THE READER used to be great.

—Karen Hawkins, Page 22
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**Saturday, Nov 6**
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City Life

When I walk outside and I’m wearing something pink I feel very girly, which I really like,” says Cheyenne Williams, 19, an early childhood education student at DePaul. “Cutesy and pink, that’s my motto,” she says, while sporting an impeccable Lolita-like ensemble.

“I always put my outfit together the night before, no matter where I’m going. I like to look coordinated and like I tried to look nice. I’ve been brought up to be clean and look kempt, because my image can already be stereotyped that I’m not,” says the Chicagoan, who was born and raised in the city.

When asked about her style, Williams says it’s pretty simple: pink, black, or both—as she displayed the day I snapped her photo.

Williams is inspired by Hello Kitty and says fashion lets her express herself and tell others who she is. As for her best fashion tip? “Always wear a little pink,” she suggests.
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Hav ing watched almost three excruciating hours of Mayor Rahm’s testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations about whether he should be confirmed as ambassador to Japan, I have concluded that . . .

I deserve a raise!

Seriously, folks, they don’t pay enough to sit through such dreck. Last week’s Senate hearing was a cover-up of a cover-up in which Mayor Rahm—abetted by Dems and Republicans—got away with murder. Metaphorically speaking.

Watching Rahm testify was like watching a really bad actor pretend he was Abraham Lincoln, up late at night with insomnia, as he wrestled with agonizing demons. As opposed to a political schemer trying to save his hide.

The real howler came when Mayor Rahm explained why he had fought so hard against releasing the police video of Jason Van Dyke shooting Laquan McDonald 16 times. “The last person you want to make a unilateral decision about the release of the video while [authorities] are investigating, is a politician. It should be made by professionals. The moment a politician unilaterally makes a decision in the middle of an investigation, you’ve politicized that investigation.”

C’mon, Chicago—if there’s one thing about Mayor Rahm we can all agree on, it’s this . . .

He’s a political creature whose every maneuver is a political move intended to advance his political career. So the notion that he concealed the video because he didn’t want to politicize the investigation is preposterous.

In fact, his great contribution to political discourse—the quote for which he will always be remembered—is the utterly cynical one he came up with about not letting “a serious crisis go to waste. And what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things that you think you could not do before.”

You knew this when you elected him, people. In fact, that’s precisely why many of you voted for him.

As such we all know that Rahm concealed that tape of Jason Van Dyke shooting Laquan McDonald for the most political of reasons—he thought its release would keep him from winning reelection. One more time . . .

Van Dyke shot McDonald on October 20, 2014. The first round of the mayoral election was in February 2015.

Originally, the official police version was that the cops had to shoot McDonald as he was lunging at them with a knife.

But the video showed he wasn’t lunging. It showed that he was pretty much surrounded by police. And that Van Dyke drove up to the scene—after the other police had done the difficult work of surrounding McDonald—and fired away.

The video exposed the original police version as a lie. But if Mayor Rahm released the video and demanded that Van Dyke be prosecuted, the cops would be mad at him. And if he released the video and did nothing about it, presumably Black voters (and a handful of white lefties) would be mad at him.

One way or another, someone would be upset. Hence, he buried the video.

We might not have known the video existed if not for articles by Jamie Kalven, an investigative journalist.

And Kalven might not have known about the video had an unnamed whistleblower not told him about it.

And we still might not have seen the video had Brandon Smith, another freelance journalist, not sued to force the city to release it.

And Smith might not have won his case had Matthew Topic, his attorney, not been so good at beating the city in Freedom of Information Act cases.

And Topic might not have been so good at FOIA cases had the city (especially under Mayor Rahm) not been so resistant to release stuff they never should have concealed in the first place.

And even with all that, the video would not have been released had Cook County judge Franklin Valderrama not ruled in Smith’s favor.

Mayor Rahm was fighting to keep it a secret on the grounds that its release would impede an ongoing police investigation.

But Valderrama ruled that there was no ongoing investigation into the shooting that he could see. Certainly not by the police department. So there was no reason to keep the tape a secret.

On November 24, 2015—over a year after McDonald was shot—Mayor Rahm finally released the video he’d fought so hard to conceal. And state’s attorney Anita Alvarez filed murder charges against Van Dyke, as protesters took to the streets.

Funny how criminal justice in Chicago can really speed up when necessary. Let me now quote Jamie Kalven from an article he wrote for Slate in February of 2015.

“This is a familiar Chicago story: A black American is shot by a Chicago police officer. A police source says the shooting was justified. [The city] announces it is investigating. Then silence. After a year or two, [the city] issues a report confirming that the shooting was indeed justified.”

I was hoping the U.S. Senate would hold a real hearing on the matter. Bring on Jamie Kalven, Brandon Smith, and maybe even Garry “Big Mac” McCarthy, the former police chief Rahm threw under the bus in his attempt to blame the cover-up on someone other than himself. But . . .

Republican senators didn’t press for a tough investigation because, at the moment, their view is police never do anything wrong. Unless officers are trying to keep MAGA insurrectionists from storming the capital and lynching Mike Pence and Nancy Pelosi. Then it’s . . . police brutality!

And Dems didn’t press the issue because they sort of want the whole police accountability thing to go away—at least until after next year’s midterm elections.

And Mayor Rahm did his bad-acting rendition of a great leader struggling with agonizing decisions as he repeated his falsehood about not releasing the video so as not to impede a criminal investigation that didn’t actually exist. As Judge Valderrama ruled six years ago.

And the senators fell for it. Senator Tim Kaine—Democrat from Virginia—went so far as to feel sorry for Rahm, saying, “Everyday in cities, beautiful things happen and tragic things happen.”

As though Rahm had nothing to do with this tragedy.

It looks like the Senate will confirm Emanuel’s appointment as ambassador, thus setting a new standard for criminal justice in Chicago. Burying evidence of murder is legal—at least for Mayor Rahm.

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The Reader’s first food critic was a diabetic undergrad with an appetite for the undiscovered

Most remember Sally Banes for her prodigious dance writing, but she was the paper’s prodigious chowhound first.

By Mike Sula

The Reader has covered food and restaurants in Chicago throughout its half-century existence, though not nearly as consistently or comprehensively as music, film, drama, or most of the other arts—certainly not every week when I came on as a starving editorial assistant way back in ’95. Back then there was a very occasional visual feature by Leah Eskin called The Purloined Menu where she reviewed restaurants by annotation. And before that, freelancers like Jody Stern and Don Rose (better known as a political wonk) contributed infrequent reviews to the calendar pages under the rubric Restaurant Tours. And in the 1970s an annual Cheap Eats guide collected listings of short capsule reviews. It wasn’t until 1999 when we launched the online Reader Restaurant Finder, a massive database of capsules, that we started publishing food writing weekly in the form of longer reviews and narratives.

And I get it. In the 70s and 80s, food and restaurants in general were nothing like the cultural phenomena they are today. I wasn’t around back then but I gather that in Chicago the food scene was pretty grim.

Or was it? In 1971, Louis Szathmary’s The Bakery had a national reputation for fine dining. The Pump Room was still drawing celebrities like flies on a baked Alaska. And two guys named Rich Melman and Jerry Orzoff opened a place called R.J. Grunts, the first property in what would become the Lettuce Entertain You empire.

It wasn’t exactly the steak-and-potatoes town it was derided for, something the Reader got from day one. On the bottom of page six of the inaugural issue on October 1, 1971, the paper ran a column called Eats written by a University of Chicago undergrad named Sally Banes who, unbeknownst to her readers, happened to be a lifelong diabetic.

In that first review Banes covered a Lakeview Japanese restaurant called Naniwa, framing the piece with a wistful food memory of her first visit as a demure young woman quietly enjoying her teriyaki—“rich and orange-brown on its pale green lettuce bed”—in the company of more talkative male friends. In this milieu she ticks off vivid descriptions of the décor, the service, the flavors, and textures, and keeps an eye out for the budget-conscious reader, concluding with a kicker about the price of female empowerment:

“Since that wonderful, innocent feast I’ve chosen to trade the childlike accoutrements of ladyhood for the rewards and responsibilities of equality in social situations. And I sometimes worry that while I’m holding up my end of a conversation my friends are eating up all the teriyaki.”

It was the times, man. The kid was with it.

When Sally Banes died from ovarian cancer in June of 2020 at the age of 69 she was mourned and memorialized all over the world. But it wasn’t for her food writing. Banes, of course, was the renowned dance historian and critic, the author of eight scholarly books who left food writing and Chicago behind some 45 years earlier.

“She was a renaissance person,” says Joy Robinson-Lynch, her best friend at the time, who was a regular member of her restaurant reviewing cohort. “She had a sophistication
about food not common in college students. She liked to eat but she was also a student on a budget.” According to Robinson-Lynch, until she arrived in Chicago, Banes’s diet and insulin injections were carefully regimented by her parents. Like most college freshmen she was suddenly free to indulge in forbidden appetites. “Once she wasn’t under her parents’ thumb she just ate everything,” says Robinson-Lynch.

Banes wrote some 20 Eats columns between that first Reader issue and mid-1973, scouring the city for undersung spots, off the beaten path. Robinson-Lynch recalls she got the gig while working at Plants Alive, the houseplant shop where Reader owner Bob Roth was also employed. Neither remembers who pitched who, but Robinson-Lynch recalls Banes’s first draft wasn’t up to snuff, and Roth sent her back to the woodshed with a directive to study critic Mimi Sheraton, who was then reviewing restaurants for the Village Voice. “She got it right away,” says Robinson-Lynch—and Roth accepted her rewrite. “She started writing these really clever, well-written pieces.”

In the midst of Chicago’s supposed culinary desert, Banes uncovered a Serbian night club, a Polish smorgasbord, 24-hour bakeries, and Green Planet, a trendy new vegetarian restaurant. “Finally, at last! We were getting some civilization in Chicago,” she wrote, though she found it much too pricey.

Two of her “longhaired male friends” were given the cold shoulder at the bar at Tufano’s Vernon Park Tap one night, but Banes and Robinson-Lynch were treated with chivalrous respect at the now-91-year-old red sauce joint. (Robinson-Lynch, a New Jersey native, recalls she broke the ice by loudly dropping the names of a few infamous East Coast mobsters.)

One of those longhaired male friends was Bob James, Banes’s boyfriend at the time, whose first name appears in a number of Eats cameos. “I just remember how difficult it was,” he says. “Describing food is very difficult. It was easy to wear out those adjectives.”

But Banes figured out how to bring the buffet to life at Valois: “A study in brown lies before you, starch and meat, siennas, umbers, oranges, pumpkins, yellows, beiges, creams—punctuated only briefly by pale green cole slaw.”

She recounted a steamy seduction by quiche Lorraine at Casa Bonnifeather in Lincoln Park: “The quiche had arrived. She submitted to it, lost herself in its grip, its massiveness and crust. She pulled away, turning to the thin, cool, wet slices of cucumber, but returned, kept returning over and over, to the quiche.”

Her rave of the budget-friendly steakhouse George Diamond’s leads with a vision of the city that summons the ghost of Carl Sandburg: “Sprawling queen of the Midwest, strong, bulky, and unsophisticated, her rolls of fat dressed in gray snow.”

Around the middle of 1973, Banes’s Eats output began to slow down, and in October her credit as contributing editor for food disappeared from the masthead.

None of the friends and colleagues I spoke to can recall exactly why Banes gave up the Eats column, which other writers picked up now and then. But Robinson-Lynch recalls a piece in early ’73 in which she describes a delicious late-night craving for mille feuilles, which worried her friend. “It scared me because this was somebody who shouldn’t be eating sugar.” Banes began to carefully monitor her blood sugar around this time “and that may have helped her move from writing about food to other things.”

In 1974 Banes coauthored Sweet Home Chicago: The Real City Guide, published by Chicago Review Press. It contained eight pages of short restaurant reviews, but as a writer she was moving on toward her life’s work. By then she’d also signed a contract to write what would eventually become her first dance history, 1987’s Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance. Eventually her own performances would be covered at length in the Reader, and in early 1974 her byline reappeared. The first of many dance reviews to come, it was about a performance of Hello Farewell Hello by Daniel Nagrin’s The Workgroup and was headlined, “An Evening of Sexual Angst.”

Meanwhile, the only food-related content in that issue was a half-price brunch coupon for Ratso’s. “At the time, I’d say the dance scene was probably more interesting,” says longtime editor Mike Lenehan. If Banes’s friends and colleagues’ recollections of her stint as the Reader’s first food critic are a little foggy, it’s only because her later work eclipsed it.

Banes is best known for her work as a dance historian and author.
CULTURE

‘The narrative was the key’

The True years (great editors, pt. II)

By Deanna Isaacs

R

erder cofounder and original editor Bob Roth had some radical ideas about editors. He didn’t want them to prescribe what went into the paper, or to solicit it. He wanted the stories to crop up like some natural urban flora and make their way on their own to the Reader office. The editors’ jobs would be to wait for the crop to arrive and publish the very best of it.

And he didn’t want those editors to fuck up the writer’s voice with some predetermined Reader “style.” His preference was for hands-off editing at every level, although the stories also had to be great reads, with every fact correct and flawless copy. No mistakes.

This made the Reader a prime destination for writers, and, as the paper grew, a gut buster for editors.

“It’s not about you, it’s about them,” is the main thing my first Reader editor, Patrick Clinton, says he learned from Roth.

Roth was pursuing excellence before excellence became a corporate cliché. But as the paper grew from eight pages in its launch year to 160 pages and more in the 1990s, his concept that stories should rise up spontaneously from the freelancing populace—without beats, assignments, leads, guidance, or any kind of plan—became harder to adhere to.

This year’s 50th anniversary gave me an excuse to check in with the editors who ran the paper during most of those 1990s juggernaut years: Alison True, who joined the Reader in 1984 and was editor from ’94 to 2010, and Patrick Arden, managing editor from ’95 to 2002. Both started as assistants and worked their way up.

A little digression here, for a story Arden tells about his first day at the Reader, where he arrived as a part-time proofreader in 1990. He’d had a previous job in the same neighborhood, at a financial news service. “Every day when I’d leave [that office] I’d go to the el station at Grand and State,” Arden says, where he would regularly see a man selling used paperback books—potboilers that he transported in a suitcase, lined up against the wall, and offered for about $1 each, or whatever price could be negotiated.

Reader proofreaders, who provided a third and fourth round of editorial scrutiny, were housed above the main editorial offices, on the fourth floor—their cubicles reachable by a circular metal back staircase. Arden recalled in an e-mail that as he emerged from that stairwell for the first time, looking to meet his new coworkers, the first thing he saw was the bookseller, “in a cubicle with his inventory of paperbacks stacked up high and a sleeping bag tucked under the desk.” He knew then that the Reader “wasn’t a typical business and didn’t operate like one. If people did their jobs well, they were given tremendous, almost absolute freedom.”

The owners “trusted that if you were working sincerely, the journalism would be good, and if the journalism was good, the business would thrive. That was unique.”

As the paper grew, however, the news hole would expand. Both True and Arden say it was nearly impossible to run this larger publication by simply trusting that terrific stories would come in over the transom every week. Arden remembers that in the heat wave of 1995, with True on maternity leave, he was “sitting under a dry [cover story] faucet, absolutely parched and waiting for a drop that never came.”

To gain control over what she calls a “catch as catch can” situation (“a way of operating that no one in magazine publishing would believe”), and enabled by the paper’s increased revenue, True added columnists, regular features, and staff writers, some of whom worked on long projects and published infrequently. Freelancers remained critical, and the paper’s relationship with them became more collaborative and intentional.

The “no assignments” policy—by then mostly a myth—didn’t officially change, but “we did make some assignments,” True says, “and even paid the occasional kill fee.”

True says it “meant a lot” to her to publish John Conroy’s police torture stories (see Michael Miner’s article beginning on page 20), but “the focus on the Reader’s criminal justice reporting may obscure the paper’s larger, more varied legacy. Anything could be a Reader story if it was well-written and interesting; the narrative was the key.”

“And there were thousands of people who made the Reader what it was but are not often mentioned,” she says. Mary Jo Madden, the longtime operations head; art director Sheila Sachs; Kiki Yablon, the paper’s first music editor and later managing editor; editors and writers Martha Bayne and Kitry Krause; writers like Harold Henderson, Jeff Felshman, Bill Wyman, Toni Schlesinger, Cate Plys, Mick Dumke, and Cliff Doerksen (recruited by True after he wrote a cranky letter to the editor); critics who were also editors, like Laura Molzahn, J.R. Jones, Albert Williams, and Tony Adler; many other staff members, and all the freelance writers, photographers, and illustrators.

After the paper was sold in 2007, True’s budget was slashed and she had to make the “wrenching decision” to let staff writers go. “That was probably a point where I could have fallen on my sword and left,” says True. Instead, “I did the best I could under the circumstances to try to make sure the Reader kept being the Reader. One way to do that was to continue using freelancers, who had been filling most of the paper every week.”

The writers who were cut included the paper’s vaunted investigative core: Steve Bogira, Tori Marlan, and Conroy.

True was axed herself in 2010, when the paper had fallen into the hands of a hedge fund. She’s now a freelance writer and editor. Arden, based in New York, is working on a book.

And the Reader—which made it possible for all those editors and writers to capture a half-century of the life of the city and put it on paper—enters a very different era.
For just over 100 years, there was the smell. Writer Upton Sinclair called it "an elemental odor, raw and crude," in *The Jungle*, his 1906 novel revealing the conditions of Chicago’s Union Stock Yards. “It was rich, almost rancid, sensual, and strong,” he wrote. “There were some who drank it in as if it were an intoxicant; there were others who put their handkerchiefs to their faces.”

The Union Stock Yards anchored Chicago’s contribution to America’s food trade from 1865 until their closing in August of 1971. According to the University of Chicago Press’s *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, more meat was processed in Chicago in the early part of the 20th century than in any other place in the world. The streets surrounding the stock yards proper (Halsted, 47th, Ashland) swarmed with ranchers bringing cattle and hogs to market. The surrounding neighborhood occasionally received surprise visits from livestock on the run. And the stench of meat permeated for blocks around.

Despite the stranglehold that the Union Stock Yards had on early industrial Chicago, the business faded along with the coming of the postindustrial age: advances in transportation and distribution made it not as necessary for Chicago to be the hog butcher for the world, or even just for the state of Illinois. And by 1971, the yards were closed with a whimper, the major plants like Swift and Armour being gone already for a few decades.

Later that year, the *Reader* joined the ranks of upstart publications looking to capture the Chicago spirit, which was then midshift into a new cultural revolution: Chicagoans stayed single for longer, more people worked white-collar jobs, conservative social mores were being questioned, and our early readers were part of that great investigation into what Chicago’s new role might be in the grand scheme.

While the cattle are gone, the industrial park still lives on, but the new inhabitants at the Stock Yards Industrial Park now include a produce distributor that built its building with wind turbines, and a small-batch beer brewery nestled into one of the old manufacturing buildings, now with a green roof. None of us knows what the next 50 years will bring, but the sweet smell of renewal has visited us in 2021.
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.

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.

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 invests in Washington City Paper and later takes control.

1982

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

1983

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.

1989

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.

1990

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

1994

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

1996


1997

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

1998

The Reader’s Village Voice format changes from Wednesday to Thursday.

1999

Offices move to 11 E. Illinois.

2002

Highest revenue year: $22.6 million.

2003

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

2004

 LA Weekly is named editor.

2006

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

2007

Creative Loafing files for bankruptcy.

2008

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

2009

Editor in chief Alison True is fired.

2010

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.

2011

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.

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.

2013

Offices move to 12 E. Grand. The Reader moves into its first real offices, at 70 W. Hubbard.

2015

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

2018

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.

2019

The Reader publishes 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.

2021

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.
When I moved to Chicagoland in 1988, I quickly realized the Reader was where to look for info on cool concerts and plays, foreign films, and apartments for rent. And wow, the weird comics! ...

@robertloerzel

Happy Birthday, @Chicago_Reader! You are #Reader50 and I am #Marriage20 after meeting my love in the pages of the Reader. Matches way back in the late 1990s, as the kids call it. Being your “Ad of the Week” really paid off!

@MaryTylerMom

Happy birthday, @Chicago_Reader!!! Thank you for being free + still around + always thoughtful. In particular, The Reader is home to two of my most ambitious pieces of investigative reporting, both of which v likely no other publication would have published as they were <3

@yanazure

this is the paper id carry in my backpack or back pocket when i was out & about in the city. the Reader always gave something to read about, something new to explore, a concert to look forward to, a restaurant to try. thank you! hope you're around for 50 more! *Yellow heart*

@alwaysjamming

In the pre-internet days, this publication kept this then 20’ish person connected because I couldn’t afford a TV, lol. I may of only had a studio w/ a murphy bed & a card table to eat on but dammit, I’m goin’ to the Green Mill tonight! Smiling face with open mouth and smiling eyes Thanks for the memories CR! #Reader50

@LipstickTomboy

I don’t even know where to start. For 10 years the best job I ever had, that taught me basically everything about writing & editing. I was telling tales tonight with the @SouthSideWeekly staff & I left the bar feeling old but also hopeful abt the next wave of Chicago journalism.

@marthabayne

Happy 50th y’all! The first cover I ever had as an artist was with the Reader and y’all have always covered music and politics with backbone. Here’s to sticking around a lot longer during a time when we reeeaaallllllllyyyyy need it. Much love @Chicago_Reader

@PsalmOne

One day I was walking on Chicago Avenue carrying my Reader tote and a gal driving by rolled down her window, held up the same tote and yelled “I have that bag too!!”

HBD, @Chicago_Reader. Bringing people together over great journalism and great totes for five decades!

@cmkueppers

You were the first paper I’ve read upon emigrating to US a more than 20 years ago... You’re still my favorite and there is a good reason for it, my dear The Best! Happy 50 “insert emojis”

@Xmagdalena
At the center of my self is a wilderness.
At the center of my wilderness is the self

I spawned from. Hear me out:
there was never a beginning or end –
only resentment, which rooted, curdled so far
into the earth of me, what else could it do

but blossom an unfathomable
want? Unspool a thousand

symmetries: magnolia’s plume,
flower’s elder, oak’s thick-veined

maul. If you cut me open, you could
know my entire history: how at the heart

of the heart of everything is
a seem: a rupture: how at the center of

every azalea is a seed, carrying another
self, which – presuming we get this far – may

spring so vast it becomes a home
to small-winged wanderers who,

when hearing the hum of their own
echo, may tremble. May sting.

George Abraham is a Palestinian American poet, writer, and engineer from Jacksonville, FL. Their debut poetry collection Birthright (Button Poetry, 2020) won the Arab American Book Award and the Big Other Book Award, and was a Lambda Literary Award finalist. He is a board member for the Radius of Arab American Writers (RAWI), and recipient of fellowships from The Arab American National Museum, The Boston Foundation, and Kundiman. They are currently a Litowitz MFA+MA Candidate in poetry at Northwestern University.

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.
For countless Chicagoans in the last few decades, the classifieds section of the Chicago Reader was life-changing. Especially in the pre-Internet age, it was the place to go for finding a job, finding an apartment, and finding love. The streams of Seeking ads and Missed Connections set the stage for early platforms like Match.com and even the dating apps we use today. There is no shortage of couples nowadays who met on Hinge or Bumble, but a few years ago, it was much more common to meet couples who found each other in the dizzyingly packed print pages of the Reader. I currently manage the recently revived Matches section, and it's not too late to submit an ad and have a love affair of your own. But in the interest of Reader history, I spent the last few months tracking down some of the success stories, so that we can all celebrate the city's best 50-year-old matchmaker.

Sally Gilbertson and Brent Carter

Sally Gilbertson fondly remembers trekking into the city from her hometown of Wheaton to pick up a copy of the Reader whenever she could. After graduating from veterinary school in June 2008, she moved to the Gold Coast and tried her hand at dating in the city. Sally used Match.com and other online services, but her love of the Reader drew her back to the Men Seeking Women section of Matches.

“I was immediately drawn to Brent’s ad!” Sally recalls. “The Reader was just starting an online site, and when you signed up they put your ad in the paper for a week. The fee was, I think, $1 to join the Reader Online Dating Classifieds, and I signed up right away to meet this guy. There was a profile you filled out that gave a snapshot of some likes and dislikes—you got to see these once you signed up for online dating. One question was, ‘If you have a pet, it better not be…’ to which Brent replied, ‘a Republican.’ I thought that was hilarious and was borderline obsessed with meeting him after that.”

The pair had a lengthy first date in March 2010 at the Old Town Ale House, and things only got better from there. They moved in together later that year, bonded by their love for Chicago’s food and music scenes. Despite “unfortunately” moving to Saint Charles in 2012 for a job opportunity, Sally and Brent come back whenever possible, especially to teach their eight-year-old to love the city, too.

March 13, 2020, marked the tenth anniversary of their first date. Excited at the prospect of getting married on a Friday the 13th, they decided to plan a courthouse wedding—it was the very last wedding at the Kane County courthouse before the COVID-19 shutdown.

“Now that we have been vaccinated for COVID, we continue to enjoy the city. We love taking the train into the city for a night out—especially for pork skins at the Publican and then on to the Emporium for pinball. In May we went to a White Sox game on the first full-capacity night!”

Roy Schuster and Mary Chris Jaklevic

On August 19, 1994, Ukrainian Village resident Roy Schuster placed a Matches ad. Just three weeks later, on September 9, Mary Chris Jaklevic of Lakeview, newly transplanted from Florida, placed a Matches ad of her own. Each wrote a snail mail response to the other’s ad, and it felt like there was a little bit of fate at play.

The pair enjoyed a first date at P.S. Bangkok on Clark Street and nine months later were engaged in London. After living together for spells in Edgewater, out to Dallas, and back to Lakeview, they now reside in Oak Park with two kids and two dogs. As the Reader celebrates its 50th anniversary, Roy and Mary Chris celebrate their 25th.
Sheila Quirke and Jeremy Hornik

“On New Year’s Eve, 1995, a guy I was dating invited me to the party he was hosting and I thought I was going as his date. Turns out, he had been dating a few other women, too, and we were all invited! Nope. Wrote the ad soon after,” Sheila Quirke remembers. In her search to find a more committed, monogamous relationship, Sheila turned to the Reader in early 1996. Although her Matches ad—which won Ad of the Week (a regular feature that granted the winner a dozen roses)—generated many responses, she never followed up with any of the men.

That April, a friend invited Sheila to an improv show at Cafe Voltaire on Clark Street (now closed). She remembered that one of the men who responded to her ad had said he did improv at the same theater. (“Could it be the darling, funny boy in the pink pants? COULD IT?”) Sheila was too shy to introduce herself in person, but she went home and immediately dug through her notebook where she had recorded the contact information and details about the men who replied to her ad. Sure enough, it had to be Jeremy Hornik who she’d seen that night. She left him a voicemail to see if there was any chance he remembered her and wanted to meet up.

“He called the next day and left a message asking if I was the blonde in the front row he had been vibing with,” Sheila writes. “I was, in fact, the brunette all the way in the back. HA!”

The pair met for coffee, hit it off, and stayed connected even as Jeremy moved to Amsterdam for six months shortly after. Through consistent e-mails (which they still have printed in a binder) and Sheila’s “awkward, but so lovely” trip to see Jeremy in the Netherlands, they solidified their relationship and moved in together in Ukrainian Village once Jeremy returned to Chicago, and they later settled in West Ridge.

Sheila and Jeremy got married in 2001 and had three kids together, the oldest of which they lost in 2009 from a brain tumor. In 2013, they were looking to adopt, and even got featured in the Reader as “This Week’s Chicagoans.”

B and M

In March 1996, two of B’s friends were trying to convince him to let them place a Matches ad in his name. Frustrated with the dating pool, he begrudgingly agreed, with the caveat that they had to work the word “pterodactyl” into the ad text somehow.

“It was a strange and dorky ad to say the least,” B notes.

However, not only did this keyword make it easier to find the ad amidst the pages and pages of Men Seeking Women ads, but it also worked for B to find love. M was seeing someone else at the time, but they didn’t want to go see Ministry play at the Aragon. She responded to B’s Matches ad, hoping to find a date—and a ride—to the show.

“I tease her that if she hadn’t wanted someone with a car that night, we’d have never met,” B jokes. “Apparently she was a high on NyQuil the night she responded, so that might have had something to do with it.”

But M liked the dorkiness of the Matches ad and the sound of B’s voice on the outgoing phone message, so she gave him a shot.

“After we had dinner and went to the club, she realized she had left the tickets at home and we had to go back to get them. Should have been a warning sign of things to come! . . . Anyway, it’s now, um, 25 years later (?) and we’re still together.”

B and M got married in 2007 and currently live in Portland, Oregon.

Liz Thomson

Minnesota resident Liz Thomson spent nearly 25 years living in Rogers Park, and they were an avid Matches user from 1996 to 2004. As someone who identifies as bi/queer, Liz remembers being disappointed that they had to choose a category within Matches, but they still loved using the Reader to find dates.

“It seemed like a fun and safe way to meet people. I liked that I had control of who I responded to. I always picked up the Reader on Thursdays . . . I figured that if I liked and read the Reader, then maybe I’d find a potential partner or date who also read it. We could always talk about the Reader, it nothing else.”

For nearly all of their Reader dates, Liz took people to the same Vietnamese restaurant in Uptown. (“It was low-key and inexpensive, since I wasn’t always sure if the other person would pay for me, too.”) Eventually, they found someone who shared their love of Chicago’s arts and culture, and “yes . . . he could tell the difference between Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese. It was very important for me to be with a person who understood that all Asian ethnicities were unique and heterogeneous.” The couple were married for nearly ten years before divorcing, but Liz still fondly remembers the small wedding at the former Hot House in the South Loop, surrounded by contemporary art, friends, and family.
Sheri and Josh Flanders

You can read about the Flanders in “We found love in a Matches place,” a short article from 2020. But since Sheri and Josh met through the Reader and today are both freelancers for the paper, they’re part of the family and we couldn’t resist once again writing about this “full-circle Reader romance,” as Josh called it.

Before she placed a Matches ad, Sheri Flanders was Wicker Park resident Sheri Allender. Around the end of 2005, she placed a Matches ad—one that she doesn’t quite remember, except for the fact that she mentioned an Ayn Rand book in her profile. (Unfortunately, this author tried and failed to track it down.) Rand became a topic of conversation on Sheri’s first date with Josh Flanders; the pair met up to see Lynne Jordan and the Shivers, “a legendary Chicago band,” and it was smooth sailing from there. Sheri moved into Josh’s Evanston apartment, and after spending a few years living in Miami, the couple is back and currently calls Rogers Park home.

Kimberly Rachal and David Chase

In early 1994, Lincoln Park resident David Chase put an ad in the Reader classifieds. He was a leasing agent at the time, looking to rent out an art gallery space in River North on a ten-year lease.

Kimberly Rachal, an artist who lived in Edgewater, was seeking more of a temporary art space, one where she could create a two-week show for her art glass—sort of an early version of a pop-up gallery.

She replied to David’s Reader ad and met him for a tour. Kimberly tells me, “I was immediately attracted to him. He was very handsome, very well-dressed.”

David must have felt the spark, too, because he completely disregarded the notion of a ten-year lease and rented to Kimberly. For the two weeks that she worked in the gallery space, she noticed David every time he made his way to and from his upstairs office. “There goes David Chase!” she’d cheekily say to her business partner Nick. She could sense the mutual attraction.

At 5 PM on the last Friday of her exhibit, David walked into the gallery. According to Kimberly, it went a little something like this:

“Watch this . . .” she muttered to Nick, before confidently addressing David. “David Chase! Are you here to take me to dinner?”

David: “I am! Are you ready?”

Kimberly: “I am!” She had no idea that David had spent the entire two weeks working up the nerve to ask her out.

They’ve been together ever since, as life partners and business partners. Kimberly and David got married on October 5, 1996—which means they’re another couple celebrating their silver anniversary this month—at the Church of the Epiphany in West Loop. In 2011, that church closed, and Kimberly and David bought the building in 2017 to convert it into the Epiphany Center for the Arts—a new art and event space complete with etched glass windows made by Kimberly’s company all those years ago.

Laura Molzahn and Eric Futran

By the time Old Town resident Laura Molzahn placed a Matches ad in July 2000, she was already well acquainted with the Reader.

“I’d been working at the Reader as an editor and freelance writer for nearly 15 years, and before that (late 70s, early 80s) as a display ad salesperson for three years,” Laura remembers. “The Reader’s original owners had gone to the same college as my first husband and me; he’d started delivering papers on the Northwestern campus in early 1971. Then I started helping him and we graduated to Lincoln Avenue stores, where we heard ‘Hot off the presses!’ about a jillion times each Friday. We made $8 a week.”

Laura, whose first husband passed in 1997, attributes being 50 and having a daughter as to why she didn’t receive a lot of replies to her Matches ad. “All were by voicemail back then. I only responded to one: Eric’s.”

Eric Futran was a widower himself, living in Roscoe Village with his 11-year-old daughter and ten-year-old son. It turned out that he also had a connection to the early days of the Reader, as a photographer with some award-winning front-page shots. The pair likely even crossed paths at some Reader events before going on their first date on Armitage, at a bar near the Old Town School.

“Eric impressed me for three reasons: One, when I mentioned I was hungry, he immediately ordered an app. Two, he told me he’d taken a second shower that day in honor of meeting me. Three, he didn’t ask any intense personal questions, despite our shared widowhood.”

Merging to become a family of five, Laura and Eric got married in 2002, with plenty of Reader friends in attendance.
In September of 1998, Searah Deysach was a young grad student at SAIC. She lived in Edgewater with her ex and her brother, which provided some fuel for her desire to expand her social circle and find a date. Luckily, her coworkers were prone to examining the Reader Matches and Missed Connections at the office, though few of the ads in the sparse Women Seeking Women category ever stood out to her. Until this one:

Kick-Boxing Babe, SQF, 5’ 4”, 28, tattooed grad-student is sparkingly smart, glitteringly sarcastic, simply fabulous, funny, queer, has good politics, is a touch hard-boiled yet a giver of tender back rubs, an occasional Xenaphile, full time vegetarian. ISO NS lefty queer cutie-pie with a strong personality, 25-30s for articulate romance.

“I liked all the things she mentioned and it felt different than the others I had read,” Searah remembers. “There was nothing about how she looked or how I should look, and I thought for once maybe I would fit the bill. But I was terrified to actually answer it.”

She continues, “Finally, on the last day that her mailbox was open, my best friend/ex/roommate locked me in my room until I had left her a message. I told her that I swore like a sailor and drank a lot and was fat and grew tomatoes in my garden. She called back and I nearly DIED, but we had a long conversation followed by a first date at [vegan restaurant] Amitabul. She drove me home and I gave her some tomatoes from my garden, and she gave me the sweetest little kiss that caused me to drop my keys under her car as I was getting out.”

The original ad—which ended up winning Reader Matches Ad of the Week—was placed by Dawne, a Logan Square resident. After the first date and tomato handoff and perfect kiss, Searah and Dawne continued seeing each other and have now been together for 23 years. They have a kid together and live in Rogers Park.
In January 1990 the Chicago Reader did something unlike itself: It launched a crusade. But though John Conroy’s “House of Screams” was the first of 23 articles he would write on Commander Jon Burge and police torture, at the time he and the Reader would not have guessed there would even be a second. The subject of police torture was so sensational Conroy assumed the dailies would take it on and take it over.

“House of Screams” was Conroy’s meticulous account of the troubles of someone it was just about impossible to care about. Andrew Wilson was arrested in 1982 for the murder of two police officers who’d pulled his car over. Absurdly, Wilson emerged as victim number three. He insisted that after his arrest he’d been brutalized at Area 2 police headquarters, electroshock being the most sinister of the techniques employed. The scars on Wilson’s body backed him up. Moreover, his lawyers, from the People’s Law Office, discovered other suspects in unrelated investigations who claimed they’d been similarly tortured at the same place.

Like Andrew Wilson, they’d been convicted of murder. Unlike Wilson, many weren’t necessarily guilty. “Guys on death row!” says Conroy today. “We were so sure the dailies were going to pick up on this.”

Wilson sued the city, the suit went to trial, and after six weeks the first trial, in 1989, ended in a mistrial. Conroy was there every day of it. The retrial lasted eight weeks, and the jury came to a bizarre conclusion: Yes, Chicago had a de facto policy of abusing suspected cop
wrote the first one,” Mike Lenehan, the Reader’s editor at the time of “House of Screams,” recently told the Reader’s Mark Jacob, “he wanted to keep hammering at it—which he did, thank God he did—but I didn’t want to do the story again. He came with the second one, I said, ‘Aw, come on John, we’ve done this already.’”

Conroy allows that his second piece, “Town Without Pity,” hot off the press in January 1996, did go over some old ground. But it needed going over. “Police torture,” the subhead read. “The courts know about it, the media know about it, and chances are you know about it. So why aren’t we doing anything about it?”

And after that, Conroy produced one or two new stories a year, introducing new victims: Darrell Cannon, Aaron Patterson, Madison Hobley; puzzling over the city’s inertia (“The next state’s attorney to investigate police torture in Chicago will be the first,” said a subhed in 2003); trying to fathom the perpetrators.

In 2004 Conroy, drawing on his 2000 book on torture, Unspeakable Acts, Ordinary People, explained that what torturers everywhere have in common is the belief they’re doing the right thing. A 2005 piece reported that Burge became familiar with electroshock techniques as an MP in Vietnam.

I had a small piece of the action. I was one of Conroy’s editors, and as months went by between his stories, the arrival of each new one was an event. I’d drive out to Conroy’s home in Oak Park early in the evening, arriving soon after his wife, Colette Davidson, brought tarts and a Bundt cake out of the oven. And I’d feast, as Conroy set a huge binder of documents on the kitchen table and, page by page, hour upon hour, we’d double-check everything he’d written.

That wasn’t the end of it. Each story was vetted by David Andich, our lawyer, and although Conroy claims generously not to remember his good nature being tested those last nights before publication, what I remember is my shuttle diplomacy between Conroy and the phone and editor in chief Alison True in her office a few steps from mine as they negotiated, past everyone’s point of exhaustion, changes I wasn’t sure mattered. We can’t go on like this, I’d think as, eventually, past midnight, I dragged myself to the State and Grand subway station.

And we did. Journalism, even at its highest level, can be a painful slog.

This year Chicago’s Invisible Institute created an online “torture archive” where it’s claimed that Burge and his men committed violence against more than 100 African Americans during the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s. In 2016 the city paid $5.5 million to 57 victims, as new names continued to dribble in. But there’s been no videotape, no George Floyd-Derek Chauvin or Laquan McDonald-Jason Van Dyke moment to galvanize the public, and no criminal trial of any officer for physical abuse.

Yes, in 2011 Burge was sentenced to four and a half years in prison, but that was for lying under oath in a civil case, not for anything he did or countenanced in his “house of screams.” Nobody else has been prosecuted.

In 1990, when Conroy wrote the first of his torture stories, the Reader was fat and prosperous. By November 2007, when he wrote his last, the world of journalism had changed. The collapse of classified advertising was gutting the paper’s finances, and just four months earlier it had been sold by the founding owners to Creative Loafing, an alt-weekly chain based in Atlanta that would declare bankruptcy a year later.

Creative Loafing slashed True’s budget, and Conroy’s slow, methodical investigations became unaffordable. In December, True dismissed four of her best reporters, and Conroy was one of them. He covered Burge’s trial four years later as a blogger for Vocalo.

By the time True herself was fired in 2010, the Reader was controlled by an investment firm in New York. “House of Screams”—by now in-house shorthand for Conroy’s nearly 18 years of reporting—stands as the icon of Reader investigative journalism, but Conroy wonders what it actually accomplished, and grants that editors who suggested he find a new subject had a point. “I was blowing on the same horn over and over again,” he says wistfully, recalling a conversation with True. “Nothing had changed. We’d said this over and over and nobody’s listening, and could we have more effect doing something else?”

True remembers:

“He’d come to me with another case and I’d say something awful like ‘People will stop caring. We can’t just write about another victim.’ I was afraid readers would get numb. And once the abuse became well-known, an accepted fact in other media, we needed to find ways to emphasize the larger group of people who were responsible. He kept hitting higher up the chain, culminating in a Who’s Who feature that spelled out what they knew and when they knew it.”

Some of the who’s who in that 2006 story had been police superintendents. Others had been state’s attorneys. One of those state’s attorneys was now, during the years Conroy wrote about police torture, the mayor of Chicago, Richard M. Daley.

“Bad cops needed to be stopped,” True reflected, “but once their pattern of torturing confessions out of detainees had been exposed, revealing the underlying network of enablers became the most important thing we could do. There were hardly any repercussions—only one guy [Burge] ever took the fall, and it was over perjury. I always wonder if things would have been different if the outrage could have gone viral. The other offenders were able to retire from the police jobs on the public dime, or even have second careers, and the higher-ups who knew about the practice have never been held to account. And of course the racism that explains the entire scandal is still rampant.”

It was Conroy’s pending book project on torture that led him to “House of Screams.” A play he wrote on police torture, My Kind of Town, led from it; it was performed by TimeLine Theatre to high critical praise in 2012. But too often, the journalism itself seemed to be not only its own but its only reward. Conroy, who worked from home, says he didn’t even know until now how proud his reporting had made the Reader’s rank and file. At least his wife Colette could be sure of the triumph of her Bundt cakes.
When I started at the Reader in October 2018, there were 16 people on staff, all of them white except graphic designer Sue Kwong, who sidled up next to me on my first day with a good-natured, “Hello, woman of color.”

We laughed, and I appreciated that her welcome eased my familiar tension of being the new Black kid on the block. Growing up in the rapidly integrating south suburbs in the 90s, I was used to being the only Black face, or one of only a handful. My family’s welcome to Home-wood then was a mixed bag, as was my entry at the newly independent Reader decades later. Most people were warm, if reserved; others made clear that I, as an outsider, didn’t belong.

Tracy Baim, my friend and longtime mentor, had just been named as publisher of the Reader, and she advocated for my hiring above the pared for life at an alt-weekly. Yeah, I’d worked six years, but: that doesn’t mean I’d been pre-paring for leadership and editor for more than a handful. My family’s welcome to Home-wood then was a mixed bag, as was my entry at the newly independent Reader decades later. Most people were warm, if reserved; others made clear that I, as an outsider, didn’t belong.

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A rapidly growing city built of wood.

A summer-long heat wave.

An exhausted and misdirected team of firefighters.

Racial, social, and economic tensions bubbling just below the surface.

ALL CHICAGO NEEDED WAS A SPARK.
HISTORY

From stage to page

An incomplete look at 50 years of Reader theater and dance coverage

By Kerry Reid

I tell this story all the time, so forgive me if you’ve already heard it. But when I moved from Chicago in late 1993 to San Francisco (where I spent the next seven years), the first thing I did was pick up the alt-weeklies there: the SF Weekly and the San Francisco Bay Guardian, both of which are now sadly defunct. (Well, officially the former is on “indefinite hiatus.”)

And when I eagerly flipped to the theater section to find out what was happening in my new city, especially in fringe theater, I was flummoxed. These papers apparently only had one critic covering a handful of shows a week. What the hell?!?! Didn’t every alt-weekly have a team of ten to 12 critics out every week, covering every damn show in town?

Spoiler alert: No. No, they didn’t. That was only the Reader. And while the Reader may not have been the primary factor driving the growth of off- and off-off-Loop theater in the last 50 years, it’s hard to argue that the paper isn’t the primary repository of its history. (If a show fell, er, opened in Chicago and a Reader critic didn’t cover it, did it actually happen?)

And by consistently using all those dozens of freelancers over the years, we’ve avoided the pitfall of one person’s voice and tastes being the primary yardstick through which all work is measured for decades at a time.

What follows are the thoughts and memories of three editors and writers who helped shape and guide that coverage for much of the Reader’s history.

“Get everywhere, go everywhere as much as possible.”

Tony Adler wasn’t with the Reader from the very beginning. But as a freelancer-assigning-editor twice during the paper’s history, he had a front-row seat to both the burgeoning theater community and the growth of the Reader itself. Adler was coordinating coverage in the rich period in the late 1980s and ’90s that many Chicago theater Gen Xers like myself view as our golden age, an outgrowth of (and sometimes a counterpoint to) the late 60s and early 70s off-Loop flowering of companies like Victory Gardens, Body Politic, and Organic.

During those years, companies like Theater Oobleck, Prop, Lookingglass, Curious Theatre Branch, Cardiff Giant, igLoo, Redmoon, Goat Island, Upright Citizens Brigade, the Neo-Futurists, and many more were creating truly original work at a seemingly breakneck pace. And the Reader was most often where we went to find out about what they were doing. (As Lisa Buscani, a former Neo-Futurist and solo performer told me many years ago, getting a “Critic’s Choice” in the Reader in those years practically guaranteed that a show would sell.
out, no matter how late at night it happened or how out-of-the-way the venue might be.)

Adler took a break from the Reader in the 90s, during which time he helped founded the Actors Gymnasium. He returned to freelancing in the aughts, and eventually became the assigning editor again until leaving the paper in 2018. Particularly in the early days, Adler notes that the attitude of the top editors and owners was hands-off.

“As far as the expectations of the editors, I was pretty much left alone. My intent was to get everywhere, go everywhere, as much as possible. This became especially important after Richard Christiansen left the Tribune. And there was really nobody; I mean, all the usual places were covered, but the coverage of the dailies became more and more constricted.”

As has been noted in our 50th anniversary coverage elsewhere, the goal for the Reader from the beginning was to let writers dive into what interested them, and Adler’s approach to covering theater and dance was the same.

“The people that I wanted for critics were people who had a sense of discovery,” Adler says. “They were writing—I know it sounds cliché, but they were writing essentially for themselves and what happened to them when they were there, and how they processed the experience.”

For Adler, that meant that they could “look outside themselves and try to be as accurate as possible about what they’re seeing, but also look inside about what is happening to them. And then go another step to engage the question of why is this happening to them? I think that I saw reviews more as essays than as raves or pans. I didn’t care especially whether someone loved something or hated something as long as they had an engaging response to it.” (The Reader has never used a star rating system for theater, though we do have a “recommended” category that’s at the discretion of each critic.)

During Adler’s first tenure as assigning editor, all the performing arts reviews ran in the front section (the Reader for many years was a “long tabloid,” folded in half and in separate sections—first three, then four). Those reviews were usually about 1,000 words apiece. This continued until around 1996, when there were so many shows that several reviews first became shorter in the front section, then appeared as 250-word boxes in the theater listings section, rather than in section one. (The exhaustive theater listings were another way that the Reader helped the performing arts community, since virtually anything that was open to the public was included.)

Another hallmark for the Reader was that the lead reviews wasn’t necessarily always on a “big” show at the Goodman or Steppenwolf. I remember being in a 1989 production of David Mamet’s Edmond at now-defunct Mary-Archie Theatre that was reviewed by the Reader’s Tom Boeker. (Boeker has the distinction of probably being the most reviled critic in the paper’s history.) The review had pride of place as the first review in the front section—ahead of Penn & Teller, who were performing in one of the big downtown palaces.

“People ask me every so often, ‘How could you go to so many shows? Didn’t you see a lot of crap?’” says Adler. “I think that this special talent of at least the Reader critic is that you’re willing to go and see what happens. And if what happens is disappointing, I suppose that’s one way you can look at it, but again, you go back to, ‘Well, why was this disappointing?’ And that’s the engagement. It’s not deciding how many stars it should get.”

“The Reader was never trying to be where everybody else was.”

Albert Williams started his career as a critic reviewing for Gay Life before freelancing for the Reader. He eventually took over as assigning editor from Adler and was a staff writer for the paper for many years, in addition to teaching musical theater at Columbia College Chicago, where he is still on faculty. (Williams also still freelances for the Reader.) He won the George Jean Nathan Award, the highest honor for a theater critic in the United States, in 2000.

But before he was a critic, Williams was a performer with William Russo’s Free Theater (not to be confused with Free Street), and a reader of the Reader who, like a lot of artists over the last 50 years, took exception to what the critics wrote.

“In the early years of the Reader—again, this was me looking at it from the point of view of somebody who was in the theater, rather than trying to write about the theater—they were snarky for the sake of being snarky. Some of those early critics were all about being Dorothy Parker for the 70s, as opposed to actually analyzing the work. And it really annoyed the hell out of me. I in fact do remember writing a nasty letter to the editor about the Reader’s reviews, where I said something was pretentious. They could be seen as being very hip, collegial, pretentious.”

Over the years, though, many of the Reader’s critics have also been theater practitioners. Lenny Kleinfeld, who wrote under the pseudonym “Bury St. Edmunds” in the paper’s early years, also cowrote the groundbreaking Warpl! sci-fi trilogy with the late Stuart Gordon for Organic. Critic Terry Curtis Fox wrote Cops, which premiered in 1976 at Organic with a cast of then-unknowns including Joe Mantegna, Dennis Franz, and Meshach Taylor. That tradition has continued into the present day: most recently, Reader contributor Sheri Flanders showed up in the WTTW “Chicago Stories” documentary Inventing Improv. (Flanders and her husband, fellow Reader contributor Josh Flanders, perform and teach improv regularly in Chicago and elsewhere.) Current chief dance writer Irene Hsiao also performs frequently around town.

Unlike most dailies, where being a practitioner of an art form disqualifies you from reviewing it on the grounds that you will lack objectivity, the Reader didn’t hold it against critics, as long as they were upfront about potential conflicts of interest.

“I always looked for critics who had been practitioners,” says Williams. “I had been an actor, and writer, and I knew what it was like to get reviewed. And I also knew that by coming out of the theater world, I brought a level of expertise and insight to the job of reviewing. And I will say that I had been very influenced in my thinking about this, without being aware that I was being influenced, when I lived in New York and I read the Soho Weekly News. Which was the alternative paper to the Village Voice. The Village Voice was the alternative to the New York Times. Soho News, they were all artists who were also writing about the arts. It was an artists’ paper, a community of arts lovers who were also artists, though not necessarily theater artists.”

Williams also stresses that he saw the Reader’s mission as being an alternative to the coverage in the dailies. “This goes back to [cofounder] Bob Roth. The Reader was never trying to be where everybody else was. ‘We have to review such and such because it’s the big ticket.’ That was Roth’s vision of everything. We are the people who are going to write about the thing that isn’t the hot ticket.”

But the Reader’s tendency to wait for writers (including critics) to come to them, rather than actively seeking out more diverse voices, also meant that, as Williams acknowledges, theater critics tended to be “very heavily slanted white and upper-middle-class and college educated. So that was just a different world than we’re in now, not only in terms of awareness, but in terms of who was available and who was asking to be available, who was banging at the door. I brought in more women than had been there before. I know that’s for sure.” (Full disclosure: I started my reviewing career at the Reader under Williams.)

Another distinction I saw between the Reader and alt-weeklies in the Bay Area was that improv was reviewed regularly in the Reader, rather than being treated as something outside the bounds of conventional criticism. Williams notes, “In Chicago we took improv seriously because of Second City, and then because of ImprovOlympic. I remember I reviewed ImprovOlympic very early in their existence. Tony assigned me and of course the thing with improv is, do you review a process that’s going to change every time? The show I see is not the show anybody who reads the paper will see. But the answer to that is you write about the process. And so you’re educating people about the process, not reviewing that ‘this is good or this is bad.’”

“The small companies were just off the wall and were a lot more fun.”

Laura Molzahn started out as an editor at the Reader, a position she held for many years. (She was the chief copy editor for the theater reviews and other coverage, and eventually took over as arts editor before leaving the Reader in 2008 and working for a few years as the freelance dance critic for the Tribune.) But as the chief dance critic for the Reader for around 20 years, she witnessed the explosion of new dance troupes that grew up around the same time as the storefront theater scene in Chicago.

(Anne Schultz wrote the first dance review I could find in the Reader archives: a review of the ballet troupe Dance d’Amboise, which ran on October 22, 1971. Entitled “To Dance Is Not To Talk,” Schultz took founder Jacques d’Amboise to task for what she called his transformation from “the excellent dancer whose ballon I had remembered into a second-rate comedic whose humor I would like to forget.”)

The Reader’s philosophy of having writers cover what most interested them sparked a lot of Molzahn’s own writing. “I have to say that I always found the smaller companies, smaller dance companies, more creative. You know, they didn’t have a lot to lose. If it was the Joffrey or even Hubbard Street, after a certain period of time, they had to kind of toe the line and do what was expected, but the small companies were just off the wall and were a lot more fun.”

The lack of space limitations also helped develop writers’ voices, including Molzahn’s. “Especially at the time when I started writing,
they were desperate to have enough editorial to balance out all the ads. And so I regularly wrote 1,000-word reviews partly just because that was kind of expected. And everybody did that, you know? It was such a different time. It’s just hard to comprehend how much things have changed.”

Molzahn, like many Reader critics over the years, also wrote arts features, including a long cover story in 1990 on Hubbard Street, who were then collaborating with Twyla Tharp.

“I went to rehearsals for like the whole summer and sat on the floor and took notes,” says Molzahn. “It was super, super long and I could never publish that at another paper.” She adds, “The other thing for me was that that was in many ways my education on what it’s like to be a professional dancer. I was sitting there with these great dancers. They had this famous choreographer, and watching all the corrections and all the interactions—there was one time that a dancer fell and he hurt his head. It just was this intimate look at the dance world, which I would never have had otherwise because I was in no way a professional dancer.”

But when the cover story ran, Molzahn recalls that sections of it got mixed up in the paste-up process. “It made dancers sound like they were saying something they weren’t,” notes Molzahn. In another instance of “That would never happen now,” Mike Lenehan, then the editor in chief, agreed to run Molzahn’s article again, in the correct order, in the next week’s edition (though not, obviously, on the cover again).

I spent some time going through the physical archives of the Reader in preparation for this piece, and it was a surprisingly emotional experience remembering the artists and companies that had their moment and are now gone. The Reader itself has changed a lot, but I hope that somehow, we’ll keep the stories of performing artists—the unsung, the not-yet-famous, and the gone-for-good—alive for another 50 years. ❱

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The first dance review in the Reader from October 22, 1971

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The title track, for example, is titled “She’s As Sweet As Tiajelo Honey. She’s the Angel of the First Degree.” “I want to Bao You” (Scottish Deltive for you to know what) is a seductive song that’s fun to munt to the lyrics. I-didn’t want the same thing, but now he’s ready now.

The best successful song, “You’re My Woman,” is the most straightforward old-fashioned love song. Not that its lyrics are odd, but that its idea is odd to finders, thinking of looking for and finding love. Its traditional love song, “You’re My Woman,” has the lyrics: “I wanna take a plane, come with me tonight. Gonna put on my hat and my pants, and probably, probably down down”.

I think the best cats are: "Wild Cat" and "Straight To Your Heart". I’ve never thought about it, but I’m not going to say why. All in all, I think this LP is a good example of the way the Morton award. His music made it possible to record a pop in the past. It is a good example of the way people love his music.

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The first dance review in the Reader from October 22, 1971

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CORRECTING HISTORY

What the first Reader theater review got wrong

By Albert Williams

The subject of the very first Reader theater review—Whores of Babylon, presented by the Godzilla Rainbow Troupe—was a historically significant piece of “queer theater,” as we would say today. In 1971, we called it Theater of the Ridiculous, cosmic drag, or genderfuck. The critic, Mark Homstad, wrote under the nom de plume “J. Leland”—a coy reference to the fictional drama critic Jed Leland, played by Joseph Cotten in the classic film Citizen Kane.

When I recently reread Homstad’s review of Whores (which ran in the inaugural issue of October 1, 1971), I was disappointed and frustrated—not because the review was negative, but because it never set forth basic information about the show. Homstad either forgot or chose not to share the identities of the actors whose work he was evaluating—not the playwright, not the director, not the actors. Not even the one actor whose performance Homstad singled out for praise for his “complete control over body and voice, a poise and grace that is essential to the physical wit of the piece.”

In an article published October 13, 2011, in the Reader’s 40th-anniversary self-reflection section, Homstad wrote: “Reading my review now, after almost 40 years, I cringe at some of the sentence constructions.... What also strikes me is a want of tact, a missing sense of proportion that feels like an absence of restraint. Still, the piece pretty much said what I intended and it ran just as I wrote it, probably because I finished so close to deadline—hurriedly handing off the last of the freshly typed pages to [then-publisher] Bob Roth in a late Monday night pickup at my apartment—that there simply wasn’t time to edit it.” If I had been his editor, I would have told Homstad that his problem wasn’t “want of tact,” it was “want of fact.”

Whores of Babylon, by Bill Vehr, received its Chicago premiere under the direction of Gary Tucker, who went by the numerical name Eleven. Both Tucker and Vehr had been early members of the fabled Ridiculous Theatrical Company, whose founder, director-playwright-actor Charles Ludlam, staged the off-Broadway production of Whores with Tucker and Vehr in the cast. In 1971, at the suggestion of actor-stage manager Tom Biscotto, Tucker moved to Chicago with the mission of bringing Theater of the Ridiculous to Chicago. “He was drawn by the excitement of a city exploding with theatrical exuberance—everything was just starting to ignite, and he wanted to be part of that,” recalls Tucker’s sister, Holly Siegel, the wife and manager of Chicago musician Corky Siegel.

Theater of the Ridiculous was a genre of post-absurdist queer theater that briefly but brightly flamed in the 1960s and ’70s. Its hallmarks included cross-gender casting and the casting of nonprofessional “street celebrities,” burlesque parody of both popular and “high” culture, and plentiful use of improvisation that sometimes reached chaotic extremes. It both influenced and was influenced by the underground films of Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, Kenneth Anger, and, later, John Waters, serving as an anarchic alternative to the more realistic 1960s “gay theater” movement that achieved commercial crossover success with The Boys in the Band in 1968.

Whores of Babylon was the debut production of the Godzilla Rainbow Troupe, cofounded by Tucker and Biscotto. The company went on to produce the Vehr-Ludlam Turds in Hell, a drag production of Erskine Caldwell’s Tobacco Road, and a solo performance by Tucker of Lucille Fletcher’s radio thriller Sorry, Wrong Number at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Eventually Tucker left Chicago, though he returned in 1981 to direct a Goodman Theatre production of the final play by his friend Tennessee Williams, A House Not Meant to Stand.

I saw the same production of Whores of Babylon that Homstad did. I wasn’t a critic then; I was an ensemble member of the Free Theater, one of the early troupes that launched what we then called “off-Loop theater” in Chicago of the late 60s and early 70s. I remember a scruffy, freewheeling theatrical free-for-all. Most vividly, I remember the actor whose performance Homstad praised without naming the artist who delivered it. He was J. Pat Miller, making his Chicago stage debut.

Miller went on to become one of Chicago’s most popular and respected actors with performances at the Goodman, Organic, Victory Gardens, and Wisdom Bridge, as well as a celebrated European tour of Waiting for Godot. Miller died in 1985 of AIDS, the same disease that also claimed the lives of Charles Ludlam, Bill Vehr, Tom Biscotto, and Gary Tucker. The Biscotto-Miller Fund began in 1985 to assist Chicago theater artists living with AIDS and other catastrophic illnesses; it continues today as Season of Concern.

The first Reader theater review on October 1, 1971.
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Rock & Roll Will Never Die

by Cary Baker and Harlan Hollander

The Reader’s current music writer surveys all 50 years of the paper’s coverage and reports back.

By Leor Galil

The Chicago Reader debuted October 1, 1971—almost two years before DJ Kool Herc threw the very first hip-hop party in the Bronx in August 1973, nearly three years before the Ramones made their first appearance onstage at CBGB in August 1974, and more than five years before Frankie Knuckles first spun at the Warehouse in March 1977. The Reader arrived around six years after a group of visionary Black Chicagoans founded the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, and just as rock ‘n’ roll entered its pimply, sentimental adolescence—in October 1971, Don McLean released American Pie, the title track of which pays homage to Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper while mourning a rosy ideal of rock’s salad days.

For decades, music coverage has been a huge part of the Reader’s footprint. When the paper was at its largest, with four thick sections of quarterfolded broadsheet, it devoted one to film, books, galleries, theater, dance, and other performing arts—and one entirely to music. The depth and variety of this coverage has also set it apart. The Reader has had something to say about music that thrived generations before its existence, music that emerged under its gaze, and music that the paper’s own advocacy helped elevate to a civic and cultural position it had long deserved.

In a Reader city guide published October 1, 1976, critic Jim O’Neal took the local government to task for neglecting the gift the blues had given Chicago. “City Hall and the Chamber of Commerce have yet to admit that the blues is a tourist attraction, or anything for Chicagoans to recognize at all,” he wrote. “Here in Chicago, where live blues activity outstrips that of any other city, official recognition is nonexistent, media coverage is scant, and countless blues musicians are struggling to get out of town—or out of the country—where someone will appreciate their art.” Eight years later, the city held the first annual Chicago Blues Festival.

O’Neal’s comprehensive, analytical essay ran in that 1976 issue alongside similar deep-tissue treatments of the city’s rock, jazz, and folk scenes. O’Neal wasn’t the only writer convinced that the genre he loved didn’t enjoy the high profile it deserved, but I suspect that the intensity of that love meant that few media outlets could’ve met his standards. After all, in 1970 he’d addressed the shortcomings of blues coverage head-on by cofounding his own magazine, Living Blues, now recognized as the oldest such publication in the country.

These Reader guides didn’t simply take the temperature of a scene by rattling off the names of its best-known figures and its most popular venues; they expended a lot of energy evoking the joys and frustrations of experiencing the music in public. I felt a pang of recognition reading John Milward’s snapshot of the Aragon Ballroom in the rock guide, though the music he mentions has little overlap with what’s drawn me there:

“Acoustically, the Aragon runs from tolerable to horrible, but for most of the kids who make it into the Arabian-motif ballroom built in the days of Capone, it’s the scene that counts—hanging out, smoking, and rolling home in the wee hours with your brain cells ringing from Johnny Winter’s twenty-minute metallic rave-up encore or with your eyes burned out from the Blue Oyster Cult’s Star Trek laser show.”

The Reader’s city guides were works of criticism intended to lead their audiences out into the world to experience art anew. Reading them in 2021, I lost myself trying to keep track of all the venues that had closed before I was born and all the people who’d run them, most of whom are gone too. Longtime Reader writer Neil Tesser made Jazz Showcase founder Joe Segal feel as multidimensional in his August 2020 obituary.

This sort of thing happens to me every time I go digging through the Reader print archives in search of music stories—I’ll get sidetracked
reading the concert calendars in the venue ads or stumble across a paragraph-long show preview for an obscure artist I’m pleasantly surprised to see written about back before they were forgotten. And even if I were laser focused every moment, I would need several years of research (and a generous advance) to write a definitive history of the Reader’s vast body of music coverage. Book publishers: Hello!

The paper’s 50th anniversary has given me the opportunity to make a start of the job, though. For this retrospective I didn’t want to celebrate the already celebrated pieces, or even my own favorites—which include Bill Wyman’s “Skinheads,” Monica Kendrick’s “Bang the Head Slowly,” J.R. Jones’s “Ska’s Lost Cause,” several Jake Austen deep dives, and every Reader story Jessica Hopper included in the new edition of her essential book, The First Collection of Criticism by a Living Female Rock Critic. I shouldn’t spend a special occasion talking about why these stories are important to me, because I already do it all the time.

I began contributing to the Reader 11 years ago, and I’ve learned firsthand how much time and care goes into every music story, no matter how small or ephemeral. Three-hundred-word concert previews, for example, don’t tend to get anthologized or mythologized, but over the past decade Reader editors Philip Montoro, Kevin Warwick, and Jamie Ludwig have spent a Herculean amount of time and effort ensuring that these brief, idiosyncratic write-ups do more than simply tell readers what musicians are playing which week. Report by thumbing their noses at the moral panic that had dogged rock ‘n’ roll: “This was largely a consciousness of the seven hours I knew this would diminish my ability to push you to think deeper about music, get you to see written about back before the long days on my feet I’ve put in at music journalism. In a 1979 review of performances by the Knack and the Record, Don McLeese went long on the fuzzy border between rock and a subset of rock that he defined as “pop,” at a time when both were dominated by straight white men playing guitars. “While delineating pop from other rock can be a hair-splitting, life-draining exercise, one that ultimately results in more contradictions than conclusions, a few guide-lights can at least illuminate the extremes,” he wrote. “Rock is muscle; pop is heart. Rock is five-o’clock shadow; pop is peach fuzz. Rock is gruff and gritty; pop is unashamedly sentimental. Rock is streetwise, citified; pop is suburban. Rock takes you by force; pop only wants to hold your hand, and let true love take its course (pop believes in nothing if not romance). Rock is prematurely macho; pop is perpetually adolescent. Rock thunders; pop bounces. Shades of difference: rock is a Dave Edmunds guitar solo; pop is a Nick Lowe vocal overdub. At the boundary, Cheap Trick straddles the line better than anyone. Where the most melodic rock meets the hardest-edged pop, there is no distinction.”

I’m fond of interrogating what makes genres distinct, but I became a professional critic in a post-Internet era when microgenres began proliferating like mushrooms. In the past decade or so, the Reader has run stories on seapunk, footwork, vaporwave, hyperpop, and fourth-wave emo. Genres are defined as much by the communities who incubate them as by their sounds, and the Reader has long offered critics the space to drill down into the meaning and limitations of such designations. Here’s Tesser on the umbrella term “jazz” in his 1976 scene guide: “To begin with, I use the term advisedly; there are too many ballpoint-happy indignateurs around this burg who noisily declare its use at all.”

When the Reader covered specific acts, particularly in the concert previews called “Critic’s Choices” (I came across them first in October 1985), those condensed, informative pieces were often insidery in a friendly way—a reminder that the “alt-” in “alt-weekly” is short for “alternative,” an invocation of a loose nonmainstream community that the paper claimed as its own. Before the Internet fragmented media monoculture (the U.S. had just three broadcast TV networks until 1986), opposition to that monoculture was more meaningful, and it could help bind people together. Drawing on that presumed bond, Reader writers sometimes addressed their audience with a sense of camaraderie, as though sending tips to a longtime pen pal. Bill Wyman exemplified this in his October 1988 Camper Van Beethoven preview: “Live, the Campers provide something akin to a heavy-metal hoedown—but you knew that.”

Longtime Reader classic Ted Shen, who passed away in 2003, prized accessibility in his writing and studiously avoided pretension—he clearly wanted to open the ears of people with no grasp of classical music, instead of speaking only to the already initiated. I’m particularly fond of this passage from his review of the Chicago String Ensemble at Saint Paul’s Church, published October 3, 1980: “As for the other two works, by contemporary composers Lars-Erik Larsson and A. Oscar Hauglund, I thought that the composers’ names would look nice emblazoned on a new line of Scandinavian furniture,” he wrote.
continued from p1

“As it turned out, my first impression had its point, for their compositions have the serviceable and pleasant quality of a cozy armchair. But they are rather modest compared to the more enduring and valued Chippendales of music.”

Beginning in 1993, the paper ran Critic’s Choices alongside a column that collected roughly a dozen shorter previews under the name “Spot Check.” (Longtime Reader critic Peter Margasak originated the column as a freelancer, and he wrote the first one I found near the start of his 23-year tenure as a staffer.) Monica Kendrick soon took over Spot Check, writing it regularly till it was retired during a 2004 redesign of the paper. In October 1998 she used the column to talk about hyperactive Japanese noise-rock oddballs Melt-Banana, and about noise and rock more broadly: “Contrary to oft-expressed opinion, Melt-Banana doesn’t sound like rock from another planet—it merely demonstrates how big this one really is.”

Of course, writing about what an artist sounds like is only a fraction of music journalism—and it’s an even smaller fraction now that streaming has made it easy to dispense with wordy descriptions and just let readers listen for themselves. History is important too, and I dug up some front-of-story books next to the Reader’s events calendar that gave me thorough lessons: Ted Shen’s 1995 profile of Black Chicago composer Maurice Weddington, or Florence Hamlish Levinsohn’s 1988 preview of a documentary on midcentury jazz phenoms Ernestine “Tiny” Davis and Ruby Reni Phelan Lucas made by the directors of Before Stonewall.

And when Reader writers got all the space in the world to unpack the role music plays in community, memory, commerce, and art, I was always struck by the many directions a single big story could take. Bill Wyman’s 1988 essay “Reading: Lennon Mania” addresses a recent rash of books cashing in on the former Beatle’s legacy, most notably Albert Goldman’s brutal biography The Lives of John Lennon, but it’s much bigger than that. Wyman’s own unvarnished look at the artist’s life has nuance and verve (though it’s hard to excuse the venom he directs at Yoko Ono) and thoughtfully considers the extent to which posthumous projects tarnished the legacy of Lennon’s best work.

Other Reader writers have wrestled with similar questions. Nostalgia and financial necessity collide in Sam McPheeters’s 2010 essay on Articles of Faith, occasioned by the Chicago hardcore band’s one-off reunion for Riot Fest: “Reuniting a hardcore band isn’t exactly the path to prosperity,” he wrote. “What drives grown men to seek and reseek these fleeting bits of former glory? Do they feel their lives lack adventure? Are they having midlife crises? Can they not find any other way to spend time with old friends? These aren’t hypothetical questions; I genuinely wish I knew the answers.” His questions also reminded me of Jessica Hopper’s excellent Reader essays on reissues by Dinosaur Jr. and Nirvana (from April 2005 and September 2011, respectively).

Peter Margasak’s first big piece in my sample, a review of a 1994 Veruca Salt record-release show at Lounge Ax, lambasts the state of music journalism during the alternative boom. “One expects label reps to have dollar signs for eyes, but the music press has always worked under the notion that it was looking for bands that would become successful artistically, not those who’d become financially successful,” he wrote. “Now music writers are becoming like art investors: more concerned with the bottom line than with lines and shapes.” On drums for Veruca Salt that night? Jim Shapiro, who would go on to serve as Reader music editor in 2003 and ’04.

Shapiro is hardly the only Reader employee who’s also been a story subject. Many alt-weekly staffers maintain creative lives outside the paper, and for most of the time I’ve worked here at least one of my colleagues has been an active musician. Cary Baker, who coauthored that Chuck Berry review in 1972, turned up in a 1989 Bill Wyman calendar feature as a subject—Baker was then the publicity director of Capitol, and appeared as a special guest at the Midwest Music Conference. And in 2005, Bob Mehr wrote about Baker launching his new Conjuroo label with a reissue of a 1973 Blind Arvella Gray album.

Reader writer Liz Armstrong was in some ways also a story subject, because her Chicago Antisocial columns often detailed her own occasionally reckless and always improbable adventures in Chicago’s weirdo nightlife scene. Her unerring sense for the odd, transcendent, kitschy, hilarious, revolting, or just plain fun made her writing distinctive, even in a paper full of strong voices.

Two of Armstrong’s columns turned up in my survey—2004’s “Now It’s a Party” and 2005’s “Going Off the Rails on the Ravey Train”—and if I could quote them in full, I would. I’ll settle for the exhausting opening sentences of the former: “It was one of those nights that makes you want to rush right home and shower, a night when you pop vitamins before bed in a vain attempt to stave off a hangover, a night peopled by incredibly tan, round-titted, ashly-highlighted, shiny-lipped women in skirts so short they need two hairstyles, pursued by incredibly tan, gel-headed, waxed-chested, clear-nail-polish-manicured men in striped button-down shirts,” she wrote. “It was a regular ol’ Thursday night at Crobar, and DJ Jordan Zawideh had decided to spend his birthday there.”

The Reader has been around long enough that many of its writers and their subjects have since graduated to national stages. In October 2005, Bob Mehr wrote about Robert Aki Aubrey Lowe shortly after he released his first experimental album as Lichens; this year, Lowe scored the new Candyman film, and Mehr won a Grammy for his liner notes to the Replacements box set Dead Man’s Pop. (Neil Tesser won the same award in 2014.) Jessica Hopper became one of the most essential voices in pop criticism while simultaneously lifting up emerging voices—most recently as an editor for the University of Texas’s American Music Series, where she’s helped many stellar new music books see the light of day, including Glitter Up the Dark: How Pop Music Broke the Binary by Reader contributor Sasha Geffen.

Don McLeese went on to write about pop for the Chicago Sun-Times and the Austin American-Statesman, and now teaches at University of Iowa’s School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Michaelangelo Matos, whose name first popped up in my survey in October 1999, published a definitive history of electronic music in 2015 called The Underground Is Massive, which the Reader excerpted in April of that year, and followed it up in 2020 with Can’t Slow Down: How 1984 Became Pop’s Blockbuster Year. Keith Harris, who debuted in my sample in October 2003, worked as the Reader’s music editor for around a year in the early 2000s and later took the same job for Twin Cities alt-weekly City Pages, which shuttered last fall—Harris is one of four former City Pages editors who in August cofounded Racket, an online magazine that’s working to fill the gap left by its defunct predecessor.

Once I reached the 2010s, a third of the Reader music features I encountered were my own. I can’t reflect on those pieces without thinking of my entire history at the paper. My first Reader story, on defunct Logan Square DIY space Strangelight, ran June 24, 2010; longtime editor in chief Alison True was fired the next day. I loved the Reader’s music journalism and already read it avidly because it reflected the visions of True, managing editor Kiki Yablon, and music editor Philip Montoro; from the start, I aimed to live up to their rigorous standards.

A big part of the Reader story during my tenure has been about frequent destabilizing changes of ownership, staff layoffs and attrition, and chronic management neglect—and about resolve in the face of those difficulties. In my early years, though, the music section was still growing, at least briefly. The issue of October 6, 2011, had more music coverage than any other year in my sample: it included two newly established recurring series, the bite-size story triptych Three Beats and the tag-team show-and-tell In Rotation; a report-ed feature on Cave’s album Neverendless; an essay on Turntable.fm and Spotify; an interview of Bryan Ferry by Bobby Conn for the Artist on Artist series; a Secret History of Chicago Music comic on prog rockers Yezda Urfa; photos from a St. Vincent concert at Metro; the music news column Gossip Wolf; a short rundown of the upcoming Riot Fest; and the usual spread of a dozen or so show previews.

Earlier in 2011, editor in chief Mara Shalhoup and art director Paul John Higgins had made the Reader a glossy publication (it had introduced color in 2004). The music section was moved to the back of the paper, where it ran upside-down as “the B Side” and got its own cover. Judging from the testimony of the musicians I’ve gotten to know over the past ten years, the existence of that cover was a boon for the local scene—the B Side allowed the Reader to spotlight a great variety of local artists much more prominently than before, including many otherwise ignored by the press and a few future stars. Chance the Rapper, for example, refers to his B Side cover appearance on “Pushead Man,” from his 2013 mixtape Acid Rap.

A survey of 50 print issues doesn’t account for stories that appeared only online, of course, and that’s been a pretty big share of the Reader’s output for a while now. Under digital editor Tal Rosenberg, the paper beefed up its blog (which had been retitled “the Bleader” in 2011) and asked freelancers and staffers to choose regular topics to write about weekly. Margasak posted about jazz on Fridays; Montoro launched a ridiculous column called Beer and Metal that ran most Mondays; I wrote about hip-hop on Wednesdays.

Online music journalism in that era offered hope for the future on one hand and, on the other, a glut of unnecessary “content” that didn’t do anything useful except draw clicks. In my own wanderings on the Web, I encountered cheap and insubstantial listicles (which...
the Reader avoided), context-free slideshows (which we sometimes ran during festival season), and transparently transactional “exclusive premieres” of forthcoming music (which I stopped posting well before the trend went bust). Some of the Reader’s blog stories were little more than announcements of imminent events, and became irrelevant within days or even hours; we’ve also run lots of great online-only pieces with much longer shelf lives. I still think often of Tiffany Walden’s 2017 oral history of WGCI’s “Bad Boy Radio.”

I can’t reflect on the past decade of Reader music coverage without mentioning the Block Beat, a multimedia series in collaboration with the TRiiBE that Walden and Morgan Elise Johnson launched in February 2018. The Block Beat brought a familial intimacy to its profiles of Black Chicago musicians, combining prose, photos, and video interviews by the TRiiBE’s deep bench of collaborators. But Walden and Johnson had already helped shape our music coverage before the Block Beat—freelancers have done as much as staff to push this publication in new directions.

Our interns have too; in summer 2018 Matt Harvey, Katie Powers, Tyra Nicole Tryche, and Anna White all contributed music writing and helped keep the paper afloat when it was sometimes literally in danger of shutting down the next day—the Reader’s already small editorial staff had lost nearly half a dozen people, and for months it operated without an editor in chief. Throughout this bleak period, the staff made sure we published a new issue every week no matter what—so thank you to Montoro, culture editor Aimee Levitt, graphic designer Sue Kwong, director of digital John Dunlevy, and acting deputy editor Kate Schmidt, without all of whom there might not be a Reader today. When my Sen Morimoto cover story arrived on October 4, 2018, Tracy Baim had just stepped in as publisher, and the long task of rebuilding could begin.

At that point the Reader’s staff had been whittled down to nothing but an editorial department and a single digital specialist—everyone now working in publishing, sales, marketing, administration, circulation, development, and special projects has been hired since then. Over the past three years Baim, co-editor in chief Sujay Kumar, and copublisher and co-editor in chief Karen Hawkins have done a lot to ensure that I could focus on music journalism without worrying that I’d be laid off or that the paper would fold. I like to think the goals I’ve set for myself place me in a worthwhile tradition—in fact, Reader contributor Howard Mandel, who in 2019 wrote a lovingly meticulous profile of Extraordinary Popular Delusions, summed up my outlook pretty well in his Chicago Jazz Fest diary for the issue of October 2, 1981.

“As a critic, you have to treat players with respect, and open yourself to the meaning of the music they’re making for you and your readers to hear,” Mandel wrote. “You can’t assume your readers (or their listeners) know anything, but you mustn’t talk down to them, either. Put yourself in their heads, hear with your ears, gently lead them to your own understanding, and stretch that understanding of yours, too. Express your ideas and opinions, and your feelings—you must—but keep them in context. Otherwise, who cares?”
S

kin and stone, organic and sterile, hard and soft; juxtapositions aren’t new in art. This push-and-pull tactic has been done, and done again, but it’s not always executed well. New York-based artist Hannah Levy manages to push and pull her viewers in the right direction for her new solo exhibition, “Hannah Levy: Surplus Tension,” now on view at the Arts Club of Chicago. Levy exaggerates form—into curves and lumps—as well as challenges our ideas of modern design. The large-scale sculptural works include steel and silicone that create tension between beauty and repellency. The works are chic and fashionable. They are shiny and new. They might repulse you. They might turn you on.

In a 2007 interview, artist Louise Bourgeois told writer Richard D. Marshall that her sculptures are portraits of a relationship: “... they embrace each other, they hold onto each other, and they are tied together forever. Yet they hang by a point, which symbolizes their fragility.” Bourgeois concluded, “In all my work, there is the fear of abandonment and separation.” In Levy’s work, the fragile and the solid are stitched together in a way that reminds me of Bourgeois’s sculptures, something that appears solid but symbolizes softness. Their relationship keeps them together forever, although it may be a meeting of opposites. This vulnerability is evident through materiality in Levy’s work. Introducing rubber, silicone, and nickel-plated steel with claw feet creates a stress between flesh versus machine.

Levy’s works are dangerous and kinky. They are metal-erotic. Sexy and smooth. Walking throughout the space, I’m reminded of Titane, the first film I’ve seen in theatres since the pandemic started. Titane is a body-horror film about a serial killer who becomes impregnated by a car. It’s a film about gender identity, sex, and murder. In one scene, a pregnant belly rips open, exposing metal and chrome in between layers of flesh. Here, at the Arts Club, a daring piece, Untitled, greets viewers like flesh on a meat hook as the thin silicone drapes over a silver chandelier-shape from the ceiling. Metal claws arch and are encased in beige silicone that ties up like a corset—the light reflects through the material. It’s taut as it attaches to the tip of the claws. Thinking of Titane, of how machine and body meet, it’s evident that art can be dangerous and erotic. How do we define the difference? Are the works seductive because they could harm us or are they provocative because they divulge someone with paraphilia?

I’m not entirely sure what the answer is to this question. And I don’t think Levy intends for us to figure it out, either. An on-the-nose critique would suggest that flesh is sexy and we recognize these materials as tactile Cau-
OCTOBER /two.up/eight.up/comma.up /two.up/zero.up/two.up/one.up
- [CHICAGO]

Work by Hannah Levy on display at the Arts Club of Chicago Ⓒ COURTESY THE ARTIST

Caucasian skin begging for a little touch. Another could dive into how repulsion charms us into being curious. We feel intrigued by the shudder-effect that some of the large-scale works imprint on the viewer.

This sexual tension can also be because we think we know what we are looking at. Much of Levy’s work has a sense of familiarity, common shapes that remind us of ordinary objects. We can look at a piece and recognize characteristics, but as a whole, Levy combines various forms to assemble a newly surreal object. In a 2019 interview with the website Dezign Ark, she said, “In combining those things I try to create something that I think of as a design purgatory,” where they exist between what we think we know and what we do not know.

Moreover, Levy’s work is heavily influenced by elements of design and modernist furniture. The elegance in her work references luxury consumption—something functional but ornate, essentially making it entirely useless. A piece of furniture that matches the carpet, but cannot hold body weight. A nod at elitism and the influence of objects that exist purely for pleasure.

The writer Whitney Mallett called Levy’s work “hyper-designed minimalist home ware from an alternative dimension.” Levy takes design and drops it on its head. She rethinks the idea of office furniture, similar to Mies van der Rohe’s concept of “skin and bones” architecture which emphasized the steel structure and blurred the lines of interior and exterior with glass. Levy’s transparency, with the bones (steel) of her works appearing through the skin (silicone), makes her an anatomical artist (similar to the anatomical architecture of van der Rohe).

There’s a sense of perversion to the material used for the chair-like sculptures in the space. Are they inviting? Or are we tricked into believing they are inviting? The silicone Levy works with in her practice is the same material used in medical prosthetics and special effects in horror films. The “neutral” tones in Levy’s work are reminiscent of American interiors. Bland, bleak, and beige. They are clinical and cold. But they also beg to be touched. The line between attraction and repulsion is thin.

Levy told Dezign Ark, “I think there is a lot of hidden sexuality in our design forms just because humans at the end of the day are pretty basic in our urges.” And with this, a simple exaggeration of a curve in metal or tension of silicone can send a viewer into a salacious headspace.

In American Women Artists, an exhibition catalog from 1980, Hannah Wilke wrote that women must create sensuality in their own terms, “. . . to touch, to smile, to feel, to flirt, to state, to insist on the feelings of the flesh, its inspiration, its advice, its warning, its mystery, its necessity for the survival and regeneration of the universe.” And here, Levy is creating a sensuality that confuses and intrigues.

In addition to Bourgeois, we can see Lee Bontecou, Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, and Meret Oppenheim—who eradicated the function of home wares and made them useless—as clear influences for Levy. Here, in the world of Levy’s erotic and fantastical works, similarities of the somatic and sensual penetrate the themes that we see in these earlier artists who worked in modernism.

“Surplus Tension” is a nod at pleasure and pain, a hook through the skin, a chain of flesh, a transparent diaphragm stretching across steel. The friction between materials and context blur the boundaries of what makes us wince and what makes us aroused.

Like Levy told Galerie magazine in 2018, “Revulsion and attraction exist side by side. I guess there’s some body anxiety in my work. It’s mildly grotesque in the way having a body is mildly grotesque.”

Exhibition on view at the Newberry Library
60 W. Walton St.
September 10 – December 30
Free and open to the public

Early risers who wanted to greet the lake had a place to gather on Friday mornings this summer and fall. Friday Morning Swim Club, a group meetup for early morning swimmers, was created by five friends last summer and has become very popular over the past year. What started as a small gathering surpassed anything creator Andrew Glatt and his friends expected. In fact, he never thought people would find it in the first place.

“We didn’t expect it to get so big,” said Glatt.

The idea started after Glatt, a professional photographer, started training for a triathlon, biking along the lake to build up endurance. He’d end every workout with a jump into the lake. Several friends started joining him at the lake at the end of his exercise routines, and a year later, Friday Morning Swim Club was born.

“Part of my training was long bike rides every Friday morning along the lake and then after, five or six of my friends and I would jump in,” Glatt told me. “I looked forward to the lake jump [after my workout] every week.”

The event grew over time from a small group to over 200 people weekly, mostly through word of mouth. Some swimmers may have also found the club because of Glatt’s high-definition photographs and drone videos, which he shares on social media. Well-composed shots of swimmers having fun with the crisp and blue Lake Michigan in the background surely attracted new people.

“I think the two things that grew the event were photos and word of mouth,” said Glatt. “If not genuine connections, Instagram photos definitely helped.”

The official events began in June 2021, growing from something Glatt did with his friends into something for the public. Waking the boldest among us, Friday Morning Swim Club draws a crowd willing to plunge themselves into the cold depths of Lake Michigan at 7 AM. If you’re open to adventure and early mornings, the group promises a community of like-minded individuals looking to bond over exercise, Chicago culture, and ice-cold water. Plus, the event promises all the coffee you can ever imagine.

“At the very first jump in June, there were only a few of us, and I thought that the only way this would get better would be with cof-
fee,” said Nicole Novotny, a friend of Glatt’s and owner of Printer’s Row Coffee Co. in Chicago. “Quite a few logistics went into it when hundreds of people started showing up at the lake.”

Novotny provides coffee for tired swimmers looking for a pick-me-up. Waking up as early as 2:30 AM to brew coffee for the event, Novotny is dedicated to the cause. What started off as sharing a 36-ounce Yeti between five or ten people quickly grew to multiple coffee carriers filled to the brim for anyone who brings a coffee mug. Not only does Novotny constantly promise caffeine for coffee lovers, she also inadvertently provided the idea for Friday Morning Swim Club. Asking friends to commit to a Thursday Night Swim Club, Glatt decided to rival his friend’s idea with his own 7 AM event.

“A couple of friends and I decided to commit to jumping into the lake every Thursday night this summer starting back in June. Andrew included,” said Novotny. “I was all for creating a similar thing but with the potential for community surrounding it.”

“When she formed Thursday Night Swim Club I thought it would be really funny to steal her idea and do the same thing with the same exact logo,” says Glatt. “She made a T-shirt and everything and we just crossed out the logo and rebranded it. It’s a long-running inside joke now.”

Coffee is only one reason people show up in droves. Many people bring dogs to the event seeing as they enjoy the waters, too. The possibility of petting a few puppies is actively promoted on Friday Morning Swim Club’s website under the FAQ section. Glatt hopes one day, dogs will outnumber people in attendance. Lucky for Friday Swim goers, some of the dogs wear life jackets.

“One of the funniest parts of Friday Morning Swim Club were these three specific dogs that came every week,” said Glatt. “It’s probably a 30-foot drop for swimmers, so when the big drop came the dogs lost their minds running up and down the pier trying to save everyone.”

Friday Morning Swim Club has provided a community for those looking to find friends in the pandemic. With the event taking place outdoors, the possibility of catching COVID is low with social distancing possible at the pier. For anyone worried about their safety, Glatt said that the club has people standing ashore, prepared to help anyone that needs assistance making it back on land. Having only a few ladders scattered about Montrose Harbor, it’s important to take precautions assuring swimmers’ safety.

“We definitely grab close friends who are fit and capable when the water gets cold,” said Glatt. “We post up every 20 feet helping people out of the water because there aren’t many ladders out there.”

Laken Browning, a Chicago resident who’s an avid Friday Morning Swim Club participant, admits the event has been a great space to both make friends and bring her own. In fact, her love is half the reason Glatt has seen an increase in participation. Her TikTok about the event has reached an audience of almost 40,000 people. “The TikTok video blew up in September and now, here we are,” Glatt said.

“It’s really wild, the power of social media,” says Browning. “I’ve gone five or so times [to Swim Club] and every time I run into random acquaintances or friends I hadn’t seen since high school.”

Though October 1 marked the end of the 2021 season, Glatt looks towards April as a potential start date for next year. Of course, if people are looking to show up through the colder months, Glatt will always be there. If you’re interested in joining in for a polar plunge this winter, the best place for more information regarding colder morning swims would be Glatt’s Instagram.

“My personal goal is to do it through the winter,” says Glatt. “We’ve started and stopped it seasonally for safety, but I’m curious to see if people will still show up.”

For the 400 or so people that show up regularly, Friday Morning Swim Club has provided a consistent staple to their schedule. To wake up at 6 AM every week and go swimming before work can be a feat. For those who are willing to subject themselves to the cold winds and waters of Lake Michigan, it can be a rewarding experience as well. With many people losing community amidst the pandemic, the Friday Morning Swim Club has provided more than just coffee, dogs, and swimming over the course of four months. It’s provided memories, friendships, and a home to those searching for one.

“It’s just a group of like-minded people who are crazy enough to want to jump in the lake at 7 AM,” said Browning.
It’s the ghost wonderful time of the year
Terrifying theater, a creepy car wash, and spooky soirées around town

By Micco Caporale, Salem Collo-Julin, and Kerry Reid

There’s a (spooky) sampling of some Halloween and other (horror) seasonal events and activities coming up (from the shadows of the night) in Chicago and beyond (the living dead). More events are listed on our website; take a gander (if you dare! Bwahahahahahaha!) at chicagoreader.com.

THEATER AND OTHER MULTI-DAY EVENTS

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.

Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog
Because toxic masculinity is scary as shit. Through 11/6: Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM; the Edge Theater, 5451 N. Broadway, blackbuttereyes.com, $30 (proceeds benefit Season of Concern).

Holy Ghost Bingo: God, Goblins & Games
A Halloween-themed edition of the Late Night Catechism franchise, through 10/31: Fri-Sat 8 PM, Sun 2 PM; Greenhouse Theater Center, 2257 N. Lincoln, 773-404-7336, greenhousetheater.org, $35.

Slasher Museum
Ongoing through Sun 10/31: Replay Lincoln Park (2833 N. Sheffield) invites guests to enjoy arcade games while immersing themselves in a seasonal pop-up that recreates scenes from classic slashers such as Halloween and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Open 5 PM weekdays, noon on weekends, 21+.

Redline VR Haunted House
Through 10/31: Redline VR (4702 N. Ravenswood) blurs the lines between the physical and digital for this uniquely haunting experience. Participants can choose from the Raven’s Curse, a traditional haunted house inspired by Poe’s “The Raven” which includes two beverages (alcohol optional!) in its $15.99 ticket price, or spring for the creepy crawlies hiding in cyberspace with the OsoreVR Haunted House ($10) or VR Zombie Shooting ($25).

Ghosts on the Bloomingdale Trail
Through Mon 11/15: Free Street Theater presents this self-guided tour along the Bloomingdale Trail between St. Louis and Humboldt. Visitors can use their smartphones to scan QR codes posted on signage and hear 15 different Chicago ghost stories. Wheelchair accessible, free, family friendly, freestreet.org.

THU 10/28
Horror of the Humanities
Virtual haunted house hosted by the DePaul Humanities Center where guests don avatars to search for clues, create artworks, and get their boogie on—all while learning from artists and scholars about horror’s relationship with the humanities. 6 PM, free with registration, bit.ly/3nzDDT3.

FRI 10/29
Brittain’s Tunnel of Terror Car Wash
From the safety of your vehicle, behold creepy clowns, shrieking goblins, and other seasonal beasts as they terrorize the grime right off your vehicle at Brittain’s Car Wash (1572 Larkin in Elgin). 6 PM-10 PM on both Friday and Saturday, $20/car with $5 of each wash going to the Boys and Girls Club of Elgin, family friendly.

A Lebowski Halloween
A costume contest plus music from Desmond Jones and the King of Mars. 9 PM, Schubas, 3159 N. Southport, lb-st.com, $12 in advance, $15 door, 21+.

SAT 10/30
Community Thrift Halloween Pop-Up
The volunteer-run Community Thrift project benefits abolitionist and mutual aid projects throughout the city. Proceeds from this event benefit people recently released from Cook County Jail. 11 AM-3 PM on the Humboldt Boulevard side of Palmer Square, free to attend, family friendly.

Dia de los Muertos Xicágo
3-8 PM, National Museum of Mexican Art, 1852 W. 19th, free, family friendly.

Splatter Theatre
Annoyance’s annual comic salute to slasher films plays tonight at 8 PM, and also as part of the theater’s “Spookfest 2021,” a quartet of Halloween-themed shows on Sun 10/31, at 9:30 PM (lineup begins 5 PM 10/31); Annoyance Theatre, 851 W. Belmont, 773-697-9693, theannoyance.com, $25 ($40 for all four shows 10/31).

Arts in the Dark Halloween Parade
6-8 PM, State Street between Lake and Van Buren, artsinthedark.com, free, family friendly.

SUN 10/31
Graceland Cemetery: Stories, Symbols, and Secrets Walking Tour
Veteran ghost tour guide Adam Selzer will share tales of lesser-known LGBTQ+ pioneers, flappers, criminals, artists, and more. 10 AM and 1 PM, Graceland Cemetery, 4001 N. Clark, $22, all ages.

SAT 11/6 & SUN 11/7
Recorrido de Ofrendas (Day of the Dead Altar Walk)
VillArte-Chicago La Villita hosts its annual art walk through Little Village featuring altars from local business, organizations, and community members. 11 AM-5 PM both days, La Villita, 3700 W. 26th, free, family friendly.

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Remembering Jan Karski

David Strathairn portrays the Polish diplomat who tried to warn the Allies about the Holocaust.

By Josh Flanders

In this fraught time of political divisions and worldwide calamities, in the face of seemingly impossible odds, how can we find the courage and conviction to stand up for what is right?

From November 3-14 at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Emmy Award-winning and Academy Award-nominated actor David Strathairn (Good Night, and Good Luck, Nomadland, Lincoln) will take the stage in a one-man performance about the life of Jan Karski, the Polish diplomat who warned the White House about the atrocities being committed in Nazi-occupied Poland during the Holocaust.

Remember This: The Lesson of Jan Karski, written by Georgetown professor Derek Gold- man and his former student Clark Young and directed by Goldman, captures Karski’s life story as a courier, risking his life to bring word of the massacres of Jews and Poles to exiled Polish leaders as well as the U.S. and Allied governments.

Strathairn originated the role in 2014 at the centennial celebration of Jan Karski’s birth at Georgetown University’s Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics, whose mission is “humanizing politics through performance.”

“It began as an ensemble piece with Georgetown students and myself,” Strathairn says, describing how it originated as a staged reading during a commemorative weekend, and was later whittled down to its current form. “We didn’t really think it was going to have a life beyond that, but the response from the school of foreign service, people in the audience, people in the Polish community, felt this was compelling.”

From there, they started offering the show to theaters, museums, and Jewish organizations. They realized Karski was a historical figure who needed a light shone on him and to be elevated for his powerful contributions, as well as his lifelong commitment to teach and inspire the next generation to take action and follow his lead. “I wasn’t surprised that it would affect people, learning about this man,” Strathairn says. “He’s been in the wings too long. The legacy of Jan Karski has been dormant. It was exhilarating to find the response and the desire to have it carry on.”

Strathairn traveled the world, performing in Poland, at Holocaust museums, and in London for Holocaust Remembrance Day. “We went to Poland on the eve of the opening of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews,” Strathairn says, “which was actually built on the Warsaw Ghetto’s footprint. We did a production at a theater with Polish acting students. That was enlightening. Every step along the way we’ve learned something about the resonance of the piece.”

Over time, the show evolved to engage the audience in questions related to how we bear witness and our role in speaking out. “We decided to bookend the piece with the common man posing questions, like ‘What do you do when you’re presented with moments like the Holocaust, or climate change, or COVID? What do you do? What should you do? Do you have a duty?’ We frame Karski’s contributions with those questions.”

This incredible story of bravery and moral responsibility feels especially poignant and timely today. “We’re onto something,” Strathairn says, “with this conceit of the common man coming off the streets to ask a question to his fellow citizens, what do we do? Then we turn it over to Karski as an example of inspiration, for an answer, of some sorts, to those questions.”

Strathairn first learned of Karski when watching Shoah in 1985, Claude Lanzmann’s nine-and-a-half hour documentary about the Holocaust, which features 40 minutes of testimony from Karski. “His testimony was seared upon me,” Strathairn recalls, “and lingered with me. And when Derek called me and said, ‘We’re putting together an event to honor Jan Karski,’ I said, ‘Wow, yes, please sign me up.’”

Looking back on his award-winning career spanning four decades, Strathairn says that the part of Karski, as compared to other roles he has played, is “maybe one of the most challenging. The role of Edward R. Murrow [from Good Night, and Good Luck] was a high bar for me to grab on to, because of his influence as an icon of broadcast journalism. This being a one-man show asks for a lot, but this one, and Edward R. Murrow, stand out as being the most challenging. It is also very rewarding too. The accolades of performance come and go, they are ephemeral, but what people take away from the story of those two men, I feel that is important, that is the most rewarding thing, reigniting their memories.”

Strathairn says that a young law student at Georgetown stood up in the audience recently, barely able to keep from being overwhelmed at how Karski resonated with her life as a student in the school of foreign service. “What do I do?” she asked. “How can I do that?”

Strathairn found that encounter very moving and telling. “He is a potent influence,” he says, “for people launching into a career with foreign service, and for the everyday citizen trying to figure out the most critical issues and to ask, ‘How do I grapple with the questions of what can I do? Do I have a duty, a responsibility?’ It’s becoming almost cliché, but when you pull it apart and examine the actual bones and neurology of what it means, you start considering one’s moral center, the ethical center of moral courage of what it means to say something, and to whom, and at what risk. That’s why we think it’s great that it’s back in the theater honoring the age-old tradition of storytelling.”

Strathairn thinks it is wonderful that theaters are opening up again “to share a common experience, when it comes to entertainment. It’s the best place to get together to entertain some important thoughts.” He acknowledges the theater’s responsibility to, as he says, “provide, at best, a visceral connection to ideas,” complemented by the Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics’s aim to put a “human face on the political issues of today for students to examine these issues.”

“You may or may not have heard of Karski,” Strathairn says, “but you will never forget him after you learn about him.”
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Haunted Hamlet

The brooding Dane makes for a good Halloween show.

Invictus Theatre’s intimate, bare-bones modern-dress staging of Hamlet is storefront Shakespeare at its best. The company’s stated aim is to “promote a better understanding . . . of heightened language . . . to express the breadth of the human condition,” and this dynamic, clearly spoken non-Equity production delivers. Director Charles Askenaizer guides the ensemble and the audience together on a shared journey through the play’s grim narrative, illuminating its philosophical, spiritual, and political themes and its darkly ironic humor as well as its suspenseful plot.

Askenaizer is electrifying as an anguished yet antic Hamlet whose tortured poetic soliloquies—delivered as expressionistic internal monologues under the relentless glare of a red-hot light—clarify the character’s painful path toward acceptance of his tragic fate.

The macabre lighting and ominous sound design by Chad Lussier evoke an eerie atmosphere—appropriate to this Halloween season—for this ghost story about a haunted prince charged to avenge his father’s murder at the inevitable cost of his own life. Standouts among the solid supporting cast include Darren Jones as the speechifying counselor Polonius, Ebby Offord as his doomed daughter Ophelia, Jack Morsovillo and Andrea Upping as a yuppiefied Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Robert Koon in the small but telling role of the traveling actor who helps Hamlet expose the corruption of his family’s court. —ALBERT WILLIAMS

Haunted Hamlet through 11/21: Mon and Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM, Invictus Theatre, 1106 W. Thorndale, invictus-theatre.com, $30 ($25 students and seniors).

My Name Is Inanna

Goddess and mortal

Tick down Iranian history through one woman’s narrative

In the opening moments of Ezzat Goushegir’s My Name is Inanna, a clock marks the passing seconds, each tick as heavy as an anvil striking a penny nail. A woman with bound hands sits listening, clearly anguished and afraid. The woman is Inanna (Maryam Abdi), both the Mesopotamian Queen of Heaven and Goddess and an imprisoned, contemporary activist trying not to succumb to despair.

The duality—woman as both goddess and mortal—propels the themes of feminine resilience and rebirth that propel Red Tape’s production, directed with unsparing intensity by Ali-Reza Mirsajadi. Time flips and jumps as the fractured narrative spins from 1953, when the CIA helped Iran’s military overthrow the sovereign nation’s democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, and install the Shah as supreme leader, to something approximating the present. It’s not always clear exactly where or when Inanna’s narrative unfolds: the script travels from 1953, to the Shah’s overthrow in 1979, to the Iran-Iraq War, to various U.S. aggressions in the Middle Eastern country. But muddling time and place doesn’t dim Abdi’s kinetic performance, which captures the furthest reaches of human emotion—from the bubbly joy of first love, to the deep, cold terror of being betrayed by your own family.

That last provides Inanna’s most unforgettable scenes, which follow 17-year-old Du’a Khalil Aswad, the Kurdish teen stoned to death (by men) in 2007 for falling in love with a Sunni boy. Inanna honors both Aswad and countless other women. Those ticking seconds? They’re a reminder. Whenever, wherever they can, women still rise. (Note: Red Tape doesn’t charge for tickets. Ever.)

—CATEY SULLIVAN

My Name Is Inanna through 12/11: Fri-Sat 8 PM, Sun 7 PM, the Ready, 4546 N. Western, redtapetheatre.org, free (also available to livestream via Twitch).
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Image: Ivelisse Diaz, 2019 3Arts Community Awardee. Photo by Christopher Costoso.

MUSIC THEATER WORKS
RAGTIME
The indomitable E. Faye Butler (The Music and Life of Fannie Lou Hamer) dazzles in the titular role, sucking the audience in like a whirlpool, and spitting them out after an intense 70 minutes. From the first moment she addresses the audience, you realize that this isn’t the kind of show where you can simply kick back and relax. Butler immediately fully engages the audience in call and response; leading the group in song, her powerful voice is louder than an entire theater of singers. (The sheer awesomeness of her voice cannot be overstated.) The engagement goes beyond being summoned to participate—the show inspires the audience to sing, clap, and shout in the tradition of the Black church. During one of the most well-crafted moments of the show, Butler preaches with a fiery aplomb that would make any pastor proud.

The set design by CollettePollard is a beautifully conceived holistic Americana pastiche of the good, bad, and ugly. The theater is draped with red-white-and-blue flag-inspired bunting, protest signs, and the household trappings of a Black southern Christian woman of that era—including the requisite photo of The Last Supper. Subtle ominous details like a church fan depicting murdered civil rights leaders and a golligow doll fix us inexorably to that tumultuous era.

Hamer’s story is underscored by classic gospel spirituals and freedom songs that undercut both the highs and lows of her incredible life story. For one brief moment Butler sings a snippet of “Pick a Bale of Cotton,” a work song commonly sung in the cotton fields by enslaved people, reflecting Hamer’s childhood and adulthood occupation of working as a sharecropper. When the band enters on the stage (Deonté Brantly, Morgan E., Felton Offard) their existence is acknowledged, as contrasted with other productions where the band and supporting roles often fade to the back. Thematically, the simple gesture reflects Hamer’s legacy of redefining the role of the marginalized.

The show opens with an impeccable a cappella version of “Oh, Freedom,” then continues frenetically, successfully ramping up to a frenzy that never lets up. Director Henry Godinez never allows for boredom; however, there are some moments and transitions that could benefit from a few longer beats of silence, allowing the audience time to absorb the gravity of her words.

The trail to civil rights was paved in song and blood, and Fannie does not sugarcoat the cost of progress. The hope of the youth that swelled into the Freedom Summer, and the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and ’65, was motivated by anger and grief, after the Kennedy assassination, the murders of young activists like Medgar Evers, and the lynching and terror perpetrated by the Night Riders (Klan and other domestic terrorists) on everyday Black people. When Butler sings—no, SANGS—“I’ve Been Changed,” it’s a showstopper moment whose enormity expresses the anguish of too many sacrifices.

While many semibiographical pieces rewrite history, Fannie serves to set the record straight; Butler channels Hamer’s gentle and generous personality to voice some uncomfortable truths around allyship, intersectionality, and some of the most intractable barriers to unification across race, gender, and class. Suffrage for Black women was undercut by white suffragists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who oppressed Black progress even as she desperately tried to throw off the shackles of her own gender. The writing of the show smartly blurs the lines between historical and modern social justice goals. When we learn that Hamer worked with Betty Friedan and the recently departed John Lewis, it is a gut punch and a reminder that history is now. Fannie is essential viewing that should be witnessed by high school students, all adults—and especially anyone who finds themselves apathetic about our current political environment. Fannie stiffens our backbones with a double dose of vigor and hope, reminding us that even when we are “sick and tired of being sick and tired,” our vote and our voices matter. 

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ometimes, I feel a thin, slightly starchy feeling when looking at a movie poster or watching a trailer. It’s the feeling of recognizing myself as a targeted audience. Especially in large franchises like Marvel, heretofore dominated by white, male heroes, when a film or TV show strays from the usual template I find myself feeling that old feeling. Privately, I’ve coined it as the Ethnic Foods Aisle Feeling—like the aisle in large grocery stores staked out for rice, noodles, curry paste, and the like. When I’m in a pinch, I’m grateful for the presence of those foods in major grocery chains, but I’m also a little rueful. The quality, the selection, the know-how of those products: they’re never quite right, but I buy them all the same because that’s all that’s available to me.

I went into Eternals, Marvel’s latest offering, fully expecting Ethnic Foods Aisle Feeling. The star-studded cast boasts an abundance of non-white actors including Gemma Chan, Ma Dong-seok, Kumail Nanjiani, Lauren Ridloff, and Brian Tyree Henry. The cynic in me wondered if this lineup was a play to Marvel’s global reach and increasingly diverse audiences, like a corporate “woke” diversity and inclusion workshop. What I found instead was genuine, delightful character development nestled inside of a complex and challenging narrative. Eternals follows the story of ten aliens (the Eternals), who are sent to Earth at the dawn of human civilization with the express task of hunting down a species of otherworldly monsters called Deviants. Told in a fragmented, nonlinear arc, the film tracks the Eternals in present day as they reunite to face a potentially world-ending crisis. Bits of the group’s history are woven in, shedding light on their time on Earth spanning all of human civilization, but I’m struggling with this kind of blasé morality. Being a hero has a small crisis of faith, but that will undoubtedly be ironed out in a heart-raising pep-talk scene. Who has time to consider the subtleties of how intergalactic warfare might affect questions of personhood when the universe is on the line?

Though not entirely successfully, Eternals struggles with this kind of blase morality. Because their time on Earth spans all of human civilization, the Eternals have witnessed countless atrocities. Inside of the group of ten aliens, opinions differ on whether they have a duty to step in, whether they should remain bystanders as they have been ordered, and finally, whether their complacency is right or wrong, especially when humans die as a result. One of the central questions of the Eternals has to do with whether there’s a kind of universal special police force. Eerily similar to the U.S. military’s way of dropping into any global conflict that needs “solving,” the MCU paints good and evil in black and white. Maybe a hero has a small crisis of faith, but that will undoubtedly be ironed out in a heart-raising pep-talk scene. Who has time to consider the subtleties of how intergalactic warfare might affect questions of personhood when the universe is on the line?

Ultimately, the film answers half of this question but struggles to cohesively answer the second half. Considering the ten points of view to jump between, the millennia of potential plot material, not to mention a satisfying array of beautifully choreographed fight scenes and sweeping landscape shots, maybe it’s too much to expect a satisfyingly distinct philosophical vision from Eternals. But then again, maybe that makes sense—after all, it’s the delicious ambiguity, the attention to a person’s capacity for contradiction and change, that makes Zhao’s MCU debut so enjoyable. 

157m, English. PG-13

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**Antlers**

Antlers is an entertaining nonentity. Though its trailer promises a meditation on the nature of storytelling, what it delivers is a serviceable monster film that breaks no new ground. With Scott Cooper directing and Guillermo del Toro producing, one might be forgiven for expecting more of this film, especially since it suggests from its first moments that it will be a story for our times. Antlers opens with a monologue from a First Nations woman describing the legend of the Wendigo, an evil creature who possesses and cannibalizes human beings. The prologue suggests that the Wendigo acts as an avenging force, wreaking havoc upon humankind on behalf of the abused earth. But therein lies the main problem with Antlers: It tries to be about far too much.

Perhaps if Antlers stuck with this one metaphor of averging nature, the film might have more impact. Instead, it also attempts to make monstrosity a vehicle for drug addiction, poverty, and abuse. The result is a muddled conflict pulled in too many directions for what is, at its core, a simple concept: Something scary lives in the woods and is coming for us. Instead, we have an undermotivated monster whose insatiable hunger can’t truly terrorize because it has no discernible rhyme or reason. All this might be forgiven thanks to the admirable efforts of the actors: Keri Russell and Jesse Plemons elevate their requisite roles as believer and doubter while Jeremy T. Thomas makes an excellently overplayed story.

Still, Antlers delivers a decent share of chills and a B-effort monster design in the eldrich del Toro style. See it for a better-than-expected monster flick, but don’t expect innovation. —**Colleen Morrissey** 100 min. R, wide release

**Army of Thieves**

Army of Thieves, a prequel to 2021’s Army of the Dead featuring far fewer zombies, follows the origin story of master safecracker Ludwig Dieter (Matthias Schweighöfer) as he joins a loose band of criminals attempting to pull off a series of legendary heists.

Shy and nerdy, Dieter is pulled into the criminal underworld by the mysterious Gwendoline (Nathalie Emmanuel), who finds the last piece of her classic mist ensemble, joining together the quirky hacker Korina (Ruby O. Fee), handsome bad boy Brad Cage (Stuart Martin), and quippy getaway driver Ralph (Guz Khan). Our team of thieves is pursued by an overzealous Interpol agent (Jonathan Cohen) with a vendetta to settle over some painful past run-ins with members of the crew.

Schweighöfer not only stars in, but directs the effort, creating a glossy, new-school heist flick that’s high on energy but low on sensible narrative. It’s not for expecting more of this film, especially since it suggests from its first moments that it will be a story for our times. Antlers opens with a monologue from a First Nations woman describing the legend of the Wendigo, an evil creature who possesses and cannibalizes human beings. The prologue suggests that the Wendigo acts as an avenging force, wreaking havoc upon humankind on behalf of the abused earth. But therein lies the main problem with Antlers: It tries to be about far too much.

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**Dune**

This visually sumptuous space opera is sure to please new audiences and Dune fans alike. Director Denis Villeneuve gifts us with unusually patient storytelling, a refreshing change in the sci-fi genre, and an opportunity to relish in setting up the magnitude of a new, grand universe. The SFX team serves up haunting, slow-gliding high-tech obelisks and highly impractical dragonfly crafts, contrasted with vast misty desolate desert vistas. The sound design is the requisite BWAAA and generic tribal vocalizations. The costuming is an exquisite pastiche of vaguely ethnic global appropriation, window dressing to the story’s main thrust which could be summed up as “What happens when imperialism goes wrong.”

The film opens on a lazy Zendaya commenting on colonialism (perhaps signaling an intention to unpack white-savior themes in the sequel), then cuts away to a satisfyingly wan and angsty Timothée Chalamet, a physical manifestation of the powerlessness of youth. Villeneuve has stated that Zendaya’s character will have a greater role in the sequel. Jason Momoa, Dave Bautista, and Josh Brolin are completely in their element, serving righteous space-bro energy. Charlotte Rampling is deliciously haughty and scheming as the Reverend Mother, matched against matrilineal renegade Lady Jessica, quietly played by Rebecca Ferguson.

At a tight 2 hours and 35 minutes running time, purists may grumble that countless details were inevitably left out. However, as Watchmen fans know, a too-faithful adaptation is a surefire way to end up with yet another pile of garbage in the gullet of a giant space-worm. After all, Dune the novel still exists and will always remain a compelling read. —**Sheri Flanders** 155 min. PG-13, wide release

**The French Dispatch**

The French Dispatch opens with a blink-and-you-miss-it exposition of the world Wes Anderson has created: It’s 1960s France, and Bill Murray is Arthur Howitzer Jr., editor of The French Dispatch, a fictional New Yorker-style magazine that originally began as a Sunday supplement to the Liberty, Kansas, Evening Sun, “bringing the world back to Kansas.” The film is a portmanteau—that is, a collection of shorter narratives within one film. It’s charmingly arranged in the structure of a print magazine, including an editor’s note, “The Cycling Reporter” by Herbsaat Sazerac (Owen Wilson), feature stories “The Concrete Masterpiece” by J.K.L. Berensen (Tilda Swinton), “Revisions to a Manifesto” by Lucinda Kremzent (Frances McDormand), and “The Private Dining Room of the Police Commissioner” by Roebbuck Wright (Jeffrey Wright), plus “Declines and Deaths” as an endnote.

The film is a love letter to France and to old-fashioned print journalism, particularly travel writing. (Howitzer Jr.’s motto as editor are “No crying,” and “Just try to make it sound like you wrote it that way on purpose.”)

It has everything that we’ve come to expect from Wes Anderson—carefully crafted aesthetics, perfect color palettes, and intricate tableau of actors. It’s to nobody’s surprise that the film has a (mostly white) stacked cast, full of Wes Anderson regulars and a variety of A-listers in both major and minor roles. The French Dispatch alternates from French to English, from black-and-white to color, as if Anderson is just off screen with a switch. There’s occasional animation, quick-witted jokes, and a score once again by Alexandre Desplat, whose light and lifting piano threads the stories together.

As with most films by this director, the style and humor and pacing can be polarizing. Despite some fun moments, The French Dispatch didn’t feel as easy a watch as other Wes Anderson films. It is certainly worth seeing for die-hard fans, Francophiles, and journalism lovers. But for newbies, on-the-fence viewers, and harsh critics, this reviewer might recommend just watching one of his other movies. —**Taryn Allen** 105 min. R, wide release

**Halloween Kills**

Halloween Kills fails to resurrect the franchise. But that was as predictable as the fact that Michael Myers is indestructible, no? Instead, it takes ambitious, sometimes even admirable, swings in various directions, but the majority of them don’t hit on anything good. Picking up minutes after David Gordon Green’s previous entry, 2018’s Halloween, Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), her daughter Karen (Ludy Greer), and granddaughter Allyson (Andi Matichak) are in the hospital after leaving the boogeyman for dead. He’s not dead, though, and as always, Laurie is convinced she’ll be able to defeat him this time around. Joining with other survivors from previous films (Kyle Richards reprises her role as Lindsey Wallace, for example) and inspiring the Haddonfield townspeople to fight back, Laurie does have numbers on her side. But that’s part of the issue. The amount of subplots bury the Strode women in their own film, which leaves it gasping for air as Michael Myers remains alive. —**Becca James** 106 min. R, Peacock TV, wide release

**Karen Dalton: In My Own Time**

Karen Dalton was never a household name and she never will be. But for a certain subset of music fans, the Oklahoma-born folk chanteuse is a legend. Lovingly directed by Richard Peete and Robert Yapkowitz, this documentary is a reverent tribute to a person who cast a spell on most people—men, particularly—whose path she crossed. A parade of aging hippies, including a couple ex-husbands, sing Dalton’s praises. Later luminaries like Nick Cave count her as a touchstone as well. But was she really worth the hype?

The thing about profiles of troubled artists who died young, had mental and substance issues, and never really “made it,” is that those of us new to their art are at the mercy of ardent acolytes. Who am I to argue with Bob Dylan, who’s quoted from his autobiography, calling Dalton his favorite singer? The singer/songwriter Angel Olsen reads Dalton’s diary throughout, lending the narrative a rare intimacy. It makes the viewer feel like they’re in the room with Dalton as she shoots speed, fights with countless lovers, and agonizes over a music career that’s not going as she’d dreamed or as so many around her expected it to.

The film has an unexpectedly meaningful coda, as a fire consumed much of the singer’s archives soon after the shoot was done, leaving it as the sole photographic and aural record of most of that material. Dalton died of AIDS in the 80s, but her music has had several revivals since. No doubt this love letter of a documentary will spur renewed interest. Whether she was an underappreciated genius or another in a long line of tormented minor lights of a significant era is up to the listener/viewer to say. —**Dmitry Samarov** 85 min. In select theaters.

**The French Dispatch**

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The Opals deserve a place among Chicago’s greatest girl groups

If they’d released more than a handful of singles during their career, they’d be as famous as the Shirelles or the Supremes.

By Steve Krakow

Since 2004 Plastic Crimewave (aka Steve Krakow) has used the Secret History of Chicago Music to shine a light on worthy artists with Chicago ties who’ve been forgotten, underrated, or never noticed in the first place.

As I’ve complained here before, women often get left out of music history—a problem that seems especially bad in soul music. I’ll never understand why Loleatta Holloway, Hollie Thee Maxwell, and the Fascsoul music. I’ll never understand why Loleatta Aed, or never noticed in the first place.

Chicago music. I’ll never understand why Loleatta Aed, or never noticed in the first place.

Music to shine a light on worthy artists with Credit: Plastic Crimewave

The Opals are still one of the greatest girl groups Chicago ever produced.

The Opals hailed from East Chicago, Indiana, where founder Rosie “Tootsie” Addison won a local talent contest in 1962, singing Ray Charles’s “What’d I Say.” Inspired by her success, she started a group by bringing aboard friends Myra Tillotson, Betty Blackmon, and Rose E. Kelly. An East Chicago producer dubbed them the Opals, and as a gimmick they took to wearing opals around their necks (until Addison learned that the gemstones were reputed to bring bad luck). The Opals released their first single, “Hop, Skip & Jump,” later that same year on the tiny Beltone label.

This catchy slice of soulful doo-wop, which sounds a lot like the Marvelettes’ “Please Mr. Postman,” became something of a local favorite. The Opals recorded it with Addison as lead singer, but Kelly soon took over that role. “I knew I wouldn’t always be lead singer,” Addison recalled for a 2006 Chicago Sun-Times feature. “My gift was my ear. I could hear if we were flat or sharp, if we were rushing it.”

While playing at Steve’s Chicken Shack in Gary, Indiana, in 1962, the Opals were “discovered” by Mickey McGill of famed pop-soul outfit the Dells. In the same Sun-Times story, Addison remembered him saying, “We got to get you out of this roadhouse.”

McGill began coming to the house where the group rehearsed to help them along. “They sounded pretty good so we started teaching them,” he explained in Robert Pruter’s indispensable book Chicago Soul. “We didn’t manage the group, but we took them as little kids and showed them how to sing and everything.”

McGill also introduced the Opals to Vee-Jay Records. They started off as backup singers for the label’s other artists, lending their voices to recordings by Otis Leavill and, most famously, Betty Everett—they’re on her iconic 1964 version of “The Shoop Shoop Song (It’s in His Kiss).” This instantly recognizable tune, written by Rudy Clark, had failed to chart when Merry Clayton released it as a single in 1963, but Everett took it to number six on the Billboard Hot 100 and number one on the Cashbox R&B charts. It’s since appeared in many movies and become a hit a few more times—including after Cher covered it for the Mermaids soundtrack in 1990.

Blackmon left the group during this time, so that when McGill helped the Opals get work with producer and A&R man Carl Davis at Okeh Records, they were slimmed down to a duo. Davis had just enjoyed major successes with Gene Chandler’s “Duke of Earl” and Major Lance’s “Monkey Time,” and the Opals’ first gig for Okeh was an uncredited spot backing Major Lance on “Crying in the Rain,” the B side of his R&B smash “Hey Little Girl.” Davis then signed the Opals to a recording contract and had them sing for his saxophonist brother, Clifford, on the 1963 single “Finders Keepers, Losers Weepers,” cowritten by Phil Upchurch (and they got a credit for their vocals this time).

Soon Davis began functioning as the Opals’ manager, polishing their image and providing them with chaperones on the road (a common practice with especially young artists). He made sure the group had fancy human-hair wigs from Chicago Hair Goods, to keep them looking sharp onstage. “We’d sweat like crazy while performing,” Addison explained to the Sun-Times. “Our [real] hair would get all messy.”

In January 1964, the Opals finally cut a single for Okeh under their own name, the rockin’ Billy Butler song “Does It Matter” b/w “Tender Lover.” Produced by Davis with classy arrangements by Johnny Pate, it’s become a collector’s favorite—the cheapest copy currently on Discogs is $200.

The Opals’ next Okeh single also came out in ’64 and also featured Pate’s arrangements and Davis’s production. What set it apart was that both its songs were by none other than Curtis Mayfield, who was still with the Impressions and had begun moonlighting for Okeh as a producer and songwriter. “You’re Gonna Be Sorry” is a classic dance-floor groover, and the flip, “You Can’t Hurt Me No More,” is an angsty soul ballad. The single was a local hit, but the Opals released only one more, 1965’s “Restless Days” b/w “I’m So Afraid.”

The Dells had recorded “Restless Days” (cowritten by McGill) in the 1950s, but their version wasn’t released. With its doo-wop flavor, the tune does seem to belong to a different era from its B side: “I’m So Afraid,” also by Mayfield, has the kind of groovin’ midtempo Motown feel that the Northern Soul crowd loves, and it’s the main reason this rare 45 sometimes fetches three figures.
The Opals provided more uncredited backing for Major Lance on his 1965 single “Everybody Loves a Good Time” (written by Van McCoy), but Lance had passed his peak and the song only reached number 109 on the Billboard charts. By this time, Kelly had left the group and Juanita Tucker had joined. But the Opals were essentially finished.

Addison became a backup singer for Ernie Terrell & the Heavyweights, a band fronted by the fighter who won a disputed heavyweight title in 1965 after one of the boxing world’s major organizations (but not the other) stripped Muhammad Ali of his championship. Coincidentally Terrell was also the older brother of Jean Terrell from the Supremes, probably the most famous “girl group” of all time.

At the time of that 2006 Sun-Times story, Addison was still singing gospel at the Lighthouse Church of All Nations in Alsip, Illinois.

Other former Opals were living in Atlanta, Georgia; Union Springs, Alabama; Frankfort, Illinois; and Hammond, Indiana.

Over the years the Opals’ music has appeared on a multitude of soul compilations, and new material is still turning up. This year Kent Records in the UK released a 45 of two vintage Opals tracks, which label consultant Tony Rounce had identified as coming from the group after discovering them on a master-tape transfer of Billy Butler recordings for Okeh. One of these lost-and-found tunes is called “Can’t Give It Up,” which sums up the attitude of soul-music collectors toward the group. The Opals are arguably more widely known today than they ever were in the mid-60s.

The radio version of the Secret History of Chicago Music airs on Outside the Loop on WGN Radio 720 AM, Saturdays at 5 AM with host Mike Stephen.
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**THE COSMIC LAVENDER COUNTRY TOUR**

See also Saturday. Lavender Country headline the Cosmic Country Showcase, with host Andrew Sa. 9 PM, Hideout, 1354 W. Wabansia, $15. 21+

I’m wary about jumping on the “nature is healing” train, but I have to admit that when I heard the news that groundbreaking gay country band Lavender Country were returning to the Hideout stage for the Cosmic Country Showcase, it felt like a pretty big ray of hope—every time they’ve graced this festive event with their tunes, it’s been a great celebration. Led throughout their various incarnations by 77-year-old Patrick Haggerty, Lavender Country released what is almost certainly the first openly gay country album in 1973. That self-titled LP is majestic and magical; almost half a century later, I still think it’s one of the best country records ever made in terms of its instrumentation, melody, and eloquent, poignant lyrics. The universe of the album is raw and confrontational, and touches on Haggerty’s socialist anger—which at that time was less provocative than his songs about emotional connection and sexual wooing between men. Due to its themes and the era of its release, Lavender Country ultimately proved hard to market, and its original pressing on Gay Community Social Services of Seattle was limited to 1,000 copies.

Reissued by Paradise of Bachelors in 2014, the record drew in new listeners with its beauty and brilliance, and in 2016, Dan Taberski helped spread the word further with the short documentary *These C*cksucking Tears*, which debuted at South by Southwest. When Haggerty and the current iteration of the band finally released the follow-up to their debut, 2018’s *Blackberry Rose and Other Songs & Sorrows*, it was to a whole different world. An openly queer country album was no longer an isolated oddity, it was a contribution to a community, and there was an audience eager and ready to receive it. Haggerty made his latest musical statement in January when he unexpectedly dropped a new single, “Treasures That Money Can’t Buy” (not to be confused with the classic gospel song of the same name). It’s a sentimental song delivered in a classic, straightforward style with production that feels like it could have come off an old 78. It’s a reminder to cherish the intangibles of friendship and love over the cruel demands of the rat race—and the bite of Haggerty’s scorn for greed gives it sharp teeth. —MONICA KENDRICK

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**SATURDAY 30**

**THE COSMIC LAVENDER COUNTRY TOUR**

See Friday. Lavender Country headline the Cosmic Country Showcase, with host Andrew Sa. 9 PM, Hideout, 1354 W. Wabansia, $15. 21+

GLAIVE X ERICDOA. See also Sunday. Midwixst opens. 7:30 PM, Schubas, 3159 N. Southport, sold out.

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**PICK OF THE WEEK**

Chicago’s Heet Deth make enough noise to wake the dead on *Heet Deth Hooray!*

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THE MEMBERS OF HEET DETH, drummer-singer Julia Bard and guitarist-singer Laila Eskin, seem to have taken the right lessons from the early-2000s heyday of the White Stripes and Death From Above 1979—namely, that two people can whip up enough noise to make a bigger band overkill. On their debut full-length, September’s *Heet Deth Hooray! (Don’t Panic)*, the Chicago gutter-rock duo play with such unrestrained fervor that you can imagine the devil perking up to listen—on the monstrous “Big Bang Boom,” Eskin contorts melodic low-end riffs into feverish, discordant blasts as hair-raising as the band’s lacerating paired hollers. Bard anchors Heet Deth’s devilish swing with rockabilly-style locomotion, particularly on “Motorcycle Race,” where a springy, chattering snare drum pushes the sassy stop-time stabs of Eskin’s flame-job guitar over the finish line. Bard and Eskin are astute vocalists, and rarely try to shout above their own din—instead they tend to sing only when they’ve dialed back their instruments. Every time they harmonize at top volume, though, they sound like they’re trying to tear their way out of a jail cell with the force of their vocal cords. —LEOR GALIL

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**HEET DETH, BUSY KWEEN POWER TRIP, RAT CHASM**

Wed 11/10, 8:30 PM, Sleeping Village, 3734 W. Belmont, $5. 21+
Few artists in the overlapping and extremely online worlds of hyperpop and digicore have achieved the crossover visibility of teenage phenoms Glaive and ericdoa—the New Yorker published an essay about Glaive before he’d even played his first show, which was this past August at the Lyrical Lemonade Summer Smash. Both artists are still teenagers, and they’ve already released solo work through a major label: Interscope has issued the Glaive EP Cypress Grove (2020) and all dogs go to heaven (2020) as well as the ericdoa album COA (2020). Glaive favors spiderweb midwest-emo guitars blended into a universe of hyperactive electronic production, while ericdoa prefers dreamlike synths and sparse, sharp-edged beats that reflect the depth of hip-hop history. As singers they strike the same wounded, existential tone, with sweetly trembling vocals that stitch together suave R&B crooning and wounded, existential tone, with sweetly trembling vocals that stitch together suave R&B crooning and.

**SUNDAY**

**Glaive x ericdoa** See Saturday. Midwest opens. 6:30 PM, Schubas, 3159 N. Southport, sold out.

**FRIDAY**

**YELLOW EYES** Immortal Bird and Bottomed open. 10 PM, Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western, $12. 21+

Black metal can be a funny genre, in that the better you get at making it, the more likely you are to be put on blast for being inauthentic. Over the genre’s three-decade history, the standard for what is “true” or “evil” has become very strict—if you’re not anonymously releasing completely blown-out, inaccessible cassettes with photocopied black-and-white covers strewn with indecipherable text, you’re a poseur. Part of the reason I love New York band Yellow Eyes so much is that they gracefully and successfully push back on that philosophy. They create black metal that’s lush, completely musically intelligible, borderline catchy, and played with next-level skill. Assuming that “accessible black metal” isn’t a self-canceling impossibility, Yellow Eyes are in its vanguard. They also reject conventional black-metal protocols and aesthetics, including pseudonyms and corpse paint, which could further provoke the heads who are itching to accuse them of being “false,” but I think they’re the perfect entry point to the genre. The band’s most recent release, the wildly epic 2019 album Rare Field Ceiling, was probably my most-listened-to record of that year due to its mind-bending guitar interplay, endless twists and turns, and sweeping, forlorn vocal howls. Yellow Eyes didn’t play live very often even before the pandemic, and Scorched Tundra’s Alexi Front (who’s coproducing this event) tells me this show has been in the works for years—it’s not to be missed.

—IACIMARUSTI

**SATURDAY**

**Glad Rags** Living Thing opens. 9:30 PM, Hideout, 1354 W. Wabansia, $12. 21+

On their debut album, All of Them, local pop ensemble Glad Rags explore how interpersonal transgressions can ripple through creative communities, and even as they grapple with anger and grief, they never lose the sense of joyful discovery that underground scenes can provide. Led by vocalist-keyboardist and Sex No Babies member Mable Gladly, Glad Rags have a core lineup of six members, but the album features contributions from 15 musicians, including drummer Benjamin Karas of experimental rock group Evasive Backflip and woodwind player Karolina Prus. Based on several instances of harm that Glad Rags members have witnessed in their creative circles, All of Them incorporates narratives that address a variety of timely themes (sexual violence, cancel culture) while questioning the responsibility of individuals within a scene to build safer, more supportive arts spaces.

Gladly wrote, arranged, and mixed much of the album and collaborated on lyrics with three of the band’s core members—vocalist and synth player Jacqueline Baker, vocalist Mar Yann, and multi-instrumentalist Patrick Sundlof. The music blends disco, new wave, and chamber pop, and Glad Rags’ use of cello, sitar, and programmed beats recalls when indie bands such as Arcade Fire made waves in the early 2000s with dance beats and synth flourishes that could compete with any EDM-inspired post-recession pop; meanwhile, a rotating cast of seven singers adds perspective, like a Greek chorus in a stage play. On “I Used to Be (Happy),” Baker ponders how the scene will respond to a predator’s return: “Will we turn him ‘round and kick him out / Or say, ‘Hello, What’s up brother? How ya doing?’” A group of background singers respond “blah blah blah,” suggesting this creep isn’t even worth
MUSIC

continued from 53

an answer. All of Them feels like a community thea-
ter troupe coming together to produce a musical
dedicated to telling one guy to fuck off. While
their album is filled with righteous anger, Glad Rags
don’t let that get in the way of the groove. All of
Them celebrates resilience through communal cre-
ativity, so it’s fitting that Glad Rags will debut the
album live at one of the first shows on the Hideout’s
intimate stage as the club brings concerts back
inside for the first time since the start of the pan-
demic. —JACK RIEDY

WEDNESDAY

HEET DETH See Pick of the Week on page 52.
Bussy Kween Power Trip and Rat Chasm open.
8:30 PM, Sleeping Village, 3734 W. Belmont, $5, 21+

ALBUM REVIEWS

ARTFACTS, . . . AND THEN THERE’S THIS
Astral Spirits
astralartifacts.bandcamp.com/album/and-then-
theres-this

Flutist Nicole Mitchell, cellist Tomeka Reid, and
drummer Mike Reed initially formed Artifacts as a
repertory group; the music on their 2015 debut
album, Artifacts (4AD Music), includes composi-
tions by founding or early members of the Asso-
ciation for the Advancement of Creative Musi-
cians, among them Anthony Braxton, Muhal Rich-
ard Abrams, Amina Claudine Myers, and Roscoe
Mitchell. But it was probably inevitable that they’d
delve into original material, since everyone in the
trio is an established bandleader and composer and
therefore keenly aware of the resources on hand.
The title of their second recording, . . . And Then
Theres This, telegraphs the shift everyone writes,
and they seem to have designed their compositions
to show off one another’s strengths. Reed’s “Pleas-
ure Palace” is simultaneously sparse and funky;
the cello’s cascading figures complement both the
drumming’s forceful, rock-ish feel and the flute’s
incantatory phrasing. Reid’s “Song for Helena”
telgraphs the shit; everyone writes, and the voicelike
quality of her playing. And the flute’s
sentimentality.

HELADO NEGRO, FAR IN
4AD
heladonegro.bandcamp.com/album/far-in

The confessional, artsy electronic songs on Helado
Negro’s first six records have always struck deep
chords in me. Born Roberto Carlos Lange, the
second-generation Ecuadorian American uses sub-
ttle musical metaphors to share mixed sentiments
stemming from his Latinx heritage—hope, anxiety,
and pride, in almost equal measure. On his latest
album, Far In (4AD), which comes after 2019’s This
Is How You Smile, Lange revisits these themes over
the course of 15 tunes that turn from ethereal to
upbeat and danceable and back, and as always his
personal reflections shed light on something uni-
versal. On this record he drives home the possi-
bilities of sustenance during lockdown and finding
true escape by turning inward through honeyed
vocals embraced by gently funky bass lines, lumi-
nous touches of synths, and propulsive drum tracks.
As usual, his songs welcome multiple readings: “La
Naranja” (“The Orange”) references the oranges
that were so ubiquitous around Lange’s childhood
home in Florida that they seemed to be in endless
supply and often were casually wasted. The lyrics
carry a delicious ambiguity—Lange could be just
as easily referring to the sweet intimacy between
lovers enclosed in their own private world of blos-
soming romance or physically confined together in
lockdown. The tune opens with long, floating
violin tones that return to punctuate its bustling
arrangement, and over a sweet bass line Lange
marvels at the potential of human connection and
the ultimate pandemic lessons: “Tú y yo, podemos
acabar todo / Tú y yo, sobreviviremos esto” (“You
and I, we can change everything / You and I, we
will survive this”). —CATALINA MARIA JOHNSON

AIMEE MANN, QUEENS OF THE SUMMER HOTEL
SuperEgo
aimeemann.com

Aimee Mann pairs her exquisitely crafted lyrics
with unforgettable melodies, but her tunes often
aren’t what you’d call light romps. The singer-
songwriter started her musical career in the 80s
as front woman of post-new-wave dance-pop
band ’Til Tuesday, then went solo in the early 90s.
On her tenth solo album, Queens of the Summer
Hotel (released on SuperEgo, the label she found-
ed in 1999 with her manager and former ’Til Tues-
day bandmate Michael Hausman), Mann probes
the depths of human experience, addressing
some grim subject matter—including suicide, self-
immolation, and incest. The record comes four
years after Mann’s previous album of new materi-
al, Mental Illness, which could serve as a compan-
ion piece to Queens of the Summer Hotel thanks to
its similar topics and similarly folky instrumentation.
Mann composed the new album with collaborator
Paul Bryan as the score for a theatrical adaptation
of Susanna Kaysen’s 1993 memoir, Girl, Interrupted
(which also inspired the movie of the same title).
Each song touches on a chapter or character in
the book, which details the nearly two years Kay-
sen spent in a Massachusetts psychiatric institution
starting in 1967.

Mann has openly spoken about her own strug-
gles with anxiety and depression, and she can
tackle tough or taboo subjects without cloying
sentimentality. GotShi forges the electric gui-
tars on some of Mann’s earlier albums in favor of
a stripped-down approach that showcases her dis-
tinctive alto. The first track, “You Fall,” layers insis-
tent piano, flute, and strings to convey the quea-
sy sensation that can come from trying to hold it
together while contemplating the feeling that
you won’t succeed. The rapid pacing of “Give Me
Fifteen” derides the hurried, offhand way some
doctors diagnose a patient experiencing a men-
tal-health crisis. The sugary singsong melody of
“Home by Now” contrasts with Mann’s lyrics, which
describe a young woman’s twisted relation-
ship with her father: “My daddy loves me / He’s
my lieben [sweetheart] / I’m eine kleine frau
[one little wife] / So draw the curtains.” The piano
waltz “Suicide Is Murder” coolly examines meth-
ods of killing oneself—drowning, bullets, pills—and
the motive, means, and opportunity needed to go
through with it. Some songs clock in at less than
two minutes, making it easy to imagine them bridg-
ing the empty spaces between scenes in the play,
but despite that brevity, GotShi isn’t a quick (or
easy) listen. This one will stay with you for a while.—KIRSTEN LAMBERT
MONOLORD, YOUR TIME TO SHINE
Relapse
monolord.bandcamp.com/album/your-time-to-shine

The doom scene has long played host to more than its fair share of the “leave politics out of music” crowd. But when online magazine Astral Noize asked Gothenburg stoner-metal trio Monolord whether they’d describe themselves as a political band, drummer Esben Willems replied, “Who isn’t? I think all bands are political in some sense. When Kiss go on stage and say, ‘We’re not political,’ that’s a political statement. We’re not Rage Against the Machine but we were open with our values, yes.” Those values echo throughout the band’s records: 2019’s electrifying No Comfort, for example, confronts the sickening global rise of racism and questions the utility of religion when it can so easily be abused for profit. Rather than merely wave a flag, though, Monolord tap into crucial subjects in a way that feels refreshing and honest, which does as much as their psychedelic atmospheres to infuse universality into songs that feel as big as the cosmos.

On their stunning new fifth album, Your Time to Shine (Relapse), Monolord once again put their political and social consciousness front and center. Who among us hasn’t looked at ongoing geopolitical conflict and climate change and wondered what horrors are rushing toward us? Monolord address this head-on right from the opening lines of elegiac opener “The Weary,” a somber apology to future generations for leaving them a planet that just might be irreparably fucked up. “Clench my fist under my smile / To make it last another while,” guitarist Thomass V Jäger sings. If you—a person alive in 2021—can’t relate, you’re not paying attention. The midpoint of the five-song record, “I’ll Be Damned,” plays on the double meaning of the phrase—to be surprised or condemned to eternal punishment—and leans into traditional stoner rock and doom with a rhythmic chug underpinning its core. It also serves as gritty palate cleanser before the band stretch their legs on two long-form songs: the reverential title track and “The Siren of Yersinia,” which initially crashes like violent waves against ocean rocks, momentarily opens up for a minimal, spacy guitar interlude, and builds back up to a climactic finale. Dripping with raw emotion and expert songwriting, Your Time to Shine makes another case for Monolord as one of the best power trios going, and its musical and thematic heavi ness provide much-needed catharsis and respite in a chaotic world. —JAMIE LUDWIG

SOLOSAM, PRINCIPLES TO DIE BY
Steak Worldwide/SoloSam
solosam.com

We’ve all felt it at some point during the 19 months and counting of the pandemic: an anguish amplified by loss, even if we’ve been lucky enough that no one close to us has died from the virus or developed long COVID. (If your life since March 2020 has been absolutely untroubled, I have to assume you’re a sociopath, a billionaire, or both.) Even in the Before Times, artists across the pop spectrum were mining trauma to make music that was acutely aware of their vulnerability and pain—and the pandemic has made suffering so widespread and mundane that an even greater number of listeners can relate to such material. Distress has saturated pop’s idiom. Chicago rapper SoloSam takes a journey through grief on his new Principles to Die By (Steak Worldwide/SoloSam), but fortunately he avoids contemporary cliches along the way. On “Tree,” for example, Sam lists the ills bearing down on the world—the stress of making ends meet on minimum wage, the racism of the prison-industrial complex—with such focused calm that it feels like he can get his arms around these bigger-than-life problems simply by speaking them. Sam wrings the energy out of his worries and transforms it into a calming elixir, which saturates the song’s sumptuous, low-key R&B instrumental. Principles to Die By is less therapeutic than empathetic—he’s working through some things, and he’s sharing his process, but he doesn’t pretend he can help anyone else the way he’s helping himself. All the same, when Sam opens up about his shortcomings and reflects on his resilience on “WISL” he sounds like someone you’d want to confide in. —LEOGALIL

THE ROCKET MAN SHOW
SAT, NOV 13

The world’s premier Elton John impersonator—hand-picked by Elton John himself as his official body double for Farewell Yellow Brick Road.

An Evening with LEO KOTTKE
THU, NOV 18

“It really sounded like two guitarists... His fingerpicking became a beautiful machine, full of syncopation…” —The New York Times

KEVIN NEALON
SUN, JAN 16

A Saturday Night Live legend, the Emmy-nominated comedian is back to his passion for making a live room of people laugh uncontrollably.

DC’S REFLECTING FOOLS
Featuring Members of the Capitol Steps
JAN 28–30

Don’t storm the Capitol Steps! The stairway to heavenly political satire continues with DC’s Reflecting Fools—the new musical parody group created by Capitol Steps members.
NEW

Animal Collective, L’Rain 3/20/2022, 7:30 PM, the Vic, 18+
Augustana, John-Robert 11/5, 8 PM, City Winery
Alina Baraz, Hope Tala 12/24/2022-27/2022, 7 PM, House of Blues
Bass Dreams Minus B, Miqa 11/6, 7 PM, Elastic
Emily Beisel, Erica Miller, and Molly Jones 11/4, 8:30 PM, Constellation, 18+
Black Angels 2/3/2022, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+
Black Dice, Atilis Band, Civic Center 11/1, 8 PM, Co-Prosperity Sphere, 18+
Blank Slate 11/7, 8:30 PM, Subterranean, 17+
Blush Scars, Edging 11/4, 9:30 PM, Hideout
BoDeans 11/8, 8 PM, 11/27, 7 and 10 PM, 11/28, 8 PM, City Winery
Boybrain, Aweful, Col Ray 11/1, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Bread and Butter Band 11/5, 9 PM, Hungry Brain
Brett Newski & the No Tomorrow, Brontë Fall 11/20, 8 PM, Golden Dagger
Brett Gazebo Effect 11/1, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+
Bruce Vine 2/26/2022, 6:30 PM, Park West
Brandi Carlile, DiFranco 8/6/2022, 6:30 PM, Huntington Bank Pavilion
Cautionary Clay 2/11/2022, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+
Charity, Harold Green 11/11, 7 PM, the Promontory, 18+
Kenny Chesney 5/25/2022, 5 PM, Soldier Field
C laudettes, Lurrie Bell 11/6, 8:30 PM, Fitzgerald’s, Berwyn
London Conrad, Capital Soiree 11/7, 7:30 PM, Schubas

COURTESY NORTHSTAR ARTISTS

Cool Yule Chicago featuring Jeff Hedberg, Margaret Murphy-Webb, Daryl Nitz, Abigail Riccords, Devon Sandridge, Jeannie Tanner, Frieda Lee, Derek Henderson, Stacy McMichael, and Andrew Blinderman 11/2/2022, 8 PM, City Winery
Samantha Crain 12/2/2022, 8 PM, Golden Dagger
Jeremy Cunningham Quartet, Andrew Meyer Quintet 11/8, 8 PM, Elastic
Kabir Dalawari Quartet; Geoff Bradfield, Russ Johnson, Matt Ulery, and Quin Kirkner 11/15, 8 PM, Elastic
Debbie-Marie Brown, Vita E. 11/9, 9 PM, Hideout
Drumcell, Truncate, DJ Hyperactive 12/4, 10 PM, Metro
Emo Nite LA DJs 11/5, 9 PM, Subterranean
Enjambre 2/27/2022, 6 PM, Concord Music Hall
Erasure, Bag Raiders 1/16/2022, 8 PM, Credit Union 1 Arena at UIC
Eva’s Twin Lover, Deep Cricket Night 11/6, 6 PM, Hideout
Emmit Fennel, Vandell 11/5, 8 PM, Lincoln Hall
Dillon Francis & Yung Gravy, Kittens 1/14/2022, 9 PM, Radius Chicago, 18+
Garden of Souls 11/4, 9 PM, Hungry Brain
Glad Rags, Living Thing 11/6, 9:30 PM, Hideout
Gucchiwars, Socalheart 11/5, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+
Erwin Helfer 11/5, 6 PM, Hideout
Danny Duran, Erwin Helfer, Anne Harris 11/20, 8 PM, Sono, Old Town School of Folk Music
Eric Hines & Pan Dulce 1/4, 8 PM, Fulton Street Collective
Honey Dijon, Derrick Carter, Ash Lauryn, Shaun J. Wright 12/18, 11 PM, Radius Chicago, 18+
“Mr. Excitement” Huff 11/19, 9 PM, FitzGerald’s, Berwyn
Robbie Lynn Hunsinger, Michael Zerang, Duke Khoury 1/4, 8:30 PM, Elastic
I Don’t Know How but They Found Me 2/1/2022, 6:30 PM, House of Blues
Illville Vanguard presents D’Angelo’s Black Messiah with Sam Trump and Erthe 11/12, 8 PM, Hideout
Brendan James 11/8, 5 PM, SPACE, Evanston
John Summit 12/30, 10 PM, Concord Music Hall
Cody Johnson, Ian Munsick 2/3/2022, 9:30 PM, Riviera Theatre, 18+
Yuri Juárez Afroperuano Group 11/14, 8:30 PM, Mauer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music
Anik Kahn, Trdmi, DJ Illest & Perry 11/18, 8 PM, Subterranean
Katie Got Bandz, Dae Jones, Sherré Jae 12/11, 9 PM, the Promontory
King Gizzard & the Wizard Lord, Leash Senior 10/15/2022, 7 PM, Radius Chicago, 17+
Chris Lake 12/21, 10 PM, Radius Chicago, 18+
Mary Lane 11/11, 9 PM, Rosa’s Lounge
Laughing Hearts, Darkhorse Collective, Sun-Riser 11/10, 7 PM, Cubby Bear
Lit & Luz Festival closing event featuring Rocio Cerón, AlgoRitmo, DJ Rocio Santos 11/6, 9 PM, Hungry Brain
Living With Tollways, Paul Abella Trio 11/16, 8 PM, Fulton Street Collective
Lombardy, Dead Licks 11/7, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+
LSDream, Inzo, Notlo 2/5/2022, 9 PM, House of Blues
Madman Across the Water performed by Christopher Neal, Dan Ingentron, Neal Alger, Larry Kohut, Gerald Dowd, Katherine Andrick, Sam Wolfs, and more 11/11, 8 PM, Fulton Street Collective
Pat Mallinger Quartet 11/5/11/4, 8 PM, Green Mill
Gaurav Mazumdar 11/24, 8:30 PM, Sono, Old Town School of Folk Music
Brian McKnight 11/23/11/4, 6:30 and 9:30 PM, City Winery
JD McPherson, Joel Paterson 12/16, 8 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Medium Build, Janet Blackwell, Gayun Cannon 11/10, 8 PM, GMF Tavern
Meshuggah, Converge, Torche 3/6/2022, 6 PM, Radius Chicago, 17+
Migos and friends 11/27, 8 PM, Nuit信贷 Union 1 Arena at UIC
Miirrors, Moritat, DJ Quin Kirkner 11/11, 9:30 PM, Hideout
Minor Moon, Bea Trovel, Volunteer Department 12/11, 9 PM, Hideout
Modern Nite, Mike Kote, Josepbine 11/15, 9:30 PM, Hideout
Nasty Snacks, Victor Torres 11/18, 8:30 PM, Golden Dagger
-Nois 11/7, 8:30 PM, Constellation, 18+
Nith Powered by DeGenovas 11/5, 8 PM, FitzGerald’s, Berwyn
Shanta Nurullah’s Sitarsys 11/13, 8:30 PM, Constellation, 18+
Leslie Odom Jr. 12/4, 7:30 PM, CIBC Theatre
Omeerta, Vended, Hazing Over, Anti-State 11/10, 7 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+
Aaron Parks 11/6, 8:30 PM, Constellation, 18+
Charlie Parr 11/12, 8 PM, FitzGerald’s, Berwyn
Brent Penny, Henry Hank, Neohead (DJ set) 11/5, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Playboy Carti 1/24, 8 PM, Credit Union 1 Arena at UIC
Tymek Murwski, Daniel Quinlivan, and Rob Frye 12/11/12, 8 PM, Elastic
Riverboats, Retirement Party, Rat Tally 12/25, 7 PM, Thalia Hall

GOSSIP WOLF
A furry ear to the ground of the local music scene

THEY HAVEN’T released a full-length of new material since 2017, but local drone specialists Bitchin Bajas seem to be having a renaissance. In July, the trio of Co per Crain, Daniel Quinlivan, and Rob Frye played a blockbuzzer show at Constellation full of lustrous, slowly unfurling long-form songs that will appear on an album due next year. Since August, they’ve also been performing a monthly series of can’t-miss themed shows at the Hungry Brain, and Gospel Wolf is stoked for the next one: on Friday, October 29, the Bajas tackle the music of jazz icon (and possible extraterrestrial visitor) Sun Ra. That same day, the band will digitally release Switched on Ra, where they cover eight of the otherworldly master’s far-out jams. Drag City will begin shipping the cassette edition in late November. Since its founding in 2002 by singer-songwriters Anna Fermín and Joe Lanasa, Fulton Street Collective has grown into one of the city’s most consistent community arts incubators, hosting stellar music and visual-arts programs and renting exhibit and work space to artists across many disciplines. On Saturday, November 6, FSC will kick its first annual fundraising month into high gear with Unity Night, which organizers describe as a “very special evening of art, food, music, drinks, and great company.” Tickets are $60, and will help fund FSC’s ongoing educational offerings, expand its non-resident membership program, and develop additional website resources for artists, among other things. You can also support FSC by donating to its GoFundMe. Reader favorite Blake Saint David recently signed with powerhouse local indie label Sooper Records, which is putting out the rapper’s Be Your Own Celebrity EP on Friday, October 29. The night before, Cole’s Bar hosts a listening party celebrating the release, featuring Semitruth, J Wade, and Pup. Masks and proof of vaccination are required. –J.R. Nelson and Leor Galil

Got a tip? Tweet @Gossip_Wolf or e-mail gossipwolf@chicagoreader.com.
11/11 LEON HEADS
Heyrocco

11/14 NADA SURF
pom pom squad

11/15 THE FIERY FURNACES
special guest fred armisen

10/29 LOW CUT
CONNIE
au, Nathan Graham

11/5 MANWOLVES
THE SLAPS
‘in the round’

11/6 ANDY FRASCO
& THE U.N.
nick gerlach’s
cult conference

11/16 MURDER
BY DEATH
20th anniversary
shawn james

11/17 THE LONE
BELLOW
half moon light tour

11/18 ADRIANNE
LENKER
lutalo

11/20 POKEY LAFARGE
ESTHER ROSE

11/21 JEPGMAFIA
zelooperz

SIGN UP FOR OUR WEEKLY NEWSLETTER!
Letter from the elusive cuckquean

A woman who gets off on her cuckquean

By Dan Savage

Q: I’m a 33-year-old straight female, been with my husband for ten years, married for six. When we first started dating, I was an extremely jealous person. Fortunately, I got it under control with lots of therapy. But once I did, I started having fantasies about him hooking up with other people. We incorporated these fantasies in the bedroom—as a fantasy—and it was insanely hot. Anyway, I had a baby a year ago. It took some time for my libido to come back, but she is back with a vengeance. I’m so horny all the time. I’m so horny that when my husband mentioned that an old friend of his who lives in another city was getting flirty, I immediately encouraged him to see if anything might come of it. With my blessing, he shared with her that I might be a cuckquean. (Sticking with “might” for now, as we’ve never actually done this.) She was interested, and the flirting escalated. Now she’s coming to town for work. Having never actually done anything like this, I started to feel unsexy jealousy creeping back in. We decided that he wouldn’t do anything with her, just grab a quick drink. But she asked to have dinner with both of us instead. That changed the math and I agreed to dinner. But I find myself vacillating between titillation and anxiety. Am I there to watch or participate? (I’m bi, so it’s not out of the question.) They’ve already got a rapport going and I’m insecure about feeling left out. I’m writing because I don’t know how to process this cognitive dissonance. One minute I’m so excited about realizing this fantasy that I’m sneaking away to get myself off just thinking about it. The next minute I’m worrying about what will happen if I see him giving her more attention than he gives me. I don’t know how to make sense of what I’m feeling. Am I really a cuckquean if I feel this conflicted? —Completely Confused Cuckquean

A: When I shared your letter with Venus, the host of the Venus Cuckoldress Podcast, she responded with three words and one exclamation point: “The elusive cuckquean!”

Cuckolding is a loving, consensual, “one-sided open relationship,” as Venus likes to describe it, and most self-identified cuckolds are men. It’s rare to encounter a cuckquean in the wild—that is, a woman who gets off on her husband or boyfriend sleeping with other women. I’ve received hundreds of letters over the years from men who wanted to be cuckolds (some gay, most straight or bi), but only a handful of letters from women like you, CCC. You are a rare flower, a black swan, a precious gem.

And what you describe—that feeling of arousal and dread, titillation and anxiety—is so common among wannabe and even practicing cuck/s that Venus gave it a name (and a whole segment of her podcast): cuck angst.

“That emotional angst comes with a beautifully complex cuckolding relationship,” said Venus. “To be able to process and overcome damaging jealousy and turn it into something highly erotic is truly an emotional feat. It’s something I admire so much about cuckolds and cuckqueans.”

While cuck angst can be confusing, CCC, it’s not disqualifying. If your angst is manageable and the rewards are worth the effort—and if your partner can help you manage it in an affirming way—you can get to a place where you want to realize your fantasies. But like, say, bungee jumping, CCC, it’s still gonna be scary.

“One minute it can feel great and the next minute it can feel terrifying,” said Venus. “But your partner plays a big role in providing reassurance and support for you during all of this. I know of a wife who wrote a thoughtful letter to her cuckold husband in advance of her first encounter with another man. It was for him to read if his cuck angst became overwhelming, and it turned out to be exactly what he needed at that moment. He was able to work through the anxiety and make room for the excitement and thrill of thinking about his wife with another man.”

The partner of a cuck has to strike a tricky balance. You’re going to need your husband to acknowledge your insecurities and offer reassurances to minimize them, CCC, but you don’t want those insecurities to disappear. For most cuck/s, eroticized insecurities are at the heart of the cuckold/cuckquean kink—no insecurities, no thrills. And while this can sound like a lot of effort to someone who doesn’t share this kink (or have a kink that requires emotional prep and after-care), the rewards—the experiences you’ll share, the connections you’ll make, the orgams you’ll have—can be great.

“But be prepared for some ups and downs,” warned Venus, “because cuckolding is truly an emotional rollercoaster.”

And please—please, please—please—don’t rush into your first cuckquean experience just because this particular woman happens to be in town this particular weekend. “Taking things slow is the key to success,” said Venus. “There’s always room to move forward with flirty teasing but having to take steps backwards due to jumping into things too quickly is never easy.”

It’s not easy to bounce back from a bad threesome that accidentally triggered feelings of jealousy, CCC, but it can be done. A bad first experience with cuckolding—where one person typically wants to be made to feel jealous and/or inadequate—can destroy a relationship. Learning where the line is between “good/bad” feelings (sexy jealousy) and “bad/bad” feelings (unsexy jealousy) takes time and not just good communication, CCC, but excessive communication.

Follow Venus @CuckoldressV and check out her personals site for men and women seeking cuckold relationships at venusconnections.com.

Send letters to mail@savagelove.net. Download the Savage Lovecast at savagelovecast.com. Follow @fakedan savage.
Spencer De La Riva’s artwork is so steeped in classic hard rock and hair metal aesthetics you’d be forgiven for thinking he came of age around the time Motley Crue scored their first hit. But the 18-year-old Chicago illustrator just has a passion for vintage hard rock culture and fashion. “I think what brings me into it the most is the amount of character that the bands of that era had—and still have,” he says. De La Riva calls his style “vintage vomit,” which sums up his tendency to mix elements from different times. “I have always been interested in old things, but since I was never actually there in the time periods I represent in my art I will usually add some kind of modern twist to it, even if I don’t mean it,” he says.

While De La Riva’s “Red Stratocaster” button design won our ’70s category, the classic Fender guitar at its center was inspired by an icon who’s more associated with the Summer of Love than the “Me” Decade. “When I think of the ’70s, I usually think of Jimi Hendrix. Even if he passed in 1970, he left such a huge mark on the rock scene and even the metal scene of that time that it feels like he was still there in some way,” he says. More of De La Riva’s art can be found on his Instagram page, and he says to keep your eye out in the near future for a new portfolio website and a new comic project. “It’s not ’70s or ’80s related,” he says, “but it will be the comic I make to prepare myself for my eventual comic about an ’80s hair metal band.”

Otis Richardson @LavenderPop

Otis Richardson fell in love with painting and drawing while growing up in South Carolina, and he eventually made his way to Chicago, where he attained his Masters of Fine Arts at Northern Illinois University. While working as a freelance illustrator in the late ’90s, Richardson and a writer friend joined forces to develop a line of greeting cards to make extra money, but as the operation grew cumbersome, his partner chose to back out. But Richardson had developed a passion for crafting greeting cards, and eventually he decided to strike out on his own. LavenderPop, which he launched in 2004, specializes in cards that celebrate Black life in gorgeous, eye-popping colors. Today, you can find LavenderPop cards at the Englewood Whole Foods and nearly a dozen Jewel-Osco stores across the city and suburbs.

Richardson’s aesthetic is informed by Black art of the ’80s and ’90s, and pop artists such as Andy Warhol. The latter helped shape his button design contest entry, “The Mixtape,” which features a slightly unwound cassette against classic ’80s colors and design staples such as bright yellow stripes. “I thought that would be kind of a good symbol of the ’80s—not just ’80s music, but the technology of the cassette tape,” he says, noting that he also found creative fuel in a box of his own vintage mixtapes, especially tracks by the Eurythmics and Crystal Waters.

Richardson cites his Buddhist practices as an inspiration for his art and a catalyst for continuing to explore new opportunities and goals. To that end, as he celebrates his victory as the winner of the Reader’s ’80s button design category, he shares a quote from Japanese Buddhist philosopher Daisaku Ikeda that describes happiness as the purpose of life: “There are two kinds of happiness, however: relative and absolute. Relative happiness comes in a wide variety of forms. The purpose of Buddhism is to attain Buddhahood, which in modern terms could be understood as realizing absolute happiness—a state of happiness that can never be destroyed or defeated.”

Congratulations to our 50th Anniversary Button Pack winning artists!

1970s
Spencer De La Riva "Red Stratocaster" @DiscountYakuza

1980s
Otis Richardson @LavenderPop

As a teenager, Kansas native Zach Bartz came to Chicago, officially to train in summer comedy workshops and unofficially to sneak into age-restricted stand-up shows. After moving to the city in 2011 to study comedy at Second City and Columbia College, he realized he had too much creative energy for one medium alone. “Chicago is the epicenter of American comedy and improvisation, and there was nowhere else I would rather be,” he says. “Little did I know that [moving here] would change my life and turn me into a visual artist, too!”

Today, Bartz is equally immersed in Chicago’s visual arts and comedy communities; his artwork hangs in several local bars and small businesses, and he leads workshops for Studio W.I.P. and teaches improv and visual art to elementary students through Columbia College Chicago’s Community Schools program. While the overlap between his two creative practices might not seem obvious, Bartz says his approach to visual art is informed by his improv training. “To me, creating visual art is all about discovering instead of inventing, which is a core tenant to good improv,” he says. “For instance, when I upcycle objects or pictures of Jesus from the thrift store, I’m looking at them from a place of discovering or excavating something that utilizes what I have in front of me, not just placing a preconceived plan onto whatever shows up.”

Bartz’s aesthetic is fueled by animation, toys, and the bright color palettes of the ’90s, so it’s perhaps no surprise that Bartz won our ’90s category with a button inspired by the wildly patterned roller rink and bowling alley carpets of the era. “Those sorts of neon designs echo through my childhood, and paired with animations from shows like Saved by the Bell, it was my obvious choice to frame the Reader R with,” he says.

1990s
Zach Bartz IG @lmZachBartz TikTok @ZachBartz

2000s
Schantelle Alonzo “Next Generation” Instagram: @mishipiku

Love it or hate it, there’s no denying that the smartphone was among the most game-changing innovations of the 2000s. Schantelle Alonzo captures that in her button design “Next Generation,” which so closely recalls the iconic Apple iPhone commercials of the era that you can practically hear the mild, inoffensive indie-rock emanating from the DJ booth in its backdrop. “Growing up in the 2000s, I think about how I basically witnessed a technological era shift right in my own hands,” she says. “My dad would trade out every Apple iPod or iPhone as they came out. This image, in a way, represents how within this decade especially we started so easily hopping from one version of a device to another, and how our modes of taking in content and news have changed.”

Richardson, Alonzo, and Bartz are among five winners whose designs are available in a button pack, which is on sale now at chicagoreader.com/50.

2010s
Mister Sickngross “FUCK THAT!” @sickngross

Even given the Reader’s anti-authority history, you might be surprised to see that the button design that we felt most reflected the 2010s depicts a rather unfortunate figure cloaked in a creepy hooded robe emblazoned with the words “FUCK THAT!”.

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Thanks, Chicago Reader! Thank you, Chicago Reader for all the years connecting people! You made a difference in my life! I always look forward to getting The Reader on Thursdays and looking at the art listings and news!

VERSATILE BOTTOM

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