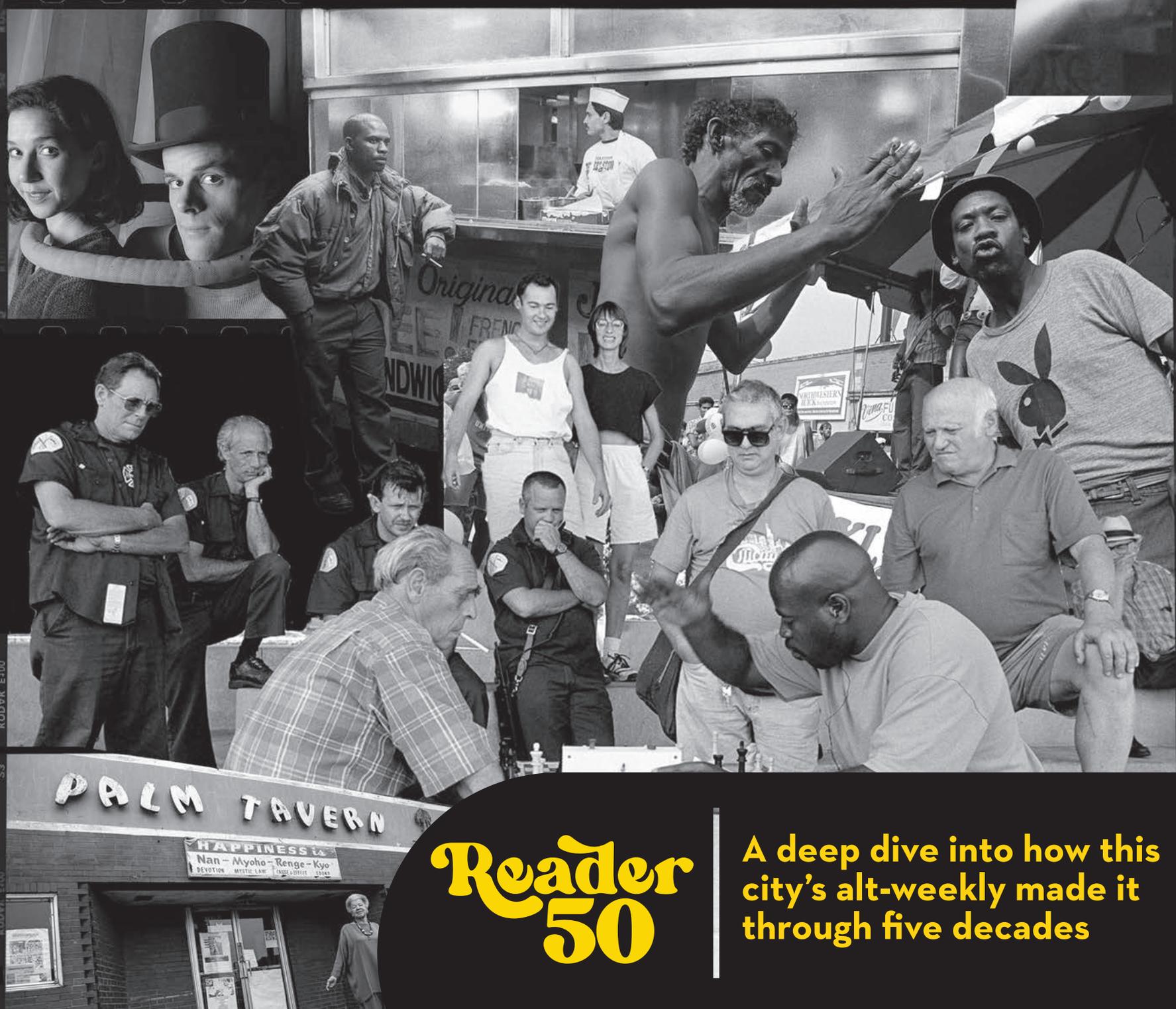


# READER



Reader  
50

A deep dive into how this city's alt-weekly made it through five decades

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ON THE COVER: PHOTOS BY JIM NEWBERRY. FOR MORE OF NEWBERRY'S WORK, GO TO JIMNEWBERRY.COM.

CAPTIONS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JULIE GREENBERG AND JEFF JENKINS, MIDNIGHT CIRCUS, 1997; JIM'S ORIGINAL HOT DOG STAND, MAXWELL STREET, 1993; UPTOWN STREET FESTIVAL, 1988; NORTH AVENUE BEACH CHESS PLAYERS, DATE UNKNOWN; GERRI OLIVER AT THE PALM TAVERN, 2001

## A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

I STARTED AT the *Reader* as an editorial assistant one month before my 23rd birthday, just a year out of college and not yet having dipped my toes in the professional world of journalism outside of the student newspaper. There was a lot I still hadn't experienced—this was before I could binge-watch TV without commercials for goodness sake! Now at 31, I realize that I've spent my most formative years with the *Reader*, all of my adult life really. Both in my own work and admiration of the work of my colleagues, I was able to discover the comedy venues I loved the most, the music I should be listening to, the issues in the city that I needed to pay attention to. In the pages of the paper I slowly came out of my shell and found my voice, and have only gotten more confident in that voice by the second.

As the *Reader* turns 50, all of us here at the paper have reflected

on not just the paper's legacy, but our own journeys within the larger story. When you read the upcoming 50th anniversary issues (there are two!) featuring everything from an in-depth history of the *Reader*, success stories from the matches in the classifieds, highlights from the last five decades of music coverage, and more, consider each writer, photographer, subject, editor, even typesetter involved in putting together the paper since the beginning. Each of them have their own stories and successes thanks to the *Reader*.

This is my final issue as a *Reader* staffer. It's a bittersweet celebration of all the things I was able to be a part of and all the exciting things on the horizon that I'll be witnessing from afar. But there's always comfort in knowing I was a tiny part of its legacy, and it was a big part of mine.

—BRIANNA WELLEN, MANAGING EDITOR



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## POETRY CORNER

### *The Greenland Shark*

By Emily Jungmin Yoon

It made sense: you have to keep living, beyond  
surprise, for desire to return.  
With antiquity returns beauty, she thought,  
or rather, longevity is an attraction.  
Growing long and old on her own, she had survived  
centuries of names man had given to time,  
such as what they called the Renaissance,  
which was a good season  
for their certain male specimen.  
She thought she remembered a name  
or two she was given by men  
who saw her and left her alone,  
because fear; because disgust.  
Mercy—perhaps.  
Through it all her heart renewed  
its languorous beating so now  
they want to know—What is your secret?  
What is your soft body capable of?  
Her fat liver could oil their killing machines.  
Her flesh could drive a pack of sled dogs mad.  
Cannibalism was not beneath her.  
Wisdom? Please. She asked nothing  
and asked for none. No,  
what she wanted was to eat in peace.  
They want to know.  
How she achieved her age,  
how they could do the same.  
This was the final desire her body held.  
For some of them, anyway—  
not these men whose livelihood depended  
on the same fish she hunted,  
who acted like they had permission to all life,  
though they do own these decks,  
on which she lay woven into their nets.  
Listening still, listening to their anger.  
That it wasn't her.  
It was not even her that they wanted,  
her heathered mass that carried her  
through ancient ice and thaw,  
and nobody asked her name.

Emily Jungmin Yoon is the author of *A Cruelty Special to Our Species* (Ecco, 2018) and *Ordinary Misfortunes* (Tupelo Press, 2017). She has also translated and edited a chapbook of poems, *Against Healing: Nine Korean Poets* (Tilted Axis, 2019). She is the Poetry Editor for *The Margins*, the literary magazine of the Asian American Writers' Workshop, and a PhD candidate in Korean literature at the University of Chicago.

Poem curated by H. Melt: H. Melt is a poet, artist and educator whose work celebrates trans people, history and culture. They are the editor of *Subject to Change: Trans Poetry & Conversation* and author of *There Are Trans People Here*, publishing this fall with Haymarket Books.

A biweekly series curated by the *Chicago Reader* and sponsored by the Poetry Foundation.

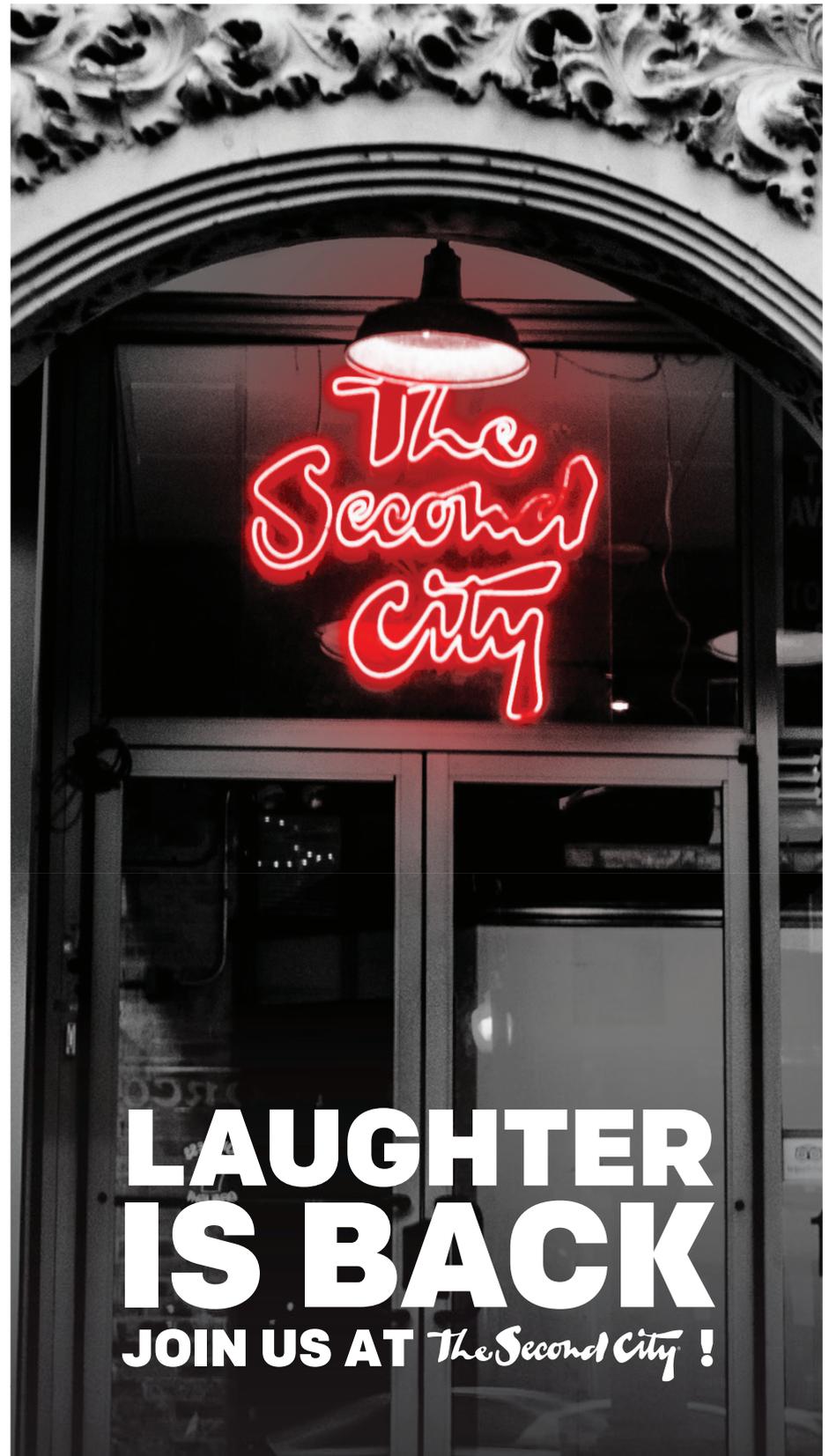
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The menu at Cafe Trinidad ToGo is focused on roti and their curry fillings, signature sides, and the iconic Trini street food doubles.

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## FOOD FEATURE

# The return of the roti at Cafe Trinidad

The city's original Trini restaurant mounts a ghost kitchen comeback.

By **MIKE SULA**

In 2016, Darryl Hicks shuttered the city's first and only Trinidadian restaurant, Cafe Trinidad. It was a serious responsibility to stand as the sole representative of a Caribbean cuisine that synthesizes centuries of contributions from African, Indian, Indigenous, Creole, Syrian, Lebanese, Spanish, Portuguese, and Chinese cooks. And it wasn't an easy decision to close. But after an 11-year run, his mom Claudia, the guiding light behind the operation, was spending increasing amounts of time back on the island, and Hicks himself was building a second business in hurricane-proof window shutters.

"It hurt me to have to close it down because there was nowhere else to get Trinidadian food," he says. "But it was hard for me to do

both."

For a moment it seemed the Hicks family might be behind a Trini food boomlet when Claudia helped another son open Rogers Park's Taste of Trinidad in 2015, but that didn't last either.

During the pandemic a few windows on Trini cuisine opened here and there, with occasional menu drops from a south suburban roti specialist and pop-up appearances by Snackette member Trini Zaddy (Sauce Works), aka Nariba Shepherd, who'll be collaborating on a Monday Night Foodball in December.

Roti are the burrito-like curry-and-stew-stuffed wraps ubiquitous to Trinidad and Tobago, and they're not uncommon in most North American cities with sizable expat

populations. Hicks thinks the people and the food wouldn't be so scarce in Chicago if there were direct flights back home. Over the past five years he has had to satisfy his longings on business trips to South Florida.

"I was in Miami a lot," he says. "I would have to travel to Fort Lauderdale to buy this huge amount of roti and doubles and I'd bring them to Chicago. I was doing that two to three times a month. It was killing me."

Hicks decided to mount a delivery-pickup comeback this spring when he got a look at the South Loop Food Company ghost kitchen. "I said, 'Now is the time. I have to do this.'" In August he opened Cafe Trinidad ToGo, with a menu focused on roti and a handful of sides, with options to Chipotle-ize the shrimp, salm-

on, chicken, and goat curries into bowl or taco form. A few of the original restaurant sides are in production too: plantains, cucumber chow, macaroni pie, rice and peas, and pholourie—savory fried flour fritters served with sweet and sour tamarind sauce.

There are also doubles, the iconic Trini street food: taco-sized deep fried bara flat-breads swaddling curried chickpeas. All orders come with the restaurant's original fruity, razor sharp habanero sauce.

In Trinidad a variety of Indian-derived flat-breads are used to construct roti. Hicks and his mom, along with their two original cooks from 75th Street, roll out and griddle cumin-scented dhalpuri, with a dough formed from ground yellow split peas and flour. Folded around the gently warming halal chicken curry, or the bolder, darker goat curry (made with Slagel Family Farm caprids), these bulging protein pillows travel well to the lakefront, where they can play the starring role in a credible island daydream.

Hicks plans to reintroduce other old Cafe Trinidad favorites—oxtails and butter beans, curry crab and dumplings, maybe even mauby, the bitter, restorative cold infusion made from the bark of the carob tree—all with the eventual aim of reopening a south-side dine-in brick-and-mortar resurrecting the original's soca-steeped Carnival vibe.

"We didn't close because the business was bad," says Hicks. "We're back because of the culture. We're still Trini." 

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## Maxwell Street



gains, bl... and bribes on Maxwell: see page 8

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CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY

## House of Screams



Torture by Electroshock  
Could happen in a Chicago  
Did it happen or

READER

## How live music looks during COVID



Photographing Chicago's cautious return to in-person concerts and festivals after almost a year and a half of forced shutdowns

By KATHLEEN HINKEL 58

PRISONER to PRESIDENT

MANDELA  
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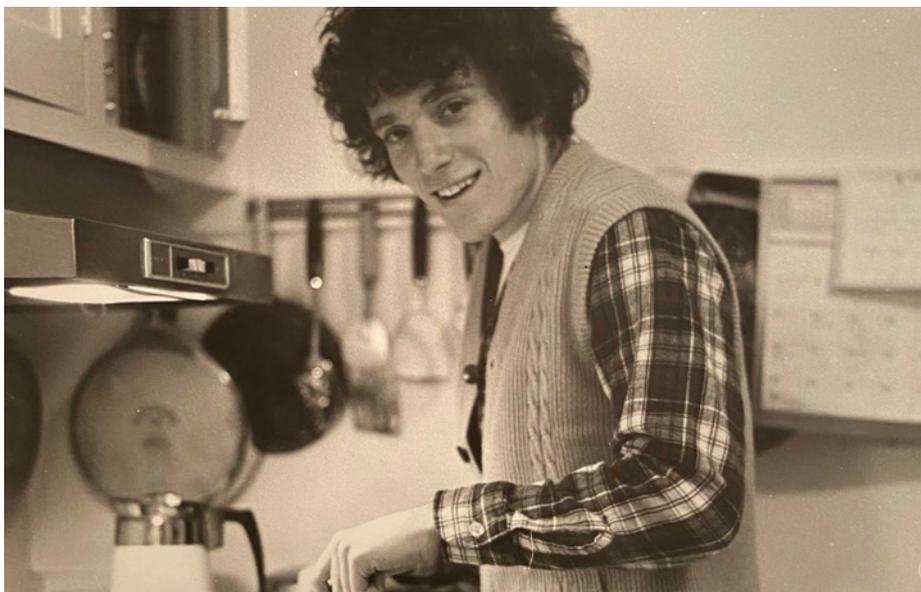
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Yours truly, right around the time I wrote my first article for the *Reader* in 1977 📷 AWW, MAN, I DON'T REMEMBER WHO TOOK THIS

## READER HISTORY

# The long haul

My not-quite-50-year love affair with the *Reader*

By **BEN JORAVSKY**

I've been writing for the *Reader* for so long that lots of you may think I've always been writing for the *Reader*.

Like, you know, I hopped out of my mother's womb with a pencil in my hand and a question or two for the doctor about TIFs.

Not true—I didn't have a pencil in my hand.

But as hard as this may be to believe, there was a time when the *Reader* was in existence, and I didn't write for it.

That time is called the 70s—the greatest decade that ever existed. As even most millennials will grudgingly concede.

The *Reader* was created in 1971. As you can see, we're celebrating our 50th anniversary. But, no, I was not there at the start.

Back in '71, I was a teenager, sitting in my bedroom, playing air guitar to Santana, writing in my diary, and obsessively following my beloved Bulls. Which sort of sounds like what I did this weekend.

On a tangent . . .

Hey, Chicago frontrunners, this year's Bulls team looks like the real thing. Feel free to jump on the bandwagon.

Back to the *Reader* . . .

My point is that the first decade went by and I didn't contribute one article to the *Reader*. Hold it! Not true. I suddenly recall that in 1977—when I was 21—I composed a 400-word, unsolicited masterpiece on Sally's Stage, a long-out-of-business restaurant on Western Avenue where the waitresses used to roll around on roller skates.

I dropped it off at the old *Reader* office on Grand Avenue. And to my utter disbelief, they not only published it but paid me about \$35.

And just like that I was a published author—like Hunter S. Thompson! One of my heroes back in the day.

I like to think that I spent the better part of the 70s preparing for my future livelihood as a *Reader* writer. That means reading books, writing in my diary, and walking around Evanston, my hometown, imagining how I'd write about politics if I got my chance.

Definitely planned to write from a leftie's perspective. That much was for sure. Always been a leftie. Probably always be one. Can't see that changing.

Back then, I'd pick up the *Reader* at the old Baskin-Robbins ice cream store on Dempster in Evanston. I imagined myself living in Rogers Park or Hyde Park or wherever *Reader* writers lived and being this slightly jaded know-it-all who would tell you what was really going on. As opposed to what the powers that be said was going on. Revealing the lines between the lines, so to speak.

A few years went by after that Sally's Stage story before the *Reader* published my next epic. I kept busy. Worked at various papers. Moved around the country. Wound up at the *Chicago Reporter* back when it was a real publication, as opposed to whatever it is these days.

The *Reporter's* publisher—John McDermott—carried on a bread-breaking tradition he learned from his days in the civil rights movement. On Fridays, he'd bring the staff to the conference room, and we'd eat lunch together. And now and then he'd bring in a guest to join us for an off-the-record conversation.

One Friday that guest was Bob Roth, then the *Reader's* publisher. I believe it was the summer of 1983. Roth walked in wearing shorts and flip-flops. I'm thinking—all right, my kinda guy!

A few months later I started writing for the *Reader* on a regular basis and I haven't stopped since. So, thank you, Bob Roth—and Mike Lenehan (my first editor). I'll always be grateful.

The *Reader* was a great place to work. A big, fat publication with ad money pouring in. They used to give us Christmas bonuses! Back then I was making about as much money a year as a beginning Chicago Public Schools teacher. That was enough for me. And, best of all, they let me write what I wanted to write!

From time to time I'd have the following exchange, generally with some older North Shore type . . .

North Shore: Don't you wanna work for the *Tribune*?

Me: Do you see anything remotely like what

I write in the *Tribune*?

North Shore: No.

Me: Then why would you think I'd want to work for the *Tribune*?

Alas, the good times didn't last. Don't want to overwhelm you with a recitation of our woes. Boils down to this . . .

Roth and his partners sold the *Reader* to a crew who borrowed too much to buy it.

They couldn't keep up with payments, wound up going bankrupt, and we were taken over by a hedge fund that brought in various consultants to oversee the investment.

I remember one of those consultants—an old *Tribune* guy, by the by—telling me, you don't really believe that TIF stuff you're writing.

And I'm like—well, ugh, actually I do.

After that I told my wife, get ready for me to get fired.

And yet . . . that consultant is long gone. And I'm still writing for the *Reader*.

A few years back, Eileen Rhodes, who represented our then-latest owners, took me out for breakfast. We had a conversation that went a little like this . . .

Me: You're not gonna give me grief when I write something that rips Mayor Rahm?

Eileen: Mayor who?

Well, it wasn't exactly those words. But that's the gist. So, thank you, Eileen for sticking to your word and leaving me free to write what I want to write. And thank you for bringing in Tracy Baim and Karen Hawkins, who are now running the show.

And on I go. Still free to write what I want. Still trying to reveal the lines between the lines.

Let me close by again saying Happy Anniversary to everyone at the *Reader*.

Against all odds, we have survived, to paraphrase Gloria Gaynor.

I'm eager to see what the future will bring. As you can tell, I'm in it for the long haul. 📺

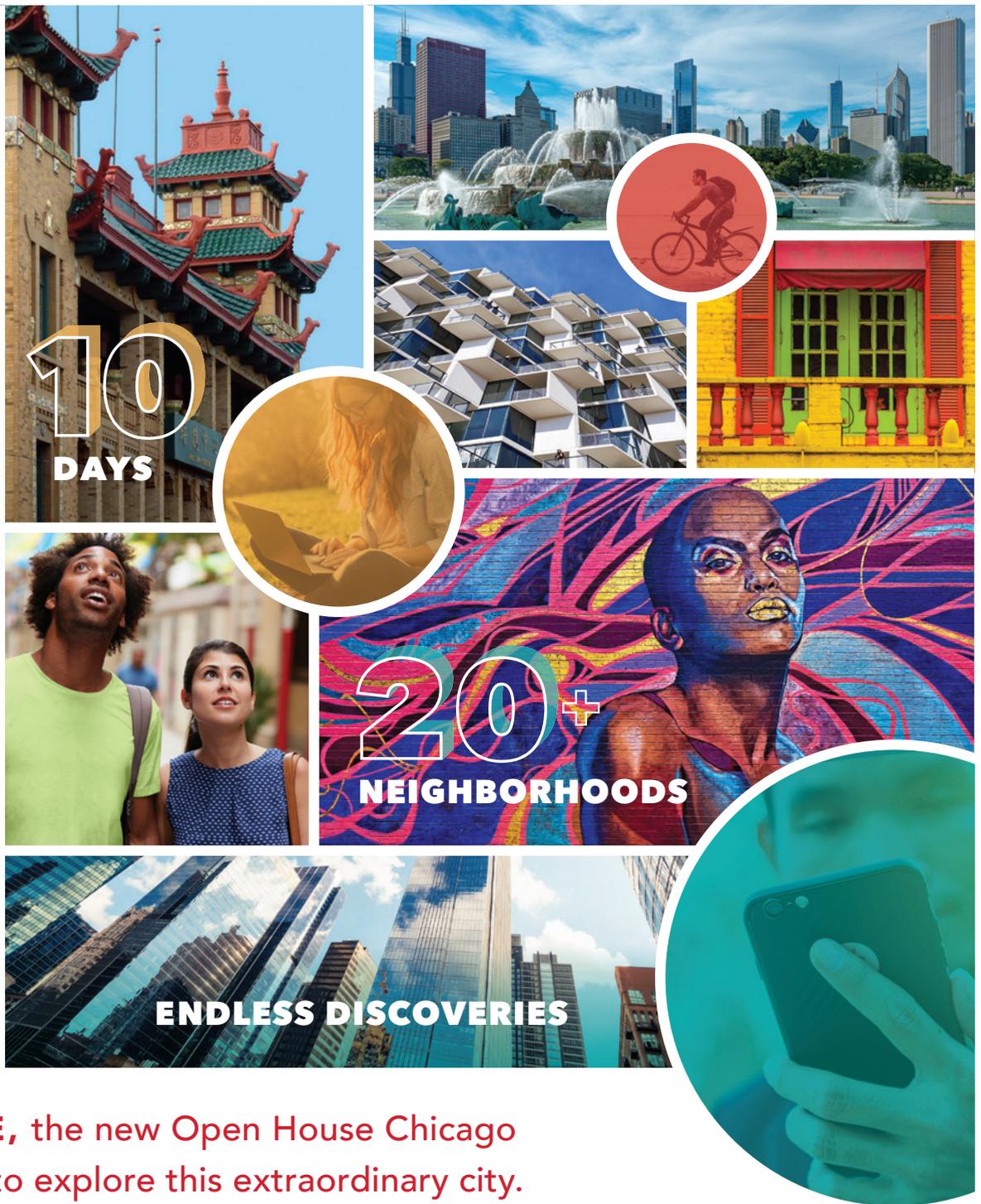
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## CULTURE

# No assignments, no deadlines, no promises, no job

How I met and fell for the *Reader* (great editors: part I)

By DEANNA ISAACS

It's 1980, and I am unemployed.

After giving up a staff writer job at the esteemed *St. Petersburg Times* to return to Chicago, I have found myself, as the saying goes, shit out of luck.

Chicago has gone from four daily newspapers to two, and is awash in unemployed journalists, all more experienced than me.

So I've come to a decrepit building at 12 E. Grand Avenue to ask Patrick Clinton if he can help me get a job.

I knew Clinton as a fellow graduate student in the English department at Northwestern University in the 1970s. He was a medievalist and a folk singer-songwriter. Now he's assistant editor at the nine-year-old *Chicago*

*Reader*, which occupies a warren of shabby, shag-carpeted offices on the second floor and isn't going to hire me, but will, Clinton assures me from behind a battered desk, take a look at anything I want to freelance.

Editorially, this rapidly growing alternative newsweekly is the best game in town: offbeat local stories that are great reads, wonderful photos, and long literary narratives, including Michael Lenehan's already-infamous 20,000-word piece on beekeeping. It looks to me like the *Village Voice*, edited by the *New Yorker*. A writer's nirvana.

But the pay sucks, and everything is written on spec. I tell myself I won't be doing that.

Blink, it's 2021.

The *Reader* is 50 years old. I've been writing for the paper for nearly 40 years, the last 20 as a staff writer.

Clinton, who became managing editor, left the *Reader* in 1987 for a career that included teaching at Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism and top editorial jobs at consumer and trade publications in New York. He's retired now, making music again and living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I've reached him by phone to remind him that, in effect, the rest of my working life is his fault.

He claims not to remember.

Clinton's own link to the *Reader* was Lenehan, a college friend from Notre Dame and Chicago roommate, who joined the *Reader* staff in the early 70s. He started out writing the *Reader's* calendar page and, under the direction of founder, editor, and publisher Bob Roth, maintaining a mountainous, ever-growing slush pile.

"I would read things, say this is terrible, we could never publish it, and then we would keep it, just in case," Clinton recalls.

In 1983, the paper moved to upgraded offices in its own building at 11 E. Illinois, where "the production area was fantastic." The production staff was much larger than the editorial staff, Clinton says, and "that had to do with the business model." When the *Reader* started out, "it was a time of burgeoning hip capitalism: jean stores, book stores, music venues"—all catering to young people who mostly lived in Hyde Park, Lincoln Park, Rogers Park, and Evanston. They were too spread out for the businesses to easily reach, but in clusters that enabled drop distribution.

These businesses couldn't afford to advertise in the *Tribune*, and they couldn't afford an advertising agency to create their display ads, "so the *Reader* became a small business advertising agency in addition to a publication. If you wanted an ad in the *Reader*, you had to come to the office and write your check, but then they'd make your ad for you. Somebody from the production department would come down, help you with it, and go back and produce it. We had an enormous, talented group of production people.

"At traditional newspapers, classifieds are your biggest moneymaker; at the *Reader*, most of the classified ads were free, which pretty much freed us from having to do much at all to develop circulation," Clinton says. In fact, a reader survey suggested that, essentially, "we could do away with the front section entirely, and they would probably still pick up the paper.

"And this is one of the things I really admire about the founders: faced with that, many publishers would just put out unmitigated crap. But they looked at it and said, 'OK, what this means is that we don't have to write something that pleases everybody. Because the music listings are there, and the classifieds are there, and everyone's going to find something to look at. So, 20,000 words on keeping bees? Cool, no problem.' They saw it as a way of real alternative journalism. People writing about what they feel like writing about."

What was the hardest thing about working there? "Roth had all these rules, and the biggest one was hands off," Clinton says. "He didn't really like or appreciate editing. He literally would have preferred if none of us spoke to writers at all. His feeling was that editors will, long run, contaminate writers and spoil the publication. I don't agree with that, but he didn't want the *Reader* to be telling people what to write."

The tension between those rules and what it took to get the paper out while maintaining its quality, "that was hard," Clinton says. "Roth built a culture that really was about the writers and artists and photographers. And the rest of us were there kind of as servants to that, rather than bosses. That is a difficult attitude to maintain, and incredibly powerful.

"When I went on to Northwestern, teaching at the J school, the stuff I learned at the *Reader* was constantly useful. I can probably say I didn't stand in the way very much. I don't think that I wrecked much of anybody." □

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## SEEDS OF CHANGE

# A revolutionary act

BIPOC growers on what it's like to urban farm on the south and west sides

Safia Rashid, a founder of Your Bountiful Harvest, cleans and prepares produce at her South Chicago farm located at Urban Growers Collective.  [DAVON CLARK/CITY BUREAU](#)



By JENNIFER BAMBERG, KYEL BROOKS, SAMANTHA CALLENDER, SUSAN CARLOTTA ELLIS, SARAH CONWAY, AND CITY BUREAU

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**F**or Chicago's burgeoning BIPOC farmers, urban farming is about more than just feeding their communities; it's often a pathway to healing their spirits and the soil itself, rooted in ancestral practices and lessons learned from grandparents before their migration north, or parents who crossed the border.

Amid a pandemic where food insecurity rose and grocery stores, at times, shuttered, BIPOC farmers on the south and the west side stepped in to donate fresh produce, run hyperlocal CSAs (community supported agriculture), and bring neighbors into the fold of how to run an urban farm. Chicagoans' struggle to access nutritious food predates COVID-19; however, the subsequent economic downturn and exacerbated hunger crisis was so significant last year that food insecurity in Cook County was projected to increase by

48 percent from 2019 to 2020, according to Feeding America.

To pull back the curtain, City Bureau spoke to 14 urban farmers to understand what the hustle is really like growing food for their communities on the south and west sides. All of those interviewed want to develop more community-rooted food systems on the city's 32,000 vacant lots despite the challenges of a single growing season and ongoing struggles to access land and water. They hope the city may one day recognize their potential by investing more seriously in urban farming, or at least curb barriers to farming.

In their own words, here is how they've healed themselves, some of Chicago's soil, and what they want from the city.

### I. 'Farming is a spiritual thing; it's magic'

**Dulce Margarita Morales, Cedillo's Fresh Produce:** Nobody's dictating to us what to grow, what to eat, and how to eat it, or when to eat it. So I think that when we take control of

our food, it's a revolutionary act.

**Chef Mel Carter, Sunflower Soule Farm:** If it were up to me, I'd be out here doing more guerilla gardening—without anybody's permission. People need food and that's just the bottom line. It makes zero sense that people in a city like this are literally starving and there's land to grow food on.

**Chef Fresh Roberson, Fresher Together LLC:** A growing place is a place of refuge, a place of care that you can immerse yourself into that feels very healing. My favorite Fannie Lou Hamer quote is, "When you have 400 quarts of greens and gumbo soup canned for the winter, can't nobody push you around or tell you what to say or do."

**Bweza Itaagi, Sistas in the Village:** For us, it's important to make sure that the food that we're growing stays within our community. Because we want to make sure that we're contributing to a more holistic ecosystem that

circulates both food and our money, so that our communities can have everything they need. For us, by us.

**Kenya Vera-Sample, DuSable City Ancestral Winery & Vineyards LLC:** Farming is a spiritual thing; it's magic. When we control our food and know that we're having proper nutrition, and it's going into our bodies and into the bodies of our community, it's security.

**II. 'Anytime you have a garden, you always have enough for yourself, and you always have a little bit to give to somebody else'**

**Alex Pate, City Farm Chicago:** On a very basic level, I don't think I've ever worked this much. I spend so much of my time at the farm, at least 60 hours a week, but I've never loved work as much as I do this. It consumes my life, but luckily, it's really what I want to be doing. I have friends who work 60 hours too, but they're just sitting at a desk.

**Vera-Sample:** Anytime you have a garden, you always have enough for yourself, and you always have a little bit to give to somebody else. That's the beauty of who we are as a people. You know your place in the world and know who you are, deeply.

**Anna Acosta, Tierra Y Paz Urban Farm:** This is where I find a place to heal from the crazy city life and, you know, all the trauma that I've endured in my life. I just love to grow, I love to give things away, I love to feed. I don't know if it's tied to losing my parents at an early age and wanting to grow that connection with folks.

**Rachel Nami Kimura, Hinata Farms:** The people that come out to the farm have said volunteering, being outside and working here, was the highlight of their week. I'm glad to be able to do that, especially last year, during the shutdown; a lot of people lost their jobs, a lot of people lived by themselves, and the pandemic has taken a toll on mental health for a lot of people.

**Margarita Morales:** I have not been to Mexico for 33 years so I had no idea how much I had missed having those trees and nature around me. My farm is a haven. It's healed my anxiety and depression, and a very toxic relationship with work. I didn't understand how bad work was affecting my body, that adrenaline rush from the restaurant. Working on the land, it's very different. You literally stop and smell the roses and see every plant and how it's doing. And you got to check for pests. You watch all the different birds. I'm sure everybody hears the cicada, but it's just all the different noises combining together while farming; it takes you to a different place. With a lot of past trauma, you know, it's hurry, hurry, grow, live, die. But you appreciate life and you appreciate death at the same time when you're growing your own food.

**Ileri Unzueta Carrasco, Catatumbo Cooperative Farm:** Farming helps me rethink my own relationship to the land. For the longest time, I didn't think I was going to stay in Chicago. I was always trying to figure out how to get my family to go back to Mexico. Twenty-something years later, I'm still here, I've made deep connections with friends who I've known since I was 14. And I'm not so sure that I want to leave anymore. And so when I started working closely with the land, I felt little pieces of thoughts coming up, like, the trees don't care

about borders, and birds migrate all the time. And like, seeds have different ways of dispersing, right?

### III. 'It's the hustle of growing in Chicago'

**Jazmin Martinez, Catatumbo Cooperative Farm:** Being a BIPOC farmer is no different than being a person of color in Chicago—it's a racist city with racist policies, and those things affect us every day. As a grower, there are still real issues of not having land access, funding, or technical support. There's still co-optation and tokenization of BIPOC growers, where organizations and institutions say they support BIPOC growers but still, they don't give growers of color leadership positions. Then if you look at the internal leadership, how many growers of color can you say are in leadership positions in any organization in Chicago? Very, very few. And then you start to broaden it and ask, *Why don't you have water and land access?* And you recognize that it's tied to all this history and legacy of redlining and disinvestment from the south and west side communities.

**Safia Rashid, Your Bountiful Harvest:** We've been working on trying to acquire land from the city, and that's been basically four years. It's just going through the city's process, and their departments are not really communicating with each other. Somebody is saying, "Yeah, you can," and this other person is like, "No, you gotta do this first."

**Vera-Sample:** We got 20 pounds of tomatoes, ten pounds of kale, but the farmers' market is not until Sunday. So we've harvested, but where do we keep all this? The refrigerator? Transportation? There are huge gaps in the food production chain, and while there's a lot of Black farmers who can cover the growing of food, it's the processing, GAP [Good Agricultural Practices] certifications, storage, resources, and transportation [costs that stack up]. We are trying to compete with major businesses with all kinds of resources.

**Beatrice Kamau, Multiple Harvest LLC:** I grew the eggplants into rows three feet wide and 60 feet long, but once I harvested, I could only sell to two people because people like to buy in quantities. They try to buy a lot so that they can put them in their deep freezer so they can use it over the winter. So the space that I use is not enough for the [African diaspora] market that I'm trying to target.

**Kimura:** In Chicago, having a winter where you can't grow and then having the growing season inversely super intense is difficult. I still haven't figured out how to make it make sense financially. It gets so busy that it's hard to focus on it during the growing season.

**Margarita Morales:** It's the hustle of growing in Chicago. Every single grower I know has a full-time job and is growing simultaneously. Farming here is not making us rich, monetarily; it's making us rich in other ways. So if the big day Armageddon comes, we will survive. All my friends who are not farmers are like, "Yeah, when Armageddon comes, we know where to go." Like, don't come to me [then] because I can show you right now how to grow your food.

### IV. 'This aspect of thinking about the land as more than just something that you get to take from'

**Martinez:** BIPOC growers in Chicago are not a monolithic community. A lot of the work is centered around how we want to reimagine the realities that we live in, in super hyperlocal spaces and places. What works in Little Village is not going to 100 percent work in Englewood and vice versa. But that doesn't mean that we can't and are not working together to strategize, brainstorm, and learn from each other.

**Unzueta Carrasco:** Everyone has been like, "You need resources? Here's this thing that I'm not using anymore. Do you need advice? Feel free to call us and see how we're doing things, come over." The community that we have with farmers of color throughout Chicago comes with sharing and growing, and this aspect of thinking about the land as more than just something that you get to take from.

**Kimura:** Chicago has a lot of passionate people that are optimists at heart, that aren't doing it for the money but because they love their community. When people are a part of something like a farm or a garden, you start to also see the challenges, and then when you have something that you want to fight for, you start fighting for it.

**Acosta:** You got your food deserts, you got your food swamps. It's just so much easier and cheaper to buy from a fast-food restaurant. You got dollar meals. You look at disinvested neighborhoods, and you don't see the delicious fresh produce markets that you see in

particular neighborhoods across the city. On the south side, particularly in Back of the Yards, there are so many urban gardens and farms and for the most part, the food stays within this neighborhood and we're feeding our folks.

**Natasha Coleman, Coleman Pharaoh Garden:** Just having green space, filled with fruits, vegetables, and flowers, is good overall energy for people in the community. It gives you a sense of, you know, like, someone cares. "Let's not throw trash here because this is beautiful."

### V. 'Leave your cares and worries at the door, because the ancestors have already made room'

**Itaagi:** When people come to volunteer with us, specifically Black, Brown, Indigenous people who maybe have never been in a garden space or haven't farmed before, it takes a little bit to adjust and to get into the flow. And then you find that people are like, "Oh, this, this just feels natural." A lot of what we know is just natural knowledge that we have passed down generationally and ancestrally. Our people are agriculturalists. We know how to grow food, we know how to work in harmony with the earth, we just have to remind ourselves and tap back into that.

**Martinez:** Everything I know about growing is because of the lineage of campesinos that come from my family, what I hold dear to my heart, the practices that my family has had for decades in Mexico. For me it's about taking part of my lineage and adapting it, and changing it to this context, to this land. Chicago has its own land, its own soil, its own weather, even within the different regions.

**Mecca Bey, Sistas in the Village:** Leave your cares and worries at the door, because the ancestors have already made room. We've already asked and been invited to be in this environment to do exactly what we were gifted and honored to do, and that's to honor this land and grow food.

**Margarita Morales:** We plant in an organic and Indigenous way, with lots of companion planting, where the plants help each other. Pesticides are very harmful to us and to our kids. We want to make sure that we're educating people on how important it is to eat organic. ➔

# NEWS & POLITICS

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**Kamau:** Most people think, “Oh, farm work is too much work.” And I agree but then I see the changes in the soil; the more you preserve the soil, the better it becomes. You see the mushrooms sprout up that are adding something good to the soil and the relationship between plants and the bugs, and you feel the connection. It’s become kind of therapeutic.

**Coleman:** Most of the time, I’m talking to the plants.

**Kimura:** There are a lot of Asian Americans in Chicago who want to find a connection to the earth, their community, and their heritage; I open up my space for people to experience farming. Then they harvest and cook, and if they don’t know how to cook it, they end up calling their mom or their grandma to get recipes.

## VI. ‘I don’t think this city actually wants urban farmers’

**Carter:** For a lot of farms, their main interaction with the city has been about hydrant access, which to me is really utterly ridiculous. [The city’s] main interest is just collecting money. At first, they were all concerned because of the pandemic, and then as soon as that was over they hit us with these fees.

**Acosta:** When the city changed rules on hydrant water access, it was total BS. Like we’re not a huge agribusiness, we’re not out to make a billion dollars, we’re just out to water our garden and to pop up at markets and provide fresh produce to our neighborhoods.

**Margarita Morales:** The fire hydrant has a cap, so we’re not able to use it. There’s a permit that we didn’t even apply for this year. We are able to access this land that belongs to NeighborSpace but we do not have the money to buy it. We would love to be able to own it, but I feel that it’s a big challenge for us, money-wise. So we’ll just continue to lease as long as they allow us to stay, or God knows what’s next.

**Coleman:** Make water more affordable for gardeners and farmers. The city could have done more to extend the dollar lot program to farmers to engage more than just homeowners—people who want to build up their community and do something positive.



**Carter:** I want to own my stuff. I want something that has my government name on it.

**Pate:** Ownership is key. I also can understand those in farming circles that don’t believe in land ownership, generally, that humans can’t own land in a literal sense. I’m all for the principle of it, but that’s not the way things are. If you don’t own land, then you’re just shit out of luck. If you’re talking long-term production of land, and the building of healthy micro-ecosystems in the soil, and soil remediation, and establishing ecosystems where animals can thrive annually, that’s resolved by land ownership by the farmers.

**Kimura:** I don’t think this city actually wants urban farmers. The fact is it’s not easy to grow here in Chicago because of the policies and bureaucratic roadblocks that are in place, and a lot of urban growers have space in temporary land situations, like on vacant lots in agreement with whoever owns the land, but once that land gets a good offer the owners sell. Unless you own it, you can’t stay safe for very long.

## VII. ‘Start listening to growers, who really do intentional community work’

**Acosta:** Urban farmers, especially folks of

color, should not have all these extra layers of challenges when trying to set up farming spaces. To me, it’s about reparations; we shouldn’t even have to fight. There’s not a caucus on the City Council that is dedicated to urban growing yet, and that’s what we need.

**Kamau:** What the city can do is try to make it conducive for us to be able to grow and get access to land, even empty city lots, and water. I love to grow my vegetables, I love the city of Chicago, and, you know, I would love to continue growing here.

**Pate:** A lot of people who are farming don’t have tons of money. Farming itself is not lucrative. And urban farming does not receive the same types of funding and government support that rural farming does.

**Margarita Morales:** There’s so much space available, all we need is maybe four plots, and we could make it work. We could feed so many families with those four plots. But the city doesn’t care for farmers, in my opinion. If they were more caring towards us, they would make things a lot easier, especially with the water access. If they understood the value of a farmer for the ecosystem they would definitely change the way things are.

Mecca Bey (left) and Bweza Itaagi (right), founders of Sistas in the Village, tend to their farm at Urban Growers Collective in South Chicago. DAVON CLARK/CITY BUREAU

**Martinez:** You’ll see a lot of work and effort being put into a message, a vision, a narrative, to really show that Chicago is a leading urban ag city. But given all the things that have happened in the last year, we need to start having honest and frank conversations about what has not worked and what is not working. And that requires people in leadership positions to not be offended, not take it personally, not get defensive, when people have genuine concerns. Start listening to growers, who really do intentional community work. Give funding directly to growers without or with little restrictions. You can’t just say that the vacant lot program and vacant lots are a solution to issues that we have regarding food access, because they’re just vacant lots. They need to be capped, they need to be remediated. People need to be tending and taking care of little spots. And you need to give people the resources, the funding, and the support to do that.

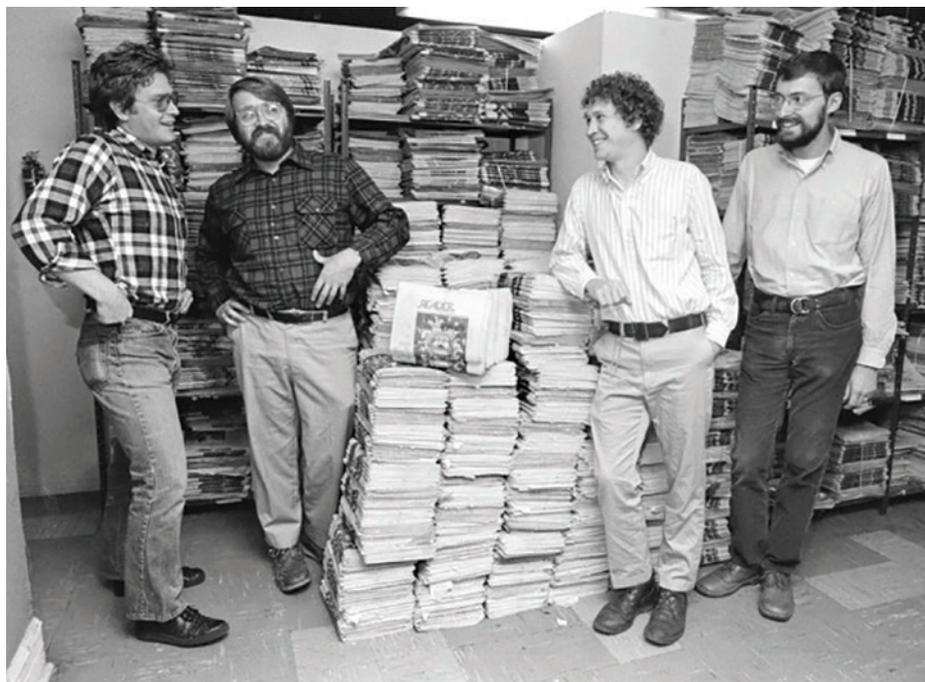
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OUR HISTORY

## The Reader at 50

A deep dive into how this city's alt-weekly made it through five decades

By MARK JACOB



Reader founders (from left) Tom Rehwaldt, Bob Roth, Tom Yoder, and Bob McCamant in 1979 and today. COURTESY DAILY HERALD/JEFF MARINI FOR CHICAGO READER

The *Chicago Reader* is a free newspaper, but its ads were once so prized that thieves would steal classified sections from the printing plant and sell them for a dollar apiece.

The *Reader* was once so dominant that if it printed the wrong screening times for a movie, the theater would change the times.

The *Reader* was once such a sensation that its revenue quadrupled in two years.

And the *Reader* was once so unpredictable that it ran a 20,012-word story about beekeeping.

Now, as the *Reader* marks its 50th anniversary, it aims to keep stirring up Chicago's news ecosystem with a promising but not-yet-proven strategy to go nonprofit and bring scores of other publications along on its campaign to promote community journalism.

Since the first issue was put together on the dining room table of an apartment in Chicago's Kenwood neighborhood and then published on October 1, 1971, the *Reader* has helped its core audience of young adults come into the city, comprehend it, and consume it. Though it was a pioneer among alt-weeklies, it wasn't

counterculture. It was young, urban culture. Asked whether the founders might have been considered hippies, the first managing editor, Nancy Banks, describes the early crew as "proto-yuppies."

The *Reader* covered politics and social issues, but it didn't have a rigid editorial agenda. It did have a well-defined marketing plan to offer extensive classified ads and the best entertainment listings in town. Beyond that, it tended to go where its writers took it.

Some call the *Reader* the nation's first free alternative weekly, but that claim is iffy. While the *Reader* changed the game by proving that a free alt-weekly could be wildly profitable, *Boston After Dark* was distributing about two-thirds of its print run as a free college edition before the *Reader* launched.

You might call the *Reader* the nation's longest-surviving free alt-weekly, since *Boston After Dark* is no longer around. But the *Reader* switched last year from weekly print publication to every other week. So is the *Reader* now an alt-biweekly? Instead of overthinking, let's accept the framing by Richard Karpel, who headed the Association of Alternative News-

weeklies when he wrote in 2007 that "the most significant historical event in the creation of the modern alt-weekly occurred in Chicago in 1971, when the *Chicago Reader* pioneered the practice of free circulation."

The *Reader* debuted in a Chicago far different from today's version. Three weeks before the first issue was published, the Woodfield Mall opened in suburban Schaumburg, claiming to be the largest enclosed retail center in the world. The year 1971 also saw the first women elected to the Chicago City Council, the closing of the Union Stockyards, and John Belushi joining the cast of the Second City comedy troupe.

The *Reader* almost didn't make it. Then it did, spectacularly, becoming a part of Chicago's cityscape. Former *Reader* publisher Jane Levine recalls "the incredible physical presence that the paper had in the neighborhoods where it was distributed—those huge stacks of huge papers that would appear, and then disappear, in the entryways of record stores and bars and bookstores and student unions."

At the half-century mark, the *Reader* has built a legacy as a home for fine writing and in-

depth reporting, a driver of arts and culture, and proof that an alternative publication can invent a successful financial model. Now it's trying to reinvent itself to survive as a nonprofit in a vastly different media environment. After 50 years, it's still taking chances.

Here's how the whole thing happened.

### THE DINING ROOM TABLE

In the winter of 1970-'71, two recent graduates of Minnesota's Carleton College were sharing an apartment at 48th and Dorchester. One of them, Bob Roth, had grown up in suburban Arlington Heights and was pursuing a master's in political science at the University of Chicago. The other, Tom Rehwaldt, was a substitute teacher in the Chicago Public Schools system.

Roth roped his roommate into a project that was difficult and might have seemed a little bit crazy.

No, not the *Reader*. Stripping off paint.

"For some reason he conned me into stripping the paint off the fine woodwork in the apartment," Rehwaldt says. "Which seems kind of crazy, that you would go to that effort to improve and gentrify somebody else's

building that you're renting. But I guess it passed the time. So we would sit there with torches, burning the paint off, and with the remover and whatever and scrapers, cleaning up the woodwork, and all the time talking about the idea of a newspaper and what we would do once we got successful with a newspaper."

The name *Reader* was suggested by an early investor, a law student named Peter Bell. Rehwaldt recalls that the name "resonated with all of us who had grown up with *My Weekly Reader* in grade school." He says another name considered was "Windy City Blast," but the other three main founders—Roth, Bob McCamant, and Tom Yoder—have no memory of that suggestion.

Roth received his inspiration for the *Reader* from the alt-weekly scene in Boston, where he had studied for a summer at Boston University. He recruited two more Carleton grads, McCamant and Nancy Banks, to come to Chicago and help launch the free paper.

While Roth was the visionary, McCamant was the one who knew how to produce a newspaper.

"I had started working in print shops when I was in high school, so I knew the whole process of putting out newspapers, upwards and downwards," McCamant says. "It made it quite easy for me to figure out how we needed to get organized to be able to put it out."

McCamant designed the iconic backwards-*R* nameplate that has always been a *Reader* signature. "It was hand drawn by me with a compass and ruler," he says.

Banks was the first *Reader* managing editor, "but there was not much to manage," she says. She quickly gave that up and shifted to a more limited role as a freelance writer for the *Reader*.

Roth "certainly had a good idea," Banks says. "I mean, it was such a good idea that he was supposed to go on being a graduate student at the University of Chicago and the rest of us were going to start rolling money into his pockets."

But Roth soon dropped out of grad school. "It just became too overwhelming," he says. "I was increasingly bored with school compared to the anxieties and excitement of the *Reader*."

The people who made early financial investments were Roth, Rehwaldt, McCamant, Yoder, Bell, Fred Green, Jim Holman, Mark Homstad, and Tim Nagler. "We were ridiculously undercapitalized," Roth recalled in a 2011 *Reader* article. "Some of them put in as little as \$500 for their shares in the company."

About 15 months in, investor Yoder came to Chicago to join the staff. Then the core group

of founders was set: two Bobs and two Toms, all graduates of Carleton College. Only Roth was from the Chicago area.

The founders took no salary in those early days, though they were credited with \$55 worth of stock in the company for each issue they worked on. To keep eating, the founders worked a variety of jobs. Roth delivered tropical plants for a shop called Plants Alive. Rehwaldt installed waterbeds for a company called Undercurrents. McCamant did outside jobs as a graphic artist, designing ads. Yoder was a dispatcher for a pager service.

Perhaps they were too young to worry about the *Reader's* long odds for success.

"I figured this was a lark," says McCamant. "I'd do it for a few months and then I'd go find a real job."

"I had some faith," Rehwaldt says, "but I also took the post office exam so I could get a job in the post office in the event I needed a job."

Michael Lenehan, a longtime *Reader* editor who joined the staff in the early 70s, detected pockets of optimism, despite the seemingly dim prospects.

"I think that at least a couple of the principals really thought that they could get rich doing this," Lenehan says. "Or that they could make a lot of money. Not that they were that interested in the money. What they were mostly interested in was making a living while having fun. And the fun part was a big part of the equation."

The staff was a bunch of young people having a good time in the city. The term "yuppies"—for young urban professionals—wouldn't come into vogue until the next decade, but the *Reader* crew were pioneers.

"We were maybe early yuppies," says Banks. "We were living in the city. We weren't out in the countryside growing our own vegetables. We certainly were familiar with smoking pot. We loved not just rock 'n' roll, but one of the best things about living in Chicago was getting to know blues and jazz. It's a picture of how this generation realized that cities were cool places to live."

Cities are also expensive, and the *Reader* couldn't afford overhead. So the early offices were in the apartments where some of the founders lived: first two places in the same courtyard building on Dorchester in the Kenwood neighborhood, then an apartment at 7710 N. Marshfield in a section of Rogers Park north of Howard.

Jane Levine, who started as an intern and would later become publisher, recalls: "We couldn't answer the phone '*Chicago Reader*'



Co-publisher and co-editor in chief Karen Hawkins with co-publisher Tracy Baim. PHOTO BY JEFF MARINI FOR CHICAGO READER

because we weren't paying for a business phone line. So we just said, 'Hello.'"

The *Reader* also had no credit cards or bank account. Everything flowed through Roth's personal account.

The weekly choreography went like this:

"On Sunday evenings, two volunteer women would come over and with them we would process all the classified ads for that week," Yoder says. "And then Bob McCamant would usually make dinner, and then we'd watch *Masterpiece Theatre*."

"On Mondays I generally picked up the mail. We would pick up ads. We hardly had any outsiders in our apartment," Yoder says. "It was a residential apartment. So if somebody wanted to advertise, I'd go pick it up. Our ad deadline was always on Tuesdays, and I'd pick up more ads on Tuesdays, or take them over the phone."

Meanwhile, Roth and others would be working on the stories.

"On Wednesdays in the very early days," Yoder said, "I went to the typesetter. I would often pick up an article or two on the way. And then I would sit at the typesetter and proofread."

The strips of type went back to the apartment so that McCamant could oversee the pasteup process in which the type was stuck onto the pages with warm wax. Headlines were produced using Letraset rub-ons that

were rubbed right onto the pages.

In Rogers Park, Levine recalls, "They pasted up in the room that was the dining room but also the office. But there wasn't any more room in there, so I pasted up in the kitchen, where there were cockroaches. I had to interrupt pasting up to kill the cockroaches."

According to Yoder, "I suppose on a good night we'd be done by midnight or one. On a bad night it would be later."

Then they'd drop off the pages to the printer early Thursday, sleep a few hours, pick up the printed papers, and start deliveries. Rehwaldt distributed *Readers* from his Volkswagen Super Beetle. "Bob Roth and I had a route," Yoder recalls, "and we delivered papers together every week. And we'd meet after we finished at Ratso's restaurant for dinner. That was a trade with the newspaper, so we ate for free. And a beer."

The first issue was 16 pages long, but most issues in that first year were only eight. In that debut year, they skipped issues around Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

The finances were dicey, to say the least. In a note to readers for the first anniversary, the paper announced: "The *Reader* sustained a \$19,874 loss in its first 10 months of operation," then added optimistically, "but all the indices are up." (That \$19,874 loss was the equivalent of about \$126,000 in 2021 dollars.)

Michael Miner, a longtime *Reader* writer

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and editor who had an article in the very first issue, recalls how the *Reader* tried to get his wife to advertise when she ran a women's clothing store called Presence.

"I remember a woman named Nancy Banks, I think it was, coming in and explaining the *Reader* from the point of view of a potential advertiser," Miner says. "I happened to be in the store at the time, and my thinking was, 'This will never work.'"

But the staff kept plugging away.

"I once delivered a bundle of papers to a bar on Armitage that had owed the *Reader* \$120 for several months," Yoder recalled in the *Reader* in 2011. "I decided to try to embarrass the owner by bringing up the debt in front of his customers. When I got back to the office the phone rang and it was the owner complaining about our asshole delivery driver's behavior. I assured him that the driver would be disciplined. And the check arrived the next week."

As time went on, it began to dawn on people that the *Reader* was in the right place at the right time.

"I think what happened in a number of cities at the same time was that the intellectual and cultural and social life developed in the center city that caused the revitalization of the cities, which were otherwise being sucked dry by the suburbs," McCamant says. "All these periodicals in all these various cities were a part of that. And certainly, in Chicago we were people of a certain age who wanted to come downtown, to come into the city, to go to clubs and bars, restaurants and tiny art galleries, and things like that. We were the mechanism by which they discovered that these things existed."

The *Reader's* founders saw the lakefront as a rich target audience, with Lake Shore Drive as a sort of "main street," as Roth once put it.

"We discovered the lakefront was a community," Yoder says. "It's a community of interest. Nobody else realized that."

The founders also understood that they could publish quality journalism while not relying on that to build their audience.

"Roth early on realized that what he called the service pages of the newspaper were the reason people were picking it up," Yoder says. "Section One might have had an appealing cover story, somebody might really have been interested in some of the reviews that were in it, but it was the classifieds and the listings. Where could you find anyplace else at that point what was really going on in the city? The dailies didn't much care about it."

At first the *Reader* offered all classifieds for

free, but later it made advertisers pay if they were charging for goods or services. To boost the classified ad count early on, Banks checked University of Chicago bulletin boards and called people to ask them if she could include their notices in the ads for free.

The *Reader* also called around to make its entertainment listings the best in town.

"The woman who did the music listings, part of her routine each week was to call this guy at the Jazz Record Mart and find out who was playing this weekend at these obscure south- and west-side bars," says Yoder. "Because we wanted to be comprehensive."

The *Reader* also came up with appealing features such as the Straight Dope column, which debuted in 1973. Roth had seen a question-and-answer column in one of the Boston alt-weeklies and asked Lenehan to write one like it for the *Reader*.

"They had a name [for the author] picked out," Lenehan says. "They had known a guy named Cecil Adams, and they thought this was great. A pseudonym. They wanted it to be a pseudonymous author who would be identified with the *Reader* no matter how often the writers came and went. At some point I wanted to give it up, and Dave Kehr started writing it. Part of the deal always was that Cecil was a recluse and nobody ever saw him. That was all part of the game. All of these people were Cecil's 'editors.' So Dave Kehr became Cecil's editor and he did it for a couple of years, I think, and [Ed] Zotti came along, and he did it for the longest time, and he's the one who made it into a franchise."

The *Reader* began to attract supporters, including influential ones.

Tom Wolfe, a hero of New Journalism who had written the best-selling chronicle *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* just a few years earlier, wrote to the *Reader* in its first year with encouraging words: "The future of the newspaper (as opposed to the past, which is available at every newsstand) lies in your direction, i.e., the sheet willing to deal with 'the way we live now.'"

Merely surviving those early years was a victory.

"A refusal to quit, I think, is necessary for any kind of new venture like this," Roth said in a 1983 interview with Media Burn. "I think something like 99 percent of all new publications fail in the first three years. And if you quit in the first three years, you're one of the 99 percent. There are not too many people who wouldn't have lost heart putting out an eight-page tabloid publication for a whole year."

## THE SAVING GRACES

"These are two of the unsung heroes of the origin story," said Bob Roth. "This Northwestern kid and our printer."

The Northwestern kid was a sophomore named Randy Barnett. The printer was an entrepreneur named Fred Eychaner. Without the faith and talent of those two young men, the *Reader* would have failed in its first few years.

Barnett was on Northwestern's Evanston campus one day when he noticed the *Reader* being left in certain locations. The wrong locations, he thought. "So I called them up from Evanston and I said, 'Hey, I like what you guys are doing, but you're not dumping the papers in the right spots. You should put them here, here, and here.' And they said, 'How would you feel about selling advertising for us up there?'"

Barnett said OK, and he did. "They were blown away by me because they had a very hard time selling ads. They were trying to sell ads and they couldn't," Barnett says.

"So then after the semester was over, they said, for my summer job, 'Would you want to be an advertising director?' But, they said, we can't pay you [right now]. We don't have any money.' My dad's a small businessman and I told him about this deal, and he said that's idiotic, you can't do that."

So Barnett took another summer job instead, driving a Good Humor ice cream truck.

"Miserable job, the worst job I've ever had," he says. "After struggling with that for six weeks, I called them from a pay phone at the Good Humor plant. I said, 'Are you still interested in me being advertising director?' and they said sure. I said, 'Why, great.' I made a deal with them."

They would pay him a generous commission, about 25 percent, but they couldn't pay him right away. "They gave me what you call pin money. If I needed a little money for something, they'd give me that. But they weren't paying me what they owed me," Barnett says.

Barnett sold *Reader* ads the rest of his time at Northwestern. "My dad kept hectoring me through the whole three years. Every time I would see him he would say, 'Has the *Reader* paid you yet? Has the *Reader* paid you yet? Has the *Reader* paid you yet?'"

Finally, Barnett was accepted at Harvard Law School and needed the money. "They were a little bit bad on record keeping," he says, "but they went through their whole files and they resolved every gap in my favor to get to the \$30,000 that they ended up paying me. Which is what made it possible for me to pay my way through Harvard Law School."

Barnett is now a constitutional law professor at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and has written 11 books. He argued and lost a case in the U.S. Supreme Court in which he represented California medical marijuana advocates challenging a federal ban. He is perhaps best known for developing a theory for why the individual mandate of the Affordable Care Act was unconstitutional.

It's doubtful that Eychaner would appreciate Barnett's view on Obamacare. The founder of the Newsweb printing company funneled \$32 million to progressive causes during the 2016 election cycle, according to the *Chicago Tribune*.

But in the early 70s, when both Eychaner and the *Reader* were just starting out, money was scarce. Which makes it all the more noteworthy that Eychaner kept printing the *Reader* as it fell further in debt.

"We were into him for, I think, \$40,000 or more at a time when it cost something like \$700 a week to print the paper," Yoder says. "If he had demanded full payment, we would have just had to quit, get jobs, and pay him off. When we'd pick up those papers, Roth would make sure he never had his checkbook with him."

Roth recalls Eychaner having "hair down to his belt" when he operated his printing plant in a "rat-filled alley" near the Belmont el stop. Roth agrees that if Eychaner had demanded his money, the *Reader* would have been forced to close.

"I've always thought that Fred watched how we were fighting and felt sorry for us, and felt sympathy for us," Roth says.

In an interview and a statement he provided to the *Reader*, the usually media-shy Eychaner calls McCamant a "design genius" and praised the *Reader's* typography and lack of typos. He says Newsweb used more black ink per page on the *Reader* than anything else it printed, adding, "The intensity of the blacks was so critical to McCamant's view of what the paper should look like. I mean, they bled over those pages."

"As to the very early days," he says, "indeed the *Reader* owed Newsweb far more than whatever our meager net worth was back then. It could have reached \$40,000 or so, but I haven't been able to find any specific confirmation."

The estimated \$40,000 owed to Eychaner and the \$30,000 owed to Barnett represent about \$270,000 and \$202,000 in 2021 dollars. The *Reader* offered to pay back both of them with shares in the company, but they declined.

"They did offer me a major share of the

stock in exchange for canceling the debt," Eychaner says, "but I needed cash much more desperately than stock. And I thought it would set up very difficult conflicts as they continued to grow."

Barnett says he needed money to go to law school, but he wishes he had thought to take half of his back pay in stock. "I have made very few decisions I really, really regretted in my life," he says, "but that was one I really came to regret. It didn't even dawn on me to do that. If I had, I could've retired."

## FROM STRUGGLING TO SOARING

"I believe it was three years before we made our first break-even issue," say Roth.

Then the *Reader* really took off. Its revenue more than tripled from 1973 to 1975, from \$80,960 to \$300,000. Then it more than quadrupled from '75 to '77, from \$300,000 to \$1.3 million.

The alt-weekly moved into real offices downtown, first at 70 W. Hubbard around the end of 1974 and then at 12 E. Grand about two years later.

"We had our offices at Clark and Hubbard, right across from the Baton [drag bar]," Yoder says. "And at that point, we were still pasting up at three in the morning. We'd look out the window and see the Baton closing."

The dining room table was no longer used for paste-up, but the process was still a communal ritual, according to Dave Jones, who started at the *Reader* in 1976 and worked in production for 30 years.

"I loved that hands-on era," Jones says. "Bob McCamant had been very sure to beef up the sound system. The production room on 12 E. Grand was just one big room, and he had these beautiful theater-style speakers in there."

According to Yoder, they got the speakers to settle a debt with an advertiser. "He owed us all this money, we went in, said, 'How about we just take some stereo stuff?'" he says.

As the sounds of Bruce Springsteen, Elvis Costello, Bonnie Raitt, and Prince wafted over the *Reader* crew, "many times it felt as much like a party as like a job," Jones says. "You've got everybody in the paper hands-on and working to produce this thing that's just coming into its own."

When they spotted mistakes in the classifieds during the proofing process, "We'd all be there with X-Acto knives cutting in corrections and sticking them in with our fingernails on Scotch tape backing just to make corrections in the classifieds. It was very primitive. But fun."

There were plenty of signs of the *Reader's* growing impact. The delivery staff started doing second drop-offs of papers at some locations on Fridays because their first batch was snapped up. And people were so eager to get first crack at the *Reader's* apartment ads that petty criminals took advantage. Jones recalls that when Newsweb was located on North Ashland Avenue, "it would get so hot inside the printing plant that they'd leave their big garage doors wide open, and people would go in, some crooks would go in there—the classified section was the first section to print, so people would go in there and steal bundles of classified sections off the skids and sell them for a buck apiece."

The Music Box Theatre reopened after a hiatus in 1983, and part-owner Chris Carlo recalled in a 1990 *Tribune* article that "the *Reader* was so important when we first opened up that if the *Reader* printed the wrong times for the movie, we would change the times."

Levine says the *Reader* didn't just cover a burgeoning cultural scene but was a major reason it was burgeoning.

"The theater scene was bubbling up in the early 70s, and the *Reader* reviewed those plays, and certainly they were all in the listings," Levine says. "Because of Yoder's theory to a large extent that the ad rates had to be kept low, those theaters had a place to advertise. And if there hadn't been a publication where they could advertise, where people could find out about them in the listings, where their plays could be reviewed, I really think the theater scene would not have grown as fast and as rich and as various as it was."

*Reader* ads were getting results.

"When we could get [advertisers] to try it, we always urged them to put in coupons, things like that, so they could see whether they were getting any results," McCamant says. "Then we urged them to try that with the other places that they were advertising. It soon developed that we were a really good way of reaching people for certain products and locations and things like that."

Yoder explains why they kept ad rates low.

"My theory was always that if an advertiser finds that he's making money off the ads he's placing in your newspaper, he'll crawl over glass to place those ads," Yoder says. "The regular business model is, jack those prices up as high as you can, hire a bunch of salespeople, end up discounting them some, no doubt. Push, push, push. But we did it the opposite. Now, part of it was, yes, we weren't that sort, that aggressive, I guess. I wasn't. But it was working."

**READER**  
Friday, October 1, 1971 Volume 1, No. 1 CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY

# Maxwell Street

Smoke, grime, and avarice seem not to dampen the spirits of the regulars. Story starts on page 8.



bargains, blues, and bribes on Maxwell: see page 8

## the Beauty and the beast | Combatting the sick call

By Joan

The phone rings while I'm fixing dinner for a friend (male, of course. Do you fix dinner for female friends?) "Hi, I'm a friend of Margie Shultz, and she said if I was ever in Chicago..." Since I recognized the voice instantly—he had called three months earlier using the same line (Note: some nuisance callers have absolutely no imagination)—I replied, "I'm sorry, I'm busy with dinner. I'll give you to my husband" and handed the phone to my thoroughly bewildered guest. Fortunately for all concerned, the caller had hung up before Peter had to gather his "husband" voice together.

The Hi-There-You-Don't-Know-Me-But caller is the most

innocuous of undesired phone calls, but I have found this "husband technique" is an effective protector of privacy in any number of circumstances.

Sure, the excitement of a city is its people—in the streets, at work, at whatever. But I sometimes reach what I call "people-saturation"—that point in most any day when the social gatherings are just too much, I am thankful to be a single woman with my own apartment. And no roommates, save a small gerbil named "The Beast." Here the solitude is sweet and the people of the city forgotten as I concentrate on just being me. Then the phone rings and I pick it up to hear, not a friend, but heavy breathing! I hang up; but the solitude is broken. The

people, via The Breather, have once again invaded my privacy.

The Breather is but one common type of annoying phone call I have received. You see, being a woman, I will react to the caller in some exciting manner. This functions the mind of your average crank caller. This type of call is annoying, but seldom dangerous since it is usually pretty easy to discourage the caller. Like the book says, the crank caller wants an audience—don't give it to him.

Obviously, putting your full name in the phone book is not a good idea—my mistake. For the last few years (only because of my procrastination in calling the phone company and having them change it), my full name has been emblazoned in its proper column of the phone book for all prospective crank callers to see:

Joan. Every year when the new phone books come out I envision this ecstatic crank caller greedily devouring each page of the book searching for new people to call. And yet sometimes I feel a definite advantage over the woman who has just used her initial. Though my full name is listed, I pronounce my name differently than most people would—a trade secret only my friends know. Most people, upon seeing "Joan" would pronounce it "Joan"; however, I pronounce it "Jo-ann!" Thus any caller asking for "Joan" is immediately suspect.

But frequently, I find myself caught off-guard, probably because every time I pick up my phone I don't say to myself, "Now Joan, be careful; this

Continued on page 12

The first issue of the *Chicago Reader* published on October 1, 1971.

The *Reader* managed to become an advertising juggernaut while keeping its editorial product strictly independent. Perhaps the best example of that came in 1994, when the same issue whose cover story was headlined "Let's Ban Smoking Outright" included a color insert for Camel cigarettes.

The soaring revenue of the *Reader* made the owners think they could replicate their success in other cities. Rehwaldt says their growth strategy was part of his early discussions with Roth before the launch, but it

ultimately led to tensions among the founders.

Nancy Banks left to start a *Reader*-like publication called the *East Bay Express* in the Oakland-Berkeley area of Northern California in 1978. At one point the *Reader* owned 54 percent of *East Bay Express*, which was sold to New Times Media of Phoenix in 2001. (That paper is now owned by another local weekly.)

Also in 1978, the *Reader* sent Levine out to Los Angeles to launch the *LA Reader*. The timing was terrible. Debuting around that time was the rival *LA Weekly*, which was "arguably

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the most successful, quickest-taking-off start-up in alt-weekly history,” according to Yoder.

“They were definitely more aggressive, better-funded competition than we ever had in Chicago,” Rehwaldt said.

While the *LA Reader* wasn’t a financial success, it had editorial achievements. The *LA Reader* employed a writer and editor named Matt Groening and published his comic strip *Life in Hell* before Groening went on to create *The Simpsons*, the longest-running prime-time series in U.S. television history. The *LA Reader* also published a comic called *The Angriest Dog in the World* by David Lynch, who would later have his own groundbreaking TV series, *Twin Peaks*.

“We also took over the struggling alt-weekly in Washington, D.C., *City Paper*,” Yoder says. “For a couple years I commuted out there weekly. I was publisher.”

The *Reader* made its first investment in *Washington City Paper* in 1982 and eventually became sole owner. Like the *LA Reader*, *Washington City Paper* struggled financially but produced distinguished alumni. Among them: CNN anchor Jake Tapper, who wrote a 1998 story for the alt-weekly about once dating Monica Lewinsky; David Carr, who went on to the *New York Times*; Jack Shafer, now senior media writer at Politico; and Ta-Nehisi Coates, who won the National Book Award for *Between the World and Me*.

When a *Twin Cities Reader* appeared in Minnesota without any *Chicago Reader* involvement, the Chicago company sued for trademark infringement. But a federal appeals court ruled that the word “Reader” was merely descriptive.

While the *Reader* was acquiring interest in other alt-weeklies, other alt-weeklies showed an interest in buying the *Reader*.

“We had people fishing around,” Roth says. “Probably the most serious one was, the *Village Voice* company tried to buy us.”

The *Village Voice*, founded in 1955 by a group of New Yorkers including novelist Norman Mailer, was the grandfather of alt-weeklies.

“The *Voice* was interested in buying the *Reader* multiple times,” Yoder says. “The first was in the fall of 1987. They also signed confidentiality agreements in 1992, 1995, 1997, and 2000. None of my paperwork shows an actual offer [in the later years], but it is clear that there was an enormous gulf between what they were willing to pay and what we would sell for.”

While the later inquiries may not have got-

ten close to a sale, the 1987 bid did. Yoder says the *Voice* was offering \$10 million. And if not for Rehwaldt’s opposition, the owners would have accepted it.

“McCamant and Roth came into my office and stared at me and said, ‘We’re all prepared to sign it and we want you to sign it too,’” Rehwaldt recalls. But he refused.

“Rehwaldt wouldn’t let us do it,” Roth says. “This was one of the many disputes that led to our ultimate divorce.”

The next year, *New Times*, a Phoenix-based alt-weekly, also came calling. The *New Times* owner told the *Tribune* that they hadn’t gotten past the “talks over drinks” stage, while Roth said *New Times* “informally let us know they are interested, but we said we are not willing to talk to anyone right now.”

Rehwaldt says the disappointing performance of the out-of-town properties was a growing source of conflict with his partners, and he tried in 1986 and 1988 to buy them out, but they didn’t bite. One or two months after his second buyout offer, he says, “They ambushed me at an annual shareholders meeting by firing me. They voted me out of office as treasurer. They couldn’t vote me off the board of directors because I had enough stock to vote myself on.

“It was a shock to me because as long as we’d known each other and as long as we’d been in business together, I would have thought that if they’d come to a conclusion that they had to get rid of me, they would have sat down and we would have had a negotiated parting of the ways,” Rehwaldt says.

He responded by filing a lawsuit, which was settled in 1991. Rehwaldt remained an owner but was estranged from the others.

In 1983, the *Reader* bought a building at 11 E. Illinois and set up offices there, where they would remain for the next 29 years. The ad revenue kept on growing, from \$3.4 million in 1980 to \$6.7 million in 1985 to \$10 million in 1990.

But the founders grew tired of the weekly grind and were ready to step back and usher in new blood. Or rather old blood: Jane Levine, who had started at the *Reader*, moved to the *LA Reader*, and went on to publications in Seattle and Durham, North Carolina. In 1994, she came back to Chicago as the *Reader*’s CEO and publisher.

“Probably the single smartest thing I ever did in my business career was managing to bring Jane Levine back,” Yoder says. “She ran the paper during its most successful period.”

Alison True, who’d started at the *Reader* in 1984, was named editor in chief.

Lenehan says of True: “Classic story: She started opening the mail. She got promoted through the ranks as the ranks were—it wasn’t very formal and there weren’t very many levels. But she started editing copy, and eventually she took over the main job and I became the executive editor.”

A newspaper founded almost exclusively by a group of guys was now run mostly by women, the senior editorial staff included.

“It was actually amazingly wonderful,” Levine says. “I don’t know how many companies in which the founders say they want to step back and turn the reins over to somebody, how many companies actually do that. They really, truly turned it over to me.”

Levine kept the cash cow well fed, and True retained the paper’s dedication to long-form journalism while also adding “a section of casuals” called *Our Town*, vignettes of the city similar to the *New Yorker*’s *Talk of the Town*. It worked at the time, True says, but now “I can’t imagine anyone would publish it.”

Levine says the editorial staff “did a good job of keeping what made the *Reader* great but moving it forward a little bit in terms of graphics and different lengths of pieces.”

And the *Reader*’s reach kept growing.

In 1996, it launched a special edition for the suburbs: *The Reader’s Guide to Arts & Entertainment*. A survey inserted into the *Reader* and its suburban cousin two years later found that 60 percent of the *Reader*’s audience were renters, 86.7 percent owned a compact disc player, 21.9 percent smoked cigarettes, and 43.7 percent owned or leased a cell phone.

Only 64.4 percent owned a personal computer. But that would change.

## THE WRITERS’ PAPER

While the big dailies had assignment desks demanding that reporters produce pieces that fit a strict definition of news, the *Reader* relied primarily on freelancers to tell the paper what was interesting. And it didn’t have to be the traditional definition of news.

In a 1985 interview on WBEZ public radio, host Jerry Nemanic asked Roth: “What kind of guidelines, if any, do you give to your own writers?”

“Well, we don’t,” Roth answered. “For the most part we don’t give them any guidelines at all. . . . The *Reader* is run much more on the absence of guidelines than on the presence of guidelines.”

The *Reader* was finding its niche.

“When we started there were four dailies in town,” Lenehan says. “TV news operations were competing with each other and doing

real news, not just shootings and mayhem. And it seemed like everyone was chasing the same stuff, and so Roth encouraged us to look in places that were not full of newspaper and TV reporters, to go to the places where they weren’t. There was no point in trying to cover politics better than the four newspapers and the three TV stations, so we went somewhere else.”

Abe Peck, who edited the underground newspaper *The Seed* before the *Reader* debuted and who later became a Northwestern University professor, said the *Reader* took an “inside out” approach in which it found small stories that would illustrate larger points.

“I used to talk about the *Reader*—I don’t know if it was their phrase or my phrase—they reported on cracks in the sidewalk rather than the sidewalk,” Peck says. “What I mean by that is that the story would be, oh, they’re building a highway, it’s going to be a big highway, and it’s going to go from here to there. And that was the sidewalk. And then the crack in the sidewalk was a neighborhood was going to get wiped out or they’d find one guy in the neighborhood who sold hot dogs for 40 years and, writ large, what does that mean for little entrepreneurs and small businesses?”

Perhaps the quintessential *Reader* story appeared in 1977 and had no apparent news value at all: Lenehan’s 20,012-word story about beekeeping. Yet the story won the prestigious AAAS Westinghouse Science Journalism Award.

“I’m sort of proud of the place that story has in the *Reader* mythology,” Lenehan says. “That was one of the kind of things we did—a story with absolutely no news, and on a topic that would not be considered important hardly anywhere.”

The length of *Reader* stories became a running joke.

Achy Obejas, a novelist, poet, and book translator who freelanced for the *Reader* from 1981 to 1995, recalls a conversation with Michael Miner early on.

“How long are *Reader* stories?” Obejas asked.

“Have you ever finished a *Reader* story?” Miner responded.

Especially in the early days, being open to freelancers’ ideas and willing to publish their work with little fiddling made up for the fact that the *Reader* didn’t pay much.

“The theory was if you let young writers write what they wanted to write, they wouldn’t expect a lot of money for it,” Miner says.

In his 1985 WBEZ interview, Roth said his

# GROWING FOR GOOD with Green Thumb

**Fully Free Campaign: Directly impacted individuals changing laws and creating opportunities**

Featuring Marlon Chamberlain, Fully Free Campaign manager with Heartland Alliance

**Q: What is the Fully Free Campaign?**

**MC:** The Fully Free Campaign is a first of its kind, a bold statewide campaign led by the expertise of directly impacted people, to dismantle the prison after the prison through legislative and narrative change. This is a strengths-based, people-first initiative. Changing the laws that limit opportunities for people with criminal records is just half the battle. Fully Free is about centering people with lived experience at the heart of our work in order to drive change.

**Q: Can you share a bit about your personal story and what spurred you to create Fully Free?**

**MC:** In September of 2002 I was sentenced to 20 years in federal prison. My sentence was reduced to 14 years as a result of The Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 (FSA), which reduced the statutory penalties for crack cocaine offenses to produce an 18-to-1 crack-to-powder drug quantity ratio.

I was released from federal prison on November 23, 2012, after serving ten years in prison. I can still remember being in the halfway house and watching individuals experience the joy of being home from prison alongside the harsh realities, the nightmare of rejection after rejection.

One day while in the halfway house, I signed up to attend a screening of the documentary *The Interrupters* and met Eddie Bocanegra. After the documentary was over, Eddie walked on stage and started talking about how he had served 14 years in prison but was now a community organizer working to change policy that would impact individuals after incarceration. Eddie and I exchanged information and he invited me to attend my first legislative meeting a couple weeks later. It was in this legislative meeting that I discovered the power of using my voice to influence change.

After that meeting I started volunteering with an organization as a leader, and a couple months later I was hired as the organizer of an initiative called F.O.R.C.E (Fighting to Overcome Records & Create Equality), which was an initiative led by directly impacted individuals. I was also one of the founding members of the RROCI coalition (Restoring Rights & Opportunities Coalition of Illinois), which passed several bills to reduce barriers and create opportunities for people with arrest and conviction records.

The Fully Free Campaign was formed as a response to Heartland Alliance's Social IMPACT Research Center's study, which revealed that permanent punishments impact more than 3.3 million people in Illinois due to former criminal legal system involvement. Each year after the RROCI coalition passed a bill, we would celebrate but wouldn't see the impact in the community. This is when we realized that ending permanent punishments requires dramatic legislative action. We cannot roll back each policy one at a time; this is an emergency. We need comprehensive policy

change. We need Illinois to act to make sure that people with records can fully participate in society and be free.

**Q: What are some of the biggest challenges someone formerly incarcerated faces when returning home?**

**MC:** People with records, like me, are told to rebuild their lives after incarceration, without help, and in most cases return to communities with limited resources, while navigating a complicated web of state laws that restrict our rights. These laws intentionally deny us opportunities for employment, housing, and educational opportunities. They create a "prison after the prison," and they follow us for the rest of our lives. That's why we call them permanent punishments. I have been home now for almost ten years and was recently denied an opportunity to chaperone my seven-year-old son Lil Marlon on a class field trip to a bowling alley because of a 20-year-old drug conviction. Although I have been employed since my release from prison, I'm currently a college student, I'm married, and I'm a homeowner, I still find myself being subjected to continued punishment.

**Q: How can people directly support the Fully Free Campaign, or support its goals in other ways?**

**MC:** Support those rebuilding their lives, and help them find stability by helping to set them up for success. People are not their mistakes. Look at them as a person, the person they are now. I had a drug conviction; I am not a drug dealer. I am a husband, a father, a college student, a community leader. If you are hiring people, consider hiring someone with a record or someone with a gap in their employment history that may have been from when they were incarcerated. If you're in a position to rent to someone that has a criminal record, give them a chance. Everyone needs a roof over their head. Offering employment and housing opportunities to someone rebuilding their life helps them in their efforts. Discounting someone for a prior offense is a permanent punishment. Choose to be a part of the solution.

Visit our website [fullyfree.org](http://fullyfree.org) to receive campaign updates and action alerts. Host a Lunch and Learn, join the coalition, follow us on social media (on Facebook as Fully Free Campaign, on Twitter @FullyFreeIL), and make a donation to support our statewide work.



# FULLY FREE



This is a sponsored content series, paid for by Green Thumb Industries. Submit YOUR questions about expungement and record-sealing in Illinois to [socialequity@gtigrows.com](mailto:socialequity@gtigrows.com). Learn more about the Fully Free Campaign [fullyfree.org](http://fullyfree.org).

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# BULL HORN



PHOTO COURTESY KRISTIE KAHNS

## Terra Firma transforms vacant mid-south-side land

Brandon Breaux

Hello, I'm Brandon Breaux, an artist and designer based in Chicago. My artistic practice is currently focused on fine art—digital commissions and a solo exhibition opening next year. I'm also a founder of a local online Japanese language school called the Chiba Center, which teaches Japanese language and culture to Black creatives around the world.

I'm dedicated to community and the arts, which is reflected throughout the work I create. To this end I've been collaborating with the Emerald South Economic Development Collaborative, a nonprofit organization whose goal is to generate community wealth and amplify local culture through shared pride, power, and investment for Chicago's mid-south side.

I'm the artistic director of Emerald South's Terra Firma initiative. Launched this year, Terra Firma is a five-year, \$25-million land care initiative to beautify, maintain, and activate more than 205 acres of vacant land on Chicago's mid-south side. Through job training and entrepreneurship programs, Terra Firma directly increases employment and business opportunities for local residents as well as produces measurable community outcomes related to physical, social, and environmental well-being. Terra Firma helps our communities recapture the value of their land for themselves. Through targeted investment we can protect the neighborhood against the negative consequences vacant land creates while

also transforming the neighborhood's current vulnerabilities into opportunities for local residents and businesses.

I'm curating two upcoming vacant land activations for Emerald South and Terra Firma focused on wellness in a series named On Firm Ground. On October 16 and 17, we're contributing to a Connect South Shore event being thrown by the Silver Room and sponsored by the South Shore Chamber of Commerce. It's an outdoor activation at 7045 S. Jeffery with 20+ vendors, DJs, face painting, food trucks, roller rink, and a steppers set on Sunday. Emerald South and I will be facilitating fresh produce vendors and morning meditation and yoga sessions each of the two days.

The following weekend on October 23 we'll be at 53rd and Prairie activating the Chicago Architecture Biennial exhibition New Witness Trees created by the Hood Design Studio. Events of the day are planned to include a meditation session, beat-making workshops, a bike ride in partnership with Black JoyRide, and a food vendor. We'll also be writing messages of witness on foil tags and hanging them on the Witness Trees.

Community is central to my work. Chicago is my base. It is my core and has been my window to the world, informing my perspective in life. It's honest, hard-working, and has made some of the most amazing humans I have had the pleasure of knowing in this lifetime.

Brandon Breaux is an artist and designer based in Chicago. He can be found on Instagram @bbreaux.

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.





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magazines and books, as well as in the hallucinations of total strangers.”

A *Reader* comic artist who hit it big was Lynda Barry, who penned *Ernie Pook's Co-meeek*. She told the *AV Club* in 1999 how her friendship with Matt Groening led to her break in the *Reader*.

“Bob Roth called me from the *Chicago Reader* as the result of an article Matt wrote about hip west-coast artists—he threw me in just because he was a buddy, right? And then Bob Roth who runs the *Chicago Reader* called and wanted to see my comic strips, and I didn't have any originals. I didn't know anything about originals, that you don't give them to newspapers because newspapers lose them. So I had to draw a whole set that night and Federal Express them. So I did, and he started printing them, and he paid \$80 a week, and I could live off of that. And because he's with this newspaper association, the other papers started picking it up. So it was luck. Sheer luck. [Matt] got into the *Los Angeles Reader*. For a long time the *Los Angeles Reader* wouldn't print me, and the *Chicago Reader* wouldn't print Matt even though they're sister publications. So we both worked on the publishers and the editors to get each other in. It was really funny: when we got into each other's papers, everything sort of took off for both of us.”

Barry, now an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, went from a weekly \$80 *Reader* paycheck in the late 70s to winning a \$625,000, no-strings-attached MacArthur “genius” grant in 2019.

The *Reader* likewise has been a showcase for photography.

One well-known *Reader* freelancer was Mike Tappin, whose photos appeared in the *Reader* for two decades and whose shot from a Talking Heads concert ran in *Rolling Stone's* 20th anniversary issue.

When Tappin died at age 47 in 1998, Bob McCamant was interviewed for the *Tribune's* obituary and cited Tappin's photos for a 1983 story headlined “\$144 a Month,” about welfare recipients.

“He took absolutely beautiful portraits of them, and it really added tremendous dignity to the lives of these people,” McCamant told the *Tribune*.

A 2015 exhibit at Roosevelt University of black-and-white photos from the *Reader* included work by Kathy Richland, who often shot pictures to run with stories by her husband, Grant Pick.

“*Reader* photographers took great pride

in our prints, always shooting full frame to show that we composed while shooting, no cropping,” Richland told the *Reader* at the time of the exhibit. “For a while in the late 80s, a visual style was to file the opening of the enlarger negative carrier to show the photo with a black outline proving it was full frame, i.e., not cropped. Prints were hand delivered at deadline, often still damp.”

Another photographer featured in the exhibit, Lloyd DeGrane, told the *Reader*, “I remember driving to the *Reader* offices with wet prints that I sometimes held out the window of my car to dry while I slowly drove.”

Among other photographers whose work was exhibited: Eric Futran, John Sundlof, Paul Meredith, Jim Newberry, and Cynthia Howe. A highlight of the show was a 1995 picture by Marc PoKempner of an up-and-coming young politician playing basketball with children. The pol had an unusual name: Barack Obama.

When PoKempner started as a *Reader* freelancer in 1974, the paper was paying \$25 for photos with a story no matter how many pictures they used.

“My father was an economist, and he pointed out to me that this was a losing proposition, that it cost me more to do the assignments than I was getting paid for them,” PoKempner says.

The money eventually got better, and PoKempner had no complaints about how his photos were displayed in McCamant's page designs. For one thing, McCamant drew the pages around the photos instead of plugging them into a predetermined hole as some designers do, PoKempner said. Also, “He was always good as far as picking the right picture. Always.”

The *Reader* provided a career boost for many photographers.

“The *Reader* did all these serious investigative stories as well as all the funny stuff, and everybody who mattered in the media community read the *Reader*,” PoKempner says. “I think it was within a year from my first publication in the *Reader*, I was recruited to work for *People* magazine by the bureau chief in Chicago because she saw my stuff in the *Reader*.”

PoKempner says the *Reader* “was the basis of my career. It was how everybody in town knew me. It was a godsend to me.”

## THE MATCHMAKER

“JUST SKATE AWAY then!” you yelled. I did, too embarrassed. 5/15/95 about 7pm, south of Belmont on lakefront. You: WF, brunette jogger, headphones, gorgeous eyes. Me: mus-

cular, WM, rollerblader, long brown hair, jean shorts/tank top. I fell in front of you; you fell on me. Interested in doing dinner?”

The Missed Connections and I Saw You ads were a destination for many of the *Reader* faithful.

But whether people were looking for a wholesome friendship or something more unusual, the *Reader's* personal ads provided a window into the yearnings of Chicagoans. In at least one instance, the ads were also a tip sheet for the cops.

In 1989, police raided a north-side apartment and arrested two women after they placed an ad in the *Reader* offering a “dungeon” featuring “a variety of mistresses and dominant nurses.” Police said they found whips, chains, and manacles, and they charged the women with prostitution.

In 1987, two University of Chicago students used *Reader* ads to “out” gay people. They placed ads offering gay relationships, and when people responded, the students sent letters or made phone calls to their families and neighbors identifying them as gay. The U. of C. was notified of the scheme and gave the students lengthy suspensions but did allow at least one of them to graduate.

In 1998, a community group called the Alliance for Harm Reduction picketed the *Reader's* offices on Illinois Street, demanding that it stop running ads for escort services because they were fronts for prostitution. Levine told the *Tribune* that, barring proof, “we are not going to stop running a whole category of advertising because this group says some of them may be prostitutes.”

In a precursor to online matchmaking, personal ads seeking relationships boomed in the early 90s. Yoder told the *Tribune* in 1992 that such ads had more than tripled in the *Reader* since 1990.

One young woman who placed an ad in the 90s was Seana Hasson, who now works in the research department of the YMCA of the USA.

“There were three of us, three women who did everything together, and two of them were single and had decided to put ads in the *Reader*, and then I broke up with the guy I was dating and so last minute I'm like, ‘Fine, I'm going to do it too,’” Hasson says. “It was February of '96. It was all a phone-based system with different boxes. So I do still have my letter from them with instructions on how to set up my box and record my greeting.”

Her Matches advertisement was chosen as Ad of the Week, which meant it got extra prominence and “you got a dozen roses,” she says. It read:

“I WANT YOU to want an equal, not an accessory. Rarely bored SWF, 27, Ivory girl looks, favors Docs, Kundera, spontaneity, beer, www, movies, alternative and industrial music over student loans, vegetables, laundry, deceit, and pink. Seeking interesting, literary, confident SWM 25-32, to inspire me to wear a dress.”

Interested parties called in and left messages, and the person who placed the ad could choose to respond or not.

“I'm sure I had hundreds,” she says, “but I whittled it down to six.”

One of them was John Johnson, who is now a fundraiser for a medical research foundation.

“John left a message and I didn't call him back, and he left a second message,” Hasson says.

“Because my first message, I was nervous and dumb and I didn't say anything about myself,” Johnson explains.

Hasson, who still has six pieces of paper with her notes on the finalists, wrote down that Johnson was “funny.”

“I did call him back,” Hasson says, “and our first date was on the Ides of March at the Duke of Perth on Clark. We sat in the back, and I think John took the signal when the waitress came by and asked, ‘Do you want a second drink?’ and I said yes.”

They got married in August 1998 and celebrated their 23rd anniversary this year. Their son turns 17 in October.

After they got together, they concealed the true story of how they met from their families.

“Online dating is so prevalent and socially acceptable now,” Hasson says. “At the time my friends and I did this, there still was a little stigma around it. Like, we didn't run out and tell our families that we met. We have a story that isn't that we met by placing an ad in a newspaper.”

Hasson still enjoys the *Reader*. “It was such a part of our lives then, and I still read it through social media,” she says. “You get it out of the box, you read it on the el. It's just a fixture.”

## CHANGING FACES

A publication run by white liberal arts grads was covering a city that was roughly a third Black, a third white, and a third Latino.

Lenehan sums up the situation well in an e-mail:

“The *Reader's* diversity story, which I think was probably pretty typical for alt-weeklies of our vintage and small businesses in general, is that (1) we started the company as a cohort of like-minded (and like-colored) friends and acquaintances, (2) focused really intensely on

# 50 years of a Chicago weekly

The history of the independent weekly *Chicago Reader* reflects the larger history of newspaper publishing in the United States. This timeline traces the *Reader's* changing fortunes over the course of a half-century.

1971

**First issue** of 16 pages publishes on October 1. The *Reader* will be just eight pages for much of the first year. In the early years, the “offices” are in apartments in the Kenwood and Rogers Park neighborhoods.

1973

The *Reader's* popular **Straight Dope** column debuts, bylined by the fictional Cecil Adams (actually Mike Lenehan, then Dave Kehr, then Ed Zotti).

1977

The *Reader* publishes **Mike Lenehan's 20,012-word story about beekeeping**, an example of the newspaper's determination to publish long, literary reads even if they're not pulled out of today's news. The story wins the prestigious AAAS Westinghouse Science Journalism Award.

1977

Revenue **quadruples in two years**, from \$300,000 in 1975 to \$1.3 million.

1976

Offices move to 12 E. Grand.

Late 1974-early '75

The *Reader* moves into its **first real offices**, at 70 W. Hubbard.

1978

The *Reader* expands to **Los Angeles with the LA Reader**, run by publisher Jane Levine. But the *LA Reader* runs into stiff competition from *LA Weekly*. The *LA Reader* was first to publish *Life in Hell* by Matt Groening, later of *Simpsons* fame.

1979

The *Reader* debuts **Lynda Barry's comic Ernie Pook's Comeek**, which is syndicated and runs until 2008.

1982

The *Reader* invests in *Washington City Paper* and later takes control.

1983

Offices move to 11 E. Illinois.

1987

Revenue is \$8.3 million, a sixfold increase from a decade earlier.

1994

Founders step back on actual production of the paper. **Jane Levine named CEO and publisher. Alison True named editor in chief.**

1990

**John Conroy's "House of Screams"** story in the *Reader* reveals police torture by Commander Jon Burge and his underlings. The story is the first of a **groundbreaking 17-year series of reports on police misconduct.**

1989

The *Reader* sells off all but a small stake of its *LA Reader* to a local group.

1988

In a **conflict over business practices**, the *Reader* board removes Rehwaldt as an officer and employee, but he remains owner of nearly one-fifth of the *Reader*. Rehwaldt sues, and the lawsuit is eventually settled with him remaining as an owner.

1987

New York's *Village Voice* attempts to acquire the *Reader* and comes close to succeeding. The *Reader* turns down the offer after co-owner Tom Rehwaldt objects.

1996

*Reader* begins publishing a special edition for Chicago's suburbs, *The Reader's Guide to Arts & Entertainment*.

1996

The *Reader* celebrates its **25th anniversary** with a party at Metro featuring a concert by the Waco Brothers.

1997

Revenue is \$19 million, more than double what it was a decade earlier.

2002

Highest revenue year: \$22.6 million.

2012

**Michael Ferro's Wrapports purchases the Reader**, which becomes a sister paper of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The offices move to the former Apparel Center.

2010

Editor in chief Alison True is fired.

2009

Creative Loafing's biggest creditor, Atalaya Capital Management of New York, takes control of the *Reader*.

2008

Creative Loafing files for **bankruptcy.**

2007

**The Reader is sold to Creative Loafing.** Layoffs of key staffers, such as John Conroy and Steve Bogira, soon follow. The *Reader's* format changes from quarterfold to standard flat tabloid. The suburban edition is discontinued.

2015

Mara Shalhoup resigns after four years as *Reader* editor to become editor of *LA Weekly*. Jake Malooley is named editor.

2017

A consortium that includes the Chicago Federation of Labor buys the *Reader* and the *Sun-Times*.

2018

**Chaos reigns at the Reader** as Jake Malooley is fired by telephone upon returning from his honeymoon, and executive editor Mark Konkol is fired after 17 days on the job because of a cover illustration widely viewed as racist.

2018

The *Reader* is **acquired by developer Elzie Higginbottom and lawyer Leonard C. Goodman and becomes an L3C (low-profit limited liability company), with Tracy Baim as publisher.** Offices move to 2930 S. Michigan Avenue.

2021

The *Reader* marks **50th anniversary.** Full nonprofit conversion is expected by the end of the year, as the L3C winds down operations. New website launches as the *Reader* plans for an increasingly digital future.

2020

Buffeted by financial pressures from the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Reader* goes to an **every-two-weeks print schedule.** The IRS approves **501(c)(3) nonprofit status.** Tracy Baim and Karen Hawkins agree to share the co-publisher title, with Hawkins remaining as co-editor in chief.

2019

The *Reader* **promotes Karen Hawkins and Sujay Kumar to co-editors in chief**, the first people of color named as top editors. The *Reader* launches the **Chicago Independent Media Alliance** to build collaboration and support for independent media.

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survival and success, paying very little attention to the outside world, (3) eventually got to the point where we could afford to turn and look outward, whereupon we (4) discovered, much to our surprise, that everyone in the company looked like us. Which in the case of the alt press meant we had joined the establishment we were so fond of criticizing.”

Achy Obejas, who is Cuban American, says, “I don’t think I, in my entire career at the *Reader*, had an editor who was of color. The whole time, and I was there a good 15 years.”

Obejas speculates that the lack of diversity sprang from the *Reader*’s standard operating procedure of simply opening its doors and considering work by whoever walked in. “The *Reader* just did not believe in outreach,” she says. “They really believed in just ‘We’re here, and anybody can come to us.’”

But in the 90s Lenehan did make efforts to diversify the contributors. First, by establishing a minority internship at the *Reader* and *Washington City Paper*. Then, by working with Northwestern professor Abe Peck to create an Academy for Alternative Journalism in which young journalists, primarily of color, would get months of training with the aim of making them attractive candidates for jobs at alt-weeklies. The *Reader* and other interested parties made financial contributions, and Lenehan and Peck lured Charles Whitaker away from Johnson Publishing to run the program at Northwestern’s Medill School of Journalism. It lasted about nine years. Whitaker is now the dean at Medill. One person who went through the program, Vernal Coleman, shared in a Pulitzer Prize this year for his work at the *Boston Globe*.

While the staff and its readership were predominantly white, the *Reader* regularly published stories about minorities, and often covered communities of color with greater depth than the dailies. Perhaps that wasn’t a high bar, but the *Reader* became known for trying to make relatively privileged people care about victims of poverty and prejudice.

“I thought about it a lot when I was writing these stories about people who lived in West Garfield Park and Englewood,” says Steve Bogira. “Because the *Reader* didn’t circulate and we didn’t have newspaper boxes in West Garfield Park and Englewood. You would think that the editors would be like the editors at the *Tribune* and the *Sun-Times* and say, well, you know, our audience is these people, so why don’t you write about—by ‘these people,’ people who live in Lincoln Park or even in the suburbs. That’s who reads our paper, so why

don’t you write stories about those [people]?’ I never got any kind of pressure to write about somebody else.”

Pushing back on the idea that *Reader* had few readers of color, current co-publisher Tracy Baim says: “When I took over, I had that notion too, and I’m not saying that notion is not probably 70 percent correct, but there are people I met and heard on the phone and met at events from all walks of life. And loyal dedication among the African American community in particular to the *Reader* shocked me.”

The *Reader*’s leadership and staff have evolved dramatically in half a century. First with the change to predominantly female leadership in the 1990s, then with the moves to diversify racially and ethnically under current ownership.

Today the *Reader*’s co-editors in chief are a Black woman, Karen Hawkins, and an Indian American man, Sujay Kumar.

“I grew up in the suburbs reading the *Reader*, loving the *Reader*,” Hawkins says. “My story is that I used to tell my mother we were going to the Bakers Square in Homewood and then we would sneak into the city and go to Scenes—there was a coffee shop at Clark and Belmont. I used to hang out in Boystown, looking at drag queens, to pick up the *Reader*. I was very aware at the time that even though I knew I wanted to be a journalist, I would say I’d never get hired at the *Reader*. And I was very aware that one of those reasons is that they only hired white people at the *Reader*. ‘Oh, you can tell our stories but you don’t want us to tell our stories. It has to be from your point of view.’”

That has changed markedly under the new management.

“When we separated from the *Sun-Times* [in 2018], there were, I believe, 16 *Reader* staffers and there was one woman of color,” Hawkins says. “And now I think we’re at 30 percent people of color.”

As far as distribution, Hawkins said, “we’re at 1,200 locations and we have really diversified where those locations are, and we have tried to be more responsive to folks saying ‘Hey, I opened a shop in Bronzeville and I’d love to be on the *Reader*’s list.’”

## TUMULTUOUS TIMES

Everything changed when the Internet happened.

But its impact didn’t arrive suddenly, and there were reasons to think the *Reader* could adjust to changing times and maintain its dominance. After all, it was still a cool product in a lucrative market in the year 2000,

when the movie *High Fidelity* came out, with a character who was a *Reader* music critic. But it should have been a sign that the movie was about an already-struggling industry, the record store.

In 2002, the *Reader*’s revenue reached an all-time high of \$22.6 million, double what it had been a decade earlier. And the *Reader* continued to branch out, acquiring a minority interest in *The Stranger* in Seattle and the *Portland Mercury* in Oregon. But technology was creating major disruptions for newspapers.

“Being younger and less established than the dailies, at the time we thought that we were doing a better job of staying on top of this stuff,” Lenehan says. “And we were more open-minded about the possibilities. I think the first thing we did is we started putting our rental ads, for apartment rentals, in a fax-back program. Fax-back was a technology that had a heyday of about ten or 11 months, I think. It was sort of like a crude Internet search. You’d call a number and you’d enter some search criteria and we’d sort the ads and send it to you with a fax. It was like an online search without a monitor. When Web browsers and so forth came around, that system was easily translatable to Web browsers. In that way we were like pioneers.”

McCamant says the *Reader* initially made the right moves on Web classifieds.

“The dailies were our competition for classified ads, and we immediately put all of our classifieds on the Web. It took the dailies a long time to give up the idea of charging extra to be on the Web. That drove lakefront housing advertising, apartments for rent, over to us overnight.”

But still, Craigslist was on the march, and would ultimately waylay classified profits for both the dailies and the *Reader*. At the time, though, Rehwaldt says he was more worried about display advertising than classifieds. “We couldn’t imagine that anybody would give away vast quantities of classified advertising like Craigslist did,” he says. “That was ultimately the thing that killed the *Reader*’s profitability.”

The *Reader* was especially criticized for being slow to put its stories on the Web.

“We decided that we would make specific services available online,” Levine says. “We would do what the Internet did better than print. And we would resist what ‘everybody’ thought we should do, which is put the paper online. So we didn’t put the paper online for a long time.”

Though she concedes that was probably a mistake, Levine notes other innovations, such

as the *Reader*’s Restaurant Finder. “It would help you search for restaurants in the way that people do: You’re going to the movies at the Music Box. Where can I eat near the Music Box? Where can I eat Mexican near the Music Box? Where can I eat cheap Mexican near the Music Box? Nobody was doing that then. There wasn’t off-the-shelf calendar software like there is now, and the mapping part of Restaurant Finder was really difficult because we had to enter all of the coordinates for everything.”

The *Reader* was not only criticized for being slow to put its stories online but for doing so in PDF form at first.

“We wasted a year or a year and a half—this was all my doing—trying to convert the *Reader* into a Web presence with PDFs so people would see the ads,” Lenehan says. “And in fact, they looked so much better on-screen than they looked on our crappy black-and-white printing—it was really quite an attractive product, but we were trying to hold on to the old model instead of figuring out what the new model was. We weren’t alone.”

In 2002, both the *Tribune* and *Sun-Times* got into the free newspaper business, with the *Trib*’s *RedEye* and the *Sun-Times*’s *Red Streak* trying to appeal to young readers. The *Reader* responded to the challenge with a bit of humor, publishing an issue with a nameplate that said *Redder* instead of *Reader* and was red, a jarring touch of color for the longtime black-and-white newspaper.

Two years later, the *Reader* got serious about color, with a redesign by Spanish firm Jordi + Utensil that included a color cover.

Interviewed by the *Tribune* about the redesign, True expressed the growing sense that the business was losing momentum: “We’re well aware of a much more crowded field of entities distracting people from the *Reader*. The way we think about what we do had to change. We haven’t felt for a long time we could take readers for granted the way we could for so long.”

Rehwaldt recalls another purchase attempt by the *Village Voice*. “Ultimately they were offering \$60 to \$65 million for it around 2003,” he said, noting that the offer was much more than the sale price a few years later. Rehwaldt, who had prevented the sale to the *Voice* in the late 80s, said he was now “advocating very strongly” to accept the offer, but his partners didn’t go for it. Levine left the *Reader* in 2004 to return to Seattle, and Rehwaldt says “Jane was the only person they could all trust,” so he thought it was time to sell.

Meanwhile the *Reader*’s revenue plunged by

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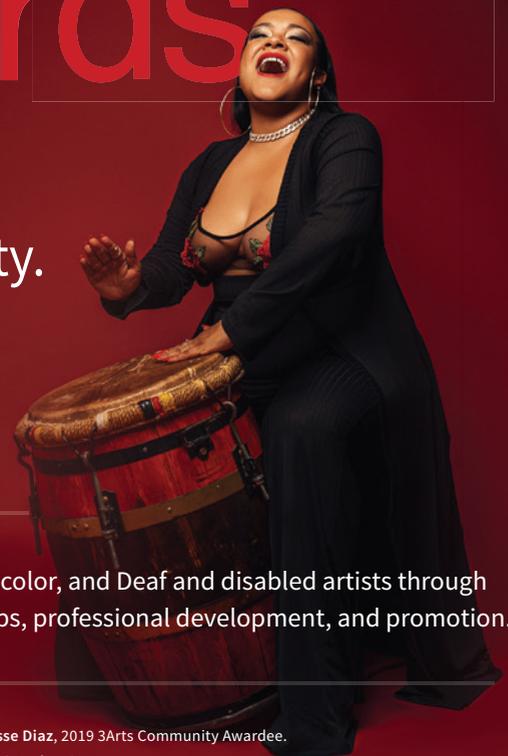
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a third from 2002 to 2006, going from \$22.6 million to \$14.2 million.

Rehwaldt's dealings with his fellow founders continued to deteriorate, and he suspected they might try to squeeze him out, though Yoder says, "I don't think it ever crossed my mind." Rehwaldt says he thought his partners wanted to add their printer, Fred Eychaner, as a new partner.

Eychaner, who made a fortune from his acquisition and sale of television station WPWR as well as from his printing business, says he vaguely recalled offering to buy into the *Reader*.

"As the years went by, irreconcilable differences emerged, and I'm sure I tried to help understand and calm the waters," he says. "Don't recall details but likely suggested I could buy some of the shares, to no avail."

Rehwaldt, who became a lawyer after being fired at the *Reader*, filed suit for a second time, accusing his partners of acting against him in an "illegal, oppressive or fraudulent" manner.

The *Reader's* Michael Miner quoted an unidentified owner as saying of the lawsuit: "It wasn't the straw that broke the camel's back. It was the three-pound bag of manure that broke the camel's back."

Rehwaldt told a friend about his wrangling with his partners, and that friend told Ben Eason, head of an Atlanta-based chain of alt-weeklies, Creative Loafing. Eason made a bid for the *Reader*, and the deal was done.

The timing was fortunate for the owners, with the Great Recession only months away.

"If we had sold four or five years [earlier], we would have really cashed in," says Lenehan, who owned a small stake. "But if we'd waited another two years, we wouldn't have gotten a dime."

Rehwaldt says he heard from his attorney soon after: "He calls me up two weeks after we close the deal with Eason in July of 2007 and says, 'Man, you guys just have unbelievable timing. You realize that all of the money in the world is now dried up for mergers and acquisitions, and it's just happened in the last couple of days.'"

"We were lucky to get out when we did before the money all dried up," Rehwaldt says.

Yoder says the owners "tried to do right by the employees," leaving them with "a pretty generous contribution to their profit-sharing plan."

Roth told the *Tribune*: "I think Ben Eason has a better idea of how to fix our company than we do."

That didn't turn out to be true. The sale to

Creative Loafing ushered in a period of tumult in which the *Reader* changed hands four more times as it struggled to find its footing in a dramatically changing marketplace.

Asked how she viewed the Creative Loafing sale, editor Alison True says, "As the end of an era, for sure. It was the end of my era. And I think in a lot of ways it was the end of the *Reader* as we knew it. Creative Loafing was an avatar of a condition that has afflicted journalism ever since. They came in not realizing that the things they tried to streamline or economize on had a bad effect on the quality of journalism. They fumbled it really badly. We had an incredible production department with all these artists and people we thought of as friends. And people who were dedicated and were being paid hourly and would still work until midnight or later. They found out their department was closing in a report on WBEZ."

True was retained for a few years, leaving her with the painful task of laying off *Reader* stalwarts such as John Conroy, Tori Marlan, and Steve Bogira. The *Reader* changed from its quarter-fold format to a standard flat tabloid, and the printing was moved from Chicago's Newsweb to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* in Wisconsin.

Just 14 months after Creative Loafing took over, it filed for bankruptcy. The next year, Creative Loafing's biggest creditor, Atalaya Capital Management of New York, assumed control of the *Reader*. The next year, True was fired and was succeeded by her highly regarded lieutenant, Kiki Yablon, who soon left too.

Even with the chaos, the *Reader* was still producing journalism that mattered. A 2009 *Reader* story about uninspected pork prompted state inspectors to seize bacon from one of the city's most high-profile restaurants, Frontera Grill. In 2010, the *Reader's* Mick Dumke asked Mayor Richard M. Daley why he thought Chicago's handgun ban was effective and the mayor bizarrely responded: "If I put this up your butt, you'll find out how effective it is. Let me put a round up your, you know."

In 2011, the *Reader* got another makeover under art director and subsequent creative lead Paul John Higgins, this one featuring a glossy cover and staples at its spine. And in a sharp departure from the founders' separation of advertising and editorial content, publisher Alison Draper explained the importance of ad placement to a *Tribune* reporter: "Every bit of this content can deal with a different psychographic or demographic, so we're being very strategic and selling positions."

Along with "psychographics," there were psychodramas ahead.

Atalaya sold the *Reader* in 2012 to Wrappports, and it became a sister paper of the *Sun-Times*. Three years later, *Reader* staffers successfully started a union membership drive and, like the *Sun-Times's* staff, became a union shop under the Chicago News Guild. Wrappports made controversial moves at the *Sun-Times*, including laying off nearly the entire photo staff, but it largely left the *Reader* to drift as it became a pawn in a larger Chicago media reshuffling. Wrappports's leading owner, Michael Ferro, became the largest stockholder in the *Tribune's* parent, Tribune Publishing, and avoided a conflict of interest by donating his share of Wrappports—including the *Reader*—to a foundation. After changing Tribune Publishing's name to Tronc (which comedian John Oliver said "sounds like the noise an ejaculating elephant makes"), Ferro tried to get Tronc to buy the *Sun-Times* and the *Reader*, which would have made him their owner for a second time. Ultimately, a group including former alderman Edwin Eisendrath and labor unions bought the *Sun-Times* and *Reader* to help preserve Chicago's status as a two-daily-newspapers town.

The *Reader* was still producing strong journalism, such as Aimee Levitt and Christopher Piatt's 2016 story about mistreatment of the cast and crew at Profiles Theatre. But the iconic alt-weekly was clearly struggling for attention in an increasingly crowded and digitally focused media environment.

And the *Reader* ran into its own embarrassing public spectacle. In 2018, Pulitzer Prize winner Mark Konkol was named the *Reader's* executive editor. Nine days later, Konkol called editor in chief Jake Malooley at O'Hare, where Malooley had just returned from his honeymoon, and told him he was fired. Eight days after that, Konkol himself was fired after a *Reader* cover illustration featuring a Black lawn jockey upset many people, including the writer whose piece it was illustrating.

The *Reader* looked like a distressed property.

"I worked very hard to save the *Reader*, overcoming the anger from folks on the *Sun-Times* side of the company who thought of it only as a drain on their resources, and skepticism from some among my board of directors," Eisendrath writes in an e-mail.

Amy Matheny, now vice president of sales at the *Reader*, had a metaphor for the relationship of the *Sun-Times* and *Reader* before the separation of the two publications: "The *Sun-Times* was the dog of the family. It demanded food, water, and walking every day, and, rightly so, it needed that attention and care. The

*Reader* was the goldfish. You walked by every now and again, when you remembered, to see if it was alive. You'd be relieved to see it still swimming, sprinkle in a little food, and then forget about it until you walked by again."

If the *Reader* could gain its independence, it could achieve dog status. But if it couldn't and continued to be ignored, the goldfish might go belly-up.

## TO THE RESCUE

In the wake of the Konkol disaster in 2018, Tracy Baim, publisher of the *Windy City Times* LGBTQ+ weekly, began talking to Eisendrath about taking over the *Reader*.

According to Eisendrath, "Tracy was the first on my list. I always thought she would be the best person to manage the publication."

Baim recalls: "When I walked in his office, he said, 'You could have it for a dollar.'"

But it wasn't that simple.

"My proposal said I would come in and run it for three months under the *Sun-Times* to see if it was viable," Baim says. "They said, no, you can have it but you have to take it today. I said, well, it will fold next week. I could not meet payroll without a plan, right? So then they pursued other suitors."

One of those suitors was Kenneth Smikle, founder of Target Market News, a trade magazine and research firm focused on Black consumers. Smikle "ultimately could not bring the capital," according to Eisendrath. Smikle died later that year at age 66.

Another suitor was Elzie Higginbottom, a well-known Chicago real estate developer who had bought one of his first buildings after seeing an ad in the *Reader*.

Higginbottom was an investor in the *Sun-Times* and *Reader*, but Eileen Rhodes, president of his East Lake Management Group, says the developer was hesitant to take on the *Reader* as a spin-off. "We said we would love to be of help, it's just that the amount of cash it's going to take and the time, we can't make a commitment," Rhodes says.

Eisendrath says he talked with Jessica Stites, a *Sun-Times* board member and executive editor of the political magazine *In These Times*, and she recruited prominent attorney Len Goodman, a *Sun-Times* and *Reader* investor, to help bankroll the effort. But as the Higginbottom-Goodman team looked into it, they realized that while they had the funds, they didn't have the expertise. Higginbottom had brought in Dorothy Leavell, publisher of the Black newspaper *Chicago Crusader*, to be the *Reader's* publisher, and she was helping out. But she planned to keep running the

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*Crusader*, and it became clear that the *Reader* needed its own full-time publisher.

The rescue effort was in doubt.

David Roeder of the Chicago News Guild, who was trying to save union jobs at the *Reader*, called Baim to see if she would get involved. She says she got the impression that the *Reader* was “days away from being shut down,” and she agreed to call Eisendrath.

Meanwhile, according to Eisendrath, he told Rhodes and Higginbottom about Baim’s past interest and asked for a green light to reach out to her. “I arranged for Eileen and Tracy to meet, and knew they would like each other,” Eisendrath writes.

The deal happened quickly. Higginbottom and Goodman bought the *Reader* for \$1, with Baim as publisher and Leavell as board chair. The *Reader* was set up as an L3C, a low-profit limited liability company, and the owners invested more than \$2 million over the next two and a half years.

As Rhodes summarizes it: “Len and Elzie put in a lot of money, and Tracy didn’t sleep for 24 months.”

Soon it became apparent to Baim that conversion to a nonprofit was the right move. For one thing, philanthropists and other donors are more willing to give money to nonprofits than to commercial enterprises. And nonprofit status also sends a clear signal of a public service mission.

Higginbottom and Goodman agreed to the shift to nonprofit, and Rhodes became board chairwoman of the Reader Institute for Community Journalism, which oversees the newspaper.

“We don’t know what the future is beyond 50 [years],” Baim says, “but this gives us a much better bridge to the future than if we were constantly begging rich people who owned it.”

Baim started the application for nonprofit status shortly before COVID-19 hit.

The pandemic caused the *Reader*’s advertising to plunge 90 percent, forcing the paper to go “dancing for dollars,” as Baim put it. The *Reader* changed to biweekly print publication, put some employees on voluntary furloughs, and got federal Paycheck Protection Program loans of \$278,300 and \$278,395. The paper also pulled new features out of its bag of tricks, including a book club, a coloring book, and a cookbook.

Meanwhile, Baim pushed forward with creation and promotion of the Chicago Independent Media Alliance, in which 69 members representing 85 media outlets across the city

collaborate on fundraising and try to increase their visibility and impact.

“The proudest thing about that COVID [response] was the emergency fundraiser we did for our Chicago Independent Media Alliance members,” Baim said. “That’s a project of the *Chicago Reader*. It’s one of the dreams I’ve always had, and when I took over the *Reader*, we really implemented it very quickly.”

CIMA, run by media partnerships coordinator Yazmin Dominguez, is a reflection of a philosophical shift in Chicago media in which cutthroat competition has largely given way to collaboration in order to counter market forces threatening local journalism.

“There’s just a great potential there to help lift the *Reader* along with everybody else,” Baim says. “The *Reader* can’t be the last paper standing, because then we’re going away too.”

Rhodes emphasizes that Baim’s efforts go well beyond the *Reader*.

“What Tracy has brought to the effort is that it’s not enough just to save the *Reader* and get the *Reader* on good footing,” Rhodes says. “She’s making the case to foundations across the country, and to philanthropists and individuals and family foundations, about why community journalism is essential, and that’s where democracy comes from.”

Abe Peck, now a Northwestern professor emeritus, says Baim’s “collaboration model is an interesting idea. I hope she’s on to something.”

So what is the *Reader*’s role going forward?

“We have this beautiful, robust, really diverse [media] ecosystem,” says Karen Hawkins, who is also co-publisher. “I think the *Reader*’s place is still seen as the place for long-form journalism. I don’t think anybody else is doing the kind of long-form pieces that we’re doing. And it’s still an alternative to what we consider the mainstream media.”

One role the *Reader* still has, according to Baim, is the “curation of the unique culture that has yet to explode. It’s before people make the cover of other papers, before their album hits a million, before they’re playing Soldier Field. We want them on their way up or at the end of their careers when they have such an important story to tell. And that’s in music. It is in other culture, but in music in particular. I think that’s one of the most important things the *Reader* does.”

Major Chicago print publications—not just the *Reader* but the *Tribune* and *Sun-Times* as well—have lost influence in the last few decades. New players have moved in, among them Block Club Chicago, ProPublica, City Bureau, Chalkbeat, and The TRiiBE. Other

longtime players such as WBEZ public radio and the Better Government Association have increased their news firepower.

In a time of media specialization, Rhodes says she believes the *Reader*’s wide scope can be a strength.

“You can go way down the rabbit hole on your individual interests,” Rhodes says. “But if you pick up a copy of the *Reader*, you have the ability to look down the rabbit hole on multiple people’s interests. You can find a restaurant you didn’t know about. You can find a band you didn’t know about. You can hear a lot about housing issues you may not have picked up on. It’s kind of an antidote to the super-niching by having a spread of things. There’s an advantage to having a wider platform than an individual micro-niche voice. I think that the *Reader* is still going to be a unique Chicago voice.”

The *Reader*’s print circulation is 56,000—just 40 percent of what it was in 2007—but the founders are rooting for its future success.

“More power to ‘em,” says Bob McCamant.

“The not-for-profit model may be the way to go,” says Tom Yoder.

Now based at 2930 S. Michigan after a few years at the downtown Apparel Center and then 30 N. Racine during the *Sun-Times* era, the *Reader* is again being praised for its innovation. A national industry group, the Local Media Association, gave the *Reader* first-place honors for Best Philanthropy Journalism and/or Fundraising Strategy in its 2020 Digital Innovation Awards.

Hawkins notes the sense of loss some may feel for the *Reader*’s old glories, but said it’s time for reinvention, not nostalgia.

“I hope that we are in a place where we can respond to changes in the industry, that we are more nimble than we used to be,” Hawkins says. “And I hope that we now understand our strengths and our place in the ecosystem, and focus on the things that we know that we can do and not the things that we used to do. I understand the grief that people have about the loss of the old *Reader*. I didn’t live through it, but I understand it. I want to create space for that grief while at the same time moving forward and saying, ‘But we survived and we have this amazing opportunity to become the next great thing.’” 

*Mark Jacob, a former Chicago Tribune metro editor and former Sunday editor at the Chicago Sun-Times, is editor of the Medill Local News Initiative website at Northwestern University.*

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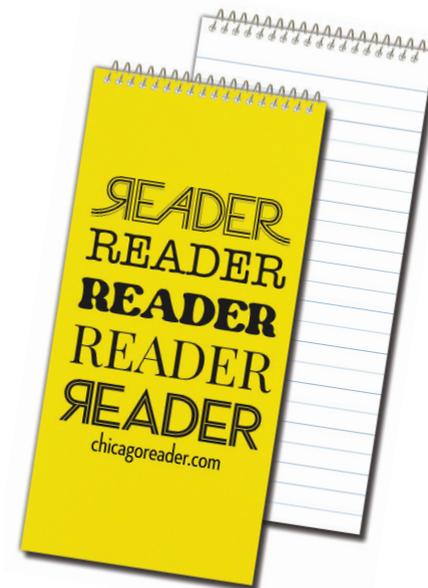
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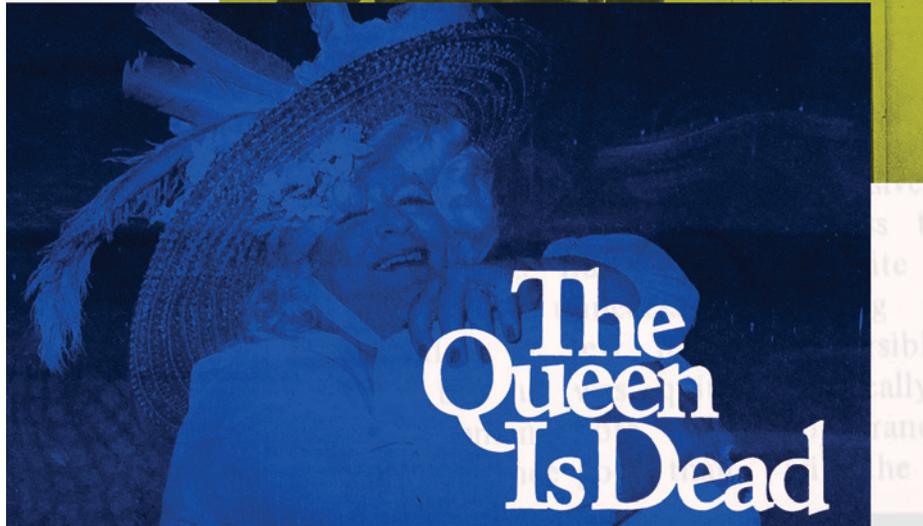
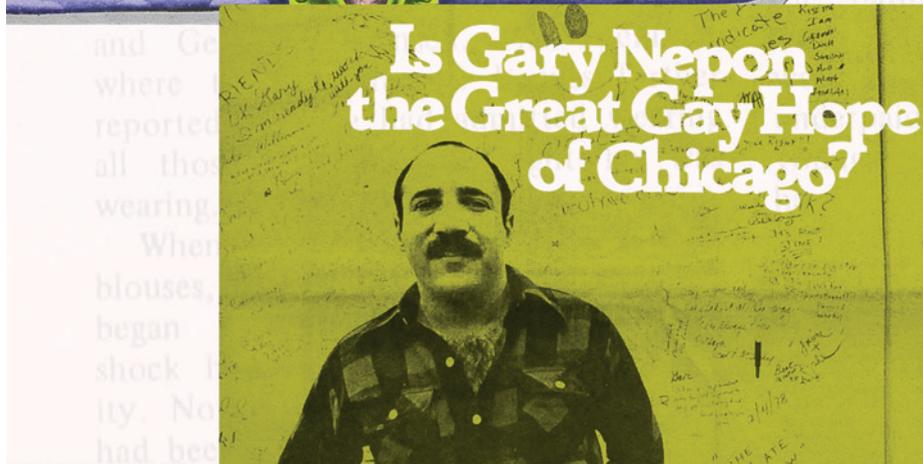
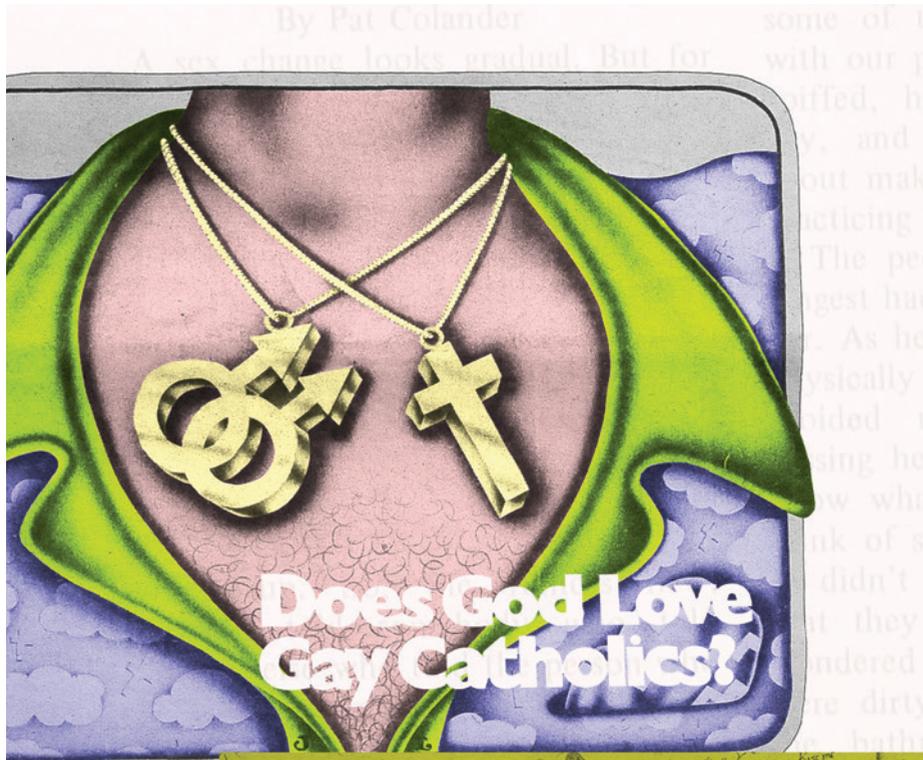
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## A LOOK BACK

# Queer history

## through the eyes of the Reader

A reflection on how LGBTQ+ issues, subjects, and writers have appeared on the paper's pages over the last five decades.

By **ADAM M. RHODES**

“**Y**oung Hyde Park male seeks other young males to get it on with.” A phone number followed, along with the young man’s availability: days, as well as Friday and Saturday.

The *Chicago Reader*’s first explicitly gay content came not in a blistering exposé, music feature, or show review, but in the classifieds, the backpages before there was a Backpage.com. And while a classified ad might not be remarkable now, for a gay man to place a per-

sonals ad in a newspaper seeking a lover just two years after the historic Stonewall Riots, it was radical.

The *Reader* has built a reputation among the Chicago media landscape as the cultural heartbeat of the city, the place to go to find what you’re doing that weekend, and for writing unlike any other publication. In the five decades since its founding, the paper has given space to ideas, people, and institutions overlooked by mainstream media, including

From top: Illustration by Jim Ludtke in the June 10, 1977, issue; photo by Paul Sequiera in the March 3, 1978, issue; photo by David L. Veltkamp in the January 8, 1980, issue. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY KIRK WILLIAMSON

Chicago's queer community. But that wasn't always the case.

In its earliest issues, queer coverage was admittedly scant, usually relegated to arts and theater coverage. In 1972, there was a blistering critique of a theater production with the headline "Nay Love for Gay Love," featuring the word homophilia as an early descriptor for queerness. And in 1973, a surprisingly thorough and positive review of a gay pornographic film, *Left Handed*, lauded as more art than porn. Or at least a little more.

Theater remained queer writings' most common domain until LGBTQ+ issues became actual news, and not just fodder for the arts.

Even when LGBTQ+ issues reached the feature pages—or even more rare, the front page—queerness itself was the focus of the investigations or critique, not how the state and city came to bear on these populations. One such cover story ran under the simple headline: "Transsexuality" in 1977 and served to interrogate the trans experience. And like coverage that persists across media to this day, the queer community was treated as a monolith of singular ideas, desires, and struggles.

"I would say most of it was a typical kind of parachute in and benign neglect," says *Reader* publisher Tracy Baim, who also has led the city's LGBTQ+ press for decades as the founder of *Windy City Times*. "They did have some gay writers, and they did have certainly some gay freelancers. You know, critics, things like that. It was kind of like a lot of alternative media, where they were hip and cool about things, so they weren't [against]."

Baim is also quick to mention that in the early days of the *Reader*, namely the 70s and 80s, the paper was "ahead of the curve," as far as nonqueer press went.

And it's important to note that most of the subjects of the *Reader's* earliest queer coverage were affluent gay men who had power in the city. Danny Sotomayor, Rick Garcia, and Chuck Renslow all earned themselves space in the paper. That's not to say that these men weren't incredibly important to the local queer community: Sotomayor led the city's ACT UP chapter, Garcia was instrumental in early legislative victories for LGBTQ+ Chicagoans, including the city's human rights ordinance, and Renslow was the entrepreneur and activist who founded the Man's Country bathhouse, Leather Archives & Museum, and International Mr. Leather contest held here in the city. But that same editorial space was rarely given to those in the community who weren't cisgender, white, male, and affluent.

And even when more marginalized people earned a spot among the features, the writing was often dismissive or disrespectful. An article from 1973 discussing anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination in City Hall features a paper doll-esque illustration of a burly, bearded man, with outfits for you to choose from including a sundress, wide-brim hat, or, strangely, a literal ball and chain. As a mustachioed person who favors a sundress, I'm the last one to comment on folk's preferred style of dress. But it's impossible to ignore the misogynistic stereotypes and outright confusion with which the earliest *Reader* covered the local queer community.

But exceptions do exist, as they often do. And starting in the 80s, more nuanced writing appeared in the *Reader*. That year, the *Reader* ran a cover celebrating the life (and death) of local drag legend Mother Carol. The next years, they published a feature on the city's former queer beach destination—the now-shuttered Belmont Rocks—and the plight of gay Cuban refugees, as well as searches for an HIV/AIDS vaccine and potential civil rights struggles related to the virus.

Albert Williams, the onetime editor of *Windy City Times*, was the *Reader's* go-to queer voice as well as a theater writer when he signed on with the paper in 1985. He spoke of being the gut-check for early editors and writers about queer issues, and of stepping in when necessary.

"You can fault the *Reader's* early years for shortsighted coverage of gay issues," Williams says. "They were you know, not always very good, because for one thing their editors didn't think in terms of, 'we need a writer for the gay beat.'"

"I don't think the gay community really saw it as being you know, reflective of the gay canon. And that's probably the best way to say it."

But as the advent of the modern queer liberation movement marched on, coverage diversified, expounded, and multiplied. Achy Obejas, Justin Hayford, and current *Reader* staffer Ben Joravsky also aided in chronicling the city's queer community. And as time went on and coverage evolved, an interesting phenomenon

occurred. Beginning in the early 90s, letters to the editor began to call out less-than-stellar coverage of the city's queer community. In 1990, one such letter chastised the paper for the headline on its profile of Danny Sotomayor, "The Angriest Queer." At the time, the word was still widely seen as a slur.

The paper also attracted queer thinkers, in its early days and now. The late Larry Kramer, who many would say gave Sotomayor a run for his money as the "angriest queer," wrote a harsh critique of *Philadelphia*, the Academy Award-nominated film starring Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington, which is often lauded as one of the first Hollywood films to acknowledge HIV/AIDS. The film follows Hanks's character as he sues his former employer for discrimination due to his HIV/AIDS diagnosis and ends with him succumbing to the virus. Hanks took home an Oscar for his role in the film.

While the mainstream press showered the movie in accolades, Kramer felt differently.

"*Philadelphia* is a heartbreakingly mediocre movie," Kramer wrote in the critique's opening lines. "It's dishonest, it's often legally, medically, and politically inaccurate, and it breaks my heart that I must say it's simply not good enough and I'd rather people not see it at all." He went on to pick the movie apart summarily, not least of which for



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## 50TH ANNIVERSARY

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sanitizing the plight of the gay characters and of AIDS patients—from family abandonment, to the breadth of government neglect under which they suffered.

Mark Schoofs, the current editor-in-chief of BuzzFeed News and a former editor of *Windy City Times*, wrote briefly for the *Reader*, covering the Chicago Housing Authority's Mid-night Basketball League, tensions between the city's gay population and then newly elected mayor Richard M. Daley, and the way artistic institutions in the city acknowledged World AIDS Day. Alongside his famous Savage Love column, Dan Savage wrote occasionally for the *Reader*, one of the earliest pieces being a humorous look at a makeover for the Ken doll that many said sported a cockring as a necklace. Mattel vehemently denied the allegations, apparently.

As the 90s became the 2000s, coverage of the queer community again grew, though still focused on mostly white, cisnet queers. This was, after all, the era of *Queer as Folk*, the height of Ellen DeGeneres's talk show, when HIV/AIDS were still prevalent but not as deadly. Queer coverage didn't reach its current fever pitch until the late aughts, as the sun set on Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and rose on the fight for marriage equality. In more recent years, the *Reader* has published important writing by queer journalists including Devlyn Camp, a queer historian and podcaster, and Nico Lang, a mainstay in modern queer journalism and currently at Conde Nast's *them*, not to mention a strong group of freelancers covering queer issues of all stripes.

But even among this progress, the transgender community faced particular scorn and mischaracterizations from the paper's previous writers. Dating back to the earliest queer reporting, discussion of trans issues focused almost exclusively on transgender women, often called transvestites or cross-dressers. While it may have been revolutionary for a paper to devote so much space to discussing transgender identity, the writing was muddled, mocking, and full of pronoun switches, outdated and offensive terminology, as well as quips that subjects were "really men" under their dresses, hair, and makeup.

In a cover story from 1993, "Cross-Dressers Make Good Husbands," a writer profiled subjects who today would likely be identified as trans women or gender fluid. The subjects, according to the article, were male-presenting people who either occasionally or exclusively wore women's clothes. Some spoke of it being an incidental happening, and others spoke of

wanting to transition. But the article treats them with the same harsh brush, and alludes to the beliefs that transness is just the end of the gay spectrum, that men become so queer that they become women.

Another article from 1997 unpacking what was then called "c" was clinical, overly medical, and frankly, horrifyingly offensive. In the first sentences, the writer describes feelings of uneasiness and discomfort at the idea of gender transition. In detailing a trans woman's medical transition, the writer waxes poetically about the shame of losing a man to the trans community—alongside tasteless descriptions of an operation where, as the writer puts it, "they cut it off."

And while coverage of the trans community has improved significantly in the *Reader*, with current staffers frequently highlighting both the highs and lows faced by the community, the media industry at large still largely fails at respectful, nuanced coverage of trans people.

The current *Reader* could not be a further cry from its founding, at least in terms of ownership. LGBTQ+ icon and journalist Tracy Baim took over the *Reader* in 2018, becoming its first openly gay publisher. Karen Hawkins, founder of feminist magazine *Rebellious*, joined the *Reader* alongside Baim as a digital managing editor—the first Black person to hold the position. Now, with Hawkins as the copublisher, the two most powerful people at the *Reader* are openly gay, a first for most publications.

In the years since Baim and Hawkins took over the *Reader*, the paper has published features detailing the queer history of Chicago's punk scene, the history of activist group Queer to the Left, and the city's Drag March for Change. I myself have covered LGBTQ-focused police reform, racist violence in Northalsted (the gayborhood formerly known as Boystown), and the state's now-repealed HIV criminalization statute. Chicago's LGBTQ+ community is in an important moment of flux, and I'm honored to be here chronicling it, particularly as a nonbinary Latinx person. As the *Reader* enters its 50th year, the writing and reporting is for queer people, often by queer people. As a team we attempt to pull fewer punches than traditional media, are unafraid of pissing off local queer leaders, and tell stories with the nuance required. And looking back with a critical eye will help the *Reader*'s queer coverage improve for the next 50 years, and beyond. ■

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PHOTOGRAPHY

## Two priests, a rabbi, and the Sex Pig

My 25 years shooting  
for the Reader

By JIM NEWBERRY



1. Uptown Street Festival, 1988; 2. Camille Dunham, 2006; 3. Fred Armisen, 2006; 4. Weasel Walter, 2002  
© JIM NEWBERRY



5. Uptown, 1988; 6. Gerri Oliver at the Palm Tavern, 2001; 7. Jim's Original Hot Dog Stand, 1993 © JIM NEWBERRY

“Nice work, but you’re not ready,” Bob McCamant declared, after flipping through the portfolio of 16-by-20-inch black-and-white prints I had spent many darkroom hours creating. We sat in his office at *Reader* headquarters on Illinois Street, in 1986, the year I graduated from Columbia College. McCamant was one of the group of four who’d founded the *Reader* in 1971, and its first photo editor.

I was an avid fan of the paper, always eager to get the latest issue, grabbing the chunky-thick, four-section slab from the tall stacks available every Thursday afternoon at bookstores, el stations, restaurants, and newsstands throughout the city. I devoured the paper, usually while riding the el, starting with

the Straight Dope column at the front of the first section, then moving on to the calendar, the feature articles, the movie and music listings, and finally to the classifieds section for my favorite cartoonists: Lynda Barry, Heather McAdams, Bill Griffith, and Matt Groening. (I wonder what ever happened to Groening, the *Life in Hell* cartoonist?)

One thing you couldn’t help noticing in the *Reader* back then: the striking, artful, black-and-white photography, which looked nothing like the photos you’d see in the *Tribune* or *Sun-Times* or almost anywhere else; the *Village Voice* is the only other periodical I can think of that compared. Photography was revered at the *Reader*; photos were copious, printed large on the page, always credited, and never

cropped (the main reason for including black edges around photos back then was for photographers to prove that the image was not cropped in the slightest).

I had a few friends who worked at the weekly as production artists, one of whom—Albert Richardson—liked my work and would occasionally run photos of mine on the calendar page he laid out every week, when he had extra space to fill. It was a thrill for me to see my work published there, but having a staff member sneak my images in through the back door did not earn me approval from McCamant to shoot assignments. He thought I needed a bit more time, and in retrospect I’m (pretty) sure he was right.

In 1988, two years later, I scheduled another

portfolio review with McCamant, and this time got the green light; he said he’d give me a try. For my first two years, my assignments were limited to 1,000 Words—a photo feature I loved shooting for. The idea was simple: the assigned photographer had the weekend to shoot almost anything within the city limits. The challenge was coming up with something special—a truly compelling shot that lived up to the titular theme; a photo that told a short story, not just a sentence or two. In other words, a great street picture. The pressure to come up with a worthy image was daunting, but it was a pleasure to roam around the city, walking through unfamiliar neighborhoods, hoping that the gods of serendipity would smile upon me. →



8. Stas Bulanda, 2001; 9. Challenger, 2004; 10. Jeff Tweedy, 2004; 11. Thax Douglas, 1999 © JIM NEWBERRY



12



13



14



15



16



17

12. Perry "Dancin' Man" Kanlan, 2011; 13. David Hatcher Childress, 2006; 14. FKA Dance Party at Big Chicks, 2008; 15. Ira Glass, 2006; 16. Azita Youssefi, 2009; 17. Mavis Staples, 2004 © JIM NEWBERRY

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In the 2000s, photography at the *Reader* transitioned from analog to digital, but in the 80s and 90s, this was the process for photographers at the paper:

**1.** Wait for a phone call. In the 80s—pre-cell phone era—this meant you better have a pager, because if you didn't get the message from your answering machine until a few hours later, you'd likely lose the assignment. More often than not the editors had to secure a photographer quickly, so if you didn't pick up the phone or call back right away, they'd call another photographer.

**2.** Buy a couple rolls of film if you don't already have them in the fridge.

**3.** Drive to the location, usually where the subject lives or works or has an exhibit, etc. Might be Rogers Park, Hyde Park, Navy Pier, west side. Could be a bowling alley, an el platform, a restaurant, a cemetery.

**4.** Shoot the assignment; the fun part.

**5.** Drive home and develop the film. Up until the mid-2000s or so, we developed and printed our own assignments. For most of us, that meant working in makeshift home darkrooms. I would develop the film in the kitchen sink of my apartment, hang the film to dry, cut it into six-frame strips, make a contact/proof sheet. Circle the best three or four images with a white grease pencil, with an eye to offering the editor several variations, including both vertical and horizontal orientations, giving them flexibility with page layout. Make eight-by-ten prints. Wash and dry the prints.

**6.** Grab the barely-dry prints and drive to 11 E. Illinois. It's probably after hours by now, so you can slide the prints under the door, or call someone and have them come down for the prints. And right by that door was the Thai restaurant Star of Siam . . . always smelled heavenly after hours of scrambling to meet my deadline.

In my 25 years shooting for the *Reader*, I

photographed an incredibly wide variety of interesting people (and to be honest, there may have been one or two less-than-interesting subjects as well), including two priests and a rabbi (individually), a Moorish Science Grand Sheik (at Temple No. 9 in Ukrainian Village), at least five aldermen, a drag king, smoke-jumpers (tree-climbing firefighters/invasive insect examiners), burlesque dancers, an Iraqi torture victim, an international air-guitar champion, a White Sox organist, a Hairy Who artist, the inventor of Paint by Numbers, a taxi driver, a hacktivist (later sentenced to prison), a professional Neil Diamond impersonator, and a porn performer who called himself "Sex Pig."

Other folks I had the pleasure of photographing: Eric Idle, Ted Levine (Jame "Buffalo Bill" Gumb in *Silence of the Lambs*), Mavis Staples, Wilco, Ira Glass (and Torey Malatia), playwrights Edward Albee and Tony Kushner (individually), Steve Albini, Cynthia Plaster Caster, Jerry "Iceman" Butler, Hypnotic Brass Ensemble, local polka hero Stas Bulanda, and Fred Armisen.

The *Reader* debuted with McCamant's Maxwell Street photo on the cover, beginning a long tradition of great photography at the paper that lives on today, a half-century later. As it happens, the market was also a favorite shooting location for my dad, an acclaimed fine art photographer and photo professor (he founded the photo department at Columbia College). His Maxwell Street negatives were misplaced for years, but a few months ago they were located, and I told him I'd love to work with the archive, with the goal of publishing a book and producing an exhibit. He enthusiastically supported the idea. That was my last conversation with him; he died a couple weeks later.

My father has left the planet, but I look forward to keeping his legacy alive by sharing with the world his extraordinary photographs that captured the unique magic of the Maxwell Street Market. Much of what I know about photography I learned from not only my dad, but my 25 years at the *Reader*. 📷

🐦 @jimnewberry

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evenings, but then virtually everyone else in the company (production, editorial, and advertising staffers) would be packing in first thing the next morning to cut and sort those galleys to run through the Schaefer Coater hot wax machine, to be pasted by hand into appropriate sections of the classifieds pages. Production would do most of the paste-up, but editorial staff (often including founding publisher Bob Roth, and eventual publisher Jane Levine, from advertising—gifted eyes, both) would sit and proof the paste-ups, looking through the long gray stream of tiny agate type for minuscule typos and mis-sorts.

“Errors in the paste-up pages would then be fixed with X-Acto knives and Scotch tape, most notably by ad director Tom Yoder, who was known for his skills cutting and repairing galley errors with his Swiss Army knife, tucked ever handy in a khaki pants pocket along with his trusty pocket watch. Two most important tools for that task—a sharp, ready knife and a keen sense of time.”

(Maybe others get waves of nostalgia hearing about such processes? I learned something new today.)

Vera Videnovich also described this foreign printing process to me. She was hired at the *Reader* in 1990 as a part-time classifieds rep. Backed by a typing test and a reference from an SAIC college professor, she was later promoted to part-time classifieds shift manager (That’s when she became the boss of current *Reader* theater and dance editor Kerry Reid, who worked part-time from 1992-1993 writing and renewing ads) and eventually started typesetting for the editorial department.

She wrote, “I picked up a shift in editorial typesetting in the days before many writers had PCs, Internet connections, or even floppy discs to hand in copy to their editors. I’d type anywhere from 1/2 to 1/3 of the entire editorial copy—when the paper was in four large sections. This included typing in classified ads that had a weekly revenue total that was more than I made in a year working that classifieds shift.”

Overlapping with Vera Videnovich was Monica Brown, a receptionist at the *Reader* from the time she moved to Chicago in 1992 until 2008. An artist by trade living in Wicker Park (“back when it was very Bohemian”), Brown fielded classifieds inquiries in person, over the phone, via mail, and with the then-new e-mail and voicemail systems. She looks back fondly on her *Reader* days, noting that many people worked part-time and were encouraged to be creative and follow passions

outside of work. Like so many other Chicagoans, she got to know the city through the paper. Her first visual art exhibitions even ran in the *Reader* listings.

Not only was I fascinated to hear about Videnovich and Brown’s roles at the time, but I also enjoyed discovering some similarities between us. Brown and I both learned the city from inside the *Reader*. Videnovich and I both started at the *Reader* at age 22, working in classifieds. She also recalled, “When I was first hired, I asked if there was a dress code. Pat Davis (a great and patient classifieds manager) pointed to a man dressed in Hawaiian shirt, shorts, flip flops, and a ponytail. It was Bob Roth, one of the owners. It was clear there was no dress code.” That same thing happened to me, except it was my coworker Teddy Piekars in a velour tracksuit and baseball cap. (The *Reader* is a fun place to work.)

Although I’m extra thankful to be typing in a Google doc right now, the process of creating the *Reader* didn’t magically get easier once computers came into the picture, especially as ad volume steadily increased. Videnovich, who did a bit of everything in her 17 years at the paper, also served as an archivist and web editor: “I manually converted and edited all the print files to HTML before there was an automated way to do it. I remember using dial-up to post the paper. It would take a while.”

Brett Murphy—classifieds advertising director from 1996 to 2008, advertising director from 2008-2010, and then digital sales director from 2010-2012 (for all Creative Loafing publications, including the *Reader*)—wrote to me about the transition into the Internet age for classified advertising.

He told me how Bob McCamant, a founding owner, along with others in IT, developed an in-house proprietary system for placing classifieds online with a credit card. People could browse ads in print *and* online for the first time, and especially for apartment rentals, this was a one-of-a-kind service in Chicago. Revenue exploded, and new customers flocked to the *Reader*. Around the same time, *Reader* Matches started booming as a dating service; Murphy noted that the “section was a very early model for what has become a vast stream of national online/mobile-based dating sites.”

In the mid- to late 1990s, Murphy saw the classifieds staff expand to manage the section, but “In the early 2000s, Craigslist expanded their free-listing business model for apartment listings into other markets including Chicago, and the popularity of Craigslist’s ‘free’ model slowly chipped away at the *Reader* classifieds business model until what was a

slow drip of revenue decreasing became a gush of falling revenue for the entire company.”

There were efforts to explore new digital revenue streams in the following years, but Murphy wrote, “These streams paled in comparison to the ‘golden years’ of the classifieds department, when not only did we consider ourselves the best and most innovative classifieds listing database in the area, we believed we were the best in the entire country, producing multi-millions of dollars in revenue each year.”

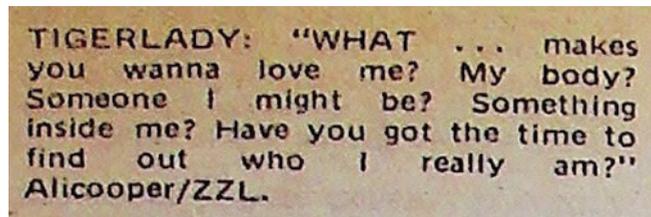
The *Reader* classifieds section was truly something special for a while, and not just as a business practice. I can’t even count the number of people who have reminisced to me about the countdown to Thursday each week,

four that transcended the commerce transacted there.”

## HOMES, CAREERS, AND OTHER LIFE-CHANGING ADS

When I decided to write this retrospective on classifieds, I wanted it to be more than just a history lesson; I wanted to directly include the voices of Chicagoans whose lives were altered by the *Reader*. So, I placed an ad in my own classifieds section about my classifieds article, seeking current or former classifieds clients who got a job, found an apartment, met a partner, or just generally changed course because of a classified ad (pretty meta, right?).

The positive responses were overwhelming, and it took me no time at all to learn that



Kris Slawinski started writing personals as “Tigerlady” in 1975 as a response to ads placed by Alex Hirka, aka ZaZa Lipsoidic.

knowing where and when the nearest *Reader* would drop, giddy to pick it up and devour it cover to cover—even back when it was the size of a college textbook.

David Jones remembers going just about anywhere in Chicago and seeing the *Reader* spread out on bar counters and restaurant tabletops, more often than not flipped open to section four, with eager highlights and pen markings from locals looking for a job, an apartment, or a date.

There was even a time when the classifieds section hit the black market, as copies snatched from a door ajar at the printer were sold on Wednesdays—one day early—for \$1 each.

“Who knew?” Jones mused. “People were willing to pay a whole dollar for just a single section of the *Chicago Reader*, ‘Chicago’s Free Weekly.’”

And despite its fall from grace, Jones’s faith in the classifieds section as a Chicago institution, not just a *Reader* revenue-generator, hasn’t wavered: “The strength and the draw of our Classifieds section was undeniable all along, right up to the ‘Dawn of Craig.’ Yes, the money made there was always a big part of our meal ticket anyway, but there was also a sense of true community that formed around section

in Chicago, during a certain era of time, the *Reader* classifieds was the place to go, for almost anything you could imagine. (One of the greatest purposes the *Reader* served was in helping people find love—but I’m saving that for a different article.)

First of all, the pages of job ads were endless. Monica Brown, mentioned in the previous section, recalls that she probably got her job at the *Reader* through the *Reader* classifieds. Another source, Richard Knight Jr., was one of many people whose career paths were totally shaken up because they happened to be poring over the classifieds one day.

In late summer of 1985, Knight was three years deep into an office job in the Loop, playing Chicago clubs with his band on the side and seeking a change. He happened to spot an ad for an event planner (or party planner, he can’t remember) at Limelight, the “oh so chic mega nightclub that had just opened in River North and caused such a ruckus.” It felt like everyone in town was talking about Limelight, so he decided to call and ask about the job.

Knight remembers being abruptly and coldly denied—until he realized the voice on the other end was a mutual friend. Suddenly, the position wasn’t filled after all. The Limelight rep offered Knight an interview, noting that



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he was just turning away people who sounded too “straight.”

Knight notes, “The word ‘straight’ as Samuel used it didn’t mean heterosexual. It was a code word at the time for squares, bridge and tunnel types, 9-to-5ers, anyone who wasn’t cool and stayed up until 5 AM and kept vampire hours.” It turned out to be a good fit, and Knight got the job that pivoted his career completely.

To illustrate what a big deal house-hunting was in the *Reader*, I went back to the archives. The first issue in 1971 had no housing section at all, but two decades later, by 1991, there were 1,016 housing ads in the “one bedroom apartment” section alone. By 2001, there were 1,215 one-bedroom listings (I counted!). By 2011, just 122. Today, the *Reader* doesn’t have housing subsections, and the last issue had one, maybe two housing ads all together.

Trudy Ring, a journalist who lived in Chicago from 1984-1997, described that “picking up the *Reader* on Thursday afternoons was an absolute must! I did find my apartment through the *Reader*—the apartment in Edgewater that I stayed in the whole time I lived in Chicago! But I was a particular fan of the Personals . . .” (more on that later).

Betty Lark Ross found apartments in Old Town and Edgewater in the *Reader*, and she found a factory building for sale that she was able to convert into a home and studio. But she also used it to satisfy a treasure-hunting streak within the *Reader* classifieds buying and selling marketplace. She wrote to me, “During the home renovation, I discovered a classified ad that featured a brand new gigantic Kohler hot tub that could hold 6-8 people for \$500. We opted to buy this and have it installed while it could be included in the design, and since money was tight, we chose to live without ceilings for a few years! We also only buy used cars, and to help with our move we bought a van advertised in the *Reader* for \$500. We used it for two years and then sold it ‘as is’ for \$500 when it needed brakes! While I truly miss the *Reader* classifieds, I am still a regular hunter-gatherer and seller on Craigslist, Nextdoor, and Facebook Marketplace.”

A final source, Elizabeth Mayer, wrote to me, “When I was getting ready to move here from Philadelphia in 1999, I found my apartment like this: A few days before a planned trip here, my in-Chicago sister got a paper copy of the *Reader* on the day it came out and priority-mailed it to me via USPS. I called several people whose listings sounded good (No pictures! So crazy!) and made appointments

DEAR? HOW DID I get involved?  
What am I doing here? Lipy  
Zapzoidic (or whatever).

WE WERE ta-al-king about the trips  
we both might take and the people  
that cause us so much grief. All-star  
Hootenariny and Cracker-Jack jokes,  
what makes them funny?

Not all classified ads are seeking something—some are simply literary practices.

for when I was going to be in town a couple days later. It worked great—I found a place I really liked on Damen in Roscoe Village.”

A few weeks after that, Mayer helped move her sister into a Logan Square two-flat with a roommate she’d found in the *Reader*, who remains one of her closest friends.

“I realize neither of these stories is out of the ordinary—but that’s the point, right?” Mayer noted. “The classifieds were just how all that stuff got done.”

## FREE AND FREAKY

I wouldn’t be painting an accurate representation of *Reader* classifieds if I didn’t talk about those Personals that Trudy Ring mentioned. Truly, before there was shitposting on Reddit, there was the *Reader* Personals section.

Pre-Internet, the alt-weekly was the best free public forum out there, where the chance for anonymity created an entire subculture of clever pseudonyms, cryptic exchanges, graphic messages, and a vast audience for those truly seeking to let their freak flags fly.

Ring told me, “I looked forward every Thursday to seeing the messages from Sparkler at 15, Basil Metabolism, Mental Floss, Boris and Doris Clitoris, Fritz Quadrata, Man of Many Pseuds, and more, even from resident conservative Rogers Parker,” she noted, revealing an impressive memory for the pseudonyms, some of which would appear in every issue. “They would comment on politics, movies, a little bit of everything, and some even offered little snippets of poetry—I remember Boris and Doris submitting some doggerel with rhymes including ‘adore us’ and ‘abhor us.’”

One of these characters, known to the *Reader* audience of 1975 as TigerLady, reached out to me to share her perspective. Today, she

just goes by Kris Slawinski, but she fondly remembers poring over the *Reader* weekly in her early 20s. She started participating in the Personals dialogue in response to ads placed by Alex Hirka, aka ZaZa Lipsoidic. Around 1976, the *Reader* put out an interview with Hirka; Slawinski remembers, “[Hirka’s] ads were flavored with literary references and quotes, musical criticism, social commentary, and philosophy, which is what interested the *Reader* journalist who sought him out.” He was into punk rock and Patti Smith, which Slawinski notes was a “very rare thing back then.”

“ZaZa set a new standard for ads, sparking a flurry from an array of misfits who were looking for a virtual playground, before what we are familiar with today was even conceived. It was a very fun and interesting time,” Slawinski wrote to me in an e-mail. “I wound up meeting Alex/ZaZa through a series of provocative classified ads about music, and had a relationship with him beginning in very early 1977 (before La Mere Vipere, the first Chicago home for punk/new wave music, opened), until he moved to NYC in fall of 1977. We used to dance until closing at La Mere every night, where many of the new denizens of the *Reader* classifieds hung out.”

“I participated in the classifieds for several years,” Slawinski recalls, “with what I’m sure I’d now call pompous screeds.”

Other “screeds” that longtime *Reader* readers might recall include Critter Lady, Beautiful Dreamer, Jedi Knight, Manuel Dexterity—the list goes on. While many will go down in infamous obsolescence, others eventually came forward with their true identities. Some even met on a yearly basis to celebrate the camaraderie of the section, according to the *Tribune*.

They’re a part of Chicago history, like it or

WITHOUT THOSE who are willing  
to become soldiers, there would be  
no wars. Don’t let them be proud of  
it — don’t buy a poppy. ZaZa  
Lipsoidic.

MY DUCK’S NAME is Platypus  
Maximus Duck. Since graduating from  
Murrymandrake’s Dancing classes, he  
really likes “Ducking in the Dark”  
hence the nickname PM. Sparkle  
Farkle.

not—the anonymous, often snarky Personals contributors were conducting their own form of journalism back then, commenting on politics and pop culture and niche aspects of life in Chicago, albeit practically in code only some can decipher.

## LEGACY

The classifieds section has changed so much over the years, and—unless Gen Z suddenly decides to adopt and prioritize print advertising and old-school dating methods—it’ll likely never be what it once was. But that’s OK!

I’m working with the rest of the *Reader* staff to create a classifieds section that caters to more than just ad agencies and a handful of less-than-tech-savvy local clients. We have a brand-new website, a fully self-service option for anyone trying to reach our readers. All ads run both in print and online (unless requested otherwise), with focus on and discounts for categories like Mutual Aid, Community, and other local causes that help the people and culture of Chicago.

Classifieds may not have the mass that it used to, but as long as the *Reader* is around—and we’re hoping for at least another 50 years—it will remain an invaluable archive and incredible time capsule of the pre- and post-Internet-creation days of Chicago. Whether it’s job hunting, house hunting, buying and selling, or whatever else you can imagine, the classifieds section of the *Chicago Reader* is iconic in the way that it allows community members to interact with their local and independent alternative newspaper, and frankly, that’s a legacy I’m proud to be a part of. 

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## BOOKS

### You're not allowed to just be old and embrace it

The authors of *What Fresh Hell is This?* and *Damaged Like Me* in conversation

By HEATHER CORINNA AND KIMBERLY DARK

Writers Heather Corinna and Kimberly Dark got together to discuss recent writing, menopause, body image, and more this summer while west coast resident Kimberly was in Chicago visiting her son and his family. The pandemic made it difficult for them to host a public event, so they decided to share their conversation with *Reader* readers. Both Dark and Corinna have long been involved in making the personal political (and vice versa). Their new books feature stories of body sovereignty and moving through a world that marginalizes certain kinds of sexualities, ages, and genders. Corinna and Dark's conversation is available to read in its entirety at the *Reader* website; what follows is an excerpt.

Kimberly Dark is the author of *Damaged Like Me* (AK Press, 2021), a collection of memoir-style essays about love, harm, and transformation. She's a sociologist, storyteller, and activist focused on helping people reclaim their power as social creators—to remember that we are creating the world, even as it creates us. This requires personal reflection and resistance as well as organized systemic change.

Heather Corinna is the Chicago-based

author of *What Fresh Hell Is This? Perimenopause, Menopause, Other Indignities, and You* (Hachette Go!, 2021), an inclusive, intersectional, and also occasionally exhausted perimenopause survival guide-slash-memoir. *What Fresh Hell is This?* also includes some choice quotes from Dark on the bullshit of social hierarchies, beauty standards, and the difficulties of sleeping with a menopausal partner. Corinna is also the founder and director of the online sexuality and relationships education organization Scarleteen and a nearly lifelong activist and educator.

**Heather Corinna:** There are so many areas where our books and the things we each write about cross over, but trauma is definitely something I want to talk about with you, including that trauma and menopause are so rarely discussed but so often involved. I feel like my book is one of the few that talks about both. Even finding information in order to be able to include research on how they interact in the book was very difficult. Obviously, some of that has to do with how trauma is a relatively new framework, but part of that is not about it being a new framework at all, but about the

things that you write a lot about, especially the silencing of trauma, and how we don't talk about trauma because it makes people uncomfortable.

**Kimberly Dark:** I think it's funny, too, that there's so little discussion about menopause and trauma, because it just feels like a foregone conclusion that non-male people will have so little credibility! If we lack "maleness," we are forced to conform to so many standards in order to have basic credibility, basic humanity, and all of what we may have achieved through beauty or money or accomplishment is revocable with age! Not only do we begin with unattainable and unsustainable standards of appearance and achievement, we are all set to time out.

I took my teenage son to the opera once and we were watching the people in the dress circle—mostly older couples in their full-on male-female-rich-people drag. The women were in fur coats and the men in tuxedos and they walked like old people, but my son said, "Why do those women all look so young? But they're not!" We discussed the pursuit of youth through all of that cosmetic surgery—and how it wasn't needed for the men! The thing is, the illusion they're trying to create is partially successful, because we know they've tried. Like, we know that there's an effort being made, even though you don't believe they're actually 30 or 40 years old. The effort to conform counts for something even when the conformity is questionable. And what would lead a person to the pain and expense of those efforts, if not trauma? But we have normalized these efforts, rather than just allowing everyone the credibility of their own humanity.

**HC:** You bring up having to show people that you're "trying" with aging and appearance, and it makes me think about some menopause experiences and cultural narratives. There's not a lot of room made, and not a lot of cultural empathy, for people who have a bad experience and menopause. It's like people think we're having a bad time because we're not "trying" hard enough or something. Or, if you're having a bad experience, you're supposed to try and pretend that you're not: to just put it away, just shut up. Don't talk about it. Don't tell anybody. Just smile through the blood, sweat, and tears, often quite literally. You also have to be trying *everything*—no matter the cost, side effects, or risks to your health—to make it better. Right? Like, and maybe if you try every-

thing, and still have a hard time, then maybe people will have some empathy or sympathy for you, but you can't just be like, "Well, fuck it. I'm having a bad time. I'm gonna have a bad time then, I guess, until it's over." Just like you can't be like, "Well, fuck it. I'm getting old. I'm just gonna get fucking old. And I'm just gonna look old." You have to at least *try* not to be old, look old. You're not allowed to just be old and embrace it.

**KD:** I mean, it's the same thing with all of the appearance conformity, isn't it? Like, you know, if you're fat, and you choose to wear orange and pink, then you're a rebel, right? Or maybe just an idiot for not understanding the rules! But you know, if you only wear navy blue and black, at least you're trying to camouflage your fatness; you don't get full credibility, but at least you're playing the game. These are capitalist standards that keep us buying, too. I don't think we should forget that. So, even through menopause, you're supposed to reject the shifts in your body's behavior. What if we embrace that sleep may have different patterns, and that thinking may have different patterns?

We could say, "Wow, what can the culture gain from this different way of the mind working and drawing connections, the different ways that sleep patterns may not just be during the night, but maybe sometimes during the day as well? What can the culture gain from these different ways of seeing?" The response is, "Well, hang on, you can't sleep differently, because how will you get to work in the morning? And how will you stay productive?" So much about respectable appearance is about remaining employable and marriageable. No one's actually mindful of our well-being as we age; we stay productive in a very narrow way.

**HC:** Which is why of course, they're happy to make more products for us to *buy* in menopause, but not to use their capital to adapt the culture in ways they can in order to actually accommodate *us* as people.

**KD:** A big thing that I hope readers get from *Damaged Like Me* is the idea that people who see things differently have something profound to contribute to the culture. [We miss out] by not paying attention to the wisdom that Black women have gained from having to be vigilant about every aspect of the culture; they actually have something really important to give. The same is true for people who are



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# ARTS & CULTURE

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aging as well. It's just so hard to not to see folks as, like, timing out, as opposed to having something different to offer.

**HC:** Right? Even when you look at so much of the common language around all of this, it's all so ableist and so ageist. It's so normalized for people to talk about the way that our minds and our bodies change as *decline* rather than *difference*; as loss rather than change. I've been no exception! Over the last few years, I've been doing a lot of work unpacking this kind of stuff in myself. I talked about some of it in *What Fresh Hell Is This?*, particularly with my brain. I spent a lifetime attached to being smart in this very specific way. I've been very afraid of the way that my brain was changing, and I was absolutely seeing it as decline and then Professor Sharon Lamb—in her perfect, strong but gentle way—called me in on that in her interview [for my book] so beautifully, thank goodness, you know, right and be like, it's just, it's just *different*, right? Of course it is.

But when you listen to the way that people—we!—talk about it and absorb all that ableism and ageism, it's all full of shame and embarrassment, it makes it so difficult to find any value in those changes. How can you find any value in them when you're ashamed and embarrassed and in hiding, and you are not going to tell anybody about them, because you need to pretend that they're not happening? That keeps you from finding value in those things and saying, "This is different now, what's here for me now?," instead of "What have I lost?"

**KD:** You know, this could be a very powerful first step when we think about how to heal from these kinds of ideas. That's all they are: ideas that we're supposed to maintain a certain way of being, and we're supposed to maintain a certain appearance.

Just notice what's happening! Oh, the culture is doing its job to maintain the status quo. I really like to not make it a problem that this is how culture behaves, like it's supposed to behave to teach you the ways of those in your family and community so when you're little, you know how to fit in. That's actually a good thing for a culture to do. The problem comes when the conformity is in service of capitalism or in service of greed, and the hierarchy of appearance and identity.

If we accepted the function of culture, we might also be able to question the parts that don't work. But because we don't even see that culture is influencing us, we lose the ability.

You're right. People just hide things. "Oh, that makes people uncomfortable. And I'm not supposed to talk about that."

I had an experience just the other day with my grandson at the San Diego Children's Discovery Museum. In the women's room, a child saw me and felt surprise and blurted—as kids sometimes do—"she's so big!" I was engaged in a conversation with a friend as we washed our hands, but the child was loud and clearly referencing me. If I were alone, I may have engaged directly, but instead, I just heard the conversation play out. The mom said, "Shh, yes, that lady is very tall." And the child interjected, "No mom, she's tall AND fat!" They left quickly, I'm sure hoping that I didn't hear. In the past, when I've engaged children, I've said something like, "Oh yeah, I'm really big. Look, this is one of the ways bodies can be. Isn't that cool?" In one way, the mom was not wrong to redirect the child's comment and thereby erase fatness because fat is synonymous with insult for most. But also, those practices need to be disrupted and I try to do it as kindly as possible. I definitely want to disrupt the message that it's not OK to be fat. Disruption is an important part of healing too. Just acknowledging the role of culture and conformity are important. It becomes possible to say, yes, menopause has been hard for me. And aging is difficult because people act like I'm invisible and maybe even stupid. Let's talk about it.

**HC:** How can we learn to be and keep trying to risk being vulnerable in the culture that we exist in? When people say (and so many of them do) "Why didn't I know anything about menopause going into it?"—one of the big reasons that people don't talk about it is because in order to talk about it, people often have to make themselves vulnerable, sometimes very vulnerable, depending on their experience. And here we are, existing in this culture in which there's the kind of silencing that happens with things that people decide aren't things you are supposed to discuss in "polite" company or culture, things you're supposed to be ashamed of. That list is long, but it *absolutely* includes menarche, menopause, and everything in between on that particular uterine or estrogenic continuum, especially if anything that happens isn't tidy, neat, quiet. Like, if you couldn't bring it to a PTA meeting, well? We also live in this culture that's really mean, violent, hurtful, and toxic when it comes to these kinds of tender, vulnerable places, and these things about us that make people so uncomfortable.

So, especially with things like fatness or things like menopause, where we're afraid that if we talk about them, people may use our vulnerability to hurt us, and we know that: we usually learned it the hard way when we were kids. That's a barrier too, but here we both are, knowing that we need to write, that we need to connect with each other, that we and others need to do all that to process our own pain and to heal and to grow but—wow.

**KD:** Yeah, vulnerability is a big step. I often remind people: you don't have to be a warrior on behalf of these topics every day. I can have a conversation with a stranger in a public restroom about being fat on one day, but another day, I might just be tired, or triggered because I have a history of very real trauma about this topic. Things shift for us over time too—and not always in the direction of progress! For instance, I thought I had figured out the whole body acceptance thing in my 30s, but then, at some point in my 40s, I was naked, getting into a hot tub, and looked down and thought, *What? Things have moved!* I realized that we're not ever done with body acceptance. We have to keep doing it when the body changes or ages and then do it again some more. We are constantly navigating vulnerability.

**HC:** That's a good reminder. There's also the credibility problem that you and I have talked about before. Like, I've been thinking to myself lately: Do I just keep setting myself up for being endlessly considered not credible because I keep being so open? I mean, I don't know if it's even a choice for me. I'm a bad liar, and I think I'm almost compulsively open. But I think about intentional choices I've made without realizing the gravity or context of them, or how people would be—like being honest about being a sexual assault survivor while working in sex education that included supporting other survivors and anti-violence education, as a field back when it was absolutely considered something survivors just couldn't do. We still are highly stigmatized in these fields, in every field, but back then as opposed to now, I took *massive* credibility hits in my work in sex ed, in my writing, in educating and supporting young people and advocating for other survivors, in a very public way. People would very publicly say, outrightly because I had experienced trauma, that I couldn't possibly be good at this, that I was "too damaged" to do work in or around anything I had lived with. It would be hilarious if it weren't so vile.

And I'm starting to get similar feelings around the way I've talked about my menopause experience. It's not the same thing, but I do think there's a link around badness and trauma and not having the "right" story or experience. I'm often talking about menopause right now without that kind of hero's journey where I can say I went through hell but I have come through it—cue the trumpets!—stronger and *better*. I'm like, "Dude, I'm a mess. I came in a *huge* mess. I've been a mess in it. I'm *still* in it. And I'm still a fucking mess a lot of the time. I'm not happy and I'm not feeling good. I'm not a hero." I don't have the right kind of story. So, like, I'm not very credible, right? Because it's like, if you didn't make this experience full of magic for yourself, right, how can you make it full of magic for other people? I'm like, "Well, I'm not offering magic!" I'm not made of magic, just regular crummy people stuff like everyone else. But it is that thing again where if you are going through or went through any kind of trauma, or shit is or was bad for you, you have or will have a credibility problem, because only people who have not been hurt or harmed are credible. And if you're vulnerable and open about your trauma or other bad stuff, you will *doubly* have a credibility problem. Especially because I think people think that means that you must be *extra* damaged, if you don't know well enough to hide your wounds like a smart animal and act like it didn't happen. Something must be really fucking wrong with you, if your shit is shitty and you're putting it out there for other people to see.

**KD:** Yes to all of that! I think we're addicted to the hero's journey and I think that it's a very male model. There's a quest and some people thwart you and some help you and then you come through because of your own ingenuity! A really great model if somebody is doing your laundry and cooking your meals. This is the thing that I talked about in the introduction of *Damaged Like Me* is that we need stories that highlight complexity, because, look, the hero's journey story is useful sometimes, right? Like, if you just need a little boost of inspiration, a simple story is super. The classic coming-out-gay story is like this, I think: *I felt bad about myself and I was hiding and then I told the truth and people respected me and loved me. And now I have the courage to be myself.* That's OK. But it's not a story that can transform the culture that oppresses people for divergent sexuality. It's not a story that actually gives us insight into the human experience that is deep and complex and profound. 



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## MONSTER SHOW

### Frankenstein's bride returns

Joseph Zettelmaier talks about his brand as a classic horror playwright

By **BRIDGETTE M. REDMAN**



Joseph Zettelmaier © COURTESY THE ARTIST

Playwright Joseph Zettelmaier is a maker of monsters, a horror artist who retells classic tales with an emphasis on what makes these constructs human.

First Folio Theatre, which has produced five of Zettelmaier's plays in the past (including horror tales *The Man-Beast*, *The Gravedigger*, and *Dr. Seward's Dracula*, along with two non-horror pieces, *Salvage* and *All Childish Things*), unveils the latest of his monster shows with the world premiere of *The Jigsaw Bride: A Frankenstein Story*, opening October 16.

Directed by Hayley Rice, the show takes place a century after the death of Victor Frankenstein when scientist Maria von Moos decides to excavate a castle and discovers a slumbering, patched-up woman. Featuring actors Heather Chrisler, Courtney Abbott, and Peter Sipla, the play brings together monster, scientist, and the owner of a traveling menagerie, a two-hour deep look into what it means to be human.

I caught up with Zettelmaier, who is opening two new plays this month along with performing his duties as a teacher and artistic director of Penny Seats Theatre Company in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He shares why he loves the classic horror genre and what he searches for when writing about monsters.

**Bridgette Redman: You've created a brand for yourself with classic horror and monster stories. What inspired you to explore those types of stories?**

**Joseph Zettelmaier:** I've always been a fan of the classic horror stories and monsters, not Freddy or Jason, but the originals, Frankenstein and Dracula and the like. I grew up with the movies as a kid. My father showed them to me and I just loved them.

As a teenager, I started reading the books and the thing that really resonated with me about all these Victorian gothic novels was that they are really not about the monsters. They're about the people surrounding the monsters. They are fundamentally really human stories. I became fascinated by the idea of exploring the human condition, the thoughts and dreams and fears through the lens of horror.

**What sort of hooks do you look for when you're reimagining a classic story?**

First and foremost, the human element, especially through the lens of what are we dealing with as a society right now? How can that be reflected in these stories? There are certain gothic tropes that I'm always a fan of—literally one of the things in *The Jigsaw Bride* that I just couldn't resist putting in is a Victorian traveling circus. It's one of those quintessentially wonderful gothic things that I just hadn't put in any of my plays yet. As much as I'm trying to reflect the human condition and where we are now, I'm also trying to explore the world of the Victorian era.

**How did *The Jigsaw Bride* come about?**

It's the spiritual sequel to *The Gravedigger*. I have my own little personal mission to write a play to capture each and every one of the classic black-and-white monsters. I'm working on one right now. I can't say what it is, but it is a one-person show. The monster is the only character. There are still a few I hadn't done, the bride of Frankenstein being one of them. In *The Gravedigger*, there is the idea of what would happen if this man-made creature, this monster, was taken in by the right person. These stories are about nature vs. nurture. And *The Jigsaw Bride* is what happens when they are taken in by the wrong person and the lessons that each of them learns about humanity from whom they are taught by.

**What do you think will most surprise people about *The Jigsaw Bride*?**

If they are expecting a mute, confused, or violent monstrous bride of Frankenstein, they will be surprised. She is not that. There are three main characters. One is one of the foremost female scientists of the Victorian era.

#### THE JIGSAW BRIDE

Through 11/14: Wed 8 PM, Thu 3 PM, Sat 4 and 8 PM, Sun 3 PM; also Thu 10/14, 8 PM, Sat 10/16, 8 PM only; First Folio Theatre, Mayslake Peabody Estate, 1717 31st St., Oak Brook, 630-986-8067, [firstfolio.org](http://firstfolio.org), previews through 10/15, \$29, regular run 10/16-11/14, \$49-\$59 (seniors \$44-\$54, students \$20).

**Why did you want to open at First Folio? How does it work for that space and audience?**

I've been with them for years. They've opened many of my horror shows and even commissioned one. I absolutely adore working there. I love the people. They made me an associate artist the very first play I worked on. I've been so welcomed there. They treat me with the utmost respect and dignity, and that matters. As for the location, the theater is literally inside a giant gothic mansion on a nature preserve; you just could not ask for a better environment.

**When researching *The Jigsaw Bride*, what**

**did you learn that most delighted you?**

There were two things. I was really fascinated by the female scientist, Maria von Moos, who was the first woman inducted into one of the greatest scientific societies in Europe. She was a groundbreaking scientist.

The other thing is that in the Victorian era, the traditional circus or sideshow was changing. What had become inordinately popular, was that instead of doing strong men and sword swallows, the circuses transitioned into exhibitions of medical curiosities. As science was advancing, the show people decided we can still make a show out of it. As we're learning more about sciences and more about biology and more about medicine, there is still something to be mined out of that for entertainment value.

**What sort of responses have you had to your horror and monster stories? What most encourages you to keep at them?**

People always seem shocked when they find out I have plays that aren't horror plays. It's not that they don't get done, but they don't get done as often as my horror plays. They are by far and away my bread and butter and I'm fine with that. I met the love of my life because she runs a horror theater in Florida. They decided to do *The Gravedigger* and then they turned *The Gravedigger* into a movie. That's yielded untold dividends. There are some people who hate the idea of being pigeonholed. I'm really quite flattered that people tend to think of me in that way. As long as I'm upright and breathing, I hope to keep writing these plays.

**What do you want people to know about *The Jigsaw Bride* that no one has asked yet?**

I wrote this play in seven days, the shortest I've ever written a play, and it was picked up for production three days after that. It moved very quickly. It's a piece I'm very proud of. One thing that really resonated with me when we did the first reading at First Folio, I hope [audiences] find it is creepy and gothic and spooky and it is not without a sense of humor. It may be a little bit of a grim sense of humor, but there is a sense of humor to it.

The primary theme of *The Jigsaw Bride* is: discount women at your own peril. That way does not necessarily go the way we think it will.

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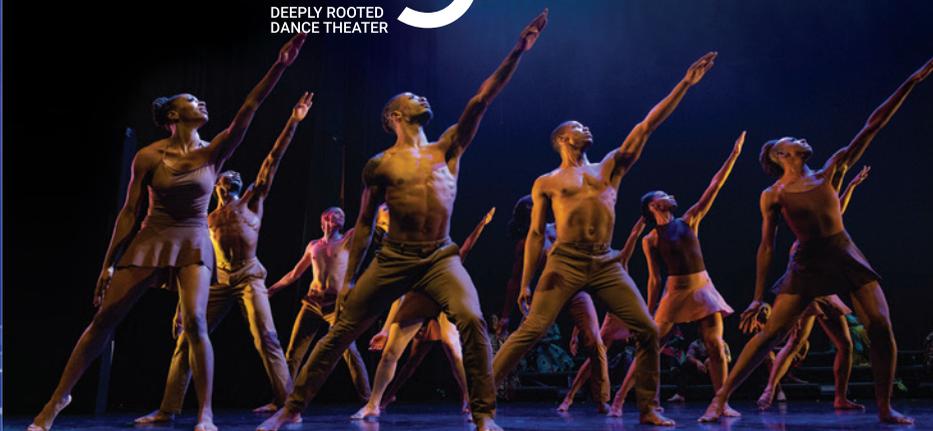
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*This Wide Night* @ MICHAEL BROSILOW

## REVIEW

### Getting out

Two women try to rebuild their post-prison lives in *This Wide Night*.

By **KERRY REID**

The walls of the grim and grimy London bedsit show faint outlines of the pictures that once hung upon them—a gallery of absence. It's a simple but gut-punching reminder that the two women in Chloë Moss's *This Wide Night* are defined mostly by what they don't have. Namely, as recently paroled convicts, second chances—followed closely by a sense of self-worth.

The squalid room belongs to Marie (Aila Ayilam Peck), the younger of the two former cellmates in Moss's drama, now receiving its local premiere with Shattered Globe Theatre (produced in association with Interrobang Theatre Project). Her room is scattered with the forensic remains of takeout dinners and solitary boozing. Her small ancient TV has lost its sound—another on-the-nose metaphor for marginalized women who cannot make their voices heard.

But despite her obvious isolation, Marie's not at all sure that she wants to welcome Lorraine (Linda Reiter) into her bunker-like

retreat from the world. At first, Lorraine, out after 12 years for a violent crime we only hear about later in the play, seems like exactly the sort of needy and boundary-violating acquaintance we'd all like to avoid. Allegedly on her way to a hostel, she begs water from Marie. "My mouth's as dry as a nun's privates," she declares, as she semi-surreptitiously tosses back unidentified pills.

But Marie takes pity on her and lets her stay. Or perhaps Marie realizes that, though she's been out of prison longer than Lorraine, she's still very much living as if she's still in stir. Lorraine's presence, irritating though she may be, at least gives Marie a familiar touchstone.

She's also funny. The unseen man next door to Marie's flat spends hours scouring the ground with a metal detector. "He lost his wife," Marie offers by way of explanation for the neighbor's odd obsession. "Is she made of metal?" Lorraine retorts.

Moss wrote her play based on women she met as a volunteer at a British prison. It got

a New York production in 2010, starring Edie Falco and Alison Pill. But Georgette Verdin's staging requires no star power. Instead, Verdin, Peck, and Reiter skillfully build the relationship between Marie and Lorraine out of shards of revelations. Moss's script steadfastly refuses to flesh out many details about what landed them in prison in the first place. That opaqueness poses a stark pointed question for the audience. Why must we know all about their past—about *anyone's* past—before we can summon sympathy for their present circumstances?

Lorraine wants only to reconnect with Ben, the son who was taken away from her. She torments herself over not being able to remember if his beloved duffel coat was blue or brown. She reads a book about space, marveling at the vastness and uncountability of the stars.

Marie recalls a game she played as a child, watching raindrops "race" to the ground and relating to the speedier ones as if they were the embodiment of classmates who had what she didn't (mostly mothers who didn't abandon them). She claims to be working at a pub, but the way she barrels through the door of the flat, quickly locking it behind her once inside, suggests something darker is going on.

The play unfolds through a series of short disconnected scenes over an indeterminate

period of time. It's set in 2008, but Marie's world has so few creature comforts (her phone is disconnected) that it may as well be a sister flat to the one occupied by the characters in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* almost 50 years earlier. These women are seemingly nowhere in the world; the paradox of their lives is that they are both invisible and seen only for the history they desperately want to move past.

But unlike Pinter's world, where the menace of the outside world replicates itself in the destructive relationships of the three men sharing the squalid room, Marie and Lorraine seek some mutual comfort and understanding. To suggest that riding out a pandemic by sheltering in place is an exact parallel to life as a former con would be, to put it charitably, a helluva stretch. But this production carefully and subtly limns the everyday aggravations of too-close-for-comfort living arrangements, as well as the, well, comfort we derive from knowing at least one person is around to witness our life.

Moss's play is part of a growing body of work about women struggling to adjust to life outside prison: in recent years, I've admired Kate Tempest's 2013 drama *Hopelessly Devoted* (also set in Great Britain, and given a terrific production in 2019 at Piven Theatre) and Boo Killebrew's set-in-Chicago *Lettie*, which lit the stage on fire at Victory Gardens in 2018. (I'd say all of them also owe a debt to Rhodessa Jones's groundbreaking work with the Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women.)

These plays go beyond the high-octane plot dynamics of *Orange is the New Black* to focus on the small relentless ways that women struggle to reintegrate with a world that never seemed to want them in the first place. When Peck's Marie breaks down near the end and delivers a searing litany of all the things she fears, it's almost unbearable. Will she bear it alone? Will the presence of another be enough to overcome it?

Moss doesn't give us any sure answers. There are none to be found. But the stellar and raw performances of Peck and Reiter linger as the weak light of morning spills through the one window Marie and Lorraine have to the outside world. **R**

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## OPENING

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Black Button Eyes stages an Internet cult fave.

As the lights come up on this three-act show (full disclosure, my first live theater since COVID-19), Dr. Horrible's maniacal laugh brings to life the demented claustrophobia we've all been feeling for the last year and a half. Played by a charmingly pathetic Kevin Webb, Dr. Horrible is the worst kind of Internet troll—a lonely one with an unrequited crush and supervillain weapons at his disposal. Under the direction of Ed Rutherford and music direction of Micky York, this "authorized fan production" from Black Button Eyes of geeky Internet musical *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* is a fun, hammy pissing contest between the good doctor and Captain Hammer (Tommy Thurston), two egomaniacs who don't deserve the affections of Penny (Stephanie Fongheiser), who's just a well-meaning volunteer trying to help the homeless.

*Dr. Horrible* was released in 2008, long before the 2016 election brought these specific male archetypes into sharper relief and coauthor Joss Whedon's sexual abuse and harassment allegations entered public consciousness. The passing of time adds a troubling

"life imitating art" aspect to the production, but Black Button Eyes is also staging this show as a benefit for nonprofit Season of Concern, which would make do-gooder Penny quite proud. While this run was originally scheduled for 2020, it's a fitting transition back to the theater after months of isolation. Much of the action plays out on seven onstage screens (feels like home, right?) and the hour-plus run time pads in two ten-minute intermissions seemingly tailored to our atrophied attention spans. —**MARISSA OBERLANDER**  
**DR. HORRIBLE'S SING-ALONG BLOG** Through 11/6: Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM; the Edge Theater, 5451 N. Broadway, [blackbuttoneyes.com](http://blackbuttoneyes.com), \$30 (proceeds benefit Season of Concern).

**No memory play**  
Amnesia wreaks havoc with a gay relationship in 4000 Days.

If your partner met you today—instead of whoever you were on the first date—would they still fall in love? Peter Quilter's queer 2016 dramedy makes literal an anxiety that looms over long-term couples, then dangles a sinister but merciful proposition: if you had a chance to walk away with a clean emotional slate, would you take it?

After collapsing at work from a life-threatening brain clot, Michael (Marc Prince) descends into a coma. For three weeks in his hospital room, tensions rise between

his decade-long partner, Paul (Michael Penick), and his protective and resentful mother, Carol (Beatriz Jamaica, filling in as understudy opening night for Carolyn Nelson). When Michael comes to, he's seemingly healthy, save for one huge exception: complete memory loss of the last 11 years, including his entire relationship with Paul.

More often than not, amnesiac relationship dramas are the stuff of daytime TV and retconning blockbuster franchises; here, both Quilter and artistic director Jay España take strides to elevate the stakes in this PrideArts production above soap opera contrivances. As a man launched ten years into his own future, Prince conveys both the grief and sense of opportunity of waking up to the real-life George Bailey otherworld of being a decade greyer, with none of the career merits he'd hung his hopes on in his youth. The concept is rich enough without the monster-in-law side conflict, which bloats the plot a bit, but at opening, Jamaica played refreshingly against the script's archetypal tropes, giving Carol some warmth.

Uneasy and tentative as it may be, there's an energy of experimentation in España's production, and 4000 Days marks a step forward for the newest generation of PrideArts. —**DAN JAKES** **4000 DAYS** Through 10/31: Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM; also Wed 10/20 and 10/27, 7:30 PM, Pride Arts Center, 4139 N. Broadway, [pridearts.org](http://pridearts.org), \$30 (pay what you can 10/20 and 10/27).

*Y Tu Abuela, Where is She?* DYLAN CRUZ

## Into the woods, again

*Grimm* examines fairy tale tropes with a twist.

If *Cheers* and *Into the Woods* got together for an unprotected hookup, the end result might be a bit like Michael Dalberg's *Grimm*, now in a world premiere with Theatre Above the Law under Josephine Czarnecki's direction. The conceit is that the characters from the Brothers Grimm fairy tales (Little Red, Rumpelstiltskin, Hansel and Gretel, etc.) have taken shelter in a cabaret bar where Jakob Grimm (Maxwell Peters) keeps showing up, seeking his lost brother Wilhelm. By reenacting the stories, the characters hope to clue Jakob into what he's really looking for. "The only way out is through," warns Little Red (Delilah Rose Lane), who is all grown up, but disturbingly still looks like a child.

It's not a bad premise, and there are plenty of moments of sly wit in Czarnecki's production, along with clever low-budget costumes by Jessie Gowens. (I particularly admired the gold-painted cocktail shakers used to represent the bulging eyes of the enchanted prince-fish in "The Fisherman and His Wife.") The seven-member cast commits with energy, and leans into the darkness of the stories with relish (particularly in what we're told is an uncollected Grimm tale about a butcher's family who come to a, er, grim end).

Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine tossed Bruno Bettelheim's Freudian *The Uses of Enchantment* in the ring with Carl Jung in *Into the Woods*. Dalberg seems to be striving for something akin to that battle over our unconscious attachment to these stories, but *Grimm* doesn't quite succeed at moving beyond a faithful story theater approach to the tales. —**KERRY REID**  
**GRIMM** Through 10/31: Fri-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM, [theatreatl.org](http://theatreatl.org), \$23 (\$20 students/seniors/industry).

## Peep horror show

Puppets and pandemic precautions clash in Rough House's latest.

After a long pandemic hiatus, it is once again demon puppet time at the Chopin Theatre, where Rough House Theater Company's cabaret of ghouls returns for *House of the Exquisite Corpse*, a revamped, social-distanced take on its 2019 immersive play-slash-haunted-mansion Halloween special, *The Silence in Harrow House*. Co-artistic director Mike Oleon's showcase spaces six puppet horror sketches across six large boxes that audiences,

## THEATER

traversing the area in groups, peer into through peep-holes in the outer wall. Headphoned, masked, and even face-shielded (courtesy of the theater, but mandatory), this is not the viewing situation most people dream of when the opportunity to watch a humongous eyeball pilot its unicycling pet bird into the fiery abyss, for instance, presents itself. But if the puppet action is thrilling enough, as it frequently is, you crane over and deal with it, forgetting to ask why, in the name of all that is spooky, the night was designed this way.

Illusions are hard to sustain, even without face shields. But to their credit, the artists behind the show's more daring pieces invite a new kind of puppet-viewing, one that never hides the hand pulling the strings, as with the box designed to look like the inside of a heart, brainchild of co-artistic director Claire Saxe, with a styrofoam man trapped in it and a very obvious red-jumpsuited puppeteer manipulating him. Oddly, the horror and magic felt realer the more performers exposed the mechanism, whereas the more heightened boxes felt a little like watching a play through a peep-hole with a fogged-up face shield on. —**MAX MALLER**  
**HOUSE OF THE EXQUISITE CORPSE** Through 10/30: Thu-Sat (timed entries every 15 minutes between 7 and 10:30 PM), Chopin Theatre, 1543 W. Division, roughhousetheater.com, \$21-\$26.

**RR** Family ties  
A somber Thanksgiving unfolds in *The Humans*.

Redtwist Theatre presents Stephen Karam's celebrated family holiday drama to open its new season. It's Thanksgiving 2015 on New York City's Lower East Side and the Blake family has gathered at younger daughter Brigid's rundown apartment to celebrate. As with virtually every family ever, each member nurses grudges, guards secrets, and leaves much of what they feel unsaid.

The nucleus around which this ordinary, troubled clan revolves is the wheelchair-using matriarch, Momo (Valerie Gorman). Deep into dementia, she spends the running time of the play nearly comatose, punctuated occasionally by outbursts of gibberish. Her one moment of clarity comes during the recitation of the pre-meal prayer. Her son, Erik (Brian Parry), is so moved, he makes everyone recite it a second time. But this family needs much more than Jesus.

Real conflicts about religion, marriage, health, and success are broached, though at the end of the meal nothing has even begun to be resolved. It is to Karam's credit that this lack of release does not take away from the lived-in feel of the interactions between people who clearly love one another, but possess no tools to express it. (This comes through even though the cast wears face shields when not eating or drinking, which occasionally makes the dialogue hard to hear.)

The emotional high point of the piece (directed by

Steve Scott) is the reading of a years-old e-mail from Momo to her granddaughters, an acknowledgement of her slipping mind. It is a farewell made more poignant by its writer's simultaneous presence and absence. Even though Momo can no longer make sense, her descendants, gathered around her and of seemingly sound mind, are even more adrift and helpless than she is in her diminished state. —**DMITRY SAMAROV**  
**THE HUMANS** Through 11/14: Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM, Redtwist Theatre, 1044 W. Bryn Mawr, 773-728-7529, redtwisttheatre.org, \$35 Thu, \$40 Fri-Sun (\$5 off students/seniors).

**RR** Identity and codependency  
Visión Latino Theatre Company's world premiere is not to be missed.

As part of this year's Destinos: Chicago International Latino Theater Festival, Visión Latino Theatre Company presents the world premiere of *Y Tu Abuela, Where is She?*

Written by Puerto Rican playwright Nelson Diaz-Marcano and directed by Xavier M. Custodio, *Y Tu Abuela* is not the writer's first collaboration with VLTC, a company of Latinx artists who perform stories that aim to open the minds of audiences to Latinx struggles and perseverance through theater. Partly inspired by Diaz-Marcano's own struggles with substance abuse and addiction, as well as the death of his mother, it's a study of familial bonds and grief, our chosen vices, and the ways in which how we process things personally can impact the people we love most.

Xavier (Adriel Irizarry) is mourning the loss of his mother and self-medicating with booze, much to the chagrin of his wife, Adalina (Gabriela Castillo), who has been driven to leave their home with the hopes that her absence will inspire Xavier to turn his act around. When the couple learns that they have been selected for a prestigious program that will allow them to modify the genes of their child before it is born, their excitement temporarily allows them to forget their marital strife. But when Xavier, who is biracial but white-passing, declares he wants their child to be Black, Adalina, who is Black, balks at his hubris, accusing him of turning the same blind spot he has for her experiences—and the experiences of Xavier's younger sister, Xamaris (Angela Townsend)—toward what the life of their unborn child as a Black person would look like.

*Y Tu Abuela* celebrates the productivity of confrontation and the necessary balance it brings to the unavoidable codependency that crops up in love of all types—familial, romantic, and self. It's insanely contemporary and topical, simultaneously digestible and intense, and not to be missed. —**KAYLEN RALPH**  
**Y TU ABUELA, WHERE IS SHE?** Through 10/24: Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 4:30 PM, Den Theatre, 1331 N. Milwaukee, thedenttheatre.com, \$30-\$60. **R**

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## NOW PLAYING

### RR *El Planeta*

Like the films of French master Philippe Garrel, conceptual artist and filmmaker Amalia Ulman's feature debut is both of its time and yet somehow not. References to social media, influencer culture, and other modernities ground it in the present era, while the spartan black-and-white aesthetic, dispassionate sensibility, and even its fashion and hairstyles evoke a not-too-distant past, one before the actual setting (sometime after the 2008 recession). Ulman—who was raised in Gijón, Spain, where the film is set—wrote, produced, directed, and stars in this stylishly aimless sojourn, about a mother (played by Ulman's real-life mother) and daughter (Ulman) who are experiencing financial instability following the recession, having been considerably affluent beforehand. The two contend with their newfound poverty in different ways; Ulman's Leo, who seems to do something with fashion, sells her sewing machine and, in one of the film's most absurd scenes, even explores

the possibility of sex work, while her mother is a full-on grifter, charging meals and clothing to the tabs of imaginary suitors. What goes unexplained is intriguing but doesn't overwhelm this rather bare endeavor, instead complementing its nonchalant poignancy. Described by Ulman as an "eviction comedy" and based on both her life and the true story of a similar mother-daughter duo, the film is neither cynical nor sentimental, evincing a distinct, often humorous voice. Also noteworthy are the film's fashions—one admires the avant-garde wares while considering the implications of the characters' preoccupation with their outward appearance and material possessions. In English and Spanish with subtitles. —KATHLEEN SACHS 79 min. *Gene Siskel Film Center*

### RR *Lamb*

*Lamb* captures grief by oscillating between the beautiful and the horrific in a way so authentic to the human experience that for a moment, one might forget just how peculiar the otherworldly youngster at the center of the film is. Half-human and half-lamb, Ada is readily

accepted by a childless couple who run an idyllic-looking sheep farm in the Icelandic countryside. Maria (Noomi Rapace) and Ingvar (Hilmir Snær Guðnason) live a seemingly simple life until this moment. But when Ingvar's brother Pétur (Björn Hlynur Haraldsson) arrives, a much more complicated past comes into focus. Maria holds many a secret, most only hinted at through interactions with Pétur, who eventually warms to Ada as well, strange as it all may seem. However, Maria's heavy grief and pain are apparent and ultimately grow into a striking strength and a will to survive in this dark and atmospheric folktale from director Valdimar Jóhannsson. —BECCA JAMES R, 106 min. *AMC Theatres, Logan Theatre, Regal Theatres, ShowPlace Icon Theatre*

### RR *The Last Duel*

*The Last Duel* recounts the story of the last legally sanctioned trial by combat in France. In 1386, Marguerite de Carrouges (Jodie Comer) accuses family friend, squire Jacques Le Gris (Adam Driver), of rape. Seeking justice and vengeance, knight Jean de Car-

rouges (Matt Damon) challenges Le Gris to a fight to the death to prove his guilt or innocence in the eyes of god.

Cowritten by Nicole Holofcener with help from Damon and Ben Affleck, *The Last Duel* operates as a well-executed storytelling triptych, recounting the same events from differing perspectives. While this conceit works well to prevent fatigue in the 152-minute runtime, it's also where the film's most evident flaw occurs as the repeated revisiting of Marguerite's rape comes across as unnecessarily exploitative.

That not-insignificant complaint aside, the lead cast all put in engaging performances, with a surprisingly comedic supporting performance by Affleck as Le Gris's benefactor Count Pierre d'Alençon balancing out the narrative with a degree of necessary levity for the sometimes-overwhelming subject matter. Perhaps the most impressive performance of all though, is that of director Ridley Scott, still helming major features at the age of 83 in a pandemic. —ADAM MULLINS-KHATIB R, 152 min. *AMC Theatres, Regal Theatres, Cinemark, Landmark Theatres*

## REVIEW

# Julia Ducournau takes the wheel

*Titane's* a ride worth taking—if you can stomach it.

By CODY CORRALL

It's been five years since Julie Ducournau's debut feature *Raw* made audience members at the Toronto International Film Festival allegedly pass out and throw up. Her highly-anticipated—and Palme d'Or winning—sophomore effort, *Titane*, faced reported walkouts from disgusted audience members at the Cannes Film Festival, and a reported faint at its TIFF premiere.

All this commotion sets the scene for *Titane* to be an impossible movie to stomach—figuratively or literally—and at the very least, was another reason to deem Ducournau to be some sort of sick and twisted provocateur. But while there are parts of the film that are not suited for the squeamish, *Titane* is interested in the intersection of the disturbed and the intimate.

*Titane* is a difficult movie to surmise without revealing too much. Ducournau herself has

been tight-lipped about the film's plot outside of a generic definition of the word "titane." But the film is best when you let it take the wheel. After a car accident in her youth, Alexia (a phenomenal Agathe Rousselle in her feature debut) is given a permanent titanium plate in her skull and a fetish for metal and machines.

Now in her 20s, Alexia works as a dancer and model at car shows—gyrating on a flame-painted Cadillac, enticing male attendees, and having some risqué fun of her own with the help of a sharp hair accessory. But when officials notice an uptick of murders in the area, Alexia goes on the run and assumes the role of a fire captain's long lost son, Adrien. There is a constant, looming threat of the truth being revealed, but that delicate dance is further complicated when an unconventional sexual encounter changes her body.

Rousselle and Vincent Lindon's performances are out of this world here. Where Rousselle is expertly terse and uncommunicative—there is scant dialogue on Alexia's end as she assumes this new identity—Lindon has his burly arms open wide to the new, and unexplainable, normal that is their lives. There's a refreshing depth to their relationship that audiences can really hold on to as the story evolves.

Many have touted *Titane* as the most "insane" or "over the top" movie they've ever seen. But that feels like a cheap misreading of the film, whose backbone is built on thoughtful ruminations on family, and a curious—though sometimes awkward and cisnormative—commentary on gender and bodies. Sure, there's body horror galore here, and Ducournau's eye for genre and violence is firmly in play with an impressive knack for brutally choreographed kills, but this is an unmistakably human story with moments of unexpected levity.

With *Raw* and now *Titane*, Ducournau is increasingly interested in the complications of humanity, and specifically what it means to be a family, or in a more queer-focused reading, what a found family looks like. In the case of both films, these families are complicated by the introduction of something foreign or horrific, but Ducournau instead treats those unusual developments like any family

drama would treat a secret just waiting to be unleashed. These elements of *Titane* are indicative of similar films under the umbrella of "new French extremity"—think of films from Claire Denis or Gaspar Noé—using gore and violence or anything else disturbing as a direct reflection of humanity and its ilk. In a world that keeps getting more and more strange, how out-of-pocket are the myriad of oddities thrown at the screen after all? What is shocking if everything is shocking? Maybe it's us.

There's a lot to look at in *Titane*, but you are constantly confronted by a tattoo on Alexia's chest that reads "Love is a dog from hell," which viewers may recognize as the title of Charles Bukowski's collection of poetry from the 1970s. Bukowski's poems from that era focused largely on the valleys of love and heartbreak, but one line has stuck with me in relation to *Titane*.

"If there are junk yards in hell, love is the dog that guards the gates."

*Titane* will not give you the answers to your questions, and you're sure to have plenty by the film's end. But it's a hell of a ride across genre, shock, and awe—and it's a delight to parse through the trash and treasures of Ducournau's cinematic junkyard. **R**

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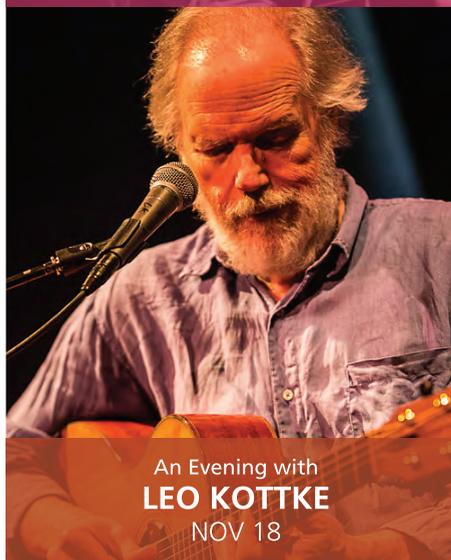
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## CHICAGOANS OF NOTE

# Jessie Montgomery, CSO Mead Composer-in-Residence

“When I think of classical music, I automatically think of how it’s connected to new music. I think the CSO does a great job of making that connection, and I’m hoping to make that even stronger.”

### As told to JAMIE LUDWIG

In April, violinist and composer Jessie Montgomery was named the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s new Mead Composer-in-Residence. Montgomery will split her time between New York and Chicago throughout her residency, which started July 1 and runs through June 30, 2024. She gave this interview while in town to prepare for the first concert of the CSO’s 2021-2022 MusicNOW season, *Homecoming*, which takes place on Monday, November 1.

I’m actually in Chicago now. We did a preview concert yesterday during the Ear Taxi Festival, which is a great new-music festival in town and a partner of CSO. The preview included a piece of mine called *Lunar Songs*, which is a piece for voice and string quartet. It was wonderful to get to know Ear Taxi. It

really did have a steady stream of audience members coming through, which was great. Leading up to that, we had a couple of days of rehearsal, and I got to know some of the musicians of the CSO, which has been great. I also met Maestro Muti, and I went to a concert at CSO this weekend. So it’s been a tremendously warm welcome, with really wonderful activities going on.

I’m really excited to see how everything comes together. We were previewing for the November 1 concert, which will include *Lunar Songs* and another piece of mine called *Loisaida, My Love*. Both will be sung by Whitney Morrison. I’m really excited about this first program, because it includes a commission by a colleague of mine from Princeton, a young, fabulous, really up-and-coming composer,

Elijah Daniel Smith [*Scions of an Atlas*]. And we’ll have a piece by Ted Hearne [*Authority*] and a piece by Nathalie Joachim [*Seen*], who is a great friend of mine. I’m just thrilled to be able to start working with them and Michael Lewanski, who’s going to be conducting the concert.

Most of my interactions with Chicago, up until about a year or so ago, have been in relation to the Sphinx Organization, because we would come here every summer to play a concert at the Harris. [Editor’s note: Montgomery has been affiliated since 1999 with this Detroit-based nonprofit supporting young Black and Latinx classical musicians.] As part of the Sphinx Performance Academy, we were in residence with Roosevelt University and Northwestern University at different points for our summer program. In those cases, we were sort of in our little bubble of teaching our kids, and we would take them to Grant Park as part of our summer learning, and we got to see all those great Grant Park performances. One of my former students showed up at the Ear Taxi Festival, so it’s coming full circle.

As far as the city’s new-music scene, my first introduction was through MusicNOW a couple of years ago, when Missy Mazzoli invited me to participate. There’s also Fulcrum Point, and I have colleagues in a really great string quartet called D-Composed. So I’m slowly putting all the pieces together and figuring out how everyone is connected. It’s really impressive how much activity there is here around new music and classical music. I feel like they all live in the same space—when I think of classical music, I automatically think of how it’s connected to new music. I think the CSO does a great job of making that connection, and I’m hoping to make that even stronger.

Part of the goal is definitely to help bring in other types of audiences. We have a partnership with Poems While You Wait—an organization that does spontaneous poems at public events—which I hope will be interesting for some of the literary audiences. I also have some ideas about bringing in performers

who have a more pop bent but also work with orchestral instruments, and hopefully that brings in more of a mixed crowd. There’s a lot of overlap now between classical and pop music, as far as how classical composers are thinking about their work. Because I think there’s an immediacy people are craving with the music, so I hope that generates more of an integration with different audiences. I’m also actively looking for composers to bring into the fold who are working in digital media and other areas, like R&B, jazz, and alt-rock bands and stuff like that.

In the United States, cultural identity has become a prominent discussion, and I think it’s really worthwhile and necessary so that we can create a little more balance in terms of representation and whose voices are being presented. In my curation for this MusicNOW concert, three out of the four composers on the program have Afro-diasporic backgrounds. My approach is really to include people with intentionality, but for the composers themselves, it’s about the opportunity to have their music presented. Whether the composers forefront their identity as the main element of their music is kind of up to them, but the representation of who’s onstage is what I’m focusing on. I just want the concerts to reflect as many unique and individual—and diverse—voices [as possible]. Now that I have a platform to present these composers, I’m super excited to be able to fulfill that part of my mission.

One of the two songs I’m performing on November 1 is a tribute to Leonard Bernstein with a poem written by J. Mae Barizo, who’s a wonderful New York-based poet. The other song, *Loisaida, My Love*, is based on a poem by a Puerto Rican activist, Bimbo Rivas, who was very active in community development in the late 70s and 80s in New York City. In terms of my own cultural identity, I have many different ways, but one of them is definitely being like, “I’m a New Yorker.” I’m a New Yorker in Chicago, and so, bringing that with me, I have a lot of pride in that. The poem is about acknowledging that even though there’s a lot of difficulty and hardship in the community, through love and action we can turn it around. It’s a piece I really identify with, and I think it has a universal message.

I’m really excited to get to know the city, and get to know all of the artists here. And just continue to make strong connections for myself and hopefully for the CSO. 📍

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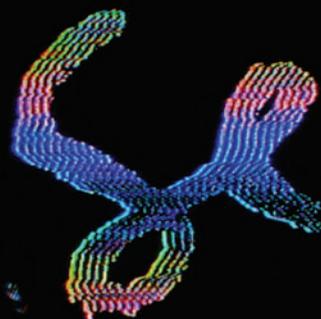
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**EXPERIMENTAL CHICAGO HIP-HOP DUO LOWERLIPDRIP** released four digital singles between 2019 and May 2020, each consisting of two tracks that overflow with freewheeling glee and unpredictable stylistic shifts. Those singles not only helped establish LLD as a local force to watch but also caught the attention of b4, a recently established imprint of venerable UK indie label 4AD. In October 2020, b4 issued LLD's *V*, whose two songs maintain continuity with the duo's previous work even as they plow fresh ground. This single combines the 80s adult-contemporary pop mysticism of "SCANDALOUS" and the dusty back-alley collage-funk of "FLAWLESS," and both tracks channel LLD's frenzied energy into smooth hooks that land with polished finesse. Though LOWERLIPDRIP recordings remain in short supply, even one of their scalding tracks is more satisfying than half an hour of the listless material on Spotify's most popular rap playlists. —LEOR GALIL

CONCERT PREVIEW  
THURSDAY14

**CATALYTIC SOUND FESTIVAL** See also Sat 10/16 and Sun 10/17. Day one of the festival features (in order of performance) a trio of Claire Rousay, Macie Stewart, and Ken Vandermark; Bonnie Jones; and Kuzu. 8 PM, Elastic Arts, Elastic Arts, 3429 W. Diversey, second floor, \$25 (\$5 for livestream), three-day pass, \$60.

Avant-garde jazz musicians have been uniting to better control their opportunities to perform, record, and engage with their communities at least since the 1960s, when the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) first convened in Chicago and the shorter-lived Jazz Composers Guild (which included Carla Bley, Sun Ra, Bill Dixon, and Archie Shepp) formed in New York City. Catalytic Sound, a cooperative of musicians from across the U.S. and Europe, takes those groups' example into the 21st century. To date, its most public face has been a website where it solicits subscriptions (in return for access to exclusive musical offerings by members such as Ken Vandermark, Tashi Dorji, Elisabeth Harnik, and Bonnie Jones) and provides a platform for its 30 members to sell physical and digital albums. But the collective has also sponsored performance opportunities.

Last year, when COVID restrictions made concerts in front of audiences impossible, the first Catalytic Sound Festival happened strictly online. This year, between October 1 and 31, the second annual festival takes place in Vienna, Austria; Trondheim, Norway; three cities in the Netherlands; and three cities in the U.S., specifically New York, Washington, D.C., and Chicago. You can buy access to festival streams from the Catalytic Sound Bandcamp page, but almost every event is also open to in-person audiences, subject to the COVID-prevention protocols of each locale. The Chicago event takes on three nights (October 14, 16, and 17) at Elastic Arts, and each date features three sets. While most of the performers are local, some come from Texas, New York, Maryland, and North Carolina; together the participants make up a multigenerational and pan-stylistic cross section of present improvisational practices. They include high-volume, higher-energy total-improv trio Kuzu, who celebrate the release of their latest album, *All Your Ghosts in One Corner* (Aerophonic), on Thursday; octogenarian multi-instrumentalist Joe McPhee, who plays a first-time duet with local keyboardist and sound artist Olivia Block on Saturday; and DJ Damon Locks, who creates live sound collages on Sunday. —BILL MEYER

**LOWERLIPDRIP** See *Pick of the Week* at left. Victor Internet headlines; LOWERLIPDRIP and Adam Diaz open. 7 PM, Lincoln Hall, 2424 N. Lincoln, \$16.

## FRIDAY15

**MIA JOY** Tenci opens. 9 PM, Sleeping Village, 3734 W. Belmont, \$18, \$13-\$15 in advance. 21+



Bonnie Jones performs Thursday (solo) and Saturday (with Joe McPhee, Katinka Kleijn, and Chris Corsano) at the Catalytic Sound Festival.

📷 COURTESY THE ARTIST

Macie Stewart performs Thursday (in a trio with Claire Rousay and Ken Vandermark) and Sunday (in Vandermark's band Marker) at the Catalytic Sound Festival.

📷 ASH DYE

Kuzu (Tyler Damon, Dave Rempis, and Tashi Dorji) perform Thursday at the Catalytic Sound Festival.

📷 JULIA DRATEL



If ever an artist were predestined to create deep-seated dream-folk songs, it might be Mia Rocha, who performs as Mia Joy. Her parents, a poet and a musician, encouraged her to use music as a channel of expression and self-discovery, and each of her songs could serve as a new addition to her emotional vocabulary. Rocha recorded the sure-footed, thrumming indie-pop of her 2017 EP, *Gemini Moon*, with a four-piece band, but she birthed her debut full-length, *Spirit Tamer*, from solitary reflection. In a February interview on Jessica Risker's IGTV series *Music Therapy*, she described the time she spent writing the album as "an incredibly low, dark period—and it was also a period where things were just pouring out of me." Fortunately Rocha retained her knack for juxtaposing emotional rigor with defiant hope: "You didn't call me on my birthday / It didn't get me down," she sings on "Ye Old Man." To that end, *Spirit Tamer* offers an unexpected premise: Pain can be a catch-and-release quarry; there's no need to wrestle with it.

In an April interview with *Reader* staff writer Leor Galil, Rocha proclaimed her love for Elizabeth Fraser of Cocteau Twins, and *Spirit Tamer* is saturated with the sort of vaporous dreamscapes pioneered by the Scottish songwriter. But Rocha salts her watery textures with bone-dry wit and sideways self-awareness: "Freak" kicks off by name-dropping Korn's "Freak on a Leash," and "Rings of Saturn" compares tired eyes to whirling planets. Rocha spent three years in the Chicago Children's Choir, and you can still hear that training in her proclivity for gauzy vocal arrangements and divine sense of harmony (especially the cavernous melody of "Across Water" and the twinkling

meditation on generational trauma "See Us"). The album closes with a cover of Arthur Russell's doleful "Our Last Night Together," retitled "Last Night Together (Arthur)." While the original is saddled by grief relayed through reverberating cello and vocals, Rocha's interpretation rings more like a lullaby. Whimsical vibraphone and feathery piano circle and ebb beneath breathy vocals, instilling hope in an unwritten future. The 12 tracks on *Spirit Tamer* don't abide by prescribed narratives—there are no happy endings or gestures of triumph, just depictions of the messiness of life. The album suggests that letting go can provide plenty of closure even if you achieve it only in the privacy of your own mind.

—SHANNON NICO SHREIBAK

## SATURDAY 16

**CATALYTIC SOUND FESTIVAL** See Thu 10/14. Day two of the festival features (in order of performance) a duo of Joe McPhee and Olivia Block; Tashi Dorji; and a quartet of Joe McPhee, Katinka Kleijn, Bonnie Jones, and Chris Corsano. Akira Sakata and Nana Omori play a streaming-only set. 8 PM, Elastic Arts, 3429 W. Diversey, second floor, \$25 (\$5 for livestream), three-day pass \$60. 📺

## SUNDAY 17

**CATALYTIC SOUND FESTIVAL** See Thu 10/14. The third and final day of the festival features (in order of performance) a duo of Mark Feldman and Tim Daisy; Damon Locks; and Marker. 8 PM, Elastic Arts, 3429 W. Diversey, second floor, \$25 (\$5 for livestream), three-day pass \$60. 📺

## WEDNESDAY 20

**ANDREW GOES TO HELL** Umru headlines; Fraxiom, LAN Party, Lucas Lex, Chase Alex, and Andrew Goes to Hell open. 7 PM, Subterranean, 2011 W. North, \$20. 17+

When the pandemic hit, the 23-year-old Chicago songwriter, producer, and vocalist who calls him-



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**PAT METHENY SIDE-EYE**

with James Francies & Joe Dyson  
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**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 15 8PM**

**Steve Dawson & Funeral Bonsai Wedding**

featuring Quartet Parapluie  
 with special guest Louis Bardales

**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 15 8PM**

**David Wilcox** in Szold Hall

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 21 8PM**

**Aoife O'Donovan**

with special guest Taylor Ashton

**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 22 8PM**

**Susan Werner**

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Orquesta Akokán © JACOB BLICKENSTAFF

**continued from 59**

self Andrew Goes to Hell returned to an old love to cope with the mounting stress: he played video games. He'd grown up with all the Tony Hawk games, whose soundtracks consist mainly of popular and bygone punk, hip-hop, and metal, and they informed his musical taste as much as the mid-2000s pop punk he heard via Fuse TV. When Andrew began DJing in seventh grade, he specialized in nightcore, drawn in by its pitched-up sounds and frenzied energy. "It reminded me of the video games I played at that time," he says. As he spent more and more time gaming in spring 2020, the sounds of video games began to influence his creativity again—and this time, he got into *Silent Hill* and other games with original scores designed to enhance play. "The music supplemented this whole feeling—I felt involved in the game," he says. "I wanted to create music that created the same immersion."

On the September album *World's Smartest Dumbass* (Curiosity Shop), Andrew does more than synthesize his influences. Its songs combine effervescent video-game blips, hypnotic dance-music synths, and the melancholy guitars and rambunctious yawns of pop punk into an adrenalized new pop language. Andrew's style can loosely be called hyperpop, especially since "hyperpop" is such a loose term to begin with—and he certainly subverts pop tropes, even as his tunes summon supersize emotions as effectively as any great three-minute radio smash. It'd be more accurate to say he has styles, not just a style: *World's Smartest Dumbass* moves from the acidic guitars of a full-bore punk

song ("If So, Let Me Go") to a dreamlike kawaii synth rhapsody ("Drift Apart") in under five minutes. On "Preservatives," woebegone longing courses through squelching sounds and syrupy singing, giving the song an alluring, urgent oomph. By marinating in these emotional extremes, Andrew reaches his own kind of pop bliss. —LEOR GALIL

**MONDAY<sup>25</sup>**

**MONTE LUNA** *Temptress, Plague of Carcosa, and Murnau open. 7 PM, Reggies Music Joint, 2105 S. State, \$12. 21+*

In 2016, Austin doom unit Monte Luna dropped their debut demo—a self-titled release with just one self-titled track more than 20 minutes long—and just a few months later followed it with their powerful first EP, *The Hound*. These served as appetizers for their self-titled 2017 full-length debut, which exuded confidence and showcased a trippy heaviness fit for total immersion. While the album was the band's first release after downsizing from a trio to a duo, its rich layers of throbbing noise seemed to come from a much bigger group. Monte Luna built on that steady foundation to deliver something even richer and stronger on the 2019 album *Drowners' Wives*—a pulsing, lurching critter with a Melvins-ish postmodern flair that demonstrated a strong current of fresh thinking and a willingness to play with the doom genre while maintaining absolute loyalty to its aesthetic. The gauntlet-dropping lead single,

"The Water Hag," wraps mournful horror in folkloric themes and sonically simulates the feel of being dragged down to the depths of the ocean.

In summer 2020, Monte Luna—by then a trio of vocalist and guitarist James Clarke, drummer Danny Marschner (also a visual artist), and bassist Garth Condit—performed three new tracks on CVLT Nation's livestream and put the recordings up for sale on Bandcamp (a portion of the proceeds benefit Austin music venues). The absolutely gnarly "Blackstar" is full of long rift shifts and changes; "Rust Goliath" is a powerful assault on the senses; and "Fear the Sun" rides a loping slow-burn build into a churning, lurching groove. Having survived COVID, lockdown, and (per their Facebook page) a bullet fired into Marschner's van on a wild University of Texas game night, the band are out on the road for a long tour with Dallas/Fort Worth-based Temptress. As a kind of mantra, the band include the words "Your eyes are dazed and heavy" in many of their social-media posts, and their music suggests they'll deliver on that promise live. —MONICA KENDRICK

**ALBUM REVIEWS**

**GOSH DIGGITY, RUNAWAY ROCKETBOY**  
 Rat Poison / Lauren  
[goshdiggity.bandcamp.com/album/runaway-rocketboy-2](http://goshdiggity.bandcamp.com/album/runaway-rocketboy-2)

Chicago trio Gosh Diggity have nailed the chemistry that gave a hard-to-pin-down magnetism to the solo lo-fi electronics projects—among them Say Hi and Casiotone for the Painfully Alone—that occupied a special place in 2000s indie pop. Gosh Diggity's early EPs, 2019's *banana brains* and 2020's *Bedtime for Bonzos*, radiate skinned-knee shambolic glee from every sunny keyboard melody and breathy vocal harmony—the singing can sound like the incantations that best friends at sleepovers share while huddled around a flashlight. The trio have tightened up what they call their "kitchen techno" for their debut album, *Runaway Rocketboy*, which Retirement Party front woman Avery Springer is releasing through her new Lauren Records imprint, Rat Poison. Gosh Diggity have sharpened the precision of their chintzy electronic percussion and buttoned up their effervescent melodies to draw out each song's messy mix of joy, sadness, and longing. On "Driving With Your Knees," bottle-rocket vocals break through a mellow, melancholy melody to start the chorus, transforming bittersweet regret into a shot of radiance to perk you right up. —LEOR GALIL

**KOWLOON WALLED CITY, PIECEWORK**  
 Gilead / Neurot  
[kowloonwalledcity.bandcamp.com/album/piecework](http://kowloonwalledcity.bandcamp.com/album/piecework)

Oakland's Kowloon Walled City formed in 2007 as an intense postmetal outfit who tipped their hat



Monte Luna COURTESY THE ARTIST

to fellow Oaklanders Neurosis, who'd helped pioneer the fusion of hardcore and sludge. During the 14 years since, the band have slowly pulled back on the aggression and fury, settling into creeping, deliberately paced noise rock. Kowloon Walled City's newest effort, *Piecework*, is also their first

album in six years, released jointly by the always-excellent Gilead Media and Neurosis's own Neurot Recordings. It documents a band hitting their stride perfectly and decimating everyone else in the genre. *Piecework* rides on massive, plodding beats that recall the style of Slint drummer Brit

Walford, fleshed out with grimy fuzz bass, dueling electrical-cable guitars, and the distressed vocal dissonance of Scott Evans. Intricate, room-miked, and mean, *Piecework* captures Kowloon Walled City perfectly riding a knife edge: it's simultaneously pummeling and introspective, furious and forlorn. Reinvestigation of the Touch and Go sound is in full swing right now, with bands from all over doing their best to pay homage to the likes of the Jesus Lizard, Shellac, Polvo, and Slint—hell, even I'm doing it—and every time I hear a record from a contemporary group playing in this style, I'm overjoyed and fully on board. *Piecework* smashes together all the best sounds from the label's golden era, creating a stirring masterpiece that'll be near impossible for any noise-rock band out there today to top. —**LUCA CIMARUSTI**

**ORQUESTA AKOKÁN, 16 RAYOS**  
Daptone

[orquestaakokan.bandcamp.com/album/16-rayos](http://orquestaakokan.bandcamp.com/album/16-rayos)

Orquesta Akokán, a big band with members split between New York and Cuba, are a musical catchall for culture, history, and genre. These players have

worked with Chucho Valdés, Irakere, Los Van Van, and other historically hefty groups, and in Akokán they traffic in vivid music that draws on a brassy combination of mambo, jazz, and folkloric traditions. On the group's second album, *16 Rayos*, they rededicate themselves to the tenets of their 2018 self-titled debut, which amassed critical accolades and a Grammy nomination.

That first disc arrived fully realized, but *16 Rayos*—the title references a Yoruba tale of divinity—feels even more cohesive and heavy with intent. The album's second single, "El Inflador," is a quick rumba that could've been seamlessly slotted into Craft Recordings' five-disc 2018 box set *The Complete Cuban Jam Sessions*, which collects definitive documentation of the country's 1950s and '60s musical peak. As burly as Orquesta Akokán can be, their abilities are more apparent in their subtler moments: the spacious opening of "Llegue con Mi Rumba," which allows the percussion to find the spotlight; the delicate embroidery of strings, a first for the group, on "La Guajira del Mar"; the rhythm section's interplay on "Orchidea"; and guest vocalist Xiomara Valdés trading bars with bandleader José "Pepito" Gómez on the closing title track. You may not grasp all the deep cultural underpinnings of *16 Rayos*, but either way, the album's cunning melodies and harmonies and relentless rhythms make it both an easy entry point into the history of Latin jazz and a contemporary touchstone for devotees. —**DAVE CANTOR**



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# EARLY WARNINGS

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## NEW

**Gracie Abrams** 2/8/2022, 7:30 PM, Metro **U**  
**Allie X** 4/21/2022, 7:30 PM, Subterranean **U**  
**Black Violin** 10/29, 7:30 PM, Genesee Theatre, Waukegan **U**  
**David Blair II** 10/21, 9:30 PM, Hideout  
**Ben Böhmer, Cri** 3/26/2022, 10 PM, Concord Music Hall, 18+  
**Boyz II Men** 10/29, 8 PM, the Venue at Horseshoe Casino, Hammond  
**Boris Brejcha** 3/5/2022, 10 PM, Radius Chicago, 18+  
**Camilo** 10/29, 8 PM, Rosemont Theatre, Rosemont **U**  
**Alaina Castillo** 11/10, 7:30 PM, Schubas **U**  
**Charlotte de Witte, Enrico Sanguiliano, Onyaa, Hiroko Yamamura** 10/31, 8 PM, Radius Chicago, 18+  
**Chore Boy & Brad Kemp, Jyroscope** 10/22, 9 PM, Subterranean, 17+  
**Circle Jerks, 7 Seconds, Negative Approach** 3/25/2022, 7:30 PM, the Vic, 18+  
**Judy Collins** 11/13, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music **U**  
**Corridor** 4/3/2022, 8 PM, Schubas, 18+  
**D Smoke** 12/1, 7 PM, Concord Music Hall, 18+  
**Diamond Formation featuring Dee Diggs, Ariel Zetina** 10/22, 10 PM, Smart Bar  
**Districts, Francis of Delirium, Vanillaroma** 3/15/2022, 8 PM, Metro, 18+  
**Disturbed, Pop Evil** 11/4, 7 PM, Hard Rock Casino Northern Indiana, Gary  
**Ekhumed, Creeping Death, Bewitcher, Enforced** 11/11, 8 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 17+

**Curtis Foster, Moore, JJ Fiction, Cantbuydeem** 10/23, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+  
**Fugees** 11/2, 8 PM, United Center **U**  
**Ginger Root** 10/23, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle  
**Goddamn Gallows** 10/26, 8 PM, Subterranean  
**Andy Grammer** 2/17/2022, 7:30 PM, Park West, 18+  
**Hallo-Queen! featuring Michael Serafini, Garrett David, Sassmouth** 10/31, 10 PM, Smart Bar  
**Hamza Akram Qawal & Brothers, DJ Ase Wonder** 11/17, 8:30 PM, Szold Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music **FREE U**  
**DJ Harvey, Michael Serafini, Bizarre Love** 10/31, noon, Headquarters Beercade  
**Sierra Hull, Dead Horses** 10/27, 7:30 PM, SPACE, Evanston **U**  
**Billy Idol & Steve Stevens** 12/1, 7:30 PM, the Vic, 18+  
**Faith Jenkins & Kenny Latimore** 10/24, 5 and 8 PM, City Winery **U**  
**Lyfe Jennings** 10/21/10/22, 7 and 10 PM, City Winery **U**  
**John K** 10/23, 8 PM, Subterranean, 17+  
**Knuckle Puck, Arm's Length, Carly Cosgrove** 12/11, 7 PM, Bottom Lounge **U**  
**Koffin Kats, Krank Daddies** 10/28, 7 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 17+  
**Lakeview Orchestra** 10/24, 2 PM, Athenaeum Theatre **U**  
**Lavender Country, Andrew Sa, Cosmic Country Showcase** 10/29-10/30, 9 PM, Hideout  
**Led Zeppelin 2** 1/8/2022, 8:30 PM, House of Blues, 17+  
**Ledisi, Kenyon Dixon** 11/6, 8 PM, the Venue at Horseshoe Casino, Hammond  
**Legions of Metal 3.5 featuring Raven, High Spirits, Destruc-**

**tor, Acerus, Lurking Corpses, Emerald Rage, Attack of the Rising, Forcefield, Olorin, Vexing Hex, Lavaborne** 10/23, 5 PM, Reggies Rock Club  
**Gary LeVox** 10/21, 7:30 PM, Rialto Square Theatre, Joliet **U**  
**Mike Lust, Negative Scanner, Matt C (DJ set)** 10/22, 10 PM, Empty Bottle  
**Majid Jordan** 11/27, 9 PM, Metro, 18+  
**Maluma** 10/24, 7 PM, Allstate Arena, Rosemont **U**  
**Amber Mark** 4/3/2022, 8 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+  
**James Vincent McMorrow** 3/31/2022, 9 PM, Metro, 18+  
**Vic Mensa** 10/21, 7:30 PM, the Promontory  
**The Monkees Farewell Tour with Michael Nesmith & Micky Dolenz** 11/5, 8 PM, Rosemont Theatre, Rosemont **U**  
**Motion City Soundtrack** 12/31, 10 PM, House of Blues  
**Mvtant, Lunacy, Iron Years, DJ Scary Lady Sarah** 10/28, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle  
**New Kids on the Block, Salt-n-Pepa, En Vogue, Rick Astley** 6/17/2022, 8 PM, Allstate Arena, Rosemont **U**  
**Nothing, Frankie Rose, Enum-claw** 10/22, 9 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+  
**Oh Wonder, Winona Oak** 5/17/2022, 7:30 PM, the Vic **U**  
**La Oreja de Van Gogh** 11/24, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+  
**Over the Rhine** 12/5, 7 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music **U**  
**Pop 2000 Tour featuring Chris Kirkpatrick, Mark McGrath, O-Town, Ryan Cabrera, LFO** 10/28, 7 PM, Genesee Theatre, Waukegan **U**  
**Ralph** 1/27/2022, 7:30 PM, Schubas **U**

**The Script** 4/7/2022, 7:30 PM, Riviera Theatre **U**  
**Shelley FKA DRAM** 11/2, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+  
**Snail Mail, Joy Again** 4/14/2022, 7:30 PM, Riviera Theatre **U**  
**Spag Heddy, Houseloadz, Pierce, Viperactive** 11/11, 9 PM, House of Blues, 17+  
**Stars of the Sixties featuring Herman's Hermits with Peter Noone** 10/22, 7:30 PM, Rialto Square Theatre, Joliet **U**  
**Starset, World Alive, All Good Things** 12/15, 6 PM, House of Blues **U**  
**Theory of a Deadman, 10 Years** 11/28, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+  
**Tink, Ann Marie, Sonta, BJRNCK, Candace Price, Feather** 10/23, 8 PM, Chicago Theatre **U**  
**Travis** 4/16/2022, 7:30 PM, Park West, 18+  
**Wavves, Harmless** 10/31, 8 PM, Subterranean, 17+  
**Faye Webster, Kate Bollinger** 2/22/2022, 8 PM, Metro, 18+  
**Yasmin Williams, Eli Winter** 10/24, 7 PM, SPACE, Evanston **U**  
**Brian Wilson, Al Jardine, Blondie Chaplin** 10/23, 7:30 PM, Genesee Theatre, Waukegan **U**  
**Wombo, Packs, Smut** 10/21, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle  
**Yonder Mountain String Band** 10/22, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston **U**  
**Yumi Zouma** 4/20/2022, 8:30 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+  
**Zion & Lennox** 11/6, 8 PM, Rosemont Theatre, Rosemont **U**

## UPDATED

**Altan** 10/30/2022, 7 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, rescheduled **U**  
**Madison Beer, Maggie Lindemann, Audriix** 11/12, 7:30 PM, House of Blues, lineup updated **U**  
**Clever** 10/31, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge, postponed **U**  
**Crumb, Duendita** 11/3, 9 PM, Metro, opener added, 18+  
**Dayglow, courtship.** 10/28, 7 PM, House of Blues, opener added **U**  
**Dan Deacon, Alex Silva, Patrick McMinn** 11/13, 7:30 PM, Metro, lineup updated **U**  
**Gorgon City, John Summit, PAX** 10/29, 10 PM, Radius Chicago, lineup updated, 18+  
**Joy Formidable, Cuffed Up** 12/9, 8:30 PM, Lincoln Hall, postponed, 18+  
**Lemonheads, Heyrocco** 11/11, 8 PM, Thalia Hall, lineup updated, 17+  
**Magnetic Fields, Christian Lee Hutson** 11/16-11/19, 8 PM, City Winery, opener added **U**

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**Justin Martin, Colette, DJ Heather** 11/26, 10 PM, Concord Music Hall, lineup updated, 18+  
**Mating Ritual, Low Hum** 10/29, 10 PM, Empty Bottle, opener added  
**Midland, Hailey Whitters, Aaron Raitiere** 10/30, 7:15 PM, Aragon Ballroom, lineup updated **U**  
**Planet Booty, Rich Aucoin, Titty City** 11/4, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, lineup updated, 17+  
**San Fermin, Pearla** 11/11, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, opener added **U**  
**Noel Schajris** 11/8, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge, canceled, 17+  
**Shannon & the Clams, Ohmme, Andrew Sa** 10/26, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, opener added, 17+  
**Supersuckers, Rod Gator, Fastplants, Evictions** 10/27, 9 PM, Reggies Music Joint, lineup updated  
**Turkuaz** 12/18, 9 PM, Park West, canceled, 18+  
**Susan Werner, Crys Matthews** 10/22, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, opener added **U**

## UPCOMING

**Alex G, Exum** 11/20, 8 PM, Metro, 18+  
**Peter Asher** 10/23, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music **U**  
**Benny the Butcher** 10/29, 7 PM, Patio Theater, 18+  
**Boombox Cartel** 11/19, 8:30 PM, House of Blues, 17+  
**Cactus featuring Carmine Appice** 11/6, 8 PM, Banana's Comedy Shack at Reggies  
**Chase Atlantic** 11/10, 6:30 PM, Riviera Theatre **U**  
**Delta Rae, Frances Cone** 11/30, 7 PM, Thalia Hall **U**  
**Dream Theater, Arch Echo** 11/11, 7:30 PM, Chicago Theatre **U**  
**Ekali** 10/23, 9 PM, Concord Music Hall, 18+  
**Elvis Costello & the Imposters** 11/3, 7:30 PM, Chicago Theatre **U**  
**IDK** 11/11, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge **U**  
**Juice, Prxzm, Mild West** 10/23, 8 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+  
**Macseal** 11/14, 7 PM, Cobra Lounge **U**  
**Peekaboo** 11/12, 8:30 PM, Riviera Theatre, 18+ **U**



## GOSSIP WOLF

A furry ear to the ground of the local music scene

IN SEPTEMBER, **Experimental Sound Studio** opened a retrospective exhibit by Chicago woodwind player and multi-disciplinary artist **Douglas R. Ewart** in its **Audible Gallery** at 5925 N. Ravenswood. His paintings, collages, sculptures, masks, musical instruments, and more will be on view via small-group appointment until Sunday, December 12. On Saturday, October 16, at 7 PM, Ewart's trio **Sonic Bamboo Rhizomes** (with ESS cofounder **Lou Mallozzi** and Chicago Modern Orchestra Project founding director **Renée Baker**) present a performance called **Water Wise Bamboo Free** at **High Concept Labs** at 2233 S. Throop. Ewart is a member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, and he's dedicated this set to AACM elders **Lester Helmar Lashley, Wallace McMillan** (aka LaRoy Roosevelt McMillan), and **Reginald "Reggie" Willis**. Proof of vaccination or a negative test within 72 hours is required, and reservations via the ESS event page are recommended.

Brothers **Jake** and **Paul Stolz** both play in **Varsity** and **Pool Holograph**, which was already enough to make them Gossip Wolf faves—but their indie-pop duo, **Discus**, bears watching too. Last week, Discus dropped the single "It Was Designed to Be Like This" b/w "Vasulka Returns," whose spacey ambience recalls UK post-punks the Cleaners From Venus. In lieu of vinyl, Discus is taking preorders via Jake's label **Sunroom** for a VHS version, which features videos for both tracks and a long-form video feedback experiment.

On Friday, Chicago rapper **Don't Be Kendall** dropped the vigorous full-length **#DBKSZN**, which establishes him as an MC to know. On "Dream," his voice slaloms across a delirious sample of "All I Have to Do Is Dream" that's sliced by busy hi-hats, and with each second he seems to inflate the song further with joy. If that doesn't hook you, maybe his reference to Village Discount Outlet on "Masterclass" will. —**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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## MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

# A deadly drone program lifted by lies

A wrongly targeted Afghan aid worker and his family are among the latest casualties.

By **LEONARD C. GOODMAN**

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

On August 29, in the final days of our 20-year occupation of Afghanistan, the United States launched a drone strike, firing a 20-pound Hellfire missile at an aid worker named Zemari Ahmadi as he parked his car outside his home in a residential neighborhood of Kabul. The lethal strike killed Ahmadi and nine members of his family, including seven children, five of whom were younger than ten. The children had come outside to meet Ahmadi as he returned home from his job at an American NGO where he distributed food to Afghans displaced by the war. He and his family had applied for refugee resettlement in the United States.

When a surviving member of Ahmadi's family complained publicly about the errant strike that slaughtered so many members of his family, the Pentagon did what it has been doing for 20 years in Afghanistan. It lied.

According to the *New York Times*, the Pentagon claimed that Ahmadi was a facilitator for the Islamic State, and that his car was packed with explosives, posing an imminent threat to U.S. troops guarding the evacuation at the Kabul airport. General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., commander of the U.S. Central Command, said the drone strike dealt ISIS Khorasan a crushing blow. General Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called it a "righteous strike."

When it was confirmed that children as young as two had died in the strike, the Pentagon suggested that any civilian deaths resulted from the detonation of explosives inside the vehicle that was targeted. The military produced an assessment that the occupants of the vehicle were wearing suicide vests and that the car itself was packed with explosives.

Most of our drone strikes take place in remote areas and no follow-up investigation

is ever conducted. However, the slaughter of Ahmadi's family took place two miles from the Kabul airport, at which American reporters were stationed covering the chaotic evacuation of U.S. troops and allies. In the days following the deadly drone strike, reporters from the *New York Times* conducted a thorough investigation, visiting Ahmadi's home and place of work, viewing video footage from security cameras, and consulting with weapons experts.

This investigation quickly confirmed that every official statement of the Pentagon was false. Ahmadi did not visit an Islamic State safe house on the day of his death; he visited his office. His car was not loaded with explosives; it was loaded with water canisters he was bringing home to his family because there was a water shortage in his neighborhood.

After the publication of the *New York Times* investigation, the Pentagon conceded that it had made a tragic, but "honest" mistake when it assassinated Ahmadi and his family by drone. No one has been held accountable for the deadly mistake.

Targeted drone killing is an innovation of the war on terror. It facilitates continuous war by making it appear less costly and more humane. Indeed, President Biden has already announced that the U.S. will continue launching drone strikes from afar after its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Similar language was used when Biden announced an end to American support "for offensive operations in the war in Yemen," while reserving the right to continue killing Yemenis if it believes they are linked to ISIS or Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula.

And of course don't expect any peace dividend from the end of the Afghan war. Last month, the House approved, in bipartisan fashion, \$778 billion in military spending for 2022, a \$37 billion increase over our 2021 military budget. More than half the funds we've sent to the Pentagon since 9/11—or about

\$8 trillion—has ended up in the pockets of private corporations such as Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Dynamics, Raytheon, and Northrop Grumman. These companies then use some of those taxpayer dollars to lobby Congress and the president to keep the wars going and the money flowing into their pockets.

President Eisenhower warned of the danger that a profit-seeking "military-industrial complex" will produce a state where wars are not fought with an intention of winning them but to ensure that they never end. The author George Orwell articulated these dangers in his classic novel *1984* (published in 1949) wherein he described continuous war as an opaque, low-intensity conflict whose primary purpose was to siphon off resources and perpetuate itself.

Begun under President George W. Bush, the drone program was fully embraced and escalated under the presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. President Obama assured Americans that our drones are so "exceptionally surgical and precise," "narrowly target[ed] . . . against those who want to kill us" while not putting "innocent men, women and children in danger."

The claim that drones are humane and effective has always been a lie. But by classifying the program as top secret and by aggressively prosecuting whistleblowers, the U.S. has been able to hide the truth about drones from most Americans. Ironically, of course, the people targeted by our drones know the truth about who is being killed. Thus the classification of all information about drones does nothing to protect national security; rather it protects government officials from any accountability.

I have asked several members of the U.S. Senate about the drone program and have never received a straight answer. In the fall of 2009, I attended a fundraiser for Senator Chuck Schumer at a Chicago law firm. The United States had just suffered one of its

deadliest months in Afghanistan in which more than 50 Americans were killed. Schumer assured the group that Obama was turning things around with his unmanned killer drone program. I asked Schumer about civilian deaths and whether the CIA (which then ran the drone program) had ever studied whether drones killed more terrorists than they created. The senator said he was pretty sure the CIA did reach such a conclusion.

In fact, as WikiLeaks later revealed, the CIA had conducted such a study in July 2009. But that study, called "CIA Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," reached the opposite conclusion: that the clandestine drone and assassination program was likely to produce counterproductive outcomes, including strengthening the very "extremist groups" it was allegedly designed to destroy, particularly if "non-combatants are killed in the attacks." This report was classified as "secret," meaning it could be read by Senator Schumer, but not by you or me, until 2014, when WikiLeaks released it to the public.

Others have come forward to expose the official lies told about our drone program. In 2014, a former signals intelligence analyst in the U.S. Air Force named Daniel Hale leaked internal documents exposing how, in one five-month period in Afghanistan, 90 percent of the people killed by our drones were not the intended target. Hale also disclosed how children in areas targeted by our drones cannot go out and play on clear days because that is when the drones fly. Hale said that drone operators reported having to kill a part of their conscience to keep doing their job. Hale was prosecuted under the Espionage Act for leaking these documents and has been sentenced to 45 months in prison.

The investigation by the *New York Times* into the drone assassination of Mr. Ahmadi and his family is an important step in bringing some sunlight into the clandestine world of drone warfare. Sadly, most victims of our drones still remain anonymous as the strikes take place in remote areas of faraway countries such as Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. Much of the work to reveal the truth about drones still falls on independent investigative journalists and whistleblowers like Mr. Hale. They are our best hope to begin holding those responsible accountable and bringing an end to this dangerous lie. 

 @GoodmanLen



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**SUN 10/17** LEGION OF DOOM  
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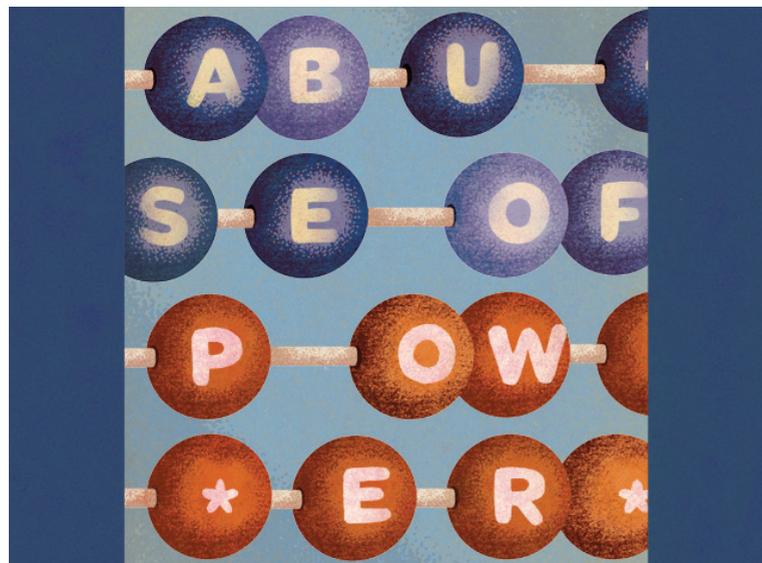
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## SAVAGE LOVE

### Minding the age gap

Just because you drove to another state to hook up with a teenager doesn't mean you weren't the victim of sexual assault.

By **DAN SAVAGE**



**Q:** Thirty-year-old trans woman here, Dan, and I have a question about what is surely one of your favorite subjects: the “age gap discourse.”

About four years ago, I had a sexual experience that I go back and forth on whether to label as sexual assault. When I was 26 years old, I met a 19-year-old on a dating site and drove to a neighboring state to hook up with them. I'll spare you the details, but when we

started doing things we had mutually agreed upon, one of them didn't feel right in the moment, so I withdrew my consent. They respected my boundary for about 15 minutes, then tried it again. I said no again, they refrained for another 15 minutes, then tried it again. The cycle continued until I just got worn down. The night ended with me trying to fall asleep so I at least wouldn't be conscious for what they were going to do. It didn't work.

I'm friends with a lot of social-justice-focused millennials, and as such, discourse about age gaps in romantic and sexual relationships occasionally appear on my social media. The consensus, as I understand it, seems to be that there is a vast maturity gap between someone who is 19 and someone who is 26; therefore, someone in their mid-20s has an affirmative duty to make sure nothing sexual happens with someone who is 19. It is also

suggested that someone like me is a creep and a predator for even thinking about hooking up with a 19-year-old. It's hard to not apply my own experience to the discourse, and boy, is it a mind fuck. Hearing people go on about how vulnerable teenagers are or how I occupied a position of power not only dredges up painful memories, but also makes me feel like a creep.

Did I do something wrong? I'm leaning towards no. I didn't have any institutional power over the other person, it wasn't an ongoing relationship, nor is it a pattern of behavior. (Like hell am I going to trust a 19-year-old again.) I also tried to follow your campsite rule. Instead of ghosting them, I sent them a message explaining why I wasn't going to play with them again—the boundary violations—in the hope that they would do better in the future. I'm about 80 percent sure I have nothing to feel guilty about, but that other 20 percent just won't shut up. Was I the bad guy here? —**AM GETTING EXASPERATED**

**A:** “I feel for this woman and, it should go without saying,

JOE NEWTON

she shouldn't feel guilty about having been sexually assaulted,” said James Greig, a London-based writer. “And to my mind, this incident shows that things are often more complex than the online ‘age gap discourse’ acknowledges.”

Greig has written about the online age gap discourse for the *Guardian*, AGE, and while he feels the conversation is motivated by legitimate concerns about unequal power dynamics and their potential for abuse and exploitation, he worries the black-and-white nature of the age gap discourse can lull people into a false sense of security. “People imagine that abuse is less likely to occur in relationships where both parties are the same age,” said Greig, “and in my experience, that's not always the case.” Additionally, condemnations of relationships and/or hookups with significant age gaps—the kind of puritanical “discourse” that has left you feeling so isolated—often fails to acknowledge, much less grapple with factors besides age that can make a person vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

“Being a trans woman in itself can make you more vulnerable,” said Greig. “But it could be just about anything: wealth, status, even just disposition or temperament—some people are more dominating or cruel than others.”

And some people don't understand that only yes means yes, that no absolutely means no, and that withdrawal of consent doesn't mean, “Ask me again in five minutes.”

Sometimes a person guilty of the kind of consent/boundary/physical violation you endured isn't acting maliciously and is capable of learning from their mistakes—here's hoping that message you sent that 19-year-old had an impact—but some people know what they're doing when they pressure a person to engage in (or submit to) unwanted sexual acts and don't care. Those people can be 19 and those people can be 99, AGE, and their victims can be younger or older. And if their last name is Trump, those people can be POTUS.

“Life is too complicated for one-size-fits-all prescriptions like ‘age gap relationships are bad’ to be of much use,” said Greig, “and that means we have to take these things on a case-by-case basis.”

And in your case, AGE, neither of us think you were the bad guy.

All that said, AGE, driving to a neighboring state to hook up with a teenager—yeah, the optics aren't good, and a lot of people aren't gonna be able to see past them. But just because some very online people (and some very offline people) will look at your respective ages at the time, do the math, and label you a predator, AGE, you aren't obligated to slap that label on yourself. You were consenting adults until you withdrew your consent, at which point you were the victim of a sexual assault. You may have to be selective with who you confide in about this, AGE, but you don't have to shame yourself. You lived, you learned, you've tried to do better. Here's hoping the other person—now in their 20s themselves—learned something too and has also tried to do better. **✍**

Send letters to mail@[savagelove.net](mailto:savagelove.net). Download the *Savage Lovecast* at [savagelovecast.com](http://savagelovecast.com). [@fakedansavage](https://twitter.com/fakedansavage)

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10.18	<b>SOPHIE B. HAWKINS</b>	11.1	<b>JOHNNY V'S WILDFLOWERS</b> TOM PETTY TRIBUTE
10.21-22	<b>LYFE JENNINGS</b>	11.2	<b>SHAWN MULLINS</b>
10.23	<b>ABBEY ROAD:</b> ALL-STAR TRIBUTE TO THE BEATLES	11.3	<b>PAT MCGEE BAND</b>

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11.7	<b>DAMIEN ESCOBAR:</b> BREAKTHROUGH	11.23-24	<b>BRIAN MCKNIGHT</b>	12.3	<b>DEVOTCHKA WITH</b> MILQUETOAST & CO
11.10	<b>DENNIS QU Aid</b>	11.26-28	<b>BODEANS</b>	12.5	<b>A MERRY AFTERNOON WITH</b> DAN & MEGAN RODRIGUEZ
11.14	<b>DARRELL SCOTT</b>	11.30	<b>CLARE BOWEN &amp; BRANDON</b> ROBERT YOUNG	12.5	<b>JACOB WHITESIDES</b>
11.15	<b>AUGUSTANA</b> WITH JOHN-ROBERT				

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**iManage LLC seeks in Chicago, IL: Sr Manager Data Science** with Bachelor's degree in Comp Sci or Electrical & Comp Eng'g, plus 6 yrs post-bacc exp as Data Scientist or sub sim pos. Alternatively, must have PhD in Comp Sci or Electrical & Comp Eng'g plus 1 yr post-bacc exp as Data Scientist or sub sim pos. Send resume to Peopleops@imanager.com (Ref. no. L4969).

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**iManage LLC seeks in Chicago, IL: Technical Director** w/ BS or for equiv in Comp Eng'g or Telecommunications Eng'g, plus 5 yrs exp in job offered or sub sim pos. 5% US and int'l travel per yr required. All costs paid by employer. Send resume to Peopleops@imanager.com (Ref. no. L9663).

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**iManage LLC seeks in Chicago, IL: Senior Software Engineer** with BS in Comp Sci or Software Eng'g, plus 3 yrs exp as Software Engineer or sub sim pos. Alternatively, must have MS in Comp Sci or Software Eng'g, plus 1 yr post-bacc exp as Software Engineer or sub sim pos. Send resume to Peopleops@imanager.com (Ref. no. L6948).

**iManage LLC seeks in Chicago, IL: Senior Software Engineer in Test** w/ Bachelor's in Comp Sci, Info Tech & Mgmt, or Electrical Eng'g, plus 18 mos exp as Software Engineer in Test or sub sim pos. Send resume to Peopleops@imanager.com (Ref. no. L2823).

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**ABC Supply Corporation Inc. in Chicago, IL seeks Full Stack Software Engineer** to design, develop, and implement solutions. Reqs MS +2 yrs exp or BS +5 yrs exp. To apply mail resume to Jennie Lindeman, HR Generalist; Ref: Job Title. 1 ABC Parkway, Beloit, WI 53511.

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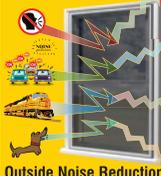


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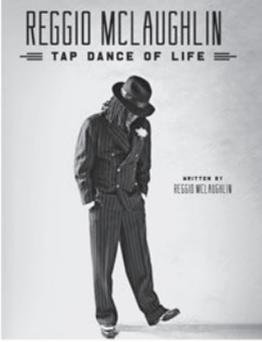
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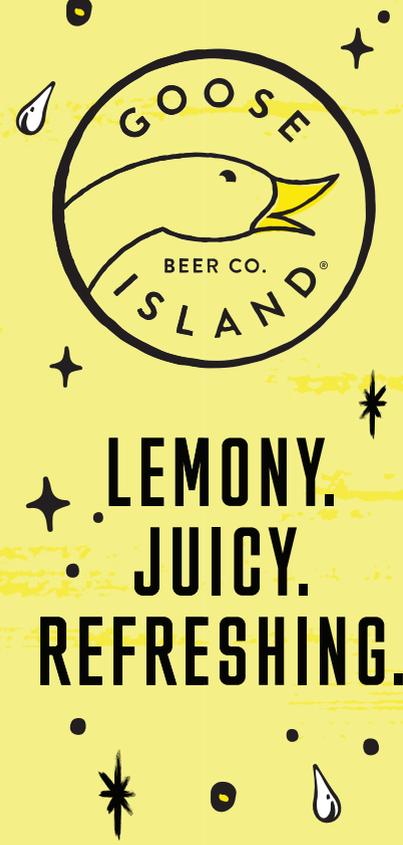


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