Allen concluded by writing that Beuke told him that he would prosecute Stokes’s “ass and send him to prison for the rest of his life . . . and if I can I’ll send you to death row.”

Franklin Freeman, too, wrote a letter to Stokes’s legal team recanting his grand jury

“It was my idea to rob Ashley.” Allen, who he’d known from prison, just “knew all of the heavyweights in the city that did the dope.”

Allen maintains that Freeman was lying about all of this and that he wasn’t sticking anyone up while on parole. I couldn’t talk more about it with Freeman because a few years ago, at the age of 67, he died of pancreatic cancer at the same prison as Griffin, where the state incarcerates elderly and sick people. His last conviction was for a robbery attempt at a gas station. His sister said he’d gotten too old and slow to get away. As she described the ups and downs of her brother’s life, the addiction that haunted him, how he loved to dance, she was emphatic that the Ciralsky case was bunk. “Frankie was a stickup artist,” she said. “Killing just wasn’t in his nature.”

“Everyone was lying so I played along with them,” Freeman said in 2002. He testified that soon after the grand jury he had a conversation with DEA agents who were building a federal case against Stokes. “They told me I was lying to my face,” he recalled. “They say that for a person who participated in the crime, I don’t have my lines down tight . . . The street, the getaway, they didn’t believe me.”

Indeed, one of the DEA agents, John Zandy, had testified at trial that after several lengthy conversations with Allen and Freeman, they found that a lot of their information didn’t check out. When I reached Zandy by phone, he didn’t have many recollections about the case. He did remember, however, that Pochordo was “a real p.o.s.” He recalled having a conversation with the detective about his note-taking. “He said, ‘Hey I write stuff when I get around to writing it,’ that sort of thing . . . The feeling that I got was that I wouldn’t want to be dealing with this guy on a regular basis,” Zandy told me. “It seemed like he had an agenda, like he was just interested in getting somebody.” Zandy also said that Ciralsky’s widow, who died in 2009, “handsomely despised Mike Pochordo,” and told the DEA that the detective was harassing her. “She said something to the effect that he would come by their house with a bullhorn and demand she come out to talk to him.”

**I**f Allen had nothing to do with these murders, what was he doing on June 20 and August 1, 1984?

Allen’s public defenders in the Gibson case, Kunz and Burke, never put anyone on the stand who could provide him with an alibi. Worse still, they had to stipulate to a letter Allen wrote a few months before the trial to his friend Lance Bell (aka Santa Bear), a former

Black Panther: **"Listen, Bear, I want to use you as a witness in my case to simply say the following. That you called my home at approximately 3:15 a.m. June 21, 1984 . . . We talked for about ten minutes. That's all I need you to say. I'm saying I was home at the reported time of the murder. I have Denise and three other people who's going to testify I was home, so will you do this?"**

The defense’s motion that could have listed potential alibi witnesses wasn’t in the case file, likely lost or misplaced during his many failed appeals. Kunz died in 2016, and when I reached Burke by phone in Florida she said she wasn’t interested in talking. “I am paranoid,” she said. “I worked for 30 years with people who were very violent and I’m not interested in being a part of that anymore.”

Though public records indicate that Denise Mims hasn’t died, all e-mails bounced back, phone numbers were disconnected, and her social media presence is nonexistent. No one who seemed like a relative responded to my texts and voicemails, and a letter I mailed was returned. Finally, I went to ring the doorbell at her last known address—a tidy, recently constructed apartment building in Auburn Gresham run by Catholic Charities. Her name was still in the directory, but the property manager told me Mims had moved out more than seven years ago.

When I asked Allen about his letter to Bell and why Mims didn’t take the stand, he said she couldn’t have given truthful testimony about being with him the night of the murder. Nor could anyone else. “The only thing I can say is I was home alone,” Allen told me. He said his lack of alibi should allay more suspicions than it raises. “I was an experienced criminal at a young age,” he said. “Don’t you think that I would be smart enough that if I had participated in a murder I would have planned an alibi just in case I was ever arrested?” He said he had a curfew and his parole officer, Curtis Miller, could have phoned him at any time of night. Miller, who died in 1988, wasn’t called to testify either.

I wondered if maybe his sister could tell me if he was shaking down drug dealers in the summer of 1984, as Freeman and Moore had both testified years apart, or if he was complying with his parole and subsisting with the help of family and friends. After writing her a letter, I received a call from her daughter, who was about eight years old when her uncle was arrested. She cried as she recalled how the gun-toting police officers stormed in, “tore up

everything in the apartment, tore up our suitcases.” They were all packed to leave for Mississippi that day. “And while they were doing it I look out the window and I see him walking down the street, I’m looking at my mother and my little brother was crying and I remember [the cops] saying, ‘You need to shut them up or we’re taking them to DCFS.’”

Allen had told me he hadn’t spoken with his sister in years and that he thought she and her family probably believed he was guilty. “It wasn’t anything like that,” his niece said. “She said she knew he didn’t do it.” They lost touch when Allen went to the Tamms supermax. “There was a time we could not communicate with him and after I found out we could, it had been so long since we had that we never reconnected.” She was friendly and warm and said it was weighing on her that they hadn’t been there much for her uncle. “I don’t want him to think that we don’t love him,” she said, breaking into tears. She said her mother likely knew what Allen was up to while on parole and that they’d think about an interview. But after our first conversation she didn’t answer any more of my calls, texts, or e-mails.

Allen didn’t have an alibi in the Ciralsky case, either. While Freeman was faced with the same challenges—being implicated by Moore, having an extensive criminal record, confessing his involvement to the grand jury—his attorneys could prove that he’d been in Atlanta at the time of the murder.

Craig Katz, who represented Allen, told me his defense strategy was “relying on the fact that their evidence was sketchy at best.” Katz has always believed that Allen was innocent. He’s also sure the state withheld exculpatory evidence from him (a constitutional violation that Allen has unsuccessfully claimed in his appeals). Still, he sees the fact that Allen escaped a death sentence as both a miracle and one of his greatest professional accomplishments. “I literally got one person on the jury, one woman, not to vote for the death penalty, it was 11 to one,” Katz recalled.

“If it had been anybody other than James with his baggage I don’t think it would have gone anywhere. There just wasn’t anything [in the state’s case] that was credible,” Katz said. He recalled his client was confident as they prepared to go to trial, convinced that an acquittal in this case would help him get the Gibson murder conviction reversed, too. “He totally believed he’d beat it,” Katz told me. “He believed that the truth would come out and everybody would see that Darryl Moore is a slimebag and the state’s attorneys and the detectives were in cahoots to put this on him and

that he’d walk.” Katz paused, the background noise of his car briefly filling the silence on the phone. “He was right. I think that’s the way it probably should have worked out.”

Unlike the public defenders in the Gibson case, Katz decided to put Allen on the stand. He figured since his client was most likely going to death row it wouldn’t hurt. Allen testified to much of what he’d written in his recantations. Not only did he describe how Pochordo and Beuke coerced him, but he also testified that the state paid his family money while they were grooming him to become another snitch against Stokes and the other dealers.

Katz asked why Allen went along with it. “After the initial fear,” he responded, “I began to plot to prove Pochordo to be a liar.” He said that when the detective came to see him at Stateville for the first time, he mentioned that Moore claimed they met in the month before Ciralsky was killed. This contradicted Moore’s testimony during the Gibson trial that he didn’t see Allen for more than a year after Gibson was killed. Allen thought this showed that Moore was lying and that Pochordo was funneling perjurers into court.

It’s unlikely that his careful observations about these subtle inconsistencies made much of an impression on a jury grappling with a sea of admitted lies, recantations, and fluid and changing statements from almost everyone involved in the case. “If you lied [to the grand jury] under oath, why should the jury believe that you’re not lying today?” Katz asked him. “I just hope that they believe me,” Allen replied.

When Assistant State’s Attorney William Gamboney cross-examined Allen, he asked if it would be fair to say “that when you’re in a tight spot, you lie?” Allen said it would not be fair. Gamboney then grilled him on statements he made during a pretrial hearing a year earlier that contradicted what he said on the stand now—about how long he’d known Harry Scott and whether he’d ever seen him in Ciralsky’s store. They were inconsistencies that don’t seem germane to Ciralsky’s murder, but, for Allen, it didn’t look good. It couldn’t have helped that when Gamboney read out the transcript of Allen’s statements from the earlier hearing and asked if he’d made them, Allen repeated: “I don’t recall, I may have.”

By the time the cross-examination concluded, Allen admitted that he wasn’t always a reliable narrator. “I have been deceptive in my life,” he said. “I have been manipulative before.”

As he made his closing arguments, Katz

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said he'd warned the jury about this. "I told you that I didn't think Mr. Allen was going to be a particularly sympathetic figure," he said, noting that everyone who'd testified agreed about Allen being an "intelligent, well spoken, cunning, manipulative individual." He argued that the reason Allen went along with the state at first was because he was trying to "get something out of it for himself"—better living conditions in prison, money for his family, new evidence to vacate the Gibson murder conviction. He argued that the state knew their case amounted to smoke and mirrors but they were betting that no jury would believe Allen's version of events. "This guy is the perfect patsy," Katz said about Allen, calling him a "bit player" in the failed crusade to put Stokes and the other big-time drug dealers behind bars. "Because nobody is going to believe two-time convicted murderer James Allen when he says that he didn't have anything to do with this."

Katz then leveled with the jury. "There is nothing I can particularly say that's going to help you make the decision as to whether or not Mr. Allen was lying when he testified before you," he said. "They are thinking it over there at the state's table, that once a liar, always a liar, but let's remember something: Originally he was going to be their liar."

**T**he evidence of Allen's innocence in the Ciralsky case couldn't get much stronger than another man coming forward as the killer. In 2009, Robert Langford began writing affidavits about how he and a different man named James Allen (who was also known as Kirby) had killed Ciralsky during an armed robbery. Langford is serving a life sentence for killing Kirby and another man. In addition to writing at least five affidavits, he has also given a deposition claiming responsibility for the murder. He is scheduled to testify to it in court on August 23.

In his confessions, Langford described how he and Kirby followed Ciralsky after he closed up his shop. "As Mr. Ciralsky was about to get out of his car my accomplice and I confronted him, and told him he was being robbed and to empty his pockets. He refused to do so. At that time I shot him and proceeded to take money from his pocket, several thousand dollars." Although the early police reports on the murder noted that the Ciralsky family didn't think any money had been taken, one of Ciralsky's pants pockets had been discovered torn open after the attack. In his most recent affidavit, signed in 2018, Langford explained that "Kirby gave up my name to the authorities in connection

## "Trials are often not about the truth. They are about credibility."

—Steven Drizin

with the murder of Robert Ciralsky. Afterwards, I shot Kirby, as well as a man named John Goolsby, in Chicago." He clarified that "the man I know as 'Head,' whose name is also James Allen, was not present on the night that Mr. Ciralsky was killed and knew nothing about the armed robbery plan."

Langford declined my request for an interview through Andrea Lyon, who was his public defender on the double murder case and has continued to keep in touch with him. Lyon even wrote about him in one of her books, describing a man who'd witnessed horrific abuse in his home as a child, culminating in his father cutting open his mother's stomach in front of the boy's eyes. Langford ended up with a murder conviction at age 15, for giving another boy a gun and telling him to shoot someone. He did 20 years and was repeatedly raped while improperly incarcerated with adults. He and Allen, who only knew him by his nickname, Vampire, crossed paths in prison in the 70s. He was in and out of prison on gun cases through the 80s, before going down for the murders of Kirby and Goolsby. Lyon witnessed him undergo a remarkable personal transformation in prison as he learned several languages, pursued every educational opportunity, and played a big role in mentoring his nephews into successful adulthood. Lyon wasn't surprised when she learned he'd stepped forward to take responsibility for a murder he'd never been charged with.

"I'm ready to admit to the crime because I've fell in love with an honest woman and she has made an honest man out of me," Langford wrote in a letter explaining his decision to Allen's friend Linda in 2010.

Allen believes that if his conviction for the murder of Ciralsky is overturned, he'll have an easier time proving that the cops and prosecutors lied in the Gibson case, too. Allen has always maintained that Assistant State's Attorney Neil Cohen asked him after their brief conversation at Area One whether he'd heard the name Langford in connection with the Ciralsky killing—nine days after it happened. Allen believes that because Cohen asked him

about Langford, the prosecutor must have known all along that Allen was not involved in the Ciralsky murder. So far, his attempts to introduce Langford's affidavits as evidence of his innocence in Gibson's murder have been unsuccessful. In March, Cook County judge Diana Kenworthy denied him permission to file another post-conviction petition. In her order the judge wrote that the issues Allen was raising "are frivolous and patently without merit," and that Langford's confessions to killing Ciralsky don't serve as proof that Cohen, Moore, or Overstreet lied under oath about Allen telling them he was a part of the Gibson murder.

During one of my conversations with Drizin, the false confession expert, he reflected on how Allen's cases are "an interesting story about the currency of credibility." The state was perfectly willing to negotiate for information with Darryl Moore to land convictions, and just how much they were willing to pay him and what crimes they were willing to let him get away with was never disclosed to the defense. "The fact that he was paid \$66,000 was fine to the State's Attorney's Office and fine for CPD," Drizin said, but "when someone like James Allen is trying to negotiate for information, we look at that as a reason not to believe his testimony." Criminal trials, he said, "are often not about the truth. They are about credibility."

It's not hard to believe that Moore and Overstreet were lying jailhouse snitches, but Allen's claims that Neil Cohen—now a judge in the Cook County Circuit Court who's married to Michelle Obama's former chief of staff—lied under oath, too, are harder to swallow. Aside from not having solid evidence to prove this, Allen is up against a man with a generally clean reputation. I had many conversations with sources who knew the Cook County criminal courts in the 1980s—including public defenders, civil rights lawyers, journalists, and others familiar with the cops and prosecutors who may have, and did, play dirty. It didn't shock anyone that Area One detectives, including Pochordo, and gang crimes unit pros-

ecutors, including Beuke (who didn't respond to my multiple attempts to reach him), were being accused of foul play. But the accusation that Cohen made up a defendant's confession and then committed perjury raised nearly everyone's eyebrows.

A 1985 *Tribune Sunday Magazine* profile described Cohen as a straitlaced, ambitious, meticulous, true-believing crusader against drugs working under Kenneth Wadas (now a supervising Circuit Court judge and among the most frequently reversed on appeal). As state's attorney, Daley appointed Wadas, a Marine who'd served in Vietnam, to lead his hard-charging narcotics unit, and Wadas picked Cohen because he wanted "people working for me who are eager to get these dogs in court and kick their asses." Cohen confirmed that he was the right man for the job. "I want to win," he said. "It is my ego on display in that courtroom, and it's a big one. Sometimes being on trial is better than sex." Cohen, who was born just a couple of months after Allen and grew up in Evanston, was clear that he hated drug dealers and saw them as a scourge on society. "If a guy makes a mistake and gets caught using, I have some compassion for him. But if he gets caught dealing, fuck him."

Operation Camelot was developed in Cohen's first few months working for Wadas. Bringing down Ashley's \$3 million-a-year heroin business was doubtless a pivotal moment in Cohen's career. But even Lyon, who was in the minority of people I interviewed who considered Cohen's reputation as an honest and forthright person to be overblown, was surprised to hear him accused of going as far as Allen says he did. "My impression of him was that he wouldn't do anything outright illegal," she said. Allen hasn't been claiming the cops forced him to make a statement and then had him repeat it to a prosecutor the way he says they did in the Ciralsky case. Allen has been claiming—in testimony, court filings, and innumerable interviews—that Cohen fabricated Allen's statement, then fed it to the cops, and lied about it under oath.

I called Cohen at home and on his cell phone, sent e-mails and messages through the Office of the Chief Judge, and even showed up to his courtroom on the 23rd floor of the Daley Center. Finally, after passing yet another message through one of his law clerks, saying I wanted to discuss Operation Camelot, I got a call back. "The judge did respond and he says to advise you that he has nothing to say to you," the clerk said with a hint of snark in his voice. He declined to comment a second time through a spokesperson who cited state

rules of judicial conduct that prohibit judges from commenting on pending cases. Allen is currently appealing Kenworthy's latest ruling on the Gibson case.

**T**estifying in Griffin's 2002 habeas corpus case, Wadas said the prosecutors knew Allen didn't shoot Gibson and considered getting him on their side to bolster their case against Ashley, but his "criminal background, it was so horrendous that . . . we didn't think that it would help us that much, because his credibility would be too bad." Wadas agreed with Griffin's lawyers that Moore wasn't "the most savory witness," but said "Allen was convicted of a prior murder, Darryl Moore wasn't."

Were it not for his credibility being bad, Allen may have had a better shot at beating the case, even with the jailhouse snitches working against him. In the absence of any physical evidence, without any written or court-reported confession, and without any reliable witnesses or an alibi, the jury would have been left to ponder whether or not Allen told Cohen that he was driving a car for a friend who was involved in something shady when a guy he'd just met was unexpectedly shot. It would have been the prosecutor's word against Allen's. Maybe they would have still believed the state that Allen wasn't just an innocent bystander, but maybe, as Allen put it in one of his petitions to the court, "the only thing that would have remained is one big REASONABLE DOUBT."

What is a reasonable doubt? It's supposed to mean that if there's even the slightest suspicion that the defendant didn't commit the crime, a jury is supposed to find him innocent. It's what it means to have "the benefit of the doubt." But on the other side of the conviction, it's the cops and prosecutors who get to benefit from doubt. Even when they win by cutting corners—lying on affidavits to get warrants, coercing confessions, having witnesses commit perjury—the state gets to move on. The detectives retire with their pensions, the prosecutors start private practices and become judges.

Having hardly had the chance to enjoy the presumption of innocence since he was 17, Allen has to prove the state guilty from behind prison walls. He lost all the appeal arguments about trial judges making the wrong calls. To win now, he has to collect new evidence of his innocence, and prove that it was not something that his lawyers could have discovered at the time of his trial. He then has to convince a judge that this evidence is strong enough to

merit a hearing, and go through appeals if she doesn't think so. And if the hearing is finally granted, as it has been in the Ciralsky case, he has to wait. Langford's confession brought him to the doorstep of this hearing six years ago. After innumerable delays due to his records being lost, and the reassignment of the case to different judges, and a pandemic that shuttered courts for over a year, a date was finally set for June. On the eve of the hearing, "two days from now" turned into "two months from now" when one of the seven state's attorneys tasked with reviewing all post-conviction claims in these decades-old cases asked for more time to prepare. There are no speedy trial laws on the other side of a conviction.

If Allen can't win in an actual courtroom, all he has left is the court of public opinion. The advantage he has with journalists and the public is that since he went away, the Internet and cell phones have made the daily horrors of law enforcement violence and impropriety impossible to ignore. While Cook County's courtrooms are still populated by many of the same players and attitudes that worked to put him away in the mid-1980s, more of us than ever seem willing to believe a story like his.

At the end of the day credibility isn't really about facts or truth, it's about our assessment of the storyteller. We perceive someone we like or have been taught to trust as credible even if he's telling an absurd story. Credibility is a birthright for some, along with their race, class, and wealth. Credibility can be something cultivated through good social skills and the right people vouching for us, but there's so much out of our control. Whether the storyteller seems believable also depends on what the listener has already seen and lived.

There's an old journalist's chestnut that "it's the story that matters, not the storyteller." Usually it's invoked to justify keeping ourselves out of our articles. The saying, of course, is bullshit because we serve as the gatekeepers to people's stories. There are no stories without our assessments of their credibility. For every source that doesn't fulfill our expectations, there are so many others that will. As one reporter who covered the Gibson and Ciralsky trials for the *Tribune* put it to me, after sharing the generally positive recollections she had of Allen: "It's always so hard when someone admits that he lied and then you're just not sure about it and there's a million other stories to cover."


Janet Malcolm points out that the nature of the relationship between the nonfiction writer and her subject is fundamentally transactional: Allen wants his story to be written and I

want a story to write. This relationship "seems to depend for its life on a kind of fuzziness and murkiness," she argues. "If everybody put his cards on the table, the game would be over." I felt that I was putting my cards on the table when I sent him *The Journalist and the Murderer*, and at first the game did seem to be over. But it wasn't, because a man trying desperately to get out of a maximum-security prison doesn't really have the luxury of folding. A few months after he disengaged, I started hearing from Debbie again, then from Linda. When I reached back out to reconnect, Allen called right away. As we caught up, mostly on my endless questions about his cases, I also asked what he'd thought of Malcolm's book. He said he agreed with her arguments. Perhaps he was sincere, but I also wouldn't blame him for saying whatever he felt I wanted to hear. Since the 1960s, the journalists who've written about him have not shared his race or class background or truly known a life like his. I am no exception. Throughout his life the media has done nothing but amplify the state's arguments that James Allen is a killer who deserves to be locked up. Even when the state's stories became comically absurd, journalists went on reporting them with nary a skeptical word about the police and prosecutors. And yet, he was still willing to trust me—to let me turn the horrors and tribulations of his actual life into another story.

Over the years I assessed and reassessed Allen's credibility, playing armchair psychologist alone and with others. I observed the devotion of the people who know him best, two women with an unshakable faith in his innocence. I nitpicked at things he said that didn't add up, fact-checked everything I could until I hit dead ends in records and memories. I weighed the likelihood of his claims that so many different people have told lies about him against the likelihood of him lying to me. I could tell you what I think about the guy, if I personally find him credible, but these subjective assessments would probably say more about me than they would about him. They would be laden with the same cognitive biases that got him into his predicament in the first place. I'm in no position to draw conclusions about James Allen, I'm only in a position to not be another publicist for the state's conclusions about him. Whether or not he is a credible person has nothing to do with whether or not he should have been convicted for the murders of Carl Gibson and Robert Ciralsky.

After all this time I can confidently say that I know his cases, but I still don't really know James Allen. He's a 71-year-old Black man

from a poor neighborhood who's spent all but 17 months of the last 52 years behind bars. Over the span of my entire life he's endured years on end of solitary confinement, survived violent attacks, had to hear about loved ones succumbing to disease and death, never sharing in the grief of their last moments. He's also missed out on most of the joys, big and small, that amount to what we think of as living—raising a family of his own, holiday meals, the caresses of a pet. His survival depends on speaking, but his only way of getting himself across is through rare and highly supervised visits, one-ounce letters, 2,000-character e-mails, and a few 20-minute phone calls per day when his prison isn't locked down. Some days he can get more calls than others if he trades Kool-Aid, chips, or a Snickers bar for someone else's phone time or stays inside while everyone else goes out to the yard. Every bit of these communications is monitored and recorded and can be used against him if he's ever able to go back before the Prisoner Review Board to ask for his parole to be reinstated or for a gubernatorial pardon.

Through all these intermittent and unreliable moments of "connection," I observed a charming and polite person swimming against the tide of being a lost cause. He's boundlessly optimistic about his prospects of getting out. He's not particularly remorseful about the deaths of the three men he didn't kill, but is haunted by the fact that he didn't call his mother on a day she asked him to in 1988, missing his last opportunity to speak to her. Besides that, I only witnessed his upbeat confidence waiver once, as he remembered a fellow Stateville inmate who was executed in the 90s. Recalling a brief conversation in the visiting room, Allen sounded frail and had to clear his throat several times to finish the story. "I'll never forget his look, and the tears I seen coming out of his eyes when he said the police lied on him and put him to death for a murder that he didn't commit. That voice is with me every day. Because I *know* how they lie." 

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# ARTS & CULTURE



A viewer takes in Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment* ■ COURTESY THE ARTIST

## ART REVIEW

### God: now at the mall

An exhibition in Oak Brook brings the Sistine Chapel to the old Sears.

By CATEY SULLIVAN

It had been almost exactly 30 years since I'd seen my favorite gorgon. I'd left him where he lived, on the wall of the Sistine Chapel, in the bottom half of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*. His name is Charon, and he is charged with herding damned souls across the Styx—with a snarl that's the stuff of nightmares. Charon, a monstrous embodiment of an Old Testament afterlife, has haunted me since I visited the Sistine Chapel in 1991.

I never imagined the Ferryman and I would next meet in the husk of an abandoned Sears deep in western suburbia. But there he (?), was, horrific as ever, part of an immersive exhibit that allows visitors to see both Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment* and the magnificent frescoes of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, all from a vantage point that's nearly impossible to achieve if you visit the art in their Vatican home.

At the Vatican, you have to elbow and push like a linebacker to get within eyeshot of Charon. In the old Sears, you can see him in all his otherworldly context. He's one of some 400 characters in the massive painting; some being swept up into heaven and others cast down into Hell. All are depicted in SEE Global Entertainment's pragmatically titled "Mi-

chelangelo's Sistine Chapel," an exhibit large enough to fill a big-box store.

Among abandoned mannequin plinths and forgotten dressing room mirrors, you'll find *The Last Judgment* as well as frescoes from the chapel ceiling transformed into walls of tapestry-sized, high-resolution images. An audio guide provides insight and context

#### "MICHELANGELO'S SISTINE CHAPEL"

Open run (tickets required) at Oakbrook Center, 2000 Oakbrook Center, Oak Brook, \$10-\$27

to the art. A word about religion: far from pandering to his audience, Michelangelo embedded his paintings with the 16th-century version of Easter eggs. Portraits of those who antagonized him and those he loved can be spotted throughout his art. And while the frescoes show a cinematic visual depiction of various tales of the Old Testament, there are also the sibyls: images of the female divine, oracles from ancient Greece.

Viewers wandering the cavernous space will encounter a gallery of biblical terrors. (Judith beheading Holofernes is deeply satisfying and *The Flood* will give you nightmares, especially

given recent events in Germany and China.) But there are wonders too: God literally shows His ass in *The Creation of the Sun, Moon, and Plants* and the *Delphic Sibyl* originates the art of the side-eye when her oracle reading is interrupted.

The touring installation (there are other iterations of the show currently on display in San Antonio, Charlottesville, and Charleston) is the brainchild of Martin Biallas, who had a less-than-optimal experience trying to see the Sistine Chapel.

"It was unpleasant," he recalls. "Long lines. And once you're finally in after a six-hour wait, you're rushed through. You're surrounded by 2,000 other people. There's 50 guards looking at you like if you're even thinking about taking a picture, they're going to tackle you. And the view—it's almost like looking at a stamp, you're so far away."

He continues, "I wanted to make it all more accessible. I wanted this to look like you were walking right under the ceiling."

Spectacle has captivated Biallas since 1975, when he arrived in the United States from West Germany as a student, just in time for this country's Bicentennial fever. "It was just everywhere, the red, white, and blue, everyone was celebrating," he says of the year positively drenched in showily performative patriotism.

More than 40 years later, Biallas's résumé is littered with outsized endeavors: He created "Star Trek—The Tour," a 30th-anniversary international touring exhibition for Paramount; brought Egyptian sacred relics to the world via "Tutankhamun: His Tomb and His Treasures"; and created the "Titanic Official Movie Tour," which opened at Wembley Stadium in 1999. He's got designs on bringing a massive Banksy exhibit to life, and wants to "do something with American history," eventually.

But back to (hello darkness) my old friend Charon. You can practically smell the sulfur as he raises his paddle to smash the skull of any lost soul who might try to escape. Michelangelo painted *The Last Judgment* between 1535 and 1541; the ceiling came much earlier, with the artist actually living in the scaffolding while he labored over it from 1508 to 1512.

"He was very secretive, kept things covered up," Biallas says before telling an apocryphal story: "The Pope tried to get in to see it a few times, and Michelangelo would throw pieces of scaffolding at his head to make him leave."

Visitors tend to initially gravitate toward the (arguably) most recognizable fresco, Biallas said.

"Of course the first thing people will try to spot is *The Creation of Adam*," he says of the iconic image of a white-haired, buff, Old Testament God pointing toward Adam, their outstretched fingers sparking the creation of mankind.

"It's a stunning, iconic image, but I was always more fascinated by *The Last Judgment*," he continues. "It's a perfect representation of our constant temptation, the battle between doing good and not. My dad was a Lutheran minister, so I learned a lot about the church and the bible growing up. But the painting was much more personal to me. I thought the message was timeless: so many things are not good for us or our world, yet we do them anyway," he says.

"*The Last Judgment* is also the only place where Michelangelo put his self-portrait. He was like an early Hitchcock, giving himself this cameo." (You can find the artist's self-portrait in the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew.)

Among the ceiling frescoes, Biallas has his favorites.

"The image of God creating the sun and the planets. There's one guy who is showing his rear end to everyone in that fresco and that's God. Seriously. That's a message," he said.

Biallas is intent on figuring out a U.S. history installation, "... something that could take people from 1776 to today." It's a concept the Hannover native has been mulling since he experienced Bicentennial fever as an undergrad at the University of Michigan.

"When we were being raised (in Germany), we were raised without that kind of patriotism, because of Hitler and what he did in the name of nationalism. We couldn't really be proud to be a German. So to me, it was fascinating how enthusiastic and devoted U.S. citizens were," he says. "When I got my first car here, a Ford, I got a special Bicentennial license plate with it. It made me fall in love with this country."

As for the gorgon, I pity him more than fear him. Of all the terrible jobs in the world, pushing people into a fiery pit has to be among the most terrible. I'll have to come back in another 30 years to see if he has changed, again. ■

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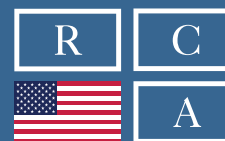
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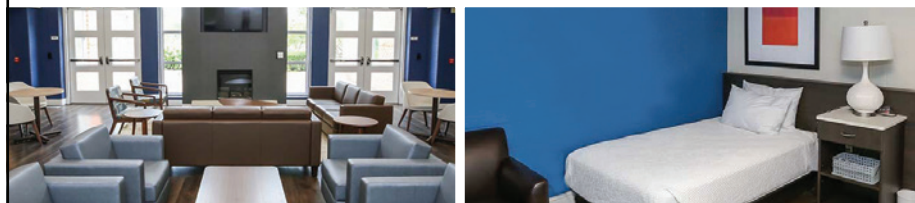


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# THEATER

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*School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play* ◉

FLINT CHANEY

### REVIEW

## The beauty myth

The smart and heartfelt *School Girls* reopens at the Goodman.

By KERRY REID

From the Heathers to the Plastics, teenage girls and their cliques have proved to be a sturdy source of pop culture anthropology. And beauty pageants have also been fertile ground for satirical treatment, from Michael Ritchie's 1975 film *Smile to Little Miss Sunshine*. (And let's not forget Annoyance Theatre's long-running 1990s hit, *The Miss Vagina Pageant*, created by Faith and Joey Soloway.)

But Jocelyn Bioh's *School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play* isn't going for low-hanging fruit of the "look-at-how-shallow-this-world-is" variety. Instead, it takes the basic plot of *Mean Girls* (new girl arrives and upends the social pecking order) and uses it as a springboard for examining postcolonialism and the whiteness of beauty standards.

Lili-Anne Brown's staging for the Goodman was in previews in March 2020 when . . . well, you know. A recording of one of the preview performances was briefly available last year, but now it's back in all its hilarious and heart-breaking live glory on the Goodman's Albert stage. (Brown and Goodman artistic director Robert Falls both made brief comments outside the theater opening night before a symbolic relighting of the Goodman marquee.)

It's 1986, and the girls of the Aburi Girls Senior High (a real place where Bioh's mother was a student) are awaiting the arrival of a representative who will give one of them the chance to be Miss Ghana at the Miss Global Universe pageant. The odds-on favorite is Paulina (Ciera Dawn), who rules over her minions with icy-cold Regina George-esque force. But

her dominance is challenged by the arrival of Ericka Boafo (Kyrie Courter), the Ohio-raised daughter of a local cocoa plantation owner. (Bioh's story was inspired in part by 2009's Miss Minnesota, Erica Nego, who also was elected Miss Universe Ghana in 2011.)

Ericka's kinder to the other girls than Paulina (admittedly a low bar to clear). She also has access to American beauty products and knowledge of pop culture that sets her apart. But it's her light skin that makes her the favorite of Eloise Amponsah (Lanise Antoine Shelley), an Aburi alum who was Miss Ghana 1966 and who is determined to mentor a girl who can win it all on the international stage. And if that means catering to colorism, so be it.

Bioh's script and Brown's staging both work in beautiful synch at unpeeling the complicated layers of these young women's lives. And the older women's, too—the conflict between Shelley's self-conscious glamour-puss (she seems to be channeling Joan Collins's Alexis Colby from *Dynasty* at some points) and the sturdy earnestness of her former classmate, Headmistress Francis (Tania Richard) suggests how long the stab wounds of adolescent battles take to heal.

Ghana only gained independence from Great Britain in 1957—less than ten years before Eloise won her title. In 1986, no Black African woman had won an international pageant, and wouldn't until Mpule Kwelagobe won Miss Universe in 1999. (Vanessa Williams won the Miss America title in 1983, only to resign under pressure from the pageant and

the media when *Penthouse* published nude photos of her without permission. Williams got an apology from the Miss America organization—in 2016.)

The idea that these women aren't just representing their own dreams but those of a country struggling to emerge from the oppression of colonialism is threaded throughout the play, as is the question of how best to counter the standards and stereotypes placed upon them by others. Beat them at their own game, or realize that the game isn't worth the candle? Bioh doesn't provide simple answers. Instead, she provides a chance for young Black women to experience joy, friendship, and conflict, and finally express understanding for the burdens they're all carrying that are too often unspoken.

Of course painful secrets are revealed and schemes are upended. Neither Paulina nor Ericka are exactly who they seem to be at the beginning. But Brown keeps a firm handle on the shifts between the ridiculous (a practice pageant where the girls sing "Greatest Love of All" is a comic highlight) and the poignant. The entire eight-actor ensemble is delightful, but Ashley Crowe as good-hearted Nana, whose penchant for snacking and access to the headmistress's records is exploited by Paulina, is particularly striking. She fully embodies a young woman who just wants to fit into a world that generally seems intent on either ignoring her or constantly finding fault.

At a well-paced 80 minutes, *School Girls*

### RR SCHOOLGIRLS; OR, THE AFRICAN MEAN GIRLS PLAY

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fills the Goodman stage with a smart and sly assessment of the undue burdens placed on Black women just for existing in their own skin. (Our current vice president apparently can't even laugh without it being used as a cudgel against her.) Bioh's play makes its points within a familiar narrative framework, but fleshes them out with subtle yet sharp observational humor and great warmth and empathy for the girls at the heart of the story. **A**

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BY MAYA DUKMASOVA



## A HOME IN CHICAGO:

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neighborhood struggle since  
the collapse of public housing

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Americans have never had a right to housing, and so this country's history is marked by racialized and classed struggles over finding and keeping a home. The racism and discrimination that has defined and divided American life are expressed on the streets of residential neighborhoods.

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While it's by no means a comprehensive portrait of the city's housing struggles, this collection of Dukmasova's articles published between 2014 and 2020 in the *Reader* offers an instructive glimpse into what's been happening here from one writer's vantage point, and could serve as a fine resource packet to students of American housing history now and in the future.



Maya Dukmasova was born in Russia and grew up in the U.S. She has been a staff writer at the *Chicago Reader* since 2016. Her work on housing, gentrification, and racial justice has been featured in *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Vice*. She is also a frequent speaker at housing and community development events. Her latest work is a book on housing and gentrification in Chicago, *The American Dream: How America's Housing Crisis is Being Fixed*.

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## REVIEW

# Annette remains a mystery—but it's a mystery worth watching

The brainchild of Leos Carax and Sparks is a delirious combination of imagination and frustration.

By KATHLEEN SACHS

I ideally I'd be writing this review ten to 15 years from now, or maybe even longer—so unsure am I as to whether *Annette* is a minor masterpiece in the present moment or something even greater that belongs to the ages and which we can't fully comprehend in the here and now.

The latter sentiment would be consistent with the work of the film's auteurs: director and cowriter Leos Carax (*Mauvais Sang*, *Pola X*, *Holy Motors*), whose oeuvre is demarcated by an eminently personal and highly cerebral sensibility; and cowriters and composers Ron and Russell Mael, who comprise the should-be-legendary band Sparks. Carax, a veritable enfant terrible who started off writing criticism for *Cahiers du Cinéma* before directing his first feature, *Boy Meets Girl* (1984),

while still in his early 20s, thrives in the realm of the misunderstood; to be fair, though, most of his films have received some degree of critical and commercial success.

The Mael brothers, for their part, have been ahead of their time so frequently in the five decades they've been performing that it's no surprise the duo let loose onto the world this madcap rock operetta. The project was born out of the Maels' career-long desire to make a movie, which had fallen through—and with such luminaries as Jacques Tati and Tim Burton, no less—several times before. The brothers reportedly wrote the music for *Annette* almost nine years ago and only after a chance meeting with Carax at the Cannes Film Festival were they able to bring the project to fruition as an actual film, versus a concept

## Annette

album as in the case of their 2009 venture *The Seduction of Ingmar Bergman*.

Their musical *Annette*, a delirious combination of imagination and (I'm sure) frustration, begins with an indelible clarion call befitting the pair. Carax himself, along with his daughter, appears in the control booth of a recording studio, the metaphor here obvious: he's the director of this amply conceived fever dream writ large. Ron and Russell sit behind the glass, and a particularly catchy song begins. "So may we start?" it asks, as the brothers stand up, walk out of the studio, and into the street, joined by Carax and, later, the film's stars: Adam Driver, Marion Cotillard, and Simon Helberg. (If someone had told me that a cast member from *The Big Bang Theory* would be in a Leos Carax film, well . . . this would be the year for such absurdity.) Leave it to Sparks to be so gracious in asking if they may delight us with their singular brand of unequivocal supplications.

After the song ends, the actors assume their roles and the story begins. Driver, appropriately bizarre and intense—and a spiritual stand-in, it would seem, for Carax regular Denis Lavant—plays a Brechtian comedian-provocateur called Henry McHenry; Cotillard a superlative opera soprano named Ann Defrasnoux. The two fall in love, and Carax illuminates their romantic trajectory with sequences of the couple singing and making love. The repeated, sung refrain of, "We love each other so much" (the film is mostly sung, with very little straightforward dialogue) establishes that trifling, almost designative view of love respective to the high arts and cheesy pop music; the combination of these two forms typifies the relationship between Carax and the band, exhibiting the radical candor of maudlin pop choruses and certain French New Wave films (and those inspired by them) alike.

Ann gives birth to a daughter, Annette, who's portrayed by a creepy puppet that resembles a monkey. (I'd say she also resembles Lavant, though I'm not sure if that's intentional; another potential coincidence is the film's overuse of the color green, a motif in Carax's last feature, *Holy Motors*.) Things go downhill for the couple afterward, as fatherhood and a decline in popularity catapult Henry into a

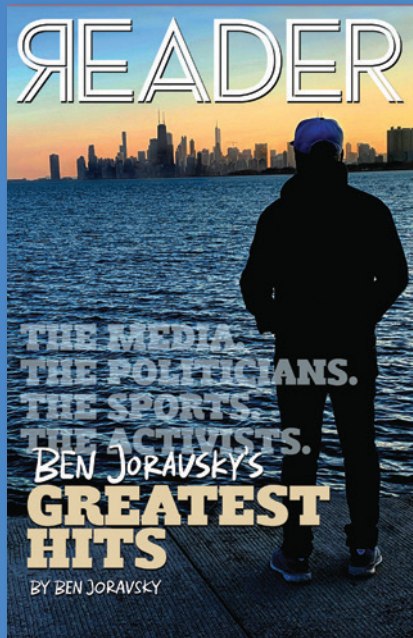
distemper of operatic proportions. In appropriately melodramatic fashion, the drama reaches its apogee at sea aboard the couple's yacht, with a swell that pulls Ann overboard. Her ultimate demise, a predicament inherent to tragedies of the stage, had been foreshadowed from the beginning; she vows to haunt Henry through their daughter, which happens by way of the infant Annette bursting into song whenever a light shines on her.

Henry teams up with a conductor (credited simply as The Conductor and played by Helberg) who'd previously accompanied Ann at the opera, and the two take the magical puppet songbird on a world tour. Driven by his rage and jealousy, Henry commits a final, tragic act that condemns him in the eyes of the law and his child. I'm unsure if spoilers matter when discussing an avant-garde rock opera, but to leave a little more to surprise, I'll refrain from revealing the final aberration. Suffice it to say, this tale of doomed lovers concludes in a way befitting the form and the filmmakers.

But what to make of it all? What message do Carax and the Brothers Mael hope to convey, if any? One need only watch one of Carax's previous films or listen to a Sparks album to know that these are artists who revel in the act of creating. Carax has long been driven by a fervor to put images onto the screen with little desire for the audience to interpret them (though they're often autobiographical in nature), much less interpret them himself, while the Mael brothers excel in making pop music that's singular in its polished simplicity (consider the chorus of their song "Balls": "Balls. All you need are / Balls. To succeed are / Balls. All you need are / Balls.")—the collaborators find common ground in their uncompromising vision.

Perhaps some day soon it will click for me, and *Annette* will reveal itself with all its mysteries solved. There are many possible explications of what it's about, from the complexities of love to the deficiencies of fame to the existential deadlock that is parenthood—dilemmas that Carax has explored before (and, to some degree, experienced himself). And as is typical of the band, it's hard to say what Sparks hopes for the audience to get out of this other than just getting it out there, to be enjoyed and interpreted as viewers see fit. More likely the truth will evade me, even if my appreciation for the film evolves over the years. Until then, I'll have a killer soundtrack to listen to. **F**

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The Suicide Squad

NOW PLAYING

RR *The Boy Behind the Door*

*The Boy Behind the Door* makes space for a heartwarming friendship in an otherwise harrowing horror story. The only thing that offers a semblance of respite in first-time feature filmmakers David Charbonier and Justin Powell's bone-chilling film is the bond between tweens Bobby (Lonnie Chavis) and Kevin (Ezra Dewey). When they are abducted and taken to a remote location, Bobby manages to escape, but instead of running for his life, he's compelled by Kevin's screams to turn back and try to rescue his best friend. Moving undetected through a house of horrors, each step Bobby takes is truly more terrifying than the last, both because of the maze-like setting and Bobby's adolescent clumsiness, which threatens to reveal his presence to the homeowners. The suspension this creates is interspersed with unnerving violence, which supports the kidnapers' unconscionable motive, solidifying that absolutely no one, especially not the children, is safe. —**BECCA JAMES** 88 min. *Shudder*

RR *The Green Knight*

*The Green Knight* is at its best when it's at its weirdest. A24, with its reputation for visual sumptuousness and bold, unsettling storytelling, seems a perfect fit for an adaptation of the 14th-century chivalric romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, an Arthurian tale of magic, violence, and honor whose strangeness continues to fascinate modern readers. The film excels when it leans into this fascinating strangeness, showing us fantastical, horrific sights and teasing us with chronological fake-outs in its plot. Those looking for a film that does full justice to the original tale, however, may be disappointed by *The Green Knight's* lapse into a familiar story of a womanizing ne'er-do-well taught the true value of honor through his trials. The magnetic leading man, Dev Patel, shines. With his long, noble features and his talent for expressive vulnerability, he does his best work when he is allowed to live out Gawain's moments of terror, confusion, and cowardice. In all, *The Green Knight*

offers some genuinely striking cinematography along with some interesting story work and a highly watchable leading man. If only it were weirder. —**COLLEEN MORRISSEY** 108 min. *In theaters at AMC Theatres, Landmark's Century Centre Cinema, Music Box Theatre, Regal Theatres, ShowPlace Icon Theatre*

RR *John and the Hole*

In many ways, *John and the Hole* evokes a Michael Haneke horror. A coming-of-age psychological thriller, it's quiet, eerie, and enveloped in affluence. Following 13-year-old John (Charlie Shotwell) and his father (Michael C. Hall), mother (Jennifer Ehle), and sister (Taisa Farmiga) as they live out their days in a modern home among the trees, the film is visually serene. Underneath this idyllic image, however, hums a disturbance—John is fucked up. Having found an old bunker in his backyard, he decides to drug his family and then drag them into it, holding them captive in the hole while they plead for his help. John then proceeds to live out a relatively tame fantasy of adulthood as his family suffers. Less severe than *We Need To Talk About Kevin* and even less sinister than *Goodnight Mommy*, this film is still down to play on the ever-present paternal fear of having reared a bad seed. —**BECCA JAMES** *In wide release on VOD and select theaters*

*Jungle Cruise*

Predictable yet fun, *Jungle Cruise* is the long-time-coming adaptation of the theme park attraction of the same name at Disneyland. It's an interesting development after the ride was closed this year for refurbishments that, among other changes, would remove the attraction's imperialist and racist content. The 2021 film stars a man of color (Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson) alongside a woman (Emily Blunt) and her queer (or at least queer-coded) brother during WWI as they embark on a mission into a jungle to find the Tree of Life, which is believed to possess healing powers. Blunt is convincing enough, albeit a tad boring; The Rock is still The Rock, and although he won't win any Oscars anytime soon for *Jungle Cruise*, his performance is charming and heart-

felt. Fans of 1999's *The Mummy* might find *Jungle Cruise* a bit too familiar, though not as funny and definitely not as scary. But it's still an enjoyable family-friendly adventure even if it's not one you'd watch twice. —**NOËLLE D. LILLEY** 127 min. *Streaming on Disney+, in theaters at AMC Theatres, Logan Theatre, Regal Theatres*

*The Last Mercenary*

In this latest Jean-Claude Van Damme vehicle, a rowdy and rag-tag ensemble cast rounds out an enjoyable action-comedy. When an infamous secret agent, Richard Brumère/The Mist (Jean-Claude Van Damme), learns that his estranged son has been falsely accused of arms trafficking, he returns to France to rescue him but learns that fatherhood may be his toughest mission. Trying to prevent the sale of a devastating weapon while saving his son, Brumère is forced to choose between the country he serves and a son he barely knows.

Written and directed by David Charhon, *The Last Mercenary* is a decent romp despite issues with pacing. While the script loses momentum, the action sequences largely make up for it, and there's always a quip or absurdly comedic situation just around the corner. For his part, Van Damme has progressed into middle-aged action star relatively gracefully, and while always being known more for his splits than his acting, finds a nice little niche in the comedic script. The set pieces are engaging—a special shout-out to one half-naked scooter scramble—and when combined with some of the more ridiculous schemes our band of heroes put together in order to unravel the plot, *The Last Mercenary* hits its most entertaining notes. —**ADAM MULLINS-KHATIB** 111 min. *Netflix*

RR *Old*

*Old* is a moving look at existence brought to life by an enthralling cast. Following couple Guy (Gael García Bernal) and Prisca (Vicky Krieps) and their two young children, Maddox and Trent, on a tropical vacation, the holiday becomes horrific in a hurry. When the family visits a secluded beach, they realize it's mysteriously causing them to age so rapidly that their entire lives exist in one day. It plays sort of like an expanded version of that one scene from the cult-classic *Cube 2: Hypercube*. Bolstered by a strong cast of fellow visitor-victims, the varied reactions to disastrous fates add interest to the mounting tension as time ticks on faster than is fair. And while seeing an M. Night Shyamalan movie is undoubtedly joining in on a rousing game of Guess The Twist, the thing about *Old* is whether viewers win that game or not, it's worth the watch. —**BECCA JAMES** 108 min. *In theaters at AMC Theatres, Logan Theatre, Pickwick Theatre, Regal Theatres, ShowPlace ICON Theatre*

RR *The Suicide Squad*

After the disaster that was the 2016 *Suicide*

*Squad*, the recent incarnation of *The Suicide Squad*, directed by James Gunn (*Guardians of the Galaxy*), is a delicious heap-of-dismembered-bodies worth of improvement. It's not quite *Deadpool* in terms of intelligent self-aware humor, but it is still a ferociously funny film and far and away DC's best offering yet. Based on John Ostrander's classic comic, the movie follows a group of expendable, government-sanctioned super villains on a mission to the fictional island Corto Maltese to fight even worse bad guys. The all-star cast of Margot Robbie (Harley Quinn), Idris Elba (Bloodsport), John Cena (Peacemaker), and Viola Davis (Amanda Waller) confidently strut in their roles, racking up the body count, but it's Daniela Melchior (*Ratcatcher 2*), David Dastmalchian (*Polka-Dot Man*), and Sylvester Stallone voicing the horribly lovable CGI-rendered King Shark who stand out as audience favorites. While no previous comic book knowledge is required to follow this pretty standard mission-gone-wrong story, nerds will delight in Easter egg appearances of villains such as Starro and Calendar Man. Anyone seeing a film called *The Suicide Squad* should expect cartoonish levels of blood and murder and not get too attached to any characters. The opening scene steals directly from *Deadpool 2*, a movie that perfectly parodied such ridiculous team-ups. Yet these baddies find their heart and have the chance to be heroes. At least they draw the line at killing children, which is the bad guy's equivalent of "having a conscience." —**JOSH FLANDERS** *Streaming on HBO Max and in theaters at AMC Theatres, Regal Theatre, Logan Theatre, Pickwick Theatre, ShowPlace Icon Theatre*

RR *Whirlybird*

Matt Yoka's debut documentary chronicles a pivotal moment in broadcast journalism with charm and heart. *Whirlybird* follows then-married reporting duo Marika Gerrard and Zoey Tur (the parents of MSNBC's Katy Tur) as they go from broke, on-the-ground stringers to capturing history from above the streets of Los Angeles in a helicopter. Gerrard and Tur's interviews help frame the immeasurable amount of archival footage and stories they covered—the O.J. Simpson Ford Bronco chase, the 1992 LA riots, among others. And there's a depressing and obsessive sense of competition (being the first, the biggest, and the best) that reverberates throughout not only the film, but the journalism industry as we know it today. *Whirlybird* also thoughtfully tackles the changing relationship between the film's central figures, not just throughout their chaotic career, but in their own personal lives as Tur undergoes social and medical transition (though most of that is unfortunately shoehorned in the end). *Whirlybird* is an essential watch to understand the evolution of how the news is told and shared, but the film is ultimately grounded by its central emotional core. —**CODY CORRALL** 103 min. *Gene Siskel Film Center*

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Alex Banin found this papier-mâché bunny head, which appears on the cover of *Did I Imagine* (and in the video for “Forget About It”), at Rogers Park vintage store Lost Eras. © NATHAN VALENCIA

# Alex Banin mixes pop with R&B—and memory with fantasy

The former college fencer uses her debut EP, *Did I Imagine*, to make peace with her old relationships.

By **TARA C. MAHADEVAN**

Alex Banin interlaces pop melodies and R&B vocals with an intuitive grace that seems to transcend her 23 years. On her new debut EP, *Did I Imagine*, she uses past relationships as an entry point for reflection, unpacking old connections in an attempt to move on. The songs are a study of memory—of how distance, time, and emotions can warp the past.

Born in London, raised in New York City, and now based in Chicago, Banin says songwriting was always “in the background” as she grew up—something she did alone. Self-taught except for a few childhood piano lessons, she viewed it purely as a private creative outlet. It wasn’t until late in high school that she started sharing her work with others—and it still

took her another few years to begin pursuing music in earnest. By that point, pretty much everything else in her life had taken a back seat to fencing.

Banin says she started fencing when she was seven because she thought “swords were cool.” She began college in 2016, arriving at Northwestern University in Evanston as a fencing recruit. The team became the center of her world for almost four years, and its demands—frequent traveling and early-morning practices—meant she had little room to polish her music or learn to get comfortable performing it.

Banin found herself stealing moments during fencing practice to jot down lyrics. She also found community with other musicians

at Northwestern, she says, which transformed her formerly solo songwriting process and ushered her into Chicago’s music scene “pretty naturally.”

In some ways, she explains, the way she got into fencing mirrors the way she got into music. “[Fencing] got out of hand at some point,” she says. “I just liked it. And I started competing locally, and then it just grew from there. Kind of like how music started too—I liked it, and then you start meeting more people and doing it more seriously. And now I’m here.”

Late in 2019, before Banin had played a single show, she signed with Chicago music management and artist development agency Loop Theory. *Did I Imagine* is self-released, but

Loop Theory helped her produce and release some of her early singles, as well as create the accompanying art and videos. The agency’s current roster includes Brittney Carter, Dre Izaya, and Heir Porter.

Banin quit fencing in January 2020, two months before what would’ve been the end of her final season. She says she’d been “battling” with the decision, but she was able to use those two months to give her first public performances—at Soho House in the West Loop and at SPACE in Evanston—right before the pandemic hit.

“I’m glad I made that decision, even though it felt hard in the moment,” she says. “I didn’t feel like an artist before. Now it feels real. It was always fun, but it feels more purposeful. I guess the difference is we’re making songs—before it was ideas.”

Being in community with other musicians has also been eye-opening for her. “I’d never really been with creatives, and this makes so much more sense,” she says. “It’s really freeing. It’s definitely what I want to be doing with my life, especially right now.”

COVID-19 promptly derailed her fledgling career as a performer, of course, and graduating during lockdown confronted her with its own set of questions: “Where am I gonna live?” she asked herself. “What am I gonna do? How am I gonna make money?” She’d been planning on playing more shows. “I went back to just writing songs by myself a lot,” she says. “A lot of music came out of it.”

Banin wrote two of the singles that preceded *Did I Imagine*, “About April” and “Hawthorne,” back-to-back in lockdown isolation. On the melancholic “About April,” released in June 2020, she speaks to a past lover about their relationship hitting the rocks. Over a delicate guitar and tapping synths, she sings about the breakup as though it’s a waking dream: “There’s nothing underneath all of the peeling tape / Entire pools could hold our weight / You bought your shoes to fly away.”

“Hawthorne,” which came out in November, shares the hushed tones of “About April,” so that Banin’s voice rings out with quiet intensity. Accompanied by subdued keys, she describes an untrustworthy love: “I don’t really

care / Yeah, body languages speak / Guess that our love's insincere / But it's all that I need."

The material on *Did I Imagine* departs somewhat from the restless interior monologues and gloomy beats of these singles—its four songs are bigger, brighter productions, both in sound and spirit. While she was finishing the EP this spring, she was finally able to leave the house, travel, and connect with musicians in real time—people she'd become used to working with virtually.

The recording process was liberating for Banin. Though she recorded most of the vocals in Chicago, other parts of the EP she crafted on trips to Los Angeles, where she worked with Chuck Inglish of the Cool Kids on opening track "Closure." She also visited Minneapolis to work with frequent collaborator vlush, whom she'd met in Chicago; he assisted on "Closure" and produced "Rolling," whose verse from Pivot Gang rapper Saba is the only feature on the project. Chicago bassist, DJ, and producer Timmy V made the beat for "Forget About It," and most of the mixing and mastering happened here too: Elton "LIOMixedIt" Cheung of Classick Studios and Matt Hennessy of VSOP Studios lent Banin their talents, respectively.

Banin worked on the songwriting during quarantine, when she was thinking a lot about old relationships and trying to put herself back in years-old situations. "Forget About It," where she faces up to her longing for a past lover, had its beginnings in 2019, but she revisited it for the EP. The closing song, "Brooklyn," focuses on a mercurial relationship from four years ago.

As its title suggests, *Did I Imagine* hinges on the imagination: to write these songs, Banin decluttered her memory, even amid uncertainty, and pieced together her recollections in sometimes abstract shapes. She uses songwriting to channel her frustrations—she uses the word "venting" to describe the process, and for her it's the root of her music.

Right from the outset, against the house- and funk-laden rhythm and snappy, propulsive bass line of "Closure," Banin censures a former suitor. "Baby, that's if you noticed / You're out here bogus," she sings. "Maybe you need to focus / On your emotions." The feeling is pure in its simplicity: a love that was once nourishing is now draining.

The wistful "Rolling" opens with a dissonant, off-putting, heavily processed voice, then recalls a story of possible heartbreak. On "Forget About It," Banin's burning vocals make the case for shaking off the past—but the old sentiment she's feeling is cavernous: "Miss you like a lover would / Missing you so damn good / I'll just roll this Backwood / And forget about it."

"Brooklyn" is the only song given a real-world location, but it still leaves us in a dream state: "And you were too broken / I couldn't relate to you when we were in Brooklyn," she sings. "I tried but I can't replace you / Everything you said to me / Disintegrates in memories."

So far Banin has made one video from *Did I Imagine*: a bizarre visual story for "Forget About It." At Rogers Park vintage and costume store Lost Eras, she found several oversize, wearable bunny heads à la *Donnie Darko* or *Alice in Wonderland* and became obsessed. "They're like these handmade heads from the 50s—like, this lady made papier-mâché bunny heads," she says. She bought one and rented six more for the video.

Directed by Michael del Rosario, the video surrounds Banin with people wearing bunny heads or snug full-head masks of blank white fabric; they're at what looks like a birthday party and in a movie theater, where the bunny people make out and eat popcorn. At one point, she puts on one of the bunny heads herself in the middle of the street, interspersed with mundane footage like a phone conversation.

The cover art for *Did I Imagine*, shot by photographer Nathan Valencia, shows Banin seated against a green backdrop beneath a spotlight, a bunny head at her feet. The prop, she says, goes "along with the imagination theme and people living in a fantasy world in the real world."

She admits that some of the memories she revisits on the EP may be more fantasy than reality. "Did this happen the way that I remember it? When you remember and you're painting a better picture than what was there, you don't really remember," she says. "You're filling in the spaces, and it's so nice, but it's not necessarily real. That's how I wrote this—I was very retrospective and introspective."

In her effort to move on, Banin lets her intuition guide her. Her investigations of past relationships push her to accept and welcome those memories—either for what they are or for what she's remade them to be.

Banin feels kinship with Chicago's music scene, and making *Did I Imagine* only deepened it. "I started here. Everything I know is here or people that I met out of here," she says. "It's accessible. There's a lot of creativity here."

Moving on is a theme of the EP, though, and Banin herself plans to move in September. She's headed to LA, she says, to explore some opportunities that have come up there. She's not sure how permanent it'll be—but then again, that's true of everything she's done so far. 📧

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## PICK OF THE WEEK

## Quin Kirchner puts a contemporary spin on mid-20th-century jazz



Quin Kirchner (center) with Matt Ulery, Nick Broste, Jason Stein, and Nate Lepine. COURTESY THE ARTIST

## QUIN KIRCHNER QUINTET

Sun 8/8, 9 PM, Hungry Brain, 2319 W. Belmont, donation suggested. 21+

**QUIN KIRCHNER BLEW INTO** Chicago in 2005, after Hurricane Katrina devastated his old hometown of New Orleans. He wasted no time making himself essential as a drummer, and since then he's played with a wide variety of acts: Afrobeat combo Nomo, tropical pop band Wild Belle, singer-guitarist Ryley Walker, and countless jazz ensembles. In all these settings, he's supplied crisp grooves and percussive coloration that keep the music flowing. Kirchner didn't release his first album as a bandleader, *The Other Side of Time* (Astral Spirits/Spacetone), till 2018, and it was worth the wait. The double LP contains an astutely selected program of tunes by Charles Mingus, Sun Ra, and Phil Cohran, as well as some Kirchner originals that are similarly tuneful, emotionally charged, and ingeniously constructed. All of them update a mid-20th-century understanding of the jazz band as a vehicle for sophisticated artisanship and impassioned communication—to that rarefied ideal, Kirchner brings electronic postproduction that borders on the psychedelic. *The Shadows and the Light*, another double album released last year by the same labels, further expands that sound with extra players, funky keyboards, and layered percussion. The quintet Kirchner will lead at the Hungry Brain, which consists of bassist Matt Ulery, trombonist Nick Broste, bass clarinetist Jason Stein, and woodwind player Nate Lepine, is the core band on both releases. You can expect material from each album plus some new tunes under development. —BILL MEYER

CONCERT PREVIEW  
THURSDAY<sup>5</sup>

**EMILY JANE POWERS** *Dream Version* headlines; *Emily Jane Powers and Deep Fake* open. 8 PM, Schubas, 3159 N. Southport, \$13, \$10 in advance. 18+

When local folk-pop artist Jessica Risker interviewed Chicago singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Emily Jane Powers on her *Music Therapy* podcast in April 2020, Powers was halfway through recording an album. "I wanted to make a guitar-forward record," Powers told Risker. "I wanted to let the guitar speak for me." On the album in question, *Isometry* (which she self-released this past June), her guitars alternately howl and coo, sometimes snapping like gators fighting over a tantalizing fish. Powers says she drew inspiration from classic rock songs with dueling guitars, and she supercharges "Blue Black Grey White" with sprinting hammer-ons. Her playing isn't all fireworks, though: she molds the sound of her six-string to fit whatever mood she wants, conforming to a Krautrock-like pulse on "Low Tide" and gently flowing through the spacious "PA Fog." Those metamorphoses are ultimately what makes *Isometry* so captivating. —LEOR GALIL

FRIDAY<sup>6</sup>

**LIAM KAZAR** See also Saturday. *Peter Cottontale* opens. 9 PM, *Sleeping Village*, 3734 W. Belmont, \$17, \$15 in advance. 21+

Multi-instrumentalist Liam Kazar has been so crucial to my evolving understanding of Chicago's bustling, magnanimous music scene that I felt a little heartbroken when he moved to Kansas City in 2019. He'd risen to national fame in the early 2010s as part of the youthful fusion ensemble Kids These Days, whose idealistic collision of jazz, rock, and hip-hop worked thanks to the personalities involved, among them Macie Stewart of Ohmme and rapper Vic Mensa. Kazar has since established himself as a key player, helping the city's music community thrive while doing his part to make sure the borders separating its microscenes stay porous; he cofounded underappreciated indie group Marrow, and he's been part of live lineups for several nationally renowned rock bands, most notably Tweedy, the duo of Wilco's Jeff Tweedy and his son Spencer. It seemed like Kazar was on the bill at every show I saw, and even when he wasn't, I'd half-expect to catch him in the crowd. Before he moved away, Kazar worked at the Hungry Brain, and at the start of the pandemic he released a covers compilation to benefit the venue.

Kazar has long been a team player, so it's a delight to finally hear him pour some of his considerable energy into his own material. His new solo debut, *Due North* (Woodsist/Mare), rests on the firm foundation of his pop know-how, but it also oozes with funk swagger and glam panache to spare. These songs glide so smoothly you'd almost believe Kazar is utterly relaxed, even though it's





Emily Jane Powers RACHEL WINSLOW

clear he's thought out every last one of the frizzled guitar riffs and squelching keyboard notes that he uses like pointillist brushstrokes on the technical or "Shoes Too Tight." *Due North* also showcases Kazar's powers as a front man, and his subtly soulful voice guides you tenderly through the album's easygoing highs and lows. On "Frank Bacon," when he embellishes his pop-minded sound with a touch of southern-rock twang, it's positively sublime.

—LEOR GALIL

## SATURDAY 7

**LIAM KAZAR** See Friday. *Sports Boyfriend* opens. 9 PM, *Sleeping Village*, 3734 W. Belmont, \$17, \$15 in advance. 21+

**YASSER TEJEDA** Second and final day of the LatiNxt Festival, featuring Yasser Tejeda & Palotr , Hector Guerra, Salt Cathedral, and others. 2 PM (Yasser Tejeda & Palotr  perform at 8:30), Navy Pier, 600 E. Grand. FREE

The Dominican Republic is famous for merengue and bachata, but Yasser Tejeda prefers to focus on lesser-known varieties of Dominican roots music. He reimagines centuries-old Afro-Dominican styles, especially palo, a sacred form of music traditionally played in the countryside that involves complex call-and-response rhythms created by drums called palos and voices. His elegantly polished compositions contain a fascinating, delicate interplay of past and present, and they're underlain by raw ancestral music meant to move bodies and bring about spiritual communion. With his band Palotr , Tejeda does jazz- and rock-infused deep dives into rhythms (including palos) played by the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit of the Congos de Villa Mella (an ensemble that's been named part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO). Palos are at the heart of secular and spiritual gatherings called quijombos, and Teje-

da's second album, *Kijombo*—a danceable, exhilarating fusion of Dominican roots rhythms with soulful, R&B-tinged jazz—takes its names from those celebrations. He also recently released a three-song EP called *Interior*, which strips down *Kijombo* tracks "Nuestras Ra ces" and "Amor Arrayano" and adds the new song "El Sol de la Madrugada." On the EP he uses just voice and guitar, and his nuanced, percussive chords echo the drumbeats of certain palos. I can't wait to be enveloped in Palotr 's textured sound when they headline day two of the LatiNxt Festival on Navy Pier, where they'll share the power of what Tejeda celebrates in the first lines of "Nuestras Ra ces" ("Our Roots"): "Siente este ritmo / Que es de esta isla / Palos caribe os / Fuente infinita" ("Feel this rhythm / It's from this island / Caribbean palos / An infinite wellspring").

—CATALINA MARIA JOHNSON

## SUNDAY 8

**QUIN KIRCHNER QUINTET** See *Pick of the Week* at left. 9 PM, *Hungry Brain*, 2319 W. Belmont, donation suggested. 21+

## THURSDAY 12

**CHUCK PROPHET & THE MISSION EXPRESS** 8 PM, *SPACE*, 1245 Chicago, Evanston, \$22.

If the best parts of your classic British Invasion, 50s country, 60s pop, and pure rock 'n' roll records could be transformed into a person, they might look and sound a lot like Chuck Prophet. For almost 30 years, this Bay Area songwriter has reliably delivered albums so pleasingly familiar that, had he started a few decades earlier, it'd be easy to imagine him outshining the likes of Tom Petty and Bruce Springsteen. Prophet (who also plays FitzGerald's on October 26) has the charisma of an arena star, and thanks to his catchy guitar riffs, powerful cho-



Yasser Tejeda MARIO RUB N CARRI N



Chuck Prophet &amp; the Mission Express COURTESY THE ARTIST

ruses, and seductively casual vocal style, which could trick you into thinking he's talking straight into your ear, his live shows always sound larger than the clubs where he plays. Other artists often cover Prophet's songs, and many of them, including Alejandro Escovedo and Kim Richey, have turned to him as a writing partner on their albums. Prophet's own work has only improved over the years, as evidenced by his recent run of records, from 2012's *Temple Beautiful*, a tribute to the vanishing underbelly of San Francisco, till last year's *The Land That Time Forgot*, which contains sharp wordplay and lovely sad songs about dead presidents and sensitive metalheads. Onstage as on his latest album, Prophet is accompanied by the harmony and duet vocals of keyboardist Stephanie Finch, his wife and long-running foil (she's stoic, he's energetic). Like

many great troubadours before him, Prophet often writes about beautiful losers, people edged out of society by gentrification, and corrupt political regimes. But the songs on *The Land That Time Forgot* have a softer edge. "High as Johnny Thunders" is a testament to an unimaginable dream world where excess makes sense: "If heartbreak was a virtue, man, I'd be so virtuous," he sings. Prophet is at a moment where his material sounds effortless and forthright. His acoustic guitar's strings squeak as his fingers slide along the neck on "Meet Me at the Roundabout," the most confident love song since Springsteen sang "I Wanna Marry You." "We've got no obligations / No one to impress," Prophet sings. "Go on and ask me anything / The answer will be yes." —MARK GUARINO



Abstract Mindstate: E.P. da Hellcat and Olskool Ice-Gre © MIKE QUAIN



Jackie Hayes © COURTESY THE ARTIST

## continued from 41 ALBUM REVIEWS

**ABSTRACT MINDSTATE, *DREAMS STILL INSPIRE***  
YZY SND  
[abstractmindstate.bandcamp.com/music](http://abstractmindstate.bandcamp.com/music)

I routinely scroll through all the new music people have uploaded to Bandcamp using the “Chicago” tag, and in January I noticed something curious: *Still Paying*, the previously unreleased second album by local hip-hop duo Abstract Mindstate. The group recorded it in 2004 and planned to release it in '05, but the material got shelved and they broke up that year. Rapper E.P. da Hellcat became a behavioral analyst, and her former bandmate, rapper-producer Olskool Ice-Gre, immediately began working more closely with one of the contributors on *Still Paying*, Kanye West. Over the past couple years underappreciated, forgotten, or never-released Chicago hip-hop recordings have made their way onto Bandcamp with greater frequency, so I didn't think twice about seeing a wealth of Abstract Mindstate music—demos, EPs, mixtapes, solo work, unreleased recordings—materialize on the site throughout that month. Perhaps I should've guessed something was afoot, but I can't imagine anyone predicting that Abstract Mindstate would reunite at Kanye West's behest.

Kanye's public behavior has been abhorrent since he cozied up to Trump a few years ago, and it'd be irresponsible to forget his garrulous recitations of right-wing talking points. From a certain angle, Kanye reuniting Abstract Mindstate—and producing the entirety of their brand-new full-length, *Dreams Still Inspire*, and releasing it to launch his new label, ZYZY SND—can be seen as an olive branch to the hip-hop community burned by his recent antics. *Dreams Still Inspire* is a deliriously joyous sample-based hip-hop album that captures a sound that old heads swear died two decades ago. Abstract Mindstate have retained all the magical chemistry that ignited between E.P. and Gre when they

met at Jackson State in Mississippi in the late 90s. Their brief, burly bars on “A Wise Tale” provide as much of an adrenaline boost as the skipping, soulful vocal sample that propels the song. Abstract Mindstate's members are both in their 40s, and they bring the wisdom and perspective of their longer lives to their lyrics. On “My Reality,” when E.P. raps about balancing mundane tasks at her day job with the surreal experience of reuniting with Gre, I find myself wondering what other great storytelling this duo could've committed to tape during the 15 years they were split up. —LEOR GALIL

### **ANNIHILUS, *FOLLOW A SONG FROM THE SKY***

**Federal Prisoner**  
[federalprisoner.shop/products/annihilus-lp-black-smoke](http://federalprisoner.shop/products/annihilus-lp-black-smoke)

Chicago multi-instrumentalist and *Reader* contributor Luca Cimarusti is having a busy summer. In July his minimalist postpunk trio, Luggage, dropped the album *Happiness*, and now he's about to put out the second full-length from his black-metal solo project, Annihilus. Cimarusti originally wanted to keep this project anonymous, but he dropped that idea after releasing his first demo, deciding that the mystique of anonymity wasn't worth the trouble and distraction of maintaining it. Last year's full-length debut, *Ghanima* (American Decline), earned rave reviews and immediately established Annihilus as a project to watch.

Cimarusti named Annihilus after a Marvel Comics villain from the so-called Negative Zone who first appeared in the late 60s, but even if you know about his plan to destroy the universe with a bomb harnessing the Power Cosmic, it really won't prepare you for the fury of the new Annihilus record. *Follow a Song From the Sky* is a deep and wild album, full of eloquent rage and formidable artistry. Its raw guitar work and vocals have strong links to punk, industrial, ambient, and postrock, and Cimarusti can switch gears between the eerie and the absolutely unhinged; “Draw the Beast,” which

features guest vocals by Ryan Wichmann of Sick/Tired, is especially brutal in this way. “Winter Song” settles into a harsh, sharp-edged groove and sustains it for a perfectly satisfying length before erupting into a glorious coda that sounds almost like an old-school rocker grinding a guitar against an amp. While Annihilus is technically a solo project, Cimarusti is hardly a loner, and on *Follow* he welcomes collaborations from several local musicians. Electronic composer Brett Naucke adds simmering, boiling noise to several tracks; Dan Binaei of Racetractor and Trevor de Brauw of Pelican contribute guitar to “AMA” and “Song From the Sky,” respectively; and Brian Case of FACS turns in a mesmerizing vocal performance on “Song From the Sky.” The first single from the album, “The Voice of Shai-Hulud” (inspired by Frank Herbert's *Dune* series), condenses an epic journey into less than five minutes—you can almost feel the sand blowing into your eyes. If this past year and a half has taught us anything, it's that the creative impulse will not be denied, even under terrible conditions. On *Follow a Song From the Sky*, Cimarusti shows how it can be adapted into wondrous new mutations. —MONICA KENDRICK

### **DAMON & NAOMI WITH KURIHARA, *A SKY RECORD***

20-20-20  
[damonandnaomi.bandcamp.com/album/a-sky-record](http://damonandnaomi.bandcamp.com/album/a-sky-record)

One of the few positive aspects of the pandemic is how it's highlighted the importance and irreplaceability of our relationships, even as a tangled web of geographic and public health considerations has often made it unclear when (or even if) we might be able to see one another after prolonged separation. *A Sky Record*, the new album from Boston dream-pop duo Damon & Naomi and Japanese experimental guitarist Michio Kurihara, was born out of a friendship that started a quarter century ago, when Damon Krukowski and Naomi Yang met Kurihara's old band, long-running Japanese psych outfit Ghost. The two groups joined forces for the

2000 release *Damon & Naomi With Ghost* and kept the door open for further collaborations; Kurihara and fellow Ghost guitarist Masaki Batoh contributed to Damon & Naomi's 2011 album *False Beats and True Hearts*. The material on *A Sky Record* began to take shape when Damon & Naomi toured Japan in 2019 and met with Kurihara to record at suburban Tokyo studio Peace Music, and reached its final form while the musicians were isolated on opposite sides of the globe. Serene opener “Oceans in Between” conjures just this sort of circumstance, with Yang singing about love and longing across a vast distance before Kurihara's electrifying guitar solo appears like a wistful message in a bottle that's somehow reached its intended recipient from a world apart. “Split Screen” grapples with how technology can bring us together while making us feel further apart, but throughout the album, water and nature remain ever present, and each song rolls like a gentle wave. (This might be because during quarantine Kurkowi and Yang developed an interest in the BBC's *Shipping Forecast*, which broadcasts the conditions on the seas around the British Isles—they even pay tribute to the program in the sublime “Sailing By.”) As solemn as *A Sky Record* can get, it never feels weighed down by its burdens and heartaches. At times it taps into the beauty of caring enough to be hurt by loss, but it also feels like a quiet celebration of resilience—and of the knowledge that this too shall pass. —JAMIE LUDWIG

### **JACKIE HAYES, *THERE'S ALWAYS GOING TO BE SOMETHING***

Self-released  
[jackiehayes.bandcamp.com/album/theres-always-going-to-be-something](http://jackiehayes.bandcamp.com/album/theres-always-going-to-be-something)

Jackie Hayes left behind a devout Christian upbringing in Waukegan to move to Logan Square at age 19 and pursue her music career on her terms. As a frequent opener at Schubas and other local clubs, she refined her attitude-heavy vocal melodies supported by simple, sludgy guitar lines and loose hip-hop drums. Hayes worked at a grocery store

## MUSIC



Ron and Russell Mael of Sparks © ANNA WEBBER

through the pandemic, and her new EP, *There's Always Going to Be Something*, captures the malaise of young adulthood while depicting the residual burnout of a year without live music; though she's just 22, she recently told *NME* that the pandemic left her "missing the drive and motivation of my younger self." On "omg," her voice curdles into a sneer as she sings, "It's just not as fun as they advertised." The song might be about failed romance or creative frustration or self-isolation—the lyrics are ambiguous, but her disappointment and disillusionment are crystal clear. The track "have fun," set to a midtempo beat perfect for terrestrial rock radio, recalls Iggy Pop's famous desire to, well, "have some fun"—it exudes the power of simple pleasures. The production on *There's Always Going to Be Something* is by Billy Lemos, who also worked with Hayes on her previous EP, and he cleverly mimics the lineup of a full rock band. "Material" is generally sparse, but it blooms into overwhelming layers of feedback, solos, and barely scrutable vocals. Hayes's lyrics describe a struggle to escape the past, but the energy of the song's conclusion suggests that a breakthrough may just be a matter of turning up the volume on your guitar amp a few notches.

—JACK RIEDY

### SPARKS, ANNETTE

Milan  
allsparks.com

This is the first time I've reviewed a soundtrack without seeing the movie, but a good soundtrack should stand on its own. And in the case of *Annette* (which comes out August 6), the soundtrack was created by Sparks—a band I've loved since I was a young lad—so I was more than up for the challenge. Formed as Halfnelson in 1968 by California brothers Ron and Russell Mael and renamed in 1972, Sparks have served as a constant source of inspiration. They've stuck to their unique, off-kilter brand of witty, literate, avant-garde glam pop while constantly reinventing themselves. The sheer impossibility of pigeonholing them is just one reason they're so

beloved. The Mael brothers are currently having a renaissance, evidenced in part by the documentary *The Sparks Brothers*, released in June. I more or less wept throughout the movie, but I also learned that they'd always been obsessed with art films and nearly worked with the legendary Jacques Tati on a motion picture project. So when the Mael brothers slipped an in-progress concept album to French director Leos Carax (a major Sparks fan), they were delighted that he responded by asking to work with them to turn it into a film musical. The stars of *Annette* include Marion Cotillard, Adam Driver, and Simon Helberg, who each lend their vocals to songs about the lives of their characters.

"So, what about the tunes?" you ask. I'm happy to report that Sparks are still way on top of their game. The opening track and single, "So May We Start," is a classic Sparks-style banger with staccato piano, minimal percussion, and a gloriously liquid melody that morphs into a full-blown new-wave symphony. The Mael brothers' trademark cleverness (which somehow isn't annoying) manifests itself in lines that seem to frame the song as the intro to a movie: "Please shut up and sit" and "The exits are clearly marked." "True Love Always Finds a Way" is gorgeous, spectral chamber folk, and "She's Out of This World" is a dense, synth-laden anthem that seems to aspire to be the new number one song in heaven (yes, this is an unapologetic reference to Sparks' 1979 hit single). "Six Women Have Come Forward" would surely also top the charts in a parallel world where baroque aesthetics and quirky pop falsettos live side by side. I have to admit, though, I don't love the songs where Russell Mael doesn't sing. Cottillard's chirpy Doris Day warble on "Girl From the Middle of Nowhere" is nice, but I'm not sure Driver's burly voice goes well with some of his tunes—though he snarls the punky "You Used to Laugh" effectively, his pedestrian pipes on "Sympathy for the Abyss" made me wish Russell had sung it instead. I'm sure these choices make a bit more sense in the context of the film, so I'll suspend further judgement until I see it. In the meantime, I'll keep enjoying all the new Sparks classics on the soundtrack. —STEVE KRAKOW

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CHICAGOANS OF NOTE

# Sasha Daltonn, jazz singer and founder of the Chicago Gospel Music Festival

“We weren’t only honoring Professor Dorsey—this was a major event introduced by the first Black mayor of the city, and it needed to be outstanding.”

As told to JAMIE LUDWIG

© COURTESY SASHA DALTONN

*Sasha Daltonn (alternately spelled Dalton) is a Chicago-based singer, writer, and producer, and in 1985 she founded what is now known as the Chicago Gospel Music Festival. This summer, she’ll publish her latest book, Unplugged: The Untold Story of Chicago’s Gospel Music Festival—just in time for the city to honor her at the Chicago in Tune gospel showcase in Millennium Park on September 3.*

I’m a product of Hyde Park. Hyde Park High School counts me as an alumni, but I actually graduated from Central YMCA because they didn’t have any gym classes and I was afraid to swim. My mother’s sister was a singer named Mary Brooks. She and her husband had an act in the early 50s, and I’d sometimes travel with them during summer vacation. They’d teach me a song or dance and make me part of their show. I always wanted to be in show business.

In 1979, the Bilandic administration introduced the Artists in Residence Program (AIR) to provide full-time employment for artists. I was hired as a singer, and I later developed several artistic programs. We performed and provided art programming for the schools, the Chicago Park District, seniors, and more. When I left, I started my own theater company called Chicago Enrichment Theater, which provided similar services.

I’ve always believed that education is possible through the arts, specifically theater, and my passion for sharing Black history led me to write *Runnin’ With the Eight Ball*, a show about three boys who are thinking about dropping out of school. Over a lively game of pool with Bronzeville seniors, they get a great lesson on the Black history of Chicago, from Jean Baptiste DuSable to Harold Washington. I included a flashback of the Club DeLisa, which had been at 55th and State. It’s always compared to New York’s Cotton Club, and well-known celebrity entertainers performed there.

I wrote the show to appeal to students, but adults started coming, and they loved the segment on the DeLisa. This led to my idea for a show about the club. I found the son of owner Mike DeLisa and asked for his permission. I began researching the club and the artists who performed there, including Dinah Wash-

ington—but I couldn’t find as much about her as the others. My interest in her story piqued, I started writing a show called *Dinah and Her Music*. She was from Chicago. I met her mother and sisters and interviewed everyone here who knew her. I was becoming obsessed.

There hadn’t been a show on Dinah Washington, although she was the most-recorded Black female from 1943 until her death in 1963. I finally found a young lady I thought would be perfect to portray her. As I gave her all this information, she said, “All I want to know is how much you’re going to pay me.” I was so upset I snatched the script and said, “I’ll do it myself.” I changed the name of the show to *Sasha Sings Dinah*. I had no plans to sing. My one-woman show *Madame Hortense* had been nominated for the Joseph Jefferson Citation (for best actress), but I was never as passionate about singing as I was about developing shows and producing. Now I’ve opened my big mouth, and I’ve got to do this show.

My mother supported everything I did, but she wasn’t that interested in me being an entertainer. She thought I should complete college, get a job teaching school, and maybe do this on the side. But she came to opening night on June 8, 1980, and said, “Oh, honey, I can see that this is going to be great for you.” That night there was a fire in her home, and she was overcome by smoke. Those were the last words I ever heard her speak. She died that November from the effects of smoke inhalation—I’m only now able to talk about what happened.

The show was a big success. It ran for 18 months, and when it closed I was tired. I’d never properly mourned my mother’s death. A New York producer, Woodie King, introduced himself to me on closing night and said, “You need to be in New York.” I just wanted to go home and rest, but I could hear my mother’s voice in my head saying “this is going to be great for you,” so I agreed.

While King raised financing for the show, the Harold Washington mayoral campaign was gaining support. The groundswell for a Black mayor began with Jane Byrne’s broken promises to the Black community, who she had promised to support during her campaign. When Reverend Jesse Jackson mentioned this to her, she told him that she didn’t owe them anything. He reported this on the radio, and a caller suggested boycotting ChicagoFest, a 12-day music festival at Navy Pier that also raised money for the city. They booked all the top artists, including Stevie Wonder and Frank Sinatra. When Reverend Jackson called for a

# MUSIC

boycott, Stevie Wonder was the first artist to join. A lot of artists boycotted that year. Some performed under protest. Some would say the boycott wasn't a success, but it was; the city lost millions of dollars. It was one of the things that fuelled Washington's journey to becoming mayor in 1983.

During the campaign, I volunteered with a group called Artists for Washington. After the election, I went to New York to do my show *Dinah! Queen of the Blues*, but I came back to Chicago to accompany my aunt at a fundraising event.

During that trip I attended a private party for Mayor Washington. I knew that in 1973, he'd introduced a bill in the state legislature to make Illinois the first state to celebrate Dr. King's birthday as a provisional holiday. At this party, I said, "Next year Dr. King's birthday will be a national holiday. Why don't you get a jump on the nation again and do a big Dr. King event? You can have an all-day celebration and a meeting with the gangs under the banner of nonviolence and end with a concert."

He said, "That's a good idea. We can start with an interfaith breakfast. You've got to do this." I said, "Oh no, I'm going back to New York next week." But I stayed. The Dr. King celebration began with the first Dr. King Interfaith Breakfast, followed by an all-day event at Medinah Temple. We brought Chicago gang leaders and some of their troops together for a discussion on nonviolence with Oprah Winfrey and Stevie Wonder, moderated by John Davis of CBS Channel 2. Stevie Wonder performed that evening in concert.

After the event, I was preparing the final report and about to return to New York when a gentleman from the Illinois Arts Council came to my office. He was trying to get the Governor's Award for the Arts for Professor Thomas Dorsey, and the committee wanted more recommendations. I didn't know that Professor Dorsey was still alive, but I said OK and I wrote two letters, one for me and one for the mayor, on his behalf.

After the governor approved the award in March 1985, I suggested that the mayor do something bigger. He asked, "What do you think?" I said, "Do a gospel festival and call it the Dorsey Gospel Festival." He said, "That's a brilliant idea, Sasha! When do you want to do it?" I said, "I don't want to do it at all, but it should be done over Father's Day weekend, since he's the father of gospel music." He said, "Can you do it that fast?" I said, "No, I'm going back to New York." But he said it was my idea and I had to do it. I returned to the Special

Events office, only to be informed that the city could only provide \$5,000 and city services. The Dorsey festival would be part of the mayor's new Neighborhood Festival Program, which replaced Jane Byrne's ChicagoFest and supported neighborhoods in producing their own events. We decided to present it at the South Shore Country Club (now South Shore Cultural Center).

When I was the point person for the Dr. King breakfast, people from the religious community were upset because I wasn't really connected to the religious community. I was known as a jazz singer, and now the city was doing a gospel festival and they put a jazz singer over it. Some demanded my removal, but the mayor said no.

Now that I had to do this gospel festival, I was nervous. It would be impossible for anyone to produce a gospel festival without support from the religious community—let alone with only \$5,000. I thought, "I need to form a committee, exactly like Washington's campaign committee, to help build this festival."

First, I went to Reverend Clay Evans, the most respected Black minister in the city and known as "Chicago's pastor." He agreed to support this effort. Then I went to Jim Fletcher, the president of Shore Bank, and he found us a sponsor. Then I went to Albertina Walker, the most prominent, most well-known gospel artist in the city, and I asked her to join my committee.

I went to other people who had been involved with the Washington campaign who were movers and shakers with a commitment to doing something right and understood the importance of the event. We weren't only honoring Professor Dorsey—this was a major event introduced by the first Black mayor of the city, and it needed to be outstanding.

The first year we had 35,000 people at the South Shore Country Club. I had pulled off in two months what usually takes nine or ten months to a year. The second year there were so many people they couldn't all get in. We couldn't contain the crowds anymore. So the third year, 1987, we moved it to Grant Park and renamed it the Chicago Gospel Festival.

At that point we had to deliver an audience of at least 60,000 people a day to be considered successful, because now we were considered a major Chicago event and we'd be compared to the Blues and the Jazz Festivals. We had to expand our thinking to reach an audience of that size. We had two stages with 16 hours of programming, and we had to be all-inclusive. That year I brought in Clifton


Davis, who starred on the TV show *Amen*, Billy Preston, who everybody—Black, white, Hispanic—knew and loved, and singer Linda Hopkins. I brought in white artists. Mayor Washington said he was mayor for *all* Chicago, so *all* Chicago communities and ethnic groups were represented. The fifth year, 1989, was my last year, and it was the biggest festival in the history of Chicago. We featured an excerpt of the Pulitzer Prize-nominated production *The Gospel at Colonus*, and our attendance was over 100,000 people.

Gospel music brings people together. I objected to the idea of combining the Gospel and Blues Festivals because they had different audiences. But blues people like gospel, jazz people like gospel, and gospel people like blues and jazz music. One reason I think we were successful is that we brought all kinds of people together under one umbrella. We never had a problem.


It became something revolutionary. We weren't the only gospel event, but to my knowledge we were the only city that presented a gospel festival and had the attendance we had—and it was free.

I'm still involved with the gospel community today and attend the Apostolic Church of God. I'm on the board of directors of the Gospel According to Chicago (GMAC) and occasionally sing with the Dr. Lou Della Evans-Reid Gospel Choir. While I'm no longer affiliated with the Gospel Festival, commissioner Mark Kelly felt I should be honored as the festival's founder. I'm very grateful for that, and I appreciate the city sincerely. Founding the Chicago Gospel Music Festival is a blessing and one of the highlights of my life. So is the Dr. King Interfaith Breakfast, which I produced for five years.

It's been a spiritual journey for me. You never know where you'll end up when you start down a path. I eventually went back to school to finish my degree, and I started working on a master's in ministry. And I started my own company, Royal Productions; we've designed, produced, and booked major events, served as talent coordinators, and booked major talent.

The industry has changed so much, but I still say trust your gut. There's nothing like a good idea. If you have an idea, explore it, give it all you have, and put people together who can help you. No man is an island. Surround yourself with like-minded people and keep the faith. Eventually your dream will be realized—dreams are the seedlings of reality. 

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**A-Trak** 9/9, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+  
**Peter Bradley Adams** 8/17, 8 PM, City Winery   
**Afrodija Social Club** featuring **DJ Sadie Woods and friends, Proximity with Micah Collier & Electec** 8/30, 6 PM, Pritzker Pavilion, Millennium Park   
**Anberlin, Early November** 9/13, 7 PM, House of Blues, 17+  
**Andrew in Anotherland** featuring **Andrew Sa and friends** 8/16, 6 PM, Pritzker Pavilion, Millennium Park   
**Arthurh, Tinkerbelles, Upstairs** 8/10, 9:30 PM, Sleeping Village  
**Battle for the Eagle** featuring **Microphone Misfitz, DJ Scratch, and more** 8/8, noon, Illinois Centennial Monument in Logan Square Park   
**Bella Shmurda** 8/14, 10 PM, Concord Music Hall, 18+  
**Black Dahlia Murder, After the Burial, Carnifex, Rivers of Nihil, Undeath** 9/3, 7 PM, Concord Music Hall, 17+  
**Luke Bryan, Dylan Scott, Runaway June, DJ Rock** 8/21, 7 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park   
**Byzantine, Bloodletter, Suncrusher, Cunning Like Cobras** 8/12, 7 PM, Reggies Music Joint  
**Candlebox** 9/19, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+  
**Clan of Xymox, Bellwether Syndicate, Autumn** 3/24/2022, 6 PM, Concord Music Hall   
**Contenders, Keith Pulvermacher** 8/26, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston   
**Julian Daniell, Soul Honey Records, Thompson Springs** 8/20, 8 PM, Schubas, 18+

**A Day to Remember** 10/9, 7 PM, Aragon Ballroom   
**Duke Dumont, Claptone** 9/17, 9 PM, Aragon Ballroom, 18+  
**Dwele** 8/21, 7 and 10 PM, City Winery   
**Eels** 5/20/2022, 8 PM, Metro, 18+  
**81355, Juice Mazelee** 8/25, 6 PM, Tack Room   
**Eivar** 1/21/2022, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+  
**El Tri** 9/11, 7 PM, Aragon Ballroom, 17+  
**Dan English, Squirrel Flower** 8/12, 6 PM, Hideout  
**Sam Fischer** 9/8, 7:30 PM, Lincoln Hall   
**Flesh Panthers, Neighborhood Threat, Rexxx** 8/18, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle  
**Robben Ford** 8/15, 8 PM, City Winery   
**Tom Grennan** 4/15/2022, 7:30 PM, Subterranean   
**Mark Hardy** 8/12, 9 PM, Tack Room   
**Mayer Hawthorne** 11/18, 7:30 PM, Park West, 18+  
**Rosie Hays** 8/13 and 8/20, 9 PM, Tack Room   
**Erwin Helfer** 8/12, 8:30 PM, Hideout  
**Peter Dinklage** 10/14, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music   
**Isaiah Rashad** 9/20-9/21, 7 PM, House of Blues   
**Izzy True, Cordoba** 8/13, 9 PM, Hideout  
**Izzy True, Toni** 8/13, 7 PM, Hideout  
**Glenn Jones** 8/12-8/14, 8 PM, City Winery   
**Juice** 10/23, 8 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+  
**Zoë Keating** 1/12/2022, 8 PM, Thalia Hall   
**Kings of Leon, Cold War Kids** 8/20, 7:30 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park

**Kississippi, Insignificant Other** 8/14, 7 PM, Schubas   
**Korn, Staind, '68** 8/27, 6:30 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park   
**Late Nite Laundry, Lucky Cloud, Cry Baby** 8/14, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen  
**LatInXt Music Festival day one** featuring **DJ Bembona, Los Rakas, Making Movies, George Arthur Calendar** 8/6, 5:30 PM, Navy Pier Beer Garden   
**LatInXt Music Festival day two** featuring **DJ Sabine Blaizin, DJ Cedeño, Yasser Tejada & Palotrè, DJ Lovebug, Sotomayor, Buenört Collective, Hector Guerra, Angelica Garcia, Salt Cathedral, Future Rootz Collective, Beats y Bateria, and more** 8/7, noon, Navy Pier   
**Little Bird, Dried Spider, North by North** 8/19, 8 PM, Schubas, 18+  
**Los Straitjackets** 8/28, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston   
**DJ Material** 8/13, 9 PM, Punch House   
**Jesse McCartney** 11/12, 8 PM, Park West   
**Mexit** featuring **DJ Ismael Peralta** 8/15, 9 PM, Punch House   
**Elizabeth Moen, Reno Cruz, Nathan Graham (solo)** 8/14, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle  
**Jim Peterik & Carl Giammaresse** 8/16, 8 PM, City Winery   
**Pitbull, Iggy Azalea** 8/22, 8 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park   
**Poppy** 11/11, 6:30 PM, Riviera Theatre   
**Preservation of Fire** featuring **Natural Information Society, Drum Divas** 8/23, 6 PM, Pritzker Pavilion, Millennium Park

**Chuck Prophet & the Mission Express** 10/26, 8 PM, Fitzgerald's, Berwyn  
**Queen!** featuring **Derrick Carter, Michael Serafini, Garrett David** 8/15, 10 PM, Smart Bar  
**Riot Ten** 9/18, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+  
**Rod Wave** 9/22, 7 PM, Aragon Ballroom   
**Scary Kids Scaring Kids** 9/23, 7 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+  
**DJ Seinfeld** 12/3, 9 PM, Metro, 18+  
**Sonorama DJs** 8/12, 9 PM, Punch House   
**Stuck, Negative Scanner, Floatie** 8/13, 10 PM, Empty Bottle  
**Sub Urban, Bella Poarch** 9/22, 7 PM, Bottom Lounge   
**Tinashe, Rei Ami** 9/24-9/25, 7 PM, House of Blues   
**Joe Troop, Jake Blount** 9/12, 5 PM, Szold Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music   
**Turkuaz** 12/18, 9 PM, Park West, 18+  
**Unlikely Candidates** 8/12, 8 PM, Subterranean, 17+  
**Viva Acid** featuring **DJ Pierre, Justin Aulis Long, Frankie Vega, Luis Baro** 8/14, 10 PM, Smart Bar  
**John Paul White, Dom Flemons** 10/29, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music   
**Hiroko Yamamura, DJ Hyperactive, Brenda, Gabriel Palomo** 8/13, 10 PM, Smart Bar  
**Mike Zito** 8/27, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston

## UPDATED

**Above & Beyond, Andrew Bayer, gardenstate, Mike Saint-Jules** 9/18, 7 PM, Huntington Bank Pavilion, lineup updated   
**Nicole Atkins, Mike Maimone** 8/13, 8:30 PM, Lincoln Hall, opener added, 18+  
**Beach Fossils, Wild Nothing, Hannah Jadagu** 10/6-10/7, 8 PM, Thalia Hall, 10/6 sold out, 17+  
**Lucy Dacus, Tenci** 10/10, 8 PM, Thalia Hall, opener added, 17+  
**Daryl Hall & John Oates, Squeeze** 8/26, 7 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park, lineup updated   
**The Marias** 2/24/2022-2/25/2022, 7:30 PM, the Vic, 2/25 added; age restriction changed   
**Middle Kids, Mattiel** 10/2, 9 PM, Metro, opener added, 18+  
**Quicksand, Narrow Head** 10/5, 8 PM, Metro, opener added, 18+  
**Josh Ritter** 10/2-10/3, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, 10/2 sold out

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**Todd Snider, Steve Poltz** 11/5, 8 PM, Park West, opener added, 18+  
**TV Girl, Jordana** 10/25, 8:30 PM, Metro, new venue, 18+  
**Watsky, Travis Thompson, Feed the Birds** 10/1, 7 PM, Metro, lineup updated   
**Zoë** 8/18-8/19, 8 PM; 8/25, 8 PM, House of Blues, 8/25 added, 17+

## UPCOMING

**Afro Fusion DJs** 8/19, 9 PM, Le Nocturne Chicago  
**Big Sandy & His Fly-Rite Boys** 8/28, 8:30 PM, Fitzgerald's, Berwyn  
**Cash Box Kings** 8/14, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston   
**Cloud Nothings** 8/19, 9:30 PM; 8/20, 10 PM, Empty Bottle  
**Emily Blue** 8/28, 8 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+  
**Glitter Moneyyy** 8/13, 9 PM, Schubas, 18+  
**JR JR** 8/14, 9 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+  
**Lloyd Banks** 8/21, 8 PM, House of Blues   
**Stephen Lynch** 8/21, 7:30 PM, Park West, 18+  
**Maroon 5, Blackbear** 8/30, 6:30 PM, Wrigley Field   
**Motherfolk** 8/19, 7:15 PM, Cobra Lounge   
**Jason Mraz** 8/11, 7:30 PM, Huntington Bank Pavilion   
**Ohmme** 8/26, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+  
**Summer Smash Festival** featuring **ASAP Rocky, Lil Baby, Lil Uzi Vert, Lil Skies, Baby Keem, City Girls, 24kGoldn, Lil Yachty, Swae Lee, Coi Leray, Lucki, NLE Choppa, Waka Flocka Flame, Lil Tecca, Earl Sweatshirt, Benny the Butcher, and more** 8/20-8/22, Douglass Park   
**Taco** 8/14, 9 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+  
**Molly Tuttle** 8/22, 3 and 7 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music   
**12th Planet, Phaseone, Guppi, OG Nixin** 8/27, 9 PM, Concord Music Hall, 18+  
**V Is for Villains, Bellhead, Code Name: Phoenix** 8/28, 7:30 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+  
**Wilco, Sleater-Kinney, Nnamdi** 8/28, 6 PM, Pritzker Pavilion, Millennium Park   
**Yung Bleu, Ann Marie, Seddy Hendrix, Noby** 8/27, 8 PM, Park West



## GOSSIP WOLF

A furry ear to the ground of the local music scene

IN 2019, SINGER-SONGWRITER Savanna Dickhut caught Gossip Wolf's ear with "Southsider," the debut single by her project **Burr Oak**—it details the heartbreaking end of a relationship over folksy indie pop. Last March, Dickhut was set to tour as keyboardist in local darlings Varsity, but COVID-19 curtailed those plans and gave her plenty of time to work on her debut full-length, **Late Bloomer**, which hit streaming services last week (and is up for preorder on cassette via Burr Oak's Bandcamp). The album's standout tracks—including "FOMO" and the dreamy, new wave-inflected "The Crowd"—are sparkling, immaculately constructed jams that pack an understated emotional wallop. On Saturday, August 7, Burr Oak plays a release show at **Schubas** with support from Max Subar and Morinda.

Since the COVID-19 lockdown arrived last March, **Experimental Sound Studio** has kept fans of improvised and new music glued to their screens with outstanding programming. But a constant cornucopia of adventurous music doesn't come cheap—the nonprofit pays performers and curators and funds studio scholarships, among other things. On Saturday, August 14, ESS hosts **Halycon Chorus: A Homecoming Fundraiser** in its garden at 5925 N. Ravenswood, featuring a live interview with and an exclusive screening of new work from Art Ensemble of Chicago cofounder **Roscoe Mitchell** plus performances by **Natural Information Society, Junius Paul, and Ben LaMar Gay**. In-person tickets range from \$70 to \$150, and though the livestream is technically free, donations are gladly accepted.

On Sunday, August 8, Chicago hip-hop preservationists **Renegades of Funk** host the annual **Battle for the Eagle** at the **Illinois Centennial Monument** in Logan Square. This free celebration of hip-hop's fundamental elements, which runs from noon till 8 PM, will include graffiti artists, dancers, DJs, and a set by the **Microphone Misfitz**. —J.R. NELSON AND LEOR GALIL

Got a tip? Tweet @Gossip\_Wolf or e-mail [gossipwolf@chicagoreader.com](mailto:gossipwolf@chicagoreader.com).

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## OBAMA PRESIDENTIAL CENTER

# The fight to preserve Jackson Park

Advocates say an alternate site in Washington Park is less disruptive and more beneficial to the community and the environment.

By **LEONARD C. GOODMAN**

*Leonard C. Goodman is a Chicago criminal defense attorney and co-owner of the Reader.*

Chicagoans mostly support the Obamas' decision to build the Obama Presidential Center (OPC) on the south side of Chicago. But few of us are aware of the controversy over the Obamas' decision to site their private center on historic public parkland on the shores of Lake Michigan, as these important issues have not been widely covered in the mainstream press, including in any of Chicago's major newspapers.

Initially the Obama Foundation considered several potential sites for the OPC. These sites were evaluated based on certain factors, including accessibility, enhancements to the physical environment, and potential for economic development. The site receiving the highest score was a site near Washington Park, just west of the University of Chicago campus, which the university described in its literature as “pair[ing] the greatest need with the greatest opportunity.”

Nevertheless, in 2016, the foundation decided to build on 19.3 acres of wooded public parkland in the heart of historic Jackson Park, east of the U of C campus and about a half mile from the shores of Lake Michigan. The city of Chicago quickly approved the transfer of public parkland to the private foundation, sparking the current controversy. The city gave the Obama Foundation a 99-year lease on the parkland, tax-free, for \$10. The OPC is permitted to charge fees for entry, parking, and third-party use, with the profits to go to the Obama Foundation.

The plan for the OPC can be viewed on the Obama Foundation website. It includes the construction of a 235-foot-high “museum tower,” which will rise above all neighboring structures, including the Museum of Science and Industry.

More than a dozen neighborhood groups throughout the south side expressed concerns about the taking of lakefront parkland. Originally designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in 1871, and later redeveloped by Olmsted and Daniel Burnham, Jackson Park is on the National Register of Historic Places and is one of the most important urban parks in the nation.

In 2018, a nonprofit park advocacy organization called Protect Our Parks (POP) went to federal court to try and stop the “partial destruction of Jackson Park,” which it called a violation of public trust. A group of longtime residents of Hyde Park and South Shore later joined in a new suit with POP, which does not seek to thwart the center from being built, but wants to see it built a mile and a half to the west, on vacant land adjacent to Washington Park. The plaintiffs have pointed to an alternate site plan for the OPC authored by Chicago architect (and Bronzeville resident) Graham Balkany that can be previewed at the POP website.

A comparison of the two proposed plans shows that the Washington Park site has distinct advantages over the Jackson Park site.

First, while the Jackson Park plan requires the privatization of about 20 acres of public parkland, the Washington Park plan requires no private taking of public green space. Rather, the latter plan proposes building the center on vacant land available for purchase on the west side of Washington Park. In Balkany's plan, public parkland for south-siders to enjoy would be enlarged rather than reduced.

As Jamie Kalven, award-winning journalist and plaintiff in the POP lawsuit, expressed in a recent *Tribune* editorial, the privatization of public parkland sets a dangerous precedent. “In view of Chicago's history of rapacious real estate exploitation, it's nothing short of miraculous that the glorious ar-

chipelago of Frederick Law Olmsted parks—Washington and Jackson parks, linked by the Midway Plaisance—has been preserved. At least until now.”

Another plaintiff in the lawsuit is Dr. W.J.T. Mitchell, U of C professor, author, and landscape historian. He explains that Olmsted's vision was for these public parks to be democratic spaces, without gates, open to all visitors. Mitchell believes the taking of parkland for private use is contrary to Olmsted's plan.

Another plaintiff, Bren Sheriff, who has lived for nearly 50 years in the South Shore neighborhood near Jackson Park, told me that the center was initially marketed as a presidential library. But after obtaining the lease to build in Jackson Park, the foundation changed course and decided to build a private entity with no official connection to the National Archives. According to Sheriff, many south-siders have been misled into believing that the POP lawsuit is an attempt by white people to stop President Obama from building his presidential library.

Second, construction of the OPC in the wooded parkland of Jackson Park will require the destruction of hundreds of mature, carbon-sequestering trees, contributing to the existential problem of global climate change. Mitchell believes more than a thousand trees will ultimately be destroyed in and around the park, many of which are more than 100 years old. The alternative plan near Washington Park does not require destruction of any mature trees, according to Balkany. Another environmental concern is that the placement of a 20-story tower so close to the lake will endanger migratory birds that fly north and south close to the western edge of Lake Michigan. The Washington Park site is farther west and is believed to pose less risk to migrating birds.

Third, the Jackson Park site is not easily accessed by public transportation, meaning that visitors would mostly come by vehicle. In contrast, the Washington Park site is situated right on the CTA Green Line. Further, the Jackson Park plan calls for the closing of two major roads—Cornell Drive and the southern half of the historic Midway Plaisance—necessitating a rerouting of traffic and the widening of Lake Shore Drive and Stony Island Avenue. The Washington Park plan does not call for any major road closures or traffic disruptions.

Fourth, the Obama Foundation has prom-


ised to bring economic development to the south side. Sheriff believes this is a pipe dream if the center is built in Jackson Park. The park is surrounded by the university, the Museum of Science and Industry, two high schools, and private homes. “Where is the economic development going to come from?” On the other hand, the Washington Park site is adjacent to many commercial businesses—especially along Garfield Boulevard—that stand to benefit from the OPC.

None of these factors favoring the Washington Park site seem to be seriously disputed. Rather, as Kalven wrote in his *Tribune* editorial: “The Obama Foundation has declined every invitation to engage the issue of ‘feasible and prudent alternatives’ and has instead mounted a marketing campaign, the central theme of which is that the Jackson Park site is a fait accompli.”

I reached out to the Obama Foundation for comment and was invited to e-mail my questions, which I did, inquiring why the Jackson Park site was selected over the alternative site west of Washington Park; and whether the community has been allowed to weigh in on the controversy over the sites. The Foundation responded that it was “unable to accommodate [my] request at this time.”

Mitchell told me that he attended a town hall meeting in 2017 at Hyde Park Academy High School where residents were invited to come to the microphone and ask questions about the OPC. But when residents started raising objections to the plan to build in Jackson Park, the open portion of the meeting was ended, and residents were directed to voice their concerns in small breakout groups. The city never again allowed open-mike questions at meetings regarding the OPC.

Mitchell explained his motivation for joining the lawsuit against locating the OPC in Jackson Park: “I want to save the Obamas from their own bad decision.”

Besides being a historic landmark, Jackson Park offers a precarious footing to support a 235-foot tower. The plan is to build the tower on the edge of the West Lagoon that is directly connected to the rising waters of Lake Michigan, which pose serious logistical issues in construction and future usage. “I am afraid it will be a disaster for the Obamas and for the city.” 

 @GoodmanLen



SAVAGE LOVE

## My boyfriend had sex with my parents

If you can't look at your mom without thinking about her sitting on your boyfriend's face, you might not be able to get past this.

By DAN SAVAGE

**Q:** I'm a 24-year-old gay man with a 31-year-old bi boyfriend. I've known that he's a lot more sexually experienced than I am, but it's never been a big deal before now. This weekend he met my parents for what we thought would be the first time. But it turns out that ten years ago, during his "big bi slut phase" (his words), they had a threesome. I recognize that no one did anything wrong—they were three consenting adults—and it's not like anyone could've known that he and I would get together in the future. But also, my boyfriend fucked my parents! I'm mortified, he's mortified, they're mortified, and I may never be able to look at my parents again. Please help us find a way to move past this! —I KNEW HE WAS INTO BLONDS

**A:** I've been writing Savage Love for almost 30 years—it'll be 30 years this September—and I rarely get letters that surprise me anymore. But after reading your letter today . . . and then laying in a dark room with a cool washcloth over my eyes for six hours . . . I came to a few realizations.

First, I can still be surprised. Thank you for that. Second, if couples in their 40s with teenage children at home are gonna have threesomes with guys in their 20s—and some are—there will always be a hard-to-quantify-but-nevertheless-ineliminable risk that their children,

once grown, could wind up meeting and fucking and even falling in love with one of the guys their parents had a threesome with back in the day. Third, since I helped create a world where 40-something couples with kids sometimes have MMF threesomes with 20-something bisexual dudes, IKHWIB, *this is all my fault, oh my God, what have I done, can you ever forgive me?*

With that said, IKHWIB, do you know who I think should weigh in on this? The former mayor of Minneapolis.

"If they've been able to laugh about this, that's a good sign," said Betsy Hodges, who was the mayor of Minneapolis from 2014 to 2018. "It might be a while before he can look at his boyfriend and not think about his parents having sex. That's a tough thing to navigate, but laughter helps."

It may seem kind of random that the former mayor of Minneapolis is giving you sex advice, IKHWIB, but Hodges reached out to me after I posted your letter to Twitter, where I told my followers—the former mayor of Minneapolis among them—that I was going to run your letter in my column even though I didn't have the faintest idea what to tell you. Betsy Hodges, on the other hand, knew exactly what to say.

"He has to ask himself if the boyfriend is worth it," said Hodges. "Everything really depends on the strength of their connection—which will have to be

weighed against whatever tension now exists between IKHWIB, his boyfriend, and his parents. Can they navigate that tension? If any of them feel bad (as opposed to mortified) about what happened and they aren't motivated to work through this and don't have the tools for doing so, this will go sideways." The Honorable Betsy Hodges suggests that the four of you have a conversation about what happened and how you want to handle things going forward.

"Having that conversation—which I know sounds dreadful—could actually help them think about this less," said Hodges, "especially if they get to a point where they can laugh about the insanity and awkwardness of the situation they've all found themselves in."

You can laugh about this until you pass out, IKHWIB, but if you can't suck your boyfriend's cock without thinking about your dad sucking your boyfriend's cock, you may not be able to get past this. If you can't look at your mom without thinking about her sitting on your boyfriend's face, you might not be able to get past this. If you can't take your boyfriend's load without thinking about the load he dropped in dad or your mom or both (21-year-olds have great stamina and such short refractory periods), you *might not be able to get past this*. You might be able to, like Hodges said, think about this less.

While I'm doubtful there's a memory hole out there big enough to stuff this in and tight enough to prevent it from falling right back out, IKHWIB, perhaps your parents have already shown you how it's done. I know when I came out to my mom, IKHWIB, she had a really hard time being around any guy I was dating due to the unwelcome mental images that plagued her when she saw me with a boyfriend. She could look at my sister and her boyfriend without picturing her little girl sucking that boy's cock, but she somehow couldn't look at my boyfriend without picturing that brute sodomizing her little boy. It took some very awkward conversations, some raised voices, and, yes, some laughter before my mom successfully willed herself to stop conjuring up mental images

of me getting my ass fucked. Maybe with some time, some awkward conversations, and a little laughter you'll be able to purge all those unwelcome mental images of your boyfriend railing your parents from your mind too.

My point is, if the parents of gay and straight kids can pretend not to know what they damn well do know, i.e., that their grown children are sexually active adults now, and if they can learn not to torture themselves with unwelcome mental images of our partners fucking the shit out of us, IKHWIB, seems to me that we should be able to do the same for them: recognize that our parents are sexual beings and at the same time expunge all unwelcome mental images from our minds. Yours is a much heavier lift than most, I realize, but if your boyfriend is

worth it, IKHWIB, you at least gotta try.

P.S. Perhaps this verse by poet Philip Larkin will help put things in perspective:

*They fuck you up, your mum and dad.*

*They may not mean to, but they do.*

*They fill you with the faults they had*

*And add some extra, just for you.*

You're not the first person whose parents . . . well, let's not say your parents fucked you up. Instead let's say you're not the first person whose parents were a little extra. Good luck. 🍀

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Advertisement for 64TEN Chicago swimwear. The image shows a man with a beard and tattoos wearing a purple tank top and matching briefs. The text "READY TO GET WET?" is prominently displayed in large, bold letters. Below it, "SWIMWEAR @ 64TEN" is written in a smaller font. The 64TEN logo, featuring a stylized figure, is also present. A circular badge on the left says "SIZES UP TO 4X". At the bottom, the address "6410 N. CLARK ST CHICAGO, IL 60626" and phone number "773.508.0900" are listed, along with social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and the handle "/LEATHER64TEN".

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# The Chicago Reader BOOK CLUB

**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**

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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**

*The First Collection of Criticism by a Living Female Rock Critic*  
Author Talk: Aug. 26, 2021

**Precious Brady-Davis**

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

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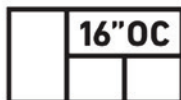
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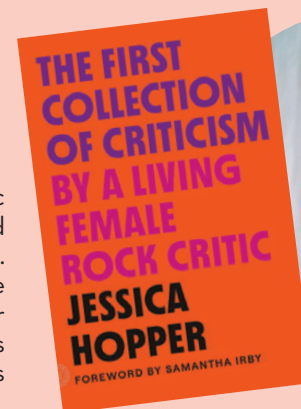
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## The Chicago Reader BOOK CLUB

Author Talk  
August 26, 2021

### Jessica Hopper Author

Jessica Hopper is a music critic, producer, and author based in Chicago. In a career spanning more than 20 years, Hopper has earned acclaim as a provocative, fearless music journalist.



She has written for *GQ*, *Rolling Stone*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *Elle*, and *Bookforum*. She is a long-time contributor to the *Chicago Reader*, and she was also a columnist for the *Village Voice*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Punk Planet*, as well as the music consultant for *This American Life* for eight years. Her first book, *The Girls Guide To Rocking* (Workman, 2009), was named a Notable Book for Young Readers by the American Library Association.

She is the author of *The First Collection of Criticism By A Living Female Rock Critic* and the 2018 music memoir *Night Moves*. She was formerly the editorial director at MTV News, and senior editor at Pitchfork and Rookie. Her essays have appeared in *Best Music Writing* for 2004, 2005, 2007, 2010, and 2011. She is series editor of The American Music Series at the University of Texas Press. In 2019, Hopper served as host and executive producer for KCRW's popular music history podcast, *Lost Notes*. Her forthcoming books, *No God But Herself: How Women Changed Music in 1975* (Fall 2022) and a revised and expanded second edition of *The First Collection* (2021), are both due from MCD/Farrar, Straus and Giroux.



### Leor Galil

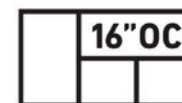
Moderator

Leor Galil serves as the *Reader's* music writer. He began freelancing for the *Reader* in 2010, and joined the staff in 2012. In 2017, *Reader* readers voted him the third best pizza in Chicago. Smash Mouth is a fan of his work.

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based Enterprise applications, Spring / Spring Boot framework, Docker; exp workng w/ relatinl & non relatinl database mgmt systems e.g. MongoDB, MYSQL; Architecting & designing scalable sftwr apps using open source Java EE technologies & platform Frameworks, such as WebSphere commerce; Exp workng w/ source control - Git, Stash, SVN; Workng w/ bld integration tools - Cloudbees Jenkins, Spinnaker. Send res via e-mail to [jobkeeper@footlocker.com](mailto:jobkeeper@footlocker.com), subject line: Code SMCBSIL3924, or mail to Foot Locker Corporate Services, Inc., Attn: M. Grund, Global Mobility Specialist, Code SMCBSIL3924, 330 W 34th St, NY, NY 10001.

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**Relativity (Chicago, IL) seeks Sr. Software Engineer** to architect, design, implement & test cloud native software consistently applying best practice software engineering. Must take and pass pre-interview coding test. Option to work remotely. Submit resumes to [Recruiting@relativity.com](mailto:Recruiting@relativity.com), to be considered, reference Job ID: 21-9012 in the subject line.

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## NEW FICTION

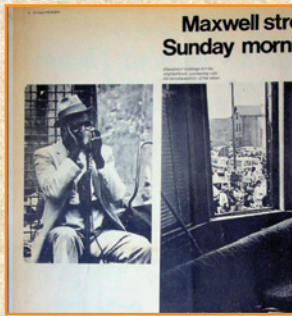
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# 1971

In the first issue of the Reader, out October 1, 1971, writer Rodney Wanker and photographers Bob McCamant and Fred Green explore the sights and personalities of historic Maxwell Street.



# 1972

In the July 21, 1972 issue, you could score a \$5.75 ticket to see comedians George Carlin and Dan Cassidy at the Mill Run Theater in Niles.



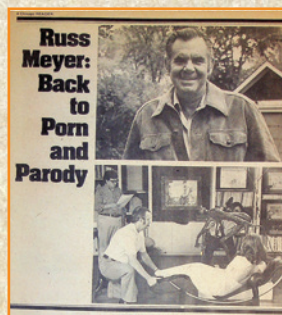
# 1973

The February 21, 1973 issue featured this profile on jazz poet/lyricist/Renaissance man Oscar Brown Jr. and his upcoming appearance at Mister Kelly's.



# 1974

“Porno” was all the mainstream rage in 1974, as evidenced by Dave Kehr’s story on director Russ Meyer from the October 25, 1974 issue. Check out Chicago institution Roger Ebert to the left in the bottom photo!



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1-10

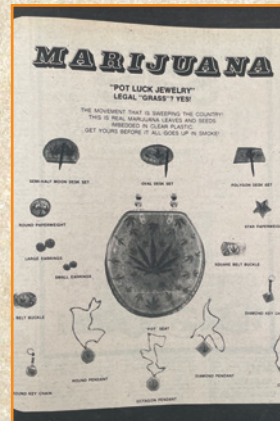
# 1975

An early edition of The Straight Dope from the May 30, 1975 issue aims to get to the hard truth about the size of softballs.



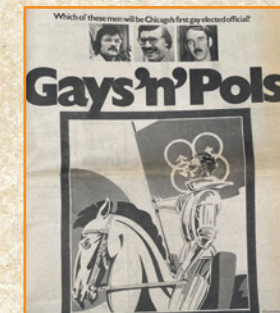
# 1976

Press your “pot luck” with this full-page ad from the March 19, 1976 issue, affording you the opportunity to buy completely legal marijuana. Okay, so it’s encased in plastic. Oh, how times have changed ...



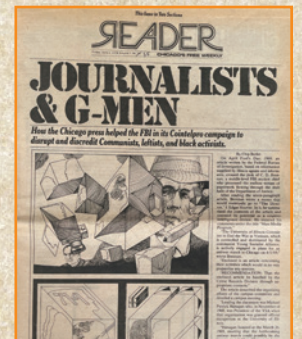
# 1977

In this cover story from the May 6, 1977 issue, Denise DeClue wonders which one of these men—namely Bill Kelley, Grant Ford and Chuck Renslow—would become Chicago’s first elected gay official. None of them were, but they all remained fixtures in the community.



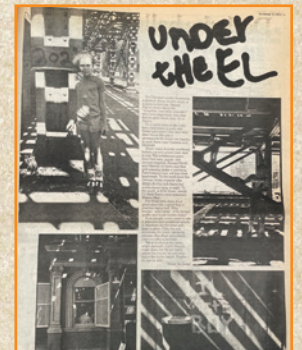
# 1978

Writer Chip Berlet blows the FBI’s Cointelpro scandal wide open in this cover story from the June 2, 1978 issue.



# 1979

Writer Hank De Zutter and photographer Steve Kagan take us to “Chicago’s public basement,” under the EL, in the November 9, 1979 issue.



# 1980

Mayor Jane Byrne has Chicago columnist Mike Royko under the magnifying glass in this Richard Laurent illustration, accompanying Michael Miner’s February 8, 1980 column entitled The Press: The Royko-Griffin Affair.



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9-9 A-TRAK

8-15 THE MUSIC OF THE  
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9-27 CITY AND  
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9-10 PITCHFORK AFTERSHOW  
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9-17 OSEES  
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**EBP**  
EMPTY BOTTLE PRESENTS

1035 N WESTERN AVE CHICAGO IL 773.276.3600 WWW.EMPTYBOTTLE.COM

THU  
8/5

**MAKO SICA**  
PLASTIC CRIMEWAVE SYNDICATE • JORDAN REYES

FRI  
8/13

**STUCK** (RECORD RELEASE)  
NEGATIVE SCANNER • FLOATIE

FRI  
8/6

HARD COUNTRY HONKY TONK WITH  
SPM - FREE  
**THE SLAPS**  
DON'T BE KENDALL

SAT  
8/14

**ELIZABETH MOEN**  
RENO CRUZ • NATHAN GRAHAM (SOLO)

SAT  
8/7

**RICH ROBBINS**  
LASALLE GRANDEUR • SEMIRATRUTH

WED  
8/18

**FLESH PANTHERS**  
THE NEIGHBORHOOD THREAT • REXXX

SUN  
8/8

DREAMHOUSE PRESENTS  
**NORDISTA FREEZE**  
DUNE DOGS • LLO LLO • SAFETY TOWN

THU-FRI  
8/19-20

**CLOUD NOTHINGS**  
MANAS

WED  
8/11

9PM FREE  
**VARIOUS DISTRACTIONS**  
WITH DJ'S BEAU WANZER & BLAKE CLARK

TUE  
8/24

**FUTURE CRIB**

8/27 - 8/29: BULLY, 9/2: BNNY (RECORD RELEASE), 9/4: SCORCHED TUNDRA PRESENTS IN THE COMPANY OF SERPENTS, 9/5: FOTOCRIME (RECORD RELEASE), 9/10: PITCHFORK AFTERSHOW WITH DIVINO NINO, 9/11: PITCHFORK AFTERSHOW WITH DEHD, 9/12: PITCHFORK AFTERSHOW WITH YVES TUMOR, 9/10: PITCHFORK AFTERSHOW WITH BARTEES STRANGE (FREE), 9/14 - 9/15: THURSTON MOORE, 9/16: TORRES, 9/17: NOUVELLE VAGUE, 9/18: ALGIERS, 9/19: COMBO CHIMBITA, 9/21: HOLY WAVE, 9/23 @ GARFIELD PARK CONSERVATORY: SACRED BONES AND EMPTY BOTTLE PRESENT PLANTASIA 10/2: FAT TONY + CADENCE WEAPON, 10/3: NATION OF LANGUAGE, 10/6: WILLIAM BASINSKI  
NEW ON SALE: 11/6 - 11/7: TOPS, 11/10: UNIFORM + PORTRAYAL OF GUILT, 2/6: A PLACE TO BURY STRANGERS

# THE PROMONTORY

AUG  
9



INFINITY SONG

AUG  
12



SKYZOO  
w/ PHILMORE GREENE

AUG  
14



ADEKUNLE GOLD

AUG  
27



FLEE LORD

OCT  
23



TERISA GRIFFIN

DEC  
3



JAY  
ELECTRONICA

AUG  
6 FIRST FRIDAYS  
w/ Sean Mac  
& Mark Flava

AUG  
17 Kanye  
Sip & Paint

AUG  
8 BODY  
Dancehall Party

AUG  
19 HYPNOTIC  
BRASS ENSEMBLE

AUG  
10 SKOLi

AUG  
24 MUSICAL CHAIRS  
f/ PHOR



SCAN ME

THE PROMONTORY | 5311 S. LAKE PARK W. | PROMONTORYCHICAGO.COM

CANAL SHORES GOLF COURSE



8.5 EMMYLOU HARRIS  
& LOS LOBOS

NEW SHOW



8.6 PATTI SMITH  
& HER BAND  
w/ GREGORY ALAN ISAKOV

NEW SHOW



8.7 BEN HARPER & THE  
INNOCENT CRIMINALS  
w/ JAKE ETHERIDGE



8.8 CAAMP  
w/ MADI DIAZ

EVANSTON, ILLINOIS



SPACEPRESENTS.COM

TEMPERANCE BEER COMPANY



9.2 BIG BOI  
w/ TWISTA



9.3 DRIVE-BY TRUCKERS  
& JD MCPHERSON



9.4 NEKO CASE  
w/ SON LITTLE



9.5 GEORGE CLINTON  
& PARLIAMENT FUNKADELIC  
w/ LIQUID SOUL