Irregular Girl is leading the fight for trans utopia

“I don’t perform positivity as much as hope.”

By Micco Caporale 38

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IN THIS ISSUE

NOTE FROM AN EDITOR

This is the first time we’ve done a summer theater and arts issue, and judging by the full-to-bursting content, that’s surprising—especially given how much Chicagoans love getting outdoors in the summer. You can read about some theater and dance programs that specialize in bringing performances to public parks, or, if you prefer indoor immersive experiences, there’s always Prince. (May there always be Prince!) Our cover story on Irregular Girl highlights this trans artist and activist’s ongoing role as “the Live Laugh Latina of clubland,” while rising Chicago playwright Terry Guest questions history through a Black queer perspective in Story Theatre’s Marie Antoinette and the Magical Negroes. A new screening series, Black Actors in Foreign Cinema, also asks us to look at history through a lens not as warped by whiteness.

If real drama weren’t enough, there’s always the theater of local politics, and we have a ton of Q & As and features in this issue on what’s going on ahead of the June 28 primary. (If you can predict what’s going to happen in the wild race for Bobby Rush’s congressional seat, you might have a future in futurism.) Outdoor music festivals should be a good way to kick back, but as Kira Leadholm’s feature on concert safety and security demonstrates, even those are rife with shady dealings.

But that’s always the challenge of living in this complicated place: balancing the joy and beauty with the dirty underpinnings. Get out and vote—then get out and enjoy yourselves! —KERRY REID

CORRECTION: An article published in the June 9 issue of the Reader, “False alarms,” stated that Governor Pritzker signed the Pretrial Fairness Act in January 2021; Pritzker signed the bill in February 2021.
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I like to go for anything that draws attention and is kinda funky and out there,” says 20-year-old Joey Prette, already a senior stylist at Free People and a musical theater student at Roosevelt University. “Usually I’d be wearing my flower earrings, but I forgot them today,” they say while sporting green, their favorite color.

Prette likes to thrift and shop at small boutiques such as Big Bud Press, where they got their wide-legged mushroom pants. “They scream ‘me’ and who I am as a person,” they say, adding that mushrooms are really cool and edgy right now.

True words indeed. An aesthetic being dubbed “weird girl,” or, better yet, “weird person,” is really happening at the moment, and Prette might be channeling it by favoring the trend’s motif du jour.

Prette’s style has an added charm provided by their monochromatic color choices, making their look pleasingly offbeat. “I love color. If I decide to wear blue, I wear all blue, and pair it with some fun patterns and accessories,” they say.

Another indicator that Prette embodies the now: they ignore gender norms when choosing their outfits, and they claim to wear platforms and heels all the time. “I don’t really shop in the men’s section anywhere, and it shouldn’t matter,” they say. True words indeed.
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FOOD FEATURE

The House of Wah Sun abides, in Irving Park
The classic Chinese American restaurant will be reborn in a former Golden Nugget.

By MIKE SULA

Last Saturday night at the House of Wah Sun in North Center, Mark Chiang lingered at the table of a few of the night’s last customers. His wife, Young Ja Kim, had already wheeled over the egg rolls, crab rangoon, and heaping platters of crispy chow fun, cumin lamb, and Sichuan green beans, but Chiang was pre-occupied by the imminent relocation of his Cantonese-Mandarin restaurant to a recently shuttered Golden Nugget two miles to the west in Irving Park.

“If can I would stay here,” he said. “I don’t want to go but I take this opportunity. Twenty-one years I been here and it’s finally time.”

Kim was simply ready to call it a night. “Will you leave them alone?” she said as she scooted past. “They came to eat.”

The House of Wah Sun’s original location opened across the street from the Davis Theater in 1947, making it one of the city’s oldest operating Chinese restaurants. But it maintained a low profile over the decades, relative to the nearby 95-year-old Orange Garden with its once-dazzling, now-darkened neon sign (now in the possession of a similarly weathered rock star). And perhaps the House of Wah Sun’s rep has suffered from confusion with Uptown’s comparatively juvenile Hong Kong-style barbecue specialist, Sun Wah (35 years).

Both names translate into roughly “New Chinese,” but the House of Wah Sun is a neighborhood institution that traffics in a nostalgic style of Chinese American food that hardly feels new, but is executed at a level that surpasses its remaining fellow dinosaurs.

Customers are invariably greeted inside the doors by a giddy dancing wooden Buddha, and in contrast, Kim, whose MO is initially stern but ultimately endearing. There’s a full bar known for its sweet, potent Mai Tais and Zombies in ceramic tiki ware, and a sprawling menu that covers all the classic Chinese American bases and then some.

Chiang says it’s little changed since he bought the place from founder Melvin Gin, a World War II navy vet who served primarily Cantonese dishes at his original carryout spot, and at the current location, which he opened in 1978.

Back then Chiang—who’s 61—was still a kid in Daegu, South Korea, one of thousands of Chinese expats from the northeastern Shandong Province who dominated the nascent restaurant economy there. “For a Chinese born in Korea, they don’t give us opportunity,” says Chiang. “You cannot work in the bank—they’re not gonna hire you. A lot of other fields are really limited. We actually work in the restaurant as no choice.”

At 24, Chiang was working in a 600-seat Mandarin restaurant in Seoul’s Gangnam District when he left for the U.S., where a prep cook job was waiting for him at Yu’s Mandarin in Schaumburg. He didn’t train to become a chef until he lit out for St. Louis, where a friend opened a new place. Three years later he returned to Yu’s, where he began cooking and where he met Kim—and two of his current chefs: his brother-in-law Fung Chin and Ping Du, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of Sichuan (the same school Tony Hu attended).

When Chiang bought the House of Wah Sun he inherited Gin’s peanut butter-kissed egg roll recipe, along with the predominantly Cantonese menu, to which he added Mandarin and Sichuan dishes. He opened right after 9/11, and business was slow at first, but they slowly built it. Those egg rolls, 600 to 800 handmade each week, put their two daughters through college (one’s a doctor now, the other a chemical engineer). Wok-toasty almost-caramelized fried rice with fat chunks of pineapple had something to do with it; as did soup swimming with chubby wontons and thick slices of barbecue pork; swollen egg foo young saucers that might levitate if they weren’t smothered.
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Create the perfect charcuterie board
Some suggestions for an incredible charcuterie board: Firehook Crackers, Baldauf der Allgauer cheese, Ubiacco Pinot Rosé cheese, Underground Meats Tuscan Style Salami (local vendor), Marcona almonds, Mitica Fennel Taralli Italian crackers

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We also have amazing in-house prepared takeaways, including handmade sandwiches and salads, which also pack perfectly for your next Chicago adventure. Take advantage of our Wellness Wednesdays in which you can save 20% on wellness products, such as vitamins and minerals. Don’t forget to stock up on sunscreen and aloe to keep the UV rays at bay. After relaxing and chilling in the sun, visit our spirits department for a few refreshing cocktail ingredients like Vodka (Moscow Mule), Rose Tequila (Tequila Sunrise), Rum (Pina Colada), Gin (Gin Basil Smash), and a diverse selection of wines and beers perfect for sipping in the fresh air.

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in sheets of thick, glossy gravy; and salt-and-pepper shrimp fried so delicately you can eat the shells. These are some of my favorites anyway—there are nearly 100 items on the menu, including that Sichuan-style cumin lamb, served sizzling atop a bed of fragrant cilantro, a newer addition and a hint of things to come.

Gin, until he passed away six years ago, was also Chiang’s landlord, but for the last 11 years, he’s been on a month-to-month lease. Late last year Gin’s children sold the building to a developer, and Chiang was told he had until the end of 2022 to get out. After more than two decades of 13-hour days, he was thinking of retiring in five years or so, but now he had to scramble.

The rent’s higher at the old Golden Nugget, but he won’t have to share the parking lot (like he would have with the COVID testing center that almost moved in until he threatened to leave)—and the taxes are lower. The Buddha’s coming with him, and so are his chefs, and he sees a market in Irving Park for some of the iconic dishes he prepped as a young man in Seoul, such as the black bean noodles zha jiang mian, the spicy seafood soup jjamppong, and the sticky sweet hot chicken wings known as gampong. The new neighborhood has historically been a stronghold for this particular Chinese-Korean hybrid cuisine, but Chef Ping, who went to culinary school in Chengdu, will also introduce more rigorously Sichuan dishes such as whole fish hot pot and the Taiwanese beef noodle soup niu rou mian.

Chiang, who also handles the restaurant’s deliveries in his Prius, is just waiting for his final health department inspection before he can open in the new place at 3234 W. Irving Park.

Kim is coming too, of course. The customers, “they come to see me,” she says.

Mark Chiang (left) and Young Ja Kim with the retro sign on the side of the Lincoln Avenue location for Chicago Reader

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FOOD & DRINK

ARE YOU READY FOR SOME FOODBALL!?

It’s a summer of Monday Night Foodball the Reader’s weekly chef pop up series at the Kedzie Inn, 4100 N. Kedzie Ave. Follow the chefs, @chicago_reader, and @mikesula on Instagram for weekly menu drops, ordering info, updates, and the stories behind Chicago’s most exciting foodlums.

June 27: Chinese-Viet-inspired barbecue from Charles Wong of Umamicue @umamicue
July 4: Independence Day break
July 11: Dawn Lewis of D’s Roti & Trini Cuisine @ds_roti_trini_cuisine
July 18: Mazesoba from Mike “Ramen Lord” Satinover @ramen_lord
July 25: Asian stoner snacks from SuperHai @getsuperhai
August 1: Keralan food from Thommy Padanilam of Thommy’s Toddy Shop @thommys_toddy_shop
August 8: Indonesian home cooking with Waroeng and friends @waroeng_chicago
August 15: Dylan Maysick of Diaspora Dinners @diasporadinners
August 22: Vargo Brother Ferments @vargobrotherferments
August 29: The triumphant return of Funeral Potatoes @funeral_potatoes
Sept. 5: Labor Day break
Sept. 12: TBA
Sept. 19: Global Asian barbecue with Umamicue and friends @umamicue

See chicagoreader.com/food-drink/ for weekly menus and ordering info

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After dropping one of Chicago Tribune's best albums of the year in 2018, Chicago rapper femdot has continued to blossom into a staple in his hometown and beyond. His 2019 breakout project, 94 Camry Music, led to a sold out nationwide tour with tobi lou, partnerships with brands such as lululemon and being the face of Toyota's 2020 Camry model roll out.

femdot created the 501c3 non-profit org Delacreme Scholars, which has supplied free grocery delivery services to over 500 families around the city of Chicago, awarded 20 scholarships midyear to Black and Brown college students, and hosted toy and coat drives throughout the city.

Fresh off being tapped to write the Chicago Bears 2021 season opener campaign, femdot followed up with his project titled Not For Sale, supported by a COLORSxStudios performance, along with four sold out listening sessions in Chicago and New York with support from brands Diageo and lululemon, along with a 24 city tour as direct support for SABA.

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**POETRY CORNER**

I watched it all happen.  
I watched people go from hands to poles and start blasting.  
I saw city action happen in the burbs, when people started capping.  
I seen blacks get pushed further south, when they shut down projects.  
I saw people shift behavior without much context.  
I saw fighting as a contest rather than nonsense.  
I saw the summers get hotter.  
I saw a whole lot of mothers.  
Ain't see too many fathers.  
I saw fewer solutions than I saw problems.  
I saw hot cheese on chips and frooties cents to the dollar.  
I ain’t realize that in other cities that wasn’t an option.  
I saw summer as an escape from school, from the pain, from the snow, from the cold, from rules, as an excuse to be loose, a muse, to help us detach from what we viewed as negative, and enhance the other things that we knew, as a reminder of all of the people we can lose, And a reminder that those people could be us too.  
You know, love and good food.

The possibility of something bigger to pursue, even just an excuse to hoop, bikes turned into cars we used to scoop, learning my friends had learned to shoot. And that happiness had a limit too.

---

An excerpt from “93 Days of Summer” (2019) By femdot.

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Not a dream

The casino may actually be worse for Chicago than the dreaded parking meter deal.

By Ben Joravsky

A

As I lie in bed drenched in sweat, battling COVID, it came to me as in a fevered dream...

The City Council had overwhelmingly approved Mayor Lightfoot’s idea to spend untold millions on a casino. Even as Alderperson Brendan Reilly warned them that it may wind up being as bad as the hated parking meter deal from 2008. And Reilly should know—as he was fooled into voting for the parking meter sale.

When I got over my COVID—yes, folks, I’m feeling better—I realized it had not in fact been a dream. It was reality. The council approved the casino on May 25 by a vote of 41-7.

And ever since I’ve been wondering—is this deal actually as bad as the parking meter one?

At first I thought—no, nothing could be that bad. For one thing, only five alderpeople voted against the parking meter deal. So you can argue we’ve made progress with those two extra no votes.

But upon reflection, I’ve concluded that in some ways it’s worse.

As evidence (and comic relief), let me introduce as exhibit A a column about gambling by Steve Greenberg of the Sun-Times. But before I do that...

Listen, I realize it’s hard to top the parking deal for awfulness. At Mayor Daley’s insistence, the City Council voted to borrow over a billion dollars from a consortium of wealthy investors. In return, Daley and the council agreed to give those investors the proceeds from the parking meters for the next 75 years. Meaning...

We got a little more than a billion. And they will get... who the hell knows? Six billion. Seven billion. Ten billion. I’m not sure I’ll be around in the year 2083 to find out.

Say what you will about the casino, I don’t think it will divert that much money from our coffers. Plus, the casino must be built. So construction workers will get jobs.

And the casino will need employees, so people will get jobs. Let’s hope those people are Chicagoans. Though so far there is no residency requirement.

On the other hand, the casino deal shares this awfulness with the parking meter deal:

The mayor rushed it through the council, who barely had time to know what they were voting on.

There was no independent cost-benefit analysis. So we don’t know what the casino will cost, which means we have no idea how much of a profit it will yield, if it yields one at all.

In fact, the Lightfoot administration still hasn’t told us how many public dollars will be spent building the casino. At the moment, they’re sorta pretending there will be no public cost. A proposition I find very difficult to believe.

Moreover, Mayor Lightfoot used some of the same hard-sell tactics as Mayor Daley did with the parking meter deal.

Back in 2008, Mayor Daley told us we needed to sell the meters to offset a property-tax hike. Then he hiked our property taxes anyway.

Similarly, Mayor Lightfoot and her City Council allies—chief among them Alderperson Walter Burnett—say they need to bring in casino revenue to offset a property-tax hike. They say they needed the casino revenue to fortify the police and fire pensions. Then they conceded that the casino’s revenues “only will be a drop in the massive bucket the city needs to fill each year in order to pay for the pensions,” as Becky Vevea and Mariah Woelfel of WBEZ put it. So your property taxes will go up anyway—just like with the parking meter deal.

Having said all that, why do I conclude the casino is worse? Because we should know better. In many ways, Chicagoans lost their virginity—politically speaking—with the parking meter deal.

Back in the Daley years, there were a few of us pointing out the city was run by scoundrels, who feed bullshit to the public. But generally, we were a bunch of lefties on the fringe. For the most part, Chicago voters were true believers—couldn’t even imagine voting for anyone other than their beloved Mayor Daley.

If you criticized him, they told you to leave. Preferably to Detroit, which was positioned as what Chicago would be without Mayor Daley. But with the parking meter it was undeniable that the city was run by scoundrels. And almost every alderperson vowed never to fall for such chicanery again. And now here we are 14 years later falling for it—again!

There’s another way the casino deal is worse.

A casino is set up to make sure its patrons lose. The more money they lose, the more money the casino takes. And ultimately the more money gets paid to the city.

So we’ve linked our economic future to soaking the saps who throw away their money at a casino. And that brings me to Steve Greenberg’s column.

It’s about a different kind of gambling—sports betting. But it’s the same basic point—the system’s set up so that gamblers lose.

Using a recently published survey of gamblers, Greenberg writes:

“This is kind of scary: 39% admitted they typically risk 50% or more of their monthly take-home income in total wagers. What are they doing with the other half, sewing $20s into kites?”

And... “Meanwhile, 60% of respondents said they bet on sports to earn extra income. Similarly effective ways of doing that: playing the lottery, investing in your cousin Earl’s latest cryptocurrency and chucking your piggy bank into a wood chipper.”

And... “Quick question: Are all sports bettors full of it or just most of them? Because 75% of respondents reported breaking even and 24% claimed they win at least 75% of the time. Do you know who wins 75% of the time? No one you’ve ever met or ever will meet.”

Finally... “On the other hand, only 11% answered that they win ‘rarely.’ One only can assume they’ve been betting on the Cubs.”

Very funny column, Steve Greenberg. Unfortunately, when it comes to the casino, Chicago, the joke is on you.
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COMMENTARY

ON CULTURE

Sun, surf, summer: time to head to the library

Riding Jane Crow, typing Nelson Algren, and the return of the Newberry Book Fair

By Deanna Isaacs

There’s a whole lot of story in history. And so much depends on the perspective of the storyteller.

What, for example, will the future think it knows of our fraught time? What will be included? What will be omitted? What will be the spin on events like the war in Ukraine or the 2020 presidential election?

Miriam Thaggert has been thinking about this sort of thing since a visit to the Newberry Library’s vast Pullman Company archives in 2014 sent her on a long detour through 19th- and early 20th-century American history.

Thaggert, now a literature professor at SUNY Buffalo, had been skimming through the employee records of the famous all-male, all-Black Pullman Company porters for a book she was planning, when she stumbled on something she didn’t expect: an application from a woman.

It set her off on a different track.

“I had never heard of Pullman maids before,” Thaggert says, but that was the position this woman was seeking. “It made me start to think about what the experiences of Black women in that company might have been like. And that led to questions about the experience of other Black women on the railroad,” as passengers or as workers.

The result, after a return to the Newberry in 2015 for an academic year fellowship and much additional research, is Riding Jane Crow: African American Women on the American Railroad, published this month by University of Illinois Press.

“One of the things I’m hoping to get people to think about is the national narrative we tell about the railroad,” Thaggert says.

Looking mostly at the years between 1860 and 1925, Thaggert found that railroad travel, romanticized by countless white male writers, was a very different experience for Black women, who were often forced to ride in Jim Crow cars even if they’d paid for first class tickets. (Ida B. Wells sued twice over this.) As passengers at that time—“a period of intense racial activity when Black political and economic advancements precipitated widespread violence against Blacks”—Thaggert writes, they had to worry about possible verbal or physical assaults by other passengers or even by the all-white conductors. The mere fact that they dared to travel made them targets. Any kind of fuss could lead to ejection from the train or a trip to jail.

“Africa’s valued progress narrative, a story so often symbolized by the railroad,” is challenged by the experience of Black women, Thaggert wound up writing. “The nation’s mechanical trajectory ‘forward’ has, embedded within it, the retrenchment of African American social progress.”

Thaggert has curated an exhibit, “Handmaids for Travelers: The Pullman Company Maids,” on view at the Newberry through September 16. A concise walk through a central chapter of the book, it’s a chance to see actual documents from the archive. These include a page from the company’s detailed Instructions for Maids (No wearing of rouge or powder!), and advertising photographs that show pampered white patrons getting manucures and hairstyles en route.

On June 29, Thaggert will be back at the Newberry for the Riding Jane Crow book launch and a discussion with University of Pennsylvania history professor Mia Bay, whose own book, Traveling Black: A Story of Race and Resistance, recently won the 2022 Bancroft Prize in history. It’s free and open to the public.

Also, after a three-year COVID suspension, the Newberry’s annual used book fair—the major event of the summer for bargain-hunting bibliophiles—is back. Scheduled for July 29-31, with free admission and “many items priced at $3 or less,” it’ll be smaller than pre-COVID fairs due, in part, to a shorter collection period. But “smaller” is relative: 30,000 to 40,000 books will be offered in the usual dozens of categories, including lots of cooking, history, and fiction.

In conjunction with the book sale, the Newberry’s hosting “a day of storytelling” across the street in Bughouse Square (Washington Park), Saturday, July 30. Celebrating “the power of storytelling and its role in shaping our city,” it’ll include storytellers like Chicago Youth Poet Laureate E’mon Lauren, Lily Be, and Vincent Romero, as well as Dawn Turner, who’ll be receiving the Newberry’s inaugural Pattis Family Foundation Chicago Book Award for her memoir, Three Girls from Bronzeville.

If you’re moved to tell your own story, there’ll be a public open mike. You can also drop in on a performance of 100 Novels by artist Tim Youd, who’s been traveling for a decade, retyping the work of famous authors in locations relevant to the books. Youd will be retyping Nelson Algren’s The Man with the Golden Arm at the Newberry (where Algren researched the book) from July 26 through August 12. He’ll type the entire novel on a single piece of paper, backed by a second sheet of paper, both of which will then be mounted as art objects. There’s a tale looking for a teller there.

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The ‘tough-on-crime’ myth

When candidates say they’re “tough on crime,” what they really mean is “we’ll put more Black people in prison.”

By Anthony Ehlers

As the election looms closer, it’s easy not to think of people in prison at all, except maybe as statistics. Those in prison are easy to dismiss. Yet it would surprise most people that the people in here are very politically astute. There is a reason for that: it’s because elected officials’ politics disproportionately impact marginalized communities. Perhaps more than any other demographic, their policies directly affect our lives. Black and Brown communities and poor people of all races have long been targets of politicians and their tough-on-crime stances.

People in prison realize our statistical importance. In Illinois, each person’s vote is not weighted equally. A single vote for a state representative in Cook County will have less influence than one in downstate Randolph County. That’s because Randolph County is located in Illinois House District 116, which is home to Menard and Pinckneyville prisons. Together, they hold more than 3,700 people, nearly half of whom are from Cook County.

According to the latest data from the Illinois Department of Corrections, 27,601 people were incarcerated in Illinois prisons as of the end of March. Almost half of them (11,743) were from Cook County. More than half were Black—but the prisons they are incarcerated in are often in rural, white counties.

The U.S. census counts incarcerated people as residents of the prison in which they are housed, which are most often in rural areas, rather than residents of their permanent, pre-incarceration communities.

This is sometimes called prison-based gerrymandering. The practice artificially inflates the populations of rural areas where prisons are located. Those imprisoned in Randolph County account for more than one in 25 residents of House District 116. The prisoners cannot vote, but they are counted as residents of the 116th District by the census, which artificially increases the number of state and federal representatives that county gets, giving voters in the district a bit more power. This leads to greater political influence and increased economic resources for the largely white, rural areas—while costing the urban, poor, mostly Black communities the same economic resources where they are badly needed.

This discriminatory and anti-democratic policy violates the fundamental principle of “one person, one vote.” That principle requires election districts to hold roughly the same number of constituents, so that everyone is represented equally.

“Residents in Chicago are actually having their political power deflated,” Kasey Henricks told Medill Reports in 2019. Henricks, a professor of sociology at the University of Tennessee, co-authored a 2017 report on racial inequality in Chicago that found the political power of predominantly white downstate communities is “artificially inflated” in the expense of predominantly Black and Brown districts that are impacted by mass incarceration.

Debate about prison gerrymandering is often framed as a partisan battle, with Democrats advocating for reform, and Republicans opposing it. But that’s not true: both parties use prison gerrymandering. While it’s true that Republican districts hold most of the prisoners, Democratic districts have prisons as well. And the 2021 SAFE-T Act, passed by a majority-Democratic Illinois General Assembly, delayed reforming prison gerrymandering until 2031.

People in prison carefully watch candidates who use the “tough-on-crime” platform. Tough-on-crime is an old standby for not having real answers to the problems that face our communities. It’s politics, with a side order of fearmongering. It’s a code word. When candidates say they’re tough on crime, what they really mean is, “we’ll put more Black people in prison.”

Tough-on-crime doesn’t lead to a crackdown on embezzlement. It doesn’t lead to more police in predominantly white and affluent neighborhoods. It means “we’ll keep those poor Black people out of your neighborhoods.”

What poor and Black and Brown communities need is further economic investment and development, jobs and opportunities. These communities are already overwhelmed with institutionalized racist and classist oppression. They don’t need to be cracked down upon. They need to be lifted up. They need inclusion, not oppression.

The police, media, and politicians have made the universal face of crime that of young Black and Latino men, while at the same time making the face of the “victims” that of a white woman or child. No one in power cares if a Black person is brutally murdered. It barely garners mention.

If, however, a white person is killed by a Black person, it’s sensationalized. You’ll find it in every newscast. Politicians will comment on it, police will react to it, the media pounds it into you. You never hear the exact words, they are much too politically correct for that, but the underlying message says that Black people are dangerous. Politicians in turn climb over the top of each other to shout “lock them up,” and promise to be even tougher on crime than the other guy. Their tacit platform is, “only we can keep you safe from Black people.”

This is what tough-on-crime really boils down to: it’s a scam, a high-stakes game of three-card monte. It’s a misdirection. Politicians are really adept at reacting to crime, and at making these somber, ridiculous statements that they could have stopped it if only they had control.

What they don’t want you to know is that the game is fixed. Crime is secretly good for candidates. They love to promise to protect you, that they have a plan, and the answers. Sadly their plans are all the same: tougher laws, longer prison sentences, and of course the smile and wink with a promise to keep “those people” out of your neighborhoods.

What you never hear are plans to stop police brutality, or plans to dismantle structural inequality, or plans to invest in Black and Brown communities. Instead of normalizing injustice, where are the plans to build up those communities? How can it be better to spend untold millions of dollars on prisons, than spending those same dollars to bolster Black-owned businesses, to create jobs, and to improve schooling?

Doesn’t it seem like our priorities are backwards?

Tough-on-crime is lazy. It’s a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound. Instead of asking how a politician will react to crime, ask them what their plans are to prevent it. Ask them their plans to end inequality and injustice. Ask them about inclusion and investment in the poor.

If all they can come up with is tougher laws and prisons, then look for a better candidate.
The Illinois primary elections are underway, and you can expect to see races for congress, governor, and state- and countywide offices on your ballot. This primary is unique in many ways: for one thing, it’s being held during the long, final days of June, instead of in blustery March. A bill signed by Governor J.B. Pritzker last year moved the primary back so that lawmakers would have time to redraw district boundaries after the census was delayed due to COVID. For another thing, a historic election is shaping up in the Congressional First District, where long-time Congressman Bobby Rush is retiring and an unprecedented 17 Democratic candidates are running to take his place on the ballot in the fall.

It wouldn’t be election season in Chicago without some skullduggery. Political antics of late include a knockdown, drag-out legal fight in the Cook County Sheriff’s race, in which incumbent Tom Dart was finally able to disqualify challenger Carmen Navarro Gercone this month after the Illinois Supreme Court declined to take her case. Navarro Gercone, who has spent decades in law enforcement and served as a top assistant to Dart, was disqualified because the SAFE-T Act requires sheriffs to be certified law enforcement officers.

And earlier this week, Mayor Lori Lightfoot appointed Monique Scott to fill the city council seat vacated by her brother, Michael Scott Jr. The Machine ain’t dead—it’s only mostly dead.

Political shenanigans aside, these races determine the visions for policymaking on all levels of government that impact you the most. But don’t worry, Chicago: we’ve got you covered!

Inside you’ll find key congressional races, and interviews with incumbents running for reelection and first-time (and repeat) challengers. We’re reprinting an April article about a state senate primary race that reveals a rift among Latinx progressives on the southwest side in English and Spanish. We also take a look at sometimes-arcane offices such as the Cook County Board of Review, Assessor, and Metropolitan Water Reclamation District. And we’ve got an extensive voter guide to judges, courtesy of our friends at Injustice Watch.

Early voting is ongoing, and the primary is June 28. The general election is November 8. You can find where to vote at chicagoelections.gov.
A rush to be first

A whopping 17 Democrats and four Republicans are vying to replace Bobby Rush, who is retiring.

By Taylor Moore

In January, U.S. Representative Bobby Rush announced his retirement, and for the first time in 30 years, the seat for Illinois’s First Congressional District is wide open. A whopping 17 Democratic candidates (and four Republicans) are vying to represent this south-side/south-suburban district. Among them are an alderperson, a state senator, a son of Reverend Jesse Jackson, and several activists, business leaders, educators, and pastors. “This is literally unpredictable,” said Pete Giangreco, a Democratic consultant who has campaigned for Rush, Barack Obama, and Representative Mike Quigley. “Anybody with a little bit of [political] base, a little bit of money, and a little bit of shoe leather could win this thing.”

We spoke to political insiders to break down this key race. The election will take place on June 28, 2022, and early voting is now available.

The past

Though its shape has changed over time—it now stretches farther into the suburbs, from Bronzeville on Chicago’s south side all the way to Bourbonnais in Kankakee County—the First Congressional District has been a bastion of Black political power for nearly a century. During the Great Migration, more than 500,000 Black people moved to Chicago to escape the segregated south, but due to discriminatory housing practices, were confined to overcrowded living conditions in certain
The race offers a wide-ranging mix of conservative, moderate, progressive, and radical Democrats—some with decades of experience in politics or organizing, and some with major name recognition among Black voters in Chicago. For many candidates, such as Jahmal Cole, who began his campaign a year before Rush announced his retirement, this is their first time running for public office.

For others, it is another attempt: Ameena Matthews is running again after garnering 7.8 percent in 2020, and Alderperson Pat Dowell decided to run one day after Rush’s retirement announcement, dropping her bid for Secretary of State. Karin Nortington-Reaves ran for 6th Ward alderperson in 2007, but gained only 14.1 percent of the vote.

Democratic candidates raised a total of $2.74 million as of June 8, according to the watchdog website Open Secrets. At the time, Swain had raised the most with $535,632, followed by Dowell with $531,812, Nortington-Reaves with $456,802, Jonathan Jackson with $374,303, and Jacqueline Collins with $159,426. Jahmal Cole has raised $153,622.

Progressives have rallied around multiple candidates in the race, with no clear coalition. A week after announcing his retirement, Rush endorsed Nortington-Reaves, former CEO of the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership, who was also recently endorsed by the Tribune. Dowell was endorsed by SEIU Locals 1 and 73 and several alderpeople.

Jackson was endorsed by Representative Chuy Garcia, Senator Bernie Sanders, the Chicago Teachers Union, the Amalgamated Transit Union, and, amazingly, Judge Mathis of television fame. Collins was endorsed by state senate colleagues, including Don Harmon, Robert Peters, and State Senator emeritus John J. Cullerton as well as Dr. Cornell West and Father Michael Pfleger of Saint Sabina.

This crowded field calls into question the value of Bobby Rush’s endorsement. In many Chicago-area races, the incumbent has heavily influenced who will succeed their term, but those in the First District seem undeterred by Rush’s anointment of a successor. Delmarie Cobb, who ran Rush’s first campaign in 1992, said, “I don’t know that he has coattails in terms of turning out votes”—Rush’s son, Flynn, lost an open statehouse race in 2018 to Curtis Tarver—but he may have coattails in terms of helping [Nortington-Reaves] raise money and get endorsements.”

Jerry Morrison, who worked on Rush’s campaign against Obama in 2000, and whose employer, SEIU Local 1, has endorsed Dowell, was also skeptical of how much it would sway voters. “An incumbent congressman endorsing someone in a field of unknown candidates is significant, but in a field of very well-known candidates, it’s probably not as important,” he said.

“It’s not the Lipinski seat,” political consultant Giangreco quipped, referring to the Third Congressional District, where Bill Lipinski and his son, Dan, presided for more than 25 years before Marie Newman won the seat in 2020.

Instead, Giangreco compared this race to Illinois’s Fifth District. In 2008, Rahm Emanuel vacated his congressional seat to become White House chief of staff, and a special primary was held. Cook County Commissioner Mike Quigley did not have the money or endorsements that his rivals had, but low voter turnout, a 12-candidate field, and reform-minded messaging allowed him to clinch the Democratic nomination with only 22 percent of the vote, according to Giangreco, who worked on his campaign.

“I think this is very much the same story, just on the south side,” he continued. “There is going to be a spirited battle and the person who wins may only get 20 or 25 percent of the vote.”

Jonathan Jackson is perhaps the best-known candidate in the race. Jackson is the national spokesperson for the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, which his father Jesse Jackson Sr. founded, and the owner of a Bronzeville-based construction contracting company. He touts his international advocacy—going on trips with his father—and his connection to Martin Luther King Jr., his godfather. Multiple sources expressed skepticism at his influence, compared to his father and brother, Jesse Jackson Jr., who represented the Second District in Congress for 17 years and resigned in 2012 amid health issues and a probe into campaign fraud.
continued from 17

A progressive organizer on the south side, who asked for anonymity because of their employer, said they think Jackson is an OK candidate, but added, “As a city, I think a lot of people are sick of the Jackson name. . . . Not saying that Jesse Jackson [or his son] didn’t do a lot of good work, but this is Chicago, and we don’t have a monarchy.”

Cobb, who is not in the race, has worked for both Jesse Jackson Sr. and Jr., and says the aphorism “familiarity breeds disrespect” applies when discussing the Jackson legacy. “What I see is that, when people are close to people, and see them every day and take them for granted, there’s not that same level of esteem and respect,” she said. “Whereas from afar, people think about the Jacksons very differently.” She thinks there may be hesitation because of the manner in which Jackson Jr. stepped down, but “if you’re looking for people who are willing to take on the establishment, who are willing to speak truth to power . . . Jonathan would be one of them.”

In such a crowded race, the outcome may come down to influence. “Does the Rush endorsement mean more than the Jackson name? That’s the great unknown here,” said Giangreco.

For the most part, no candidates have gone negative on each other. At one point during a May 23 candidate forum hosted by Indivisible Chicago-South Side and UChicago Democrats, Norington-Reaves lambasted “a certain candidate” for receiving an endorsement from an organization that advocates for defunding police. Called for comment, Norington-Reaves said she was referring to Our Revolution’s endorsement of Jackson. Her campaign also sent out an email that attempted to paint Jackson as supportive of defunding police based on the endorsement.

Depending on the outcome, the person elected to represent the First District could have a long-term effect on national policy. “These seats don’t come up very often,” Giangreco said. “It’s a safe Democratic seat. . . . Once you win them, you tend to have a long career in them.”

Cobb says people should be doing as much research on these candidates as they would if buying a car. “All these people have a record, whether you were in the private sector or the public sector. If you’re a progressive, where have you been on the big issues? Why didn’t I see you? Those are the questions people need to ask themselves. Don’t let somebody tell you who they are.”

Whoever wins the primary will have large shoes to fill. “This has always been an activist seat,” Cobb said. “When you look at the types of people—larger-than-life personalities and activists—that have held this seat, there’s a legacy that follows. Those are the kinds of people [First District residents] want representing them—somebody who’s going to fight, somebody who’s going to make sure they have a voice in Congress and bring resources back to the district.”

The future

The Illinois primary election will take place on June 28. Early voting is open now to Illinois residents. Democrats and Republicans who win their primary elections will face off in the general election on November 8, 2022.

Typically the primary election takes place in March, but last year, Governor J.B. Pritzker signed a package of election reforms that shifted the 2022 primary forward by two months. Morrison, who has worked on many political races, said the delayed primary date, the proximity to Independence Day weekend, and the fact that this is a midterm election (no U.S. president on the ballot) could lead to low voter turnout. “People in Illinois aren’t accustomed to voting that late in the season.”

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Get our free daily newsletter delivered straight to your inbox Monday through Friday! Dive into our most recent stories and exclusive insights from our co-publishers, editors, and staff writers.
Unaid Ahmed, a 45-year-old Indian American candidate for Illinois’s Eighth Congressional District, is posing a stiff primary challenge to incumbent Raja Krishnamoorthi, a Democrat who has held the seat for five years. This is Ahmed’s first electoral run.

Ahmed was born in Hyderabad, India, and his family moved to the U.S. when he was still a child, about 30 years ago. He has since lived in Chicago, spending most of his foundational years in Rogers Park. A few years ago, Ahmed moved to the Eighth District, where he lives with his wife and four children.

In an interview with the Reader, Ahmed shared vivid details about his first few years in America and talked about his working-class upbringing.

“My childhood has been quite, quite interesting. As a new kid on the block my dad used to have two jobs, sometimes a third job; same job, two shifts,” he said, recounting his early years in Chicago. “Growing up you either became a doctor, or an engineer, otherwise you’re no good,” he said, lightheartedly emphasizing all the American dreams his parents had for him. In 2000, Ahmed got a degree in computer science from DePaul University, and from there went to corporate America to work at Accenture for seven years. In 2009, Ahmed earned an MBA from the University of Chicago, and then started his own technology consulting firm, SAKStech, in 2013.

Ahmed said that “politics was never on the plate for him,” but he was inspired to get into public service by his parents, who always taught him to share and give back to the community.

In 2015, Ahmed volunteered for Krishnamoorthi’s first campaign for Congress.

“To be very honest, I was excited. And I was excited to see [Krishnamoorthi] . . . And maybe he was a great guy back then, a fellow Brown brother running,” he said.

Since then, Ahmed’s politics have continued to evolve. He is a staunch supporter of raising the minimum wage and enacting Medicare for All. “In the wealthiest nation on the planet, everyone should be able to thrive,” he said.

In 2020, Ahmed was organizing rallies in support of universal healthcare and urging representatives such as Krishnamoorthi to stop taking money from the for-profit healthcare industry when he met Elisa Devlin, now his deputy campaign manager. Devlin said that she was moved by Bernie Sanders’s campaign, and when that ended she wanted to continue being involved in politics. She started an organization called Schaumburg Area Progressives, a platform that she runs to this day.

It was during her involvement with SAP that Devlin crossed paths with Ahmed.

“I saw the same qualities [in Ahmed] that really drew me to Bernie. That authenticity,” Devlin said.

According to Ahmed, Devlin had a huge role to play in pushing him to run for office.

“Basically Elisa said, ‘Junaid, if you’re not the candidate, we think that there is no candidate in 2022,’” he said.

Both Krishnamoorthi and Ahmed are Indian Americans, but vary starkly in their views of religious politics in India. Ahmed is a practicing Muslim, while Krishnamoorthi identifies as Hindu, and has expressed support for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing paramilitary organization in India.

The RSS is a Hindu nationalist organization that promotes the creation of a homogeneous Hindu homeland in India, and espouses the Hindutva ideology—a right-wing ideology that casts out and discriminates against non-Hindus as “foreign.” Current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was a former member of the RSS, and joined the Bharatiya Janata Party, which draws its core political values from RSS, as an RSS organizer in 1985.

Modi was elected prime minister in 2014. During his administration, India has fallen on the religious freedom, press freedom, and hunger index, and has seen a rise in violence against Muslims.

In 2005, the U.S. government revoked Modi’s
diplomatic visa for failing to control anti-Muslim riots in 2002 in Gujarat, the Indian state he was head of at the time. In 2014, Modi’s government passed a Citizenship Amendment Act that was widely derided as anti-Muslim, and has passed several other laws since then that have been similarly criticized. In January, Gregory Stanton, the founder and director of Genocide Watch, called the current systemic discrimination of minorities in India as an “impending genocide.”

During the 2019 Howdy Modi event—a grand reception for Modi in Houston—Krishnamoorthi delightedly shared the stage with Modi. He was the only elected Indian American politician who attended the event.

“Unfortunately, Raja chose to look the other way when a call for genocide is happening in India,” Ahmed said. “He chooses to still keep associating with these people who have openly enabled this genocide. He’s not even ashamed of it.”

According to Pieter Friedrich, a freelance journalist who does independent research on Hindutva and its associated links with American politicians, Krishnamoorthi extends his support to right-wing politics in India because of financial interests. Friedrich called Krishnamoorthi “the RSS’s man” in Congress.

In the run-up to the 2016 race, Krishnamoorthi’s campaign accrued the highest funds among all House races across America. The Hindu American Political Action Committee (HAPAC) contributed $35,000 to his campaign in 2015.

The HAPAC’s stated mission is to ensure that the religious freedom and human rights of Hindus all over the world are preserved. It is linked to the Hindu American Foundation, which underpins the Modi government’s nationalist, allegedly anti-Muslim agenda.

“Breaking in is getting your foot in the door the first time,” Friedrich said. “That’s always the hardest. That’s the biggest hurdle. And so that initial financing from the earliest days, that’s particularly what [Krishnamoorthi] gained,” Friedrich said.

With more than $9 million in his campaign bank, Krishnamoorthi doesn’t necessarily need the financing, but he does need to avoid alienating his earliest and most influential supporters—the people who were crucial to helping him get into Congress in the first place, Friedrich added.

Ahmed has raised just over $800,000 via a combination of individual and grassroots donations. In a debate last month, Ahmed promised to “never take a dime of corporate money” and vowed to expand campaign finance reform if elected.

Krishnamoorthi’s frequent donors include Bharat Barai, member of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America, the overseas branch of the VHP India, which in a way is a subset of the RSS. The RSS and VHP are part of the Sangh Parivar, a conglomerate of over a dozen Hindu nationalist organizations. In May, Barai was seen talking about a chapter he wrote about Indo-U.S. relations and Prime Minister Modi’s inspirational guidance to the diaspora in the book Modi @ 20—in which experts recount and praise Modi’s 20 years as an Indian statesman.

In 2018, the World Hindu Congress was held in Chicago. The event was organized by the VHPA. The same year, the CIA labeled the VHP as a “religious militant organization.”

In addition, the VHPA is known to be taking active steps to “saffronize,” that is, “Hinduize” South Asian history. When the VHPA received approximately $833,000 of U.S. federal COVID relief funds, many human rights activists criticized the grant, saying the organization had “Hindu supremacist” sentiments. An Al Jazeera reporter who pursued the story about the disbursement of COVID funds to right-wing Hindu organizations faced a subsequent lawsuit and death threats for his reportage.

The U.S. Department of State’s 2021 Country Reports of Human Rights lists a slew of violent acts committed against Muslims in India—including one by a member of the VHP, who was arrested for making an attempt tolynch a Muslim cattle trader who later died in police custody.

“I think that as far as that issue [fascism in India] goes, having an Indian American Muslim candidate challenge is crucial to exposing those fault lines in [Krishnamoorthi’s] character and in the ethics of his campaigns and really holding his feet to the fire on this issue,” Friedrich said. 

@mdhembla
Testing the waters

Precious Brady-Davis hopes to make history as the first Black, openly transgender woman elected in Chicago.

By Katie Prout

Precious Brady-Davis, who works as the Sierra Club’s regional communications director, is campaigning to be one of the nine commissioners of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, which manages stormwater mitigation and wastewater treatment for Cook County. Brady-Davis, who grew up in public housing in Nebraska and was the first openly transgender contestant on the reality show Say Yes to the Dress: Atlanta, published a memoir, I Have Always Been Me, in 2021. The Reader interviewed her by phone recently. Brady-Davis fielded questions while caring for her two-year-old daughter Zayn, who she and her transmasculine husband Myles Brady Davis are raising together in their Hyde Park home. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Katie Prout: Could you start by talking about your background?

Brady-Davis: Absolutely. For over 15 years, I’ve worked in nonprofit management. I started working at Chicago’s Center on Halsted, where I was the youth outreach coordinator for several years. After that, I went to work at Columbia College, where I oversaw national diversity recruitment.

After 2016, with the election of Donald John Trump, I felt that I couldn’t just sit on the sidelines of history as we watched Trump take action to remove all of these environmental protections. I knew this was just the beginning, that more environmental rights and environmental regulations would be slashed. And so, I went to work at the Sierra Club, on a campaign called Beyond Coal that works to retire coal plants.

Working at the Center on Halsted, I led a $1.6 million CDC HIV prevention grant. The MWRD is protecting the water for the citizens of Cook County, so it’s still an extension of protecting public health.

What does the MWRD do?

The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District is the agency that manages stormwater and wastewater. What the MWRD does is they take the water that leaves our home, they clean that water, and then they push it back out into [Lake Michigan]. That’s the essence of what the MWRD does: they protect the source of our drinking water.

They’re also the second-largest landowner in Cook County, so they manage public land. There’s a myriad of uses for that public land. They often lease much of it so that the taxpayers benefit from the revenue of those leases.

The nine commissioners are the folks who run the agency. They run the district, they oversee the budget, they create policy.

Nonprofit management is not new to me. I come to nonprofit management with a great deal of diversity, equity, and inclusion experience. I come to this work with a great gaze of creativity. What would it look like to see installations across Chicago, collaborating with artists to collect rainwater to ease the burden on our sewers? We could fund artists, and we could also educate the public about climate change. What would it look like to have decorative barrels across Chicago that store rain?

When and how did you first learn about the MWRD? What compelled you to try and join it?

I came to know about the MWRD because of Deb Shore. Deb Shore was a commissioner who served at the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District for 15 years. She was recently appointed by President Biden to be the Region Five EPA Administrator. She was also the first out lesbian, outside of a judge, who was elected in Cook County. I’ve long followed Deb’s career and have been inspired by her.

When I am elected, I will be the first Black trans woman elected in Chicago history. I’m also an environmentalist. I talk about having this history of diversity, equity, and inclusion: I see environmental justice as another diversity issue.

Why is diverse representation in public bodies important?

Far too often, I think the population being served isn’t actually reflected in the government, and often their needs don’t get met—particularly poor people, particularly people of color, people who are most impacted, you know, from climate change. I believe in inspiring the future, and particularly LGBTQ youth. We deserve to be in every sector of society, not just one. We have the right to sit in positions of power. We are qualified, we are our leaders. And I think [our election] helps change the stigma and the perception that LGBTQ folks, and trans people in particular, have faced.

How does MWRD interact with residents’ daily lives?

So let’s say that Lake Michigan is flooding, and it’s flooding your basement. The MWRD is responsible for that, but nothing that has to do with your water bill, and nothing to do with the water department: that is local and on the city. The flooding is on the county. If you’re having issues with stormwater around your home, the MWRD is responsible for that. You would reach out to one of the nine commissioners who are elected countywide.

How can folks learn more about the MWRD?

The MWRD has two in-person board meetings (a month). They’re also online: folks can watch them virtually. Those meetings are open to the public, [but] I’d like to increase access to them as a commissioner. Currently, they happen at 10:30 AM. That’s not really accessible for the general public, for working-class people. So I think it’d be great to have more meetings at night.

The MWRD is also on social media. Every day, they do a historical photo of the agency [on Instagram]. There’s lots of cool details. I follow it, it’s very informative.

Is the MWRD an agency that can launch political careers in Cook County?

I think in Cook County, there’s a myriad of offices that you could say that about. I know that in this race in particular, there are folks who are standing behind certain candidates in this race, because they’ve circulated petitions for them. They actually don’t have qualified
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experiences. I find that troubling and disheartening, and I don’t think it serves the residents of Cook County.

I think we need folks who understand the need to protect Lake Michigan and to protect the residents of our city. This is about public health. I mean, we’re seeing people across Cook County having to boil their water, like in Dixmoor. There are actual issues with the water. We need to actually advocate for people of color. When people of color make insurance claims on flooding, they often don’t become resolved. We need actual folks who are committed, solid public servants, and not people who just want to get a jumpstart to their political careers.

How is water quality a public health issue?

[Recreationally,] folks across Cook County want to enjoy the water. Folks want to enjoy the Little Calumet River, folks want to enjoy the Chicago River without getting contaminated. If contaminants got into our water, it would make the water unsafe to drink. We absolutely saw, catastrophically, what happens when we don’t have solid leadership in positions of folks who care for our water. We saw what happened in Flint. The same thing could happen if we didn’t have solid leadership at the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, and didn’t continue to have that leadership.

What are your top, hit-the-ground-running initiatives you’d be championing at the MWRD?

First, I want to prioritize environmental justice projects that advance community resilience. How can we support local communities? That would be one idea, creating a rain barrel project in a place like Englewood. Second, how do we increase and advance green infrastructure across Chicago? Third, engaging the stakeholders and increasing diversity in terms of people who are engaged in the work. So [my priorities are] advancing community projects and community resilience, centering environmental justice, increasing green infrastructure, and then advancing community outreach, in particular to young people in marginalized communities. I think the MWRD can do violence prevention. They can engage young people in programs about the water reclamation district, and serve as an incubator to the trades, educating folks through community programs and community conversations.

How could MWRD work on violence prevention?

What would it be like to take marginalized young people from the south and west sides on a tour of one of the plants? What would it look like to have environmental programming for young people specifically? There’s a myriad of green spaces around Chicago, you know. We’d love to immerse young people in nature, in and outside of their communities across our great cities. I think that’s more work that we can do, that I would champion as a commissioner. I would champion creating a task force to engage on environmental issues, and violence prevention should be one of those tenants.

The commissioners, the mayor, and the City Council should come together. Nothing in this conversation [about violence prevention] has come up about green space. There’s this current conversation in Chicago about where young people should be, and around public safety. And I think that nature should be in that equation.

Nature is a place where so many people find refuge, where they find relaxation, where they can experience centering. There’s more room for that, like community gardens where young people can help plant green infrastructure in their communities. If we want to actually create impact in communities, and we want to broaden the awareness of what the Metropolitan Water Reclamation does, then we need to do innovative things that actually tangibly affect people’s lives. That’s work that I’m interested in doing.

— Katie Prout

@katie_prout
Kina Collins grew up on the west side in Austin, and began organizing around gun violence while she was a student at Rufus M. Hitch Elementary and Von Steuben High School. In 2015, she began organizing with the protest movement that coalesced around the murder of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald by then-Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke. Collins also worked with the Center for American Progress and Physicians for a National Health Program. In 2020, she challenged U.S. representative Danny K. Davis, who has represented the Illinois Seventh District since 1997, and garnered 14 percent of the vote in the district as it currently stands, or we can fight for the district that we should have. And I think we’re gonna prevail on June 28.

Second time’s the charm?
Gun-violence advocate Kina Collins takes another run at Danny Davis.

By Jim Daley

Jim Daley: What have you been working on since the 2020 race?

Kina Collins: I became the executive director for one of the largest gun-violence prevention nonprofits in the state. It was formerly known as the Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence, and is now One AIm Illinois. It has a statewide grassroots coalition, and we were pushing for things like removing firearms from the homes of domestic abusers and the gun dealer certification and licensing program here in Illinois. Because of that work, I was tapped by the Biden-Harris administration to serve as a stakeholder for the Gun Violence Prevention Task Force.

The pandemic exposed a lot of the issues that progressives have been fighting for around wage equity, access to health care, and listening to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. So a lot of my time since the last primary has been doing mutual aid across the district, checking in with folks to see if there’s any way we can plug them into resources.

Why do you think we’re in a new moment for gun-violence survivors and advocates from Chicago to be elected to Congress?

Nationally, Chicago has consistently been used as a political punching bag around this issue, but we’re not talking about the root causes. We deal with everyday gun violence here in the city of Chicago. And the root cause of everyday gun violence is poverty. Until we begin to address structural violence, which includes public school shutdowns, lead in our piping, abandoned buildings, vacant lots, food deserts, and a lack of jobs in these areas, we can’t strike at the heart of the root cause of what we’re experiencing here in Chicago.

I think that it’s time for Chicago’s congressional delegation to push back on conservative talking points that say Chicago is just an epicenter of violence. We don’t have a single gun store or a shooting range in the city. Chicago is not spreading gun violence across the country. However, red states are spreading gun violence to the city of Chicago. Fifty percent of the guns recovered in crimes in Chicago can be linked back to other states, primarily Indiana, Wisconsin, and Mississippi. The other 40 percent of guns can be linked back to gun shops in the suburbs of Illinois.

My stance is very clear: I support the Second Amendment and the right to legally obtain and own guns. However, my job as a gun-violence prevention advocate is to keep guns out of the hands of people who can harm themselves and harm the public. One of the ways that we’ve been able to do that is through red flag laws, and there’s overwhelming public support for universal background checks. So the messaging is the same.

How are gun violence, access to health care, and criminal justice reform all part of your platform?

We don’t live single-issue lives—a lot of this stuff is interconnected. I think that our district serves as a microcosm of the United States. We have the Gold Coast and we have the west side of Chicago; we have the western suburbs and the south side. When we look at the disparate impacts and outcomes that happen across the district, we have the wealthiest of the wealthy and some of the most working-class communities in our district. All of them are interconnected.

In Chicago, practically all of our mental health services have been eviscerated. When mass shootings happen and the talking point is that the shooter had a mental health issue, I take umbrage with that, because people who suffer from mental illness are stigmatized around the issue of violence, when actually those who suffer from mental illness experience more violence than they commit. And if that is the case, and that’s your talking point, why do we not have universal health care as a preventative measure for that?

The more brushes with the law that you have, the more likely you are to become a homicide victim. In a district where we see places like Austin, and $100 million being spent by our government to incarcerate adults for mostly nonviolent offenses, we know that poverty is a policy choice that’s being made. That $100 million should be invested in true prevention, and that prevention looks like housing, education, and a fortified and strong local economy.

What are some issues that resonate with a wealthy white Gold Coast voter as much as a young Black man in Austin?

From Westchester all the way to West Englewood, everybody is concerned about public safety and crime. They’re concerned about gun violence. And they’re concerned about very urgent crises, like climate change, a livable wage, and student loan debt.

But people want to know, can we elect a representative who is not going to take corporate PAC money from companies like BP, Exxon Mobil, and Amazon, which are not geared towards the upliftment and the betterment of our district? And the answer is yes. We’ve been able to out-fundraise the incumbent without taking a dime of corporate PAC money. And that makes it easy for me to walk into Congress with a clear moral authority to hold major corporations to account.

How is this race different from 2020?

The pandemic changed a lot of things. Last time, I put a very strong focus on Medicare for All and health care, and it just so happened that our primary was the week before the entire globe basically shut down. And after that happened, I heard from constituents from all across the district who said, “Kina, you were talking about this, you were talking about full access to health care,” and how these issues play a role. So I think that the pandemic really validated me and a lot of voters’ eyes.

Also, we’ve been able to consolidate the progressive space here in the district and on the national level. And I think that we really make the case not just to progressives, but to everyday people across this district that failed status-quo leadership and the same things that we’ve been doing are not going to cut it. We have two options: we can vote for the district as it currently stands, or we can fight for the district that we should have. And I think we’re gonna prevail on June 28.

@jimdaleywrites
The heated race for Cook County Assessor is a case study on Chicago-style politics. Fritz Kaegi, the reform-minded incumbent who was left with a mess to clean up by his predecessor, is facing a challenge by Kari Steele, a politically connected commissioner of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, which manages wastewater treatment and floodwater mitigation. (Steele’s campaign did not respond to repeated requests for an interview.)

The assessor’s job is not one most people dream of, unless you get a kick out of determining the value of close to two million parcels of land in Cook County. Add to that all the repairs needed to fix a broken system left behind by Joe Berrios who hired his relatives to work for the board, accepted excessive donations from property-tax appeals lawyers, and disproportionately taxed homeowners in poor communities over rich and politically connected developers.

That’s the system Kaegi says he inherited back in 2018 after Berrios’s ouster. He sat down with the Reader to talk about what changes he’s made since and to explain why Cook County voters should give him another chance.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Kelly Garcia: What does the Cook County assessor do?

Fritz Kaegi: It provides the way that we’ve split up the bill for the cost of government around here. In Chicago, there’s about somewhere between $7.25 and $7.5 billion of property taxes that have to be collected every year.

We figure out how we split that bill amongst all the people who own property in Cook County. So it’s really an office that’s about equity. How we split that bill is driven by our estimates of the market value of each person’s property. And the key is that the biggest building owners are like the person at a dinner who ordered a 40-ounce steak and a lot of sides, and we compare them with the person who just ordered an appetizer or a side salad. How are you splitting up the bill amongst them?

The key to evaluating how an assessor is doing is making sure that you’re estimating the market value of all of those properties fairly and accurately, without bias or favoritism, so that you’re not moving the burden from one group to another. That’s the most important thing that this office does.

Residents from Pilsen and Little Village often tell me they’re facing a burden of higher property taxes, which is pricing them out of the community. How are you addressing this?

I think the greatest inequity in the system is that under my predecessor and for years before that, big buildings were undervalued, so that people who lived in Pilsen and Little Village were picking up the tab for them.

The gold standard in our industry looked at commercial transactions that happened in 2018, [which was] the year before we came into office. It found countywide that commercial properties were 40 percent undervalued, and in Chicago, it was 50 percent, and that undervaluation got bigger the bigger the building got. So basically, small commercial properties in places like Pilsen and Little Village tended to be valued more closely to the mark, and the biggest properties were hugely undervalued. So those little commercial properties were picking up the tab for the big buildings downtown, just like homeowners were in Pilsen and Little Village.

Now, I think there’s another part that I have less control over that people might want to blame me for, which is when gentrification drives up the values of properties. And eventually the assessment system catches up if we’re doing our job, because you don’t want to systematically undervalue some properties because then you’d be passing on the tab to others, to people who live in neighborhoods where prices have not been going up.

But we’re not an engine of gentrification, we just catch up to the gentrification that’s already happened. What we can do to mit-
igate that is make sure everyone gets their [property tax] exemption. We’ve really made a big push for seniors who are over 65 whose income is under $65,000 a year. They can get the senior freeze, which basically locks your assessment in place.

The omnibus affordable-housing bill is going into place this year, and it’s going to be incentivizing the renovation and construction of affordable housing that’s tied to people’s incomes, rather than market rents. Because gentrification really puts a lot of pressure on renters.

**What have you accomplished in your first term?**

Last year was the first time in close to a decade that the average homeowner in Chicago saw their property tax bill fall. Last year it was a 1 percent reduction in homeowner’s share of the burden, and now we’re talking about 9 percent with this reassessment. *(Editor’s note: one-third of properties in Cook County have their taxes reassessed each year; in 2021, properties in Chicago were that third.)*

We’re also proud of the fact that countywide, homeowners property taxes were up just 1 percent each of the last two years, which really throttled back much greater growth than had been seen over the previous two decades.

In the first year our assessments were sent out, the gold standard in our field found they were within industry standards for accuracy and equity for the first time ever in the history of our office.

We also replaced the 40-year-old computer program that was the backbone to our system. In 2020, we put in place an online appeals system and online exemptions system. In 2021, we replaced the backbone of the system; that has allowed other gains such as automatic renewal of the exemption for seniors.

We are winning awards for this stuff. This office did not win awards before. We won awards from the International Association of Assessing Officers for our public outreach during the pandemic. We won awards from the National Association of Counties for the digital tools that we created.

For the longest time, this office was a source of mistrust and inequality and corruption, because it was used as a platform for favoritism, for nepotism, and for punishments for political enemies. On day one, I put in place an ethics order that forbids conflict of interest and requires extensive disclosures by our employees. It makes me the first assessor in the history of this office not to take donations from property tax appeals lawyers and appraisers who practice before us.

**Why are you running for reelection?**

The work that we’re doing is going to be keeping more resources in the neighborhoods with average people, and we can continue to make progress on that. Keeping money in the neighborhoods where it never should have been leaving is so important to not only the health of our neighborhoods, but also for people’s livelihoods and for their incomes.

That’s why it’s meaningful, and we cannot go back to the way it was. This [2021] reassessment in Chicago is on track to be keeping more than $600 million a year in our neighborhoods. But that could all be reversed if you bring back favoritism to this office. The enemies of the reforms that I’ve been putting into place are backing my opponent—the club of big-building owners, the tax lawyers, people who worked for Joe Berrios, those folks, they want this office broken again, and we cannot go back to that. There’s too much at stake.

The work that we’ve done has only been made possible by the public mandate. They were the ones who made it possible. That mandate that brought me into this office, and I’ve been carrying forward that message. And that is how we’re bringing about change: we go to every room, we talk to everybody, even the people who might not have been with us to carry this forward, and we’re winning people over. And with the public’s backing, we’ll be able to do that again for four more years.

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The Board of Review is easily one of the least understood bodies of government in Cook County. Every year, homeowners, landlords, and business owners receive an assessment, or estimated value, of their property from the Cook County Assessor’s office that ultimately determines their property tax bill. If you’re mad about paying higher property taxes because your assessment increased, the Board is the independent body you can appeal to.

Every county in the state has a property tax appeals board, usually appointed by the assessor or county board. In Cook County, board members are elected by the public. Commissioners are elected from three separate districts equal in population. They serve four-year terms while alternating a two-year term. Unlike other jurisdictions, Cook County commissioners are not required to hold a real estate law license.

Cook County homeowners can file an online appeal at the Board’s website. Unless you’re a commercial property owner, you don’t need an attorney to do so. All three commissioners review each appeal, and if two out of the three agree that a reduction is warranted, then the property assessment is lowered.

If a property owner is unhappy with the Board’s decision, they can also file an appeal with the state’s property tax appeal board or file a lawsuit through the Circuit Court of Cook County.

The problem is that not a lot of homeowners know they can appeal their property taxes.

Take Irma Morales for example. She’s been a homeowner in Little Village for more than 20 years. When the county reassessed property values last year, she says homeowners in her neighborhood were the last to find out that they could appeal their property taxes with the assessor and she didn’t know about the independent appeal process through the Board of Review.

“I couldn’t even figure out how to fill out the forms,” said Morales, who primarily speaks Spanish.

Unete la Villita, a community organization Morales cofounded, staged a protest along with other community groups outside the assessor’s office last summer to express concerns over high property taxes that they feared would displace small business owners and longtime residents.

Moises Moreno, executive director of Pilsen Alliance, told the Reader he and his wife could no longer afford to live in Pilsen, due in part to high property taxes. “We’re
trying not to get taxed out of the city,” he said. “I know there are families, homeowners, and small business owners whose assessments have gone up astronomically and have to decide between selling their house or risk losing it.”

Moreno says Pilsen Alliance helps homeowners appeal their taxes through the assessor’s office, but that they can only do so much. Like Morales, he was unfamiliar with the Board of Review. He says the appeal process is a Band-Aid solution to unfair property assessments that benefit real estate developers at the expense of longtime residents.

“I think what folks are really asking for is reform at the state level,” he said.

Some people are more familiar with the Board of Review than others. Take Alderman Ed Burke (14th Ward), who’s currently facing federal corruption charges. Before the FBI raided his office in 2019, he was a partner at a law firm specializing in property tax appeals. His clients included big corporations such as AT&T, Walgreens, and ComEd.

According to a 2017 investigation by the Tribune and ProPublica, Burke successfully knocked $865 million off of his clients’ property tax bills between 2011 and 2016. When property taxes—the main source of revenue for schools, parks, and police—are reduced for one taxpayer, another, like Morales, has to pick up the tab.

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For decades, former Illinois House of Representatives speaker Michael Madigan was similarly banking on property tax appeals. His law firm, Madigan and Getzendanner, has dominated the property tax appeals game for years. Madigan is still a partner at the firm and is currently the subject of a federal investigation into an alleged bribery scheme involving ComEd.

Southwest-side neighborhoods like Pilsen and Little Village are in the district represented by Board of Review commissioner Michael Cabonargi. He admits it’s a challenge to ensure everyone in the county has access to an appeal process that is independent of the assessor’s office.

According to data provided by the Board of Review, homeowners on the south and west sides are less likely to appeal their property taxes than homeowners on the north and northwest sides. Cabonargi says language and Internet access can be barriers for homeowners trying to appeal, adding that his office does extensive outreach to areas in his district.

Last year, the Illinois General Assembly redraw the district boundaries for the Cook County Board of Review (it’s required to do so every ten years), meaning all current board members are up for reelection. In an effort to preserve minority representation on the board, the first district boundaries were redrawn to include predominantly Latinx Chicago wards and suburbs such as Cicero, Berwyn, and Hanover Park.

Shortly after the new map was introduced, 12th Ward alderperson George Cardenas announced he was running for the Board of Review to unseat the first district incumbent Tammy Wendt. The new boundaries for the first district would include Little Village, Brighton Park, McKinley Park—neighborhoods Cardenas has represented as alderperson for 19 years.

But Irma Morales and Moises Moreno say the Board of Review is just a power grab for Cardenas.

“Look at his record,” Moreno says. “Look at the donations he’s taking. Is he friendly with developers? Because developers are the ones who don’t want the change we’re asking for, which is a fair property tax assessment.”

Since 2003, Cardenas has accepted donations from dozens of real estate developers. Among his biggest donors are Pacific Star Capital CEO Aria Mehrabi, who has given him $25,000, and Bertco Development, which has donated $16,000.

Cardenas did not respond to our request for comment.

The Illinois primary elections are on June 28, 2022. The general election will be held on November 8. Election information can be found on the Cook County Clerk’s website at cookcountyclerkil.gov/service/2022-info-candidates.

@KellyGarcia...
A political battle is emerging between candidates running to represent the southwest side in Springfield. State senator Celina Villanueva—a vocal leader for immigrants’ rights—is being challenged by Pilsen resident and first-time candidate Javier Yañez.

In early March, Villanueva was invited to speak about her campaign at a meeting of the 25th Ward Independent Political Organization (IPO) in an effort to win their endorsement. Sources told the Reader that IPO members were not satisfied with some of her responses. The following morning, Yañez—himself a member of the 25th Ward IPO—launched his campaign for state senate. He was able to get enough petition signatures to get on the ballot by the March 14 deadline for established parties. Yañez is 25th Ward alderperson Byron Sigcho-Lopez’s chief of staff; Sigcho-Lopez denied encouraging him to run against Villanueva.

Villanueva was born and raised in Pilsen and was elected to Orozco Community Academy’s Local School Council in 2020 as a community representative, but will not be seeking reelection to the LSC. Yañez says that if he’s elected to the state senate, he wants to tackle issues related to public safety and economic development.

Villanueva, a Little Village resident who represents the 11th District in the General Assembly, is running for reelection in the newly drawn 12th District, which now includes Pilsen, Bridgeport, and Chinatown, in addition to Little Village, Brighton Park, and McKinley Park.

“I believe the 12th District deserves independent, accountable, and elected leadership and that’s a big part of why I’m running,” Yañez said.

His primary challenge reveals growing friction among progressive Latinos on the southwest side. Villanueva is a close ally to Chuy García, a long-time community activist who has represented the area for decades as an alderperson, state senator, Cook County commissioner, and now U.S. congressman. García’s progressive coalition on the southwest side is expanding amid a power vacuum created by the federal indictment of the once-most powerful Democrat in the state, former house speaker Michael J. Madigan.

García endorsed Villanueva in the state senate race. Yañez previously worked as an aide to García when the congressman was a Cook County Board commissioner.

The General Assembly is divided into two legislative bodies, with 59 members in the state senate and 118 in the house of representatives. Both groups work closely with the governor to pass legislation and decide how your tax dollars are spent.

In 2018, local party leaders appointed Villanueva to fill a vacancy in the house, and she kept her seat in the following election. She was appointed to the senate in 2020 after former state senator Martin Sandoval resigned amid a corruption probe.

Villanueva has been a vocal leader for immigrant workers’ rights. Earlier this year, she introduced a bill that would establish stronger penalties against employers who violate workers’ rights to a 24-hour rest day each week. Recently, Villanueva introduced legislation that would allow noncitizens to vote in school board elections across the state.

“I’m somebody that values community and the belief that we need to fight to have our voices heard and that’s why I’m running for reelection,” Villanueva said. “I feel like I have a long list of accomplishments and I still have a lot more to do.”

The 2022 Illinois primary is on June 28. The general election is on November 8. 📲

@_KellyGarcia_
Se abre una grieta política en el lado suroeste

La senadora estatal Celina Villanueva se enfrenta a un desafío en las elecciones primarias por parte del jefe de personal de Byron Sigcho-López

Por Kelly Garcia

Una batalla política surge entre los candidatos que se postulan para representar el lado suroeste de Chicago en Springfield. La senadora estatal Celina Villanueva - una líder que ha defendido los derechos de inmigrantes - se enfrenta a Javier Yáñez, un residente de Pilsen y candidato por primera vez.

Al principio de marzo, Villanueva fue invitada a hablar sobre su campaña en una reunión de los miembros de la Organización Política Independiente (IPO, por sus siglas en inglés) del distrito 25 en un esfuerzo para obtener su aprobación. Algunas fuentes han informado al Reader que miembros del IPO no estaban satisfechos con algunas de las respuestas de Villanueva.


Yáñez nació y fue criado en Pilsen. Fue elegido para el Consejo Escolar Local de Orozco Community Academy en 2020 como representante de la comunidad, pero no buscará reelección. Yáñez dice que si es elegido al Senado Estatal, quiere abordar temas relacionados con la seguridad pública y el desarrollo económico.

Villanueva, una residente de La Villita, que representa el distrito 11 en la Asamblea General, se presenta a la reelección en el nuevo distrito 12 que ahora incluye Pilsen, Bridgeport y Chinatown, además de La Villita, Brighton Park y McKinley Park.

“Creo que el distrito 12 merece un liderazgo elegido, independiente y responsable. Esa es una gran parte de la razón por la cual me presente”, dijo Yáñez.

Su desafío en la elección primaria revela la creciente fricción entre los latinos progresistas del lado suroeste. Villanueva es aliada de Chuy García, y por décadas ha representado el área como concejal, senador estatal, comisionado del condado de Cook y ahora como congresista de los Estados Unidos. La coalición progresista de García en el suroeste de Chicago está creciendo en medio de un vacío de poder creado por la acusación federal del demócrata más poderoso del estado, el ex-presidente de la Cámara de Representantes, Michael J. Madigan.

García respaldó a Villanueva en la carrera por el Senado Estatal. Yáñez trabajó anteriormente como asistente de García cuando el congresista fue comisionado de la Junta del condado de Cook.

La Asamblea General está dividida en dos cuerpos legislativos con 59 miembros en el Senado Estatal y 118 en la Cámara de Representantes. Ambos grupos trabajan juntos con el gobernador para aprobar leyes y decidir cómo se gasta el dinero de los impuestos.

En el 2018, líderes locales del partido nombraron a Villanueva para cubrir una vacante en la cámara, y ella mantuvo la posición en la siguiente elección. Fue nombrada para el Senado en 2020 después de que el ex senador estatal Martín Sandoval renunciara en medio de investigaciones por corrupción.

Villanueva ha sido una líder que ha defendido los derechos de los trabajadores inmigrantes. A principios de este año, presentó un proyecto de ley que establecería sanciones más fuertes contra los empleados que violen los derechos de los trabajadores a un día de descanso cada semana. Recientemente, Villanueva presentó una legislación que permitiría a los no ciudadanos votar en las elecciones de los consejos escolares en todo el estado.

“Soy una persona que valora la comunidad y la creencia de que tenemos que luchar para que se escuchen nuestras voces y por eso me presento a la reelección,” dijo Villanueva. “Siento que tengo una larga lista de logros y todavía tengo mucho que hacer.”

Las primarias demócratas de Illinois de 2022 son el 28 de junio. Las elecciones generales son el 8 de noviembre.
Prince of the Mag Mile

A new interactive exhibition about the Purple One visits Chicago.

By Jack Riedy

“Prince: the Immersive Experience” begins with purple light through stained glass. Guests in groups of ten to 15 are led through double doors to a replica of the “When Doves Cry” music video set: portraits hung on purple walls, bouquets scattered on the floor, and a white claw-foot tub to pose behind. The only thing missing is Prince himself.

Open to general admission as of June 9, the 20,000-square-foot exhibition about deceased Minneapolis pop star Prince occupies prime real estate on the Mag Mile. Tickets start at $39.50 each for approximately an hour of touring through photo backdrop installations, infographics on Prince’s life and work, and a few personal artifacts. It’s a sensual if sometimes superficial introduction to the legendary musician.

The exhibit is the brainchild of Superfly, an “experience company” that brought tourist attractions “The Friends Experience” and “The Office Experience” to the same Michigan Avenue location in which you can now find bigger-than-life-size images of Prince. Once the company decided to focus on music for their next endeavor, “the shortlist was easy,” Superfly COO Richard Gay told me. “Who are the stars that are multidimensional? You wanna talk about the gear, you wanna talk about the talent, you wanna talk about standing for something like social justice and artists’ rights?” Gay, a Chicago native, reinforced his enthusiasm by reminiscing about seeing Purple Rain in theaters as a teen and watching Prince’s famous Super Bowl XLI halftime show with his son. Superfly soon secured full collaboration of The Prince Estate, now representing three of Prince’s siblings and music management company Primary Wave, and Paisley Park, the artist’s home and studio turned neo-Graceland in the Minneapolis suburbs.

The most immersive parts of the experience are the sets that allow visitors to pose within the visual worlds of Prince, chiefly from his cultural peak in the mid-80s and early 90s. You can recreate the Purple Rain cover and straddle a hulking purple motorcycle, artfully arranged at an angle away from a dimly lit alleyway door. The rest of the set is filled with references, like a graffiti message signed by “Nikki,” a faux storefront for Erotic Cities Electronics, and a wall mimicking the silver star exterior of famed Minneapolis club First Avenue. Another room echoes the Caligulan vibe of 1991’s Diamonds and Pearls, including a tongue-like pink leather chair culled from the set of the title track’s music video. Murals of performance photos and Prince quotes, some rendered in his charming proto-leet speak, provide additional fodder for posing throughout the exhibit.

Superfly presumably brought the same level of detail to this exhibition as it did to duplicating Dunder Mifflin’s office, but it’s strange to see one idiosyncratic man’s art presented with the same approach as a network TV sitcom. Prince’s biggest hits are played throughout the exhibit, but there is little discussion of his actual musicianship. His near-constant recording and technological innovation are summed up in a faux studio where guests can control the volume of individual instrument tracks on “Let’s Go Crazy.” The song is not a great example of mixing or arranging process even in the simplified context, since Prince’s famous “Dearly beloved . . .” monologue occupies the first minute with only vocals and church organ
The other music-focused room is the “Glam Slam” dance studio, meant to approximate hearing a Prince song on a nightclub dance floor for a few minutes, until the group is shuffled into the next area. The room is surrounded on three sides by a kaleidoscopic mirrored lighting installation designed by LeRoy Bennett, former lighting designer for Prince. The DJ dropped “1999” just before I entered, gamely bouncing in place and occasionally filtering out the low end to approximate a drop. It is an impressive display worthy of Prince’s many dance floor classics, but in a small preview tour group on a Monday evening, no one mustered up any moves beyond enthusiastic nods and knee bends.

The exhibition includes a few personal artifacts from Paisley Park’s collection. Three flamboyant outfits are exhibited on 5’2” mannequins alongside sketches from their designers. The next room showcases custom instruments, including a hot-pink keytar, held under such high security that only one had arrived when I visited three days before the exhibition opened to the public.

Prince continued to record and release music until his 2016 death, and the exhibition attempts to balance his most famous albums with a four-decade career. One hallway features a timeline of every album released in his lifetime with a tracklist and description. After the “When Doves Cry” room, touch-screen displays scroll through an interactive timeline of Prince’s childhood and early career in 70s Minneapolis, culminating in the musician’s lifetime with a tracklist and description. After the “When Doves Cry” room, touch-screen displays scroll through an interactive timeline of Prince’s childhood and early career in 70s Minneapolis, culminating in the musician’s lifetime with a tracklist and description. After the “When Doves Cry” room, touch-screen displays scroll through an interactive timeline of Prince’s childhood and early career in 70s Minneapolis, culminating in the musician’s lifetime with a tracklist and description.

A New York Times quote “If you don’t own your masters, your master owns you” is etched in bold letters alongside graphics from his album Emancipation. This felt a little ironic in the middle of a deeply branded experience. For all his visual sense and impeccable logo, part of Prince’s appeal in life was his sense of remove; you might have to sign up for a proto-subscription service to hear his music, or wait until the wee hours of the morning to get into the aftershow, but Prince was worth it for his unpredictability.

The exhibition culminates in the playlist lounge, where visitors answer BuzzFeed-esque personality quizzes on touch screens to receive a Spotify link to a suitable Prince mix. I chose the color of my aura and my favorite Prince headshot and received Freedom Fighter, a playlist of heavy rock deep cuts whose obscurity I begrudgingly respected. Each display offers playback through purple headphones from sponsor BOSE, which the guide cheerfully informed me will be exclusively available at the gift shop.

I was disappointed that the exhibition didn’t discuss Prince’s influence on modern music with specific examples; when even a soft-rock moppet like Harry Styles is earning templates in some falsetto, it might benefit younger listeners to better understand that artistic lineage. It is a stark contrast to “David Bowie Is,” the 2014 retrospective held at the Museum of Contemporary Art that took great pains to place the British icon’s work in context with its contemporaries and numerous artistic progeny.

“Prince: the Immersive Experience” is a good introduction to Prince, and the actual artifacts will be worth it for any devotees who aren’t ready to make the pilgrimage to Chanhassen, Minnesota. But the exhibit’s superficial focus on Prince’s positive brand attributes fails to convey the unique scope of his art. The best way to learn about Prince is to stay home and listen to his albums, but there’s not much money to be made in music lately.

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@jackriedy
The Paintings of Cézanne have been a source of inspiration and influence on other painters. An exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago shows the artist's wide-ranging influence on other painters.

By Dmitry Samarov


There are some entities and influences on our work that we take for granted, as though they were always there and it's impossible to conceive of a world without them. I felt that way at the Chicago Theatre over a decade ago listening to Leonard Cohen in concert. The idea that the old man in the sharp suit on stage years ago. It's not a debt that can be repaid or even adequately grasped.

It's a vision that centers subjectivity, motion, and change, rather than stability, hierarchy, or order. Probably no coincidence that he worked out his methods at the same time when Nietzsche was killing God. Nobody who believes in a benevolent creator fashioning and guiding the universe could see their surroundings in the slippery and undeniable way Cézanne saw his environment.

And yet he was also very flawed as an artist. His figures—especially when unclothed—are hopelessly clunky and wooden. They rarely relate in any convincing way to their environment. The bathers are the worst. It's some sort of ersatz Eden that he keeps trying to evoke, but what comes out is more like the cheap decor of a Greek eatery.

Like many of the innovators of his time, Cézanne came up in the French academic system and utterly failed its dogmatic, leaden course of study. Had he excelled, he'd likely be forgiven now. It was his inability to make bacchanalies, formal portraits, or history paintings that forced him into finding another way. Yet the remnants of that staid education reverberate throughout his career.

To promote “Cézanne,” (an exhibition currently on display at the Art Institute of Chicago organized by the institute with the input of the Tate Modern) the museum chose to reproduce the lousy epic last bathers painting across three flags attached to its facade. What draws art professionals to those lumpy ladies? They're featureless and often have two left legs. They look like they were cut-and-pasted into a fantasy forest without much bother about reconciling figure and ground.

It's reassuring that Cézanne was such a bad figure painter. Makes him almost human. When people are clothed and he knows them well, he does much better. There's one really good self-portrait in the show: Self-Portrait with Pink Background (Portrait de l'artiste au fond rose), created by Cézanne around 1875. It underscores what a taciturn, disagreeable man he must have been. The expression on that mug seems to wonder why the viewer has intruded on his solitude, except that he himself is also the viewer! Not a guy I would ever want to meet. Best to leave him alone to paint his mountains, trees, fruit, and bottles and marvel at the results.

The first time I visited the show, in the members-only preview days, the galleries were packed. I went back and forth through the rooms a few times, noting the four or five pictures I knew I'd return to on future visits. The only major series I missed is his card players. He painted at least four—The Card Players (Les Joueurs de cartes), which lives at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, is probably my favorite—but only one sketch of a single card player is included in this exhibition.

The biggest surprise is an earth-toned oil painting of Paris rooftops (Paris Rooftops, 1882). It feels like the kind of composition I've attempted myself many times. I didn't know Cézanne had tried it too. He's mainly a village and nature guy, rather than a city creature.

This one almost looks like an Albert Marquet (1875-1947). Marquet is a big influence on me, but much more manageable and human-scaled than Cézanne. Strolling through, I remembered what Barnett Newman said about Cézanne's apples in the 1972 documentary Painters Painting: that they were like super apples, that they oppressed him.

There's an ascetic remove in the best of Cézanne's paintings. Like they were assembled by a being either beyond or incapable of everyday emotions. It can be off-putting sometimes. But when these pictures connect, they alter the way you see the world with your own eyes.

The shifting perspectives, the jagged horizon line, the endless retries to capture the same motifs that will always elude him. Cézanne's mission is about conveying how it is to be: day to day, hour to hour, moment to moment. It's often not a comforting or welcoming world that he shows, but it's one I recognize all too well.

@Chicago_Reader

Paul Cézanne’s Portrait de l’artiste au fond rose was probably created in 1875. It’s on loan to the Art Institute of Chicago from the Musée d’Orsay in Paris for this exhibition. © ADRIEN DIDIERJEAN FOR RMN-GRAND PALAIS/ART RESOURCE NY
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EXHIBITIONS

An invitation to listen to survivors

“Remaking the Exceptional” examines torture in Guantánamo Bay and closer to home.

By Nina Li Coomes

“I t’s an invitation,” says Aaron Hughes, cocurator of “Remaking the Exceptional: Tea, Torture, and Reparations,” an exhibition currently on display at the DePaul Art Museum. Marking the 20th anniversary of the opening of the Guantánamo Bay detention camp, the exhibit examines the similarities between survivors of torture at the U.S. military prison with survivors of police torture here in Chicago.

The installations, paintings, and sculptures are an invitation, as Hughes puts it, “To be with the work. To be with the research. To be with the questions. That invitation that we have been continuously invited into by survivors, by those most impacted. All our work is part of sharing that invitation.”

And it’s strange: while one might expect a show about police torture, U.S. imperialism, and violence to be cold and hard to look at, the two-floor exhibition is indeed inviting. I have visited it three times so far, moving quietly through the rooms, looking at walls emblazoned with the names of police torture survivors, gazing up at pastel drawings of flowers pressed neatly into the corner of one room.

It is not easy to sit here with the stories of brutality inflicted upon these survivors, but something continues to beckon me back. The work, the stories, even the quiet hum of survivor interviews piped through an installation on the first floor seems like an opening, a gesture to sit and stay awhile. Each time I exited the doors of the DePaul Art Museum, I found myself promising myself I’d be back.

The exhibition is the outgrowth of a ten-year collaborative partnership between Hughes and cocurator Amber Ginsburg. Together, Hughes and Ginsburg created the

An aesthetic practice of beautification, but rather one of deep, committed research and community building. It was in this process of seeing the “many instances of creative making along the way,” that Ginsburg and Hughes came to the idea of an exhibit that highlighted the devastating, intricate connections between the U.S. military practices of torture with domestic ones, as seen through police torture here in Chicago.

As they talk, Ginsburg and Hughes reference “creative acts of resistance to state violence.” I ask them to clarify—what do they mean by that? So often one of the critiques lobbed at artists, makers of all genres, is that their art does little to materially affect the outcomes of harm. Ginsburg explains, “We use that term to describe a spectrum of creative acts. [For example,] the gesture of making a mark on a Styrofoam cup in complete isolation and that mark being seen as a threat to a massive prison, and yet people continue to make those marks and make flowers and poetry, it’s creativity despite.”

Hughes’s comment draws attention to the fact that, as of 2017, survivor-made art from Guantánamo is no longer allowed outside of the prison. He tells me that he believes this is because the art was considered “a threat to the logic of that system of incarceration and confinement and torture.”

To further illustrate this point are two empty frames on the second floor of the exhibition, where paintings by Sabri al-Qurashi were intended to hang. The artwork’s inability to make it to the DePaul Art Museum, despite the organizers’ best efforts, is proof “that people that survive Guantánamo and survive police torture here in Chicago and survive the carceral system here in Illinois, many of them still live in a state of being un-free. And, you know, our work is connecting the dots so we can seek liberation together. And art is a way to imagine that,” says Hughes.

Ginsburg draws my attention to another subject the exhibition explores: legal advocacy. She remarks, “The one other area that I would add that has been very inspiring to us is also the kind of legal advocacy as a creative legal resistance. Really emulating that in the exhibition are the two reparations banners looking across at each other.”

Here, Ginsburg is referring to two floor-to-ceiling banners on the second floor positioned on opposite walls titled Speculative Reparations Ordinance for Guantánamo Torture Survivors and Speculative Reparations Ordinance for Chicago (Burge) Police Torture Survivors. Constructed in 2012 by attorney and organizer Joey Mogul, the banners draw a speculative legal framework of reparations for torture survivors. In 2015, Speculative Reparations Ordinance for Chicago was animated through the actual approval of a reparations ordinance in the Chicago City Council. This piece of art, like so many others in the exhibit, has real-life ramifications.

Nothing illustrates this to me more, though, than what happened the last time I visited the exhibition. Through an open door I saw Dorothy Burge, one of the artists featured in the exhibit, smoothing squares of blue fabric on a table. Burge is a quilter and an activist, and her quilted portraits hang from the ceiling of each room, hoovering over quotes from torture survivors painted on the walls. Though I was feeling shy, I entered and introduced myself to Miss Dorothy, who immediately invited me to an online workshop she was scheduled to lead: guiding participants through the process of making quilt squares emblazoned with positive messages for torture survivors. Behind her stood Vincent, a police torture survivor himself, who is an artist-in-residence at the museum this month.

Miss Dorothy led me back through the exhibit I just pored over, and showed me photographs of her grandnieces and nephews who are the subjects of some of her quilts. She showed me a photograph of a survivor of Guantánamo standing in a wrecked building and told me how much the photo reminded her of the wreckage of Cabrini-Green when it was demolished. She pointed to the purple and green portraits she’s made of incarcerated people and told me that two of the subjects have since been freed. As we parted ways at the entrance, she again invited me to attend her workshop. I am reminded of Aaron Hughes’s words: that the show is an invitation. The invitation seems beautiful, difficult, and urgent. Most of all, I realize that it is alive and breathing, a hand outstretched for me to come back, sip (metaphorical) tea, and listen.

Free Robert Allen, a quilted work by Dorothy Burge as part of her 2021 series Won’t You Help to Sing These Songs of Freedom ©ZOEO DABERT, COURTESY DEPAUL ART MUSEUM

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Irregular Girl is leading the fight for trans utopia

“I don’t perform positivity as much as hope.”

By Micco Caporale

If it’s the first Friday of the month, you’re going to see a line snaking out of Berlin that extends past the entrance to the Belmont CTA station and sometimes around the block. It’s populated by people in leather miniskirts and mesh crop tops, disco bambis and alien centaurs, club mystics with lashes so long you can bounce fantasies off them, and other creatures of the night. They’re on a pilgrimage to experience Strapped, the gender-inclusive dyke night founded by drag queens Siichele and Irregular Girl, a performance artist who will grace the Steppenwolf stage later this summer.

“I really believe in the power of nightlife as a place where people who are marginalized—who aren’t of the status quo—are able to meet and celebrate one another and live out fantasies turned realities,” she explains.

Irregular Girl is the Live Laugh Latina of clubland, and her body of work highlights her range of irregularities as assets while refusing to hide how remarkably ordinary she is. When she’s not onstage welcoming the city’s hungriest children like a hot witch in a gingerbread house, she enjoys spending time with her husband and parents. She tans at the beach and bops to Britney Spears, plays video games and watches Real Housewives. Wait, I thought we were describing an irregular girl. What’s so irregular about this one? And once we know, how do we let that information shape our behavior?

Since cis womanhood is the cultural default of womanhood, one of the things that makes Irregular Girl “irregular” is being trans; thus, much of her persona is built on embracing what makes transness and especially trans womanhood unique and beautiful. Her drag is one example of this, but another is her talk show, That Shit’s Trans!, where she connects with local trans artists to discuss their work as well as popular media that’s shaped their trans experience—for instance, Sailor Moon finding a compact that completely transforms her. After filming a pilot episode for OTV last year, she performed a live version at the Logan Theatre in November. Now she’ll be joined by dancer and choreographer Darling Shear for a live show at Steppenwolf on July 20 (part of the theater’s ongoing LookOut series).

By touching on “regular” media, she allows audiences into her and her friends’ worlds without letting onlookers decide the terms of
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continued from 38
discussion. But why should that bother any-
one? Would you interrupt the coolest girl in
the room after she's invited you to eavesdrop
on conversations with some of Chicago's most
groundbreaking artists? (And if so, uh, do you
have something against cool people? Wait, are
you saying Irregular Girl is TOO exceptional
for your tastes—that she's not, dare I say,
regular enough? It's in the name, people: She
is IRREGULAR!!)

Irregular Girl—or Regina Rodriguez, as
she's known when the makeup comes off—
moved with her family from Peru to Chicago
when she was seven. Raised mostly in Edge-
water, she attended an arts high school where
she concentrated on sculpture, then continued
her studies at the School of the Art Institute
of Chicago, where she focused mainly on fibers
and performance art. As her arts education
evolved, so did the questions she was asking
herself about her gender, what it was, and how
she was manifesting it in both her work and
her everyday life. If gender is a performance,
how do we define sincerity? What separates
art and artifice? In what ways can and do these
ideas live in harmony? What's fun about the
discord?

Meanwhile, she was drawing inspiration
from people such as Ana Mendieta, Tania
Bruguera, Carolee Schneemann, and Billie
Zangewa. She was exhibiting and performing
in places like the Art Institute of Chicago,
MCA, and Queens Museum in New York as well
as a slate of local galleries, including Mana
Contemporary and Zhou B. She's had an as-
sortment of fellowships and artist residencies,
including as a project curator for the A.I.R.
Gallery in New York. It was there, in 2016, that
she started doing drag.

“I'd just turned 21 and had just started going
out,” she says, laughing, “and I noticed the
drag queens always getting free drinks. I was
like, ‘OK, I want free drinks.’ That’s literally
why I started doing drag. Just broke in New
York. But I was able to express my gender
more outwardly there because I wasn’t around
my parents or anybody I knew. I was able to ex-
periment and experience my gender by myself
and for the first time figure out what I liked
just for me.”

Her initial drag persona was Mason Jar. But
when she decided she wanted to undergo med-
cal transition in 2018, she adopted the name
Irregular Girl.

“As Irregular Girl, I don’t perform positivity
as much as hope,” she says. “It’s really, really
heavy to live as a person of color. And with all
of this anti-trans legislation, it’s really, really
difficult to wake up every day and feel the re-
ality of living in a country that doesn’t value
you, see you, respect you for what you know is
your truth. It’s heavy and hard, but I’m trying
my best to share the parts of myself that I hid
for so long in hopes that other people will
want to share that of themselves, too. . . . It’s
heavy and a lot of work, but it’s what keeps
that hope alive inside of me to continue to free
myself and other people’s minds of what they
think they know. And to give people an example—or even just a friend. Just being a friend
to others is really important to me.”

To experience Irregular Girl is to revel in
someone exceptional who’s exceptionally
down to earth: the perfect micro-celebrity for
the diffuse communities who emerge at night.

A fan named pb tells me on Twitter: “One of
the most compelling things about Irregular
Girl is the way she talks about the divine light
that trans people possess—how we are con-
ducts of change. She truly embodies it, and
it makes her merch feel like a rallying cry or a
badge of solidarity that we are able to transform
anything about ourselves and the world around
us until we reach the utopia shining out over the horizon.”

Local rising techno DJ Miss Twink USA,
who was one of the guests on the pilot episode
of That Shit’s Trans!, describes working with
Irregular Girl: “Years ago, I met Regina back in
the clubs. She was doing these insane club-kid
looks, and the impression she left on me was
purely impeccable. Fast-forward to 2022,
Regina is a household name, and her magic
and craft are growing stronger and stronger.
I went to Strapped in April where she pulled
out a sword while performing to a new Flor-
defense & the Machine track. It made me feel
possessed! Struck and transfixied by her every
move and glorious storytelling. The way she
invites us into the world she sees for herself
is fascinating, and it makes me want to be
a better artist each day. Irregular Girl is one of
the most talented and powerful artists here in
Chicago.”

Drag performer Sangria Whine writes: “Ir-
regular Girl’s show Mom Jeans was my first
ever show in Chicago, so to say she’s import-
ant to me is an understatement. She’s not only
a talented performer but such a humble and
caring individual. She always makes me feel
welcomed and like I have a space in the scene.
I look up to her so much, and I truly hope one
day I can be at her caliber of talent.”

“At art school, I learned a lot about image-
making and holding attention,” Irregular Girl
says. “The performance art that I was doing
at SAIC was very, very image based. There’s
such an immediacy to performance art, like
your body is right there, almost like there’s no
metaphor. I mean, it’s all a metaphor, but you
have the physicality of yourself, right there.
I think that’s where my energy comes from in
my performances now, because, as a trans per-
son, I’ve had to learn to grow love and rejoice
in my truth. I really value the freedom that my
life gives me and the freedom that I feel when
I’m onstage. I have to be 100 percent there and
take my audience with me.”

But she doesn’t hide the ways she’s vulner-
able on her path. Last summer, she was one of
five Chicago trans women who shared stories
with Them. about experiences sporting bulges
at the beach. Recently, she appeared in Cook
County Research’s PSA for a campaign called
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luminaries like herself and Bimbocita share
how PrEP, an HIV prevention medication, cre-
ates more opportunity for safety and comfort
while enjoying nightlife. Any of these stories
sound like you? Try PrEP! In 2014, a study by
Kaiser Family Foundation found that gay and
bisexual men accounted for 2 percent of the
population but 66 percent of new HIV trans-
missions. Latinx people of all genders are four
times as likely to get HIV as white people. On
paper, it feels like numbers, but the weight
of the myriad ways HIV complicates life as a
queer trans Latinx person is very real—and
it’s especially palpable in the community right
now.

On June 7, Berlin celebrated the life of
Simon Sin Miedo, a trans Latinx staple of
industrial goth nightlife and BDSM scenes in
both Chicago and Minneapolis. Earlier this
year, they’d been diagnosed with HIV and
spent months raising money on GoFundMe
to cover relocation and treatment costs to
manage it. When Sin Miedo passed, they were
publicly drowning in needs created by a lack
of social safety nets exacerbated by their HIV
diagnosis, a disease whose systemic denial
causes gay genocide. Why do we tolerate
that hope alive inside of me to continue to free
myself and other people’s minds of what they
think they know. And to give people an example—or even just a friend. Just being a friend
to others is really important to me.”

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Taking the drama and dance outdoors

Producing in parks presents challenges, but it’s worth it.

By Kerry Reid

I spent most of the 90s in the Bay Area, where outdoor theater in the summer is a given, and the weather generally cooperates (if you’re not facing the threat of forest fires, that is). But in Chicago, extreme heat and thunderstorms go with the territory. Despite Mother Nature and other logistical challenges, outdoor theater and dance performances now take place all over the city and suburbs, alongside street fairs, music festivals, and everything else the season offers. Bonus for the COVID-cautious: many outdoor theater performances offer better chances at ventilation and social distancing—just stake out your spot on the grass. I talked to a few people behind the scenes to get a sense of what it takes to make those performances happen, before audiences show up with blankets, folding chairs, and picnics to get their dual culture/nature fix.

The OGs of Oak Park

Now heading into their 47th season, Oak Park Festival Theatre has been producing Shakespeare (and sometimes other writers) in downtown Oak Park’s Austin Gardens for most of their history. After a disastrous fire in their offices last fall, which destroyed much of their archival material and tech equipment, the company has rallied and will be back with A Winter’s Tale starting July 12. (The company’s productions are ticketed, with prices ranging from free for kids under 12 to $38 for adults.)

Unlike the other companies and producers I spoke to, OPFT has the advantage of being in one spot the whole summer, rather than having to load up and move around week to week. But as artistic director Barbara Zahora points out, other outdoor productions “use semi-private or private property to work with so they can leave some things in place from night to night throughout a production run.”

For OPFT’s public park setting, the outdoor stage stays up all season, “but everything else, every night, we set up and strike.”

George Zahora, who serves as composer and sound designer for many shows in Austin Gardens, and is also Barbara’s husband, notes, “We can’t bury cables in the park or anything like that. We have to work around existing installations of power, et cetera. So there are limits. So as far as sound is concerned, we have to set up speakers and mixing-board microphones every night, which means running a lot of cable. Some of that we’ve found ways to just have in place permanently, but of course, any of that stuff is at the mercy of Mother Nature.” And since the park is open to the public, the “stuff” can’t be something a curious passer-by can walk away with or damage.

Anyone who’s attended OPFT shows also has experienced the ambient noise of planes, emergency vehicles, car alarms, and everything else one finds in a bustling downtown area. Some nights, the locusts chime in as a chorus, too. Negotiating all that requires a particular skill set from performers. Barbara notes, “I’ve had one dear friend in particular say to me, ‘I think I’m a better actor because of this,’ because they felt that they had to deal with a lot of distractions, but they were also, for lack of a better word, exposed in a way that was different than the type of exposure that you get in an indoor space. To protect the performance from children crying or running off during your big monologue, to rain, to the planes, to cicadas, you have to be so focused and committed to not just what you’re doing in that moment, but to the craft itself and to what you’re trying to create for the community.”

Kevin Theis, longtime OPFT company member who’s directing The Winter’s Tale, notes that the outdoor setting can also lead to felicitous synchronicity. “When we were doing Of Mice and Men and Lenny was talking about the rabbits, there were actual rabbits running around in front of the stage. I mean, you don’t get that indoors. We had an entire squirrels’ nest drop into the middle of the stage during a show. Audiences just flip out. They love when something goes haywire. When I was doing Amadeus [Theis played Mozart’s jealous rival, Salieri] opening night and I’m railing against God and God was answering me with thunder in the sky? It was so thrilling.”

A Moveable Dream

Midsommer Flight has been offering free Shakespeare in the parks for ten years, and this summer, they’re returning after the COVID hiatus with A Midsummer Night’s Dream (the first show they ever presented) as part of the Chicago Park District’s extensive “Night Out in the Parks” programming. It’s a bit of a misnomer, however; Midsommer Flight relies on natural daylight for their touring productions. (This year’s season opens July 15 in Lincoln Park.)

Producing artistic director Beth Wolf notes that being a portable production presents challenges. “Because we are such a small company, we don’t have the budget to rent a truck or hire drivers. We rely on our touring company of mostly actors and usually a stage manager. Not everyone has a car, but every year enough people have cars that we can load everything in and out. And part of that calculus is creating a plan for which items go in which people’s cars and how many cars do we have this year. So we don’t want to over-design the show and then be unable to fit it all in.”

Unlike OPFT, Midsommer Flight doesn’t use any amplification or sound equipment. Wolf says, “We make a point to hire a vocal coach at the beginning of the process who comes into our rehearsals and does vocal workshops with the actors to help them use
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their voices in a healthy way to project across these big park spaces and to deal with ambient noise. So most of the time actors are gonna keep going and push through. But there are times when we tell them if there’s something that can’t be ignored, like a low-flying plane that just obliterates all sound, we can wait that out. You can even acknowledge it. We are suspending our disbelief for the world of the play, but we are very much in the middle of a city with real things happening. And there sometimes comes a point where ignoring it is more distracting than just acknowledging it and letting the plane go by or the siren go by.”

**Broadway al fresco**

Porchlight Music Theatre’s “Broadway in Your Backyard” series has been happening for a few years, but this summer is the first time the company has joined “Night Out in the Parks,” which itself celebrates ten years this summer. The 60-minute concert of Broadway favorites kicks off July 19 in Wicker Park and travels throughout the city.

Production and operations manager Alex Rhyan is the point person for figuring out the transportation and setup, which include a portable stage and sound system, but no props or costumes. “We need to pack everything in and be able to pack everything out with us. Even though we’re going to Park District places, we like to be very self-sufficient because we don’t know what we can rely on. Every park is different and every park has different amenities.”

Site visits beforehand help Rhyan and his team find locations within the parks “that provide some shade and where the sun’s gonna set right at six o’clock, and that is also accessible to the building. Hopefully at most of the parks, we are going to have a fieldhouse, so there are restrooms.”

The concerts do feature live accompaniment, and working out the sound requirements for each show is a big part of Rhyan’s job, especially since the park locations vary in terms of what’s available technically. “We always have a backup plan for electricity and bring a generator. And with that, lots of extension cords. I bring hundreds of feet of extension cords. That’s probably the one thing that is overkill and sits in the truck all summer long.”

Going to so many different communities also means that Porchlight (led by artistic director Michael Weber and musical director Justin Akira Kono) pays close attention to the songs in the concert, especially with paring down from a 90-minute show, as in past years, to an hour for the parks. Says Rhyan, “We’re looking at the community and the demographics. If certain places have more youth going to them, we’ll add in more Disney songs.”

Rhyan also notes that, while the series is free, Porchlight benefits by using it as “a tool for our outreach in education, in marketing and getting patrons, but also development opportunities.”

**Dance parties**

This is the city’s Year of Chicago Dance, and there’s also one more week left in See Chicago Dance’s Chicago Dance Month celebration, which features performances and workshops all over the city. Additionally, Chicago SummerDance returns July 6 with free pop-up performances, programs at the Spirit of Music Garden in Grant Park, and other themed events around Chicago.

In other words: there’s never been a better season to fall in love with all the varieties of dance Chicago has to offer.

Surinder Martignetti, community engagement manager for See Chicago Dance, spends a lot of time doing site visits, sometimes in decidedly unsummery weather, to figure out what locations will work best for Chicago Dance Month.

“I always try to go out to parks that are outside of the city center,” says Martignetti. “I really love being in parks, especially on the south and west side that are underutilized spaces because I love bringing dance and movements to these unexpected places. We have a dedicated audience that goes to see these things, but there’s also all of the people that just happen to be in the park that will stumble across these beautiful, unique experiences and just have this connection with dance that is unexpected and lovely.”

Martignetti also works to make sure that the companies they’re partnering with understand the limitations of the environment. “Most of these companies are dancing everywhere and anywhere. So I feel like most people already know how to negotiate and go into these spaces and know what to expect. But I’m also super clear, like, ‘This is a raw space. I’m not providing a dance floor.’” As far as material, she says, “I don’t really put any parameters on their dance season. Like you can do whatever you want as long as there is no rude language. It needs to be family friendly. We’re in a park, so no references to gun violence or gunshots in your music.”

John Rich is the dance and theater coordinator for the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE). He notes that this year’s SummerDance schedule is more expansive than in years past, in keeping with the Year of Chicago Dance initiative.

And while the downtown programs are always popular, the programming in the parks brings dance instruction and artists to neighborhoods, focusing on particular cultural and community interests. For example, they offered a cumbia and house music combination for Back of the Yards last year, and also “started working with Plant Chicago, which is a neighborhood market. We were positioning some of our summer dance programs in relationship to city markets, really just thinking about wellness, thinking about dance, thinking about food for wellness. We were in the middle of the pandemic, and just wanting people to be well and safe was a really big priority,” Rich says.

And while not everyone may be comfortable dancing around strangers (pandemic or no pandemic), Rich notes, “Social dance is a very special form of community and cultural engagement. You’re dancing with other people. It’s just a beautiful way to connect, and people come out and they’re respectful. Whether that means dancing with someone you know, or dancing with a stranger, mutual respect is a core part of the experience.”

@kerryreid
Thanksgiving, 2016: Flint, Michigan has been without clean water for 936 days.

written by Erika Dickerson-Despenza
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Sometimes to understand the present, we must look at the past.

In 2017, playwright Terry Guest grappled with how America could elect someone so outwardly racist as Donald Trump. It shocked him into questioning what could be done about the rise of fascism in the U.S.

“Do we protest? Does that work?” Guest asked himself. “Do we yell? Do we scream? Do we give up? Do we focus on our family and our own personal lives? Do we cut off somebody’s head?”

Those musings sent him back in time to figure out what answers people found when faced with the same questions. The result is Story Theatre’s Marie Antoinette and the Magical Negroes, opening June 30 at Raven Theatre.

Guest doubles as playwright and director in a story about revolution, rage, and revenge. Set during the French Revolution, the play takes a new look at the lost monarchy myth by putting it in the mouths of Black people.

Brenna DiStasio, one of the founding members of Story Theatre, plays Marie Antoinette, and explains that the company seeks stories that ask how people feel rather than telling them how to feel. They actively support new work and emerging playwrights.

Those goals made Marie Antoinette and the Magical Negroes a good fit for the young company. In 2019, they premiered Guest’s At the Wake of a Dead Drag Queen; that script previously won a grant for a developmental workshop from Atlanta’s Out Front Theatre.

This past spring, Guest’s The Magnolia Ballet premiered at About Face, with Guest playing one of the roles under the direction of Mikael Burke (also the director of At the Wake of a Dead Drag Queen). It received rapturous reviews.

“Terry’s work is so beautiful,” DiStasio says. “It is so unique in that it has this mysticism about it. It is constantly digging for the complicated nature of history and interpersonal interaction in a way that really fits our mission statement. This show explores the themes of Black liberation and what do we do? How do we react in the face of adversity in a way that honors the fact that not everyone has the same answer?”

While Guest went seeking for answers, he found something else instead.

“I grew to appreciate how throughout humanity, particularly with Black people, we have had to ask these questions generation after generation after generation,” Guest says. “The thing that keeps me going is knowing that I am not alone, that my ancestors asked the same questions that my children will be asking. There is a connectivity to my history as a Black person and to my present, looking around at the different ways that my Black siblings are dealing with all of the things that are happening in the world and America.”

The play spans 300 years of history. It moves from the French Revolution to the Haitian Revolution to the 1992 LA riots and back again. While there is anger, there is also humor and joy.

“It’s a really funny, fun show,” Guest says. “There’s lots of movement and dance. It will feel like something people have never seen before. My goal is not to create something that’s perfect. My goal is to create something that’s powerful and that is saying something new and exciting.”

In the play, a group of magical traveling Black players decide to put on a show to help them understand and digest the complicated feelings they’re experiencing around being...
Black in a country that keeps showing it hates them. The story they examine is the French Revolution and how it inspired revolutions around the world.

"Whenever people ask me to describe the show, I’m like, you just have to see it," Guest says. “It’s too simple to say that it’s the story of Marie Antoinette. JFK and Jackie Kennedy show up and they’re played by Black people.”

DiStasio says that as the play explores Black liberation, it recognizes that the Black experience is not a monolith—Black people experience it in different ways, all of which are valid and should be honored.

DiStasio points out that they explored her character as both a symbol and a real human being. She is the perfect villain, and also a woman with her own hopes and dreams that put her at odds with the duty she was tasked with fulfilling.

More importantly, she says, is that the story is told through a Black lens, and not the oft-told white Eurocentric lens.

“What is so beautiful about what Terry does is that he states and recognizes that Black people were there and present and engaged and living and surviving and thriving this entire time,” DiStasio says. “There were Black people living in France. The actions of the French monarchy had an impact on the American slave trade.”

Guest agrees that too often stories of the French Revolution focus on Marie Antoinette and the experience of the royals. Not enough attention is paid to the people whose suffering sparked the revolution.

“Looking at where we are now, in this country, there are so many people who are starving and angry and reaching a breaking point,” Guest says. “It’s a really apt time to look at what’s been done before and to see if we can do things a little bit better.”

As for telling the story from a Black perspective, Guest points out that he is Black and he only knows how to tell the story from his perspective.

“This is just my story, my little version,” Guest says. “I’m not trying to be anyone’s voice of a generation. I’m just trying to tell my little stories and write my little plays about my little corner of the world. And that corner of the world happens to be Black.”

As a director, Guest says he put together a cast that was “energetically diverse,” with five of the seven roles cast with Black actors.

“All our actors have such a variety of ways of interacting with each other and the world,” Guest says. “It really shows the complexity of Black actors in this town. All the actors play multiple characters, so they get to really shape-shift and time travel. Black folk don’t get to do that as often as we should.”

Story Theatre has published content warnings, inviting people to contact them for more information. Guest points out there is violence, revolt, and decapitation. It takes a critical look at how people perpetrate and experience violence in this country.

“Everybody has a different comfort level,” DiStasio adds. “This play deals with white supremacy and Black rage and Black joy and Black liberation in a very vulnerable and frank way. Those themes are inherently triggering. We want to make sure you know that . . . you will see negative actions by white bodies being perpetrated on Black bodies. But ultimately, the goal of this show is actually Black healing and Black liberation taking over that narrative.”

Since Guest started working on Marie Antoinette and the Magical Negroes in 2017, he’s rewritten it many times and says he’s still discovering new things that will lead to future rewrites. (The play also closes a run at Baltimore’s Single Carrot Theatre this weekend and also has a short run this week at Indianapolis’s Southbank Theatre.) However, he has found that the historical setting makes the play continue to be more relevant.

“People are getting closer and closer to that breaking point that I was talking about,” Guest says. “I can’t wait for the play to not be relevant.”

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Pictured: Leaf Demon by Andy Lowrie (left)  
Mound by Kento Saisho (right)
Method and madness

Isaac Butler examines Stanislavski and his descendants as a many-headed hydra of theory.

By Dmitry Samarov

“M

y dear boy, why don’t you try acting?”

Laurence Olivier’s quippy response to Dustin Hoffman’s story of how he stayed up three nights to fully inhabit the sleepless state of his character in the 1976 thriller Marathon Man may be the most oft-cited example of the absurd ends Method acting came to in America. But that anecdote, if Hoffman is to be believed, is misunderstood, if not apocryphal. Apparently Hoffman was staying up nights partying to get over a breakup and Olivier’s advice was given in sympathy rather than criticism. This is but one of the many myths and legends de-fanged, contextualized, or outright refuted in Isaac Butler’s scrupulously researched but eminently readable biography of an acting philosophy that dominated the 20th century—and continues to exercise influence on stages and screens of every size and shape to this day.

As with so much that has come to be thought of as uniquely American, the Method was born elsewhere. Konstantin Stanislavski established the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) in 1898 with his partner, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, in response to a hidebound style of acting codified throughout Europe. Exaggerated declamatory speech was favored over realism. Sets were barely an afterthought and rehearsal and refinement of craft were unheard of. Theater was not a place to explore everyday events, and an actor’s own life was not a source to be inspired by.

Stanislavski sought to change that. His greatest ambition, defined and redefined endlessly over decades, was for an actor to perform his role from the inside. The Russian word for this idea is perezhivanye, which is often translated as “living the part,” but is more like some kind of special empathy, or maybe a living through. Whatever it is, the road to get there would be fought over merci-

lessly by every practitioner and acolyte who came into contact with it.

Not unlike a cult, adherents of Stanislavski’s “system” began debating and reinterpreting it even within its first years. Vsevolod Meyerhold starred in MAT’s production of Chekhov’s The Seagull, the first successful mounting of a play—now an unquestioned classic—that was considered the most notorious flop of its day. But Meyerhold left and established his own experimental, highly Symbolist style of theater soon after. Other early students like Yevgeny Vakhtangov and Richard Boleslavsky would do the same. The door Stanislavski opened by exploring everyday behavior and psychology seemed to lead to different rooms for every individual who opened it.

It was Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, another Stanislavski veteran, who established the first outlet for his gospel in the U.S. in 1922 with the American Laboratory Theatre, following a well-received MAT tour that featured revivals of The Seagull and other mainstays of the company’s repertory. At the time the American theater scene was in its infancy and hopelessly beholden to the same 18th- and 19th-century conventions prevalent in Russia decades earlier. Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner—perhaps the most recognized exponents of various styles of the Method—all spent time at the Lab school. And not unlike Stanislavski’s first followers, each founded their own church devoted to worshipping the master’s teaching in seemingly contradictory ways.

Butler is able to explain the various techniques, exercises, and approaches of acting from the inside because he lived it as an aspiring actor in his youth. He describes having to walk away from the practice after feeling chewed up by the intense inward exploration required under some of the Method-related systems his teachers espoused. Indeed, oftentimes, these acting exercises resemble experimental psychotherapy rather than preparation toward any kind of public performance. Each teacher comes off like a charismatic cult leader and many decisions by actors and directors to leave one group and join another read like personal, emotional betrayal.

Somehow this collection of intense, often troubled individuals, through harrowing, sometimes utterly ridiculous strategies, established a way of emoting that became the standard in the U.S., both on stage and screen. It is the movies, of course, that did the most to mainstream the Method in the persons of Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, Robert De Niro, et al. But the Pandora’s box that Stanislavski hammered together around the turn of the 20th century continued to unleash personalized angels and demons for anyone who unlocked it. While one actor might insist that personal traumas are crucial to unlocking authentic emotion in performance, another favors obsessive research into a character’s profession or physical gestures. It’s no accident that even the man who started this revolution insisted on putting quotation marks around his “system,” because it was an ever-changing process, never to be truly codified or finished.

The stickiest criticism of the Method, one that goes all the way back to its nascency in Russia, is that it favors the actor over the play (or movie). By working by themselves apart from the text or their colleagues, they become the entire show and detract from any bigger picture. This is clear in movies where costars come from different schools. Watching Tilda Swinton in 2007’s Michael Clayton, for instance, is jarring because whatever it is she’s doing is in an entirely different universe than everything and everyone around her. To me, she’s the only reason to watch that film, but that only points up that production’s failure rather than Swinton’s incredible skill.

In his introduction, Butler calls his book a biography rather than a history—even though his subject is a school of acting rather than a person. I think he’s right to make that distinction, though his subject is really a many-headed Hydra-like creature, spawning new appendages quicker than anyone could hack the old ones off. He ends with the thought that though the Method inspired a lot of questionable personal behavior and often led to excess, it will always remain in the actor’s quiver. There’s just no putting this self-absorbed genie back in its bottle. ❍
Siah Berlatsky shakes up Shakespeare

The teen playwright’s Elizabethan pastiche debuts with the Artistic Home.

By Kerry Reid

Siah Berlatsky just graduated this month from ChiArts, but though she’s taking a gap year before college, the 18-year-old playwright-director-actor isn’t letting the grass grow under her feet. In August, she’ll be part of Artistic Home’s outdoor developmental series, “Summer on the Patio,” with her Elizabethan-style gender-bending rom-com, Malapert Love, which she also directs. (“Malapert,” a favorite word of William Shakespeare’s, is both adjective and noun, meaning “saucy,” or “an impudently bold person.”) Berlatsky’s play, in which six characters (and a foul drunkard named “Phischbreath”) scheme and (sort of) duel as their hidden affections are revealed, nestles in repertory alongside those of internationally known writers: David Ives’s Venus in Fur and Joe Butterworth’s The River.

I caught up with Berlatsky (daughter of Noah Berlatsky, a longtime Reader contributor) the day after her ChiArts graduation to find out how she ended up being the youngest playwright onstage in Artistic Home’s history, and how being the first trans and a fan of Shakespeare comedy specifically with all of those tropes that I love so much and make it a more explicitly modern piece.

In terms of coming out as queer and trans, did you find that process easier by being in a high school for the performing arts?

Definitely. ChiArts has been a particularly accepting environment for that. Most of the people that I know there are trans. But it’s not just at my high school. I know lots of other people from lots of other schools that have been very accepting and supportive.

What was the journey with this play? Was it a class project that kind of just kept going?

It started out just as purely a hobby, sort of a passion project thing. I would write it on the bus or the train to and from school on my phone. I didn’t really think that anything would ever come of it. I was just a kid experimenting with art. But there have been a lot of teachers and mentors [at ChiArts], especially Kathy Scambiattera [artistic director at Artistic Home] who took notice of it and felt that it could be a professional production.

How is the Summer on the Patio program set up and have you started working on the show?

It’s basically a festival with three different plays, with three completely different teams in a very strict process that just really emphasizes the relationship between the actor and the text. We’ve just begun rehearsals. We had our first table read last week and we’ll be performing every Sunday in August.

What are some of the things you’re hoping the rehearsal process might bring out for you and the play?

With theater, there isn’t any insight that is deeper than seeing the play fully performed. You don’t really get to see what the finished product is until you have actors and audience in a space. I’m really just excited to see the work as it was meant to be—viewed and interacted with. Already, I’ve gotten a lot of insights just from the few table reads and I’m just hoping to see more of that, see what works and what doesn’t, to make it the best play that it can be. And hopefully it have produced in the future.

Who are some of the playwrights that you’ve looked to for inspiration aside from Shakespeare?

Definitely more classical playwrights—Oscar Wilde and Chekhov are the two whose style I think I enjoy the most. Oscar Wilde, particularly, although, you know, one hopes that my career doesn’t go quite the same way his did. [laughs] But I just love his voice. I love the satirization of cishet societal norms. The way that he does that, I admire greatly. Among more contemporary playwrights, I think probably my favorite would be Tarell Alvin McCraney [Ms. Blakk for President].

I just think that the work that he’s doing in elevating queer voices and the sophistication, the control that he has over his settings and his characters is really brilliant. And definitely something that I aspire to.

What are your future plans?

Well, so right now, I’m looking at taking a gap year. I have a lot of projects that I have to sort of attend to at the moment. Hopefully I would like to go to college in New York or Chicago and pursue a degree in either dramatic studies or English or something that will forward my writing and get me new connections in theater spaces to hopefully branch out, where and with whom I’m producing plays.
**Theater**

**OPENING**

**Shameless nostalgia**

*Cruei Intentions: The '90s Musical* tickles the millennial naughty bone.

We all remember where we were when we saw *Cruel Intentions*. Its iconic soundtrack (anyone else melt to Counting Crows’ “Colorblind”? and “shameless perversity” (thank you, BuzzFeed, for this spot-on description) have become canon in many a millennial’s coming of age and sexual maturity. Directed by Adrian Abel Azevedo, Kokandy Productions’ Chicago storefront premiere of the 1999 movie’s jukebox musical adaptation is an incredibly fun nostalgia trip that still feels at turns shocking, twisted, and touching in all the right, confusing ways. You love to hate every character, especially Kathryn (Maddison Denault) and Sebastian (David Moreland), whose stepsibling sexual tension and moral bankruptcy wreak havoc on all in their wake. The plot, based on the 1982 French novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos: an exalted bet that Sebastian bed the new headmaster’s daughter before the school year begins.

That the story is told with limited dialogue and mainly lyrics of your favorite 90s songs is a pleasing foil to its chaotic pacing and some problematic/dated plot points (some suspension of disbelief required here). Scenes with the film’s classics “Colorblind” and “Bitter Sweet Symphony” do not disappoint, with choreographer Laura Savage making the relatively small space feel layered and alive with energy. The entire cast impresses with their vocal performances, delivery of compelling camp, and ability to create an intimacy that verges just close enough to voyeuristic. Anabella Oddo stands out as Cecile (Selma Blair in the movie), using her vocal chops and charming physical comedy to give the “annoying” character depth, growth, and surprising power. —Marissa Oberlander

**Cruel Intentions: The '90s Musical**

Through 8/7; Thu-Sat 7 PM, Sun 5 PM; Chopin Theatre, 1543 W. Division, kokandyproductions.com, $40 (students/seniors $30).

**Lead in the water**

The Flint crisis comes to sorrowful onstage life at Victory Gardens.

I hardly ever start reviews this way, but trust me, stop reading this and hop online to get tickets for Erika Dickerson-Despenza’s *culled watthah*, now in its local premiere at Victory Gardens under Lili-Anne Brown’s direction. It’s a profound, poetic, scabrous (and beautifully acted) piece of theater that hits at so many levels and points of entry. The show’s structure is a perfect metaphor for the water issues that Flint faces, as well as the larger issues of human rights and justice and those willing to compromise themselves and their communities to keep their own families from going under: their own dreams from withering away.

Big Ma (Renée Lockett) is the matriarch of the home, through Brianna Buckley’s Marion, with some of the most powerful scenes off stage. Marion’s little sister, Ainee (Sydney Charles), pregnant and struggling to stay sober, watches over Marion’s girls: Plum (Demetra Dee), who, like Beneatha in *A Raisin in the Sun*, finds comfort in Yoruba rituals (particularly those involving Yemoja, the water deity), and Reesee (Ireon Roach), whose chemo for leukemia (caused by the lead poisoning) causes her to sleepwalk. Sydney Lynne’s set places large metal pipes that look like a mythic Rust Belt version of a ruined temple behind the small but cozy home where the women try to deal with the lack of clean water—that most basic of human requirements and rights. (How many bottles of water do they need to cook? To clean? Will the water be safe for their kids?) It’s an apt metaphor for this heartbreaking wonder of a play that overflows with history and mystery, love and anguish, small telling details about how these women hold each other up and big-picture truths about how little their lives matter to the People in Charge.

—Kerry Reid

**Cullud Watan**

Through 7/17; Tue-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM, Sat 6/25 and 7/16 3 PM only; Wed 6/29 2 PM only; word for word captioning Wed 6/29 2 PM, Fri 7/1 and Sat 7/2 7:30 PM; ASL interpretation Fri 7/1 7:30 PM; audio description/Touring Fri 7/1 7:30 PM, and Sun 7/10 3 PM (four begins 90 minutes before show); Victory Gardens Theater, 2433 N. Lincoln, 773-877-3000, victorygardens.org, $29-$62.

The magic is gone

*Godspell* feels dated and preachy.

Every piece of art has a timeliness. When it is born and put into the world, it becomes part of its identity for better or worse. For *Godspell*, that time has come and gone. First staged in 1971, this musical by Stephen Schwartz and John-Michael Tebelsk is painfully dated. That cannot be fixed no matter how many contemporary references are crammed into this show, which only make it feel older than it is. Those references are by design, a way to keep the material fresh and timeless, but the opposite occurs. When the music itself is stuck in a certain time, the quips are awkward. The heavenly voices of Theo Ubique’s angelic ensemble (directed by Christopher Pazdernik) cannot resurrect this relic. *Godspell* is more akin to a youth church camp musical improv showcase than traditional musical—even Jesus Christ Superstar feels young compared to this tired work.

A series of biblical parables set to flower-child rock opera, this “Baby Shark” infested musical makes for a long two-hour runtime. Which is really too bad because the performers and musicians (led by musical director Jeremy Ramey) are undeniably talented. But *Godspell* doesn’t have much of a plot to hold on to other than the loosely tied parable strings.

Laz Estrada’s soothing melodies paired with Austin Nelson Jr.’s range could save more souls than one could count. Even so, *Godspell* has lost its magic. Certain audiences may find themselves spellbound, but this boring, preachy musical is likely to have its nonbelievers.

—Amanda Finn

**Godspell**

Through 7/31; Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 7 PM; Theo Ubique Cabaret Theatre, 721 Howard, Evanston, 773-939-4010, theo-uc.com, $42-$54 (three-course meal from La Cocinita available for $29 per person).

**Big-box blues**

*Steeple* returns to live shows with a dark workplace comedy.

On the wall of the big-box retail warehouse that forms the setting for Eboni Booth’s *Paris*, now in a midwest premiere at Steep Theatre under Jonathan Berry’s direction, there’s a sign reading: NOBODY CARES. WORK HARDER. It’s a stark enunciation of the realities of late-stage capitalism and consumerism. The title refers not to the City of Lights, but to the sad little Vermont burg where Emmie (Amber Sills) has returned in 1995 after a year of college in Washington, D.C. Though she grew up in Paris, nobody seems to believe her—which seems to be a racial microagression (Emmie is Black). The Emmie we first meet seems pretty introverted (for reasons we come to understand). Manager Gar (Terence Sims), who is also Black, isn’t surprised that she couldn’t get hired to work the register at another store in town. He gives her a chance (and a choice of name tags between “Emmie” and her actual full name, “Emman”), but there’s not much to celebrate this season. Not even for Gar, who has found his own enterprising way to supplement his wages.

Emmie’s coworkers, including alcoholic middle-aged former nurse Wendy (Lynda Shadrake), who’s married to the town traffic cop, Dev (Alex Gillmor), bitter single mother of four Maxine (Michaela Petro, in fine tear-your-head-off-if-you-look-at-her-wrong mode), and wannabe rapper kid Logan (Alex Levy) bounce off each other like rats in a cage. Sometimes they’re kind, sometimes they’re cruel. But mostly just exhausted and beaten down by the grind, they share illicit shots of booze on...
the clock and gossip to pass the time. The appearance of the fearsome Carlisle (Josh Odor), with whom Gar has made his extracurricular arrangements, adds an element of danger that’s left dangling at the end of the play. But what comes across clearly in this work—the first live production from Steep since 2020, and the first in their new space on Berwyn—is that Booth is a fierce and funny writer to watch.

—KERRY REID

The celluloid closet
A gay Hollywood star faces being outed in a PrideArts farce.

The Chicago premiere of British playwright Chris Woodley’s Tommy on Top, now playing at Pride Arts Center, is a witty farce that elevates crucial questions about representation and authenticity in contemporary media.

The show is centered on Tommy Miller (Ryan Cason), a closeted actor who’s just been nominated for his first Academy Award. He’s the favorite to win, and his boyfriend George (Patrick Gosney) and sister Molly (Theresa Liebhart) have joined him at a suite in Beverly Hills to celebrate ahead of the ceremony. However, their evening takes a turn when a celebrity blogger threatens to out Tommy with some photos of him and George. At the request of his manager, it’s been paramount that Tommy hide who he is for the sake of his career, especially since no openly gay man has ever been awarded an Oscar for performing.

From there, the throughline of Tommy on Top is whether he and his team can pull off a ruse to prevent the blogger from revealing the photos. But the more compelling question that emerges is whether or not Tommy will ever get to live an authentic life and maintain his position as a Hollywood heartthrob.

In spite of the silliness that the group concocts to protect Tommy, the stark realities of what it means to be gay in Hollywood are never lost on the characters or the audience. Director Jay Españo successfully blends the show’s slapstick comedy and of-the-moment references with the hard truths that Tommy’s predicament reveals about the biases that persist in environments that claim to have progressed past them. —KATIE POWERS

Pleasant posies
Drury Lane’s Steel Magnolias is comforting, but not challenging.

My daughter tells me she likes the 1989 movie version of Steel Magnolias because you can have it running in the background while you do other things, and still more or less follow the plot. The 1987 play the movie is based on has the same virtue. You don’t really have to use all your brain cells to get the gist of what is going on—a group of southern women in a small Louisiana town regularly get together at Truvy’s beauty salon and talk about stuff. The frequently revived play certainly has its virtues—Robert Harling’s dialogue is witty, the characters have enough depth to give actors something to chew on, and the story is sweet, shallow, and inoffensive—but if you go hoping to learn something new about the world, you are at the wrong show.

The current revival at Drury Lane, directed by Johanna McKenzie Miller, brings out the best in Harling’s material. The pitch-perfect cast makes all of Harling’s lines glitter; they flesh out this rather slow-moving—and at times very predictable—slice-of-life narrative. (Believe me, over the course of this two-hour-plus long play, you will have lots of time to drink in Angela Weber Miller’s wonderful, eye-pleasing set.) Every actor in the ensemble gets her star turn, and makes the best of it. Janet Ulrich Brooks is particularly winning as the sharp-tongued local eccentric, Ouiser. —JACK HELBIG

Amber Sallis and Alex Levy in Paris at Steep Theatre © RANDALL STARR

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**Elvis**

Baz Luhrmann’s *Elvis* is a maximalist dream. It’s a loosely focused biopic of one of America’s greatest musical creations that jumps and shimmies through the early infatuation of the young Presley with the Black gospel music of his downtrodden youth, to the stardom of his 20s and 30s, and through the his decline into drugs and despondency. Flashes of color, lightning cuts, and the camera spins and needle drops are at times overwhelming, but it’s overall enjoyable experience that washes over you in waves of excitement.

Austin Butler does an excellent job expressing the barrage of emotions that Presley undergoes in his meteoric rise and fall, evoking pathos through his eyes. And the performances throughout the film are poignant reminders of the lasting impact Elvis has on American pop culture.

Luhrmann’s film is best described as hagiography; events seem to happen to Presley-run-ins with the law, financial crisis, family drama—without any real insight into how our hero causes or contributes to them. Even the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy are shown less in terms of their cultural impact and more as things that cause Elvis to have a bad day. Elvis’s relationship with the Black community is portrayed as one of a friendly enthusiast who’s welcomed into the fold and suffers more consequences from the white political elite than the Black musicians who were unable to reach his stature due to their race, who he uses as mentors and confidants.

More confusing than some of the quick cuts, temporal shifts, and squeaky-clean race relations is Luhrmann’s portrayal of Elvis as one of a friendly enthusiast who’s welcomed into the fold and suffers more consequences from the white political elite than the Black musicians who were unable to reach his stature due to their race, who he uses as mentors and confidants.

But *Freedom Uncut* is also a can’t-look-away chronicle of the 1980s, the decade that saw the superstar ascents of Annie Lennox, Prince, and Madonna, and Michael Jackson as a thrilling solo artist who could not be beat. Watching the 80s through the lenses of its superstars is its own glossy and compelling reward, but *Freedom* also depicts the carnage of the decade, when the HIV virus tore through the world without mercy or viable treatment, targeting Michael’s first love, Anselmo Feleppa, among its other victims. At one point we see footage of David Bowie beaming backstage while Michael does a tribute to Freddie Mercury, the arena crowd singing along in massive unison to “Somebody to Love.” Like all the music packed into *Freedom*, it warrants setting your speakers and whatnot, all of them, to stun. This one in particular: Michael is singing a tribute to a man who died of AIDS. And he is singing it to Anselmo, knowing full well that they might be separated by the same disease. Michael calls it the “loudest prayer” he ever made. It’s still worth turning up. —**Catey Sullivan** 87 min. Wide release in theaters

**Jurassic World: Dominion**

Jurassic World: Dominion, the sixth installment in the Jurassic Park franchise, sets up a dual storyline by bringing back the stars of the original film—Dr. Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern), Dr. Alan Grant (Sam Neill), and Dr. Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum)—and pairing them with the heroes of the current trilogy: former Jurassic World staffers and current dinosaur conservationists Owen Grady (Chris Pratt) and Claire Dearing (Bryce Dallas Howard).

Themes of man-made environmental destruction and the hubris of scientific development left unchecked to its unintended consequences permeate the film. Several years after the destruction of Isla Nublar and Jurassic World, dinosaurs have spread across the globe, precariously co-existing with humankind. Plagued by poaching, illegal breeding, and abuse, dinosaur protection is entrusted to the mega-conglomerate Biosyn. When a plague of prehistoric locusts seemingly tied to the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy are shown less in terms of their cultural impact and more as things that cause Elvis to have a bad day. Elvis’s relationship with the Black community is portrayed as one of a friendly enthusiast who’s welcomed into the fold and suffers more consequences from the white political elite than the Black musicians who were unable to reach his stature due to their race, who he uses as mentors and confidants.

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Performances and editing are poor in parts—there were audible awkward laughs and groans from a friendly audience at moments during the screening I attended—but that’s largely not what these films have ever done well. The drama stems not from the relationships of the characters but from the various dinosaur Chases that occur, and the comedic quipping of our characters as they try to escape their preposterous circumstances. And while there’s never really a sense of true danger for our heroes, we get just enough of the range of CGI dinosaurs and their weird traits to keep Jurassic World: Dominion entertaining. —**Adam Mullins-Khatib** PG-13, 146 min. Wide release in theaters
OUTDOOR MOVIES

Ghost of drive-ins past?
The best of Chicago's outdoor screenings keep the drive-in legacy alive.

By Maxwell Rabb

Bogged down by the rise of at-home movie screenings and big mall theaters, the appeal of the drive-in has faded away into a faint memory, leaving us with a mythology of first dates, family barbecues, and community. Now more than ever, streaming has stolen our attention, and the once immensely popular outdoor movie venue with nearly 4,000 U.S. locations at its all-time high has waned down to a meager 305 theaters.

With more people prone to staring at phones or computers, movie watching is suddenly a lonely, individual experience. With every movie at our fingertips, the final nail is hammered into the drive-in theater's coffin. But why do we need to stay locked in the house for a movie night? Or a major premiere?

Warm weather has thawed out Chicago, and more importantly, freed us from social hibernation—meaning it’s time to pry ourselves away from the screens that kept us warm through the winter. But that doesn’t mean you need to propel yourself into unwanted socializing immediately. And with the rippling effects of the pandemic, everyone is a little slow to the punch. Trying to adapt to a time without consistent social gatherings, the last two years sparked a renaissance of the open-air theaters, reviving the special memory of meeting to catch a movie together.

Chicago summer is spilling over with exciting events, so when trying to balance it all, there is no shame in feeling some exhaustion. On the days when it’s necessary to slow down, there is a clear solution to avoid throwing a beautiful day or evening away by holing up inside. Open-air theaters and outdoor movie showings happen nearly every single day of the summer, so there are plenty of options for every type of movie mood.

From the comfort of your car or on a picnic with friends, Chicago’s outdoor movie screenings have resuscitated the alluring drive-in experience, so screen time can be spent with others all summer long.

Chicago Onscreen
Despite lasting only a single week, it would be a mistake to miss the Chicago Onscreen Local Film Showcase. Whether you just love short films or want to support local artists, this showcase will feature Chicago-focused films that are guaranteed to contend with any major blockbuster. This year’s event will be held between August 29 and September 3 and will premiere films including Ray & the Agave, Room Rodeo, and Teacher in the Window.

Night Out in the Parks
This summer, the Chicago Park District is exceeding expectations by hosting more than 100 outdoor movie screenings. The park district is holding family-friendly film showings at Oz Park, Humboldt Park, Wicker Park, Osterman Beach, and many more. Make sure to bring dinner picnic supplies any time through August 27 to enjoy beloved classics including Ferris Bueller’s Day Off (June 23 at Holstein Park), The Devil Wears Prada (July 7 at Bartelme Park), or Soul (July 8 at Peterson Park).

ChiTown Movies Drive-In
Pilsen’s ChiTown Movies is a charming hideaway designed to fulfill your drive-in dreams. This theater is tucked away at the end of Throop Street, making it the perfect date spot or family movie night choice. Every spot in the lot gets a remarkable view of the extra-large screen. Every week, the revived drive-in theater features blockbusters such as Friday the 13th, Shrek, and Encanto. To top it off, you can order snacks and drinks directly to your car.

Millennium Park Summer Film
The Millenium Park Summer Film Series is Chicago’s most popular, awe-striking outdoor movie option. Beneath the skyline, movie lovers can snag a spot on the Great Lawn (as long as you arrive early) to watch some of their favorite movies. The film series runs from July 12 to August 30, playing movies including In the Heights (July 12) and Dirty Dancing (August 2).

Movie Night at Gallagher Way
Every Wednesday through September 21, Gallagher Way—the small sister park of Wrigley Field—hosts an outdoor movie screening fit for a family outing. Starting with Josie and the Pussycats and ending with Bohemian Rhapsody, there is a chance to gather and watch one of your favorite movies on the giant digital screen.

Rooftop Cinema Club
Located on the fifth-floor terrace at the Emily Hotel in West Town, the Rooftop Cinema Club delivers an opulent outdoor theater experience, complete with a cushioned chair, headphones for audio, and, to top it off, a full food and drink menu courtesy of the hotel. The outdoor theater will host screenings nearly every day this summer, including Breakfast at Tiffany's (June 26).

Water Flicks at Navy Pier Summer Film Series
With the view of the lake and the Centennial Wheel, it is tough to beat the location of Navy Pier’s Summer Film Series. Hosted on Mondays from July 11 to August 29, the film series will show cherished movies like Minari (July 25) and cult classics such as Are We There Yet? (August 29). Typically strung together by a theme, this year’s Water Flicks feature movies about family—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

People enjoy an outdoor movie at Rooftop Cinema Club.

@Chicago_Reader
Showcasing Black actors in foreign cinema

A Chicago film series is helping audiences experience the long and rich history of international films with Black stars.

By Arionne Nettles

When Floyd Webb was 20 years old, he left his hometown of Chicago to go live abroad. It was 1974 and also the spark of a decades-long journey of traveling to over 50 countries. And as he did so, there was one constant: movies.

Webb went to the movies every place he went, he explains, and through that travel, the vast number of films with Black actors came into view.

“I had access to film programs, like at the [National] Film Theatre, on the South Bank in London, and they would have films in the afternoon,” Webb says. “I worked in that area and I used to walk over there to watch films. And suddenly... I started discovering Black actors who turned up in foreign films.”

And for Webb, this discovery was huge because growing up, he didn’t see many Black actors. It’s why Sidney Poitier—as one of the most famous actors of all time—became a beacon of light for Black film. The first Black actors who turned up in foreign films.

“When Sidney Poitier came along, he was changing [the] game—he was that powerful, self-realized character with agency, but there were very few films like that,” Webb says. “He was coming out of the American neorealism period immediately after World War II.”

As Black actors in the U.S. continued to struggle for roles, the presence of Black actors had exploded across the globe since the end of World War I. Yet, today, the richness of this history is not always something the average Chicago moviegoer can experience. But a new international film series is aiming to change that.

Webb is the curator of the Black Actors in Foreign Cinema screening series, co-presented by nonprofit media arts organization Chicago Filmmakers and his company, the Blacknuss Network, which has an alternative streaming service to watch Black films. This series is meant to give audiences a taste of some of the many international films featuring Black actors that were out even long before Webb first left for abroad.

The foundation of this work goes back to Webb’s work as the creator of the Blacklight Film Festival.

“I founded a film festival back in 1982, basically, to highlight and showcase new alternatives and radical works that were coming out,” Webb says. “Because there was a movement in the late 70s, early 80s, we got a sudden boom in Black independent film production. But it was not only here, it was like all over the world.”

On June 11, the first film in the series, Kiku and Isamu, screened at Chicago Filmmakers in Edgewater. The 1959 Japanese film stars two orphans—the children of a Japanese prostitute and Black GI—as they search for answers about race. After the showing, Emiko Takahashi, who played Kiku in the film, joined the audience virtually from Japan for a discussion.

“I was wondering after I saw the film, I said, ‘Whatever happened to her? Did she stay in Japan? Was her life pretty much like this young girl’s in the film?’ And she answered all those questions for us,” Webb says.

Without Pity, a 1948 film from Italy, is the next film in the series, and it will screen on July 23. Set at the end of World War II, it’s the story of a Black sergeant stationed in northern Italy who works to save his girlfriend. The film, which was briefly available in the U.S., was later banned in the U.S. and in Germany because it includes an interracial romance. But in Italy, it was a box office hit.

The role of protagonist was perfect for John Kitzmiller, who was, himself, a Black soldier. He was also stationed in Italy and rose to the rank of captain.

“He stayed in Europe after the war because his family had died while he was in the war, and he decided not to come back,” Webb says. “Carlo Ponti, an Italian director, saw him in a bar one night and heard his voice and said, ‘Wow, he can use it in the movies.’ And he did.”

The series’ third film, The Proud Valley, stars one of the most famous actors of his time: Paul Robeson. In the 1940 film from Wales, Robeson plays a Black sailor who deserts his ship and finds a job in a mining community.

“It’s Paul Robeson supporting... his core beliefs,” Webb says. “He was totally supportive of working people and I think it’s really interesting when you see actors who live what they believe, they find the roles that are reflective of the things that they believe.”

Last up in the series is Dainah la Métisse, which will be shown on September 17. This 1932 French short is set on an ocean liner and is a mysterious story of flirting, race and class dynamics, and a missing wife.

“This combination of desire and Renoir Charleston film, and this actor and this actress, the story of a Black magician, performing on a boat... with his kind of curious wayward wife—it’s really special,” Webb explains. “Black-and-white images are just so beautiful and so absurd. There’s a lot of surrealism in this film.”

@ArionneNettles
Police and security are meant to keep concertgoers safe, but what happens when they do more harm than good?

In summer 2020, as America reckoned with a sickness in its system of law enforcement, so too did the music community interrogate the role of police and hired security at concerts. Like the municipalities that explored community-based alternatives to policing, activists wondered what might replace the imposing CPD tower at Lollapalooza or confrontational security guards at local venues. The Union of Musicians and Allied Workers (UMAW) even formed an abolition committee in solidarity with police- and prison-abolition movements.

The live-music industry supports and relies upon police and police-adjacent security in myriad ways, and severing its connection to policing is no small task. Music venues in gentrifying neighborhoods can contribute to the overpolicing of these communities. Retired and off-duty police officers often staff private security forces, and in Illinois, former and current officers don’t have to complete security firearm training. And perhaps most obviously, the presence of police or security is usually a given at all but the smallest licensed music venues. (Unlicensed and DIY venues are another matter, of course.)

Law enforcement at concerts can seem like a necessary evil—bringing together a large number of people who are likely to be drinking or using drugs often leads to physical altercations and medical emergencies. But hired security and police are frequently ill-equipped to keep concertgoers safe in those situations. What viable alternatives exist to the status quo? Music venues have reopened to a society that’s reexamining its relationship with police, and many of them are asking themselves this question.

Do police and hired security have a place in live music? Or is the community of fans, artists, venues, and presenters better able to keep itself safe?

By Kira Leadholm
Some Chicago venues implement reform, others only talk

Racism is baked into modern policing practices. Since 2015, Black Americans have been killed by police at a rate more than twice as high as white Americans, according to an analysis by the Washington Post that began with data from that year. Of the 49 people killed by police in Chicago since 2015, 36 were Black, according to the same data. So when Chicago erupted with protests in summer 2020, it wasn’t only about abolition. Activists were calling to dismantle a system that relies on white supremacist values to regulate society.

For music venues, heeding this call has meant adopting measures to keep all patrons, artists, and staff safe—specifically those of color. And while some venues implemented meaningful reform, others responded in ways that felt performative or dismissive.

In summer 2020, a business posting on social media without acknowledging the ongoing, generation-defining struggle for racial justice could seem tone-deaf and callous. So when South Loop rock venue Reggies tweeted about reopening its patio a few days after the George Floyd protests broke out, a Boston-based artist manager (who asked to remain anonymous to protect his clients) felt it demonstrated a disregard for promoting anti-racism. He’d been primed to react that way, he explains, by memories of Reggies security officers he says were racist toward his Black clients.

“Pretty much every time I’ve been through Reggies—and you know, this could be coincidental, maybe it’s not—but it’s Black artists, specifically, that I’ve had bad experiences with,” he says.

In 2017, one of the manager’s clients, a well-known rapper, played a Lollapalooza after-show at Reggies. When the artist and team tried to enter the building, the manager says, security assumed they were gate-crashing and tried to enter the building, the manager says, “It’s humiliating, you know, to go to a show where you’re billed, being paid to perform, and security’s basically like, ‘Get the fuck out of here.’”

Credential checks are essential and a sign of diligent security, the manager says, but the problem lies in what he sees as the guards’ assumption that a Black artist must be trying to game the system and sneak people into the show. (Reggies employs in-house security personnel.) This assumption reinforces the criminalization and overpolicing of Black musicians. He says this issue isn’t unique to Reggies; it’s a consistent problem in venues across the country.

Communication, the manager says, can prevent some of these issues. “What makes for great security is when they’re communicative,” he says. “When there’s an effort on security’s side to understand who the personnel is.”

Reggies did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Metro has received similar criticism, though not for being silent at the wrong time. Days after George Floyd was murdered, Metro sent an email to subscribers with the subject line “How can you combat racism?” To K.D., a former audio engineer and artist manager who’s going by her initials to protect past clients, the email felt disingenuous. K.D. went to Metro only as a patron, not in her professional capacity, and in her view, she says, the security at the venue acted racist every time she attended a show.

“They were just checking me for weapons and things like that. They went out of their way to just do extra, like going under his arm, checking genitalia, his rear. He was uncomfortable,” she says.

In response to a particularly bad experience with security at Metro in 2013, K.D. took to Facebook to tell her story. The post received comments from four or five friends, she says, who’d had similar experiences.

“I don’t think that they actually look to combat racism, just by the way they treat their patrons,” K.D. says, explaining her reaction to Metro’s email. “It’s almost like they’re doing it just for marketability.”

Metro declined to comment for this story, but it did point to its safety policy: “Metro does not tolerate acts of violence, victimization, or predation. We always encourage our patrons to voice their concerns and want you to know that we not only hear you—we support any effort that makes our local music scene safer and more equitable.”

Other venues used the protests as an opportunity to revise their approach to concert safety. In summer 2020, Schubas Tavern in Lakeview circulated a list of alternatives to calling the police among staff and posted safety information around the venue. The safety info is still up today, and the staff list remains in force. “We’re always constantly re-evaluating and looking at where we can improve, but with security, we’ve really been communicating to the patrons in the venue that security is a resource to them,” says Dan Apodaca, talent buyer at Schubas.

Schubas made headlines late last year when its CEO and president, Michael Johnston, faced accusations of secretly videotaping two women in his home; each had worked for him in several roles, including nanny, house manager, and personal assistant, and he used hidden motion-activated cameras to film them in the bathroom. Johnston has pled not guilty. In March, two more women—a former dog- and house-sitter and a former housekeeper—accused Johnston and his wife of illegally videotaping them, according to Block Club. Johnston’s attorney did not respond to a request for comment regarding the recent charges.

Audiotree, the parent company of Schubas and sister venue Lincoln Hall, removed Johnston from his positions following the first set of accusations, and Apodaca says that Schubas has enhanced its workplace safety measures.

“We’re refining and expanding our internal training practices for every employee and equipping our managers with the tools to lead recurring pre-shift training and discussion sessions with staff on various topics like bystander intervention and the avenues available for reporting workplace harassment,” Apodaca writes in an email. He also says the venue will continue to do everything in its power to ensure patron safety at its concerts.

Even before defunding the police entered mainstream conversation, Apodaca says, Schubas emphasized de-escalation strategies, collaborated with Our Music My Body, and treated calling the police as a last resort. The venue employs in-house security, which Apodaca sees as preferable to outside security because guards feel accountable to the venue. “I think that helps reinforce our philosophical approach of security being as much a hospitality role as a security role,” he says.

The Golden Dagger, a small venue in Lincoln Park formerly called the Tonic Room, also employs in-house security trained in de-escalation strategies. “When we hire security, we specifically ask if they are able to intervene and protect the venue in moments of contention without calling the police,” says Zoey Victoria, talent buyer for the Golden Dagger.

If Victoria had to call the police—which at the time of our interview she hadn’t yet—she says she would notify everyone within the venue. “The bottom line is, if we call the police to our venue, we are making it unsafe for people,” she says. “We have a really big queer audience, a lot of young people, and a lot of people whose identities don’t necessarily allow them to be protected by the police.”

Victoria says it’s incumbent upon talent buyers and venue owners to adopt an anti-racist and abolitionist ethos. “It’s really easy to talk a big talk and make the Instagram post and donate to the big organization,” she says. “But what needs to happen right now is direct mutual aid and uncomfortable conversations in meeting rooms.”

Community policing at concerts

The propensity of police and venue security toward confrontation and racial bias may result in part from poorly conceived training. Data suggest that the increasingly common military-style approach to training primes recruits to act as soldiers rather than as mediators, which all but encourages violence. And the training used by CPD and private security to address implicit racial bias appears inadequate as well.

A national study published in 2016 on the training of nearly 135,000 recruits in 664 state and local police academies found that recruits received on average 168 hours of training in firearms, self-defense, and use of force. By comparison, each recruit spent about ten hours learning to respond to mental health crises and about nine on conflict management. The same study found that nearly half the recruits received training that emphasized the military-style “stress” model, even though the police spend the vast majority of their time responding to nonviolent calls.

Police agencies also heavily recruit military veterans: vets comprise nearly 20 percent of police officers in the U.S. despite being about 7 percent of the population. The City of Chicago offers preferential treatment to the ap-
bizarre artistic spectacles, eccentric displays of personal excess, and supposed lawlessness. Far less coverage, unfortunately, focuses on Burning Man’s community-based approach to safety.

The Black Rock Rangers are a mostly volunteer team who mediate disputes and help solve crises at the event. Burning Man contracts High Rock Security, a Colorado-based company born out of the Black Rock Rangers, to support the volunteers in particularly difficult situations. High Rock’s unarmed team relies upon de-escalation, harm reduction, first aid, access control, and behavioral science to resolve conflicts.

“I’ve noticed that conventional security, if something can’t be resolved, they’re going to come over there and yell at you or kick you out—escalate, in other words. Just going to bring a bigger stick, whereas we try to avoid that by talking,” says High Rock cofounder Michael Black, who goes professionally by Ranger Crow. If a patron is causing a disturbance or experiencing psychological distress, a High Rock staffer will speak with her until the situation is safe again.

If a patron is acting physically threatening, a High Rock professional will lightly restrain them—in other words, hug them—until the situation is resolved. “If it has to go beyond verbal, it’s kind of hugging in some sense, if that’s what it takes to be like, ‘OK, don’t hurt yourself or anyone else,’” Crow explains. If appropriate, High Rock will bring in medical or psychological experts, all while talking the patron down. “What’s not happening is them getting strapped to a gurney and thrown in the back of a paddy wagon,” he says.

Several state and federal agencies, including local sheriffs and tribal police, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Forest Service, are also present at Burning Man. And in some extreme cases, High Rock must defer temporarily to one or more of these agencies. But High Rock cofounder Seth Schrenzel says this symbiotic relationship can’t function unless the authorities cede control of the situation when they’re no longer needed.

“We have been in circumstances where we had an excellent relationship with the law enforcement officers assigned to a festival or an event where the officers, at our request, got involved in a circumstance that was escalating beyond where we felt like we were going to be useful,” Schrenzel says. “We had an understanding with them, that once the immediate and specific need for them to get involved was no longer a factor, they would turn this entire scene back to us.”

Schrenzel believes there’s a place for law enforcement at festivals, though the nature of its presence can make a world of a difference. Armed officers dressed in tactical black read as confrontational from the get-go, and driving squad cars through a crowded festival is ineffective and unsafe. A better approach is for officers to engage with the community in a friendly manner, Schrenzel says.

For similar reasons, Schrenzel thinks security is more effective unarmed. “The presence of firearms nearly guarantees the fact that a situation will escalate,” Schrenzel says. Data support his claim: according to a 2018 Vox study, U.S. states with the highest gun ownership rates and the most permissive gun laws also have the most police killings.

Concert patrons themselves often perceive the presence of police or security as a threat. In a 2021 online survey of 216 festival attendees on several continents, 46 percent reported concerns about unwanted security—more than reported any other concern. Only 19 percent felt private security made them safer.

Jessi Fehrenbach has worked at Burning Man for five years and has seen High Rock at work. She’s also worked in many venues for a large entertainment company she prefers not to name. Fehrenbach says there’s no comparison between the Rangers at Burning Man and conventional music-venue security.

“The rangers come and they decrease the tension in an argument, just by listening to each side,” Fehrenbach says. “I think that the music world as a whole could really benefit from a program like the Rangers on-site at different festivals. It would probably help law enforcement. There’d be less arrests and less problems if there was mediation.”

Is Burning Man’s model a viable alternative to the police? Buck Down, who has worked for Burning Man’s Gate, Perimeter, and Exodus team since 2010, thinks so. “A lot of what was sort of clumsily labeled ‘defund the police’ has actually more to do with things like community policing and de-escalation as a first response. These are the basic first principles we have organized our security ethos around,” Down says. “These are the basic first principles we have organized our security ethos around [at Burning Man].”

Data suggest that community-based policing at Burning Man works. Though 78,850 people attended the event in 2019, only 60 were arrested, mostly for drug possession—and the festival didn’t descend into chaos as you’d expect if security were simply ignoring antisocial behavior. In 2014, Burning Man’s crime rate was far lower than that of any comparably sized town, according to research from Manuel A. Gomez, associate dean of international and graduate studies and associate professor of law at Florida International University.

Another crucial aspect of concert safety is the presence of medical professionals, especially when people are likely to be using drugs. But punitive legislation and stigma against drug use can prevent users from seeking help in life-threatening situations. DanceSafe, a Colorado-based public health organization that aims to promote drug safety at festivals, believes that experts in public health and social services are better suited to handle drug-related emergencies than the police.

“Police are going to have a much more historical record of targeting Black and Brown people, low-income people. There are structural and systemic issues and really complex power dynamics,” says Jessica Breemen, chief growth and impact officer of DanceSafe. In an
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effort to push back against the criminalization that’s been advanced by the war on drugs, DanceSafe offers festival patrons nonjudgmental and comprehensive public health services, including drug testing, free water, and electrolytes.

DanceSafe also advocates for repealing the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act, which allows law enforcement to fine and imprison business owners, property owners, and event promoters for failing to prevent drug-related offenses on their premises. The bill, sponsored in the Senate by Joe Biden, was initially called the RAVE Act and died in Congress in 2002 after the dance–music community advocated against it. The following year, Biden attached it as a rider to the PROTECT Act, which aimed to prevent and prosecute child abuse. The PROTECT Act passed, prompting critics such as the ACLU to accuse Biden of sneaking the RAVE Act through Congress without a public hearing or recorded vote.

The odds of prosecution under the RAVE Act are low—no major music festival has been prosecuted, according to a 2018 Chicago-Kent Law review—but Breemen says the law still prevents venues from offering lifesaving initiatives such as safe consumption sites and overdose prevention programs, because such measures tacitly acknowledge the likelihood of drug-related offenses.

Because safe consumption has been criminalized, venues and security companies may be less likely to train their guards in drug safety. Breemen says this can lead to “not knowing how to de-escalate, physical force, unbalanced power dynamics . . . it could lead to not knowing how to provide medical services and it ends up becoming a medical emergency, hospitalizations, or death.”

Security and police also frequently lack the training to respond to survivors of sexual assault, which occurs all too commonly at concerts and festivals. Chicago-based campaign Our Music My Body aims to raise awareness and improve prevention of sexual harassment and assault in the music scene and provide survivors with safe space at shows and festivals.

Security officers often respond inappropriately to disclosures of assault, says Maggie Arthur, director of education and training for Resilience (which advocates for survivors of sexual violence) and former campaign coordinator at Our Music My Body. Sometimes officers even perpetrate it. “If someone doesn’t feel comfortable going to security, because security was the one who caused harm, we’re there as people who they could come talk to, who would potentially help them find support or resources, or just listen and empathize and support them in whatever way feels good,” Arthur says.

At the 2021 installments of Lollapalooza, Riot Fest, and Ruido Fest, Our Music My Body received a total of six disclosures from survivors. Four of these alleged instances involved security perpetrated harm or responding ineffectually to victims, Arthur says.

In addition to its presence at shows, Our Music My Body conducts training courses with local venue staff on how to identify a potential assault and intervene. To persuade venues that such training was necessary, though, OMMB had to prove to them that sexual assault actually occurred in their spaces. When the campaign launched in 2016, few venues or festivals saw an urgent need. “A lot of those fests were like, ‘Yeah, that sounds really great and super important, but it’s definitely not happening at our fest,’” Arthur says.

So in 2017, Our Music My Body conducted a study of 509 Chicago-area festivalgoers—379 of them women—and found that 92 percent of women reported having experienced sexual harassment at Chicago music events. “When we were able to bring that information back to these festivals and venues, immediately they were much more interested,” Arthur says. The survey also suggested a business incentive for supporting the education of staff and security in violence prevention and crisis intervention: 84 percent of respondents said they’d be more likely to attend a concert at a venue that provides such training. By 2019, Our Music My Body was partnered with 20 venues in the Chicagoland area.

Arthur says that it’s unnecessary to involve police and security in instances of sexual assault if a venue’s staff is well-trained. “We don’t need security and cops—we can help each other. And so we want staff to be armed with that knowledge, because we know that they’re the ones who are most likely to see this stuff happening,” she explains.

Unfortunately, training festival security is more difficult than training staff at smaller venues. Though some festivals welcome Our Music My Body to table at their events, Arthur says many organizers don’t believe the group’s training can work logistically. Festivals enlist hundreds of employees and volunteers from around the country, making it a challenge to gather everyone in one place (or even at one time, in the case of an online course). Hired private security companies often provide their own training—though many don’t cover sexual assault, Arthur says—and they may be reluctant to collaborate with outside groups.

Arthur says OMMB’s attempts to get involved in the training of festival security have been especially frustrating. “Something there’s still this resistance of, like, ‘they’re just not gonna listen or they’re not gonna care,’” she says. “We have had so many circular conversations with fest organizers . . . then they’re like, ‘Oh sorry, it’s not gonna work out.’” Lollapalooza, Riot Fest, and Ruido Fest did not respond to requests for comment.

If a security guard perpetrates harm, it can be nearly impossible for the festival or the survivor to track that individual down without the company’s cooperation. Our Music My Body has proposed adding unique numbers to security guards’ T-shirts to make them more identifiable, but festivals have resisted the idea.

“Chicago loves to say, ‘We are the home of Lollapalooza. And we have these venues that have been around since the 80s, and they’re still kicking it.’ That is a source of pride for our city. In my brain, it only makes sense that you would want those music spaces you’re so proud of to be safer spaces for people to attend shows,” Arthur says. “[Chicago is] in a position to be on the forefront of some initiatives.”

Allegations of corruption haunt local security giant

The playing field is hardly level, though, and those initiatives have a steep climb ahead of them. Most community-based safety groups are small and volunteer run, and the concert–security industry is dominated by massive companies. In Chicago, Monterey Security Consultants Inc. provides services at major venues such as Lollapalooza and Soldier Field. But the company has emerged embroiled in so many scandals that investigators and even some former employees believe it to be incapable of keeping patrons safe.

From the moment of its launch, Monterey has been at best scandal adjacent. The company was founded in 1999 by former CPD officers Juan Gaytan and Santiago Solis. The latter is the brother of the disgraced former alderperson Danny Solis.

In 2017, Minneapolis law firm Mason LLP carried out an independent investigation of Monterey Security at the behest of SMG, operator of U.S. Bank Stadium, where Monterey had been providing security since the previous year. The study relied in part upon FOIA’d documents from the Chicago Police Board, and revealed that Gaytan had faced a litany of misconduct allegations during his nine years with CPD. In 1995, Chicago Police Superintendent Matt Rodriguez and the Chicago Corporation Counsel accused Gaytan of taking money by force and “disrespect to or maltreatment of a person” and recommended he be terminated. The Chicago Police Board acquitted Gaytan of some charges but found him guilty of hitting two people with a flashlight, resulting in a three-month suspension, according to the report.

In late 2001, the Chicago Police Board charged Gaytan with fabricating evidence, unnecessarily pointing his weapon, and providing false information in a police report, all in association with a single incident in 1994. Gaytan resigned from the force in August 2002, before he could face a Police Board hearing on these matters.

Within Monterey’s first three years, its annual business soared to $3 million, even though it allegedly operated without a license for almost two of those years. And despite mounting allegations regarding the company’s misdeeds, in 2002 it was awarded a $600,000–per-year contract to provide services at Soldier Field, according to the Chicago Tribune. In 2013, the company renewed its contract with Soldier Field and added two smaller venues to its turf, bringing in a total of more than $2.6 million, according to the Sun-Times.

In 2016, the Sun-Times reported that Chicago police had arrested two Monterey guards for offering to sell scalped wristbands. Neither guard had a security license, which Gaytan justified by saying they provided “guest services” rather than security. Gaytan told the Sun-Times that at any given Soldier Field event, one-third of Monterey guards are unlicensed.

The following year, a man died of asphyxiation after being restrained by a Monterey guard at a Walmart on the northwest side. The guard, Adrian Santos III, was wearing a vest that said “sheriff” despite having been fired from his job as sheriff’s deputy in Lake County, Indiana, two years prior. Santos wasn’t licensed as a security guard, and he had been previously charged with domestic battery and felony strangulation following a fight with his wife. 
brief tenure was nearly over. He was uncomfortable, and he didn’t get paid till his
security guards in Minnesota.

At U.S. Bank Stadium, some hired guards who failed their background checks were kept
on as “event services,” according to the private investigation. Monterrey told investigators that it employed hundreds of people with criminal convictions, which is illegal under Minnesota law. These convictions included felony robbery, felony theft, assault, weapons violations, and drug offenses.

Minnesota state law stipulates that background checks must be completed by the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) or the FBI, but according to the report Monterrey used a service called Oracle to run many of its background checks. Investigators deemed Oracle less effective than the BCA or FBI in this capacity for several reasons: Oracle checks don’t employ fingerprints, they contain a slew of disclaimers that describe their own limitations, and they rely on self-provided information.

The investigation further alleges that Monterrey’s training courses, such as the one Pittman attended, were not administered by a state-approved instructor. Though the Minnesota Board of Private Detective and Protective Agent Services approved two course instructors for Monterrey, neither taught any courses in Minnesota. Still, Monterrey issued “certificates of achievement” to its U.S. Bank Stadium guards bearing one of the two instructors’ names.

“This isn’t the company you want controlling a crowd of 50,000 to 100,000 people,” Pittman says of Monterrey. “If I would have had Monterrey Security at Astroworld, I would have wanted to hire a different company.” Pittman is speaking hypothetically—neither he nor Monterrey were involved in security at Travis Scott’s Astroworld festival in Houston, where ten deaths resulted from a crowd surge.

Monterrey’s transgressions led U.S. Bank Stadium to fire the company in September 2017 and replace its services overnight, and the next day the Minnesota Board of Private Detective and Protective Agent Services voted four to zero to revoke Monterrey’s license to do security work in the state, according to Minnesota Public Radio. New York’s Buffalo Bills fired the company shortly after.

According to its website, Monterrey still provides services at Soldier Field, Lollapalooza, Shedd Aquarium, and Allstate Arena, among other venues in Chicago and Indiana. Monterrey did not respond to a request for comment.

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Pravda Records goes the distance

Chicago's longest-running independent rock label throws the first Pravdafest, celebrating 38 years of rolling with the punches and putting in the work.

By Mark Guarino

Beginning with Napster and continuing through Spotify, the nemeses of independent record labels have been legion over the past few decades. The deaths of brick-and-mortar retail chains, including Tower and Borders, have made releasing new music even more of an uphill climb.

Yet Pravda Records has weathered it all and continues to thrive. The Chicago label—which toasts its 38th year with a two-day festival, June 24 and 25, at Sketchbook Brewing in Skokie—has survived shifting public tastes, the rise of online piracy, and the collapse of the dominant format, and the rise of online piracy, several changes in the industry. The deaths of brick-and-mortar retail chains, including Tower and Borders, have made releasing new music even more of an uphill climb.

Pravda has endured with its underdog approach by keeping overhead low, never banking on a single artist or sound, and diversifying its income streams: retail sales, publishing, downloads, licensing, streaming, merch. Its staff at its biggest totaled about 30 people, during the period when Goodman operated a storefront that sold Pravda products along with new releases from other labels. The store opened inside Metro in 1986, an era “ripe for people who wanted to be creative,” says Metro owner Joe Shanahan.

“Pravda was the hub for all of that,” says Shanahan. “I learned so much from [Goodman and Mosher] in understanding what was out there. The music they put out was way under the radar. MTV didn’t even matter. They were putting out indie records for an indie crowd. It was a glorious time. And they were literally sitting in the middle of it all.”

Eventually Pravda moved to a storefront on Southport, steps from the Music Box. Then in 1992 Goodman sold the retail business, bought out Mosher, and consolidated his staff. Today, Pravda has three full-time employees who work out of an office on the northwest side. The label outsources publicity, social media, and radio promotion to third-party vendors to control costs.

Each year Pravda handles an average of eight releases. Just as in the early days the record store helped fund the label, today Pravda...
is underwritten by the hard work Goodman does to license its music to television and film productions all over the world. This has generated revenue steadily thanks to a diverse assortment of placements: Netflix’s *Grace and Frankie*, KFC commercials, Beverly Hills, 90210, and more.

Goodman got interested in licensing in the early 1990s, and he says it’s helped Pravda brave the turbulence in the industry as it shifted formats, from vinyl to CDs to downloads to streaming. “There’s always going to be events in the music business that threaten your existence,” he says. “How we always dealt with it was to embrace it.”

What’s also helped Pravda stay the course has been consistent access to established artists whose former labels had either closed or been swallowed up in mergers and acquisitions. In 2016 the Flat Five’s debut was a hit for Bloodshot Records. Then the label ceased releasing new music, and signs pointed toward an eventual sale. The band’s second record ended up on Pravda in 2020.

What Goodman offers is a 50-50 profit split, committed long-term marketing support, and global distribution of physical media. What he gets in return are artists with dedicated fan bases and no problem filling clubs, as opposed to those trying to build audiences from scratch.

“Launching a new band is such an enormous task now. Just because a young band has a good demo—we have to look at the big picture,” Goodman says. “Sometimes that’s not a good business plan for us. We’ve done it.”

Another advantage of working with veteran artists is that they tend not to take for granted the work labels do. “A lot of people say, ‘We don’t need record labels anymore,’” but I think they do,” Goodman explains. “A lot of bands don’t want to sit around and run a business. They want to make music. To do that you need a label and partnership with people you have a good relationship with.”

Shanahan says what makes Goodman “unique in the record business” is the “trust he built with bands and touring musicians,” in part because he’s a musician himself. As a keyboardist, Goodman has been a member of several Pravda acts, including R&B collective the Imperial Sound, long-running rock trio the New Duncan Imperials, and the Service, one of the label’s earliest garage bands. Mosher has been his bandmate in all three.

“The fact that he’s run a business for nearly 40 years while never having worked another job in the music industry—while also working as a musician? You have to be a pretty balanced person to make it a sustainable situation for yourself and for other people,” says Melissa Thornley, Goodman’s romantic partner and Pravda’s marketing director.

Susan Voelz, a singer-songwriter and violinist who performs with Poi Dog Pondering, released her first solo album, *13 Rib*, through Pravda in 1993. She says the label’s support “was pivotal” to moving forward with her own music. “It validated me. It made me believe in myself to keep evolving, keep writing,” she says. “They let me do exactly what I wanted to do. I would give them a finished record. And I could go anywhere I wanted with it musically.”

She’s returning to the label now, with two new albums on the horizon.

Goodman started piano lessons at age five; by age 12, he was a working musician in a teenage band he booked at social events around Skokie. Not long afterward he got a fake press credential that let doormen all over the city know that he was a reporter for *Rolling Stone* magazine (“I had just gotten my braces off,” he says). Soon Goodman was slipping into punk shows all over the city; at the same time, he was playing professionally on the region’s lounge, resort, and supper-club circuit as part of Keith Miller Featuring TCB, a popular Elvis Presley revue. He was 16.

Goodman’s chutzpah aligned with the creative ethos fueling independent music culture in the mid-1980s. He began Pravda (Russian for “truth”) as an entirely DIY project while still in college. The record that earned the label its first national exposure was the 1991 compilation *20 Explosive Dynamic Super Smash Hit Explosions!* , a snarky homage to K-Tel collections that showcased covers of mossy 70s hits from up-and-coming Chicago bands: Material Issue, the Slugs, and Smashing Pumpkins, among others. Two more volumes followed.

Goodman realized he could play a wider role outside Chicago, helping revive the careers of musicians who’d fallen away from the spotlight. The first artist he worked with was also the greatest: Andre Williams, an R&B performer who had a string of chart smashes in the 1950s and wrote hits for the likes of Stevie Wonder and Ike & Tina Turner.

By the time Goodmen met him in 1998, Williams was fighting drug addiction and living without a stable home. Goodman and Thornley helped him get clean, resuscitated his career, and put together a band that he used to tour the world. Maybe most important, they acted as his friends, doing simple but important tasks like driving him to doctor’s appointments.

Williams died in 2019. Goodman has helped several other artists in similar ways, including Syl Johnson, Renaldo Domino, Tiny Tim, Archie Bell, and Hasil Adkins. He assembled each one a band and gave them a touring life, licensing income, and the chance to record new music for new audiences.

For Goodman, the effort was worth it for the stories. He met Tiny Tim at a gas station in Ames, Iowa, when Goodman was on tour with the New Duncan Imperials and Tim was playing comedy clubs with Jerry Mathers of *Leave It to Beaver* fame. Goodman stayed in touch and eventually brought Tim to Chicago in 1993 to record a live album at what’s now Martyrs’. The New Duncan Imperials backed him on tour, which removed Tim from the comedy circuit and put him in music venues, where Goodman felt he belonged.

One memory that sticks in Goodman’s head is the time he invited Tim to his parents’ place for dinner. “He was hitting on my mom while my dad took photos,” he says. “They remembered him from Johnny Carson and couldn’t believe he was in their home.”

“Tiny Tim was so interesting to me. We’d have long discussions in the car about the history of show business,” says Goodman. “He was also into religion and philosophy. He was a serious musician and serious music expert. He knew so many songs from the 1910s and 1920s and was educated in the history of vaudeville. He was much more than ‘Tiptoe Through the Tulips.’” Tours, however, could be a struggle. “He would give us a list of songs to learn, and then we’d get to the gig and he’d say, ‘We’re not going to do that, tonight we’re doing all the hits of 1910,’” Goodman recalls. “Which was fine. But we didn’t know any of them.”

“I’ve always been drawn to outsider musicians,” he says. “A lot of people I worked with had long, amazing showbiz histories and life stories. To me, they were fascinating, and deep down, very beautiful people to work with and just be around.”

In Pravda’s next phase, Goodman expects to release a solo album from Nora O’Connor, formerly of the Blacks and currently in the Flat Five. He also may break from his current business model to release new music by one or two younger bands he’s talking to. But the weekend of Pravdafest, he intends to spend his evenings listening to the label’s artists—and because the Service are making an appearance, he’ll be playing onstage as one of them.

“I’m proud of the catalog and I’m proud of what we’re doing now,” he says. “We’ve had a really good ride.”

@markguarino
Bill Connors, art director for the Empty Bottle

“I don’t come from a place where anyone I know owns or wants to own a bunch of expensive paintings. What I do want are things that I collected over my life that mark time.”

As told to Micco Caporale

There’s a lot that makes going to shows magical besides the live music, and no one knows this better than Empty Bottle art director Bill Connors. The Illinois native never expected to be guiding the aesthetic of one of Chicago’s most beloved independent venues, but the job has proved a natural fit: Since high school, Connors has experimented with music and video projects, playing with how moments of sound and image can be combined to create new meaning. At his core, he’s always been a visual thinker, capturing the attitude or essence of an artist or event with a collage-style approach to gig posters, album covers, logos, and T-shirts. Connors is formally trained as an artist, but he prioritizes cultural ephemera—which he sees as accessible art objects—over collector-driven fine art. His signature style—something like art nouveau skateboarding in a garbage can—has appealed to acts as diverse as Post Malone and Metallica. His career hasn’t been easy or straightforward, but his work is already proving influential.

I grew up in Orland Park and started attending SAIC in 2007 and graduated in 2012. In 2010, I started couch surfing until I could live in the city full-time. I really found a home in the printmaking department, and I took a lot of studio classes so I could stay in the buildings overnight and crash on a couch when I got tired.

I’m a huge fan of the Chicago Imagists—like the Hairy Who kind of stuff. A lot of that was painting, but their book stuff got me into the world of offset lithography, which led me to screen printing. That got me thinking about translating these higher-art paintings into something ephemeral, like a zine or pamphlet. Something not very precious. And from there I got interested in show posters. I can remember being at Handlebar for the first time—in, what, 2008?—and seeing Ryan Duggan’s work. He’s got a very particular hand-illustrated style with this really sharp sense of humor. Always an inspiration.

SAIC is a very conceptual school, but I’ve never felt like I had a place in the conceptual-art world. I like making for making’s sake. I always felt out of the loop with that “precious art” thing. I don’t come from a place where anyone I know owns or wants to own a bunch of expensive paintings. What I do want are things that I collected over my life that mark time, you know? And making that accessible to more than just, like, people I met in school.

My art is so eclectic. I know everybody says that, but the kind of art that I like and the kind of music that I like—I don’t know if they necessarily overlap. Like, not in a way where I’m like, “Oh, yeah, I definitely see the connection between this music and this artwork!” That’s not always my favorite moment. I really, really like when things go off-kilter.

When I was in high school, I’d share stuff online. In the LiveJournal/Blogspot days, people would chronicle every moment of their life in great detail rather than, like, a quick snapshot, so it felt like a great place to share work and get feedback from random people in a way that was natural and helpful for me. It was a great environment to get a discussion going about some drawing that I was working on with my friends who were just trying to, like, skateboard.

I wasn’t trying to advertise, but here’s where that becomes sort of a thing. Because by the time I was 21, I was negotiating with bands and companies that were, like, in Australia. I did something for Converse right out of college because I was sharing so much work online. I’m very grateful for everything that’s come my way, but at the same time, it makes me afraid.

The algorithm has got me pegged to a degree. It’s feeding me the same kind of images and artists who are doing work in a specific way. Sometimes it ends up distracting me from what I’m working on, like having too many reference points for your own work. But it scares me too, because I’ve gotten offers from companies or whoever where they’re very excited but want to charge a very low rate. And then you counter and immediately feel that gust flow the other direction, like, “Oh well, if this guy won’t do it for 40 bucks, I’ve got 100 people on this app who will!”

I see it a lot with companies that I know have the money, but they bank on you wanting their endorsement or to feel part of their “team” or whatever. But it’s like, I need to pay my rent. I need to pay for food. I need time to do human-being things. It’s a constant turn and burn. I don’t know how people rely solely on freelancing. Nothing but respect from me.
In 2014, I started working the door at the Empty Bottle. Most people didn’t know that I had this art career outside of work. But once I started doing more work for bands that were touring and coming through the Bottle, people started connecting me to the place, and I started getting more offers. Eventually I started doing graphic design here and there for the Bottle, and then I graduated to my current role as art director. That’s a new role, and it happened during the pandemic so we could focus more on merch and branding.

Every time we have a show—all that stuff on Instagram—it’s hand collage, which is a little bit more than I should have undertaken, but I like the way it looks, so . . .

I’ve always been into collage, like rooting through magazines and collecting images to use in different ways. I experimented with digital-collage stuff in high school—just poking around Photoshop and Illustrator for years. Those were rough. I learned a lot of different collage techniques in school, but those were mostly physical collages. In school, I was really into physical materials and scanners and physically printing things and then scanning the things that I physically printed. And it got into this whole process of physical, digital, physical, digital, just back and forth, you know? Which also lends itself to Xerox stuff, right? Like, the more times you photocopy something, the more blown-out it gets, and you can create these little worlds, especially adding hand drawing.

People always ask me, like, “Oh, are you really into, like, punk artwork?” I like that kind of thing, but it’s always been kind of an afterthought to me. I just like that photocopy look in general. It feels timeless. It’ll always look like the perfect age because it can be any time.

I don’t really have a process. There are steps, sure, especially with the scanner, but I’m like the trashman. I use everything and anything. I work digital and analog. I’ll scan things, use other people’s scans, take photos, find photos, add drawn elements by hand or in the computer. What I’m most interested in is a collage that feels like a collage but doesn’t necessarily look like one, you know?

Right now I’m trying to make work for posterity. I’m not interested in “the cloud.” I’ve worked with some big people, but I don’t always post it if I’m not into it. I wish I had more time to regroup and just make something for me instead of clients. I don’t want to be depressing, but I don’t want to lie to people either. Sometimes I think it looks like I’m killing it, but I’m not. I’m really not. I’m so broke and tired.

That’s the thing that kills me about the Internet. People think, like, “Oh, this image will get me a bunch of followers, and then with a bunch of followers, we’ll get a bunch of money.” But exposure and followers don’t translate to money. “But I’ve worked with some big people, but I don’t always post it if I’m not into it.”

@JuggaloReporter
Mother Nature ascend a queenly throne

By Alejandro Hernandez

What if you had the ability to create your own world from the ground up? What rules would you create? What type of environment would you cultivate? As educators and artists, this is what rap duo Mother Nature attempt to do with their work—especially with their latest EP, Nature's World. Their goal is to create a world built on community empowerment and equity, and cultivate respect and appreciation for the planet's natural resources.

Composed of rappers Klevah and TRUTH, Mother Nature has established themselves as a force to be reckoned with in Chicago with their consistent musical output and educational workshop series, The Miseducation of HipHop. The pair first met in the 2010s while attending the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where they did grassroots community work and made music together. With encouragement from a mentor, they came up with hip-hop-centered workshops that teach young people how to express themselves wholeheartedly and become the best people they can be.

“Hip-hop and education “just intersect,” says Klevah. “It’s just like who we are as being true to ourselves, our own paths, and being true to what cultivated Mother Nature to begin with.”

“Anybody can go back to our first project and know what we’re about and where our politics stand and whatnot. But doing the music is just a part of the mission, and then doing the education aspect—the knowledge—that is a part of the mission too. They exist with each other.”

That never-ending quest for knowledge has helped them tour the country to perform and teach others. However, it wasn’t until their previous project, 2021’s SZNZ, that they landed placements in national publications with a brash, in-your-face rap style. With Nature's World, produced entirely by Renzell, they bring an energy that is more soothing and calming.

“Renzell’s music allows us to just sit down, sit back, relax, catch a vibe. We not biting people’s heads off as much, you know what I’m saying?” says TRUTH. “The bars is always gonna come with Mother Nature projects, but I feel like it’s our Divine Feminine-type project. I feel like we always ‘rawr rawr’ all the time, and on this one, it allows us to be more introspective and explore ourselves in different ways. . . . We on our queenly throne at this point, head held high, just doing what we do.”

Spirituality has always held an important role in the lives of both, and there’s no doubt in their minds that connecting with Renzell occurred via divine intervention. Mother Nature and Renzell had known of each other for some time—but actually getting in the studio together was a fateful encounter that happened when the time was right. In those recording sessions, they felt a collective encounter, and felt they were operating on the exact same frequency.

That can perhaps be credited to Renzell’s knowledge of the science behind how sound waves affect the human mind. “I always knew that a certain frequency made us move in a certain way,” he says. “So that made me then want to study what that meant in music and what certain frequencies did to the body. And then in turn, obviously, I’m making music that provides that feeling internally. It all kind of started to go hand in hand because you know, it’s like a very soulful music that we create. It comes from the soul. We are vessels of what is actually happening. The universe is blessing us with these sounds and these ideas and these people around us, and then we become vessels of that frequency that we’ve all vibrated to.”

In March, Mother Nature opened for Mick Jenkins, with whom Renzell has worked closely since the beginning of his career. An upcoming documentary that will be released along with Nature’s World gives viewers an in-depth look at the project’s creation; in it, Renzell says that Mother Nature’s performance impressed Jenkins so much that it reminded him of the first time he saw Smino. Garnering such praise from a respected artist like Mick meant a lot to Mother Nature and helped them to push their work to a higher level.

“I know exactly how it looks when an artist is hungry and got that mind state to make records, put them out correctly, and go onstage and have that stage presence,” Renzell says. “All of those things make up a world-renowned artist, and not just a local artist. I’ve seen it in Mick, I’ve seen it in Smino, Chance, Vic Mensa, I saw it in Noname. I’ve seen it more than once, basically . . . Mother Nature definitely checks off all those boxes.”
COMING SOON TO THALIA HALL

FRI 7-1  TY SEGALL  & FREEDOM BAND  - BILL MACKAY
7-2  PEPPERMINT
7-5  CORRINE BAILEY RAE  - MALIA
7-7  BOB MOULD BAND  - MELKBELLY
7-15  YEULE  - PITCHFORK MUSIC FESTIVAL AFTERSHOW
7-16  CAMP COPE  - KAINA  - PITCHFORK MUSIC FESTIVAL AFTERSHOW
7-20  NIMESH PATEL  - LAST SHOW  - 2 SOLD OUT

SAT 7-21  FUCKED UP  - PERFORMING DAVID COMES TO LIFE  - PONY
7-23  STEPHEN MARLEY  - BABYLON BY BUS TOUR
8-1  EIVØR  - EMILY JANE WHITE
8-2  BOY PABLO  - MAZIE
8-3  CAT POWER  - ARSUN
8-4  WAVVES  - KING OF THE BEACH TOUR  - BOYO, SMUTT

TUE 7-20  MADISON CUNNINGHAM  - BENDIGO FLETCHER
7-22  RY X
8-20  MADIson CUNNINGHAM

THU 8-21  EIVØR  - BRENN ALLEN
8-22  BOY PABLO  - MAZIE
8-23  CAT POWER  - ARSUN
8-24  WAVVES  - KING OF THE BEACH TOUR  - BOYO, SMUTT

FRI 9-9  CASS McCOMBS
9-20  MADISON CUNNINGHAM  - BENDIGO FLETCHER
9-22  RY X

THU 9-22  RY X
9-23  EIVØR  - BRENN ALLEN
9-24  BOY PABLO  - MAZIE
9-25  CAT POWER  - ARSUN
9-26  WAVVES  - KING OF THE BEACH TOUR  - BOYO, SMUTT

MON 9-27  EIVØR  - BRENN ALLEN
9-28  BOY PABLO  - MAZIE
9-29  CAT POWER  - ARSUN
9-30  WAVVES  - KING OF THE BEACH TOUR  - BOYO, SMUTT

TUE 10-1  MADIson CUNNINGHAM
10-2  EIVØR  - BRENN ALLEN
10-3  BOY PABLO  - MAZIE
10-4  CAT POWER  - ARSUN
10-5  WAVVES  - KING OF THE BEACH TOUR  - BOYO, SMUTT

SAT 10-8  THE WAR AND TREATY  - W/ CHRISTIAN LOPEZ  - 8PM
10-9  WELCOMED BY CHIRR  - DEEP SEA DIVER  - W/ WALTZER  - 8PM
10-16  MODERN ENGLISH  - 8PM
10-29  RHETT MILLER  - 8PM

THALIA HALL

SIGN UP FOR OUR WEEKLY NEWSLETTER AT THALIAHALLCHICAGO.COM
**CONCERT PREVIEWS**

**SATURDAY 25**

**PASCUALA ILABACA Y FAUNA**
9:30 PM, Martyrs’, 3855 N. Lincoln, $25. 21+

Chilean singer-songwriter, accordionist, and pianist Pascuala Ilabaca offers endlessly unpredictable sonic pleasures. On six albums and one EP, she builds upon a foundation of Andean folkloric music while incorporating sounds inspired by her time and studies in Spain, India, Guatemala, and Mexico. At this Martyrs’ show, she’ll be accompanied by her longtime band, the saxophone- and clarinet-driven four-piece Fauna, which also features her drummer husband, Jaime Frez. Fauna flawlessly follow Ilabaca’s lead as the tunes move among hand-drum pulses, raga-tinted melodies, and accordion riffs in the lilting rhythms of cueca, Chile’s national dance. In “Te Traigo Flores,” clarinet replaces Andean flutes in a structure reminiscent of a traditional tune, which gives it a jazz manouche swing. The recent single “Pa Mi” adds the percussiveness of Barcelona’s rumba nueva into the mix, then segues into light rap paired with cumbia. Ilabaca ties these disparate elements together and smoothly propels them with her bright, crystalline vocals. True to the nueva canción of her homeland, many of her lyrics also have an activist bent: “El Baile del Kkoyaruna” tells the story of a First Nations worker who has to leave his land to work as a miner (“kkoyaruna” in Quechua, the indigenous language of the chorus). “Por Qué Se Fue la Paloma” lays out a huayno, a traditional festive Andean rhythm, while Ilabaca sings of a dove’s choice to fly away from confinement to freedom. The strength of Ilabaca’s musicianship and the inventiveness of her compositions enable her to pull off her unusual melange of musical elements—but in concert, what will ultimately stick with you is her hopeful, uplifting tone and vibrant spirit.

—Catalina Maria Johnson

**THURSDAY 30**

**WOVENHAND**
A solo set by Wovenhand front man David Eugene Edwards. Bruce Lamont opens. 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 2100 W. Belmont, $25. 17+

It’s been a long wait since Wovenhand’s 2016 album, *Star Treatment*, though disciples of founder David Eugene Edwards were fed well by his rich and mysterious 2018 collaboration with Alexander Hacke of Einstürzende Neubauten, *Risha* (Glitterhouse). Wovenhand, which Edwards founded in Denver in 2001, has gradually shifted over the years from an intense, stark gothic country feel to a more electrified, louder, and heavier sound. The effect has been akin to watching something ancient and chthonic rise out of the dusty earth, summoned by Edwards’s apocalyptic prophet vibe, and learn to take a fierce joy in the noise and bustle of the modern world. The band’s latest album, *Silver Sash* (Sargent House), came out earlier this year, and though Edwards typically does the bulk of the songwriting, this time around he let long-
time guitarist Chuck French (also of Planes Mistaken for Stars) take the reins on more material than ever before—the shift feels seamless, because both musicians possess a fine sense of melody, drama, climax, and resolution. Opener “Temple Timber” sets the tone with a wild mix of sounds and energies: clean and distorted, restrained and unbridled. “Dead Dead Beat” has a straightforward postpunk drive with a flash of dark playfulness (“Here the mountains divide the gods / The devil has lost his phone,” Edwards sings, “Lock down the room / Leave no unturned stone”). The epic boneshaker “8 of 9” showcases the maturation of Wovenhand’s heavy industrial influence.

All that said, Edwards will play this set at Beat Kitchen solo, carrying all the weight of this work on his own shoulders. He’s always been a charismatic force in concert, never seeming contained by the band around him. Even when he performs on his own (often seated on a chair), he summons an uncanny shamanship with his cadences, hypnotic and entrancing. This is a rare opportunity to catch Edwards’s songs stripped to their bones—though those bones are sometimes terrifyingly large and half-buried in windswept desert sand. Even Wovenhand’s quietest acoustic work has a way of leaving a sensitive listener with a massive groove-bump out-break and an impending sense of Revelation, so if you experience this yourself, don’t say I didn’t warn you. —MONICA KENDRICK

SATURDAY

CHICAGO SOUL JAZZ COLLECTIVE WITH DEE ALEXANDER Part of the American Music Festival, which runs Fri 7/1 through Mon 7/4. The Rebirth Brass Band headlines the outdoor main stage; Nelson Street Revival closes out the nightclub stage inside Fitzgerald’s; the Chicago Soul Jam with Dee Alexander headlines the Sidebar stage. The day’s other performers are Marshall Crenshaw, Michael McDermott, Daddy Long Legs, Lilly Hiatt, Chicago Farmer & the Fieldnotes, Ellen Jewell, Tre Burt, Fox Crossing Stringband, Sarah Borges, Jonah Tolchin, the Claudettes, Los Lagos, the Joel Paterson Band, Terry White & the Loaded Dice, and Donna Herula. 9:30 PM (music begins at 1 PM), Sidebar stage, Fitzgerald’s, 6615 Roosevelt, Berwyn, $55 per day.

Since 2018, the Chicago Soul Jazz Collective has made waves in town by resurrecting the stylish grooves of the postbop era, which began in the late 1950s—nationally, the sound was shaped by the Hatchett family. In 1978 the crew became a “Few” when Tony Hatchett considered the first house 12-inch, “On and On”—and in 1980 the rest of the Chosen Few showed up. It helped that the Hatchett family’s album, “Porcelain Songs” — which features electronics-spiked pop-punk from British-Lithuanian duo Flyovers in Patterns, wispy ambient by Polish solo project Starshy, and experimental collaborations on the Weatherday server — is relatively small (fewer than 800), at least compared to the Grimes server (Pitchfork reported more than 15,000 members). But Porcelain Songs illustrates the intensity and breadth of Weatherday’s cult among other musicians: the comp features electronics-spiked pop-punk from British-Lithuanian duo Flyovers in Patterns, wispy ambient by Polish solo project Starshy, and experimental collaborations on the Weatherday server. It’s difficult to make sense of Porcelain Songs without having heard the solo project that inspired it—the arena-size ambition, cheeky experimental flair, and beguiling intimacy of Weatherday’s lo-fi recordings create an aesthetic umbrella expansive enough for all the comp’s disparate sounds to fit beneath it. Helmed by a multi-instrumentalist who goes by Sputnik, Weatherday has so far dropped only one full-length in its brief career, 2019’s Come In (Porcelain Music). The album’s soaring songs tie together shoegaze fuzz, quasi-symphonic flourishes, postpunk gloom, and posthardcore rushes. Sputnik’s shabby, earnestly yearning vocals give the project its defining character by helping corral these components into a coherent sound. In just a few years, Come In has become an urtext for emo’s emerging fifth wave, giving young musicians permission to break rules that inhibited earlier generations. Last year, U.S. indie label Topsheel, a crucial fourth-wave emo outlet, dropped a double-LP reissue of Come In, and the whole run of 2,000 sold out—if you want a pristine copy, be prepared to pony up $100 on Discogs. Earlier this year, Weatherday collaborated with Seoul fifth-wave emo artist Asian Glow on the Weatherglow EP, whose polished, concise songs express both artists’ desire to reach for the stars. —LEOR GALL}

ALBUM REVIEWS

ARThUR BROWN, LONg LONg R oAD Prophecy Productions/Magnetic Eye arthur-brown.bandcamp.com/album/long-long-road

If I were forced to subscribe to any wild theory circulating on the Internet right now (we won’t say the c-word), it wouldn’t be about lizard people, a flat Earth, anything “secretly staged by crisis actors,” organized religions, or UFOs. It would be that a
continued from 69

God of Hellfire lives and flourishes here on this planet as a for-real deity. This divinely blazing being is widely recognized under the human name Arthur Brown, but to me he’s an effortless pioneer, a visionary, and yes, even an otherworldly lord of the highest order. With his glass-breaking operatic voice, the flamboyantly experimental singer-songwriter broke out of London’s late-60s rock scene with the Crazy World of Arthur Brown, a manic, Screamin’ Jay Hawkins-inspired R&B group best known for their 1968 single “Fire” (in various forms or line-ups, they’ve continued to make records on and off ever since). Brown later explored more varied sounds, including futuristic electronics with his 70s band Kingdom Come and avant-garde synth music on the 1982 solo Requiem—neither of which the world has caught up with yet. I can be pretty cynical about new releases by even the most beloved legacy artist, but from the get-go, heads will recognize Brown’s new album, Long Long Road, as an epic future classic. Opener “Gas Tanks” (a term on the minds of everyone hemorrhaging petrol money) starts with a collage of electronic swells, birdsong, and other mysterious sounds, then gives way to a pounding organ-led groove of Hellfire God proportions. This righteous cut evokes vintage Brown and puts his proggy tendencies on brilliant display: flute parts, tricky pin-drop changes, and of course his unearthly falsetto vocals. The track blends into the mellow and irreverent spoken word of “Coffin Confessions,” which segue into the Hammond B3 gospel glory of “Going Down.”

Long Long Road feels like a concept album: the tracks all flow into each other, and together they seem to hint at a theme of aging and roads traveled. Brown is entering the final phase of his career, after all—this LP comes out on June 24, his 80th birthday. The downer “Once I Had Illusions (Part 1)” treats a snaking guitar line with swirling backward effects, while the acoustic-guitar number “I Like Games” betrays an abstract but rootsy Captain Beefheart influence that shows off the versatility of Brown’s voice, which veers into low ‘n’ gritty blooz tones. The variety continues on the jazzy, vibes-accented “Shining Brightness,” which is dense with trippy sonic details and chunky fuzz guitar. The album’s title track and first single, “Long Long Road,” is ironically my least favorite here. It feels like a commercial ballad with chart aspirations, and it just doesn’t fit Brown’s talents or this album—especially considering that it precedes the ominous, progressively closing track, “Once I Had Illusions (Part 2).” It runs past six minutes, with dark, ruminative lyrics (“Sometimes I feel there’s no blood in my veins”) and an approach to the blues that’s not quite like anything we’ve heard before—no mean feat.

Long Long Road is a definite must-have for every Brown fan; the main conundrum is deciding between formats. The release will arrive as a fancy box set whose many delights include a 48-page hardcover book, an LP, two CDs, and four art prints, all hand-numbered and signed by Brown. The art book (which comes with the two CDs) is also available separately, and it comes with liner notes by Brown and two exclusive studio recordings. For those without such deep pockets, it’ll also be released on 180-gram red vinyl and as a Digipak CD—but I gotta admit, I want it all.

—STEVE KRAKOW

GLENN JONES, YADE MECUM

Thrill Jockey

glenjones.bandcamp.com/album/vade-mecum

Yade Mecum translates from Latin as “go with me.” When Glenn Jones makes such an offer, anyone who appreciates a vivid musical trip shouldn’t think twice. The 68-year-old guitar and banjo player from Cambridge, Massachusetts, began working as a solo acoustic musician in the early 2000s, after spending years playing with surf-meets-experimental-rock combo Cul de Sac, coproducing and compiling folk records, and befriending and assisting the original Takoma Records guitarists, John Fahey and Robbie Basho. Like them, he composes tunes that combine folk and blues forms with devices learned from other styles, and he prioritizes the expression of emotional truths over displays of technical facility. On this latest LP, Jones uses rich sonorities derived from idiosyncratic tunings as inspirational springboards for intricate, unhurried excursions that reference places, pets, and old friends. Many of them are now gone, and Jones’s melodies persuasively evoke his sadness at having lost them as well as his joy at having known them in the first place. But some of those friends are still with us: on “Ruthie’s Farewell,” whose title nods to the old friend who gave him his first banjo when she moved away and couldn’t pack it, Jones reunites on record for the first time in three decades with fiddler Ruthie Dornfeld, who played on the debut Cul de Sac record. —BILL MEYER

ERICA DAWN LYLE & VICE COOLER, LAND TRUST: BENEFIT FOR NEFOC

Self-released

ericadawnlylevicecooler.bandcamp.com

Land Trust: Benefit for NEFOC embodies the spirit of mutual aid that guides many punk communities. When Bikini Kill’s 2020 reunion tour was canceled, touring bass guitarist Erica Dawn Lyle and drummer/tech Vic Cooler wanted to make themselves useful. But during lockdown, they were isolated in their respective homes on opposite sides of the country—Lyle, a longtime artist, critic, and organizer in the DIY community, was in New York, and Cooler, a photographer, producer, and drummer who’s performed with the likes of Peaches and the Raincoats, was in California. They began trading riffs and beats via file sharing, and eventually invited friends to write lyrics and develop the material into finished songs. The result is a 14-track sampler that sounds like a survey of feminist punk from the past 30 years. The artists are using it to raise money for the Northeast Farmers of Color (NEFOC), a BIPOC-led grassroots organization fighting for land sovereignty.

Most of the heavy hitters contribute flourish-es of their signatures style to their songs with Lyle and Cooler: the Linda Lindas add bratitude to the album can be and do. After all, we’re all stronger together. —MICCO CAPORALE

PETROL GIRLS, BABY

Hassle

petrolgirls.bandcamp.com/album/baby

Politics are an inherent part of punk and hardcore culture, but not even the most ardent fans like feeling preached to, especially by artists who seem more focused on their messaging than on their music. On their new full-length, Baby, British-Austrian postpunk band Petrol Girls step away from all that (and even poke fun at their own boots of sanctimony) to churn out a set of songs that turn up the party vibes without toning down the politics. Their tunes can sound joyful even when they take direct aim at deadly serious topics such as the carceral state and the exploitation of crime victims and survivors; they also highlight how absurd it is that, in the so-called civilized world, anyone has to fight for basic human rights and dignity in the first place. Lead single “Baby, I Had an Abortion” is an absolute banger with a gritty guitar hook that could stick in your head for days, with lyrics by front woman Ren Aldridge about her experience encountering anti-abortion protesters after she underwent the procedure in 2018. The indignant “Fight for Our Lives” features guest vocals from feminist organizer Janey Starling, whose Dignity for Dead Women Campaign with Level Up (referenced in the lyrics) made inroads for better reporting practices on gender-based violence in the UK. That song provides one of the album’s most powerful moments of catharsis: Aldridge screams “You don’t own us” at anyone who would try to control women and force them into a life of fear. The stripped-down, live-sounding production, which doesn’t airbrush out imperfections, underscores the urgency of the material—even in the Petrol Girls’ missteps, their passion comes through loud and clear. —JAMIE LUDWIG

RON TRENT, WHAT DO THE STARS SAY TO YOU

Night Time Stories

rontrent.bandcamp.com/album/what-do-the-stars-say-to-you

Chicago dance-music veteran Ron Trent creates deep house that can keep a dance floor jumping for hours while simultaneously maintaining an intoxicating tranquility. Since the early 90s, Trent has built a reputation for appealing both to house heads who treat Marshall Jefferson’s “Move Your Body” as a commandment and drone devotees who thrive on meditative, atmospheric thrumming. For his first full-length album in 11 years, What Do the Stars Say to You (Night Time Stories), he collaborated with musicians whose backgrounds span several genres but who all share Trent’s goal of making immersive music that’ll have you nodding your head without realizing it: they include Texas psych-rock phenoms Khruangbin, Italian ambient composer Gigi Masin, and the two surviving members of Brazillian fusion trio Azymuth (bassist-guitarist Alex Malheiros and percussionist Ivan Conti). Trent juggles several instruments—guitar, percussion, synth—while guiding the album through tropicalia, soul, smooth jazz, light funk, and more. The gentle poise of his creative direction produces a fluid, imaginative experience as rejuvenating as a trip to the sauna. —LEON GALL
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**NEW**

Alvays, Slow Pulp 10/14, 7:30 PM, Riviera Theatre, 18+
Amel Larrieu 10/26, 7:30 PM, Park West
Amyl & the Sniffers 9/28, 7 PM, the Vic, 18+
Antilock, Backstreet Flag-Anti, Suicide Machines, We Are the Union, Gully Boys, Blind Adam & the Federal League 11/4, 8 PM, Metro
Añashe 8/5, 10 PM, Concord Music Hall, 18+
Asi Asli, Family Vacation, Free Times 7/17, 8 PM, Golden Dagger
Bear Grillz, Odd Prophet, OG Nixum, Miu 1/26, 10 PM, Concord Music Hall, 18+
Duane Betts 9/7, 8 PM, City Winery
Bicep 9/21, 6:30 PM, Cermak Hall at Radius Chicago, 18+
Black Exellence, Music Expo featuring Nola Ade, Naglaa, Timmy F, Jana Ghee, Kordy Blakka 8/5, 7 PM, the Promontory, 18+
Blackdiamondwhite 7/7, 8 PM, The Vic, 18+
Blood, Bassy, Krewel, Power Trip, Unnamed Ship, Graphic 7/10, 8 PM, Empty Bottle
Ilan Bluestone 8/12, 10 PM, Prysm Nightclub
Jeff Bradshaw and friends featuring Algebra Blessett 8/31, 8 PM, Cermak Hall, 18+
Jen Silver, Clutch, Helmet, Quicksand, JD Pinkus 10/16, 6 PM, Concord Music Hall, 17+

Coco & Clair Clair, Folie 7/29, 11 PM, Schubas, 18+
Marc Cohn 8/10, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Caro Finko, Soft & Dumb 7/21, 9 PM, Sleeping Village
Savannah Conley, Secondhand Sound 7/19, 7:30 PM, Schubas, 18+
Dayglow, Ritt Mommy 11/4, 7:30 PM, Riviera Theatre
Dead Can Dance 4/30/2023, 7:30 PM, Chicago Theatre
DDG 7/14, 7 PM, Bottom Lounge
Deerock 7/9, 10 PM, Prysm Nightclub
Al Di Meola 7/9, 7 and 10 PM, City Winery
Fletcher, Chappell Roan 1/1, 7:30 PM, Riviera Theatre
Foals 12/2, 7:30 PM, the Vic, 18+
Lee Foss 7/22, 10 PM, Concord Music Hall, 18+
DJ Mark Fuller 7/9, 9 PM, Punch House
Hackensaw Boys, Al Scorch 7/24, 8:30 PM, Fitzgerald's
Hood 7/8, 7 PM, Schubas, 18+
Kiss the Tiger 9/7/7, 8 PM, Golden Dagger
LA Witch 8/2, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Laughing Hearts, Diet Lite, What to Do 7/2, 8 PM, Golden Dagger
Stephen Marley 7/23, 8 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Mecca Monday, Soul II Soul featuring Ladi Soul, Joel McClendon 7/23, 7 PM, the Promontory
Merella 7/30, 8 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+
Muse 10/1, 7:30 PM, Riviera Theatre, 18+
Matt Nathanson, Donovan Woods 8/26, 7:30 PM, the Vic, 18+
Mister Goblin, Black Seinfeld, Flowerz 7/9, 9 PM, Sleeping Village
Netsky 8/26, 10 PM, Concord Music Hall, 18+
Buffalo Nichols, Matt Hendricks 7/24, 8:30 PM, Buddy Guy's Legends
Orchard Pool Kids, Significant Other 10/22, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge
Ellis Paul 1/7, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Mike Phillips 8/2, 8 PM, City Winery
Phoenix, Porches 7/17, 7:30 PM, Aragon Ballroom, 18+
Qron 7/8, 10 PM, Prysm Nightclub
Record Company 1/14, 8 PM, Park West
Rematch, Driveways, Flourescents, Risk 7/9, 7 PM, Bottom Lounge
Kim Richer 7/23, 7 PM, SPACE, Evanston
RP Boo, DJ Mann, Socal, DJ Reel 7/15, 10 PM, Smart Bar
Saajtak, Mad Myth Science, Jeaf 7/2, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Sanctum Dark Music Festival night one featuring Adult., Psycho, Hide, Blu Anxuities, VISceral Anatomy, Andi 11/10, 6 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Sanctum Dark Music Festival night two featuring Boy Harsher, Soft Crash, Riki, Sacred Skin, Pixel Grip, Club Music 11/26, 6 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Sanctum Dark Music Festival night three featuring Plack Blague, Void Vision, Choke Frasick, Hole of Your Concern, Retcon, and mom 11/27, 6 PM, Empty Bottle
Scorchd Tundra XII night one featuring Monolord, Earthless, Dortha Coettrell 9/1, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle

**UPCOMING**

Avril 7/31, 7:30 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 17+
Backstreet Boys 7/29, 7:30 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park, 18+
Big Time Rush, Dixie D’Amelio 7/7, 8 PM, Huntington Bank Pavilion
Black Keys, Band of Horses, Ceramic Animal 7/17, 7 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park
Camilo Sesto, Francisca Valenzuela 7/25, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+
Chicago, Brian Wilson with Al Jardine and Blondie Chaplin 7/24, 2 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park
Def Leppard, Mötley Crüe, Poison, Joan Jett & the Blackhearts 7/24, 4 PM, Wrigley Field
Foying, Great Death, Home Is Where 7/26, 7:30 PM, Bottom Lounge
Frank Turner & the Sleeping Souls, Bronx, Pet Needs 7/10, 6 PM, Concord Music Hall, 17+
David Gray 7/8, 8 PM, Huntington Bank Pavilion
Norah Jones 7/5, 8 PM, Huntington Bank Pavilion
Mandy Moore 7/7, 7:30 PM, the Vic, 18+
Out of Space presents Elvis Costello & the Imposters, Nick Lowe & Les Stratton 8/6, 7 PM, Canal Shores Golf Course, Evanston, 18+
Out of Space presents Jenny Lewis, Trampled by Turtles 8/4, 6:30 PM, Canal Shores Golf Course, Evanston, 18+
Psychedelic Furs 7/23, 9 PM, House, 18+
Wild Pink 7/10, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle

**UPDATED**

Chet Faker, Adi Oasis 9/16, 7:30 PM, the Vic, 18+
Choe and Cambria, Alkaline Trio, Motihica 8/6, 8:30 PM, SeatGeek Stadium, Bridgeview, lineup updated
Dear Hunter, The World is a Beautiful Place and I Am No Longer Afraid to Die, Tanner Merritt 8/21, 7:30 PM, Lincoln Hall, venue changed, 18+
Decembersisters, Jake Xerxes Fussel, VV, Chicago Theatre, lineup updated, 18+
Mac DeMarco 11/19, 7:30 PM, Riviera Theatre, canceled

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JUNE 23, 2022 • CHICAGO READER 73
I’m taking a week off, so this is a reprint of a column that was originally published on January 13, 2016. I hope everyone has a happy and safe Pride. Please be careful out there. —Dan

Q: As a queer man of color—I’m Asian—I feel wounded whenever I am exposed to gay men in New York City, Toronto, or any city where white gay men dominate. Gay men, mostly whites and Asians, reject me because of my race and no one admits to their sexual racism. I understand that sexual attraction is subconscious for many people. But it is unfair for a gay Asian like myself to be constantly marginalized and rejected. I fight for gay rights, too. I believe in equality, too. I had the same pain of being gay in high school and the same fears when coming out, too. Why is there no acceptance, no space, no welcome for me in this white-painted gay community? I’m six-foot-one, 160 pounds, fit, and very good-looking. What can I do? I might as well be a sexless monk.—Enraged Dude Details Infuriating Experience

A: “I relate to a lot of what EDDIE is feeling here,” said Joel Kim Booster, a Brooklyn-based writer and comedian. “The double-edged sword of living in a city with a large gay community is that the community gets so large that we finally have the opportunity to marginalize people within it.”

Jeff Chu, a writer who also lives in Brooklyn, can relate: “Racism still thrives in the gay community, just as in broader society,” said Chu. “Many of us who are Asian American come out of the closet and walk into this weird bamboo cage, where we’re either fetishized or ignored. Many times I’d go into a gay bar and see guys playing out some gross interracial porn in their heads—with me playing the part of their Chinese pocket gay. Others (the ones I was interested in, to be candid) would act as if I were wearing an invisibility cheongsam.”

Chu feels there’s plenty of blame to go around for this sad state of affairs. “It’s the gay media,” said Chu. “It’s Hollywood. Even with all the LGBT characters we have on TV now, what images do we have of Asian American ones? It’s that LGBT-rights organizations still haven’t diversified enough, especially in their leadership. And it’s all of us, when we’re lazy and don’t confront our own prejudices.”

Booster and Chu are right: Racism is a problem in the gay community, some people within are unfairly and cruelly marginalized, and we all need to confront our own prejudices.

Even you, EDDIE. You cite your height (tall!), weight (slim!), and looks (VGL) as proof you’ve faced sexual rejection based solely on your race. But short, heavy, average-looking/unconventionally attractive guys face rejection for not being tall, lean, or conventionally hot, just as you’ve faced rejection for not being white. (The cultural baggage and biases that inform a preference for, say, tall guys is a lot less toxic than the cultural baggage and biases that inform a preference for white guys—duh, obviously.)

“As a stereotypically short Chinese guy, my first reaction to reading EDDIE’s letter? Damn, he’s six-foot-one! I’m jealous,” said Chu. “And that’s also part of the problem. I, like many others, have internalized an ideal: tall, gym-perfected, blah blah blah—and, above all, white.”

Booster was also struck by your stats. “It’s hard for me to wrap my head around any six-foot-one, fit, VGL guy having trouble getting laid,” said Booster. “On paper, this is the gay ideal! I don’t really consider myself any of those things—and I have a perfectly respectable amount of sex.”

Booster, who somehow manages to have plenty of sex in New York’s “white-painted gay community,” had some practical tips for you. “EDDIE should stay away from the apps if the experience becomes too negative,” Booster said. “If logging on to a hookup app bums him out, take a break. Being a double minority can be isolating, but living in a big city can be great. There are meetups and clubs and activities for all stripes. Join a gay volleyball league—truly where gay Asian men thrive—or find one of the many gay Asian nights at one of the gay bars around the city. They’re out there.”

Chu has also managed to find romantic success in New York. “I’ve been where EDDIE is, except shorter, less fit, and less good-looking, and somehow I found a husband,” said Chu. “The monastery wasn’t my calling, and I suspect it’s not EDDIE’s either.”

A quick word to gay white men: It’s fine to have “preferences.” But we need to examine our preferences and give some thought to the cultural forces that may have shaped them. Do yourself the favor of making sure your preferences are actually yours, and not some limited and limiting racist “preference” pounded into your head by TV, movies, and porn. And while preferences are allowed (and gay men of color have them, too), there’s no excuse for littering Grindr or Tinder or Recon—or your conversations in bars—with dehumanizing garbage like “no Asians,” “no Blacks,” “no femmes,” “no fatties,” etc. (But “no Republicans” is fine.)

The last word goes to Booster: “A note to the rice queens who will undoubtedly write in about this man: We like that you like us. But liking us solely because our race can be uncomfortable at best, and creepy as hell at worst. In my experience, it’s perfectly OK to keep some of those preferences behind the curtain while you get to know us a bit as humans first.”

Follow Joel Kim Booster on Twitter @ihatejoelkim and be sure to watch his wonderful new movie Fire Island, streaming now on Hulu. Jeff Chu is the author of Does Jesus Really Love Me?: A Gay Christian’s Pilgrimage in Search of God in America; follow him on Twitter @jeffchu. 📝

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Roadmap to the races

All primary races are on the Democratic ballot unless otherwise noted. For subcircuits, voters will see only those contests on their ballot for the subcircuit in which they reside.

### APPELLATE COURT
2 vacancies
- Hall vacancy
  - Russell “Russ” Hartigan
  - Dominique C. Ross
  - Debra B. Walker
- Harris vacancy
  - Raymond W. Mitchell
  - Devlin Joseph Schoop
  - John H. Ehrlich

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### COUNTYWIDE CIRCUIT COURT
10 vacancies
- Brennan vacancy
  - Howard B. Brookins, Jr.
  - Ubi O. O’Neal
  - Lisa Michelle Taylor
- Callahan Jr. vacancy
  - Mary Bernadette McMahon
  - Suzanne Therese McEneely
  - Tracie Porter
- Cannon vacancy
  - Diana López
  - Monica G. Somerville
  - Mable Taylor
- Hyman vacancy
  - Thomas E. Nowinski
  - Carmen Migdalia Quinones
- Ingram vacancy
  - Elizabeth “Beth” Ryan
  - Yolanda Harris Sayre
- Leeming vacancy
  - Rena Marie Van Tine
  - Wende Williams
- Lynch vacancy
  - Deidre Baumann
  - Paul Joyce
  - Michael Weaver
- McGury vacancy
  - Ruth Isabel Gudino
  - Chelsey Renee Robinson
- O’Brien vacancy
  - Araceli R. De La Cruz
  - Jacqueline Marie Griffin
  - Dan Balanoff
- Sullivan vacancy
  - Thomas More Donnelly
  - Claudia Silva-Hernandez
  - Merithd Vanae Hammer

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### SUBCIRCUIT COURT
17 vacancies
- 1st: Johnson vacancy
  - Maria M. Barlow
  - John W. Wilson
- 4th: Gavin vacancy
  - Nick Kantas
  - Amanda Moira Pillsbury
- 4th: Rogers vacancy
  - Jerry Barrido
  - Chloe Georgianna Pedersen
  - ShawnTe Raines-Welch
  - Patrick Campanelli
- 5th: Portman-Brown vacancy
  - David L. Kelly
  - Jenetia Marshall
- 5th: Shelley vacancy
  - Timothy W. Wright, III
  - Judie Lyn Smith
  - Tiffany N. Brooks
  - Jackie Marie Portman-Brown
- 6th: Araujo vacancy
  - Charles “Charlie” Beach (unopposed)
- 6th: Vega vacancy
  - David S. Rodriguez
  - Kerrie Maloney Laytin
- 7th: Martin vacancy
  - Marcia O’Brien Conway
  - Owens “Joe” Shelby
- 8th: Gordon vacancy
  - Pat Casey
  - Bradley R. Trowbridge
  - John Fritchey
- 8th: Lipscomb vacancy
  - Jennifer Bae
  - Stephen Swedlow
- 9th: Cleveland vacancy
  - Sanjay Tailor
  - Ann Buran-Vongher
- 9th: Jacobius vacancy
  - Basileios “Bill” John Foutris
  - Torrick Alan Ward
  - Barry Goldberg
  - Don R. Sampen
- 11th: McGuire vacancy
  - Chris Taliaferro
  - Aileen Bhandari
- 13th: Groebner vacancy (Republican)
  - Christine Svenson
  - Gary William Seyring
  - Dominic J Buttitta, Jr
- 13th: Groebner vacancy (Dem)
  - James “Jack” Costello
  - Joe Gump
- 14th: Brown vacancy
  - Iris Y. Chavira (unopposed)
- 14th: Jagielski vacancy
  - Steve Demitro
  - Viviana Martinez
  - Jorge V. Cazares
- 15th: Lawler vacancy
  - Bernadette Barrett
  - Jim Gleffe

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### WHAT TO KNOW
This year’s Illinois primary elections are on June 28.

Early voting in Chicago’s 50 wards and sites in suburban Cook County starts June 13. To find your polling place:
- City residents: www.chicagoelections.gov
- Suburban Cook County residents: www.cookcountyclerkil.gov/elections

Who can vote?
Voters must be at least 18 years old, a U.S. citizen, and reside in their precinct for at least 30 days prior to Election Day. People with felony convictions can vote in Illinois as long as they are not serving a felony sentence in prison or jail.

For more information about each candidate and to locate your subcircuit, scan the QR code or visit injusticewatch.org/judges.
Why you should check your judges

Judicial candidates might be among the most obscure names on your ballot, but these elections come with high stakes. Judges are powerful officials whose choices on the bench touch many aspects of life, from traffic tickets to divorces, lawsuits, evictions, and criminal cases. They have the power to take someone’s freedom, enforce or overturn state laws, and correct or perpetuate injustices. Yet there are few places to get information about the people running for judge. That’s why Injustice Watch created this guide to judicial candidates running in Cook County’s primary elections on June 28, 2022.

Illinois voters elect judges every two years. This year, 75 candidates are running for 29 judicial vacancies in Cook County. Every voter will get to choose candidates to fill two appellate court seats and 10 circuit court seats. You may also have one or two subcircuit races on your ballot depending on where you live. Judges elected from subcircuits have the same responsibilities as other circuit court judges, but only people who live in that subcircuit can vote for them.

Our team spent months researching the candidates’ legal experience, community involvement, donors, political connections, conduct, and controversies. We sent every candidate a survey asking why they deserve your vote. And we collected recommendations from 13 bar associations, groups of lawyers who interview and rate candidates.

A condensed version of our findings, edited for space and clarity, appears here. For more detailed candidate profiles, visit injusticewatch.org/judges.

Understanding the candidate icons

Current or former public defender: This candidate has served as a public defender, representing clients in criminal court who can’t afford a private attorney.

Current or former prosecutor: This candidate has served as prosecutor in criminal or quasi-criminal (such as traffic court) cases at the city, county, state, or federal level.

Appointed judge: When a judicial vacancy opens at any level, the Illinois Supreme Court appoints someone to fill the seat until after the next election. Candidates with this icon were appointed to the court at some point.

Democratic Party pick: The Cook County Democratic Party endorses candidates for appellate court and countywide circuit court seats but not for subcircuit seats.

Past controversy: The candidate has been involved in some kind of personal or professional controversy.

Highly qualified ratings: Two or more bar associations have rated this candidate highly qualified or recommended. Not all bar associations give out ratings higher than qualified. But those that do have suggested that this candidate is particularly well-suited to be a judge.

Negative ratings: At least two bar associations have said this candidate is not recommended or not qualified to be a judge. Candidates who don’t participate in the ratings process are automatically rated as not recommended. For complete bar association ratings, visit injusticewatch.org/judges.

About the endorsers

This guide includes endorsements, available by press time, from labor groups and other political organizations that have a defined process for endorsing judicial candidates. We exclude endorsements from individual politicians or community leaders.

Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL): An umbrella organization of more than 300 local labor unions in Chicago and Cook County.

Independent Voters of Illinois-Independent Precinct Organization (IVI-IPO): A nonprofit, independent political organization focused on voter education, voter registration, and candidate endorsements.

Personal PAC: An abortion-rights political organization focused on ensuring access to abortion in Illinois.

APPELLATE COURT

Russe “Russ” Hartigan

Experience:
Goldstine, Skrodzki, Russian, Nemec and Hoff, Ltd.

- Partner (2017-present): Serves as a mediator and practices civil litigation.

Cook County Circuit Court

Various law firms
- Partner (1981-2010): Operated firm with different partners through the years, defending municipalities in lawsuits, handling worker’s compensation and personal injury cases, and serving as a mediator and arbitrator.

Notable: Hartigan resigned from the circuit court in 2017 due to an illness in his family. He ran unsuccessfully for circuit judge again in 2020 and applied to be an associate judge in 2021 but was not selected. Hartigan has also served numerous stints as an elected official in several suburban Cook County communities, including Lyons Township, where he’s a former township supervisor, school board member and trustee, and Western Springs, where he served on the zoning board and is also a former village board trustee.

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or above by all bar groups and highly recommended or highly qualified by two.

Dominique C. Ross

Experience:
Cook County Circuit Court
- Circuit judge (2008-present): Hears divorce, child custody and other cases in the domestic relations division. Attorney in private practice

Notable: Ross is a former chair of the Illinois Judicial Council, an association of Black judges. Ross was sued in 2009 by an election attorney she hired for allegedly failing to pay him more than $60,000 for his work. Ross counter-sued, saying the attorney had exceeded his estimated hours without telling her. The case was ultimately settled. Several attorneys told Injustice Watch that Ross has been known for showing up late to court and has, on occasion, missed or continued hearings. At least one attorney mentioned she has improved in recent years. In a statement, Ross said she could not adequately respond without knowing the specifics of the allegations. “It is more likely than not that a circumstance arose outside of my immediate control at the time and that was the reason I was not present for an undated and unspecified amount of my 1000’s of hearings set to be heard from 2008 to 2022,” she wrote. “In either circumstance, tardy or not attended, the amount would surely be at the most overly exaggerated of averages, less than a fraction of a percent. Therefore, I reject the characterization of tardiness and not showing up being a reputation and I find it insulting.”

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or recommended by six bar associations. Three bars rated her not qualified or not recommended. The other evaluations were not available by press time.

Endorsements: CFL, Personal PAC

Debra B. Walker

Experience:
Cook County Circuit Court
- Circuit judge (2008-present): Currently serves in the domestic relations division presiding over divorce cases.

Clausen Miller, P.C.
- Partner (1996-2008): Represented professionals accused of malpractice and judges accused of misconduct by the Judicial Inquiry Board.

Brydges, Riseborough, Peterson, Franke and Morris
- Senior associate (1993-1996)

Notable: Before going to law school, Walker was a certified public accountant. Walker is a former chair of the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism, which conducts training for lawyers and judges.

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or recommended by five bar associations and highly qualified or highly recommended by four. The other evaluations were not available by press time.

Endorsements: IVI-IPO, Personal PAC

INJUSTICE WATCH JUDICIAL ELECTION GUIDE 2022 3
Raymond W. Mitchell

**Experience:**
Cook County Circuit Court
- Circuit judge (2008-present):
  - Hears cases in the chancery division, where people bring lawsuits asking a judge to order something to happen. Previously presided over trials in civil lawsuits over business disputes.
- Partner and associate (1998-2008):
  - Handled cases in state and federal appellate courts.

**Notable:** Last year, in a lawsuit filed by the Fraternal Order of Police, Mitchell ruled that the City of Chicago had to negotiate its Covid-19 vaccine mandate for city employees with the police union through arbitration, halting the mandate for police officers covered by the union. An arbitrator ultimately upheld the vaccine mandate. In 2018, Mitchell dismissed a lawsuit filed against the City of Chicago by two residents over the city’s water pipes.

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or recommended by six bar associations and highly qualified or highly recommended by four others by press time.

**Endorsements:** CFL, Personal PAC

Devin Joseph Schoop

**Experience:**
- The Cochran Firm Chicago
  - Partner (2019-present): Represents plaintiffs in civil rights, police misconduct, and catastrophic personal injury cases.
  - City of Chicago Law Department
    - Assistant corporation counsel (2017-2019): Represented the city and police officers in misconduct cases.
  - Cook County Circuit Court
    - Circuit judge (2015-2016): Appointed by the Illinois Supreme Court. Heard traffic cases and later child abuse and neglect cases.
  - Laner Muchin, Ltd.
    - Associate (2003-2007)
    - Wildman Harrold Allen & Dixon, LLP.
    - Associate (1999-2003): Focused on commercial cases.

**Notable:** Schoop ran unsuccessfully for circuit judge in 2016 and 2018. He currently represents a group of Black City of Chicago Water Department employees who are suing the city for alleged discrimination and a hostile work environment. The lawsuit was filed in 2017, shortly before the city’s inspector general released a report that found supervisors in the department exchanged racist, sexist, and homophobic emails. In 2014, Cook County Chief Judge Tim Evans appointed Schoop’s then-firm, Laner Muchin, to investigate allegations of corruption and abuse at the county’s probation department. Schoop played a leading role in the investigation, and shortly after, the Illinois Supreme Court appointed him as a judge. Schoop represented the City of Chicago in a civil lawsuit filed by the family of Alfontish Cockerham, who was killed in 2014 by officer Anthony Babish. A jury awarded the family $1.3 million.

**Endorsements:** Personal PAC

John H. Ehrlich

**Experience:**
Cook County Circuit Court
- Circuit judge (2012-present):
  - Hears pre-trial motions for civil lawsuits in the law division. Previously presided over foreclosures and traffic court cases.
- City of Chicago Law Department
  - Deputy corporation counsel, torts division (2008-2012): Represented the city in wrongful death and personal injury cases.
  - Assistant corporation counsel and chief assistant corporation counsel, torts division (1995-2008)

**Notable:** In 2017, Ehrlich dismissed several combined lawsuits filed by 53 former NFL players against helmet manufacturer Riddell. Ehrlich said the players failed to file their suit within the two-year statute of limitations. The appeals court upheld his decision.

If elected, Ehrlich says he would be the first LGBTQ+ appellate court judge in the state.

Some of Ehrlich’s top campaign contributors are personal injury attorneys whose cases could come before him in the law division. Ehrlich said in a statement that it’s not a conflict of interest because, “I do not know who has or has not contributed to my campaign committee or the amount of any contribution.”

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or recommended by six bar associations. The Women’s Bar Association of Illinois and the Chicago Bar Association found him highly qualified. The Illinois State Bar Association found him not qualified.

**Endorsements:** IVI-IPO, Personal PAC

Howard B. Brookins, Jr.

**Experience:**
Chicago City Council
- Alderperson, 21st Ward (2003-present):
  - Represents neighborhoods on the South Side.
  - Law Office of Howard B. Brookins, Jr.
    - Attorney in private practice (1990-present):
      - Focused on criminal defense, estate, personal injury and contract dispute cases.
  - Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office
    - Assistant state’s attorney (1989-1990)
  - Cook County Public Defender’s Office

**Notable:** Brookins ran unsuccessfully for Cook County state’s attorney in 2008 and the U.S. House in 2016. As an alderperson, Brookins pushed for years to get Wal-Mart to build a store in his ward and voted against an ordinance that would have mandated a higher minimum wage at big-box stores. He previously chaired the council’s Black Caucus. In 2006, he called on the City Council to stop paying to represent disgraced former police Cmdr. Jon Burge in lawsuits related to his torture of Black men in the 1980s and ’90s. In 2016, his former chief of staff pleaded guilty to accepting a $7,500 bribe to help arrange a letter of support for a liquor license for a business owner who turned out to be an FBI informant. Brookins was not charged with wrongdoing. In 2020, the Chicago Board of Ethics found supervisors in the department exchanged racist, sexist, and homophobic emails. In 2014, his former chief of staff pleaded guilty to accepting a $7,500 bribe to help arrange a letter of support for a liquor license for a business owner who turned out to be an FBI informant. Brookins was not charged with wrongdoing.

**Bar association ratings:** Did not participate in the evaluation process.

Lisa Michelle Taylor

**Experience:**
Schwartz Gilligan
- Associate (2017-present):
  - Represents defendants in car accidents and other cases involving injuries or insurance claims.
- Henderson Parks, LLC
- Lewis Brisbois Bisgaard & Smith LLP
  - Partner (2005-2013):
    - Represented defendants in medical and nursing home negligence, car accident, and other civil lawsuits.
- Pretzel & Stouffer
- Worker, Sitko & Hoffman, LLC

**Bar association ratings:** Did not participate in the evaluation process.
Mary Bernadette McMahon

**Experience:**
Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office  
- Assistant state’s attorney (2005-present): Supervises all of the prosecutors and oversees felony and misdemeanor cases at the Skokie courthouse. Previously was a deputy supervisor at the Rolling Meadows courthouse and prosecuted felony cases.

**Notable:** McMahon hails from the wealthy and politically connected family that owns McMahon Food Corp., a dairy distribution company. In the early 2000s, the company held lucrative contracts to distribute milk to Chicago Public Schools, the Cook County Jail, and the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, according to a 2012 Chicago Sun-Times/Better Government Association investigation. In a statement, McMahon said she previously owned shares of the company but divested from it in 2007. McMahon’s cousin, Joseph Birkett, is an Illinois appellate judge and former DuPage County state’s attorney. Her sister, Frances McMahon Kushner, is also an assistant Cook County state’s attorney.

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or recommended by seven bar associations and highly qualified by the Chicago Bar Association. The other evaluations were not available by press time.

**Endorsements:** CFL

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Suzanne Therese McEneely

**Experience:**
Cook County Public Defender’s Office  
- Assistant public defender (2002-present): Has worked in a variety of roles within the office, including the abuse and neglect division, the domestic violence division, and the criminal division.

**Notable:** McEneely ran unsuccessfully for judge in 2020. She does not have a current campaign website or a visible social media presence.

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or above by all and highly recommended by four bar associations.

**Endorsements:** Personal PAC

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Diana López

**Experience:**
Cook County Circuit Court  
- Associate judge (2021-present): Hears traffic cases at the Richard J. Daley Center in Chicago.  
- Solo practitioner (2010-2021): Focused on family law. Served as a Guardian ad Litem, or child advocate, in divorce and adoption cases. Also served as a mediator in domestic relations cases.

**Notable:** Somerville applied to be an associate judge in 2021 but was not selected. From 2013 to 2017, Somerville helped run the city’s workers’ compensation program, which was operated for decades by Ald. Ed Burke’s finance committee, until federal prosecutors charged him with racketeering, extortion, and attempted bribery in 2019 (that case is still ongoing). Within weeks, the mayor commissioned an audit of the prior two years of the program, including the last year. Somerville was the director, and the City Council voted to move the program under the city’s Finance Department. The audit found that the program did not have measures in place to detect or prevent fraud, that data collected about workers’ compensation claims was incomplete and disorganized, and that claims were not reviewed or processed according to best practices. Somerville said she would not comment about a “pending investigation and/or litigation.”

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or recommended by 11 bar associations. The Illinois State Bar Association found her not qualified, and the Women’s Bar Association of Illinois found her not recommended.

**Endorsements:** IVI-IPO

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Monica G. Somerville

**Experience:**
City of Chicago Department of Finance  

**Notable:** Taylor ran unsuccessfully for judge in 2012, 2016, 2018, and 2020 and for state representative in 2010. In 2018, Taylor represented Cook County Circuit Court Clerk Dorothy Brown in a petition challenge in her run for Chicago mayor. Brown lost the challenge and did not appear on the ballot.

**Bar association ratings:** Found not qualified or not recommended by six bar associations. The Black Women Lawyers’ Association of Greater Chicago found her recommended. Others were not available by press time.

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Mable Taylor

**Experience:**
Law Office of Mable Taylor*  
- Attorney in private practice: Focuses on criminal defense, personal injury, employment law, family law, and real estate, among other types of cases.

**Notable:** Injustice Watch could not verify the dates of employment, and Taylor did not provide additional information.

**Endorsements:** CFL, Personal PAC
experience: clerk of the circuit court of cook county
• chief of staff (2020-present): oversees office's operations and strategy.
cook county recorder of deeds
• labor counsel (2018-2020): oversaw compliance with shakman decrees, which governs patronage hiring, and negotiated union contracts.
cook county assessor's office
• labor counsel (2017-2018): oversaw compliance with shakman decrees, which governs patronage hiring, and negotiated union contracts.
cook county state's attorney's office
• assistant state's attorney (2014-2017; 2004-2012): started by prosecuting criminal cases. later moved to the civil side of the office, representing the county in employment, civil rights, and other civil lawsuits, and ultimately serving as a supervisor.
cook county department of human resources
• deputy director of labor relations (2012-2014): negotiated union contracts and represented the county in labor disputes.

notable: nowinski's father, also named thomas e. nowinski, was a cook county circuit judge from 1991 to 2004. his sister, christina nowinski wurst, is the co-founder of a consulting firm that has worked for chicago mayor lori lightfoot, and alderman howard brookins jr. (21st ward), who is also running for judge this year. while at the cook county state's attorney's office, nowinski represented the office in a civil lawsuit brought by the mother of david koschman, who was killed by richard j. vaneco, a nephew of former mayor richard m. daley. the suit alleged a cover-up of the incident and botching of the investigation.

bar association ratings: rated qualified or recommended by all bar associations.

endorsements: cfl, personal pac

experience: the law office of elizabeth c. ryan
• trial attorney (2011-present): private practice focused on personal injury cases.
newman, boyer & statham
circuit court of cook county
• law clerk, judge martin s. agran (2004-2006): drafted memorandum opinions for a judge in the court's chancery division.

notable: ryan ran unsuccessfully for judge in 2020.

bar association ratings: rated qualified or recommended by all bar associations.

endorsements: personal pac

experience: illinois state police
• legal counsel (2021-present): represents the state police in employment cases, consults with the illinois attorney general's office on litigation involving the state police.
illinois secretary of state's office
• contract prosecutor (2019-present): prosecutes license suspensions and revocations in administrative hearings.
circuit court of cook county
• administrative law judge (2010-2020): presided over cases involving ballot petition challenges.

notable: sayre testified for the state at former chicago police officer jason van dyke's murder trial about the use-of-force training she led at the police academy. van dyke's attorney said sayre was likely van dyke's instructor, but sayre said she couldn't recall him specifically.

bar association ratings: rated qualified or above by eleven bar associations. the illinois state bar association rated her not qualified.

endorsements: cfl, personal pac

experience: cook county circuit court
• circuit judge (2021-present): appointed by the illinois supreme court in february 2021. hears civil jury trials with damages of $50,000 or more.
• associate judge (2001-2021): heard civil jury trials and child protection cases.
illinois state comptroller's office
• special counsel (1999-2001): oversaw several divisions of the office.
circuit court of cook county
• associate judge (2010-2021): oversaw several civil jury cases.

notable: van tine was the first female indian american state court judge in the country when she was selected as an associate judge in 2001, according to the national asian pacific american bar association.

experience: dejolo law office
• attorney in private practice*: focused on criminal defense, personal injury, and child support cases.

notable: williams ran unsuccessfully for judge in 2020 as wendelin "wendi" de loach. williams, who used to practice law in colorado, had her law license there suspended for 30 days in 1997 for representing a client in a murder case when she had previously represented a co-defendant in a separate matter. she used her prior relationship to visit the co-defendant several times in jail without his lawyer's knowledge or approval. she later acknowledged that her client and the co-defendant had competing interests because her client was offered a plea deal in exchange for testimony against the co-defendant.

bar association ratings: rated qualified or above by all and highly qualified or highly recommended by seven bar associations.

endorsements: cfl, personal pac

experience: law offices of carmen m. quinones
• attorney in private practice (1989-present): focused primarily on family law. also serves as a guardian ad litem, or child representative, in domestic relations cases.

bar association ratings: rated not qualified or not recommended by eight bar associations.
Deidre Baumann

**Experience:**
Baumann & Shuldiner
- Partner (2001-present): Focused on civil rights, police misconduct, personal injury, and employment discrimination cases.
- Deidre Baumann Law Offices

**Notable:** Baumann ran unsuccessfully for judge in 2010, 2012, 2016, and 2020. In 2003, a federal judge sanctioned Baumann and her former law partner in a case, saying they had failed to appear in court several times and delayed the case for three years. In 2009, Baumann represented families of people buried at Burr Oak Cemetery, a historically Black cemetery in Alsip, in a class-action lawsuit where workers had allegedly emptied graves in an attempt to resell the plots. The lawsuit was settled, but because the cemetery had filed for bankruptcy, most families received very little compensation. Baumann did not respond to a request for comment.

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or above by most bar associations. The Illinois State Bar Association rated her not qualified, and the Chicago Bar Association rated her not recommended.

**Endorsements:** IVI-IPO, Personal PAC

Paul Joyce

**Experience:**
Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office
- Assistant state’s attorney (1999-present): Has worked in bond court and felony review, and as a prosecutor on felony cases. Currently works at the Skokie courthouse.

**Notable:** Joyce does not have an active campaign committee or website.

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or recommended by eight bar associations and highly recommended by the Decalogue Society of Lawyers. Others were not available by press time.

Michael Weaver

**Experience:**
McDermott Will & Emery
- Partner and associate (2007-present): Currently oversees the firm’s pro bono practice. Previously represented large companies, including Honeywell, in asbestos lawsuits.
- High Court of American Samoa

**Notable:** Weaver applied to be an associate judge in 2021 but was not selected.

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or above by all. Chicago’s LGBTQ+ Bar Association rated him highly recommended.

**Endorsements:** CFL, Personal PAC

Ruth Isabel Gudino

**Experience:**
Cook County Circuit Court
- Circuit judge (2021-present): Appointed by the Illinois Supreme Court. Currently hears traffic cases at the Richard J. Daley Center.
- Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office
  - Assistant state’s attorney (1997-2001; 2003-2021): Has served in many roles in the office, including supervisor of criminal prosecutions in Maywood, supervisor of the juvenile justice division, and director of legal hiring and recruitment.
- United Auto Workers-GM Legal Services Plan
  - Staff attorney (2001-2003): Worked on small claims, probate, real estate, and breach of contract cases for Ford and General Motors union employees.
- Cook County Public Guardian’s Office
  - Assistant public guardian (1995-1997)

**Notable:** Gudino was a finalist for associate judge in 2019 but was not selected. Gudino’s largest outside campaign donor is Monterey Security Consultants, a politically connected private security firm that has faced allegations in Illinois and Minnesota of failing to comply with state regulations. Gudino did not respond to a request for comment.

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or above by all and highly qualified or highly recommended by three bar associations.

**Endorsements:** CFL, Personal PAC

Chelsey Renee Robinson

**Experience:**
Owens and Robinson
- Founding partner (1996-present): Private practice focused on family law, criminal defense, bankruptcy, and real estate.

**Notable:** Robinson is a legal consultant for the “Judge Mathis” show. She ran unsuccessfully for judge in 2016 and 2020.

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or above by most bar associations. The Illinois State Bar Association rated her not qualified.

**Endorsements:** IVI-IPO

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Jacqueline Marie Griffin

Experience:
Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office
• Assistant state’s attorney (2005-present): Prosecuted child support, child abuse, and juvenile delinquency cases. Has prosecuted felony criminal cases since 2012, with a focus on sexual assault and domestic violence cases since 2017. Attorney in private practice
• (2007-present): Represents buyers and sellers in real estate transactions.

Notable: Griffin ran unsuccessfully for judge in 2020. Her father and two uncles were Chicago police officers.

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or above by 11 bar associations. The Decalogue Society of Lawyers and Chicago’s LGBTQ+ Bar Association rated her not recommended.

Dan Balanoff

Experience:
Balanoff and Associates
• Managing partner (2007-present): Primarily focused on estate planning, real estate, and consumer bankruptcy law.

Notable: Balanoff is part of a progressive political family from Chicago’s Southeast Side with roots in the labor movement. His father is Cook County Circuit Judge Robert Balanoff and his grandmother Miriam Balanoff is a former Cook County circuit court judge and state representative. His uncle, Clem Balanoff, is a former state representative and political consultant, and his father’s first cousin is Tom Balanoff, who recently retired after a lengthy tenure as president of SEIU Local 1.

Bar association ratings: Rated not qualified or not recommended by seven bar associations. Three bar associations found him recommended. Others were not available by press time.

Endorsements: IVI-IPO

Thomas More Donnelly

Experience:
Cook County Circuit Court
• Circuit judge (2021-present): Appointed by the Illinois Supreme Court in December 2021. Presides over jury trials in wrongful death, police shooting, medical malpractice, and product liability cases.

Bar association ratings: Notable: Donnelly first ran for circuit judge in 2000, but lost to Matthew Coghlan. In 2011, Donnelly threw out the arrests of 92 Occup Chicago protesters who violated the city’s curfew by camping out in Grant Park. Donnelly said in his decision that the curfew ordinance was unconstitutional because the city selectively enforced the curfew. But the Illinois Appellate Court overturned his decision in a judgment later affirmed by the Illinois Supreme Court. Since 2016, Donnelly has been a board member of the Illinois Judicial College, which trains judges and staff across the state. Many of Donnelly’s largest donors are personal injury law firms and lawyers, whose cases could come before him in the law division. In an email, Donnelly said, “As a judicial candidate I am not allowed to solicit campaign contributions. My committee handles fundraising matters and abides by all campaign finance rules and safeguards.”

Bar association ratings: Notable: Donnelly qualified or recommended by five bar associations and highly recommended by three. Others were not available.

Endorsements: CFL

Claudia Silva-Hernandez

Experience:
Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County
• Labor counsel (2021-2022): Advised the office on labor and employment issues.

Illinois Department of Human Services
• Administrative law judge (2019-2021): Heard appeals of decisions to terminate state and federal benefits, such as food stamps and child care subsidies.

Solo practitioner
• Contract attorney (2017-2019): Assisted with discovery requests for cases involving white collar crimes.

Independent Police Review Authority
• Staff attorney (2016-2017): Provided legal analysis for investigations into alleged misconduct by Chicago police officers.

Chicago Housing Authority
• Contract attorney (2012-2016): Represented the CHA in administrative hearings about the termination of housing vouchers.

Illinois Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission
• Litigation counsel (2008-2011)

Will County Public Defender’s Office
• Assistant public defender (2007-2008)

Bar association ratings: Did not participate in the evaluation process.

CIRCUIT COURT

O’BRIEN VACANCY

Maria M. Barlow

Experience:
The Barlow Law Firm LLC
• Principal attorney (2011-present): Primarily focused on family law and estate planning.

City of Chicago Law Department
• Assistant corporation counsel (2008-2011): Prosecuted various types of cases, including traffic tickets and building code violations.

Notable: Barlow ran for Cook County commissioner in the 4th district in 2018. She lost in the primary to Commissioner Stanley Moore.

Bar association ratings: Did not participate in the evaluation process.

John W. Wilson

Experience:
Cook County Circuit Court
• Circuit judge (2021-present): Appointed by the Illinois Supreme Court. Serves in the 4th municipal district at the Maywood courthouse.

Cook County Public Defender’s Office
• Assistant public defender (1997-2021): Served in numerous roles, including acting chief of the 6th municipal district (Markham) and homicide and felony supervisor in Markham. Also served on the homicide task force, a special division representing people accused of murder.

Notable: Before becoming a lawyer, Wilson was an administrator at City Colleges of Chicago and an assistant men’s basketball coach at Wilbur Wright College. Some of Wilson’s top donors include 4th Ward Ald. Sophia King; her husband, attorney Alan King; and his house music group, the Chosen Few DJs.

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or above by all and highly qualified or highly recommended by three bar associations.

Endorsements: CFL, IVI-IPO, Personal PAC

ENDORSER RATING: 1/5
Jerry Barrido

Experience:
Cook County Public Defender's Office
• Assistant public defender (2000-present): Since 2019, represents defendants in felony cases at the Maywood courthouse. Before that, was a senior attorney handling hearings about transferring young people accused of serious crimes to adult court. Has also worked in the traffic division, juvenile justice division and forensic science division.

Notable: Barrido ran unsuccessfully for judge in 2018. He told Wednesday Journal in March that he deliberately chose to run in the Rogers vacancy because he wanted to challenge ShawnTe Raines-Welch, whose husband is Illinois House Speaker Emanuel “Chris” Welch. “I deliberately wanted to give the people a choice as to whether or not they wanted to go with the status quo Democratic politics or to have someone who is a fighter in the courtroom, who has a reputation as a zealous advocate and a hard worker period,” Barrido said.

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or recommended by all bar associations.

Chloe Georgianna Pedersen

Experience:
Fletcher & Sippel, LLC
• Partner (2019-present): Leads the firm’s labor and employment law practice.
• Associate (2014-2019): Represented railroads and other transportation companies on labor and regulatory issues.

Raines-Welch applied to be an associate judge in 2021 but was not selected. Her husband is Illinois House Speaker Emanuel “Chris” Welch. Raines-Welch has received large campaign contributions from labor groups, including LIUNA Chicago Laborers’ District Council PAC and Chicago Area Laborers Joint Labor-Management PAC; politicians, including state Rep. Marcus C. Evans Jr. and House Majority Leader Greg Harris; and corporations, including Munibuy LLC, which buys and securitizes revenue streams from various municipalities in Illinois.

Raines-Welch’s current municipal clients include Dolton and Calumet City. She has faced accusations in both suburbs of protecting the mayors over the interests of the trustees and towns. Raines-Welch and her campaign did not respond to requests for comment.

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or above by 10 bar associations. The Illinois State Bar Association found her not qualified.

Endorsements: CFL, Personal PAC

ShawnTe Raines-Welch

Experience:
Ancel Glick
• Partner (2019-present): Represents various suburban municipalities and a school district as general counsel. Also presides over traffic hearings and other administrative hearings for towns including Markham and Blue Island.
Sanchez, Daniels and Hoffman, LLC
• Associate (2011-2019): Defended municipalities and school districts in civil rights and employment lawsuits.
Attorney in private practice
• (2009-2011): Represented plaintiffs in personal injury cases.

Notable: Raines-Welch applied to be an associate judge in 2021 but was not selected. Her husband is Illinois House Speaker Emanuel “Chris” Welch. Raines-Welch has received large campaign contributions from labor groups, including LIUNA Chicago Laborers’ District Council PAC and Chicago Laborers Joint Labor-Management PAC; politicians, including state Rep. Marcus C. Evans Jr. and House Majority Leader Greg Harris; and corporations, including Munibuy LLC, which buys and securitizes revenue streams from various municipalities in Illinois.

Raines-Welch’s current municipal clients include Dolton and Calumet City. She has faced accusations in both suburbs of protecting the mayors over the interests of the trustees and towns. Raines-Welch and her campaign did not respond to requests for comment.

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or above by 10 bar associations. The Illinois State Bar Association found her not qualified.

Endorsements: CFL, Personal PAC

ENDORSEMENTS

INJUSTICE WATCH JUDICIAL ELECTION GUIDE 2022

4TH SUBCIRCUIT
GAVN VACANCY

Nick Kantas

Experience:
Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office
• Assistant state’s attorney (2004-present): Currently supervises the juvenile delinquency division. Previously has served as a supervisor in the felony review unit and a prosecutor in the felony trial division.

Notable: Kantas applied for associate judge in 2019 and 2021, but was not selected. Kantas’ wife, Maren Ronan, is a registered Illinois lobbyist who has worked for more than two dozen municipalities, school districts, companies, and nonprofits, including a red-light camera operator and Casa Central Social Services Corp.

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or recommended by all bar associations.

Amanda Moira Pillsbury

Experience:
Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office
• Assistant state’s attorney (2005-present): Prosecutes felony criminal cases. Has also worked in child protection, juvenile justice and felony review units.

Notable: Pillsbury ran unsuccessfully for judge in 2018 and 2020. In her 2020 run, she received $1,000 from Chicago businessman and perennial candidate Willie Wilson.

Bar association ratings: Rated not qualified or not recommended by five bar associations.

Endorsements: CFL, Personal PAC

Chloe Georgianna Pedersen

Experience:
Fletcher & Sippel, LLC
• Partner (2019-present): Leads the firm’s labor and employment law practice.
• Associate (2014-2019): Represented railroads and other transportation companies on labor and regulatory issues.

Cook County Recorder of Deeds
• Chief legal and labor counsel (2012-2014): Advised the recorder on legal issues and investigated allegations of employee misconduct.

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or recommended by all bar associations whose ratings were available by press time.

Patrick Campanelli

Experience:
Patrick Campanelli, Attorney at Law P.C.
• Attorney in private practice (1986-present): Focused on criminal defense, traffic, and personal injury cases.

Notable: Campanelli is married to former Cook County Public Defender Amy Campanelli. He ran unsuccessfully for judge in 1996 as a Republican.

Bar association ratings: Rated not qualified or not recommended by five bar associations. The Chicago Bar Association rated him qualified. Others were not available by press time.

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**Timothy W. Wright, III**

**Experience:**
- Quintairos, Prieto, Wood & Boyer
- Gonzalez, Saggio & Harlan
- Burris, Wright, Slaughter & Tom
- Television station WJYS

**Notable:** Wright was a finalist for associate judge in 2021 but was not selected. In addition to his legal work, Wright was involved in politics in the 1980s and 1990s. He held director roles for the City of Chicago under mayors Harold Washington and Eugene Sawyer, was a domestic policy advisor for President Bill Clinton, and was chief of staff for U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush. In 2009, Wright represented Roland Burris, whose son was his former law partner, in matters involving his appointment to Barack Obama’s Senate seat by Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who was soon after indicted on corruption charges.

**From 2001 to 2014, the IRS filed six liens against Wright’s home for nonpayment of nearly $600,000 in taxes. In an interview, Wright said that those liens occurred while he was working outside the country and that he has since cleared his debts. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Wright was director of the Southern African Economic Development Fund for the Federal Home Loan Bank of Chicago and chairman of the Sub-Saharan African Advisory Committee of the Export-Import Bank of the United States.**

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or recommended by all bar associations.

**Endorsements:** CFL, IVI-IPO, Personal PAC

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**John H. Marshall**

**Experience:**
- Illinois Department of Human Services
  - Supervising administrative law judge (2019-2021): Conduct hearings related to state and federal benefits programs.
- Law Office of David L. Kelly
- Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office
  - Assistant state’s attorney (2001-2006): Prosecuted criminal felony and misdemeanor cases.

**Notable:** Kelly ran unsuccessfully for judge in 2018.

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or recommended by all bar associations.

**Endorsements:** CFL, IVI-IPO, Personal PAC
Jackie Marie Portman-Brown

**Experience:**
- **Cook County Circuit Court**
  - Independent Police Review Authority
  - Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office
    - Assistant state’s attorney (1998-2005): Prosecuted child sexual abuse, narcotics, and misdemeanor cases. Also reviewed felony arrests.

**Notable:** Portman-Brown lost her judgeship in 2020 after voters did not retain her for another term. She is one of just two Cook County judges who have not been retained in the past three decades. Portman-Brown was placed on administrative duty in February 2020 after she was captured on video locking her 6-year-old grandniece alone in a courtroom holding cell for about 10 minutes. In an interview with Injustice Watch, Portman-Brown said the girl’s mother asked her to put her in the holding cell. “There are some who didn’t understand the tough love mentality that was intended for my grandniece, but there were a lot of people in this community who were raised with that. And my nephew, whose daughter it is, understood that,” Portman-Brown said. “Would I do this again? Probably not. But her behavior has been improved since this incident.”

Portman-Brown has proclaimed herself a “lock ‘em up” judge in media interviews and faced criticism for her temperament on the bench. In 2018, Injustice Watch reported that the HOPE court program she ran was shut down after two separate outside reviews accused her of “bullying” behavior in the courtroom and questioned the program’s efficacy. In an emailed response to Injustice Watch, Portman-Brown said the program was a success and the review by Chicago Appleseed Fund for Justice mischaracterized the comments of the HOPE court team. “I am demanding of everybody including myself because the most important part is that we are all working toward the defendant’s success and the program’s success.”

**Bar association ratings:** Rated not qualified or not recommended by 8/13 bar associations.

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**David S. Rodriguez**

**Experience:**
- **Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County**
  - Deputy general counsel (2020-present): Advising the clerk on policy and legal matters.
  - Rodriguez Law Group P.C.
    - Attorney in private practice (2006-2020): Focused on a variety of cases, including contract disputes, family law, and real estate transactions.
  - State of Illinois Court of Claims
    - Commissioner (2011-2017): Served as a part-time hearing officer for cases where people made claims of monetary damages or injury against the state.
  - Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation

**Notable:** Rodriguez ran unsuccessfully for Illinois Senate in 1998. He filed to run for judge in 2020, but did not get enough signatures to make the ballot.

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or recommended by all.

**Endorsements:** IVI-IPO

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**Kerrie Maloney Laytin**

**Experience:**
- **Cook County Circuit Court**
  - Associate judge (2021-present): Hears traffic cases and landlord-tenant disputes in the Richard J. Daley Center.
  - Illinois Human Rights Commission
    - Chief administrative law judge (2021): Heard cases of alleged discrimination under the Illinois Human Rights Act and supervised other administrative law judges.
  - City of Chicago Law Department
    - Assistant corporation counsel and senior counsel (2002-2019): Represented the city in cases before state and federal appellate courts.
  - Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago (now Legal Aid Chicago)
  - U.S. Department of Justice
    - Trial attorney, federal programs branch (1999-2000): Represented the government in cases challenging the constitutionality of statutes and administrative actions.

**Notable:** The Illinois Supreme Court appointed Laytin to the circuit court in 2019, but she lost when she ran for a permanent seat in 2020. She was selected as an associate judge in 2021. Laytin holds investments in several private companies, according to her financial disclosure forms, including Chicago restaurants Giant and Chef’s Special Cocktail Bar.

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or recommended by all.

**Endorsements:** CFL, Personal PAC

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**Charles “Charlie” Beach**

Beach is running unopposed in this primary.

For his full candidate profile, visit injusticewatch.org/judges.
Trowbridge wrote in of more than $88,000 in income taxes from property Trowbridge owns for nonpayment. The state of Illinois have filed liens against a judge in 2012, 2018 and 2020. The IRS and but withdrew before the election.


Experience:
Attorney in private practice
• (2003-present): Focused on personal injury cases.
• (2003-2009): Focused on criminal defense, police misconduct, and personal injury cases.

Illinois Department of Human Services

Illinois Department of Employment Security

Chicago Police Department
• Sergeant (2000-2002): Worked in the 15th district on the West Side, the 9th Side, and in central detention.

Notable: Casey filed to run for judge in 2020, but withdrew before the election.

Bar association ratings: Rated not qualified or not recommended by 8/13 bar associations.

Endorsements: CFL, Personal PAC

Bradley R. Trowbridge

Experience:
Law Offices of Bradley R. Trowbridge
• Attorney in private practice (2003-present): Practice focuses on family law, divorce, and domestic violence cases. Has also served as a Guardian ad Litem, or child representative, in family court.

Pro Bono Advocates
• Staff attorney (2003): Represented survivors of domestic violence in orders of protection and child custody cases.

Legal Assistance Foundation

Notable: Trowbridge ran unsuccessfully for judge in 2012, 2018 and 2020. The IRS and the state of Illinois have filed liens against a property Trowbridge owns for nonpayment of more than $88,000 in income taxes from 2008 through 2015. Trowbridge wrote in an email to Injustice Watch that he is in a payment plan with both the IRS and Illinois. “I certainly did not intend to file inaccurate returns for those years,” he stated.

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or recommended by all bar associations.

Endorsements: IVI-IPO, Personal PAC

John Fritchey

Experience:
F4 Consulting Ltd.
• Government relations director (2008-present):
   Runs a lobbying and political consulting firm.
   Worked as a political analyst for radio station WGN.

Cook County Board of Commissioners
• Commissioner, 12th district (2010-2018):
   Represented parts of Chicago’s North and Northwest sides.

Law Office of John A. Fritchey
• Attorney in private practice (2004-2008):
   Focused on zoning and other administrative issues in Chicago.

Illinois House of Representatives
• State representative, 11th district (1996-2010):
   Represented parts of Chicago’s North Side.

Notable: As a county commissioner, Fritchey was a staunch opponent of the penny-per-ounce “soda tax” and a proponent of marijuana legalization. Fritchey’s lobbying and consulting firm has represented several cannabis companies in zoning issues before the City of Chicago, and also represents the Pilsen Wellness Center, a mental health and substance use treatment facility. He is not currently registered as a lobbyist with Cook County or the state of Illinois.

In 2013, the Chicago Tribune reported that Fritchey was one of a handful of politicians and wealthy individuals who had gotten Cook County judges to protect their identities in divorce proceedings by allowing them to file paperwork with initials instead of their full names. In an email, Fritchey wrote, “Illinois law allows for absolutely anybody to request to file under initials but it’s likely not something that most people care to or choose to do. … I didn’t and don’t see any special treatment whatsoever.”

Bar association ratings: Rated not qualified or not recommended by four bar associations. Eight bar associations rated him qualified or recommended.

Endorsements: Personal PAC

Jennifer Bae

Experience:
Cook County Sheriff’s Office
• Director of employee discipline (2019-present):
   Oversees employee discipline and represents the sheriff’s office in grievance and arbitration with union members.
• Member, Sheriff’s Merit Board (2013-2017):
   Conducted disciplinary hearings for sworn members of the sheriff’s office and voted on disciplinary actions.

Chicago City Council
• Staff attorney, finance committee (2017-2019):
   Wrote and advised on city ordinances and policies introduced in the finance committee.

Law Office of Jennifer E. Bae
• Solo practitioner (2012-2017):
   Focused on criminal defense.

Bae Law Offices
• Partner (2000-2012):
   Focused on criminal defense and civil rights law.

Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office
• Assistant state’s attorney (1997-2000)

Notable: Bae ran unsuccessfully for judge in the 12th subcircuit in 2016. If elected, Bae said she would be the first Korean American female judge in Cook County.

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or recommended by all bar associations.

Stephen Swedlow

Experience:
Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan, LLP
• Co-managing partner (2012-present):
   Leads the Chicago office of a large international law firm. Represents both companies and consumers in civil and class-action lawsuits.

Korein Tillery
• Partner (2008-2011):
   Focused on intellectual property, class action, and civil lawsuits.
• Associate (2001-2004)

Swedlow & Associates
• Partner (2004-2008):
   Represented plaintiffs in class-action lawsuits against pharmaceutical companies, chemical companies, and consumer goods companies.

Latham & Watkins
• Associate (1996-2001)

Notable: Swedlow represented health insurance companies in a class-action lawsuit filed in 2016 against the federal government over unpaid fees related to the Affordable Care Act. The government was ordered to pay $3.7 billion, and Swedlow’s firm was awarded $185 million in legal fees. Swedlow won a $10.1 billion verdict in a class-action lawsuit against Philip Morris International in 2003. It was the largest civil judgment in Illinois at the time, but the judgment was overturned by the Illinois Supreme Court.

Swedlow currently represents plaintiffs in class-action lawsuits against Facebook and Amazon over alleged privacy violations. Early in his career, Swedlow represented plaintiffs pro bono in a civil lawsuit against Matthew Hale and his white supremacist, neo-Nazi organization World Church of the Creator, after one of Hale’s followers killed two people, including Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdson, and injured nine others during a shooting spree. As of May 12, Swedlow had loaned his campaign fund $500,000, which is a notably large sum for a subcircuit race and nearly seven times as much as his competitor had raised.

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or above by all and highly qualified or recommended by three bar associations.

Endorsements: Personal PAC

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### 9TH SUBCIRCUIT - CLEVELAND VACANCY

**Sanjay Tailor**

**Experience:**
- Cook County Circuit Court
  - Circuit judge (2021-present): Appointed by the Illinois Supreme Court. Presiding judge of the county division, which hears cases about elections, name changes, adoptions, and mental health proceedings.
  - Associate judge (2003-2021): Served in several divisions, including domestic relations, where he heard divorce and child support cases; law, where he heard contract and business disputes; and chancery, where he heard class action lawsuits, constitutional challenges to laws, and other civil cases.
- Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office
  - Assistant state’s attorney (1996-2003): Represented the county and county officials in medical malpractice, civil rights, and other civil lawsuits.

**Notable:** In 2017, Tailor ruled in favor of the City of Chicago in a longstanding dispute with the city’s main police union over the city’s decision to maintain decades’ worth of police misconduct complaint files, despite a provision in the police union contract that requires those files to be destroyed after five years. Tailor ruled that the contract provision violated the state’s Freedom of Information Act and the public’s interest in disclosure. That decision was upheld by the Illinois Appellate Court and Illinois Supreme Court. In 2018, he dismissed a lawsuit by then-Cook County State’s Attorney Anita Alvarez, which the Chicago Police Department could not withhold photos of police officers from the public.

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or above by all bar associations except one. The Chicago Council of Lawyers rated him well qualified. The Illinois State Bar Association rated her not qualified. Other evaluations were not available by press time.

**Endorsements:**
- CFL, IVI-IPO, Personal PAC

### 9TH SUBCIRCUIT - JACOBIUS VACANCY

**Basileios “Bill” John Foutris**

**Experience:**
- Foutris Law Office, Ltd.
- Anesi, Ozmon, Rodin, Novak & Kohen

**Notable:** Foutris ran unsuccessfully for judge in 2020. He represented the family of Quintonio LeGrier in a wrongful death lawsuit against the City of Chicago and police officer Robert Rialmo. Rialmo killed LeGrier and his neighbor Bettie Jones while responding to a call for help. The jury in the case awarded LeGrier’s family $1.05 million, but the verdict was reversed by Judge Rena Marie Van Tine, who is also running for election this year, based on a finding by the jury that Rialmo was in reasonable fear of great bodily injury or death.

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or recommended by all bar associations.

### 9TH SUBCIRCUIT - JACOBIUS VACANCY

**Barry Goldberg**

**Experience:**
- Office of the Illinois Attorney General
  - Bureau chief, Charitable Trust bureau (2019-present): Brings civil and criminal cases against nonprofits and executives accused of fraud, misuse of funds and other violations of state law.
  - Assistant attorney general, Charitable Trust bureau (1999-2006).

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or recommended by eight bar associations and highly recommended by the Decalogue Society of Chicago. Other evaluations were not available by press time.

**Endorsements:**
- CFL, IVI-IPO, Personal PAC

### 9TH SUBCIRCUIT - JACOBIUS VACANCY

**Don R. Sampen**

**Experience:**
- Clausen Miller, P.C.
  - Partner (2008-present): Focused on commercial litigation and appeals.
  - Meckler Bulger and Tilsen
  - Partner (2003-2008): Focused on insurance coverage and commercial litigation.
- Office of the Illinois Attorney General
  - Chief, Public Interest and Special Litigation divisions (2000-2003): Worked on special litigation, including a nationwide lawsuit against several tobacco companies.
  - Assistant attorney general (1995-2000)
  - Martin, Craig, Chester & Sonnenschein

**Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or above by all. The Chicago Council of Lawyers rated him well qualified, and Chicago’s LGBTQ+ Bar Association rated him highly recommended.

**Endorsements:**
- Personal PAC

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Gun violence last summer. In an interview, Taliaferro said he has supported police accountability efforts and does not always see eye-to-eye with the police department or unions. “I do love our police department and I love our police officers,” he said. “But my voting record has always been what I thought was best for our city and my ward. And because of that, I’ve lost the support of the Fraternal Order of Police and the sergeants’ union.”

**Bar association ratings:** Rated recommended by four bar associations and not recommended or not qualified by four. Other evaluations were not available by press time.

**Endorsements:** CFL.

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**Aileen Bhandari**

**Experience:**
- Attorney in private practice (2008-2016): Focused on divorce, child support, estate planning, and other domestic relations cases.
- Chicago City Council Alderperson, 29th Ward (2015-present): Represents parts of the Austin, Belmont Cragin and Montclare neighborhoods on the city’s West Side.
- Nexus Legal Group Attorney in private practice (2008-2016): Focused on divorce, child support, estate planning, and other domestic relations cases.
- **Notable:** Taliaferro served in the U.S. Marine Corps before becoming a police officer. As an investigator in the Chicago Police Department’s internal affairs unit in 2005, Taliaferro wrote a memo to department higher-ups about the high number of complaints against officers in the Special Operations Section, the Chicago Tribune reported. Several members of that unit later faced federal charges for stealing drugs and money from people they falsely arrested.
- Taliaferro has been a reliable pro-police voice since joining the City Council. In 2010, Mayor Lori Lightfoot made Taliaferro the council’s public safety committee chair. Since then, he has supported the mayor’s version of an ordinance creating a new police oversight body and stalled attempts by fellow alderpeople to hold a hearing to question Police Superintendent David Brown about plans to address

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**Christine Svenson**

**Experience:**
- Principal (2008-present): Focused on employment law, election law, and family law.
- **Notable:** Svenson ran unsuccessfully for judge in 2018. In 2014, she represented a client who filed a lawsuit alleging sexual harassment against Dan Rutherford, then the Illinois state treasurer and a Republican candidate for governor. Rutherford accused Svenson and her client of fabricating the allegations to help his primary opponent, Bruce Rauner. Svenson denied political motivations. She said a previous $3,500 payment from Rauner’s campaign was for unrelated legal work.
- Svenson has worked on several cases with Judicial Watch, a conservative legal group. In a 2015 case, Svenson represented a client who filed a lawsuit asking the court to force Cook County’s cooperation with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detainer requests, which ask local jails to hold people who immigration officials suspect are in the country illegally. The county had passed a 2011 ordinance ordering the sheriff not to comply. A Cook County judge dismissed the lawsuit, and the Illinois Appellate Court later dismissed an appeal filed by Svenson, saying the case briefs submitted on her client’s behalf were “completely deficient.” In an emailed statement, Svenson said she had approved the documents but did not write them. She disagreed with the appellate court’s assessment, writing, “Our brief was not deficient at all.”
- Svenson represents a reporter with the conservative news outlet The Daily Caller in a pending lawsuit against Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, claiming she violated the First Amendment in May 2021 when she granted interviews only to reporters of color to mark the midpoint of her first term.

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**Gary William Seyring**

**Experience:**
- Attorney in private practice (2010-present): Focused on real estate, contract disputes, domestic relations, contested estates, and personal injury cases.
- **Notable:** Seyring is running for judge in the 13th subcircuit for the fifth time. He lost in the Republican primary in 2014 and 2016, and lost in the general election in 2018 and 2020. In addition to his law practice, he also has served as an arbitrator with the Cook County Arbitration Program. Before becoming a lawyer, Seyring was an accountant for several years.
- **Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or recommended by all bar associations.

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**Dominic J Buttitta, Jr**

**Experience:**
- McHenry County State’s Attorney’s Office Assistant state’s attorney (2010-2013): Held various roles, including prosecuting misdemeanor and traffic cases, felony cases, white collar crimes, and mental health court cases.
- **Bar association ratings:** Rated qualified or recommended by all bar associations that were available by press time.
Steve Demitro

Experience:
Steve Demitro Law Office
• Attorney in private practice (2000-present): Focuses on personal injury, wrongful death, and criminal cases. Also works as an arbitrator.

Metropolitan Water Reclamation District

Notable: Demitro dropped out of high school but later earned his GED diploma, went to law school, and passed the bar exam. He ran unsuccessfully for judge in 2012 and 2020.

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or recommended by six bar associations. Four bar associations found her not recommended or not qualified. Others were not available by press time.

Endorsements: CFL, Personal PAC

Viviana Martinez

Experience:
Chicago Public Schools
• Deputy general counsel (2022-present): Works on contract negotiations, procurements, and legal compliance.

Cook County government
• Special assistant for legal affairs, Bureau of Administration (2018-2022): Provided legal counsel to various county departments.
• Interim director, Department of Adoption and Family Supportive Services (2018-2019): Oversaw policy and training for the department responsible for social investigations of families involved in adoptions and parentage proceedings.
• Assistant special legal counsel, Office of Cook County President (2013-2018): Provided legal counsel to the office and various county departments.

Office of Cook County Commissioner Jesús “Chuy” García
• Chief of staff and general counsel (2010-2013): Drafted legislative proposals, wrote speeches and press releases, and managed office staff.

Attorney in private practice
• (2008-2010): Represented people in immigration cases and foreclosure defense.

Office of the Illinois Attorney General
• Assistant attorney general (2007-2008): Worked on labor-related issues.

Bar association ratings: Rated recommended or qualified by six bar associations. Four bar associations found her not recommended or not qualified. Others were not available by press time.

Endorsements: CFL

Bernadette Barrett

Experience: The Barrett Law Group
• Attorney in private practice (2019-present): Focused on family law and civil litigation.

Barrett & Sramek

Notable: Barrett ran unsuccessfully for judge in the 15th subcircuit in 2004. Her husband, Michael B. Barrett, is a Cook County Circuit Court judge in the Markham courthouse.

Bar association ratings: Rated qualified or recommended by all bar associations that were available by press time.

Jim Gleffe

Experience: Cook County Clerk’s Office
• Deputy chief of staff and labor counsel (2020-present): Represents the office in employment issues.

Cook County Recorder of Deeds Office
• Chief deputy recorder and chief of staff (2018-2020): Worked on labor issues, contracts, and legislative priorities for the office.

Chicago City Clerk’s Office
• Policy analyst (2013-2014): Worked on city legislation related to the clerk’s office.

Illinois Secretary of State’s Office
• Chief deputy director, securities division (2012-2013): Oversaw regulatory and enforcement cases involving the sale of securities.
• Enforcement attorney (2009-2012)

City of Chicago Law Department

Notable: Gleffe and his wife, Kristen Bauer, have close ties to former House Speaker Michael Madigan. Gleffe was a longtime precinct captain under Madigan in Chicago’s 13th Ward. Bauer is a registered lobbyist who has represented clients including ComEd, which is embroiled in a bribery scandal that led to Madigan’s indictment last year, and Green Thumb Industries, a cannabis company that was one of the first to receive licenses to grow medical marijuana in Illinois, according to the Chicago Tribune. In 2019, Gleffe was involved in efforts to challenge the ballot petitions of David Krupa, a college student who was running against 13th Ward Ald. Marty Quinn. Gleffe noted he had never heard of several dozen affidavits from residents who said they wanted to withdraw their signatures from Krupa’s nominating petitions. But the Quinn campaign collected far more affidavits than the number of signatures Krupa had collected, leading to questions about the veracity of the affidavits, the Chicago Tribune reported. In a statement, a spokesperson for his campaign said, “The role of a notary is only to verify that the person signing a document is who they say they are. ... Jim carried out his notary duties in full compliance with the law.”

Bar association ratings: Rated not qualified or not recommended by four bar associations. Two bar associations rated him recommended. The other evaluations were not available by press time.

Endorsements: CFL, Personal PAC
Injustice Watch is a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization in Chicago. Our work focuses on justice and equity in the court system. This judicial election guide is the result of a year of extensive research and reporting about Cook County judicial candidates. We offer the guide as a resource to voters. We don’t make endorsements or recommendations.

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