

READER

The Food Issue

Something's
GROWING
at Back of the Yards
Algae Sciences

By MIKE SULA 20

PLUS:
Candy Con | Sober Curious Chicago | Summer Food Memories

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Threads of connection for the cause

Stitch By Stitch convening and exhibition rediscovers connection between craft and activism.



Thrill of recognition or contempt for inaccuracy

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JASON DESANTO, Senior Lecturer at Northwestern Pritzker School of Law

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COMMENTARY

A detail from the dome on top of the Illinois State Capitol building in Springfield.  ANDREW ADAMS/UNSPASH



ON POLITICS

More madness from Mary

Miller, Trump, and Bailey run Illinois's Republican Party—as frightening as that may be.

By **BEN JORAVSKY**

I suppose it's somewhat reassuring to know people still get outraged by the MAGA madness Mary Miller spews. That we all haven't gone numb to her lunacy—even though she seems to be saying crazy things all the time.

In case you forgot, Mary Miller is the downstate congressperson who made her name last year by declaring: “Hitler was right.”

You'd think such a comment might turn off voters—even Republican ones. Nope. Miller trounced her opponent—Congressman Rodney Davis—in last month's Republican primary. That makes her pretty much a shoo-in to be reelected in November.

Miller trounced Davis thanks to Donald Trump—speaking of MAGA madness—who endorsed her at a downstate rally just a few days before the election. “She's somebody I've gotten to know,” said Trump at the rally. “She's been all for me, all the way. You have to remember that. And she's just a very good person and a very MAGA person.”

That was all MAGA had to hear. Roughly 58 percent of Republicans voted for Miller—

they'd probably jump off a cliff if that's what Trump commanded.

In many ways, Trump was returning a favor with his endorsement since Miller made an appearance at a rally for Trump on January 5 in Washington. That's the day before the infamous Capitol insurrection which we now realize was an attempted coup, hatched by Trump, to pressure Vice President Mike Pence into overturning the election of Joe Biden by the voters of the United States. Something, people, I hope we never get numb to.

It was at that January 5 rally where Miller made her observation about Hitler. Which, in its entirety, went like this . . .

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

It took her a while to apologize. First she

used the notoriety gained by the comment as an opportunity to blast “left-wing radicals in our country today.” Eventually, she offered an “apology” in which she admitted that while it's wrong to say “Hitler was right,” her main point was that, well, you know—Hitler was right.

In this case, she, like Hitler, thinks it's a good idea to brainwash impressionable young people with propaganda so they'll be under your command forever. Sort of like Illinois Republicans with Trump.

At the recent rally, Miller thanked Trump for his three Supreme Court appointees who tag teamed with three other justices to eviscerate abortion rights in America. Or as Miller put it: “President Trump, on behalf of all the MAGA patriots in America, I want to thank you for the historic victory for white life in the Supreme Court yesterday.”

Her “white life” line set off another brouhaha. It echoed MAGA replacement theory, which holds that one of the main problems with abortion is that it allows white women to end their pregnancies. Thus depriving the country of the white babies it needs to keep white people as the majority race in the country. A position, come to think of it, that would fit in quite well back in the Germany of you-know-who.

After non-MAGA Americans recoiled, Miller's press secretary issued a clarification. It was “a mix-up of words.” And Miller meant to say “victory for right to life” as opposed to “victory for white life.” If you say so, Con-

gressperson Miller.

Also receiving Trump's blessing at that rally was state senator Darren Bailey, who went on to crush his opponents in the Republican primary, winning the right to run against Governor Pritzker in November.

I've been telling people about Bailey since he made a name for himself back in the early days of the pandemic, declaring his right to infect his colleagues in the General Assembly with COVID-19 by not wearing a mask. Bailey is as far to the right as Miller—though he's so far refrained from saying “Hitler was right.”

Bailey did have to apologize for comments he made after a deranged 21-year-old man climbed up on a roof and, armed with an automatic rifle, started shooting people at the Highland Park Fourth of July parade, killing seven people and wounding 30 others.

Bailey's initial comment, made soon after the shooting, when the shooter was still at large, went like this: “Let's pray for justice to prevail, and then let's move on and let's celebrate—celebrate the independence of this nation.”

When voters expressed outrage over Bailey's insensitivity to the people who had just been killed, he apologized. And then, true to form, tried to blame everything on Pritzker.

I point all of this out to remind you that Bailey, like Miller, are MAGA to the core. As such, they're first allegiance remains to Donald Trump. They have no solutions for the problems this country faces. They either deny those problems exist, or try to exploit them with hate.

In the matter of guns, Bailey's position is that guns are not a problem and we need no laws to control their spread—even as the carnage continues.

It's been over five years since Trump went on the Bill O'Reilly show and said: “I got to meet a couple of very top police [in Chicago]. I said, ‘How do you stop [the shootings]? How do you stop this? If you were put in charge—to a specific person—do you think you could stop it?’ He said, ‘Mr. Trump, I'd be able to stop it in one week.’ And I believed him 100 percent.”

Listening to Trump's comments on the O'Reilly show reminds me of *Harvey*, the movie where the Jimmy Stewart character has an invisible friend who's a giant rabbit. The notion of Trump having make-believe conversations with his make-believe police friends in Chicago might be funny, if the times weren't so tragic and the stakes so high. 

 @bennyjshow

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COMMENTARY



Left: Kenilworth Beach; right: Winnetka Park District sign © DEANNA ISAACS

ON CULTURE

Sun, sand—and segregation

Exploring the racially charged history of beach access in and around Chicago

By DEANNA ISAACS

So, a bicyclist walks up to a beach on the North Shore. It's hot, he's been riding, he just wants to put his feet in the cool Lake Michigan water that he can see sparkling behind a booth and a prominent "beach pass required" sign. A hapless kid with a summer job is manning the booth.

What happens next?

How about a research paper from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs?

This is the scenario that got Samuel Kling, who's director of global cities research at the council and also the cyclist in question, thinking about why it is that City of Chicago beaches are open to all comers, but once you're out of the city, beach access is hard to come by.

It's not the sort of thing the council would have been likely to address back in 1922 when it was founded as the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, with a mission of combating a regional case of head-in-the-sand isolationism. These days, however, the council has a center focused specifically on cities, having recognized that they "increasingly shape our world." And on the day in 2020 when Kling was turned away from a suburban beach, he

was already deep into a pandemic-inspired project focused on rights and public spaces.

What came to mind as he climbed back on his bike, Kling says, was a book he'd read in grad school about the segregation of beaches in the Jim Crow north—Andrew W. Kahr's *Free the Beaches: The Story of Ned Coll and the Battle for America's Most Exclusive Shoreline*. This was different from the south, Kling says, although the result was the same. "It's a layered system where many things conspire to segregate public spaces, housing, and all sorts of other areas. It might look like an accident of geography, but it's not. It's a long-standing struggle over civil rights, going back to the 1919 race riots in Chicago that started on a beach."

On July 27, 1919, a Black youth, 17-year-old Eugene Williams, was floating on a raft that crossed an imaginary color line in the area of Chicago's 29th Street Beach. For this, Williams was stoned by a white beachgoer, fell from the raft, and drowned. In the extended riots that followed, 38 people were killed and hundreds injured.

"Beaches and public spaces are places

where the racial hierarchy has been enforced," Kling says. "It's where there've been lots of instances of racial violence. And when you look at it through that lens, there's more to the suburban beach restrictions story than just charging nonresidents a lot of money for access."

In September 2020, he and environmental researcher Lucas Stephens published a report that documents current restrictions on beach access in the Chicago suburban region, reviews their history, and characterizes residence requirements as extensions of entrenched patterns of segregation in housing. They suggest that increasing dependency on federal and state funds to combat the erosion that's coming with climate change offers a legal justification for dropping those requirements and opening access to what is clearly a regional asset.

Unsurprisingly, Kling and Stephens found the most restrictive public beach access policies (including parking restrictions) in "the whitest, wealthiest municipalities." When they mapped and color-coded results, in 2020, they got a necklace of "highly exclusionary"

red beads extending from Wilmette to Lake Forest—a string of beaches charging nonresidents significantly more than residents for entry.

Chicago's de facto beach segregation never became law. But Kling says by the 1920s and '30s, in the early years of the Great Migration, official residence requirements were being instituted in many of the suburbs. (Evanston History Center director of education Jenny Thompson makes the same point in her own research, "A Shifting Shoreline," noting that "racial discrimination was practiced on Evanston's beaches prior to 1909 and, as Evanston's Black population grew in the following years, especially in the period from 1910 to 1930, it would continue.")

The Council collaborated with Chicago Public Art Group artists Cynthia Weiss and Sonja Henderson to create a traveling exhibit that interprets the report. "Right to the Shoreline" is on view at the Evanston Art Center, 1717 Central Street, Evanston, through July 27; admission is free.

Also, next week: Lookingglass Theatre Company will conduct its annual free commemorative performance of spoken word, movement, and music, *Sunset 1919*, at 7 PM Wednesday, July 27, at the Eugene Williams Memorial Marker, 125 Fort Dearborn Drive (roughly 29th Street and the lakefront). And CRR19 (Chicago Race Riot of 1919 Commemoration Project) will lead its fourth annual two-hour Bronzeville Bike Tour at 10 AM Saturday, July 30, starting at the Chicago Military Academy, 3519 S. Giles; free with a donation option. [f](#)

[@Deannaisaacs](#)



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ON PRISONS

Drinking water in prison is a crapshoot

The tap water at Stateville has been dangerous for decades.

By **ANTHONY EHLERS**

As Chicago lays the groundwork for a new casino, people imprisoned in Illinois gamble with their health every time they take a drink of water. When most people think of places with poor drinking water, images of poor and underdeveloped countries spring to mind. That’s why the tragedy of Flint, Michigan, was so shocking: people wondered how that could happen in the United States. But it’s not uncommon—last year the *Guardian* reported that some 25 million Americans drink from contaminated water supplies. Some of those people are here at Stateville Correctional Center.

The water at Stateville has a long history of contaminants. “I’ve been hearing about contaminated water for years from prisoners,” Alan Mills, executive director of the Uptown People’s Law Center, told *The Appeal* in March. Mills also noted that prisoners have complained that the water is often brown, sometimes smells like sewage, and had black flecks in it. Stateville was built in the 1920s, and its infrastructure—including the plumbing—is crumbling. Prisoners are worried that

its pipes contain lead, and the corrosion from these pipes is the reason for the brown water. The prisoners’ complaints of discolored and strange-tasting water have been on record with the Uptown People’s Law Center since 2013.

This past spring, IDOC and the Illinois Department of Public Health announced that *Legionella* bacteria was detected at Stateville. It was later revealed that water in five other prisons had also tested positive for the bacteria. Shari Stone-Mediadore, managing director of Parole Illinois, told *The Appeal* in April that she was “appalled that the IDOC seems to be more concerned with covering up the problem than with protecting the health of the people in their custody.”

On March 5, *Legionella* bacteria was found right here in C-House, where I currently live. Inspectors found it in one empty cell. They did not test in any of the inhabited cells, nor did they test the showers, a known breeding ground for *Legionella*. Aaron Packman, director of the Northwestern Center for Water Research, told *The Appeal* that contaminated showers are “a big concern.” The showers

Toxic chemicals and bacteria have plagued Stateville’s drinking water for decades. ENGINE AKYURT, UNSPLASH

were not tested here, or at any of the other prisons.

Janet E. Stout, a microbiologist at the University of Pittsburgh and the president and director of the Special Pathogens Laboratory, which specializes in *Legionella* detection and control, told *The Appeal* that inspectors need to test multiple locations at a site to understand the full scale of the bacteria’s spread. Water testing at Stateville is haphazard at best. In January, the *Reader* reported that the company responsible for lead testing on Stateville’s water did not follow federal guidelines.

It wasn’t until March 11 that they finally told the prison population they found *Legionella* in our drinking water. This is how the IDOC cares for those of us in prison. They claimed to have flushed the system several times; however, *Legionella* bacteria grows in shower heads and faucets, and in stagnant water, like wells from our very source. They began to pass out bottled water every day, yet the water is not purified like IDOC claims, but comes from a facility also found to have had *Legionella* there as well. They only allow two 20-ounce bottles per person. This is not enough. The IDOC is not providing enough water for the basic needs of its roughly 2,200 men inside Stateville.

In the 1990s through the mid-2000s, the water at Stateville contained high levels of lithium, and more than twice the level of radium permitted by federal guidelines. In 2000, the EPA found the prison was violating federal limits for radium in the water; in 2003, it found Stateville had achieved compliance with those limits. But it wasn’t until the late 2000s that the prison changed water sources to our current well.

The IDOC and the prison administration have long known of the health risks associated with the drinking water here. Several years ago, an internal memo revealed that IDOC advised all staff not to drink the water here at Stateville, and provided employees with bottled water. The prisoners were never told of the health risks in consuming the water, and so were unable to protect themselves, nor were the prisoners provided with bottled water. For years IDOC knew the water was bad, and of the associated health risks, and kept silent.

Legionella bacteria is only one in a long list of problems facing prisoners and their drinking water. Prisons in Illinois have a long history of providing contaminated drinking

water to prisoners. This particular issue is not a new one. One person at Stateville was diagnosed with Legionnaires’ disease in 2015, and in 2020 two prisoners in Pontiac Correctional Center contracted it. While it is treatable, one out of every ten people who get sick with Legionnaires’ disease will die. It is especially deadly to people over 50, current or former smokers, and those with underlying illnesses. It is truly a crapshoot every time we drink the water.

Local activists have been calling for greater oversight of the state’s prisons by calling for the Illinois Department of Public Health to create a task force for monitoring and investigating contaminated water in prison. Jennifer Vollen-Katz, the executive director of the John Howard Association, told *Injustice Watch* that more oversight “is critical to improving the sanitation, hygiene, and safety issues that are rife within Illinois facilities.” IDOC cannot be trusted to either conduct the testing, or reveal the results. The oversight must come from an outside agency.

How can people in prison feel like they can be a productive member of society when they don’t even feel human? Dogs in animal shelters are given clean water and good food full of all the vitamins and nutrients to ensure they are healthy. IDOC feeds us a diet below nutritional standards, and food that is old, stale, and sometimes rotten. Dogs at a shelter get walked every day. We get to go outside twice a week—and only if enough staff show up for them to run the yard. If dogs were given contaminated and potentially deadly water, protesters would line the streets. We are given contaminated and potentially deadly water every day and the state does not care. Our water is not only bad for our physical health, but for our mental health as well. The people here know that they’re valued less than a dog.

Fresh, reliable drinking water is a basic human right—one that most people take for granted. Every day we drink the water from our faucets without a second thought.

Imagine how it feels to gamble with your health and your life every time you’re thirsty. No one should have to worry about dying from their drinking water. The real casino is right here in IDOC. We gamble every day.

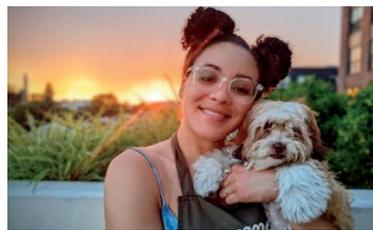
@Chicago_Reader

What makes a co-op a co-op?

Since it opened in 2009, the Dill Pickle Food Co-op has been a community staple in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood and beyond. But what makes a co-op a co-op? We spoke with Dill Pickle general manager I'Talia McCarthy to learn about her personal connection to the cooperative world, and the values of community, sustainability, and environmentalism that drive Dill Pickle and likeminded stores around the country.

What drew you to working in co-ops?

I fell in love with cooperatives at a very young age. I was born and raised in northern California, and I was introduced to the cooperative world at age three. My dad is an immigrant from Antigua and Barbuda, and one of his first jobs after coming to the United States was volunteering at the Davis Food Co-op; he later managed and ran the deli department. During my childhood I was fortunate enough to see the co-op take the time and resources to train, develop, and invest in their employees' growth and education. I applied to be a cashier at Davis Food Co-op when I turned 18. I worked there for ten years in various capacities while earning my bachelor's degree in history, and later my teaching credential and my master's in education. After serving as the store manager for a couple of years, I left in 2018 to help run New Leaf Community Markets (a B-Corp Certified Organization, not a Co-op) in Santa Cruz. Though I planned on staying at New Leaf Community Markets for quite some time, I soon received an email from Dill Pickle expressing that they heard I'd moved on from my old co-op and they were looking for a new general manager. I was super intrigued by the idea of running a more urban and diverse community store so I decided to go for it.



What should people know about co-ops compared to traditional shopping?

Co-ops are people working together for better food, stronger communities, and a healthier world. However, the most unique and important thing about them is that they are democratically run and owned by consumers like you and I—not investors. I'm proud to be one of the 1.3 million members nationwide. Because of co-ops, communities can find meat that is sustainably raised and products that have been grown or made within 100 miles of where they live. (The average co-op purchases goods from 51 local farms and 106 other local producers.) Co-operatives are also super diligent about recycling plastics, cardboard, and food waste. They carry three times more locally sourced products, donate more than three times as much annual income to charity, and sell more organic goods than conventional grocers while prioritizing employee wages and benefits.

What makes the Dill Pickle and its community so unique?

Cooperatives are businesses that are democratically controlled and financed, enabling community members to collectively fill local needs, and as a cooperative, the Dill Pickle has sustainability and concern for the community built right into its DNA.

Read the rest of the story online at chicagoreader.com/dillpicklevalues.
Stop by their Logan Square store at 2746 N. Milwaukee.

This sponsored content is paid for by The Dill Pickle Food Co-op

ARE YOU READY FOR SOME FOOTBALL!?

It's a summer of **Monday Night Football** 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.

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 @diasporadinner

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

On the south side, a quest to



Ernest Radcliffe has coached the Morgan Park Mustangs for 15 seasons. ✓
ZAHID KHALIL

Black baseball

keep
alive

As the game's popularity declines nationwide, the Morgan Park Mustangs are a beacon for the future of the sport.

By **MATTHEW RITCHIE**

There's nothing out of the ordinary about Morgan Park High School's baseball field. The beige dirt is arranged in the traditional diamond shape, with intermittent cracks and crevices befitting the average city baseball field. The grass is a lush, deep green, in great shape for the middle of April, thanks to months of rain and snow. The outfield's fence distances are uneven: the left-field foul line wanders into the school's softball diamond, while the right-field expanse is halted only by a chain-link fence.

When I walk up to the field on the far south side on a Saturday afternoon this spring, I'm treated to an intrasquad scrimmage—Mustangs vs. Mustangs—after the opposing team pulled out of a scheduled game. The energy and decibel level is that of rival teams: their chirps and laughs can be heard from down Vincennes Avenue, lighting up the atmosphere of the sleepy street corner. But it's just the Mustangs varsity team, wrapped in orange-and-green hoodies to ward off the extended Chicago winter. Looking around the field reveals a rare sight in high school baseball: every single person, whether it be a coach or player, is Black.

Just 6 percent of Black high school students in cities choose to play baseball. In that context, Morgan Park's varsity team is an enclave keeping the sport alive for Black teenagers. The varsity team has morphed into a beacon of consistency, becoming a national model for what Black high school baseball can achieve. Their history is woven into the fabric of the Chicago Public League (the athletic body for Chicago Public Schools) and its vaunted Jackie Robinson South conference.



Radcliffe (center) and players at an April game against the Gwendolyn Brooks Eagles. **MATTHEW RITCHIE**



In 2021, they captured the city championship for the second time in the school's history, rising above their fiercest rival, the Simeon Career Academy Wolverines, in a two-day war. This year, their on-field goal remains the same.

"Our goal every year is to win a city championship and state championship," head coach Ernest Radcliffe tells me over the phone. "We've come close: we've won a few city championships. We were in the state Final Four in 2016. After winning the championship in 2021, we went deep in the state tournament, won the regional championship, and lost the sectional championship."

Radcliffe's lofty goals for his youthful charges make sense: he's been at the helm for each of Morgan Park's titles. Towering over the rest of the field's denizens like a proud redwood tree, he looms behind home plate, barely protected by the flimsy net screen situated near the catcher. He's an expert at balancing his stern urges with playfulness when necessary, allowing his toothy smile to break through whenever his charges crack jokes. From behind his makeshift shield, Radcliffe acts as an umpire and a teacher. His raspy voice booms out so that even the outfielders can hear him without issue. When the freshman pair of Jayvion Price and Jairen Horton mess up their base coverage assignments, Radcliffe emerges to firmly correct their snafu. Price and Horton's eyes are turned upwards, dead set on following Radcliffe's orders: not out of fear, but out of respect. When he says something once, the team refuses to disappoint him again.

"He gets you whatever you need and all that extra," Horton says. "You can look back at a bunch of things and think, 'Oh Radcliffe taught me that, Radcliffe showed me that.'"

Radcliffe, who played in the Saint Louis Cardinals minor-league organization, is the nephew of Negro Leagues legend Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe. He devotes the entirety of his days each spring to the Mustangs. His time and effort aren't wasted. Each of the 18 or so kids who make up the varsity baseball team holds a love for the game that erupts whenever they step on the field. During the scrimmage, the intensity is just as high as it would be during their upcoming conference matchups. It needs to be. Due to rain and snow postponing multiple games, the Mustangs face a mid-April stretch that has them playing five games in seven days, dropping them right into the thick of their CPL slate. Their 4-1 record at this point is nothing to scoff at, but it certainly doesn't mean that the job is done yet. "When you're the champions, you definitely have the bullseye on your back," Radcliffe says.

Radcliffe's youngest son, Jacoby, stands high atop the pitcher's mound, ready to try and mow down his friends and teammates. He's average height and no more than 150 pounds soaking wet, but he possesses a steely assuredness and unflinching self-confidence that sets him apart. From the mound, the loneliest spot on the baseball diamond, the de facto team leader warms up while withstanding chirps from every angle.

"We finna get you this time, Coby," his best friend, Preston Jones Jr., and Collin Williams

yell as they prepare to face the senior Southern University commit. His father's voice booms from behind the plate, shouting, "I'm not giving you any extra calls just because you're my boy!"

As he strikes out the first two teammates he encounters, Jacoby takes a momentary victory lap. "Sit yo ass down boy!" erupts from his wiry frame as he blows an 85-mph fastball past his talented counterparts. It all feels routine to him, shaping up to be another instance where the status quo remains the same and the coach's son dominates.

But when shortstop Jayvion ropes a single to left field off of Jacoby, the practice grinds to a halt. The hitters explode from the dugout, mobbing Jayvion and roasting Jacoby, shouting "the kid got you!" Coach Radcliffe's boisterous laugh echoes alongside his players' roars, with every member of the team basking in the joys of the children's game. The pressures of repeating their 2021 championship are forgotten, and Black happiness is the only thing that matters, if only for a brief second.

"I've heard it so many times, but I love it when we go out of town to these tournaments," says David Husband, the grandfather of Mustang pitcher Kion Williams. "It's rare to see an all-African-American team play at a high level and compete against the best."

Even if the old adage is trite in the realm of baseball, the Mustangs play the game the right way. The fundamentals of the sport have been drilled into their heads. Every hitter, from Jacoby at the top of the lineup to

sophomore right fielder Lewis Dean in the nine-spot, is able to bunt and handle the bat in pivotal situations. Anytime a player reaches base, Radcliffe has them off and running, stealing bases and wreaking havoc on the opposing team's defense. In an early-season game, a non-conference win against Leo High School, junior left fielder Kyle Hudson-Duff totaled five stolen bases by himself. This style of play is no accident: it's rooted in the legacy of Black baseball, reaching all the way back to the Negro Leagues.

"Often historians point to the fact that it was a faster game in general," says Ray Doswell, a historian and the vice president of curatorial services at the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. "In fact, they did have a lot of heavy hitters with power, but they also had a lot of speed guys: base-to-base play was something that was very important. This was something Rube Foster emphasized with his founding of the Chicago American Giants."

When I mention Morgan Park and coach Radcliffe, Doswell immediately recognizes his name and tracks the coach's lineage back to the glory days of Negro League baseball in Chicago. "Double Duty" played on the Chicago American Giants for three different stints between 1934 and 1950. "There are stories of Foster making sure they did lots of bunting drills: that circles would be put in different spaces from home plate and making sure that they hit those targets. He would also fine his players \$5 if they didn't slide into a base."

Radcliffe's uncle and father introduced him to baseball by the time he was five years old

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and taught him everything they knew about the sport. Armed with the tools of the ancestors, Morgan Park forges ahead to defend their city championship title. To do so, they'll have to claw their way through the Jackie Robinson South conference—one filled with fierce rivals such as Simeon, who they bested in the championship last year, Kenwood High School, and Gwendolyn Brooks College Preparatory Academy.

Made up of primarily south-side public and preparatory high schools, this section of the Chicago Public League serves as a proving ground for majority-Black baseball teams to battle for supremacy. For some games, like those between Morgan Park and Simeon, almost every kid on the field is Black. It's a vestige of the Great Migration, in which Black people emigrated from southern states to northern cities between the late 1880s and the 1920s, and the years of segregation in the north that followed it and persisted to this day, leaving schools like Morgan Park and Simeon 97.1 percent and 98.2 percent Black, respectively.

Morgan Park and Simeon are situated mere miles away from each other, and have a decades-long, red-hot rivalry fueled by proximity and familiarity.

"We all play travel ball together, but CPS is just different," Jacoby says. "It's just so competitive. Everybody is chirping. When we play our rivals, Simeon, we know it's going to be tough. They'll talk you out of your game."

On a chilly afternoon in early May, the Mustangs travel to Simeon in the midst of a poorly timed losing streak. They'd dropped five straight conference games to Brooks, Lindblom, and Kenwood, each as heartbreaking as the last. Defensive errors and lapses in offensive production plagued them, putting them in sixth place with four conference games to go. But the games against Simeon have different energy. The Wolverines' turf field runs up against the sidewalk behind the school, forcing the dugouts to be right next to home plate.

When Jacoby steps up to the plate in the first inning and takes a fastball down the middle for a called strike, "That's one!" echoes from the Simeon dugout. The Mustangs will not have an inch of comfort in the batter's box. It's the type of energy Jacoby warned about, but was unafraid to confront when the moment came. After senior pitcher Damarion Redmond sets down Simeon in the bottom half of the inning, verbal sparring continues,

with the Mustangs' blazing orange jerseys acting as a foil to the Wolverines' piercing blues as they crossed paths. Even as the frigid temperatures persist, the heated rivalry lights up both teams at every turn, making each turning point feel like the linchpin for a pivotal championship game.

The game is nerve-wracking, even to the neutral observer. It's certainly elevated by the capacity crowd on either side, as Morgan Park and Simeon fans have made it feel like an intense pickup game at a family reunion. In the fifth inning, right fielder Lewis Dean singled, stole second, and advanced to third on a wild pitch. Each time he took off, the Mustang parents and dugout alike exploded in excitement. It's the brand of baseball that they play, and it's a joy to watch and be a part of at every turn, especially when it results in runs scored. In the end, it's not enough, as they drop the game to Simeon 4-2: but even in defeat, the moments still resonate.

"My boy's played for other teams, but I really like Radcliffe, I like this program, I just like this," Lewis's father James Dean says to me while I sit next to him and his partner Areesha. "I wanted him to race motorcycles, and now he wants to swing a bat. And now I'll rush home from work to see this, just to see them play."

"We love it, they're having fun, doing well, thriving," Areesha says. "They've got aspirations to play college ball, I love it. Lewis really loves the game. I love what he loves, and he loves the game."

Morgan Park's previous championship success aligns with CPL's campaign to keep baseball growing in Chicago's majority-Black neighborhoods. A pivotal figure in this push is the organization's regional director, Eddie Curry, who has been in the role on and off for 23 years. After rejoining CPL in 2013, Curry now oversees 80 varsity teams across the city. Teams consisting of a majority of Black players hold a special place in his heart.

"I want them to see people get out and come from a school like Englewood High School, go to college and choose to be at a Black university, that it can be done," Curry says to me in late May as we sit together at Wrigley Field, the host site for the city championship. "My favorite part is seeing the growth and how much they pick up skill-wise. And if you notice, we don't really have trouble and bad kids playing baseball for us."

Baseball clearly has had a grounding

"I've heard it so many times, but I love it when we go out of town to these tournaments. It's rare to see an all-African-American team play at a high level and compete against the best."

—David Husband, grandfather of Mustang pitcher Kion Williams

impact in CPS communities: in 2021, all 11 seniors from the Morgan Park championship team graduated, with nine of them going on to play college baseball. That's why Curry and CPL put an emphasis on growing the game from an early stage in the kids' lives. They are piloting an elementary school baseball and softball program this year, primarily in south- and west-side neighborhoods, in order to jumpstart interest and development in the sports. Curry says he believes that it will go a long way in closing the advantage that north-side schools inherently hold.

"They've got more pitching on the north side, just by the fact they have more arms to go to," Curry says. "We've got champions on the south side. But when you look at a school like Lane Tech, they've got 30 kids in the dugout. It's more about depth, more of their kids want to play baseball."

The north side-south side interactions on the field occur in out-of-conference games or in the city playoffs, where the stakes are highest. After Morgan Park trounce the Senn Bulldogs 21-3 in the first round of this year's city playoffs, they make the trip north to face the Walter Payton Prep Grizzlies. The game is

played at Seward Park, in the infamously gentrified near north side Cabrini-Green neighborhood, in the shadow of Payton's buildings, which has one of the highest percentages of white students in the public system at 40.8 percent. The field does not seem fit for a city playoff game: it has no pitcher's mound, and it encroaches upon softball diamonds on both sides of the outfield.

There's no visible difference in the way these teams prepare. Both run through defensive drills with impressive efficiency, exhibiting a laser focus far beyond their years. The split begins with the first pitch. On the Morgan Park side, up and down the bench, each and every coach is loud. Their regal button-down forest green jerseys, emblazoned with fiery orange lining and a bold "MP" on the chest, make it feel as though they've arrived to handle serious business. Whether it's an assistant coach rooting for the batter or Radcliffe pacing the field and barking orders at the defense, the Mustangs will be heard. Respectability politics and timidity go out the window—it's time to win. They'll talk shit, letting you hear about it, making sure you never forget your mistake. After Jacoby reaches on an error to start the game, he steals second, and scores after Preston laces a single to right, just like they drew it up. A 1-0 lead in the most important game of their season.

This intensity and confidence translate to the defensive side of the ball. Jacoby is on the mound, just as he was during intrasquad, throwing to fellow senior Kendall Garland behind the plate. Freedom and fun are flowing. Jacoby is dealing, racking up strikeouts, while the defense is flying around him, throwing out base runners as they try to move around the basepaths. All the while, the Payton players and coaches are quiet as can be, silenced by the energy Morgan Park has brought to their backyard.

But after a particularly biting spell of Mustang heckling, the Payton first-base coach comments on Morgan Park's abilities to play baseball. He's within earshot of the Morgan Park fans. A couple of the team's dads, including James Dean, immediately tell him to cut it out and focus on the game. The exchange devolves into a battle of the masculine wills, and the first-base coach turns his back to the field completely. The spectators' focus shifts away from their children to the ugly display of machismo occurring in front of them.

The first-base coach squares up and says, with an air of superiority, "We're here to play

NEWS & POLITICS

baseball, y'all do what you do. We're here to play baseball." The statement strikes a nerve. It echoes a sentiment Black people encounter whenever they step into a white-dominated space: you don't belong. It's the attitude that drives Black kids and families away from the sport at all ages. Before it escalates any further, the umpire and a Morgan Park assistant coach command the Payton staffer to leave their fans alone.

But the line has already been crossed: "That's why we don't want to lose to them—they've got that privilege in them," James Dean mutters under his breath.

Still, the Mustangs play a focused game. After a disastrous fourth inning where they give up seven runs, they crawl back within one, making it 7-6 going into the bottom of the sixth. But when Payton sends a fly ball deep to center field, Jacoby chases it all the way back, across a softball field, until he collides with the black chain-link fence and drops to the ground as the Payton players round the bases. His teammates and coaching staff sprint across the field to help him. Time stops for every Black person there, eyes

locked on the horizon, waiting for Jacoby to pop up, like he always did. After an eternity of five minutes, he slowly rises and shakes off the hardest collision I'd ever seen. When he snaps out of his malaise, the score is 9-6, Grizzlies.

And that's how the game would end. An inning later, Morgan Park was eliminated from the city playoffs, ending their quest to repeat before it could truly flourish. There's no tone of regret or anger, just sadness for the result. That sadness comes from a belief in the Mustangs' ability to repeat as champions, from pride in the way that they played and competed every day. Each member of that program cared deeply about the result, stemming from a love for each other and the game they played together.

"You know we didn't give up, it was a tough situation," coach Radcliffe said to me after the team broke from their postgame circle. "I just want them to stay positive, it was a hell of a game.

"We fought like champions." 🏆

🐦 @mkrwrt



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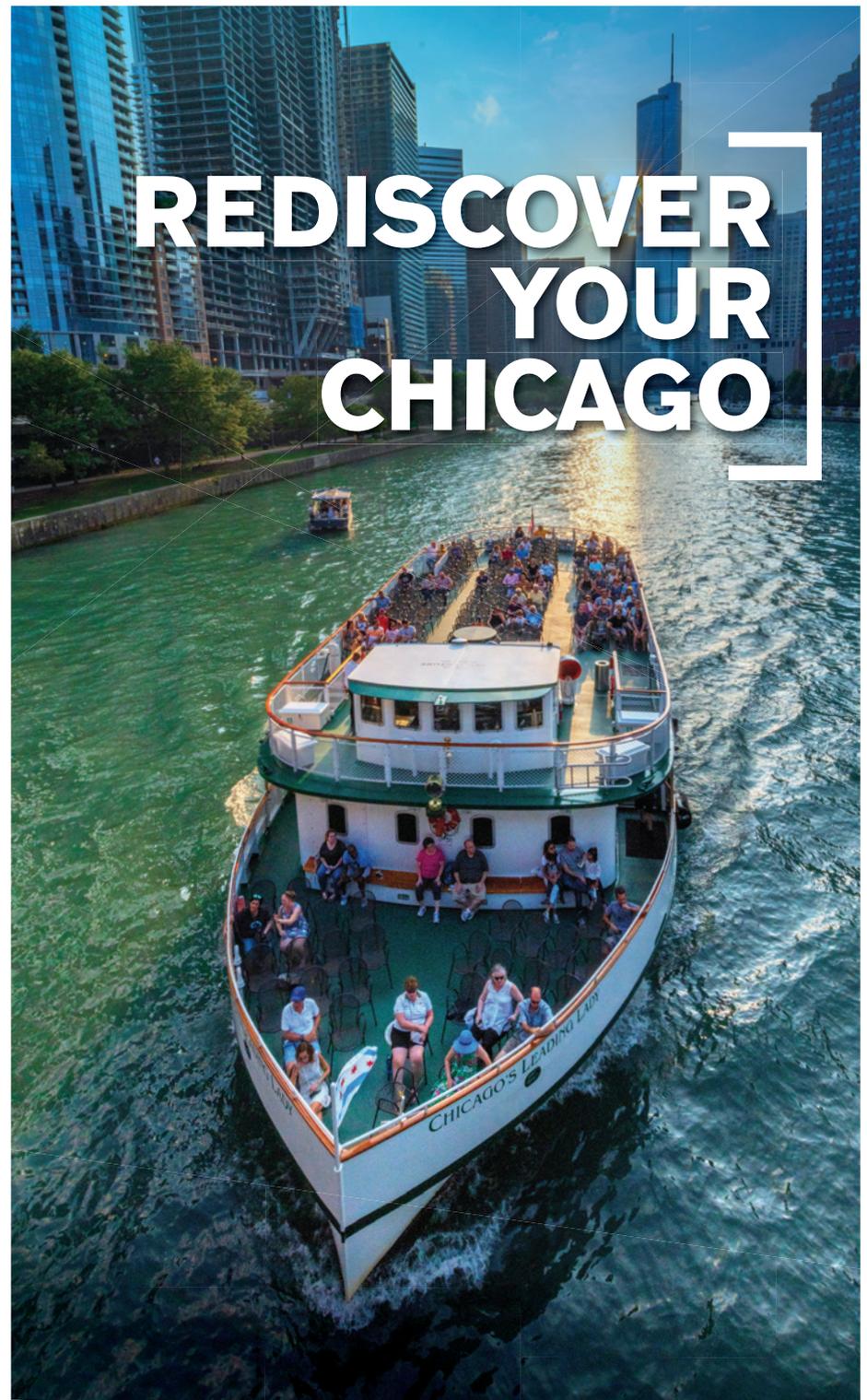


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WNBA

Bring Brittney home

Brittney Griner, imprisoned in Russia, was honored at the All-Star Weekend.

BY MAYA GOLDBERG-SAFIR



Brittney Griner was everywhere at the 2022 WNBA All-Star Weekend in Chicago. On July 9 and 10, all around Wintrust Arena in the South Loop, you could see her initials, BG, printed in block letters onto T-shirts, her name scrawled across homemade signs. And at the game itself, all 22 players emerged from the locker room after halftime in matching Griner jerseys, paying tribute to the honorary all-star. The crowd roared in response.

Griner wasn't there physically, of course. She is still in a prison cell outside Moscow.

The saga of her detainment began in February, when Griner flew to Russia to play with UMMC Ekaterinburg, a team she'd first signed with in 2014. There was nothing unusual about this arrangement: nearly half of the WNBA's 144-person roster spend their off-seasons playing overseas to earn higher wages. That's because the league's "super-max" base salary is capped at \$228,294, even for the superstars.

Until this year, Ekaterinburg was considered a kind of crown jewel in overseas contracts because of its deep pockets. Griner has played there for more than seven years, in a city not far from Siberia, with WNBA superstars Sue Bird and Diana Taurasi, as well as the Chicago Sky's own Allie Quigley and Courtney Vandersloot.

But what should have been another routine trip to Russia was different. On February 17, Griner was arrested after customs agents at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport allegedly found vape cartridges containing cannabis oil in her luggage. Days later, Russia invaded Ukraine.

When news of Griner's arrest broke on March 5, Russian media released a grainy airport video and a single mugshot of the basketball star. They also denied her access to representatives from the U.S. embassy, a basic right for any American arrested overseas, for five weeks. Two months later, on May 3, the U.S. State Department formally classified Griner as wrongfully detained. On the Fourth of July, she wrote a letter to President Biden pleading for help.

But that didn't end her imprisonment. Now, Griner's freedom depends on a high-stakes political negotiation between the United States and Russia, with the Kremlin promising to use "maximalist" demands in exchange for her release. If convicted, which is nearly certain in wrongful detainment

HALEY TWEEDELL

“Narratives that criminalize a six-foot-nine Black lesbian come easy for mainstream media here in the United States.”

cases (nevermind Russia’s conviction rate of over 99 percent), she faces up to ten years in prison.

This is the brutal reality of hostage diplomacy that the world of women’s basketball has come to know over nearly five months. And at the first-ever All-Star Weekend in Chicago, it inspired overwhelming, community-wide support. But this rallying cry, and the insistence of Griner’s superstar legacy on and off the court, is at risk of being drowned out by a growing media frenzy.

All-Star Games often lack the defensive tenacity typical of the regular season, making them the perfect opportunity to slam an easy bucket. So throughout Griner’s seven WNBA All-Star appearances—the real appearances, in physical form—she’s had a habit of dunking. During the 2019 All-Star Game in Las Vegas, buoyed by fans’ cheers, she dunked three times. On the final dunk, Griner hung from the rim and playfully stuck her tongue out, leading to raucous applause.

This is Griner’s power: as a player, and as a person, her energy and strength are infectious. “She’s just someone who’s always happy, always coming in the gym just full of life,” Allie Quigley told the Athletic in May. “She’s [6’9”], but her personality is even bigger than that.”

And women’s basketball fans have watched her blossom over the years. In 2013, when Griner was first drafted by the Phoenix Mercury as the number one overall pick, she was still a sometimes-shy college student, itching for life beyond campus. In part, that’s because at Baylor University, in Waco, Texas, Griner was explicitly told to keep her sexuality as a lesbian hidden from public view, behind closed doors. When she later spoke publicly about the experience, she said, “No matter how much support I felt as a basketball player at Baylor, it still doesn’t erase all the pain I felt there.”

As Griner began openly embracing her identity, she also encouraged others to do the same. In the WNBA, she has become known for her advocacy around mental health. In 2021, she told reporters, “We really don’t talk

about our feelings. . . . That’s something that hurts us as a society. It’s something that’s going to change with more athletes speaking up about it.”

This is the Brittney Griner women’s basketball fans had come to know: driven by the will not only to succeed on the court, but to help others. This is the person who has been missing from the sport for over 150 days.

July 10 was a gorgeous summer day in Chicago. For die-hard WNBA fans and Sky season ticket holders like Rochelle Huber and Taylor Roberts of Uptown, “it was like a cherry on top after winning the championship last year.” Huber and Roberts celebrated All-Star Weekend alongside the players, splurging on a suite at the JW Marriott across from Wintrust. “I don’t think it stopped being a party all weekend—for us, or for the players,” Huber said. By 10:30 AM on Sunday morning, the couple had joined thousands of “ready to go” fans outside the arena. They streamed through the doors a full 90 minutes before tip-off, filling the stands and buying out the merch booths. “It was completely packed. It was completely packed,” Roberts said.

By noon, there were nearly 10,000 people in attendance. Inside Wintrust, the lights dimmed and the top stars in the league—including four players from the World Champion Chicago Sky—stood as all-stars under the bright lights.

The final player, named an honorary all-star by the league, was absent.

But suddenly, there she was. Griner’s 6’9” frame, magnified on the Jumbotron. Fans, including Huber and Roberts, were ready. “BG is always at the forefront,” said Huber. “It’s the one issue that unites everyone.” Around them, in the stands, scores of people wore T-shirts, many of them homemade, with the slogan “We Are BG.” Hundreds of others wore “Free Brittney Griner Now” pins. Signs insisting “Bring Brittney Home” waved in the air.

And the WNBA’s message even reached through the walls of prison. Days after the game, at her last court hearing on July 15, Griner brought with her a printed-out photo-

graph of her teammates, all wearing number 42. She held the photograph within the metal cage in the courtroom, where she sits during trial proceedings.

According to the James W. Foley Foundation, an organization that advocates for American hostages held abroad, there are more than 60 Americans wrongfully detained overseas. In wrongful detainment cases, it’s considered lucky when someone comes home within months, and it’s typical for such imprisonment to stretch for years. This leaves the families of detainees—hundreds of people—fighting for their loved one’s freedom over unimaginably long periods of time. Now, the wrongful detainment community also includes thousands of players, coaches, and fans from the WNBA.

But there’s a striking difference between how Griner is recognized by her own community and how she has been portrayed in mainstream media.

Before her detainment in February, Griner was relatively unknown to the general public, despite her accomplishments. The lack of coverage by mainstream media outlets of her superstar career made her initial arrest seem to many as a kind of baffling blip in the news cycle.

But for those who knew Griner, the arrest was shocking, unprecedented, and overwhelming. Initially, her family and teammates followed the State Department’s advice to remain quiet, which is typical in these cases. Making noise, the government warned, could only worsen her situation, provoke Russian President Vladimir Putin’s temper, and turn Griner into a political pawn.

At the same time, experts like Gissou Nia, director of the Atlantic Council’s Strategic Litigation Project, sounded the alarm. “Is Brittney Griner a Russian hostage?” she wrote for NBC News on April 12. “What we know about her detention doesn’t support the theory that this was just a routine arrest.” Nia cited several hallmarks of a wrongful detainment in her case: the denial of consular access, a basic right for any foreign national detained; the strikingly timed invasion of Ukraine one week after her arrest; the lack of physical evidence despite the severity of the charge.

And yet, across major U.S. outlets, Griner’s story remained tucked into short backpage paragraphs, even once Griner was officially classified as “wrongfully detained” in May.

But after Griner’s trial began on July 1,

media coverage exploded.

Experts say that in the case of wrongful detainment, the legal system is often weaponized and used as a kind of Trojan horse for state-sponsored hostage-taking. Many have warned that Griner faces a “kangaroo court” where the outcome is puppeteered from above. Wrongful detainment advocates such as Jonathan Franks are familiar with this pattern. Franks, a crisis management consultant who has worked closely on several wrongful detainment cases, recently helped to free former Marine Trevor Reed, who was imprisoned in Russia for over two years. “Wrongful detentions are never resolved judicially,” Franks says. “They’re resolved politically. . . . This is not a court and it’s not going to conduct a trial. It’s going to conduct a PR and propaganda exercise for the [Russian] regime.”

But the logic of a “trial” has a bewitching quality. And as Griner’s case turns into a media spectacle, many U.S. outlets are simply reprinting the Russian government’s narrative with headlines like “WNBA star Brittney Griner Stands Trial in Russia on Drug Charge” and “Brittney Griner’s Trial on Drug Charges Formally Begins in Russia.” This framing adds legitimacy to what is widely known to be a sham. The evidence Griner is being railroaded is clear: on July 7, prosecutors testified that Griner was carrying only a fraction of a gram of hashish oil in her luggage. And yet, she faces up to a decade in prison for “large-scale transportation of drugs.”

Now, millions of Americans are coming to know Griner as a detainee in handcuffs, hunched over, led through a Moscow courthouse by armed guards. The optics of incarceration make a particular kind of sense to American audiences. It’s something we should assume Putin’s regime is aware of as well. Narratives that criminalize a six-foot-nine Black lesbian come easy for mainstream media here in the United States.

That’s also what makes the legacy of the first-ever WNBA All-Star Weekend in Chicago so important. It revealed a cathartic outpouring of support from Griner’s community of loved ones and fans. And it sent a direct message of solidarity to a superstar imprisoned halfway around the world, a message much bigger than basketball.

As Huber put it: “BG is our number-one priority this season.” 

 @mayags

THE SALE OF DOUGLASS PARK

A promise worth keeping

Youth soccer coach Ernie Alvarez recounts his days in Douglass Park.

BY KELLY GARCIA

On a humid summer afternoon at the playground near 19th and California, 67-year-old Ernie Alvarez sat serenely under the blazing sun. The longtime youth soccer coach reminisced about his beloved Little Village, the neighborhood he's called home for more than half a century. His soft eyes were fixed on the damaged soccer field before him.

Next to Alvarez was his teal road bike. His neon orange safety vest hung over his shoulders. Every once in a while he'd wipe beads of sweat from his forehead with a napkin. As we talked, I watched as his gaze wandered back to his younger days at Douglass Park.

Alvarez was born in a small rural town in Texas in 1955. When he was ten years old, his parents, like many other Mexican immigrants in the mid-1960s, relocated to Chicago in search of jobs. They settled in what was known then as South Lawndale.

South Lawndale was mostly Czech and Polish immigrants who worked manufacturing jobs at the nearby large factories. Steadily, the growing Mexican population—forced out of neighboring Pilsen because of Mayor Richard J. Daley's plans to expand the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) campus—began moving in.

Meanwhile, across the BNSF railroad embankment that separates the two communities, Black residents in North Lawndale were replacing the predominantly Jewish population. At the time, it was one of the few neighborhoods in the city where Black people were allowed to buy homes—through exploitative contracts. The neighborhood underwent financial collapse, the effects of which are still evident today.

South Lawndale's white ethnic residents renamed the neighborhood Little Village because they didn't want to be associated with the growing Black community next door.

For Alvarez, growing up amid such volatility was a culture shock. He was frequently getting into fights at his new school. After two days, he refused to go back, so his parents placed him in Catholic school. He eventually made some friends and started playing in a

Mexican baseball league at Douglass Park. He distinctly remembers the name of the team he used to play for: the Chicanos.

Once every few weeks, the teams would gather at the baseball field in Douglass Park to play (the baseball diamond is no longer there). Other weeks they would go up north to Humboldt Park or down to Piotrowski Park. Alvarez's favorite memory was playing against a tall Puerto Rican kid who was sent by another group of kids to beat him up.

"He ended up liking me though, and we became friends," he said, laughing.

Alvarez has plenty of fond memories of the park, but he also recalled some troubled moments. During his youth, racial tension was high between the Mexican people in Little Village and the Black people in North Lawndale. Over time, Douglass Park, which splits evenly down Ogden Avenue, became the front lines of a turf war between gangs. Some of that tension still lingers today.

"There was a lot of that when I was younger," Alvarez said, pointing at red police tape blocking off a portion of the park yards away. Just hours before near the playground, a young man was shot and killed while waiting in his car for his mom to finish her doctor's appointment. The reason behind the shooting is still unclear.

In 2001, Alvarez took a buyout from his job at a management company where he worked as an in-house auditor. After some time off, he decided to become an ESL instructor for parents. That's where he learned about an opportunity to become a youth soccer coach.

"The guy they originally hired for the job couldn't handle the kids," Alvarez recalled. "So they asked me to do it and I said I'd only do it for one season."

Alvarez didn't know what he was in for. He remembers coaching his first group of fifth-graders and realizing that none of them could read. So, he vowed to teach them. The deal was that if the kids practiced writing something every week, he'd take them to play soccer at Douglass Park on Fridays.

Over time, their reading levels improved.



Muddy tire ruts and dry patches at a soccer field in Douglass Park. © KELLY GARCIA

clear to Alvarez that his young soccer players would not be able to use the park this summer.

Now they're forced to play at ChiTown, a private indoor sports facility in Pilsen. Alvarez helps cover the program's registration fees so long as his students keep writing. The kids, he said, are just happy they have somewhere to play in the summer.

During his free time, Alvarez stays up-to-date with any actions taking place to save Douglass Park. In 2015, when the first music festival, Riot Fest, moved in, Alvarez was not shy to voice his concerns. His supervisor connected him to a group of residents who were beginning to organize against the music festival.

Since then, he's been one of many members of Concerned Citizens of Riot Fest in Douglass Park. The original purpose of the group was to fight against one summer music festival moving into their neighborhood and now, seven years later, the park is the site of three, including Summer Smash in early June and Heatwave last weekend. The organizers argue that aside from the damage the music festivals cause to the park, the money they make from selling tickets (and, allegedly, parking spots) doesn't get back into the hands of the community. Instead it stays in the pocket of the local alderpeople.

Alvarez joins the community meetings when he can. He believes change is on the horizon. In May, Alderperson Michael Scott of North Lawndale abruptly resigned from his post (only to be replaced by his sister). Alderperson George Cardenas, who represents Little Village, recently won the democratic primary race for Cook County Board of Review. For the first time in over two decades, the neighborhoods surrounding Douglass Park will be electing new council members to represent their interests.

Though he's angered by the damage done to the park and the lack of attention from city officials, Alvarez remains hopeful that his young soccer players will once again be able to play at Douglass Park.

"It's not going to happen overnight," Alvarez said. "It's not going to be easy, but we're going to need everyone." 📍

He started challenging his students to get creative with their writing and soon enough they were entering poetry slams. The first year was tough: none of his students came back with trophies. He was shocked to hear the kids refer to themselves as a "bunch of losers from Little Village."

He decided to return the next year—and the year after.

Sixteen years later, Alvarez is still the youth soccer coach. Through a wide grin, he boasts about the seven youth poets who've won the national poetry slam. He's mentored hundreds of kids, including the children of kids he mentored years before. Some have even grown up to teach alongside him.

"I'm so proud of them," he said, wiping tears away from his cheeks. "They're the ones who've grounded me. They gave me a purpose. I have to keep my promise to them."

Through no fault of Alvarez, keeping that promise is getting harder and harder to do. Across the playground, the soccer field at Douglass Park is crisscrossed by muddy tire tracks and pockmarked with bald, dry patches. The damaged condition of the field means players are prone to twisting their ankles in the muddy divots or suffering abrasions from sliding on the dry patches.

It's been a week since the first music festival of the summer took place and it's only a matter of days before crews begin setting up for the next one. In late May, it became

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LA VENTA DE DOUGLASS PARK

Una promesa que vale cumplir

Un entrenador de fútbol juvenil comparte sus experiencias en de Douglass Park

POR KELLY GARCIA

En una tarde húmeda de verano en el patio de recreo cerca de la 19 y California, Ernie Alvarez, de 67 años, se sentó tranquilamente bajo las llamas del sol. El veterano entrenador de fútbol juvenil recordó su amado barrio de La Villita, el vecindario al que ha llamado hogar durante más de medio siglo. Sus tiernos ojos se fijaban en el campo de fútbol dañado frente a él.

Junto a Álvarez estaba su bicicleta verde azulada. Su chaleco de seguridad de naranja neón colgaba sobre sus hombros. De vez en cuando se limpiaba las gotas de sudor de la frente con una servilleta. Mientras hablábamos, vi como su mirada volvió a sus días de juventud en Douglass Park.

Álvarez nació en un pequeño pueblo rural de Texas en 1955. Cuando tenía 10 años, sus padres, como muchos otros inmigrantes mexicanos a mediados de la década de 1960, decidieron mudarse a Chicago en busca de trabajo. Se establecieron en lo que entonces se conocía como South Lawndale.

En ese momento, la población de South Lawndale estaba compuesta principalmente por inmigrantes checos y polacos que trabajaban en las grandes fábricas industriales. Poco a poco, la creciente población mexicana, forzada a abandonar su vecindario en Pilsen debido a los planes del Alcalde Richard J. Daley para expandir el campus de la Universidad de Illinois en Chicago (UIC), comenzó a mudarse a South Lawndale.

Mientras tanto, al otro lado de las vías férreas que separan los dos vecindarios, los residentes Afromericanos en North Lawndale estaban reemplazando a la población judía. En ese entonces, North Lawndale era uno de los pocos vecindarios en la ciudad en los que se permitía a los Afromericanos comprar casas, a través de contratos explotativos. El barrio sufrió un colapso financiero, cuyos efectos aún existen.

Los residentes europeos de South Lawndale le cambiaron el nombre a La Villita porque no querían ser asociados con la creciente comunidad Afromericana de al lado.

Para Álvarez, crecer en medio de tanta volat-

ilidad fue un choque cultural. Con frecuencia se metía en peleas en su nueva escuela. Después de dos días, negó regresar a la escuela, así que sus padres lo colocaron en una escuela católica. Con tiempo hizo algunos amigos y comenzó a jugar en una liga de béisbol mexicana en Douglass Park. Recuerda claramente el nombre del equipo en el que jugaba: los Chicanos.

Una vez cada pocas semanas, los equipos se reunían en el campo de béisbol de Douglass Park para jugar (el diamante de béisbol ya no está allí). Otras semanas iban al norte, al Parque Humboldt, o al Parque Piotrowski. El recuerdo favorito de Álvarez fue jugar contra un niño puertorriqueño y alto que fue enviado por otro grupo de niños para golpearlo.

“Pero le terminé gustando y nos hicimos amigos”, se rió.

Álvarez tiene muchos buenos recuerdos del parque, pero también recuerda algunos momentos difíciles. Durante su juventud, la tensión racial era alta entre los mexicanos de La Villita y los Afromericanos de North Lawndale. Con tiempo, Douglass Park, que se divide uniformemente por la avenida Ogden, se convirtió en el frente de batalla de una guerra territorial entre las pandillas. Parte de esa tensión aún persiste hoy.

“Había mucho de eso cuando era más joven”, dijo Álvarez, puntando a la cinta roja de policía que bloqueaba una parte de los patios del parque. Apenas unas horas antes, cerca del patio de recreo, un joven fue baleado mientras esperaba en su carro a que su madre terminara su cita con el médico. La razón detrás del asistente aún no ha sido aclarada.

En el 2001, Álvarez aceptó una compra de su trabajo en una empresa de administración donde trabajaba como auditor interno. Llevo un tiempo sin trabajo y luego decidió ser un instructor de inglés para padres. Ahí fue donde se enteró de una oportunidad de ser entrenador de fútbol juvenil.

“La persona que contrataron inicialmente no podía aguantar a los niños”, recordó Álvarez. “Entonces me pidieron que lo hiciera y dije que solo lo haría por una temporada”.

Álvarez no sabía en qué se metía. El recuerda



Ernie Alvarez
KELLY GARCIA

cuando entrenó a su primer grupo de alumnos de quinto grado y se dió cuenta que los niños no sabían leer. Entonces, juró enseñarles. El trato era que si los niños practicaban escribir algo cada semana, Alvarez los llevaría a jugar fútbol en Douglass Park los viernes.

Con el tiempo, sus niveles de lectura mejoraron. Alvarez comenzó a desafiar a sus alumnos a que sean más creativos con sus escrituras y pronto comenzaron a participar en concursos de poesía. El primer año fue duro: ninguno de sus alumnos volvió con trofeos. Se sorprendió al escuchar que los niños se referían a sí mismos como un “grupo de perdedores de La Villita”.

Decidió regresar al año siguiente, y al año siguiente.

Dieciséis años después, Álvarez sigue siendo el entrenador de fútbol juvenil. A través de una amplia sonrisa, presume de los siete jóvenes poetas que han ganado el concurso nacional de poesía. Ha sido mentor de cientos de alumnos, incluyendo de los hijos de los niños que ayudó para enseñar junto a él.

“Estoy tan orgulloso de ellos”, dijo Alvarez mientras se secaba las lágrimas de las mejillas. “Ellos son los que me han ayudado a ser una persona centrada y sensata. Me dieron un propósito. Tengo que cumplir mi promesa con ellos”.

Sin culpa de Álvarez, mantener esa promesa es cada vez más difícil de hacer. Al otro lado del patio de recreo, el campo de fútbol en Douglass Park está atravesado por huellas de llantas fangosas y lleno de parches calvas y secas. La condición dañada del campo significa que los jugadores son propensos a torcerse los tobillos, al tropezar con los parches secos o sufrir abrasiones.

Ha pasado una semana desde que se llevó a cabo el primer festival de música del verano y es solo cuestión de días antes de que los equipos comiencen a prepararse para el próximo. A finales de mayo, Álvarez tenía claro que sus jóvenes futbolistas no podrían usar el parque este verano.

Ahora están obligados a jugar en ChiTown, un centro deportivo privado en Pilsen. Álvarez ayuda a cubrir los gastos de la inscripción para

el programa siempre y cuando sus estudiantes sigan escribiendo. Los niños, dice Alvarez, están felices de tener un lugar para jugar en el verano.

Durante su tiempo libre, Álvarez se mantiene al tanto de las acciones que se llevan a cabo para salvar Douglass Park. En 2015, cuando comenzó el primer festival de música, Riot Fest, Álvarez no dudó en expresar sus preocupaciones. Su jefe lo conectó con un grupo de residentes que comenzaron a organizarse contra el festival.

Desde entonces, ha sido uno de los muchos miembros de Ciudadanos Preocupados del festival Riot Fest en Douglass Park. El propósito original del grupo era luchar contra un festival de música de verano que se instalaba en su vecindario y ahora, siete años después, el parque es el sitio de tres festivales. Los organizadores sostienen que además del daño que los festivales de música causan al parque, el dinero que ganan con la venta de boletos (y, supuestamente, lugares de estacionamiento) no vuelve a las manos de la comunidad. En cambio, se queda en el bolsillo de los concejales.

Álvarez participa en las reuniones comunitarias cuando puede. Él cree que un cambio llegará pronto. En mayo, el concejal Michael Scott de North Lawndale renunció de repente de su cargo (solo para ser reemplazado por su hermana). El concejal George Cárdenas, quien representa a La Villita, recientemente ganó la carrera en las elecciones primarias para la Junta de Revisión del Condado de Cook. Por primera vez en más de dos décadas, los vecindarios que rodean Douglass Park elegirán nuevos miembros del consejo para representar sus intereses.

Aunque está enojado por el daño causado al parque y la falta de atención de los funcionarios de la ciudad, Álvarez tiene esperanza de que sus jóvenes futbolistas puedan volver a jugar en Douglass Park.

“No va a suceder de la noche a la mañana,” dijo Alvarez. “No va ser fácil, pero vamos a necesitar a todos.”

@_KellyGarcia_

POETRY CORNER

Hourglass

By Sherren Olivia

If I had three wishes
I would only ask for one
Because the wish I have, I know is too large
Too big of a wish for one person
But I am willing to make the sacrifice
When I was younger
She taught me answers come through prayer
So, at sunrise and sunset
I close my eyes tight until static forms where the light once was and pray
“God, if you will only grant me one wish,
Please just save my mom”
As the weeks come and go
I feel her slip through my fingertips like loose sand
Each grain mimics a memory I’ve lost
I can no longer smell her perfume
The extravagant outfits don’t make appearances anymore
Fine lines of wisdom stretch across her face in sadness
I can’t help but question
How do you rescue someone from their body?
I need more time in the hourglass
Her emotions ever changing like a shallow hole near the shore
A hole that I could never fill
But I still try
In the morning, I’ll wrap myself in layers
Grab a large bucket to fill the hole
And pour into her until I have no more
Until the waters run dry,
but by then
Until then
God,
if you could grant me one wish
Please, save her

Poem curated by femdot. Rapper femdot. has continued to grow in his hometown of Chicago. His most recent projects Not For Sale and 94 Camry Music led to partnerships with brands like Toyota, lululemon, and the Chicago Bears along with two nationwide tours with Tobi Lou and SABA. He also started the 501c3 non-profit org Delacreme Scholars, which supplied free grocery delivery services, toy and coat drives, and college scholarships throughout the city.

Sherren Olivia also known as Ren is a Jamaican-American singer-songwriter raised in Chicago, IL. At an early age, she started singing in church, but it wasn’t until college that she considered singing as a profession. While obtaining her degree, she continued to make music with many local Chicago artists performing on stages such as Lollapalooza and several major venues in Chicago and LA. Her biggest inspiration comes from artists like Aaliyah, Jill Scott, and D’Angelo, who she attributes her initial desire to sing. In 2015, she released her first two singles on Soundcloud, *Come Home* and *Flower* (live at home). The songs quickly built traction. With the release of her awaited debut album *Oasis* gaining over 200,000 plays, this is only the beginning for Sherren Olivia.

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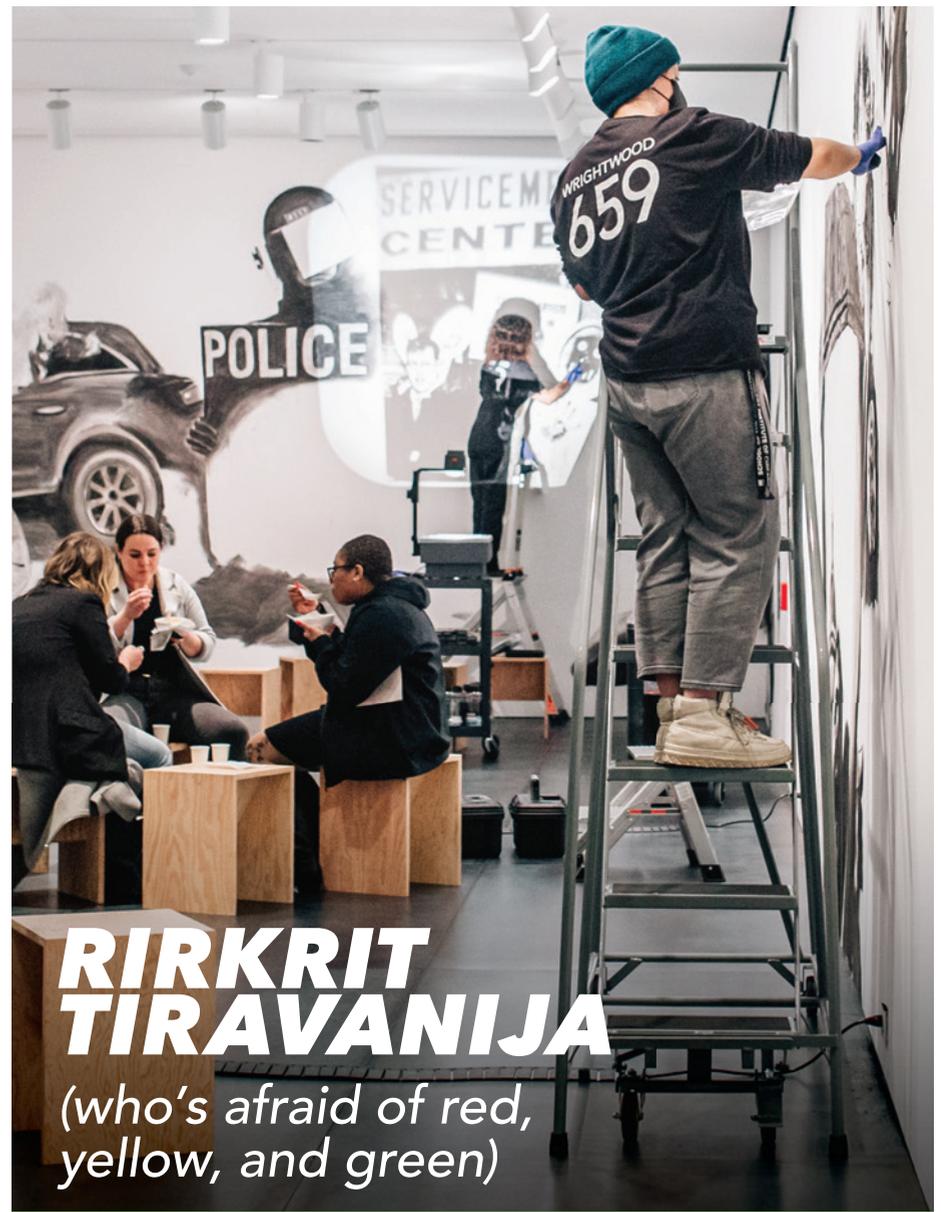
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IMAGE CREDIT: Installation view of *Rirkrit Tiravanija: (who's afraid of red, yellow, and green)* at Wrightwood 659, 2022, Alphawood Exhibitions LLC, Chicago. Photo: Aleya Cydney Photography.



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HIRSHHORN

Rirkrit Tiravanija: (who's afraid of red, yellow, and green) is organized by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.



Leonard Lerer and
the photobioreactor

MATTHEW GILSON FOR
CHICAGO READER

FOOD SCIENCE

Something magic's growing at Back of the Yards Algae Sciences

An unlikely team of bioprospectors is experimenting with the green stuff, psychedelic mushrooms, and toxic toads.

By **MIKE SULA**

Vivid green fluid silently courses down a vertical stack of cascading glass tubes on the third floor of the Plant, the sustainability-oriented Back of the Yards small business incubator where the meat-packer Peer Foods once processed industrial quantities of ham, bacon, and sausage in cavernous stainless steel smokers.

Nearby, spirulina-spiked Beyond Burgers sizzle and char on a flattop griddle, not far from a cart arrayed with ocean-blue chocolate truffles. Lab workers bustle about, occasionally swigging from tumblers of mushroom- and algae-enriched beer or seltzer. Amid them, Leonard Lerer, a slight, 62-year-old, South

African-born scientist washes hydroponically grown red leaf lettuce in a sink.

Leonard is soft-spoken, with a nasally Cape Town accent, and he's a bit of a mumbler. But he can also be forceful, direct, and animated when he's pitching his work to investors or making a point to a reporter. In this moment he's nearly shouting above the din. "The fact that we happen to be working with psychedelics is essentially because we have the expertise and the knowledge related to cellular agriculture," he says. "And that's it. I want to be absolutely clear, because otherwise I'm fucked. I never tried the shit. Never gonna try the shit. The only time I'll ever try the shit is if I have cancer and I'm about to die and I have terminal depression. Because I

believe in the shit."

The "shit" is the hallucinogenic compound psilocybin, extracted from psychedelic mushrooms, which are fruiting in large quantities on the same floor in secured, sterile, temperature-and-humidity-controlled grow rooms.

Lerer is the chief scientific officer of Back of the Yards Algae Sciences, a food-focused biotechnology company he founded in his downtown apartment kitchen in January 2017. He's also CFO of its pharmaceutical research arm Parow Entheobiosciences, both of which now occupy the Plant's 7500-square-foot top floor with millions of dollars worth of high-tech lab equipment. With it, each company integrates lab-grown algae and fungus into the pursuit of

their respective missions: to research and develop sustainable plant-based food colorants, meat substitutes, and agricultural biostimulants, along with psychedelic drugs for the treatment of psychiatric disorders like PTSD, OCD, anxiety, depression, and schizophrenia.

On any given day, some eight to ten employees and interns are working on these problems in the Plant. It's also home to a pair of "retired scientists" that helped the company with an unprecedented achievement: using cellular engineering to replicate and grow the powerful hallucinogen 5-MeO-DMT.

Their names are Betty and Bufi, and they spend their days eating crickets and worms in a terrarium above the lab.

It was a typically busy day. Lerer and his team were prepping algae- and non-psychedelic mushroom-based snacks and drinks for an open house following the International Food Technologists Expo at McCormick Place, where BYAS exhibited some of these products earlier in the day.

Meanwhile, the glass tubes of the photobioreactor, as always, were flowing with spirulina, the anti-inflammatory and antioxidative algae the company purifies into a shockingly blue powder called phycocyanin, a natural colorant and additive that they incorporate into a host of foods and beverages, from curaçao to coated candies to fish substitutes, energy drinks, and a heme—a blood analogue for hacking meatless burgers, enhancing caramelization and mimicking meaty flavor. It makes them bleed blue. A small California burger chain that Lerer contractually can't name uses it in its veggie burgers, and BYAS has produced plant-based tuna, crab, and fish sauce substitutes with it too—though those haven't yet reached the market.

Lerer launched Back of the Yards Algae Sciences with phycocyanin. But the substance arrived at a distant remove from his initial training in forensic pathology and epidemiology. His early publications focused on non-natural mortality (see *Homicide-Associated Burning in Cape Town, South Africa* and *Preventable mortality following sharp penetrating chest trauma*). He later worked on global public health projects, and earned an MBA, embarking on a successful career in life sciences finance. “I spent most of my professional life working for investors,” he says. “I was the guy who was torturing the companies that were asking for money.” He was living in Paris in 2016, doing a bit of investing of his own, when he bought into a friend's start-up that had developed a new bioreactor that cultivated living algae. The company was short-lived, but along the way he'd become close to its principal scientist who was attempting to extract gold particles from water, but had accidentally worked out a sustainable method of producing phycocyanin from spirulina.

The following year his wife, a prominent oncologist in her own right, took a job in Northbrook as the head of global medical affairs for cancer research at the U.S. headquarters of the Japanese pharmaceutical multinational Astellas, and the couple moved to Chicago. “I was at a loose end,” says Lerer. “Like, ‘What am I gonna do here?’” This was around the time that Mars Food had expressed an interest in working with natural food colorings, and he



A range of phycocyanin-enriched substances found at the Plant  MATTHEW GILSON FOR CHICAGO READER

saw an opportunity: “I said, ‘Maybe I can up-scale the production of this blue stuff and sell it to Mars.’ So I brought the scientist over and we started to work.”

He eventually moved the operation into a small corner bay in the Plant. The rent was cheap, but he realized phycocyanin wouldn't be cheap enough for Mars. Instead he became fascinated by the sustainability projects housed in the Plant, particularly the indoor farming efforts. He thought that algae's demonstrated accelerative effects on plants could overcome the enormous energy costs that continue to prevent large-scale vertical farming—growing crops in stacked vertical layers, often indoors—from becoming economically sustainable. And he conducted experiments that showed that his phycocyanin could dramatically boost growth rates and yields in indoor-grown lettuce, basil, peppers, tomatoes, and strawberries.

Later he applied algae to the practice of cellular agriculture but quickly abandoned the idea of developing lab-grown meat products. “I had the idea that you could use the algae extracts as food for the meat cells,” he says. “Once we were doing it, we realized there was no way. ‘This thing is impossible. Anybody who says we're gonna have lab-grown meat in Whole Foods in a year or two doesn't know what the hell they're talking about. It's a lie.’”

Nevertheless, “I had enough money to basically start the business and keep going,” he says. “Every now and again somebody would come up here and say, ‘I want to give you some money,’ and I started to bring more and more people on board. Suddenly I became, at a very late age in life, an entrepreneur.”

Jay Pleckham spent the early part of the day grinding *Psilocybe cubensis*, a species of magic mushroom commonly

available to recreational and religious users, and one that scientists have rediscovered for its therapeutic potential. In this case grinding is the first step in extracting their psychoactive compounds for shipment to a psychedelics company in Jamaica. He was one of the people Lerer brought on board in late 2018.

Pleckham, a red-bearded glassblower with HVAC training and construction skills, had recently returned to Chicago after a decade in northern California, where he'd built and managed a clandestine off-grid cannabis farm and an extraction lab. Pleckham invested in a now-defunct chocolate company at the Plant, building out and equipping a space on the second floor—and he made himself useful to other businesses in the building. One day Plant founder John Edel asked if he'd be willing to help a tenant on the third floor who was having trouble with a panning machine, used to coat candies or nuts with a sugar-based shell.

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Pleckham found Lerer attempting to make M&M-type candies he intended to coat with a phycocyanin coating, but the machine wasn't cooling the chocolate enough for the colorant to adhere. Pleckham solved the problem by rigging an old home air conditioning unit to the machine's tumbler, forcing cold compressed air into the machine.

"Len's like, 'What else do you do?'" says Pleckham, who replied, "'We grow mushrooms.'" On the side, Pleckham was building an edible mushroom supply company with his former partner in the cannabis farm, a fellow glassblower named Tony Milewski, who'd also returned home to Park Ridge to take custody of his young son.

Milewski was also an accomplished amateur mycologist who'd grown up foraging mushrooms, a skill he'd independently inherited from his grandfather. Pleckham caught the fungi-hunting bug from Milewski, and they'd begun supplying restaurants like the Girl & the Goat and Kimski with fresh, next-day, air-freighted wild, west coast morels, matsutakes, and porcini. He'd also built Milewski a laminar air flow hood so he could culture and grow mushrooms from spores in his garage when the imports were out of season, but they ran into a roadblock when they discovered that, at the time, the Cook County health code contained obsolete language that forbade commercial indoor mushroom growing.

Lerer and Edel had already rented a portion of lab space to a couple of PhDs from Argonne National Laboratory who were attempting to make a chicken substitute from mushroom mycelia. "I was looking at the bioreactor, and saying, 'What would happen if we added some of the algae to the mushrooms?'" says Lerer. "They weren't very interested in that, but I was."

After Pleckham solved Lerer's tumbler problem, "He hands me a bag of this blue powder and says, 'Here, see what this does.' I don't even really understand what it is, but I bring it back to Tony. He mixes it up with some media to make petri dishes, and also mixes it up with some water to mist the mushrooms. The stuff in the petri dishes grew really fast, and we also noticed that it was making little points of mushrooms grow straightaway. It was totally fucking amazing."

The phycocyanin had similar effects on some of the edible and nutritional mushroom spores Milewski was culturing, even remediating a contaminated specimen, which began to thrive, rapidly developing mycelia—the

branching, spreading threads of a germinated fungal spore.

But it had a particularly profound effect on a dish inoculated with *Psilocybe cubensis*.

Psilocybin, and other associated psychoactive compounds, or entheogens, are present in more than 200 fungal species. The federal Drug Enforcement Agency classifies it as a Schedule 1 drug, along with heroin, LSD, and cannabis, and possession is prosecutable with stiff penalties. A lab-grown fungus culture usually doesn't produce psilocybin until it fruits into a mushroom, which doesn't often happen until it's transferred from a petri dish into a healthy substrate. Milewski, a single father, was leery of the risks of fruiting psychedelics, but thrilled with the early results.

Pleckham reported back to Lerer, who was working toward patenting his phycocyanin as an agricultural biostimulant. He invited Pleckham and Milewski to replicate their petri dish experiments in the controlled environment of the lab. The results were equally impressive, but at first they were circumspect about every variety they were growing.

"Can you tell me what kind of mushrooms you were growing?" Lerer asked. "They were very sheepish about the whole thing. Eventually I got it out of them. I said, 'Oh that's cool.' But what do I know?"

"We walk out of the lab," says Pleckham. "Me and Tony high-five each other, and we're like, 'That will be an interesting story for the rest of our lives.'"

Lerer wasn't up to speed on recent research into psychedelics, nor was he paying any attention at all to the snowballing national movement that pushed cities like Denver and Oakland to decriminalize psilocybin. (A resolution supporting plant-based psychedelic decriminalization has been languishing in Chicago City Council for a few years, but more recently state representative La Shawn Ford has begun drafting a bill for the Illinois House.)

But Lerer is a voracious reader, and he began to devour the research until he was ready to take a serious risk and bounce the story off of his older brother, Dr. Bernard Lerer, a retired but still active internationally esteemed neuropsychopharmacologist and psychiatry professor at Hadassah-Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

"Some might call my brother a conservative, Zionist fascist," says Lerer. "He's the exact opposite of me. We never got on very well. Now, over the years, as we got older, our relationship improved." That summer Lerer phoned his brother to wish him a happy birthday.

"I was scared to ask his advice," says Lerer. "I was very circumspect about the whole thing. He's a conservative dude. I said, 'Benny, I've heard these psychedelic mushrooms could have potential in psychiatry.' My brother says, 'That's the future of psychiatry. I've been thinking of doing something.' I almost fell off my chair."

A few months earlier Bernard Lerer received a lifetime achievement award at a conference hosted by the International Society for Affective Disorders, where he stumbled into a talk on the latest research on the positive effects of psilocybin on patients with depression. "He was blown away," says Lerer. "He spent 40 years treating people with PTSD and nothing worked, and here they had these results."

The brothers decided to join forces, the younger Lerer to develop production in Chicago, the older to run trials on mice at Hadassah BrainLabs, the research laboratory he founded. They launched a new company to raise money, naming it for Parow, the Cape Town suburb where they grew up.

They moved fast. Bernard wanted to start immediately with preclinical trials, the precursor to human trials that, after much time and hard work, could lead to the production of FDA-approved drugs. Leonard applied for and very quickly received DEA licensing to produce and study psilocybin, a process the agency had fast-tracked for all Schedule 1 drugs the year before. By August of last summer, Pleckham and Milewski were working in the lab full-time, culturing, growing, and extracting magic mushrooms with the approval of the federal government.

Tony Milewski spent the better part of the day in his mycology lab, behind two locked and coded doors, seated in front of another Pleckham-refurbished laminar flow hood. A current of forced air blew toward him, preventing contaminants from landing in the open petri dishes he was working with. He scalped tiny strands of mycelia bred from two different cubensis varieties, transferring them to fresh dishes in the hope that he created a successful mutation. One variety known colloquially in the underground mycology community as Money Bags, and represented by a dollar sign, grows dense clusters of small, potent mushrooms in a short amount of time. The other, Penis Envy, is revered by psychonauts for its large, heavy, slower-growing, and extremely powerful fruit. Since he started working in the lab, he's bred several novel varieties made possible by the library of over 300 different

medicinal and edible mushroom spore prints he's amassed and cataloged via the mycological community, which acts, in its own collaborative way, like a mycelial network.

"Being in the counterculture for such a long time I had easy access to these things," he says. "I put it out there: 'Hey guys, here's an opportunity. I'm building an analytical laboratory. Let's figure this out.' So everybody gave me spores from their collections. I absorbed like six of the largest collections in existence."

When Lerer introduced me to Milewski as the head of mycology for BYAS and Parow, he draped his arm around the younger man and declared, "This is my brother." The feeling is mutual, but they're an unlikely pair. Milewski, a natty vintage dresser, has no formal scientific training, but he does have a spiritual reverence for all fungi, and fervently believes that it can save the world.

Lerer is also a believer—but he believes only in the data, and is agnostic when it comes to the advisability of decriminalization, or whether the hallucinogenic trip associated with psychedelics is necessary for patients to benefit from psilocybin.

"Tony has never had the opportunity to get an education," says Lerer. "If he had, he would have been a great researcher. But he and Jay are serious readers, and they are better informed in the scientific research than a lot of academic mycologists. I feel a great affinity toward him on an intellectual and even spiritual level. He's taught me this reverence for nature because he does it in a very rational way."

Pleckham, who, along with Milewski has an ownership stake in Parow, is the lab's jack of all trades. He does have a scientific degree in brewing technology from the Siebel Institute of Technology, one of the many skills he draws on to put his hands in nearly every project.

Pleckham and Milewski's work was interrupted that afternoon when they were summoned downstairs to the Plant's Packingtown Museum to help workshop a poster abstract the company was presenting later in the week to a gathering of mass spectrometry chromatographers. Lerer was in attendance, along with his wife Karin Blakolmer, who'd stepped down from her corporate cancer research job last October to lead Parow as CEO.

They joined a handful of staffers spread out on folding chairs in front of a large projection titled, informally "The 10 Mushroom Challenge." A chemical analyst named Seth Johnston stood before them and laid out the results of a study that addresses the heart of Bernard Lerer's preclinical mouse research:

Do the therapeutic benefits of psychedelic mushrooms result from the presence of psilocybin alone, or is psilocybin only effective in concert with associated nonpsychedelic chemicals known as tryptamines, a concept called the entourage effect? The answer might resolve the thorny problem of whether to test extractions of isolated psilocybin in the mouse trials, or full spectrum extractions of all the known chemicals present in the mushrooms.

Based on popular anecdotal experience—and personal experience—Milewski and Pleckham passionately believe the latter is the way to go. What’s more, they believe that fresh mushrooms, which most casual users have never tried, produce a more robust, holistic trip than dried ones. “It’s like playing a note on headphones on a Casio keyboard, compared to playing that same note on a grand piano in a concert hall,” says Pleckham. “It’s the same frequency, there’s just more there.”

The scientists are more cautious. “Listen,” says Lerer. “When you’ve got malaria, you’re not gonna eat the bark of a quinine tree. If you’ve got depression, why the hell should you be taking a mushroom? You should be taking a drug.”

Blakolmer and Lerer hope that the trip isn’t necessary to manufacture and administer an effective pharmaceutical-grade drug that would be accessible to the millions of people suffering from mood disorders. In the end, an FDA-approved, full-spectrum drug extracted from fresh mushrooms would be much more difficult to develop and manufacture than one made from isolated psilocybin extracted from dried mushrooms.

Analysis for “The 10 Mushroom Challenge” was conducted on dried, ground mushroom varieties, all of which produce variations in the intensity of their visual and physical effects. A debate ensued:

“Dried mushrooms are considered to be very dark,” said Milewski. “Things can get extremely introspective—people hiding in tents. You know, bad trips. That’s not a rare thing, but I’ve never seen that happen with a fresh mushroom.”

“It makes no difference,” said Blakolmer. “Because you cannot give a patient a fresh mushroom and you cannot give a patient a dried mushroom. You have to find out what’s inside.”

But the team was just “bioprospecting”; they’re only in the discovery phase of the company’s research. There’s much more to be learned. Blakolmer directed the group to get started on a continuing study of fresh versus



Spirulina-spiked Beyond Burgers being grilled at the Plant MATTHEW GILSON FOR CHICAGO READER

dried mushroom species.

Parow is a long way from developing the right formulations and dosages for clinical trials on human subjects, but they have a leg up on most other psychedelic companies. The majority of psilocybin trials are conducted with synthetically derived compounds. Few researchers have access to large-scale quantities of natural psilocybin, let alone the full spectrum of chemicals that develop in a mushroom.

They also have Blakolmer, who “righted the ship” when she came on board, according to Milewski. She used her long experience in clinical development to tighten the budget, forecast future needs, keep the company in regulatory compliance, and place timelines on Bernard Lerer’s preclinical experiments. They’ve already sent one shipment of natural, full-spectrum powdered mushroom extract to Israel, where he used it to study its effect on marble burying behavior in mice, a proxy for OCD; and he studied a telltale head twitch response in psilocybin-dosed mice, which mimics similar behavior in tripping humans.

“We are dealing with these compounds like

I deal with an oncology molecule, because we think that this is what patients deserve,” says Blakolmer. “Patients with mental disorders need treatment that is developed with the same rigor as treatment for diseases, like cancer or diabetes. There cannot be any shortcuts in development, even though these drugs have been used for thousands of years.”

About a year and a half ago Jay Pleckham un-muted his mike during a Zoom call about cellular agriculture and asked if they could grow toad cells in the lab.

Lerer had no idea what he was talking about, but he was intrigued when Pleckham told him about *Incilius alvarius*, the Sonoran desert toad which, when threatened by predators, secretes a toxin from the parotid glands located behind its eyes that includes 5-MeO-DMT. The brief but intense psychedelic trip the secretion causes in humans who ingest it has created an enormous demand on the black market. Toad “milking” is stressful, often fatal to the creatures, and its popularity threatens the species. 5-MeO-DMT is also interesting to researchers, but not easy to come by in large

quantities for study. If they could find a way to grow it in the lab, it might be scalable, and someday it might relieve the pressure on the species.

Lerer gave the experiment a green light and Pleckham sourced a pair of female toads from a Texas reptile and amphibian dealer. They were shipped to the lab, where an amphibian veterinarian anesthetized the toads and biopsied cells from their glands. The cells were then placed in a bioreactor for two months, where they did indeed begin to produce 5-MeO-DMT.

No one will say exactly how algae was involved in the process. But the company has patented and open-sourced it so it’s publicly available for any researcher to access. “It was a pilot project,” says Blakolmer. “We know it can be done in order to upscale and really grow large amounts of these cells. But it will require completely different expertise and a lot more funding, which we currently do not have.”

But the toad experiment might reveal the solution to the problem of upscaling psilocybin production for use in drug manufacturing. Yet Lerer isn’t ready to commit to that. “Forget about how you’re gonna grow psilocybin. The fundamental question is, ‘Is there a difference between eating a mushroom and taking a synthetic psilocybin?’ We will know very soon. If it turns out that natural mushrooms are better than synthetic psilocybin, there’s a case to be made for growing the mushrooms to scale, or genetically modifying microbes, such as bacteria, yeast—or algae—to produce all the molecules. If it turns out that there is little or no difference between the two, it doesn’t make sense to grow psychedelic mushrooms because the only thing that is effective is psilocybin. If these entourage molecules have no effect, then the cheapest method wins. If that’s the case, yeah, maybe using genetically modified microbes is cheaper than chemically synthesizing psilocybin.”

As for the aforementioned “retired scientists” Betty and Bufi (named for the toad genus *Bufo*), “They are alive and well and they are much loved by the entire team,” says Blakolmer, who is the keeper of the toads in the small apartment she and Lerer stay in above the lab. “They definitely connect with humans. This is why we have to protect them.”

But she may be underselling a deeper personal connection. “You walk in the room and they just stare at Karin,” says Pleckham. “They are in tune with her.”

@MikeSula

ESSAY

If you teach a girl to pickle

She might also learn to process love, grief, and hope through food.

By YASMIN ZACARIA
MIKHAIEL



Persian cucumbers on an auntie's counter; a decades-old print of Houshang Mikhaiel grilling for a family meal © YASMIN ZACARIA MIKHAIEL

If you finish the pickles, I'll teach you how to make them."

I was sitting at my auntie's breakfast counter surrounded by a Persian feast of cheeses, fruits, toasted barbari, and nuts, but I was most drawn to the gallon jar housing the homemade spears. It seemed like a fair deal, and I locked eyes with a cousin seated beside me. We shrugged, grabbed forks, and each chased more pickles out from their vinegar abode.

These moments in June at the counter were the softest, among my most treasured, as I convinced my auntie that "yes, I can prep" and "yes, I can cook," earning her trust so that I could help, not just witness. I had grown up different from my cousin next to me, at a distance from the half of me that felt most like home.

When my dad Houshang Mikhaiel emigrated from Tehran, Iran, in the late 1960s, he made a home in Chicago. Although the middle child, he was the first to leave home, and his four siblings later settled in Los Angeles. He called himself the black sheep of the family, and from what I can gather, that means the one most committed to assimilating. He didn't teach me Farsi, he converted from Judaism to Catholicism when he married my Italian-Hungarian mom, and he shrugged off the family business of real estate in favor of electrical engineer-

ing. (In a twist I don't quite understand, he ultimately charmed his way into the antiques business.)

What my dad couldn't kick, however, was Persian cooking, even if made with American substitutions or alongside doctored frozen foods. He tried escaping the culture, but the flavors lingered, and I loved them. Sweets and savorys existed together in the way of the iconic burned rice, tahdig, which he'd make with cranberries (instead of barberries/currants). Or in what my little sister and I knew of as "lulu" (instead of "luleh") kebabs he'd dress with honey barbecue sauce (instead of alongside shirazi salad).

When my dad's appetite lessened in April, that was the first sign that something wasn't right. I had been caregiving on and off for him for years, as I navigated my early 20s. I cherished the time I spent brunching with him, sometimes snapping photos of his ring-adorned hands as we shared a meal before errands. I'd always give him my orange slices.

Dad was a fighter, a bionic man, despite a life of medical emergencies, two cancers among them. But by May his appetite was gone and now diabetes emerged even with his birdlike eating habits. Caregiving now wasn't just buying the groceries, but cooking them, and I was stumped.

The list of possible ingredients dwindled as

the flavors I'd grown up with now caused him physical pain. I leaned on a friend to brainstorm simplified meals. She was a godsend and sent a Google doc of options. I spent a weekend at his apartment cooking through the list, and although they weren't his recipes, I recognized him in my movements, the multitasking, the tasting, the timing. He looked on from the couch, too weak to join me, telling me I was making too much food, that I was doing too much. (Both points he always said when it came to caring for him.) But I thrived and loved poking through cabinets and using the oven for its intended purpose instead of as storage. Cooking was something I could have agency over. I couldn't change my dad's growing fatigue, but I could switch up the dressing on our cucumber salad and lessen the seasoning on his salmon.

The following week we received his stage four cancer diagnosis. I googled the survival rate and immediately drove back to his apartment. He had put all the food I made in the freezer. And now, I defrosted it for us to share and talk through what came next.

We took an emergency trip to Los Angeles, where his miracle doctors practiced, where my Persian family lived. A couple of my aunties picked us up from the airport and drove us the hour to Duarte. The entire way there, they gave us the rundown on the food they made

us, how to prep it, how to plate. They lovingly interrogated me on what I'd been feeding him, how often, how much. My dad sat stoic in the passenger seat, praising me and convincing them he had what he needed.

My aunties made a beeline for the mini fridge once I unlocked the hotel door. It was then stuffed with soups and fruit for my dad and, impossibly, my favorites (homemade pickles among them). My mind wandered to the prior summer, where such a spread existed atop my auntie's mahogany dining room table instead of a chipped hotel desk. But I was grateful for them, for the food, for showing up.

Food has been the thread, through hope and grief. The stories of my dad center on his cooking, his jokes, his charm, his love for his daughters. He died during a high Jewish holiday, Shavuot, which means we couldn't sit shiva, the week of mourning where family would come and visit us. Rather, I drove my sisters from family house to family house, from table to table, across Los Angeles in a journey we dubbed Sisterhood of the Traveling Shiva. With each spread an auntie or cousin pointed out my dad's favorites, dishes I knew and dishes I didn't. But pickles could pair with each one, and those were also among his favorites. **■**

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Sugar and snacks and everything nice

What would you do with 22.4 pounds of treats?

By LEOR GALIL

There's an inflatable red M&M outside McCormick Place Convention Center. It often hangs out by the entrance I need to find whenever I come to the sprawling complex, which is almost never. Unless it's the Sweets & Snacks Expo. The blown-up, pillow-like version of that smart-mouthed mascot stood about 20 feet above the tallest person gathered by gate 40 outside McCormick Place's West Building when I first arrived to wade into the sugary and salty smorgasbord at the end of May. I noticed a few smokers scattered around the oversized feet of my trusty candy friend.

You'll definitely need to take breaks if you attend this candy convention, cigs notwithstanding. Sweets & Snacks showcases more than 700 exhibitors specializing in chocolate bars, bubblegum, licorice, jerky, pretzels, ice cream, peanuts, cashews, pistachios, snack cakes designed for superhero fans, fruit snacks that come in tiny shapes that look like the actual foodstuffs they're manufactured to resemble, fruit snacks that are a single flat 40-inch strip of candy liberally dusted in sour sugar and rolled up in the shape of a disk, chips that mimic the taste of foods that do not come in chip form (prawn cocktail), and gummies molded to resemble savory dishes you'd never want to be rendered into gummies (sushi, tacos, hamburgers).

This sugary sprawl takes up four and a half acres of McCormick Place. My first day at the convention, I spent about two hours zigzag-

ging around; my phone's pedometer told me I walked more than four miles in that time.

The convention, which lasts four business days, is an industry event. So unless you buy chips and gum in bulk for a big chain of stores, or run a small snack company eager to make connections with the people who buy chips and gum in bulk, it can be tough to get in. The expo attracts about 16,000 professionals whose jobs qualify them for inclusion in the industry, which I don't consider myself a part of in any meaningful way. After all, I spend most of my *Reader* time writing about local music.

On the other hand, I'm a journalist with a sweet tooth, which qualifies me to get into Sweets & Snacks—I think, anyway. Part of what I love about working in journalism is it gives me the opportunity to be in places I'd ordinarily never have any excuse to be in. I'm hard-pressed to think of another job that would allow me to pop into a studio session in the middle of the day for a sprawling conversation with a musician I've never met before.

A candy convention is no different in that regard. I did draw some confusion from the Australian couple manning the table for the Scorched Peanut Bar (imagine a crunchy Pay-day enveloped in a sheath of chocolate) when I had more to tell them about Chicago house music than, uh, I don't know, the inner workings of our local candy economy.

I didn't share with them the depths of my thirst for sweet stuff; how I'm part of a non-competitive running club that plans outings

around eating ice cream; how I'm the guy with the reputation for showing up to a party with the dumbest limited-edition novelty snack I could find on my way over, which could mean an Oreo variety that delights my friends or a jelly-bean special grotesque enough to make me a pariah; how my friend Sarah and I put together an art zine made up of photos of slices of pie, ice cream sundaes, and Pop Tarts we texted each other over the course of a handful of months; how I'm pretty sure about a quarter of my 16,000 Twitter followers only know me for the way I profess my affection for out-there foodstuffs and not because of my journalism work, which is the reason I'm on Twitter in the first place.

As a kid I had eyes bigger than my stomach. I still recall the summer day my mom brought a batch of homemade blondies to a poolside picnic to share, though I'm not sure anyone else devoured as many as I did—at least I don't remember anyone else feeling sick from eating as many as I did. I've tempered this desire as I've aged. Still, the Sweets & Snacks Expo is my danger zone. I've had trouble pinpointing how much candy the average American consumes annually. A 2016 report from the U.S. Census Bureau says the number is close to 22 pounds; meanwhile, this year Tuscon.com, *CityBeat*, and Yahoo! News all republished the same Conversation story written by Mississippi State University assistant professor of nutrition Rahel Mathews that says Americans eat about eight pounds a year. All I know is that after two visits to this year's Sweets & Snacks

Selections from the smorgasbord (left to right): a selfie display from Stuffed Puffs' exhibition space; a close-up of the two-day take from Sweets & Snacks; and the tidy Warheads soda display a couple days before attendees could abscond with a can or two. © LEOR GALIL

Expo, I brought home 22.4 pounds of candy and snacks.

The National Confectioners Association debuted the All Candy Expo at Navy Pier in June 1997. The *Tribune* reported that more than 300 exhibitors were on hand the following year. When the Expo moved to McCormick Place's newly opened West Building in 2007, the number of exhibitors ran close to 500, and it expanded its focus to feature snack companies for the first time. Thus the name change to the Sweets & Snacks Expo in 2010. The convention had been absent in Chicago the past couple years—the NCA opted to try the first pandemic-era Sweets & Snacks Expo in Indianapolis last year. The return to Chicago also coincided with a milestone: the convention's 25th anniversary.

I began attending this convention 12 years ago, and the general layout hasn't changed much since. All the exhibitors fit into two halls. The 100,000-square-foot Skyline Ballroom often hosts a lot of the novel and newer entries to the world of snacks, and at least six times as many exhibitors flood the West Hall, a warehouse-sized space with an corporate-antiseptic feel that sits just across the hall from the ballroom. I've gone to Sweets & Snacks enough times for me to feel like I know the map. I am almost certain that Alabama Christian sweets company Scripture Candy always occupies the same booth by one of the West Hall entrances, for example—because their hard candies come wrapped in biblical verses derived from the

King James Version, I never felt like engaging with their treats would be comfortable or kosher for me. It wouldn't surprise me if all my candy convention recollections have begun to play tricks on me by congealing into a single memory loop of me walking down aisles of treats in the cavernous convention hall.

The joy of Sweets & Snacks is getting the chance to try dozens of sweet items I otherwise don't come across in all my candy hunting. That also presents a challenge; I find I must constantly gauge what free samples are worth picking up and carrying while scurrying around the convention. Attendees can't bring outside bags. Convention organizers provide everyone with a single bag large enough to contain more than ten pounds of foodstuffs. The bags are a gift and a burden. The bag becomes heavier and more cumbersome the more treats you pick up—I noticed the handles of my bag dig into my fingers towards the end of my first journey through the convention.

I've avoided almost any high-risk scenario since the pandemic began, save routine trips to the grocery store. Before this year's Sweets & Snacks, I hadn't flown on a plane or attended an indoor concert since late March 2020, though I've since reintroduced myself to the joys of domestic flights. The allure of all that candy brought me to a place where I felt comfortable enough to try attending a large-scale indoor event. I elected to keep my mask on the entire time, which is not an easy task at an event centered around food. So I didn't get to try some out-there items only available on site—I'll just have to daydream about Carrot Bacon's vegan jerky till I decide to pony up for a bag. But I did bring home a haul.

What would you do with 22.4 pounds of candy and snacks? I couldn't very well eat it all myself, nor did I really want to attempt to eat my way through this collection. But I did want to get a better sense of what I brought home. So for several days, I cataloged everything in a Google spreadsheet. In total, I managed to get 266 items.

The line items don't quite capture the size, weight, and dimension of what I brought into my apartment; how could they, when a single sample of Wiley Wallaby watermelon-flavored gourmet licorice takes up one line, and a collection of flower-shaped gummies that Raindrops packaged in the form of a bouquet takes up another line? After I documented each item, I'd carefully place it into one of three organizing containers—two 19-quart boxes, one 12-quart bin—or one of two tote bags. In

the weeks following the convention, I'd grab whatever struck my fancy, which was hard since almost everything qualified.

And I'd make sure to update my spreadsheet with notes of everything I tasted, for the sake of consistency. Big Bite's s'mores filled marshmallow was a mouthful; the chocolate hunk in the center gave my mouth a bit of a workout. Burts Prawn Cocktail chips had a strong salt and vinegar flavor with a hint of a shrimp aftertaste. Goetze's Caramel Cream with Oreo barely resembled the taste of my favorite sandwich cookie. Joffer Beverage Company's Jelly Belly French Vanilla sparkling water tasted just like a vanilla jelly bean, which I found to be a problem. I did this, too, because as I'd consume more treats during the work day—Legendary Foods' thick strawberry Tasty

tried a can of blue raspberry during the convention's twilight hours. The early afternoon felt a little late.

Plenty of displays no longer bore any sign that a snack had ever been present, or were picked over enough to make me second-guess taking what was left. It reminded me of an eleventh-hour supply trip to a grocery store just before a hurricane passes through town. I became more aware of the building's skeleton and how its physical design functions as a large-scale Etch A Sketch for a rotating cast of associations when I wasn't distracted by handfuls of candy mascots and the scent of sugar that seeped into my mask. On desolate stretches of the convention floor, I half expected an empty bag of Lay's Layers Sour Cream & Onion chips to pass me like a tumbleweed.

The red M&M appears nonplussed to stand in the designated smoking area.  LEOR GALL



Pastry, Go Raw's messy Spicy Fiesta Snacking Seeds, Cookie United's perfectly moist Black Panther Cake Bites, Snack House's unsettlingly sweet Keto Cereal Fruit Puffs—I wanted to try and hold onto the tastes a little longer.

The best time to go to the Sweets & Snacks Expo is the afternoon of the fourth and final day. All the exhibitors off-load the bulk of what's left of their sample stock, so anything that isn't taped down to a display or behind glass is up for grabs. After daydreaming about Warheads soda after my first trip to McCormick Place, I finally re-

Still, I emerged from that second trip with 12.6 pounds of treats. I knew I'd give away most of the stash to friends. I had to—I told my doctor I'd share the sweets with friends during my annual physical right beforehand.

In the proceeding weeks, I got rid of the treats pound by pound. When a couple friends had dinner in my backyard, I made sure to run into my apartment and throw a hodgepodge of sweets in a tote bag as a parting gift; they brought over two bottles of unearthly looking Mountain Dew Flamin' Hot, so this was the least I could do. I often share sweets with my Gossip Wolf cowriter, J.R. Nelson, so I pack-

aged up a hefty chunk of candy and brought it to him at Myopic Books to share with the whole crew. I didn't always succeed at sharing, though. Memorial Day weekend I went camping on Rock Island, Wisconsin, and I forgot to bring any souvenir from the candy convention. Fortunately, my buddy Matt came through with some choice wacky snacks, and despite having just overindulged at a convention dedicated to things I should eat in moderation, I managed to devour an embarrassing number of Old Bay flavored Goldfish.

When I tell people about the candy convention, I'm bound to hear one question: What was your favorite candy? I've yet to come up with any answer. But it's made me think a lot about what candy I do love, the kind I don't feel the impulse to log in a spreadsheet because it's already lodged in my head. Like Good & Plenty, even though those chewy licorice morsels wrapped in white and Pepto-pink shells were never my go-to choice.

My parents wisely didn't keep candy or many other sweets around the house when I grew up, but I'd get my fill on frequent trips to see my maternal grandparents; we all lived in suburban D.C., so my grandparents were a crucial part of my upbringing. My grandma's got an intense sweet tooth of her own, and always likes to indulge her loved ones with their favorite treats. She'd often keep a carton of French Silk ice cream for my dad, though my mom tended to conspicuously scoop some for herself too.

After my grandpa died in 2005, my grandma downsized and moved into an apartment. She set up her two-bedroom in a way that reminded me of the place I had so many great childhood memories, and sweets: her matching chair and ottoman patterned with zigzagging brown, orange, red, and white lines; a painting of a guitarist holding an acoustic six-stringer aloft, their head turned away from the viewer in such a way I had trouble deciphering the image for much of my childhood; a wallet-sized photo of my grandpa, squinting with a thin smile, that my grandma kept near the kitchen sink. She kept a glass bowl filled with Good & Plenty on a wooden side table, nestled between an off-white sofa and a wooden chair partially upholstered in mahogany red. Whenever I'd visit, we'd sit with the candy bowl between us, and I'd peck at the Good & Plenty at her encouragement. I thought of that candy as I made my way to the convention, and called my grandma just to say hello. 

 @imleor



FEATURE

Drink less, party more

Local spirit-free drinks brands and community platforms are creating a booming sober curious movement in Chicago.

By **COURTNEY SPREWER**

Latently, I've been curious about sobriety. After a series of life changes—most notably going from spending 9-5 at home in soft pants, hungover if need be, to re-embarking on a commute to the office with both hard pants *and* small talk—I think I've finally hit the breaking point where I'm ready to admit that unfortunately, I do in fact feel better when I make a conscious effort to avoid alcohol and treat my body well. And apparently it's not just me. Google searches for the term “sober curious” have skyrocketed over the past 12 months. But in case you aren't one of the hundreds of thousands of people whose interest has been piqued by the movement, here's a quick rundown.

The phrase “sober curious” was first coined by Ruby Warrington in her 2018 book *Sober Curious: The Blissful Sleep, Greater Focus, Limitless Presence, and Deep Connection Awaiting Us All on the Other Side of Alcohol*. Not a complete forgoing of alcohol, sober curiosity is a social wellness movement that empowers individuals in their choice to abstain from alcohol, be it on occasion or for good. The movement also encourages participants to explore their relationship with alcohol and the physical and mental benefits that may come from reevaluating it or cutting it out altogether.

The pandemic is partially to blame for this increased interest in the sober curious movement. What started as the occasional glass of wine—whether alone or in good virtual

company via Zoom cocktail hour—soon grew into more-than-occasional full-fledged solo binge drinking for many of us. According to a CNN article published this January, since the start of the pandemic, the average American has had a 14 percent increase in the number of drinking days per month. However, many people are starting to refocus on wellness and realizing that their relationship with alcohol isn't particularly . . . sustainable. And as is the case with all toxic connections that have run their course, it may be time for a break, babe.

But a break from alcohol is often easier said than done. Don't feel too bad—that's by design. Traditionally, alcohol has been integral to all things communal and often synonymous with celebration. But within the American cultural ideology specifically, with an emphasis on hard work and go-go-go mentality, alcohol has often been used as a tool of escapism. Serving as a clear punctuation for the end of the workday, and a tool to relax and unwind, alcohol became an integral part of our societal routine and a necessary counterbalance. This also means that for those who may choose not to indulge, it's hard to find occasions and venues that don't center alcohol.

Enter the ever-growing world of nonalcoholic, zero proof, buzzless, spirit-free mock or cocktails. Whatever you want to call them, there's no denying their impact.

Companies like Chicago-based Ritual Zero Proof, which specializes in spirit-free rum, gin, whiskey, and tequila alternatives, know that

A range of alcohol-free beverages at an In Good Spirits event IN GOOD SPIRITS

people these days are more wellness focused than ever. Rather than taking a stand against alcohol and staunchly advocating sobriety, Ritual's goal is simply to give the consumer options. And who doesn't love options? Especially if those options come with a whole new scene of people who don't know you from that one time you met them drunk at that one place. After all, the real lesson is the friends we made along the way, right?

Enter Humboldt Park's own Adriana Gaspar and Héctor Díaz—who himself hails from the Gage Park neighborhood. Díaz and Gaspar are partners in life and In Good Spirits, a new local community offering a platform for gathering and celebrating sans alcohol. In Good Spirits is on a mission to refresh social rituals through different but no-less-vibey experiences that help break down the social constructs that pit sobriety against socialization.

I recently attended a sold-out event of theirs at Cindy's, on the roof of the Chicago Athletic Association hotel. This gathering served as a true testament to the new social scene that's popping up around Chicago in response to the budding sober curious movement. Surrounded by expansive city views, lush greenery, charcuterie, and ornate glass punch bowls filled with the good ice and a plethora of nonalcoholic options, guests of all races, ages, and stages in their wellness journeys mixed, mingled, and could be seen happily nodding in agreement that: Hmm, yes, I do believe the sparkling nonalcoholic aperitif made with ashwagandha was the collective favorite. Even better if you added a spring of rosemary from the beautiful mostly-edible tablescape.

Gaspar and Díaz confirm that this event was not an anomaly, and that their events draw a good mix of strictly sober and sober curious attendees. “To meet people that have stopped drinking due to things like allergies or other personal reasons has been fascinating. . . . Both sets expressed their desire to still go out with friends and feel included socially without sticking out for only having water in their hand or nothing at all,” says Díaz, who opts for mindful, occasion-based drinking after a recent scare with kidney cancer (which he thankfully beat. Go, Héctor!). Gaspar, in contrast, pledged to strict sobriety in honor of her father.

On both ends of the sober curious spectrum,

the couple knows all too well how alienating making the choice to modify your drinking behavior can be. “We really want to normalize not [equating] socializing with drinking alcohol. Drinking alcohol in social gatherings is so ingrained in our society that we think something is wrong with the individuals who are not drinking. If someone's not drinking, the immediate reaction is to ask, ‘Why not?’”

Instead of allowing their social lives to suffer, they made their own scene and are beginning to change that narrative. For Gaspar, “Coming out of the pandemic and social distancing, being in community was as important as ever. However, I didn't want to compromise my sobriety journey. Personally, I felt there was work to be done.” And you know what they say: If you want something done right, do it yourself. We all know Chicago is no stranger to the DIY scene—shout-out to those broad shoulders.

Since their inception earlier this year, In Good Spirits has received overwhelming support from both the budding sober curious community and the local restaurants, bars, and venues that welcome those that are welcoming change. Gaspar and Díaz note that it's been great to witness ideologies of consumers, producers, and distributors looking to support the sober curious space change in real time. It's a stark difference from most places stuck in the past, when the only options nondrinkers had were water, soda, or a sugary mocktail. For those who are slower to hop on the bandwagon? Don't worry, Gaspar is making sure to promote the sober curious movement at every bar she finds herself at these days.

“At bars and restaurants, it's been great to see spirit-free options on the menu more and more,” Gaspar says, “and I've had a couple of instances already where the menu didn't have a nonalcoholic option at the time, but the bartenders crafted one with genuine excitement (shout-out Estereo in Logan Square and La Luna in Pilsen).”

And as far as all their new friends and predictions for a more inclusive beverage future?

“We're grateful for the opportunity to offer something cool and new in the city, and the impact we've been able to make in the few months since our inception,” says Díaz. “In Good Spirits means a lot to us on a personal level and is really a culmination of who we've been, who we are, and what we believe in. It's been a fun and fulfilling journey thus far, and the best part is, we're just getting started.”

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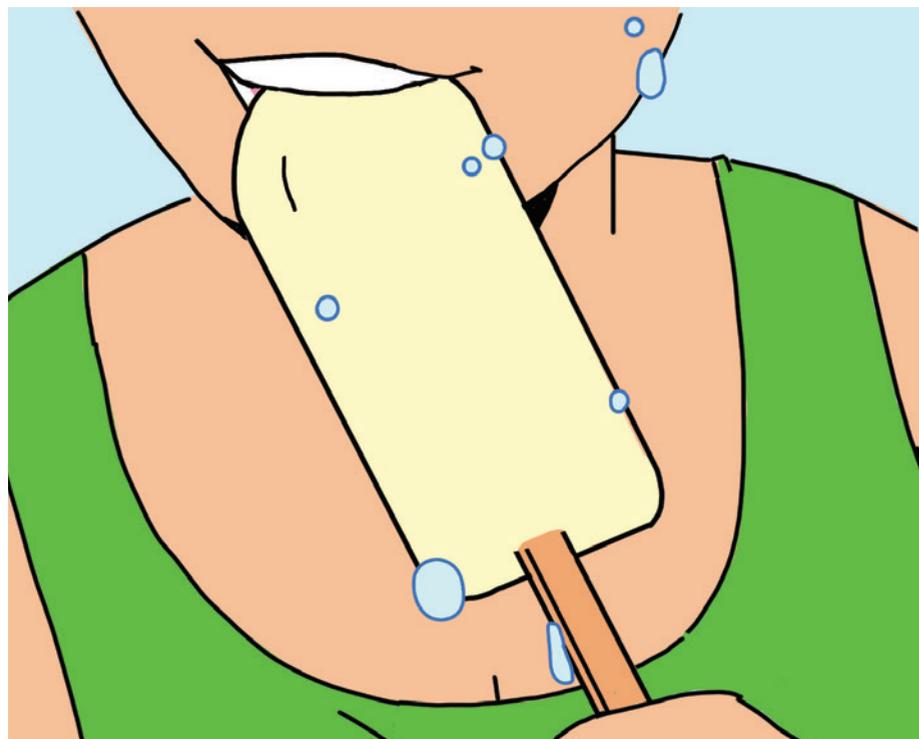
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ESSAYS

The tastes of home

Reader staffers recount some of their most memorable food experiences from Chicago summers past.

By READER STAFF

It's a common refrain in the city: Chicago summer is so worth the wait. Newbies and transplants can feel the buzz of opportunity in the air when the weather starts to turn. Visceral summer memories fuel locals through even the coldest, darkest months. And many of those memories involve food and drink—cookouts, summer cocktails, farmers' markets, patio dining, the list goes on. In

the minds of *Reader* staffers, when asked to consider their favorite Chicago summer food memories, answers varied, but stories about Mexican street vendors emerged as a surprising thread. It's a good reminder to carry cash, to indulge in a spontaneous treat, and to always support your neighbors pushing carts or manning tents when the summer sun's blazing its hottest.

Beachside coconut paletas

At Foster Beach in the summer of 2001, I enjoyed a melty coco paleta from the purveyor with the jingly La Michoacana cart. I exchanged one dollar for ten minutes of sweet and icy goodness, milk and coconut on my tongue, forgetting the hot drama of my life. I stood on the shore, toes dug into clumpy sand, and slurped dreamy perfection from a smooth wooden stick. As I yanked out occasional crunchy coconut flakes with my front teeth, the busy stage play of beach life unwrapped before me: stinky smelts washed up, children dipped in and out of waves in sodden diapers, and the lake produced its distinctly lakey smell—the one that screams “home” to me.

I had never heard of paletas before—though I'd seen the cart—until my friend and messy crush object, Girl-Poet E, purchased one for me. It was sophistication. Something I'd never thought of and something that felt at once mature and fitting of my new decade.

Coco paletas are comforting and kind. They were the creamy balm and an antidote to my life of self-created turmoil, artistic frenzy, and passionate love for City, for Art, and for Girls.

—JT Newman

Fantastik Fruit's colorful gazpacho

It's definitely summer in Chicago if I'm in line at the fruit cart at Clark and Morse in Rogers Park. I never mind the wait, because the vendors routinely offer everyone pieces of mango, melon, or pineapple to tide them over.

I love listening to their patter, and even when I can't see their Olympic-level knife skills in action, I can hear the soothing tap-dance of their blades on the cart's cutting boards. I love soaking in the pool of citrusy perfume pouring from dozens of freshly squeezed limes and oranges, feeling the first cool evening breezes sneak into the muggy humidity of the day, and watching the sky go purple after sunset.

This particular cart, run by Victor Mejia and his family, says “Fantastik Cokteles y Gaspachos” on the side, but I've only ever ordered the gazpacho. It's a specialty of Michoacán's capital, Morelia, but Fantastik offers much more than the traditional mango, jicama, and pineapple: depending on the day, you can get papaya, honeydew, kiwi, strawberry, cantaloupe, coconut, watermelon, and more. Each cup is so tightly packed with fruit, all finely and precisely diced before your eyes, that it leaves little room for the “soup” part of the gazpacho. For liquid Fantastik uses orange juice, not tomato, and toppings include lime, salt, chili powder, chili sauce, onion, cilantro, and crumbled queso fresco. It's sweet, tangy, salty, and spicy—and probably the healthiest street food anywhere in Chicago.

When *Reader* food writer Mike Sula interviewed Mejia in 2011, he remembered how the police had given him a hard time when he got started. “No more,” he said. “They nice now. Because now they shop with me. They like the fruits.” —Philip Montoro

Sweet and sour peppermint in a pickle

It's not like I was used to fine dining at age six, but I was still set adrift when Brian handed me the plastic bag with the pickle in it. Brian was a teenager, a son of one of my father's friends, and the de facto gang leader for a group of us that ended up shuttled together in a random backyard as the dads worked out the finer points of some auto repair. "Here," he said. Brian insisted I take the crinkling and messy bag. (How can a dark green pickle spout off neon green juice?) "Now shove the peppermint in," he instructed, and I watched the others unwrap peppermint sticks from their sticky plastic and then push them through the pickle. "Now you just eat it," Brian told us while chomping. When you bite into a peppermint in a pickle, there's a fresh tang of mint that mingles through the acidic pickle, but then it's just a rush of sugar and salt. It's an acquired taste. It's possible that the tradition isn't native to Chicago (some food historians say that it's a southern thing that moved up here with migrants in the early 20th century), but the sweet/sour mix can always push my brain straight to a Chicago sidewalk on a sticky summer night and kids yelling at each other just to be loud. —**Salem Collo-Julin**

Elote off the Blue Line

I was looking to move into the city in the summer of 1999, and my friend Jean knew that, so she invited me to live out the last three months of her lease on Division. I packed the station wagon and fled my high school bedroom at my parents' house in Wheaton (which had become my post-collegiate bedroom for one year) and moved into the city proper.

I had visited her place previously on the rim of Wicker Park. Stepping out of the Blue Line station, amid the hustle and bustle of the street, she asked, "Do you want an elote?" She had to explain this phenomenon to me, as there were no Mexican food carts in Wheaton: an ear of corn, slathered in mayonnaise, drizzled with melted butter, and sprinkled in parmesan cheese and red pepper. It was the

taste of summer. Sweet, savory, messy, round molecules of utter pleasure on a stick.

I got one every day after work. I slowly gained confidence in my ordering skills. "Sin chile," I would sheepishly blurt, much to the elotero's amusement. That fraction of language mastery helped cement in my mind my status as an actual Chicagoan. And before long, when approached on the street by a Lincoln Park couple asking for directions, I uttered, "No hablo Ingles," and walked on, minding my own business. Thanks, corn! —**Kirk Williamson**

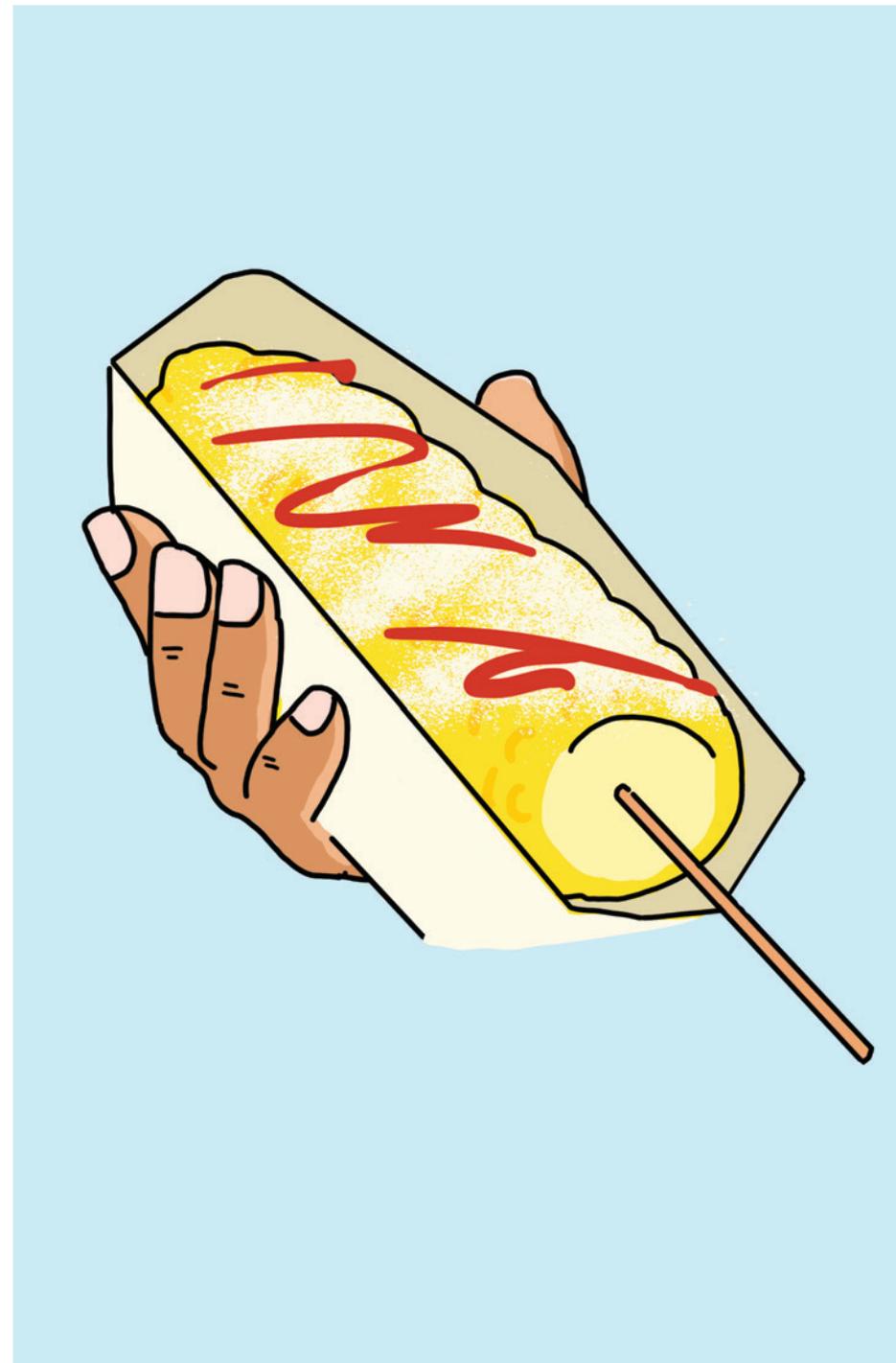
Joong Boo's discount sashimi platter

There are very few things worth walking three miles in the sticky Chicago summer for, and Joong Boo's discount sashimi platter is on the top of that list. I first tried the Korean grocery store delicacy in my friends' backyard, after walking up Milwaukee to their Logan Square apartment, my feet aching from shoes more aspirational than practical.

I hadn't been to their house in months because of the pandemic lockdown, so I relied on music in the alley to guide me to their gate, where I was greeted with beer and long overdue hugs. We slowly filled the picnic table with fixings: matchsticks of cucumbers, a fan of avocado slices, scallions cut at an angle that I can never quite replicate. Finally, we placed the cold palette of sliced fish (only two of which we could collectively identify) at the center of the table.

We spent the afternoon assembling rolls in our hands together, laughing and talking. Each bite was a little more satisfying than the next, like the last perfect bite of a meal over and over again. I was still new to Chicago, and when the lockdown hit, it felt like any feeble sense of community I had built just disappeared in an instant. As steam from the bowl of rice mixed with the hot air and the crinkle of breaking nori mixed with the buzz of cars and cicadas, I finally felt the relief of that community coming back. —**Savannah Hugueley** 

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ARTS & CULTURE

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JENNIE C. JONES

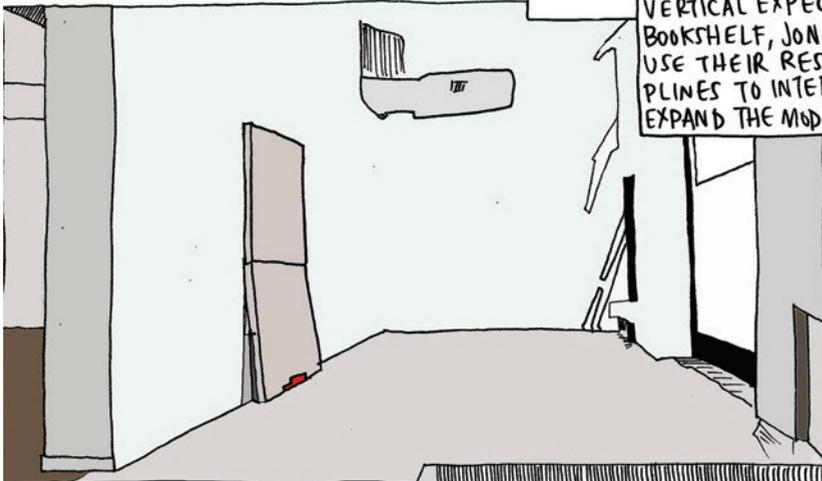
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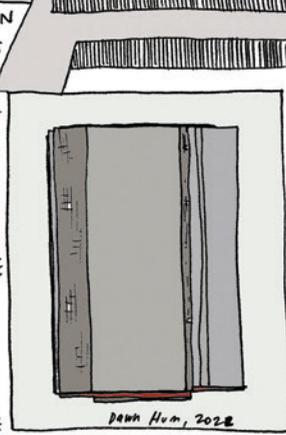
NORMAN TEAGUE

at THE BUREAUS OF **RECONSTRUCTION** CONVERSO GALLERY

COMICS JOURNALISM

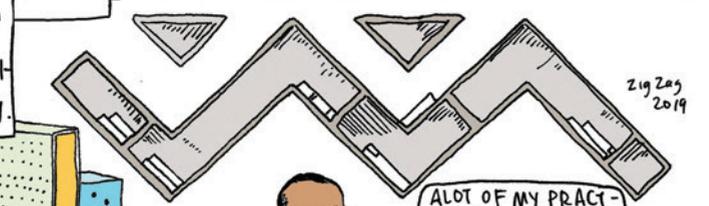
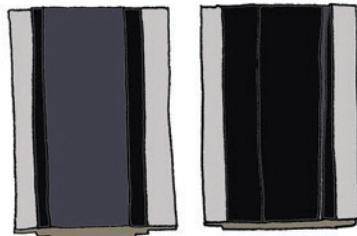


JONES'S LATEST CHICAGO EXHIBITION PRESENTED PAINTINGS + DRAWINGS RELATED TO HER RECENT SHOW AT THE SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM. USING MATERIALS ENDemic TO RECORDING STUDIOS, JONES CREATES ABSTRACT MINIMALIST ARTWORKS THAT SYNTHESIZE SIGHT + SOUND BY REFERENCING (OR "SPEAKING" WITH) CONCEPTUAL AVANT GARDE AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC. IN A 2017 TALK AT THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO, JONES DESCRIBES MILES DAVIS FACING AWAY FROM HIS AUDIENCE AS A RADICAL GESTURE BY WHICH HE COULD BE MORE PRESENT TO HIMSELF, HIS FELLOW MUSICIANS, + THE MUSIC. JONES IS NOT CURRENTLY DOING INTERVIEWS BUT IN THAT SAME TALK, SHE QUOTES



At times Jones's recombines have the effect of converting earlier eras of jazz into a type of free jazz... The possible intended message here is one of continuity between the sixties and earlier eras rather than the current accepted tropes of irreparable rupture.

- George E. Lewis



Stanza 1 2022

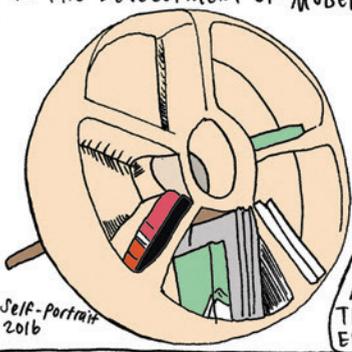
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More information on Jennie C. Jones's work is at patrongallery.com; more on Norman Teague is at conversomod.com. @COCO PICARD

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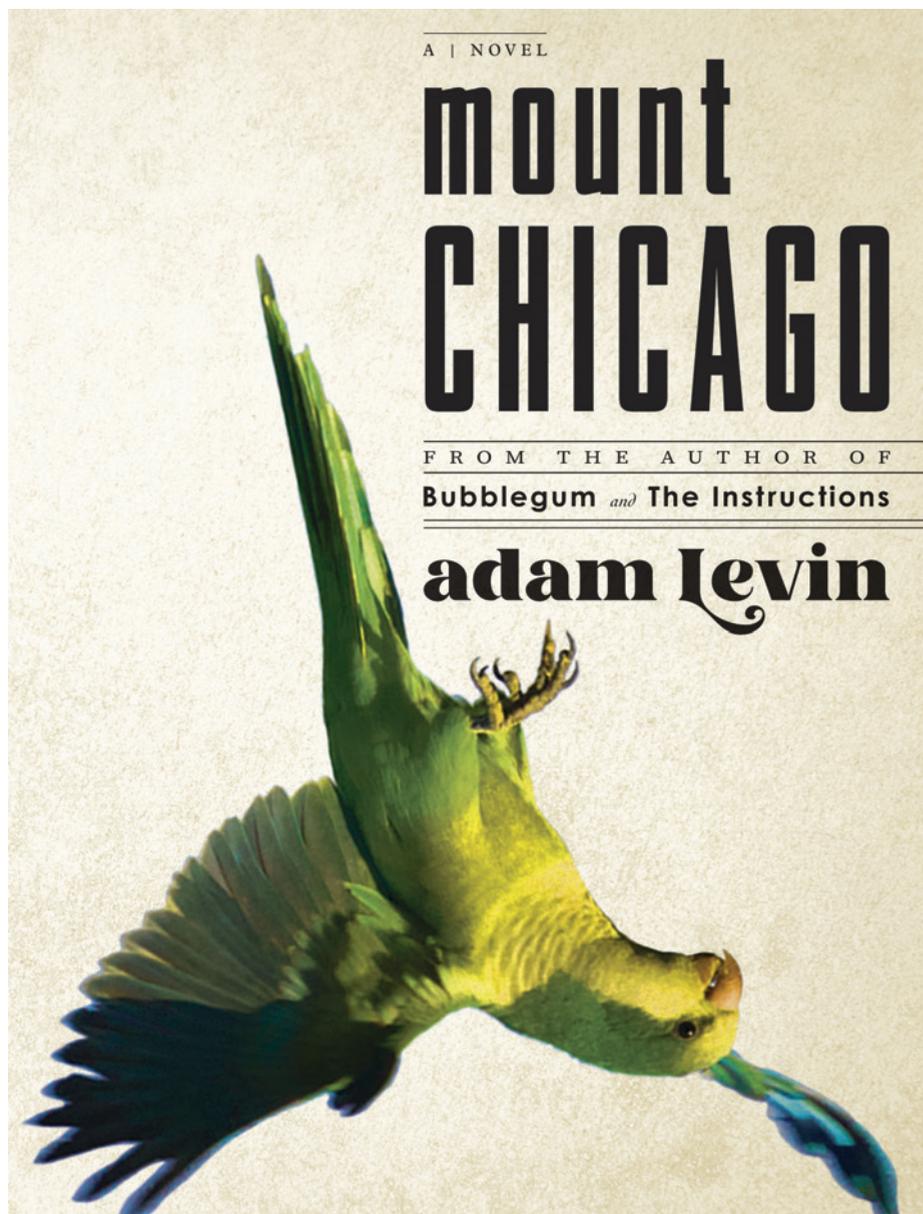
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not before the reader suffers through almost 600 pages of masturbatory meta riffage meant to be funny.

While Gladman is the putative protagonist, there's also Apter Schutz—a wunderkind marketer, behaviorist therapist, political consultant, and dabbler in contrarian white power/anti-PC agitprop; Gogol, the parrot; a nameless Chicago mayor, who's neither Daley, nor Rahm Emanuel, nor Lori Lightfoot, but more an ersatz *SNL* Da Bears caricature; oh, and also Ari Emanuel, the superagent of *Entourage* fame. These, plus a half dozen friends, lovers, and hangers-on are slammed into one another to evoke this novel's sprawling, yet bizarrely tunnel-vision universe. The author, Adam Levin, also inserts offstage commentary, so as to make sure his dumb readers know what they're reading is fiction, or lies, as he likes to call them. He need not have worried. We know.

I met Levin in the late 90s in Wicker Park. We were never friends but hung out in a couple of the same coffee shops. He was always writing. What he'd been working on in those years, it turns out, was a thousand-page brick of a book called *The Instructions*, about a boy who thinks himself the messiah. A short story collection and slightly shorter novel followed over the next decade. Levin taught creative writing at local colleges and married the French-born writer Camille Bordas, eventually leaving Chicago when she got a professorship

MOUNT CHICAGO BY ADAM LEVIN
Doubleday: hardcover (out 8/9), \$30,
penguinrandomhouse.com

in Florida. I wouldn't normally mention any of these extraneous biographical factoids, nor my very tangential connection to this writer, if the grim endless slog of his novel didn't take so many detours into factual, often very local corners I'm intimately familiar with. The Rainbo Club in Ukrainian Village is a recurring setting. I've been a regular there for more than 25 years so I feel invested when Levin mentions it. Unfortunately, neither that bar, nor dozens of other Chicago spots, are rendered as anything but generic backdrop for his characters' machinations. Levin's idea of poetic license/humor (?) is to have Corona served at the Rainbo. Which, as anyone who ever drank there would know, it isn't. Hilarious, right?

One would think that a catastrophic event—

referred to sometimes as the “terrestrial anomaly” or 11/17, after the day it occurred in 2021—might lend the story some weight. But it comes off as a mere plot point or inciting incident (in creative writing-speak). Emotionally, it feels like the kind of fantasy a child might come up with: what if everyone who loved me was wiped off the face of the earth? What would I do? Who would love me then? The answer, in this case, is an annoying little bird named after a great Russian writer.

Gogol, like Levin's human stand-ins, is given pages and pages of inner monologue. This parrot has no more or less a distinctive voice than any of the others. Whoever's talking or thinking in this novel is, with very little pretense, just Adam Levin. The effect is not unlike that horrifying scene in Charlie Kaufman's 1999 film, *Being John Malkovich*, where a whole room is filled with dozens of characters, babies included, each bearing the title actor's impassive physiognomy. There are also multiple references to Woody Allen, Louis C.K., and Philip Roth. Levin does this to name-check his obvious influences but also to align himself with writers and artists who've recently been disgraced over personal conduct. Political correctness is skewered often, so Levin casts his lot with what he clearly sees as victims of left-wing overreach. This might be more compelling or thought-provoking if he didn't content himself with just insulting people whose political or cultural positions differed from his own, rather than exploring why previously celebrated men in positions of power aren't allowed to do whatever they want these days.

After wandering through the self-loathing wilderness of these pages for over a week, when Gladman finally straps on his suicide mask and has highlights from his miserable life flash before his eyes, it is sweet relief for this reader as well.

In one of several authorial interjections, Levin addresses his real-life wife and his (imaginary) prospective readers, “I wouldn't want to bore you at all, Camille. Ever. Come to think of it, that goes for all of you, whoever you are. I'll move on.” Had he heeded his own words, this novel would have remained safely locked away in the proverbial drawer. But we can't all be so lucky. **✎**

@Chicago_Reader

BOOKS

Mount Chicago tries hard, but fails

A new novel by former Chicagoan Adam Levin disappoints.

By **DMITRY SAMAROV**

A novelist, writing professor, and covert comedian named Solomon Gladman wakes up one morning in Chicago, sometime in 2022. He and his French-born wife, Daphne Bourbon (would she be named Siobhan Single-Malt were she Scots-Irish?) plan to meet Gladman's parents and sisters downtown for brunch. But Gladman begs off

because of a hemorrhoid flare-up and stays home. Daphne goes by herself and is swallowed up, along with most of downtown, in a sinkhole that kills thousands and causes billions in damage. Gladman lives out the rest of his days eating Xanax and guzzling whiskey, forestalling suicide out of loyalty to his parrot, Gogol. Gladman will eventually off himself, but

BOOKS

A hunt for Chicago treasures

Chicago Scavenger gives readers an adventure while they learn about obscure city sites.

BY TONY PEREGRIN

For Jessica Mlinaric it all started in her grandma's backyard.

"My cousin and I spent hours drawing scavenger hunts and treasure maps to the patch of trees between her lawn and a neighboring grocery store parking lot," writes Mlinaric in the introduction to her new book *Chicago Scavenger: The Ultimate Search for Chicago's Hidden Treasures*. The spiral-bound book, designed to jot down notes, features riddles to more than 342 hidden and overlooked works of public art, architectural oddities, and under-the-radar museums.

There is something a little bit *Goonies*, perhaps a little *Indiana Jones* about scavenger hunts—particularly in the case of Mlinaric's quests. *Chicago Scavenger* asks readers to decode poems and pore over photo fragments to locate sites across 17 Chicago neighborhoods.

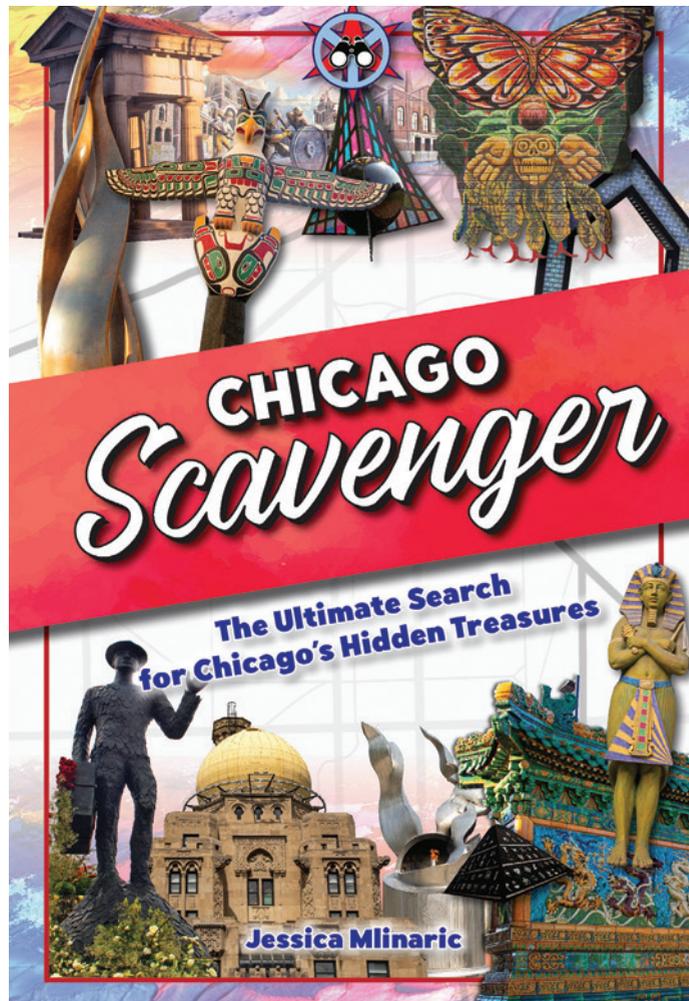
"I think that finding something surprising in your everyday surroundings gives you that thrill of discovery," says Mlinaric, a Chicago-based writer and photographer, and the founder of urbnexplorer.com, a blog featuring "travel insights for the culturally curious."

"I selected places that were historically important, visually interesting, or meaningful to the cultural fabric of the community," Mlinaric continues, "and I picked spots that are reasonably close together so that readers could explore a single neighborhood in an afternoon."

Considering the author's criteria for selecting spots in the book, does *Chicago Scavenger* adequately cover the full spectrum of the city's diverse cultures and neighborhoods?

"I was very intentional about making sure that I had a balanced representation of northern and south-side neighborhoods, and a few on the west side as well," says Mlinaric. "Exploring that richness of diversity is really important to me, and it is one of the things that I love best about living in Chicago."

Once sites were selected, Mlinaric set about



Jessica Mlinaric COURTESY THE ARTIST

writing the clues—mini-poems that rhyme with a slightly Seussian cadence.

"I didn't read any Dr. Seuss to prepare to write the clues, but I was thinking about it," jokes Mlinaric. "It was my publisher who wanted to make them rhyme, and I was a little hesitant. I'm not a poet, I've not written in rhyme before. I took a day off work to see if I could even do this! And I actually had fun with it."

Mlinaric was hesitant to divulge which riddles she thinks might be the most challenging for readers to decode, but she admits Geoffrey Baer—a Chicago public television personality and local historian who works for WTTW—was impressed with the degree of difficulty of some of her clues.

"Geoffrey Baer was kind enough to write the blurb for my book. And he said he thought some of the riddles were challenging," says Mlinaric, sounding slightly incredulous. Mlinaric, whose first book *Secret Chicago: A*

Guide to the Weird, Wonderful, and Obscure was published in 2018, appeared on season one of Baer's WTTW program *The Great Chicago Quiz Show*.

CHICAGO SCAVENGER: THE ULTIMATE SEARCH FOR CHICAGO'S HIDDEN TREASURES BY JESSICA MLINARIC

Reedy Press, paperback, 192 pp., \$20.95, chicagoscavengerhunt.com

If you do get stumped by a clue, don't fret: Mlinaric encourages readers to email her via chicagoscavenger.com for additional hints.

Readers can solve the riddles solo or team up with friends and family as a way to engage with the city. There's no timetable for completing the scavenger hunt, but for the more competitive explorers eager to conquer all 17 neighborhood quests, the clues actually lead to a gem of a prize.

"Take a picture of each site, upload it to my

website, and you'll get points for correctly identifying each location in the book. I'll update the leaderboard regularly so that you can see where you stand," explains Mlinaric. "Winners will receive a custom poster by local illustrator Jason Swearingen that incorporates some of the places in the book. It's really beautiful—I'm really excited about it!"

Mlinaric started writing *Chicago Scavenger* early last year before COVID-19 vaccines were readily available and after a year in pandemic lockdown in her Wicker Park apartment. "As someone who really tries to get out and about in the city, it blew my mind to get back out in Chicago and have a reason to visit other neighborhoods and talk to people. I was just so in love with Chicago again after being stuck in the little bubble of my house. It was a very exciting time and it made my heart swell with pride to be a Chicagoan." 

 @tonyperegrin



From left: Jacinda Ratcliffe, Nikki Lynette, and Keeley B. Morris in *Get Out Alive* MICHAEL BROSILOW

REVIEW

Singing past stigma

Nikki Lynette's *Get Out Alive* offers real talk on depression and suicide.

By **KERRY REID**

The same day that I saw Nikki Lynette's new musical *Get Out Alive* with Haven, the U.S. rolled out the new 988 phone number for the National Suicide Prevention Hotline, with the promise that there will be more resources to address mental health and substance abuse issues, as well as support for those experiencing suicide ideation.

As Lynette makes clear in her show (developed at Northwestern's American Music Theatre Project, where she was the first Black woman playwright selected for the program), for people with depression and a history of suicide, social stigma and shame are often the boulders in the way of seeking help—and just getting through each day is a Sisyphean struggle. Part bio-musical, part sociological exploration of the way depression affects Black Americans in particular, part ritual exorcism of that shame and stigma, the show is a defiant and raw challenge to the audience. Lynette wants us to think more empathetically about how we treat others with mental health issues—and how we treat ourselves when the blue devils of doubt, anxiety, and self-loathing start taking over our minds.

Watching the show, I was reminded of the controversy that erupted in the 1990s over Bill T. Jones's dance piece *Still/Here*, which illustrated the experiences of people with life-threatening illnesses (cancer, AIDS, cystic fibrosis) and grew out of workshops he and his company conducted with them. (The participants who shared their stories were present onstage in videos, much as Lynette makes space for Black people to speak on video in her show about how depression affects them.) In a now-infamous 1994 *New Yorker* review, "Discussing the Undiscussable," critic Arlene Croce told her readers that she was declining to review Jones's work, claimed he was guilty of promulgating "victim art," and asserted, "By working dying people into his act, Jones is putting himself beyond the reach of criticism." So . . . the critic is the real victim here? You can't write about something if it makes you "feel sorry" for the people whose stories are being told?

I've taught Croce's essay and the many cogent responses to it in various criticism classes over the years, and one point that a student made early on has always stuck with

me: the people Jones worked with in creating *Still/Here* don't refer to *themselves* as victims. That's something Croce (and too many others) put on them as a label. And that's something that Lynette's piece tackles head-on: If we're only willing to view people with depression and a history of suicide as damaged victims, rather than people with the same complicated histories that many of us have through being humans on a planet (especially this planet at this point in history), then we're part of the problem.

The show, codirected by Roger Ellis and Lucky Stiff and co-choreographed by Keeley B. Morris and Jacinda Ratcliffe (who also appear as choral/supporting figures for Lynette), is structured as a song cycle in the form of a memorial. Two runway platforms bisect, with the playing area surrounded by floral arrangements (one bearing the legend "RIP to a Bad Bitch") and shelves of votive lights created out of dozens of prescription pill bottles. (Eleanor Kahn designed the set.) DJ P1 serves as emcee and also pops up with a well-timed line or two during the 100-minute performance, while Chris Owens's video projections offer trippy visuals in addition to the aforementioned documentary interviews.

Get Out Alive is essentially a chronology of Lynette's journey with her own mental health, which culminated in a suicide attempt in California after losing a pregnancy with an abusive partner. Before she ended up in that situation, there was also a history of sexual abuse (as there is with so many people), family dysfunction (her father was largely out of the picture), and the added stress of being Black in racist America. When her mother is diagnosed with cancer, Lynette comes back to Chicago to care for her—with the quiet understanding with herself that once her mother is gone, she can once again deploy the "Get Out of Life Free" card of suicide and end the pain that has continued despite hospitalization and medication after her previous attempt.

With songs like "My Mind Ain't Right" (which appeared in Spike Lee's Netflix reboot of *She's Gotta Have It*—the filmmaker shows up in the story as a kind of lifesaver at one point), the banger revenge anthem "I'll Kill You and Cry on Your Grave" (dedicated to the man she calls "Lucifer, the Lord of Fuckbois"), and "The Strong One," Lynette creates an Afro-goth/hip-hop soundtrack for her life

story. It's sometimes messy, sometimes funny, and of course sometimes deeply anguishing.

What it's not is an exercise in begging for sympathy or framing herself as a victim. Lynette is asking us to consider why we cannot find it in ourselves to even listen to people with mental health issues without judgment, and without treating them as a punchline or danger to others. (See for example the rush to label every mass shooter as "mentally ill.") If one in five Americans has mental health disorders (and that was, as Lynette points out in a February 2021 TED Talk, before the pandemic), then there are a helluva lot of "victims" out there.

Not all of us have the creative ability to transform our stories into music and storytelling, as Lynette does. But we do all have the ability to make space for each other's stories, especially when those stories are coming from Black women who face disparities in mental health care as they do in so many other areas. Lynette, who opened for Pussy Riot on a U.S. tour, identifies punk and other alternative cultures in her TED Talk as a source of strength, since they're used to being viewed as "creeps and weirdos." But you don't need to be punk to adopt Lynette's demand for "radical social change" when it comes to fighting the pernicious demon of stigma.

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OPENING

RR War and romance
Dear Jack, Dear Louise offers warm epistolary nostalgia.

Ken Ludwig is best known for high-octane farces such as *Lend Me a Tenor*, but in *Dear Jack, Dear Louise*, he goes for tender epistolary romance. Based on the love-affair-via-letters story of how his parents met in World War II (but wholly imagined by Ludwig, as his mother destroyed the letters before her death), this Northlight production, directed by Jessica Fisch and starring Casey Hoekstra and Sarah Price, is a sweet exercise in nostalgia with just enough bite to keep anything saccharine at bay. Introduced long-distance by their fathers—Jewish immigrants who knew each other in the “old country” who settled in Pennsylvania and Brooklyn—Jack and Louise are in some ways a study in contrasts. He’s the steady-as-she-goes Army doctor, she’s the aspiring actor-dancer whose boarding-house life in New York feels like a lost subplot from *Stage Door*. Price’s demeanor reminds me of Rosalind Russell—sharp wit with screwball undertones. (At one point, she sardonically defines “avant garde” as “The stage was dark and we spoke with Hungarian accents.”) Hoekstra’s earnestness as Jack is leavened with ironic observation, darkening as the war drags on and the casualties mount.

The wartime background means that there’s both urgency and doubt in their interactions; she feels guilty about complaining about her career, and he isn’t quite the straight arrow he appears at first. As the show progresses, we feel how much they’ve invested in each other, and even knowing how it ends, there are moments that we draw in our breath, rooting for it all to come out OK. —**KERRY REID** *DEAR JACK, DEAR LOUISE* Through 8/7: Wed 1 and 7:30 PM, Thu 7:30 PM, Fri 8 PM, Sat 2:30 and 8 PM, Sun 2:30 PM; also Tue 7/26, 7:30 PM and Sun 7/24, 7 PM; touch tour, open captioning, and audio described performance Sat 7/30, 2:30 PM; relaxed performance for individuals with sensory sensitivity Sun 7/24, 7 PM; Northlight Theatre, North Shore Center for the Performing Arts, 9501 Skokie Blvd., Skokie, 847-673-6300, northlight.org, \$30-\$89 (\$15 students, subject to availability)

RR Fight or flight
 Two men in 1967 confront different aspects of being American.

The Chicago premiere of David Alex’s sociopolitical drama *ENDS*, directed by Davette J. Franklin, follows two men who represent conflicting visions of life in America. Set in 1967, the story begins with Kingsley (Rejinal Simon), a 30-year-old Black man who has spent the past 18 years living in a remote forest cabin as a response to the racial violence his family experienced during his childhood. His only companions are the words of great Black thinkers who offer him solace and conviction. Soon, his isolation is disturbed when weary traveler and newly returned Vietnam veteran Globber (Peter Kattner III) seeks refuge in his home to take shelter from a vicious storm.

Although Globber initially enters the home against Kingsley’s will, they come to understand one another’s opposing experiences. Kingsley has rejected his identity as an American while Globber has just willingly put his life on the line for it. The tension surrounding whether the men will eventually adapt to the other’s way of living—extreme isolation or faithful connection—moves the story forward.

The Chicago premiere’s intimate setting invites the audience to put themselves in each man’s shoes and deeply consider the people, experiences, and philosophies that comprise his point of view. Although the show raises questions about life in 1960s America, its themes of what it means to be patriotic in the face of violence and turmoil are ever relevant. —**KATIE POWERS** *ENDS* Through 7/31: Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 4 PM (understudy performance Sat 7/23), Dreamers YOLO, 5419 N. Lincoln, davjasentertainment.com, \$25 (student/industry \$15)

RR Al fresco dreams
 Midsommer Flight returns to the parks

On its ten-year anniversary and return from a COVID-19 hiatus, Midsommer Flight is restaging *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the play that started it all in 2012. On the night I attended, the crowd, close to 100 people by my estimation and incredibly engaged, was compelling

Casey Hoekstra (left) and Sarah Price in *Dear Jack, Dear Louise* **RR** MICHAEL BROSILOV

proof that free summer Shakespeare continues to bring communities together around art that stands the test of time. The reason it stands the test of time? Strong, diverse casting by casting director Karissa Murrell Myers and accessible, entertaining interpretation by director and company founder Beth Wolf. The large cast masterfully employs modern body language and vocal intonation to convey the meaning behind Shakespeare’s prose, helping the audience toward a more intuitive and visceral experience, rather than an overly intellectual head-scratcher.

While the story’s many subplots converge around the couplings of Lysander and Hermia and Demetrius and Helena, the ancillary characters shine as the instigators of comic relief, both physical and with well-timed verbal barbs. Barry Irving delivers as two charismatic taskmasters, Quince and Egeus, giving each nuanced differences while maintaining a thread of simmering, put-upon, “Do I have to do everything myself?” frustration. Jack Morsovollo is a charming ham as Bottom, the weaver who winds up with the head of a donkey. Ebby Offord is a mischievous, prancing Puck, bringing the otherworldly magic and gleeful moments expected of one of the Bard’s most iconic characters. Original music by Justin Cavazos is a fun addition, helping the production stick the landing with energy and comforting positivity. —**MARISSA OBERLANDER** *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM* Through 8/21; see midsommerflight.com for complete schedule and information; free

RR Winter in July
 Oak Park Festival Theatre focuses on redemption.

This is a great play for the summer—despite its title—because *The Winter’s Tale* is as much about the coming of spring as it is the dreary desolation of December. At least that is what director Kevin Theis emphasizes in this high-spirited, lighthearted production. All that is positive, sweet, and redemptive in the play—the open-hearted expressions of friendship, the warmhearted comic turns, the full-throttle romance in the second half—works like a charm. Georgia Dib and Brian Bradford are especially winning as the play’s young lovers. In contrast, the darker moments in the play, in particular King Polixenes’s murderous, paranoid jealousy, are not nearly as moving, or, oddly enough, even convincing. In the earlier, darker moments of the play David Gordon-Johnson never seems to get the pitch and tone of this character right; sometimes he seems too angry, at other times not angry enough.

Yet Gordon-Johnson feels utterly at home—and perfectly cast—in the play’s happier, more positive moments near the end. The armchair psychologist in me wonders if there is a connection between the focus in this production on redemption and new growth, and the theater’s tragedy last fall—a devastating fire that destroyed 50 years of records, props, costumes, and light, sound, and office equipment—and their recent so-far-successful struggles to rise from the ashes. Certainly, this joyous production gives us hope of many more productions to come. —**JACK HELBIG** *THE WINTER’S TALE* Through 8/20: Thu-Sat 8 PM, Sun 7 PM, Austin Gardens, 167 Forest Ave., Oak Park, 708-300-9396, oakparkfestival.com, \$38 **RR**

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FEATURE

Odd Obsession has returned

Ryan Graveface's chaotic storefront of cultural eccentricities will house the previously shuttered video store.

By **NOAH BERLATSKY**

When you enter the new Graveface Records & Curiosities and Terror Vision at 1829 N. Milwaukee, the first thing you see looming in the doorway is a giant plaster Christ with a vacantly grinning bunny head. Amidst the disarray of the still-under-construction project are bins of Swedish death metal records with animal skulls scattered on top of them, two-headed stuffed calves, and various half-boxed twisted objects that don't admit to easy identification.

The real thing-that-should-not-be is farther in, though. Snake through dim passages and terrifyingly low ceilings, and you eventually descend into a basement. There, emerging from dim corners and obscene angles, is a terrifying torrent of unknown and unholy video.

Odd Obsession has returned to Chicago.

Brian Chankin's legendary video store opened on Halsted across from Steppenwolf Theatre in 2004. Chankin had been recording and collecting obscure horror, foreign, low-budget, indie, bootleg, and limited-release films since he was seven or eight. That metastasized into a more than 25,000-video

collection which became the heart of Odd Obsession. "I was just interested in anything that was interesting and hard to find," Chankin told me by phone.

As Ben Sachs wrote in the *Reader*, the store was a haven for budding cinephiles and weird culture obsessives. Devotees would wander in and stay for hours, volunteering to stock shelves in return for free rentals.

Before streaming, Odd Obsession was one of the few places you could find films like Stephanie Rothman's *The Velvet Vampire* (1971) or the schlock anti-classic *The Astro-Zombies* (1968). Even post Netflix, films in the collection like Trent Harris's *The Beaver Trilogy* (2001) remain almost impossible to see. (What is *The Beaver Trilogy*, you ask? It's three short films about an Olivia Newton-John impersonator from Beaver, Utah, named "Groovin' Gary." The first section is a documentary about Gary. The second and third movies are biopics in which Gary is portrayed respectively by Sean Penn and Crispin Glover.)

Those who loved Odd Obsession were passionate. But, unfortunately, they were also relatively few in number. Chankin was almost

Brian Chankin's film collection RYAN GRAVEFACE

completely uninterested in purchasing new movies to bring in more casual customers. "I honestly never really knew how to run a business," he says.

The store lost money year after year, shifting venues repeatedly. The end was already coming, but COVID put the final stake in the store's undead heart. Disillusioned and exhausted, Chankin closed the store in 2020. He shifted his full-time focus to Deadly Prey, an amazing gallery that features movie posters by Ghanaian artists.

But even as Odd Obsession died, Chankin hoped for a resurrection. "I didn't want to have any sort of sale of the movies. I thought at some point, something could happen with them."

Enter the weird culture entrepreneurial vortex known as Ryan Graveface. A Chicago native, Graveface moved to Savannah in 2010. There he runs a bewildering array of businesses: indie record label Graveface Records, scuzzy horror video and soundtrack label Terror Vision, a Graveface Museum with oddities and space for Graveface's extensive John Wayne Gacy memorabilia collection.

Graveface had been an Odd Obsession customer and fan. When he decided to open a storefront in his old hometown, he knew he wanted Chankin's video collection to be part of it.

Chankin didn't want to run the store, but he was excited to have the movies made available again. Not least because putting the collection on display means it's no longer boxed up and inaccessible. "On a personal note, on a selfish note, I'm going to be happy to be able to just kind of see all the movies out there again, and take them home and watch [them] myself," he told me.

Graveface's current plan is to have his own records, videos, posters, and other merchandise available for sale in the front of the store. He'll also have a Graveface Museum which patrons can tour for a cover price. That'll include, he says, a reproduction of John Wayne Gacy's prison cell.

The Odd Obsession collection will be available for browsing as part of the museum experience for casual visitors. More dedicated aficionados can become members and rent from some 15,000 titles on a monthly plan.

"Odd Obsession made no money," Graveface says ruefully. "So that's why it's down here and an attraction." The hope is that treating Odd Obsession as one part of a larger weird culture experience will make the video store more sustainable than it's been in the past.

For now, though, it's great to have one of Chicago's more obscure cultural treasures lurking in the city's nooks and crannies once more. If you want to see Crispin Glover's Olivia Newton-John impersonation, head around the bunny-headed Jesus, past the John Wayne Gacy display, and watch your head down the stairs. Odd Obsession has got you.

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The Sea Beast
NETFLIX

NOW PLAYING

The Sea Beast

There's probably enough to keep the under six (or so) set engaged in Netflix's *The Sea Beast*, a sort of *Moby Dick*-meets-*King Kong* but with a far, far less interesting monster than either. The animated story (with screenplay by Chris Williams and Nell Benjamin; the former also directed) is fine: plucky orphan lass Maisie Brumble (Zaris-Angel Hator) stows away, and epic adventure at sea ensues. In this case, we're on a "hunting" vessel, part of a storied fleet that through the generations has been valiantly dedicated to eradicating the sea beasts who have been waging war on innocent humans since time immemorial. Or so the sacred texts of sealore say. When Maisie befriends the dreaded Red Bluster, she sets in motion a reckoning between humans and beasts, both in terms of their history and their futures as fellow creatures of the planet. To be sure, the movie encourages critical thinking in a way that makes sense to young minds. What nonetheless absolutely sinks *The Sea Beast* is the wildly underwhelming Red Bluster, the most magnificent and feared beast of them all. RB looks like an oversized bath toy and little more. If you're going to title your movie *The Sea Beast*, you need to commit to a beast that earns its billing. Despite some snazzy water sequences, Red Bluster isn't even worth third billing, let alone first and only. —CATEY SULLIVAN PG, 105 min. Streaming on Netflix and playing in select theaters

Where the Crawdads Sing

At the start of a story that's more glossy than grit, we see a young woman being chased through the marshes of North Carolina by the police after a local golden boy of the town turns up dead. But Daisy Edgar-Jones simply

looks too glamorous to be ridiculed and ostracized by townies as "The Marsh Girl," otherwise known as Kya, in Olivia Newman's shallow adaptation of the wildly popular 2018 book *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens. Kya is an outsider in her small town and learns to live off the land in the marshes, a natural talent that will prove useful later. She is abandoned by her family and isolated from the rest of the community except for two boys who both claim to love her but will later betray her. The latter of the two, Chase, is the murder victim we see at the movie's start, and naturally, everyone is convinced Kya is the culprit.

Where the Crawdads Sing has potential but always seems to be missing something: there's hardly any tension in courtroom scenes that should set you on edge as the theories of Chase's death are revealed, and there's a twist that completely misses the landing by breaking the age-old rule of "show don't tell." The film brightens when it focuses on the beauty of the nature Kya makes a home in, something that shines through in the original novel thanks to the author's background as a naturalist. Though it would be irresponsible to decontextualize this compliment from how many moviegoers at the film's screening could be overheard whispering about the similarities between the events of the movie and the author's involvement in a 1996 murder while doing conservation work in Zambia with her ex-husband, Mark Owens.

There are a host of other things wrong with the film, from poor pacing, to a lack of character depth, to heavy-handed themes of a wannabe *To Kill a Mockingbird* but without the racial awareness. But Jones does her best with what she has to work with, and the movie may still strike an emotional chord with viewers if they don't look too closely. —NOËLLE D. LILLEY PG-13, 125 min. Wide release in theaters

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Living with Muddy



Chandra Cooper outside the Muddy Waters home on July 16, 2022, and her mother, Amelia Cooper, with grandfather Muddy at the home in 1964. Both women serve on the board of the nonprofit working to turn the home into the Mojo Museum, and Chandra is its president.  CHANDRA BY ANDREW BURKE-STEVENSON FOR CHICAGO READER; AMELIA AND MUDDY BY RAY FLERLAGE COURTESY THE MOJO MUSEUM

You may have heard that Muddy Waters's Chicago home is becoming a blues museum. Now you can hear from two women in his family who lived there.

By **DEITRA FARR**

In 1954, McKinley Morganfield bought his first house, located at 4339 S. Lake Park Avenue in Kenwood. Better known as Muddy Waters, the Father of Chicago Blues shared the south-side house with his wife Geneva, Geneva's son Charles, his granddaughter Amelia "Cookie" Cooper, and his great-granddaughter Chandra "Peaches" Cooper.

Quite a few people came and went over the

nearly two decades Muddy lived there. Pianist Otis Spann and harmonica player Paul Oscher, members of Muddy's band, were among the musicians who stayed in the basement. The basement also hosted legendary jam sessions and rehearsals with some of the greatest blues artists on earth. During his years in Kenwood, Muddy recorded some of his best-known and most enduring songs, including "Hoochie Coochie Man," "Got My Mojo Working," and

"Mannish Boy."

Today the house is owned by Muddy's great-granddaughter Chandra, who is the president of the nonprofit that's working to turn it into the Muddy Waters Mojo Museum. The city designated the house a Chicago landmark last October, and this spring the nonprofit received \$250,000 from the Commission on Chicago Landmarks for exterior renovations and another \$116,152 from the city

for interior renovations. The house has been unoccupied for more than a decade, so it needs plenty of work. The Mojo Museum eventually plans to open exhibit space on the first floor and a recording studio and music room in the basement.

I first saw Chandra in 2017, during the dedication of the Muddy Waters mural downtown on State Street. She was looking up at the mural, and she had tears running down her face. Little did I know that in a couple of years I'd be a board member for the Mojo Museum, along with Chandra's mother, Amelia.

Most of the coverage of the museum project has focused on the process of securing landmark status and raising funds, and on underlining Muddy's huge importance in the worlds of blues and rock 'n' roll. I wanted to tell a more personal story, so I talked to Amelia, who grew up in the Kenwood house, and to Chandra, who was born in 1970, a few years before

the family moved out. I asked both ladies what it was like to live with Muddy Waters.

Amelia "Cookie" Cooper

My mother was his first child. Her name was Azelene Morganfield. I was his first grandchild. I was told she was having some personal relationship problems, so I ended up living at Muddy's house. Looking back, I always considered myself having a normal childhood. I didn't really realize the fame and who he really was until I was much older.

When you grow up in a house like that, you have all different types of people. I was about eight or nine years old when I noticed the different colors. Honestly, there were so many

Caucasian and different people coming in and out of our house. As I got older, when I'd walk with these musicians and people to the store, the kids in the neighborhood would ask, "Why you with this white man?" I mean, this is the south side of Chicago, the Low End, that they now call Bronzeville. That's when it dawned on me, this ain't normal [*laughs*].

I never thought it was abnormal, but as young as I was, I felt my sleep schedule was kind of messed up. In our household Muddy's wife Geneva was there, and Muddy would do his gigs. At one and two in the morning, we're waking up. It would be loud with the musicians coming in. Then Geneva would start cooking. Cooking food in a small house, you're going to smell it. Making eggs and homemade biscuits. When they'd come in, Geneva would get up and ask if anybody was hungry and did they need anything. I would get up and try to help her. Little Walter and Otis Spann were

like uncles. Otis stayed there.

If they'd had a good set and they were a little tipsy, they might go in the basement and start playing again. I had to go to school, but it was always that early morning wake-up. That was my normal life. I didn't know any different. As I got older some of that toned down, but not in the early years. It was always him and the band and somebody staying there.

Someone was always staying with us. On the first floor he basically kept it for the primary family, but in the basement we always had somebody staying with us.

I wasn't raised to cook quick food. I was raised to cook hard-core southern food from scratch. Muddy was a very good cook, and Geneva was an excellent cook. Muddy cooked very spicy food. He liked his food well seasoned. So I picked up the way he cooked. I picked up the way he cooked his greens. I cut up tomatoes, green onions, and peppers for



Bluesman John Primer (left) and Chandra Cooper onstage outside the Muddy Waters home on July 16. © ANDREW BURKE-STEVENSON FOR CHICAGO READER

continued from 41
garnishment.

A lot of people don't put garnishment in their greens, but that's the way I was taught. He had a specialty he called "wine chicken." So I learned how to do that, and the crowder peas. Muddy would make homemade lemonade, and I still do that. Certain things that you grew up with you can never get rid of. Just in the last eight or nine years I cut down on my spices.

When I first got married, my husband couldn't eat nothing that I cooked. He said, "Why do your food be so hot?" [Laughs.] I really have calmed down with that. For a long time, I would set you on fire [laughs].

I used to spend a lot of time with Otis Spann. He was going to teach me how to play the piano. I was just amazed with the piano. I started with him, but then I said I wasn't going to do it. Now I regret that I didn't. He was excellent. I loved him.

Little Walter was Geneva's baby. He was always very sensitive towards Geneva, I think because she was such a mothering person. I think she was like a big sister to him. He was protective of her. She was always making sure he was OK and did he need anything. She used to say he had a rambling soul. He was a very attractive man.

Paul Oscher was my buddy. When he first came to live at the house, he was very quiet. I think he had to get used to living with Black people. When you live with Black people you've got to do something. Normally people would stay a week or two, so when Paul's two weeks left, I had to put him in the system. He acted like he didn't have much to do. At Black people's house everybody's got a dish schedule. Every time we eat, he eats. So that was my little joke with Paul, because I made him wash dishes [laughs]. Paul was like a brother. He stayed with us quite a while.

The neighborhood was very different than it is now. It was more family oriented. Everybody knew everybody. Kids playing up and down the street.

Now neighbors are so standoffish. Muddy never had any problems in the neighborhood. We never had any problems with Caucasians or any type people coming to the house. Nobody ever jumped them. Nobody ever intimidated them. When the gangs started coming in, the Blackstone Rangers versus the Disciples, that divided the neighborhood and really bothered us.

Muddy used to take me to James Cotton's house to play with his daughter for hours. I

was also really close with Willie "Big Eyes" Smith and his kids. I would go to the movies with them. Willie would pick me up because I was an only child, so I could be with his kids.

Geneva was an excellent mother. My mother came back and forth. I didn't have any contact with my father. My mother passed when I was eight or nine years old. I had a lot of contact with my mother's mother, my grandmother. But it was really Muddy and Geneva who raised me.

I was very young when I had Chandra. Geneva always wanted a girl. Muddy was very disappointed in me. Geneva was very supportive.

I was about to turn 14 years old. Geneva found a school I could go to for unwed mothers, and I never missed a day of school. I never missed a year of school. I appreciated them for being so strict. I had to go to school, come home, and take care of my baby. And for the record, I was not promiscuous. My first time, and I ended up pregnant. I had really thought about giving my baby up for adoption, but Geneva said, "No, we'll make it."

That's all Geneva wanted, was a girl.

Chandra "Peaches" Cooper

I don't remember anything about the first three years of my life. But I can tell you this, I feel honored that when I came home from Illinois Masonic Hospital, I went to that house at 4339 S. Lake Park Avenue. I was there until I was three years old. I spent time with my great-grandfather and his wife Geneva in that house. And they gave me the nickname of Peaches that has stayed with me all these years. I have no memory of Geneva at all, but I will always honor her name and who she was in my great-grandfather's life.

Geneva was very important to his life and legacy. I was told growing up that she acted as if I was her and Muddy's baby. On her deathbed she made it clear to him that I was to be taken care of for the rest of my life. She put me in a place where I was in my great-grandfather's will and his estate.

So I take all of that seriously. I realize I wouldn't be the woman that I am, the person that I am, if he was not the humble, loving man that he was. The patriarch of our family. I was a spoiled kid, and I wasn't spoiled by anybody except him. The position I'm in is the preservationist to save and secure his house. To make sure the house becomes a museum.



Renovations have already begun on the Muddy Waters home at 4339 S. Lake Park Avenue.

ANDREW BURKE-STEVENSON FOR CHICAGO READER

I did not grow up with my biological father, but I was able to spend time with him. I looked at my great-grandfather Muddy as my daddy. I called him "daddy." He was my father figure. When we moved from Lake Park to Westmont, I lived in that house as well. I watched him be the man of the house, and I watched him be a professional. I watched how he handled his friends and his musicians.

I honor him, because in my lifetime I have never seen a man like him. He had a dream. He had what I'd call an American dream. Even though he picked cotton and lived on a plantation, he got up out of that situation. He moved to Chicago and he made himself something and somebody. If he can do it, I can do it. I run a successful nonprofit in the city of Milwaukee, where we house girls that have mental health issues and also victims of human trafficking since 2009.

Muddy died in 1983, and after he died we had the house in the estate. When I realized they were going to sell the house to somebody outside of the family, that's the day I had to

position myself to be able to buy the house.

This house is so significant, and it was so hard for me to understand why they wanted to sell it. I knew right away that the house should be a museum. Once I did get possession of it, I just kept it. I used a lot of funds to keep it. I didn't know how I would get to this point, but I knew the significance of it.

I want the museum to be a place that recognizes who Muddy Waters was, as the King of Chicago Blues. But beyond that I have a call to make sure that generations to come be educated about the blues and other music.

People say the blues had a baby and they call it rock 'n' roll. Blues had a few babies. You can hear aspects of blues in hip-hop and all kinds of music. We need a place of education and community resources. We need to give back to the community. A place where there are performances. So we'll not just have a static museum, but a museum that enriches, inspires, and transforms people. 

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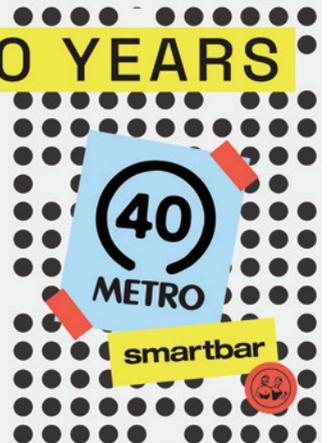
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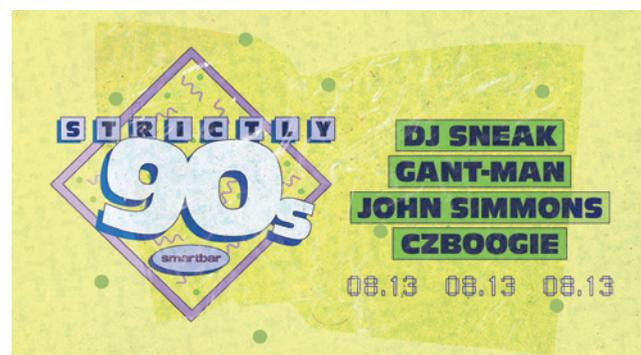
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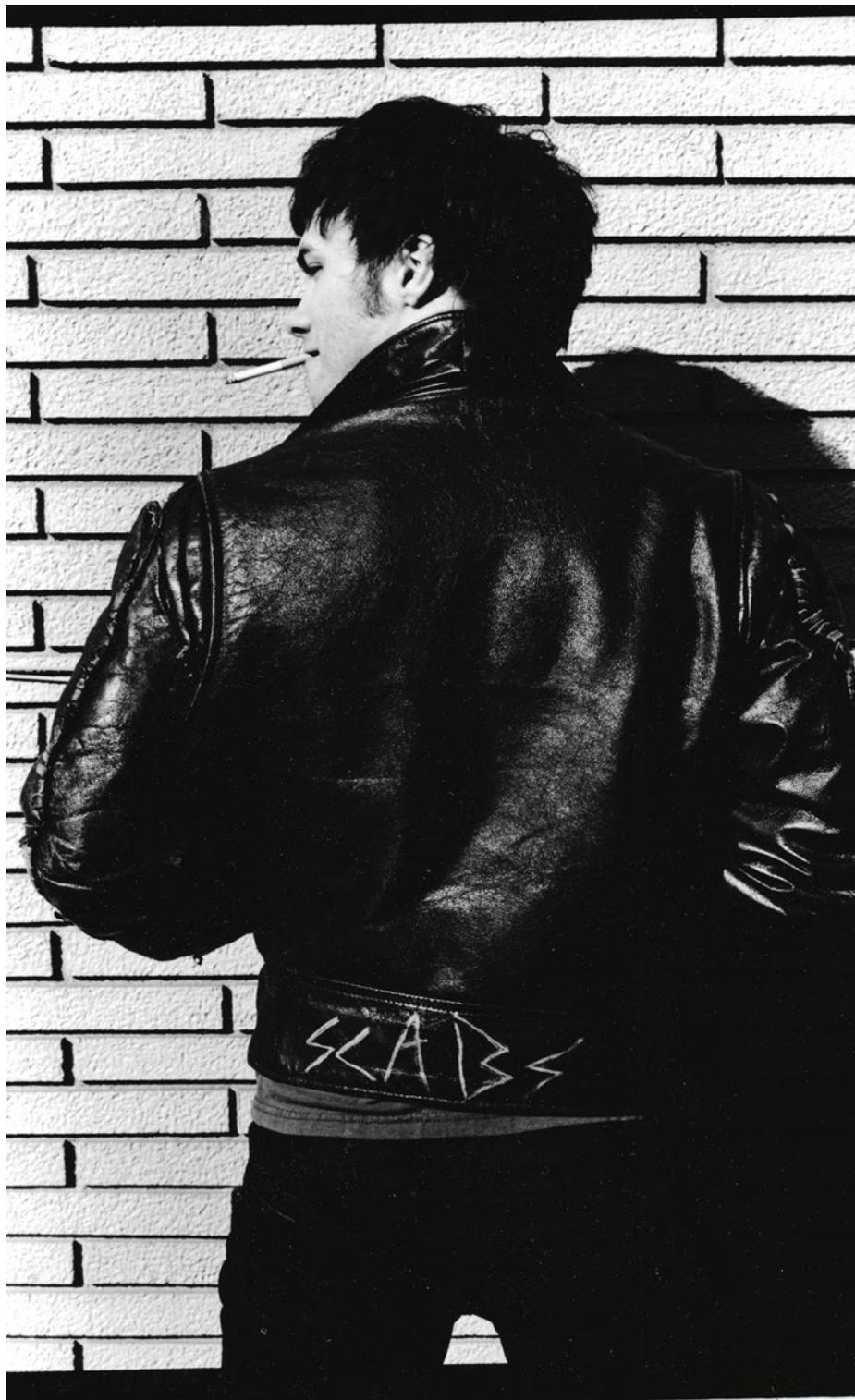
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PICK OF THE WEEK

Northwest Indiana punk firestarters Liquids are the best opening band you'll see all summer



Mat Williams of Liquids © COURTESY THE ARTIST

LIQUIDS

Cobra Man headline; Liquids open. Skate company Worble screens the full-length video *Worble World* between sets. Sun 7/24, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western, sold out. 21+

NORTHWEST INDIANA'S PUNK SCENE would be a lot less thrilling without Mat Williams—he's been the engine behind many of the local bands whose names have filled homemade gig flyers around the Region. If you consider yourself a connoisseur of midwestern punk, you've likely collected a cache of his music, whether by Pukeoid, Dagger, Guinea Kid, or the ne plus ultra of 2010s mutant punk, the Coneheads. For the past five years, Williams has been pouring his energy into Liquids, whose scummy-sounding recordings carry so much magnetism, momentum, and joy that you'll remember all over again why rock briefly became the lingua franca of postwar American youth. The raw rippers on last year's self-released *Life Is Pain Idiot* keep you on the edge of your seat by compressing an album side's worth of songwriting into every 90-second tune—Williams has figured out how to make punk rock feel like it's being invented right in front of your ears. Recorded by fellow midwestern DIY lifer Erik Nervous, *Life Is Pain Idiot* dials back Liquids' scuzziness and leans into power pop, which complements the band's brutally sharp musicianship and off-the-leash nastiness. Williams plays like a lead-footed Formula One driver who hits the starting line already going 80 miles per hour, which lends extra oomph to every drum fill and guitar lick on the chipmunk-voiced boogie-woogie scorcher "Lemon Rice (Doomed to Live)." Onstage Liquids play with the same need for speed, and their songs are so short that their sets fly past—when I caught them in a Pilsen park one afternoon last summer, I missed most of their show trying to find a bathroom. Be sure to get there early for this one. —LEOR GALIL

CONCERT PREVIEW
SUNDAY²⁴

THE COSMIC COUNTRY COOKOUT Dougie Poole headline; Boulevards, Tobacco City, Toadvine, Andrew Sa, Lavender Country, and Sarah Weddle open. 2-10 PM, Judson & Moore Distillery, 3057 N. Rockwell Building 5, \$15. 21+

The Cosmic Country Showcase is an acid-infused variety show that happens a handful of times per year at the Hideout, and on July 23, its presenters are repotting this ravenous alien plant (think Audrey II from *Little Shop of Horrors*, except in a cowboy hat) as the Cosmic Country Cookout at Logan Square's newest whiskey distillery, Judson & Moore. Launched in 2019 by musicians and event organizers Sullivan Davis and Dorian Gehring, both of whom have deep ties to the local roots-music scene (Davis used to book talent for the Hideout), Cosmic Country was originally a covers night where its founders could jam with pals. But it quickly grew into something wilder and more amorphous that included intergalactic skits, drag performances, alt-comedy sets, and an eclectic mix of headliners, including Tasha, Lala Lala, and Jeff Tweedy. After the pandemic shut down Chicago's music venues, the showcase went online as Cosmic Country VR, but it has survived as a local cult favorite in no small part due to its organizers' passionate attention to the details of its atmosphere, which relies on a raw mix of humor, innovation, and escapism.

The Cookout expands the showcase's usual evening format into a daylong delight of trippy country music. What separates it from other Chicago summer festivals isn't its lineup, though; it's the Cookout's promise to open a door into another world. The showcase's freewheeling magic will extend beyond the stage into every inch of the venue, and it'll include an immersive photo booth, food from Lonesome Rose and Pretty Cool Ice Cream, and a "general store" (read: vendors specializing in camp, country, and vibes). The bill features plenty of local crooners, such as Andrew Sa and Tobacco City, plus cameos from the extended Cosmic Country universe. New York songwriter Dougie Pool sings electronica-inflected songs for an audience that knows about surviving the gig economy; Boulevards (aka North Carolina singer-songwriter Jamil Rashad) makes funk-infused roots music like a cowpoke Curtis Mayfield; and pioneering queer musician Patrick Haggerty, everyone's favorite gay granddaddy of country, returns with his band Lavender Country. Cosmic Country is pretty far out and going further—it plans to take over Chicago one venue at a time, moving from the distillery to other local music spaces before making a triumphant return to the Hideout. This year, the city. Next year? *The world.*

—MICCO CAPORALE

LIQUIDS See *Pick of the Week* at left. Cobra Man headline; Liquids open. Skate company Worble screens the full-length video *Worble World* between sets. 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western, sold out. 21+



Andrew Sa (right) and guest at the Cosmic Country Showcase © SARAH LARSON



Black Magnet © BEKAH SCOTT

WEDNESDAY

CAT POWER

Arjun opens. 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 1807 S. Allport, \$42.50-\$75. 17+

Chan Marshall, who's performed as Cat Power since the mid-90s (she adopted it from the name of her first band), refreshes even the most weathered motifs with her smokestack voice. While she's amassed a formidable catalog of soulful originals, she's most renowned for refracting other artists' radio hits and obscure B sides through her singular lens. Earlier this year, Marshall released *Covers*, a spiritual counterpart to her desolate 2000 collection *The Covers Record* and rip-roaring 2008 release *Jukebox*. The new record compiles two original tunes plus ten interpretations of songs by artists as diverse as Frank Ocean, the Pogues, Billie Holiday, and Bob Seger.

Marshall challenges herself by synthesizing disparate eras and genres into a cohesive body of work, mining moments of drama from each track. Her bustling translation of "Pa Pa Power," a ghostly anthem by Dead Man's Bones (a defunct Ryan Gosling duo project inspired by Disney's Haunted Mansion), is a career high-water mark. She transforms Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds' 1992 track "I Had a Dream Joe" from a macabre screed into a reverberant incantation, and she pares down Iggy Pop's sorrowful, synth-powered late-70s cut "Endless Sea" until it's a slinky missive.

Marshall has given herself the cover treatment too. *The Covers Record* featured a new version of "In This Hole," from her 1996 album *What Would the Community Think*, and here she presents a reworking of "Unhate," off 2006's *The Greatest*. The original is an anemic acoustic track, but Marshall transforms the marrow-deep self-hatred of its verses into a triumphant reclamation of self, chanting "I hate myself and I want to die" until the

words ring hollow and she sounds like she's defeated her demons. Cover songs are often denigrated as exercises of pomp and laziness, and in less capable hands they're often little more than set fillers or B sides. But Marshall sings with such conviction that each song on *Covers*—whether she wrote the lyrics or not—could've bled from her fingertips.

—SHANNON NICO SHREIBAK

LILAC, WAILIN STORMS, THE POISON

ARROWS Lilac headline; Wailin Storms and the Poison Arrows open. 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western, \$10. 21+

Lilac are essentially a Chicago supergroup of musicians who've done time in underrated bands. They include former Cacaw and Coughs front woman Anya Davidson (also an underground comics artist and author and occasional *Reader* contributor) on guitar and vocals, Kenny Rasmussen (late of Anatomy of Habit) on drums, and two veterans of Baltimore outfit Witch Hat, Chris Day on bass and Conor Stechschulte on guitar and vocals. Lilac released a debut single, "Barbed Wire Entanglement" b/w "On a Wheel," in 2018, and last year they put out a self-titled debut LP. Maybe it's the times, maybe it's my wiring, but even though many reviews I've read of the record describe its jagged, noisy sound as "scary," I find something soothing in its intense, forceful weirdness. "Woman in Power" combines updated riot-grrrrl rage with a circular, funky groove that could lead to some creative moves in the mosh pit. "Burn Down the White House" is as sharp-toothed and heavy as a night-stalking Godzilla. And "Savage Alphabet" gives us a strangely tender affirmation: "You're an animal shitting on the deck of the ark / You're a baby in the dim, green, cold, wet dark."

Also on the bill are **Wailin Storms**, a four-piece from Durham, North Carolina, who integrate heady folkloric southern-gothic ambience into their spiky

postpunk sound. On July 22, they'll release their fifth full-length, *The Silver Snake Unfolds* (Gilead Media), and it's a pointed, smoky broil of tension and payoff. "Sunday Morning Ceremony" rises and falls, its frantic pace and strategic pauses unspooling as though driven by a terrified frenzy, until it culminates in a ghostly breakdown. "Drag" emphasizes its own ghostly breakdown, which feels naked and very afraid. "Carolina Moon" tells an eerie, seductive dream-logic fairy tale, and front man Justin Storms seems very conflicted on whether to fight it or embrace it. The night kicks off with a set from Chicago rock trio the **Poison Arrows**, who released their long-delayed fourth album, *War Regards* (File 13), in February. They kept it on COVID ice for a while, but it's a strong comeback (the band hadn't released anything since 2017's *No Known Note*) with a tough, unified sound and a great guest spot from Chicago rapper Sterling Hayes on "We Are Col-lateral." This eclectic bill showcases three bands with different flavors of intensity, who might all be at the peak of their power. It's all killer, no filler.

—MONICA KENDRICK

ALBUM REVIEWS

BLACK MAGNET, *BODY PROPHECY*

20 Buck Spin

listen.20buckspin.com/album/body-prophecy

In 2020, Oklahoma City musician James Hammon-tree released his first full-length as Black Magnet. *Hallucination Scene* uses all the best parts of 90s industrial metal—even the radio-friendly sounds—to make something that hovers between synthetic and organic. Through their layers of synths, drum machines, and ugly noise, his songs remain as catchy as the best work by the greats to whom he tipped his hat. On his brand-new album, *Body Prophecy* (20 Buck Spin), Hammontree pushes all those ideas

and elements further and makes them a bit meaner. Produced and engineered by Chicago-based metal master Sanford Parker, the record combines massive, slamming electronic beats, harsh guitar squalls, copious glitchy synths, and processed, tortured vocals. It ditches the melodic flourishes and dance-floor-ready energy of Black Magnet's previous work for an unsettling listen that leans slightly more Godflesh than Nine Inch Nails and more Uniform than Marilyn Manson. Each track feels larger-than-life as it pounds relentlessly into your brain, and the last one is a remix of album cut "Incubate" by Godflesh front man Justin Broadrick. It's a match made in heaven: a reimagining of the student's song by the master that adds signature Broadrick eeriness to a smasher of a record. —LUCA CIMARUSTI

CUCO, *FANTASY GATEWAY*

Interscope

enter.fantasygateway.io

California singer-songwriter Cuco (aka Omar Banos) makes distinctively woozy bedroom pop that mixes vocals in Spanish and English with laid-back beats, fuzzy guitar reverb, synth wash, 808s, and the occasional distant bossa nova horn. His summer-romance-and-weed-friendly formula has made him a force on streaming platforms, and rather than mess with success, he keeps the vibe going strong on his new sophomore album, *Fantasy Gateway* (Interscope). Cynics might find Cuco's relatively simplistic lyrical style off-putting—on "Aura" he sings, "Do you want to come home with me / Do you want to get lost with me tonight?"—but this music isn't made for cynics anyway, so it's all good.

"Sweet Dissociation" is a perfect distillation of Cuco's style. Its hook, just shy of irritatingly catchy, is wrapped in layers of psychedelic shimmer so that the track throbs in your brain like a fuzzy Day-Glo psychic caterpillar. "Sitting in the Corner" adds a few twists, mainly via a canny choice of vocal col-

continued from 45

laborators, and the groove fits just as easily under Adriel Favela's norteño rhythms as it does beneath Kacey Musgraves's country-tinged indie-rock singing. Cuco doesn't so much combine Mexican and American influences as refuse to distinguish between them, and in his hands they become a single cascading rainbow of sound. He'll come to Chicago next month to headline the first day of Ruido Fest on Friday, August 19. —NOAH BERLATSKY

DISSONANT DESSERT, ABSURD, OBSCENE!

Self-released
dissonantdessert.bandcamp.com

Eric Novak is a prolific Chicago multi-instrumentalist who plays with jazz quartet Whtvr Frvr and jazz-fusion sextet Cordoba. He's also loaned his talents to a variety of local artists, including indie-rock band the Curls and folk singer Reno Cruz, and most recently he added warm woodwinds to *Portrait*, the new album from rapper Davis. Novak also releases his own music under the name Dissonant Dessert, and his work feels unlimited in structure and raw emotion. The songs on his brand-new record, *Absurd, Obscene!*, sometimes slowly dissolve or abruptly cut into different time signatures, replicating the fleeting, shape-shifting nature of dreams or psychedelic experiences. He calls this style "emo prog," but the influence of 70s funk-rock giants Parliament-Funkadelic is obvious in its dissonant guitars, grotesque humor, and large ensemble (the album credits 43 musicians in total, including keyboardist and singer Ayanna Woods, harpist Yomí, and Cordoba vocalist Brianna Tong).

Novak began work on *Absurd, Obscene!* in June 2019 with live-tracked group recordings, but when the pandemic closed studio spaces, he relied on his collaborators to undertake overdubs and edits at home. He plays electric bass, percussion, keyboards, violin, and five kinds of woodwinds across the album's 11 tracks, but he makes his greatest impression as a singer, trading off vocal styles to reflect the emotional tumult of his music. On "Ain't Shit," he croons about loss with melodramatic flair, and on album opener "... Opened, Underneath the Static" he growls in a tone he compared to "a possessed Cookie Monster" in an April interview with music blog Music Shelf With Mustard.

Loss haunts *Absurd, Obscene!* in the form of decaying environments, relationship troubles, and death, all depicted with wide-eyed psychedelic clarity. "Ain't Shit" laments the passing of Chicago musician Trey Gruber, who fronted the band Parent, while condemning coattail riders who used his death to boost their own careers with "fake-ass shrines." On bleary-eyed ballad "Zem Boolyniff," Novak contrasts receding tides and dried-up rivers with sparkling neon—a depiction of loss that has accrued deeper meaning over time. He recorded the core of the track on March 7, 2020, with engineer Mark "Mouse" Bruner at his Reelsounds Studio in Skokie, an experience Novak later described in a press release as "one of the warmest, most open sessions I've been a part of" due to Bruner's "huge presence and personality." Unfortunately the session was one of Bruner's last; he passed away that October, and Novak dedicated the song to his memory.

For all its heavy subject matter, parts of *Absurd, Obscene!* are downright zany. "Tantric Birdbath"

alternates driving rock with rim-shot grooves and marimba fills reminiscent of a cruise-ship commercial; "Huh, How?" takes a left turn midway through its syllable-dense verses to bloom into a slick disco groove that recalls Steely Dan. It's moving to hear Novak's contributors help bring his song to life; Nexus J adds a confident rap verse on "Hairy Sink," taking shots at acid rain and landlords. The album concludes with the epic "... Shut, Trampled Underneath the Static," featuring contributions from six guitarists, including Reno Cruz and Cordoba's Cam Cunningham. Despite its huge cast, *Absurd, Obscene!* retains the frantic, fortuitous energy of great improvisation. It feels like a long, strange trip through Novak's ego that's been captured for our ears. —JACK RIEDY

F.A.B.L.E., GREEN ROOM

Storybook
instagram.com/f.a.b.l.e

Emerging Chicago rapper Christopher Horace charmed me a couple years ago with the first EP he released as F.A.B.L.E., *(IX) The Hermit*. His downy voice makes his playful raps sound more intimate than he can spell out with words, lending them the air of a confession shared between friends—and his gentle performances fit into his humid, laid-back, soul-influenced instrumentals like puzzle pieces. Horace intensified that magnetic aesthetic on his 2021 full-length, *Duckweed*, and the new *Green Room* (Storybook) adds a new wrinkle by incorporating a grab bag of musical styles. When Horace sings a melancholy hook over a faint, gleaming synth melody, cannon-fire bass, and strands of electronic percussion on "Debt," he replicates the outsize grandeur of big-tent pop rap. *Green Room* also experiments with kitchen-sink beats, full-band fusion, and sultry R&B, and the album's skits help hold it together through these zigzags—in part because Horace uses them to get bracingly honest. He plumbs his grief at the loss of his grandfather ("BTW I'm Sorry") and confronts the mental hurdles he's set up for himself by seeking other artists' acceptance ("I'm Not Really Shit"). He delivers those bits quietly, like he's recording a voicemail, and throughout *Green Room* he often speaks at that restrained volume—another way this diverse album feels like a coherent whole. —LEOR GALIL

VARIOUS ARTISTS, ON LIFE: VOL. 3

Teklife
teklifemusic.com/album/on-life-volume-3

In 2017, foundational Chicago footwork collective and record label Teklife dropped *On Life*, a compilation highlighting all the producers in its wider family. That record became a series, and the new *On Life: Vol. 3* arrives four years after the second chapter. Given the engrossing sounds it contains and the growth in Teklife's ranks of artists, I hope the series has no end in sight. Major players, underappreciated veterans, and younger additions to the crew fill *On Life: Vol. 3* with electrifying tracks as strong as material they've put out on their celebrated solo ventures. On "Whistle," for example, Boylan slices and dices sampled whistling till it sounds like a backmasked birdcall, equal parts gentle and prickly, and DJs Phil, Spinn, and Manny collaborate to create a

refined matrix of percussion on "No Love" that glimmers like its splendid synth melody. Curiosity draws me to the producers who've most recently become part of Teklife's growing crew, since they're mostly unfamiliar to me. Their presence proves that Teklife has learned to expand sustainably in the decades since Spinn and Rashad cofounded the crew as GhettoTeknitianz in 2004, and these newcomers add new links to the chain that will carry Teklife's

core values and evolving aesthetic into the future. A key example is Chicago beat maker DJ Jalen, who released a giddy EP in March called *Footwork Trax Online Vol. 1*. He supplies one of the highlights from *On Life: Vol. 3*: "Workin Me" bounces along on a raw, plasticine vocal loop and steam-engine percussion, both of which pay homage to footwork's past and make a solid case that Jalen's playfulness should help shape the genre's future. —LEOR GALIL



Cuco © RICHARD BROOKS



F.A.B.L.E. © DENNIS THOMPSON



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Chicago's greatest postpunk obscurity returns from oblivion

Forty years ago, Stations made a brilliant EP with Joy Division producer Martin Hannett. It was never finished or released—until now.

By **STEVE KRAKOW**

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

Lately it seems like every “lost” recording, no matter how inconsequential, is getting pushed on limited colored vinyl for a crass Record Store Day cash grab. Beneath the hype, “archival releases” are too often just so-so live jams or half-baked outtakes by established artists—and it’s usually clear why they hadn’t

been released before. That’s what makes the decades-delayed album release by all-but-forgotten Chicago postpunks Stations so exciting.

While Stations were active, in the late 70s and 80s, they released only one single and a music video. But they also recorded a long-lost EP with Martin Hannett, architect of the

STEVE KRAKOW

distinctive postpunk sound of Factory Records and producer for Joy Division—most famously, that’s his work on the genre’s urtext, 1979’s *Unknown Pleasures*. The three tracks Hannett mixed for that EP make up the core of the first Stations release in nearly 40 years, the album *Ghostland*, forthcoming on Chicago label No Sé Discos.

“It sounds like it could’ve been recorded yesterday,” says No Sé cofounder Jorge Ledezma. “I personally refer to Stations as postpunk futurists—they were way ahead of their time. The world can finally catch up.”

Stations never had a stable lineup for long, but the core of the group was always guitarist David Stowell and front woman George Black, who’ve been married since 1984. Stowell was born in Toledo, Ohio, on February 12, 1956, and raised in the countryside outside Columbus. His family moved to the Windy City in 1966, arriving the night of Friday, July 15, just as the Richard Speck murders on the far south side hit TV news.

Black was born at Loretto Hospital on the west side of Chicago on March 5, 1955, and raised in Lombard by parents she calls “very advanced hipsters of their time.” Her father was a well-loved bandleader, comic, and emcee, and she says he was in the running for the late-night TV gig that Johnny Carson eventually landed. Black’s great-uncle on her mother’s side was vaudeville-era singer and recording artist Sir Harry Lauder, who in 1908 became the first artist signed to Victor Records.

“Our most exciting Christmas Eve was when my father had a Baldwin Acrosonic spinet piano delivered when I was around eight,” Black remembers. “I could play some songs by ear after listening to the recording. I began taking drum lessons at around ten years old. I saw the Beatles live twice!”

Black auditioned for Stations in February 1979 by answering a “vocalist wanted” ad that Stowell and guitarist Ed Yeo had placed in the *Illinois Entertainer*. They settled on the name “Stations” after about two weeks of rehearsal, having rejected several other options, including “Petrol.” Their first lineup was Stowell, Black, Yeo, Andy Cers (bass), and Marty Binder (drums).

“The first song we ever played together was ‘Tired of Waiting for You’ by the Kinks,” says

Stowell. Stations debuted at Katz & Jammer Kids on Lincoln Avenue in early spring 1979, playing originals and covers of Buzzcocks, Television, Magazine, Ultravox, and Gang of Four. “There were lots of other influences happening,” Stowell recalls. “Pere Ubu got listened to quite a bit, also straight-ahead rock like Sex Pistols, the Jam, and the Damned. We also dug Bowie, Iggy, Kraftwerk, and many others.”

This version of the band lasted till early 1980—as Stowell describes it, they dissolved by “crashing into wreckage in classic Pete Townshend style at a performance at O’Banion’s with Ed Yeo smashing his Les Paul to bits.” Binder left abruptly to join Buddy Guy and Junior Wells on an international tour, Cers went back to Minneapolis to start architecture school, and Yeo joined 4XY (with drummer Harry Rushakoff, later of Concrete Blonde).

Black and Stowell kept writing songs together and moved into a dilapidated house at 1648 W. Bloomingdale, formerly occupied by new wavers the Dadistics. “We found copies of their single sleeves scattered around the house,” Stowell says. “And needles.”

By the time Stations released their lone single, “Against the Grain” b/w “Calendar,” in August 1980, they had a new backing group: drummer Stevo Georgiandis, bassist Doug Hayden (aka Dexter Veka), and keyboardist Greg DeLap. Technically the single came out on a label called DuVall Records, which Stations invented on the spot using the address of the Bloomingdale house. The seven-inch captured the band’s sound at the time: taut, rumbling bass; aloof but nimble vocals; straight-ahead, propulsive drumming; noisily coloristic guitar; and catchy synth accents.

This incarnation of Stations never played a live gig. Georgiandis, better known as Stephen George, would go on to join a very early lineup of Ministry, and Hayden and DeLap moved to the west coast.

Again without a rhythm section, Stowell and Black bought what they’re pretty sure was the first Roland TR-808 Rhythm Composer sold in the midwest. It would soon become the world’s most famous drum machine, used on uncountable early new-wave, hip-hop, and synth-pop recordings, but at that point it wasn’t yet available in local stores. While the two of them wrote new material to suit their

new equipment, they also threw something of a Hail Mary with the single they’d already released: they sent a copy to producer Martin Hannett via Pinnacle Records in London, which at the time distributed Factory Records.

“In the brutally cold winter of 1980, with Reagan elected and John Lennon murdered, it was not exactly cheerful on the streets,” Stowell says. “We heard Joy Division’s first single, ‘Transmission,’ on the radio in the van—heater broken, legs wrapped in plastic, nine below zero outside, dark sky overhead—and everything fell into place. I thought, ‘This is the sound of the future! Stations *has* to work with Martin Hannett!’”

Amazingly, their blind mailing got results in the form of a visitor that December. “We got a call at the Bloomingdale house,” Stowell recalls. “A fellow with a pronounced Mancunian accent who identified himself as Martin Usher was hoping to stop by.” This was easier said than done: “Our place was stuck between an ancient railroad siding and an alley, no street access,” Stowell admits. “We gave him instructions on how to get to our place and he stopped by. Soon we were sitting down with Usher, who was not only a friend of Hannett’s but a skilled engineer who wound up building the gear that would make New Order’s sound possible some months later.”

Stations had been booked to open for Joy Division on what would’ve been their first U.S. tour, at Tuts on Belmont on May 27, 1980. Three days before the gig, they got the call: the whole tour was canceled, because front man Ian Curtis had committed suicide on May 18.

Stowell and Black were still working with their drum machine when a sculptor friend, David Kotker, introduced them to “this kid from Northwestern University named Steve Albini,” as Stowell puts it. “We worked out some songs with Steve on bass, Black on vocals and snare drum, myself on guitar and keyboards, and the new TR-808 as drummer. We did one live gig at Exit the night of an ice storm on December 17, 1981. It was pretty good considering the crap weather.”

Albini didn’t stick around long either, though. “Steve liked to play his bass with the treble cranked all the way up, more in the guitar and vocal range of frequencies than the bass, so it became a really midrange-dominant

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sound we were getting,” Stowell says. “George and I both felt that Steve would take off better doing his own sound, and it turned out he did just that with Big Black.” He also later produced the likes of the Pixies, the Jesus Lizard, and of course Nirvana.

“Black and I kept scouring other bands for drummers and bass players,” Stowell says. Bassist Frank Brodlo and drummer John Elliott (who augmented his playing with the 808), both later of the group Dessau, completed what would turn out to be the most durable lineup of Stations to date, though that was an easy bar to clear.

“We began working in earnest, writing new material rapidly and getting ready to play live gigs,” Stowell says. “In my mind that was the best iteration of Stations. We just clicked, and the songs started coming fast. We played better venues—Tuts on Belmont, Cabaret Metro, and multiple shows at the 950 Club, also

known as Lucky Number.”

The Hannett saga was still unfolding as well—he’d contacted Stations through Usher, and just after Christmas in 1981 they’d traveled to meet him in Manchester. Hannett had already done a record for another American group, proto-everything New York dance legends ESG, and he agreed to produce an EP for Stations. In summer 1982, Hannett flew to Chicago and booked a session at Studiomedea Recording in Evanston with Stations—who were by then firing on all cylinders with Brodlo and Elliott.

“That same weekend we played a backup slot at Cabaret Metro behind Killing Joke, and Hannett did live sound for us,” Stowell recalls. “Martin had great ears, and was a wickedly smart and talented musician and bassist and a likable, generous guy. How many artists did he encourage and promote?”

To say Stations meshed aesthetically and

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philosophically with Hannett would be an understatement. “One thing about producing artists—you can try molding them, scolding them, controlling them, or inspiring them, or just finding and bringing forward something they themselves aren’t aware of in their work,” Stowell says. “Martin was ready to jump in and help, ready to experiment until something started to click. I only wish we could have done more with him.”

Hannett returned to Manchester with the 24-track master on two-inch tape. Eventually he sent back a cassette of three rough mixes: “Climate of Violence,” “Demonstration,” and “In Defense of Cosmetics,” the last of which

Stations soldiered on, going through several more lineups around the core of Black and Stowell. From 1982 onward, Black says, they tended to gig only four times per year. She recalls a show at Exit in December 1982, when a winter storm had been blowing all day and it took them an hour to drive three miles to the venue in her Honda station wagon.

“By showtime, we stood astounded that the club was packed!” she says. “All these people made their way to the show in a blizzard. Afterward I went out front on Wells to fetch my car to load gear out the back. Two drag queens we knew who followed the band were having a fight on my car. I opened the passenger side door to climb into the driver’s seat, and they

promote the “Fear & Fascination” video (a special occasion in and of itself, since the club rarely booked live bands). “We were betrothed by a City of Chicago marriage clerk,” Stowell says, “invested with the abysmal power of the County of Cook.”

Stations played their last gig at Medusa’s on March 3, 1989, with bassist James Kirk and drummer Steve Cullens, both from New York. Black says the end came because they couldn’t keep going as they had been, approached by labels and then snubbed, over and over. “We had taken it as far as we could at that time,” she says. She and Stowell were both in their mid-30s. Hannett died in 1991 at age 42.

Stowell and Black didn’t entirely abandon music, though—in 1998 and ’99, they recorded at their tiny apartment in the South Loop (on Federal Street south of the Harold Washington Library) on a TEAC cassette four-track. “We took the best of those recordings and had them mastered by Rick Gallo and then released them on CD under the band name ROPS 56,” Stowell says. That self-released disc, the only extant music from ROPS 56, is titled *The Other Upriver*.

The couple also began supporting themselves with a catering business, which launched in Chicago but eventually took them to Portland, Oregon. “Our clients were changing, moving, and we were ready to change everything and start on a new chapter in our lives,” Stowell says. “We left Chicago in September of 1999 and started first a popular food cart, then a popular restaurant called Veganopolis Cafeteria, which became a hit with touring musicians.”

Stowell and Black published a popular vegan cookbook in 2010 and got involved in promoting Oregon bands such as Blitzen Trapper. They recorded a song called “Strange Weather,” but they never released it.

The saga of Stations might’ve ended there if the couple hadn’t returned to Chicago in 2009. Stowell got a job bartending at a Whole Foods, where he and coworker Jorge Ledezma bonded over music after Stowell played Kraftwerk on the store PA. “Jorge and I started talking music, and I was blown away by the fact that he’d done a tour in Finland with Damo Suzuki from Can,” Stowell says. “I told him about our demos with Martin Hannett.”

Ledezma plays in tropicalia-influenced Latine psych-rock band Allá with his wife, Lupe Martinez, and his brother Angel. (The Ledezma brothers also anchored long-gone space-rock outfit Defender.) Last year

the three of them founded No Sé Discos, a family- and artist-run south-side record label that focuses on uplifting Black and Brown musicians. “We are all working-class musicians,” Ledezma says. “This is what binds us, and this is how we met David—while working together in food service.”

Stowell loaned Ledezma a copy of Hannett’s rough cassette mixes of Stations, and Ledezma was blown away. Hannett’s signature production, skeletal and vast with reverb, gives the songs a broad sonic spectrum that’s heavier, denser, and darker than the 1981 seven-inch. The sound echoes other UK Factory bands such as Section 25, Tunnelvision, and Crispy Ambulance.

No Sé Discos began working on a Stations release, to be titled *Ghostland*. Its six tracks will include the three Hannett mixes, a live cut from Tuts, and at least one song from what Stowell calls the “Portland mix” of the 1982 Studiomediam session, which the band undertook themselves using a backup tape they’d recovered in 1992. (The songs Hannett mixed weren’t the only ones Stations recorded there.) Stowell and Black have also unearthed some demos with Albini on bass.

“The Martin Hannett tracks were mastered by Matt DeWine at Pieholden directly off the only known physical copy,” Ledezma explains. Initially he’d asked DeWine about mastering from a cassette source because he thought Stowell might want restored versions of the Hannett mixes for his personal collection. “But when we got those tracks back, we knew we had something special,” Ledezma says. “The Portland mixes are incredible, very pro, but the Hannett mixes show how these two artists were a perfect match.”

The first single from *Ghostland* is “Climate of Violence,” released via Bandcamp on June 29. Stations are talking about playing a show to support it, before Stowell and Black move away from Chicago again. They’ll both attend the free No Sé Discos night at the Empty Bottle on Monday, August 8, where Allá will perform a song from the Hannett session and label folks will spin Stations music between sets all night.

I can’t wait to finally hear this baby on wax—and I can’t wait for Stations to finally get their due as a top-tier postpunk band. **A**

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



Lead single “Climate of Violence” is one of the three 1982 tracks produced by Martin Hannett that will appear on the Stations LP to be released by No Sé Discos.

featured R. Lewis Floodstrand of 8½ on saxophone. Hannett had mixed them at Strawberry Studios in Stockport, the home base of 10cc for much of the 1970s. It was also where Joy Division had recorded *Unknown Pleasures*.

Black frequently talked to Hannett on the phone, and the band hoped he’d shop their EP to Factory Records. But Hannett and Factory cofounder Tony Wilson were feuding, and Hannett was frustrated and angry. Hannett’s heroin addiction—he was “chasing the dragon,” as Stowell puts it—made everything worse. Stations never received final mixes, and the rough cassette that Hannett had sent essentially became a time capsule. Stowell says it’s “been heard by less than 20 people in the entire span of its existence.”

both fell in after me, one strangling the other on the console. I talked them down and said, ‘Look, I can give you a ride somewhere.’ But they stopped, made up, and wandered off into the silent city streets at 2 AM.”

In 1983 at Columbia College, Stations made what would turn out to be their only other release, a video for the song “Fear & Fascination” shot on black-and-white 16-millimeter film and edited on videotape. Dan DiNello directed the clip, and it came out in 1984. “It might be the first American goth video—a song about the limits of language and the arising of new forms of human communication,” Stowell says.

Stowell and Black got married on June 26, 1984, the day after playing a show at Neo to



GOSSIP WOLF

A furry ear to the ground of the local music scene

CHICAGO'S NEWEST record store specializes in all things metal. **Meteor Gem** occupies a garden-level boutique at 3082 N. Elston, and its stock is so laser-focused on extreme music—including death, doom, black, post-, and progressive metal—that the records in just one subgenre outnumber the entire metal inventory of many local shops. Owner **Mikhail Fedyukov** has been involved in Chicago's heavy underground for about a decade, booking and occasionally performing at DIY shows. He began selling records online about five years ago, and when the pandemic hit, he decided to devote all his working hours to that pursuit. "I had a small vinyl warehouse in my one-bedroom apartment," he says. Fedyukov launched Meteor Gem's website in January 2021, signed the lease for the Avondale brick-and-mortar location in February 2022, and opened the store on July 1. "The selection is all my taste and my friends' tastes—it's what my customers are looking for. I don't have anyone telling me what to buy," he says. "I make sure to get the stuff in here that I care about." Meteor Gem is open Monday and Thursday from 11 AM to 7 PM, Friday from 11 AM to 8 PM, and Saturday and Sunday from 10 AM to 8 PM.

In local electro-rock favorites Chandeliers, **Chris Kalis** and **Lisa Armstrong** have learned to combine deft melodic interplay and sublimely danceable rhythms. As **Drasii**, the duo recently dropped "Memory," which Kalis describes as "influenced by 90s house and techno, ambient film scores, and cosmic disco." This wolf thinks this chilled-out track is a future dance-floor classic! On Wednesday, July 27, Drasii performs at **Elastic Arts** for the **Chicago Underground Film Festival's** opening-night afterparty. The bill also includes **Extreme Animals**, **Blake Parker**, and a DJ set from 2016 Chili-Synth Cook-Off champion **Mike Broers**. —**J.R. NELSON AND LEOR GALIL**

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

WOLF BY KEITH HERZIK

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Beabadoobee, Lowertown 11/29, 7:30 PM, Riviera Theatre 18+
Paul Bedal Quartet 8/20, 9 PM, Hungry Brain
Bellows, Nat Harvie, Brent Penny 8/25, 9:30 PM, Hideout
The Big Payback: A Drug War Reparations Concert & Fundraiser featuring Twista, Do or Die, Crucial Conflict, Shawna, and more 8/26, 9 PM, Metro, 18+
Big Wild 9/30, 9 PM, Aragon Ballroom, 18+
Black Midi, Quelle Chris 10/12, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Black V Neck 8/13, 10 PM, Spybar
Blackbear, Waterparks, Heart Attack Man 9/17, 7:30 PM, Aragon Ballroom 18+
Bonobo (DJ set), Garrett David, Michael Serafini 9/17, 10 PM, Smart Bar
Boombox 11/5, 7:30 PM, Park West, 18+
Michelle Branch 9/21, 7:30 PM, Park West 18+
Eli Brown 9/16, 10 PM, Prysm Nightclub
Built to Spill, Prism Bitch, Papas 8/18-8/19, 8 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Caifanes 9/18, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+
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Sherren Olivia, CP, Gold Haze 8/30, 8 PM, Schubas, 18+
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Stephen Day, Goldpark 8/10, 8 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+
Dead Bolts, the Thing With Feathers, Llo Llo 8/12, 8 PM, Subterranean, 17+
Death Valley Girls, Shadow Show, Waltzer 8/4, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Disfunktional featuring Diz, Mikeone, Red Tailed Hawk Luna 8/6, 9 PM, House of Blues
Dreary North Fest featuring Sirius Blvck, Zebes, Collapsing Scenery, Depraved, Slutbomb, Hallucination Realized, X-Eyes, School Drugs, World Peace, Heel Turn, Seed, Pig City, and more 9/9-9/11, 2 PM, Subterranean, 17+
Easy Star All-Stars, DJ Chuck Wren 8/5, 9 PM, Subterranean, 17+
Echosmith, Phoebe Ryan, Band of Silver 10/28, 7 PM, Bottom Lounge 18+
Fabulous Thunderbirds 8/8, 8 PM, City Winery 18+
Fiji Blue 10/1, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen 18+
Fishbone, Action/Adventure 9/3, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+
The Fixx, Jill Sobule 9/6, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+
Flor, Wildlife, Good Problem 10/8, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge 18+
Sonny Fodera, Biscits 10/29, 10 PM, Concord Music Hall 18+
Fretboard Summit featuring Milk Carton Kids, Chicago Blues Blast, Molly Tuttle, Bobby Broom, and more

8/25-8/27, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music 18+
Full of Hell, Blood Incantation, Vermin Womb, Mortuous, God Is War 9/30, 7 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 17+
Giant Swan 9/4, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Goatwhore, Incantation, Bewitcher, Caveman Cult 8/11, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+
Jackie Greene, Lilly Winwood 8/22-8/23, 8 PM, City Winery 18+
Gyasi 8/9, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Halocene, Lauren Babic, David Michael Frank, Just Joe 8/6, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+
Sophie B. Hawkins 12/1, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston 18+
The Heavy Heavy 10/11, 9:30 PM, Hideout
Highly Suspect, Dead Poet Society 10/13, 7 PM, Radius Chicago 18+
Dave Hollister 8/11, 7 PM; 8/12, 7 and 10 PM, City Winery 18+
Horse Jumper of Love, Babehoven, Sadur 8/5, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+
I Set My Friends on Fire, These Hearts, Sink In, Across the Water Tower, Blind Equation 8/12, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+
Ian Sweet, Benny 8/4, 9 PM, Sleeping Village
Ionnalee 4/21/2023, 8 PM, Metro, 18+
Grace Ives 9/14, 8 PM, Schubas, 18+
Jade Novah, Jared Brady, Annalé 8/11, 8 PM, Subterranean, 17+
Jett Girls, Los Black Dogs 8/12, 8:30 PM, FitzGerald's 18+
Jungle Giants 11/5, 7 PM, Bottom Lounge 18+
Noah Kahan, Stephen Sanchez 11/5, 8 PM, the Vic 18+

Paul Kalkbrenner 10/11, 8 PM, Concord Music Hall, 18+
Kalush Orchestra 11/4, 7 PM, Concord Music Hall 18+
Kard 8/16, 7 PM, House of Blues 18+
Kashmir 1/21/2023, 9 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 17+
Kazka 11/6, 6 PM, Concord Music Hall 18+
Leland Blue, Lady Denim 8/15, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+
Less Fest featuring Freddie Sunshine, Worry Club, Pretoria, Brotherin, Lasalle Grandeur, Gosh Diggity, Saturdays at Your Place 8/7, 6:30 PM, Subterranean, 17+
SG Lewis 10/14, 7 PM, Radius Chicago, 18+
Lifeguard, Fruit Leather, Domino 8/6, 7:30 PM, Concor Club 18+
Linden Method, Take the Reins, Guardrail 8/5, 9 PM, Gman Tavern
Little Mazarn, Hannah Frances 8/29, 8 PM, Judson & Moore Distillery
Local Honeys 8/5, 8 PM, Golden Dagger
Melt-Banana, Ed Schrader's Music Beat 10/15, 8 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 17+
Miyavi 10/17-10/18, 8 PM, Cobra Lounge, 17+
Steve Moakler 8/9, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston 18+
Murder by Death, Amigo the Devil, Samantha Crain 8/13, 7:30 PM; 8/14, 7 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
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Dillon Nathaniel 8/5, 10 PM, Spybar
Neighbor 8/5, 9:30 PM, Schubas
Lizzie No 8/4, 9:30 PM, Hideout
Nowhere Days, Bad Year, Alleys & Gangways 8/12, 8 PM, Gman Tavern
Olan 9/15, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+
Om 9/15, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Omah Lay 9/20, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+
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Planet Booty 10/21, 8 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 17+
Pokey LaFarge, Taylor Rae 8/7, 8 PM, FitzGerald's
Post Sex Nachos, Similar Kind 8/20, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+
Puppet 11/10, 7:30 PM, Cobra Lounge, 17+
Red Fang, Bell Witch & Aerial Ruin, Help 8/6, 9 PM, Metro, 18+
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Steel Pulse, KRS-One 9/4, 6:30 PM, Temperance Beer Co., Evanston
Stick to Your Guns 9/8, 7 PM, House of Blues, 17+
Sugar Candy Mountain, Holy Wave 8/7, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Ebo Taylor, Chicago Afrobeat Project, Future Rootz 8/11, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Tegan & Sara, Tomberlin 11/3, 7:30 PM, Riviera Theatre 18+
Daniel Thrasher 8/17, 4:30 PM, Beat Kitchen 18+
Tinarwen 9/9, 9 PM, Metro, 18+
Tourist 10/14, 10 PM, Concord Music Hall, 18+
Carmen Villain 8/29, 7:30 PM, International Museum of Surgical Science
Vilma Palma e Vampiros 9/22, 10 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+
Violet, Miss Twink USA, Millia 8/6, 10 PM, Smart Bar
Watchhouse, Onlies 9/1, 8 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Wavves, Boyo, Smut 8/4, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
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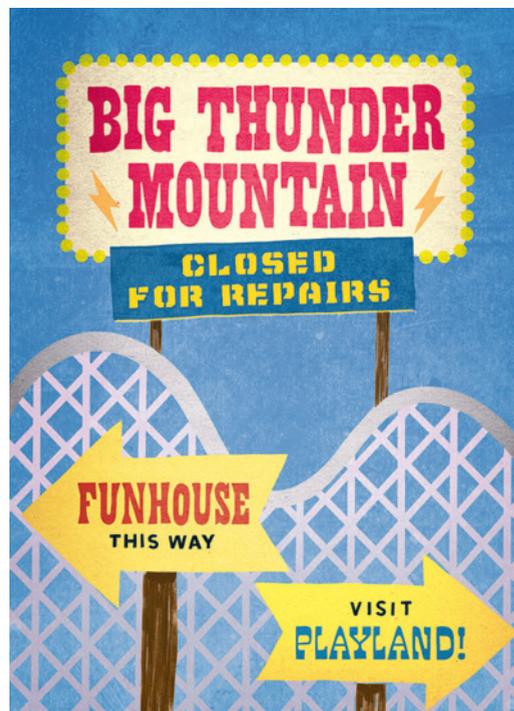
SAVAGE LOVE

SAVAGE LOVE

Your husband should meet your Daddy Dom

A series of threesomes might revive your sex life.

By **DAN SAVAGE**



✍️ JOE NEWTON

ual infidelity is one thing, emotional infidelity is another.

But the odds your husband will leave you—after 30 years—seem slim. And even if he's upset at first, who knows? If he's open to meeting your boyfriend/daddyfriend once his anger dissipates, and if he's attracted to your Daddy Dom and your Daddy Dom is attracted to him, a series of hot threesomes might revive your sexual connection with your husband. Things could also go from not great to truly terrible—you could wind up getting divorced—but things aren't going to get better on the sexual front without a shake-up, LAD, and telling the truth is a pretty good way to shake things up.

All that said, LAD, telling your husband, "I have a boyfriend, I'd like you to meet him, I think you two might click," is a big risk and there are no backsies.

Q: I'm a 26-year-old gay man in Arizona. I was with my 38-year-old boyfriend for a year and a half. We were monogamous from the start but when we "laid our kink cards on the table" about six months in (I'm a longtime listener and reader), he "confessed" that he wanted to watch me get fucked by another guy. Or guys, plural. He brought it up literally every time we had sex for a year. Two weeks ago, I got on Grindr (with his OK) to see what was out there. I found a couple and showed him their photos. He was thrilled. We went over to their place, and it felt right, and they both fucked me in front of my boyfriend. My boyfriend—who jerked off and came while watching me get fucked—had a complete meltdown after we left. He called me a bunch of names and accused me of enjoying it too much and broke up with me. I still have my own apartment, thank God, so I took some clothes and left. He says he wants a monogamous relationship now, but not with me because of what happened. I didn't do anything he didn't ask me to. I'm heartbroken and filled with regret and can't stop crying. Was I supposed to fake hating it? Is there any way to salvage this? —**WHOLLY HEARTBROKEN OVER RELATIONSHIP ENDING**

A: There's no way to salvage this, WHORE, but there are two ways of looking at it... ❏

The full version of *Savage Love* is exclusively available on savage.love/savagelove! Email questions@savagelove.net.
 @fakedansavage

From the end of *Roe* to the assault on democracy to the climate crisis to the war on Ukraine, it's all bad news, all the time, for everyone. But the monkeypox outbreak is an extra little helping of bad news specifically for gay and bi men. (More than 96 percent of monkeypox cases have been in gay and bisexual men.) Hey, faggots? If you have a rash or feel like you have swollen glands, stay home. And if you're sexually active or hope to be soon, get the monkeypox vaccine at your earliest opportunity. In the meantime, here's a column featuring all gay questions to remind us that gay life isn't just freaking out about ingrown hairs. —**DAN**

Q: I'm a mid-50s gay man, married to a man. We've been together for 30 years. We love each other and have built a great life together, but our sex life is so lackluster it's nearly extinct. After years of trying to get my spouse to talk about our likes, wants, needs, and differences, and after years making suggestions about how or what we could do either together or apart to improve our sex life, I finally had enough and began having dalliances here and there. I encouraged him to pursue sexual satisfaction where he likes, but his response is always, "I couldn't do that."

So, what's the problem? I've always been drawn to Daddy/boy scenarios—it plays into my submissive tendencies—and I recently met a hot Daddy. We've been meeting up for six months, we're both GGG, and the sex

is awesome! But my spouse does not know about my relationship with Daddy. I would love for the two to meet, as I think they would enjoy each other's sense of humor and personality, as they are both wonderful men. Is it possible to introduce them so that the three of us could be friends and maybe ease my spouse into opening things up? My spouse and I are both sub bottoms and my Daddy is a gentle Daddy Dom. Do I bring them together or do I keep these two relationships separate? —**LUSTING AFTER DADDY**

A: If what you're seeking from me, LAD, is some way to tell your husband you've been fucking another man for six months without upsetting him, I can't help you. He's most likely going to be upset. Additionally, there's no way to tell your husband about your recently acquired fuckbuddy without putting your vague DADT agreement at risk.

Now, assuming your husband isn't an idiot, LAD, he knows you've been having sex with other men. When you told him to pursue sexual satisfaction elsewhere, he must've known you planned to do (or were already doing) the same. But there's a difference between knowing something because you *kindsorta* figured, LAD, and knowing something because you were *literally* fucking told. And there's a difference between having sex with other men—one-offs, one at a time—and having sex again and again with one man. (Which, during this monkeypox outbreak, is a far safer option for you and your husband than one-offs.) Sex

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