

REORDER

Searching for

It's less about one individual and more about the calling to feed all the birds in the Loop.

By Katie Prout '14

The Pigeon Lady

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

"THE PIGEON STORY," as it came to be colloquially and intriguingly discussed among *Reader* editorial staff in the past few weeks, went through many iterations. When its author, staff writer Katie Prout, started hearing curious rumors of "the pigeon lady"—a specter of debatable gender, age, and race who regularly feeds the pigeons downtown—she initially pitched the story idea as a short fluff piece, one that would hopefully break up the

intensity of her other reporting on homeless populations, addiction, and mental health. Katie has no particular interest in pigeons—or birds in general, for that matter—but it quickly became apparent that the story of the pigeon lady was larger than that, larger than any one person sprinkling birdseed in the Loop, larger than the "city chickens" themselves. Casual reporting turned into a full ethnography, and Katie began investigating bigger questions

about the birds and beauty; about resilience and all-consuming passions; about surrogate habitats and this specific piece of the Chicago ecosystem, its architecture, and its people.

The result is this issue's cover story, a fascinating walking tour of the Loop with Katie in which she unpacks her own obsession with the mysteriously pigeon-obsessed. —TARYN ALLEN, ASSOCIATE EDITOR



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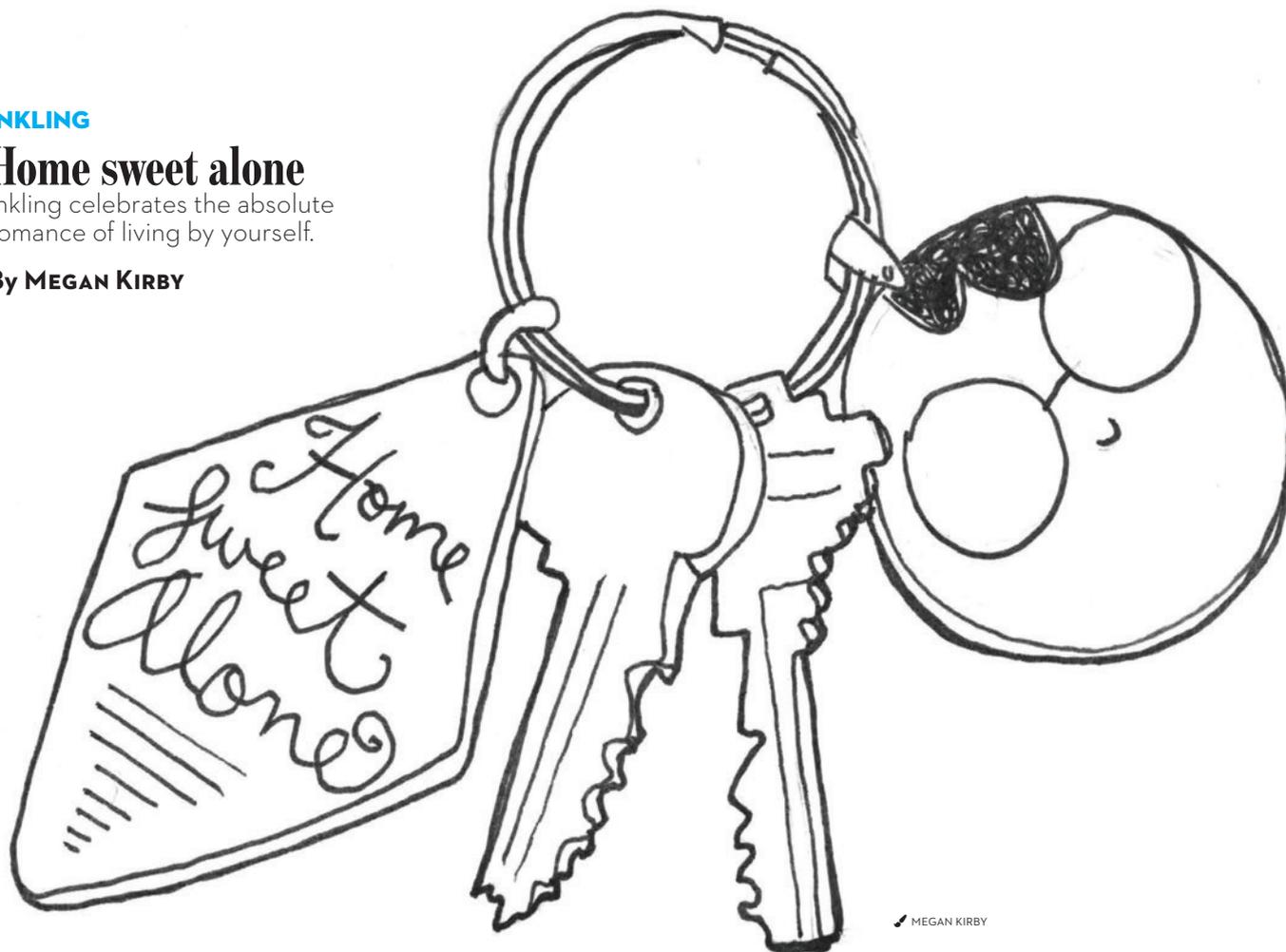
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INKLING

Home sweet alone

Inkling celebrates the absolute romance of living by yourself.

By MEGAN KIRBY



MEGAN KIRBY

When I moved into my first studio apartment in 2017, I got obsessed with the 1995 Jewel single “You Were Meant For Me.” In the song, Jewel has recently split with her lover and moved into her own apartment. She’s heartbroken, but she also digs having her own spot. She fries eggs and reads the paper and picks her wet towels up off the floor. I loved the details that she included in honoring the coziness of domestic ritual. Her song illustrated the comfort of being responsible only for oneself.

Living alone for the first time in my life, I quickly found the most obvious perks. I could sing along to Jewel as loud as I wanted. I could dance in my underwear. And I could play “You Were Meant For Me” over and over, long past the point where a roommate would have thrown my Bluetooth speaker out of a window.

“You were meant for me,” I sang to my 400-square-foot studio apartment. “And I

was meant for you.”

I’ve lived solo for almost five years now (minus one summer between leases when I lived in someone’s dining room—I’d rather not talk about it). Living by myself is the most romantic thing I’ve ever done. It’s been a half-decade lesson in turning up for myself, day after day. I’ve learned a sort of inverse golden rule—how to treat *myself* the way I treat other people. That means I thank myself for making my bed and folding my laundry, and I don’t beat myself up too much if the dishes pile up in the sink.

I’m an extrovert. I get supercharged by a street fest, a comics convention, a crowded kitchen at a house party. Through most of my 20s, I bounced around town like Chicago was a pinball machine and I was the ball. I lived with my college roommate, and we filled the empty hours with tiki drinks and One Direction fan edits on YouTube. I never had any solitude—and I liked it that way.

Then my roomie moved across the country, and I could not bear the thought of learning to cohabitate with someone else. So I found my own spot. Some parts of studio living immediately appealed to me. I liked that everything belonged to me. The paint-by-number cats on the walls. The thrift store duds in the closet. Even the wads of hair on the shower floor—mine, mine, gloriously mine.

The longer I lived alone, the more I loved about spending time by myself. My jokes always landed. My impulses were always encouraged. My company was always appreciated.

Then the pandemic hit. Being the sole name on a lease came with an extra level of isolation. During certain stretches of the last two years, I have reverted to my most feral self. Unibrow untended, hair tangled and frizzy, sweatpants so filthy they could be studied in a lab. But I found that even in these moments of primal devolution, I liked the

strange animal of myself, this little Neanderthal hunched over the fridge, eating Hormel chili straight out of the can at 11 PM.

Maybe the real perk of living alone is learning to treat every iteration of myself with kindness. When I feel energized and vibrant, I make art and cook elaborate breakfasts and take long walks. When I feel burnt out or gross, I can sit with myself the same way I’d sit with a friend who’s having a tough time. I can stare out the window or take naps or scroll TikTok until my brain oozes out of my ears, free of judgment. And when I need to, I can convince myself—gently, imploringly—to please shower and change your sweatpants, baby girl.

I’m not sure if I’ll always live alone, but I do know that this stretch will never be a waiting period or a consolation prize. Right now, it feels so luxurious to fully prioritize my needs, to own my full days. Maybe someday I’ll find someone worthy of cohabitating. And as I box up my things, I’ll also pack up the knowledge that I’ll always take care of myself. If I ever do decide to live with someone again, I know one thing for sure: they better like listening to Jewel.

Last fall, I moved into a new studio apartment with big windows and walls painted pale blue. My books sit on their shelves and my pothos grows over the door. I’m still figuring out where all my furniture fits. Not a bad distraction, this Tetris game of my home. But I’m finding, as I decide where my desk and couch and kitchen cart belong, that my life fits just right. **RI**

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ILLINOIS IS FULL OF WINNERS

FOOD & DRINK



RESTAURANT REVIEW

Avenida Peru takes it to the street

Lima-style street food moves out of the home kitchen onto Central Avenue.

By **MIKE SULA**

Karlo Caceres and his mother, Cecilia Descalzi, threw out the couch in the living room of their tiny two-bedroom Jefferson Park apartment. They replaced it with foldable tables stacked with aluminum trays and plastic carryout containers and bags. This is where they staged the pickup and delivery meals Caceres advertised each week on Facebook under the name Avenida Peru. In the adjoining kitchen they brought in a second oven range, two blenders, two deep fryers, and four small woks where they prepared iconic Peruvian dishes like lomo saltado, ceviche, and papas a la huancaína, but also regional rarities like rocoto relleno—spicy red peppers stuffed with minced beef from the Andean city of Arequipa, Cecilia’s hometown.

“It was like a restaurant in an apartment,”

says Caceres. If the people placing orders for his Lima-style street food and comida criolla thought he was cooking in an established brick-and-mortar, he didn’t explicitly discourage them. “I would just cook a dish and take a picture as good as possible and show people what I was gonna offer,” he says. “I had to tell them something: ‘My idea was to open a restaurant, but because of the pandemic I ended up having nothing.’ I told them, like, ‘This is restaurant-quality food but made from home.’”

It wasn’t too far from the truth. It was March 2020, and he’d just lost his server job of about five years at Basilico Ristorante in Norridge. But like so many suddenly unemployed hospitality workers, he launched his own operations in the semi-underground.

Caceres, who is 38, always wanted to own a restaurant, but until the pandemic the closest he’d come was working front-of-the-house jobs. His family emigrated to Lima from southern Peru in the 60s and 70s, and that’s where he grew up, feasting on the city’s abundant street food and his grandmother’s home cooking. “I was raised by my grandma because my mom was working,” he says. “She would take me to the street market every day. Because she was my best friend, I used to help her cook.”

He was studying hospitality in Lima when his family convinced him his best opportunities were in the States. He settled first in Chandler, Arizona, in 2004 and started frying wings at Pizza Hut. But he hated the weather, so he moved here two years later, when his culinary career was derailed by the necessity of

taking a job at an auto parts store. Enrolling in culinary school at Triton College proved to be another false start—he couldn’t afford tuition and rent, but he did find some stability at Al’s Beef in Niles, where he worked for seven years as a cashier, occasionally making deliveries and helping out in the kitchen until he landed at Basilico, which at the time he considered a “dream job,” he says. “I always liked talking to people. I knew if I got the chance to work with customers face-to-face my ability to talk to them would give me more income.”

Cooking out of the apartment was his girlfriend’s idea, but in the pandemic’s first spring he still wasn’t even sure they’d make it. From word of mouth and posting on expat Facebook groups he’d built a steady flow of pickup and delivery orders each day. Neigh-

Avenida Peru owner Karlo Caceres; clockwise from left: lomo saltado, ají de gallina, ceviche carretillero, chaufa criollo; drinks, from left: chicha morada and Inca Cola  MATTHEW GILSON FOR CHICAGO

READER

bors attracted by the aromas became regulars too. That he was cooking with his mom didn't hurt either, and he turned his limitations into assets. "People would call me the same day they wanted a dish. I had to tell them, 'I don't cook in quantity. I just cook at the moment,' and they were impressed. They would give me another chance. People started learning my way of working and I would have orders every day. The second month there were like seven cars outside every day, stopping and waiting for this food. We needed extra help for the deliveries."

While the money was good it wasn't great, and by July, as more restaurants began reopening, Caceres started worrying that it wasn't going to be good much longer. He thought he'd need to look for a straight job, but almost in defiance of his doubts, fortune kept pushing him toward a brick-and-mortar. Knowing he likely couldn't afford it, he nevertheless called the number in the window of a small vacant space near Central and Belmont. Despite his misgivings, the landlord—the owner of neighboring Central Gyros—almost made it impossible to pass up once he heard Caceres held down a job for so long at Al's, where he was pals with the owner.

Caceres and his girlfriend, Glenda Lopez, opened Avenida Peru in December 2020 without a website or service ware. More than a year later there's still minimal online presence, but Caceres's commitment to detail supersedes most other Peruvian restaurants in town. It's only grown his organic, word-of-mouth following (I learned about it through the indefatigable Titus Ruscitti).

First, the fries that come with salchipapas and lomo saltado are hand-cut, thick, and crispy, which takes simple hot dogs and spuds to another level. He uses tenderloin for the latter dish; the smoke that adhered to his home kitchen ceiling is much more manageable with a professional exhaust, but the proverbial breath-of-the-wok that typifies this Chinese-style stir fry sings through the rich brown sauce. The handful of ceviches cooked in the citric "tiger's milk" are focused on corvina rather than the typical tilapia. The ceviche carretillero in particular is an iconic street

food of crispy, hot, deep-fried calamari, cool silky fish, and the textural corny contrast of mote, or hominy, and crunchy toasted chulpe (like supersized corn nuts).

Cold slices of potato bathed in creamy ají amarillo pepper sauce accompany each pesto pasta-steak combo but really come into clarity with the ají de gallina, shredded chicken smothered in the smooth creamy sauce, enriched with milk and thickened with crackers. For this, Caceres uses the more expensive frozen Peruvian peppers rather than preservative-spiked pastes.

The thoughtful execution of these dishes alone would be enough for Avenida to stand out, but it has another unique thing going for it. On Saturday and Sunday mornings from 9 to 11:30 AM, Avenida operates as a *sanguchería*, with a lineup of common Peruvian breakfast sandwiches that aren't common here at all. He outsourced a bakery to duplicate the bolillo-like Lima-style pan franceses in which he swaddles thick slices of pork belly or blood sausage seasoned with ají amarillo and huacatay, or black mint, atop layers of fried sweet potato, with a nest of shredded salsa criolla, or lime-pickled red onion, to cut the richness. There's a tenderloin sandwich and shredded chicken as well, and occasionally butifarra, the brined fresh Peruvian country ham whose labor intensity makes it more of a rarity. "When I have it nobody orders it," he says. "When I don't have it everybody starts talking about it."

Lopez quit her job to manage the front of the house while Caceres cooks. Bring your own pisco and she'll shake you up a sour, unless you're in the mood for the housemade passion fruit juice or sweet purple-corn-based chicha morada. Meanwhile, as the seasons change Caceres is planning to broaden his Lima focus with more uncommon regional specials. Look for *olluquito con carne*, made with a shredded dried Andean tuber; or *carapulcra*, a porky potato-peanut stew; and the promising *ceviches de concha negras*, made with inky black clams. "It's expensive, but people like it," says Caceres. 

 @MikeSula

POETRY CORNER

Birds & Rom-Coms

By Viola Lee

Today I taught my students a lesson called the Timeline of Life. In this work, the children learn about the coming of all lifeforms and it ends with the arrival of humans. Beginning with a drop of jelly, that one celled organism, then multi-cells, plants, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds then human beings. Whenever I give this lesson, the children discuss the birds, how this is the first time, where we see creatures care for their young, building nests, feeding their young, caring until those strange featherless bodies are able to leave and become swallowed in the swell of the wild. The swell of the wild. O, God, can I stay here in this? Can I live in this black dress where nothing happened? Other than falling asleep with you. Our friends in the other room. We are all in Oak Park. At the Ernest Hemingway suite. All in love with each other. All wake up to go camping. And we are all here. And it's something that I will try to outlive, create, carve out for the entirety of my life. But, you were here all along, you and those birds, there I said it. I am still in love with you, that boy with that dark curly hair, family healthy, where every vacation is a reset, still in love with this community we build. But really the community is you, and I want to live here in this. On most days, I love a good Rom-Com, maybe because I would not have it any other way, maybe because even though each day gets hard, I want you, even though I get frustrated, I want you and our bodies, all young and becoming --- when we were everything and worked to create something from scratch and then start it all up again.

Like a cycle, all endless and fruitful.
Like Spring.

Like being in love again and again.
And living there.
And staying there.

Viola Lee (she/her/hers) is the author of *Lightening after the Echo*, published by Another New Calligraphy. Her work has been published in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Hong Kong Review*, *Barrow Street*, and *Crazyhorse*. She lives in Chicago with her husband, son, and daughter. She teaches first, second and third-graders at Near North Montessori School.

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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NEWS & POLITICS



In the race for governor, Aurora mayor Richard Irvin (left) and Ken Griffin are trying to answer the ultimate question: Can MAGA be bought? 
CITY OF AURORA; PAUL ELLEDGE

POLITICS

No más

Despite blanking on Mike Flannery's abortion question, Richard Irvin wins the \$20 million Ken Griffin lottery.

By **BEN JORAVSKY**

With word just breaking that Kenneth Griffin kicked in \$20 million to Richard Irvin's gubernatorial campaign, I guess you can say he passed the audition.

Irvin, that is, not Griffin. No, Griffin's running the audition. It's his play, and he's casting it.

I thought Griffin might abandon Irvin after his inability to answer a straightforward question about abortion posed to him by veteran FOX 32 News reporter Mike Flannery.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's fill in some of the gaps...

Irvin is the mayor of Aurora. Oh, don't act like you heard of him until a few weeks ago, people. Outside of political junkies and, presumably, the voters of Aurora, he was unknown.

In contrast, pretty much everyone has heard of Griffin by now. The richest man in the state and CEO of Citadel LLC, a hedge fund investment company, he's spent tens of millions in campaign contributions over the last few years to defeat a referendum that would raise

his taxes and to elect Republicans who will lower his taxes.

He says he's "all in" to defeat Governor Pritzker—money being no object.

Apparently, Griffin will never forgive Pritzker for betraying his class and trying to raise taxes on the wealthiest residents like, well, the two of them.

In the battle of the billionaires, Griffin is worth an estimated \$26 billion—Pritzker "only" \$3.6 billion. Hard to believe this, but Pritzker may be outspent in this upcoming election.

For much of the last year, the Republican candidates for governor have been limited to hardcore MAGA types like state senator Darren Bailey.

Obviously, Griffin concluded that Illinois is not ready to go this far to the right in a general election. Looking for a more electable candidate, he essentially plucked Irvin from obscurity to fulfill his mission of beating Pritzker.

At first, Griffin didn't come out and say: Irvin's my guy. He was cagier than that. But

somehow the word spread.

And then on Monday, Griffin let his \$20 million donation do the talking. Basically telling Bailey and the others: step back, Jack.

Now the question is—will MAGA voters go along for the ride? It's a fascinating political experiment—can the allegiances of MAGA, who are supposed to be true believers, essentially be, you know, bought?

Remember, before Irvin runs against Pritzker, he must win the Republican primary in June. And that means winning over MAGA voters without saying too much of their batshit crazy stuff that Pritzker can use against him in the general election.

So far, Irvin's done a creative job of finessing it. He's running commercials that say he's for the police and against looting. Also, he doesn't like Black Lives Matter. At least, he thinks "all lives matter." Although he points out that if you say "all lives matter" that means you also think Black lives matter. Though that's different than saying Black Lives Matter. Got that?

Way to take the tough stands, Mayor Irvin!

He still has nothing to say about Trump—much less whether he voted for him. Won't say if he thinks the presidential election was stolen. Or whether people should take the COVID vaccine. Or whether the capital insurrectionists were engaging in "legitimate political discourse," as the Republican National Committee recently voted in a resolution censuring Representatives Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger.

It's not clear what Griffin's position is on these matters. Having watched him for the last few years, I suspect the issue that really drives him is his tax bill—anything to lower it.

Although Griffin did criticize Florida governor Ron DeSantis for being too politically impractical in taking a hard stance against mask mandates. This criticism came after Griffin had donated \$5 million to DeSantis's campaign.

As I pointed out a couple of weeks ago, Irvin's trickiest challenge is to walk the fine line

on abortion.

Most Republican politicians stick to the party line that abortion should be illegal in all instances, rape and incest included.

Cross this line and Republican voters will cancel you—no questions asked. So much for their belief in free expression.

Irvin has not taken a public position on abortion. But his running mate, Avery Bourne, is an avowed antiabortionist who has backed several bills that would essentially outlaw abortion should the Supreme Court overturn Roe. As I think it will.

Joining Bourne to Irvin is like an arranged marriage designed to assure MAGA that Irvin is against abortion no matter what he says, or doesn't say, on the issue.

And that brings us to Irvin's disastrous one-on-one interview with Flannery.

For several weeks after he announced his candidacy, Irvin avoided interviews with reporters, letting his commercials do the talking. And then, under heat for ducking the press, he agreed to several one-on-ones. Which is how he wound up sitting down with Flannery.

I figured he'd have been coached on abortion questions. But when Flannery hit him with the A question, well, the exchange went like this:

Irvin: I'm pro-life.

Flannery: Any exception for rape, incest, the life of the mother?

Irvin: There are always exceptions like rape, incest, the life of the mother.

Flannery: You would allow abortion in those circumstances?

At that point, you can hear one of Irvin's aides in the background saying that time's up.

After a pause, Irvin says: "I think we're done."

Folks, I haven't seen a more embarrassing retreat since the second Durán/Leonard fight of 1980. That's the one where Roberto Durán, tired of being pummeled by Sugar Ray Leonard, threw up his hands and declared: "No más!"

After "I think we're done," I wondered if Griffin might be done with Irvin. Would he round up another puppet, I mean candidate, to run against Pritzker?

But after Monday's \$20 million contribution to Irvin, it's clear Griffin is standing by his man.

Maybe Irvin can spend some of Griffin's millions to hire someone to tell him what his position is on abortion.

Enjoy your candidate for governor, MAGA. 

 @bennyjshow



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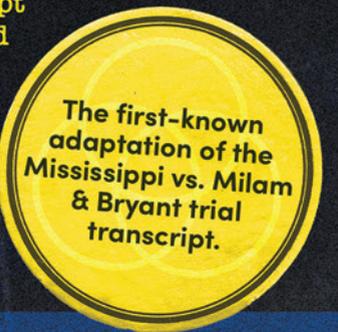


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PHOTO ESSAY

#SadBoyEnergy (The Prelude)

A collection of photos celebrates Black men's vulnerability.

By ISAIAH 'THOUGHTPOET' VENEY

Toxic masculinity—the set of unspoken rules that say what it means to be a “man”—denies male-identified people from expressions of vulnerability, sadness, pain, and even joy. This photo essay, titled #SadBoyEnergy (The Prelude), is a dive into the vulnerability of what it means for Black men to suffer from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder and how that connects with the setbacks of showing genuine emotion that isn't harmful to others through imagery and collaborative perspectives.

Fighting against worry and depression has always been a war for me, ever since I learned what melancholy even was. Sadness has always been my comfort place. A universe I'm all too familiar with all too well. I've never strayed away from this perspective and foundation that resides in my soul. It gives me the power to be honest.

Trying to understand myself more has been leading me to find my roots and examine how my life choices have crafted me into who I am. I come from the blood of a Four Corner Hustler from out west Chicago and an ex-soldier from Virginia who never raised me. Yet here I stand, protected by a rising phoenix disguised as prayers from grandma. Regardless of how you feel about me, my destiny is already written.



LEFT: Organizer and artist Heavy Crownz's music reflects his native Englewood and exuberates positive change for Chicago's communities.

BELOW LEFT: Poet and organizer Toni Mono leads weekly "brother circles" and grapples with emotional health by doing community work.

BELOW RIGHT: #LetUsBreathe Collective cofounder and AirGo podcast cohost Damon Williams works to create a world without police through mutual aid and transformative justice. 📍

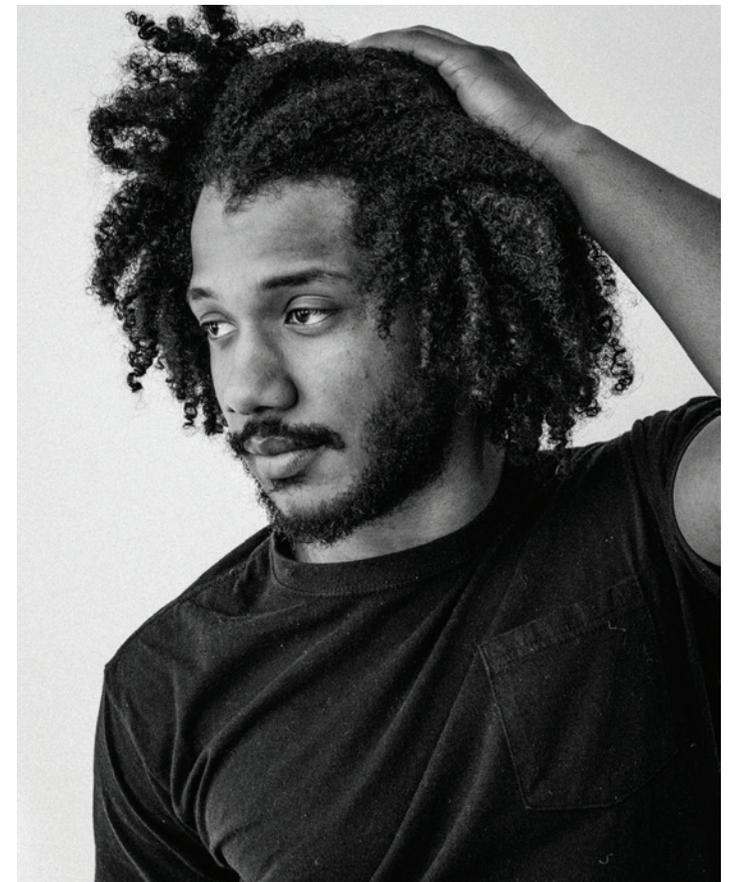
ALL PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE BY THOUGHTPOET

I used to cry because I never knew who my family was, but now I use those tears to manifest my own peace that will inspire those around me. I'm learning who I am so that I can break generational curses by just existing. I'm not about to regress and destroy my peace. I'll die before that happens.

I'm remaining focused so that my burdens may inspire a city and strengthen it to save itself. A wandering angel disguised as a storyteller from Tuley Park. The big brother with no big brother of his own will empower a community through his struggles so that they will prosper.

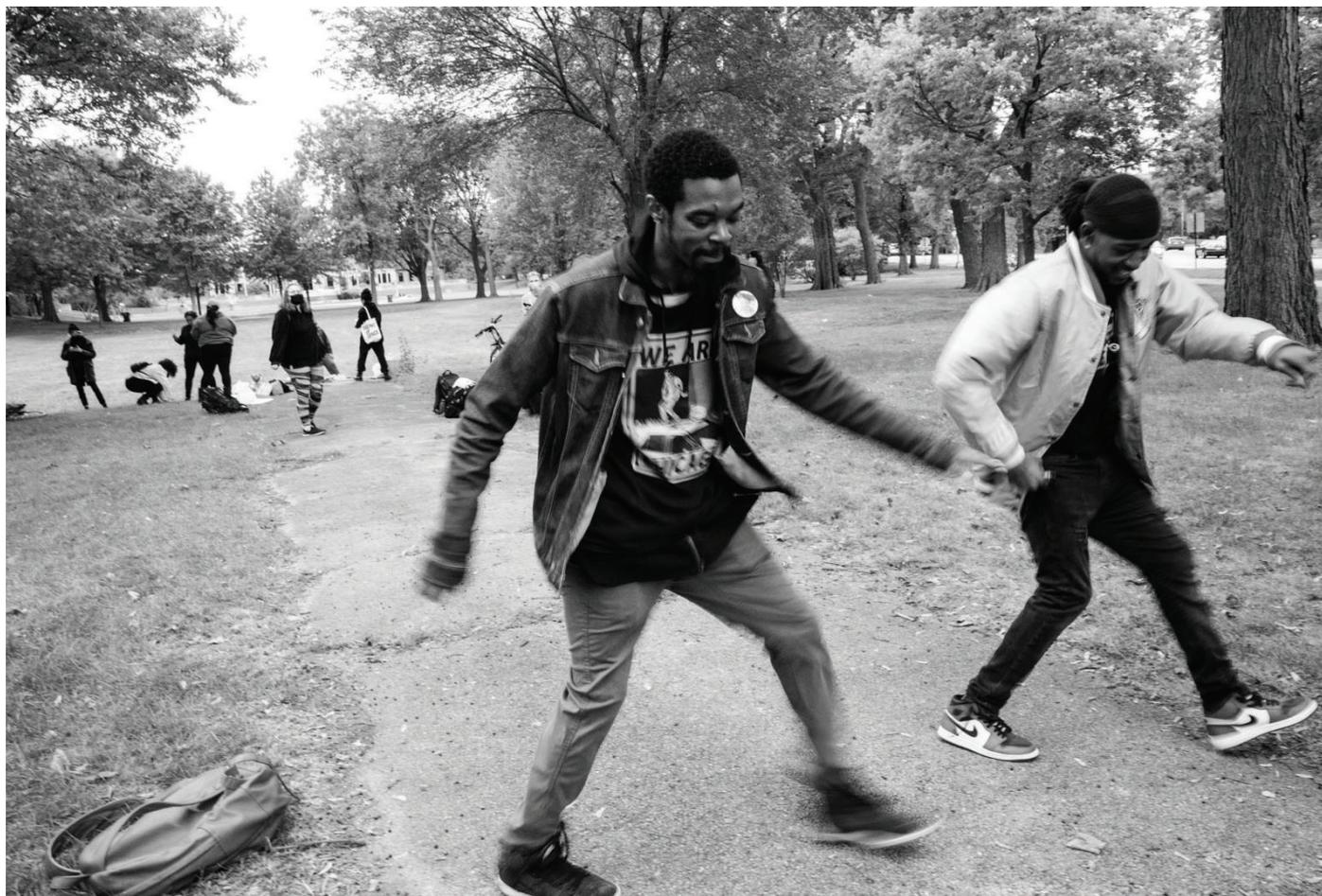
These photos are of masculine-identified Black men who do so much for the south- and west-side communities of Chicago, and who often don't get asked if they are OK emotionally. In modern American society, many Black men aren't checked in on about their mental health, and have lower rates of access to therapy and other mental and emotional support systems. This disparity often manifests as higher suicide rates and shorter average lifespans.

These photos capture a certain vulnerability that most Black men don't speak on. 📍



[@thought_poet77](https://twitter.com/thought_poet77)

NEWS & POLITICS



ABOVE: Footworkers Chi Blu and Rashad Harris facilitate free, blissful dance sessions that welcome Chicagoans of all ages.

RIGHT: Producer Renzell constantly considers how to curate Chicago culture and allow artists to be themselves and represent their communities.  ALL PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE BY THOUGHTPOET



ABOVE: Scientist and rapper Jordan "DXTR Spits" Holmes's latest project, "How Men Cry," seeks to change the narrative around mental health.

BELOW: Musician Chai Tulani honored a friend who passed away with original compositions written to uplift their community.



RIGHT: Jermaine Wright (makeup by Jade Landon) is a dancer and youth organizer who defies a singular definition.

BELOW LEFT: Runway model Carl Veney sustains his mental health by leaning into the faith he grew up in at Burnside Community Baptist Church.

BELOW RIGHT: Members of the South Shore Drill Team say it is one of the few outlets that allows them to decompress.  ALL PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE BY THOUGHTPOET



Searching for The Pigeon Lady

It's less about one individual and more about the calling to feed all the birds in the Loop.

By **KATIE PROUT**



© LLOYD DEGRANE

Are pigeons beautiful? I think they might be, but I rarely stop to look. Sometimes though, walking to the Jackson Red Line stop on my way home, I notice them. There are dozens here, heads bobbing up and down like Lake Michigan waves. The pigeons peck at bits of Cheetos and empty dope bags, discarded Jimmy John's bread and soft pink worms flushed aboveground after a heavy rain. They are a collective and they are unbothered. They part easily, carelessly, for the Columbia students in their white platform sneakers, the hustlers who hang out on the narrow green of Pritzker Park, the Harold Washington Library visitors in their rain bonnets and heavy coats, and me. Powdery gray and blue, charcoal and snow-white, the pigeons have iridescent rings around their necks like permanent makeup, something else with a reputation for being trashy that I happen to like.

When I started trying to find the pigeon lady, or ladies, or whoever it is feeding the birds downtown, I'd never seen her, but I'd heard stories from people who live outdoors in the Loop. Sam sees the pigeon lady on weekday mornings, driving down Wells and tossing seed out of her passenger window with a bucket. Mark sees her in the same spot on weekday afternoons. And according to Kelly, two different pigeon ladies feed all the birds on Lake Street between State and Wells.

The more I heard, the clearer it became to me that the pigeon lady is less of a gender or individual and more of a calling. The pigeon lady is white, she's Asian, she's Hispanic. She's elderly and she's middle-aged. She drives an SUV, she drives a sedan, she has a driver—a man who is her husband, or maybe her hired chauffeur. She *is* a driver, according to my friend Jeff; he says the pigeon lady is a male taxi driver who rolls down his window, stretches out his hand, and feeds the birds



© LLOYD DEGRANE

who land on it each morning while idling in the cab line at Union Station.

For months, I was consumed. I'd never seen her, yet I believed, for I'd seen her wake: feathers, scattered seeds, and a handful of rustling birds. Every time I would walk through downtown and stop to say hey to someone I know, I'd also ask if they knew about the pigeon lady: every time, they'd laugh and say, "You just missed her!" Some complained about the pigeon shit that flurries down on them while the birds wait for the pigeon lady to show up with their hand-delivered meal, others don't mind, and even kind of like the show. I wanted to see the show, but what I really wanted to do

was meet its star.

Back in Michigan, after my siblings and I left home, my dad kept pigeons for a few years until they all either got eaten by possums or flew away; for a while, one named Coobles used to join him in the garage, sitting on his hat whenever he smoked a cigar. I knew someone in recovery who owned hundreds of pigeons, channeling urges to relapse into tending to, and talking with, clouds of birds roosting in handsome, handmade coops. But this passion was all peripheral to my life. I didn't care about pigeons either way, other than picking up, once I lived in the city, some vague knowledge that pigeons were brought

to America by European settlers and have been more or less wronged by us humans ever since. I felt guilty about that, but not enough to break city code and feed them, and not enough to learn more about how they cohabitate with us. What I did care about—what I do care about—is people, especially the ones lit up inside by a singular passion. Weird people, people possessed, people other people might term freaks. The pigeon lady could be a freak, I thought, and feeding pigeons could be the mission of her life. Jeff calls pigeons "city chickens"—she could also be cultivating them as a food source. After all, squab remains popular throughout the world: you can

go buy pigeon at multiple Chicago butchers today if you want to.

A few weeks ago, Guy, who lives on a corner in the Loop, told me a story about watching the pigeon lady catch a pigeon with a blue butterfly net and pull it into her car. Maybe she caught it for food, or maybe for companionship, her very own Coobles to keep her company. Maybe she loves them, and thinks they're beautiful. Regardless, the pigeon lady is motivated enough about feeding these birds to spend hours a day and what I could only guess was hundreds—if not a thousand—dollars a year on birdseed and gas to do so. I wouldn't know why until I asked her.

"I LOVE PIGEONS. They are gorgeous and funny and smart and social. I almost missed the red line watching this column of them perched on a building. They are perfect creatures and everyone who hates them is wrong."
—@nlcomes

My search for the pigeon lady begins with Guy on a 13-degree Tuesday in January. While I keep an ear out for any sudden beating of wings, Guy—a white man in his early 30s with a quiet voice—is hustling where he sleeps, in front of the doorway of a recently shuttered shop. Last time we spoke, Guy told me about two pigeon ladies: one who comes and throws feed on his corner every morning between 10 and 11 AM, and another who comes later in the afternoon, less often, and with a driver. When I ask Guy if I can come hang out on his corner and watch for her, he agrees, and so one morning, I arrive with breakfast. Together, we wait.

"I just don't like it because we sleep over here," Guy explains when I ask him what he thinks about the pigeon lady. "When they toss the food out, the birds come over, and they expect the food every day, so they pop up. They shit all over the place, they shit all over the blankets." Indeed, on the ground behind us are the squares of cardboard he uses as a sleeping mat, plus bird droppings.

Above us, pigeons ruffle and coo, shuffling on the elevated rails. It's so cold out Guy can store the donated food and drink he gets against the empty storefront's locked glass door without fear of it spoiling. We keep our masks on to hide from the wind. We talk about the cold, how kind the Starbucks workers across the street are, the increasingly poor quality of dope, and a video Guy saw in which Bill Gates says the vaccine makes peo-



Elmo holds a pigeon he coaxed into his hands. © LLOYD DEGRANE

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ple believe in God but not the Christian God. Guy doesn't wholly buy the video's truth. I try and fail to explain deep fakes. I ask Guy if he's ever talked to the pigeon ladies ("I just yell at them and tell them, 'Don't do it!'") and whether they listen to him ("No, they still do it."). As the minutes tick on, we watch the pigeons gather around us like summer storm clouds.

"Want to go get warm?" Guy asks, and inclines his head toward a nearby 7/11. We go in and stomp our feet hard. Guy nods at the young man working behind the counter. "He usually lets me stay inside for a couple minutes," he says. We take turns peering over the worker's shoulder through the glass window behind him, watching for a vehicle to suddenly slow down, birdseed to spray. It's 10:30 AM. After our couple of minutes are up, we resume our posts.

"There she is," Guy says, so quiet I almost don't hear him.

A silver, slightly beat-up SUV rolls toward us with its hazards on. Slowly, magnificently, the SUV's lone occupant—I see the slightest glimpse of a woman with black hair and round cheeks—reaches over the passenger seat and pours out a bucket of bird feed. I stare, mouth agape under my mask. Here she is. Here is the pigeon lady. Too awestruck to move at first, I stumble forward, but the SUV rolls on and makes a right turn before I can catch up.

Guy is standing patiently where I left him, not exactly waiting for me but not *not* waiting for me, either. I feel vaguely embarrassed. "I didn't expect to see her so soon," I say lamely, and thank him for noticing her approach. We watch as pigeons—I quickly count at least 200—bob and dart, one mass hunting for fallen food. I missed my first chance to get the pigeon lady on the record, but at least now I can confirm for myself that she's real.

"I know she probably thinks she's doing something nice by feeding the birds," Guy sighs. "But sometimes a car comes by and runs them right over."

"crazy that they're just doves with a bad branding strategy"
—@emilymester

At 11 AM, I say goodbye to Guy and walk east to meet up at Macy's with Lloyd DeGrane, a documentary photographer who's been visiting folks downtown and handing out harm reduction supplies for years. We usually walk together, and today he's going to take me on a tour of all the spots he's seen the pigeon lady.

Because it's so cold, we take the underground Pedway. I've never used the Pedway before, and marvel at its backlit stained glass and dropped coffee cups and my fellow pedestrians: tired county employees, fragrance counter managers clad in black and vaping on break, sanitation workers sweeping brooms, a man who is angry because we don't give him any cash (we have none). We pop up for air at City Hall, and check the corner of Clark and Randolph, but there's no feed and no birds.

At 12:40 PM on Lake, between State and Wabash, we see a solitary pigeon, but no pigeon lady. At 1:05 PM at Madison and Wells, the spot where Sam and Mark hustle in shifts, 30 or so pigeons peck at fresh yellow seed, a sign we just missed her. Sam is hurrying down the street. Mark is dopesick, he tells us, and he's on his way to help him out. "Can I use your phone?" he asks Lloyd. While we walk together, Sam tells me the pigeon lady he sees drives a white sedan. "I hate it," he says of her feeding the birds. In addition to Madison and Wells, Sam says he saw her once at Clark and Lake, a tiny woman standing on top of the planter boxes and throwing bread with gusto.

Lloyd and I wander some more. Under a viaduct off Ida B. Wells, I finally meet Elmo, someone I've heard casually about for years. Elmo, a middle-aged white man with graying dark hair, is originally from Kentucky; I can still hear the land in his voice. Sometimes he catches pigeons just for fun. He calls to them, clucking his tongue in such a way that the birds, hypnotized, walk right into his hands. Lloyd shows me the pictures, and later, asks Elmo if he thinks pigeons are beautiful.

"They're intelligent," Elmo answers. "They're rats with wings. I got one now that's always hanging out at my tent. He wants to sleep with me, but I chase him away every night."

"I'm getting a pigeon tattoo on my foot!"
—@panoramicolors

We say goodbye to Elmo and walk back north. At 2:42 PM, on the northeast corner of Clark and Lake, a short man with a gray ponytail and purple coat walks in our direction.

"Look!" says Lloyd. The man is quickly and discreetly throwing handfuls of seed out of his black duffel bag. After he passes us, I turn around. Here is a chance for me to reclaim my reporter pride, and begin to get the answers I seek.

"Excuse me!" I say, huffing as I try to speed

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Elmo by the river © LLOYD DEGRANE

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walk his way in three pairs of pants. “My name is Katie and I’m from the *Chicago Reader*, can I ask you a couple questions about what you’re doing?” He smiles shyly.

“Next time,” he says, and keeps moving.

“What’s your name?” I call out as he opens a glass door to a small shopping mall I’ve never noticed before.

“Angel,” he calls over his shoulder, and disappears.

“Walk under the bridge that goes over Irving Park Rd for the train and L tracks. Particularly on the South side of IPR, east of the @cta entryway. Tell me of the beauty of these winged rats then.”
—@DivisionTweets

One afternoon in mid-January, I spent some time trying and failing to articulate to myself why I was increasingly obsessed with the pigeon ladies, and why, in turn, the pigeon ladies were obsessed with feeding the birds regardless of financial or social cost. It had something to do with beauty, I finally decided. We all value beauty, even if the parameters of how beauty is measured and defined shift from culture to culture. We’re passionate

about what we find beautiful, and disdainful of what we don’t.

That’s as far as I got.

Irritated, I turned to the masses. “For a story I’m working on for @Chicago_Reader : are pigeons beautiful?” I asked Twitter. I thought I was asking a cheeky, fun question that could drum up some good quotes and allow me to procrastinate a little longer. I did not expect, when I turned my phone back on later that night, to have hundreds of notifications. Six hundred and twenty-two of you voted in my poll.

The results were clear, but not without a strong showing from what ended up being the minority opinion: 62.4 percent of voters said yes, pigeons are beautiful, while over a third—37.6 percent—said no.

“You do realize your little brother @coobles321 showed pigeons at the Fowler-ville Fair and got first place AND Best Of Show, right?” replied my mother in a tweet. Apparently, the judge decreed them “nice birds, exceptionally pretty with tight feathers from frequent flights.”

I did not realize. Nor did I understand the degree to which pigeons figure into Chicago political lore and law, until Chicagoans sent

me links telling me so. In 2019, state representative Jaime Andrade Jr. was giving a live Channel 2 interview on pigeon waste and feathers at the Irving Park Blue Line Station when one pigeon flew by and pooped on his head. In another video, Andrade actually confronted a pigeon lady—a woman just outside of a parked SUV and a man who was assisting her—who was feeding the birds shortly after the station was power-washed. “Please don’t feed the pigeons. Please,” Andrade said, to which the woman responded by cussing him out.

Andrade’s experience isn’t the only time a pigeon lady and the law have come into conflict. In 2012, Alderperson James Capplemann was sweeping up bread crumbs on the corner of Broadway and Wilson when the woman who’d set them out emerged from her car. A heated encounter ensued, during which the woman, later identified as Young Kang, allegedly shoved Capplemann and threw bread crumbs in his direction.

“What is a criminal? Hey, I take care of God’s creatures,” Kang later told the *Sun-Times*. “That is criminal? [...] If I am wrong, I still have to do it. I have to save the life. What’s wrong with that? If they have to hang me, if

they have to kill me, I’m going to die.”

I don’t recall my family’s pigeons inciting violence or passionate declarations of life-or-death, although my brother’s Twitter handle makes me consider that Coobles played a more prominent role in our lives than I thought. I’m obsessed with Kang’s quote. I’m obsessed with the moment a calling becomes a compulsion. Quests can show you the whole world, but they also can narrow your range of vision until you see nothing else, not even your own two feet, blistered and sore, as you chase a light only you can see.

“A beautiful gang of pigeons have taken over the Reader box in my neighborhood and I am SCARED of them [heart-eyes emoji]”
—@miccicaporale

Whether for or against, people are very, very passionate about pigeons. Beauty is entwined with passionate love, and what we love, we’ll do most anything to protect and care for—even if we’re utterly wrong, even if that care is actually harmful to what we love, and to ourselves.

“NO. Keep wildlife wild. We do not need to

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be actively going out and feeding wildlife,” Mason Fidino, a quantitative ecologist at the Lincoln Park Zoo, nearly shouts over the phone. Pigeons, he says, can eat “practically anything” and breed multiple times a year. Feeding them artificially inflates their population beyond what can be naturally sustained. That’s bad for them, but it’s also not great for us.

Throughout its natural history, the rock dove, what we now call a pigeon, nested along cliff crevices and caves. “If you ask a pigeon about skyscrapers, they’d think, ‘Hey, look at this nice cliff face I can nest in,’” says Fidino. Like humans, pigeons are highly adaptable: “There’s a reason we’re all over the world, just like the pigeon is.” And like us (and other animals), even when they fight, pigeons like to live together.

Pigeons are not themselves dirty; this reputation is unjust. As Fidino points out, for an animal to evolve with dirtiness, that trait would have to provide some kind of survival benefit. What they did benefit from was nesting in large, cooing groups. More pigeons equals more poop, and pigeon waste does carry at least four different diseases harmful to humans who breathe it in. But, says Fidino, “you have to be *really* breathing it in, day in and day out, in significant quantities.” You have to share even closer quarters with the birds than do most fellow city dwellers. You have to be Sam, or Mark, or anyone else who lives under the station platform, or viaduct, or Lower Wacker, and breathe in the dust from the pigeons who roost above your head day after day.

“not many birds can say they’ve been to war”

—@emilymester

“You ever freeze a pop?” Guy asks me. Two days later, I’m back on the pigeon lady hunt on a decidedly warmer morning, but it’s still January. I’m still in three pairs of pants.

“Yeah,” I answer.

“You know how it’s frozen but you can still squeeze it, still move around the ice inside?”

I think back to my childhood, freezing 24-ounce plastic bottles of Faygo Rock & Rye because slurping them like slushies made me feel fancy. “I do,” I reply.

“That’s how my feet felt,” Guy explains. I ask him if he can feel his feet now. He can, and they hurt, a lot. He peeled off his socks at the 7/11 yesterday to take a look. Their color

is good but they’re swollen: he’s planning on going to the hospital soon.

At around 10:30 AM, two Streets and Sanitation trucks pull up right where the pigeon lady throws her feed. A blue garbage truck follows. Across the street, I see a CPD SUV crawl to a stop and park against the flow of traffic. “I’m finna walk off,” Guy says, and quickly slouches away. Two police officers get out of the SUV and cross the street. One of them nods in the direction Guy vanished and asks me, “Do you know where he went?”

“No,” I answer.

I forget to ask the officer if he’s seen the pigeon lady. It’s technically against municipal code to feed pigeons in Chicago, though, so maybe that’s for the best.

My phone rings. It’s Lloyd, and he’s excited. He’s run into Kelly, a white woman in her upper 30s with blue eyes and a round, serene face who hustles outside of the State Street Chick-fil-A. Right now, Kelly lives on the Blue Line, but tomorrow she’s signing the lease and picking up keys for a one-bedroom apartment, her first place in four years. Today, she has a story for me.

KELLY

Sleet, rain, snow, she’s out here. She usually comes the same time every time, between three and four [in the afternoon]. But the funny thing is, as soon as she gets out of the car, before she even puts anything out, these birds are, like, following her! So as soon as the first drop of rice comes, there’s this whole flock. That’s what was amazing to me. She didn’t even lay any rice, and these pigeons are flying up in the air, waiting.

I am thinking it’s gotta be, like, maybe two five-pound bags of rice? You can tell when she’s running low—in the beginning, she just takes her hand and throws it, and then whatever’s left, I just see her take the bag out and sprinkle it out.

A lot of people get mad. Well first, everyone hates pigeons because they have no fear factor, they don’t care what it is. [Laughing] A lot of times, she pours so much rice that the pigeons are fighting over it. So there’s pigeons that are diving down, and there’s rice flying up in the air because they’re fighting over the pieces—I wish I had recorded some of the things. But yeah, some people get mad. But the cops, there’s signs up on the el, \$200 fine—but like, everybody knows her and the cops talk to her.

“I love birds but once saw a pigeon eating a leg of fried chicken on an el platform and was like, noooo you’re eating your family”
—@Petit_Smudge

After talking with Kelly and tooling around for a couple hours more on foot, Lloyd and I head to the Wit Hotel. It’s shortly before 3 PM, and the day is cold and rapidly cooling further. I long for a hot toddy.

“Kelly said between three and four,” I casually remind Lloyd, trying to measure his tolerance for a long stakeout and hoping it’s as low as mine. “I’ll probably head out around four.” I know better, of course. Tranquil and rangy, Lloyd is a camel. For every coffee I need, for every snack, for every stop to pee, he could walk to Detroit. But today, for once, Lloyd’s cold too.

“I’ll get on the bus around then,” he allows.

All around us, the pigeons are gathering. Soon, they number close to a hundred. It can’t be long now, I say. We stand, shoulders a few inches apart, shivering and squinting in the direction of the setting sun’s light.

I want to ask the front desk staff of the Wit if they’ve seen the pigeon lady. Lloyd suggests I pop in right now, since once we see her, we’ll likely be running towards her and away from the hotel. I’m just starting to get some answers (“Oh, you’re talkin’ about the pigeon lady.”), when one worker interrupts another and points to her left. Outside the window is Lloyd, waving his arms as frantically as his peaceful demeanor will allow.

“I just saw a big cloud of pigeons swarm!” he says when I burst outside, and points at the dark blur rising and falling into the pink and red sky a few blocks due west. We both take it as a sign that she’s just thrown out seed and our stop is next. Excited and chatty, I open Voice Memos on my phone, ready to finally get the pigeon lady on the record. Lloyd preps his camera for a woman, a driver, her big bags of feed and stylish knee-high boots.

She doesn’t come, of course.

“Feeding pigeons is not as contentious as the prospect of dibs in Chicago, but it’s similar. Like dibs, pigeons are part of Chicago.”
—Mason Fidino

“Goddammit,” I say at 4 PM. I’m shivering now, and feel much like Linus in *It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, waiting with de-ranked and wild hope for folklore to show up.

“Are you kidding me?”

Lloyd laughs a little and shakes his head. I feel like a big, disappointed idiot all over again: once for biffing it that first morning with Guy, when I saw the pigeon lady and froze, and now for freezing again, more literally. My stamina can’t hold. We call it, and at 4:04 PM, fist-bump to our defeat. I descend the State and Lake Red Line stairs into the earth; he heads to catch the 136 express bus.

The State and Lake stop is humid even in the cold. At 4:09 PM, I’m surreptitiously trying to film a bundled-up busker blasting Natalie Merchant’s “Kind and Generous” from his speakers when my recording is interrupted with a phone call. It’s Lloyd.

“She’s at Dearborn and Washington!” he yells.

“Motherfucker!” I yell back, and try to do math. That’s about three blocks from where we were. If I run back up the stairs and to him, I’ll definitely miss my train, but will I miss her? I’d hate to pay double fare. On the other end of the line, Lloyd’s the most excited I’ve ever heard him sound.

“She’s right here!” he says. “I’m watching her. Blue Toyota SUV, heading north. Now she’s pulling away!”

“Is there a driver?” I ask.

“There’s a driver,” he confirms. “Hundreds of pigeons, I can’t believe it.”

I can. It was always going to end like this.

“We think of them as pests because they are around in large numbers. But that does not make them ugly, it’s our way of thinking that’s ugly.”
—@AloiArtTalk

From his bus stop, Lloyd texts me a zoomed-in photo of the aftermath. I see wet winter asphalt, the unexpected green of a bike line, and 50 pigeons, round dark heads and steel-colored wings, blurring together as they rush to the picture’s center, where the sidewalk is dotted with pale yellow seeds. The closer I look, the more I’m surprised to see how every bird is different, in ways both subtle and profound. Some have gray heads, some are a soft, chocolate brown. A few are speckled like Holstein cows. Others are so black as to be almost blue. I can hear my train coming. I look a little closer, and feel simultaneously defeated and at ease. I still don’t know what the pigeon lady thinks, but these birds are beautiful to me. **■**

@katie_prout



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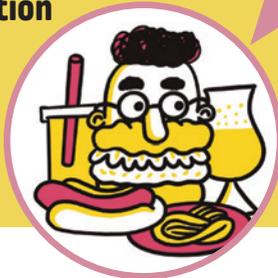


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ART PREVIEW

Occupying the moment

The Women's Caucus for Art visits
Bridgeport.

By **BRIDGETTE M. REDMAN**



A screenshot from *A Black Woman's Declaration of Independence*, a video in the exhibition by Jessa Ciel. COURTESY WOMEN'S CAUCUS FOR ART

Dr. Maura Reilly is a curator who understands feminist art.

It is one of the reasons she was chosen to curate a historic exhibition at Bridgeport Art Center as a part of the 50th anniversary celebration of the Women's Caucus for Art (WCA). The organization put out a call for self-identified women artists based in the U.S. to submit works on the theme of "Occupy the Moment, Intersect History with Impact," and they received hundreds of entries. The resulting juried exhibition is on display at the center's Fourth Floor Gallery until Friday, February 25.

Dr. Reilly is the founding curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum and the author of 2018's *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (Thames & Hudson). "Occupy the Moment, Intersect History with Impact" is an attempt to capture the important historic events taking place this year that affect women. Reilly describes this moment in her catalog essay as being "defined by fragmentation, right-wing extremism, political polarity, systemic racism and sexism, totalitarianism, a climate emergency, the ongoing colonialist legacy, toxic masculinity, and the continued misogynistic control of women's bodies."

Women's Caucus for Art president Laura Morrison also explained in the catalog that the title of the exhibit was designed to reflect this year's theme for WCA's national conference, which is "Occupy the Moment: Embracing Our History, Enhancing Our Impact."

"In 2022, we find ourselves two years into a global pandemic that has disproportionately made life more difficult for women across the globe," Morrison wrote. "Now more than ever, the personal is deeply political to women artists. The artwork submitted covered a vast

range of social and political topics including racism, reproductive rights, global warming, the environment, police brutality, economic disparity, misogyny, women's work, the pandemic, politics and political figures, sexual harassment and abuse, mental health, labor, voting rights, gun violence, nuclear disarmament, world peace, refugees and immigration, gender and wage disparity, domestic violence, the patriarchy, gender and power, women leaders and activists, feminism and feminist history."

Reilly chose 42 pieces of art for the exhibition that she felt represented where women are in 2022. She told me in a recent phone conversation that most of the entries were political in nature, and the politics were expressed in conversations about race, gender, trans rights, police brutality, abortion rights, and climate change.

"Women artists are really grappling and showcasing for us the realities of the situation for women globally," Reilly said. "We are facing very serious dangers as women. It is an opportune moment to have an exhibition that showcases that."

Not all the works in the exhibition are political. Reilly categorizes some as quiet and meditative works, and other pieces humorous. Some are even positive and hopeful about the future.

"We are so imbued with politics at the moment that I think I was more keen and inclined toward the political work, but I didn't want [the exhibition] to be fully political," Reilly said. "I wanted some of these different perspectives and beautiful works."

Reilly was tasked with judging the entries completely anonymously, and, as such, she only later learned who the artists were. It turned out that many artists she chose were

self-taught. The artists in "Occupy the Moment" represent a large age range, and the exhibition even includes a drawing by 14-year-old Shabad Singh which examines the past, present, and future of the fight for women's rights. There are also works by more established feminist artists such as Carol Cole and Mimi Smith.

The exhibition includes paintings, sculpture, collage, mixed media, videos, drawings, and craft-based work. Reilly was unable to personally hang the exhibition, but she worked closely with Noreen Dean Dresser, the vice president for WCA special events, who was on the ground and able to help Reilly achieve her vision. The exhibition was originally slated to be part of a full weekend's worth of celebrations and conferences in Chicago honoring the golden anniversary of WCA, but most events were canceled in deference to the recent COVID-19 upsurge.

Reilly's goal in selecting work was to capture as many different voices as possible. Some themes showed up more often than others and she worked to balance them.

"I wasn't going to make 30 of the 42 chosen works about [Black Lives Matter]," Reilly said. "There are three or four works about BLM in the show, and that gave me an opportunity [to also include] works on bipolar disorder or the aging body, whimsical conversations with male modernist masters. I tried to capture as many voices as possible. There is a great image of a house that is sinking after a hurricane ravaged Puerto Rico dealing with climate change. There is a beautiful portrait of two little Native American girls."

While the exhibition deals with many intense issues, Reilly said there is nothing explicit or too difficult to look at in any of the entries. Parents can feel comfortable taking their kids to see the show. They might have to do some explaining to provide context, such as explaining what the George Floyd protests were about or what toxic masculinity is.

It is a show she hopes Chicagoans of all ages will attend and engage with.

"It is an important show because of the history of the WCA and the current sociopolitical moment," Reilly said. "If you want to see what women artists today have to say about where we are, then you should go out of the way to see this really beautiful show."

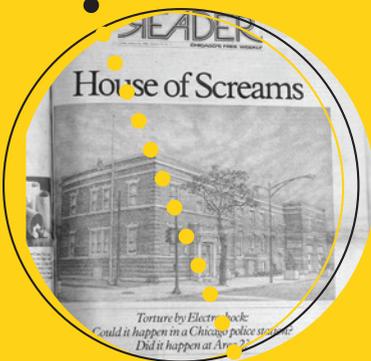
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Left: one of the land markers that will be installed in February in front of a south-side home; right: artist Tonika Lewis Johnson

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PUBLIC PRACTICE

A theft hidden in plain sight for decades

"Inequity for Sale" reveals a sad history for Englewood homeowners.

By **MEGGIE GATES**

The greater Englewood area has been subject to land theft for over 80 years. It's apparent when you see boarded-up windows and overgrown weeds that cover the community. Empty houses abound, a legacy for years, vacant lots indicating opportunities withheld from aspiring Black homeowners. It's a crime that Chicago's Tonika Johnson, activist, artist, and the National Public Housing Museum's 2021 resident Artist-as-Instigator, seeks to expose with her project "Inequity for Sale."

"In my lifetime, I witnessed disparity get worse and worse in Englewood," Johnson told

me. "I wanted to visualize that by putting land markers in front of homes impacted by land sale contracts . . . over 200 houses sold under land sale contracts are now abandoned or just empty lots."

Inequity for Sale aims to highlight the negative impact that land sale contracts have had on the greater Englewood area. After learning about the contracts at a community meeting hosted by the Resident Association of Greater Englewood (RAGE), a community-driven activist organization, Johnson became interested in the idea of visualizing the impact that land sale contracts had on the area through a public art project.

"The actual idea for 'Inequity for Sale' was inspired by a 2019 Duke University report [‘The Plunder of Black Wealth in Chicago: New Findings on the Lasting Toll of Predatory Housing Contracts’] that people forwarded to me," says Johnson. "I linked up with Amber Hendley, one of the researchers on that report, and she gave our community members a map of all the homes sold in Englewood through land sale contracts, which prompted the idea."

"Inequity for Sale" looks at the myriad racist housing-market practices that Black homeowners have historically faced. Land sale contracts were offered to Black homebuyers on the south and west sides throughout the

50s and 60s in lieu of traditional mortgages, and often resulted in the potential buyer paying high monthly rates but never actually owning the home.

After Hendley showed residents a map dotted with homes sold to homeowners through the unethical practice of land sale contracts, Johnson went to work putting together what would become a significant aspect of the "Inequity for Sale" project. Tracking down homes on the map, Johnson began to focus on creating land markers for specific homes impacted by the contracts. The markers, some of which are already set up in public, include information on the family that once lived there to

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ARTS & CULTURE

continued from 24

honor the legacy of previous homeowners.

Johnson hopes providing these physical land markers will make people realize how deeply these land sale contracts impacted the community.

"I took a collection of addresses to create landmarks for and focused on houses within a four- to five-block radius," says Johnson. "The families who had land stolen from them ultimately affected everyone, not only the people in this neighborhood."

Picking up steam after Johnson was selected for a residency with the National Public Housing Museum in 2019, the project has been underway for over three years now. Johnson partnered with Tiff Beatty, the museum's program director of arts, culture, and public policy, and the two began to plan what would become "Inequity for Sale." Johnson and Beatty had previously worked together on the Folded Map Project, which tackled urban segregation as seen in Chicago.

"Last year we did a public hearing, a virtual event where we invited the community to come hear about the project," Beatty says. "We want to share the project with the community through different means as a way of engaging them on a deeper level."

Johnson and Beatty created a three-part podcast series detailing the history of land sale contracts for the project, which is central to providing background and information about the physical land markers. Produced by the National Public Housing Museum, the podcast details the history of how legalized theft contributes to present inequality in Black communities all around America. The podcast, along with a downloadable self-guided tour, website, and photos, aims to help inform people about the historical aspect of land sale contracts while they visit the physical sites.

"The podcast explains what the problem is and the larger systemic issues tied to it," says Johnson. "Not only did we need something to provide the public during my residency, but we realized it makes sense to pair physical landmarks with something that gives the audience an oversight on what they're seeing."

Overall, it's estimated that Black families in Chicago have lost \$4 billion over the years to predatory housing contracts.

"If Black homeowners in the 50s and 60s owned their homes, the homeownership rate for Englewood would have probably been 80 percent, but that's not the case," says Johnson. "The present day homeownership rate is around 25 percent because Black families

didn't even have the chance to claim home ownership years ago."

Often shut out from conventional mortgages, homeowners had no choice other than to buy directly from sellers with little to no legal protections. Homeowners were promised the home if they could repay their debts over the course of ten to 20 years; however, many were unable due to high interest rates that bled them dry. Many Black homeowners with land sale contracts never received the promised ownership of the home, instead ruining their credit and credibility with banks, assuring future mortgages were all but impossible to secure.

"Ninety percent of the homes that were being sold to Black people were sold on land sale contracts," says Johnson. "You have white families leaving the neighborhood selling their homes to Black families who thought they own their homes but really don't. This is how Englewood transitioned into a Black neighborhood."

While the first two land markers are already installed and available for the public to read in passing while walking through Englewood, the other markers (ten to 15 altogether) will be on view late this spring alongside a physical exhibit at the National Public Housing Museum in Chicago on Taylor Street. The goal is to create an immersive experience that people can visit to physically see the impact land sale contracts have had on the community.

"When you see a neighborhood that has vacant lots and abandoned homes, it always has to do with some kind of city neglect, disinvestment, or people being taken advantage of through discriminatory housing tools," says Johnson.

Both Beatty and Johnson hope this project will provide insight into the past by providing audiences the necessary tools to help process what has, and what will, become of the greater Englewood area.

"I want to help connect people to this specific history because it's an ongoing issue affecting the community today," says Beatty. "I'm really excited to be able to drive down the block and see the big yellow signs, because we're teaching people a new narrative of Englewood than what we've been told."

"I want Black youth, and Chicago in general, to not view neighborhoods with vacant lots and abandoned houses as something that's the fault of its residents, because that's not who's at fault here," says Johnson. **■**

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This Is Only a Test ■ EVAN HANOVER

SECURITY THEATER

Scattered shots

This Is Only a Test tackles the absurdity of active-shooter drills.

By **KERRY REID**

In his 2018 comedy special *Kid Gorgeous*, John Mulaney recounts the crime safety (or “Stranger Danger”) lectures delivered to him and his fellow classmates by former Chicago cop J.J. Bittenbinder. (“Time for ‘Street Smarts’ with Detective J.J. Bittenbinder. Shut up! You’re all gonna die. ‘Street Smarts!’”)

Bittenbinder was making his mark during those more innocent pre-Columbine days when the national narrative (reinforced by milk cartons everywhere) was that strangers outside the school walls tossing kids into trunks of cars was the greatest criminal threat they faced, instead of (probably male)

classmates with killing machines invading the educational sanctuary and wreaking havoc.

Sure, Brenda Spencer shooting up an elementary school in San Diego in 1979 with the excuse “I don’t like Mondays” got enough worldwide publicity to inspire a Boomtown Rats hit, and Laurie Dann’s murderous 1988 assault on Winnetka’s Hubbard Woods Elementary led to a book by former *Chicago Tribune* columnist Eric Zorn and a made-for-TV movie starring Valerie Bertinelli as a thinly veiled Dann. But it took the cumulative effect of Columbine and Virginia Tech and Parkland and too many others for schools to start incor-

porating active-shooter drills as if they were on the same plane as fire and tornado drills. In the process, we’ve turned mass murder into something akin to a tragic accident or a natural disaster—horrible, yes, but really unavoidable—rather than deal with the root human and political causes of gun violence.

Those drills are the crux of Eric Reyes Loo’s *This Is Only a Test*, now in a world premiere with Broken Nose Theatre under Toma Tavares Langston’s direction. A John Hughesian quartet of high school students—a nerd, a jock, an overachiever, and an out-of-the-closet gay theater kid—are subjected to the training of a former military dude who’s selling his active-shooter survival “strategies” to schools. The principal is skeptical, but he convinces her that she has more to lose with parents who will blame her if a shooting happens than with gutting still more of the arts and sports budget to finance the “security” program. (Which is more expensive than the clear plastic backpacks the kids carry, for sure.)

Like Mulaney, Loo seems interested in exploring how early exposure to safety measures that seem to offer precious little protection can scar a kid’s psyche for life. In a program note, Loo writes about seeing a school-shooting drill on a news special. “I couldn’t process what I was looking at right away. *Is it funny? Is it sad? Is it tragic?*”

This Is Only a Test

Through 3/12: Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM; industry night Mon 2/28, 7:30 PM, understudy night Wed 3/9, 7:30 PM, Den Theatre, 1331 N. Milwaukee, brokennotheatre.com, pay what you can.

It’s all those things, and his play tries to grapple with all of it, to diminishing effect over the two acts. In addition to the tensions between the kids at the school, which include a tentative-and-fraught gym friendship between jock Wynn (Austyn Williamson) and drama king Kramer (Graham Helfrick), Loo weaves in scenes involving the parents (all played by RjW Mays and Christopher M. Walsh, who also play the principal and the security consultant). These seem designed to

help us understand how scary the world outside the school also is for these kids. It’s particularly effective when Wynn, who is Black, is reminded by his mother not to leave the house while wearing his hoodie.

But Loo never shows us enough of the inner life of these kids for some of the shifts in character to fully make sense. Maybe that’s the point he’s trying to make: we never know what kids are going through, or when one might “snap” under the weight of being asked to deal with adult situations beyond their years. However, here the changes in persona seem almost arbitrary, with scenes included as a way to check boxes on a list of challenges facing the students, ranging from free-floating teen insecurity (embodied best by Sophia Vitello’s mousy Lenore) to a neglectful stepdad who keeps a handgun within too-easy reach. Academic powerhouse Selma, played with pinpoint intensity by Zhanna Albertini, finds her surface confidence dropping every time she’s in the presence of both her stepdad and the security guru, until she somehow finds a dark energy of her own.

In Lenore’s case, the shooter drills actually seem to give her a sense of power and agency she lacked before; the girl who could never get cast in school plays starts booking commercials, much to the disgruntlement of Helfrick’s Kramer. But while it’s a funny aside, it feels out of place, as if Loo is saying, “Hey, maybe some good comes out of this insanity.” (Liliana Padilla’s *How to Defend Yourself*, produced at Victory Gardens in February 2020, handled some of the same issues of empowerment and danger more effectively, and Mara Nelson-Greenberg’s *Do You Feel Anger?*, produced at A Red Orchid Theatre that same year, captured the absurdity of Band-Aid corporate trainings; both confronted the essential dilemma of security vs. fear with greater depth than what Loo provides in his play.)

There are a lot of interesting ideas floated in *This Is Only a Test*, and lord knows the topic remains sadly relevant. Monday marked the fourth anniversary of the Parkland shootings, which spurred the March for Our Lives movement and the sense that kids are fed up with being victims and pawns, and are ready to demand real change. *This Is Only a Test* doesn’t take that step into activism. But then again, maybe that’s because putting the onus of change and protection on children, rather than the adults in charge, is also inherently absurd. ■

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A scene from *FORCE!* © RICARDO ADAME

OPERA

‘We need to be imagining other possibilities for ourselves’

Cadenza offers a sneak peek at a new opera about the carceral state.

By **IRENE HSIAO**

The United States incarcerates more people and incarcerates them at a higher rate than any other country in the world, with 2.3 million people presently in custody—over half a million more than the country with the next highest population of imprisoned people. A report released in 2021 by the Sentencing Project found that Black people in the United States were five times more likely to be incarcerated than white people. And incarceration does not only affect those currently and previously in prison. According to data compiled by the Prison Policy Initiative, 113 million adults—or about 34 percent of the total population of the U.S.—have had an immediate member of their families in jail.

Yet even this overwhelming figure omits many more whose lives have become embedded in a system of surveillance, policing, and imprisonment. “Prisons exist to put people somewhere where we don’t have to remember them or think about them,” noted performance maker Anna Martine Whitehead in 2020. *FORCE!* an opera in three acts, with an original score by Whitehead, Ayanna Woods, Angel Bat Dawid, and Phillip Armstrong, spotlights some of the most forgotten—the women and femmes who care for people who have been incarcerated. Set in the waiting room

of a prison (“the epitome of Black women’s loneliness”), six women and femmes of color come into contact with a mysterious growth that threatens to erase their memories as they ready themselves to enter the prison.

“Prisons are these hidden spaces that are so impossible to see into, and that waiting room space is adjacent to the invisible space—in some ways it feels even more invisible or more opaque,” Whitehead says. “There’s so much happening psychically, emotionally, politically, socially. It’s all going down. We don’t talk about prisons, and we’re really not talking about those mostly women of color, mostly poor, working-class women in those spaces. They are in an architectural space that makes them feel terrible, they’re probably tired because they’re usually far from where they live. They might be visiting someone they’re really excited to see, or they’re mad that they’re in prison, or they’re mad that they haven’t done some paperwork they were supposed to do, or they’re nervous, or they have some bad news to share or good news. *FORCE!* is about all the complexity of those of us who go in to see people.”

On February 16, the public will get its first glimpse of *FORCE!* with the premiere of *Cadenza*, a short film directed by Whitehead and

Wills Glasspiegel, on OTV. *Cadenza*—named for virtuosic ornamental passages often improvised by performers—is “an extension of *FORCE!* It gives a taste of it and does its own thing,” says Whitehead. “It’s not quite a documentary—it draws on the aesthetics and poetics of the opera, it’s another iteration of it.”

The cast of *FORCE!* and *Cadenza* includes Chicago music and dance luminaries Zachary Nicol and Tramaine Parker (as Worn’n’Lovin Hustle), Rahila Coats and Woods (as Who Knows), Jenn Freeman and Daniella Pruitt (as Rage-a Tha World), and Bat Dawid (as Down’n’Battered). “There are six characters: three have a voice and a body, and the voice is played by a different actor than the body. Two characters have a voice but no body. And one has a body but no voice,” says Whitehead, who plays herself in the work. “All the characters are inspired by my thinking about my own experience.”

These experiences include over a decade of working with imprisoned people and prison workers—beginning with her first job out of college assisting her father with interviews of corrections officers in Washington, D.C. Later, as a puppeteer with Philadelphia’s Spiral Q puppet theater, which combines puppetry, street theater, and social justice work, Whitehead found herself in residencies working with those on the other side of the bars—people who were formerly incarcerated, on probation, on parole, or in a housing program. Since 2016, she has taught performance and dance with the Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project, which connects teaching artists and scholars to students in Stateville Correctional Center, a maximum security prison outside Chicago in Crest Hill, Illinois.

Conversations with currently and formerly incarcerated people, as well as parole officers and prison guards, have given her a broad perspective on prisons and imprisonment. “There’s more than two sides,” she says. “The older I get the more I understand how we are all in relation to the prison industrial complex. Penal culture is replicated throughout all aspects of my life—all of our lives. Some of us get off clean and some don’t.

“I learn about my own family and understand my direct linkages to criminality, the space of illegality. I have family who are now or have been incarcerated. I have family mem-

bers who are in the military, and there’s a relationship between policing and the military. I have family in the sex offender registry: you may not be spending time in prison but this registry shapes your life for the rest of your life. I think about my own run-ins with police and my relationship to education—there’s some uncomfortable overlaps between penal culture and higher education. Prisons impact me and people I know personally—and ripple out much further than just the edifice of the prison.”

“*FORCE!* is at its core an abolitionist practice,” says Whitehead. “The making is just as important, if not more so, than the thing people will see. In the making, there’s a prioritization of Black queer people, our joy, and being joyful together. The methodologies we have for making capital A ‘Art’ don’t work for my people. They’re carceral—they’re about penalizing people, making people work for no money, sticking to these timeframes. The reason why those waiting rooms are filled with women, especially Black women and women of color, is because those are the people who do the caretaking.

“When we create these structures, where in order to make art, you need to not make any money, and you need to work all the time, who can do that? People doing the caretaking can’t do that. A big part of the work happened in the process of making the work, and it’s about reimagining what it means to make work. We need to be together with each other, and we need to be imagining other possibilities for ourselves, other realities—that’s why we’re doing this. It doesn’t mean that when you watch it, you’ll go, ‘We need to abolish prisons now.’ That’s probably not going to happen. But the practice of creating it was an abolitionist practice, and for me, I can only now make work in this way.”

Cadenza premieres 2/16 on OTV, followed by an open panel discussion with scholar Marshall Green and members of the *FORCE!* Constellation. It will then be available through 3/16 at watch.weareo.tv/videos/force with a subscription. \$4.99 monthly/\$39.99 annual subscription gives access to all OTV programming. More information at www.force-anop-era.com. Excerpts from *FORCE!* will also be performed on Mon 3/14, 7 PM, as part of the *Night of Song* with the CSOMusicNOW series at the Harris Theater, 205 E. Randolph, cso.org, \$20. 📺

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OPENING

RR True blues
Porchlight's take on a 1982 revue is a musical feast.

A fine cast backed by a first-rate jazz combo make Porchlight Music Theatre's revival of Sheldon Epps's concept revue *Blues in the Night* a delicious musical feast. A 1982 Broadway vehicle for Leslie Uggams, this durable jukebox musical—smartly staged for Porchlight by Chicago theater veteran Kenny Ingram—anthologizes a rich trove of 1920s, '30s, and '40s standards from the Great American Songbook. A slim narrative focuses on three women in a hotel in 1938 Chicago: the naive Girl with a Date (Clare Kennedy), the more experienced Woman of the World (Donica Lynn), and the worldly-wise Lady

from the Road (Felicia P. Fields), a veteran of vaudeville's infamous Theatre Owners Booking Association—TOBA—whose exploitation of performers of color earned it the alternate name Tough On Black Asses.

Individually and in harmony, the ladies—joined by a slick saloon singer (Evan Tyrone Martin) and a dancing gigolo (Terrell Armstrong)—tag-team their way through a marvelous collection of classic blues and jazz tunes by the likes of Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, Ida Cox, Jimmy Cox, Mack Gordon, and Vernon Duke. It's a real treat to hear these smart, complex, emotive, image-packed songs delivered with style and intelligence to the crisp accompaniment of an onstage band led by the superb pianist Maulty Jewell IV. Highlights include Lynn and Martin in an artful pairing of Billy Strayhorn's melancholy masterpiece "Lush Life" and the cocksure, exuberant "I'm Just a Lucky So-and-So," by Strayhorn's mentor Duke Ellington; Kennedy wailing Ann Ronell's

Top: *Evita* at Drury Lane Theatre; bottom, *Hertha Nova* at the Impostors **RR** BRETT BEINER/KYLE SMART

"Willow Weep for Me" as she juggles a whiskey flask and a Gideon Bible; Fields wielding a riding crop as she growls her way through the galloping double entendres of Bessie Smith's "Take Me for a Buggy Ride"; and a beautiful group arrangement of the great song that gives the show its title, Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer's "Blues in the Night." —**ALBERT WILLIAMS** *BLUES IN THE NIGHT* Through 3/13: Thu 7 PM, Fri 8 PM, Sat 3 PM, Sun 2 PM; Thu 2/17, 1:30 PM only, Ruth Page Center for the Arts, 1016 N. Dearborn, 773-777-9884, porchlightmusictheatre.org, \$59-\$74 (\$25 rush, \$20 students pending availability).

RR A fresh *Evita*
Drury Lane's revival offers plenty to admire.

Marcia Milgrom Dodge demonstrates in Drury Lane's *Evita* what great casting in 2022 looks like.

The director and choreographer gathered a cast diverse in race, age, and body type, creating what feels like an authentic picture of Argentina from 1934 to 1952. There is no color line among the military, upper-class, or poor. Her diverse choices are first revealed in the opening sequence where pairings include same-sex dancers alongside more traditional ones performing sultry tangos to the live accordion music.

Later, she reimagines "The Art of the Possible" scene with drummers replacing musical chairs in an intense, exciting sequence.

Richard Bermudez stuns as Che, the cynical revolutionary who is on fire the entire performance. Sean MacLaughlin's Peron oozes charisma and induces goosebumps with his deep, reverberating baritone.

At the performance I saw, Michelle Aravena struggled in the titular role throughout the first act. While she looked gorgeous and had fantastic physicality, her enunciation and phrasing were muffled. This disappeared in the second act when she put on a powerful performance worthy of the legend she portrayed.

While all period pieces require great costuming, Ryan Park outdoes himself with costumes that demonstrate *Evita*'s superstar style, and display the contrasts between the various Argentinian classes. The black-and-white checked costumes of the aristocrats, especially as a backdrop to *Evita*'s couture, are creative and eye-catching. Emily Young and Brittany Crinson's wig and hair design is superlative.

Drury Lane offers a fresh look at this iconic figure, making the Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber musical feel new. —**BRIDGETTE M. REDMAN** *EVITA* Through 3/20: Wed 1:30 PM, Thu 1:30 and 8 PM, Fri 8 PM, Sat 3 and 8 PM, Sun 2 and 6 PM, Drury Lane Theatre, 100 Drury Lane, Oakbrook Terrace, 630-530-0111, drurylanetheatre.com, \$59-\$74 (\$5 senior discount for Wed and Thu matinees).

RR Keep dead and carry on
Details slow down the afterworld fable of *Hertha Nova*.

Anyone who has dealt with a homeowners association might suspect those organizations to be spawned out of the bottom rung of Hell, but in *The Impostors'* afterlife fable, they're more of a friendly (albeit suspect) purgatorial nuisance. Bernard (Nick Strauss) awakens from his deathbed to the dilapidated netherworld of Old Hertham, a genial if sort-of-miserable community of spirits awaiting housing assignments in the new shining city

across the fault. There, he reconnects with his deceased former lover Eve (Keaton Stewart) and—in a time-traveling intergenerational love conundrum twist—Eve's adult daughter (Gail Harder).

Rachel Borgo's adaptation of Harry Blamires's novel *New Town: A Fable . . . Unless You Believe* spends a significant percentage of its runtime in fantastical world-building mode, and to its credit, it does achieve a vividly imagined, droll, acutely British vision of life after death where everyone keeps carrying on and rolling with the punches, leaky roofs and squeamish family romantic triangles be damned. Stefan Roseen's impressively scaled production treats it all tongue-in-cheek with broad storybook characterizations and a whimsical score by Dominick Vincent Alesia, who earns one-man-band status playing piano and guitar (sometimes literally at the same time).

But by allocating so much of its dialogue to the contractual in-and-outs of New Hertham's arcane points-based reference system, *Hertha Nova* plays out with a pace more akin to a graphic novel or RPG than a 110-minute theatrical play. Besides some nuance in the mother-daughter relationship pushed to otherworldly strains between Harder and Stewart, the take-it-on-the-chin tone also flattens some of the emotional ebb and flow of the plot, resulting in a play where minute 20 feels an awful lot like minute 100. —**DAN JAKES** *HERTHA NOVA* Through 2/26: Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM, Den Theatre, 1331 N. Milwaukee, theimpostorstheatre.com, \$15 general, \$20 reserved.

RR Something's here, something great
Marriott's *West Side Story* does everything right.

I can't think of an American musical with a better pedigree than *West Side Story*, conceived, directed, and choreographed by Jerome Robbins, with a score by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, and a book by Arthur Laurents. Yes, the show is pretty great. But it IS almost 65 years old. It's hard to imagine anyone having a fresh take on this material (even in a year when Steven Spielberg has released his own big-budget movie revival). Yet that is what the folks at Marriott Theatre have done. In this revival they have taken an old warhorse and made it gambol and sing and kick around the pasture like a high-spirited colt.

Every element of the production (directed by Victor Malana Maog and choreographed by Alex Sanchez) works perfectly—the acting, the dancing, the set design, the scene changes. Everything flows with a precision, grace, and power that keeps the audience on the edge of its seat, even audience members like me who have seen this show many times, and went into the theater thinking I knew it too well to be surprised. How wrong I was.

The ensemble is packed with actors who totally embody the roles they play. In less sensitive times, most of the Puerto Rican gang members in the show have been played by non-Latinx actors. In Robert Wise's 1961 film, Maria was played by a white actress of Russian descent (born Natalia Nikolaevna Zakharenko, better known as Natalie Wood). This production deftly avoids these past errors, presenting us with a fine, diverse cast, packed with Latinx performers.

Jake David Smith, playing Tony, exudes a very winning, hopeful naivete about the world. It is not hard to see why his Tony captures Maria's heart so quickly. Lauren Maria Medina's Maria is the perfect foil to Smith's

THEATER



West Side Story at Marriott Theatre LIZ LAUREN

Tony. Together they are utterly charming, and the course of their true love utterly devastating. The same is true of the actors in the important roles of Riff, Bernardo, and Anita (Drew Redington, Gary Cooper, and Vanessa Aurora Sierra, respectively). In point of fact, I have never seen a production of *West Side Story* with as many utterly convincing performances as are present here. Again and again, these performers remind us that the Jets and Sharks are still just adolescents, lost in a world their still-developing brains are not ready for, and making the impulsive mistakes all adolescents make—with tragic results. I have not seen the Spielberg movie version of *West Side Story* yet, but I can't help wondering if the director and cast were not reacting to the movie by giving us what a movie just cannot; intense, real, heartfelt live performances that shake an audience to its roots.

When so many things go right, as happens here, the analytical part of my brain shuts down. I can see part of what is working; for example, the pace of the show is positively thrilling, flowing gracefully from scene to scene, creating a very cinematic effect in Marriott's in-the-round performance space. But I could not tell, on a single viewing, the totality of what made me want to linger in the theater wishing the production was a little longer.

Every inspired moment Robbins, Bernstein, Sondheim, and Laurents packed into the show is realized on the Marriott Theatre stage. And more. Whatever the opposite of turning in your grave is, Robbins, Bernstein, Sondheim, and Laurents are doing it right now. —**JACK HELBIG** *WEST SIDE STORY* Through 3/27: Wed 1 and 7:30 PM, Thu 7:30 PM, Fri 8 PM, Sat 4 and 8 PM, Sun 1 and 5 PM; also Thu 3/17 and 3/24, 1 PM, Marriott Theatre, 10 Marriott Dr., Lincolnshire, 847-634-0200, marriotttheatre.com, \$50-\$60.

Feminist fable

When There Are Nine offers more hagiography than insight.

When Ruth Bader Ginsburg died in September of 2020,

I texted my raging feminist aunt immediately:

"How sick do you feel right now?"

"I'm in tears—I'm terrified of what comes next."

We didn't even have to identify what happened. As soon as the news of Justice Ginsburg's death emerged, we all knew we were fucked. We're still fucked.

And as we endure the grieving process—not necessarily for the person, but for the impending death of legislation like *Roe—PrideArts'* world premiere production of *When There Are Nine* appears to be in the denial phase. Like many pieces of art and media created over the last decade, playwright Sally Deering's one-act show is pure celebration. Rooted in the final moments of Justice Ginsburg's life, the show offers a series of flashbacks and visions that magically unpack the judge's biography. Under Sam Hess's direction, we get a story that mildly explains the impact of Justice Ginsburg's work and how she became an icon for mainstream (i.e. white) feminists.

But, in erasing the complications of the woman at the heart of the story, the play does its heroine an um, injustice. We see Justice Ginsburg (Talia Langman) suffer sexism at every turn. In spite of this, she climbs and climbs, and we're obviously rooting for her. At the same time, however, I want to see the ugly, the moments where she might've truly struggled between a thriving career and motherhood. I want to talk about the series of racist attitudes she enacted while on the bench.

The production certainly isn't unique in its bluish-free depictions of women's history. In fact, I empathize with the limitations the play faces: women and queers are disposable in our culture, and if they don't move through the world neatly, they are easy to throw away. Like Justice Ginsburg, *When There Are Nine* suffers the weight of sexism while embodying many of feminism's shortcomings. In that respect, it is a very true story. —**KT HAWBAKER** *WHEN THERE ARE NINE* Through 3/13: Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM; also Wed 3/9, 7:30 PM, The Broadway, PrideArts Center, 4139 N Broadway, pridearts.org, \$30 (\$25 students and seniors).

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Ramona Slick at the Music Box  SARAH GAGLIONE

FILM EVENTS

Interview with the film queen

For Rated Q, Ramona Slick blends drag shows and movie screenings.

By **DORA SEGALL**

Chicagoan Ramona Slick has curated a monthly meeting place for Chicago's film nerds and queer community. In December, the erotic performer and queer burlesque dancer debuted a new event series, Rated Q, at the Music Box Theatre. Each event features a brief drag show and screening of a queer film classic. Audience members wear their campy weekday best as, in true cult film fashion, they cheer for both cosplayed and projected characters. I spoke with Ramona Slick about

the series and the influence of movies on their queer identity. This interview has been condensed for length and clarity.

Dora Segall: What gave you the idea for Rated Q?

Ramona Slick: I grew up in a super-small town and didn't really have access to any sort of queer life around me, but my dad took a lot of time to introduce me to queer and cult

movies. I remember watching *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* when I was a kid. I really developed a lot of my queer identity early on through movies. Rated Q is the ultimate merge of my two passions—cult films and being a queer nightlife person who dresses up for dollars. I'm really glad that it's resonating with other people.

Could you talk about the two screenings you've done so far?

Our first one was *Heathers*, which is one of my favorite movies of all time. I'm pretty sure that anyone who had a rough high school experience also dreamed about killing all of the popular kids. That screening was very successful—we sold over 300 tickets. And for the second one, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, we almost sold out the house, it was packed.

For the actual shows, it's really fun to be able to do drag that is themed around some of my favorite movies. It's also just nice being able to introduce drag to a new audience that was just coming there for the movies and to be able to introduce a new film to people who are coming just for the drag. Sometimes we get the people who love both, which is what I'm going for.

One of the elements that I love about Rated Q so much is it really becomes sort of an interactive viewing experience. I found that the audience is very responsive, just able to have a lot of fun with it and kind of relax. It really becomes a community viewing experience.

How do you pick the films and the performers?

I pick both myself. I run everything by the Music Box, but for the most part, I basically get to curate viewings specifically for movies that I really love. It's a little selfish, but, you know, everyone benefits. We all get to make money. And then I've been really careful to try to align performers whose artistry or characteristics match the feel of the movie.

You mentioned the Music Box. How did you end up collaborating with the venue, and how has it been so far?

I've been going to the Music Box since I moved

here in 2016. I've always appreciated the historical aspect of it, given that it was built in 1929, and I have always loved the selection of films that they show. I had this idea, and I actually was talking about it with Bambi Banks-Coulé. She said, "Oh, you should reach out to the Music Box," and I was like, "I love Music Box, so that is actually a fantastic idea." I set the meeting, and now here we are a couple months later. Rated Q is my steady, monthly event. It's really my first big event production series that I've completely put on by myself. It's my own idea, and I'm completely at the helm, so I'm glad that it's going well. I've been fortunate enough to get a lot of production knowledge from [nightlife promoters] A Queer Pride, people like [performer] Abhijeet, as well as just the community in general. They've really helped me put on my big-girl boots—big "them" boots.

What's the future of Rated Q?

I just booked all the spring shows, which I'm very excited for. I really love being able to give performers an environment that is not necessarily the night clubs. It's a breath of fresh, buttery popcorn air. Another thing that I really love about Rated Q is that it's one of the rare all-ages shows here in Chicago. If I was a young 16-year-old who loved Chicago drag but never got an opportunity to see it, I could come to Rated Q. I think that's really important. The kids are crazy, but they deserve to join in on the fun as well. This project combines so many elements that I feel like I owe a lot of my queerness to, just by seeing such grandiose displays of camp at a young age. I would not be the person or the drag queen that I am today without cinema. I would love to continue sharing some of the movies that made me and our community as fabulous as we are now and then also give drag performers a really beautiful venue to perform in. 

RATED Q All screenings start at 9:45 PM, and are preceded by performances and an optional cocktail hour at 9 PM in the Music Box Lounge, featuring DJ Ca\$h Era. Upcoming: Wed 2/23 (*Interview With the Vampire*, with performances by Miss Toto and Claire Voyant), Wed 3/23 (*Little Shop of Horrors*, with performances by Irregular Girl and Lucy Stooles), and Thu 4/21 (*Showgirls*, with a performance by Chamilla Foxx). Tickets are \$15, all-ages subject to parental discretion. Music Box Theatre, 3733 N. Southport, 773-871-6604, musicboxtheatre.com

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Tsujiura Renbo CHICAGO JAPAN FILM COLLECTIVE

FEATURE

New directors in a new year

The Chicago Japan Film Collective brings emerging indie directors to local audiences.

By NINA LI COOMES

Every January, young Japanese people celebrate Seijin-no-hi, or Coming of Age Day, to commemorate their passage from childhood into adulthood. With this, and both the calendar and Lunar New Year in mind, cofounders Yuki Solomon and Hiroshi Kono of the Chicago Japan Film Collective decided to put on a free, virtual New Year's Screening featuring two young Japanese filmmakers.

"We picked out two films—one was directed by director Seira Maeda who is 25 years old and showing the freshness of the new voices from Japan, and the other is a little older, director Daisuke Ono, who started making films five or six years ago," Kono says. Each film was made within the context and constraint of the COVID-19 pandemic, though neither deals with the pandemic directly.

"We saw that these days there are many challenges—not only the pandemic, but also the lifestyle of people is changing and within that limitation what you can do. I saw that these films maximized their potential within those limitations and saw that those young filmmakers are somewhat better at it than the people who have done this for a long time," Solomon says.

The first of the features is *Back to That Day*, directed by Maeda (94 minutes, in Japanese with subtitles) and follows a 30-year-old

playwright (Reina Matsui) struggling to understand the place of art in her life when she receives the staggering news of her younger sister's (Miwako Kakei) abrupt death. Pensive and poignant, the film moves slowly through the haze of sudden grief, seeking ultimate redemption in the heroine's decision to restage a play. Though the pace and focus can wobble from time to time, crisp cinematography and subtle performances from its lead actors propel this drama for the entirety of its runtime. Threaded throughout is the anomie and anxiety of youth in Japan, particularly from the lens of the late 20s and early 30s woman, surely a reflection of Maeda's own experience as a creative woman in Japanese society.

Tsujiura Renbo (111 minutes, in Japanese with subtitles) also follows a young female artist (Saori), this time a singer-songwriter named Emi. Emi meets Shinta, played by director Ono, who becomes her manager. Together they navigate the unglamorous tedium of a musician trying desperately to succeed, while also balancing a tenuous sometimes-romance. Most compelling about Ono's characters are their fierce devotion, Emi to her art and Shinta to Emi, layered with their sheer spiky realism—in one memorable scene, Emi refuses to play nice with a radio DJ and instead slams her guitar into his head. Granular and unflinching, Ono turns an exacting lens onto the prosaic

reality of trying to live as a young artist in Japan. A distinct sense of bleak humor offers much-needed room to breathe. Still, there are times the film struggles with the disjointedness of its plot. The story too neatly mirrors Emi's own stop-start trajectory, risking shaking off its audience in the pursuit of depicting disorientation.

In many ways, the experiences exhibited here are universal ones—loss of a loved one,

the fight to hold on to a younger self's uninhibited dream. CJFC's New Year's Screening asks an American audience to consider the frailty and necessity of art in a mire of human difficulty and loneliness. Taken together, the two films paint a portrait of a thoughtful younger generation of Japanese artists, seeking to carve out a space for themselves in an inhospitable and insensitive world.

The CJFC New Year's Screening concluded on February 13, but keep an eye on cjfc.us for future programming at the Chicago Japan Film Collective.

@nlcoomes

THE CHEVALIER

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Known as "The Chevalier de Saint-Georges," 18th-century Black composer Joseph Bologne was a virtuoso violinist, a friend of Mozart's, the finest fencer in Europe, general of Europe's first Black regiment, and a crusader for the abolishment of slavery. Weaving together Bologne's own music with semi-staged dialogue, "The Chevalier" offers a thoughtful meditation on equality.

Dame Jane Glover conducts the Music of the Baroque Orchestra and violin soloist Brendon Elliott in this "concert theater" work written and directed by Bill Barclay.

Music of the Baroque appreciates the support of the Zell Family Foundation in presenting "The Chevalier."

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Marry Me 🎬 UNIVERSAL PICTURES

NOW PLAYING

RR *Hive*

In *Hive*, writer-director Blerta Basholli tells the story—based on real events—of Fahrije (Yllka Gashi), who lives in a Kosovan village that has been devastated by the kidnap and suspected murder of a large portion of the village’s male population during the war in Kosovo in the late 1990s. In the aftermath of the war, as hope steadily decays into grief, Fahrije attempts to organize the local widows into a cooperative to produce and sell honey and ajvar (a popular form of pepper and eggplant condiment). The ghosts of the past still linger, as many of the remaining men—the aged fathers-in-law of the town used to a patriarchal system where women are nonworking wives and daughters—lash out against the women taking on new roles and responsibilities in their uncertain futures.

Basholli’s film is a gorgeous and tightly crafted work of realism, capturing the struggles and hopes of the community through lingering camerawork. Trauma is woven throughout the film; the village both through its individual members and its collective stumbles through different modes of dealing with their pain and uncertainty. Gashi is wonderfully nuanced in her portrayal of Fahrije’s stern but vulnerable demeanor, as a woman who is straddling the past and present, who ultimately must choose to risk alienation from both to survive.

Overall, *Hive* is a largely understated film, one in which there are no major sweeping moments of uplifting discovery, an exceptionally moving glimpse into the hopeful perseverance of a group of women who are some of the first in their society to come to terms with

the ways in which their world has forever changed. In Albanian with subtitles. —**ADAM MULLINS-KHATIB** 84 min. *Wide release on VOD*

RR *Last and First Men*

Before his untimely death, the prophetic Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson completed his first and final film, exploring a delicate space between the literary and the cinematic for a science fiction classic. *Last and First Men* is the composer’s reimagined narrative of Olaf Stapledon’s triumphant sci-fi novel by the same name. Jóhannsson’s haunting adaptation facilitates a chilling link between two distinct humanities spanning across two billion years. The disembodied dialogue, narrated by Tilda Swinton, is a dispatch from the “18th” iteration of humanity. Swinton’s phantasmic narrator pierces time to muse over humanity’s trajectory as it faces imminent and inexorable extinction, resulting in a wildly compelling retrospect of human life, the universe, and earthly beauty through the lens of incredibly bold hindsight.

Jóhannsson’s masterful film is careful but not quiet, presenting an inviting dialogue that is evenly paced and imbued by a dynamic musical score. The composer’s film deviates from the standard sci-fi film adaptation by dropping excessive special effects currently oversaturating the genre. Instead, Jóhannsson redesigns the classic sci-fi story as a prose poem, delivered as a transmission to us: the first humans. The poignant retrospective is accompanied by a musical score indicative of the late composer’s expert craftsmanship. While some may find this sci-fi style underwhelming compared to its explosive counterparts, the striking illusory, asymmetrical visuals will pull the viewer deep into the narrative, unnervingly propelled two billion years into the future.

Last and First Men is a flash of the cosmos, unveiling an imposing and reflective vision of humanity’s inevitable expiration. During the transmission, the disembodied narrator offers a beacon of hope. Jóhannsson’s only film is a glimpse through exhaustive time and space, providing a brutal reminder that we occupy a blip of an everlasting universe even if we live under a dying sun. —**MAXWELL RABB** 70 min. *Streaming on Metrograph*

Marry Me

A pop star, fueled by betrayal, panic, and an insane amount of adrenaline, proposes to an audience member holding a sign that says “MARRY ME.” In a media landscape saturated by YouTuber clout weddings and reality show contestants getting “married at first sight,” the catalyst of Kat Coiro’s *Marry Me* feels more like a convention of the romance genre than a gimmick.

Neither international superstar Kat Valdez (Jennifer Lopez) nor divorced dad and math teacher Charlie Gilbert (Owen Wilson) wants to “fail at marriage” again, so they try to make it work. He comes to the recording studio; she hangs out with the mathletes. “They’re not so different after all,” Coiro keeps telling us, as though trying to convince herself.

At its core, this is another formulaic rom-com—there’s the love triangle (will Kat pick old flame Bastian or new beau Charlie?), the dramatic epiphany, and the grand romantic gesture that ties everything up into a neat little bow. But it’s hard to find the romance in this love story. There’s no distracting from Lopez and Wilson’s lack of chemistry, and the fact that their characters have nothing in common save for this: they’re lonely.

Can companionship only be accomplished by spinning the marriage roulette wheel? *Marry Me* seems to say “yes.” For all the film’s forced girl-power, it never occurs to Kat that she can leave the game entirely, and that maybe, all she really needs is a friend who isn’t on her payroll.

If you’re coming to the theater as a fan of Jennifer Lopez’s music and abs, you’ll get a heaping dose of both; the original songs shine (almost) as bright as Kat Valdez’s wardrobe. But if you want to be swept off your feet, I’d look for something with a bit more heat. —**BROOKS EISENBISE** PG-13, 112 min. *Wide release in theaters and streaming on Peacock*

A Night of Knowing Nothing

Winner of the Golden Eye award for Best Documentary at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival, Indian writer-director Payal Kapadia’s feature debut ambitiously merges fiction and nonfiction techniques to elusive effect. Kapadia (who cowrote the film with Himanshu Prajapati) frames the film with a fabricated correspondence from “L”

to her estranged lover; his parents made him quit the film school they’d both been attending and forbid him to continue dating L, who’s from a lower caste. An interstitial at the beginning claims that the letters and footage were found in a locker at the film school, a somewhat needless device that feels gimmicky. In the letters, L details the political strife at their university and across the country as activists demand equality among India’s various castes; the malcontent results in turbid protests and violence against certain minority groups. The accompanying footage—of student life, of the protests, of that violence—is made to look artsy rather than realistic. It’s rather distracting and almost makes the occurrences seem fictitious. In this overmodulated way, the film also purports to be an homage to cinema itself; some shots seem pulled directly from Chantal Akerman’s *Je Tu Il Elle*, while in voiceover, L considers Pier Paolo Pasolini’s controversial sympathy for the Italian police rather than protesters, considering them to be more proletariat than the bourgeois students. Not surprisingly, the film evokes parallel cinema as well, though the hodgepodge of influences adds to the overwrought muddlement. In Hindi, Bengali, French, and English with subtitles. —**KATHLEEN SACHS** 97 min. *Gene Siskel Film Center*

Rumble

Rumble will be diverting enough for its target audience, which I’m gonna go out on a limb and guess is humans who have not yet reached the double digits. As for the rest of us: it’s an unoriginal story told with predictable dialogue, but it’s not as bad as nails on a blackboard.

The best part of director Hamish Grieve’s animated feature is the colorful, eye-popping creatures, none of whom would be terribly out of place at the Tatooino cantina, which I mean as high praise indeed. The plot (based on Rob Harrell’s graphic novel *Monster on the Hill*), follows plucky youngster Winnie Coyle (Geraldine Viswanathan) as she tries to save her hometown of Stoker from ruin. To do this, she must save its star attraction and commercial heart, the Jimbo Coyle Stadium, named for her late father, legendary coach Jimbo Coyle (Carlos Gómez), and home to the legendary monster wrestling champ, Tentacular (Terry Crews). The stadium is in danger of shuttering because the suction superpower is abandoning the town in the service of a soulless corporate overlord. It falls to Winnie’s reluctant prodigy, Rayburn Jr. (Will Arnett), son of the late, legendary monster-fighter Rayburn Sr. (Charles Barkley!), to take down Tentacular and save the day.

It’s not quite as clunky as it sounds and it has a kicky if cliché message of girl power embedded in it. But really, it’s all about the monster fights and they’re fun, especially when Rayburn Jr. really leans into his love of salsa. Bonus points for the animation’s vivid portrayal of stadium wrestling culture; the detail in the massive crowd scenes tells a story about many in it. —**CATEY SULLIVAN** PG, 104 min. *Streaming on Paramount+* 📺

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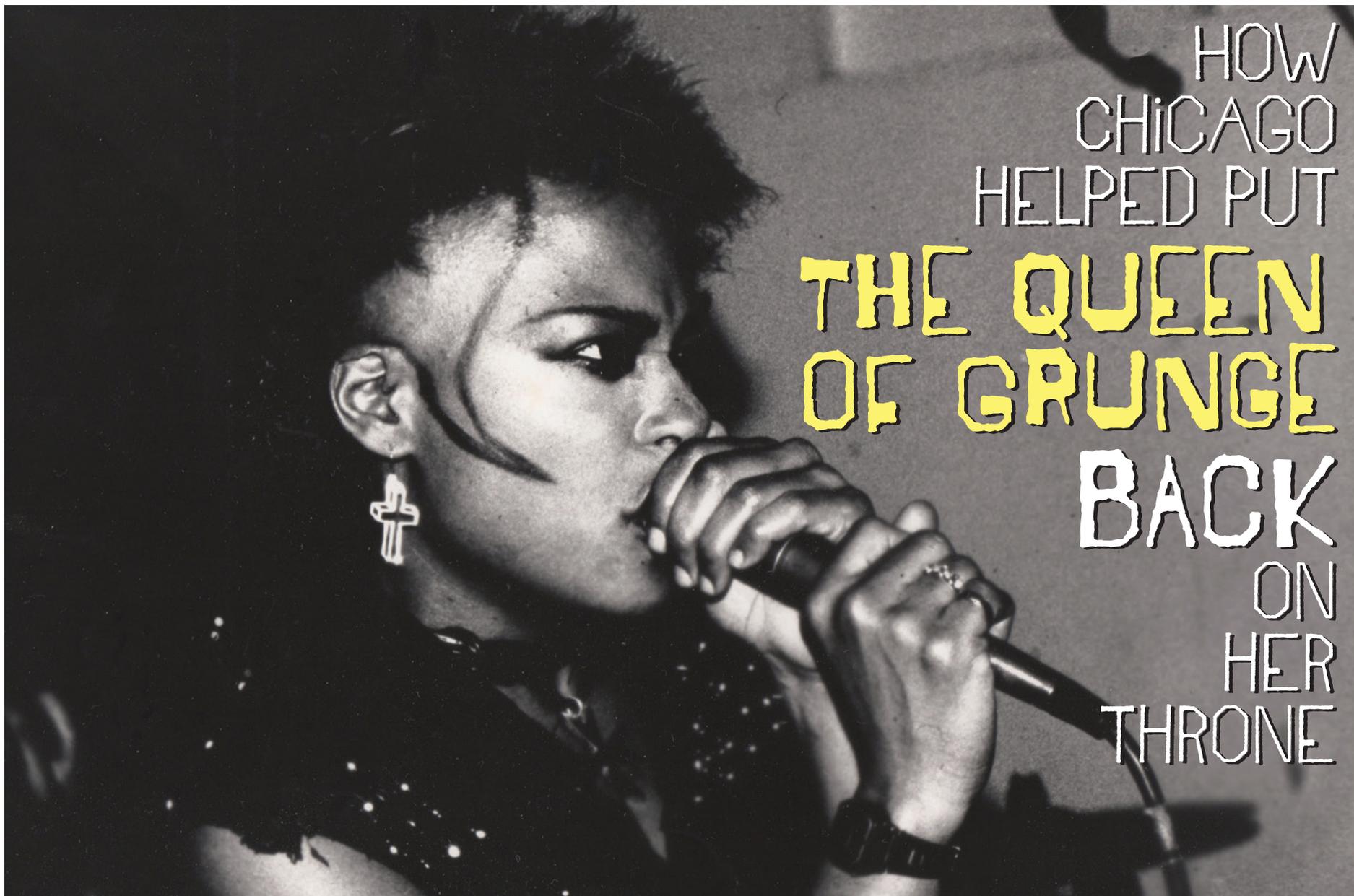


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HOW
CHICAGO
HELPED PUT
**THE QUEEN
OF GRUNGE**
BACK
ON
HER
THRONE

The writing of Jen B. Larson and a new reissue by Bric-a-Brac Records have burnished the legacy of Seattle band Bam Bam and their powerhouse front woman, Tina Bell.

By **LEOR GALIL**

On January 4, 2020, Jen Lemasters started She Bop, an Instagram account dedicated to recordings by women in rock. Lemasters has a huge record collection, not least because she and her husband, Nick Mayor, own Bric-a-Brac Records & Collectibles. Lemasters's knowledge of punk and new wave, and her particular love of underdocumented bands that exist outside dominant rock narratives,

made her a perfect fit for a project like She Bop. She launched the Instagram page with a post about the 1981 debut of New York post-punk group Disturbed Furniture, establishing a template for the account by including photos of the seven-inch's front and back covers, a video sampling the music, and a few details about the record's provenance.

She Bop has posted about a few well-known bands, including the Go-Go's, X-Ray Spex, and

the Raincoats. But the feed focuses on obscure records, often decades old: they include "Elizabeth's Lover," a doo-wop-inflected 1980 single by New York new-wave group Dizzy & the Romilars; *Signals From Pier Thirteen*, a raw 1981 EP from Philadelphia synth-punk outfit Crash Course in Science; and "Bountiful Living," a 1978 boogie single from Akron art-rock trio Chi-Pig.

In She Bop's early months, Lemasters

"Tina Bell was a force to reckon with," says Om Johari, a veteran Seattle punk musician, activist, and self-described "Black weirdo" who's helped rescue Bell from obscurity.  CHRISTINA KING

usually posted daily, and by June 9, 2020, the account represented a sizable archive. That fateful day she posted the record that would eventually become the first she'd reissue, fulfilling her dream of launching a label: the debut of Seattle proto-grunge band Bam Bam.

Discogs calls Bam Bam's 1984 EP "Stress," after the first song on what someone presumed was its A side (the record doesn't indicate which is which). Bam Bam formed in 1983,

and they mixed punk's speed and attitude with metal's noise and swagger years before grunge. They broke up in 1993, after a series of personnel shake-ups and a dramatic change in sound, and that 1984 EP remains the only formal release by the lineup that made the group briefly popular in Seattle. The reissue came out earlier this month, inaugurating Lemasters and Mayor's Bric-a-Brac imprint.

Before that She Bop post, Lemasters had already shared her love of Bam Bam with her friend Jen B. Larson. After Bric-a-Brac opened on Kedzie and Diversey in 2013, Lemasters and Larson crossed paths often; Larson sang and played guitar in a frenzied, scuzzy punk band called Swimsuit Addition, whose gigs included a few Bric-a-Brac in-stores. Swimsuit Addition split up in 2016, and the following year, Larson began to channel her growing interest in the women of first-wave punk into a Tumblr called Punkette Respect.

"It sounded like so many of these bands around the world could've been in the same scene—but a lot of them, of course, hadn't even heard each other," Larson says. "They were creating things that really seemed to me almost coherent, as if all these women and these bands were, like, working together in some way. I was just really fascinated by that."

Larson's dedication to writing about these bands led her to independent publisher Feral House, which in 2019 signed her to a book deal; *Hit Girls: Women of Punk in the USA, 1975-1983* is due in August. While researching her book, she often consulted Lemasters, who shared her desire to lift up women in punk—and who especially wanted to spotlight women of color in punk.

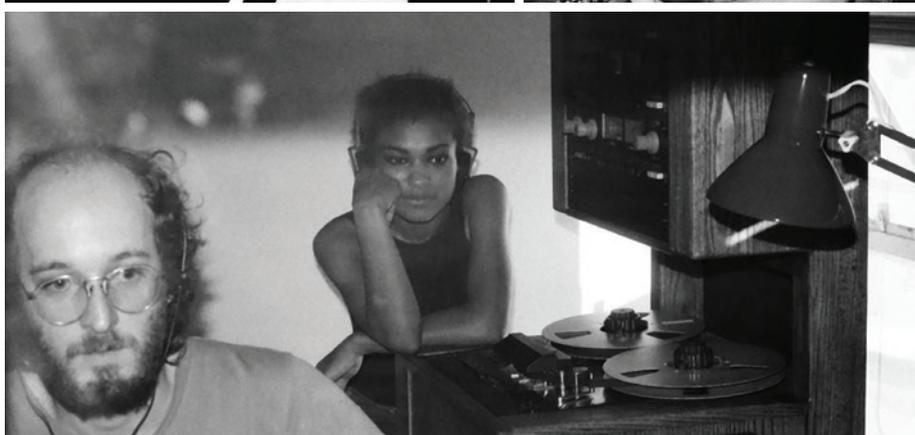
"She started sharing a lot, and her knowledge is—I can't even keep up with her, I can't keep up with her record collection, I can't keep up with any of it," Larson says. "We really bonded over it and were just constantly sharing things with each other. She's constantly sharing things that I don't know with me, and Bam Bam was one of those bands."

Larson could immediately hear how Bam Bam had foreshadowed what the grunge explosion would make famous as "the Seattle sound." The thin historical record on Bam Bam bothered her, because they had something none of Seattle's celebrated 80s bands did: a Black woman with a powerful voice and a magnetic stage presence. Even in old photos, singer Tina Bell seized Larson's attention. "I started digging, and I noticed the injustice of her story being left out of the grunge scene in Seattle," Larson says. "And I was like, 'This is dumb. We've gotta fix this.'"

Fortunately, Larson wasn't alone in her



Bam Bam cutting their debut EP at Reciprocal Recording in 1984. Clockwise from upper left: Tina Bell, bassist Scotty Ledgerwood, drummer Tom Hendrickson, guitarist Tommy Martin, and Reciprocal owner Chris Hanzsek with Bell. © DAVID LEDGERWOOD



push to properly canonize Bell and her band. Om Johari, a Black punk musician and activist who grew up in Seattle and Alaska, first saw Bam Bam as a teenager in the mid-80s and never forgot about Bell. "Tina Bell was a force to reckon with," Johari says. "She was somebody that I found was very attractive—a type of person that I felt was a shero, not only to claim space in predominantly white spaces but also to claim space as somebody who's doing alternative music."

In fall 2015, Johari enrolled in a University of Washington class that asked students to create a Wikipedia page, and by the end of that year she'd made one for Bell. In November 2015, Johari also logged her thoughts about Bell's legacy on her personal WordPress blog. "The woman who might very well be the unwritten voice of grunge in the Seattle scene," she wrote. "How do you keep her story from going unsung?"

Johari's Wikipedia page for Bell was taken down within a year, and the current one didn't get posted till summer 2021. This was well after Larson had begun her research, and she had an uphill climb ahead of her. Bam Bam's founders, Bell and guitarist Tommy Martin (who'd been married for more than half of Bam Bam's ten-year run), are both dead—Bell passed away in October 2012, Martin in October 2019. But Larson found Johari's blog post in 2020, along with a handful of other pieces from the U.S. and abroad—including a 2019 interview from Romanian music site the Sonic Mosquito Soup with two of Bell's bandmates, Martin and bassist Scotty Ledgerwood.

The surviving original members have never stopped carrying a torch for Bam Bam and Bell, and they've helped document the band's legacy. In 2018 Ledgerwood began digitally issuing unreleased Bam Bam recordings, and he talks up Bell to any journalist and blogger who comes calling. (She gave him a nickname he still uses, "Scotty Buttocks.") Original drummer Matt Cameron, who became a key figure in grunge after his brief tenure in Bam Bam (he's played in Soundgarden and Pearl Jam), has talked fondly about his first Seattle band. In a 2011 book that Pearl Jam assembled to commemorate their 20th anniversary, he describes playing with Bam Bam in '83 at storied all-ages Seattle venue the Metropolis—he calls that gig a "revelation," because he'd found "a music scene that fully accepted me."

Larson pitched a story on Bell to Please Kill Me, a music and culture site that grew out of Gillian McCain and Legs McNeil's 1996 punk oral history of the same name. On September 3, 2020, Please Kill Me published "Tina Bell's hidden legacy: The Black woman who created

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the sound of grunge.” Larson closed the piece with a call to action: “It’s more than time to crown Tina the Queen of Grunge,” she wrote, “and not as a woke PR move, but because it’s the Truth.”

A wave of new coverage of Bell and Bam Bam followed. *Sound & Vision*, a podcast of Seattle public radio station KEXP, ran an episode about Bell and her band in March 2021. In September 2021, national news program *CBS Mornings* ran a segment on Bell featuring interviews with Johari, Ledgerwood, Cameron, and Oscar-winning documentary filmmaker T.J. Martin, who’s Bell and Martin’s son.

As Larson’s Bam Bam story made the rounds, Ledgerwood was talking with Lemasters and Mayor about reissuing an expanded version of the band’s 1984 EP. They finalized a deal in February 2021.

“Talking with Scotty, you can really tell he’s passionate about keeping the legacy of Tina Bell and Bam Bam alive, so that made it easy,” Lemasters says. “He was like, ‘Yeah, I just want this out there.’” The new Bric-a-Brac reissue, titled *Villains (Also Wear White)*, came out digitally in November 2021 and on vinyl on February 4—just a day before what would’ve been Bell’s 65th birthday. The insert includes an essay from her son, who wrote, “The continued desire to support their music not only keeps their legacy alive but also makes our family’s life sacrifices all worthwhile.”

Tina Marie Bell was born in Seattle in 1957. According to her youngest sister, Christy Stepney, Bell was the third of ten children and the oldest daughter—she took on the role of caretaker when her parents were busy at work. “She made sure we ate, went to school,” Stepney says. “I was told when I was in day care, she would come and pick me up.”

Stepney is 11 years younger than Bell, and she says her sister didn’t always welcome that responsibility. “One day—my mum tells me—Tina just told her, ‘You had that baby, you take care of that baby,’” Stepney says. “That’s how she was; she was always straightforward, honest, but had a loving heart and always wanted to see you do better.”

Bell’s authority over her siblings went unquestioned, but it didn’t prevent her from bonding with them. Stepney recalls one Christmas when she asked Bell how Santa would be able to deliver gifts, since their family didn’t have a chimney—and Bell built one. “It was amazing,” Stepney says. “It was like, where does she think about that? How does she think to help me believe in Christmas? Even though she was older—she knew mom



“There really weren’t any other women who were commanding the stage in the same way that Tina Bell was,” says Om Johari. “Tina really did stick out, not only because of the sort of cultural demographic of that band but also because of what she was thinking about and how she was performing.”  CYNDIA LAVIK

and dad were Santa—she never spoiled that for me. She kept me believing that there was hope.”

Stepney experienced Bell’s love of music firsthand—in fact, she didn’t have much choice. “We had this big stereo at home, and she would play her records—we didn’t have headsets, so we all had to listen,” Stepney says. “We’d be like, ‘Why are you listening to that?’ Especially Billie Holiday—I’d be like, ‘That’s so sad.’ But she heard something different.”

Bell was part of the choir at the Mount Zion Baptist Church in Seattle’s Central District. In the 1970s, she participated in a joint production between her church and a theater troupe connected to the Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute. The role required her to sing the 1947 song “C’est Si Bon” in French, so she needed a language tutor. The production tracked one down for her: Tommy Martin.

Martin and Bell became romantic partners before they became bandmates. T.J. was born in 1979, and when his parents got married, he was just old enough to be part of the wedding. Bell and Martin formed Bam Bam in 1983, by which point Martin had already played in a couple punk bands. As he told the *Sonic Mosquito Soup* in 2019, he’d been motivated to start his own group by a bad experience in a band called Sex Therapy: “This time around I

was determined to get in a band where I had a say in the direction, in the music, the writing, ya know?” he said. “So rather than join someone else’s band, I decided to form Bam Bam.” The name began as an acronym for *Bell And Martin*.

In spring 1983, Martin placed an ad for a bassist and drummer in the *Rocket*, a free monthly Seattle newspaper. Ledgerwood answered the call; he says he was intimidated by Martin but especially by Bell, whose confidence overwhelmed him and drew him in immediately. “It was like we were friends,” he says. “She didn’t give a shit about music. She started asking me about my mom, my wife, and my boy. ‘Where’d you guys go for vacation?’ and whatever—she wanted to know who I was as a person.”

Bam Bam was a real commitment from the start. Ledgerwood recalls spending six days per week at Bell and Martin’s home, writing and rehearsing for six hours a day. “For some reason [when] we used to write music, Bell and I would lie on the floor and do it,” he says. “Tommy would throw wads of paper at us and strap on his guitar.” Cameron, who’d moved to Seattle from San Diego in 1983, joined the band that summer—Ledgerwood is sure he was aboard by August, when the whole band went together to see a Peter Gabriel concert.

Martin booked Bam Bam’s first show for October 15, 1983, at the Metropolis in Pioneer Square, owned by Hughes “Hugo” Piottin. “Tommy was raised in the Lyon area,” Ledgerwood says. “So not only is he speaking French, he has a regional accent that Hugo recognized—they obviously hit it off right away.”

Bam Bam made their live debut alongside Room Nine and Tse Tse Force. “It was exciting—it was the best time of my life,” Ledgerwood says. “We were at the center of this shit and didn’t know what was going on.”

When Bam Bam began playing out, their hometown didn’t yet have much patience for bands playing punk, postpunk, hardcore, or new wave. “Seattle was a hard nut to crack,” says Room Nine guitarist and singer Ron Rudzitis, who’d go on to form Sub Pop grunge band Love Battery in 1989. “It was hard to get out of, and it was hard to make a splash in the town. It was tough to be in a band—you had to be really dedicated and willing to play for nothing most of the time.”

It seemed like any musician with an idiosyncratic bent and big ambitions moved away. Tomata du Plenty and Tommy Gear played around Seattle as the Tupperwares before decamping to Los Angeles to form synth-punk band the Screampers in the mid-70s. One of

Seattle's biggest early-80s punk bands, the Blackouts, split for Boston in 1982. Underground bands on budgets didn't typically tour through the northwest at the time—the most plausible route was north from San Francisco, which was at least a 13-hour drive. That left Seattle musicians to entertain themselves. “There just wasn't that many people going to shows other than other musicians,” Rudzitis says.

Few venues would book punk or new-wave bands, and those that would didn't last long. Bam Bam formed at around the time a trio of such venues sprang to life in Pioneer Square. The Metropolis opened at 207 2nd Ave. S. in April 1983 and lasted till March 1984. About

Rudzitis says. “Of course Soundgarden and Nirvana made it hugely popular, but these guys were doing it back in the early 80s, which made them stand out.” Bell stood out to him too, and not just because she was a Black woman in a scene dominated by white men. “She belted it out with a punk-rock feel, but with a lot of soul,” he says.

Stepney wasn't sure what to make of her big sister fronting Bam Bam. “Being Black and singing rock and punk? We're just like, ‘What is going on?’ But she owned it,” Stepney says. “She just showed me, don't hold yourself back. You can do what you want to do—if you're strong in what you want to do, you should at least try it. And I feel like that impacted every-

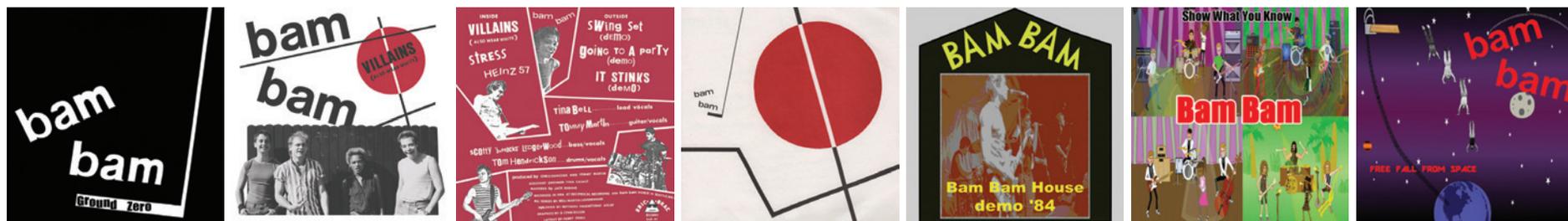
Bell, including an incident at the Metropolis when a couple people in the crowd confronted her aggressively enough that she hit them with her mike stand and Martin dove into the crowd with his guitar. “It was very much not the typical Metropolis show,” he says. “Metropolis was, like, our home base for a while—for an incident like that to occur at the Metropolis, or for that matter any club, was unheard-of. By and large, the crowd went nuts for her.”

“They had a crowd that if you were a new budding band, it was somebody who you definitely wanted to be on the same bill with,” Johari says. On May 5, 1984, a group from the tiny west Washington town of Montesano

check-cashing place. Bell made the call, Casale answered, and Bam Bam became the first band to record at Reciprocal—the original location, not the famous one.

By the time Bam Bam began their first session at Reciprocal in spring '84, they'd already gone through the first of many lineup changes—Tom Hendrickson had replaced Cameron on drums. “It was a big step up for me,” says Hendrickson. “I was kind of in awe of these guys and the situation I was in—even at the time, I kind of felt like it was a lucky situation I'd somehow fallen into.”

Martin wanted Hendrickson to focus on simple, driving beats, and let him decide what to play within that directive—with a few ex-



Bam Bam's recorded output with Tina Bell, left to right: the “Ground Zero” single, which Scotty Ledgerwood released digitally in 2018; the front and back covers of Bric-a-Brac's reissue of Bam Bam's 1984 EP; the original cover of the 1984 EP; demos recorded by Tommy Martin at the home he shared with Bell, also released recently by Ledgerwood; the 2017 single “Show What You Know”; and the 2019 album *Free Fall From Space*, which consists of material from the 1984 Reciprocal sessions. © COURTESY SCOTTY LEDGERWOOD

a block west at 311 S. Washington St. was Graven Image, an art gallery and basement venue operated by Larry Reid, who managed proto-grunge group the U-Men; it hosted shows from October 1983 till August 1984. At the same intersection, a basement venue called Behind the Grey Door opened in early 1984, run by Donner Cooper, front man of punk band “R” Gang, which included drummer Duff McKagan of future Guns N' Roses fame. It too shuttered before the end of the year.

The clubs sometimes worked together to draw out crowds. “We would frequently do, like, drink cover nights—15 bands for \$5, one admission would get you into all the clubs,” Reid says. The Seattle scene at the time consisted of maybe a few hundred people. “We all knew each other,” Reid says. “So if there was something new and interesting going on, we would be sure to catch it.”

Reid remembers seeing Bam Bam eight or ten times during their run, including at a few shows he booked. “I don't remember all those shows, but Bam Bam was pretty popular,” he says. “They played a lot of shows—maybe even too many shows for a small scene. You don't want to saturate that crowd.”

“What really struck me about Bam Bam was they amalgamated a metallic thing with punk, which really hadn't been that prevalent,”

thing for me.”

When a teenage Om Johari saw Bam Bam play, it hit her right in the heart. She'd begun collecting records at age four and went to see *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* by herself in fifth grade, and she loved to see Bell break out of the roles to which Black women in music had traditionally been confined.

“It definitely meant empowerment. It also gave me a feeling of older-sister solidarity, because I could understand what it was like for her to come in and out of these spaces,” Johari says. “We were persons who, because of our being quote-unquote different, had to accept that we were going to have to take considerable flak coming in and out of both communities. So you're too weird to be Black, but you're too Black to be weird in the white community. She represented somebody who was quintessentially punk, because she was definitely one of a kind.”

By all accounts, Bam Bam drew big, enthusiastic crowds, which makes their absence from Seattle music history all the more perplexing to Ledgerwood. “If race and misogyny is the element that held us back—and that was only one of them, by the way, but it definitely was—that wasn't in our face usually,” he says.

Ledgerwood counts just a few occasions when concertgoers hurled racist invective at

played their first Seattle gig, opening for Bam Bam at Behind the Grey Door. The Melvins arrived with a 17-year-old friend who helped carry equipment; he dropped Ledgerwood's 1983 Ibanez Roadstar, taking a chunk out of the body just above the pickups. Ledgerwood wasn't pleased, but years later he would tell people that the gouge in his instrument was thanks to Kurt Cobain.

Bam Bam cut their debut EP at Reciprocal Recording, which would later become the most important studio in grunge history. In the late 1980s, as Sub Pop helped transform Seattle's provincial scene into the envy of the indie world, the biggest local bands booked the studio to record with producer Jack Endino, a key architect of grunge's massive sound. In 1988, Nirvana pulled up to Reciprocal to record their first demo with Endino; he later produced their debut album, *Bleach*, which Sub Pop released in June 1989.

Chris Hanzsek and Tina Casale opened Reciprocal Recording in 1984, after moving to Seattle from Boston the previous year. They took out an ad in the *Rocket*, offering an hour of studio time for \$10. “That's pretty cheap—even we can afford that,” Ledgerwood remembers thinking. “None of us really had a job.” Martin drove a bus part-time, and Bell worked at a

ceptions. “For some of the songs, he preferred not to have any hi-hats,” Hendrickson says. “He preferred a more open, uncluttered sound, without a time meter that way.”

Hanzsek recalls that Bam Bam came in for eight or nine sessions; Ledgerwood says they recorded the three songs on their debut EP plus about a dozen others that wouldn't be released during the band's lifetime. Bam Bam got comfortable enough with Hanzsek and Casale that the couple ended up babysitting young T.J. for one night.

“Tommy liked to turn his amp up to an unbelievable loud sound level,” Hanzsek says. “Dangerous to be in the same room, actually. I recall he was tripping circuit breakers in the building.”

“He literally—like a fuckin' movie, like some *Back to the Future* bullshit—he literally blew the fucking windows out,” Ledgerwood says. “Boom—glass, poof, out—from the sound waves, on our first day there.” He remembers Bell laughing after the dust settled.

Bell didn't like working in a studio or doing multiple takes; the recording of “Free Fall From Space,” which Ledgerwood released digitally in 2019, was particularly demanding. “Tina was at her wit's end, 'cause she goes from a sweet, sexy coo to an ear-splitting loud shriek when she says ‘Watch me faaaaaal!’—it

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just goes on forever. We had several good takes and they [Martin and Hanzsek] wanted to do more, and she was fuckin' pissed," Ledgerwood says. "She turns to me and goes, 'Scotty, how many times are these assholes gonna make me do this?'"

"We were all pretty cordial and friendly with each other," Hanzsek says. "But at some point something transpired, and one day I got a message from Tommy letting me know they were done recording at Reciprocal and were going somewhere else that was more 'professional.' I was flabbergasted and didn't know what to make of it."

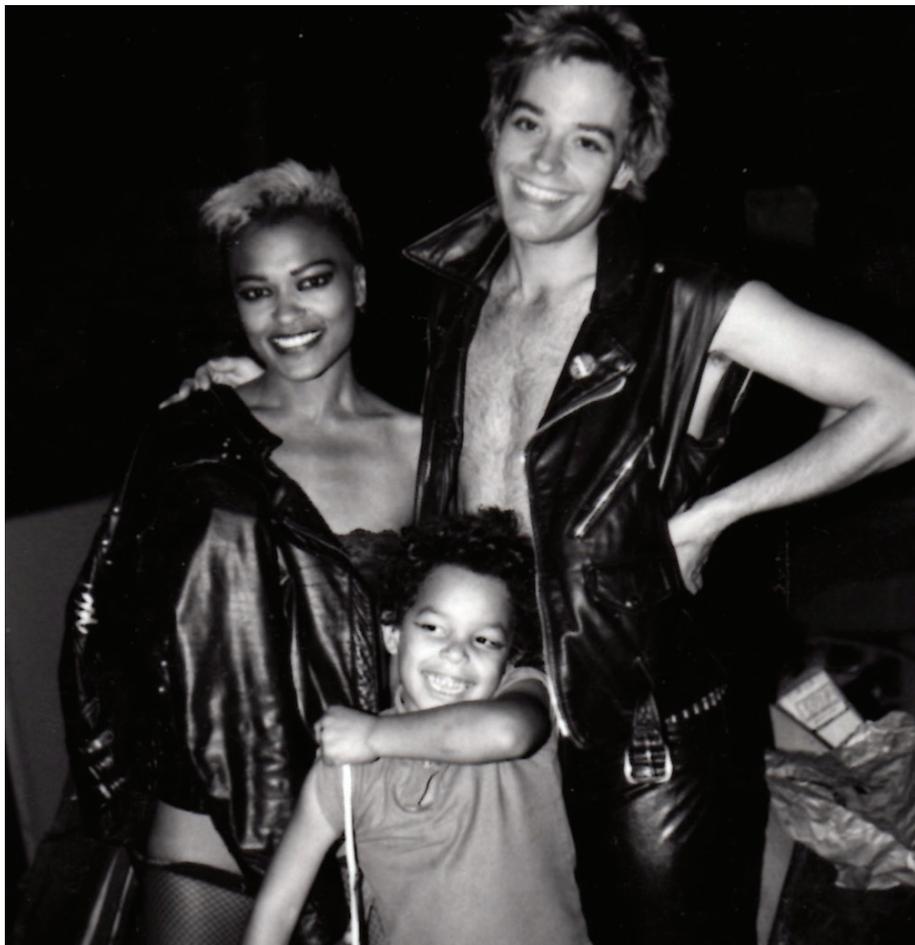
Bam Bam's self-released EP consisted of three songs from the Reciprocal sessions—"Villains (Also Wear White)" on one side, "Stress" and "Heinz 57" on the other. They celebrated with a release show at the Lincoln Arts Center in September 1984; Home-wreckers and "R" Gang opened.

By that point, Ledgerwood was planning his exit; he wasn't happy that Martin hadn't credited him on the EP as a cowriter. Ledgerwood also didn't like that Hanzsek—who would later launch grunge label C/Z with Casale—was only credited as an engineer, not as a producer. "That was probably the one thing that fucked the band the most," Ledgerwood says. "That, in my opinion, is why C/Z never signed us."

The Seattle scene in 1984 didn't yet have many alternative labels, and most of them were tiny, ephemeral, or both. Bands such as Bam Bam were often left to their own devices. Hanzsek and Casale didn't launch C/Z until 1986, with the compilation *Deep Six*—a crucial document of the emerging grunge scene that featured the U-Men, the Melvins, Malfunkshun, Green River, Soundgarden, and Skin Yard (whose lineup included Cameron and future C/Z owner Daniel House). In theory Bam Bam could've worked with C/Z, but their only subsequent output consisted of early-90s instrumental cassettes that Martin self-released after Bell quit.

Over time, Martin had come to dominate Bam Bam's creative process, and the resulting tension contributed to the souring of Ledgerwood's feelings about the band. "Tommy was a control freak," Ledgerwood says. "The thing is, unlike most control freaks, what he said was valid. But it doesn't necessarily mean that's the way it should be done. Especially when you're playing from your heart." He gave his bandmates a heads-up about his intention to quit in late 1984, and finally left in early 1985.

"When Scott left, I really wasn't much interested in staying," Hendrickson says. "I



This photo of Tina Bell and Tommy Martin with their son, T.J. Martin, appears in the insert of Bric-a-Brac's new Bam Bam reissue. © COURTESY T.J. MARTIN AND SCOTTY LEDGERWOOD

really didn't fit in too well." He and Ledgerwood continued to hang out after they both left Bam Bam. In 2002, Ledgerwood founded the punk band Called in Sic, and Hendrickson joined on drums a year later. Martin joined in 2010 and remained part of the band till his death in 2019.



Scotty Ledgerwood stored his Bam Bam archives at his in-laws' ranch in Washington State, but in summer 2017 a fire nearly destroyed the group's recordings. © COURTESY SCOTTY LEDGERWOOD

abstract cover featured a big red disc on a white field, bisected by a black-and-white line—it didn't even have enough text on it for him to tell who the artist was. "I listened to it, and that really grabbed me," Mayor says. "So I borrowed it for a little while."

The Bric-a-Brac release *Villains (Also Wear White)* expands on Bam Bam's original cover art with a prominent photo of the four band members. The reissue also includes three additional tracks, all newly remastered by Jack Endino.

Endino never saw Bam Bam in their prime. He heard of them after he moved to Seattle in 1984, though—he worked with Hanzsek at Reciprocal, and as Skin Yard's founding guitarist, he briefly played in that group with Cameron. "By the time Skin Yard was really active in 1986, it seemed like I had stopped hearing about them," Endino says.

Bell and Martin left Seattle in 1986 to live and tour in Europe, just as the city's underground scene started to take off. Sub Pop began its label operation in earnest that year, and when it released Green River's *Dry as a Bone* EP in 1987, co-owner Bruce Pavitt (a Forest Park native) described it in the catalog as "ultra-loose grunge that destroyed the morals of a generation." As Sub Pop came to define the Seattle scene in the late 1980s, the label pushed a grunge archetype—a shaggy, flannel-clad white guy with a fuck-off attitude and a sensitive heart—and the city's older alternative groups could end up sidelined if they didn't fit that profile.

Endino did eventually find a used copy of Bam Bam's debut EP, though without its eye-catching cover or its insert. "I didn't know who they were or what they looked like," he says. "None of my friends knew them. I didn't grow up in the city, so I assumed they were another band that had already run its course before I got here. I think there might have been a generation gap, because an old musician buddy of mine told me he had known about them but thought of them as 'married parents with a band.'"

Through the decades that followed, Bam Bam remained a cool curiosity to Endino—one of a handful of local bands he wishes he could've seen, like the Blackouts or hardcore band Ten Minute Warning. In 2015 Endino appeared with Hanzsek on Michigan music-TV show *Welcome to the D*, and he mentioned Bam Bam in the interview. Ledgerwood reached out and filled Endino in on the band's history, supplying him with a heap of recordings, including the masters for the 1984 EP. "Turns out, that seven-inch was a bad pressing," Endino says. "Chris Hanzsek's original



In summer 2021, Om Johari booked a concert called Bam Bam Tributaries at Seattle's Central Saloon, where a lineup of vocalists who've followed in Tina Bell's footsteps performed Bam Bam songs with a band that included original drummer Matt Cameron. © SCOTTY LEDGERWOOD

recordings were actually much better than anyone realized."

In July 2017, Ledgerwood and his wife were staying at his in-laws' Washington State ranch when a fire broke out in one of several storage buildings where he'd stored Bam Bam's archives. Flames engulfed the building, but he ran inside anyway. Fortunately the worst injury he suffered was a broken arm, and he saved his old band's master recordings, footage from music videos and live shows, and photos and their negatives. Ledgerwood did it for himself as much as for his late friend Tina Bell.

Bell had a rough time in Bam Bam after Ledgerwood left. The band's stint in Europe was plagued by immigration hassles and worse, and when they returned to Seattle in 1988, they barely recognized the lay of the land. "The scene was just really starting to accelerate," says Preston Singletary, a Native American glass artist who briefly played bass for Bam Bam upon their return. "There were a lot more bands moving to town, trying to get discovered." As new groups saturated a small market, it got harder to land gigs.

Martin's musical interests began to shift around 1990; Nick Rhinehart, Bam Bam's final bassist, compared the guitarist's newer material to the wild experimentation of Mr. Bungle. "As Tommy progressed, the music got crazier and crazier," Rhinehart says. "It was probably difficult to sing over this stuff." Bell and Mar-

tin were already split up by the time she quit the band in the early 90s. Bam Bam carried on as an instrumental trio for a few more years and broke up in 1993.

Bell and Martin remained in contact, and in the late 2000s Martin reconnected Bell with Ledgerwood. She was living in Las Vegas, and though he was still in Seattle, their friendship picked up right where it left off.

"I used to actually look forward to one or two in the morning, 'cause we're both insomniacs, and I knew bloody well—that phone be ringing, that's my Bell," Ledgerwood says. "After a while we started writing again together." Ledgerwood became Bell's manager and helped look after her, since they both knew she was fighting depression and alcoholism—mostly he placed grocery orders for her, since he'd had some training as a nutritionist.

While in Vegas, Bell remained in close contact with her loved ones. She'd sometimes spend hours on the phone with Stepney and her children; Ledgerwood would talk to her as often as five times a week. But the distance intensified the tragedy of her death from cirrhosis of the liver in October 2012. By the time T.J. Martin could travel from his home in Los Angeles to retrieve her belongings from her Vegas apartment, her landlord had thrown away almost everything.

Jen Lemasters and Nick Mayor met while record shopping in Atlanta's Little Five Points neighborhood in summer 2005.

"Jen bought a Le Tigre record," Mayor says. "I bought a three-CD pack of WWF intro songs, 'cause I thought it was fun." They moved to Chicago in 2009 and learned the city by record-shop hopping. "We had this ideal of record stores from John Hughes movies—the bygone days of the record store being a community center where you would go to hear the new music, and find out about shows, and meet people that share interests," Mayor says. "That's really what we wanted Bric-a-Brac to be."

"I just wanted it to be visually cool," Lemasters says.

They opened Bric-a-Brac at the corner of Kedzie and Diversey in June 2013. Vinyl, cassettes, VHS, toys, T-shirts, and other gadgets filled the cozy shop. The store evoked the aesthetic of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, with the addition of many drawings of the couple's corgi, Dandelo, a fixture in the shop. Mayor and Lemasters made live music a priority too. "We had laid the store out specifically with in-store performances in mind," Mayor says. "And making sure that that was the center of the business plan, because the Chicago all-ages scene is either super big venues or basements."

Bric-a-Brac quickly established a solid reputation among music fanatics. "I've always seen Jen and Nick as music gurus in a way, but Jen was someone who would recommend things to me that I would really like," says Larson.

A few years ago, Lemasters and Mayor got the idea to open a horror-movie-themed coffee shop; they enlisted a former coworker of Lemasters, Jason Deuchler (aka DJ Intel), as a partner. Last spring, they expanded their plan to include relocating Bric-a-Brac—they'd found two adjacent storefronts in Avondale that could accommodate both businesses. After about eight months of construction, the new, larger Bric-a-Brac opened in January at 2845 N. Milwaukee. The partners are putting the finishing touches on the coffee shop, called the Brewed—a reference to David Cronenberg's 1979 post-divorce body-horror picture *The Brood*. It should open in March.

All of this means Mayor and Lemasters haven't had a lot of time to promote the Bam Bam 12-inch. Fortunately, they had other people doing the heavy lifting.

When *CBS Mornings* began coordinating interviews for a story on Tina Bell last year, Om Johari got the idea to book a show. "I reached out to Matt Cameron, and I said, 'Hey, how would you like to play some of them songs?' And he was like, 'That would be awesome—what do we do?'"

With the blessings of T.J. Martin and Ledgerwood, Johari spent a couple weeks assembling a group: Cameron on drums; Fishbone cofounder Kendall Rey Jones and genre-blending Seattle singer-songwriter Ayron Jones on guitar; and New Orleans-based Jenelle Roccaforte on bass. Johari also chose several women to take turns on the mike, most of whom live in Seattle: Eva Walker of the Black Tones, D'mitra Smith of Ex's With Benefits, Shaina Shepherd of Bearaxe, and singer-songwriter Dejha Colantuono (who flew in from New York).

In July 2021, onetime grunge-scene hub the Central Saloon hosted the show, called "Bam Bam Tributaries." For Johari, it was an opportunity to pay homage to an artist whose legacy she'd fought to preserve. She also saw it as a way to let T.J. Martin honor his parents. "I was really, really happy to be able to facilitate an opportunity for him to basically have a service for them, on his terms," Johari says. "That, for me, probably, was equally as powerful as reclaiming Tina's name."

"The love for Tina felt big-time that July," Ledgerwood says. "I was so afraid I was gonna break down that night. I didn't crack until I got home."

For years, Lemasters had daydreamed of forming a Josie & the Pussycats cover band—she saw the 2001 live-action movie adaptation of the TV show in a theater, and she still talks about it. She finally made the band happen in 2021, with help from Larson (who brought in drummer Stef Roti to complete a trio). The same drive that drew them both to Bam Bam also drew them closer together. They started practicing in August to play on Halloween. "It was like a dream come true for me," Lemasters says. "It was really fun. Turns out those songs are very hard."

A few months after that show, boxes of Bam Bam vinyl arrived at Bric-a-Brac. The reissue is a testament to the tireless work of the people who love Tina Bell and her music, and to the bonds they've formed among themselves while amplifying her legacy. Lemasters and Mayor began shipping copies in early February. Mayor put together a package for his old college radio station, including the original Bam Bam seven-inch with WOBC's call letters on it—a way of making belated amends for his theft in 2014. "I'm sending it back to the station with a promo copy of the record and a little note saying, 'Thanks for letting me borrow this,'" Mayor says. "Here's it back. It birthed this whole project, so thank you."

@imLeor



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CHICAGOANS OF NOTE

Jeremy Alvarez, founder of DJ night Research & Development

“So many people in all these scenes, they’re really there because they care about providing these fun, musical, hopefully safe spaces for people.”

As told to MICCO CAPORALE

It’s romantic to imagine a DJ dropping a track so profound it can save your life, but what about a DJ who can open up possibilities away from the dance floor? Jeremy Alvarez, founder of a dark electronic DJ night called Research & Development, is known as much for his skill at connecting disparate people as he is for his talent at combining unusual beats. In the 16 years that this humble nightlife fixture has called Chicago home, he’s DJed as many parties in bars and clubs (most notably as a resident at Danny’s Tavern) as he has in basements, warehouses, and other off-the-map venues.

Alvarez started Research & Development at Smart Bar in 2017—Thursday nights were for getting sweaty to moody, experimental

techno and EBM. When the pandemic forced Smart Bar to scale back its programming, R&D moved to Soundcloud, where Alvarez joined forces with Eric Fernandez (better known by the DJ name Makeen); the two of them use their ears for talent to distribute mixes by local or up-and-coming electronic artists who’ll remind global audiences of Chicago’s place in industrial nightlife. In January 2022, Research & Development began a monthly night at the Whistler, with more events on the horizon in other spaces.

Im originally from New Jersey, but I moved to Miami when I was ten, then came here when I was 22 or 23 in 2006. Technically,

I’ve lived here longer than anywhere else in my life. Some people still say, “You’re from Miami,” but others are like, “No, you’ve earned your Chicago card.”

I came here because I was sick of Miami. I love visiting—it’s a place like no other—but the cost of living is very high. And people there are rude. I visited Chicago a few times, and people were so nice. Like push-your-car-out-of-the-snow nice. It was affordable.

I really didn’t know very many people. I didn’t come here for school; I didn’t come here for work. I just came here to come here, because it seemed worth living here. I’ve been in a 15-, 16-year relationship with the city since.

I’ve always loved music. I was involved in

various music projects in Miami—like punk and postpunk- and hardcore-type bands—but when I got here, I didn’t really know how I wanted that to continue. Since being here, I’ve just morphed over and over. Then I started going to clubs and really admiring DJs. I remember falling in love with Danny’s right off the bat.

I actually used to work around the corner at Scylla. That was the first restaurant by Stephanie Izard from *Top Chef*. It’s no longer there. Maybe my first or second week there, though—which was maybe in the first two or three weeks of living here—the bartender was like, “Hey, we’re gonna go after work to this bar around the corner. They play soul music. It’s pretty cool. Just come on through.” So I go over with them, and of course—I didn’t know this at the time, but it was Sheer Magic night, which was Danny’s, like, premier soul night. And just in that moment I had this feeling, like: This is exactly what I’ve been searching for.

Miami has grown a lot. There’s a lot of different stuff there now, but back when I was living there, you weren’t gonna find a place like Danny’s—and especially that music that they played at Sheer Magic. So, well . . . I love it. I just love it. I became a regular. What I really love about Danny’s is that it had a pretty eclectic nature, you know? They didn’t have a website, so you didn’t know what you were going to get unless you were pretty tuned in. So OK: I know that the Smiths night is on, you know, *this* Tuesday. Hot on the Heels is *this* Tuesday. Night Moves is on this Wednesday, and so on.

Eventually, I figured it all out, but you could just show up and there would just be good music playing every time. Even if it wasn’t great, it was interesting. Just stuff you’re not going to hear everywhere else.

I used to do a party in Miami called Vibrator with my very good friend Daniel Romeu. I actually moved here with him. And eventually, we ended up getting a night together at Danny’s around 2010 called Loose Joints that was more like an Arthur Russell tribute night. Very New York 1977-1984. Lots of no wave, new wave, disco and punk and postpunk . . . it was

a blast.

But I've always been a DJ who jumps around. Punch House, Beauty Bar, all these different places. I was playing some soul, R&B, disco, salsa, Latin music—like good music for a Tinder date. But when Smart Bar approached me, I had been throwing raves with this collective called Order, and Smart Bar's booker knew I was looking to really move into the techno sphere. And that's how Research & Development happened.

The vast majority of the music cultures that I've been a part of have been scenes that foster a do-it-yourself culture—you know, people throwing shows in their basements, lawns, apartments, living rooms, coach houses, backyards, whatever! That seems to be the ethos that I follow through, like, punk and hardcore and postpunk into noise and other electronic music, avant-garde, free jazz, stuff like that.

It's not like I had never been to a rave before. But as I started going more regularly, it reminded me of all those other scenes. You've got these dedicated people who are setting up and promoting the shows and playing the music—and it's just to do it. Like, obviously

there are some people who really care about potentially making it a professional career, but so many people in all these scenes, they're really there because they care about providing these fun, musical, hopefully safe spaces for people. I think that safety has become a much bigger concern, and I'm glad to see that kind of attitude.

For Research & Development, I look for people who are innovative but tend towards darker music. Whether that's techno, club, electro, whatever—I want to support local and up-and-coming DJs and let them have a space where they can be themselves and feel free to sprawl out, see what's comfortable, or even consciously get uncomfortable. I don't think that we need to be complacent.

At the same time, while new and shiny things are exciting, I want to make sure we're somewhat of an homage to the culture and the music that came before, whether that's, you know, things like Throbbing Gristle or Jeff Mills—it's a very wide selection, but that's where we tend to go.

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PICK OF THE WEEK

La Armada keep fighting the good fight on *Anti-Colonial Vol. 2*

MANUEL VELASCO

LA ARMADA, JUVENTUD, CRASA, SI DIOS QUIERE, SNUFFED
Sat 2/26, 8 PM, Cobra Lounge, 235 N. Ashland, \$15. 17+

THE PANDEMIC HASN'T BEEN EASY on anyone, but it's been especially unkind to those who rely on live music for income or a creative outlet. That said, if there were any local band I had faith was going to pull through, it was La Armada. Formed in the Dominican Republic in 2001, this socially and politically charged five-piece immigrated to the U.S. over several years, regrouping in Chicago in 2008 following a brief stint in Florida. Their music fuses hardcore, metal, and punk with influences from Afro-Caribbean genres, and despite all odds, they went nearly two decades before their first lineup change: original lead singer Javier Fernandez departed in 2019, and Casper Torres stepped up to the mike. After La Armada's 2020 plans (including a European tour) were sidelined by COVID-19, they got to work writing and recording new material; eventually they even played a couple of shows, including Ruido Fest 2021. At the start of the pandemic La Armada had envisioned recording and releasing a few songs every couple of months, but when circumstances changed, they instead made a full album in three parts. Their brand-new *Anti-Colonial Vol. 2* (out this month on their own Mal de Ojo label) compiles that material, some of which they've also put out over the past couple years on releases such as the 2020 EP *Songs of the Exiled I: Chicago* and the July 2021 EP *Opias*. "Plagued" and "Gun Nation" (off *Songs of the Exiled*) were remixed, remastered, and partially rerecorded, and six other tracks are entirely new to this album. Every song is as vital as ever: La Armada don't mince words or riffs as they tear into the crimes of our society—greed, racism, colorism, Christian supremacy, xenophobia, exploitation of the masses (especially vulnerable communities such as immigrants) by the powers that be. Their message is ultimately about empowerment, compassion, and unity, which feels all the more precious in our increasingly uncertain times. In concert, the band are known for bringing together fans from Chicago's various heavy-music scenes, so plan accordingly for what's sure to be a high-energy record-release party. —JAMIE LUDWIG

CONCERT PREVIEW
SUNDAY20

SIDAKA Blake Saint David headlines. 8 PM, Hideout, 1354 W. Wabansia, \$12. 21+

Chicago rapper-producer Sidaka began dabbling in music seven years ago, when he was a 15-year-old tinkering with a piano in an effort to impress a crush. Since then he's gone from experimenting with bedroom recording on his own to learning every aspect of music making: he studied audio engineering at Flashpoint Chicago, and in 2019 he landed an internship at esteemed hip-hop hub Classick Studios. Sidaka already had a foot in the door of the local scene—he'd been a DJ for a couple years—and in summer 2019 he befriended underground producer Cloud Boy, whose Creative Mansion collective Sidaka has since joined. Early this month, Sidaka self-released *Coming Back Home*, a five-song EP whose two bonus tracks are its most visceral and vital (to hear them, you have to buy the EP on Bandcamp—they aren't streamable like the other three). On "Road to Miss," his steely flow cuts through a hazy but suffocatingly loud instrumental that feels like it should've been impenetrable. Listeners can find their way through the song's intoxicating fog by holding onto Sidaka's vocal line like a handrail, even though he rarely raises his voice—and when he does, it's not to shout down the music but to underline a point in his lyrics exploring youthful insecurities and ambitions. —LEOR GALIL

SATURDAY26

LA ARMADA See Pick of the Week at left. *Juventud, Crasa, Si Dios Quiere, and Snuffed* open. 8 PM, Cobra Lounge, 235 N. Ashland, \$15. 17+

MUSIC FROZEN DANCING *Divino Niño* headlines; *Sweeping Promises, Pixel Grip, Automatic, Surfbot, and Stuck* open. 1 PM, Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western. FREE

For many of us, the malaise and isolation that often accompany Chicago winters have been exacerbated by the pandemic—when the weather is at its most brutal, it can be hard to leave your warm, cozy home to go see a show, and it doesn't get easier when you have to worry about picking up COVID there. That alone would make the return of Ukrainian Village block party Music Frozen Dancing extremely welcome, even if the lineup weren't stacked with bands that'll help you shake off your seasonal blues. Headlining this free outdoor concert is Chicago four-piece *Divino Niño*, whose genre-blending psychedelic songs (the September single "Drive" incorporates elements of trap and yacht rock) feel like relaxing on a beach no matter how damn cold it gets outside. (One of *Divino Niño*'s front men, Camilo Medina, who formed the band with childhood friend Javier Forero in 2013, told NPR in a 2019 interview, "I would love to give people a little vacation.") The rest of the six-act bill is loaded with



Sidaka © LUKE HANS



Cheer-Accident © COURTESY SKIN GRAFT RECORDS

a mix of local and touring bands, including two more Chicago acts: noise-punk outfit Stuck and scintillating dance trio Pixel Grip. The out-of-towners provide equally good reasons to brave the elements: Sweeping Promises from Lawrence, Kansas, deliver new-wave and postpunk hooks like they were born to do it; Los Angeles's Automatic play sleek, sinister synth-punk that could cut through ice; and unhinged New York trash rockers Surfbort throw so much stuff at the walls that a lot of it sticks. Here in the midwestern tundra, we don't get too many outdoor shows in the middle of winter, so put on your warmest boots and come ready to dance till you sweat through your coat. —JAMIE LUDWIG

SUNDAY27

POST OFFICE WINTER *Your Arms Are My Cocoon* headline; *Post Office Winter*, Colleen Dow, and *Bleached Cross* open. 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 2100 W. Belmont, \$12. 17+

Chicago DIY rock duo Post Office Winter take an audible joy in playing scruffy, comfortable indie rock whose charming shabbiness feels like an accident they wouldn't have any other way. The band's founders, Johnston and Huffman (Jones College Prep juniors who prefer to go by their last names), belong to a local teenage DIY rock collective called Hallogallo, whose members have already made strides on the national stage: in March 2021, the imprint of Georgia music magazine *Chunklet* issued a single from noisy three-piece Lifeguard, and the following month totemic indie label Matador signed jangly trio Horsegirl. Some Hallogallo acts overlap in personnel too—Johnston plays in an ambitious group called Dwaal Troupe with Kai Slater from Life-

guard. Johnston and Huffman live a block apart, and they formed Post Office Winter in the early months of the pandemic to try to have a little fun. They based their debut album, June's *Songs for a Scientist* (Hallogallo), on a series of stories they made up about a world of anthropomorphic animal characters. Johnston and Huffman say the stories are complicated, and it's hard to tell what's going on in their lyrics—the main feeling you get from their mellow performances is coziness. They sing in hushed voices that occasionally come across as hesitant, as if they're spilling a secret that just happens to be set to frilly guitar riffs, loose drumming, and unruffled keys. Post Office Winter recorded and mixed *Songs for a Scientist* in Johnston's parents' garage, and as a pandemic precaution they left the door open—occasionally you can hear a CTA train in the distance, which adds to the album's homegrown charm. —LEOR GALLI

ALBUM REVIEWS

BLOOD INCANTATION, TIMEWAVE ZERO
Century Media
bloodincantation.bandcamp.com

Denver band Blood Incantation set the metal world on fire with their second full-length, 2019's *Hidden History of the Human Race*, a technical death-metal masterpiece that smashes together mind-bending, virtuoso-level musicianship with Middle Eastern-inspired melodies, epic prog-rock twists and turns, and sci-fi moods and flourishes. The album's brutal, alien take on death metal earned it top honors on countless best-of-the-year lists (and regular appearances in the insane.johnny memeverse). So where do you go after you redefine a genre? Blood Incan-

tation chose to strip their music down to its barest elements and release a moody, spooky, ambient synth record. The eerie, intergalactic soundscapes and sinister energy of *Timewave Zero* (out February 25 on Century Media) are pure Blood Incantation, but the album opens new doors for the band, trading double kick drums and guttural vocals for cinematic, sweeping synth passages that could've come from Pink Floyd or Hawkwind. The album consists of two side-length compositions, "Io" and "Ea," and the two-CD edition includes a third, "Chronophagia," that's even longer. They're unexpectedly stirring, and show a side of the band that you didn't know you needed but will probably love anyway. —LUCA CIMARUSTI

CHEER-ACCIDENT, HERE COMES THE SUNSET
Skin Graft
skingraftrecords.bandcamp.com/album/here-comes-the-sunset

When I moved to the Windy City in 1995, "psychedelic" and "progressive rock" were dirty words associated with patchouli-scented hippies. A few local bands were boldly mining this expansive territory, though, including Sabalon Glitz, Frontier, and Cheer-Accident. Led by drummer, singer, keyboardist, and trumpeter Thymme Jones, Cheer-Accident always put on a thrilling, even hilarious live show, where it was anyone's guess what would happen. Would Jones climb inside his bass drum and not come out, as I once saw him do at Lounge Ax? Would they enlist their cabdriver to sing with them, like they did at the Fireside Bowl? Would they try the patience of venue staff with a maddeningly repetitive 15-minute improvised blues jam and constant unnecessary requests for "more reverb," the

way they did at Pop's? Even better, the shenanigans never eclipsed the band's complex, heady, and playful sounds.

Founded in 1981 and active as a live band since '87, Cheer-Accident have gone through many lineup changes over the years, with Jones the only constant (though guitarist Jeff Libersher has also been aboard since their first show). On their new 24th LP, *Here Comes the Sunset*, they're joined by bassist Dante Kester and the usual bunch of guests: this time they include oboist and keyboardist Amelie Morgan, saxophonist Cory Bengtson, and violinist Julie Pomerleau (also a coconspirator of Bobby Conn). They started working on the album in the 2010s, recording at Jones's various residences in Humboldt Park—it's tricky to lay down drum tracks with neighbors around, he admits. But genius takes its own time, right?

"Star Vehicle (4 Flats)" kicks off *Here Comes the Sunset* with a Magma-ish explosion that settles into a metronomic pulse that recalls This Heat or Faust. Then mutant horns and Jones's distinctive singing enter the mix, and the track becomes a delicious slab of catchy art-rock on par with Peter Gabriel or 801. "Maison de Velours Ecureuil" uses a complex time signature that's impenetrable to mere mortals such as myself, but it has me imagining what would happen if the *Star Wars* cantina band beamed in Yes drummer Bill Bruford for a dance jam.

Even if you think you've figured out Cheer-Accident's weird modus operandi, they'll still surprise you by throwing in a faithful version of Cheap Trick's "Dream Police"—or faithful until the middle section, anyway, where the strings go off the rails completely, as though ELO had collided with ELP at Budokan. (Jones cites Cheer-Accident's treatment of "Theme From Shaft" on the 1991 Prayda Records compilation *20 Explosive Dynamic Super Smash Hit Explosions!* as a precursor.) On the



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Dreamer Isioma @ DANIEL DELGADO



Laura Cocks @ JULIA DEN BOER

continued from 47

CD version of *Here Comes the Sunset*, that rock-in' cover flows right into the title track, but on the LP it starts off side two, which works almost like a 15-minute avant-garde suite. The rest of the album slaloms through spacey atmospherics, dark post-punk, heartbeat rhythms, and Jones's fragile but jazz-informed vocals, which are a big part of why I call him "the Robert Wyatt of Chicago" (or is he the Eric Stewart?).

Here Comes the Sunset packs an epic journey into around half an hour—positively concise for a Cheer-Accident album—and proves that the band continue to care as little as possible about commercializing their "everything but the kitchen sink" aesthetic. Music scenes come and go, but the Accident persist, reminding us that they're still one of the greatest, most challenging, and most fun bands that Chicago has ever produced—and that their music will always transcend genre and hype.

—STEVE KRAKOW

LAURA COCKS, *FIELD ANATOMIES*
Carrier
lauracocks.bandcamp.com/album/field-anatomies

When you're ensconced in a circle of 29 piccolos, no one can hear you scream. New York-based flutist and TAK Ensemble cofounder Laura Cocks re-creates this otherworldly sonic scenario in David Bird's "Atolls," the first piece off their new debut solo album, *Field Anatomies* (Carrier). Bird says his piece derived the auxiliary performers' pitches by employing "combined spectral analysis" of a cymbal crashing and Janet Leigh's iconic shriek in *Psycho*. To get the desired eerie effect, Cocks recorded herself playing each of the parts while Bird, who produced the track, used binary panning to build a surround-sound sensation. The subsequent works on *Field Anatomies* create similarly mon-

strous spectacles out of recontextualized ingredients. The album's most riveting works are metacommentaries on the flute itself, and both were written by composers with deep Chicago bona fides; Cocks also has local roots, having grown up in the tiny northern suburb of Green Oaks, and they cite Nicole Mitchell's performances in the city as a major influence. The album's tour de force is a 2014 piece by Catalan composer Joan Arnau Pàmies, "Produktionsmittel I" (German for "Means of Production I"), where Cocks eventually trades their flute for an aluminum foil sheet and glass bottle. Bethany Younge wrote "Oxygen and Reality" for Cocks in 2017, the same year Younge left Chicago for New York. Like Pàmies's piece here, "Oxygen and Reality" employs unusual materials—in this case balloons—to dramatic effect. Also as with "Produktionsmittel I," Cocks's album performance, while electrifying, doesn't give a complete picture of the work, since both scores specify lighting and stage directions for performers. Only in performance can you see a balloon quivering like a lung at the end of Cocks's piccolo, while they grasp their instrument with the desperation of someone sucking from an inhaler. The instrument becomes a giver of breath rather than an insatiable taker. In the ongoing shocks of the pandemic era, Cocks's asphyxiation feels all too visceral, all too soon. But where there is discomfort, I find there's also some truth—and *Field Anatomies* will make you squirm. —HANNAH EDGAR

DREAMER ISIOMA, *GOODNIGHT DREAMER*
AWAL Recordings / Dreamer Isioma
dreamerisioma.ffm.to/goodnightdreamer

In March 2020, Chicago singer-songwriter Dreamer Isioma released their breakthrough EP, *Sensitive*, whose slyly funky title track became a slow-burning hit—in a little under two years, it's racked up nearly 70 million Spotify streams. Isioma is clearly a pop star in the making, and treats the history of record-

ed music like a grand buffet: they pick out the tastiest bits and assemble them into new dishes, such that you can still identify the ingredients even as you recognize that the combinations can only exist thanks to Isioma's taste and chutzpah. On their new debut album, *Goodnight Dreamer* (AWAL Recordings/Dreamer Isioma), Isioma powers through the album's wildly varied stylistic experimentation with ambition, confidence, and precision, which help bind together tracks that might not otherwise seem to belong on the same record. In other hands, the woozy, airy club-pop feel and reggaeton pulse of "Time Is Temporary" would've made for a jarring transition into "Crying in the Club," which sounds like an R&B single melting into a hyperpop blur. Isioma makes it work, though, with talent and force of will. Their trust in their musical vision unifies the scattered moods and ideas of *Goodnight Dreamer*, and their silken singing and earnest expressiveness will make you a believer too. —LEOR GALIL

MATCHESS, *SONESCENT*
Drag City
matchess.bandcamp.com/album/sonescent

For roughly a decade, Chicago multi-instrumentalist Whitney Johnson maintained a fairly steady developmental arc with her solo project, Matchess. Her songs, which comprised layers of viola, organ, tape loops, drum machine, and voice, progressively materialized out of a murky, analog fog; the hooky, propulsive tracks on the 2018 release *Sacracorpa* glided like a lucid dream of flying. *Sonescent*, her debut recording for Drag City, departs from this approach by taking a deep dive into the recesses of Johnson's mind. Its music came to her during a Vipassana meditation retreat in Joshua Tree, California. Required to maintain silence and abstain from writing or recording throughout her stay, she had no immediate way to document the melodies and arrangements that arose into her consciousness

after a few days of contemplation. After completing the course, she did her best to remember the songs she had heard while meditating. In contrast with her usual process of performing and tracking her music entirely alone, she wrote it down on paper, taught it to a band, and took them into a studio to record it. But you'll only hear brief snatches of those recordings on *Sonescent*. Most of the album consists of hypnotic electronic tones, which are periodically churned by the sounds of the band—snatches of barely audible folk-rock break the synthetic surface like koi briefly surfacing in a pond and then disappearing into the depths, an effect that's by turns lulling and deeply disquieting. Only time will tell if *Sonescent* is a reversal of *Matchess's* evolution toward lucidity or the first step on a new path altogether. Either way, it's a remarkably concrete representation of an elusive intrapsychic experience. —**BILL MEYER**

MATT PIKE, PIKE VS. THE AUTOMATON
MNRK Heavy
pikevstheautomaton.bandcamp.com/album/pike-vs-the-automaton

Matt Pike has had a long and storied career as a member of pioneering stoner-metal trios Sleep and High on Fire. But the pandemic has been hard on team players, and so this year the guitarist and

vocalist is releasing his first solo album, *Pike vs the Automaton*—a heartbreaking work of cabin fever. He recorded it largely at home with drummer Jon Reid, a current and former bandmate of Pike's wife, multi-instrumentalist Alyssa Maucere-Pike (in *Glory in the Shadows* and *Lord Dying*, respectively). Maucere-Pike also appears on this fierce and flexible album, whose trippy gurgle is redolent of pungent bong water and whose guitars sound like they might shoot fire like in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. In the press materials for the album, Pike says he set out to make a psychedelic rock record that fans of Sleep and High on Fire would like, and in my opinion he succeeded. "Trapped in a Midcave" is a heavy chugging monstrosity of a riff machine, with fiendishly catchy flourishes of 80s hard rock and metal, a guitar solo that sounds like it's blasting out of an airlock, and a charming old-school fade-out.

Possibly the most startling track is the moody, brooding "Land," a western gothic piece that Pike wrote with Maucere-Pike. It features Brent Hinds of Mastodon on guitar and Steve McPeeks of West End Motel on bass, and it reeks of spilled whiskey and regrets—I'll be damned if I don't hear a little influence from cowpunks like the Gun Club and the Divine Horsemen in its unearthly revenant howls and slow-burning drawl. The next track is the utterly unhinged "Alien Slut Mum," which premiered in December with an extended video whose delirious bad trip of horror-flick shaky cam shows us what

appear to be a werewolf, an alien, a Sasquatch, and a whole lot of bones. "Latin American Geological Formation" is another delight: the slinky playfulness in its rhythms and guitar lines underpins sinister, impressionistic storytelling that sounds like someone on a long, chilly nighttime drive who's propelled by a thirst for revenge that ends in violence. Lyrically, Pike also returns to familiar themes on this album: "Apollyon" and "Leaving the Wars of Woe," with their occult vibes, invoke apocalyptic angels who aren't about to say "be not afraid." *Pike vs the Automaton* is a serious psych-metal record, with nothing remotely tossed-off or half-assed about it, but I came away with the unshakable sense that Pike and his friends had a jolly great time making it—just like I did listening to it. —**MONICA KENDRICK**

ALISON SHEARER, VIEW FROM ABOVE
Self-released
alisonshearer.bandcamp.com/album/view-from-above

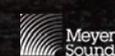
Alto saxophonist Alison Shearer had nearly completed her debut solo album when her father, acclaimed photojournalist John Shearer, died in 2019. In the aftermath, the Brooklyn-based musician, who cofounded the ten-piece hip hop group Pitchblak Brass Band and currently plays with eclectic party band Red Baraat, decided to start from

scratch. Her new *View From Above* doesn't address John's death or Alison's grief directly, though it nods to John's work in the civil rights movement with "Big Sides," a gospel-tinged protest against police violence. Instead, the bulk of the material, as the album title suggests, lifts and swoops away from specifics, with bright melancholy and nostalgia circling about each other somewhere in the region of the clouds. Like fellow saxophonist Kamasi Washington, Shearer mixes funk and soul into her jazz, but she focuses on a lighter side of fusion—the kind pioneered by Chick Corea's *Return to Forever*. The intricately angular postbop sax in the intro to "Celestial" puts you in a nimble spaceship, but its zigs and zags are cushioned by Horace Phillips's gentle, solid drums and Kevin Bernstein's fluid, melodic piano. "Dawn to Dusk," with its influences from Eastern scales and gritty soul-jazz bottom, may be the album's most aggressive-sounding track; "Purple Flowers," by contrast, with Hattie Simon's honey-sweet vocals spinning around Shearer's honey-sweet tone, borders on neosoul dream pop. Shearer never ventures into avant-garde territory, but her songwriting is too complex and eclectic to fit comfortably into smooth jazz. *View From Above* is comforting, celebratory, and upbeat without being glib. At a time when loss is pervasive and hope is hard to come by, it's worth listening to someone who has grappled with the first and managed to hang on to the second. —**NOAH BERLATSKY**



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- 2.24 VIVIAN GREEN
- 2.25 ENTER THE HAGGIS
- 2.26 DAVID ARCHULETA
- 2.28 CRASH TEST DUMMIES WITH MO KENNEY

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| 3.13 JD SOUTHER: "ALL THE HITS... SOME OF THE STORIES" | 3.17 JIM MESSINA | 3.26 CHANTÉ MOORE |
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| | 3.20 OLETA ADAMS | 3.28 MIKE ZITO & ALBERT CASTIGLIA |

EARLY WARNINGS

CHICAGO SHOWS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT IN THE WEEKS TO COME

ALL AGES FREE



Alison Wonderland JARED TINETTI

NEW

Alash 3/23, 8:30 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music

Jason Aldean, Gabby Barrett, John Morgan 8/12, 7:30 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park

Alison Wonderland 4/9, 9 PM, Aragon Ballroom, 18+

Rodrigo Amarante 6/23, 9 PM, Sleeping Village

Dan Andriano & the Bygones, Emily Wolfe 5/11, 8 PM, Metro, 18+

Anfang, Scarlet Demore 3/20, 8:30 PM, Sleeping Village

Aristocrats 8/20, 9 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 17+

Arts Fishing Club, Virginia Man, String Machine, Caracara 3/12, 8 PM, Chop Shop, 18+

Atomic Bitchwax, Valley of the Sun, Cloud Cruiser, Canyyn 3/8, 8:30 PM, Chop Shop, 18+

Bad Daddy 3/13, 7 PM, Rosa's Lounge

Gregor Barnett with Roger Harvey & Brendan Kelly 3/4, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+

Big League Boys 3/5, 9 PM, Beat Kitchen

Black Tiger Sex Machine, Lucii, Vampa, Phonon, Hairitage, Swarm 4/15, 10 PM, Radius Chicago, 18+

Bleach, Ax & the Hatchmen 3/6, 8 PM, Subterranean, 17+

Brother Ali, Mally, DJ Last Word 4/16, 8:30 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+

Chastity Brown 3/4, 9:30 PM, Hideout

Cactus featuring Carmine Aplice, Pat Travers Band 6/16, 8 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 17+

Chalaban, Arab Blues 3/30, 8:30 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music

Chicago Blues Festival 6/9-6/12, Millennium Park

Chicago Gospel Music Experience 6/4, Pritzker Pavilion, Millennium Park

Chicago House Music Experience 9/16, Millennium Park

Chicago Jazz Festival 9/1-9/4, Millennium Park

Crawlers 6/13, 7:30 PM, Subterranean

Crooked Teeth, Glimmers, Unwell, Long Gone, Farhampton 3/6, 6 PM, Cobra Lounge

Deals Gone Slack, Stop the Presses, Three Blue Teardrops, Bama Lamas 3/11, 8 PM, Chop Shop, 18+

Dreamjacket, Wayward Motel, Baby Money 3/5, 6:30 PM, Subterranean, 17+

Dying Fetus, Chelsea Grin, Body Snatcher, Frozen Soul, Undeath 5/28, 5:30 PM, Concord Music Hall, 17+

Emo Nite LA DJs 3/4, 9 PM, Subterranean, 17+

Expo '76 & Total Pro Horns featuring Robert Cornelius 3/11, 8:30 PM, FitzGerald's, Berwyn

Fake Fruit 5/9, 8:30 PM, Sleeping Village

Fatboy Slim, DJ Heather 4/16, 10 PM, City Hall, 18+

DJ Foster Grant 3/24, 9 PM, Hungry Brain

Fulcrum Point New Music Project presents Caitlin Edwards, Malik Johnson, and John Bitoy 3/10, 8 PM, Hungry Brain

Amos Gillespie's Unstructured Time 3/4, 8:30 PM, Constellation

Girl Ultra, Katzú Oso 6/1, 7 PM, Bottom Lounge

Harold Green & Flowers for the Living 3/15, 7 PM, the

Promontory

Grip 3/4, 9 PM, Schubas, 18+

Erwin Helfer 3/17, 8 PM, Hungry Brain

Hide, Cloud Rat, Spirit Trap 3/12, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle

Intonation Spring Showcase featuring Kasey, Alysha Monique, Intonation All-Star Band, Pershing Magnet School musicians, and more 3/5, 12:30 PM, the Promontory

Joseph 3/25, 7 and 9:30 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music

Joe Kay 3/17, 9 PM, Thalia Hall, 18+

Key Glock 4/22, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge, 18+

Katy Kirby & Sun June, Friko 3/3, 9 PM, Sleeping Village

Kota the Friend 4/29, 9 PM, Metro, 18+

Ladysmith Black Mambazo 3/20, 4 and 7 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music

Last Dinosaurs 5/31, 7 PM, Bottom Lounge

Lathums, Red Rum Club 3/6, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+

Liquid Stranger, Mersiv, Tvboo 3/26, 9 PM, Aragon Ballroom, 18+

Local H 3/12, 8 PM, FitzGerald's, Berwyn

Brian Lupo 3/4, 8 PM, FitzGerald's, Berwyn

Mall Grab 4/22, 10 PM, Metro, 18+

Mastodon, Opheth, Khemmis 4/28, 7 PM, Aragon Ballroom, 18+

Mattiel, John Roseboro 3/11, 10 PM, Empty Bottle

Mer's Music Showcase featuring Mer, Stephen Francis, Malo, Pino Farina, Melody Angel 3/3, 7:30 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+

Scanner 3/12, 9 PM, Lincoln Hall

Midcentury Llama, Disaster Kid, Modern Dairy, Family Vacation 3/4, 6:30 PM, Subterranean

The Midnight, Nightly 3/11, 7:30 PM, the Vic, 18+

Mystery Skulls 5/5, 7:30 PM, Subterranean, 18+

Nebula, Year of the Cobra 5/17, 8 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 17+

New Found Glory, Four Year Strong, Be Well 5/28, 8 PM, Riviera Theatre, 18+

Olive Avenue, Fingy 3/8, 9:30 PM, Hideout

Orville Peck 6/1, 7:30 PM, Riviera Theatre

Otis: Go 3/10, 8:30 PM, Constellation

Pink Siifu, Turich Benjy, Peso Gordon, Vonbeezzy 3/3, 7:30 PM, Schubas

Plague Years, Somnuri, Furthest From the Light, Poisoned Breath 3/4, 8 PM, Cobra Lounge, 17+

Post-, Nick Photinos 3/6, 8:30 PM, Constellation

Eric Prydz 5/7, 10 PM, Radius Chicago, 18+

Joe Purdy, Earl Buck 3/5, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston

Puscifer, Moodie Black 7/2, 8 PM, Chicago Theatre

Abigail Riccards Quintet 3/4, 8 PM, Green Mill

Roof Dogs, Buckets 3/3, 9:30 PM, Hideout

RP Boo, DJ Spinn, DJ Clent, Cuenique, Majik Myke 3/4, 10 PM, Smart Bar

Satsang, Tim Snider & Wolfgang Timber 3/9, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston

Sheer Mag, Nancy, Abi Ooze, Zorn 3/10, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle

Snow tha Product 4/14, 8 PM, Metro, 18+

Marco Antonio Solís 5/7, 8 PM, Allstate Arena, Rosemont

Supa Bwe 3/10, 8 PM, the Promontory

Talib Kweli (DJ set and interview), Jarobi White (DJ set) 3/10, 8 PM, Chop Shop

Tallest Man on Earth, Uwade 3/16, 8 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+

Third Eye Blind, Taking Back Sunday, Hockey Dad 7/8, 7 PM, Huntington Bank Pavilion

Tigers Jaw 3/4, 6 PM, Subterranean, 17+

Various Distractions featuring DJ Beau Wanser, DJ Blake Clark 3/9, 9 PM, Empty Bottle

Wind-Ups 3/13, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle

Work Party, Glowing Brain, Heet Deth 3/11, 9 PM, GMAN Tavern

Yard Act 3/29, 9 PM, Sleeping

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Village
Yo La Tengo 3/12, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall

UPDATED

Allie X 4/21, 7:30 PM, Park West, venue changed

Badbadnotgood, Skiifall, Standing on the Corner (DJ set) 3/10, 9 PM, Metro, lineup updated, 18+

Chet Faker 9/16, 7:30 PM, the Vic, rescheduled, 18+

Death From Above 1979, OBGMs 11/9, 7:30 PM, Metro, rescheduled, 18+

Districts, Francis of Delirium 3/15, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge, venue changed, 18+

Don Broco, Plot in You, Phem, Color 8 4/19, 7 PM, Metro, lineup updated, 18+

Epik High, Woosung 3/12, 7:30 PM, the Vic, lineup updated

Jawbreaker, Built to Spill, Smoking Popes, Irene Tu 4/13-4/15, 7 PM, House of Blues, show added, 17+

Lil Tecca, BabySantana, Bktherula, Yngxchris 4/18, 6:30 PM, House of Blues, rescheduled; venue changed

Stephen Marley 3/18, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston, canceled

The Midnight 3/10, 7:30 PM, the Vic, canceled

Pablo Vittar, Alice Longyu Gao 4/25, 8 PM, Metro, lineup updated

Sammy Rae & the Friends, Con Brío 3/18, 7:30 PM, Metro, lineup updated

Rina Sawayama 4/30, 7 PM, Riviera Theatre, venue changed

Snapped Ankles, Gloin 3/3, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle, lineup updated

Sports, J Ember 3/10, 8:30 PM, Lincoln Hall, lineup updated, 18+

Squid, Delihul 3/16, 7:30 PM, Metro, lineup updated; venue changed, 18+

Teddy Swims, Stephen Day 4/16, 8 PM, Metro, lineup updated, 18+

Touché Amoré, Vein.fm, Militarie Gun, Scowl 3/29, 6:30 PM, Metro, lineup updated

The Tubes 7/9, 7:30 PM, Park West, rescheduled, 18+

Steve Vai 11/16, 7:30 PM, Copernicus Center, rescheduled



GOSSIP WOLF

A furry ear to the ground of the local music scene

IN SUMMER 2020, local Garifuna musician **Ifeanyi Elswith** released the album **Everything Festyle**, which Gossip Wolf hailed as a “star-making turn” that feels like “an intimate conversation with the coolest girl on the block.” Needless to say, this wolf has been on the lookout for new tunes from this velvet-voiced singer ever since! Last month, Elswith released what she calls an “island genre flip” of Summer Walker’s R&B hit “You Don’t Know Me” (produced by Jeremiah Frisloe). As good as that cover is, it was apparently just a warm-up for the sumptuous new single “**Hold You,**” which came out on Valentine’s Day and features a poignant verse by rapper **Wren**. Elswith uses melodic invention and boldly stated emotional truth to illuminate the difficulties of a tempestuous affair, creating a song so powerful it’ll be thawing the air between estranged lovers for years to come.

Local producer **Kurt Vise** crafts intricate jams whose sound vacillates between the early DIY electronic industrial music and mid-90s IDM. On Saturday, February 12, Swiss label **Sol VII** dropped two new releases from Vise, **Retrieve the Earth Elements** and **Escape the Gray**, that strike a balance between his headphone-oriented style and his dance-floor moves. The barreling, dystopian “Biohazard” is a highlight, and both releases are available via Sol VII’s Bandcamp page.

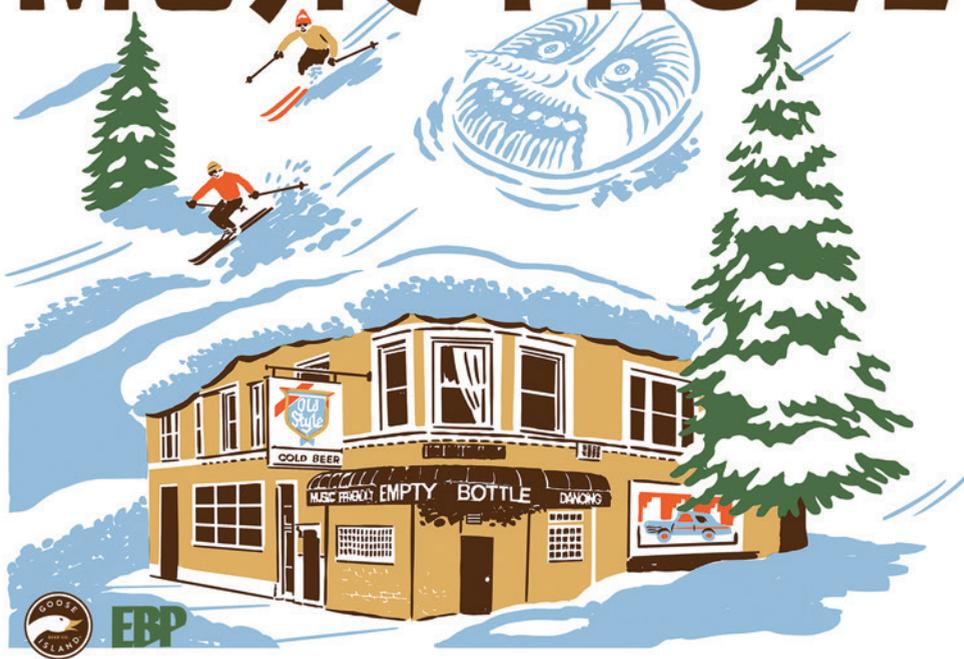
Gossip Wolf fell for Chicago hip-hop duo **Stranded Civilians** when they dropped the giddy, upbeat 2019 single “SOS!” with its smooth-as-hell flute sample and guest verse from WemmyMo. The north-side group included it on their terrific debut mixtape, 2020’s *Nirvana*, and last Friday they dropped their second full-length, **Obsidian**. The album feels engineered to improve your mood: rappers **Tony Santana** and **Aubry** slice the air with verses as cleanly as though they’re tossing Frisbees, adding sparkle to the rich music with the joy they take in working together.

—J.R. NELSON AND LEOR GALIL

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Solution Systems, Inc has openings for Microsoft Developer with a Master's degree in CS, Engg (any), Tech./ rld to analyze, evaluate, & design buss. processes around major transactional areas such as finance/sales/supply chain mgmt etc. Customize, support, & test NAV C/AL on C/SIDE and AL code in Visual Studio. Dsgn tech rqmnts, handle support tickets & improv sys performance. Wrk location is Rolling Meadows, IL with reqd travel to client locations throughout the USA. Please mail resumes to 3201 Tollview Drive, Rolling Meadows, IL 60008 (OR) email: susan@solsyst.com

LEGAL NOTICE

NOTICE OF PUBLIC SALE OF PERSONAL PROPERTY

Notice is hereby given that pursuant to Section 4 of the Self-Storage Facility Act, State of Illinois, that Chicago Northside Storage - Lakeview / Western Ave Storage LLC will conduct sale(s) at www.storage treasures.com by competitive bidding starting on February 9th and end on February 16th @ 9:30am on the premises where property has been stored, which are located at Chicago Northside Storage 2946 N Western Ave. Chicago, IL 60618. 773-305-4000. In the matter of the personal property for the individual listed below, Chicago Northside Storage

- Lakeview. John Frankot CC100, Jesus Santos N34, Leonard Hollander T177. Purchases must be made with cash only and paid at the time of sale's redemption. All goods are sold as is and must be removed at the time of purchase. Sale is subjected to adjournment.

RESEARCH

Have you had an unwanted sexual experience since age 18? Did you tell someone in your life about it who is also willing to participate? Women ages 18+ who have someone else in their life they told about their experience also willing to participate will be paid to complete a confidential online research survey for the Women's Dyadic Support Study. Contact Dr. Sarah Ullman of the University of Illinois at Chicago, Criminology, Law, & Justice Department at ForWomen@uic.edu, 312-996-5508. Protocol #2021-0019.

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PERSONALS

Tracy Guns & Britney Beach were at the skyscraper & CD convention in NY city. There was a party with M. Crue, B. Sabbath, ACDC - GNR & Aerosmith on Tuesday. Do you go? Yes - Bieber & Gwen said we went early, and saw L. GaGa, B. Spears. It was so fun. I can sell a lot of CDs there. I was happy. Love,
Guns N Roses
Dominick DeFanzo
Lia Lakely

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READER matches

Bowmanville, Monday at Sunset

You were looking out at the cemetery snow from behind a fence Monday, at cloudy sunset, just to look at something far away. I jumped the fence nearby, and wondered if you needed a leg up. You didn't, but said how grateful you were I asked. Your kindness & your smile made my day. Email thefarawaysnow@gmail.com

SWM Looking for Open Minded and Adventurous Female

Lincoln Park based SWM is seeking a woman to explore various aspects of sexuality. Open to everything from hotwifing, swinging, exhibitionism and voyeurism, to whatever your imagination desires. Let's start the conversation and see where it takes us. Fully vaxed and boosted. CLLPM4U@yahoo.com

Late 20s Woman Seeks Romance

Late 20s woman seeks date (any gender) who hates consumerism as much as she does. Enjoys music, thrifting, craigslist, getting drinks, writing, dry humor, & feeling inspired by the small/beautiful/absurd things in life! Please be funny & nice! No rich people. hewasaskaterboy77@gmail.com

Writing student 4 older gay psychotherapist/clergy/mentor

I'm a 100% straight sociology major, 19, wanting to switch to a writing major. (I'm not matriculated this semester). I'm looking to connect with an older, gay, 60+, psychotherapist, clergy or social worker who is kind, understanding and patient, someone I could feel safe with. robert@writingmajor.hush.com

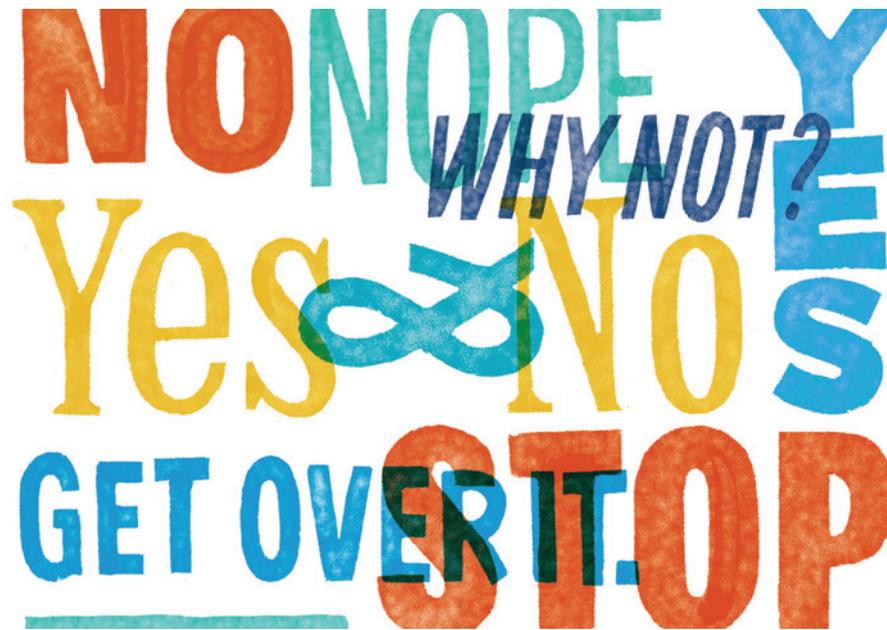
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OPINION

JOE NEWTON



SAVAGE LOVE

Quickies with obvious answers

Reminder: this is a sex-advice column, not a phone-sex provider.

By DAN SAVAGE

Q: I'm a very sexual cis male in his 30s.

Three years ago, I met this woman who just blew me away. She is eight years older, extremely beautiful, intelligent, and funny. I came onto her early on and she told me straight up that she was asexual. She likes kissing, cuddling, and solo masturbation, but that's it. She says intercourse doesn't do anything for her. To keep a relationship alive in the past, she would go through the motions, but she has no interest in doing that anymore, so I moved on. Since then, we got to know each other better and I have fallen in love with her. Last night we had dinner and I started thinking aloud how we might make a relationship work. I suggested that I could watch her masturbate, and maybe we could have an open relationship. She said it was out of the question. She admitted that when she first met me, she liked me, but now she loves me as a friend. She says there's no chance that this could work, and we should keep things platonic. She doesn't even want to kiss and cuddle me, as she fears I would get "worked up" and she would have to

reject me. We got into an argument, and she got angry with me. I love her. I want to spend every moment with her. I sincerely believe we could make this work. How can I convince her? —SEXUAL MAN INTO LOVING ECSTASY

A: You already have your answer, SMILE, and that answer—her answer—is "no."

Q: I'm a horny divorced bisexual male. Can you help me find females for regular phone sex? I masturbate every night and enjoy it much more if I hear a sweet voice on the other end of the line. I live in North Carolina, and I am usually freshly showered, naked, and erect between 11 PM and midnight. I time my orgasms for precisely midnight. Please help find me a female to have erotic discussions with! —JERKING ABOUT CONVERSATIONS KEPT SENSUOUS

A: Sir, this is a Wendy's. (Full disclosure: This isn't a Wendy's. This is a sex-advice column, JACKS, and sex-advice columnists are not matchmakers. So, you'll have to find and/or

hire a phone-sex provider on your own.)

Q: I'm not having sex with my best friend's husband, but we're doing something my best friend would probably find objectionable: I'm letting his husband drink my piss. The first time it just kind of happened. We're able to rationalize what we're doing—my best friend isn't into piss and I'm a "safe" person to do it with in that I'm not going to ask him for more—but it does involve putting my dick in the mouth of my best friend's husband. I was the best man at their wedding, and I feel guilty about this. I'm also married, but my husband and I have an agreement about outside games. Maybe I just need you to tell me to stop. —GAY URINAL IS LYING TO SPOUSE

A: First, the obvious answer: Stop.

Second, the obvious follow-up question: How'd that happen, GUILTS? Unless your best friend's husband was wearing a ridiculously convincing urinal costume at a Halloween party and you were on mushrooms, it didn't just happen. *You did it.* Even if he was in a convincing urinal costume and you ate all the mushrooms, *you did it.* You won't be able to stop doing this if you can't be honest about how you started.

Q: My friend started dating a girl eight years ago in college and broke up with her a year later. They have no relationship at all now. They don't even converse. I have been in love with the girl in question since the first day I met her. I was going to ask her out years ago but before I could she was dating my friend. I recently asked her out and we are now dating but none of our friends from back then know. I want to spend the rest of my life with her. I vibe with her like no one else. Do you think it's right to be with her? Or am I doing wrong to my friend? —THE BAD FRIEND

A: Your friend broke up with this woman—the woman you want to spend the rest of your life with—seven years ago. He doesn't own her, he doesn't have eternal dibs, and if he can't be happy for you, he's not your friend. And if you're feeling like a bad friend, maybe backing up and rereading GUILTS's letter will make you feel better. 📧

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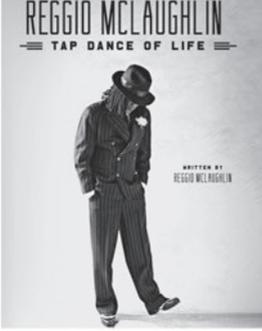
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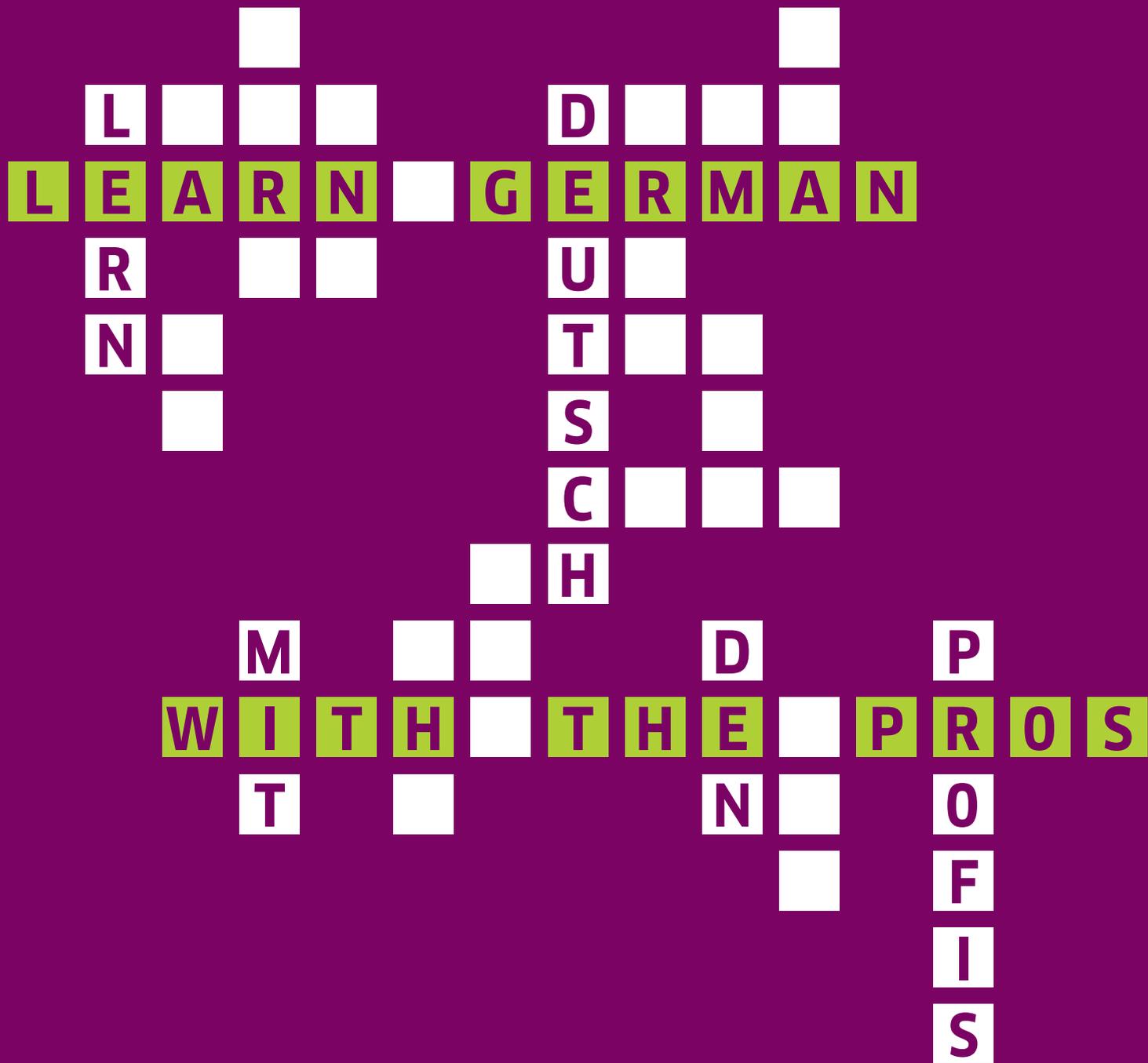
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