

READER

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A NOTE ON THIS WEEK'S COVER

OUR COVER THIS week was born out of a sense of uncertainty, something most of us have been feeling for about 22 months now. While it's true that some of us (ahem, especially some of us on the editorial side of this newspaper) like to periodically check in with prognosticators and astrologists (or even that guy who sells flowers outside the Jewels on Archer who will shout your weight at you with aggravating accuracy), the beginning of the COVID-19 age in March 2020 pushed the great majority of us to look out for any kind of

reassurance, be it mystic or medical.

It's a tough thing to pay attention to the news these days, but hey, when has it ever been an easy time to pay attention? A friend is fond of reminding me that at least we don't live in the Stone Age and have to spend our hours hunting deer and bison with homemade axes, but sheesh—at least Paleolithic people didn't have to deal with property taxes and wrangling streaming services, AM I RIGHT?

No, I'm wrong. It's true that the blessings of our modern age come with some curses, and

there are some questions in the universe that humans are perhaps here to worry about for the course of our days. Even though we managed to find a Magic 8-Ball, a grade-school-style paper fortune-teller (I know some of you used to call it a "cootie catcher," and you can keep that to yourselves), a mini slot machine, various books on alchemy and chaos, tarot cards, and a good luck pig drawing from a friend's daughter, we still can't predict what this year will bring. While we're all waiting for a sign, at least we'll continue to bring you the best of Chicago's stories that we can muster.

—SALEM COLLO-JULIN, CULTURE EDITOR



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ILLINOIS IS FULL OF WINNERS

SHOP LOCAL

A needle in a haystack

The story of a unique Chicago embroidery shop

By ISA GIALLORENZO



Embroidery pattern by Ciara LeRoy of Pretty Strange Design. COURTESY MAYDEL

Who knew finding all the materials to make one cross-stitch pattern for a kid's room would be so hard? Lauren Venell, 41, learned it the hard way—she almost gave up on the project given how difficult her search was. And that's a lot to say since Venell does not seem easily intimidated by a challenge.

A crafter since her early years, Venell tried all she could to stay in the field, including learning how to set up her own online shop pre-Etsy. Her tech proficiency landed her a lucrative job in Silicon Valley, but her heart wasn't in it. With a deep-seated love for both business and craft, Venell would find herself dreaming about her very own company, to be managed in a very different way.

One of the many times she got laid off (a common occurrence in the volatile tech world), Venell decided that she'd had enough, and moved to Chicago to found Maydel (rhymes with "ladle"). Maydel is the only online needlework shop that offers every single shade of DMC floss (a premium thread) and fabric by the square inch. The shop also stands out due to its commitment to inclusion, accessibility, and sustainability. The *Reader* recently interviewed Venell about her business and inspiring trajectory. Here are some highlights from that interview, and the full conversation

can be found at chicagoreader.com.

Isa Giallorenzo: When and why did you start Maydel? Could you tell me about the whole process you went through while moving away from Silicon Valley? When was your "aha" moment?

Lauren Venell: Maydel has been open since April 13, 2021. In the mid 2000s, I was a professional crafter specializing in soft goods. My work sold well but I couldn't find a way to scale my business to a sustainable level. I tried outsourcing my manufacturing, consulting for clients, making kits, and editorial production, but none of those options allowed me to create my own new work.

One day, wanting to get back to making something with my hands after spending all day at the computer, I purchased a cross-stitch pattern to make for my daughter's room. The pattern called for 30 colors of embroidery floss, plus needles, fabric, and a hoop of a particular size. I found about half of what I needed at one big-box store, another 25 percent at a second big-box store, and all but one color of floss at a few different stores online. I finally found the last color (DMC 917—I will remember it forever) in a box of 12 that I had to order from the UK. All in all it took six entire

weeks and way more than I'd budgeted to get the supplies for the project. I was so frustrated I almost didn't want to do it anymore.

"Why wouldn't the artist sell full kits for this project when the supplies are so hard to get ahold of?" I wondered. Then I thought back to my own craft business days and remembered how difficult and expensive it was to try to put kits together. The markup was almost never worth the labor, and the purchase minimums needed to take advantage of price breaks were way too steep for an independent artist to afford. That's when it hit me—a company that made and sold supply kits on behalf of crafters would be a win-win-win: a win for artists and designers wanting to make more money without spending any additional time on operations, a win for customers who could finally get everything they needed in one place, and a win for the supply company, which could build an unlimited product catalog from a single, limited set of craft supplies.

Why did you choose Chicago?

My husband is originally from Chicagoland, and we still have lots of family in and around the city. Over the many years that we visited I fell in love with Chicago and frequently looked for jobs or transfer opportunities so we could move here. As a born-and-bred Brooklynite, Chicago has always felt like the best of New York without the pretension.

You are a 20-year veteran crafter, teacher, and designer. I wanna know about your background.

I've been fascinated by both craft and business my whole life, from when I was a kid selling friendship bracelets and tiny clay animals on my front stoop, to my early 20s, when I had a side gig making bizarre plush objects like giant burritos and cuts of meat.

I've always found craft really powerful—the fact that you can take a length of string and weave it around itself to make a sweater, a basket, a lace doily, or a fishing net is pretty mind-blowing. Creating something out of nothing with your own two hands feels like a magical superpower. But so does business. If

you think about it, the fact that I could turn something as crazy as a stuffed ham hock into rent and groceries is equally unbelievable.

In terms of accessibility, could you give me an idea of what you offer for people with physical impairments? Is it also a core value in your business?

On the product side, Maydel carries hypoallergenic and metal-free needles in every type and size, including needles with ballpoint tips that automatically fall into place when stitching on canvas. We also carry nonslip embroidery hoops with large wing nuts that are easy to twist, squeezable snips, and flat-strip threaders that are more visible than fine wires. Every pattern and chart is audited for legibility and clarity, and several are available in large print, peel-and-stick, or color-separated formats, with more being added every month. The website and search are navigable by both keyboard and mouse/trackpad, and can be read by a screen reader.

Our Pony Black needles, which are hypoallergenic, sustainably packaged, and made using the world's highest labor standards, have been extremely popular and are difficult to find elsewhere in the U.S. I'm also very proud of the projects we carry by our partner artists: patterns for gorgeous Palestinian tatreez by Elian Aboudi, ingenious paper embroidery by Yuka Hoshino, and bold text art by Ciara LeRoy.

The idea for color-separated patterns came about when the artist Yuka Hoshino and I were trying to devise a way for people to distinguish between similar colors in a paper embroidery design. What resulted was a new, technology-driven way to make all types of cross-stitch and needlepoint patterns more readable that I hope will be adopted throughout the industry.

You donate 1 percent of your revenue (not profit) to charitable organizations.

This year I donated about 6 percent of my profit to the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization and the Chicago Neighborhood Initiatives Micro Finance Group (Greenwood Archer Capital). Economic and environmental justice are very important to me, as is supporting my local community, so I wanted to make sure that Maydel is contributing to a more equitable Chicago where everyone is able to thrive. 

 @chicagolooks



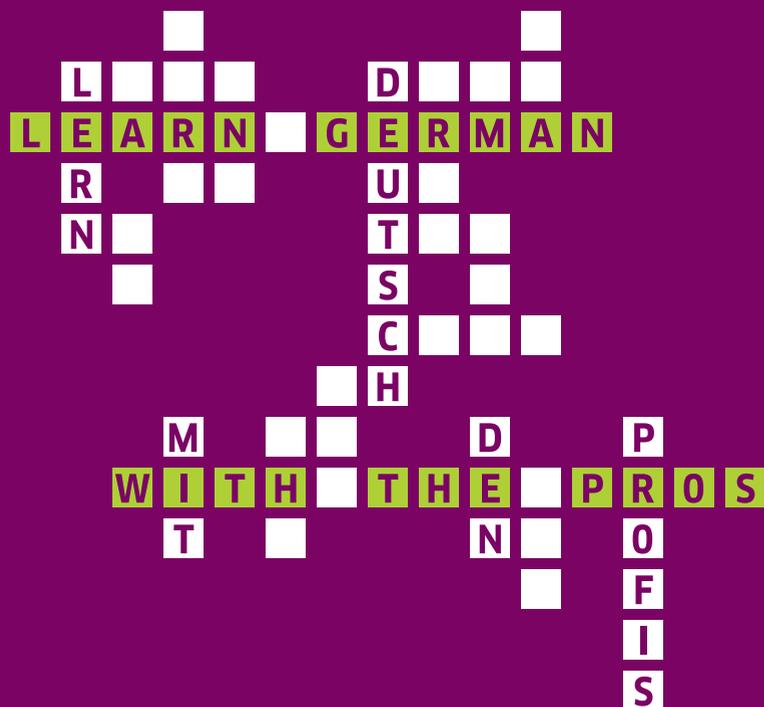
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FOOD & DRINK



Clockwise from left: chopped brisket sandwich, Moonwalker breakfast sandwich, Unicorn Blood pink latte © COURTESY MOONWALKER CAFE, J. KIRBY TORRES

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Moonwalker Cafe is the scratch kitchen every neighborhood deserves

A cafe expands its orbit beyond Avondale.

By MIKE SULA

When Arlene Luna moved back to Chicago in December 2020 she discovered that all of her old classmates from the now-defunct Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago had left the life.

“Everyone that I knew from back then is no longer in the business,” she says. “I came back and started looking up a few people, and they were all either retired and no longer cook-

ing, selling products, or doing research and development.”

Luna hadn’t. She’d spent the previous 15 years cooking in southern California in the country club, fine dining, and catering kitchens of Palm Springs, and later Long Beach. In June 2020 she’d been clocking five hours a day on the 405, commuting to a private chef gig 30 miles away in Beverly Hills. The pandemic put

a stop to that.

A family visit home to Avondale convinced her it was time to move back, and she convinced her boyfriend, John “Jack” Blue, a recent accounting school graduate, to join her. Her sister happened to own an empty loft across the street from where she’d attended Madonna High School, and they planned to settle in. As they prepared to move, her sister

noticed that an abandoned taqueria just 300 feet away was available for lease.

“Thirty years ago when I was a freshman I was always thinking, ‘If I want to eat something really good I have to go further east,’” she says. “Everything was east of Western.” Even now, there’s a couple of diners and a bunch of fast-food joints within the immediate orbit, but no one’s offering the fresh, local, made-to-order food she knew the neighborhood needed.

“‘You’ll be able to moonwalk to work,’” her brother told her, and since Luna is Spanish for moon, Moonwalker Cafe seemed like the right name. Luna already knew she wanted to source her bread from Evanston’s Hewn Bakery, and she wanted to serve Dark Matter Coffee, but with few remaining industry contacts, she took to Instagram to discover the other products she needed: kombucha from Vargo Brother Ferments; syrups from Jo Snow; Berkshire ham and sausage for breakfast sandwiches from Catalpa Grove Farm; and Hewn pastries and Do-Rite Donuts to supplement Luna’s croissants.

Blue, who’d had relatively little restaurant experience, submitted to a few days of basic barista training at Dark Matter HQ and began to develop what would become a number of signature drinks: the mocha, coconut milk, and almond milk Almond Joyous latte; Jarritos tamarind soda matcha; Unicorn Blood latte spiked with beet juice.

Moonwalker opened its doors in early August with the first of what would become many of Luna’s own popular signatures: a house-smoked, hand-carved turkey sandwich on Hewn country loaf, with lettuce, tomato, and a choice of chili and/or garlic aioli. Available only on Wednesdays, it sold out each week.

Mostly open for breakfast and lunch, Luna and Blue tried to meet more of the neighborhood’s demand for thoughtful, real food with Sunday morning biscuits and gravy, and sold out Friday night pop-ups featuring “whatever Jack craves”: smoked brisket sandwiches, chicken parmesan, boeuf bourguignon, and west coast In-N-Out-style burgers. “Jack was having withdrawals,” she says.

“I tell her what I want, and she makes it

happen,” says Blue. This impulsive approach extends to the daytime menu, which is ever changing in line with the seasons and an increasing influx of new, word-of-mouth visitors coming from outside the neighborhood; the turkey sandwich is temporarily 86’d in consideration of holiday oversaturation (but back next week).

Tomato or split pea soup bread bowls are currently having a moment, as is an off-menu breakfast burrito, and the coquito latte, based on the eggnog-like Puerto Rican holiday drink that’s been given an extended run.

“People keep coming in specifically for that drink,” says Luna, who makes her own evaporated and condensed coconut milk for it. “In southern California it’s something that almost nobody knows. When I was out there I always made it for different holiday events. Growing up in Chicago you either had a friend or neighbor that would bring your family a bottle. We’re definitely keeping that on the menu through the winter months.”

Neighborhood support has allowed them to hire two employees, including Kelsey Summers, a neighborhood home baker who started Gold Dust Bakery during the pandemic and was looking for professional kitchen experience. Luna is planning to teach her how to make bagels in house.

They’re also planning to restart and expand their evening pop-ups after a holiday hiatus, perhaps inviting other chefs into the kitchen to cook for the neighbors, who just seem excited that outsiders are taking notice of this once overlooked pocket of Avondale. A recent blurb in *Chicago* caused a stir. “People were just coming in like, ‘Wow, you guys made this list.’ They felt like it was for them—and that’s kind of what we hoped for; that people would think that it’s a place that belongs to them.”

On January 31, Luna and Blue will be expanding their orbit further when they arrive at the Kedzie Inn in Irving Park as part of the second season of Monday Night Foodball, the Reader’s weekly chef pop-up series. Watch this space for details.

 @MikeSula

POETRY CORNER

Filipendula Rubra

By Ananda Lima

These days when people fall in love with me I know
it’s a dream those who love me love me
in a different way when I see my face
letting go of its shape I think
who cares about my face
when I was
a child somebody
said I was beautiful
my mother
corrected them
charming in her own way my boy
is the most beautiful thing I have ever
seen when I tell him
he says all mothers
think that and I
say
nothing
and keep
writing
a prairie
poem

Ananda Lima is the author of *Motherland* (Black Lawrence Press, 2021), winner of the Hudson Prize. She is also the author of the chapbooks *Vigil* (Get Fresh Books, 2021), *Tropicdilia* (Newfound, 2021, winner of the Newfound Prose Prize), *Amblyopia* (Bull City Press, 2020), and *Translation* (Paper Nautilus, 2019, winner of the Vella Chapbook Prize). Her work has appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Poets.org*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *Gulf Coast*, *Poet Lore*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Pleiades*, and elsewhere. She has an MA in Linguistics from UCLA and an MFA in Creative Writing in Fiction from Rutgers University, Newark.

Poem curated by Natasha Mijares: Natasha is an artist, writer, curator, and educator. Her debut collection of poetry, *violent wave*, is forthcoming from PANK Books. She received her MFA in Writing from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has exhibited at various international and national galleries. Her work has appeared in *Gravity of the Thing*, *Hypertext Review*, *Calamity*, *Vinyl Poetry*, and more.

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Let's watch Mary Miller and Rodney Davis try to out-Trump each other this June. [U.S. CONGRESS](#)

POLITICS

Good news, Dems

There will be nothing civil about the war between Mary “Hitler was right” Miller and Rodney Davis.

By **BEN JORAVSKY**

I'm happy to report a little good news as we head off into the new year—Donald Trump has endorsed Mary Miller in her race against Rodney Miller in the 15th Congressional District.

I know you must be wondering why I think a Trump endorsement is good news.

It's because Davis and Miller are incumbent congresspeople running against each other in a Republican primary. Meaning no matter what—a Republican will lose. Hooray!

Moreover, Trump's endorsement promises to turn up the heat in a race that will undoubtedly be a Republican civil war. And it's always better for MAGA to be fighting each other as opposed to fighting the rest of us.

So, yes—more hooray!

Though, upon reflection, I'm not sure I used the correct word. As there will be nothing civil about this toxic showdown between Miller and Davis.

At this point, I'd like to give a shout-out to the Democratic legislative map drawers who had the foresight to redraw the congressional districts in such a way as to more or less force Miller to run against Davis.

Though, upon even more reflection, I wish the Dems had figured out how to draw all five Republican congressional incumbents into one giant MAGA district where they'd run against each other. Maybe next time, Dems.

What they did was slick enough, as the

Dems are finally catching on, doing to Republicans what Republicans have been doing to Dems in Texas, Indiana, Wisconsin, Florida, etc. That is, trying to gerrymander them out of existence.

OK, enough of the preamble—time to get down to the particulars, starting with Congresswoman Miller.

As you may recall, she is the MAGA partisan who made a name for herself by showing up at a Moms for America rally in Washington, D.C., on January 5 of last year.

At the rally, Congresswoman Miller gave a speech declaring, “Hitler was right.” A declaration that you'd think even a MAGA follower would know not to make, even if they believed it.

Her basic point is that America is locked in a battle for the future, which will be won by the side that most successfully brainwashes the children. Here's her full quote . . .

“Each generation has the responsibility to teach and train the next generation. You know, if we win a few elections, we're still going to be losing, unless we win the hearts and minds of our children. This is the battle. Hitler was right on one thing: he said, ‘Whoever has the youth, has the future.’ Our children are being propagandized.”

Apparently, she was alluding to a speech Hitler made in 1935 where he said: “He alone, who owns the youth, gains the future.”

In her speech at the rally, Congresswoman Miller got specific: “Fill your children's minds with what is true, and right, and noble. And then they can overcome evil with good. Because they can actually discern between what is evil and what is good.”

Remember, her speech came at a Save the Republic rally dedicated to promoting a lie. In this case the lie being that Trump won, even though he lost the presidential election to Joe Biden.

Apparently, it doesn't matter to Miller if you fill your children's minds with lies.

In the aftermath, Miller sorta apologized, blaming lefties for twisting her words. But she hasn't backed down from her assertion that Trump really won the election—which, one more time—he actually lost.

She voted against certifying Biden as the winner. And voted against impeaching Trump for stirring up the invasion of the Capitol. And voted against creating the select committee to investigate the insurrection. And she wants to essentially kick Congresspeople Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger out of the Republican Party 'cause they're participating in the congressional investigation.

In short, her mind is filled with blind allegiance to Trump.

In contrast, Davis is what currently passes for a “moderate” Republican. As he voted to certify the presidential election. Plus, he's

managed to get through life without ever declaring, “Hitler was right.” Man, the bar really is low for Republicans these days.

The Democratic congressional mapmakers more or less created the 15th district to benefit Davis, hoping he'd run for reelection as opposed to running against Governor J.B. Pritzker.

It worked. And so J.B. still doesn't have a “moderate” Republican running against him.

But then Miller decided to run in the 15th district—as opposed to the 12th district, where she now lives. (A congressperson need not live in the district they represent.)

Whoever wins the June 28 primary will undoubtedly win November's general election. So who will win in June?

Well, Davis has more campaign money than Miller. But Miller has Trump's endorsement. That gives her the upper hand on the MAGA vote. And he or she who owns MAGA, gains the future—as you-know-who might put it.

Obviously, Trump is still mad at Davis for voting to certify the presidential election. After meeting with Congresswoman Miller at Mar-a-Lago, Trump gave her his blessing.

In his endorsement message, Trump praised Miller for fighting against “the radical indoctrination of our children.”

So, we're sorta back to Miller's Hitler quote.

In the aftermath of Trump's endorsement, Davis is walking that fine line all “moderate” Republicans must tread.

He brags about his work “with President Trump during his time in office.”

And then in a roundabout way suggests he's even Trumpier than Miller 'cause—follow me, folks—she is supporting the “never Trumper” ticket for governor.

That would be the ticket of Darren Bailey and Stephanie Trussell.

State senator Bailey, who's running for governor, is hard-core MAGA. Trussell, his running mate, is newer to the Trump cult, having declared in 2016 she'd never vote for Trump.

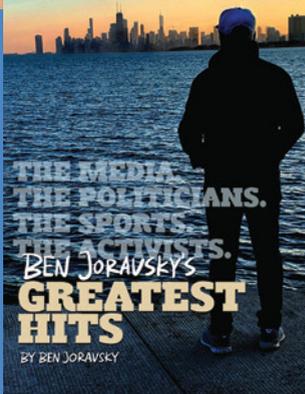
It looks as though the June 28 primary will come down to whose head is further up Trump's big, old behind. May the best brown-noser win. [f](#)

[@bennyjshow](#)

BEN JORAVSKY'S GREATEST HITS



READER



Ben Joravsky's Greatest Hits is a collection of profiles and features hand-picked by Ben from his 40 years of writing for the Reader. Each article offers a distinctive portrait of an activist, politician, writer, or sports personality who has left an indelible imprint on Chicago.

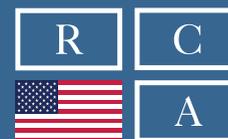
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CULTURE

Arts folk: what would you do with \$20 million?

DCASE wants to know.

By **DEANNA ISAACS**



DCASE commissioner Erin Harkey at the Chicago Cultural Center. PATRICK PYSZKA/CITY OF CHICAGO

How bad is COVID-19 damage to the arts sector?

Arts Alliance Illinois says it's been researching that question and will be releasing the results any day now. I didn't have them by press time, but it's safe to assume they'll be brutal.

The heads of both the AAI and Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events published recent op-eds in *Crain's* describing the situation as "a horror movie," and the arts landscape as "devastated."

And that was before Omicron began shutting down holiday shows in venues that had so recently reopened.

How much of this damage might be permanent? Will we see once-great city centers turned to hulking ghost towns, their offices, theaters, museums, shops, and concert halls forever emptied out?

Are we going back to normal anytime soon? Or ever?

Just before the holiday break, I put those questions to someone who's thought a lot about the future of city centers, University of Michigan professor of urban and regional planning Mark Rosentraub. Too soon for a definitive answer, he said, but "normal is not likely something that's going to occur as fast as we had hoped."

He also said that catastrophes "don't really institute new trends. They simply accelerate existing trends."

Movie theaters, for example, have been under siege for a while, Rosentraub said. "You can blame Samsung and Sony for that. With or without a pandemic, movie theaters have a problem." Ditto for the decentralization of populations and jobs: it was already happening. COVID just stepped on the accelerator.

Which underscores a point the arts leaders made in their op-eds. Here's AAI board chair Michelle Boone and executive director Claire Rice: "The truth is, the issues facing creatives today existed long before COVID-19. Despite the incredible value the arts-and-culture sector brings to our city and state, the arts have always struggled with lack of funding . . . Creatives have long stitched together gig work and lived paycheck to paycheck, often without basics like health insurance or stable housing."

Like the problems facing movie theaters, starving artists predated the pandemic.

Still, as DCASE's new commissioner Erin Harkey wrote, "Revitalizing our city's arts and culture scene is essential to [the city's] post-pandemic recovery."

Harkey, who was officially appointed to her storied job just last month but has been on the DCASE staff since 2016, told me last week, "The good news is that while we have been devastated, the cultural sector has definitely shown its resilience. Our talented artists and our venues, as we continue to navigate this and try to safely reopen, really give us renewed hope for better times ahead."

Here's more good news: thanks to \$10 million from the city's 2022 corporate budget (itself bolstered by nearly \$2 billion in federal recovery funds), and \$16 million from the American Rescue Plan (to be spread over two years), the DCASE grants program, which puts cash directly into the hands of artists and arts organizations, is getting a mega bump-up this year, going from \$2.7 million to \$20.7 million. And they're looking for advice from the public on how to spread that cash around. Harkey

says DCASE needs to assess existing programs, and also to set up new programs for arts organizations, "especially those providing services in neighborhoods that have traditionally been underserved," individual creative workers of all kinds, and small arts businesses. Keep an eye on chicagoculturalgrants.org for current opportunities (with immediate deadlines) and others that will be coming up in the near future.

This month, in collaboration with Arts Alliance Illinois and the Chicago Cultural Alliance, DCASE is hosting "Chicago Arts and Culture: Funding and Futures," which consists of two informational webinars with Harkey (January 11 and 21), and four "deep dive" online focus groups (January 5, 14, 18, and 19).

They're also inviting the arts community to take a brief online survey aimed at identifying the efficacy of DCASE's current funding programs and the challenges arts workers, arts organizations, and small arts businesses are facing. Register for the online meetings and find the survey at artsalliance.org/chicago-fundingandfutures. Focus groups will be kept small, with reservations accepted on a first-come basis.

Three of the four focus groups were already taking names for a waiting list when I attempted to register Monday. That reminded me that Chicago's seen its share of pro forma public input sessions, designed and managed to validate whatever's already been decided. I don't think this will be one of those, but even if it were, the amount of money in play suggests that it'll be worthwhile to participate. As Mayor Lori Lightfoot put it in her year-end message, these are "once-in-a-lifetime resources."

So step up, starving (or formerly thriving) artists: there's a big pot to split here.

@Deannaisaacs



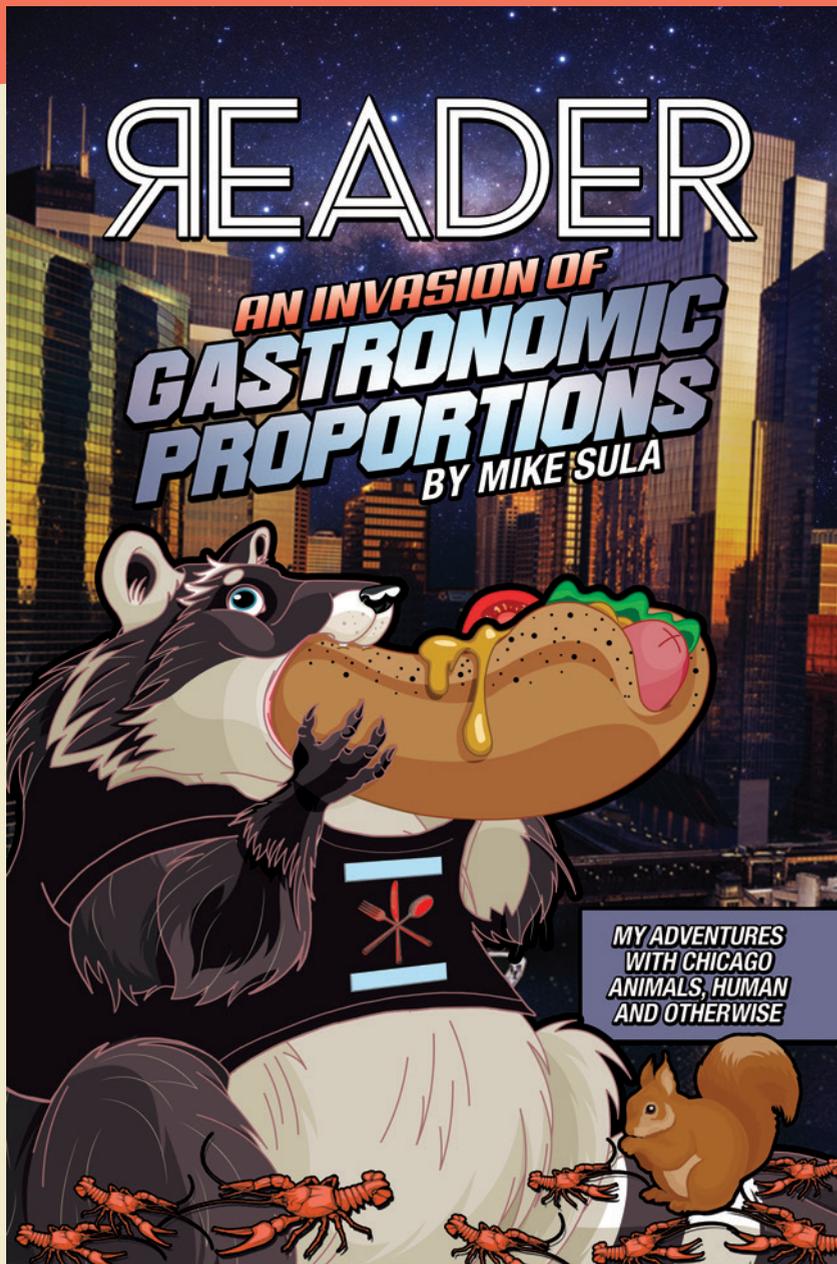
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In recent years, the conversation surrounding mental health has been itchy to escape within the confines of our minds. And reasonably so; it's not often that we feel comfortable or safe enough to discuss these topics openly within our own families, friends, and close ones. So far, we've done a great job of embracing this awareness via social media as we #selfcare our way into acknowledging this long-ignored and important aspect of our health.

Most importantly, doing this has created an opportunity for unified introspection as we now have the spaces for more of these conversations via self-help, therapy, or initiatives that help further establish this awareness. In the spirit of these efforts, Nature's Grace and Wellness has taken initiative within the cannabis industry to help "Spark the Conversation" surrounding mental health awareness. Not only do we seek to break stigmas associated with

cannabis and cannabis users, but we also hope to help foster a sense of community and to provide accessible mental health education.

Our initiative leaders, Alia Reichert and Cynthia Guzman, have been at the forefront of this initiative since its inception in 2020 and have since focused on organized outreach efforts to dispensaries throughout Illinois in efforts to spark more conversations within the cannabis community. If you'd like to know more about their roles, experiences, and insights as a result of these efforts, we have featured an interview here in the *Chicago Reader* as the first in our new series, which we hope is a valuable extension of our efforts to make this information available to all cannabis users, industry members, and readers alike.

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A selection of poppers at Leather 64TEN in Rogers Park. © KIRK WILLIAMSON

QUEER CULTURE

Huff, huff, pass

Poppers, public policy, and policing queer sex

By ADAM M. RHODES

I remember the first time I tried poppers. It was with my first serious boyfriend during my sophomore year of college in Orlando, Florida. He was older, sweeter than I deserved, and graciously showed me the proverbial and literal ins and outs of gay sex. It was one of those sweet, brief relationships that is more meaningful years down the road than in the moment.

But I digress. The first time he brought out a little brown bottle from his backpack, he was wearing only a jockstrap and we were in the limbo between foreplay and actual fucking. He told me to cover my left nostril with a finger and inhale briefly through my right. He explained it poorly, and I was skeptical. I don't remember feeling anything but can confidently say today that I was absolutely fucking it up somehow. I think I took a quick

sniff rather than the required seconds-long huff.

Initial fumbles aside, poppers have become a staple of the sex lives of myself and so many queers like me. Brands like Jungle Juice, Blue Boy, and (my personal favorite) Rush are ubiquitous at adult or adult-adjacent queer retailers across the U.S. Some well-known leather and fetish retailers make their own versions of the products, while homemade brands have taken queer culture by storm. I saw a poppers vending machine on Twitter a few weeks ago.

So when the U.S. Food and Drug Administration this past June warned about the dangers of inhaling or otherwise consuming poppers, chemically known as alkyl nitrites, I wasn't the only confused queer. Though certainly not for everyone, poppers are an in-

grained part of queer culture, so much so that they feel almost out of the FDA's reach, and certainly out of the agency's consciousness. I'd love to meet the gay intern who reminded them about poppers in 2021.

Let's step backward a bit. For those not familiar, to put it bluntly, poppers make it easier for bottoms to get fucked, though tops use the products too, certainly. Moments after a short, roughly four-second huff, your blood vessels dilate and your muscles relax. (That goes for your bootyhole muscle too, in case you haven't caught on.) A head rush, flushed cheeks, and some would say voracious libido are soon to follow.

But the key to poppers is that huff. It's almost ritualistic. Bottles pass from one partner to the next almost like an offering. After deep breaths come deep sighs, followed by

deep euphoria.

Using poppers isn't isolated to fucking. Many like to enjoy the head rush during a circuit party, on a nightclub dance floor, or other such social affairs. Celebrities like Sam Smith and Nicole Scherzinger have been seen using poppers, and rumor has it that John F. Kennedy was a fan himself. I gave one friend her first huff in my Upper West Side apartment over dinner.

On the outside, poppers may seem like a simple but niche sex enhancement. But Adam Zmith writes in recently published *Deep Sniff*, which details the history of poppers, that the brown bottles have a storied life that almost mirrors the criminalization and stigmatization of queerness and queer sex themselves.

After originating as a Victorian-era treatment for chest pain, poppers since at least the 1960s have been popular among gay men for the head rush that came with a huff of the vapors. In their early iteration, poppers were sold in small glass ampoules that made a popping noise when they were broken in order to release the vapors. (Hence the name "poppers.")

The Stonewall Riots cemented the permanence and the resilience of the queer identity, and the rise of queer culture after that moment in turn increased the popularity of poppers. Over-the-top homoerotic ads selling poppers appeared in the decades following Stonewall, promising explosive orgasms, hard fucking, and beautiful, muscle-toned men. Poppers had attained their status as a gay sex staple.

But the hard-fought sexual freedom enjoyed in the 1970s was cut short by reports of a rare cancer soon seen among a small but growing number of gay men.

Years into the AIDS crisis, two gay activists in the U.S. published a book in the mid-1980s warning that poppers could cause or were at least a cofactor for AIDS, though their arguments were later entirely discredited. U.S. lawmakers banned butyl nitrate, a common substance in poppers, in 1988 and two years later banned the broad class of chemicals known as alkyl nitrites in the Crime Control

Act of 1990, a bill sponsored by then-Senator Joe Biden. Prosecutors at one point also charged two men for selling poppers in 1996, though sentences were minor.

But the products have faced harder attention abroad.

As Zmith writes, UK gay bars were raided repeatedly by police who were hunting poppers and using the arm of the law to stamp out queer sexuality in the mid-1980s. A stark symbol of the stigma gay men endured during the AIDS crisis, Zmith writes that some officers wore rubber gloves during the gay bar raids, apparently to protect themselves from the virus.

Both the UK and Australia have tried to ban poppers, and products containing alkyl nitrites are considered drugs in Canada and require a prescription.

And to echo some of Zmith's writing, the crackdown on the brown bottles feels like a proxy for state-sponsored efforts to crush or at least antagonize queerness itself.

That includes the FDA's recent disclaimer.

When I saw the disclaimer—which mentioned ingesting the chemical—nauseous waves, horror, and confusion filled the room like vapors from a Rush bottle. Nauseous because if you've ever used poppers, it is likely impossible to imagine actually drinking the chemical.

As any regular poppers user will tell you, even a brush of the bottle around the nostrils or on your lip will have you reaching for a rag. And I know more than a few folks who have ruined a set of sheets by spilling a bottle in the throes of passion. One friend who I spoke to for the article, whose friends call him a “poppers papa” thanks to his generosity with a brown bottle, said he sports a chemical burn on his chest from a spilled bottle.

A harm reduction group based on New York City's Lower East Side recently posted a guide to safe poppers use on Instagram, with advice ranging from how to safely store poppers to which pharmaceutical recreational drugs to avoid mixing with the vapors. According to the group, mixing poppers with other stimulants like meth, speed, cocaine, and MDMA may increase your risk of fainting, a heart attack, or stroke, and using erectile dysfunction drugs with poppers can also cause a heart attack or passing out.

So the caustic, volatile nature of the chemical is certainly well known among actual poppers users.

When I shared with friends and sources that people had ingested a bottle like an en-

ergy shot, I was met with similar caterwauls of horror and nausea. Nearly everyone I told asked: “Who the fuck drinks poppers?”

It felt like a piece of institutional queer knowledge: how to use poppers, what they were for, not to drink them ohmygod. But it's important to remember that not everyone has access to such knowledge, even in the age of the Internet, and these fumbles might be like mine in sophomore year of college, but with more severe consequences than unflushed cheeks and a still-tight butthole.

The FDA collects voluntary reports of complaints from consumers, health-care professionals, and product makers under its adverse event reporting system, and an FDA spokesperson told me that six reports, including two deaths, had been made to the agency between 2020 and 2021.

But there's a glaring disconnect between the severity of the “increase in serious adverse event reports” cited by the agency and the half-dozen reports necessitating the alert. According to an FDA spokesperson, the agency has only ever received 20 adverse event reports about poppers, and according to documents obtained as part of a public

records request, only nine of those have come in the past decade. Those numbers seem exponentially too small to warrant an FDA disclaimer during a pandemic (in which the agency is tasked with approving vaccines).

Some people about whom the complaints were made were mixing poppers with a litany of other recreational drugs (no shade!), so singling out poppers specifically feels inaccurate. Some of the reports center on patients who ingested poppers oftentimes not understanding how to use the product. Most confused the product with an energy shot, which calls into question the labeling more than the products themselves.

But Zmith says the labeling is its own tangled web that relies on a strange pact between retailers and the government: retailers agree to not label their products as being for human consumption, mainly queer sex, and regulators allow the products to be sold, albeit with labeling that doesn't tell the whole story. They're sold as solvents and cleaners, not butthole looseners.

Despite what feels like an endless list of poppers brands, a recent BuzzFeed investigation reveals that instead of the sleazy,

sex-craven bathroom chemists that the FDA would like you to believe are crafting poppers, most of the production is done by everyday, blue-collar types making an honest dollar.

As the article states, many of the most recognizable poppers brands are made in a Pennsylvania factory, by Pac-West Distributing, staffed by workers who either don't know what poppers are or don't want to.

The article also explains in greater detail the complicated relationship between the government and poppers makers, dating back to 1974 in Los Angeles, just a year after the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. According to BuzzFeed, that year in 1974, a medical student trademarked one poppers product. And two years later, the massively popular Rush product hit the shelves, made by PWD, in fact.

The unspoken pact between regulators and poppers makers reeks of how the agency has historically thought of queer people: dirty, unhealthy sex fiends. We see that in the agency's first responses to the AIDS crisis; in its delays in approving HIV drugs, leading to a historic takeover of its headquarters by the activist group ACT UP; in the ways the agency previously policed poppers; and in the way the FDA still bars gay men from most blood donation. As long as poppers makers don't explicitly mention the use of poppers for gay sex, the FDA keeps its hands off their product.

The relationship between queer sex and the FDA is illustrated in one friend's response to my findings. His skepticism turned to outright disdain when I told him that just nine reports had been made to the FDA in the past decade. Almost as if he were readying a nostril for a whiff, he turned up his nose.

His eye roll was legendary and as he shifted his weight between his hips, he said matter-of-factly, “I'll probably use them more now.”

Over their lifetime, poppers have served as a near proxy for queer sex, met with much of the hand-wringing, “family oriented,” decency concerns lobbed at queerness itself. But the story of poppers and queer sex is one of survival, of resilience. For nearly centuries, police and health officials have tried to criminalize them into extinction. But in back rooms, in dive bars, on dance floors, and in the heat of passion, they survive. **FI**



Two popular brands of poppers at Leather 64TEN. Many of the most recognizable brands are made by Pac-West Distributing in Pennsylvania. **© KIRK WILLIAMSON**

WHAT MY HAND TELEPHONE DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT ANN

My 91-year-old neighbor on hardtack, comradery, and the possibilities of outer space

By KATIE PROUT

Anna May Swanson goes by Ann generally, unless it's the government or the doctor calling; then it's Anna May. She lives alone on the top floor of our three-story apartment and takes the stairs two to three times a day for exercise. She reuses bits of recycling for her own PPE. This is how I met her when we moved in June 2020, coming down the back porch stairs as my boyfriend and I huffed and sweated our furniture through the alley gate, a bit of faded silk scarf over her mouth and nose, biscotti wrappers repurposed into gloves and merrily crinkling on each waving hand.

"Jack was saying how much [information] you can get from your telephone. Well, not from your telephone, from your *hand* telephone," she explains to me from the other side of her locked apartment door. Jack, her stepson, helped her prep for this interview: I could hear his voice on Ann's landline speakerphone while climbing the stairs to her place, sharing some data he'd found about our little crook of Edgewater. For example, the building right next door to ours recently sold for a large sum and is "fancy now." It wasn't fancy when Ann lived there

from childhood to age 45, when, in the shortest move I've ever heard of, she relocated all her belongings across the alley to the place she lives now. Our building was and remains decidedly unfancy—Ann and I have talked a bit before this about starting a tenants union to get our management company to fix literally anything—but she's made it her home for 47 years, meaning Ann, who will be 92 this spring, has lived on our street for the better part of a century.

I asked Ann if I could interview her because I'm interested in what it's like to live somewhere so specific for so long, and because I like to hear the stories she tells me in the stairwell. As Omicron spiked, we decided chatting face-to-face was out, but as her landline and my cell phone don't get along, so was a phone call. Instead, I listen to her drag a chair in from another room to her entryway while I sit down on her doormat. I feed two copies of the *Reader* with my name in the masthead under the door, so she knows I'm for real, and watch them wriggle and disappear as she tugs on them from the other side. Her door between us and our masks on, we begin.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU LIVED HERE?

It's about 48, 47 years here [on Victoria Street], and 34 on Ardmore [the building next door to ours]. Something like that.

AND WHERE DID YOU LIVE BEFORE THAT?

Various places on the north side, always the north side.

WHAT WAS THIS BUILDING LIKE WHEN YOU FIRST MOVED IN?

There was no fence in the backyard. There were no washing machines. The sidewalk was cracked in the backyard.

DOES THE INSIDE OF YOUR APARTMENT LOOK DIFFERENT FROM THEM?

No, no. Except they decorated [recently], painted the kitchen and the bathroom. They've done that before. I got new linoleum.

One time this summer, when I bring her some mail, Ann invites me in. Everywhere in her kitchen, there are sticky notes, with names and numbers written in cursive; I see mine among them, along with the magnifying glass she uses these days to read. Her stove is in the same place as ours, but it's much smaller, much older, and looks like it's made of porcelain. Above it, the corner of the ceiling leaks when it rains, she tells me, and gets in her soup.

The apartments on our side of the building come with weird little almost-porches that face the street—not quite three seasons, not quite a room. Some residents use theirs as precious storage space. I've filled mine with plants. Inside her place, I see Ann has done the same, only some of her plants are decades old. She has the usual household pothos, green and veiny, except there is nothing usual about hers: there are so many vines it's become a huge riotous bush, new leaves cascading down over years of yellowing and dead brethren. She too has a Christmas cactus, only hers looks less domesticated and more like the real thing: a strong, fuchsia-tipped desert tree. Her Christmas lilies have thick, heavy stalks—she stopped putting the bulbs to bed a long time ago, and now they bloom and grow year round. Everywhere in this little room are heavy old bags of dirt and half-full gallons of distilled water; everywhere are the husks and dust of things long dead, and life creeping over.

HAVE YOU ALWAYS LIVED ALONE? OR DID ANYONE ELSE LIVE WITH YOU?

My mother for a while.

DID YOU MOVE IN WITH JACK AND JACK'S DAD, OR WERE YOU ALONE WHEN YOU MOVED IN?

I don't wanna bring that up.

GOTCHA. THANK YOU FOR TELLING ME.

Mhm.

WHAT WAS THE NEIGHBORHOOD LIKE WHEN YOU FIRST LIVED HERE?

I went to the beach a lot, with my girlfriends.

I used to drink water at the fountain there, at Sullivan's. You should find out about Sullivan's on your telephone!

I'LL LOOK IT UP. [I DO LOOK IT UP, BUT AM UNSUCCESSFUL, SO I E-MAIL THE EXPERTS. "THERE WAS A DRUG STORE NAMED SULLIVAN'S PHARMACY AT 5759 N. BROADWAY FROM AT LEAST 1922 THROUGH AT LEAST 1965. WOULD BE INTERESTED IN READING THE STORY. BEST, LEROY BLOMMAERT, EDGEWATER HISTORICAL SOCIETY."]

Then we would go to another neighbor's garage, which was on the parking lot of Walgreens now, at Ridge and Broadway. We'd use his bathroom. There were four of us who would go in there [laughing] when we were out shopping at the dime store on Bryn Mawr. We were always shopping at the dime store.

WHAT DID YOU USED TO GET?

I used to always get colored sewing thread, because I loved to do cross-stitch and embroidery.

WHAT KIND OF COLORS DID YOU LIKE?

Oh, anything that was unusual. Off-reds, off-blues, off-yellows. I'd get up, have a box full of different colors.

While I'm transcribing this interview, Ann knocks on the door. "Mailman!" she sings out through her mask. Ann has had many jobs in her life, one of which was as a preschool teacher. I love her voice: it's bright and scratchy and exactly right for reading to a bunch of squirmy three-year-olds. It's the kind of voice that wants to play.

Today, Ann's wearing a blue cardigan, gray trousers, and drugstore glasses. Her hair is white and flossy and sticks up in excited little exclamation marks all over her head, making her look, to my imagination, a bit like a nonagenarian Joan of Arc. She's windswept and eager, as always, even though I know it's been a long time since she's properly been outside. She hands me a letter that was delivered to her by mistake. We talk for a bit about how messed up our mail has been, but how much better it's gotten since we started calling the local post office together to fix it.

HOW HAS THE NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGED?

I don't know that many people now. At that

time, there were more kids to play with. They were always in the alley jumping rope, playing hide-and-go-seek in the gangways, which are not there anymore, except that they're boarded up. And we would roller-skate on the tar part—[that's] where the sewers are in the middle of the street. That was smooth skating on that. And then in the street, we would play red rover, red rover, and so we would be standing on the curbs and running across the street, there and back. Then we used to go to the Armory and go roller-skating there.

ON THE PHONE YESTERDAY, YOU TOLD ME ABOUT A BIG SNOWSTORM ON OUTER DRIVE [AN EARLIER NAME FOR LAKE SHORE DRIVE THAT ANN STILL USES], WHERE YOU HAD TO CRAWL ON YOUR HANDS AND KNEES TO SEE THE LAKE.

Oh yeah, that was one year when there's no cars on the Outer Drive, and I remember thinking, "Oh boy, this is the first time I've really been able to walk on the Outer Drive!" I did it as much as I could until I got past the buildings, and then I crawled on the top of the snow like I was swimming to reach the water, which was frozen and had ice caves—frozen waves that were just real high near the edge of the lake.

WHY DID YOU WANT TO GO SEE IT?

Oh, I figured I'd never get that chance again!

WERE YOU A TEENAGER, WERE YOU A KID, WERE YOU IN YOUR 20S?

Well, that wasn't that long ago. Probably 1985. I'm not sure. [This places Ann in her mid 60s.]

DO YOU HAVE ADVICE FOR OTHER WOMEN IN THE CITY WHO ARE LIVING INDEPENDENTLY, AS YOU HAVE LIVED?

Just do everything that you wanna do!

Sometime in the fall of 2020, there's a soft knock on our door. On the other side is Ann. Her pilot light's gone out, and she needs to borrow a lighter to spark it again, but the only one we have is one of those long ones meant for grills or, in my case, half-burned novena candles, and she's never used anything like it before. She takes it, but is back again shortly, asking my boyfriend, Carter, to show her once more how to use it. She practices for a minute in our doorway, using both her thumbs to pull

down the safety switch and trembling with the effort to do so. Carter is quietly alarmed, and offers to light her stove for her, but Ann waves him away. "I've got it this time!" she says, and then, to our cat Poe, who is a kitten at this point and who has crept to the doorway to watch a human only slightly larger than him wave around some fire, "Hello, bunny! You have a rabbit!"

Definitely alarmed now, we both offer to come light her stove, but Ann assures us that she'll have no trouble lighting the pilot light now, her eyes are just a little bad at night. She disappears again, and we brace ourselves for an explosion. Minutes tick by, and then here is Ann again: red-cheeked, shining blue eyes, the long lighter held up in her hand like a sword. "I got it!" she says triumphantly, and thanks us.

WHAT DO YOU DO DURING THE DAY LATELY? HOW DO YOU SPEND YOUR TIME?

Trying to keep up with everything.

WHAT IS "EVERYTHING?"

Well, reading information. I like to read about health . . . I think it's important to exercise the joints. The legs and the arms, the toes and the ankles—anything that bends that doesn't wanna bend. And even exercising the scalp, by brushing. A stiff hairbrush, a hundred strokes a day.

HOW DO YOU GET THE NEWS?

When the TV is working, I get it through there.

A week or two after the pilot light episode, there's another knock, only this time I don't think it's a knock, I think it's the apartment settling. A moment later, I hear a rustle, and find a sheet of paper slipped under our door. It's a note from Ann. "Hi Katie, Carter & Poe," it begins. "I hope you can all enjoy the 'Meow-athon,' on Ch. 9, today, Thurs. and have a Happy Enjoyable Halowen [sic]. Ann #3." On the top right corner, there's a carefully inked face of a little cat.

YOU'RE SOMEONE WHO HAS SEEN A LOT OF HISTORY AND HAS LIVED THROUGH QUITE A BIT. WHAT DO YOU THINK THE NEXT YEAR WILL BE LIKE?

Oh, I think we'll be in outer space more and more. There's gonna be plenty of real estate up in the sky there [laughs].

continued from 15 DO YOU LIKE THAT IDEA?

Well, I don't know if I'll be here. I think in the future, we're definitely going to need more people on whatever they discover up there. They started that last week, they went up to outer space—I don't know if [where they went] is the definition of [space]—they only went ten minutes. I don't know if that's above the ionosphere, or stratosphere. There's so many spheres up there. I don't know what they consider outer space. Definitely where the Space Station is, they'll put something up so people can hitchhike up there [laughs again].

IF YOU WERE HERE, WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO THERE?

Yes! If it's safe. Only if it's safe.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT THE IDEA OF LIVING IN SPACE?

Well, there'd be more space [laughs]!

WHAT ARE YOUR OWN HOPES AND THOUGHTS FOR THE NEW YEAR?

They'll be able to find vaccines that can handle all the variations of diseases. Other diseases that have been hard to eradicate.

DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE FOR NEXT YEAR?

To learn about everything that you wanna learn about.

Once, during the weeks of our mail fiasco, when I bring 13 pieces of Ann's mail that was delivered to me up to her front door, she tells me a story about spending weeks in England in her 20s, and how she and her sister drank poitin (a type of Irish moonshine) with some Irish immigrants deep in the countryside. Another time, before the COVID spike, Ann shows me the old globe in her apartment. She studies it almost daily, trying to memorize the regions, waterways, and borders. "Even though some of the names have changed," she explains to me (for example, her globe still says Burma), "the lines and the lands are mostly the same. I just think it's important to know about the world."

Passing each other in the stairwell this fall, she unexpectedly starts talking about the U.S. pullout from Afghanistan. "It's awful," she

says, then stops. Ann is very careful with her words, and when they escape her, she takes as long as she needs to locate them again. I wait. "I just think," she says haltingly, "that if women were in charge, and if we gave women money, there'd be no more war!"

DO YOU STILL EMBROIDER?

No, I don't. 'Bout all I do is sew buttons. Especially when you can't go to the store and you're trying to keep everything as wearable as can be.

At this point, as is usual in our conversations, the topic turns to hardtack. In the stairwell one afternoon in autumn 2021, Ann tells me about her favorite way to make hardtack sandwiches, a thing I didn't know people voluntarily did. She likes them panfried with a slice of strong, good white cheese.

It's so nice to be able to store the bread and not be afraid of it spoiling.

WHERE DO YOU GET HARDTACK FROM?

More and more regular grocery stores carry it. Before it used to be Swedish delicatessens. [Ann was born in Chicago, but one of her parents immigrated from Sweden, the other from "above the Arctic Circle."]

DID YOU LEARN ANYTHING NEW THIS YEAR

"THERE'S GONNA BE PLENTY OF REAL ESTATE UP IN THE SKY."

—Ann

ABOUT YOURSELF, OR HOW THE WORLD WORKS?

I think I have to think about that.

HOW DID YOU DECIDE TO STAY ON THIS BLOCK FOR MOST OF YOUR LIFE? WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO STAY?

The lake. That's always been what I liked about this building, that I could walk to the lake. We can drink Lake Michigan water. And you can always get fresh air. And when a storm is coming, and it's a northeasterly, you know it's coming from the lake. It's coming from Canada.

I always liked to have a perimeter where I can walk all the time—to Sears Roebuck, and that was the first Sears store they opened up, and that turned condo. And I used to walk up to Evanston. I'm afraid of walking too far [now].

DO YOU REMEMBER THE LAST TIME YOU WENT TO THE LAKE TO SEE IT?

I can't remember.

IF YOU EVER WANT ME TO TAKE PICTURES OF THE LAKE, I CAN TAKE THEM AND PRINT THEM.

Oh, no no no, that's OK. One of these days [laughing] I'll get out of this house when that

pandemic gets a vaccine that will wipe it out.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WANT ME TO KNOW RIGHT NOW, OR DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?

It's just nice having neighbors, and I certainly appreciate you taking [care of] the mail. It's so important to keep in touch with what I'm doing. You made me real happy, and especially at Thanksgiving time, when I noticed there was mail out here. Thank you.

YOU'RE WELCOME! I HOPE YOUR MAIL IS GETTING DELIVERED REGULARLY NOW, BUT IF YOU HAVE ANY TROUBLES, YOU KNOW WHERE I LIVE.

I think it's nice that we both have the same idea of making things better. It's nice to be in touch with somebody that knows stuff, that you can converse with. I'm very grateful for that.

WELL, I'M VERY GRATEFUL THAT YOU'RE MY NEIGHBOR. I LIKE HEARING WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY.

When my boyfriend and I were unloading the car after our New Year's trip to Michigan, Ann is doing her stair exercise. She declines to be interviewed further, but encourages all to have a happy New Year. 📺

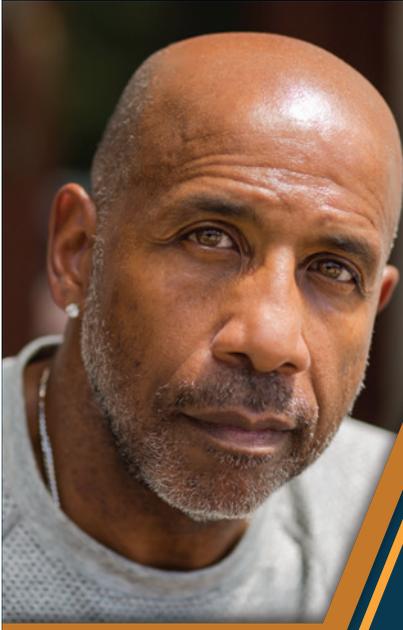
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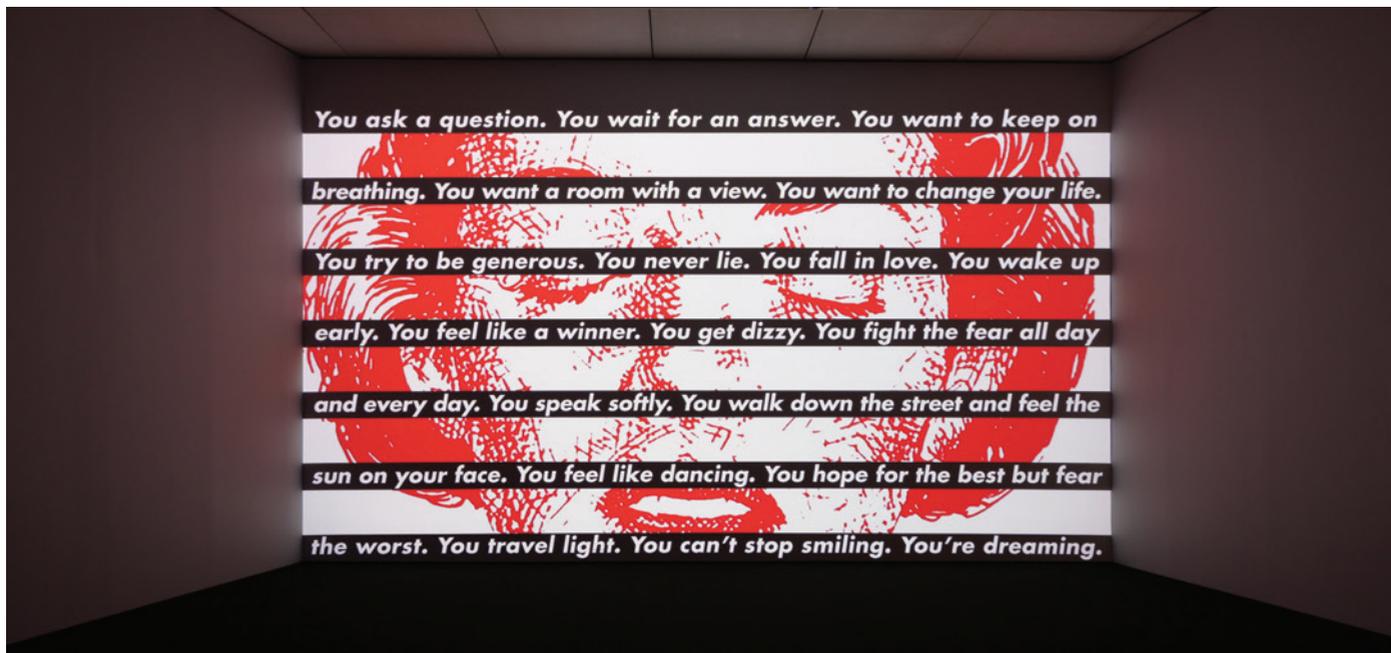
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ARTS & CULTURE



An LED installation display from Barbara Kruger's exhibition "Thinking of You. I Mean Me. I Mean You." © COURTESY ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

ART REVIEW

Thinking of us

Barbara Kruger captures the zeitgeist of the present moment with her exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago.

BY KAYLEN RALPH

Barbara Kruger, collagist, conceptual artist, and Futura Bold Oblique font savant, will turn 77 two days after her exhibition "THINKING OF YOU. I MEAN ME. I MEAN YOU." closes at the Art Institute of Chicago on January 24.

The expansive exhibition, which opened in September after being delayed almost a year by COVID-19 concerns, is the artist's largest in 20 years, and her first solo exhibition in the U.S. since 1999 (mounted by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles).

Make no mistake: despite Kruger's age and decades-long career, this exhibition is *not* a retrospective—even if that's exactly what it feels like. And that's exactly the point.

The earliest of Kruger's works included in the exhibit are pasteups from her days at Condé Nast in the 1980s. While some of her older, most widely recognized works, such as 1988's *Picturing "Greatness"* and *Pledge, Untitled (Who Speaks? Who is Silent?)* from 1990, are included too, this is mostly done to afford Kruger a limitless canvas for recontextualizing that older work (some of which is reworked) and showcase it alongside her previously un-

seen work from the past 20 years.

According to Robyn Farrell, an associate curator in the Art Institute's Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, and cocurator of "Thinking of You," of the nearly 80 works in this exhibition, 28 of them predate the 1999 MOCA retrospective, while 48 of the works have been produced since 2003. Of that latter 48, a whopping 40 were remade or newly produced for the Chicago presentation of the exhibition.

"I would describe the exhibition as a space where the past and present are simultaneously in conversation with one another," says Farrell.

And that's a conversation that the collective "we" also seem to be in the midst of right now.

One of Kruger's most widely recognized works is *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)*, which she originally produced for the Women's March on Washington in 1989, a year when—much like this one and the last several—waves of antiabortion laws were introduced to chip away at *Roe v. Wade*. The Broad Art Foundation, where the original of *Your Body* lives, notes about the work, "The

woman's face, disembodied, split in positive and negative exposures, and obscured by text, marks a stark divide. This image is simultaneously art and protest. Though its origin is tied to a specific moment, the power of the work lies in the timelessness of its declaration."

Back in September, during the opening week of "Thinking of You," news of the updated abortion restrictions in Texas was breaking, which really hammered home the long-lasting relevancy of Kruger's work. In this endless loop of pandemic pandemonium and its ensuing effect on the social and political culture, life itself feels like a slightly reconstructed retrospective.

"Barbara's work always resonates . . . because her work is about how we are to one another," Farrell says. "It's essentially about the human condition, and how the human condition is responsive to the institutional constructs that inform our daily lives. And therefore, the work is unfortunately always relevant, because people don't often change."

When viewers first enter "Thinking of You" in the Art Institute's Regenstein Hall, they are met with a large-scale, mind-bending work

that sets the tone for the rest of the exhibit. In stark black-and-white font, "You" are invoked for the first of many times, because this is a show that centers around the idea that the personal is political, but also that the political is personal, especially if you're a woman. You are led to take this very politically charged exhibition very personally.

"You. You know that women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size."

That's one of the first invocations greeting visitors to the exhibit that rejects the concept of a traditional retrospective, and in doing so, challenges the timeline of an artist's relevancy, which is . . . relevant. By pushing back on the usual parameters, Kruger rejects the idea that any artist, but particularly a female-identifying one, one who has consistently embraced the personal nature of politics, is ever in a position to cease that exploration, to say that it's done and dusted. This reinforces the idea that women's contributions to culture are indelibly prescient and of the present, no matter when they were first conceived, created, or recreated.

In Claudia Durastanti's new book, *Strangers I Know*, she writes, "Rereading yourself

"THINKING OF YOU. I MEAN ME. I MEAN YOU."

Through 1/24: Thu-Mon, 11 AM-5 PM, Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan, 312-443-3600, artic.edu

means inventing what you've gone through, identifying each layer you're built upon: the crystals of joy or loneliness beneath, the result of some evaporated memory, everything that's been carved out, then flooded, only for you to realize that time's not healing after all: there's a breach that can't be filled. The only thing time will do is carry dust and weeds along with it, until that crevice is covered over and transformed to a different landscape, distant, almost a fairy tale, where you no longer recognize the language spoken, that might as well be Elvish." If time itself isn't healing, why should we limit ourselves to merely looking back? Why not transform? That's what Kru-

ger's asking us—me and you—to do. As a new year dawns, what a perfect opportunity to dive into that transformation.

Farrell tells me, “In her practice, Barbara has tracked culture over time, and it’s always been through a mode of media communication. Whether that be a printed page or a large-scale vinyl, or a billboard, or a bus or a wrapped facade, she’s always mimicked the primary mode of communication.”

And to that end, “Thinking of You” is a multi-sensory exhibition, with reverberatory audio throughout, and massive, state-of-the-art, large-scale LED installation displays in nearly every room.

“It only makes sense that this most recent body of work is communicated through screens,” says Farrell. “That was Barbara’s decision, and it was something that she knew she wanted to do immediately, and I think it seems inevitable that would be the case because the mode by which most of us receive information on a daily basis are across the flat screen, whether it be a laptop or a smartphone. So it makes sense that she’s sort of mirroring soci-



Barbara Kruger's *Untitled (Truth)*, 2013. Collection of Margaret and Daniel S. Loeb. Digital image courtesy of the artist. COURTESY ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

ety. She’s always tracked the cultural zeitgeist, but she’s reflected that commentary through whatever the technology of the day might be.”

There’s irony in the fact that Kruger’s work, in theory a caustic skewering of capitalism, is perfectly mounted to be captured through

today’s primary technology du jour—Instagram—itself a thinly-masked hand tool of capitalism.

Farrell concludes, “The urgency of her work, as it migrates from a printed page to a screen and interior to exterior walls lies perhaps less

in its graphic immediacy, than in its fluency and the ways that her work can be continually replayed, redeployed [and] broadcast for a particular site and for particular audience.”

Just as we are Kruger’s audience, we experience her work with our own ever-present, personal audiences in tow, and a retrospective is really all we get—at the conclusion of our career, a year, or decades of constitutional protections of our bodily autonomy. The siren’s call to curate is amplified by our desire to control the narrative, to try our vainest to meter the lasting impression we leave, to make sure everyone knows—we were not only always in on the joke, but we also wrote the punchline.

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A serious collection of X-Men comics awaits interested shoppers. **MEGAN KIRBY**

collection in batches, issue by issue. Many include Clowes's handwritten labels chronicling issue numbers, authors, and artists. Some are even sold inside their original bags. And all are affixed with a label that reads "From the Dan Clowes Collection."

Clowes grew up in Hyde Park. While living in Chicago in 1989, he began publishing *Eightball*, a comics series that fixates on misfits, outcasts, fanatics, and sardonic weirdos. *Eightball* became an underground comics sensation, and many of the serialized stories became stand-alone graphic novels. Cult classic *Ghost World*—the story of two antisocial teen girls bumbling through life after high school graduation—began in *Eightball* in 1993, and was adapted into a Terry Zwigoff film in 2001. Though Clowes moved to California in 1992, he remains a hometown hero—partly thanks to the overt Chicago references that punctuate *Eightball*.

Before he became a cartooning titan, Clowes was just a kid blowing all his cash on weekly comics releases. Now, a couple thousand of those issues are in the basement of Chicago Comics. "These are mostly things I bought out of rote obligation/OCD during a period in my teen years when I bought basically every comic coming out," Clowes says via e-mail. "My best friend worked at a newsstand on Lake Park and was able to get everything at a discount."

Over the years, Clowes shipped his favorite issues back to California. In October 2021, when he was cleaning out his late mother's house in Hyde Park, he called up Chicago Comics. Would the store be interested in buying the rest of the collection? Kirsammer drove out in person and left with the 15 boxes, plus an assortment of vintage games, a Ouija board, two paint-your-own-monster kits started (and abandoned) by Clowes, and a ton of pulp novels that belonged to Clowes's mother (who worked as a motorcycle mechanic).

In Chicago's rich comics history, Clowes is a giant. His art has been shown widely, including a solo retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2013. Last year, a selection of original Clowes pieces appeared in the MCA's exhibition "Chicago Comics: 1960 to Now." Ignatz Award-winning cartoonist Bianca Xunise, who contributes to the newspaper strip *Six Chix*, was thrilled to

see her work hanging alongside the artist who introduced her to indie comics. She remembers driving to Chicago Comics as a teen, back when their impressive smut collection made a visit feel scandalous. Clowes was one of the first non-superhero artists she gravitated towards. "I didn't know comics could be this," she says. "That was what hit me at first: I have these same thoughts, I have these same observations of the world. I was like, 'Oh, I wonder if there are other cartoonists who have this same world view.'"

So far, the response to the collection has been enthusiastic. When Chicago Comics posted a Facebook announcement about the collection, it quickly gained more than 450 likes and a barrage of comments. "I had someone come in 20 minutes after I made the Facebook post, saying, 'Where are they?'" Kirsammer says. For now, the collection is only available in-store.

On December 9, the Quimby's Instagram account posted that the Clowes family Ouija board would be on sale when the store opened the next day. "Putting the ghost back in *Ghost World*," they commented. The next day, Skye Rust showed up at the door before the store opened. As co-owner of the Andersonville store Woolly Mammoth Chicago Antiques and Oddities, she's always on the hunt for cryptic memorabilia. Now the Clowes Ouija board will live in Woolly Mammoth's permanent collection of taxidermy, skeletons, and esoteric memorabilia. "I am thrilled we get to preserve a kick-ass weirdo object from an amazing Chicago artist," she says. "We know folks will love getting to visit it in person."

Can any artistic understanding be gleaned from the pages of Clowes's old superhero comics? Kirsammer isn't convinced. "People are like, 'Can you figure out how he formed the ideas for *Eightball*?'" he says. "The thing is, it's just a typical kid's comic book collection from that era." But Quimby's employee Caroline Cash found a surprise inside one of the pulp novels destined for the store's shelves: a small sketch of the Silver Surfer, along with a series of Clowes's practice signatures, drawn directly onto the pages of the book.

Now the comics that Clowes bagged and labeled himself decades ago will live on as beloved artifacts in Chicago and beyond. "[Eric] and his stores are the best, and I'm happy he was interested in finding a home for these remnants of my stunted adolescence," Clowes says. **FI**

@megankirby

COMIC BOOKS

From the Dan Clowes collection

Chicago Comics and Quimby's acquired a stash of treasures from the lauded cartoonist's adolescence.

By **MEGAN KIRBY**

If you head down to the basement of Chicago Comics, past the endless rows of back issues and vintage titles waiting to be priced, you'll find 15 white boxes. They contain a pretty standard collection of 60s and 70s comics—*Thor*, *Conan the Barbarian*, *X-Men*, *MAD* magazine. But these comics have a special allure. They belonged to comics great Dan Clowes. And after decades languishing in his

mother's Hyde Park house, Clowes's childhood comics collection is going up for sale.

"There's so many collections like this," says Eric Kirsammer, owner of Chicago Comics and Quimby's Books. "But how many people grow up to be Dan Clowes?"

Now, local comics fans can score a very tangible connection to a legendary artist. Chicago Comics and Quimby's are selling the

ARTS & CULTURE



EVENTS

Let's get lit

Book discussions, poetry, and other upcoming Chicago literary world events

By SALEM COLLO-JULIN

Here are some book-related, word-inspired, and otherwise literary Chicago events to kick off 2022. Each event is free and open to the public, but registration might be required (and you'll want to support the writers by buying their books!).

Sun 1/9, 2 PM: Children's book signing event for Chicago author LaTasha Gaines and her new series *Books & Bullies*. Reading and Q&A led by Coach Jhe', followed by an opportunity to purchase books and talk to the author. Light refreshments will be served by host Eméché Cakery & Cafe (3453 S. Prairie). More information and RSVPs to teamichooselife@gmail.com.

Thu 1/13, 7 PM: The Poetry Foundation's Open Door reading series presents work from new and emerging poets by featuring two midwestern writers who invite two of their writing students or collaborators. Tonight's event features Kofi Antwi (*Tidal Wave*), Jesse K. Baer (*Holodeck One*), Louise Akers (*Alien Year*), and Tariq Shah (*Whiteout Conditions*).

Presentation is online through Zoom and registration is requested at Eventbrite, with more information at poetryfoundation.org.

Sat 1/15, 2 PM: The Chicago Public Library hosts an online chat with author and Columbia College Chicago professor Eric Charles May, whose novel *Bedrock Faith* was chosen as the library's 2021 One Book, One Chicago selection. This presentation is hosted at the Walker library branch (11071 S. Hoyne) with a concurrent broadcast on Zoom. Registration is required for attending either the in-person or Zoom presentation. 312-747-1920, chipublib.org.

Wed 1/19, 6:30 PM: City Lit Books hosts its regular Poetry Salon featuring C. Russell Price, author of the chapbook *Tonight, We Fuck the Trailer Park Out of Each Other*. 2523 N. Kedzie, sign-up for open mike begins at 6:15 PM and readings begin at 6:30 PM, 773-235-2523, citylitbooks.com.

Sat 1/22, 3 PM: Women & Children First,

Take yourself on a date to the public library in 2022. [DOLLAR GILL/UNSPASH](https://www.instagram.com/dollar_gill)

who have been in business for 42 years, host an online celebration of Chicago author Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski series for its own 40th anniversary of being in print. An online event with the writer via Crowdcaster; contact the bookstore for details. 773-769-9299, womenandchildrenfirst.com.

Sat 1/29, 2 PM: Black Metropolis Research Consortium presents a conversation with Ayana Contreras on "Afro-Optimism and Creativity in Chicago," in honor of Contreras's new book *Energy Never Dies*. In person at Chicago Public Library Woodson Regional branch, 9525 S. Halsted, 312-747-6900, chipublib.org.

Wed 2/2, 6:30 PM: American Writers Museum hosts a reading from writer Hanif Abdurraqib and illustrator Ashley Evans for their new children's book *Sing, Aretha, Sing!* Online event, free registration at Eventbrite, americanwritersmuseum.org.

Tue 2/8, 6:30 PM: Seminary Co-op Bookstore and the American Writers Museum cohost a reading and discussion with author and Chicago native Nancy Johnson, whose debut novel *The Kindest Lie* was a *New York Times* Editor's Choice pick. This is a hybrid online and in-person event, and registration is required for either at the Seminary Co-op website. American Writers Museum, 180 N. Michigan, 773-752-4381, semcoop.com.

Thu 2/24, 6 PM: Poetry Foundation's Forms & Features poetry workshop participants share new work. An online presentation with Eventbrite registration required, poetryfoundation.org.

Sat 2/26, 10 AM: Take a master class in writing Black historical romance novels and the romance genre in general, led by Dr. Margo Hendricks (who writes in the genre under the pen name Elysabeth Grace). Sponsored by DePaul University's Center for Black Diaspora. Free and online with Eventbrite registration; more information at facebook.com/BlackDiasporaDPU.

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Mary Rose by Black Button Eyes Productions

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PREVIEW

The lost girl

Black Button Eyes turns an unsung J.M. Barrie play into a musical.

By **KERRY REID**

J.M. Barrie's most famous creation has become shorthand for all puckish men-children who refuse to grow up, entranced by a world of adventure and derring-do, where good and evil exist on an uncomplicated binary. But while Peter Pan and his fellow Lost Boys have found life in numerous adaptations since Barrie first introduced the character 120 years ago, another Barrie creation with a penchant for getting lost in time has been generally ignored.

In 1920, Barrie's play *Mary Rose* made its debut at London's Haymarket Theatre, with a New York production following the same year. Then it mostly went away, except for a New York revival in 2007 and one in London in 2012.

But Ed Rutherford, producing artistic director of Chicago's Black Button Eyes Productions, felt Barrie's play would be a great fit for his company, whose tagline is "We help magic invade reality." In Barrie's story, the title character vanishes twice from the same Scottish island (shades of *Brigadoon*)—once as a small child for 21 days, and then again as a young wife and mother for decades. Each time she reappears with no memory of the lost time, and not looking a day older than when she disappeared.

Rutherford first became aware of Barrie's play when it was under consideration for production with Promethean Theatre Ensemble, where he's an artistic associate. Promethean passed on it, but Rutherford says, "It did kind

of stick with me as an interesting story. It had a lot of potential, but it's very much a piece of its time. It's got a three-act structure and other issues with it that I think make it unsuitable a little bit for contemporary audiences. But I just thought there was something there that kind of got under my skin and stayed with me."

With Barrie's play entering the public domain a few years ago, Rutherford realized that he and his collaborators could take the original and reimagine it as a shorter musical project. He reached out in early 2020 to composer and lyricist Jeff Bouthiette, who had previously worked as musical director with Black Button Eyes on their 2016 production of the Polly Pen/Peggy Harmon musical version of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*. The enforced pandemic shutdown gave the two plenty of time to focus on the project, which opens in a world premiere at Edge Theater this weekend.

In addition to trimming the length, Rutherford (who wrote the book and cowrote the lyrics with Bouthiette) says, "It was important to me—and this is maybe partly what I'm talking about when we discuss how it's very much of its period—that I find opportunities to give the title character more agency and emotional complexity than maybe made up the original text." He adds, "It also has to do with some of the other themes I want to explore as far as how you deal with loss and grief, especially the sudden loss of somebody that you care about very much."

MARY ROSE

1/7-2/12: Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM, the Edge Theater, 5451 N. Broadway, blackbuttoneyes.com, \$30.

The score itself, though, has what Rutherford describes as "a very classical feel to it with obviously some contemporary influences and more modern sounds. I would say that we do have one number that explicitly is referencing British music hall a little bit from that period."

Bouthiette says, "The thing that was exciting is that I could immediately hear what this might sound like. It has, to me, a very specific tone. I like to describe it as *The Secret Garden's* creepier or older sibling that's into Ouija board." They've orchestrated the score for a

four-piece band: piano and keyboards, violin, cello, and percussion.

Stephanie Stockstill, who performed in Black Button Eyes's *Goblin Market*, plays the title role, and notes that Mary Rose "is a Victorian woman, but she's a little bit more of a free spirit. Even as a child it's mentioned she was always running wild. Sometimes she was kind of devilish. She had that streak to her and she does make some unconventional kinds of choices. Even if they're not conscious choices, her subconscious is sort of asking to be taken away from the life that she has."

Even without an explicitly feminist adaptation, one could argue that there is something implicitly feminist in imagining a woman who essentially rejects being Wendy, the responsible conscientious girl and maternal figure in a world full of male ids.

Rutherford says, "There are definitely themes that Barrie explores in *Peter Pan* that I think also find echoes in *Mary Rose*, just as far as specific plot points. An island that is mysterious and magical figures, importantly, kind of like Neverland. The character of Mary Rose, it's clear in the original text—and we do explore that a little bit more in this version—that kind of like Peter Pan, she's preoccupied with and concerned about growing up and passing the milestones of age. Whether it's starting a family or becoming more distant from her parents, that sort of change as we get older and mature is something that she's not sure she wants to buy into." Bouthiette notes, "Her personality, her desires, and how that intersects with the supernatural world really are the center of the piece."

For Stockstill, the story also has resonance with our own sense of "lost time" during the pandemic.

"This was a really weird, lonely time," she says. "At least for me during COVID, it felt like the world was taken away from me, not the other way around. Not only theater, but I sing for people who live in assisted living facilities and I work in a bar, so everything was gone for a year. She goes through being out of the world, out of time, and then she does come back. And she goes back and forth [in time] a bit and we're experiencing that now. So it's just strangely parallel." **FI**

@kerryreid



Fifteen Minutes by Dalya Lessem Elnecape is one of three plays in Pegasus Theatre Chicago's 35th Annual Young Playwrights Festival. ANTHONY ROBERT

LA PENNA

THE NEXT GENERATION

Decisions, demons, and doom

The Young Playwrights Festival tackles big issues in short plays.

By **KAYLEN RALPH**

While many of us (perhaps too optimistically) planned to complete any number of creative projects over the course of pandemic isolation parts one, two, or—dare I say it—three, 300 Chicago-area high school students managed to write and submit one-act plays to Pegasus Theatre Chicago's 35th Annual Young Playwrights Festival.

And three of those students—Laylah Freeman of Advanced Arts/Gallery 37, Sarah Lerner of Whitney Young Magnet High School, and Dalya Lessem Elnecape of Lane Tech College Prep—are beginning their 2022 by getting

their winning submissions professionally produced and staged (virtually) by Pegasus.

In *The Little Things*, written by Freeman and directed by Christian Helem, it's Christmas 1950, and Freeman's protagonist, Minerva Spencer, is mourning her deceased high school boyfriend, Ben Crawford, while trying her best to dodge her mother's attempts at holiday matchmaking.

"*The Little Things* was inspired by my own experience of chasing my past," Freeman said via e-mail. "During quarantine, I had a lot of time on my hands to reflect on the choices/decisions I made, the opportunities I did and

did not take, and the people I kept around or left behind."

While many of us experienced similar reflections during quarantine, Freeman's ability to translate that relatable melancholia to the stage is an amazing example—and lesson—in the transmissibility and relatability of grief through art.

"I was filled with regret," Freeman continued. "I wasn't satisfied with how it all turned out and longed for the alternative; like my main character, one of those alternatives included a boy. I spent most of that time—the rest of my junior year and summer—harping on what would've happened if I wasn't so closed off to things or didn't let what others said or did define my actions. By the time my Theatre class got around to our playwriting unit, I realized how much time and energy I let slip away, and I didn't want anyone else to make the same mistake I did."

Pegasus Theatre Chicago, which has been a mainstay in the Chicago theater community for more than four decades, has its roots in the celebration and promotion of original student writings, initially performed by both faculty and students at the City Colleges beginning in June 1978. Today, the theater's mission is to champion new, authentic voices and produce boldly imaginative theater primarily by and about Black, Indigenous, or other people of color. The Young Playwrights Festival, nearly as old as the theater itself (and the oldest competition of its kind in the United States), is an example of the community engagement that is essential to the theater's ethos.

"The festival starts in the schools across many different Chicago communities with students representing many different cultures," Ilesa Duncan, executive/producing director at Pegasus Theatre Chicago, said via e-mail.

"We have always worked to be a catalyst for young people to cultivate their creativity, experience professional theatre, and hopefully create the next generation of artists, producers, and arts leaders."

Duncan is directing *Have Faith*, written by Lerner, in this year's festival.

"I'm always excited to connect with what the youth are thinking, feeling, navigating, exploring," Duncan said. "They are the future,

and I'm always fascinated and encouraged by their honesty, bravery, and willingness to discover."

Lerner said *Have Faith*, which is about a Catholic University student who accidentally summons a demon to her dorm room while doing a Latin homework assignment, was inspired by the television show *Lucifer*, but that the college setting itself stemmed from the fact that she was writing the play during her senior year of high school, while simultaneously applying to colleges.

Lerner said she wrote and submitted the play as part of a class assignment—she never thought she would actually win.

"I think that the best part of this experience has been learning how to work with an entirely new written creative medium," she said via e-mail. "I had never even thought about writing a play before, so it was challenging to have to write in a completely foreign way. The last time I was involved with theater in any way was probably sixth grade, so I had no idea how to go about writing for a theater production. I had to reorient the ways in which I thought about writing so that I could create a story for the stage instead of the page."

The reality of creating art alongside the dol-drum of day-to-day life—assignments, college applications, familial expectations, and, yes, a global pandemic—and the timelessness of that dichotomy, is perhaps another lesson afforded to these students.

For *Fifteen Minutes* (directed by Ruben Carrazana), in which five people in a park must frantically decide what to do when receiving devastating news, Lessem Elnecape was primarily inspired by the Greek myth of Cassandra, "wherein a young woman is given the gift (or rather curse) of being able to foresee impending doom, but [is] unable to do anything about it," they said via e-mail.

"This made me think of the collective helplessness that so many of us felt facing the pandemic. I really love storytelling mediums that give me the ability to explore real emotional difficulties like this but in a more unlikely or unrealistic setting. Like all of existence ending." **R**

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REVIEW

Sacrificing story for shock and awe

Parallel Mothers carries Pedro Almodóvar's distinct style and affinity for the taboo, but it's not his best.

By KATHLEEN SACHS

Not until now has Pedro Almodóvar so explicitly broached the violent history of his home country. The Spanish maestro has long hinted at the repressive regime he was born into, simply by virtue of the ways his vibrant melodramas reject any sense of propriety—what shame there is implicit to Spain's history during and after the rule of General Francisco Franco lingers underneath the provocative stories and meticulous compositions that so typify an Almodóvar film. An exchange between the title characters of his latest feature makes clear, unequivocally, that memories of El Caudillo's white terror have always haunted his farcical sagas, when the older of the two mothers, played by Penélope Cruz, tells the younger one during an argument that it's time she knew her country's history. This comes after the teenage mother decries the other's obsession with unearthing the mass grave where her great-grandfather was interred. Running from her own trauma, the young woman believes that people need to move forward rather than look back.

Born in 1949, Almodóvar moved in 1967 from

the small rural town of Calzada de Calatrava to Madrid in the hopes of becoming a filmmaker, only to discover that Franco had closed the National School of Cinema. After the general's death in 1975, Almodóvar emerged as a key figure in *La Movida Madrileña*, a post-Francoist counterculture whose participants expressed themselves in ways previously forbidden. The proud bastard child of the punk and new wave movements that had taken hold elsewhere in the world, *La Movida Madrileña* was the auspice under which Almodóvar made his first several films, among them *Pepi, Luci, Bom* (1980), *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), and *Dark Habits* (1983). Each is a cavalier refutation of the societal mores that had governed Spanish society under Franco, and it's in these films that Almodóvar developed the throughlines of his career, including blithe depictions of such taboo subjects as gratuitous sex, queerness, physical and sexual abuse, incest, and drug use, as well as his use of exquisite costumes and set design to beautify the repugnance.

Some of these tendencies are present in *Parallel Mothers*—which, like *Julieta* (2016) and *Pain and Glory* (2019) before it—is also

gether more serious than his early films. In her seventh collaboration with the director, Cruz stars as Janis Martinez, a fashion photographer who's seen at the start taking pictures of a handsome forensic anthropologist, Arturo (Israel Elejalde). She asks Arturo for help in unearthing the mass grave where her great-grandfather was buried after he was shot by Nationalists in the early days of the Spanish Civil War. Residing on the board of an organization that aids in excavating such burial grounds, Arturo promises to do what he can. The two soon begin a romantic affair, and Janis becomes pregnant by the married Arturo. When she's ready to give birth (alone), her roommate at the hospital is Ana (Milena Smit), a teenage girl who also became pregnant by accident. The two bond over their circumstances and being first-time moms; Ana's own mother, Teresa (Aitana Sánchez-Gijón), hangs around, but she's preoccupied with an upcoming audition for a Lorca play.

Janis and Ana exchange information but lose contact after giving birth. They encounter one another again some time later when Ana takes a job at a cafe near Janis's apartment. Janis hires Ana to be a live-in nanny for her daughter, Cecilia, and, as befitting an Almodóvar film, the two women enter into a sexual relationship. This twist, however, pales in comparison to the one that dominates the film and which I won't spoil here. It's also at this point that the tone of the film shifts, lending substance to the Saul Bass-esque title sequence that opens the film. Blood-red and black, and utilizing the recognizable shape of photographic film (a reference to both Janis's profession and the photographs of the slain men her great-grandfather took shortly before the murder), the opening sequence recalls the titles of films like Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder*; it's at odds with the beginning of the film but loyal to its sensational midsection.

This part is also loyal to earlier Almodóvar films, where any trace of sentimentality exists only under a thick layer of multihued irony. As it approaches the end, *Parallel Mothers* regains the placid timbre of its beginning, becoming rather somber in its return to the mass grave that was Janis's proverbial baby before

she had an actual child. Ana, Janis, and Janis's best friend (Almodóvar regular Rossy de Palma) trek to the burial site with women from the nearby village, all of them carrying photographs of their loved ones, an image familiar in media about disappeared persons under totalitarian regimes. Almodóvar mimics this by featuring a slideshow of the photos taken by Janis's great-grandfather, temporarily disrupting the narrative flow with an element of documentary that poignantly breaks through the facade of the fictional world.

Parallel Mothers has just one major male character, Arturo; otherwise every other principal cast member is female. Though Almodóvar's films have often centered on female characters, this one feels especially like a love letter to Spanish women and to women in general. Almodóvar exhibits empathy toward the wives, daughters, and descendants of Spain's tens of thousands of disappeared persons, who have had to bear the brunt of their absence emotionally as well as logistically (they're the ones who've dedicated themselves to giving proper burials to their deceased relatives). He also makes a connection between national violence and sexual violence; Ana's daughter was conceived through rape, which her parents pressured her to keep secret. Ana may be ignorant of her country's history (it's also implied that her parents are politically conservative), but she's not ignorant of violence and its lingering effects. No man is an island, but each woman is a country, a history of its pain.

A subtle and personal masterpiece, Almodóvar's last film, *Pain and Glory*, is a tough act to follow, and indeed, *Parallel Mothers* is not among the best of his storied career. The connections between the present-day narrative and Spanish history at times feel tenuous, even forced; the connection between the two is less a parallel and more a perpendicular meeting of two different lines. The love affair between Janis and Ana also feels awkward, as if inserted solely for the purpose of making the film more transgressive. In his explicitness about one thing, it seems Almodóvar is reluctant to be less explicit about the others, unwilling to sacrifice shock in support of a larger, more heartrending awe. Each part of the film—Janis and the unusual circumstances around her experience becoming a mother; the pursuit of having her great-grandfather exhumed and given a proper burial—is consequential on its own, but when put together, the results feel almost like an afterthought. **F**

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



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RR *Don't Look Up*

Don't Look Up is depressing. But this isn't a warning not to watch the film. It's more a suggestion to mentally prepare for such a scathing satire at the increasingly worrisome end of an already arduous year. It follows Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence), an astronomy graduate student, and her professor Dr. Randall Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio), after they discover a giant comet heading directly for Earth. It's clear the comet will destroy the planet, but also abundantly clear that those in power will fail the populace miserably. So the two join up with NASA employee Dr. Oglethorpe (Rob Morgan) to try not so much to save the world but to get someone, anyone, to do so before impact. The Adam McKay film stays true to the writer-director's signature style. It's star-studded, and the edits often wink at the audience, but it's not so fun being in on the joke this time around. —**BECCA JAMES R**, 138 min. *Wide release in theaters and streaming on Netflix.*

The King's Man

In *The King's Man*, Matthew Vaughn returns to direct the third installment in the Kingsman series, a silly and raucous film with a globe-spanning prequel that stretches the boundaries of believable history. As some of the most notorious historical figures from the early 20th century band together to start World War I, British nobleman Orlando Oxford (Ralph Fiennes) must put together a band of talented spies to bring a stop to the carnage.

The King's Man is a rather glorious mess of a film. From Gavrilo Princip (Joel Basman) to Grigori Rasputin (a delightful Rhys Ifans), the range of dastardly villains is as broad in scope as the film's plot. Traipsing across Europe, our band of heroes uses wit, cunning, and a few well-placed punches to attempt to piece together the mystery of who's pulling the strings of the wanton bloodshed. Thematically, Vaughn's film attempts to pack in several muddled messages, from pacifism, to the need

for action, to the argument that drawing America into WWI was a good and noble thing.

There are a few turns and surprises which are less shocking than they are unnecessary—who knew we needed a Woodrow Wilson affair plot! For the most part, though, the film has such a sloppy but fun narrative that one imagines the expansive cast—from Gemma Arterton as the faithful leader of the domestic servant spy network Polly Wilkins, to Tom Hollander as the triple threat of the noble cousins King George, Kaiser Wilhelm, and Tsar Nicholas—had a hell of a time filming. —**ADAM MULLINS-KHATIB R**, 131 min. *Wide release in theaters.*

RR *Licorice Pizza*

I'd kill to live in a universe written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson. There, a wizened, 15-year-old soon-to-be-former child actor can fall head over heels for a curiously immature 20-something Jewish girl who still lives with her religiously observant parents and it doesn't come off as creepy or outlandish. It's a world that lifts Richard Nixon, the 1970s oil embargo, and Barbra Streisand from ours, but also riffs liberally from *Taxi Driver* and other movies without ever coming off as pastiche. This is a film carried by two people who've basically never acted before, but Anderson somehow knew that they could, and neither hits a false note in over two hours. It's a star-crossed love story à la *Harold and Maude* minus the tragedy.

Is it believable that a 15-year-old boy could start a waterbed franchise in the downtime between acting auditions? Then, capitalize on the impending repeal of a state ban on pinball machines by opening the first arcade in his town? Can he pine away for the girl of his dreams through the entire running time of the story and be satisfied in the end with a single innocent kiss? In our jaded, fallen world none of it would ever fly, but Anderson sells these fairy-tale notions and dozens of others. Perhaps he should change his surname to Barnum, though this is the type of snake oil we need these days by the barrelful. —**DMITRY SAMAROV R**, 133 min. *Wide release in theaters.*

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Parker Lee Williams helped shape Chicago hip-hop—and he never stopped building

He threw the city's first recurring hip-hop party, worked with the likes of Grandmaster Caz and Jamal-Ski, and built commercial music libraries that continue to support local artists.

By LEOR GALIL

Parker Lee Williams grew up in the 1970s on New York City's Lower East Side, while the city's grassroots hip-hop movement sprang to life. When he moved to Chicago as a 15-year-old in 1983, he brought along firsthand knowledge of the culture's foundational elements. His skills with spray cans and pens helped spread his tagger's name, P-Lee, around his north-side home, and his sets behind the decks as P-Lee Fresh—at parties or late at night on Northwestern's radio station, WNUR—taught everyone in Chicago hip-hop his name.

Williams was also a producer, and in the late 80s he formed the duo Mental Giants with one

of his best friends, a rapper called Akbar. In the early 1990s, Williams began collaborating with artists from his old hometown of NYC, first Boogie Down Productions affiliate Jamal-Ski and then Curtis Brown, better known as Grandmaster Caz.

To understand the importance of that affiliation, it helps to understand Caz's importance. He emerged during hip-hop's infancy to become one of the most revered rappers from the halcyon days of the late 1970s, both as a solo artist and as a member of the Cold Crush Brothers. Kool Moe Dee of the Treacherous Three, a contemporary of Caz's, ranked him at number six in his 2003 book, *There's a God on*

the Mic: The True 50 Greatest MCs.

Kool Moe Dee suggested that Caz's biggest weakness is his small recorded output, but Caz has a claim on one of the most important rap singles of all time: in the Sugarhill Gang's hit 1979 debut, "Rapper's Delight," Big Bank Hank rapped lyrics that Caz originally wrote (he's since set the record straight). Will Smith, who became one of hip-hop's 1980s crossover successes as the Fresh Prince, also idolized Caz, as he discusses in his new memoir, *Will*. "In a way, Caz validated and unleashed a creative part of me that I never thought anybody would care about," he writes. "He made it OK to be me."

A new tribute wall in honor of the late Parker Lee Williams, painted by Severe, Matr, and Serk from Williams's crew XMEN and located on Milwaukee just south of Fullerton. LEOR GALIL

When Williams connected with Caz in the early 1990s, though, the hip-hop trailblazer's glory days were far behind him. "People weren't clamoring to sign Grandmaster Caz during that time," Caz says. "It's not like I turned down other deals and offers to work with Parker. That was fucking *it*—I was in the abyss. So that work that we did together means everything to me. It put me back on my feet." Williams issued a few of his collaborations with Caz through his own label, Jazz Child Records, beginning in 1996 with a split 12-inch by the Cold Crush Brothers and Mental Giants.

"Parker was always working," Caz says. "He

had so many ideas—he used to overwhelm me with fucking music. I didn’t fully take advantage of all the things that we could have done at the time, because you think you have time with people.” Williams died of a heart attack on Wednesday, December 8, at age 54.

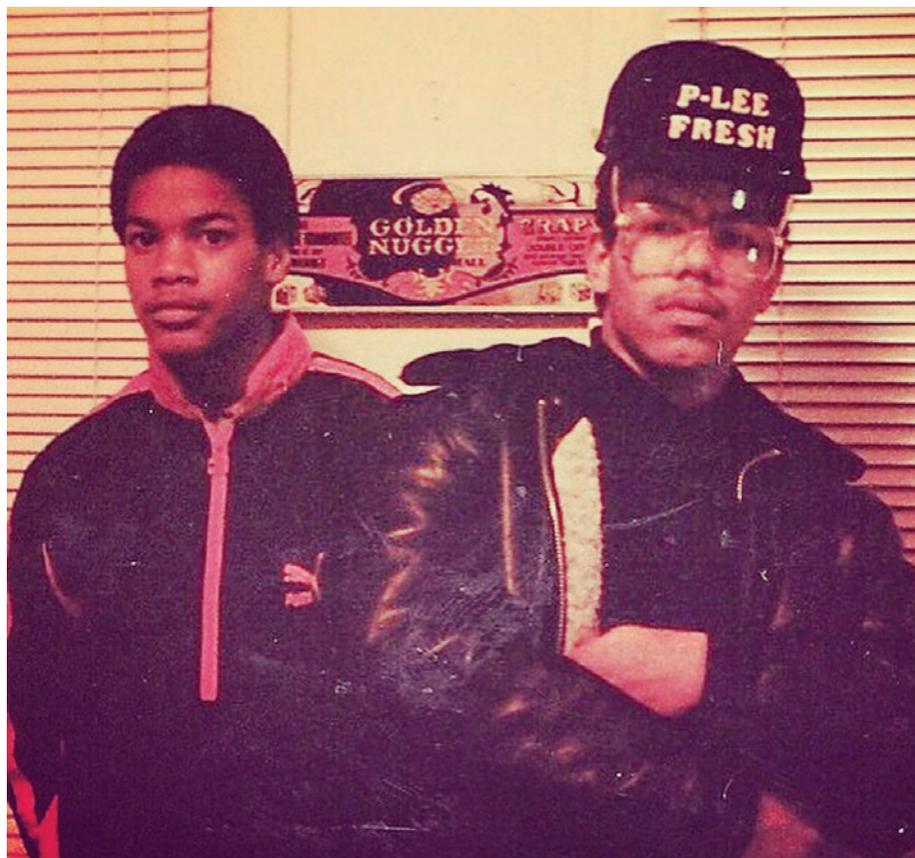
Williams remained a workhorse for his entire career, whether inside or outside the hip-hop world. In 1990, he started interning for Oprah Winfrey’s production company, Harpo Studios. “It was a paid internship, and he started working so much overtime that they put him on salary,” says blues guitarist Dave Herrero, Williams’s business partner. “They were like, ‘You’re costing us too much money working too much.’”

Williams ascended through the ranks and became Harpo’s music director in 2000; his work in that capacity for *The Oprah Winfrey Show* earned him Emmy nominations in ’06 and ’09. After Williams left Harpo in 2015, he and Herrero created *Who’s the Boss*, a music library that continues to license tracks to TV shows, films, and commercials. All the while, Williams kept a foot in the local hip-hop scene.

“From day one to the end, he always had that B-boy [spirit]—whether it was the art, with the graffiti, or later on with the music—that was always in him,” says DJ 3rd Rail, who’s hosted WNUR’s *Dedicated* hip-hop show for nearly three decades. “Him working for Oprah Winfrey, it doesn’t get any bigger, and he still took time out to put out independent hip-hop records. That speaks volumes on the love for the music and the love for the culture.”

Flora Koppel loved the arts from an early age. “I was a singer, I had studied acting at the Goodman Theatre,” she says. “So music was a very important part of my life.” In the early 1960s, she was working at a Wells Street nightclub, where she met a jazz drummer named Leroy Williams who was gigging at the club. They hit it off, and in 1967 they moved to New York together. Their son was born that November. “I named him after Charlie Parker—I liked the name Parker,” Koppel says. “It was Parker after Charlie Parker and Lee after his dad. He was destined, from that day, to be something great musically.”

As the elder Williams advanced in the world of jazz, young Parker Lee had a front-row seat. “He got to know all these famous musicians,” Koppel says. “Barry Harris was in his life from when he was a baby; Charles McPherson was in his life since he was a baby. And they were in my life too.” (Harris died at age 91 on Wednesday, December 8, the same day as Parker Lee



Akbar and Parker Lee Williams, who would soon found the duo Mental Giants, in Williams’s Rogers Park bedroom in 1985. COURTESY AKBAR

Williams.)

DJ Kool Herc threw the first hip-hop party in August 1973, a few months shy of Williams’s sixth birthday. It’s not clear when Williams got into the culture, but the exact date might not matter. “I almost can’t remember when he didn’t love hip-hop,” Koppel says. He got his hands on some turntables, and as hip-hop’s musical branch grew, he came to have his own favorite MCs, including Busy Bee Starski and Grandmaster Caz.

Williams’s parents divorced when he was seven. Several years later, in 1983, Koppel’s father died, and because she wanted to be closer to her mother, she decided to leave the east coast for Illinois. “My mom didn’t want to move to New York, and I couldn’t move to where she was, which is Rock Island, which is a little bitty town,” Koppel says. “But we said we could move to Chicago, and I could work out of Chicago.” She and Williams moved here the same year. They bounced around between a few neighborhoods after they arrived—first Wicker Park, then Uptown—and eventually

settled in Edgewater.

Williams had a little trouble adjusting to life in Chicago. When he began exploring Wicker Park, he had his first run-in with a gang. “He walked back in the house and said, ‘I’m going back to New York tonight.’ He was just totally devastated,” Koppel says. “But as he got better and better known for his graffiti and his hip-hop, the gangbangers left him alone.”

Hip-hop graffiti had started to trickle in from New York around the time Williams moved to Chicago—in 1983, for instance, Logan Square teens dabbling in graffiti had formed the crew ABC (best known as the Artistic Bombing Crew). But Williams knew the fundamentals firsthand, and he introduced Chicagoans to proper handstyles with every piece he created on the north side.

Williams found a compatriot in Akbar, a New York native who’d also lent his knowledge of hip-hop graffiti to Chicago when he moved here in 1982. “I was homesick before I met Parker,” Akbar says. “I was writing my name up around my neighborhood, just because I

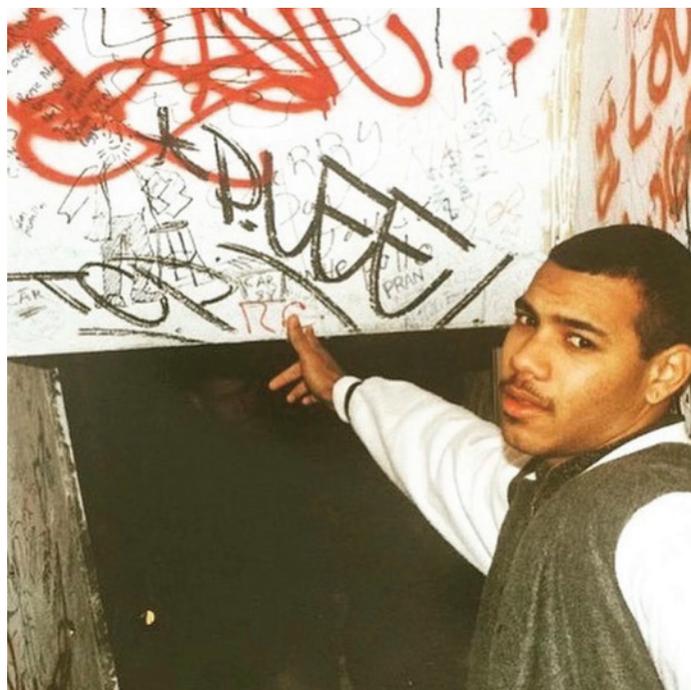
had nothing else to do.” In New York, Akbar had initially favored the tag “Blank 136,” after the number of the Harlem street where his family lived. His older brother, a member of the Zulu Nation, gave Akbar a new graffiti name before he moved to Chicago: Stane.

“A few times I almost got into some trouble with the gangs because I was writing ‘Stane,’ which was very close to ‘stone,’” Akbar says. If he tagged a block in the territory of a rival to the Almighty Black P. Stone Nation, it could cause real trouble for him. “I had a few close calls,” he says. “But as soon as hip-hop hit and blew up with breakdancing—with movies like *Beat Street* and *Breakin’*—I kind of got a pass on situations like that.”

Beat Street came out in summer 1984, around the time a buddy of Akbar’s who also wrote graffiti introduced him to Williams. The two of them became close quickly, and with their friend Kaos (who said he’d come from Queens) they formed a hip-hop crew called the Crowd Pleasers, named after a Lower East Side roller-skating crew. “We were on some exclusive New York shit—‘We’re gonna be the New Yorkers that kind of set the trends out here.’ We wanted to make Chicago look like New York,” says Akbar.

Later in the 80s, Williams launched XMEN, a Chicago version of the venerable New York graffiti crew. But he and Akbar initially envisioned TCP as involving all of hip-hop’s foundational elements. “Back then you didn’t just do one thing—we were a crew, but we did a little bit of everything,” Akbar says. “I would go over to his house, and we would make tapes; he had two turntables already and a little mixer. We would rap—we would practice and stuff. And then after, we would go out and bomb our neighborhood. We would go get on the train, and we would go writing. I was into breakdancing. Parker kind of had a few moves—he would pop-lock and stuff. We did everything. It wasn’t so compartmentalized back then.”

Akbar says other hip-hop heads wanted to join TCP, but he and Williams kept it exclusive—they wouldn’t even let in members of Akbar’s previous group, the Wild Rockers. “They kind of felt scorned,” Akbar says. “Looking back, we realized that actually created other crews. If we had let everybody into TCP and been all-inclusive, then there wouldn’t have been so many crews. It gave birth to a lot of other crews, and these crews just popped up overnight.” In 1986, TCP and several other crews, including ABC, formed a union called the Feds.



Williams with his “P-Lee” tag, pictured at left in New York in 1983 and at right in Chicago (specifically the Loyola Red Line station) in 1986
© COURTESY AKBAR

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That year, Williams organized, promoted, and hosted what’s widely believed to be the first recurring hip-hop party in Chicago. It took place weekly at Stepps Entertainment & Dance Club, a short-lived nightspot at 6459 N. Sheridan, right by Loyola University in Rogers Park. On April 14, 1986, Chambers of Time Inc. ran a filing notice for an alcohol license in the *Tribune*, and shortly it began promoting the venue in print. The company was likely related to a poppy funk group called Chambers of Time, which had a Friday residency at the club, but Akbar can’t remember the name of the owner he and Williams won over.

“We had Sundays,” Akbar says. “We used that as a venue to bring all the different B-boys and B-girls from around the city to one place to party. We had an open mike and a rap battle every week. All the writers would come and have a writer’s bench. After the party, the writers that came would all go tagging.”

The open mikes attracted fierce MCs. Akbar says one of the Stepps parties was the first time he saw Ang13, who in the 1990s would become one of Chicago’s most respected rappers and a fixture at Elbo Room’s Blue Groove Lounge. “People from way on the south side of Chicago who would probably never even go to the north side came to our party,” Akbar recalls. “Because there was no other place to really party if you were into hip-hop.”

Future Blue Groove founder Jesse de la

Peña, a veteran DJ and graffiti writer, was living on the southwest side in 1986 when he got wind of the daylong parties at Stepps. “Back then, seeing something that resembled a hip-hop movie—something you would see in *Breakin’* or *Beat Street*—in person, it was definitely a thrill,” he says. “It was odd to see. I mean, where I was from, there would be dances and stuff. But it was never really a hip-hop thing.” De la Peña had never seen a hip-hop DJ mix with multiple records, and the sight of Williams playing with two copies of Joeski Love’s 1986 single “Pee Wee’s Dance” dazzled him. “And the fact that he was from New York and also a graffiti writer, that definitely had a lasting impression on me,” he says.

As much as de la Peña enjoyed his experience at Stepps, he only went one time. “Right after I got out of there, I got arrested,” de la Peña says. “There were a bunch of graffiti cops staked out at the Loyola stop, and I ended up going to jail.” A *Tribune* story from June 24, 1986, reported that on the previous Sunday the Chicago Police Department had arrested a dozen people for vandalism at the Loyola Red Line station, the nearest one to Stepps; this followed a round of arrests there the week before, and in both cases most of the arrestees were teenagers. In 1985, the CTA had spent \$1 million to clean graffiti off trains.

“We got raided by the cops because of the amount of graffiti writers that would come and would destroy the Loyola station after the

party,” Akbar says. “I guess the word got out to law enforcement that this is a place to go catch graffiti writers.”

As far as Akbar can remember, there were only three of these hip-hop parties at Stepps. To get into the club, you had to climb two flights of stairs; this meant that when cops entered the building, everyone at the party got a heads-up. “Everybody’s like, ‘Run!’ People were hiding markers, and people were in the bathroom trying to flush their markers down the toilet—it was crazy,” Akbar says. “After that, the owner decided, like, that’s it.” Despite the short lifespan of the parties, they were a crucial beginning for Chicago hip-hop—and frustratingly, also a beginning for CPD’s ongoing project to criminalize hip-hop events and fans.

If you wanted to know how to get to a Chicago hip-hop party in the 1980s, you tuned in to one of the few radio stations that played rap records, most of which were based on university campuses. WHPK in Hyde Park became synonymous with hip-hop locally, but WNUR also planted a flag. DJ Easy Lee, who spun for crucial early NYC hip-hop group the Treacherous Three (and later its breakout star, Kool Moe Dee), began playing rap on WNUR’s house-focused *Streetbeat* program in fall 1983. In the mid-80s, Williams hosted a Sunday-night *Streetbeat* slot.

During those years, Williams traveled back

to New York City each summer to visit his dad. He frequently returned to Chicago with hip-hop records before anyone else here could get their hands on them, and he made sure to share them through his WNUR sets. “Parker had a ridiculous amount of records, bro,” Akbar says. “I don’t know how his mom put up with it, because his room got insane after a while. He had too many records.”

By the late 1980s, Williams and Akbar had turned more attention toward making and performing their own music. Akbar had honed his skills as a rapper in the 1980s by traveling to different parts of the city battling anyone he could find; Williams’s trove of records supplied him with material to make underground tracks. They planted the seeds for their duo in 1987. “I came up with the name Mental Giants to separate ourselves from the old TCP, which was more associated with being graffiti artists,” Akbar says.

“I would compare them to Gang Starr—DJ Premier and Guru,” DJ 3rd Rail says. “Parker was one of the earlier producers. He had that ear, he had that flavor. He was very anti-commercial. He was very underground.”

Williams already had his internship at Harpo Studios when his music won over Jamal-Ski in the early 90s. Jamal-Ski’s speedy rapping and singing, inflected with Jamaican patois, had by then earned him spots on two Boogie Down Productions albums. He loved hardcore punk and reggae, not just underground hip-hop, but his bond with Williams went deeper than musical taste: Jamal’s father was also a jazz musician, and his mother lived on the same block as Williams’s father.

“There were people out there [in the New York hip-hop industry] and established artists, and once I got my record deal that I had with Columbia, I could have gone to them, but with Parker I had an unconditional relationship before,” Jamal says. “He just had some crazy, underground jazzy beats. Not just jazzy—some of them were hard.”

When Williams went to NYC in 1990 to work on what became Jamal-Ski’s Columbia debut, the 1993 album *Roughneck Reality*, Akbar

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joined him for a while. The hip-hop industry began to flourish in the early 1990s, and Akbar was in the thick of it. In fall 1991, when Jamal's A&R representative, Faith Newman, signed Nas, Akbar heard the news straight from her.

"I kind of shied away from trying to get signed at that time," Akbar says. "And maybe to my own detriment, or maybe I should have been more aggressive. But I went with how I felt, and I was like, 'Let me go back to Chicago.'" Before he left New York, Jamal got him in the booth to record the *Roughneck Reality* track "Akbar's Groove."

Williams shuttled back and forth between New York and Chicago for much of the 90s, maintaining his burgeoning career with Harpo while collaborating with longtime favorites such as Caz and Busy Bee. It's not an overstatement to say that Williams's enthusiasm and hustle changed Caz's life.

"He reignited my love and my interest for the music—and for hip-hop, period," Caz says. "I was not in the best place in my life when me and Parker met. I was regular as a guy can be, not even my whole self. Parker helped to bring that back out of me. He didn't have to work for me, but he wanted to—and he was excited about it, and kind of put everything else to the side to do that. How do you ignore that kind of passion and that kind of interest? So I got caught up in it as well."

Williams brought a lot to his recordings with Caz—including his mother. "I even sang with Caz on some of his recordings," Koppel says. "Parker always tried to make sure I got my chance to sing, my chance to do music."

When Williams became the musical director for *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 2000, he decided to compose new music to replace the program's tinny theme. "He was determined to give her a new sound, a hip sound," Koppel says. "They didn't really have hip-sounding music that reflected the emotions of the shows that they were doing, and he was very dedicated to that."

Herrero tells the tale of that theme song's debut. "Oprah heard that music, and she's like, 'What's going on? The show sounds great, what's happening here?' They told her that Parker started as a music director," he says. "She's like, 'Give him carte blanche, whatever he wants, let him do his thing.'"

Williams got the idea to build an in-house music library for Harpo after spending too much of the studio's money on an outside library. He used tracks he made and others



"He was playing little drum pads by the time he was five," says Williams's mother, Flora Koppel. "He got pictures with drum pads and sticks and everything, sitting on it in his little shorts and his little Afro. Music was everything to him—because it was his dad, it was his dad's friends, it was me." COURTESY AKBAR

whose creation he supervised, and Harpo could charge to license them out. "He ended up making Oprah a million a year, year after year," Herrero claims. "He created a money-maker for her."

Herrero met Williams in 2004, when Williams was recruiting local musicians to supply that Harpo music library. "It was work for hire, but we maintained our royalty streams," Herrero recalls. "Oprah would get the publishing, because they gave us really good up-front money. At the beginning it was like \$1,000 a composition." The setup was a game changer for Herrero, a blues guitarist who'd previously relied exclusively on live shows for his income. "I generally do two tours of Europe a year," he says. "All the money that I've ever made in

music was just from playing gigs. Through the royalty streams that we got through the show, I ended up building my recording studio."

Williams left Harpo in 2015. The next year, he reconnected with Herrero, who pitched him the idea of building their own music library. "I told Parker, 'We're gonna do this—we're gonna do it artist friendly,'" Herrero says. "So we did it non-exclusively. We took half of the publishing—which is 25 percent of the pie—for our exploits, what we did to connect those dots. That was just the model we built in the last four years. We put together a music library that has over 15,000 compositions in it."

Herrero and Williams talked every day while creating Who's the Boss Music Library, in the process establishing a strong friend-

ship. Herrero especially took to Williams's sense of humor. Williams liked to give people nicknames—Herrero was "Dave the Doer," and Herrero's girlfriend Sasha, a pianist, was "Sasha Keys." Once when Williams was hanging out with the couple as they were cooking, he came up with another nickname for Sasha. "He goes, 'Oh, look at you, Chef Boyar-keys,'" Herrero says. "He was just really sharp, clever, witty, hilarious all the time."

A few months ago, Who's the Boss Music Library struck a deal to create 30 custom tracks for *The View*. "Things were just really right now starting to take off for us," Herrero says. "And this was gonna be his legacy piece."

Williams had been reaching out to old friends to let them know about his music library. Jamal-Ski recently found a message from him about Who's the Boss. "He said, 'Yeah, I'm trying to license some of your music and get it out there, as well as sell it,'" Jamal says. "I was looking at it—it's a great idea. And then he turned around and passed. I don't even know what day that message came in. But it had to be a day or two before."

Williams and Akbar had a brief falling out in the early 2000s after Akbar took a solo record deal that resulted in his 2001 album, *Big Bang Boogie*—Williams was hurt that his friend had gone outside their close partnership. They patched things up within a few years, and in 2005 they recorded a handful of new Mental Giants tracks with the help of DJ 3rd Rail, who issued them on his label, Subway Hip Hop Records. But Williams remained busy with Harpo, and Akbar, who'd raised a family, moved back and forth between the midwest and New York. All those things made it hard to prioritize Mental Giants—but that changed after Akbar moved back to the Chicago area in 2016.

"It took both of us a while to get back on the same page, but eventually we did, and we started recording music," Akbar says. They even performed a couple times as Mental Giants, including a headlining set as part of the Blue Groove Lounge 25th anniversary show at Metro just before the pandemic. They had plans to put out an album—their first. Akbar says they've got seven songs in the can, and he'll do what he has to for that record to see the light of day. "I'll make sure that he's not forgotten," Akbar says. "I'm on that—to make it my business to make sure people know about what we did for Chicago." **FI**

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DOUBLETREE



Karennoid spins as part of Agua de Rosas at Podlasie Club in November 2021.  GOTHIKA GRIEF

CHICAGOANS OF NOTE

Karen Valencia, aka Karennoid of reggaeton DJ collective Agua de Rosas

“Being Karennoid lets me live in this cyber-matrix world that’s flirty and gothic and unapologetically Latina.”

As told to MICCO CAPORALE

DJ collective Agua de Rosas spread the gospel of reggaeton, and though they’re based in Milwaukee, they have an evangelist in Chicago too: Karen Valencia, better known as Karennoid. In November, the trio (Valencia, Julio Cordova, and Gabriela “Chanchita” Riveros) played their first Chicago gig at emerging underground dance haunt Podlasie Club. They opened for faceless Tijuana rapper Muxxxe, who stumbled onto the stage around 1 AM drunk on glamour and wine and threw down to a packed crowd that had already lost track of time writhing to Agua de Rosas’ reggaeton mix. Valencia would say that’s the magic of the music. This is how the DJ got her start.

I grew up here in Chicago, on the southwest side in Gage Park. I’m first-generation Mexican American, and I was raised in a hardworking middle-class family. From an early age, I was encouraged to go to college and aspire to be a professional in a corporate setting—you know, something that my other relatives may not have had the opportunity to do. But throughout my childhood, I was always interested in music and other creative things, like writing.

I’m the youngest of three, so I got exposed to all kinds of music growing up. My parents listened to more traditional Mexican music, like boleros and romantic and regional music from the 60s and 70s . . . also Mexican and

Latin American styles of 80s rock. But then my older siblings had their own things. So I was exposed to hip-hop and pop punk and alternative rock. My brother was listening to Bone Thugs-N-Harmony and turning me on to Chicago house and juke music. And my sister was into Shakira and exposed me to No Doubt and Smashing Pumpkins. I just had a lot of music that helped me develop my own taste.

Musically I’m all over the place. I grew up in the “1, 2 Step” Ciara era and listened to all those bops in elementary school. Then in high school I was an emo kid. I was a hipster for a while too, listening to, like, She & Him and all these indie bands. Then I was into Fall Out Boy and Panic! at the Disco and Paramore. I

just love music so much. It was always really part of my identity, but I didn’t think of it as a career or even a hobby because I felt like I shouldn’t do that. Like it was taboo.

I went to Northwestern and studied English literature with a double minor in gender studies and film and media. When I was a kid, I dreamed of being an author, and even now, more people know me as a poet than a DJ. But after I graduated in 2015, I started working at Uber corporate. I was trying really hard to do what my parents wanted. If you talk to other first-generation folks, there’s this sense of guilt and responsibility to make these dreams come true that might not necessarily be yours. You want to be successful, not just for yourself but for all your family. And so I tried that. But I knew in my heart that I wanted to do something creative. I just wanted to be somebody else.

In 2016, I discovered this mixtape by an artist called Bad Gyal. She’s this girl from Spain, and the tape was all very raw, underground, DIY reggaeton and reggae-inspired music. That absolutely changed my life. I had reggaeton in the back of my mind—like, I grew up with stuff like Daddy Yankee and Ivy Queen—but it wasn’t a big part of my life. Then I heard this mixtape and I couldn’t stop thinking about reggaeton.

It just gripped me. Just as a listener, reggaeton gripped me to my core: my body, my mind, my spirit. Thinking about it as a performer, it just took on this whole new aspect for me. I wanted to DJ because I knew the power of music to move people—not just physically, but to make you feel something. I wanted to use it to build a world, tell a story. I’ve always been a storyteller and very theatrical—I majored in theater in high school—so I started fantasizing about being a DJ. Like I have very clear memories of going to the gym and thinking about it the entire time.

I built out my Spotify library and made tons of playlists. I envisioned myself performing reggaeton to an audience and imagined everything from the songs I’d share to the artistry. Like, what was I wearing? What was my atti-

tude? Who was this persona? I could picture playing that beat—you know, that iconic boom-chick reggaeton beat blasting from the speakers—and people just going crazy for it. I had all these visions on the Stairmaster.

I felt alone in my little dream, though. In the beginning, I never, never, never told anyone because I was so scared of family reactions and what people would think. It was a secret I sat with for years. From 2018 to 2020, I was secretly researching and buying equipment and talking to other DJs I knew that were girls, like Squadooble and Cqchifruit. Those two ladies really, really helped me get where I am today. Then in March 2020, I decided to quit my job and just go for it. March 6 [laughs].

But quarantine really forced me to hunker down and learn to DJ. No more treadmill daydreams. My name “Karen” is bilingual, so I wanted my artistic persona to also be bilingual, because I carry my Mexican American identity with me everywhere. One of my friends came up with “Karenoid,” and I liked it because it fused my name with something more technological, like an android. I’m super inspired by Y2K cyber realness. Even though I’m a digital DJ, I love physical media from that time—like CDs, floppy disks, cell phones, things like that. Neoperreo is clearly my biggest influence: the music, the fashion, the Gothic-style lettering—just being hardcore but being cute while also being very, very Latina. Being Karenoid lets me live in this cyber-matrix world that’s flirty and gothic and unapologetically Latina.

My first DJ set was at a Pilsen art gallery in July 2020. I kept playing house parties and generator shows. Then flash forward to 2021, around April or May, and I was releasing things on Soundcloud and promoting it on Instagram. That’s how Julio Cordova found me. He’s the cofounder of Agua de Rosas, alongside Gabby Riveros. They’re Milwaukee artists and DJs who love underground reggaeton.

I remember Julio followed me on Instagram, and I was like, “Oh, who is this? He seems super cool.” And then I saw the Agua de Rosas Instagram and was shocked. Right away I was obsessed with them. I invited them down to see me play a going-away party around Memorial Day, and we learned we had so much in common. Like it was crazy how much in common we had. We even had tattoos by the same tattoo artists. In June they asked me to join their collective.

Until I met Gabby and Julio, I felt very alone in the specific reggaeton I liked. It’s funny because we had already sort of met before, but

we didn’t know it. Tomasa del Real, an amazing reggaeton artist from Chile—she came to Chicago for Ruido Fest in 2019. At the time, I was freaking out, but no one else I knew liked her. Meanwhile, Julio, Gabby, and all their friends from Milwaukee drove down to see her, and we ended up in the front row together. Like a few months ago we discovered a photo of me photobombing them at the show. It’s beautiful.

Joining a collective has changed everything for me. As a DJ and an artist, it can be very lonely. I had a very small support circle, and social media makes you compare yourself to everyone. Finding collaborators has given me confidence, but it’s also encouraged me to experiment and push boundaries. I’m very much still a beginner DJ, but it feels like I have a family challenging me and cheering for me.

As a collective, we’re trying to put a flag down. We’re saying, “Hey, we’re here too, and we want to be part of the reggaeton party map.” People overlook the midwest, but Chicago is so rich and diverse in culture and music. I want Agua de Rosas to help grow the reggaeton community here because Chicago music is frigg’in iconic. We don’t just DJ here. You’re going to experience something multi-dimensional that’s, like, attacking all of your senses. We’re more DIY and bring a lot of artistry, and that makes it really special. I just want us to get bigger and better so we can gather more people and showcase more underground and local talent.

Reggaeton is really similar to hip-hop culture. The tone is heavily influenced by rap, and a lot of reggaetoneros are rappers. But they’re also singers, and dance is a big part of reggaeton culture too. Literally the gyrations—the movement of your hips. The beat influences your body and takes over your mind. I read on Instagram that there was a study that reggaeton activates more brain activity than classical music. So there’s science behind the power of this music to move our bodies.

The culture is really about bodies being together and having freedom to express our sexualities without judgment or inhibitions, so there’s a fashion that goes along with it too. It’s very specific with an iconography that evolves with the subculture, but you generally want to feel sexy. You want to feel like your most powerful, best self. But there’s also reggaeton slang. The culture is very, very rich. If you’re a diehard, you recognize other followers like it’s a religion. **✎**

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BEST COAST
ROSIE TUCKER

SAT JAN 22
LIAM KAZAR
ERYN ALLEN KANE
MOONTYPE

SAT JAN 29
DORIAN ELECTRA
MY AGENDA WORLD TOUR



SUN FEB 06
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KATAKLYSM
NAILED TO OBSCURITY



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INNER WAVE
GIRL ULTRA

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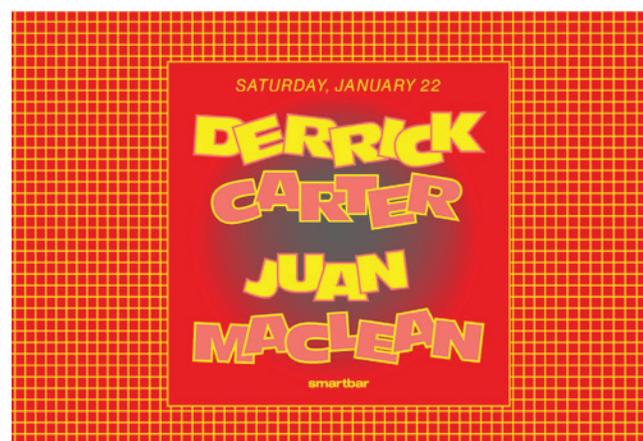
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Riot Fest presents
GIRLS AGAINST BOYS
FACS / POISON ARROWS

TUESDAY FEB 08 / 7:30PM / 5+
GRACIE ABRAMS
ALIX PAGE

SATURDAY FEB 12 / 6:50PM / 5+
JP SAXE: THE FEELINGS ARE STUPID TOUR
TROUSDALE

TUESDAY FEB 15 / 8PM / 5+
Obsessed presents
SHE’S A WOMAN
starring **MIZ CRACKER**

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FEB 18 **SLEIGH BELLS**
FEB 20 **ARIES**
FEB 22 **FAYE WEBSTER**
MAR 03 **ADORY**
MAR 04 **JOYWAVE**
MAR 05 **KAINA**
MAR 07 **HARU NEMURI**
MAR 09 **SUPERCHUNK**
MAR 10 **BADBADNOTGOOD**

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SUNDAY JAN 09
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TRISTAN DA CUNHA (DUNGEON MEAT)
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PICK OF THE WEEK

Hana Vu carves new pop landscapes with *Public Storage*

© JING FENG

HANA VU, BURR OAK, EMILY JANE POWERS, NEPTUNE'S COREPart of the *Tomorrow Never Knows* festival. Wed 1/19, 7 PM, Schubas, 3159 N. Southport, \$20. 18+

STORAGE UNITS, WITH THEIR heavy padlocked doors and stockpiles of intimate possessions, are ripe for metaphors about emotional compartmentalization. On her debut album, *Public Storage*, Los Angeles guitarist and songwriter Hana Vu finds inspiration there, drawing on memories of the storage units her family used during their frequent moves and her subsequent feelings of displacement. At 21 years old, Vu has already become a local electro-pop fixture with an impressive list of career triumphs: she's opened for Soccer Mommy and Wet, collaborated with Willow Smith on her 2018 single "Shallow," and released a concept EP focused on two Hollywood A-listers, 2019's *Nicole Kidman / Anne Hathaway*. But on *Public Storage*, released by Ghostly International in November, Vu shifts the spotlight from red carpets to plagued psyches. While the album's roots stretch back many years, Vu typically spent only a day or two writing and recording each of its 12 tracks. The record's disarming frankness needles at Gen Z's agonies and anxieties. "World's Worst" is a brazen cross section of existential dread, despite its light drum cadence and jaunty flute: Vu declares herself the world's worst color, talker, lover, and winner. "My House" is a spiritual sequel to Diana Ross's 1979 hit "It's My House," transplanting the narrative from an opulent mansion to a dirty "hole in the wall." The album reaches its peak powers when Vu navigates the contrast between her concise, pithy lyrics and lush arrangements—"Everybody's Birthday" juxtaposes chipper cowbell and gold-plated shame, for instance, while "Maker" pairs thrumming banjo with flagrant desperation. The heart of Vu's appeal is her deference to a bygone pop-music landscape still fresh in our memories—the tizzy over Lana Del Rey, the fixation on Lorde, the rise and fall of Avril Lavigne. Vu offers an unvarnished addition to this spit-shined canon—it's made to look picture-perfect, but her relentless urgency reveals flaws underneath. With her squeamish album art, references to school shootings ("April Fool"), and nods to the West LA fires ("Heaven"), she demonstrates that she's acutely aware of pop music's thematic blind spots—and she's here to shine a light. —SHANNON NICO SHREIBAK

CONCERT PREVIEW

THURSDAY 13

MODERN NUN *The Laughing Hearts* headline; *Dunedogs* and *Modern Nun* open. 8 PM, Schubas, 3159 N. Southport, \$15, \$13 in advance. 18+

Queer indie-rock band Modern Nun celebrate small, everyday divinities on their new self-released debut EP, *Name*. The Chicago trio accompany their melodies with loose, relaxed guitars and straight-forward drums, playing at a leisurely pace that allows their rich vocal harmonies to stand out in sharp relief. Those harmonies cluster in the quiet moments of Modern Nun's minimal songs, their inviting coziness accentuating the music's sweet lilt. Singer and guitarist Edie McKenna pays homage to the little joys you can make for yourself, and delivers her words with plenty of heart; on "Silk House," she makes a metaphor of the plants she's brought to life with her green thumb, and finds beauty even in their flaws ("And everything I grow in my garden is green / And even the rotten tomatoes look clean"). In a recent *Block Club* story, McKenna and her bandmates—guitarist Lee Simmons and drummer Haley Webster—describe the tension and pain they endured growing up queer in religious households. From the sound of *Name*, they've conjured a spirituality together to replace the one they shouldn't have been denied in the first place. —LEOR GALIL

FRIDAY 14

NEAL FRANCIS WITH DOS SANTOS 8 PM, *Thalia Hall*, 1807 S. Allport, \$28.50. 17+

Chicago singer-songwriter Neal Francis isn't particularly religious, but the church has had a deep impact on his music. As a child piano prodigy, Francis learned to play the pipe organ at the Catholic church he attended with his family, an experience that helped fuel his budding love of performance—since then, he's sat in with local blues bands, played with instrumental funk group the Heard, and explored piano-driven classic rock and R&B in a solo career. In 2017, Francis took a job as music minister at St. Peter's United Church of Christ in Belmont Cragin, which unbeknownst to him would play a major role in his latest album, *In Plain Sight*. While on the road in support of his 2019 solo debut, *Changes*, Francis broke up with his longtime girlfriend. He arrived home that fall with an immediate need for a place to stay, and arranged to move into the parsonage at St. Peter's for a few months. He wound up living there for a year, and was able to take advantage of the quiet nights to work on his music. That combination of time and space shines through on *In Plain Sight*. Recorded entirely on analog tape, its songs feel unhurried and calm even when they deal with heartache and isolation, and their bright, gently psychedelic settings carry the conviction that even the most dramatic personal obstacles can be tackled head-on. Roots-rock fans might be drawn in by a cameo from guitarist Derek Trucks on "Can't Stop the Rain," but the album's best moments are Francis's own work—the little



Neal Francis @LIINA RAUD

details that seem designed to give each song a distinctive sound and character, including the spacey synth action on “Problems” and the lush instrumental outro of “Sentimental Garbage.” —**JAMIE LUDWIG**

SAVE THE ROCK 'N' ROLL FESTIVAL See also Sat 1/15 and Sun 1/16. *Bloodletter, What? Vicious Attack, the Decayed*, 7 PM at Live Wire Lounge, 3394 N. Milwaukee. *No Dead Heroes, Fastplants, Satanic Panic*, 7 PM at Reggies Music Joint, 2105 S. State. *The Crombies, the Operators, Evil Empire, Aweful*, 9 PM at Cobra Lounge, 235 N. Ashland. *Hewhocorrupts, Nequient, Something Is Waiting, Gamma Goat*, 9 PM at Liar's Club, 1665 W. Fullerton. All shows \$15, three-day pass via savetherocknroll.bigcartel.com for \$135. 21+

In April 2020, just weeks after COVID-19 shut down the live-music industry, four Chicago venue operators—Louie Mendicino of Cobra Lounge, Herb Rosen of Liar's Club, Robby Glick of Reggies, and Dave Hornyak of Live Wire Lounge—banded together and pledged to host a massive festival dedicated to local rock, punk, and metal. They set their eye on a date in December 2020, recruited Shane Merrill of Empire Productions to help pull together the best possible lineup of bands, and held weekly conference calls throughout the year to strategize and discuss the latest news on the virus. Most of that news hasn't been good, of course, and the team pushed the original festival dates back more than a year—which makes it all the more exciting to see their vision finally come to fruition. And boy howdy, have they packed this bill with excellent bands that showcase the depth and range of the Chicago scene. While the clubs are located fairly far away from one another, Reggies will operate its famous bus service so that fans can catch as many sets as possible. The Save the Rock 'n' Roll Festival runs for three nights at four clubs (five if you include both halves of Reggies), and it includes satirical grindcore from Hewhocorrupts, monster thrash from Bloodletter, super sludge from Pale Horseman, cosmic-horror doom from Plague of Carcosa, trippy

hard rock from We Killed the Lion, atmospheric post-metal from Without Waves, jazz metal from Yakuza, and much more. While of course far from exhaustive, this lineup is a great snapshot of the past two decades of Chicago heavy music. Even delayed till 2022, this fest is a major leap of faith—at the time of this writing, I too am very worried about what I'm calling the Necro Omicron. Like everything else these days, this event could be changed, postponed, or canceled with little or no notice. But if all goes well, you won't have a better opportunity to catch such a rich variety of local hard-and-heavy in such a concentrated dose anytime soon—or such a potent blast of riffing hope. —**MONICA KENDRICK**

SATURDAY 15

SAVE THE ROCK 'N' ROLL FESTIVAL See Fri 1/14. *Black Road, High Priest, Wizzo, Pale Horseman, Tombstone Eyes*, 7 PM at Cobra Lounge, 235 N. Ashland. *The Bollweevils, the Creepers, the Last Great Riot, the Hallow*, 7 PM at Reggies Music Joint, 2105 S. State. *Inhuman Condition, Micawber, Crusadist, Inner Decay*, 9 PM at Live Wire Lounge, 3394 N. Milwaukee. *Flatfoot 56, Squared Off, Splatter Pattern, the Rip Ups*, 9 PM at Liar's Club, 1665 W. Fullerton. \$15, three-day pass via savetherocknroll.bigcartel.com for \$135. 21+

SUNDAY 16

SAVE THE ROCK 'N' ROLL FESTIVAL See Fri 1/14. *Yakuza, Without Waves, These Beasts, Plague of Carcosa*, 9 PM at Reggies Rock Club, 2105 S. State. *Molder, Nucleus, Wraith, Cryptum*, 7 PM at Cobra Lounge, 235 N. Ashland. *From Beyond These Walls, Numerical Control Society, Hypervolume, Pray for Death*, 9 PM at Reggies Music Joint, 2105 S. State. *We Killed the Lion,*



The Kreutzer Sonata @CLAUDIA GUAJARDO

Unto the Earth, Damn the Buzzards, 9 PM at Live Wire Lounge, 3394 N. Milwaukee. *The Rumours, Heavy Seas, Dummy, others TBA*, 9 PM at Liar's Club, 1665 W. Fullerton. \$15, three-day pass via savetherocknroll.bigcartel.com for \$135. 21+

WEDNESDAY 19

HANA VU See *Pick of the Week* at left. Part of the *Tomorrow Never Knows Festival*. *Burr Oak, Emily Jane Powers, and Neptune's Core* open. 7 PM, Schubas, 3159 N. Southport, \$20. 18+

ALBUM REVIEWS

EMILY BLUE, THE AFTERLOVE
Self-released
emilyblue.bandcamp.com

I won't pretend it's possible to rank pop music from different decades in a defensible way, but Emily Blue's new self-released third album, *The Afterlove*, makes a great case for the whimsy and arena-size ambition of the 1980s. Blue largely eschews nostalgia, instead reimagining the futuristic idealism of the 80s for an era that's on the other side of EDM—and that's still making sense of the imprint left by that genre's balderdash brogue. Blue understands that a pop song can express hope even when its lyrics evoke depression and loss, and her embrace of that paradox gives *The Afterlove* an intoxicating power. The best of these opulent, amiable tracks accomplish what any great pop song does: they make the world feel a little less lonely. —**LEOR GALIL**

BORIS, W
Sacred Bones
boris.bandcamp.com/album/w

As Boris continue to steer in and out of avant-rock territory, the 30-year-old Japanese band increasingly splinter genre ideas and expectations fans might foist upon them. The trio have been prolific during the pandemic, releasing nearly a dozen albums whose variety almost necessitates a disregard for boundaries: they include studio full-lengths, EPs, and live and archival recordings that explore the history of outsider rock music. The title track on November's *Reincarnation Rose* EP navigates a dividing line between 90s stoner-rock aesthetics and Stooges-era hard rock and psych. *W*, the troupe's first long-player on Sacred Bones, provides a foil to 2020's punk-inflected *NO* (Get it? *NOW*) and steps into more serene territory. On “Icelina,” guitarist and vocalist Wata whispers atop melancholy synth lines that seem suited to Björk; “The Fallen” features a bit of dirgey profundity and purposefully disjointed shredding; and “Drowning by Numbers” splits the difference between the two, adding a dub-indebted bass line. Boris always have embraced a roiling set of influences and worked to create albums that function as a pastiche of whatever inspires their members at the moment. *W* isn't as artfully quilted as 2003's *Akuma No Uta*, whose cover is a Nick Drake reference and whose songs move from calm and contemplative to cacophonous. While the majority of *W* skews toward Boris's more serene side, the album ends with “Jozan,” a four-minute exploration of noise and metal. It's an acknowledgment of the band's beginnings and a nod to old fans who've waded through the ensemble's fathomless sonic permutations. —**DAVE CANTOR**

THE KREUTZER SONATA, CRADLE TO THE GRAVE
No Time/Don't Panic
thekreutzeronata.bandcamp.com/album/cradle-to-the-grave

Chicago four-piece the Kreutzer Sonata play raw hardcore in clipped, stentorian bursts, so that each song exposes new gristle. On the new *Cra-*



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continued from 35

dle to the Grave (No Time/Don't Panic), hammering drums sprint in Tasmanian-devil circles, austere guitars scorch the fastest path to the next melody, and Adam Kreutzer hollers lyrics about the woes of the city and the world in hoarse, bellicose belches. The Kreutzer Sonata's gruff attack is an antidote to the side effects of our cruel universe and an homage to the hard-won highs of hard living. Often a gaggle of other voices jump into the fray to complement Kreutzer's harsh singing, and their shambolic harmonies tease out the melodic sensibilities buried beneath the music's rough exterior. Gang vocals are a bit overdone in hardcore, but sometimes they transcend cliché to suggest that the best way through darkness is to get everyone pulling together. —LEOR GALIL

JESSICA PAVONE, *WHEN NO ONE AROUND YOU IS THERE BUT NOWHERE TO BE FOUND*

Relative Pitch
relativepitchrecords.bandcamp.com

About a decade ago, back trouble forced Jessica Pavone to stop playing viola for nearly two years. Since her return, the impact of music upon the health and well-being of both performers and listeners has been one of the New York-based artist's essential concerns. When she was composing the material for her most recent ensemble album, *Lull* (Chaikin), she asked her soloists about their favorite notes to play, then worked those notes into the score. In her solo practice, Pavone likewise makes sure that music physically feels good to perform. Recently she's studied with sound healers and learned about cymatics, which attempts to describe the effects of sound waves on the human body using observations taken from physics. On the four unaccompanied pieces that comprise *When No One Around You Is There but Nowhere to Be Found* (Relative Pitch), Pavone lets the music develop patiently, exploring the grain and movement of one zone of sound before moving to the next. But as she proceeds between passages of bright, bowed harmonics, folk-song-like melody, and electronically filtered resonance, the density of event in each moment is highly concentrated and vividly compelling. —BILL MEYER

MICHAEL ROTHER & VITTORIA MACCABRUNI, *AS LONG AS THE LIGHT*

Grönland
michaelrother.de

I was a wee lad with little journalism experience in 1998, when I interviewed German guitar god Michael Rother, who'd cofounded pioneering experimental rock outfits Neu! and Harmonia in the 70s. Not only did I hit him with a clichéd question about his biggest influences, but I also pressed him when he said that no one really inspired him. Finally, he admitted (I think only slightly annoyed) that George Harrison and the first British Invasion ax wielders had been big for him as a youth—but he made it clear that he'd never intended to copy anyone. Rather he and his bandmates were trying to create their own kind of German music. Anchored by the motorik rhythms of drummer Klaus Ding-



Jessica Pavone © LOGAN WHITE

er and Rother's fierce strumming, Neu! did indeed set a precedent for generations of musicians with a novel form of propulsion—and in the decades since, Rother has continued to undertake new explorations of his creamy distortion and metronomic pulse in his solo work.

When the pandemic began, Rother was still living on the same isolated German farmland where in the early 70s he'd recorded some of his most famous works with Harmonia and Brian Eno, but in 2020 he moved to Italy to be with his partner, electronic musician Vittoria Maccabruni, whom he'd met on tour in 2005. On the duo's new album, *As Long as the Light*, Rother's palette has widened; Maccabruni's voice and digital sequences seamlessly combine with his expansive guitar ideas, and their collaborative skills enhance each piece. Album opener "Edgy Smiles" acts as a grand statement of intent, with synthy bleeps giving way to a consistent throbbing backdrop for Rother's unmistakable heady sound. The duo also match fiercely minimalist electronic beats with full-on guitar bliss on "Exp 1" and "See Through." Topped by Maccabruni's whispery torch-singer vocals, the chill, cosmopolitan "You Look at Me" veers toward a modern indie-pop sound, but Rother's spiraling guitar harmonies and backward ripples send it into orbit—maybe it'll be a hit on another planet. The duo take a dark turn on "Curfewed," whose constant scuzzy roar and indiscernible samples bubble beneath an ominous thump that evolves into polyrhythmic skittering reminiscent of drum 'n' bass—Autechre, Squarepusher, or Cabaret Voltaire would surely appreciate it. The drone-heavy "Codrive Me" is even more out-there, with a main rhythm built from weird bloops, breathing samples, and what might be a backward heartbeat; Rother descends into this backdrop with tremolo-treated guitar that sounds like a surf instrumental. Closing track "Happy" returns from these strange, dystopian realms with a simple, plaintive keyboard line and Rother's signature surging guitar. Rother and Maccabruni make interesting, challenging, and occasionally beautiful music together, which feels like a sweet meta-

phor for their partnership. I look forward to hearing where their romantic and artistic alliance goes in the future—who doesn't like a psychedelic love story? —STEVE KRAKOW

USTALOST, *BEFORE THE GLINTING SPELL UNVESTS*

Gilead
gileadmedia.bandcamp.com/album/before-the-glinting-spell-unvests

New York City black-metal band Yellow Eyes stand out from the pack with the opulence and indulgence in their brutality. Their topsy-turvy song structures, sweeping melodies, and epic structures bring a sense of grandeur to their take on what's often a stark genre. Somehow the solo project of Yellow Eyes singer Will Skarstad, which he calls Ustalost, is even more indulgent. Ustalost's new *Before the Glinting Spell Unvests* (Gilead) is fuzzy, mysterious, and mystical, like a long-lost anonymous tape of raw black metal from the early 90s, but it also embraces the genre's tradition of lush, over-the-top excess. Through the bleak, blackened haze, an array of dark delights emerges around every corner: layers of gothic synths, knotty guitar interplay, jam-packed arrangements, dramatic orchestral vocals. *Before the Glinting Spell Unvests* is dense and intense, and gives you the sense that Skarstad is completely off his leash, flexing all his musical muscles and having the time of his life doing it—at any rate, that's the impression I get from the bouncy, rubber-band bass melodies of "Stinging Stone" and the whimsical "Spider Tongue, Memory Ester," which tips its hat to Genesis. Because black metal is typically austere, it's a complete blast to get sucked into Skarstad's perfectly executed maximalism. Given how excellent Yellow Eyes are, you'd figure their front man's solo project would also be great, but *Before the Glinting Spell Unvests* exceeds even those expectations—it's one of the best solo black-metal releases in a very long time. —LUCA CIMARUSTI

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PINEGROVE 2-8
NIGHT TWO SOLD OUT ~~2-9~~



CATE LE BON 2-14 MON
mega bog



SERPENTWITHFEET 2-22 TUE
apollo mighty
PRESENTED BY CHIRP RADIO

1-14 **NEAL FRANCIS • DOS SANTOS • PRESENTED BY 93 XRT**
1-16 **WELLRED • TRAE CROWDER, COREY RYAN FORRESTER, DREW MORGAN**
1-30 **SAMIA • LOVING U, THANKING U: THE TOUR • ANNIE DIRUSSO**

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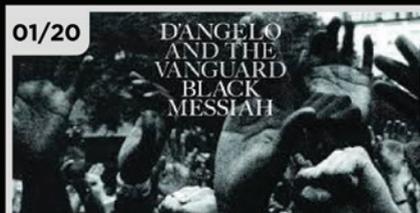
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1/28 @ MUSIC BOX THEATRE: BOY HARSHER "THE RUNNER" FILM SCREENING, 1/28: CLOAKROOM (RECORD RELEASE), 1/29: CAFE RACER, 1/30: LYRA PRAMUK, 1/31: BABY JESUS PAPER BOY (FREE), 2/4: LUIS VASQUEZ, 2/5: WE ARE SCIENTISTS, 2/6: A PLACE TO BURY STRANGERS, 2/10: SWEET COBRA, 2/11: THE SPITS, 2/16 @ METRO: LOW, 2/19: ZOMBI, 3/2: CHARLOTTE DOS SANTOS, 3/3: SNAPPED ANKLES, 3/5: RYLEY WALKER + BITCHIN BAJAS, 3/8: BESNARD LAKES, 3/10: SHEER MAG, 3/12: HIDE
NEW ON SALE: 1/22: THE KNEE HI'S, 1/23: LEGION OF DOOM, 2/2: BELOVED PRESENTS DEVIN SHAFFER, 2/12: CUPCAKKE, 2/23: EQUIPMENT POINT ANKH

THE PROMONTORY



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JAN 12 Good Vibes Only Ft. Just Nesh

JAN 20 Illville Vanguard presents D'Angelo's Black Messiah

JAN 21 Silent "JUKE JAM" Chicago



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JAN 7 **THE CLAUDETTES**
WITH BABY TEETH

JAN 8 **CHICKEN BONE**
LOW TICKET WARNING!

JAN 9 **FAREED HAQUE & GORAN IVANOVIC**

JAN 15 **WESLEY STACE'S LATE STYLE**

JAN 16 **THE HEAVY SOUNDS**
FT. OSCAR WILSON & MICHAEL DAMANI

JAN 20 **PETER BRADLEY ADAMS**
RESCHEDULED FROM 2021

JAN 21 **NICHOLAS TREMULIS**
AND THE PRODIGALS

JAN 22 **FUNKADESI**

JAN 28 **BRITTNEY SPENCER**
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CHICAGO SHOWS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT IN THE WEEKS TO COME

ALL AGES FREE



Tank & the Bangas COURTESY HIGH ROAD TOURING

NEW

Accidentals, Beth Nielsen Chapman, Kim Richey, Maia Sharp 3/3, 8 PM, Szold Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music

Aldous Harding 6/3, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+

Almost There but Not Really, Retinas, Bottom Bracket, Rom 1/23, 8 PM, Reggies Music Joint

Aminé, AJ Tracey, 454 3/17, 8 PM, Aragon Ballroom, 17+

Amity Affliction, Archetypes Collide, Seafloor Cinema 4/1, 7 PM, Metro

Asaf Avidan 1/28, 9 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+

Baroness 2/13, 8 PM, Cobra Lounge, 17+

William Basinski, Faten Kanaan 10/5, 9:30 PM, Empty Bottle

Bobby V 1/23, 8 PM, City Winery

Brother Moses 1/26, 8 PM, Schubas, 18+

Cate Le Bon, Mega Bog 2/14, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+

Nick Cave & Warren Ellis 3/20, 8 PM, Auditorium Theatre

Clem Snide 2/12, 7 PM, Golden Dagger

Code Orange, Loathe, Vended, Dying Wish 4/4, 7 PM, Metro

Lucy Dacus, Indigo De Souza 2/15, 8 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+

Dream Theater, Arch Echo 2/20, 7:30 PM, Chicago Theatre

Exum, Fingy 1/22, 9 PM, Sleeping Village, part of the Tomorrow Never Knows festival

Fennesz 3/22, 7:30 PM, Garfield Park Conservatory

Ms. Lisa Fischer 1/23, 5 and 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston

Fletcher Rockwell 1/29, 1 PM,

FitzGerald's, Berwyn
Forever Frida featuring Luisa Maria 3/2, 8:30 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music

French Casino, Phil Yates & the Affiliates, Bishop's Daredevil Stunt Club 1/21, 9 PM, Reggies Music Joint

Fundamental Kink; Division Point; Thank You, I'm Sorry; Disaster Kid 1/23, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+

Funkadesi 1/22, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston

Ghost of Paul Revere, Early James 1/29, 8 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+

Ginger Root, Gabacho 1/21, 9 PM, Sleeping Village, part of the Tomorrow Never Knows festival

Conan Gray, Bülow 3/25, 8 PM, Aragon Ballroom

Half Alive 3/15, 6:30 PM, House of Blues

Jonathan Hannau 1/30, 8:30 PM, Constellation, 18+
Headwave, Yomi, Rosebud 2/4, 8 PM, Golden Dagger

Heet Deth, Rat Chasm, Dirty Junk, Pillbug Junction 1/22, 6:30 PM, Subterranean, 17+

Hip-Hop Culture Fest featuring Brodie Fresh, Bills, JJ Fiction, the Boy Nique, Poncho Biggs, Kajahn Ari, Blvsh Fuego, and more 1/22, 10 PM, Subterranean

Hobbyist, Badwolff, Kao Ra Zen 1/26, 9:30 PM, Hideout
Honestly Same, Forest Management 1/20, 8:30 PM, Constellation, 18+

Inhaler, Junior Mesa 3/17, 7 PM, House of Blues
Inspector, Elefante 2/25, 9 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+

Christian JaLon, JusSol, Khaliyah X 1/25, 8:30 PM, Sleeping Village
Elton John 8/5, 8 PM, Soldier

Field
Kenmujo, Constant Headache, Good Water 1/25, 9 PM, Hideout

Kaki King 1/25, 8 PM, City Winery

Denise La Grassa 1/28, 8 PM, Phyllis' Musical Inn
Minor Moon 1/23, 7 PM,

Schubas, part of the Tomorrow Never Knows festival, 18+
Tom Misch 3/22, 8 PM, Aragon Ballroom, 17+

Mitis, N3wport, Rico & Miella, Man Cub, Mahi 1/29, 9 PM, Concord Music Hall, 18+

Monochromatic Black, Orinoco, Deaf Ear, Enox 1/27, 8 PM, Cobra Lounge, 17+

Nelly 1/20, 7:30 PM, Genesee Theatre, Waukegan

New Nostalgia, Fenwick Jazz Band 1/20, 7 PM, FitzGerald's, Berwyn

Ookay 1/22, 10 PM, Prysm Nightclub

Pentagram Chile, Oath of Cruelty, Perversion, Berator 1/28, 8 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 18+

Ben Platt, Jake Wesley Rogers 3/19, 8 PM, Wintrust Arena

Pool Holograph 1/26, 8:30 PM, Sleeping Village

Ron Pope 1/22, 4 and 8 PM, City Winery

Gregory Porter 2/18, 8 PM, Chicago Theatre

Lyra Pramuk 1/30, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Quijote Duo, Shi-An Costello 1/23, 8:30 PM, Constellation, 18+

Rico 1/28, 9 PM, FitzGerald's, Berwyn
Rockie Fresh, Valee, Casey Veggies, Joey Purp, Happybirthycalvin, YP 1/21, 8 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 18+

Run Around, Take the Reins, Just a Mess, Company for a Loser 1/22, 7 PM, Bottom

Lounge
Slow Pulp 1/27, 9 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+
Snow Shoe 2022 featuring Old Shoe, Mr. Blotto, People Brothers Band 2/4, 9 PM, Chop Shop, 18+
Brittney Spencer, Abbey Cone 1/28, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston

Sunday Cruise, Scarlet Demore, La Rosa Noir, Mini Projects 1/21, 7:30 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+

Sunless, Immortal Bird, Farseer 1/27, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+

Swim Camp, Floating Room, Deals 2/8, 8 PM, Golden Dagger

Taking Meds, Somerset Thrower 1/21, 6:30 PM, Subterranean, 17+

Tank & the Bangas, Cory Henry 3/13, 7:30 PM, House of Blues, 17+

Together Pangea 4/16, 7:30 PM, Cobra Lounge

Tommy Trash 1/21, 10 PM, Prysm Nightclub

Twin Shadow 2/16, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+

Rosalba Valdez 1/20, 7 PM, FitzGerald's, Berwyn
Valentine's Love Jam featuring Tank, Ja Rule, Donell Jones, Blackstreet, Dave Hollister, Brownstone 2/12, 9 PM, Arie Crown Theater

Luis Vasquez 2/4, 10 PM, Empty Bottle

Matthew Logan Vasquez 1/25, 7:30 PM, Schubas

Vinyl Palace, Ryan Hadarah, Shi la Rosa 2/12, 9 PM, Chop Shop

Violet Crime, Mild West, OK Cool 1/21, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+

Waipuna 2/23, 8:30 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music

Brent Weinbach, DJ Dougpound 1/21, 7 and 9 PM, Hideout, part of the Tomorrow Never Knows festival

Bob Weir & Wolf Bros 3/18, 7:30 PM, Chicago Theatre

Mike Wheeler, Joanna Connor 1/20, 8 PM, Kingston Mines

Wolf King, Frail Body, Knoll 2/10, 8 PM, Cobra Lounge, 17+

Wu Grass (Chris Castino & Chicken Wire Empire) 2/11, 8 PM, Chop Shop, 18+

Wuki 1/28, 10 PM, Prysm Nightclub
Yves Tumor 3/30, 9 PM, Metro, 18+

UPDATED

Another Michael, Jodi, Joey Nebulous 1/23, 9 PM, Sleeping Village, lineup updated; part of the Tomorrow Never Knows festival
Aries, Brakence 2/19-2/20, 7 PM, Metro, 2/19 sold out

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Boy Harsher's The Runner film screening 1/28, 9:30, 10:45, and 11:59 PM, Music Box, shows added, 18+

Samantha Crain, Sunny War 1/23, 8 PM, Golden Dagger, lineup updated

Emily Blue, Babe Club 1/15, 9:30 PM, Hideout, canceled

Lornoar, Eton Tribe All-Stars 2/2, 8:30 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, lineup updated

Mansionair 6/9, 8 PM, Metro, rescheduled; lineup updated, 18+

James Vincent McMorrow, Ben Abraham 3/31, 9 PM, Metro, lineup updated, 18+

Meshuggah, Torche 9/29, 6 PM, Radius Chicago, date changed; lineup updated, 17+

Sen Morimoto, Blake Saint David, Angel Bat Dawid 1/20, 9 PM, Sleeping Village, lineup updated; part of the Tomorrow Never Knows festival

New Kids on the Block, Salt-N-Pepa, En Vogue, Rick Astley 6/17-6/18, 8 PM, Allstate Arena, Rosemont, show added

Night Spice, Releaser, V Is for Villains, Curtis Foster 2/11, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge, date, time, and venue changed; lineup updated, 17+

Pinegrove 2/8-2/9, 8 PM, Thalia Hall, 2/9 sold out, 17+

JP Saxe, Trousdale 2/12, 6:50 PM, Metro, lineup and time updated

Macie Stewart, Reno Cruz 1/21, 8 PM, Golden Dagger, lineup updated; part of the Tomorrow Never Knows festival

This Wild Life, Broadside, Home Team, Night Like This 2/14, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge, lineup updated, 17+

Waltzer, Friko 1/20, 8 PM, Golden Dagger, lineup updated; part of the Tomorrow Never Knows festival

Alina Baraz 1/26-1/27, 7 PM, House of Blues

Courtney Barnett 1/23, 7:30 PM, Chicago Theatre

Josh Berman Trio 1/23, 9 PM, Hungry Brain

Beths, Lunar Vacation 1/28, 9 PM, Metro, 18+

Blessed Madonna, Harry Cross 1/21, 10 PM, Smart Bar

Blue Hawaii 1/21, 10 PM, Empty Bottle



GOSSIP WOLF

A furry ear to the ground of the local music scene

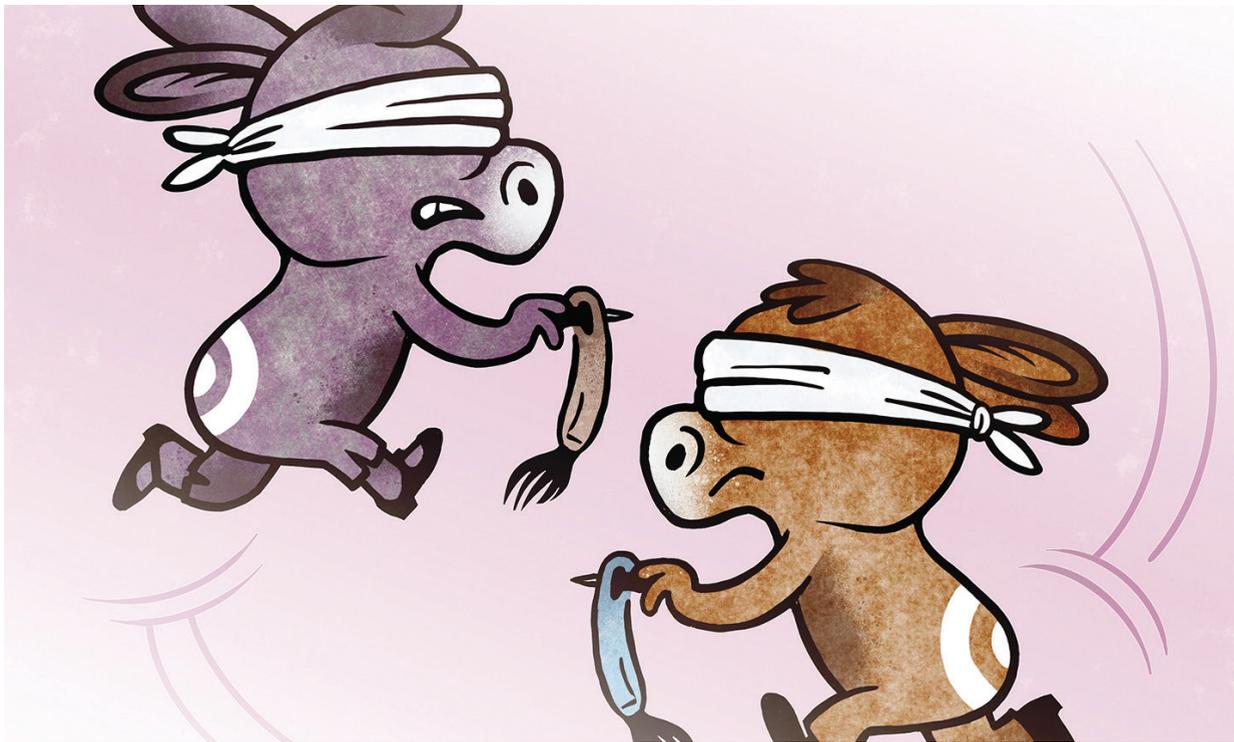
SINCE MOVING to Chicago from his native California in 2017, singer-songwriter **Reno Cruz** has made an indelible mark on the city's indie-rock and soul-music scenes, spending the past few years playing guitar in the **Lala Lala** live band and collaborating with Gossip Wolf faves such as **Wyatt Waddell**, **Sen Morimoto**, and **Shawnee Dez** (who also works for the Reader). After the pandemic hit in March 2020, Cruz began occasionally dropping lush, lovingly orchestrated solo tracks that display an easy candor about feelings of isolation and solitude. Two of those songs, "Your Love" and "F.I.L.I.N.T.H.," reappear as standouts on Cruz's debut solo album, **Falling in Love Is Not That Hard**, which arrives digitally on Friday, January 21, via his Bandcamp. That night he'll celebrate with a set at Lincoln Park venue **Golden Dagger**, which was just rehabbed after a fire; **Macie Stewart** of Ohmme headlines.

Boo Williams is a legendary figure in Chicago house, and as a DJ and producer he began releasing music in the 90s on classic dance labels such as **Relief**, **Farris Wheel Limited**, and **Cajual**. (According to reports from heads brave enough to keep partying during the pandemic, his DJ set at **Podlasie Club** in Avondale last month proved that his skills on the decks remain absolutely incendiary.) On his Bandcamp page last week, Williams released **The Best of Boo Williams**, which collects ten of the master's crisp and ebullient productions, many of which have become difficult to find. To this wolf, it seems impossible that the relentlessly grooving "Feeling Good" dropped more than 20 years ago!

Chicagoland heavy-prog group **Mechina** celebrated New Year's Day by dropping the hyperclean symphonic-metal album **Venator**, which continues the story of a vast intergalactic war that the band have been telling for more than 15 years. Whether you've been following along or not, the blockbuster thrust of opener "Suffer" should sweep you into the record. —**J.R. NELSON AND LEOR GALIL**

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

✍️ JOE NEWTON



SAVAGE LOVE

Vaxxed and confused

Who's the bigger a-hole: the girlfriend who didn't isolate after symptoms or the boyfriend who won't isolate with her?

By **DAN SAVAGE**

Q: My boyfriend is male, I am female, and we've been together almost three years. We live alone in separate homes, but spend about three or four nights a week together. We're both fully vaxxed and boosted, and we mask in public, etc. On the Monday before Christmas, I started feeling mild symptoms but tested negative. My boyfriend felt fine, and we spent a few nights together that week. On the morning of Christmas Eve, I took a second at-home test and it was positive. So, I cancelled plans to see a friend that afternoon and spoke to my boyfriend. Our Christmas Eve plans involved dinner with some

of his family members. An hour later he called and said he tested negative and that he thought the best thing would be for me to isolate alone on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. He was still planning to go see his family. I burst into tears. He'd already been exposed and if his foremost concern was protecting his family, the logical thing to do would be to minimize contact with them, not me. I couldn't believe he was going to leave me at home alone over Christmas when we'd already had so much close contact that week. And he knew that spending holidays together as a couple was important to me! He called me back,

we argued, and then he offered to have me come over to his house to sleep in the guestroom. Once I was there, he changed his mind, and we wound up sharing his bed. The next morning, I wanted to clear the air and he told me that he was angry about my behavior. He thought I was being selfish and risked further exposing him. I am really confused and hurt by the way everything has unfolded. Which one of us is being an asshole here?

—**FLAMINGLY UPSET COUPLE KNOWS CONFLICT OVER VIRUS IS DUMB**

A: "I'm not going to assign the title of 'asshole' to either the letter writer, or her boyfriend," said Dr. Stacy De-Lin, a board-certified physician who shares sound science about COVID-19 on her invaluable Instagram account. "But there is a clear public health answer to this question: the writer should have isolated away from her boyfriend as soon as she knew she was positive, and her boyfriend, having known

he had a significant exposure, should not have attended any family gatherings."

While Dr. De-Lin doesn't feel comfortable assigning the title of "asshole" to either of you, FUCKCOVID, I'm gonna go ahead and cut the asshole in half here—in a display of Solomonic wisdom—and award the title of "asshole" to both of you. But you shouldn't feel too bad about that, FUCKCOVID, seeing as this never-ending pandemic is bringing out the asshole in all of us.

"In addition to addressing public health, we also need to address the incredible mental health toll that nearly two years of a pandemic has taken on all of us," said Dr. De-Lin. "Many of us longed to see our families and friends and were devastated when those plans were once again upended this year. Furthermore, the guidance on rapid testing, as well as the guidance on what vaccinated folks can and can't do, has been constantly changing. So, it's no wonder that her boyfriend still wanted to find

a way to see his family and thought he could do so safely, and that the writer didn't want to be alone on Christmas when I'm sure she was already feeling so isolated."

And to put things in perspective, FUCKCOVID, it's not like you punched a flight attendant or said, "Let's Go, Brandon!" to Joe and Jill Biden on Christmas Eve. All you did was get upset. And you were right about one thing: If your boyfriend was gonna see anyone on Christmas Eve, it should've been you. Considering how much time you'd spent together after you became symptomatic (but before testing positive), you could reasonably argue that if you were going to expose him, you'd already exposed him. So, in the spirit of harm reduction, he could've and should've cancelled his plans with his family and spent the holiday with you instead. And that's what he did, right? So, as much as the suggestion that you spend Christmas alone may have upset you, you didn't spend Christmas alone, right?

So, maybe give your asshole boyfriend some credit for that?

All that said, your boyfriend could reasonably argue that you could've and should've isolated yourself at the onset of your symptoms and not spent multiple nights with him before you predictably tested positive. But if you were to let go of your anger about him suggesting you spend Christmas alone, maybe that would inspire him to let go of his anger about not seeing his family. Because at the end of the day, FUCKCOVID, it was the same desire for human contact that prompted you to put your boyfriend at risk (by hanging out with him after the onset of symptoms) and prompted your boyfriend to contem-

plate putting his family at risk (by hanging out with them after a significant exposure). So, recognizing your mutual assholery, maybe—in the spirit of the holiday—you two can forgive each other and move the fuck on.

While I had Dr. De-Lin on the line, I asked her for some advice for all of us—all us assholes—on getting through the next wave of this seemingly never-ending pandemic.

"We have ways that we can prevent the spread of the Omicron variant: get vaccinated and boosted, isolate when positive or after a high-risk exposure, wear masks in indoor settings, and keep gatherings outdoors," said Dr. De-Lin. "The COVID Omicron variant is not only significantly more infectious than any variant we've seen so far, but it's also coming at the worst possible time: the holiday season. So, it's running rampant through the country and the world, and hospitals are already at the breaking point, making it more important than ever to avoid catching and spreading the virus."

And as difficult as it might seem right now—and it seems mighty difficult—taking the long view will help us get through this.

"It's important to remember that this wave, and the pandemic itself, will get much better, and we will be able to gather with our families and friends again in the ways that we used to, without fear," said Dr. De-Lin. "In the meantime, I hope that the letter writer and her boyfriend, and all of us, can be patient and forgiving with each other in these challenging times." **✉️**

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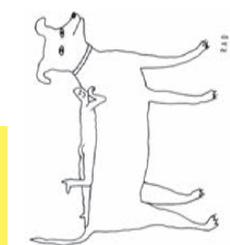
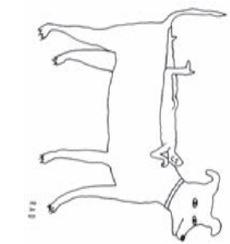
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