An audiologist’s study of over-the-counter hearing aids, a guide to radiator noises, an investigation of ShotSpotter, and much more
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**On the cover: Illustration by Joe Mills. For more of Mills’s work, go to joemills.com**

**THIS WEEK ON CHICAGOREADER.COM**

‘Sincerely held’ Nearly half of Chicago police employees applied for exemptions to the COVID-19 vaccine, Taylor Moore reports.

Marching for choice Hundreds demonstrated downtown after a leaked draft of a SCOTUS decision threatened abortion rights.

Still free. Still freaky. The Reader is transitioning fully to its nonprofit status.

—

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The Reader is finally free. We are now able to fully become a nonprofit newsroom—which means the Reader will be owned by YOU, our readers, and no one else. Will you make a donation today to kick things off, and be part of this historic moment?
Walking down North Avenue with his bulky Home Depot purchases in tow, George Blakemore sparkled in a glistening metallic-toned ensemble he painted himself. “I think that we all are artists,” he said. “We all use our imagination and we all are creative. There was a Black gentleman that died called Mr. Imagination who would say everything begins with the mind. When you saw me and thought, ‘I would like to take a picture of this gentleman,’ it started from your mind. And so, even though you are a reporter for the Reader, that’s an art too because you are creating.

“We all are artists because everything comes from the mind. And during the COVID-19 that was good therapy for me, and it would be good therapy for everybody to do something creative. Some people might sew, and might sing, and might dance, and all of that is using your imagination,” Blakemore said, always generously bringing his attention to the person he’s talking to. It is fair to say he interviewed me as much as I interviewed him on that bright Sunday afternoon earlier this spring.

“I paint Chinese umbrellas and I do canvas also. During my birthday party, they had a lot of my artwork there. A lot of people who came over made a purchase, and some of them gave me a little present,” says Blakemore, grateful for the 80th birthday party that the organization ExCons for Community and Social Change (ECCSC) had just thrown for him.

“I just thought it was wonderful that these young men and women were there to honor me. They are ex-offenders who are free now, and they’re doing good things in the Black community. I like to push positive things because there’s so much negativity that’s going on in our community. This is a grassroots organization whose founder, Tyrone Muhammad, stayed in the penitentiary for 21 years. Now he’s out trying to make positive contributions,” Blakemore explained.

An activist himself, Blakemore reminded me he’d been featured in the Chicago Reader 2015 People Issue, which presented him as “The Concerned Citizen.” That profile by Deanna Isaacs showcased Blakemore’s extensive history of attending meetings of local governing bodies and speaking his mind whenever he could. “The citizens have a responsibility and the elected officials have a responsibility. All of the above have dropped the baton,” he said in the article.

In his activism, Blakemore—a former civics teacher—fights for Black people to receive goods, services, contracts, and jobs in Chicago and Cook County. He considers those to be reparations that the Black community deserves. Having arrived in Chicago in 1970 at the end of the Great Migration, Blakemore said he has mixed feelings about the city he now calls home. “I’m working to make a better, more inclusive Chicago, where all people can benefit from living in this beautiful global city,” he said.
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FOOD & DRINK

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Dawn Lewis of D’s Roti & Trini Cuisine has a sweet hand

A self-taught home cook opens the city’s second Trinidadian restaurant.

By Mike Sula

Nobody just wakes up and says, “I’m gonna make roti today.” Not for the first time, anyway, and not without preparation.

So says Dawn Lewis, who over the last four years earned the title of “the Roti Lady” among Trinidadian expats exiting frenetic soca fetes at the South Loop club Bassline, who grew dependent on her curry-stuffed dhalpuri and flatbreads.

“I’d make 50 or 60 roti and pull up at the end of the night and sell them out of the trunk,” says Lewis. “Ten minutes later they sold out. Gone.” It wasn’t long before promoters started inviting Lewis inside the club to sell, and along with monthly sold-out online roti pop-ups, the onetime federal government worker built the nest egg that allowed her to move her operation out of her Dolton home kitchen and into a 200-square-foot kitchen at the South Loop Food Company in late March.

If you’re keeping score, D’s Roti & Trini Cuisine is one of two Trinidadian restaurants in Illinois, both of them operating out of that particular ghost kitchen.

Lewis, 42, isn’t Trinidadian, but she grew up among the south suburban expat community and learned to cook the island’s syncretic Caribbean cuisine after marrying a man from the mountains in the northwest of Trinidad. “I’ve been gifted cookbooks from a lot of Trini people I know,” she says. “I watched videos,
read literature, or it was just trial and error. And we have people in the neighborhood. We have friends. Whenever I cook something I’m like, ‘Come taste this. Tell me how it is. What needs to be improved?’”

It didn’t come easy. Her first attempts at dhalpuri, the yellow split pea-infused roti, didn’t go well. “I did four roti and I thought I was gonna pass out because the dough was so hard to knead.” An ambitious early attempt at her husband Marvin’s birthday party ended up with rotis that were stiff and unyielding and could’ve been a setback if she hadn’t persevered.

“I know people were talking about me,” she says. “But you never give up if there’s something you love to do. I kept at it. I kept at it and here we are today.”

Dhalpuri and paratha are two of the most iconic and celebrated flatbreads in a whole Trini canon, most of them derived from the Indian migrant population. Dhalpuri incorporates ground yellow split peas into the wheat flour dough before it’s rested, rolled, and cooked on a flat griddle known as a tawa, producing a silky-soft envelope for fillings. Paratha often incorporates a bit of sugar into the dough, which is layered, and sometimes buttered, and pressed in from the edges as it cooks to achieve a tensile but flaky outcome. Paratha is also known as “buss up shut” for its resemblance to a busted up shirt. Lewis offers each of these with chicken, beef, or potato and chickpea curries.

She also does doubles: smaller fried flatbreads known as bara that come with curried chickpeas and are meant to be augmented with a handful of chutneys, including: tamarind, culantro-based shado beni sauce, pickled green apple kuchela, and hot pepper sauce made with her homegrown pimentos.

Lewis makes between 50 and 60 roti a day by herself, and though she can now bang out a batch of dough in five minutes (not counting one to two hours of resting), it took some time to get there. “You have to wake up early in the morning and go kill two chickens,” which is her sly way of not revealing certain secrets she’s picked up. “One thing I’ll say, flour is a fickle thing. People think you have to knead-knead-knead the flour—and you don’t. You have to be gentle with it. And you have to have a clean heart and pure hands.”

You might wonder why Lewis chose to move into the same ghost kitchen as the only other Trini restaurant for miles. But apart from the flatbreads, there’s little overlap between her menu and her neighbors at Cafe Trinidad. She offers fry bake and saltfish, a deep-fried flatbread split open and packed with salt fish, or buljol; reconstituted salt cod, sauteed with tomatoes, and peppers. Pelau is another regular standard: browned rice with stewed chicken, pigeon peas, and calabaza. On Fridays there’s Trini-style Chinese with five-spice-lacquered roast chicken and chow mein or fried rice. Saturdays bring more restoratives for folks recovering from the previous night’s liming: thick cow heel soup, or split pea-based corn soup. “There’s always that corn soup man selling after the party,” she says. “You get that corn soup after you’ve been drinking and it brings you back and opens you up. You say, ‘OK, I can go a little bit longer.’”

After that she offers the classic Trini Sunday lunch of stewed chicken, macaroni pie, red beans and rice, and callaloo. But these dishes represent just a fraction of her repertoire. Over the holidays she’s busy filling orders for tamale-like pastelles, rugelach-like currant rolls, coconut sweetbreads, and the iconic rum or brandy-soaked black cake. Her Instagram features a deeper bench, dishes she could only pull off in a brick-and-mortar, which is her long-term goal.

In the short term, she just wants more people to, “Try meh hand,” she says. “In Trini culture people say, ‘Try meh hand,’ try my food. Or, ‘She have a sweet hand,’ meaning she can cook.”
I n the last few weeks, Mayor Lightfoot has revealed several important details about the casino she’s pushing so hard to develop, including . . .

Where it will go—near Chicago and Halsted on the city’s near north side.

Who will run it—Bally’s Corporation.

And why we need it—to raise money to pay police and firefighter pension obligations.

But she’s not told us the details many Chicagoans probably most want to know—how much it will cost.

For the moment, Mayor Lightfoot is sort of pretending the project has no public costs. As though Bally’s is shouldering the expenses.

Or as the Sun-Times recently reported: “Bally’s will foot the bill for those infrastructure upgrades, according to Jennie Huang Bennett, the city’s chief financial officer. . . . No tax increment financing district will be created for the corporation either, she said during an interview with the Sun-Times editorial board shortly after the casino announcement.”

Wow. That’s quite a pledge. Of course, I hope no one in Chicago actually believes it—that would mean you’ve learned nothing over the last few decades.

To understand why I’m so skeptical, consider the scope of the project that Bally’s and the city have proposed.

They want to build a super-big casino on a site where a Tribune printing plant has been operating for over 40 years—so there’s a lot of wear and tear on the property. Also, they’ve got train rails running along the site.

Before they actually build the casino, someone is going to have to pay to buy the property, demolish the printing plant, rid the site of any toxins, and probably do something about those unsightly train tracks.

Plus add traffic lights, widen and pave streets, and do whatever else it takes to assure locals that said super-big casino won’t overwhelm the nearby River West neighborhood with traffic.

And the Lightfoot administration is suggesting that all of this won’t cost the public a dime? That Bally’s will foot the whole bill? C’mon, Chicago, you’ve got to be too smart to fall for that.

Mayor Lightfoot is not the first Chicago mayor to cover up the real costs of her fantasies—and I’m sure she won’t be our last.

To hear our mayors, Chicago has an almost magical ability to build stuff for no cost to the public. Even as the public winds up paying for it with rising property taxes year after year.

In particular, Chicago’s mayors are skilled at underestimating a project’s cost and overestimating its benefits.

But to suggest that Bally’s will pick up the whole tab? Man, I haven’t heard such a tall tale since Mayor Daley said it wouldn’t cost the public a dime to buy up Michael Reese Hospital, tear it down, and construct an Olympic Village.

Last I heard that deal has cost taxpayers around $100 million in property taxes—even though we didn’t even build the Olympic Village because we didn’t get the Olympics. Mercifully.

So you can be pretty sure that the casino will cost you tens of millions in property tax dollars, which will probably come from a TIF.

Because the tax increment financing program is the main source—perhaps the only source—of discretionary money the mayor has for projects like a super-big casino.

And that brings me to the second part of the statement in the Sun-Times. The part where the chief financial officer contended that “no tax increment financing district will be created for the corporation.”

That statement may actually be true. That is—the city might not have to create a new TIF district for Bally’s. But that’s only because there are several already existing districts to draw from.

That area is crawling with TIF districts. Thanks to research assistance from John McDermott Jr.—activist, troublemaker, and fellow TIF geek—I can name them. Here goes . . .

River West, Chicago/Kingsbury, Near North, Goose Island, Cortland/Chicago River, and North Branch (South). If I left any off the list, I’m sure John will let me know.

So yes, the city could pay for the casino project by bringing in property tax dollars from nearby TIFs (they call it porting). Is that legal? Well, I suppose. It’s how Millennium Park was paid for.

Look, I love construction projects that give people jobs. But as one of the taxpayers footing the bill, please don’t tell me I’m not footing the bill. Or that there aren’t more pressing development needs—that would also create construction jobs—all over the city, especially on the south and west sides.

What we need with this project is less cheerleading and more skepticism in the form of an objective cost-benefit analysis. That’s where a dispassionate bean counter subtracts the real costs of building the casino from the anticipated benefits of operating it.

Then we will know if the project is worth the investment.

In this case, Mayor Lightfoot says the casino will bring in about $192 million a year for the city—all of it dedicated to pay for police and fire pension obligations.

Alderman Walter Burnett—the mayor’s chief casino cheerleader—has been going around saying alderpeople must approve the project or raise property taxes to pay for the pensions.

My guess is that the casino will wind up making us do both. That is—we’ll raise property taxes to build the casino, which probably won’t bring in enough revenue to cover pension obligations. So we’ll raise property taxes to cover the rest of our pension tab.

This is starting to remind me of the parking meter sale, which Mayor Daley insisted was a great deal for taxpayers.

He kept bragging about the $1 billion the deal would bring in—without mentioning the meters were worth around $10 billion over time.

So it’s like we borrowed $1 billion and paid $9 billion in interest. Like I said, this hustle has been going on for a long time. 🗣️
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The end of Roe
Still feeling comfortable about reproductive rights in Illinois? Don’t.
By Deanna Isaacs

Regarding the recently revealed U.S. Supreme Court draft ruling on Roe v. Wade: WTF?
Because, it’s the F we’re talking about, right?
That little itch we’re biologically programmed to scratch and its inordinate, inequitable aftermath?
As I’ve opined here before, if cisgender men were the ones carrying a pregnancy for nine months, suffering through an excruciating (and dangerous) delivery, and then being saddled with the responsibility for another person for much of the rest of their lives, we would not be in this pickle.
In that world, it would be clear to everyone that nature’s arrangement—whereby the dads would be newly expecting every year or two for decades—is no longer optimal. And that when contraception (it would be free and available everywhere) would occasionally fail, direct intervention, if desired, is warranted.
Nothing about this would be illegal, socially frowned upon, or hard to access. Dudes would be picking up their uterine reset pills as casually as a Starbucks or a six-pack. And if a surgical adjustment should be necessary, it would be no more expensive or disconcerting than a dental procedure.
But that’s not our world. It’s not the patriarchy that’s getting, as the guys used to say, knocked up. Instead, in the wake of Donald Trump’s appointment of three justices to the U.S. Supreme Court, we’re facing the loss of the wedge of reproductive freedom Americans have had for the last 50 years.

So, shame on us. A year ago, Terry Cosgrove, who’s headed the pro-choice political action committee Personal PAC for more than 30 years, told me that he expected the Trump Supreme Court to “eviscerate Roe v. Wade.” Now that it’s coming to pass, the biggest surprise for him is that people are reacting with shock.
“It’s very simple,” an admittedly frustrated Cosgrove tells me: “This is the result of losing elections. The seeds of it were sown a long time ago. Donald Trump told us exactly what he was going to do if he was elected president, not enough people took him seriously, and we lost the 2016 election.”

“Trump said, ‘I’m going to appoint judges that are going to overturn Roe v. Wade.’ What didn’t people get about that? So here we are. I don’t know why people don’t understand how important it is that we do everything we can to elect pro-choice candidates.”

Well, um, what about that thing people are suggesting now, codifying the right to choose through legislation at the federal level?
“In the Congress? It’s not going to happen this year,” Cosgrove says. “We don’t have the votes in the Senate. I don’t know why people are wasting their time and energy even talking about that when we have two Illinois Supreme Court races [in districts two and three, north and northwest of Chicago] in a few months that are going to decide the future of abortion rights in the state of Illinois. If we don’t win them, the right-wingers have lawsuits in the Illinois court system right now seeking to overturn HB 40 [signed by Governor Bruce Rauner in 2017] and the Reproductive Health Act [signed by Governor J.B. Pritzker in 2019]. If HB 40 is struck down, our trigger law, which says the day Roe v. Wade is overturned abortion and birth control and IVF are all illegal in Illinois, is back in effect. That’s what’s riding on the ballot.”

If people are serious about undoing this damage, they need to volunteer as much time as they can for the campaign of a pro-choice candidate, Cosgrove says. “They need to donate to pro-choice organizations, talk to everyone they know about registering to vote, and make sure they get out and vote for those pro-choice candidates.”

“If everyone turns all their attention to Washington, D.C., and stops paying attention to Illinois, they’re going to lose everything here. There won’t be a single state left in the middle of the country where abortion will be safe and legal and acceptable.”

His words were on my mind as I drove through Indiana to a college graduation in Ohio last weekend, on highways dotted with anti-abortion billboards.

For more about this year’s Illinois elections, join Personal PAC (personalpac.org) and Jane’s Army (janesarmy2022.com) for a virtual event, “Illinois Elections 101 & Fighting Back Against SCOTUS,” at 6 PM on Monday, May 16.

Jessica McCartney, 50, at the abortion rights rally at the Federal Plaza on May 7

“I have a daughter who was conceived through IVF and I’m afraid that things like that may be next after taking away the right to abortion. I also have a daughter who may need health care one day.” – KATHLEEN HINKEL

For more about this year’s Illinois elections, join Personal PAC (personalpac.org) and Jane’s Army (janesarmy2022.com) for a virtual event, “Illinois Elections 101 & Fighting Back Against SCOTUS,” at 6 PM on Monday, May 16.

@Deannalsaacs
Four surprising benefits of adopting a flexible, nontraditional working arrangement

By Megan Eileen McDonough, Content Strategist at Deskpass

If trend studies are any indication, hybrid work—a work style in which employees blend working from different locations, such as their home, office, or coworking space—is here to stay. With benefits such as reducing stress levels, boosting productivity, and encouraging work-life balance while increasing autonomy, flex working has never been more popular.

From a social-impact lens, hybrid offices can greatly improve the working environments for underrepresented groups, such as members of BIPOC communities and working moms. Here are four overlooked benefits of adopting a flexible, nontraditional working arrangement:

**Mothers can balance family care and careers**

Studies show that women are leaving the workforce at a higher rate than men, with some women taking positions below their skill set or with lower salaries in order to balance their job and family-care responsibilities. With a remote or hybrid work approach, mothers can be more involved with childcare without sacrificing their job and their income, whether they work from the office or at home.

Although the balance is changing, women are usually the primary caregiver in the household, and having flexibility around when and where they work can be a game changer. Without it, women are more likely to decelerate their careers or leave the workforce altogether. In an effort to accommodate new mothers, many coworking spaces have created dedicated nursing rooms where women can pump in privacy. Even outside of woman-focused coworking spaces, flexible working arrangements increase virtual communication, which can reduce the power dynamics that are often found in male-dominated office environments, in which women may be less likely to speak up or contribute to discussions. Remote office tools such as Slack allow coworkers to communicate in front of the entire department, therefore reducing opportunities for harassment or closed-door conversations where women are more likely to be negatively affected.

**SPACE SPOTLIGHT: Dayhouse Coworking**

This women-owned workspace includes a lactation room for moms and a designated children's play area.

**Women may feel safer in curated coworking environments**

In recent years there has been a rise of female-focused coworking spaces. Some women specifically gravitate toward these comfortable, judgment-free zones as a place where they can utilize amenities that are there to help them thrive, and wear what they want without having to worry about prying eyes over their shoulder. Women also tend to feel more confident networking when they feel safe in their environment.

**SPACE SPOTLIGHT: ThinkBar**

Lofted ceilings, large windows, skylights, exposed brick, and natural light make for a relaxed, welcoming work environment. BIPOC workers may be better represented

As Deskpass cofounder Nicole Vasquez points out, “From an industry perspective, Black, Indigenous, and people of color at tech companies are still unfortunately underrepresented.” They are unlikely to have the same experience at the office as their white counterparts, and are more likely to feel discomfort and disconnection at work or with their teammates.

One emerging trend in coworking is a rise in shared workspaces and social spaces that specifically cater to people of color, such as Mox.E in Chicago. Even beyond formal coworking spaces, flexible working arrangements can allow employees to choose a workspace in any neighborhood they choose, and for BIPOC that might mean a neighborhood with demographics that match their identity. “Another benefit is that seeing people who are successful that look like you is a great inspiration,” Vasquez adds. Having the freedom to choose your workspace is key in finding an environment where you feel safe and supported.

**SPACE SPOTLIGHT: Mox.E**

This BIPOC-owned space is where under-represented entrepreneurs go to build, connect, and capitalize their businesses. A healthier work/life balance leads to more human connections

What the traditional 9-5 office got right pre-pandemic was the separation of work and home. Many people find it hard to disconnect from work when their kitchen table is now their office. Instead of being a place where they’d gather with friends and family, they now consider it their workplace.

While people value flexibility in how and where they work, they still crave human connection. People might enjoy working from home long-term, but they want to feel professional and to have access to professional environments—and they want them close to home and on their schedule. In the future, a positive work-life balance will be a lot more attainable because people will have the ability to go into the office when and where it is most conducive to their lifestyle.

**SPACE SPOTLIGHT: Art/Work Coworking**

Open day and night, this spaces offers an integrated collaboration between art, technology, work and life.
It’s quiet around here until it’s not

What does a neighborhood sound like? And what does that mean?

By Salem Collo-Julin

“It’s always quiet around here until it’s not,” said my neighbor from down the street, petting her big dog’s head. Her dog was sitting contentedly in the grass near the lagoon in Sherman Park, near my house in Back of the Yards. It’s often silent there, unless there’s a flock of geese fighting—or unless a loud, anxious dog (like my own little bundle of joy) decides to assert his space by letting the whole park know that there’s a bigger dog nearby. I was quietly walking my dog through Sherman, accompanied only by the occasional notification jingle of some app on my cellular device, until my dog saw my neighbor’s dog and the dog opera began.

My neighbor and I run into each other fairly often in this part of the park, if I get there early enough in the morning to catch her on her own daily nature walk with her sweet giant, and though it’s been years now, my dog always needs to shatter the silence when he spots her dog. My interactions with this neighbor normally consist of just a wave and a smile. But if my dog sees her dog (or any other dog, really), howling and barking ensues.

This usually manages to wake up dogs in yards near the park, and for what feels like hours, all anyone can hear is the bitter staccato of canine shouting. “Hey hey hey,” my dog scream-yelps, “Where are you? You can’t get me! You can’t get me!” “Shut up,” a dog voice hollers back from the streets west of the park. “What’s going on?” “Who’s yelling?” “Rat-a-tat!” “Rarf rarf hooooow!”

My relationship with the lady with the big dog is perfectly fine. That day we chatted a little about a car accident that had awakened a bunch of the neighbors a few days prior. One of the semitrailer drivers who parks their rig in an empty lot down the way backed out onto Racine Avenue a little too quickly and managed to reverse T-bone two passing cars speeding in opposite directions. None of the three drivers seemed to be paying attention.

The sound of the truck tires striking the minivan was one loud boom, quickly followed by the sound of another car crunching into the front of the semi—and then, just as quickly, by the sounds of people leaving their houses and heading to the scene of the accident. You could hear them yelling “Is everyone OK?” amid the crunching of various shards of headlight plastic and other car parts under the tires of cars still pushing through on Racine, swerving around everyone and ignoring any semblance of safety. In my head, I remember it like this: at 5:55 AM I heard a few birds talking smack on a wire outside my window (I’m convinced they’re making fun of me), and at 6 AM I heard the crash, then the people. Then I ran outside too. It’s always quiet around here until it’s not.

I sometimes get the question “What’s that area like?” when I tell new people in my life where I live. Many are genuinely curious to find out if the coffee’s good at the grill (it’s all right) or if the bus comes on time (best CTA drivers in the city on this route, in my opinion), but some people always ask “What’s your neighborhood like” in a thinly veiled attempt to suss out whether they’d be afraid to walk around here.

I can’t tell you if any area is safe, and honestly, when there are humans involved, no neighborhood is “safe”—break-ins, bar fights, and homicides can and have happened nearly everywhere. I’m certainly not going to tell you that my neighborhood is either perfect or the worst, especially when you’re a fellow Chicagoman who should know better. We have a terrible history of segregation in this city, and when you indulge your impulse to categorize areas as inherently good or bad, you’re just reinforcing the cycles of crime and pov-
To avoid feeling like I need to teach grown people how to use their brains, then, I usually answer by describing my neighborhood’s variety of noises. It’s quiet around here until it’s not, which also could describe downtown at night, or DeKalb, or Mars. Hate and fear are interconnected, and the disturbing legacy of white supremacy leached into the water when we first built lead pipes underground—and when we segregated neighborhoods by skin color or country of origin. Despite our attempts to filter it out of the supply, white supremacy has managed to re-form itself in harmless-sounding questions: “Is it safe around here?” “Is it always this loud around here?”

When it’s not quiet, there are car crashes. My rough count from last summer alone was ten on the corner near my house, where there probably should be some sort of sign saying YIELD or SLOW DOWN or JESUS CHRIST, PEOPLE. Instead, there’s only a remnant of an old, entirely avoidable crash: a pushed-in fence, slammed by a car speeding through on a rainy day. Car crashes attract the people, and half the neighbors will stand outside offering phones, translation into English for the benefit of a CPD or CFD responder, and the like. The other half will just stand there and cluck.

Crashes happen so often here that they’re like mobile and temporary town squares. Conversations about what just happened and whether or not the passengers are OK are punctuated by the exclamations of people who’ve been waiting all winter to tell someone, anyone, “They should put a sign here!” or “I called 311 and nothing happened!”

There are other things that make loud noises around here, including gunshots. But you hear them less often now than ten years ago—we knew the neighborhood was “changing” when fireworks sounds started overtaking gun sounds. Firearm owners where I live announce their presence at midnight on New Year’s Eve with what sounds like a collective 100-gun salute, shooting into the air in their backyards. It’s like an industrial noise-fusion composition accompanied by “Don’t Tread on Me”-style shouting.

One year something set off an explosion in a garage a few blocks away—someone had stashed Indiana fireworks near a stockpile of ammo near an old car, so that the power of suggestion would’ve been enough to blow everything up. The fire department seemed to get there almost immediately, thankfully. No one ran out of their homes to investigate that incident.

On the fun and loud side, my neighborhood has always been the sort of place where people feel comfortable playing their music and having backyard parties. It’s totally all right with us if you’re talking loudly in your yard, or on the sidewalk, or on your stoop. No one is going to call in a noise complaint about your party, even if it stays loud into the wee hours and beyond. We’ve got other fish to fry.

This has resulted in some completely surreal lineups, if like me you think of summer Saturday nights as a series of backyard concerts. The neighbors on our side of the alley pretty regularly hire full bands and set up elaborate outdoor speaker systems for birthdays, graduations, and the like. Nearby there’s a vacant lot (no one knows who owns it, and they haven’t been around in years to check up), and last fall it provided the venue for a wedding reception, complete with horseback rides for the kids, a ten-piece band, and fireworks. At these affairs, the music can go until the next day.

I’ve since learned that there’s a drummer for a band specializing in rancheras who lives down the way; he often can only practice in the wee hours of the morning, and the acoustics of the side of my house seem to bounce his sound directly into my bedroom window. I’d rather listen to drums than guns at night, but given enough time you get used to both.

When I was a child, I traveled to Iowa for a few weeks one summer to help out on a cousin’s farm. I loved dealing with the chickens and running through the grass, and I was totally happy spending the evenings watching the two VHS tapes that my cousin’s grandfather would let us watch (a Victor Borge tribute compilation from PBS and Dorf on Golf). What was unsettling, though, bordering on frightening, was the complete lack of human noise at night. The sky was a sea of stars, but there were no trucks on the highway, no random couples arguing on the sidewalk, no planes making their way into Midway—none of that. Just stillness and crickets.

People tend to think “crickets” when a sudden, awkward silence befalls a room, but actual crickets can get incredibly loud. I think we use them to mean “quiet” because nothing is louder to us than our own thoughts. When I hear my city, I’m really just hearing my relationship to its evolution.

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@hollo
A guide to midwestern radiators and their calls

How to tell by listening whether your steam radiator is healthy, out of alignment, or harboring a dire malefic presence

By Katie Prout

In the 2015 horror film The Blackcoat's Daughter, there's a midnight scene where a teenager named Kat slips out of her room and into her boarding school's dorm basement. An older girl named Rose, apparently the only other student left at the school over winter break, grows curious and follows. Old pipes creak and whine as Kat's indecipherable voice floats on the air, her murmurs part of a one-sided conversation only she is privy to. As Rose creeps toward the boiler room, a dull, rhythmic boom grows louder. She peeks through a window in the door to see Kat violently, repeatedly prostrating herself in front of the enormous glowing boiler. Part of the horror of this scene comes from a shared, familiar unease: we've all had the experience of not knowing what sounds our home is making or why. In this way, my cat Poe is also like a possessed Catholic schoolgirl. Sometimes, he looks like he's worshiping the miracle of home heating systems, but clearly he's actually communing with the devil. His conduit isn't a boiler but rather our apartment radiators, and specifically the one in our bedroom—and only when the radiator is as cold and silent as a headstone. Roll over at 3 AM and crack your eyes open, and there he is, an inky, furry little goblin sitting upright and motionless in front of the flaking radiator. Worshiping, communing, listening. When we call his name, not even his ears twitch.

I'm new to radiators. The furnace in the bungalow I grew up in made its own sounds—and shot out dry dust—when it turned on. But radiators, man. As disturbing as it is when my cat fixates on their silence, it's taken me a long time not to be equally concerned by their noise. They look like xylophones but sound like teapots, hissing and whistling. Other days, they make a clanking and then a terrible metallic grinding that reminds me of another movie scene—when the iceberg rips raw the starboard hull of the Titanic. Occasionally, if the rest of the room is quiet, I can hear water trickling inside the radiator's coils, like a barely-on bathtub faucet. The hissing and trickling I kind of like. And because I grew up with five siblings, clanging and banging are noises I've long been conditioned to ignore. But the whistling? The whistling really freaks me out. What does it mean? What is my radiator trying to tell me? Is it about to blow up? Am I going to die?

“No,” says José Campuzano, owner of JC Radiators in Humboldt Park. His voice over the phone is gravelly and low, and he's patient with my questions and economical with his words. For the past ten years, his job has been bringing old radiators back to life.

José grew up with radiators. In a warehouse in the city, he stores a thousand radiators he's collected over the years as part of his work. He just finished installing 24 radiators throughout his own home, cutting his heating bill to about a quarter of what it was when he used forced air.

“I think a lot of the newbodies, I don't know how you wanna call them—millennials—they just don't know radiators,” José says. Guilty as charged. “They see them as an antique, or a dying type of heat. But they're here for a reason. Forced air is an inferior way of heating property. Radiators should not be removed,” he finishes, his growl dropping to a whisper. In the past few seconds, José has spoken more words than he did in the past 15 minutes. I'm interested.

“What do their sounds mean?” I ask. “Is it a language you understand?”

“Yes,” he says. It turns out the whistling I hear is not a threat. Hissing or whistling is just a sign that the radiator is working properly as it releases air. Banging and hammering, however, are something else. Steam radiators, the kind we're talking
about, are especially common in old Chicago apartments and homes. They’re powered by water heated in a boiler, which is usually located in the basement (so as to be closer to the devil). The resulting steam travels through a pipe to the radiator, which radiates out the heat; as the steam cools, it condenses back into water and returns to the boiler.

If a radiator is making lots of banging or hammering noises, it’s a sign that either it or the pipes connected to it are pitched incorrectly. As a building settles, pipes can shift so that they’re tilted or angled in the wrong direction, making it harder for the condensing water to get where it needs to go. “You don’t want to hear any of the banging or the hammering,” José tells me.

Water trapped in the radiator or pipes can cause a leak, or worse. Steam forcing its way through water—one of the main causes of those undesirable sounds—puts stress on the metal, because water doesn’t compress like steam. Pooled water can also weaken metal by causing corrosion.

“Cast iron shatters like glass,” José helpfully explains. Imagining this, I let out an involuntary “Oh God.” José gives out a dry chuckle. “Yeah, it’s really soft and brittle, but it’s heavy as heck.”

“I should call my landlord,” I say out loud, thinking about the banging and clanking I hear from the radiator in our apartment stairwell. “No,” José corrects me. “Call JC Radiators.”

A few days later, I do. “José,” I say, “one more thing.”

“Sure,” he says.

“Why does my cat sit and listen to the radiator even when it’s cold and quiet?” I think but don’t ask, Is he possessed?

I can hear the shrug in José’s voice. “They hear better than we do.”

“Yup,” he confirms, then pauses. “Make sure you add my name to that.”

@katie_prout
before last March, you might not have heard of ShotSpotter. That month, news of 13-year-old Adam Toledo’s killing by a police officer in Little Village rang through Chicago just as resoundingly as the alleged noise of gunshots that brought cops to his location in the first place.

Almost as soon as the news of Toledo’s death broke, activists began raising questions about the private gunshot-detection system that summoned police to the scene. That summer, the activists’ voices grew even louder when it became public that the city had quietly extended its $33 million, three-year contract with ShotSpotter by another two years, through August 2023.

ShotSpotter markets its technology as a “proactive” tool that hears gunshots and gets police to potential crime scenes faster than 911 calls.

But sound is a tricky thing. It travels, echoes, and reverberates, and can be muffled, distorted, or unclear. How can ShotSpotter sensors tell the difference between a gunshot or firework? They apparently can’t—at least not as accurately as the company has publicly asserted. And there is little evidence to suggest that the Chicago police (CPD) or ShotSpotter test the devices to see how they register different loud noises once deployed.

ShotSpotter’s primary purpose is to hear gunshots, but according to a report published by the city’s Office of the Inspector General (OIG) last August, only 9.1 percent of alerts generated between January 1, 2020, and May 31, 2021, actually resulted in police finding evidence of a gun crime. And a 2011 study commissioned by the company found that trucks, motorcycles, helicopters, fireworks, construction, trash pickup, and church bells, among other sounds, have all triggered false positive alerts, mistaking these sounds for gunshots.

In its 2021 report, the OIG found that the very presence of ShotSpotter changed the behavior of police and how they worked in areas where ShotSpotter devices were present. The report found that CPD officers’ “generalized perceptions of the frequency of ShotSpotter alerts in a given area may be substantively changing policing behavior.”

Until now, where ShotSpotter devices are has paradoxically been a closely guarded secret: the CPD won’t acknowledge the exact locations of the devices, despite the fact that they can be seen from the street. The department steadfastly denies Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for ShotSpotter locations by claiming that such information is exempt from disclosure because the metadata of the device locations may include private addresses. In response to one FOIA request, the department claimed that because ShotSpotter is used for law enforcement, “the release of such information could endanger the life and safety of property owners who are cooperating with police.”

To build a map of ShotSpotter locations, the Reader and the independent research organization Lucy Parsons Labs compared work permits filed by Motorola Solutions—which installs surveillance devices for the city—and the Office of Emergency Management and Communications with data from the Department of Transportation. Our analysis located more than 750 apparent ShotSpotter devices spread throughout the city, including in districts the CPD has not publicly acknowledged as having them.

The OIG’s report revealed that the city’s violence reduction dashboard confirmed that as of May 2021, ShotSpotter devices had been installed in 12 police districts. (The OIG noted that 0.6 percent of alerts were located in a district outside the 12 with confirmed
Adam Toledo’s death wasn’t the only time the devices made headlines. In March, the Associated Press reported that Michael Williams had been jailed in 2020 for supposedly killing a young man from his neighborhood. During the citywide unrest that followed the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Williams gave a ride to a man who was later killed. Williams was arrested for the killing based on evidence that prosecutors later said was unsubstantial—a “noiseless security video showing a car driving through an intersection, and a loud bang picked up by a network of surveillance microphones.”

Williams’s case was dismissed and he was later released from Cook County Jail in July of 2021, but his arrest and the time he spent in the jail—during which he contracted COVID-19 twice—left him “shaken” and feeling unsafe when he walks around his own community.

Another key aspect of Williams’s case is that there appeared to be modifications of the data after the event occurred, which is not unique to this case. According to Vice, “months later and after ‘post-processing,’ another ShotSpotter analyst changed the alert’s coordinates to a location on South Stony Island Drive near where Williams’ car was seen on camera.”

And it seems like this may not be the only time such “post-processing” has occurred.

An analysis by the Reader and Lucy Parsons Labs found that between January 2017 and May 2022, there were 50 days in which at least 10 percent of ShotSpotter detections that were reported in an initial dataset were removed from subsequent reports.

In one example, an initial version of the data that was published in August 2021 showed 90 ShotSpotter alerts citywide for April 21, 2021. However, a version of the data from the same date that we reviewed earlier this month showed only 74 ShotSpotter alerts. That’s a discrepancy of 18 percent.

After being asked by the Reader about the discrepancy, the Office of Public Safety Administration said they are reviewing the database for a “technical issue” and will “resolve it as soon as possible.”

According to the OIG’s report, ShotSpotter devices located near the edge of one district can occasionally pick up sounds in another. Jonathan Manes, an attorney at MacArthur Justice Center who leads MacArthur’s Illinois office on surveillance technology, said this is to be expected because neither ShotSpotter or CPD tests the devices to determine how they respond to different types of sound.

While ShotSpotter claims to have an accuracy rate of 97 percent, Manes said that misrepresents the facts. “They continue to repeat every chance they get that their system is supposedly 97 percent accurate,” he said. “It’s not, and that number is not an accurate number.” The figure is based on the assumption that every alert ShotSpotter creates is based on an actual gunshot, unless the police department disagrees, according to Manes. “We know that Chicago police never send a complaint for false alerts,” he said. “That’s just not an accuracy number, it’s a tally of customer complaints, and the fact that they keep calling it an accuracy number is, in my view, just dishonest and misleading.”

ShotSpotter’s supporters and critics don’t shy away from publicly voicing their thoughts on the devices, and Manes is no exception. He regularly reports his findings on
ShotSpotter’s inaccuracy and ineffectiveness on Twitter, and about a year ago, a Twitter user under the username of @slayercapital, an account that has since been deleted, started responding, calling his claims against ShotSpotter “disgusting and despicable.”

The account’s owner claimed to have no involvement with ShotSpotter, but Manes said he believes the account was in fact run by Doug McFarlin, ShotSpotter’s vice president. Before the account was anonymized, it included McFarlin’s first name, and most of the account’s followers are ShotSpotter executives.

That wasn’t the only instance where ShotSpotter’s C-suite attempted to use Twitter to further their agenda. Last August, when the anonymous account criticized Action Center on Race and the Economy organizer Alyx Goodwin’s takes on ShotSpotter, she took to Twitter. She says she tweeted questions about whether the anonymous messages were being fired out from a burner account run by ShotSpotter CEO Ralph Clark.

Clark responded from his account to say the anonymous account wasn’t him. After Goodwin accused Clark of overpolicing Black and Brown communities, she said she called the accusations false.

Goodwin said she also noted an apparent shift in marketing from ShotSpotter. While the surveillance company often boasted its 97 percent accuracy rate, last summer, Goodwin said she saw the company shift to focus on response times, and the ability to get police to scenes quickly.

“Theyir claim to fame, that I think they’re trying to really market, is that they cut down police response times,” Goodwin said.

Manes concurred. He said that the company’s marketing changes over time with what they believe “resonates in the moment.”

“When discussions about policing were focused on community policing, and having officers sort of walking the beat and that sort of thing, they were marketing their product as a good way to get officers into the community,” Manes said.

“Now, I don’t think that sending officers chasing down nonexistent gunfire is an especially conducive way to improve police-community relations,” Manes added, “but that was the pitch they made then.”

Ed Vogel contributed data analysis to this story.
In defense of subtitles

By Janaya Greene

As a child I hated subtitles. The words constantly multiplying and changing on the bottom of TV screens distracted me from the scenes in shows and movies. Sometimes the white words overlaid on a black background moved at a quicker pace than what the characters onscreen were actually saying and spoiled what was to come. I’d rather the educators who screened educational specials at school turn the boxy 90s televisions off altogether.

Obviously, a distaste for captions spoke to my privilege as a nondisabled child who had an option to dislike them in the first place. But surprisingly, subtitles have grown on me as an adult. As a lover of many things Black, I love watching films created in other countries like Nigeria, South Africa, and even France (shout-out to Netflix’s Lupin). As my film and TV palate has expanded, I’ve learned of the innate multiculturalism of most Black folks in the African Diaspora (not just in America) that translates onscreen. It is quite common for scenes in these films to have characters who converse in Pidgin English (a mix of a local language and a version of English) or two other languages separate from English altogether. As much as body language is also a very communicative tool, missing even a few words can shift an understanding of what’s happening in a story. Subtitles help put the pieces of these conversations together.

Subtitles are also quite useful for those of us looking to become more confident in speaking another language. I am years from my high school days of studying French and even further from my days learning Spanish in grammar and middle school. Immersing myself in non-American entertainment has renewed my interest in remembering and enhancing my French-speaking skills; it’s also made me want to learn local languages like Bantu people’s Lingala, which isn’t as readily available to learn unless you are in community with Congolese or other Bantu people. Those once-pestering words on the bottom of television screens I now see as an opportunity to refresh and expand my communication.

As beneficial as they may be, subtitles have their faults. Late last year, conversations around Netflix’s Squid Game, one of the streaming service’s most viewed series, brought to light how poor transcriptions in the show completely shift the understanding non-Korean speakers likely have of the storyline. As a native English speaker, it’s a question I often ponder: Are the subtitles presented accurately capturing what’s being communicated onscreen? Still, I’d argue that turning on your subtitles here and there is a great start to expanding your knowledge of other parts of the world.

Not interested in Rosetta Stone or Duolingo? Try subtitles.

@janayagr
Dropping beats and seeds

Englewood rapper Heavy Crownz blends art and community organizing.

By ALEJANDRO HERNANDEZ
Photos by THOUGHTPOET

The late, great Tupac Shakur once wrote a poem about a rose that grew from a crack in the concrete. The anomaly of a gorgeous flower growing amid adverse conditions serves as a metaphor for individuals from under-resourced neighborhoods who rise above systemic challenges in order to contribute something beautiful to the world. If there’s anyone in Chicago today who embodies the spirit of a rose growing from concrete, it’s Englewood rapper Heavy Crownz.

The self-proclaimed “63rd Representer” cultivates an organic aesthetic in his music as well as his personal life. He says his purpose is to be a force for positive change, describing himself as a combination of the rappers Common, Gucci Mane, and Curren$y. The lead single for his newest album, Whole Lotta Seeds, is the appropriately titled “Grow Sumn.” Over a soulful sample and drum loop, he pushes listeners to grow from the things that are holding them back in life.

“My whole brand is agriculturally based. I like to use beats as a landscape to plant seeds,” Crownz says. “With it being called Whole Lotta Seeds, it’s just me keeping people up to date with all the things that I’ve grown through with experiences on my journey through self-growth and reflecting on my upbringing. . . . There’s a lot of places that I put energy into and not look for anything back. So a lot of places I’ve served and put time into, I can see the fruits of my labor. It’s like been a whole lot of seeds.”

He credits his affinity toward this organic lifestyle to his spiritual beliefs. After reading a book about the power of grace by evangelist pastor Joseph Prince in 2020, Crownz says a switch flipped for him to develop a Christ-conscious approach by extending grace to himself and others. He isn’t just planting figurative seeds in the ears of music listeners, though. After teaching both elementary and high school students on the south and west sides, he currently serves as youth program manager for Imagine Englewood If (IEI), a holistic nonprofit organization that provides mentorship and food sustainability programs for the community. One of his goals with IEI this year is to put his hands literally in the dirt with community gardening projects that will give residents living in food deserts more healthy options.

“I’ve been blessed to plant seeds of positive intention in those areas,” Crownz says. “I was born and raised in Englewood, 63rd and Parnell. I grew up with a lot of the pioneers of the drill scene and know them on a first-name basis. It was always important for me, once the scene took off, that that was not the only narrative imagined by residents. Before I even knew of the proper terminology of labels, I always was moving with a loving energy amongst all the different chaotic things that was going on in Englewood.”

One of IEI’s upcoming projects is a Unity Day on May 14, when residents and other organizations are invited to help clean up 100 blocks, beautify the organization’s peace campus at 64th and Honore, and come to a community cookout after. Following in the footsteps of his favorite rapper and community activist, Common, Heavy Crownz says he is geared to continue being a vessel for peace and positivity, whether it be creating new music or strengthening bonds with the people he serves.

“I’m proud of going into this purely and organically. I’m making sure that my life reflects my music and my music reflects my life. I’ve been blessed to see a lot of dope momentum grow in the last two years,” he says. “As I grow, I gotta give myself grace. A plant don’t really stress when they grow, they just grow. The rain come in the air and they grow. The sunlight come, they add to it and they grow. They just stay present. We gonna grow regardless, bro, so let me love on you. And let me love on myself while we at it.”

@DroInTheWind_
Cabrini hymns

By Sol Cabrini

With all those liquids descending from the eye,
Edging towards the tear of the sky,
Recording those modes of ruckus,
From the elevator to the staircase,
The smell of waste traces the dirt on the mold,
At every angle, the isolated block is a common project,
So We honed its dis-symmetry
Rolled up the dice on the face of doom
Cooked up gumbo before the funeral
Grilled those migratory phantoms to juke
And fed our spirits some soul,
In order to Raise our kids on a home
On top of another home,
In those black skyscrapers
Where we wondered on its beat with cheap ragged clothes and torn up soles,
Inside the seat of the feet running here and there
Our New Orleans heat sizzled up and down Sedgwick Street
Going nowhere but anywhere around the block of our Chicago heart.

Sol Cabrini (she/her) is a poet, academic, and mixed media artist born and raised in Chicago. She is currently pursuing a PhD at Performance Studies NYU.

Poem curated by Jada-Amina. Jada-Amina is a South Side Chicago born and based, Black Indigenous American singer, writer, and cultural worker.

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Ele Matelan tells stories with sound effects

The Chicago foley artist explains the history and practice of the craft that gave us slapsticks and thunder sheets.

By Kerry Reid

Ele Matelan didn’t plan on making a career out of sound effects. Like a lot of Chicago theater artists, she moved here after college (at Southern Methodist University) to pursue acting. She also did some stage management for her SMU pals who had formed the House Theatre of Chicago in 2001.

But one winter night in 2005, Matelan found herself in the audience at what was then called American Theater Company for their production of Jordan Harrison’s sci-fi/noir comedy Kid-Simple. Subtitled A Radio Play in the Flesh, the show used live sound effects created and performed by Scotty Iseri—and it foreshadowed and inspired Matelan’s current work as a foley artist (or, as she sometimes puts it, a “sonic storyteller”). If you’ve ever seen a live radio play, such as American Blues Theater’s It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!, then you’ve seen foley artists in action onstage. They’re not hidden behind the curtain. As Matelan points out during our Zoom interview, “Foley is performance.”

“A lot of people that do what I do now, they grew up listening to Prairie Home Companion and Lights Out and pretty much anything that radio theater has had to offer for the past century. But that wasn’t really part of my upbringing,” says Matelan. “My major association with radio theater onstage to date had been seeing it parodied on sitcoms. So I had seen that episode of Punky Brewster where they do a radio play.

“But Kid-Simple was the first time I had ever seen a sound-arts practitioner working without the luxury of a jump cut. Like, he was super present in all of the scenes. His physicality was really paying a lot of attention to what was going on with the other characters onstage. He was also making sure that he was revealing props in a way that helped sell the story as well.”

Matelan’s association with House also helped give her a sense for what foley could do. As another early inspiration, she cites the theater’s 2004 production of Stephen Taylor’s prehistoric tale Cave With Man, where sound designer Michael Griggs used live practical sound effects. “That’s when I saw a little bit of this kind of instrumentation,” she says. “It was a very traditional percussive-heavy sound design.”

Matelan reaches back and pulls out a rasp. “That was probably my first time seeing one of these in action.” She runs a small stick over the rasp as a demonstration. “In the context of the story, as needed, someone might consider this to be a cricket or a frog. I’ve used it for the sound of a baseball as well,” she says, punctuating herself by rapping the side of the rasp to create a sharp “pop” that does indeed sound like a bat making contact with the ball.

After that night at Kid-Simple, Matelan was entirely sold on the art of foley. But getting practical training was another matter. She notes that her theater education generally didn’t emphasize technical elements, so when it came to learning how to be a foley artist, she did it hands-on and in the field.

“The way I looked into it was by being friends with a lot of folks at Strawdog [Theatre],” she says. “Around the same time, some of them were starting Wildclaw Theatre. That was my first real exposure to getting to do this kind of work. The people that worked at or were company members at Strawdog that also went on and founded Wildclaw had been very active in Strawdog’s late-night radio-play series, which was originally supposed to be like a writing initiative for their ensemble members, so they could get more writing and producing experience. And it was cheaper, generally, to do radio plays than to fully stage and block and produce plays. And so that became like a real common prac-


During our interview, she shows me a pair of plastic pastel unicorns she got at Party City—when she squeezes them, they squeak, and she notes that they sound remarkably like seagulls. In a 2019 talk for students in Northwestern’s sound arts and industries program, Matelan ran through some of her other favorites, including chamois, a soft and porous leather that she calls “one of the most reliable sources for gross. A soaked chamois can give you vomit sounds or squishy gore sounds, depending on how you squish, squeeze, or flop it. Dry and pulled taut, it can also make awesome heartbeat.

“Found objects are the things that I enjoy incorporating into designs onstage as much as possible,” Matelan says. “Because anything that the audience has some sort of recognizable relationship with already? It feels like a gift for them, like it’s tickling the same part of the brain that likes wordplay. It’s putting something familiar into a new context.”

During the COVID shutdown, Matelan found herself increasingly busy with online radio plays, often via Zoom, and she also works in studios for film productions from time to time. But she maintains that there’s nothing like making sounds in real time in front of an audience, where she’s every bit as integral to the ensemble as the rest of the actors.

“I absolutely use a lot of the physical training that I remember from college,” Matelan says. “And to incorporate what I’m doing onstage, there are elements of puppetry that come into play, when you’re acting as a physical extension of voice characters. Also the way that you’re throwing focus to the voice actors when you’re not engaged is also really integral to the way that I try to choreograph things.”

Matelan’s career has given her a fresh appreciation for sound in everyday life too, and as her seagull unicorns demonstrate, she seeks out unexpected sources. “I pay a lot more attention to things,” she says. “Just the possibility that a sound could be found somewhere, and that it might be interesting and compelling. It might not necessarily be something that I’m looking for for a specific gig I have going on at any given time. It might just be like, ‘Oh, I’m glad that exists.’”

@kerryreid
Jasleen Singh aims to change that. She’s a clinical audiologist and postdoctoral fellow at Northwestern University’s Auditory Research Laboratory, and she was recently awarded the $75,000 Birtman Grant from the American Hearing Research Foundation. Over-the-counter hearing aids are on the horizon, and this grant will allow her to study the way attitudes about hearing loss and hearing health care change when patients consider an over-the-counter model of hearing-aid distribution, as compared to the current doctor-driven model.

While gearing up to launch her research project, a Chicago-area study that will focus especially on underserved and marginalized populations, Singh took the time to speak to the Reader about her work.

Jamie Ludwig: Can you please share a little bit about your background and what drew you to audiology?

Jasleen Singh: I got my AuD from Syracuse University. During my clinical rotations I saw that there was this fundamental need of improving access to hearing health care, specifically in populations that typically are underrepresented. This inspired me into looking into how I could contribute to that type of literature or evidence-based best practice. I decided to pursue my PhD as well at SU, specifically with Dr. Karen Doherty, who has done a lot of work with hearing aids, and I did my dissertation with respect to over-the-counter hearing aids.

To give you some background as to what’s happening in our field: in 2017, the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology recognized that there was this huge limitation, or lack of uptake, in hearing aids, which is super concerning. There was a paper in the Lancet, which talked about hearing loss being the largest modifiable risk against dementia. What that essentially means is, of all the factors that we have control of in our environmental space, unaided hearing loss is neglected, even though it’s the third most common chronic health condition in the U.S.

Hearing health care is apparently a low priority for our society, even though conservative estimates put the number of Americans living with hearing loss at 30 million. Most insurance plans (including the majority of Medicare plans) won’t touch it. Unlike eye care, oral care, and even foot care, it hasn’t spawned its own retail industry—perhaps because hearing health care has a harder time driving the consumer market with a cosmetic angle. That’s left people in the early stages of hearing loss with few choices outside of doctors’ visits (which can be inconvenient and expensive) and hearing aids (which cost hundreds or even thousands of dollars per pair). Plus there’s the social stigma associated with hearing loss, which discourages many from seeking help. Eighty-six percent of adults over 50 living with hearing loss don’t wear hearing aids at all.

HEARING HEALTH CARE

What if hearing aids were as easy to get as reading glasses?

Northwestern audiologist Jasleen Singh uses a prestigious new grant to research how self-fitted over-the-counter hearing aids might connect more people with care.

By Jamie Ludwig
"Why do adults with specifically age-related hearing loss choose to forgo treatment?" To drop another statistic, among people who could benefit from a hearing aid, only about 15 to 20 percent uptake them, and one of the biggest barriers to access is cost. So there was this huge push to see if we could create a new model of health-care deliveries, specifically with over-the-counter hearing aids.

That’s where my dissertation came into play, looking at the feasibility of this model in terms of whether or not we’re actually targeting the issue at hand. And that’s where [this idea] came about in terms of my general interest in audiology, and what led me to pursue it a little bit further at Northwestern, which is where I’m currently doing my postdoc.

Is the Auditory Research Lab at Northwestern known specifically for its work on hearing aids?

Dr. Sumit Dhar is the principal investigator of the Auditory Research Lab at Northwestern University. They’re doing a lot of work looking at how we can optimize hearing health care. There’s currently a multisite study that’s looking at the feasibility of the over-the-counter hearing-aid model, specifically when it pertains to actually self-fitting your own hearing aid—the actual process of having the devices in your hand and manipulating them yourself to see whether or not you can get sustainable outcomes.

Why is it that hearing aids are not currently covered by most insurance companies? You can find visual aids in any drugstore, but in terms of the retail market, hearing devices have been so far behind.

In the recent Medicare revamping under Joe Biden, there was a discussion of getting hearing aids covered under Medicare care. Unfortunately that hasn’t come to fruition, although I agree that they should be covered by insurance, at least to some degree. It’s unfortunate that our health-care system hasn’t caught up to speed with other analogous fields. I think a lot of it comes down to just the sheer number of people who would require it.

What holds people back from dealing with their hearing loss?

The literature has shown that the number one predictor of hearing-aid uptake is someone’s perceived handicap from their hearing loss. Hearing loss is so invisible that it takes almost ten years for somebody to notice a change in their hearing. So even though there are gradual age-related changes that might begin in your 40s or 50s, it’s not until later in life when you actually say, “There’s something going on with my hearing, and I would like to do something about it.” At first it’s not being able to recognize it, and then it’s whether or not your hearing loss is causing enough of an issue in your day-to-day activities where you feel like you need to address it.

Outside of that, there are also general stigmas related to hearing aids. I think a lot of people associate having a hearing aid with being old. Unfortunately, the perception that hearing loss is a part of the natural aging process feeds into the idea of pushing off getting hearing aids. Now there’s considerable research that suggests that people who get hearing aids earlier on in their progression tend to do better with them. It’s interesting that there’s all this push for starting earlier in your life, while there are multiple barriers that are preventing people from getting them.

Do you think movies like CODA or Sound of Metal, or American Girl releasing a doll with a cochlear implant, are helping to change the stigma? Have younger generations started to change their minds about hearing loss compared to older generations, or are they at least talking about it more?

I think the discussion around hearing loss—in terms of a lot of the culture platforms—is at least bringing some sort of awareness to the idea of taking care of your hearing. There still needs to be a lot more research to determine whether or not they are making measurable strides as to what people perceive about hearing aids in general, but I’m optimistic that it’s encouraging people to think about their hearing in a more targeted and calculated way.

More and more, our smartphones are actually able to give us much more information about the levels of what we’re setting our headphones to. There are sound-level-meter apps. There are a lot more tangible tools for the individual that can allow them to start thinking about their hearing more seriously.

You start to think about how many people in our city spend so much time playing music or going to concerts, or who work in a field like construction or aviation where there’s a lot of noise. Are younger people
just not conscious of the risks of losing your hearing and the associated potential health consequences over time?

Unfortunately, hearing health care does not get a lot of advertising attention. In general, my guess would be that most people are not aware of what they’re doing and how that can cause issues to the integrity of their auditory system. I’m just happy to keep pushing out that message as much as I can.

You mentioned that preventative care can do a lot to prevent this degradation over time. What are some positive steps that people can take?

Genetics play a big role in whether or not hearing loss is going to be something that you experience at some point in your life. But hearing protection is the number one way to prevent noise-induced hearing loss. Noise-induced hearing loss is super challenging, because of the way that it affects our auditory system. It specifically impacts the frequencies that are related to speech, specifically consonants, and how we’re able to have intelligibility when it comes to conversations.

So noise exposure specifically impacts our ability to understand conversations over time. You talked about wearing hearing protection regularly, and specifically in situations like concerts, but even going to a restaurant or a bar that’s noisy can cause potential damage in the long run. So just be more cognizant of the areas that you’re going to be, and whether or not you need to bring your plugs along with you.

With this grant, do you have a specific plan in mind for conducting your research, or what the scope is going to look like?

A very important part of my research is looking at the psychology behind using hearing aids as a potential treatment. The plan is currently to use an already FDA-approved self-fitted hearing aid. There are companies which have already started the process of developing technology that is completely consumer driven, so it’s all controlled through a smartphone app—you’re able to do a hearing test, which then provides a prescription. Typically when you purchase hearing aids, you go to a professional who then fits the hearing aid using a specific hearing test, so it’s much more involved.

I’m basically trying to see whether or not this new model of hearing health-care delivery reduces some of the barriers, in terms of being able to actually physically handle the device yourself and program the device yourself. More importantly, are you able to reduce your level of hearing handicap if you have concerns with your hearing? So that’s kinda more the general scope or objective, and one of the major things that we’re also trying to do is to target communities that are typically underserved.

Right. If you don’t have a smartphone, how can you use these new technologies?

Exactly. There is considerable research to suggest that individuals in lower SES [socio-economic status] populations uptake hearing aids at a lower rate. So we’re also trying to figure out information related to what cost is actually appropriate for somebody who is living paycheck to paycheck. We don’t want to be providing these solutions and have them be sold at a thousand dollars, or any price point that may not actually be attainable for somebody who doesn’t have a lot of disposable income. Plus the smartphone.

We’re trying to work with more community partners and see what their feedback is on this specific model of health care, and see if it’s something that’s actually going to address what it intended.

Is the study limited to people in the Chicagoland area, or is it a national study?

This is seed funding, so we’re limited to the Chicago area just primarily because of dollars—we can only go so far when it comes to the implementation. We’re still in the process of trying to partner with specific community centers to see whether or not this is something that can be integrated into specific community health centers. So that’s TBD at this point, but I’m really hoping for some more exposure, to see if people would like to get involved. We are hoping for about 90 participants, so it’s a pretty decent-size group. Typically when we do hearing-aid studies, the populations tend to be very small, but we’re hoping to get a pretty sufficient sample size.

The specific AHRF grant is intended to kinda wrap out in about a year’s time. Like I mentioned before, it’s seed funding, so the idea is to get you started with an idea and see whether or not it can be scalable. The other study that I mentioned that our lab is doing runs until the end of next year, so, OK. We do have several projects people can absolutely get involved in with respect to OTC hearing aids.

What’s the clincher that really gets people from saying “I should do something about my hearing” to actively pursuing it?

I think the bare minimum that somebody should do is just get a baseline hearing test. When you think about vision, everyone’s had an eye test at some point, just to ensure that things are working the way they should. That way, if anything does change, you have a reference of what your baseline is. So if somebody is trying to be more proactive about their hearing, that is a great first step.

Then based on the results—of course there’s never any pressure to consider a hearing aid—we typically recommend following up with a hearing test every three to five years. That’s a very low investment. And typically Medicare does cover the cost of a hearing test. So I think that’s a really good first step: being able to know about what your hearing system is doing, and whether or not there’s anything you could do presently to help you.

If you’re a musician, definitely get your hearing checked as soon as you start playing your instruments. But if you’re concerned more about age-related hearing loss, I think your early 50s is a good time to get started on that.

It’s exciting to think about how this research could really change lives. In a generation it might just be common sense that if you need to get a hearing aid, you just stop at the Walgreens on your way home.

Hopefully that will be the norm. For a lot of clinicians, OTC hearing aids are thought of as your entryway into hearing health care. So let’s say you’re not ready for a full-fledged hearing aid, where you have to go into specific appointments—this could be a great primer to get you to think about your hearing. And it’s a low-investment primer, which is super important. Then if your problems continue and you need much more involved health care, you can go to an audiologist or a hearing health-care professional who can guide you through the process with much more pointed advice.

It’s better to start early, so I do see a lot of potential for this market. We just have to make sure that people are set up for success.
FILM

The sound of silents

Chicago's silent film accompanists deliver the music.

By Kathleen Sachs

Several decades after the metamorphic transition from silent to sound, a 1981 article in the New York Times observed that “a live musician is rarely seen at a movie except as a member of the audience.”

That's not untrue with regards to one Dennis Scott, who can often be found sitting in the first few rows of the main room at the historic Music Box Theatre. But unlike other audience members, he’s enjoying the movie after playing in between showtimes on the majestic theater organ affixed to the left of the screen, a sonic behemoth that for many is now an essential fixture of the experience.

The aforementioned Times article was about the dearth of live silent film accompaniment, a tradition lost to its heyday but which has since enjoyed periods of revival in limited exhibition venues. Scott has been the Music Box Theatre’s house organist since 1992; in 2011 he started a monthly silent cinema series that continues to this day.

“It was the music,” he says of his deep affection for the pastime. “I always just loved the music, and I loved the sound of a theater organ.”

Scott is one of several musicians in and around Chicago for whom live silent film accompaniment is a regular gig. Another in this cadre is Dave Drazin, who accompanies on the piano and has done so at the Gene Siskel Film Center for nearly 40 years, a job he landed quite fortuitously.

“They were showing something—I don’t know what—but I just walked in, and there was a piano on the side. I asked the house manager if it would be alright if I played the piano for the movie, and he said he would ask the director. He came back and said OK. So I just played, and then the director said, ‘We need a guy like you.’”

A longtime hot jazz aficionado who studied music in college, Drazin has often utilized his predilection for extemporization, improvising scores on the spot. Jay Warren, president and cofounder of the Silent Film Society of Chicago, takes another tack, the traditional photoplay organist instead referring to his accompaniment as a “compiled score.”

Warren relies on themes for different parts of the film, a tactic imparted by his “unofficial mentor” Gaylord Carter, a renowned organist, film accompanist, and composer who is credited with having helped revive public interest in silent cinema, leading to its initial renaissance.

“One thing we [learned] is not to overplay the film,” says Warren. “You want to be the background. You want to embrace the film; we don’t want to be the star of the show. You should forget about us.”

For Scott, who for many years worked in advertising and PR and thus knows how to captivate an audience, authenticity is key. He prides both himself and the theater on maintaining high standards of exhibition that honor the nuances of silent cinema.

“In this part of the country, [we do] the most authentic presentation of silent films, because we can do 35-millimeter. We can also do variable-speed 35-millimeter, which very, very few places can do. If a film is shot at 20 frames per second, we can show it at that speed.”

He’s especially proud of the organ itself, which he and his husband spent three and a half years restoring. Soundwise it’s digital, with all the effects viewers would have heard back in the 1920s; the console, however, is from 1929, like the Music Box itself.

Scott, Drazin, and Warren are the most prolific working accompanists in Chicago, whose names you expect to see connected with a silent film screening; however, they aren’t the only ones.

For example, Chicago-based musician Maxx McGathey has recently composed and performed original live scores for Robert Wiene’s 1924 film The Hands of Orlac and Alfred Hitchcock’s The Lodger (1927).

A few weekends ago, internationally celebrated musicians Min Xiao-Fen and Rez Abbasi accompanied the 1934 Chinese silent feature The Goddess for an event copresented by the Silent Film Society of Chicago at the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts.

Comfort Film, a program of Logan Square’s Comfort Station, offers a yearly Silent Film and Loud Music series. Past pairings include Wiene’s The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920), with music from Kassi Cork, Vince McAley, and Anthony Forgrase; F.W. Murnau’s Faust (1926), with music performed by Mexican rock band Los Black Dogs; and Oscar Micheaux’s 1920 film Within Our Gates, accompanied by Paul Giallorenzo and Ben LaMar Gay.

“[It’s] a way to expose our younger audience to these classic films,” says Comfort Film programmer Raul Benitez. The limitations are none; participants are given free reign both in selecting the film and devising their accompaniment. “Every screening is a surprise,” he says. “We even had a band edit a film.”

Keyboardist Kassi Cork doesn’t consider herself especially well versed in silent cinema, but she was nevertheless drawn to the prospect. “There is a history of music performance, primarily organ and piano, for silent film accompaniment that has always intrigued me as a pianist,” she says. “I grew up in a town that still had an organist play before movie showings, and there has always been something magical about that.”

Though new to it, Cork’s process in imagining an accompaniment is similar to that of seasoned practitioners. “While watching the film I create an outline of the overall plot, including mood and ideas it might give me.”

As far and wide as silent film accompaniment reaches in Chicago, spanning melodies from the silent era to music not yet even conceived during that time, there’s one thing these musicians have in common: the film is the thing, the guiding force behind what they do.

“People ask me if I look at the screen,” remarks Scott. “I say, I always look at the screen, that’s more or less my sheet music.”
Seeing with silence in avant-garde cinema

Films that omit music and sound can be transformative, instructive, and all the more beautiful.

By Joshua Minsoo Kim

In 1928, directors Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Grigori Alexandrov began a collective statement with a declaration: “Our cherished dreams of a sound cinema are being realized.” It was a transitional period for the medium, as feature films had recently incorporated synchronized audio, and the year prior saw the first part-talkie in Alan Crosland’s The Jazz Singer. Their excitement, however, was tempered. “Sound is a double-edged invention,” they suggested, wary of how straightforward implementations could “destroy the culture of montage.” Only the most thoughtful would ensure these new technologies led to innovation, and this radical change for film would be, as we now know, a permanent one. This evolution was something they may have seen as inevitable, as they noted that “the whole world now speaks of the ‘silent’ that has found its voice.”

The “voice” that those Soviet filmmakers referred to was, of course, actual voices or sounds. But there’s an unintentionally profound statement there regarding silence as having its full potential unlocked, that there exist far more possibilities for silence than we recognize. I’ve spent much of my life thinking about this and, as with most, it began with John Cage. While the American composer wrote a lot on sound and silence, the passage of time has reduced his words to basic ideas stemming from his most famous work, 4’33” (1952): There’s no such thing as true silence, the “extramusical” sounds we hear outside of a performance should be appreciated as music, silence should be considered as a true compositional and structural element, and so on.

These are perspective-shifting truths, and they certainly transformed how I engage with the world through my sense of hearing, but the music that has followed in the decades since has proven itself less revelatory than it initially appeared. Artists who are (self-)described as “post-Cage” are, in fact, regurgitating his ideas in slightly different contexts, and the results are largely inconsequential. Really, it’s works outside of this highbrow tradition of classical music (ironically referred to as “new music”) that surprise me most. One example: the 1970 LP The Best of Marcel Marceau, a long-form gag showcasing the greatest hits of a mime. Each side features 19 minutes of silence followed by a minute of uproarious applause. It’s funny in a way that most serious music isn’t.

Different contexts allow for different understandings of silence. Especially after I experienced the highs and lows of quiet teaching in a high school classroom, I came to understand silence as instructive through the arts, and mostly appreciate it nowadays when watching avant-garde films. When you watch a silent experimental film, there’s no room for music to dictate anything. Consider the real miracle of sound as an artistic medium: it can be engaged with in a multitude of ways, but importantly, it’s one of few that people regularly interact with passively—think of white noise machines you keep on when sleeping or any music you comfortably leave playing in the background.

What’s not considered in our passive engagement with music is that its inherent rhythms are so impactful that they can readily overwhelm filmic ones, which is why it’s such a travesty that countless avant-garde films are ruined by poor considerations of audio. Beyond the mere content of the music being dull, it’s how it usually functions: at their worst, experimental films utilize sound as a cheap mood enhancer. Through an inability to trust the images to evoke emotions and ideas on their own, directors use music as a way to fill in cognitive blanks. These artists don’t trust the audience, or even themselves.

This is why the most spellbinding avant-garde films often transcend the need for sound. Stan Brakhage, of course, is one of the most important in this regard. He understood how silence forced an acute awareness of his images: “I feel they need a silent attention,” he once said of his works. Indeed, in Window Water Baby Moving (1959), sheer joy and love are on full display as he captures his then-wife giving birth, and any emotions would’ve been stymied if audio was provided. Through extreme close-ups, rotations of his camera, and dazzling reflections of light on water, he constantly maneuvers in a tight interzone between visual abstraction and clarity. What occurs is a continual refocusing on these bodies, as if he’s reminding you that, yes, what you’re witnessing is actually extraordinary. More than anything, silence prevents what we’re seeing from diminishing into banalities.

One real power of silence comes in allowing films to be appreciated at their basest levels. It’s so often that it can lead to greater appreciation for light. There’s Brakhage’s own A Child’s Garden and the Serious Sea (1991), which transforms light-reflecting seafoam into mystical colors, or Jerome Hill’s Words of Mercury (2011), whose glimmering blues and yellows conjure up a sense of the fantastical. In Nathaniel Dorsky’s Threnody (2004), silence allows for a consideration of the contrast in rhythms we encounter in our everyday lives, be it the fading of light on specific textiles, the sway of flora in the wind, or the stillness of a cloudy evening sky. Silence, as people may understand it via meditation, is a way to be more attuned to the world around us.

Even filmmakers who’ve explored sound throughout their careers often find their creative peak when employing silence. Take Bastian Clevé, whose works have been soundtracked by legends such as Eberhard Weber, NEU!, and Klaus Schulze. His silent short film Tollhaus (1979) has rapid cuts that create such an irresistibly frenetic rhythm that every juxtaposition feels like a chance to see every image anew. Such edits would be far less disorienting with a soundtrack, as it would render the footage more seamless via music’s ability to establish an overarching atmosphere.

In the context of film, silence helps us appreciate the beauty and gift that is our sense of sight. We need to understand silence as infinite in its capabilities, that there may never be a point at which it fully “finds its voice” or stops teaching us. Just as there exists a difference between hearing and listening, there is a huge gulf between merely looking and intently watching. Silence, when used effectively, ushers us into the latter.
Horror is a sound you can’t stop saying

The maddening repetition of Philip Glass’s “Music Box” in 1992’s Candyman and its 2021 sequel

By Noah Berlatsky

Glass’s music is a theme for the baby. But its maddening loop is also an auditory mirror of the loop of story which is also the loop of history. The past is a story repeating in the present. Horror is a sound you can’t stop saying.

Nia DaCosta’s 2021 Candyman sequel/reboot is scored by Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe. His incidental music is influenced by Glass, holding up a kind of buzzing electric mirror to Glass’s crystalline compositions.

Lowe does reproduce one piece from the original score, though. Glass’s “Music Box” theme is used in a scene that reprises and retells the events of the previous film.

In a flashback sequence told through artist Kara Walker’s eerie shadow-puppet cutouts, we see Helen Lyle start to investigate Candyman and then go insane. She makes snow angels of blood and throws a child into a fire.

Glass’s music tinkles and chimes as the words grind on, echoing the horror story campfire tale of the first movie. The story the shadow puppets tell here is garbled, though; in the “real” events of the first movie, Candyman, not Helen, was the murderer, and the baby lived. To reflect this, Lowe adds ambient hiss and echo. The music box fades toward white noise buzz, space and sound collapsing into a single trauma, a bloody hook dragged through a honeycomb.

The “Music Box” theme has a final, clearer rendering at the end credits of the 2021 film. By this point we’ve walked again through the razed, gentrified landscape of Cabrini-Green. The baby rescued in Candyman, artist Anthony McCoy (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II), has become ensnared in the story, learning to his sorrow that Candyman isn’t one ghost, but a genre, or a hive. A Black man who moves into a house in the wrong neighborhood; a Black boy executed for a crime he didn’t commit; a Black man accused of putting razor blades in candy—they all die and are born again as a story of death. Racist violence repeats in a predictable path, like a bee following a scent trail.

Kara Walker’s puppets reprise each story in a ritual of dark and light as the music box repeats its unending theme. The movie is the music is a sound is a story is a word. Candyman. Candyman. Candyman. Candyman. Horror is a sound you can’t stop saying.

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--- AND MUCH, MUCH MORE! ---
LOVING REPEATING:
NEW WORK BY MILLER AND SHELLABARGER

Coco Picard interviewed artists Dutes Miller and Stan Shellabarger about their practice earlier this spring.

Our collaboration developed organically—we were both ceramic students at Illinois State University but did not collaborate (or date) at the time. We worked cooperatively as many craftspeople do, sharing tasks like making clay and firing kilns. We are both from large families where cooperation is necessary. A few years later, we started living together and working on collaborative performance pieces. Those performances grew out of a shared interest in performance and each other.

The silhouette is very present in Loving Repeating. The silhouette is made from tracing a shadow. A shadow is a reminder that a body is present. A silhouette is a reminder that a body is gone. What is missing causes loneliness. In Loving Repeating, there is a large painted mural of our silhouette repeated many times to form a pattern. That pattern is then pushed into a forced perspective, creating an illusion of the mural receding into space. Some may see a hinting to the infinite in this receding in space.

The name of the exhibition comes from Gertrude Stein novel The Making of the Americans. She talks about history being made by the repetition of the everyday over generations and that is a type of infinity. She also suggests that love is tied to loving the way another is repeating.

We’ve done two other similar shows like the one going up at the Hyde Park Art Center. The ashes of both are included in this show in the form of box urns. Like those urns, all the work—excluding the murals—are made of paper. After the show ends, we’ll burn it and place it in a pine box urn.

We talk about our collaborative work all the time and everywhere, at breakfast, on walks...we have art dates where we hash details about this and that. We’ve been working collaboratively for almost 30 years, so it comes easily. But it really always has. We’ve also had very separate solo art practices since the very beginning.

Don’t force your collaboration.
If you give your work time and attention, it will grow.

Coco Picard interviewed artists Dutes Miller and Stan Shellabarger about their practice earlier this spring. @COCO PICARD

@cocolarolo
The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) is releasing proposed updates to the FY2022 HCV Admin Plan, ACOP & Lease for public comment.

The 30-day public comment period begins April 29 and ends May 31, 2022. While CHA encourages and welcomes all program participants, residents, and the community-at-large to review the proposed updates to the FY2022 HCV Admin Plan, ACOP & Lease you are not required to attend the public comment hearings in order to submit comments. Your presence or absence at the hearing does not affect your housing.

CHA will host two public comment hearings, livestream, and in-person:

- Wed, May 11, 2022 at 6:00 pm, FIC 4859 S. Wabash
- Mon, May 16, 2022 at 11:00 am, https://youtu.be/PgGi1HWFytM

(A recording of the livestream session will be available following the hearing. Sign and Spanish interpreters will be present.)

We ask that comments pertaining to the HCV Admin Plan, ACOP & Lease be submitted electronically to commentontheplan@thecha.org or via US mail and postmarked no later than May 31, 2022. All comments will be added to the comment grid and receive a response during the livestream and/or in writing in the comment grid.

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**ARTS & CULTURE**

**Deeper research and a politics of care**

Curator and cultural producer Ciera McKissick forges a future in art.

By Kerry Cardoza

In the summer of 2020, the people of Chicago rose up in support of Black life, with thousands taking part in dozens of actions across the city. That season of uprisings had curator and cultural producer Ciera Alyse McKissick thinking about Black people moving through space: about how Black migration and travel has been a portal into the future, and about how cultural artifacts record history. She wondered what legacy Black people wanted to leave behind, what stories they wanted to tell. Her thinking evolved into the curation of the compelling, concise group exhibition, “Relic,” on view until May 27 at the Arts Incubator gallery, part of the University of Chicago’s Arts and Public Life initiative.

Inspired in part by Alisha Wormsley’s traveling billboard project, *There Are Black People in the Future*, “Relic” includes tender depictions of Black cultural artifacts and asks how those objects might inform the years to come. The exhibition marks a new era in McKissick’s practice, an era that allows for slower movement, deeper research, and a politics of care. “Relic” is the main curatorial project for McKissick this year—a marked difference from her usual pace. In 2021 she curated six exhibitions and additional work for the Terrain Biennial, took part in two art fairs, curated film screenings, organized virtual artists talks and an album release, held a two-day food and arts festival, and hosted a pop-up event. This was all undertaken as part of her independent curatorial work as well as her work for AMFM, an online arts magazine-turned-brand that McKissick founded in 2009. All this on top of her day job as public programs manager for the Hyde Park Art Center, a position that she has held part-time alongside other jobs for pay until this January, when HPAC made her a full-time employee.

“The pandemic really opened up my eyes to the way that I was working before. I was very busy, it felt like I was flipping shows a lot, putting one up and taking one down. I didn’t have enough time to process what I was really doing, and be able to sit with and let the things meander in my body,” she says. “I hope to make that a deeper part of how I continue to work. It’s important to be able to really hone in on a theme or subject matter. How can I engage the public and make this information digestible for everyone to be able to take in? I think arts oftentimes can be really inaccessible or people don’t feel comfortable in those spaces. And I don’t ever want people to feel that way.”

McKissick, 34, was raised in Milwaukee. As long as she can remember, she has been interested in writing and in the arts. Her parents enrolled her in an arts elementary school. She took dance and art classes, played multiple instruments, and did stage crew in theater productions.

As a kid, she made magazines out of notebooks, writing quizzes and even assigning articles to her friends. Her father took her to see plays and movies, and she was inspired to be a part of telling those kinds of stories. “I was only supposed to stay for a year,” McKissick says. “But I fell in love with the arts and community of the city. Here I am nine years later.” She became enmeshed in the arts scene,
going to open mikes and meeting people. “AMFM kind of resurrected,” she says. When she first put together art shows, she real-
ized she wanted something more engaging to happen in the space than just wine and cheese. She started a jazz series, working with Cultura in Pilsen until the space was shut down, and held other pop-up events. While in residency at Chicago Art Department, she had carte blanche over their two galleries for programming.

“I was like, everyone should be able to have the opportunity to do this,” she says. “I want-
ed to be able to lay the groundwork for people to incubate, come up with ideas, and flip the space as they saw fit, as I was able to do at Chicago Art Department.”

McKissick launched a GoFundMe to come up with enough start-up money to rent a space of her own, and opened AMFM gallery in Pilsen in 2016. “It was really born out of me going to all of these different types of spaces that I would pop up at and then there was so much overhead,” she says. “I wasn’t able to have as much autonomy over things, and I wanted to have more power over my vision.”

At first it was a live/work space, with McKis-
sick living behind the storefront gallery. “That was a wild ride, my cat was at the gallery for a while,” she says. After moving out, she turned the room into a music production studio. There was also a gallery, studio space for art-
ists, and a small shop, all in about 1,000 square feet. “It was a labor of love,” McKissick says, adding that friends helped paint murals inside and build out the space.

Over the roughly two years it was open, AMFM gallery hosted ten resident artists and held over 200 events. Erin LeAnn Mitchell was one of the resident artists. She was initially connected with McKissick through a mutual friend who correctly guessed they’d get along. “I think we have similar ambitions and drive,” Mitchell says.

Having a studio at AMFM was a game changer for Mitchell at that point in her career. She was in an arts education graduate program, but really wanted a place to make work. At AMFM, Mitchell created a body of work called Black Sauce, which she showed in the gallery. “That show, having that space, I feel like it really catapulted me into the place where I’m really thinking about a future space, I’m actively thinking through where I’m celebrated, rather than just sort of tolerated.”

One of the seeds that led to Relic was a three-in-one bronze comb created by Haitian American artist Abigail Lucien. An object of cultural significance for Black folks, it was coated by its material. It was useful but also beautiful, and it was something that a Black audience would understand innately. Three works by Lucien are in the show: two wall-hung sculptural pieces and a gorgeous video, A Softening, which shows the artist embracing a large chunk of shea butter.

Another inspirational seed was LaKela Brown’s sculptural reliefs, which feature plaster imprints of door-knocker earrings and chain necklaces. They recall ancient artifacts imprinted in clay, or fossilized remains. Two of Brown’s plaster earring reliefs are included in the exhibition, with layered compositions and heart-shaped or geometric imprints, some painted gold.

Upon entering the gallery, the viewer is confronted by a standalone wall, papered with gold, screen-printed ledgers from the Freedmen’s Bureau, documenting the lives of some of the nation’s first Black entrepreneurs. The entries contain the person’s biographical information, as well as their last wishes. In an essay for the exhibition, McKissick writes that the centerpiece references the fact that “Black people’s labor created the economy of the country,” with the illegibility of the handwritten pages “representing the barriers of entry Black entrepreneurs faced—and still do.”

“It’s honestly a show for Black people,” McKissick says. “In the sense that just like that comb, if you don’t know then you don’t understand. It’s been a beautiful testament to Black culture in time and space. Thinking about the future of it all like, what is going to be left behind of us here? The things we see in the media are so sensationalized. It’s trauma porn and I don’t like to engage with things in that way. I’m trying to think beyond that. We don’t talk about the history that happened before slavery. I’m thinking about: what kind of stories do we wish to tell or what do we wish to leave behind? I posed that question to all six of the artists and they met with me those objects in the show.”

After almost a decade of producing events in Chicago, McKissick has thought a lot about what she wants AMFM, and her own practice, to look like. She recently registered AMFM as an LLC and wrote a three-year strategic plan for the business.

Some of that looks like slowing down, hav-
ing more of a research-based curatorial prac-
tice. “Relic” was a two-year process, which allowed McKissick time to think deeply about the work. Along with the essay, McKissick built a website that features related work, including music and video, to expand the exhibition’s reach beyond those who can physically visit the gallery. She’s also put together robust programming, including virtual artist talks and a manifestation session with artist Rhonda Wheatley. A closing session on May 27 will feature a dance performance and a DJ set by Sadie Woods.

“Relic” has also served as a lesson in what it feels like to work with more resources. Arts and Public Life provided both curatorial and artist stipends, though more often curators and cultural producers are on their own when it comes to funding. “I find that, especially as a curator, there haven’t been many opportuni-
ties in the past to receive grants,” McKissick says. “I know that some of that is shifting now, especially after the pandemic, because people think about arts workers and creatives in a different capacity.”

She still gets comments from people who miss AMFM’s gallery. “It really felt like home,” Mitchell says. McKissick hopes to open up her own space again in the future. She envi-
sions an institutional space, with room for performance, studios, and opportunities for mentorship and artist services. “I’m thinking a lot about the south side and the lack of studio space,” she says.

With fewer DIY or artist-run cultural spac-
es, people go to institutions instead, many of which have increased their opportunities for BIPOC artists following 2020’s calls for racial equity. “People are really catching on that POC and artists are the gatekeepers of culture,” she says. When BIPOC artists work with white-
led institutions, it benefits the institution. “I would love for them to be able to uplift some-
thing that directly impacts the artists more. That’s my hope, to create that institution specifically for them.”

With McKissick’s drive, there’s little doubt she’ll realize these goals in due time. Her mother says that she’s always been fearless: “She just has this like, I’m not gonna wait for somebody to tell me to do it. And that’s with everything.”

It’s important to McKissick to maintain relationships with all the artists she’s worked with, connecting folks with opportunities when she can. “We’ve gotten to this point in our relationship where I fully am trustful of Ciera,” Mitchell says. “Ciera is someone who will have my best interests at heart. It’s really good to have someone on your side like that. That looks out for you when you’re not around and speaks your name in rooms that you’re not in.”

The description of AMFM on its website really sums up McKissick’s whole approach: “AMFM is a brand for artists and the people.” She wants her work to uplift artists and the community in an approachable, accessible way. “I don’t want to perform,” she says. “My work is authentic. I try to always meet people where they’re at and have conversations on their own level. I think that’s a testament to why I’ve been able to do the work that I’ve been able to do here in Chicago for so long, and why I was welcomed in so openly. There’s a certain level of trust that you have to build with people and with artists. I think that’s something that’s really, really important, especially when you’re dealing with something as sensitive as telling people’s stories and their truths.”

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MAY 12, 2022 • CHICAGO READER 37
BOOK REVIEW

True biz? There’s a lot to learn in this new book.

Compelling characters drive the plot, buoyed by Deaf culture lessons.

By Taryn Allen

“Eyeth—get it? In the Deaf storytelling tradition, utopia is called Eyeth because it’s a society that centers the eye, not the ear, like here on Earth.”

That’s the opener to “Ear vs. Eye: Deaf Mythology,” one of the many brief lessons sprinkled between the chapters of Sara Nović’s realistic fiction novel True Biz, released March 29 by Random House.

Charlie Serrano is a Deaf high school student in Ohio. Her cochlear implant has created language deprivation and family strife rather than improved hearing, but after her parents’ divorce, Charlie gets the opportunity to enroll in the fictional River Valley School for the Deaf, experiencing Deaf culture for the first time over the course of the book. Unfortunately, River Valley is at risk of losing its funding and shuttering.

The point of view switches in third person between Charlie and other main characters with each chapter, denoted by the ASL symbol for the first letter of their name, but even when readers can’t focus exclusively on her point of view, chapter-break lessons allow us to look over Charlie’s shoulder at her coursework or research.

“Eyeth may be a pun, but it’s not a joke—it’s a myth.”

This particular lesson—meant to reinforce that Deaf culture is a culture, as well as to provoke questions about accessibility and designing a Deaf world—is one of many in Nović’s new book. They never feel dry or preachy, but I suppose I was primed to be interested from the get-go.

I’m hearing, but learning the basics of American Sign Language (ASL) was an early quarantine hobby for me, and around the same time, my TikTok algorithm steered me deep into DeafTok. My “For You” page was full of Deaf creators, a wonderful mix of mini ASL lessons, stories, skits and jokes, and more. As immersive as TikTok, YouTube, and other resources can feel, I knew my experience of Deaf culture was still very limited and very online.

When I read the synopsis of True Biz—which is an expression in ASL that means “real talk” or “seriously”—I snatched the book up, and I was delighted to see the illustrations and bite-size lessons as I flipped through the pages.

Since Nović herself is Deaf, it initially feels like these teachings, like the Deaf mythology page, come directly from her to the reader. But the further you get into True Biz, the more you can tell that the lessons are for Charlie, from the other characters that Nović brings to life.

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We learn lessons like “Spelling Doesn’t Count,” on the American Sign Language (ASL) alphabet, and “Deaf President Now,” a history lesson about a student protest at Gallaudet University, from the syllabus of Dr. February Waters, a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults) and the headmistress at River Valley. We learn

“Body Language,” a page full of illustrated instructions for signs like “naked,” “flirt,” and a range of other (dirtier) sexual words and actions, perhaps from Austin Workman-Bayard, Charlie’s mentor at school, whose family have been Deaf for generations. We also learn from Charlie herself, who encounters new concepts in the Deaf world and subsequently looks up Wikipedia pages such as “Black American Sign Language (BASL).” My personal favorites are her awestruck observations of her Deaf friends: Charlie marvels at their ability to ride the bus while signing with both hands, highly adept at balancing without holding on.

As Charlie gets more acclimated to River Valley, so too do we get acquainted with Charlie, her peers and family, and Deaf culture.

Novic’s writing is smooth and easy, even while jumping between perspectives. She balances dialogue in ASL, spoken English, and over text, with italics and alignment indicating who’s communicating. It’s interesting to read Deaf characters written by a Deaf author, as the use of sound as a key sense and descriptor is altered, but it’s no disadvantage. A key theme is language/sound access, and in many cases, Nović only lets us know what Charlie knows, creating vulnerability and slowing the pace of many conversations. A frequent refrain is Charlie seeing or hearing only a view, chapter-break lessons allow us to look over Charlie’s shoulder at her coursework or research.

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Both in the chapter-break lessons and in the narrative sections, Nović manages to cover many intense topics without it feeling too jarring: bodily autonomy, Deaf “cures” and medical trauma, eugenics, anarchism, marital and family struggles, the cochlear implant debate, and more. In fact, Nović’s writing feels so steady that she never gives a true sense of urgency to even the most high-stakes parts of the plot, and the ending wasn’t as satisfying as I hoped. Still, True Biz is a page-turner, an intriguing character exploration, and an honest survey of the basics of Deafness.

It might be imperfect, but I finished the book ready to recommend it and full of renewed excitement for learning ASL, eager to consider how I too might work toward the ideals of Eyeth in my own everyday life.

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"ROUSING! POWERFUL!"
—The Chicago Tribune
Steppenwolf’s *Seagull* opens a lovely new space

By Kerry Reid

“Here is a theater. No curtain, no wings, no scenery. Just an empty space.” Konstantin Treplev, the young and hungry artist manqué in Anton Chekhov’s *Seagull*, intones these words before the disastrous and abortive premiere of his play-within-the-play for his family. But at the Saturday opening of ensemble member Yasen Peyankov’s production at Steppenwolf, it sure felt like a clear-the-throat, point-to-the-room-around-you moment.

The room in question is Steppenwolf’s new Ensemble Theater (officially, the Ensemble Theater in Honor of Helen Zell, because multimillion-dollar complexes require generous donors), and it happens to be in the round. So: No curtain. No wings. Pointedly, the benches onstage for Treplev’s family are first set up for a proscenium seating arrangement, then reconfigured for in the round. But there is scenery in Treplev’s play, where his beloved Nina is first raised up from the wooden floor on a circular platform, and then encased in a white lattice cagelike structure that descends from the ceiling.

It’s an odd moment, and one that encapsulates some of the incongruities in Peyankov’s staging. (He also translated and adapted the script; according to a program note from co-artistic directors Glenn Davis and Audrey Francis, he’s been working on it for 15 years.) Why would Treplev talk passionately about the importance of the empty stage, only to deploy mechanical contraptions? Is it to show us that he lacks the strength of his strongly worded convictions? Or is this staging choice to reassure the audience that semi-fancy stagecraft is still on tap in the new home? The former could be interesting to explore, but the latter gets in the way.

In truth, there’s often a sense in this play that Treplev (Namir Smallwood) rails about the importance of new forms as a way to take revenge on those he sees as artistic sellouts—namely his actress mother, Irina Arkadina (Lusia Strus), and her lover, the popular writer Boris Trigorin (Joey Slotnick). By contrast, Nina (Caroline Neff) sincerely idolizes both Arkadina and Trigorin. Not that it does her much good. Masha (Karen Rodriguez), the daughter of the caretaker for the country estate where the action unfolds, carries a torch for Treplev, while the dull schoolteacher Semyon Medvedenko (Jon Hudson Odom) walks miles to court Masha despite her barely concealed contempt for him. Masha dresses all in black because she’s “in mourning for my life.” (Aren’t we all?)

This is a play where nobody’s fully satisfied, not even the seemingly self-satisfied Arkadina (played to the brassy hilt by Strus, making a welcome return to Chicago, where she cut her teeth with the Neo-Futurists and Peyankov’s European Repertory in the 1990s). The adaptation by Peyankov feels contemporary and sharp, with acidic to-the-gut lines that land when they need to. Neff is a cooler and steadier version of Nina than the fluttery naiads of other productions I’ve seen, where the impulse to play the doomed seabird of the title colors everything too soon. We can almost believe that Neff’s Nina, even with all her vulnerabilities, will somehow find a way to get by, even if it means selling out her own values. Or perhaps she always was more in love with the possibilities of fame offered by Arkadina and Trigorin’s careers than the reactive Angry Young Man posturing of Treplev.

Generational differences are present in the casting. Smallwood, Neff, and Rodriguez are newer members of the ensemble, and it’s a pleasure to see them in the company of cofounder Jeff Perry (who plays Sorin, Arkadina’s querulous brother and owner of the estate) and longtime ensemble member Eric Simonson, who plays country doctor Dorn, the one person who genuinely enjoys Treplev’s play. (Scott Jaeck takes over Perry’s role beginning May 24.)

But even with the intimacy afforded in the undeniably lovely and comfortable new theater, there is emotional distance in this show and a presentational quality to moments that should be as stripped-down and accessible as Peyankov’s text. Some of that is the nature of the (feathered?) beast with this play, which always lodges uneasily between tragedy and comedy—a state of affairs implied by the poster, featuring a cartoon bird with a toy gun at its head and a banner reading “BANG!!!” spilling out of the barrel. Everyone is slightly out of sync in the story, but that doesn’t mean that the actors should feel like they’re in different plays, which sometimes happens here.

I think it again goes back to our not having a clear idea of Treplev, who is the catalyst for much of what happens or doesn’t happen. He is beloved by Masha (and at least for a time, by Nina). His tragedy, perhaps, is that he cannot see the former at all and cannot see the latter for who she really is.

Smallwood’s Treplev nails the self-pity and inchoate rage inside. But if we don’t get a sense of the life and pleasure he derives from trying to create even his clumsy attempts at “new forms,” we’re left with a bit of a void, and Peyankov’s staging hasn’t given us that yet. He doesn’t seem to fully trust that we’ll be able to hold both sides of Treplev in our minds. In that way, the rising platform and descending cage in Treplev’s play are perhaps appropriate metaphors, after all. This is a *Seagull* striving to have it both ways: celebrating Steppenwolf’s past and pointing to its future, yet feeling a little trapped between the two.
On an industrial strip of Rockwell just off Elston, beyond a white door with numbers painted in red, past a makeshift bar, through a dark curtain lies a white brick room filled with smoke. Through the haze, folding chairs line each wall, leaving bare an expanse of concrete, above which soar long sheets of white fabric. Long prisms of light slice across the space, confining the darkness, opening angular apertures for action.

Every seat in the house has a front-row view of Visceral Dance Chicago’s TAKE, with choreography by founder and artistic director Nick Pupillo, lighting by David Goodman-Edberg, costumes by Moriah Turner, and sound design by Johnny Nevin.

First to enter is Meredith Harrill, whose commanding presence focuses attention to the center of the space, then opens the floor for the rest to follow as if storming a runway, in costumes that are simultaneously futuristic and retro, Jean Paul Gaultier-meets-The-Matrix. The mood is aggressively energetic, the movement throughout a dazzling display of flawless technique in episodes dramatically and spatially partitioned by shifts in the light.

The light drives the story: in a blistering solo, Andres Castillo Gomez is pulled by its force—then, immediately following, Meagan Cubides is pushed in all directions by a bright beam wheeled around her and across the floor by Brandon Talbott. Duets and trios materialize within bright polygons defined by their contrast with the darkness surrounding. From their geometric masses, Michelle Meltzer is lifted into the air and passed from hand to hand, peering down from the air like an exquisite extraterrestrial. The company clusters in a corner, shadows looming out the length of the long diagonal, throwing patterns far larger than humans can reach on the floor.

For all our proximity, the dancers stare stoically above our heads and hardly seem to make eye contact with each other; the effect makes viewers into voyeurs, almost close enough to touch but never to really make contact. Until, abruptly, on a single count the focus shifts: the dancers gaze upon us, arms outstretched, commanding us from our chairs. We are drawn into the center of the space, then abandoned there for a serenade by a single string player, Nicole Watson, who paces through the maze of bodies playing a simple melody.

The dancers return, hoods pulled down over their eyes, marching like warriors to an unseen enemy. The hoods fall, exposing faces and trembling hands. Then, with the light, the space changes again, brightening and expanding to the walls beyond, upon which supported dancers delicately step, as if discovering a new gravity—and by extension the audience, which is now within the confines of this new border. We are invited to join them in a last joyous dance as white petals fall from above.

@ireneCHsiao
The year was 1834. Indigenous communities were being displaced from their ancestral homelands on the forced march known as the Trail of Tears. Over two million people of African descent were enslaved. And America’s first model minority, Afong Moy, was imported to New York: a 14-year-old girl who had already lived and worked in America—and millions more would follow in the decades after to labor under inhumane conditions for inferior pay. Afong Moy was the first documented Chinese woman to come to America and, for thousands of white Americans, the first and only Asian person they would ever see.

No first-person account of her life remains, as Afong Moy could not read or write. Instead, we know of her today only through the eyes of others, in advertisements, in the newspaper, in journal entries, and in poems—all in English, a language she could not speak. Her feet were advertised and fetishized—a body part that symbolized a barbaric foreign custom to be feared and detested, as well as an erotic body modification. In Charleston, to her reported shame, her unbound feet were a spectacle presented to an ogling public; in Philadelphia, they were a medical curiosity examined by physicians.

When economic downturn blunted the white middle-class appetite for foreign luxury products in 1837, the Carnes evidently abandoned Afong Moy. She survived several hard years, coinciding with the first Opium War, allegedly in a New Jersey poorhouse. During this time, Eurocentric attitudes shifted from admiration and desire for China’s advanced technologies, refined commodities, and exoticism into the perception of an alien and enemy other, fueled by drug addiction and skirmishes over territory created by Europeans using opium to dominate the global market.

Afong Moy returned to the stage in 1848 among a menagerie of freaks shepherded by P.T. Barnum, “the master marketer of difference.” By this time able to speak English, Afong Moy began to talk back to an increasingly jeering public. The circus cast her aside as Afong Moy was not her real name—nor was “Julia Foochee ching-chang king,” the name under which she was first advertised. Bought by traders Nathaniel and Frederick Carne, she was exhibited in fine clothing on an ornamental chair, sang songs in Chinese, demonstrated eating rice with chopsticks, and walked upon her four-inch feet—over and over again, for hours a day, before spectators who paid 25 cents to see her act. Though some Chinese men already lived and worked in America—and millions more would follow in the decades after to labor under inhumane conditions for inferior pay—Afong Moy was the first documented Chinese woman to come to America and, for thousands of white Americans, the first and only Asian person they would ever see.

Glenn Obrero and Mi Kang in rehearsal for TimeLine’s The Chinese Lady (2018), directed by Helen Young, with production since a TimeLine reading of the play in January 2020, the story of the first documented Chinese woman in America has become painfully legible after two years of pandemic-exacerbated xenophobia, nationwide reflection on past and present racial inequities, and ongoing anti-Asian violence. In the recent past, the country has witnessed the shootings of eight people, including six Asian women, in Atlanta in March 2021, hate crimes against Asian elders across the country, and even a brutal attack on a dancer on his way to perform before the first preview of Ma-Yi Theater Company’s production of The Chinese Lady at the Public Theater in New York earlier this year. However, these incidents are not new—rather, they exhibit the same performance of fascination, derision, and obliteration enacted upon Afong Moy in the brevity of her known life.

“The tricky thing about this play is, because Afong Moy was a real person,” says Young. “She was brought to America by two American merchants who were looking for a live demo doll of the products they were trying to sell—products that were not necessarily authentically Chinese, though they were made by Chinese artisans. I first looked at this as an opportunity to share a Chinese story. As I looked at it more and more it is not a Chinese story—it’s an American story.”

“Chinatown is signifi cant to our accounting of what it is to be human, to study history, [and] to examine history.” Afong Moy was not her real name—nor was “Julia Foochee ching-chang king,” the name under which she was first advertised. Bought by traders Nathaniel and Frederick Carne, she was exhibited in fine clothing on an ornamental chair, sang songs in Chinese, demonstrated eating rice with chopsticks, and walked upon her four-inch feet—over and over again, for hours a day, before spectators who paid 25 cents to see her act. Though some Chinese men already lived and worked in America—and millions more would follow in the decades after to labor under inhumane conditions for inferior pay—Afong Moy was the first documented Chinese woman to come to America and, for thousands of white Americans, the first and only Asian person they would ever see.

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By IRENE HSIAO
presumed wealthy, bought for less, exploited, silenced, never enough, hypervisible, invisible—other.

“When other people use you as a way to look at themselves, your own reflection will become blurred and fractured. You may even start to hate that reflection. The image that Moy presented to white Americans about Chinese people (and by extension, all Asians) persists to this day: Quiet and submissive. Foreign and exotic. Dirty and diseased,” writes Diep Tran in an American Theatre article on The Chinese Lady. “Some of those stereotypes were unfairly placed upon Asian Americans. Other stereotypes were performed by Asian Americans as a means of survival.

“For so long, being Asian American meant privileging the American part of that descriptor, subsuming the Eastern parts of yourself for the Western parts, which were deemed superior. It meant separating yourself from your diasporic community, and their pressing concerns around poverty, incarceration, deportation, and healthcare, and entering the upper ladders of society, which were inevitably Western. You give away your community to ascend, and then wonder why there isn’t anyone who looks like you when you get to the top.”

But as the only ethnicity that was deliberately prohibited by law from immigration to the United States by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (which was repealed in name in 1943 and in practice in 1965 with the elimination of quotas that limited Chinese immigrants to 105 visas annually); denied American citizenship until 1952; and is still omitted from most mainstream American narratives—including those on race—is it surprising that Asian Americans have internalized the message of exclusion to the point of diminishing and rejecting Asian and American culture, in order to better perform the role of a proper “American”?

“It goes back to the exoticizing—it’s [white] society’s fault that Asian Americans feel they have to prove they’re American,” notes Wu, who is from Shanghai. “I was talking about the play in an Uber the other day. The driver was Chinese American. I was like, ‘Do you know how unusual it is to have an all-Asian cast?’ And he was like, ‘Girl, I think you’re doing a great job, but have you considered hiring a white actor? That way more people will come to see your show!’”

“The view of Asian immigrants as ‘sojourners’ and European immigrants as ‘settlers’ is both a mistaken notion and a widely held myth,” writes Ronald Takaki in Strangers from a Different Shore. “Coming here from Asia, many of America’s immigrants found they were not allowed to feel at home in the United States and even their grandchildren and great-grandchildren still find they are not viewed and accepted as Americans.”

This sense of homelessness, of loss of place and identity, is the core and the vacancy of the Asian American experience, which recognizes its distance from its presumed homeland yet is not recognized in this one. “I was born in Hong Kong but came here when I was one,” says Young. “I always feel I’m less than Chinese. It would be better if I could say I lived in Hong Kong until I was 15 and can speak Mandarin perfectly, but here I am in America. I have this feeling of inferiority.”

To be less than is the only possible conclusion from a cultural standpoint that expects to see the vastness of China—or even of all of Asia—contained and presented in a single human being. And to be less than is the only possible conclusion from a cultural standpoint that has reduced that vastness to bound feet, vases, chopsticks, and chop suey.

“What is happening is a performance. For my entire life is a performance. These words you hear are not my own. These clothes that I wear are not my own. This Room in which I am seated is intended to be representative of China, just as I am intended to be representative of The Chinese Lady: the first woman from the Orient to ever set foot in America, and yet this Room is unlike any room in China, and I am unlike any lady to ever live,” Afong Moy says in the first minutes of a play written by a contemporary Korean American man from Indianapolis.

“The characters should be played by Asian or Asian American performers,” writes Suh in his notes to the play. “They should speak in their natural and organic speaking voices . . . the characters should simply move the way the actors move.”

@IreneCHsiao
OPENING

**RR** The bones of grief

*Diving Up Dessa* combines paleontology and personal loss.

Laura Schellhardt’s *Diving Up Dessa* was commissioned by the John F. Kennedy Center as part of its Theater for Young Audiences program in 2018. But this play, now in its Chicago premiere with Theatre Above the Law, is like a lot of great YA fiction—relevant to many audiences.

*Dessa* (Star Smith) is a young girl grieving the death of her father in a car accident, trying to fit into a new school in a new city, and engaging in dialogue with the spirit of 19th-century paleontologist Mary Anning (Stephanie Stockstill), whose pioneering fossil discoveries along England’s “Jurassic Coast” in Lyme Regis were given short shrift in her own lifetime. Under protest, Dessa partners up with rich boy Nilo (Anders Danielson) on a science fair project inspired by Anning’s work (and the way it was ignored by the patriarchs of paleontology).

Meantime, her musician mother, Esther (Melanie McIntulty), struggles to connect with Dessa while writing jingles for a paper company.

In Tony Lawry’s staging, the story unfolds with engaging wit and poignant reality. Digging up the past for Dessa doesn’t just mean restoring Anning to a place of honor on the wall of the local museum. It also means understanding the truth about her dead dad and the mother she blames. Stina Taylor’s set, with hand-drawn fossils on the floor and a curio cabinet reflecting objects of symbolic importance in the play, provides a spare but smart environment, and the cast delivers Schellhardt’s dialogue, which ranges from scientific disquisition to soul-searching grief, with simplicity and empathy.


**RR** People who need people

The Luckiest gets a stellar production with Raven.

When everyone on the stage is excellent, it shows a director fully in command of the material. That’s the case with Cody Estle’s production of *The Luckiest* by Melissa Ross, receiving its Chicago premiere at the Raven Theatre. Plays about a young woman’s disability and impending death always risk straying into Love Story-style bathos, while pieces involving a straight woman and her gay/bisexual friend can easily seem copied from Will & Grace. But Ross, incredibly, has fresh takes to offer both on their relationship and on the health crisis which comes to dominate their lives, and she introduces Lissette’s lasagna-making mother into the mix without turning her and her Boston accent into a cliché of maternal overreach.

As Lissette, the over-the-top protagonist who contracts ALS in her 30s, Cassidy Slaughter-Mason brings just the right amount of manic energy to a role which could easily become grating. Similarly, Tara Mallen brings Lissette’s mother to life with such genuineness and humor that we can see both what Lissette has inherited and what she’s been desperate to escape. These two are ably supported by Christopher Wayland as Lissette’s best friend Peter. That makes his role sound smaller than it is: big moments are spread pretty evenly among the three of them, and their ensemble work is never anything less than generously collaborative—but what a pleasure it is to see a piece with women at the center and a man playing straight (so to speak).

**J. Kelly**

**RR** War cries

Trap Door’s Medea Material evokes inchoate rage.

A wooden rowboat and plastic sheets lining two back walls are the only decorations for Sarah Tolan-Mee’s English-language adaptation of Heiner Müller’s 1982 cry-of-anguish riff on war, betrayal, and the messiness of identity. Using the Greek legends of Medea and Jason as a jumping-off point, this is a raging, poetic rant against tyranny and fate rather than any kind of coherent narrative. But I don’t mean that as a criticism. There was no way to deliver the inchoate rage so palpable throughout this brisk 70-minute piece in anything like a three-act structure. Instead, a half-dozen Medeas and several Jasons take turns reciting, dancing, and ritually enacting acts which will be familiar to theatergoers from the dawn of time. Departures, arrivals, violence, and couplings each get evoked repeatedly, with every performer adding their own wrinkle to what—less capable or adventurous hands—might have been shop-worn gestures.

This is a difficult play to write about because its effect is a mood or vibe rather than anything verbal. I wish I could just tell you to go and let it engulf you with no forebought, warning, or explanation. It does the thing art’s supposed to do—it shows rather than tells. Through the barest of means Trap Door manages to summon a massive, elemental vision. Just as the nine cast members seamlessly slide in and out of identities, foreground, and background, so that wooden boat serves variously as refuge, coffin, and shrine; the plastic sheets are sometimes water, other times a barrier between this world and other worlds. Under Max Truax’s able direction, this group of actors makes often complicated feelings utterly palpable. I don’t know how they did that and don’t want to ask, but I’m grateful to them for working their dark magic.

**Dmitry Samborov**

**RR** Reunion and regret

The Pavilion captures how “what if” rules our lives.

Like several post-pandemic shows in Chicago, the Artistic Home’s production of *The Pavilion*, written by Craig Wright and directed by Julian Hester, is about an intimate relationship between two people over time. It is also about the creation of the universe, being tethered against tyranny and fate rather than any kind of coherence. But I don’t mean that as a criticism. There was no way to deliver the inchoate rage so palpable throughout this brisk 70-minute piece in anything like a three-act structure. Instead, a half-dozen Medeas and several Jasons take turns reciting, dancing, and ritually enacting acts which will be familiar to theatergoers from the dawn of time. Departures, arrivals, violence, and couplings each get evoked repeatedly, with every performer adding their own wrinkle to what—in less capable or adventurous hands—might have been shop-worn gestures.

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NOW PLAYING

**Anaïs in Love**

Anaïs in Love is as magnetic as its protagonist. From the start, Anaïs (Anaïs Demoustier) is messy, flitting from one stressful situation to the next. Except she does it with admirable ease, whether explaining to her landlord why she's behind on her rent or arriving too late to a date with her boyfriend. By the time she awkwardly encounters the much older man she'll embark on an affair with, Anaïs seems to be treading dangerously close to manic pixie dream girl territory. But filmmaker Charline Bourgeois-Tacquet never lets her get there. Instead, Bourgeois-Tacquet offers a much more charming character whose naivety becomes more apparent when she falls in love with Emilie (Valeria Bruni Tedeschi), whose husband is the aforementioned man. Again, she's messy, but the film embraces that in a way that honors the character, giving her room to grow autonomously and with an authenticity viewers won't be able to shake. —Becca James  98 min. Wide release on VOD

**Happening**

The past several years have been an ongoing study in prevailing disquietude—this is especially true of the current moment, when the rights of people who can get pregnant are all too easily threatened. As the saying goes, prohibiting abortion doesn’t stop people from doing it but rather makes it unsafe and potentially fatal. Audrey Diwan’s poignant adaptation of writer Annie Ernaux’s memoir about undergoing an illegal abortion as a 20something woman in 1965, when abortion was still illegal in France, lends compelling imagery to this truism; the French director spares little in her harrowing depiction of a young woman’s quest to terminate her pregnancy. Anne (Anamaria Vartolomei) hails from a working-class village, where her parents (Sandrine Bonnaire is notable as her mother) own a bar and wish better for their gifted daughter, who studies literature at a nearby university. Her future is jeopardized when she gets pregnant; a disapproving doctor tricks her into taking medicine that only strengthens the embryo, and an attempt at aborting it herself proves futile. And that’s just the beginning. Anne contends not only with this physically torturous quagmire but also with suffering grades and isolation from her peers. Diwan charts her journey to the eventual abortionist’s makeshift clinic with aplomb, depicting the lengths people will go to in order to exert bodily autonomy. The no-holds-barred approach to the procedure and its aftermath is the kind of interpretation of real life that great cinema does best; one can only hope such empathy translates offscreen as well. —Kathleen Sachs  R, 100 min. Limited release in theaters

**The Last Victim**

No amount of cowboy bravado could pump life into director Naveen Chathappuram’s debut film. On paper, The Last Victim should be a knockout Western thriller fueled by high-speed chases, gruesome shootouts, and comfortably familiar stoicism, but despite its promise, the film is a tangled mess of lukewarm plotlines that fails to captivate. Filled with uninspired performances and listless dialogues, it only presents a single absorbing mystery: “What just happened?”

For fans of classic Westerns, The Last Victim’s central plot is commonplace for the genre. The film follows small-town Sheriff Herman Hickey (Ron Perlman) as he tracks down a group of outlaws led by the stone-faced antagonist, Jake (Ralph Ineson), who is responsible for the senselessly heinous massacre that opens the film. This proverbial Western plot is complicated when a professor (Ali Larter) and her husband (Tahmoh Penikett) cross paths with the outlaw gang. Suddenly caught in Jake’s unintelligibly brutal rampage, the movie begins to feel like a pointless game of cat and mouse until this violent carousel of pursuits finally comes to a stop.

Tethered by the theme of revenge, this film attempts to expose the vulnerable underbelly of grief as the characters become enveloped by a horror-like game of survival. Instead, The Last Victim delivers a story with whiplash-inducing pacing and an ensemble of underdeveloped characters that will easily be forgotten. The film requires the audience to string together incoherent and fruitless plots that supposedly lead to the conclusion of some hidden motivation or mystery. This is simply asking too much. The movie holds some potential to foster a cult following, but overall, The Last Victim is a tepid action thriller that is carried almost exclusively by Perlman’s sonorous monologues, but even he seems bored. —Maxwell Rabb  103 min. Wide release in theaters and on VOD.
Eli Schmitt, 20, moved to Chicago a couple years ago to attend DePaul, where he studies journalism and art history. In that time he’s become a crucial connector in an emerging youth arts movement best known for its bands, which include Lifeguard, Post Office Winter, Friko, Dwaal Troupe, and Horsegirl. Schmitt wears a lot of hats in the scene. He plays the bands’ music on his Tuesday-night Radio DePaul show and books local DIY concerts. In his apartment, he shoots the live-performance YouTube series New Now and hosts an ongoing informal music-listening hangout he calls Record Club. Schmitt also documents the scene via the zine Unresolved, whose third issue he expects to have printed by June 5—in time to sell it at Horsegirl’s Thalia Hall record-release show that night. Schmitt will be onstage too, playing drums for Post Office Winter.

I started out just doing a radio show through DePaul, Mother Night Radio Hour, in the fall of 2020. I’d always wanted to have a radio show, and so for a while that was the only thing that I was doing—until about a year ago, when I had the idea to do a “locals” episode of the radio show. I would play local musicians, and that got me in contact with a lot of musicians, including Horsegirl.

So now, along with the Mother Night Radio Hour, I do a program called New Now, where I record live bands from Chicago in my apartment. I originally wanted to do that in the DePaul studio, because they have nice equipment. They wouldn’t let me do that. They were just like, “Oh, you can do that over Zoom.” I was like, “That’s not happening, it would sound terrible.” I figured if no one else was gonna let me do it, I would just do it myself. I’ve been doing that since October. I also have a zine called Unresolved, which attempts to document the current art scene in Chica-go—not just music but also visual art, poetry, photography, and people that I think are doing stuff that’s forward-thinking.

I also drum for Post Office Winter. I started doing that in January of this year. Before January, I’d never picked up drumsticks; they asked me to play with them. I said, “You know that I don’t know how to play drums, right?” They were like, “Yeah, but that would be awesome.” I started playing with them at the Beat Kitchen show, which was on February 27. I’m really excited to play at Thalia with them.

I paint. That was the first thing I really did. I enjoy experimenting with materials. Recently I’ve been working plaster and fruit—like, ground-up fruit—into pigment. I’m interested in maps and landscape. Saying all that out loud makes me think about how it seems like a common theme with my work and my artistic interests is documenting—things that are very fact-based. Maybe that stems from my majors—as, like, a journalism major, and my interest in art history, which is my minor at DePaul.

I grew up in Indianapolis, which wasn’t a city that had a lot of an arts scene that I was interested in. There was really nothing going on for kids. Indianapolis is a great city to be a little kid or to be an adult in. There’s no space for teenagers to go, because all the clubs are 21-plus, and there’s no real space for people to get together and grow a community. The only place that I found was Luna Music, which is a record shop near my house.

I started going there when I was 13, like, every weekend. I would just go hang out there on a Sunday afternoon. I ended up getting a job there when I was 16, and that was really a godsend for me. It was really a place that allowed me to explore all these interests in music. Just being around other—they were all 40 years old, all my coworkers, but they got it on a level that I felt like I could relate to, like, as an artistic individual.

I moved to Chicago in the fall of 2020. I didn’t know anyone, really—I think I knew three people here. I’ve always been someone who enjoys being by themselves, but it was hard to not have a community. I couldn’t really find that with people at DePaul, for the most
part. There weren’t people that inspired me and really pushed me. There were people that were “arty,” in the common sense of the word, or “indie,” in the common sense of the word—where they dress that way, and they might like art. But there was something missing.

I was really lucky to find Horsegirl. I met them at an art show—they came up to me, and I was really nervous that they were there. I saw them come in, and I was like, “Oh my gosh, it’s Horsegirl, I’m gonna freak out.” I wanted to talk to them, and they ended up coming up and talking to me. They were like, “Hey, thank you so much for playing us on your radio show, it was really cool.”

We ended up talking about music for a while. By the end of the conversation—we talked for about an hour—I was like, “Hey, I had this idea for this thing called Record Club, would you be interested in coming?” They said they would love to come.

I have people over at my house every other Friday and just hang out and listen to records. It’s still going on today—it’s been one year of doing it. Record Club gave me that home. It gave me that space to create for myself and also for others, to be around like-minded people that had drive and were creative—but also very kind. It’s never been a very cliquey or pretentious space. I think that was, like, the clicking moment for me.

There’s an Instagram group chat, which everyone is in. I just text them, “Hey, there’s gonna be a meeting.” So people just come, and they bring records, and we just hang out for, like, six hours. And there isn’t really any structure, or things that we need to do, or things that we need to accomplish.

It’s not like a normal club. It’s more of, like, a very informal gathering. It doesn’t feel only important to me, but it feels so important to everyone else that’s a part of it. There’s people that you only know through the Record Club. . . . I’m getting used to opening my apartment to people that I don’t know at all. Like, sometimes people just show up, and I don’t really know who they are, but I always try to welcome them with open arms, because I know that they might be in the same position that I was in at one time.

I think it’s created something that feels important and lasting. And I know, just from experience, that things don’t last forever, in that the things that you create change and flow. I feel so thankful to be in the community, right here, right now, and it feels really right, and I never had that before. It makes me lucky, because so many other people in Record Club never had that either. I feel like we’re all discovering this thing all at once. And especially it seems like there’s more momentum within the music scene in the last couple months, especially Horsegirl, Friko, Lifeguard, Post Office, Dwaal. It seems like there’s more momentum, and just more love, in the community.

I have this feeling that I always need to be doing something. I have a fear of wasting my time, and I feel like I always have so little time to do the things that I want to do, and so I need to just go out and do them. I’ve never been someone that procrastinates either, so I think that helps a lot—that I’m someone that feels very passionate about the things that I do, and I’m driven to do them, and feel like I have the energy to do them. I’m very dedicated to this idea of DIY, in that there’s no one else that can do it better than you for yourself. It’s like, “OK, we want to have a show. Let’s just do it ourselves—that way we have control over all the elements of it, and we don’t have to be reliant on other people that might not get what we want.”

I’m really inspired by so many other punk artists who’ve done the same thing. Like the Raincoats—the drummer, Palmolive, is a big inspiration for me, in that she’s a self-taught drummer and an artist. She didn’t really care about the traditional conventions of drumming or anything like that, and they just went out and did that. And I’m really inspired by bands like Fugazi, and the scene in Olympia in the 80s—like, with K Records, and how much they were like, “OK, we’re gonna do this ourselves, and we’re gonna have this be an all-ages thing, and it’s gonna be cheap and affordable,” and really opening that to the public. And I feel like I share those sentiments a lot with Kai [Slater] of Dwaal Troupe and Lifeguard and Haldogallo.

There’s this great Pharrell song with the Clipse, “You Can Do It Too.” Don’t let anyone else tell you, “It has to be this way, you have to follow these set of rules.” Go out there, do it, and figure out the rest later. Just take that leap.

I met someone on the beach once, and they told me this: “To be a sturdy stick in a swift river.” Be confident in who you are and what you believe in, and let the world take you where it may. Be open-minded and let the stream of life figure it out for you, but know who you are, and make the decisions that you believe in, and don’t compromise if you don’t have to. 

@imLeor
I love Third Coast Percussion—I ranked their 2018 release Paddle to the Sea number one on my list of the best Chicago albums of the 2010s—and I’m a big fan of Jlin. So when I heard that TCP had commissioned music from my favorite experimental footwork producer, I started counting down the days till they’d get a recording out. It took a couple years, but the wait is over: on Friday, May 13, TCP release their new album, Perspectives (Cedille), whose centerpiece is a seven-movement, half-hour suite by Jlin called Perspective. She wrote the suite using software, never creating a notated version, and then TCP worked with her to develop an arrangement, searching through their vast collection of instruments to take optimal advantage of their dazzling variety of sounds, densities, and energies. Jlin’s mutable tracks—sometimes brooding and severe, sometimes frenetic and exhilarating—translate beautifully to an acoustic setting. When their programmed layers are played by hand, they lose the superhuman bass detonations that footwork accomplishes electronically, but they gain new dimensions in physical space. Jlin excels at stacking rhythms, pitches, textures, and metabolisms to create the impression of huge three-dimensional volume—her music towers to airless heights over thundering depths, and TCP’s lively, rigorous performances preserve its mind-boggling sense of scale even as they render its sounds literal and tangible. Perspective combines explosive cacophony, taut negative space, microscopically tight gestures, glassy shimmers, slashing spasms that tangle with relentless ostinatos, and the occasional slamming, sashaying backbeat. The final movement, “Embryo,” adapts a track that appears on Jlin’s 2021 EP of the same name, providing a fun chance for an A-B test.

Five movements of Perspective will form the heart of the program at Third Coast Percussion’s first in-person Chicago concert of 2022. Part of the pleasure of seeing this kind of music played live is the chance to connect every element in its dizzying kaleidoscope of sounds to a concrete source. TCP’s performance video for the movement called “Derivative” is edited pretty briskly, but I can spot vibraphone, cowbell, woodblocks, flexatone, tambourine, a large spring, muted button gongs, a squeaky toy with multiple plastic horns, some sort of crank ratchet or cog rattle, a devil chaser (a buzzing cut-bamboo striking stick, also called a koplok), metal bowls and pots half-filled with water, and of course drums and cymbals of every conceivable size and timbre—including one cymbal cut into a long, dangling vertical helix.

The program also features two other compositions from the new album: a percussion arrangement of Philip Glass’s 1988 solo piano piece Metamorphosis I (by Peter Martin of TCP) and the Chicago premiere of Danny Elfman’s Percussion Quartet, written for TCP at Glass’s request. (The remaining composition on Perspectives is Rubix, a no-nonsense indie rock that captures the allure of a towering blaze in the space of a single spark. On their new full-length, Sheer (Flesh & Bone), they pack dream-pop’s gauzy atmosphere into tidy, loud-quiet-loud tracks. The songs hit hard and move briskly, driven by sprocket-wheel rhythms, while retaining shoegaze’s heavenly whoosh—despite their solid, grounded drumming, they’re dreaming of the stars. Guitarist David Algrim and keyboardist Sarah Clausen take turns on the mike (and occasionally duet), and their contrasting personalities—Algrim seems to be testing out a nasal affectation on his dry, strained voice, while Clausen pushes out her downy coo with straightforward gusto—lend the material an extra depth of character. When everything clicks into place, like it does on the rollicking single “Total Orbit,” Gentle Heat sound like they could fit an album’s worth of music into two and a half minutes. —LEOR GALIL
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three-movement collaboration between TCP and Flutronix, aka flutist-composers Nathalie Joachim and Allison Loggins-Hull. It couldn’t be adapted to the flutists’ absence.) Glass’s piece is lush and meditative, foregrounding varying elements of its mesh of repeated patterns against a steady, lyrical chord progression, while Elfman’s retains some of the character of his scores for 80s and 90s Tim Burton movies: playful, spooky, surging, and dramatic. Lastly, the concert includes works from two other recent TCP albums: “Fields” by Devon Hynes, aka Blood Orange (from 2019’s Fields), and “The Hero” by Clarice Assaad (from 2021’s Archetypes, rearranged here by TCP’s Robert Dillon because Clarice and her father, Sérgio, won’t be present to play the piano and guitar parts). —PHILIP MONTORO

FRIDAY 13

JOEBOY 8 PM, Park West, $32 W. Armitage, $29-$30

Throughout the next few months, Chicago will host several concerts featuring contemporary Nigerian pop stars, and Joeboy in particular is a must-see. Born Joseph Akinwale Akinfenwa-Donus, the 24-year-old singer attracted international attention in 2019 for his summery single “Baby,” a love song with a loping chord progression and an overarching yet understated chirpiness that’s ready to burst at the seams. When Joeboy maneuvers between heartfelt singing and rapping, “Baby” explodes with so much color that it channels the exuberant delirium of a relationship’s honeymoon phase. On that song and others, Joeboy proves more adept than most pop stars of the moment at making infatuation palatable. “Show Me,” from his triumphant 2021 debut album, Somewhere Between Beauty and Magic (Banku Music / emPawa Africa), employs an incredible, barely perceptible transition in the moods of his synths. Though their tones initially feel mysterious, Joeboy’s heartfelt declarations as the song progresses propel them into a zone of complete confidence and unbridled euphoria—he won’t stop chasing after love. Somewhere contains Joeboy’s best material to date, and shows that he knows how to ride along to the beats that drive his songs.

On “Focus,” his rapping and the percussion engage in a subtle interplay: the soft musical accents and insistant rhythm feel lighter and more buoyant because of his elegant voice. “Runaway” cruises at a slower tempo but is just as resplendent because Joeboy’s singing intertwines with the track’s numerous shimmering guitar melodies. Most of his songs have an admirable brevity too; “Celebration” reflects quietly on life’s small joys in under three minutes, closing the album with charming gratitude. Since the album’s release last January, Joeboy has put out a handful of singles on his own and with other artists. The most commercially successful among them is “Sip (Alcohol),” a bleary song about escaping life’s miseries—it’s proof that he can provide a potent dose of any emotion he wants to conjure up and leave you feeling elated. —JOSHUA MINSOO KIM

RLYR: Djinjah and Salvation open. 10 PM, Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western, $10. 21+

I heard a lot about the glory days of the Fireside Bowl even before I moved to Chicago, and I loved the way the venue brought together bands from disparate subscenes with almost every show. Chica-go instrumental trio Rlyr exemplify that freewheeling spirit: in their wondrous thrashing, I can hear the residual effects of growing up seeing grindcore, heated breakdowns and exultant crescendos make their stylistic hopscotch feel as thrilling as though you’re hearing such leaps for the very first time. —LEOR GALLIL

THURSDAY 19

GENTLE HEAT See Pick of the Week, page 48. Discus and Smut open. 9:30 PM, Hideout, 1354 W. Wabansia, $12. 21+

ADULT. A small number of tickets will be available at the door, but this show is otherwise sold out. Kontrovida and Spike Heils open. 10 PM, Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western, $18. 21+

It’s tempting to call Adult.’s music, on Becoming Undone, their staying power lies in their ability to guide you through a ritual danse macabre. —MICCO CAPORALE

FRIDAY 20

ADULT. A small number of tickets will be available at the door, but this show is otherwise sold out. Kontrovida and Spike Heils open. 10 PM, Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western, $18. 21+

It’s tempting to call Adult.’s music, on Becoming Undone, wherever you’re hearing such leaps for the very first time. —LEOR GALLIL

SATURDAY 21

40 YEARS OF TOUCH A showcase by London collective Touch featuring Jonathan Thomas Miller and Cleared with Olivia Block. 7:30 PM, International Museum of Surgical Science, 1524 N. Lake Shore, $22. 21+

London-based Touch isn’t a record label in the traditional sense; it’s far more multifaceted. It might be more accurate to describe Touch as a collective that also extends into publishing, performance curation, and site-specific multimedia events driven by a loosely defined stable of international avant-garde electronic and sound artists, who include guitarist and producer Fennesz, experimental electronic composer Phill Niblock, multi-instrumentalist Oren Ambarchi, noise and tech-
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no producer Mika Vainio, and Icelandic composer Hilda Guðnadóttir.

This year Touch turns 40, and it’s celebrating its big anniversary with a chain of showcases in the U.S. and Europe that kicked off in Berlin in January. The Chicago event, held at the International Museum of Surgical Science, has a great lineup. Ohio native and Los Angeles resident Jonathan Thomas Miller is a multi-instrumentalist and composer for film and TV, and his credits include the Life Below Zero documentary series. Last year his versatile style, which blends esotericism and whimsy, landed him a composer-in-residence position at Columbia College.

Hard-working composer and sound artist Olivia Block has been one of the brightest lights in Chicago electronica and minimalism since the 90s. Her latest solo work, last year’s **Innocent Passage in the Territorial Sea**, is absolutely mesmerizing. The track “En Echelon” recalls noise pioneers Suicide while also managing to suggest glitch culture, harpsichords, and drum circles—all within less than six minutes, a span that feels longer than it is in the best possible way. For this show, Block will collaborate with minimalist Chicago duo Cleared, aka percussionist Steven Hess (who also plays in Rlyr and Locrian) and guitarist Michael Vallera (also of Luggage). Block contributed a remix of a Cleared track to their 2020 album for Touch, The Key, and she’s collaborated with Hess in experimental group Haptic. Block will provide field recordings and synth organ for this performance, which she says will include a shared piece in two parts: one focusing on field recordings and electronics, the other on instruments and tones. The venue for the concert, the International Museum of Surgical Science, is a Chicago gem that deserves its own write-up—its environment creates an intense combination of the luminous and the grotesque, and these artists are perfect for threading that needle.

—MONICA KENDRICK

Since January 2020, vocalist Julian Otis and Elastic Arts executive director Adam Zanolini have programmed Afri/Classical Futures, a series offering an antidote to the overwhelming whiteness and deadness of the classical canon. Each Afri-Classical concert invites a Black artist working in or springboarding from the Western classical tradition for an intimate live performance and conversation, though the exact form is up to the artist. Cellist Olula (who formerly performed as Olivia Harris), who came aboard as a curator of the series in its second season, explained this approach to Adam Zanolini for Elastic’s newsletter: “Because this is a Western classical music series, it’s very important that we don’t bring in those hierarchies, that we don’t prop up the structures that we’re trying to fight against. . . . I want to continue to see a more expansive approach to the question, ‘What is classical music?’” Previous Afri-Classical guests have included chamber collective D-Composed, Milwaukee-based violin-and-cello duo Sista Strings, pianist and polymath Charles Joseph Smith, prolific composer and string player Renée Baker, and singer and composer Ayanna Woods, who’s behind some of the most engrossing choral music being written in Chicago right now. (Musical talent may be a family trait; her sister is Jamila Woods.) Next up in the series is the Honourable Elizabeth A. Baker, a Florida-born multi-instrumentalist and electronics artist whose career, slow-developing music constantly reinvents itself. When she premiered her work “Strange Loops” here in October, the performance managed to amuse several AACM musicians—no small feat—by employing overlapping scales in different keys and directing musicians to bounce Ping-Pong balls inside a piano and use the bodies of other instruments as resonators, either by singing or blowing their horns into them. Ever out of the box, Baker will use this solo set to spotlight a harmonica guitar (specially designed by experimental luthier John C.L. Jansen) and the 16-channel speaker system at Elastic Arts, which the Chicago Laboratory for Electroacoustic Theatre installed just before the first U.S. pandemic shutdown.

—HANNAH EDGAR

**TUESDAY 24**

**KIKAGAKU MOYO** Joshua Abrams opens.

8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 1807 S. Allport, sold out. 17+

Earlier this year, Japanese psych band Kikagaku Moyo announced that they would go on indefinite hiatus following their 2022 tour. It’s always surprising when a successful, globe-trotting band call it a day at the top of their game, and their multitudes of fans got pretty upset in response to the news. Over the past decade, Kikagaku Moyo have become one of a handful of cult-favorite bands to make the break from underground psych heads to more mainstream indie-rock audiences, a la Woodenships and Earthless. And they deserve this wider attention for how they’ve ingeniously toed the line between immaculate songcraft and spacey experimentation. Kikagaku Moyo (whose name means “Geometric Patterns”) formed in Tokyo in 2012 around the duo of drummer Go Kurosawa and guitarist Toma Katsurada, then expanded into a five-piece influenced by a disparate mix of sounds, including Indian music, hip-hop, black metal, and power pop.

Japanese audiences weren’t particularly welcoming to the band, so they turned to the U.S., playing events such as Austin Psych Fest and releasing albums on statewide labels, including New York-based Beyond Beyond Beyond Beyond Beyond. In recent years, Kikagaku Moyo have toured their psychedelic asses off (except during pandemic lockdowns, of course) and started their own imprint, Guruguru Brain. While their hiatus is a sad development, at least they’re going out with a bang: to coincide with this tour, they’ve just released their swan-song LP, Kumayo Island (Guruguru Brain). The seeds of the album were planted while the box was stuck in Amsterdam during the early days of the pandemic and germinated in a studio in the Shinjuku area of Tokyo. The album is a fitting epiphany; the songs on Kumayo Island sound like the culmination of Kikagaku Moyo’s shared musical experiences. Opener “Monaka” (named for a type of Japanese adzuki-bean sweets) is inspired by minyo, a Japanese folk-music style, and aided by sitar, snaking wah-wah guitar, and a funky groove; “Dancing Blue” slaps just as hard. It’s nice to hear the band sing in their native language (they sometimes use their own made-up tonal tongue), which they also do on the gently flowing “Yayoi, Iyayoi,” which spirals into a fierce Flower Travellin’ Band-style freak trance. Overloaded Eastern-style guitar adorns “Field of Tiger Lilies,” and “Nap Song” is a gentle sleepwalker (as one might expect from its name). The band even take on “Meu Mar,” a dreamy tune by Brazilian troubadour Erasmo Carlos—a bold choice, considering the aesthetic distance. “Maison Silk Road” (which wins song title of the year for me) are the most musically challenging tracks on the LP, with densely layered field recordings and identifiably sounds that could’ve come from the beyond. It’ll be interesting to see how Kikagaku Moyo re-create these songs live, and I’m curious to see to what extent they mix it up with back-catalog material at this final Chicago gig.—STEVE KRAKOW

**ALBUM REVIEWS**

**CAVE IN, HEAVY PENDULUM**

Relapse

cavein.bandcamp.com/album/heavy-pendulum

The title and story behind Cave In’s 2019 LP, Final Transmission, led many to believe that the eclectic rock band’s two-and-a-half-decade run had come to an end. Following the tragic passing of bassist and vocalist Caleb Scofield in 2018, the group flashed out the last demos they’d made with him and turned them into a complete record. It seemed like a fitting conclusion to the band’s arc as well as a heartfelt goodbye to the man who’d given them so much of their heart and soul. But to the delight of Caveheads such as myself, the band have decided to carry on. Their new album, Heavy Pendulum (Relapse), isn’t just another collection of songs in their catalog; it’s another step in the evolution of a band whose shifting sound is one of their biggest

**THE HONOURABLE ELIZABETH A. BAKER**

8 PM, Elastic Arts, 3429 W. Diversey #208, $15.

**CAVE IN**

8:30/PM, Thalia Hall, 1807 S. Allport, sold out. 17+

**WEDNESDAY 25**

**KIKAGAKU MOYO** Joshua Abrams opens.

8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 1807 S. Allport, sold out. 17+

**S/T**

8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 1807 S. Allport, sold out. 17+

**HILDAS GUÐNADÓTTIR**

8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 1807 S. Allport, sold out. 17+

**GURUGURU BRAIN**

8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 1807 S. Allport, sold out. 17+

**THE KEY**

8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 1807 S. Allport, sold out. 17+

**THE HONOURABLE ELIZABETH A. BAKER**

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assets and most defining features.
Cave In emerged from the mid-90s Boston hardcore scene, and their 1998 debut LP, Until Your Heart Stops, essentially reinvented metalcore with unrelenting, knotty, incredibly complex dual-guitar shredding topped with the even more shredded vocals of front man Stephen Brodsky. Finding out what new musical moves a Cave In record would contain soon became one of the most exciting things about following the band. In 2000, they issued their prog-rock space-metal masterpiece, Jupiter, where Brodsky traded in his scream for a velvety falsetto. They toyed with shoegaze-adjacent indie rock on 2002’s Antenna, then blended sludge metal with space rock on 2005’s Perfect Pitch Black and 2011’s White Silence. Since Scofield’s death, Converge bassist Nate Newton has stepped in, and his grimy, groovy low end is a perfect fit. Heavy Pendulum is Cave In’s most straightforward, focused release to date, with direct heavy-metal riff laying the groundwork for Brodsky’s signature vocal hooks (and the occasional trade-off with Newton’s menacing growl). Cave In’s beloved stargazing space-guitar leads are less of a presence, but that vibe proves quite tuneful, depending on what the situation requires. But he rarely performs on his own, which makes the music on his debut LP, Amache (Cuneiform), especially surprising. It’s credited to Nick Macri & Mono No Aware (“mono no aware” is a Japanese phrase referring to cognizance of the impermanence of things), but Macri is the only musician on it. He opens the album with tolling, almost prayerful metal percussion, but that vibe proves quite transient when he abruptly burps his electric bass. “How to Be in the Body... Without Jumping Out of Your Skin (for Tracy Pew)” is named for the late bassist of the Birthday Party, the ferocious post-punk combo where Nick Cave made his bones. The piece wraps around one and a half sides of a vinyl record, taking a winding path from simple, scorched melody to electronically scoured noise. Then Macri turns to his acoustic bass for the title track, dedicated to the thousands of Japanese American citizens who where shipped to internment camps during World War II and then made Chicago their home after the war. Macri has a familial connection to this heritage, and the piece’s solemnity makes it feel a bit like a prayer of remembrance. —BILL MEYER

UPIOMAMMUT, FENICE
ufomammut.bandcamp.com/album/fenice

I’ve never been the type to have a single favorite artist (I’ve probably got 100, depending on the context or mood), but for more than a decade I’ve counted Italian psychedelic-metal group Ufomammut among the best bands on the planet. So in January 2020, when they announced that their drummer, Vito, was departing and that the other members were taking a break after 20 years together, I hoped their hiatus wouldn’t turn permanent. In the years since, we’ve experienced so much loss, but Ufomammut have thankfully not become a casualty of the time; their new album is titled Fenice (“Phoenix”), and they’ve emerged from their own ashes with a renewed sense of purpose and spirit. They’ve long been known for pushing the boundaries of heavy psychedelic music and building dense, titanium-strength walls of sound replete with far-reaching cosmic experiments and cavern-scaping doom, and their philosophical underpinnings have seemed to grow more ambitious from album to album. But as they note in the press release for Fenice, all those complexities began to take their toll. And so, joined by new drummer Levre, they decided to shake off the past and get back to basics. A listen to the album suggests they’ve accomplished their mission. Fenice twists and turns but never loses momentum or focus, and its relatively stripped-down atmospheres suggest that Ufomammut have burned off their music’s impurities (well, most of them) while preserving the white-hot essence. Written as a single track and divided into six pieces, Fenice is best experienced in its entirety. Between the church bells, whispers, and flying-saucer-invasion synths of opener “Dust”; the stunning, serene melodies that contrast with increasingly thunderous bass on “Metamorphoeid”; and the grimy, pulverizing grooves of “Empyres”, each song can more than stand on its own, but when you’re offered a journey as heady as this one, you want to make it last as long as possible. —JAMIE LUDWIG
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Luciano Antonio 6/1, 8 PM, Jazz Showcase
Apocalypse Hoboken, Kyle Kinane, Boris the Sprinkler, Party Like It's 1984 6/2, 8:30 PM, Unitarian Church
Chris Brown 6/11, 8 PM, Live Wire

UPCOMING

A.J.R. BoyWithUke, Blue Man Group 6/5, 7:30 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park

LOCAL FOUR-PIECE Mystery Actions remind Gossip Wolf of the cool, slightly intimidating kids from the Chicago street-punk scene in the late 80s and early 90s, when it centered on Clark and Belmont—specifically Punkin’ Donuts and the Alley. Perhaps that’s because the band—vocalist Nikki Mouse, guitarist Lucy Dekay, drummer Rose Beef, and bassist Mikhail Hell—crank out tough-as-nails, high-speed punk that’s earned them slots supporting timeless heroes such as the Dead Boys, Buzzcocks, GBH, and the Adicts. Mystery Actions have been working on an as-yet-unintended EP that’s due on Friday, May 20, and last week they dropped its scorching debut single, “War Beat.” On Friday, May 13, they debut the “War Beat” video at GM Tavern as part of a show there with Watermelon and Exedo.

They aren’t mercenaries who escaped from a military stockade, but brand-spanking-new local thrash band Ready for Death are kind of like the A-Team—five weirdos brought together by unlikely circumstances who reliably create explosive action. The group includes members of Racetracer (Dan Binae), Luggage (former Reader staffer Luca Cammaruto), Pelican (Dallas Thomas), Indecision (Artie White), and Haggathorn (Shawn Brewer), and in April they released their ferocious debut single, “Cyborg Priest.” On Saturday, May 14, they play their first live show, at 7 PM at Tone Dead Records, with an opening set from sludgy stoner trio These Beasts.

Chicago punks Daddy’s Boy have a heck of a lineup: Jon Strasheim (aka Oblivious Newton Jon), Bandcamp Daily editor Es Skold (Split Feet), Neal Markowski (Retreaters, Future Living), and Bryan Gleason (Fake Limbs). They’ve been pretty quiet lately, and their new full-length, Great News!, sounds like they’ve been saving up things to rail against. Recorded by Steve Albini at Electrical Audio, Great News! channels every ounce of the past few years’ frustration into agitprop rippers!—J.R. Nelson and Leon Galil
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SAVAGE LOVE

Bewjeweled butt plugs and the war on abortion

This is a column about worries.

By Dan Savage

Q: I’m a straight guy, married to a straight woman for 15 years. Several years back, I opened up to my wife about my fantasies of her sleeping with other men. I was nervous about bringing it up. Her views on sex had always been traditional, and she had always expressed a very strict idea of monogamy and commitment. So, I was extremely relieved when her reaction was intrigue rather than disgust. She was curious about it and wondered if I really wanted it to happen or if it was just something I wanted to keep in our rotation of dirty talk. Fast-forward to this week, and my wife tells me she is interested in exploring this. (Note to other guys who want this from their wives: be respectful, don’t pressure, and give her time to think about it. Your patience might be rewarded!) Here is the problem: We both have careers that could be complicated or damaged by the stigma around “cheating.” I know about all the apps out there, but we live in a large city, and there is a nonzero chance that we might run into someone on the apps we are connected to professionally or socially. Are any of the apps out there geared toward folks who want to go about this carefully? Is it possible to minimize the risk of professional or social embarrassment here, or is this just something we must accept to pursue this lifestyle? —HOPING UP, SEEKING HELP

A: There are lots of dating apps for people and/or couples looking for casual sex and/or kinky sex (Feeld, 3Somer, Open, et al.), and lots of people—single and partnered—looking for casual and/or kinky sex on regular dating apps (Tinder, OKCupid, Christian Mingle, et al.). But hookup/threesome/swinger apps, while perceived as sleazier, are a safer bet for a couple like you and your wife.

While there’s no way to eliminate your risk of being recognized on an app, HUSH, anyone who spots you on Feeld looking for extracurricular dick was on Feeld looking for and/or offering up a little extracurricular dick of their own. The threat of mutually assured destruction—if they gossip about you, you’ll gossip about them—is usually enough to restrain bad actors, as is the threat of the obvious follow-up question. (“Wait, why are you on Feeld?”) And most people on hookup apps aren’t bad actors, HUSH, but fundamentally decent people like you and your wife, i.e., singles and couples looking for a little fun, not for an opportunity to hurt anyone. A friend or a relative or a coworker who spots your wife in a bar with a strange man—or in the lobby of a hotel or on her way into your apartment—is likelier to cause you headaches than one of your fellow perverts online.

To minimize your risk of being spotted and outed on the apps, HUSH, don’t post face pics and only share them after you’ve established—to the best of your ability—the person you’re talking to isn’t a bot, a pic collector, or an extortionist. Again, there’s no way to fully eliminate the risk, but at a certain point you have to trust your gut and take a risk. You also have the option of creating a profile in a city you visit regularly but don’t live in, HUSH. After you’ve found and vetted a few good candidates, get yourself some airline tickets and a hotel room and have those drinks in a bar that a colleague, a fan, or your father-in-law is unlikely to walk into.

Q: There’s a story making the rounds on Reddit about people getting those metallic “bewjeweled butt plugs” all the way into their asses and needing pretty intense intervention to get them out, ranging from partners pulling them out with their fingers (the unfun kind of double penetration) to actual surgery in a hospital (only fun for a very select few). The blame, apparently, is the fact that the base of these toys is rarely wider than the widest party of the head, which is pretty damning, and that lubed metal is slipperier than lubed silicone. So here are the operative questions: Are metallic bewjeweled butt plugs safe or not so much? Are silicone bewjeweled butt plugs any safer? Are there any safe bewjeweled butt plug options out there? The world isn’t going to stop being obsessed with sparkly butt toys any time soon, so we’re going to need to find a way to do it safely. —INSERTION TOY EXTRACTION MESSY SITUATION

A: I’ve seen those jeweled butt plugs in shops and in photos online—they’re usually made from stainless steel and have glass “gems” mounted at the end of an alarmingly narrow base—but I’ve never actually seen one in person. Or in a person, at least not in person. But knowing what I do about butts (and how they relax after some play), and knowing what I do about plugs (a flared base is your line of defense against a trip to the ER), I would’ve worried too much about losing one to use one. As for safe bewjeweled butt plug options, ITEMS, you’re going to want a flared base and a jewel that’s at least the size of Cullinan I Diamond, the fist-sized rock on the Queen of England’s royal scepter, which come to think of it . . .

Q: As you’ve surely heard, the conservative Supreme Court majority plans to overturn Roe v. Wade. While my wife and I were lamenting the state of this fucking country, she mentioned that nobody ever hears men talking about the abortions that kept their lives on track—even though that’s obviously a very common thing that happens. How many guys shat their pants after a condom failed during sex with a woman they weren’t that into? How many prominent men knocked up their mistresses or assistants or babysitters? How many Republican boys have pressed a wad of their parents’ money into a girl’s hand because having a baby would ruin his future? These men need to speak up. I’m not expecting actual Republicans to do so, but perhaps there are men out there who are willing to speak up and admit we all know: Men benefit from abortion while bearing none of the shame associated with it. It’s time we heard from them. I’m sorry I don’t have a catchy name for this or a cute sign-off. I’m so tired and the world is falling apart.

A: Now for some real worries. We are weeks away from American women being stripped of a fundamental constitutional and human right. And we face the prospect of an out-of-control and illegitimate Supreme Court stripping us of a host of other rights: the right to contraception, the right to same-sex marriage, the right to interracial marriage, even the right to have sex for pleasure—you know, the sex most people have most of the time. In Lawrence v. Texas (2003), the Supreme Court struck down sodomy laws that criminalized not just consensual gay sex, but consensual sex between men and women that wasn’t open to conception as well. While it should be enough to hear from women who’ve benefited from safe and legal abortion—and it should be enough to know that women die from unsafe and illegal abortions, and enough to know that banning abortions doesn’t stop women from getting abortions—I happen to agree that cis men who support abortion rights and
have benefited from them need to speak the fuck up about reproductive freedom. “There are millions of men whose lives would have been worse without abortion,” the writer Jill Filipovic wrote on Twitter last week. “Men who wouldn’t have found their big loves, wouldn’t have their kids, wouldn’t have been as successful, wouldn’t have taken big risks” if they had become fathers before they were ready. To those men, to all men, Filipovic says, “This is your fight, too. Get in it.”

And gay men? The exact same arguments being used right now to strip women of the right to decide when and whether they want to bear a child—abortion isn’t within the “history and traditions” of the United States, abortion isn’t a right enumerated in the Constitution, abortion is a moral question—can and will be used to strip us of the right to have sex and the right to marry. Republican assholes are passing laws in red states right fucking now that force women to give birth to their rapists’ babies against their will. Don’t for a second think these same assholes won’t pass laws forcibly ending your gay marriage or throwing your gay ass in jail for getting your gay ass fucked. This is our fight, too, faggots.

Q: Is there a website where we can legally find out how to buy the abortion pills you’ve mentioned on the podcast?—MAKE IT STOP

A: Everything you need to know about abortion pills—how they work and where to get them—can be found at planpills.org. And anyone using those pills at home needs to read Dr. Jen Gunter’s essay “Your Medical Team Cannot Tell If You Had a Self-Managed Abortion” at vajenda.substack.com. And everyone should read Jill Filipovic’s advice on what we can do right now to fight back (“Get To Work, Get Informed, Get Brave”) at jill.substack.com. And if you can afford to donate to the National Network of Abortion Funds, now would be a great time to do so. They’re at abortionfunds.org. And finally: don’t vote Republican, don’t fuck Republicans.

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