

# READER

Petition filings signal the start of election season in Chicago

# SIGN HERE

By KELLY GARCIA  
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WINDY  
CITY  
TIMES

Quarterly insert inside!

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# Vote for the Best of Chicago

The ballot for **nominations** closes at noon on **December 9**, and voting on the most nominated **finalists** will begin on **January 18, 2023**.

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## STREET VIEW

### Groove is in the heart

Guests at the *Reader's* UnGala let their freak flags fly.

By ISA GIALLORENZO



Rebecca Baruc and Dan Wilcop © ISA GIALLORENZO



Juliette Buford © ISA GIALLORENZO

Famously “free and freaky since 1971,” it was high time the *Reader* celebrated its “50ish” years with a bang—and that was exactly what happened on November 30 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Koval signature cocktails were flowing (honorable mention to their cranberry gin), healthy, fresh apps were feasted on, cool swag was given away, fine raffles were drawn, and very loud music and announcements were blasted throughout the museum, making attendees scream at each other in delight while savoring deluxe chocolate truffles and rainbow candy popcorn. Guests were also able to enjoy the exhibitions currently on display at the MCA, including the newly-opened “Forecast Form: Art in the Caribbean Diaspora, 1990s-Today.”

The whole affair was a joyous display of *Reader* pride, as if the characters printed in the rebellious alt-(bi)weekly miraculously came to life to party together and pay homage to the iconic publication.

Attire suggestions covered a wide spectrum, allowing everyone to dress as they pleased. According to the invitation: “From biz casual to Met Gala-fab, to 1970s-inspired creations (culturally appropriate please!), you do you.” More *Reader* it could not be. Many of the guests really dedicated themselves to the task, interpreting the 70s in all kinds of ways. Mechiya Jamison, whose look was inspired by Diana Ross, Donna Summer, and Brigitte Bardot, even created a vision board on Pinterest in preparation for the event. *Sine Qua*

Non hair salon owner and past *Reader* Best of Chicago winner Laura Boton broke out one of her special 70s vintage bags. “It’s my favorite decade . . . I don’t think it will ever go out of style,” she said.

Eric Proescher, Boton’s husband, digs those times as well. Though it was pretty hot at the museum, he committed to a turtleneck shirt underneath his wide-collared sweater. He kept a smile on his face and didn’t even break a sweat, a real pro. Visual artist Jenny Kendler, not a fan of the disco era, found a loophole to honor the dress code: “I went with a more offbeat reference, channeling glam rock and Kansai Yamamoto, who designed for David Bowie. This gender-bending silk shantung blazer is a thrift store find from years ago and it reminds me of Bowie’s

iconic striped vinyl outfit,” she explained.

Rebecca Baruc, a teaching artist at the Chicago High School for the Arts, said she was told her curly hair was very 70s. Other than that, she decided to focus instead on her eyewear and accessory designer boyfriend Dan Wilcop, and coordinate a complementary color palette with him. Baruc wore her favorite garment at the moment, a Big Bud Press jumpsuit that fits her like a glove and makes her feel great.

Speaking of suits, matching sets were all the rage at the event. Molly Rian, the art director for music venue Metro, sported a black brocade suit with metallic flowers that was gifted to her years ago. “I’ve been kinda striving to put together a closet full of suits because I find



## CITY LIFE



Laura Boton and Eric Proescher © ISA GIALLORENZO



Tone Khan © ISA GIALLORENZO



Molly Rian © ISA GIALLORENZO

them a powerful thing to wear," she said. Edin Newton, also stunning in a vivid cerulean blue ensemble, said their look was giving "Austin Powers goes to the MCA, but with femme queer vibes." KR Riiber, the artistic director of the Neo-Futurists, was going for a "70s leisure suit with masculine angles and a contemporary cut." DJ Antonio Robles Levine rocked a leather set featuring a studded jacket by local darling Kokorokoko vintage store.

Matched or mismatched, in 70s attire or otherwise, what all these guests had in common was a special appreciation for the newspaper they were there to celebrate. Many of them fondly looked back at the *Reader* as their doorway into the cultural life of the city when they first moved here; others credited the

publication with being essential to help their business grow. "I love that it's such an institutional fixture in Chicago. You say *Reader*, I think of Chicago," said Juliette Buford, who works at Marwen, an arts organization for children from under-resourced communities. "The *Reader* is Chicago," said performer and party cohost Lucy Stoele, who has also graced a cover of the *Reader*. "It's part of the heartbeat of the city, and it's one of the reasons I'm still here."

*Special thanks to GlitterGuts for letting me use their photo booth. More photos at [chicagoreader.com](http://chicagoreader.com).* 📷

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# CITY LIFE

More from the Reader's UnGala at Museum of Contemporary Art  ISA GIALLORENZO



Edin Newton



Antonio Robles Levine



Samantha Wilton



Lucy Stoole



Jhanée Kimbrough and Mechiya Jamison



Jenny Kendler



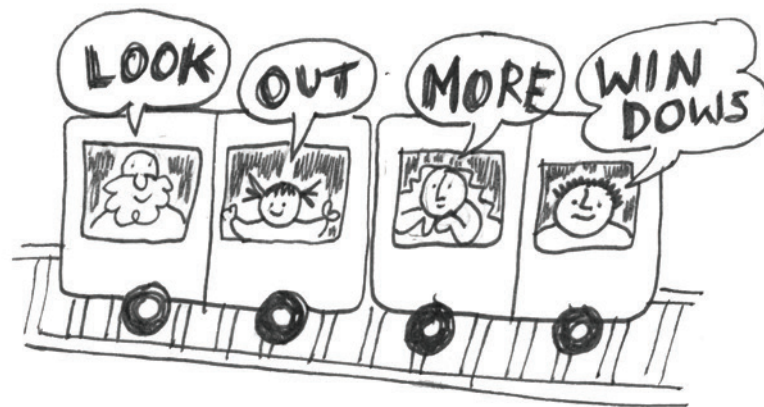


# 'Tis the season to gift responsibly.

*Lottery games aren't for kids.*

 Be Smart, Gift Smart. Must be 18 or older to play.





## INKLING

## Let us stare out the windows

The CTA's wraparounds are giving us the runaround.

By MEGAN KIRBY

Last month, I had the misfortune of catching the Lunchables bus. Have you seen it yet? The windows and doors are obscured by a full-wrap ad that creates the illusion of a stack of crackers, meat, and cheese moving horizontally along the street. I boarded the Lunchables bus and found my window blocked by a slice of processed ham. This was *LunchaBullshit*.

I love to look out the bus window. Watching the world slide by along a bus route is a major pleasure of city life. And now, my view had been snatched away by this low-rent charcuterie. It's not just the bus, and it's not just Lunchables. Everywhere I look, there's another CTA vehicle fully wrapped in another ad. And every time I see one, I want to scream.

I am not protesting every CTA advertisement. Put ads on the bus! Wrap the train

interiors! Cover every inch of the station! But please, please, leave the windows alone.

I fell in love with the city from bus and train windows. Public transit drew me to Chicago when I was 23. I was always a nervous driver. After a few months of utterly failing to parallel park, I got rid of my car. The CTA could get me basically anywhere I needed to go. And I discovered there's nothing more romantic than experiencing the city through a window seat: letting my thoughts tune in and out, listening to Lana Del Rey or just the hum of people sitting around me, feeling the bus vibrate under my ass while the world passed by outside.

Of course, I'm romanticizing here. Public transit keeps me humble. Sometimes there's piss or fights or it's pouring rain, and the bus ghosts me once again. But looking out

the window softens those humiliations. It is so wonderful to see the world. So every time I board a vehicle with window clings, I feel utterly robbed.

When you sit inside a vehicle with window clings, you can arguably still see. If you press your eyes to the interior of the tinted image, you can make out a shadow world outside. The cling blocks the sunlight from getting anywhere near you. People and cars and street signs pass by like vague approximations of themselves, haunting in their ambiguity. If it's nighttime and the bus isn't announcing stops? Good luck figuring out when to pull the cord, buddy.

Being forced to live inside an advertisement is just modern life, but that doesn't mean I have to enjoy it. How dare these various billboards obstruct my reality? I boy-

cotted my nearby Walgreens because they replaced their functional refrigerator doors with digital screens that flash and shift and barely reflect the actual inventory behind them. When I am hungover and frantically searching for orange Gatorade, I imagine some Silicon Valley snake slithering through a pitch deck about "disrupting doors," and my blood just boils.

It feels baffling to defend glass windows—an invention humans have known and loved since 100 AD. I'm begging, please: let me stare through a pane of glass at whatever lies beyond!

I've considered boycotting every last flavored vodka and fast-food restaurant with full-wrap CTA ads. But the other week, I saw a Red Line fully swaddled in advertisements for Harry Styles's Chicago shows. I felt a sharp pain resonating from the spot where I got a One Direction tattoo, and I thought, "Harold, my darling . . . how could you betray me?"

I'm afraid that soon, we'll all just board a windowless box that transports us from point A to point B. Our only commute entertainment option will be to look at ads on our phones. I promise I am not some anti-phone zealot. I love my phone so much that I must force myself to take breaks. Which is why I keep my phone in my pocket when I have a CTA seat with a view. The trade-off is worth it.

When I defend my right to look out the window, I am defending my right to witness so much: front stoops, dog walkers, graffiti, rain puddles, industrial corridors, hand-painted grocery signs, school kids all in a line. The river! The lake! Bikers and joggers and drivers obliviously picking their noses! Your brain must cast a wide net to catch it all. You experience a different city when you ride public transit through it.

My favorite view comes when I ride one of the elevated trains through downtown at night. The glow of the skyscraper windows, shining rectangles suspended in the dark. My own reflection in the window, and then Chicago behind, like it's all sliding under my skin. A deep calm spreads as I watch the city move within me and around me. How lucky, how wonderful, to be able to see it. **✎**

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





Give a little bit of yourself and watch your world change. © NATHAN LEMON/UNSPLASH

## PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

# Help, they need somebody

Volunteer opportunities this month and beyond

By SALEM COLLO-JULIN

We can get caught up in the push to get everything possible signed, sealed, delivered, and done by the end of the year and forget to take care of the most important stuff: our inner sense of well-being and peace and our communities. Volunteering and helping others is a way to address some of your spiritual and social needs that you may have been neglecting in the rush this year, and there are a bunch of groups and organizations in Chicagoland that could use your help to get their important work done. If you would like to find more organizations, there's a good resource in Volunteer Match ([volunteermatch.org](http://volunteermatch.org)) where you can find specific needs by event, topic, and more. And many nonprofits looking for volunteer power are listed in the Reader's Nonprofit Guide, viewable at [chicago-reader.com/nonprofit](http://chicago-reader.com/nonprofit).

And if you are short on time but can give money, do it! Many of the groups listed need extra cash for their 2023 programming, and some even offer merch if you're shopping for gifts for friends this holiday season. Show your Chicago pride by supporting your community.

### My Block My Hood My City

The group needs volunteers on Sat 12/10 to help hang lights and decorate homes along S. Martin Luther King Dr., as well as volunteer snow shovelers to help seniors and residents with disabilities clear their sidewalks after winter storms. Ongoing volunteer help is welcome throughout the year serving seniors, responding to community needs, and more. Go to [formyblock.org](http://formyblock.org) for more information.

### Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago

Lurie Children's Hospital welcomes donations of new and unopened age-appropriate toys for the children that receive their services, which includes infants through young adults. The hospital cannot accept cloth donations (think clothing, plush toys, or blankets), but they've curated wish lists at Amazon to give you an

idea of what the young patients and families are most in need of. You can email [donations@luriechildrens.org](mailto:donations@luriechildrens.org) for more information or check out the hospital's website at [luriechildrens.org](http://luriechildrens.org). Lurie also has an active volunteer corps that helps year-round with caring for families, entertaining patients, and planning hospital special events. One volunteer job is dedicated to distributing tech games like Nintendo Switch, providing tech support, and playing games with the patients. If you're over 18 years old and can make a six-month commitment for weekly two-hour shifts plus pass a background check, contact Lurie for details.

### Rincon Family Services

This mental health services provider and community resource is looking for volunteers to help assemble desks and chairs at their new Avondale location that serves as a community space for those experiencing emotional crises. Those 18 and over can sign up for multiple four- to eight-hour shifts through the rest of December. Other volunteer needs occur throughout the year; email [rtinoco@rinconfamilyservices.org](mailto:rtinoco@rinconfamilyservices.org) to inquire.

### Creative Chicago Reuse Exchange

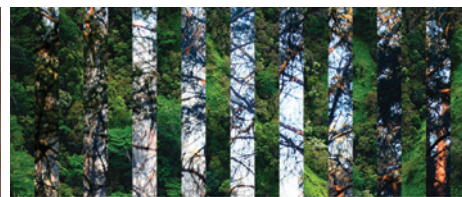
This resource, which provides reused materials to teachers, needs help sorting and arranging items in their warehouse space on 82nd Pl. Check out [creativechirx.org/volunteer](http://creativechirx.org/volunteer) for details or email [info@creativechirx.org](mailto:info@creativechirx.org).

### Open Heart Magic

Volunteers are trained as "Certified Hospital Magicians" and scheduled on Saturdays to visit children in area hospitals and entertain them bedside. Go to [openheartmagic.org/get-involved/](http://openheartmagic.org/get-involved/) for more information. The magicians visit various area hospitals, including La Rabida Children's Hospital (6501 S. Promontory) and Rush University Children's Hospital (1653 W. Ida B. Wells). [F](#)

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# COMMENTARY



## BEYOND CLIMATE BREAKDOWN

Envisioning New Stories of Radical Hope

PETER FRIEDERICI

FOREWORD BY KATHLEEN DEAN MOORE



Peter Friederici; cover of *Beyond Climate Breakdown* © JOSH BIGGS, NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY/  
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### ON CULTURE

## Hey, it's getting warm in here!

What's keeping us from doing something about it?

By DEANNA ISAACS

Peter Friederici has a history in these pages. In 1987, the Chicago native—then a recent Northwestern University graduate with a bachelor's degree in comparative literature and no clear path to a career—got hired as a *Reader* editorial assistant. He spent two years in that job, working under editors Michael Lenehan and Alison True. Now an established environmental author and a professor at Northern Arizona University, he credits those two years with teaching him how to be a journalist.

“Chicago was an endless source of stories, and proofreading every week was a great way to learn to write and edit. You see what everybody's doing—it's a little bit like seeing everybody's dirty laundry—and you see how things can be improved,” Friederici recalls. “It gave me a potential outlet, and the *Reader* had that wonderful freedom—you could write

about something that most people would view as obscure.”

A hefty piece on the demise of prairie chickens and another about a walk through the Volo Bog are representative of numerous stories he contributed to the *Reader* during those years, and subsequently as a freelancer. Concern for the natural world has been a through line in his writing, some of it done during a seven-year stint as a field biologist; at NAU he teaches rookie scientists how to better communicate about their work. His latest book, *Beyond Climate Breakdown: Envisioning New Stories of Radical Hope*, published this fall by MIT Press, is a sweeping and often eloquent 143-page essay on our biggest and most neglected problem: this overheating planet, “our own Frankenstein.”

In brief, the greenhouse gases that industrialization has released into the atmosphere

are destroying the stable climate that's made human existence possible. We've known this since at least the 1980s but have failed to do anything significant to halt it. “[W]hat is the matter with a society that would willingly destroy its own future in this way?” is the question Friederici addresses.

His answer is unexpectedly literary and deeply political. We need to change the story around it, he says, starting with the nomenclature (“breakdown” rather than climate “change”) and extending to the highly individualistic Western cultural narrative that shapes the way we think about our country, our government, and ourselves. This is not an issue any one person is going to be able to fix, no matter how dutifully we recycle or how often we bike instead of driving—though we need to keep doing those things too. Climate breakdown is a problem that requires collec-

tive action at the federal and international levels, and, Friederici says, that's going to mean shedding our entrenched myths of heroic individualism.


Arguing that individualistic narratives are inherently tragic and that tragedy entails foregone conclusions, he says we need to “step out of the yoke of the narratives whose comfortable weight we have allowed to settle on us over centuries,” including the extreme free-market ideals that grew out of the post-war period, and find more open-ended, “regenerative stories” that link us to something even older: the closer connection with nature (and each other) characteristic of many indigenous cultures.

“Just providing more facts to people seldom makes much of a difference,” Friederici says by phone from Flagstaff. “Especially when we start talking about challenging topics like climate change—or vaccination. We've all seen that play out in recent years. However much good information is out there, it's really hard to change minds and practices.

“The 2015 Paris Agreement set a limit on warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius [above the base level set in 1880]. Beyond that, things are going to get exponentially worse. We're already more than two-thirds of the way there, and our greenhouse gas emissions have not slowed down. It doesn't look promising.”

He concludes the book with a few reasons for hope, including technological innovation, the pursuit of legal liability for fossil fuel companies (which have profited by degrading the environment while promoting climate-change denial), and “the rapidly growing engagement of today's youth.”

But, he says, “So much damage has been done already. We can have a climate breakdown future that's really bad, or we can have a climate breakdown future that's less bad. Where we have the choice is how bad do we let it get, and how creative do we get about solutions.”

“We stand on a knife edge of history,” he writes, “still able to choose a path better than that of inertia . . .” 



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 — Chicago Reader

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## POETRY CORNER

### Mother's Mausoleum

By Tarnynon "Ty-yuh-nuh" Onumonu

When I lay me matriarch to rest  
 I will only mourn for three days  
 Parade around Mother's mausoleum  
 A ceremony fit for the Christ woman  
 Then gather every one of her disciples  
 To roll a rock away  
 Pallbearers bear witness to resurrection  
 Her death be Genesis  
 A begin again  
 Swift return to dark garden  
 Nine months pass  
 Eject  
 Then slap  
 Somewhere the Christ woman cries out  
 "I'm back!"  
 But of course, not in those words  
 No teeth to tongue yet  
 As she caterpillar wriggle  
 From some distant womb cocoon  
 This time she won't be forced  
 To butterfly so soon

She carefree chrysalis  
 No burdens to clip wings in bloom  
 Soon to be fluttering folly  
 Little loose neck Bambi nose candy  
 Coulda sworn I seen her just one yesterday  
 Floated past mine eye  
 To settle upon succulent sunflower  
 Then planted a seed  
 Unbeknownst to I  
 She delivered the butterfly me  
 Life cycles on atop a hill  
 Just below illustrious blue  
 Once dark cloud caste  
 Now sunshine monsoon  
 We monarch butterflies  
 Soar above Trump Towers  
 And other mournful estates  
 Two niggas escaped Varna  
 In hot pursuit to reincarnate  
 Rebirthed as mother and daughter  
 To begin again

Tarnynon (Ty-yuh-nuh) Onumonu is an emerging writer born and raised in the Jeffery Manor neighborhood on the southeast side of Chicago and is extremely proud of and humbled by her Southside citizenship and West African lineage.

Poem curated by Justus Pugh. Justus is a poet, writer, and technologist born and raised on the South side of Chicago. As an artist, his work is guided by the idea that our imagination is our ancestor's wildest dreams, inherited. And this imagination comes through writing his "Afrotranscendental" poetry, writing culinary fiction with *Village X Magazine*, and, now and today, storytelling.

A biweekly series curated by the *Chicago Reader* and sponsored by the Poetry Foundation.

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Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday: 11:00 AM–4:00 PM

Thursday: 11:00 AM–8:00 PM

**Note:** The Poetry Foundation building will be closed to the public from Friday, December 23, 2022 and will reopen on Wednesday, January 4, 2023.

#### Celebrating the Poets of Forms & Features (Online)

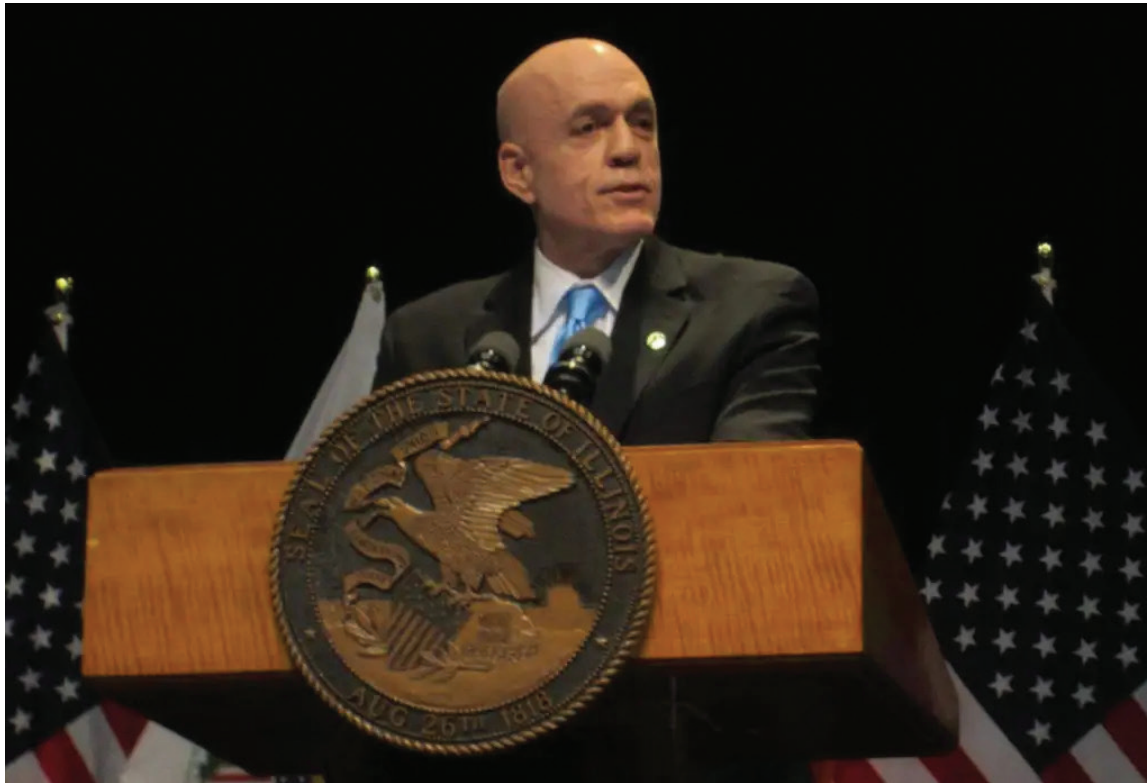
Poets working in the online poetry workshop and discussion, *Forms & Features*, will share work created in this online creative community.

Thursday, December 15, 7:00 PM

Learn more at [PoetryFoundation.org](http://PoetryFoundation.org)







State representative Greg Harris announces the signing of a bill legalizing same-sex marriage in Illinois in 2013. COURTESY GREG HARRIS

## ILLINOIS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

# A survivor retires

Illinois House majority leader Greg Harris wraps up a historic career.

By AARON GETTINGER

Greg Harris is a survivor. He made it through the rough-and-tumble world of Chicago politics on the far north side, managing campaigns and serving as chief of staff to former alderman Mary Ann Smith (48th) before serving in the Illinois House for more than a decade. He did not seek reelection this year.

Harris, appointed in 2006, became the first openly gay man to succeed another openly gay man in the state legislature, the late representative Larry McKeon (D-13th). During his tenure, Harris spearheaded the legalization of same-sex marriage in Illinois and was the Democrats' chief negotiator in the years-long budget fight against former governor Bruce Rauner.

He was elevated to majority leader in time for the General Assembly's groundbreaking 2019 spring legislative session, which passed a \$45 billion capital plan, legalized marijuana,

raised the minimum wage, and established abortion as a fundamental right in the state. He continued leading the majority through the COVID-19 pandemic; the election of a new speaker, Chris Welch (D-7th); the passage of the Legislative Black Caucus' four-part post-George Floyd agenda—education, economic equity, health care, and criminal justice reform—in 2021; and the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act that following summer.

“Leader Harris is the embodiment of a public servant, and throughout his 15-year career he has been a passionate advocate for what’s fair and just,” Welch said in a statement. “His command of a wide range of public policy issues has been a vital asset for our state. As a values-oriented leader and the first openly gay majority leader, he has given a voice to so many who have continuously felt left out of state government. I am grateful to have worked alongside Leader Harris in the House

chamber, and I am remarkably blessed to call him a friend.”

With Harris's departure, Illinois will lose a state legislator whose lived experience includes gay Chicago life before and activism during the AIDS crisis. Harris tested positive for HIV in 1988 and lived for years with AIDS himself before the arrival of effective antiretroviral therapies. He survived drug and alcohol addiction and suicide attempts, and continues membership in a 12-step program.

“Almost everyone else I know, my friends back then, died during that time,” Harris said. “I still think, ‘Why did I survive that, and others didn’t?’”

He got involved in community organizing and local politics almost a decade later when he was politicized by the AIDS crisis. He tested positive in 1988 and developed AIDS in 1990, at which point most of his friends were sick, dying, or dead.

“There was just literally no support system, no medical care, no organized gay community to speak of,” he said. “There was no corporate support. It was the Reagan years; he wouldn’t even say ‘AIDS.’”

Many HIV-positive Chicagoans were losing their homes, and unable to access food, pastoral care, and the meager health care treatments available. Motivated to change the circumstances, Harris found activism. As others worked on housing, legal assistance, and did direct action with ACT UP, Harris's group Open Hand Chicago provided home-delivered meals: 41,476 in 1989, its first year of operation, and 750,000 by the end of 1994. He also chaired the city's first AIDS Walk in 1990.

“Everyone sort of went and did things where they were comfortable,” he said. “I think everyone went where they thought they could do the most good. Getting people food seemed to be a really important thing.”

Harris took AZT, the first HIV treatment available. Asked if it helped, he said, “I’m still here.” He nevertheless developed cryptosporidiosis, an opportunistic infection, surviving by getting nightly intravenous nutrition. He also suffered from substance abuse and mental health issues. He made more than one unsuccessful attempt at suicide.

“This time around, knock wood, I’ve just been participating in a program of recovery and doing things that people suggest I ought to do. And it’s worked, but it’s not been easy,” Harris said. “It’s not, I don’t think, unusual for people to do those things or go through these things, but for politics in particular it’s always been, ‘Oh, you never talk about that.’ That’s been one of those things historically that people have wanted to keep within themselves because of all the negative attacks that can be used against you.”

He decided to be open about his recovery from the very beginning, saying that doing so takes away power people could have held over him, and adding that he’s glad more elected officials are being open about depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.

“A lot of people you meet on the street are like, ‘Thank God you’re willing to talk about this openly. We see a lot of hope that maybe one day in our job we’ll be able to talk about the struggles we’ve been having,’” Harris said. “It’s always been very interesting to me, that so many people have taken note of the fact that I’ve talked about depression, suicide, those kinds of things.”

In 1991, Harris managed now-congressman Mike Quigley's City Council campaign against

then-incumbent Uptown alderman Helen Shiller (46th).

Shiller said her relationship with Harris improved once he became a state representative, and that he capably navigated the different communities in the district. She said they developed professional rapport, especially in terms of incubating a societal safety net. She said he never wavered in his support for those doing social work, even when they were opposed by gentrifying forces: “Those who just wanted them gone because they represented hope and expectations for people who brought them to the community.”

“I always appreciated that,” Shiller said. “And I always appreciated that he ultimately took on that role statewide as the defender of those institutions we had the funding that we had for much of the safety net.”

**H**arris began introducing legislation to legalize same-sex civil unions and marriage in Illinois in 2007, amid the national GOP effort to gin up their base’s turnout by putting gay marriage bans on state ballots. While working on that effort, Harris also dealt with both the impeachment of former governor Rod Blagojevich and the onset of the Great Recession in 2009.

The Illinois civil unions bill passed in 2011. Harris introduced same-sex marriage legislation again in 2012 and 2013. An umbrella organization, Illinois Unites for Marriage, organized LGBTQ+ Illinoisans and allies to lobby all 118 representatives for the bill.

“It was a tremendous education process, for one thing,” Harris said. “In districts like mine along the lakefront, we had a pretty large community of people who were out being LGBT. That was not necessarily the case in districts around the state.”

It passed the Senate in February 2013 and the House, narrowly, that November. The first LGBTQ+ couple was married later that month.

Harris “was right in the bucket from day one, as the main advocate in the House” for same-sex marriage legislation, former Illinois House speaker Michael Madigan said. “He did an excellent job.”

“I think it’s had a tremendous effect on folks,” Harris said. “You see increases in family units being formed, adoptions, folks having children and raising them, people feeling far freer to be themselves out in society, broader support in corporate America. All kinds of good things have come from it.”

Legislative gridlock and the state’s cataclysmic budgetary impasse began at the end of



Harris presides over a session of the Illinois House during the COVID  
 © COURTESY GREG HARRIS

June 2015, when Rauner vetoed a budget that spent more than it collected in taxes, which the legislative majority said should have been fixed with certain cuts and new sources of revenue.

“What Rauner did in particular was he went through the budget, and he targeted about a dozen or 14 human service items that were of particular interest to Democrats who were involved in the budget process: homeless youth, immigrant and refugee rights, autism programs, after-school programs for kids,” Harris said. “It was political and personal at the same time.”

“I’m really upset at the number of people who got hurt because he just had this really evil, intentional way of targeting human services and folks in need and making them pawns in his fight against Democrats and organized labor,” he added.

Compromise was out of the question. “[Rauner] had essentially taken the state hostage, and I don’t think we wanted to negotiate. We wanted to be sure that we won.”

Harris soon began working to gain enough votes to override Rauner’s veto. That work lasted through a 2016 stopgap budget until the summer of 2017 when some legislative Republicans broke ranks and voted with Democrats to override the governor’s veto. The governor and General Assembly did manage to pass an education funding compromise.

Harris noted that the state was \$17 billion in debt by the time the imbroglio ended.

“It just made so many things difficult for the state, and it’s been a lot of work since then, over the past four years with Governor Pritz-

ker, to build the state back up, where we’ve paid off our backlog of bills,” he said. “We’re essentially paying our bills timely, as they come in. We’ve made all of our pension obligations; we even contributed more than required by law into the pensions. We have \$1 billion in a rainy day fund, which is the most Illinois has ever had, I believe. And are getting upgrades from Moody’s, Fitch, Standard & Poor’s, where they’re saying, ‘Illinois is on the path to a good fiscal future but still has a lot of work to do there.’”

Madigan said he always wanted strong majority leaders and that Harris’s experience as his budget coordinator positioned him well for the goal.

“Like anything else in the legislature, the members are concerned about the issues, but one way or another, to a certain degree or less, everything is driven by personality consideration,” Madigan said. “What you have in the legislature are 118 people in the House, 59 in the Senate, elected from districts. They go to the capitol building with their agenda, which has been shaped by the people in their district; it’s been shaped by their experience and their campaign. Their predisposition is not to come together as one. The predisposition is to go in and pursue their individual agenda.”

“Well, that’s reflected in the budget-making, and somebody like Harris has to deal not only with the issues and how much money is allocated to different types of spending, especially when there’s a lot of tension around the budget-making, but they have to deal with the personalities.”

Governor Pritzker and his legislative super-majorities passed a \$40 billion budget in the governor’s first year, increasing funding for K-12 education and human service agencies by hundreds of millions of dollars while also paying in full a mandated multibillion-dollar pension payment.

“You have Democrats in control, you have a lot of things that were priorities for us, like leading the nation in climate change,” Harris said. “If you look at the equity reforms in the health care arena, the way that we’ve fundamentally expanded access to higher education and trades during that period, the energy bill, expanding trans rights, becoming the first state in the country to require education about Asian American history in our schools, adding LGBT health care to the [sexual education] curriculum, protecting abortion rights and reproductive rights—any of those would have been monumental achievements.”

At his exit, Harris remarked on the state Democratic Party’s big-tent nature; Madigan was always good at elevating women, non-white, and LGBTQ+ people to leadership positions. Harris’s predecessor as House majority leader, former representative Barbara Flynn Currie (D-25th), said he was not one to shove a progressive agenda down less-progressive Democrats’ throats.

“He had to craft things that were responsive to the progressive left wing and also be responsive to people who were concerned about spending too much money,” suggesting that his experience working on diverse constituents’ needs in the aldermanic office prepared him well for that role.

“I’ve done the things that were on the top of my priority list to do, and it’s time for new leadership and a new crop of people to come in and make their dreams come true for their communities,” Harris said.


“When I announced I was retiring, I sort of thought people were going to come up and say, ‘Thank you for passing this bill or that bill. You did a good job,’” he said. “More people came up and said, ‘Thank you for being willing to talk about your personal struggles. That meant so much to me or to one of my kids.’ That’s the thing people remember.”

*The all-hours 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is available toll-free at 9-8-8. The free and confidential Crisis Text Line for emotional crisis support is also available 24/7; text HELLO to 741741. ☑*

🐦 @aarondgettinger





From left: Edrinna Bryant, Daniel McWilliams, and Kimberly Britt, worker-owners of ChiFresh Kitchen, are hoping to purchase a building to launch an affordable housing co-op.  ABEL URIBE / CITY BUREAU

## HOUSING

# Joy and struggle

Chatham food-service worker cooperative ChiFresh Kitchen starts a housing co-op.

By ANNABEL ROCHA, JHAYLIN BENSON, JERREL FLOYD, AND CITY BUREAU

*This article was originally published by City Bureau, a nonprofit civic media organization based on the south side.*

Cardboard boxes of food stacked across the kitchen might appear scattered to outsiders, but make sense to staff working in a building on East 71st Street in Chicago's Chatham neighborhood.

The warehouse feel and gleam of stainless steel appliances fades from the kitchen when stepping through a doorway into a nearby room. Columns of unopened food boxes form an almost mazelike pathway toward the backroom, where a small table makes it a tight fit. The room is modest, but serves as a space for brainstorming, arguing, cracking jokes, and discussing the needs of the staff of ChiFresh Kitchen.

ChiFresh is a food-service contractor and worker cooperative that prioritizes hiring formerly incarcerated Black women. Founded in 2020, ChiFresh has become a valued resource

in neighborhoods across the city, serving healthy meals to low-income communities in locations such as daycares and schools. Owner and president Kimberly Britt explained that, from allergies to portions to temperature control, one mistake has the potential to throw off the quality of the end product.

With the food business running smoothly, ChiFresh's handful of owner-employees are in the process of organizing their own housing cooperative, which they believe will give them more control over their housing needs.

"Everybody wants three times the rent on your paycheck," Britt said while reflecting on her own struggle to find housing. "Everybody wants to do a background check."

For many renters in Chicago, the feeling of being powerless and at the mercy of property owners is all too familiar. An array of issues plague the housing market—rising rents, prices, gentrification, and displacement—and given that Chicago has a shortage of 120,000 affordable housing units, housing co-ops have once again emerged as viable options to help

fill the gap.

A housing cooperative is a residential property that is owned and often managed by the people who live in the building. The members of the co-op do not pay rent to a traditional landlord and are jointly responsible for maintenance. Co-ops can make home ownership more accessible for lower-income residents.

While there is little legal resistance for those who wish to start a housing co-op in Chicago, there is an education gap because of the absence of a centralized place for information to assist aspiring co-ops along the way. So what does starting a housing cooperative entail? City Bureau met with folks establishing their own to discuss the joys, the struggles, and what they're learning through the process.

As formerly incarcerated individuals, the ChiFresh worker-owners faced barriers to safe and affordable housing like cost, and credit and background checks, forcing them to live in areas that felt unsafe.

"It's not really realistic for us to have a

\$2 million building that we work out of, but we're living in the hood, where we get our cars stolen, our houses broken into, etcetera, etcetera," Britt said.

"To live somewhere safe, it's just, it costs you a lot," agreed Edrinna Bryant, owner and chef of ChiFresh.

Like many people, the ChiFresh staff did not know what a housing cooperative was. Camille Kerr, consultant and founder of the worker ownership firm Upside Down Consulting, taught Britt and Bryant about the potential of cooperative models. ChiFresh had the vision of building a network of resources for people who were formerly incarcerated, and Kerr had the knowledge to help direct them.

"Being able to have someone who knew what a co-op was and just walking us through, we [were] able to plan this on our own and come up with our own ideas," Bryant said.

"Once we put our vision together," Britt said, "how could you say no? The whole world is claiming to be about reentry."

Cooperative building isn't linear, and without help from someone experienced in establishing one, it can be a difficult process to endure. ChiFresh is also receiving guidance from Jason Tompkins, a co-op resident and board member of NASCO Properties, an organization that primarily works with student housing cooperatives. "There is a learning curve if you really want to do this in a way that protects your sanity and, then really is able to keep it in the hands of the people," he said, although he notes local resources like the Chicago Rehab Network can offer some assistance.

## Connections

The first step when establishing a co-op is building a network of interested members. For most housing co-ops, this network of potential members will be from a certain community. For example, ChiFresh is centered around supporting formerly incarcerated Black women. The Pilsen Housing Cooperative prioritizes longtime Pilsen residents. However, different members can pull a co-op in many different directions.

Even the folks at ChiFresh disagreed on where to live. "How much peace would they get with the train going by every minute?"



Britt, who sat at the far end of the table, asked as ChiFresh board members debated whether the co-op should be located next to a CTA train line.

Yittayih Zelalem, codirector of the Nathalie P. Voorhees Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement at the University of Illinois Chicago, has worked on community development issues and affordable housing. He said the strength of the co-op members is vital to building a financial entity together. So things like membership dues, fundraising, inspecting properties, and deciding on rules and guidelines must be established as a collective.

Zelalem encourages people to think about living in a co-op as a long-term experience because people don't often move into a co-op for only a year. "You're going to be neighbors for years and years to come," he said.

### Agreeing on the rules

ChiFresh's cooperative bylaws and guidelines hold members accountable. Britt said there's no room for them to sway from or make exceptions to those agreed-upon rules.

"Because then that opens up Pandora's box," she said.

Unlike other emerging housing cooperatives, ChiFresh is approaching the process from a unique perspective. They've already established bylaws through their worker cooperative.

Renee Hatcher, a professor and the director of the Community, Enterprise, and Solidarity Economy Clinic at UIC Law School, works with a variety of collectives and cooperatives, including housing co-ops. She said establishing bylaws gives a co-op the opportunity to legally note priorities centered on its mission. So if a group wanted to create a housing co-op that provided affordable options for its members, they can include that language in their bylaws. Hatcher also advises that a legal expert looks over the bylaws as well.

"You can't outright discriminate, but you can focus on certain communities," she said.

For example, one of the first agreements in the bylaws of the Logan Square Cooperative is "to provide affordable, adequate, safe, and sanitary housing accommodations for persons of low- and moderate- income." The co-op can also share information about openings at the space with potential members or organizations that align with the co-op's mission.

That diversity in experience typically adds to a cooperative. Mark Smithivas, a resident of the Logan Square Cooperative, said a co-op

can be as diverse as the group wants it to be. He said he wishes Logan Square had been more diverse in age and families. "We're all getting older now, so we're also less able to do a lot of physical tasks," Smithivas said, referring to things like shoveling snow and general building maintenance.

But Hatcher said the first step for emerging housing cooperatives is forming a legal entity. That process is often broken down into two options: formally incorporating a business in the state or forming a nonprofit and applying for recognition by the Internal Revenue Service for tax exemption.

ChiFresh is an already established legal entity. And because of its success with fundraising and popularity and name recognition, funding the housing cooperative hasn't been a huge struggle.

Hatcher warned that one of the most common mistakes is rushing to acquire property before establishing an entity.

### Collective financial stability

Kerr said in addition to applying for loans, ChiFresh is also looking for grants to offset additional costs to make sure the housing cooperative is affordable.

"We probably got the funding lined up," Britt said.

That's not the case for all housing cooperatives. Dianne Hodges, a longtime resident of one of South Shore's oldest Black-run housing cooperatives, the Genesis Cooperative, first moved there in 2009. As board president, she led refinancing efforts and successfully approached the Chicago Community Loan Fund, an organization that provides technical and financial assistance to development projects that benefit low- and moderate-income residents.

"It's not easy to get anything from them," Hodges said. "They push you . . . they make you have accountability," she said, referencing the training they had to go through to get funding.

In March, the City of Chicago revealed a new pilot program aimed at preserving vulnerable properties in South Shore by granting money to housing co-ops and condos. The City's Community Wealth Ecosystem Building (Community WEB) Program is allocating \$15 million in grants to organizations that support entities like limited equity co-ops, a type of housing cooperative that limits how much a resident can resell their unit for. The idea is to maintain affordability.

But what makes a housing co-op unique is

its ability to move as a collective. Maurice Williams, the vice president of economic development for the Chicago Community Loan Fund, said individual credit scores aren't necessarily important when starting a co-op. What matters more is the group's financial standing.

One of the first financial steps for a housing co-op is simply establishing a savings and checkings account as a collective. Those accounts should also include accountability measures, like making sure that one person can't withdraw and limiting individual access to the funds.

Potential lenders will likely ask to see the group's bylaws and funding structure. They'll ask how much tenants will pay each month toward the loan, how much money has already been saved in the shared account, and how much the construction costs are. This information typically falls into what is called a pro forma document, which is essentially a financial blueprint or outline for a cooperative. It typically breaks down things like estimated expenses, annual revenue, and debt coverage.

ChiFresh will likely still be able to establish equity within the future building while getting a significant portion of their costs covered through grants, fundraising, and loans. Kerr said they've already started constructing a pro forma document, and the priority now is finding property to determine the final dollar amount of the housing cooperative.

"It all depends on the spot," Kerr said.

### Finding the right space

"We're thinking about Bronzeville because that's close," Bryant said.

"You're gonna make me raise lots of money for Bronzeville," replied Kerr, illustrating the sometimes difficult discussions needed to reach a consensus. Purchasing property for a housing cooperative is similar to purchasing property as an individual, with the added challenge of making the decision jointly.

Finding the right building for a co-op goes beyond aesthetics like high ceilings or a big yard. It's important to determine the quality of the space and uncover any hidden costs that could be detrimental to the co-op's financial success.

"If you can see where a problem is, often it's fixable. If you don't know what the problem is, then it could be even a bigger problem than you think," said Peter Landon, the founder of LBBA, a Chicago-based architectural practice that's worked with housing cooperatives like the Pilsen Housing Cooperative. "You don't

want a money pit if you're really trying to make it be affordable."

He said co-op members must be realistic in determining what they can afford at the moment and may consider creating accounts like a replacement reserve, which are funds set aside to eventually pay for costly repairs. Zelalem said establishing reserve funds into those accounts is vital to the strength-building of the cooperative.

It's important to factor additional costs like maintenance into the budget and consider city zoning ordinance laws and permit requirements required for any work needed. The city offers an online calculator to help estimate permit building fees. Tompkins said it could take up to two and a half years to move into a space.

### Making it happen

Establishing a housing cooperative creates a snowball effect of learning, leading to a vast pool of new legal, housing, and interpersonal knowledge.

It's easy to nonchalantly discuss the desire to create group housing and picture what that might look like, but ChiFresh worker-owners said it takes more than a shared vision to make this happen—it's a combined willingness and effort that's taken them this far.

"[During our weekly meetings] we was strategizing and coming up with plans and what will work, we had different ideas, different targets, and everybody was just really putting forward like their own personal experience," Bryant said.

The ChiFresh worker cooperative and soon-to-be housing cooperative has experienced challenges individually and as a group, but is now creating its own path in a system that structurally blocks housing options. While it isn't easy, there's joy in the freedom they are finding.

"We are in the beginning stages, we're excited about it," Britt said. "And we gon' make this happen. Like we made ChiFresh." 

*Annabel Rocha and Jhaylin Benson are 2022 Fall Civic Reporting Fellows. Jerrel Floyd is City Bureau's engagement reporter covering economic development and segregation in Chicago. You can reach him with tips at [Jerrel@citybureau.org](mailto:Jerrel@citybureau.org). Learn more and get involved at [citybureau.org](http://citybureau.org).*





DAVID ALVARADO FOR CITY BUREAU

## LABOR

# Temp workers have rights

City Bureau answers questions from workers who rely on staffing agencies.

By SIRI CHILUKURI, MAIA McDONALD, CRISTAL RAMÍREZ, DANIELA TOVAR-MIRANDA, AND CITY BUREAU

*This article was originally published by City Bureau, a nonprofit civic media organization based on the south side.*

Temp jobs are on the rise. Employers have increasingly turned to temp workers because of the flexibility a temporary workforce provides, meaning companies can ramp up or scale down their workforce as needed. So far this year, the industry has employed an

average of more than three million people nationwide—already surpassing 2021 figures, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The trend holds in Illinois. Last year, the number of temp workers in the state rose by more than 10 percent from 2020 to nearly 170,000 workers. While those figures include office workers, the majority of temp jobs in the state are in industrial facilities. The jobs are filled by staffing agencies, which are con-

centrated in Cook County and the surrounding collar counties, according to a City Bureau analysis of Illinois Department of Labor staffing agency registration data.

Chicago-area worker advocates said many of the temp workers they interact with have complained about wage theft, retaliation, and workplace safety issues. They are not alone. Nearly a quarter of temp workers interviewed as part of a national survey published earlier

this year said they've experienced wage theft, meaning they were paid less than the minimum wage, not paid overtime rates, or not paid for all the hours worked. Nearly 20 percent said they hadn't received safety training, and the majority of workers interviewed said they had experienced some form of employer retaliation for raising workplace issues.

In the Chicago area, worker advocates said people who gravitate toward the industry are undocumented immigrants or were formerly incarcerated, which makes them less likely to report abuse, including discrimination.

A 2021 report on industrial temp hiring found that staffing agencies in the Chicago area routinely engage in racial discrimination. The report revealed that when workers of similar gender, age, and employment history were paired and sent to look for jobs at staffing agencies, more than a third of the agencies tested favored Latinx applicants over Black applicants. Some only allowed Latinx workers to apply or, when both applied, offered Latinx workers more or better jobs.

Dan Shomon, a spokesperson for Staffing Services Association of Illinois, which represents about 20 companies in the state, disputed the report's findings and said that association members are committed to good quality jobs and report similar numbers among Black and Latinx hires to the association.

City Bureau reporters surveyed more than a dozen workers in North Lawndale and neighboring Little Village, which is home to several industrial staffing agencies, about their experiences in the industry. Workers said they had experienced or suspected wage theft and discrimination, and wanted to know how to transition to permanent employment and more information about their rights. Below, we answer common questions from workers.

### What can I do if I suspect wage theft?

Keep good records.

Gather evidence stating the promised wages, such as flyers, contracts, or screenshots of online ads, and documents showing a worker's actual pay, like pay stubs, text messages, or emails. Worker advocates said



workers should also track their hours and pay.

“Don’t talk to management or employers alone because then they can deny whatever transpired in that conversation,” said Jannelle White, the director of Temp Worker Union Alliance Project. “So, first steps: document, document, document. Take notes, and take a witness whenever possible.”

Tommy Carden, an organizer with Warehouse Workers for Justice, which organizes warehouse and transportation industry workers in Illinois, said that if a paycheck seems short, workers can talk with their coworkers to assess whether it is a one-time error or an issue they are all experiencing.

Worker advocates stress that temp workers have a better shot at forcing their employer to pay up if they band together and collectively organize at worksites. Some workers have used the courts to collect what’s owed. “One single worker trying to make a legal claim and having a legal case will be less successful than having many coworkers coming together and applying pressure around the same issue,” Carden said.

## Can I report wage theft to the city or state?

Yes, workers who live in Chicago can file a complaint with the city or the state.

Under the Day and Temporary Labor Services Act, staffing agencies are required to provide workers a detailed statement including the number of hours worked, the places where they worked, the pay rate, and any deductions. The Illinois Department of Labor handles complaints about unpaid wages and illegal deductions. To do so, workers can fill out a form and include photocopies of their evidence.

In Chicago, temp workers earning no more than \$29.35 per hour, working for companies with at least 100 employees and employed in industries including manufacturing, retail, or warehouse services are covered by the Fair Workweek Ordinance. Workers can submit an anonymous complaint with the Office of Labor Standards, said Andrew Fox, its director.

## Are companies required to offer me a full-time job?

So-called client companies, the firms contracting staffing agencies to provide workers, are not required to permanently hire temp workers. However, workers can apply for permanent positions when they become available.

Under state law, a temp agency should attempt to place workers in a permanent position when client companies have openings.

The lack of regulation on how long a temp worker can stay a temp creates a class of what local worker advocates call “perma-temps.” Client companies can keep a temp worker employed for an indefinite period of time without offering an opportunity for permanent employment.

“It’s a contradiction, but it’s a reality that you have people who are temporary workers forever,” said Carden, of Warehouse Workers for Justice. Labor experts said some companies have union contracts or other collective bargaining agreements that limit the temporary employment status of a worker, but those still do not guarantee permanent employment.

## What if my workplace is unionized?

Workers can review the union contract to see if there is any language that creates a pathway for permanent employment of temp workers. If there is no union, the employee handbook from the client company may have information on temp-to-hire practices.

“There could be a limitation in the contract that says that a temp has to become a direct hire,” said Tim Bell, executive director of the Chicago Workers Collaborative. “If there is no contract, there is no collective bargaining agreement in that shop, then the period is unlimited.”

Bell said temp workers should build a relationship with their union steward and coworkers to learn if and how they can transition to a permanent role.

## Do I have to join a union to organize?

No. Federal labor law protects private-sector workers who want to organize with coworkers with or without a union. Workers can bargain for better wages, benefits, and working conditions. In Chicago, worker centers, like Arise Chicago, have supported workers who have formed a worker committee, which can represent workers in conversations with employers without a union.

However, retaliation against workers who form worker committees can and does happen. Workers fired or disciplined for organizing their workplace can file unfair labor charges against their employer with the National Labor Relations Board, the federal agency that protects private-sector workers’ right to organize.

## I was fired. Now what?

Illinois is an “at-will” employment state, meaning that nonunion workers can be terminated for any reason. However, if workers feel they were discriminated against and are part of a protected class, their firing might have been illegal.

First, do you believe you were fired because you are a part of a protected class?

The Illinois Human Rights Act forbids discrimination based on “age (40+), ancestry, arrest record, citizenship status, color, conviction record, disability (physical and mental), familial status (with respect to real estate transactions), gender identity, marital status, military status, national origin, orders of protection, pregnancy, race, religion, retaliation, sex, sexual harassment, sexual orientation, and unfavorable military discharge.”

Federal laws also make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of the person’s race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy and related conditions, gender identity, and sexual orientation), national origin, age (40 or older), disability, or genetic information.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is the agency enforcing the federal laws while the Illinois Department of Human Rights handles complaints under the Illinois Human Rights Act.

## Document all communication

Similar to suspected wage theft, worker advocates said workers should document everything that would support their discrimination case and reach out to coworkers for support.

“If there’s community support, there’s potential for protests and direct actions, and those things sometimes can get better results than going through the legal system,” said Bell, of the Chicago Workers Collaborative. “It’s very hard to win discrimination cases.”

Betsey Madden, chief legal counsel and ethics officer at the Illinois Department of Human Rights, said any evidence of what happened, including a letter of termination or email, is helpful for the department when investigating claims.

Workers can also check with a local worker center for additional support.

## Consider filing a discrimination charge

Workers can file a complaint against their em-

ployer with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and a charge with the Illinois Department of Human Rights. Separately, the Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division handles civil rights violations and also enforces federal laws that protect people from discrimination based on race, color, national origin, disability status, sex, religion, familial status, or loss of other constitutional rights. Workers can report a civil rights violation against their employer on the department’s website.

## What if I’m undocumented or have been arrested?

Anyone, regardless of their immigration status or whether they have been accused or convicted of a criminal offense, can submit a charge with the Illinois Department of Human Rights or a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Find a lawyer. Workers can reach out to a legal aid provider or private attorney familiar with workers’ rights cases, said Jane Flanagan, acting director of the Illinois Department of Labor.

However, temp workers should know that discrimination cases can be difficult to prove and win because of all the documentation that’s needed.

Carden, of Warehouse Workers for Justice, said that often workers who approach the worker center are interested in the legal route. He added that “a lot of the time you have to be real honest with workers and say, ‘OK, it’s going to be really hard for you to win this unless you have a very specific set of documented facts.’”

His advice: Use every tool in the workers’ rights toolbox to organize and apply pressure while the case is working its way through the courts. **■**

*Siri Chilukuri, Maia McDonald, Cristal Ramirez, and Daniela Tovar-Miranda are 2022 Fall Civic Reporting Fellows. Sarah Conway, City Bureau’s senior reporter covering jobs and the economy of survival in Chicago, also contributed. You can reach her with tips at sarah@citybureau.org.*

*If you or someone you know experienced racial discrimination in temp hiring, connect with City Bureau reporting fellows at tips@citybureau.org.*

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## MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

# Last in line

The latecomers and superstitious test their luck with a lottery, hoping to get the last spot on the ballot.

By **KELLY GARCIA**

It was a quarter till four in the afternoon, the Monday after Thanksgiving, when a line of wool trench coats and puffy winter jackets appeared at the corner of Clark and Lake. They stood in the cold, wide-eyed first-timers, jaded political operatives, and others almost ambivalent to the custom. They waited to walk through the revolving glass doors of the Chicago Board of Elections Loop Supersite—a downtown storefront turned into a polling place adjacent to the el tracks. This was the last chance to get on the ballot for February’s municipal election.

Corey Denelle Braddock wore a navy blue, zippered sweatshirt with “Corey Denelle Braddock for 37th Ward Alderman” printed on the back. He had on a matching baseball cap. I asked why he was submitting petitions an hour before they were due. “I wanted to get as many signatures as I could because I wanted to make sure that dirty tricks aren’t something I’m affected by,” he told me.

Krystal Peters, candidate for the new Seventh Police District Council, laughed when I asked the same question. “I’m a master procrastinator,” she said. Another woman said,

“I’m excited to get this over with.”

“My name is Wendi Taylor Nations, and I’m running for alderman of the 43rd Ward,” Wendi Taylor Nations, wearing a tan wool coat, told me eagerly, as if narrating a campaign advertisement. “I’m here because I want to get into the lottery to be the last person on the ballot.”

It’s a Chicago tradition for prospective candidates to line up outside the Board of Elections office hours, if not days, before the period to submit petitions to get on the ballot opens. Board officials hand candidates a white slip of paper if they’re in line by 9 AM on the first day petitions are due. The hope is that by winning a lottery, your name will appear at the top of the ballot. (That is, if you successfully dodge attempts from your opponents to kick you off the ballot.)

In the 2020 documentary *City So Real*, Willie Wilson supporters camped outside the elections board office the night before to get a top spot on the ballot for the 2019 mayoral election. (Wilson paid these people.) Cleopatra Draper, candidate for Ninth Ward alderperson, was in line at eight in the morning on

Research shows there’s some advantage to being listed first on the ballot—and last on the ballot. ↗

JOHN GARRISON

a Friday this year, even though doors didn’t open until Monday morning.

There’s no advantage to being first in line. The rules say candidates who filed “simultaneously”—four transferred calls later, I learned that this means anyone who shows up before doors open—and received a ticket are placed in the lottery. But it’s not for nothing. Research shows that there is an electoral advantage to having your name listed first on a ballot.

There’s also a second lottery, a week later, for folks hoping to get the last spot on the ballot, available to those in line by 4 PM on the last day petitions are due. It’s a last-minute chance for the latecomers and superstitious to test their luck. Research, apparently, shows there’s also some advantage to being last.

When I went, the first ones in line were supporters of second-time mayoral candidate Chuy García, the last one to file petitions in a crowded race. “We want Chuy! We want Chuy!” they chanted as they saved his spot. Minutes later, the U.S. Congressman materialized with his wife, Evelyn, and political advisor Clem Balanoff. Together, they wheeled a cart with a large stack of petition signatures wrapped in green plastic and held down with bungee cords. A large cartoon replica of García’s trademark mustache was taped to the front of the cart.

García was the first to step through the revolving doors. The room was decked in blue curtains, and rope barriers ran through the middle. The space quickly filled with his supporters and news crews who followed like ducklings. Once at the registration tables, García tossed his stack of petitions on top. A board official measured the stack with a yardstick (it was just a few inches short from the top). At nearly 50,000 petition signatures, García had one of the highest counts among mayoral candidates and even more than incumbent Mayor Lori Lightfoot. His gambit worked: On Tuesday, election officials announced the results of the lottery, and García was indeed last on the ballot.

More office seekers trickled in throughout the next hour, though it was less of a spectacle. Near the entrance stood a police officer and a few board officials keeping watch. Reporters camped out in the corners using their coats as blankets to lie on. It was uncomfortably warm inside. Almost everyone’s attention was on the big name in the room.

“Twenty-eight is a very lucky number in the Chinese community,” Don Don humbly told me. A candidate for 11th Ward alderperson, he stood with his hands behind his back and spoke in a hushed tone. He told me that he announced his campaign on September 28, and it only made sense to file his petitions on November 28.

Others stood in line to get referendums on the ballots. Dixon Romeo and Savannah Brown, two young, Black community organizers from South Shore, showed up with 750 signatures to get two questions on the ballot for Fifth Ward residents: Do you support a holistic package of housing protections for South Shore residents? Do you support the use of a city-owned vacant lot at 63rd and Blackstone for affordable housing?

Romeo said the referendum would be non-binding, or without legal power. But he said it would send a message to retiring Fifth Ward alderperson Leslie Hairston and Lightfoot about the lack of affordable housing, directly from residents. One board official at the registration table patiently wrote the referendum questions by hand on different sheets of paper for each of the 12 precincts in the ward.

Would the referendum get enough support? “We’ll let the numbers talk,” Romeo said.

By 5 PM, officials locked the doors. Only a handful remained inside. Andre Smith, candidate for 20th Ward alderperson, stood at the end of the line. He had a big smile on his face. He told me the other two candidates in the race, Jennifer Maddox and the incumbent alderperson Jeanette Taylor, had similar first names, so his name would stick out by being last on the ballot if he won the lottery.

I chatted with a board official and a political consultant who didn’t want to be named. They sat on chairs, ties loosened, relieved that the day was almost over. Both agreed that filing petitions had gone smoothly this year. It was a miracle they were done before six, they said.

For more than two hours, I watched as candidate after candidate exited the building. The process of getting (and staying) on the ballot is arduous and complicated, and it was designed to be that way. Yet every election cycle hundreds accept the challenge, even if there’s no real guarantee of victory. For these people who braved the cold and long lines and red tape, no tactic can be ruled out.

Peters, one of the last candidates to exit, walked out joyfully. “Even if I don’t win,” she said, “I’m in.” 📱

🐦 @\_kellygarcia\_



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# ARTS & CULTURE

QR "FOR EACH OTHER"  
Through 12/17: Tue-Fri 10 AM-5 PM, Sat  
noon-5 PM, Gallery 400, 400 S. Peoria,  
gallery400.uic.edu

## VISUAL ART

### We keep us safe

At Gallery 400, Chicago artists and collectives explore forms of care.

By ERIN TOALE

This exhibition is a much needed reminder of our interconnectedness in the face of the toxic individualism touted by much of contemporary American culture. It explores the increasing overlap between artistic practice, mutual aid, and political activism. The title, "For Each Other," references the ways the included artists "consider care in their work and in the contexts they create for their work," writes exhibition curator Lorelei Stewart. *Care*, a word that has thankfully reentered cultural discourse as of late, takes many forms here: prompts for audience self-reflection, bowls for sharing soup, publications about resource sharing, flyers calling for community volunteers, multiple seated reflection spaces, and so on. Some of the works are straightfor-

wardly interactive, some abstractly encourage rest and reflection. Unsurprisingly, given the communal conceit of the show, several collaborations and collectives are featured.

A striking installation by Kennedy Healy and Marley Molkentin titled *Care* is the stand-out. The series depicts their relationship as personal care assistant and receiver of care services and grapples with, as Molkentin tells me in a joint interview, "how broken our state care system truly is." Both artists are invested in social justice, disability justice, and media production, and are driven to make work that calls attention to what they call "violence framed as care." (Healy runs a disability media company, Crip Crap, that creates work about disability by and for disabled people.)



Marley Molkentin and Kennedy Healy, from the series *Care*, 2021, color photograph  
COURTESY OF GALLERY 400 AND THE ARTISTS

This refers to, says Healy, "state in-home care and many other institutions like psychiatric wards, group homes, work programs, nursing homes, etc. that claim to offer care but often strip people of their rights, autonomy, and dignity in exchange."

This room-sized installation of several distinct works thoughtfully documents the logistics of the daily interactions between the two artists but goes beyond simply archiving them. Materials used include the logistical

acoutrements of medical care: time sheets that document Molkentin's hours worked, continuous positive airway pressure gear, and catheters. Stunning portraits of the two of them throughout their daily routine, printed large, are hung salon-style across a single wall. These include a nude portrait of Healy in a pink-tiled shower; her pose is a supported contrapposto, reminiscent of Botticelli's *Venus*. There is also an image of Molkentin guiding Healy in a Hoyer lift sling (an assistive

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**IMAGE CREDITS:** Louise Abbéma (1853–1927, France), *Sarah Bernhardt et Louise Abbéma sur le lac au bois de Boulogne*, 1883, Oil on canvas, 160 x 210 x 3 cm (framed), Collections Comédie-Française. (Detail)

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device used to transport patients with mobility issues) adjacent to a suspended life-sized figure sculpture—made of medical bills—also seated in a Hoyer lift sling. Though there is tenderness in the interactions between the two, the works bluntly recount the reality of living with a disability in the state of Illinois and make clear the need for social reform and increased community support.

Latham Zearfoss's video installation *Grant Us Serenity* explores infrastructures of care while emphasizing the healing power of pleasure. Zearfoss invites the viewer into a relaxation cave with a sumptuous padded rug and tree stumps to sit on. The lights are dim, and both the walls and floor are a soothing blue. Projected on the wall is a cerulean sky occasionally interrupted by a passing cloud or bird—which fades to lavender at the end of a five-minute loop. (This was shot at the experimental residency Poor Farm.) The soundtrack is a gentle, ambient compilation of field recordings taken near the artist's home, including a wind chime and a freight train. The room encourages both emotional and physical presence and reminds the viewer that rest

can function as both self-care and resistance, especially if you are queer, BIPOC, or part of an otherwise marginalized or vulnerable population.

Zearfoss offers the viewer an intermission from the exhaustion of being sentient in the world today. In addition to creating a quiet, meditative moment in the midst of—as the artist describes—a “very text-heavy and thematically heavy” exhibition, this work also brings up the relational politics of space and power: who gets it, who doesn't, who needs to cede more in public discourse (usually the person in the room with the most privilege). Zearfoss writes, “I thought of this as a supportive gesture to the viewer but also to my fellow artists, who are doing such important work. Sometimes fading into the background is the most powerful thing we can do.”

Zearfoss's positing a world in which all public spaces include zone-out rooms echoes the cheeky installation by Real Fake Artists, Inc., a collective of six recent University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) grads (Gallery 400 is housed at UIC). *The Stuff Is Fake but the Need Is Real*

consists of playful cardboard renderings of a proposed student lounge, to be hypothetically housed in the same building as the gallery. Public spaces can be forms of care, amenities for students at a public institution can be forms of care, and—as frequently espoused in the transformative and restorative justice movements—constructive criticism can also be forms of care (for more on this, see Adrienne maree brown's writings on the topic). Institutional critique is alive and well; long live institutional critique!

There is more than one art world in Chicago, and it was great to see some nontraditional works and spaces outside the constellation of usual suspects. I am talking mostly about The Love Fridge, an incredible food-access and neighborhood beautification initiative launched at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic—now boasting 24 locations. The refrigerators, and often accompanying pantry shelves, are painted to reflect the neighborhood in which they are located. The organization's rallying cry, “solidarity is not charity,” makes the argument that providing food to a neighbor in need is not an extraor-

dinarily philanthropic act but a basic gesture of community support. Their mission reads: “Feeding oneself is not a privilege but a right.” Especially during times of collective tragedy, we really aren't meant to go it alone.

This show was generous with both public programming and ephemera, and I left with a tote full of treasures (of course following The Love Fridge ethos “take what you need/leave what you can”). My favorite was the zine *Take Me With You: Waiting Room Edition* by the UIC Disability Cultural Center Community Care Cohort. The compiled poems, coloring pages, games, tips, and other enrichments are designed to “alleviate the wait and anxiety of waiting rooms.”

This exhibition's series of gentle gestures in both intimate and public places act as a handbook for how we can keep each other well-cared for. I left with zines, recipes, resources, and a renewed curiosity in what the future of mutual aid and community care looks like in Chicago—where we keep us safe. 📍

🐦 @erin\_toale



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IMAGE CREDITS: “Cosmic Returning” painting from *Quantum* Chandelier 21-D-02, Michiko Itatani, 2021, 78” x 96”, oil on canvas, courtesy of Michiko Itatani. (Detail)

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## VISUAL ART

## Inside Roman Villarreal's world



Installation view of "Roman Villarreal: South Chicago Legacies" exhibition (June 17, 2022-January 8, 2023), Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art

© CHERI EISENBERG

In his first major retrospective, the self-taught artist displays 50 years of life on Chicago's southeast side.

By PARKER YAMASAKI

There's conflict, grief, helplessness, loss, and also joy, camaraderie, and loyalty inhabiting artist Roman Villarreal's south-side neighborhood and, consequently, the work he's made there. All of this is on display in his first retrospective, "South Chicago Legacies," at Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art.

Villarreal grew up in the Bush neighborhood on the southeast side, among steelworkers, of which he was one, and gang members, of which he was also one. He started his art practice in the army during the Vietnam war by making drawings and selling them to fellow soldiers. Villarreal served his term without getting deployed to Vietnam, a fate that few men in his community shared. In fact, his parish, Our Lady of Guadalupe, is believed to have suffered the highest per capita death rate of men sent to war during that era. This was the first of two devastations that would mark his community worse off; the second was the closure of the steel mills.

In the years following the war, Villarreal started sculpting what he saw on the streets out of material he salvaged. In the late 1970s, he constructed *The Rainbow Lounge*, the

oldest piece on display at Intuit. It's a three-dimensional wooden panel painted in bright acrylics that depicts a band performing at the eponymous hangout. The women's lips flash bright red lipstick, the men's carry heavy handlebar mustaches. It's warm and jovial. As Villarreal told me, "You have to show the good and the bad."

The decade that followed *The Rainbow Lounge* brought national tragedy, and many of Villarreal's 1980s works chosen for display deal straightforwardly with drug abuse, addiction, and a community in mourning. Side-by-side paintings *They Die On The Throne* and *Habits* show a man with a needle in his hand and a woman with a bottle to her lips, respectively. Though to reduce these paintings to drug awareness PSAs would be a huge disservice. They imbue the space with its most glaring displays of color—colors were associated with gangs and were very important to the community, Villarreal told me—and showcase his skill with acrylics.

"The way I see it, we were this middle-class neighborhood while the steel mills were open," he says. "Then came the closures and the downfall. So now we have this whole

generation that grew up during a time when all they saw was a middle-class neighborhood falling through the cracks. It hasn't been the same since." Villarreal bore witness to it all: "Vietnam, death, fatherhood, closures, and the street art movement. . ." he says, skimming through a half-century's worth of history in a few seconds. He consolidates it all as naturally as he might give his address. He knows the stories well because he's spent his life telling them.

"I tell people I'm an urban anthropologist," he says. "All I'm doing, really, is showing you my experiences from the 80s, 90s, [and so on]. I have to make sure there's an even balance. I don't only want to show bad, because it's not only bad." A painting from the 1990s, *Porch*, shows his signature blocky figures—friends, kids, pets—gathered on the front steps of a house, drinking beer, listening to music, and enjoying the weather, Villarreal says. Then he adds: "They're all wearing gang sweaters." Villarreal lived on a block called "the beehive" where a lot of Latin Kings also lived. All summer they got together on porches before "the bloody 90s," as he puts it. "Then we all moved to

the backyards." The painting itself holds all of these aspects: the love, the warmth, the moment, as well as the loss, the violence, the change.

*Porch* wasn't, in fact, meant to be viewed. It was a sketch for a clay piece. Of course, things don't always work out as planned. An alabaster sculpture called *Dogs* (2019) started out as a lion and her cubs. He hadn't even finished it when Intuit's exhibition curator Alison Amick decided they wanted it in the show. "You never know what people are going to see in your work," he says and seems genuinely interested in the various ways that the show could have played out.

Intuit is dedicated to outsider art, but the museum has the hardwood floors and white walls of any West Town gallery. When the exhibition opened in June of this year, Villarreal says he was "really, really surprised to see it all together in that space." Villarreal was used to seeing his work in group shows or outdoors (his two most well-known sculptures, a mysterious mermaid at 41st Street Beach and a steelworker and his family at Steelworker's Park, live in public spaces).


Villarreal left the steel mills in the late 1980s

## ARTS & CULTURE



Installation view of "Roman Villarreal: South Chicago Legacies" exhibition (June 17, 2022-January 8, 2023), Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art  [CHERI EISENBERG](#)

and has been making art full-time ever since. He proudly identifies as an outsider artist; his auto-didacticism granted him a freedom that he doubts he'd have found by studying art in an institution. He attempts to describe the freedom that he feels when he's working, fumbling around with the words before settling on: "There's nothing as beautiful as a blank canvas." He works almost every day, sketching and painting when it's cold, sculpting when it's warm. Between his three studios, he has 900 works.


There are drawbacks to his outsider position, though. Namely, what happens to the art after the show closes or, ultimately, once the artist dies. There aren't established places for preservation in the outsider art world, let alone continued sales. "We don't have a traditional outlet. There's a lot to learn from trial and error: technique, how to promote work, how to network. But we'll learn to survive," he says. And isn't that the truth. 

 [@Chicago\\_Reader](#)



Roman Villarreal (American, b. 1950). *In a Clinch*, 2000. Marble, 20 x 16 in. Courtesy of the Villarreal Family

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## VISUAL ART

### Michelle Grabner does it again

In a survey exhibition at MICKEY, the artist finds novelty in familiar forms developed over 30 years.

By ALEXANDRA DREXELIUS

A compact solo exhibition at MICKEY presents the remarkable range of Michelle Grabner's three-decade career. A celebrated figure in local and national art scenes, Grabner has done it all. Adjacent to her dedicated studio practice, Grabner's pioneering curatorial platform The Suburban—an experimental gallery established in Oak Park in 1999 with her husband Brad Killam—has championed the ingenuity of artist-run

spaces. Additionally, Grabner has taught at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for over 25 years, leaving an indelible mark on the city's artists and creative ecosystem.

Entering the first gallery, one can appreciate the scope of Grabner's trademark domestic vernacular applied across painting, sculpture, and photography. However, this survey is far from comprehensive. "A Minor Survey" hinges on a swiftly spoiled joke: all works on view were made in 2022. The motifs are largely recycled: two monumental, oil-on-burlap gingham paintings reprise Grabner's signature checkered series, debuted in 2015; and three oil-on-canvas works, resembling bleached cloths, recall both textile paintings from the 90s and a recent series of pastel pictures adorned with white enamel globs. This may be Grabner's first solo presentation in Chicago since 2013, but what differentiates her recent interventions from ideas honed over the past ten years? Look past the titular punchline, and the show could be brushed off as same old, same old.

But Grabner succeeds at iterating upon presumed old hat with novelty and aplomb. Some forms remain the same. For instance, a recent tondo painting—comprising a black, gesso-coated panel drawn over with graphite rays—replicates a form initiated over a decade ago. Nevertheless, the meditative icon, elegantly rendered with mechanical precision, emanates a timeless quality illustrative of Grabner's enduring brand of abstraction.

Other works test the limits of past ideas in new configurations. A particularly compelling patinated brass blanket breaks with Grabner's previous textile sculpture idioms. Unlike earlier metal-cast cloth works, which appear vertically suspended from two points, this crocheted knit lays loosely folded on the floor. The uneven appearance of the blanket's corners, not quite lined up, summons the labor required to fold linen uneasily handled by a single person. A simple chore can be a heavy order without the help of others.

Despite her focused engagement with abstraction, Grabner's appropriation of household accessories, from jam jars to dish towels, is perhaps too easily read as social critique—invoking second-wave feminist rhetoric espoused by the Wages for Housework movement and simultaneously vulnerable to casual sexism—as demonstrated in a 2014 *New York Times* review that conflated her artistic output with the efforts of a soccer mom. The tendency for viewers to extrapolate class and gender discourse follows not only



"A Minor Survey: Michelle Grabner" installation view, MICKEY 2022  
COURTESY OF MICKEY AND THE ARTIST

from the artwork's domestic content and the geographic context of the suburban midwest, but also from Grabner's parallel success as a curator, critic, and educator. Unpacking the social terms of her interdisciplinary career in a 2012 interview with critic Barry Schwabsky, Grabner stated, "curating, writing, and teaching are super social endeavors, and they often evoke various critical positions. But yes, my studio is not social." Unlike past institutional surveys that included bibliographic videos, collaborations, and work by other artists, MICKEY's presentation conspicuously omits Grabner's more social endeavors, focusing on the scope of her aesthetic strategies.

While the artwork cannot entirely escape external associations, the present survey approximates the routines underpinning Grabner's studio methodology. It's a conceptual and self-referential practice where nothing goes to waste; ideas are repeatedly executed to the point that all possibilities are exhausted—or so you might think. Clarity and wit sprout from her sustained engagement with monotony.

Look at a delicate wall-mounted sculpture, composed of bronze rods and flowering plants burgeoning at the joints. Resembling a canvas stretcher, the work is based on an arcane double entendre—"mullions" and "mulleins"—the former a term for a window frame divider and the latter a type of perennial plant. It's a cheeky pun, perhaps originating from extended time spent mulling things over.

Nearby, an assortment of cans and tins coated in silver leaf lay atop a plinth. Their lids are peeled back but largely intact, as if the artist's phantom hand was suspended in motion. The veneer—an ornamental redundancy, in which metal adorns metal—belabors a sense of being worked over. But these pieces also espouse a

lightness. Rid of their utilitarianism, these containers are open-ended and permeable. They preserve nothing.

Two other sculptures appropriate the visual language of DIY crafting projects. Repurposing salvaged wood slabs, Grabner cuts out shallow circular beds to house assorted lid-like objects—some ready-made, others trompe l'oeil. The reliefs, evocative of her mobile sculptures, emulate salon-style hangs of Grabner's various material strategies. Paintings, metal castings, and found objects lay side by side like spare parts of a whole practice. But for all their succinctness and poetry, these wood board assemblages could run the risk of falling flat. The quirky yet refined conceit exists precariously, calibrated just enough to avoid the pretense of triteness.

Grabner has articulated boredom as a critical measure in her process and an unlikely defense against her work turning stale. To better understand the capricious conditions of her practice, one might look to artist Dick Higgins's seminal 1968 essay, "Boredom and Danger," published in the *Something Else Newsletter*. The text appraises a shift in art's production and accompanying terms of engagement; describing danger as a crucial element in successful works, he remarked, "a sense of risk is indispensable, because any simple piece fails when it becomes facile. This makes for all the more challenge in risking facility, yet still remaining very simple, very concrete, very meaningful." Embracing the possibility of failure, Grabner's work exists at the edge of easy. An ode to looking hard and looking harder at the simplest of conceits, "A Minor Survey" revels in the stunning patience of Grabner's gaze.

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## COMEDY

## Stand-up tragedy

Ben Wasserman talks about creating his comic solo *Live After Death* out of deep loss.

By KERRY REID

**O**n Inauguration Day 2017, New York-based comedian Ben Wasserman's father died—the first in what would turn out to be a series of deaths in his life over the next three years, including his grandfather, his uncle, and four friends. Wasserman, whose past comedic work included a segment for MTV where he painted with his butt, takes a deep dive into grief in *Live After Death*, an interactive comedic solo show he developed in part through performances in an actual funeral home. (At one point, Wasserman juggles balls representing the people he's lost while an audience member reads prompts about other things going on in his life, including his grand-

mother's dementia and his battle with kidney stones.) He's now touring the show and will be performing December 13 at Lincoln Lodge. Maggie Winters, a Reader Best of Chicago 2021 winner for "best comedian (non stand-up)" opens.

I talked to Wasserman about what it's been like for him to perform what he called "the last show I'd ever wanna have to do."

**Kerry Reid: You hadn't really leaned into autobiographical material prior to doing this show, correct?**

**Ben Wasserman:** I, for the most part, was

always just sort of like your standard-issue goofy weirdo guy who would go up with some sort of high concept. I've got bits where I'm like a meditation coach and the whole joke is just that I'm an angry guy trying to make people meditate. Or I would be Britain's number one insult comedy duo, and then it would only be me, and I'd get an audience member to help me insult the rest of the crowd in a British accent. Really untethered, goofy, stupid stuff. And then I started losing people, and I could not help but talk about it. And I happened to be on stage, and so it sort of just bled into my comedy.

**How much of your previous performing persona is still present in *Live After Death*?**

Oh, it's all there. This sounds gross to say out loud. But I would say I'm firing on all cylinders in terms of who I am, my comedic voice. And I'm also meeting people with material that's a little bit more approachable, maybe. The whole goofy sensibility and fun persona kind of thing is still thoroughly there. It's just now mitigated by, you know, more somber topics.

**LIVE AFTER DEATH**

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[thelincnolodge.com](http://thelincnolodge.com), \$15

**Your mom was at one of the shows I saw on a clip you sent. How has she reacted to your doing this personal material in front of audiences?**

She's been wholly supportive. There's never been a moment where I was thinking, "I should probably run this by her or something," only because ultimately this is my truth. So she has no say, but there were a couple things within the show that at first I was a bit hesitant about her seeing. Just in terms of, "Is this gonna trigger her?" I was worried that there's one moment in the show that's pretty vulnerable in exposing our shared loss and our experience with it. [The grandfather and uncle that Wasserman lost were his mother's father and brother.] I was worried that she would break down crying in the middle of the show, but then she was just cracking up the whole time.

That was nice.

**Was developing it at a funeral home a deliberate choice? Did you just call up the funeral home director and say, "Hey, I'm a comedian, and I'm doing a show about death?"**

I've done it in a funeral home. I have it lined up next year for a couple more funeral homes and cemeteries and a casket factory. It's very purposeful. My friend is a funeral director and was, at the time, the funeral director of Sparrow Funeral Home [in Brooklyn]. We were at a party, and I was telling her that I had this new show that I'm gonna start workshoping, and she was like, "Oh, you should do it at the funeral home." Then a few months later, I did the first one at the funeral home and it sold out. Then we were like, "Hey, let's do this every month."

**Were people more accepting of the premise since it was outside the realm of a usual comedy venue?**

I've done the show in regular comedy venues, bars, jazz clubs, record stores, and funeral homes. And I would say that people come to the show at the funeral home with a bit more—it's hard to say if it's more openness, but definitely there is, like, an extra something in the air. The funeral home shows were always really special. The vibe in the room was one of, "Oh, we've all lost people, we're all in community together based on that." And now we're sharing in this wacky, chaotic show experience kind of thing. I don't love thinking of comedy as an art, but I would say that this show in the funeral home or in a cemetery or something like that does do something along the lines of creating a more special environment for people to approach the material and to open up. Because a lot of the show is interactive, I think it engenders a little bit of vulnerability and openness and just sort of, like, gets death on the mind in a way that a regular comedy venue might not necessarily.


**It feels cliché to say "COVID changed everything," but what's it like doing this show in light of the pandemic?**



## THEATER

Before all the shutdowns in 2020, I had finally decided, “OK, here’s a full-length solo show I can do about grief and loss, and I’m gonna hit the road.” The tour was slated for the last week of March 2020. Obviously that wound up being canceled. And then I spent the next almost two years just watching everyone deal with loss. And it sort of shifted my perspective on what this show could be or should be. Before COVID hit, the show was very much about my loss and my experience with grief and super autobiographical and yada yada yada. And then once it was, like, obvious that everyone was in some way grieving, and quite robustly, I was like, “It would be more interesting to kind of engage

with others about their loss.”

I had an extra two years to kind of—not get over it, but get more accustomed to my grief, and know that life continues. The initial emotional balance of the material wasn’t hitting as much for me personally anymore. And so I thought it would be more interesting and probably more conducive to the vibe of the show if I shifted from it being exclusively about my losses and more kind of just creating a conversation about everyone in the room’s experience with loss and grief and deaths and mortality. 

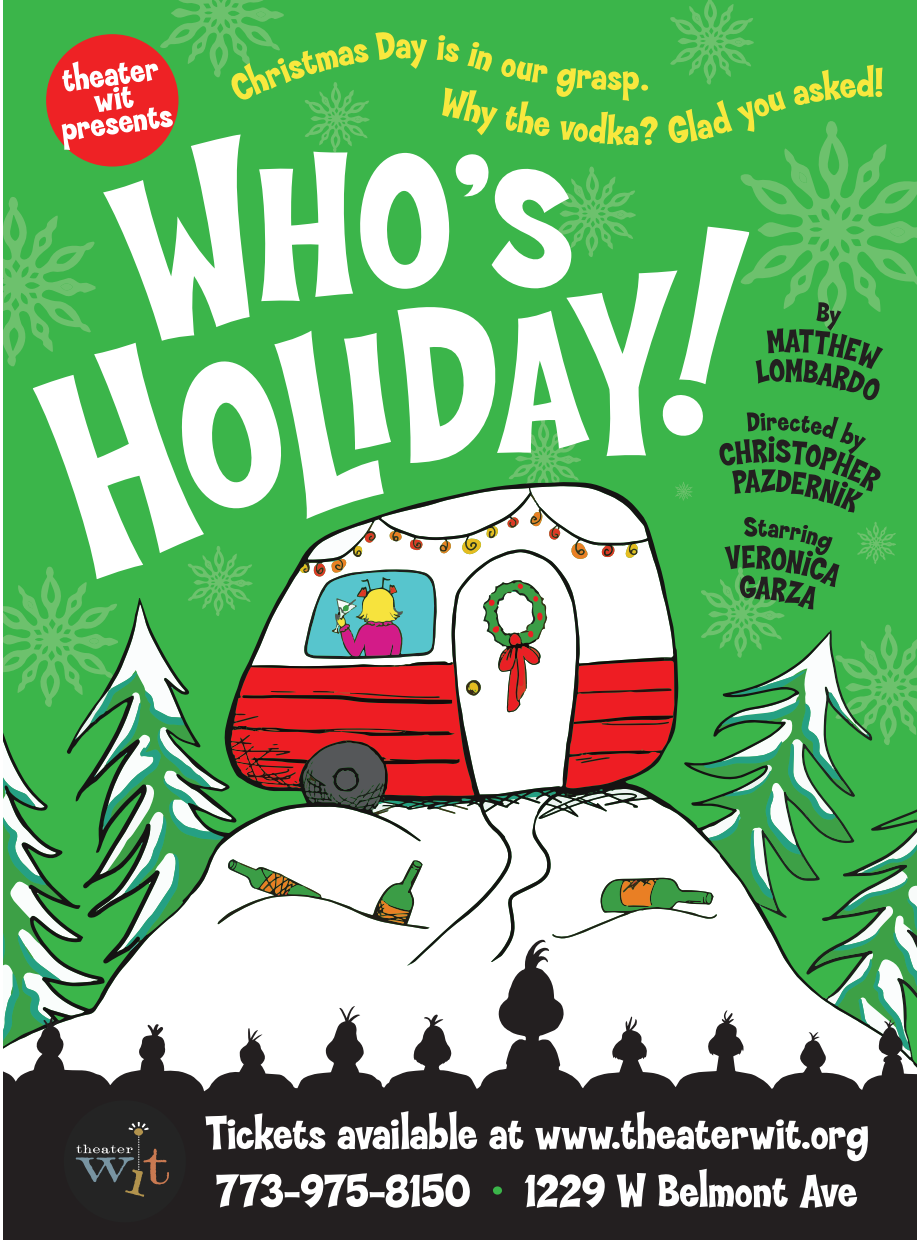
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## REVIEW

## Practical holiday magic

Manual Cinema's *Christmas Carol* updates Dickens for our times.

By IRENE HSIAO

Uncle Joe was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatsoever about that. The cardboard boxes littered the floor, filled with Joe's tools, Joe's college textbooks, Joe's albums and manuals, Joe's CDs, Joe's tax returns, Joe's unfinished projects, and all manner of Joe's mess and memorabilia, stacked in a circle radiating outwards from a table upon which was posed a glass of half-drunk wine. There is no doubt that Joe was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story that Aunt Trudy (LaKecia Harris) is going to relate. For beyond her wineglass glints a piece of cardboard that has transcended its purpose as a receptacle for detritus and collectibles to become, thanks to the judicious application of Sharpies and string lights, a space for the most fantastic magic—but more on that part later.

It's Christmas 2020, and Aunt Trudy is alone. She is alone because, as aforementioned, Uncle Joe is dead, and, as the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic required, most everyone is in quarantine. And yet, because of the marvel of modern technology, her house is full, not only with the stuff and memory of the departed but also with the specters of his numerous blood and legal relations—of which Trudy is, in fact, not one, as Joe and Trudy

never crossed over from cohabitation to conubiality (“a mutual decision,” Trudy insists). That's right—it's a good old-fashioned Zoom Christmas, and for Joe's aggressively festive fam, that means it's time to gather (virtually) for Uncle Joe's annual puppet presentation of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, as reanimated by his grieving widow (in spirit only)!

Aunt Trudy is not amused. Actually, Aunt Trudy seems a little stuck in the anger stage of grief, and, in the absence of her once-loved Joe, some cardboard figures and the muted countenances of his family are indeed a sad compensation for the real thing.

Scowling in front of a camera that beams her shoebox puppet show to an audience of distant and—for all practical purposes—imaginary kin, she whips open the cardboard curtain and begins a monotone rendition. The flatness of her voice is matched by the two-dimensionality of the paper doll puppets that first appear: dour Ebenezer Scrooge, hunched at his desk and his chipper nephew Fred inviting him to dinner, all beneath Trudy's withering glare. This glare is magnified a dozen or more times by a screen above the stage that makes a puppet the size of a person—and thus manifests this disgust at a scale that extends to all of us who have gathered here in Glencoe

**RR** MANUAL CINEMA'S CHRISTMAS CAROL  
Through 12/24: Wed-Fri 7:30 PM, Sat 3 and 7:30 PM, Sun 2 and 6 PM; also Tue 12/20 7:30 PM and Wed 12/21 and Fri 12/23 3 PM, Sat 12/24 3 PM only; open captions Thu 12/15; Writers Theatre, 325 Tudor Ct., Glencoe, 847-242-6000, [writerstheatre.org](http://writerstheatre.org), \$35-\$90

for a Christmas puppet show. “Bah humbug!” sneers Ebenezer/Trudy with feeling. But before we have time to tire of Trudy's testy telling, the miracle of modern technology proves its man-made provenance: faces freeze! The connection is unstable! The lights go dark! And then, as Trudy is joined by three silent hooded figures (Lizi Breit, Julia Miller, and Jeffrey Paschal), the story can begin.

In *Manual Cinema's Christmas Carol*, adapted from the Dickens with additional writing by Nate Marshall, storyboards and puppet designs by Drew Dir with additional puppets by Chicago Puppet Studio, and original score and sound design by Ben Kauffman and Kyle Vegter, their signature style of keeping the mechanisms of their image-making visible works double, not only by keeping viewers tuned into the practical magic of making cut paper tell tales, but also by shaping Aunt Trudy's role as puppeteer, commentator, and player. The puppet show can be viewed on two scales and both are life-size: Trudy and a paper box on a stage, and Trudy and the story on a screen. The effect is as disorienting as the shifts in place and scale we've become accustomed to on Zoom, which brings us all to act in an imaginary place, and here renders live Trudy tiny as Joe's puppets next to the pro-

Manual Cinema's *Christmas Carol* LIZ LAUREN

jected story, sealing her place as a personage within it. (The company first presented the show online in 2020.)

As Scrooge undergoes the customary visitations, much of Dickens's story unfolds in dreamlike images that succeed each other in cinematic blinks of the eye that take us immediately from time to time and place to place, blending tears and rain, skeletons with bare tree branches, in every way wondrous. Trudy's backstory with Joe unfolds in parallel, as she remembers the party where they met, their early love, and then how their ways diverge as Trudy is seduced by capitalistic values and workaholicism, while Joe remains generous and friendly but financially irresponsible and dependent on the woman he did not marry. As Ebenezer wrestles with his shriveled soul with the aid of the spirits who haunt him this one night, so does Trudy surrender to the silent ministrations of the ghostly puppeteers. When the third spirit arrives—gargantuan, cloaked, and looming horribly—it comes for the two of them.

The Christmas classic retains its charm in *Manual Cinema's Christmas Carol*, which brings the old story to our recent present in this new telling, while also acknowledging feelings—anger, frustration, and disappointment—that are particular and familiar to loss, holidays, and our technological moment.

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The Golden Girls: The Lost Episodes—The Obligatory Holiday Special © RICK AGUILAR STUDIOS

## OPENING

**RR** Doff we now our gay apparel  
The *Buttcracker* takes it off to reveal a heart of gold.

There are two Christmas pantomimes based upon 19th-century fables currently playing on Chicago stages, and unless Mary Zimmerman has been up to some dramatic retooling, it's safe to assume this is the only one that features crotch sparks. Producer Jaq Seibert's cheeky, irreverent holiday-themed burlesque revue returns for its sixth edition and first back from a two-year pandemic hiatus, this round in a nightclub-styled space upstairs at the Greenhouse Theater Center.

If a glitzy, rouged, politely horny retelling of Tchaikovsky's ballet seems like an odd bird of a holiday theater offering, knowing its debut home—the defunct Uptown Underground space, operating today as The Baton Show Lounge—may help contextualize it as the high-energy, campy cabaret offering that it is. This year's iteration, featuring set design by Gabrielle Strong and lighting by Samuel Stephen, does a remarkable job of transferring that essential lounge bar vibe to what is otherwise a traditional theater black box venue.

Director Miguel Long's production, with choreography by Dylan Kerr, works hard to earn a spot on the naughty list, but there's no denying it runs off a heart of gold, serving up pasties and feather fans and risquéness without raunch. Long's *Buttcracker* is an inviting and joyfully queer experience that celebrates beards and heels and tits and bellies and butts in any and all combinations, then decks them in holly. Elena Avila (Clara), Olivia Lindsay (*Buttcracker*), and Claire Francescon (Drosselmeyer) make for charismatic guides, and the show's lineup promises a rotating billing of magicians and circus acts and dancers. —**DAN JAKES** **THE BUTT-CRACKER: A NUTCRACKER BURLESQUE** Through 12/31: Thu-Sat 8 PM, Sun 3 PM; also Sat 12/31 9 PM, no performances Sat-Sun 12/24-12/25; Greenhouse Theater Center, 2257 N. Lincoln, 773-404-7336, [thebuttcraackerburlesque.com](http://thebuttcraackerburlesque.com) or [greenhousetheater.org](http://greenhousetheater.org), \$30-\$50 general admission (industry and

SRO \$20, VIP \$75-\$100, which includes stageside table, private VIP bar, meet and greet with artists, and show merchandise); NYE \$60-\$100 general admission, \$150-\$200 VIP. 18+ (21+ to drink)

**RR** A very Austen holiday  
*Georgiana & Kitty: Christmas at Pemberley* is a rom-com delight.

Playwrights Lauren Gunderson and Margot Melcon wrap up their *Pride and Prejudice* fan fiction trilogy with *Georgiana and Kitty*, once more bringing to the center of the action characters peripheral in Jane Austen's book. In this case, we're dealing with the sister of Mr. Darcy and the youngest of the Bennet sisters. Naturally, the story is a romance, but it's also something of a feminist tract as it focuses on *Georgiana's* musical gifts and her determination that they not be dismissed just because she's a woman. And naturally, Darcy (fiercely embodied by Yousof Sultani) can be counted on to interfere with her happiness, whether personal or professional.

As with every rom-com, the plot is not the point, and the only longueurs occur when our heroines insist on attention to their project rather than their relationships. This is particularly the case with *Georgiana* (the adorable Janyce Caraballo) and her painfully shy beau Henry Gray (Erik Hellman, so delightfully awkward that it's easy to imagine the audience feeling as smitten as *Georgiana*). When Henry disappears for most of act two and the Women's Music Society takes his place, even devout feminists might miss him. And the wooing of *Kitty* (Samantha Newcomb, charming and suitably bossy) by Thomas O'Brien (Nate Santana, just as charming and cheerfully feckless) goes from flirtation to marriage during intermission, which seems like a false economy.

But these quibbles are beside the point, as the play is a thoroughly finished product co-commissioned by Northlight and theater companies in Minneapolis and California and enjoying a rolling world premiere at each of them. Marti Lyons's production, particularly the music by Christopher Kriz which holds such a central role in the love story, is impeccable. You don't need to have seen the other plays to enjoy this one, though

if you have you'll enjoy the notion that the others are taking place simultaneously, just offstage. That makes *Christmas at Pemberley* a sort of dramaturgical layer cake—a delicious one. —**KELLY KLEIMAN** **GEORGIANA & KITTY: CHRISTMAS AT PEMBERLEY** Through 12/24: 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 12/20 7:30 PM and Fri 12/23 2:30 PM, Sat 12/24 2:30 PM only; open captions and ASL interpretation Fri 12/16, open captions and audio description Sat 12/17 2:30 PM; North Shore Center for the Performing Arts, 9501 Skokie Blvd., Skokie, 847-673-6300, [northlight.org](http://northlight.org), \$30-\$89 (\$15 students pending availability)

**RR** A very *Golden Girls* Christmas  
Hell in a Handbag's "obligatory" holiday edition is smart and sweet.

Now in its 21st year, Hell in a Handbag Productions has a ridiculously hilarious new show playing at the Center on Halsted in their *The Golden Girls: The Lost Episodes* series subtitled *The Obligatory Holiday Special*. With the holidays looming, December is a time to see happy, funny shows, and *Golden Girls* does not disappoint. Playwright and perennial Dorothy, David Cerda, has crafted a comedy with just the right balance of melodrama and humor, paying homage to one of the best-written TV shows of all time.

Dorothy and the gals learn that the Shady Pines Retirement Community is closing, and they need to save Sophia's friends from being homeless on Christmas. Ryan Oates is uproarious as the acerbic-tongued Sophia, trying to help her friend Nancy Drew avoid losing her home (a fantastic Robert-Eric West, stepping in to understudy for Danne W. Taylor). Grant Drager nails the naughty Blanche (pun intended), and Ed Jones is delightful as the dim-witted Rose, who may not make it to the St. Olaf Herring Bowl Parade. Cerda captures the essence of the original show, including working with seasoned actors who elevate this work to more than just campy sketches under Spenser Davis's direction. But don't be fooled—he keeps it smartly self-aware. It's essentially a light piece of nostalgia from a less-informed time, and Cerda and the company enjoy playing with that motif. Cerda even sprinkles in a deftly written talent show, allowing his actors to showcase their singing abilities with comical Christmas and Hanukkah songs. —**JOSH FLANDERS** **THE GOLDEN GIRLS: THE LOST EPISODES—THE OBLIGATORY HOLIDAY SPECIAL** Through 12/30: Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM; also Sun 12/18 7 PM and Wed 12/21 7 PM; no performances Sat 12/10 and 12/24 or Sun 12/25; Hoover-Leppin Theatre at Center on Halsted, 3656 N. Halsted, [handbagproductions.org](http://handbagproductions.org), \$29 advanced general admission, \$34 at the door, \$48 VIP/reserved seating with drink ticket

**RR** Have yourself a dirty little  
Christmas

*Jack Off the Beanstalk* puts an R-rated spin on the holiday "panto."

I try not to lose myself in hyperbole, but I'm guessing Tom Whalley's *Jack Off the Beanstalk* (a bawdy take on the classic British "panto") is the only play this holiday season where the cow steals the show.

Fist the Cow (Tyler Callahan), the bovine possession of the titular Jack Clapp (Joe Lewis)—whom Jack naively sells off for a proverbial "fuckton of gold pieces"—makes their rousing entrance several minutes into the show.

Their (Fist's pronouns suggested they are nonbinary) dialogue consists of moos but their facial expressions—ranging from the confused to the imperious—and provocative dancing make them the real Greek chorus.

PrideArts, after kicking off this season with the lovely musical drama *Girlfriend* (also featuring Lewis), does a real 180-degree turn with the ribald story of Jack's attempts to save his farm and village from the Vagiant and its villainous henchman, Fleshlight (Neill Kelly), wooing Princess Jill (Anna Seibert) along the way.

The plot is threadbare, but the spirited cast, under the direction of Bryan McCaffrey, is having fun. *Jack Off the Beanstalk* is sturdy enough to string together 100 minutes of vulgar jokes, bad puns, musical numbers, and rude props—the creators get more use out of a double-headed sex toy than anyone in the audience would have ever thought possible. The audience participation contest is in refreshingly bad taste too.

With no room for sentimentality and only a few Christmas carols shoehorned in, *Scrooges* will love the lack of holiday treacle. Still, the show includes a sing-along to the best version of "Jingle Bells" ever, with new R-rated lyrics suggested for the relatives you hate, which alone is worth the price of admission. —**MATT SIMONETTE** **JACK OFF THE BEANSTALK** Through 12/18: Wed-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM, PrideArts Center, 4139 N. Broadway, 773-857-0222, [pridearts.org](http://pridearts.org), \$35 (\$30 students/seniors), recommended 18+

**RR** The food of love  
Midsommer Flight's *Twelfth Night* returns in a joyously queer staging.

Shakespeare was queering the narrative before that term even existed. So it makes sense that *Midsommer Flight's* seventh annual production of *Twelfth Night* at the Lincoln Park Conservatory goes all-in on genderqueer playfulness this year—especially with queerness under attack from so many quarters.

Bex Ehrmann's staging amid the purple-and-lavender *Nutcracker*-themed decorations in the conservatory's Show House Room features a cast with several trans and nonbinary performers. It's also a streamlined and smart take on the story of Viola, a survivor of a shipwreck that she believes took the life of her twin, Sebastian. Upon arriving on the coast of Illyria, she disguises herself as Cesario, a boy servant in the home of Iovelorn Duke Orsino, who seeks the hand of Olivia, who is also mourning the death of a brother and wants none of the duke's expressions of ardor.

But she does find herself drawn to Cesario, and in Ehrmann's telling, Viola (Maddy Shilts) is also more intrigued by her anagrammatic double, Olivia (Ebby Offord), than by the somewhat stuffy and presumptuous Orsino (John Drea). "Tell me what you think of me," Offord's Olivia asks Shilts's Viola, to which the latter replies, "That you do think you are not what you are." It applies just as well to Viola herself.

Amid the growing awareness of their attraction for each other, the show also features the delightful comic plotting of Reginald Hemphill's aptly named Sir Toby Belch and Travis Shanahan's hapless Sir Andrew Aguecheek against Rusty Allen's stuffed shirt Malvolio, manservant to Olivia, and the comic and musical stylings of North Rory Homewood's observant jester, Feste. A preshow songfest, featuring quirky numbers like Sandi Thom's "I Wish I Was a Punk Rocker (With Flowers in My Hair)" lets the entire ensemble show off their musical skills. —**KERRY REID** **TWELFTH NIGHT** Through 12/18: Thu-Sun 7:30 PM, Lincoln Park Conservatory, 2391 Stockton Dr., [midsommerflight.com](http://midsommerflight.com), pay what you can **RR**





Throughline Films shoots *Crafted for Christmas* at OatFlow Cafe in Long Grove, Illinois.

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## PRODUCTION

# A Chicagoland Christmas

Nearly 200 new holiday movies will premiere on TV, in theaters, and on streaming this year, and the Chicago film industry is looking to capitalize on the festive boom.

By **MARAH EAKIN**

**W**hy do so many Christmas movies take place in Chicago? *Home Alone's* Wet Bandits tore apart the northern suburbs in 1990 while *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* shot some of its establishing shots in the Loop in '89. Vince Vaughn brought *Fred Claus* to town 15 years back, while *Office Christmas Party* found Jason Bateman, Jennifer Aniston, and Olivia Munn terrorizing a downtown high-rise back in 2016.

It's anyone's guess as to why so many movies think "Chicago" in the same breath as "Santa," but it's a trend that shows no sign of slowing down, particularly as streamers, niche cable networks, and (shudder) Candace

Cameron Bure have doubled down on making Christmas content. This year alone, there are 170 new holiday movies across all networks and streaming platforms, from big budget productions like Ryan Reynolds and Will Ferrell's *Spirited* to the much smaller *Holly & the Hot Chocolate*, which marks QVC's first foray into the Santosphere. More annual holiday movies seems to have meant more work for Chicago's film industry, too, with at least four distinct holiday movies being filmed within the city's confines last year.

Buffalo Grove resident Adam Rockoff can take some credit for Chicago's Christmas film boom, having written over a dozen different Christmas movies, including *A Merry Christ-*

*mas Wish* and *A Royal Christmas Engagement*. Rockoff says he got his start in the biz by writing thrillers and horror movies. When some of the former got picked up by channels like Lifetime, he began working with what he says are "five or six large companies in LA," any of whom might ask him to pen some heartwarming holiday fare. Rockoff acknowledges the limitations of the oft cheesy genre, but says he relishes the challenge of having to write to a particular set of parameters. Plus, he jokes, "There are a lot of worse ways to make a living."

One of Rockoff's latest creations is *Crafted for Christmas*, a potential future classic being shot this winter out in Buffalo Grove. The sec-

ond Christmas movie bankrolled by Chicago's Throughline Films, *Crafted for Christmas* tells the story of a hardened big city reporter who's forced to take a break from her political beat in favor of a puff piece about a small-town toy company run by some ruggedly handsome craftsmen. Anyone with half a brain knows what happens from there, and that's sort of the point.

Throughline co-owner John W. Boshier says that about two-thirds of all holiday movies airing on TV these days are made on spec, meaning that production companies foot the bill to make them, in the hopes that a network or streamer then buys the rights to air the movie. Because companies like Throughline are looking to actually sell their movies, be it to Hallmark, Lifetime, or Great American Family (GAC), Boshier says, "We don't want to take any big swings. If we do something that Lifetime's OK with but Hallmark and GAC wouldn't be, then we're limiting ourselves. You don't want to lean too heavily in any one direction."

*Crafted for Christmas* perfectly threads the network needle, avoiding too much talk of Santa or religion, too-recent relationship drama, or anything that might suggest a Chicagoland Christmas isn't all fluffy white snow and peacoat-appropriate weather.

"The Christmas that we're trying to sell is one that's nostalgic and where everything's pleasant," Boshier says. "You don't want to see your actors shivering, and you don't want to see the ugly side of winter, like gray street sludge on the curb."

That's probably why Boshier and company have chosen to shoot *Crafted for Christmas* out in the burbs, where quaint main streets abound and local business owners are all too happy to open up for some festive cheer. "It's so much easier to get someone's cooperation if you tell them we're making a Hallmark-esque Christmas film than to go into someone's business and say, 'Can we stage a quadruple homicide here?'" Boshier jokes. "There's not a lot of weight in the material, and the productions can have kind of a light atmosphere."

Throughline is shooting *Crafted for Christmas* at a number of local businesses, like WTTW's news studio in North Park, a toy factory in Vernon Hills, and at the Cherry Tree Inn B&B in Woodstock, which also acted as Bill



## FILM



"The Christmas that we're trying to sell is one that's nostalgic and where everything's pleasant."

© KIRK WILLIAMSON FOR CHICAGO READER



Murray's temporary residence in *Groundhog Day* (1993). At the B&B, Boshier says, *Crafted's* art department is working in tandem with the business owners to seamlessly blend their decoration plan for this holiday season with what the movie thinks would look good on camera. "That way," Boshier says, "it gives them some free labor, gives us some cost savings, and in the end, everybody gets a beautiful product that they're happy with."

Production designer Ania Bista knows how that works, having made Chicago Christmas magic happen onscreen in movies like *Hot Mess Holiday*, a Comedy Central movie about both Diwali and Christmas that came out last year. Like most festive fare, *Hot Mess Holiday* didn't actually shoot in the winter, giving Bista some distinct curation challenges. These days, it's certainly easier to order a bunch of fake Christmas trees online than it was even a decade ago, but that doesn't mean Bista is a fan

of the practice. "I would prefer to see things in person so I can really see the scale, the quality, and the color," Bista explains. "Buying and renting locally is always preferred."

For *Hot Mess Holiday*, Bista says, that meant trekking north to Loves Park, home of the Ambrose Christmas store. Open just six months a year, the holiday emporium keeps a hefty stock of all things Christmas and was willing to open its doors off-season for Bista and her reasonably generous checkbook.

Bista says, "I was able to send either myself or a team member out there to buy everything in person. It was great to be able to support them, too, because I was able to get everything I needed in a matter of weeks rather than hoping some Amazon order was going to come in time."

When Bista was done with her holiday glitz and glitter, she even thought to pass some of it along to local prop shops, like Zap Props

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in McKinley Park. Shop owner Madeline Rawski-Edquist says she's now the proud owner—and renter—of a cute pink Christmas tree courtesy of Bista and *Hot Mess Holiday*. She's added it to her stock of holiday gear, which includes antique toys featured in *Home Alone 2* (1992) and a pair of five-foot-tall nut-crackers viewers might recognize from *Office Christmas Party*.

"It's always interesting to see what you get a

request for," Rawski-Edquist says, musing that while the three full-sized Santa sleighs she has in stock are always rented out around the holidays, she "could always use more thrones" for Jolly Old Saint Nick. Those, she says, she knows she could rent. Fake snow mounds, too. "I don't have any of those," Rawski-Edquist says, "but I wish I did." 📺

🐦 @marahe



NOW PLAYING

RR *Bardo: False Chronicle of a Handful of Truths*

In Alejandro G. Iñárritu's hallucinatory trip to the land between life and death, Amazon is buying Baja California, and you can have a philosophical discussion with the conquistador Hernán Cortés atop a hillock of corpses. You meet your long-gone father in the bathroom of a large hall filled to capacity with your peers who want to give you an important prize and shrink down to the size of a boy while retaining middle-aged features. Your dead infant son keeps reappearing, often from between your wife's legs, still very much alive.

These and dozens of other dream images are filmed in a seamless wide-screen format that fish-eyes toward its outer edges. They are what Silverio Gama, a stand-in for the director, sees in his last days after suffering a massive stroke on a subway train in LA.

Whether you will be entranced, confused, or put off by Iñárritu's latest deep dive into his own subconscious depends on whether you prefer your movies logical or lyrical, as well as how high your tolerance for unlikable and unrelatable protagonists is. Gama is a self-absorbed narcissist, and his visions are mostly self-serving, but I can't deny their sweep and all-pervasive ambition. As long as you don't think too long about some of the implications of what flashes past your eyeballs, this is a film to be dazzled by and lost in. —DMITRY SAMAROV R, 159 min. Netflix

RR *EO*

Jerzy Skolimowski's *EO* is a haunting, tear-jerking epic about the futility and cruelty of modern life. The octogenarian director demonstrates how easily mundane existence can slip into either anguish or cheerfulness as we follow the title character through a tumultuous odyssey across the Polish countryside. And, yes, *EO* is a donkey. But do not mistake *EO* for a fairytale, because Skolimowski abandons the fantastical depictions of animals in favor of a harsher reality that is, at the bottom line, undeniably authentic. Instead, *EO* reimagines the brutal absoluteness of Robert Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar*.

Skolimowski's first film in seven years delivers a visionary commentary on the anxieties of permanence, memory, and hopelessness in modern life. But instead of a typically human, easily accessible narrative, Skolimowski chooses an unassuming, gentle, and watchful donkey to experience the multifaceted spectrum of life, adorning *EO* with more personality than any Disney special. *EO* stumbles into a tense soccer game, escapes from hunters, and even attends a party. In short, *EO* lives a dynamic, exciting life before he faces an unsettlingly familiar fate. But most of all, *EO* is innocent.

*EO* is a tender film, filled with close-ups of our melancholic donkey, boiling over with emotion that might solely come from the audience. There is a depth

to *EO*'s eyes, but more than anything, there is room for projection. *EO* is a donkey caught in a tumultuous sequence of violence, celebration, and regularity; most importantly, he is an animal Skolimowski compels us to see. And often, Skolimowski pans away as the story is consumed by these peripheral human vignettes. Suddenly, we wonder, where is our donkey? *EO*'s innocence is irreducible and his story is honest. Skolimowski illustrates the inexplicable life of a donkey, a life frequently ignored, but in his courageous endeavor, his inventive and engrossing film strikes an emotional core and pulls viewers into *EO*'s observant eyes. —MAXWELL RABB 86 min. Gene Siskel Film Center

RR *The Fabelmans*

*The Fabelmans* is a story of how the things we love the most can bring us the most pain but also drive us to find ourselves. It's a semi-autobiographical love story to cinema in the truest sense, opening with the precise and logical engineer Burt (Paul Dano) and creative-driven former pianist Mitzi (Michelle Williams) taking a young Sammy (Gabriel LaBelle) to his first film *The Greatest Show on Earth*. Terrified but engrossed by the images he sees, Sammy begins his journey as a burgeoning filmmaker, enlisting his family and friends into his cinematic projects. Simultaneously, the Fabelman family undergoes a series of moves necessitated by Burt's increasing success in his engineering career and at the expense of Mitzi's emotional and social stability.

Steven Spielberg's 33rd feature film is a marvel coming-of-age story and one of his most personal. Much of its charm comes from its ability to create robust internal lives for its secondary characters, eschewing the standard trope of the world through the eyes of a self-centered main character. There are typical growing pains and tensions for Sammy as he discovers that the world is more complicated and nuanced than he could imagine. The hopes, fears, and missed opportunities of his parents are also given ample time onscreen to allow for a fully composed vision of the rocky progression of a family that truly loves one another, but aren't always able to move in the same direction.

*The Fabelmans* is a mesmerizing film, shot with typically expert skill and deftly utilizing Sammy's films within films to convey joy, fear, and devastating pathos, with the script by Tony Kushner providing truly devastating moments of heartfelt emotion. It's a fully orchestrated film that manages to maintain its relatability, eagerly shifting between embellishment and moments of truth without losing its potency. —ADAM MULLINS-KHATIB PG-13, 151 min. Wide release in theaters and VOD

RR *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

D.H. Lawrence's 1928 novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* doesn't seem an especially propitious basis for a new Netflix movie. Sex scenes aren't a scandal anymore, and neither is a relationship across class lines; the shock of the original has little power now. Add in Netflix's



*Violent Night* R ALLEN FRASER / UNIVERSAL STUDIOS

egregiously wrongheaded effort to turn Jane Austen's *Persuasion* into a vehicle for cutesy snark from earlier this year, and many viewers may approach Laure de Clermont-Tonnerre's adaptation with caution.

That caution is, thankfully, not necessary. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* may not have the power to shock that it once did, but in Clermont-Tonnerre's hands it retains both romantic and social resonance. In the era of Donald Trump and Elon Musk, Sir Clifford Chatterley (Matthew Duckett) certainly seems familiar. Wounded in the war, his impotence is not, the film makes clear, due to his disability, but to his embrace of his class and his entitlement. He orders men to misery in his mines. He orders his wife Connie (Emma Corrin) to sleep with someone else to provide him with an heir. He thinks he has the right to demand production and reproduction. Duckett as Chatterley practically curdles in on himself, turning away from his marriage in favor of the safer emotional satisfactions of power.

Corrin as Connie Chatterley is the perfect actor to show love dying and love opening anew. Their face is so radiant in happiness that every moment of sadness and misery feels almost unendurable. Clermont-Tonnerre wisely keeps the focus of the film squarely on Connie as she traipses through ravishing wild landscapes in ravishing fashionable frocks, searching for her quietly smoldering gamekeeper Oliver Mellors (Jack O'Connell). The latter manages to convey with only the occasional look of wonder that he can't believe the miracle he's been given. Their sex scenes are plentiful and joyously, earthily sensuous. The old slang words "John Thomas" are never uttered, but I think Lawrence would still be pleased. —NOAH BERLATSKY R, 126 min. Netflix

RR *Sr.*

*Sr.* is capable of softening even the hardest of hearts. Not everyone is a film buff, but most moviegoers know who Robert Downey Jr. is, whether as the affable and attractive Tony Stark or the lively and legendary Charlie Chaplin. His first roles, however, were in a handful of independent films directed by Robert Downey Sr., an absurdist, anti-establishment artist who set the standard for countercultural comedy in the 60s and 70s. He is also, of course, Jr.'s father. This is where it becomes easy to deploy cynicism. But to dismiss *Sr.* as

a particular type of nepotism baby's cash grab would be to forsake the film's namesake, a man so steadfast in his artistic vision that he decides to "embark on his own concurrent and final film project" within *Sr.* And while those aforementioned film buffs could wax poetic about his legacy, it's much more enjoyable to see *Sr.*'s career through the same lens that shot celebrated works like *Greaser's Palace* (1972). Compiled with documentarian Chris Smith's footage of *Sr.*'s final years battling Parkinson's disease, the film also showcases how his love of creating is reflected in his familial relationships, making for a perfectly surreal, silly, and sentimental send-off. —BECCA JAMES R, 89 min. Netflix

RR *Violent Night*

Santa is on the prowl in *Violent Night*, and he's packing heat, tattoos, and a surprising amount of heart. David Harbour is the grizzled-up Saint Nick, and he's just a guy, still prone to tender sympathy with young believers, as well as vomiting from his sleigh during his holiday deliveries. But when he stumbles onto a band of mercenaries so dastardly you actually sympathize wholly with the wealthy family who owns the compound they're attacking (and headed by a scene-stealing Beverly D'Angelo), he reluctantly decides to bring the Christmas cheer... by any hilariously violent means necessary.

*Violent Night* kicks cynicism to the curb as Santa rediscovers Christmas magic between bloodbaths, bonds with the young and wide-eyed Trudy (Leah Brady, the movie's embodiment of innocence and belief), and battles John Leguizamo in one of his most twisted roles yet—a villain so committed he dubs himself Scrooge and eventually becomes determined to end Christmas itself. Their standoff is one of the most imaginatively grisly in a movie full of satisfying ends, no small task for audiences who have long since become acclimated to niche content. And even with the usual tropes that must be indulged, the cartoonish brutality is still worthy of the multiple *Home Alone* callbacks.

Despite refusing to tip a few scales in the favor of those attempting to rob the rich to feed themselves, *Violent Night* still manages to conjure its own holiday miracle—the desire for a sequel in a market glutted with them. —ANDREA THOMPSON R, 112 min. Wide release in theaters R



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# The reinvention of indie music, chapter one



An excerpt from the book *You're With Stupid*, by Kranky label cofounder Bruce Adams

By PHILIP MONTORO

**A**s far as the national press cared, Chicago's 1990s indie-rock scene revolved around Smashing Pumpkins, Liz Phair, and Urge Overkill. I won't say anything one way or the other about the merit of those artists, but their success had the felicitous side effect of persuading major labels to slosh irresponsible amounts of money around the city—and local labels, producers, and musicians used that money to do much more interesting things.

One of the local labels that arose in this environment was Kranky, founded in 1993 by Bruce Adams and Joel Leoschke. Like Drag City and Thrill Jockey, two of its best-known peers from that era, Kranky (styled “kranky” by the label) was uncompromising in its aesthetic choices—in fact, one of its early slogans was “What we want, when you need it.” Unlike those operations, though, Kranky stayed small. When the label matured in the late 90s, it was averaging just eight or nine releases per year—but its influence has long been hugely out of proportion with its size.

In the pre-Internet era, when albums had to be physically shipped, Chicago remained an important hub of music-industry infrastructure even as its other industries withered. Adams worked for a suburban distributor called Kaleidoscope in the late 80s (it also employed Drag City founders Dan Koretzky and Dan Osborn), and a few years later he befriended Leoschke while they were colleagues at Cargo, a major distributor of indie labels. Musicians often worked at distributors, labels, venues, recording studios, publicity firms, or

Bruce Adams cofounded the Kranky label in 1993 and sold his stake to Joel Leoschke, the other founder, in 2005.  ANNIE F. ADAMS



college radio stations, and even if they didn't, they knew people who did. This helped trigger an explosion of grassroots collaborations, with noise-rock players rubbing elbows with folks operating in avant-garde jazz, electronic dance, psychedelia, ambient music, and more.

Adams and Leoschke contributed to this wildly fertile hybridization by opening a door from indie rock into an almost otherworldly space—one that rewards “concentration, stillness, and the abandonment of preexisting structures and conventions,” as Jordan Reyes put it in the *Reader* in 2018. “Kranky debuted with *Prazision*, a beautifully glacial album by Virginia drone-rock trio Labradford,” he wrote, “and since then it’s maintained a focus on meticulous, entrancing sounds, sometimes understated and ghostly . . . and sometimes towering and awe inspiring.”

Kranky began working with its best-known artists in the late 90s: it released three albums by Minnesota trio Low before their move to Sub Pop, and it issued the CD version of the debut full-length by Montreal collective Godspeed You! Black Emperor, *F# A#*, followed by *Lift Your Skinny Fists Like Antennas to Heaven*. But by then the label’s sonic territory—lush and caustic, serene and uneasy—had already been staked out by the likes of Labradford, Jessamine, Bowery Electric, and Stars of the Lid.

“At a certain point, an aesthetic started to congeal,” Adams told *Reader* critic Peter Margasak in a 1998 label profile. “I always think of it as the intersection where our tastes overlap with the economic possibilities of who we can work with.”

The label developed a distinctive personality too: austere, remote, and quietly, somewhat cryptically playful, with a sprinkling of what Margasak called “almost recreational negativity.” The title of Adams’s recent book about Kranky and its milieu, set mostly in the 90s and early 2000s, comes from another label slogan: *You’re With Stupid: Kranky, Chicago, and the Reinvention of Indie Music*.

After Adams sold his share of Kranky to Leoschke in 2005, he ran a low-key imprint called Flingco Sound System for more than a decade. He now lives in Urbana. Leoschke is in Portland, Oregon, as is the Kranky warehouse. The label’s other staffer, Brian Foote, does management and promo work in Los Angeles. Kranky’s latter-day artists include Tim Hecker and Grouper.

This excerpt from *You’re With Stupid* (published by the University of Texas Press) is drawn from two different spots in the book.

It sets the stage for the launch of Kranky and describes the community of musicians that Adams and Leoschke helped shape with their stubbornly idiosyncratic ears and prescient vision. —PHILIP MONTORO

### From *You’re With Stupid: Kranky, Chicago, and the Reinvention of Indie Music* by Bruce Adams

**T**he story of kranky is a Chicago story. In the early eighties, as a global music underground was developing, a network of wholesale music distributors, independent record labels, clubs, recording studios, college radio stations, and DIY publications established themselves in Chicago. The city had been a center of the recorded music business since 1913, when the Brunswick Company started making phonograph machines and pressing vinyl. Chicago had been home to jazz pioneers Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, and Louis Armstrong for a brief, impactful time. In the 1950s Chess Records was a force in the blues and R&B scenes. Alligator Records was an independent blues label started in 1971. But the founding of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (or AACM) in 1965 is what created the precedent and working model for independent organization and avant-garde music in the city that eventually was reflected in house music and underground rock. AACM’s self-reliance and the border-crossing devotion of related musicians who incorporated ancient African music into the creation of future-facing music put Chicago on the map of innovative and independent music centers.

It was possible to get cheap apartments to live in or practice space for your band or even a storefront to open a distributor or store. The hollowing of the city’s industrial base had left empty warehouses and business spaces that were ideal for multiple activities, especially for anyone willing to live near a highway, train line, or in a low-income or overlooked neighborhood. One point of origin for house music was an underground club called “The Warehouse.”

The people behind the bars or record store counters, or piling the boxes up in warehouses, were often musicians, or artists, or both. Well-stocked record stores and distributors brought records into the city, giving people opportunities to listen to and process music. The radio provided access to multiple college stations playing a dizzying variety of music. Rent was cheap enough that people didn’t

need full-time jobs and could pursue their enthusiasms. David Sims of The Jesus Lizard moved to Chicago in 1989 and recalled in the free weekly the *Chicago Reader* in 2017 that the band’s landlord “raised the rent on the apartment five dollars a month every year. When we moved in it was \$625 a month, and when I left 11 years later it was \$675 a month.” My experience was similar.

If you were a music lover but not a musician, you could work for a music-related business or start your own. Self-published fanzines popped up, and people had workspaces where they could screen print posters and T-shirts for bands. The major labels and national media were located on the coasts, lessening the temptation for bands to angle for the attention of the star-maker machinery. The circuitous impact of all the above was meaningful in shaping how and why Chicago would become the fertile center of the American indie rock scene, and why it produced so much music that broke the stylistic molds of that scene.

I moved to Chicago from Ann Arbor, Michigan, in the summer of 1987. I shared a house with a roommate from Michigan in a northside neighborhood called Bowmanville and started work in a suburb called Des Plaines, right by O’Hare. It was at a distributor called Kaleidoscope, run by the unforgettable Nick Hadjis, whom everybody called Nick the Greek. His brother Dmitri had a store in Athens and promoted shows for American bands like LA’s industrial/tribal/psychedelic outfit Savage Republic. Kaleidoscope was a common starting point for enterprising young music folks seeking to enter the grassroots music business within Chicago. People came in from downstate Illinois or Louisville, Kentucky, or Austin, Texas, and worked there before they went off into the city to work at the growing Wax Trax! and Touch & Go operations. Bands were starting their own labels to record and release their music, following the pattern established by the SST and Dischord labels. In those pre-Internet times, scenes grew up around successful bands who distributed their singles via touring the country, getting fanzine coverage, and garnering college radio airplay. The seven-inch single, LP, and tape cassette were the preferred formats for these bands and labels.

Two guys named Dan (Koretzky and Osborn, respectively) who worked at Kaleidoscope had been impressed, and rightly so, by a self-released, self-titled album by the duo Royal Trux that Kaleidoscope stocked. A little later,

I had a single called “Slay Tracks 1933:1969” self-released by the band Pavement firmly pressed into my hands by one or another Dan and was informed that only a thousand were pressed. I bought it that day. Dan Koretzky and Dan Osborn each worked at the distributor, had experience at Northwestern’s WNUR radio station, and were strategically placed to discover and make contact with new bands. They reached out to Royal Trux and Pavement, started a label called Drag City in 1988, and began releasing records in 1989. In a similar process, Joel Leoschke and I would start Kranky after hearing the first single from an unknown ambient duo from Richmond called Labradford four years later.

In the economic sense and at the label level, independent or “indie” refers to a means of production and distribution. Independent labels operated outside the fiscal control of major labels and multinationals that owned them; the so-called “Big Six” of the Warner Music Group, EMI, Sony Music, BMG, PolyGram, and Universal that operated from 1988 to 1999. Indie labels arranged and paid for manufacturing themselves and were distributed at least in part by independent distributors like Chicago-based Cargo, or Mordam Records in San Francisco, who sourced records from hundreds of labels around the world and got them into record shops domestically.

The levels of economic independence labels exercised were on a spectrum. So, for example, hardcore punk records on the Washington, DC, Dischord label were manufactured by the British independent distributor Southern Records, which also provided European manufacturing and distribution for a consortium of mostly British labels. Although Chicago-based Touch & Go Records were also distributed by Southern in Europe, the label arranged and financed its own manufacturing. By necessity, most labels had to interact with multinationals, and those interactions also existed along a spectrum. The psych pop Creation label, home to My Bloody Valentine and Oasis, and grindcore pioneers Earache Records with Napalm Death and Godflesh started out as independents in England and were eventually manufactured and distributed in North America by Sony. RED, originally an independent distributor called Important, was eventually acquired by Sony. Virgin/EMI Records opened Caroline Records and Distribution in 1983 in New York. Touch & Go was distributed by both of these distributors.

Labels turned artists’ recordings and artwork into LPs, singles, cassettes, and compact



continued from p. 35

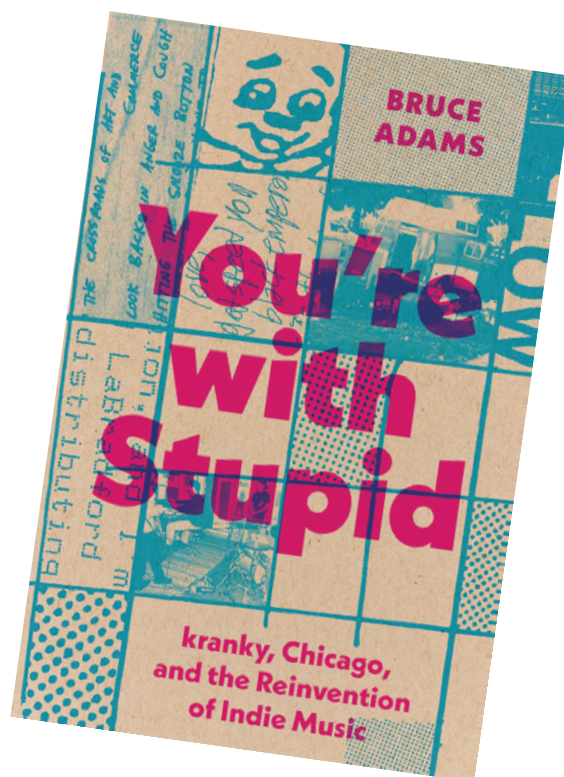
discs. Parts were shepherd through the manufacturing process, and finished products were received and warehoused somewhere, be it someone's closet, basement, or a wholesale distributor, and then scheduled for shipment to record stores and mail-order customers. Stores needed to know what was arriving when in order to predictably stock their shelves, and so release schedules had to be created, coordinated, and adhered to. Likewise, fanzines, the magazines created by dedicated fans/amateur writers, and radio stations had to be serviced with promotional or "play" copies of releases so that reviews were run and music was played on air when records arrived in stores or as close to that time as possible. If there was enough money available, advertising would accompany the release. Some labels had paid staff or volunteers who promoted records; others hired agencies. If bands were touring, stock had to be ready for them to sell on the road. And if a label wanted to export releases or had a European distributor, the schedule had to be aligned with the logistics of overseas shipping and sales. At any step in the process of releasing music—manufacturing, shipping, or distribution—a label could easily find itself doing business with a multinational. Complete self-sufficiency and independence for record labels was virtually impossible in practice. It's fair to say that the greater the degree of economic independence a label possessed, the more aesthetic leeway it had to operate with.

There was something about the Chicago music scene that is harder to quantify, but definitely existed: an attitude of mutual support and aid. When I worked at Kaleidoscope, my coworkers were in bands like Eleventh Dream Day and the Jesus Lizard. At Cargo, many of the employees were in bands and would show up at each other's shows to lend support. This was, to some extent, an inheritance from the early days of the hardcore punk rock circuit, when bands had to depend on each other to organize and pull off shows. I had seen the ethos in action when I roadied for Laughing Hyenas and saw how they coordinated with the Milwaukee band Die Kreuzen to perform together in weekend shows across the Midwest. This do-it-yourself, or DIY, approach worked for sound engineers like Steve Albini and John McEntire who had begun as musicians. As David Trumfio puts it, "Touring and meeting other people on a similar path was very important to keeping my focus. Being a musician is and was essential to

being a successful engineer and/or producer in my opinion. You have to have that perspective to know how to relate to the people you're recording." As groups returned to Chicago from touring, they offered reciprocal aid to bands they played with in other cities. Tortoise provided space in their loft to Stereolab, and Carter Brown from Labradford sold equipment to Douglas McCombs from Tortoise. In Chicago, musicians performed and recorded together, crossing over genre boundaries to interact. Tom Windish summarizes it by saying, "It wasn't like the Touch & Go people couldn't be friends with the Drag City people or the Wax Trax! people couldn't be friends with the Bloodshot people." Brent Gutzeit, who came to Chicago from Kalamazoo, Michigan, in late 1995, describes the scene: "Everybody was jamming with each other. Jazz dudes playing alongside experimental/noise musicians, punk kids and no wave folks. Ken Vandermark was setting up improv and jazz shows at the Bop-Shop and Hot House. Michael Zerang set up shows at Lunar Cabaret. Fireside Bowl had punk shows as well as experimental stuff. Lounge Ax always had great rock shows. Empty Bottle used to have a lot of great shows. I set up jazz and experimental shows at Roby's on Division. Then there was Fred Anderson's Velvet Lounge down on the southside. There

were underground venues like ODUM, Milk of Burgundy, and Magnatroid where the no wave and experimental bands would play. Even smaller independent cafés like the Nervous Center in Lincoln Square and Lula Cafe in Logan Square hosted experimental shows. There was no pressure to be a 'rock star' and nobody had big egos. There was a lot of cross-over in band members, which influenced rock bands to venture into the outer peripheries of music, which provided musical growth in the 'rock' scene."

Ken Vandermark breaks down the resources and people who made Chicago such an exciting city to be in: "A combination of creative factors fell into place in Chicago during the mid-'90s that was unique to any city I've seen before or since. A large number of innovative musicians, working in different genres, were living very close to each other. Key players had been developing their ideas for years, and many were roughly the same age—from their late twenties to early thirties. A number of adventurous music journalists, also in the same age group, were starting to get published in established Chicago periodicals. People who ran the venues who presented the cutting-edge music were of this generation too. Music listings for more avant-garde material were getting posted effectively online. All of this



*You're With Stupid* covers mostly the years 1991 till 2002, during which Kranky contributed to a multifarious and rapidly evolving underground scene whose influence reached around the world.

activity coalesced at the same time, without any one individual 'controlling' it. And there was an audience hungry to hear what would happen next, night after night."

Bill Meyer sees this cooperative spirit from the independent scene of the mid-1990s in present-day Chicago: "I describe it as an act of collective will. This thing exists because it does not exist in this way, anywhere else in the world. What we have now are people who really want to get together. They will rehearse each other's pieces and they will be in each other's bands. They don't resent each other's successes. If you go to New York, there's a lot of people doing things, but there's also a lot more hierarchy involved. You don't have that here. And I think that to some extent, the Touch & Go aesthetic imported over into the people who came after Ken Vandermark and were very attentive to that kind of thing."

In Chicago, 1998 was a year of significant releases from Tortoise, Gastr del Sol, and the Touch & Go edition of the Dirty Three's *Ocean Songs*. The latter was an Australian band made up of violinist Warren Ellis, drummer Jim White, and guitarist Mick Turner. Their fourth album was recorded in Chicago by Steve Albini and is one of the most accurately titled ever. *Ocean Songs* ebbs and flows with the trio's interplay and became very popular with rock fans who may have been familiar with the Touch & Go label but were otherwise unenthusiastic about the new bands in Chicago. In performance, the Dirty Three were dynamic, with Ellis being particularly charismatic. White moved to the city and contributed to the Boxhead Ensemble and numerous recording sessions. Drag City released Gastr del Sol's *Camofleur*, solo records from Grubbs, and a triple-LP/double-CD compilation of Stereolab tracks called *Aluminum Tunes*. Thrill Jockey were channeling the Tortoise *TNT* album through Touch & Go Distribution.

The Chicago scene was producing an incredible range of music. Lisa Bralts-Kelly observes that unlike earlier in the decade, when groups moved to Seattle to make it as grunge stars, "Nobody came to Chicago to sound like Smashing Pumpkins or Liz Phair." And unlike centers of the "industry" like New York City and Los Angeles, prone to waves of hype that focused on a few bands, as occurred with the Strokes beginning in 2001, a multitude of Chicago bands could develop, connect with supportive labels, and build an audience. ■

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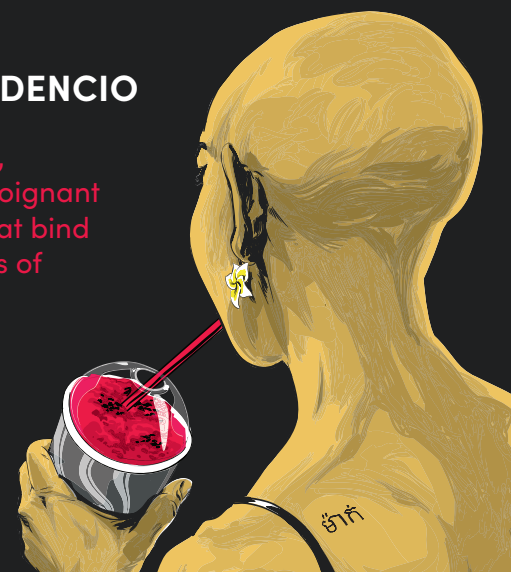
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CHICAGOANS OF NOTE

## Jesse Sandvik, DJ and booker at the California Clipper

“I think of what I do as, like, layering and sandwiching different songs or genres together to create a certain flavor or experience. DJ Jesse Sandwich.”

As told to MICCO CAPORALE

Among the local venues to fall victim to the COVID-19 pandemic in its first terrible year was beloved Bucktown dance spot Danny's Tavern. The bar had been home to several popular DJ nights, including *Night Moves*, a cosmic disco monthly that ended its 12-year run (after a few lineup changes) hosted by Ross Kelly and Jesse Sandvik, aka Jesse Sandwich. Sandvik, a 42-year-old DJ and producer, also runs boutique dance label Areaman, and since the demise of Danny's he's begun booking DJs at the California Clipper, a jewel in Humboldt Park's crown that's also known for its eclectic, Americana-inflected live music and variety shows. The Clipper was almost lost to the pandemic too, but it reopened in February 2022 under new management and has quickly become one of the city's most reliable nightlife spots. Sandvik is responsible for the club's diverse and exciting lineups of innovative DJs—and the return of *Night Moves* in January 2023.

I'm originally from Ithaca, New York. I moved to Chicago about 18 years ago. I had visited several times driving cross-country, and the music, art, and culture here just sunk its claws into me. I had spent a lot of time in New York, in and around Brooklyn, but the energy here felt a lot more my speed.

The records I grew up listening to had a really lasting impact on me. *Dizzy on the French Riviera*, the Jazz Messengers, John Coltrane . . . I can remember my father playing Booker T.'s “Green Onions” really early on a weekend when all I wanted to do was sleep, and now that's some of my favorite music. I grew up in the MTV era, and hearing those records—maybe doing some work downstairs or cleaning—that was my first experience of vinyl as a doorway into unknown worlds.

In my teens, I was into punk and hip-hop, so those records got me interested in how that instrumental music gets made. I had a notebook for tracking samples of things I wanted. You

know, side A, first track: drums. Side B, track three: bass. Stuff like that. I went through all my dad's records and did this. Even though I didn't have a sampler, I'd assembled a pretty large binder of all this sample material. When I was 19, I dropped out of college and moved in with some friends, one of whom was a producer, and I finally got to record all those samples and start making my own music. And then I got to travel and see what was out there, because of that music.

When I moved here at 24, I'd only been to Chicago three times, and every time left me wanting to see and hear more. I'd just get blown away every time I visited, whether it was seeing Jeff Parker or hitting Danny's. There's always so much happening here, and it felt like a warm, inviting environment full of opportunity.

New York struck me as expensive. In Chicago, it seemed like there was more intention behind things, because it's more affordable.

People have more space and time to cultivate what they're doing, instead of being stuck in the rush and hustle of New York.

I was doing a lot of construction work when I moved here. I was actually interested in object and furniture design and party installations, so I started throwing parties. We were doing loft parties, creating these now-called “immersive” environments: a zombie disco on Pluto or the wreckage of a sunken cruise ship. One time we built a DJ booth in a mouth. Those parties let me incorporate art and music together, and I got to work with a lot of talented artists in Chicago.

I got interested in DJing mainly through Kevin Stacy at Danny's. He asked me to come in and open up DJing on a Saturday night. I had never DJed before. I was like, “No way, I don't know how to do that. I just listen to records.” We'd talked a lot about music before, so he said, “Don't worry. I'll show you what to do.” Once I experienced filling up a quiet room on



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# MUSIC

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a Saturday night with people and music, I was hooked, and Danny's let me cut my DJ teeth.

That first night, I remember being really nervous and super focused on bringing the right records. I'd already spent a few years just going to Danny's and enjoying the music, but I never expected to DJ there. Still, in my head, I already kind of knew what I'd play if I did: 60s and 70s instrumentals and loungey jazz music, Burt Bacharach, surf rock. Things along the lines of Booker T. & the M.G.'s! But more campy, maybe. There are these records called *Persuasive Percussion*—like, really produced studio albums that were built for people to listen to on their hi-fis at home. I played some of that stuff because it has a big rush of sound to it, and I felt like it fit in the space really well, especially in the more relaxed earlier hours of Saturday or Sunday at Danny's.

For a few years, I kept playing this atmospheric stuff at Danny's. I don't think I had the confidence to, say, captain the ship of a really busy dance floor. So I was able to kind of find my sound and build my confidence and practice mixing songs.

I heard a lot of DJs there. Some of my favorites were the Night Moves crew, which was Brandon [Walsh], Yolanda [Carmina Alvarez], and Ross [Kelly]. A year or two after hearing them, they asked me to do a guest night. I was thrilled. Eventually, that lineup changed to just Brandon and Ross, and then Brandon moved. In 2015, Ross invited me to be an official Night Moves DJ, and we did that together for about five years until Danny's closed.

Night Moves really focused on Italo disco, cosmic disco, Balearic disco. . . . Balearic disco is a late-80s genre of music from Ibiza—kind of a chill house style, sort of postdisco bossa nova, more downtempo. Music you listen to watching sunrises on the beach. It's really pretty and ethereal. We'd play some of that stuff earlier in the night, then build towards that Italo sound or things like Sylvester's "I Need Somebody to Love Tonight." By the late evening, we'd progress to all things disco, but really focusing on Italo boogie, boogie funk, house, acid house, even some of the old WBMX classics you'd hear on Chicago radio, like Mr. Master.

As a DJ, I think having access to a lot of inspiration and mentors in Chicago gave me an example of finding my own voice or style. That's very important to me. Being eclectic and dynamic is enjoyable to me. People like Mark Grusane, Noshua Luv, Darren Jones, Jeff White, and Brandon and Ross from Night



"Like, be serious about your craft, but the overall attitude or promotion of an image can get way too serious for me," says Jesse Sandwich. "So I like to be more lighthearted."

LIINA RAUD

Moves . . . there are so many DJs, it's hard to mention, but those in particular really gave me a sense of listening differently and playing differently, even when it comes to approaching another DJ.

Like, maybe someone is playing something that I'm really into, and I ask them about it. Instead of telling me the exact track, they might tell me what label it's on or who the artist is. That creates a path where I can find all this other music by these other artists until I arrive at my own song that speaks to me within the realm of that track.

That's a big point of contention these days, especially with vinyl collectors and vinyl DJs. I'm not sure people understand that. There are some people making a career for themselves by finding records that nobody else has taken the time, patience, or dedication to find. It gives them an element of mystique. There's so much recorded music that exists on tape—even unreleased music or vinyl that's not on the Internet. Chicago has a lot of DJs that specialize in that. If someone doesn't want to give you a track, it doesn't always mean they're trying to be rude. They're trying to encourage the magic and beauty of a DJ who can take you to an audio world you don't know how to find. They want you to wonder and explore.

Playfulness is really important in my sets,

so I like having a kind of comical name. I think people in the DJ world often take themselves too seriously. Like, be serious about your craft, but the overall attitude or promotion of an image can get way too serious for me, personally. So I like to be more lighthearted.

My first DJ name was DJ Smooth & Delicious, but in a way, I've always been Jesse Sandwich. I mean, Sandvik, Sandwich . . . yeah. I don't know when that name officially occurred, but food and flavor have always been part of my musical journey. I love to cook, and I love music. And there's a body experience to both. You've really got to absorb them.

I've always been obsessed with finding new flavors and trying recipes, the same way I've always been into finding new sounds. I like the tactile search for ingredients, which I think is similar to my fascination with record hunting. Both food and music engage multiple senses. Like, music goes beyond listening. It really triggers emotions for people, and you can physically feel it. Deaf people can still sense music, even if they're not "hearing" it. I think of what I do as, like, layering and sandwiching different songs or genres together to create a certain flavor or experience. DJ Jesse Sandwich.

I worked in hospitality for a long time, from being a line cook to a server. Then I got more into the bar side of things. I worked my way up

from being a busboy and food runner to being a manager and a bartender at Big Star, and that kind of overlapped with more of a dive into DJing and music. The Boogie Munsters were a big influence, and Tim at Star Creature Universal Vibrations, as well as Shazam Bangles and Constance K, got me into this more deep boogie, funk, disco, and house kind of vibe, which led me to meet DJs from both the north and south sides.

Then Tim asked if I would be interested in doing some work for Star Creature—mainly shipping and inventory stuff—so I did that on the side after I became disenchanted with hospitality. I also did a lot of work with Numero Group, so I've been fortunate to learn and grow from two influential Chicago labels, especially during the pandemic.

When the Clipper was preparing to reopen, Kristina Magro [from new owner the Orbit Group] asked if I would be interested in booking DJs there on Fridays and Saturdays. I was curious if they had more programming available, so now I work on putting together playlists for all their businesses and consulting for their sound systems.

As a booker, I'm really interested in highlighting not just Chicago music history but Humboldt Park's history. There's music all around you there, constantly. If you just walk through the park on any weekend, you're going to hear people playing music out of their cars or hanging out and barbecuing to music or just enjoying a live show in the park. So bringing some of that sensibility into the California Clipper is really important to me—having bands playing Puerto Rican-style music as well as having DJs who are able to honor that tradition. But I also want the California Clipper to be a place for dynamic dance music. It's about being able to connect to that kind of unifying sense of joy that happens on the dance floor, regardless of the genre or where in the city the DJ is from.

At the Clipper, we've put together something really special and intentional. It's something I've always dreamed of, and I'm just so happy that Kristina and the rest of Orbit Group ownership supported that vision. People need an intimate space to dance and get together, and they deserve to do that with a sound system that is nice and enjoyable. We have a DJ booth that's permanent and beautiful and part of the architecture of the space, and the room sounds incredible. We're really lucky how it all came together. 📸

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# MUSIC

## THE SECRET HISTORY OF CHICAGO MUSIC

# Witchslayer have finally released the album they should've made 40 years ago

A new lineup has recorded a collection of forgotten favorites by one of Chicago's most promising early-80s metal bands.

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.*

I'm choosy about metal. Thrash and technical metal don't often move me, and as unhip as it makes me sound, I don't care for most death metal or black metal either. (The latter's well-documented Nazi infestation doesn't help—but yeah, I do have Venom's first album.) I like my metal sludgy and epic, preferably with lyrics about medieval beasts—think power metal, doom, and stoner metal. Hair metal is OK by me too, especially when it's fun, glammy, and sleazy. My favorite subgenre, though, is scrappy, punk-influenced NWOBHM—which stands for New Wave of British Heavy Metal, something you surely know if you've bothered to read this entire paragraph.

NWOBHM bands shaped the sound of local heavies Witchslayer, and that's a big part of why they made the cut as Secret History of Chicago Music subjects. Founded in 1980, they

should've torn up the burgeoning stateside metal scene, but alas, by the time they split four years later, they hadn't yet toured, and their recorded output consisted of one demo and a single track on a compilation. I was lucky to talk with Witchslayer vocalist and cofounder Jeff Allen about the band's origins—and about their unexpected return in 2022.

Allen was born in the small northwest Indiana town of Knox on August 14, 1961. Allen's father was in the printing trade, and he moved

the family to Chicago to take a job on Printer's Row. The Allen family eventually settled in the northwest suburbs, specifically Des Plaines, when the area was mostly cornfields.

"The 60s were a really interesting time to be a child growing up," Allen says. "My first exposure to music, like most people, was with the Beatles. I had this mini 45 RPM portable record player, and I used to play Beatles 45s when I was three or four years old. I also used to watch the Beatles cartoons."

Allen's childhood got darker, though, and so did the music he sought out. "By the late 60s, my parents had divorced, and I became basically a pretty pissed-off kid," he recalls. "I naturally gravitated towards heavy rock as an emotional outlet. In 1972, when I was in middle school, I had a friend who had older brothers. So at 12 years old I got exposed to albums like Neil Young's *Harvest*, Jimi Hendrix's *Are You Experienced*, and Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*." Allen also benefited from some unusu-



STEVE KRAKOW



## MUSIC

al pedagogy: “I had a great music teacher at Dempster Junior High in Mount Prospect, Mrs. Nelson, who spent a semester having the class listen to the Who’s *Quadrophenia* album,” he says. “She reviewed the album song by song, and of course I aced that class.”

The rise of glam rock in the 1970s also influenced Allen—especially the music’s sinister side. “By the time I was in middle school I had grown a huge fondness for Kiss and the Alice Cooper Band,” he says.

Early in the 70s, Allen’s mother remarried, and her new husband had two sons and a daughter. “We were like a modern-day Brady Bunch,” Allen says. “His oldest son used to lock himself in a room and blast Frank Zappa albums as well as Black Sabbath’s *Master of Reality*. When I first heard Black Sabbath it scared the crap outta me—it was the heaviest music I had ever heard. That was my first exposure to metal.”

Allen’s high school years overlapped with the golden age of the rock star, and he saw lots of great bands—among them Van Halen, Rush, Led Zeppelin, AC/DC, and Aerosmith (the first album he ever bought was *Toys in the Attic*). His best friend’s dad was a member of IATSE Local 2, the Chicago chapter of the stagehands’ union, so they could get into almost any show they wanted: “You name a 70s rock band, and I most likely saw them perform live in Chicago.”

Allen’s own band came together, appropriately enough, out of a bunch of partying teenagers. “Witchslayer originally formed at a house party in Mount Prospect,” he says. “A family was selling their house, and one of their kids decided to throw a massive party in their vacated home.” The open mike in the basement seemed to attract all the young rockers in the area—many of whom were already friends, having gotten to know one another at Forest View High School in Arlington Heights and Prospect High School in Mount Prospect.

“After a few beers I decided to jump on and start singing,” Allen says. The ad hoc cover band he fronted consisted of Ken Wentling on drums, Paul Speckmann on bass, and Tom McNeely on guitar. Later that night, McNeely and guitarist Craig McMahon approached Allen about joining their band in Des Plaines. “I said, ‘Sure,’ but they told me I had to start learning songs from New Wave of British Heavy Metal bands,” he recalls. “At that time I was still into all the 70s bands I listened to in high school.”

Many of the musicians at that fateful party had already started gigging: Speckmann (later of War Cry and Master) had played in a high

school group called White Cross with Ron Cooke (later of Thrust). Future Witchslayer bassist Sean McAllister (later of Trouble) had played in Taurus and Love Hunter. Even Allen had been in what he describes as an “awful garage band” (which he’d rather forget) right out of high school.

That said, when Witchslayer formed (styled “Witch Slayer” at the time), it was the first band for most of the five musicians involved: Allen on vocals, Wentling on drums, McNeely and McMahon on guitars, and Pat Ryan on bass.

“We were heavily into a band called Angel Witch and also liked Tygers of Pan Tang, Saxon, early Iron Maiden with Paul Di’Anno, early Def Leppard, Motörhead, Raven, Judas Priest, Ozzy’s new band with Randy Rhoads, and of course Dio and Black Sabbath,” Allen says.

Witchslayer’s first shows were at a teen center in Elk Grove and a dive bar in Palatine called Haymakers that later hosted the likes of Twisted Sister, Queensrÿche, and Michael Schenker. They also played the Rusty Nail on Belmont and the Thirsty Whale in River Grove, which was the heavy metal headquarters of the northwest suburbs.

“Once we rented out a VFW hall and went around to all the local high schools and plastered kids’ cars with flyers,” Allen says. “We ended up doing that show in front of probably 500 to 1,000 kids. We charged them three dollars to get in.” Witchslayer didn’t want to get a reputation as a mere “bar band,” so they tried to be selective about gigs and not play out so much that they got taken for granted.

McNeely and McMahon couldn’t get along, unfortunately, and soon McNeely left. No new second guitarist clicked, so the band became a four-piece, with McAllister replacing Ryan on bass and Dale Clark replacing Wentling on drums. That first lineup did manage to write set staples “Witchslayer” and “I Don’t Want to Die,” the latter of which would appear on the *Metal Massacre 4* compilation released by Metal Blade Records in 1983.

The second lineup didn’t last long either, because a better-established group had designs on McAllister. “We shared a rehearsal space with Chicago doom band Trouble, so that led to us doing a few shows with them,” Allen remembers. “Trouble saw our bassist Sean McAllister perform and recruited him away from us. Sean played on Trouble’s first album, called *Psalm 9*, and we found Sean’s replacement, Rick Manson, in an *Illinois Entertainer*

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## MUSIC

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'available musicians' listing."

Witchslayer continued to share bills with Trouble, including a Halloween show at the Rusty Nail. "Our bassist, Rick Manson, wore these newly machined shackles on his wrists and accidentally cut his head open at the start of the show," says Allen. "We started playing our opening number, and I turned to look at Rick and he was covered in blood (think of *Carrie*). We paused the show and called for an ambulance, but Rick refused to leave the stage. People in the audience thought it was a Halloween prank, so we finished what we could of the set while we waited for paramedics to arrive. Rick almost bled to death onstage that night."

The last thing McAllister did before Manson took over was play on the sessions for Witchslayer's lone demo in 1983. It's since become a cult favorite, and Italian label Flynn Records reissued it on vinyl and cassette in 2020. "There was a pretty notable recording studio in Chicago at the time called Streeter-ville," Allen says. "We met one of the sound engineers, and he agreed to record a five-track demo tape with us at his home studio in Lake Villa. Recording expenses were huge back then, so this was an economical way for us to record."

Witchslayer are in full-on thunderous attack mode throughout the demo. Their riffs go for the throat, whether they're blazing fast or slow and frosty, and their screaming guitar solos and powerful, flamboyant vocals scrape at the sky.

The band felt like they were gaining traction—they drew a big crowd to an outdoor show at UIC—but they couldn't get signed to a label. The closest they got was probably their appearance on the Metal Blade compilation. "Brian Slagel of Metal Blade Records was one of the only guys showing interest to underground metal bands in the U.S. at that time," Allen recalls. "We went out to Los Angeles to see the US Festival in '83 and decided to make a cold call to Metal Blade. We met Brian at his office, handed him our demo, and said we wanted on his next *Metal Massacre* release. He ended up including us as well as four other Chicago area bands (War Cry, Thrust, Trouble, and Zoetrope)."

Witchslayer had other near misses. "There was also Jon Zazula out of New York City that had a label called Megaforce Records," Allen says. "He initially signed acts like Raven and Metallica, and he was looking at Witchslayer, but for some reason we didn't successfully

negotiate a deal with him."

The band had reason to believe that they were having problems making headway in the industry because they were from Chicago, not from New York or Los Angeles—and because they were ahead of the curve. "Our guitarist Craig McMahon once ran into an Atlantic Records A&R guy at the Roxy nightclub on the Sunset Strip in LA," Allen says. "The guy took Craig out to his car, opened up his trunk, pulled out his briefcase and then our '83 demo tape. He told Craig he thought we were too heavy for prime time at that point."

Witchslayer had been trying to sign to a label for four years when they threw in the towel in 1984. "The final straw was when we got picked up by Jam Productions to open for the German band Accept at the Chicago Metro," Allen recalls. "The Accept roadies pulled us aside and stated that there was no way they were going to deal with an opening act. If they did let us play, they'd have given us one speaker and no monitors. 'Here's \$150—now go fuck off.' We were devastated, and in hindsight we shoulda forced our way onto that stage. We had no management, and we were just kids. I sat in the audience for over an hour waiting for Accept to come on, and the entire sold-out Metro crowd was chanting 'Witchslayer! Witchslayer!'"

Allen has some regrets about the choices the band made back then. "Looking back, I think if we had just sucked it up, formally recorded an EP or independent album, and hit the road, that Witchslayer would have broken out and become a mainstream metal band," he says. "Our songwriting was very good, and we would've just improved over time. Regardless, the band died that night at the Chicago Metro."

After Witchslayer split, Clark went to California and recorded an album with the band Rampage. He later moved to Tampa, Allen says, and "at one point was working with Nicko McBrain of Iron Maiden to create a reality TV show called *Golf Rocks* where he'd play golf with guys like Nicko, Alice Cooper, et cetera." At first McMahon moved to California too, and he now lives in Phoenix. He got into filmmaking in the 1990s, creating low-budget horror movies and Christian family films, and he has a YouTube channel called Life to Afterlife Spirituality Series—he's even posted some "spirit box" episodes where he claims to contact the deceased! Manson stayed in Chicago, where he runs a painting business; since Witchslayer he's played in a few groups, including a Slayer tribute band.

Allen abandoned music and went back to college. "I'm currently living a quiet life in Denver. I've worked in the tech industry for most of my career," he says. Four years ago, though, he decided to get back into metal—specifically, he wanted to finish the album that Witchslayer should've made in the 80s.

"I tried for years to get the original band back together, but my efforts would always fail," he says. "So I went to plan B and pulled in all active old-school Chicago musicians who were on the scene back in the 80s. I needed the album to be done in Chicago in order to recapture that exact feel and sound."

Allen recruited guitarist Ken Mandat (Damien Thorne), bassist Mick Lucid (Damien Thorne, Vicious Circle), and drummer Gabriel Anthony (Tyrant's Reign) to form the new Witchslayer (which changed the group's name from "Witch Slayer"). They recorded 11 tracks written by the original early-80s lineup and released a self-titled album in June 2022.

"I had north siders and south siders working together on this album," Allen says. "We recorded the album in Saint Charles and Calumet City. It was mastered in Schaumburg by John Scrip at Massive Mastering. Lettering was done by Eric Rot of Chicago, and our logo was drawn by Don Clark in Rolling Meadows." Former Witchslayer bassist Sean McAllister, now living in McHenry, returned to serve as executive producer.

Witchslayer are working on a vinyl release of their album for early 2023 via the Cult Metal Classics imprint of Greek label Sonic Age Records. They plan to play a couple Chicago shows in spring 2023, and in April they'll appear at Keep It True XXIII, a three-day underground heavy metal festival in Würzburg, Germany, between Frankfurt and Nuremberg.

"This puts Chicago metal and Witchslayer onto a major international stage," Allen says. "Chicago metal bands from the 80s carved out a very unique heavy doom-metal sound. It evolved from the large city and tough working-class atmosphere, as well as the long, cold, gray winters."

It might be too early to hope that the new Witchslayer will write any material of their own, but the chance to hear these 40-year-old shoulda-been classics again—not only played live but also on a recording actually intended for release—is plenty exciting already. **📺**

**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**.





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## PICK OF THE WEEK

## Jake Xerxes Fussell brings songs from the south to the Old Town School



TOM RANKIN

## JAKE XERXES FUSSELL, JAMES ELKINGTON

Sat 12/10, 8 PM, Old Town School of Folk Music, Szold Hall, 4545 N. Lincoln, \$24, \$22 for members. 🎧

**JAKE XERXES FUSSELL** deftly balances the imperatives of research and performance. A second-generation folklorist raised in Columbus, Georgia, he draws much of his material from field recordings made throughout the American south. His four albums, all released by North Carolina label Paradise of Bachelors, scrupulously credit the folk-song collections from which he sources his material. However, if you compare the versions of those tunes that appear on those old LPs with Fussell's recordings, his artistry quickly comes into focus. His first fidelity is to the stories the songs tell—he enunciates so clearly that you won't need a lyric sheet to catch every word—and he's not shy about streamlining them to get at their essence. He pares down "Rolling Mills Are Burning Down," for example, to a single verse and chorus that vividly portray the personal tragedy that follows the economic collapse of a factory town. Fussell's arrangements pull the songs out of time. The sparse, gorgeous orchestration on his latest record, *Good and Green Again* (produced by local multi-instrumentalist James Elkington), feels neither antique nor contemporary, but it perfectly frames Fussell's rich voice and sturdy, reverberant guitar playing. In concert, Fussell's singing and picking are quite complete unto themselves; he and Elkington will both be performing solo tonight. —**BILL MEYER**

CONCERT PREVIEW  
THURSDAY 8

**STRESS POSITIONS** Ganser headline. 9 PM, *Sleeping Village*, 3734 W. Belmont, \$18, \$15 in advance. 21+

Chicago four-piece C.H.E.W. played D-beat hardcore with the intensity of a house fire. It has to be tough to maintain that level of energy, focus, and combustibility, and when C.H.E.W. called it quits in 2021, I was thankful we'd gotten to enjoy them for as long as six years. Earlier this year I noticed that three-fourths of C.H.E.W.—bassist Russell Harrison, drummer Jonathan Giral, and guitarist Benjamin Rudolph—had formed a new band called Stress Positions with vocalist Stephanie Brooks. In May, the band self-released their debut EP, *Walang Hiya*, and local punk label Open Palms Tapes issued it on cassette in July. Stress Positions barrel through most of these songs at such blistering speeds that they almost become airborne, leaving scorch marks on the ground. Giral's dense, thundering drumming ignites the band's riffs and gives them their core character—they're relentless and frantic, though they can jump from pulverizing to swinging like flicking a light switch. Stress Positions are as loud as you'd expect—Rudolph's seesawing guitars alone can fill a room—but Brooks's voice is somehow even louder, so that her sharp holler punctures the avalanche of noise like a giant spike. On the slow-churning "Unholy Intent," her scream shoots into its hoarse extremes, embodying the vitriolic power that Stress Positions unlock together. —**LEOR GALIL**

## FRIDAY 9

**SON LITTLE** *Lizzie No* opens. 8 PM, *Chop Shop*, 2033 W. North, \$25.25. 18+

By the time singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Aaron Earl Livingston released his first full-length album as Son Little in 2015, he'd already worked with genre-bending artists such as the Roots and RJD2 and produced the 2015 Mavis Staples EP *Your Good Fortune* (he also wrote its first two tracks). In keeping with the musical openness of those collaborators, Little's own material incorporates influences from a wide variety of eras and styles, including blues, 50s and 60s R&B, hip-hop, heavy psych, and art-pop. If you adore listening to music on shuffle or flipping through the records in a vintage jukebox, you may hear a kindred spirit in Son Little—and as disparate as his sounds can feel, they always hang together like a carefully curated playlist. Little brings that approach to his latest album, the September release *Like Neptune* (Anti-). Its songs are informed by a mountain of journals from his youth that he discovered during pandemic lockdown and reread searching for the roots of his long-term depression and anxiety, and his lyrics are intimate and personal even when the music could fuel a party (such as on funky opener "Drummer" or soulful banger "Stoned Love"). But the record's emotional resonance and atmosphere



of self-reflection mean that many of its most interesting moments are also its quietest, including the haunting, sepia-tone “Deeper” and the stunningly reverential “Gloria,” which features one of Little’s most moving vocal performances yet.

—JAMIE LUDWIG

## SATURDAY 10

**JAKE XERXES FUSSELL** See *Pick of the Week* at left. **James Elkington** opens. 8 PM, Old Town School of Folk Music, Szold Hall, 4545 N. Lincoln, \$24, \$22 for members. [ML](#)

## TUESDAY 13

**KIKÙ HIBINO WITH STEVEN HESS AND HARUHI** *John Daniel & Norman W. Long and Veronica Anne Salinas* open. 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western, \$10. 21+

When Chicago multimedia artist Gregory Bae died suddenly in 2021, he left behind a shattered artistic community. Among the grieving was his friend Kikù Hibino, a sound artist whose work has been heard in venues such as the Chicago Cultural Center, Lincoln Park Conservatory, Elastic Arts, Hairpin Arts Center, Hyde Park Art Center, and Experimental Sound Studio. So when the Museum of Contemporary Art unveiled a retrospective of Bae’s work, on display through March 12, 2023, Hibino was invited to perform at the exhibit’s opening. To honor Bae’s unquenchable compulsion to connect artists to one another, Hibino looped in drummer Steven Hess (Locrian, Cleared, Rlyr) and singer-bassist Haruhi Kobayashi (a multimedia artist who goes by Haruhi) to perform a new piece inspired by Bae’s *Ex Radios* (2019), a ten-inch-by-six-foot collage of discarded instruction manuals and radio antennae. Hibino interpreted the artwork as though it were a graphic score, using it as a blueprint for a long-form ambient composition for synthesizers, drums, bass, and voice. “Instead of focusing on a chord progression,” Hibino says, “we focused on showing multiple chord harmon[ies] all at once and created a rhythmic layout by cutting them up.”

Last month the MCA posted a video of the trio’s debut performance of *Ex Radios* on its website, though Hibino considers that version a work in progress. At this Empty Bottle show, the trio of Hibino, Hess, and Haruhi will refine their vision to incorporate more vocals and rhythms; during their performance, photographer Liina Raud and visual artist Galina Shevchenko will project an original VJ set. *Ex Radios* continues to inspire new art years after its creation—much as Bae himself is still catalyzing collaboration after his death. —HANNAH EDGAR

**SUNN O))) SHOSHIN DUO** *Ready for Death and Deep Tunnel Project* open. 9 PM, Thalia Hall, 1807 S. Allport, \$32, VIP \$77-\$432, opera box \$360 (six tickets). 17+

Over the course of 24 years and nine full-length studio releases, drone-metal outfit Sunn O))) have cultivated a lofty mystique. In fact, their reputation



Stress Positions [@RICARDO ADAME](#)



Kikù Hibino [@CHRISTOPHER ANDREW](#)



Steven Hess [@COURTESY THE ARTIST](#)



Honey Dijon  COURTESY THE ARTISTApollo Brown (left) and Philmore Greene  JENNY RISHERNina Hagen  GABO

continued from p. 47

often precedes them: you've probably heard the lore of their 120-decibel live shows, with their glacial cadences and bone-rattling soundscapes. But their first Chicago appearance since a 2019 stint at Rockefeller Chapel is the local debut of a new endeavor called Shoshin Duo. This project pares Sunn O))) down to its founding members, Stephen O'Malley and Greg Anderson, for a maximalist display of volume, harmonics, and distortion. Shoshin is the Buddhist concept of learning with a "beginner's mind," surrendering preconceived notions in favor of openness and radical zeal. This approach bears a natural kinship with the modus operandi of Sunn O))). They've explored the outer limits of what a guitar-amp-pedal rig can achieve, pushing listeners to reconsider what music can and should be.

In recent years Buddhism has been a frequent theme in Sunn O)))'s work, and it's a personal source of inspiration for O'Malley. On 2015's *Kannon*, Sunn O))) used equally jolting and spellbinding compositions to explore the transformative power of suffering through the lens of the Buddhist goddess of mercy. When they began tracking 2019's *Life Metal* at Chicago's Electrical Audio, O'Malley and Anderson pursued a daily practice of setting aside 12 minutes at the beginning and/or end of each studio session to explore the limitations of a single modal drone. That methodical cultivation of calmness, akin to yoga or meditation, informed the contemplative, expansive music they released on the sister album to *Life Metal*, called *Pyroclasts*. However Shoshin Duo materialize, one thing is certain: it'll be a full-body experience. Whether it leans more toward exorcism or meditation, only time will tell. —SHANNON NICO SHREIBAK

## SATURDAY 17

**HONEY DIJON DJ Heather and Shaun J. Wright open. 11:30 PM, Metro, 3730 N. Clark, \$35 at the door, sold out online. 2+**

House music never went out of style, but not everybody knows about its culture, its history, or even its existence—and a legion of those newbies fell for house this year, thanks to new dance-oriented albums from superstars Drake and Beyoncé. The latter recruited figures from across house history for *Renaissance*, including Chicago native Honey Redmond, better known as Honey Dijon. She's been spinning records for nearly a quarter century and part of the scene for even longer—she recently told the *New York Times* that she snuck into the Muzik Box, the 80s club where Ron Hardy reigned, at age 13. When she moved to New York City in the late 90s, she carried the imprint of the first couple waves of Chicago house, and over the decades to come, her DJ skills made her an international phenomenon. Classic Chicago house—with its effusive melodies, its joyous queerness, and its welcoming euphoria—is all over Dijon's second album, November's *Black Girl Magic* (Classic Music Company). Sleek, urbane keys and light-on-its-feet electronic percussion root the album's insistent pulse, creating a magical elixir that can persuade you any surface is a dance floor. *Black*

*Girl Magic* foregrounds vocals, and Dijon has recruited a panoply of guests (including Compton rapper Channel Tres and Ruff Ryders affiliate Eve) whose every ringing syllable lets everyone who's listening know they're welcome to the party. I'm a sucker for "C's Up," where Chosen Few member Mike Dunn invites you to take a trip on Lake Shore Drive, delivering his lines in a low, sultry rumble that promises thrills he can't even describe; it's a reminder that the journey Dijon took to become a global dance ambassador began in Chicago. —LEOR GALIL

## ALBUM REVIEWS

**APOLLO BROWN & PHILMORE GREENE, *COST OF LIVING***

Mello Music Group

[apollobrown360.bandcamp.com/album/cost-of-living](http://apollobrown360.bandcamp.com/album/cost-of-living)

West-side rapper Philmore Greene has been crafting a catalog of mature, unfussy boom-bap since he dropped his 2018 debut, *Chicago: A Third World City*. His new fourth full-length, *Cost of Living* (released by esteemed hip-hop indie Mello Music Group), builds on his established elements—relaxed, sample-based instrumentals and thoughtful ruminations about the systemic unfairness that has historically afflicted Black people (and the frustrating new ways it manifests itself thanks to modern technology). But the album also feels rejuvenated, as though Greene's creativity has been reborn and he's newly excited to be doing the same work. This is no doubt in part because he's found a collaborator who can supersize his vision: veteran Detroit beat maker Apollo Brown, who's also worked with established MCs such as Guilty Simpson, Skyzoo, and Ghostface Killah. The producer populates *Cost of Living* with tracks built from lightly dusty samples that accentuate the crispness in his understated percussion. This music has a self-consciously throwback feel, but as much as Greene shows his deference to hip-hop history, he doesn't let it distract him from focusing his songs on the present. He's an unflashy rapper who delivers frank descriptions with a workingman's confidence and care. His voice functions as a sturdy element in the album's instrumentation; he ends his lines with exclamation points, so that each one lands like a rim shot in a drum break, and he smooths out the flow of his songs with a subtly soulful, melodic touch. On "Steep Life," Greene reflects on the bleak socioeconomic outlook for young Black men, delivering his lyrics with his whole chest—he raps like he wants you to believe that even when the world blocks your path, you can make your own way where no one expects it. —LEOR GALIL

**NINA HAGEN, *UNITY***

Grönland


[groenland.com/en/product/nina-hagen-unity](http://groenland.com/en/product/nina-hagen-unity)

Some aging rock legends make music that feels like a shadow of the early work that cemented their fame. Not Nina Hagen, though. On *Unity* (Grönland), her first album since 2011, the German pop-



## MUSIC

punk icon unleashes a blast of feral camp that sounds if anything more Hagen than ever. Her distinctive theatrical voice has roughened to an even more theatrical froglike croak; on her preposterous, reverb-laden cover of Merle Travis's workers' anthem "16 Tons" (whose video features a series of fabulously diverse queer-coded lip-synchers wearing variations of Hagen's famously flamboyant make-up), she sounds like she's gargling at the bottom of a mine shaft. On her German-language cover of Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind," she somehow goes even further over the top, enunciating as if she's in an opera against hyperactive synth wind effects. The original songs on *Unity* are great too; Hagen teams up with George Clinton for the insinuating

funk of the title track, which interpolates the African American traditional "Wade in the Water" and incorporates the dial tone of a collect call from prison as a hook. Jamaican singer Liz Mitchel of Boney M. adds her mannered squeaks to Hagen's mannered bellow on the feminist reggae anthem "United Women of the World." The political messages of solidarity with workers, Black people, women, queer people, and victims of war are all so gloriously big and bloated that they go beyond corny and become transcendent, weird, counterintuitively hip schmaltz. When Hagen's shouts of "Freedom!" echo away at the end of "Redemption Day," they sound like liberation from the shackles of time, hate, and good taste alike. *Unity* is a joy. —NOAH BERLATSKY 

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# EARLY WARNINGS

CHICAGO SHOWS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT IN THE WEEKS TO COME

ALL AGES FREE



Buddy Guy © COURTESY RCA RECORDS

## NEW

**Alfa Mist** 5/2/2023, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+  
**American Authors, Billy Raffoul** 2/25/2023, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+  
**Ausar, Jay Wood, T Star Verse** 12/23, 8 PM, Schubas, 18+  
**Mac Ayres** 5/5/2023, 9 PM, Metro, 18+  
**Bacilos** 5/14/2023, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+  
**Emily Beisel Group; Jon Irabagon, Joshua Abrams, and Jeremy Cunningham** 2/16/2023, 8:30 PM, Elastic 🆓  
**Bodysnatcher, Angel-maker, Paleface, Distant** 3/22/2023, 6:30 PM, Subterranean, 17+  
**Bryce Vine, Black Party** 3/12/2023, 7 PM, Riviera Theatre 🆓  
**Bury Tomorrow, Hollow Front, Afterlife** 5/13/2023, 6:30 PM, Park West 🆓  
**Laura Cai** 12/30, 9 PM, Tack Room 🆓  
**Catbamboo, When We Was Kids, Machin, Skies Are Shifting** 1/20/2023, 9 PM, Reggies Music Joint  
**Charlatans [UK], Ride** 2/7/2023, 7:30 PM, the Vic, 18+  
**The C.I.A.** 3/28/2023, 9 PM, Empty Bottle  
**Collection** 3/2/2023, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+

**David Bowie Birthday Bash featuring John Mead's True Believers** 1/8/2023, 7 PM, SPACE, Evanston 🆓  
**Dead Inside** 12/31, 9:30 PM, Gman Tavern 🆓  
**Dog Faced Band, Poner Cockbusch** 3/10/2023, 8 PM, Reggies Music Joint  
**Drumcell, DJ Hyperactive, Lowki** 12/30, 10 PM, Smart Bar  
**Kevan Eftekhari** 12/24 and 12/31, 9 PM, Tack Room 🆓  
**Elio** 3/26/2023, 7:30 PM, Subterranean 🆓  
**Epex** 2/9/2023, 7 PM, Metro 🆓  
**Ezra Collective** 4/2/2023, 8 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+  
**George Harrison Birthday Tribute Concert featuring Ellis Clark, Ary Jeebie, and more** 2/25, 7 PM, Martyrs'  
**Grateful String Band** 1/20/2023, 9 PM, Martyrs'  
**Buddy Guy, Bobby Rush** 1/5/2023, 7:30 PM, Buddy Guy's Legends  
**Buddy Guy, Rico McFarland** 1/6/2023, 8:30 PM, Buddy Guy's Legends  
**Buddy Guy, Jimmy Burns** 1/7/2023, 8:30 PM, Buddy Guy's Legends  
**Buddy Guy, Big Llou Johnson** 1/8/2023, 7:30 PM, Buddy Guy's Legends  
**Gerrit Hatcher, Paul Gialorenzo, and Julian Kirshner; Katinka Kleijn and Bill MacKay duo** 2/9/2023,

8:30 PM, Elastic 🆓  
**Hi Ho, Xyzxyz, Acceptor** 1/14/2023, 8:30 PM, Gman Tavern  
**Home Team, Broadside, Honey Revenge** 4/1/2023, 8 PM, Subterranean, 17+  
**Igorrr, Melt-Banana, Otto Von Schirach** 9/29/2023, 7:30 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+  
**Izz, Riddle House** 1/14/2023, 8 PM, Reggies Music Joint  
**June of 44** 3/4/2023, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+  
**Kate NV** 4/6/2023, 9 PM, Sleeping Village  
**Alex Lustig, Mishegas** 3/31/2023, 9 PM, Sleeping Village  
**Martin Dupont** 5/25/2023, 8 PM, Metro, 18+  
**Joel Medina, Cosmic Jaywalkers, Amelia Harlovic** 2/18/2023, 8 PM, Golden Dagger  
**Bret Michaels, Night Ranger, and more** 7/29/2023, 6 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park 🆓  
**Motel Breakfast and more** 2/2/2023, 8 PM, Golden Dagger  
**Motel Breakfast and more** 2/3/2023, 8:30 PM, Schubas, 18+  
**Motel Breakfast and more** 2/4/2023, 8:30 PM, Sleeping Village  
**Brooks Nielsen** 4/26/2023, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge 🆓  
**Os Mutantes** 3/10/2023,

9 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+  
**Perpetual Flame Volume One night one featuring Lingua Ignota, Hide, Midwife, Planning for Burial** 4/28/2023, 7:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+  
**Perpetual Flame Volume One night two featuring Lingua Ignota, Thou, Moor Mother, Vile Creature, Ashley Rose Couture (fashion show)** 4/29/2023, 7:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+  
**Perpetual Flame Volume One night three featuring the Reverend Kristin Hayter of Perpetual Flame Ministries tent revival** 4/30/2023, 7:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+  
**Smokey Robinson** 4/28/2023, 7 PM, Hard Rock Casino Northern Indiana, Gary  
**Claire Rousay, Lia Kohl & Zander Raymond Duo** 2/16/2023, 8 PM, Co-Prosperty, 18+  
**Shame** 5/24/2023, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+  
**Michael Shannon, Jason Narducy, and friends perform the Modern Lovers** 1/19/2023, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston 🆓  
**Skillet, Theory of a Deadman** 2/17/2023, 6 PM, Hard Rock Casino Northern Indiana, Gary  
**Skizzy Mars** 3/4/2023, 8 PM, Subterranean, 17+  
**That 1 Guy** 3/1/2023, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+  
**Totally Cashed, Sweet Bike, Calicoloco, Gosh Diggity** 1/13/2023, 8 PM, Gman Tavern  
**Vulgar Boatmen** 1/7/2023, 8 PM, Schubas  
**Walkmen** 5/19/2023-5/20/2023, 7:30 PM, Metro, 18+  
**Morgan Wallen, Hardy, Ernest, Bailey Zimmerman** 6/22/2023, 6 PM, Wrigley Field 🆓  
**Morgan Wallen, Parker McCollum, Ernest, Bailey Zimmerman** 6/23/2023, 6 PM, Wrigley Field 🆓  
**Weekend Run Club, Pinksqueeze, Calicoloco** 1/6/2023, 8 PM, Schubas, 18+  
**Westerman** 5/17/2023, 8 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+  
**Wheelwright** 4/7/2023, 8 PM, Golden Dagger  
**Yeat** 3/2/2023, 7 PM, Aragon Ballroom  
**Sheryl Youngblood Blues Band** 1/16/2023, 7:30 PM, SPACE, Evanston 🆓  
**Zeke, Speedealer** 1/13/2023, 9 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 17+

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## UPDATED

**Protomen, Cybertronic Spree** 2/24/2023-2/25/2023, 9 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 2/24 show added, 2/25 sold out, 17+

## UPCOMING

**Algoritmo** 12/22, 7 PM, Fitzgerald's, Berwyn 🆓  
**Borgore, Lucii, Tynan, Chassi** 12/31, 10 PM, Concord Music Hall, 18+  
**Serge Devant** 12/23, 10 PM, Prysm Nightclub  
**La Tosca featuring Andrea Falcone, Stephanie Pielck, Boleszek Osinski, Lou Marini, and David Ilardi** 12/23, 8 PM, Green Mill  
**Michael McDermott** 12/22-12/23, 8 PM, City Winery 🆓  
**Roya Naldi** 12/22, 8 PM, Hungry Brain  
**Natural Information Society, Separatist Party (Marvin Tate, Ben LaMar Gay, Mike Reed, Bitchin Bajás)** 12/31, 9 PM, Constellation, 18+  
**Rod Tuffcurls & the Bench Press** 12/30, 9 PM, Joe's  
**Sonny** 12/29, 8:30 PM, the Promontory, 17+  
**Thaddeus Tukes Quartet** 12/22-12/24, 8 and 10 PM; 12/25, 4 and 8 PM, Jazz Showcase 🆓  
**Twas the Night Before Xmas Eve Juke Jam featuring Fendi Da Rapper, Pamp & Da Knox, DJ Nehpets, DJ Clent, Traxman, DJ Stak Chip, and more** 12/23, 9 PM, Avondale Music Hall  
**Lil' Ed Williams with Mama Rosa's All-Stars Band** 12/22 and 12/29, 9:30 PM, Rosa's Lounge  
**Bobbi Wilsyn Quintet featuring Miguel de la Cerna, Marlene Rosenberg, Frank Morrison, and Larry Brown** 12/22, 7:30 and 9:30 PM, Winter's Jazz Club  
**Young Wolf, Uncanny Snow, Savo** 12/28, 9 PM, the Promontory, 17+  
**Zedd** 12/29, 10 PM, Radius Chicago, 18+ 🆓



## GOSSIP WOLF

A furry ear to the ground of the local music scene

**SOUTH-SIDE NATIVE** and Chicago soul artist **Manasseh** has all the skills to become a superstar. His sumptuous voice and incisive lyrics, as well as his stellar craftsmanship as a vocal and instrumental arranger, have made all his recordings knockouts. His most recent release is the March 2022 full-length **Monochromatic Dream**, whose delicious earworms of psychedelic soul traverse a glorious kaleidoscope of tones and moods. Needless to say, this wolf is breathless with anticipation for his forthcoming EP **Variations VI: I'll Be**, set to drop early in 2023. Manasseh will likely give you some idea what to expect and when during his **Museum of Contemporary Art** concert at 6 PM on Tuesday, December 13. It's part of the museum's **Soundtrack** series, which invites local musicians to respond to the themes of a current exhibit—in this case, the multimedia piece *She Mad Season One* by Los Angeles artist Martine Syms. Manasseh will be joined by his stellar backing band, the **Fam**: drummer **Brandon Cameron**, bassist **Lamonté Norwood**, keyboardist **Remon Sanders**, and vocalists **Blake Davis** and **Lisha Denise**.

On Thursday, December 8, local hip-hop blog **FromChicagoToTheWorld** and podcast **Real Ones** host a showcase at **Cole's Bar** called the **Igloo**. The concert features four emerging vocalists who bring an R&B sensibility to hip-hop and pop: **S-O-S**, **Sherren Olivia**, **Sydney August**, and **Ine'a J**. Tickets are \$20 (\$15 in advance), and doors open at 9 PM.

Upstart Chicago indie-rock trio **Friko** have had a banner year since the March release of **Whenever Forever**, a lush romp of an EP. They wrapped up their first tour last week, and they're releasing a black-and-white video for their chamber-pop tune "Holdin' on People" that combines animation, live action, and digital rotoscoping. Plus they headline an all-ages show at **Metro** on Thursday, December 8! **Cafe Racer** and **Lifeguard** open. —J.R. NELSON AND LEOR GALIL

Got a tip? Tweet @Gossip\_Wolf or email [gossipwolf@chicagoreader.com](mailto:gossipwolf@chicagoreader.com).



## REGULAR DICKS

### Stop sitting on that man

You should expect kindness, even in a casual relationship.

By DAN SAVAGE

**Q:** I recently split from a committed, monogamous, extremely long-term relationship. I'm now exploring the dating scene as someone who has never dated online prior to this year. I'm a woman with kids, and I'm not looking for another parent. I want to keep things casual. I haven't had any boyfriends yet, just a couple of regular dicks. I keep getting pissed at my regular dicks for making me feel like I'm not the most important thing in their lives, which is kind of the whole point of keeping things casual. Do you have any slutting advice? —**DIVORCED AND MEETING PEOPLE**

**A:** Do I have any slutting advice? Oh, honey. There's 30 years' worth of advice for sluts in the archives of Savage Love and the *Savage Lovecast*. But here's a little slutty advice just for you . . .

Casual relationships are still relationships, DAMP. So, even if you're not the most important thing in the life of some man whose dick you're sitting on regularly—and you know it and you're keeping your expectations and demands in check—you shouldn't be made to feel like the least important thing in his life either. If a guy can't be considerate, if he can't be respectful (of your time) and grateful (for your pussy), stop sitting on that dick. Even if the dick is spectacular,

DAMP, go find another seat. Because being kind to a sex partner—casual or committed, regular or irregular—is a very low bar, DAMP, and you shouldn't put up with men who can't be bothered to clear it.

That said, DAMP, sometimes a person needs a nudge. Some people worry a casual sex partner will mistake kindness for romantic interest and are performatively inconsiderate to avoid confusion (instead of using their words); others have actually had casual sex partners mistake kindness for romantic interest and are overcorrecting (instead of using their words). So, if one of your regular dicks is being ungrateful or unkind, use your words. Make it clear to him that you wanna keep things casual but that you expect to be treated with kindness and consideration. Good (or good enough) guys will show you more consideration going forward, DAMP, and guys who aren't good (or aren't good enough) will show you their asses—they'll make no effort to be more considerate—and you shouldn't put up with (or sit down on) those dicks.

Finally, DAMP, while kindness and consideration are perfectly reasonable expectations where casual sex partners are concerned, endless conversations to process your feelings are not. So, I would advise to confide in a

trusted friend or two about your frustrations before you confront one of your regular dicks about something that's bothering you. Are you pissed about something that you, as a casual sex partner, have a right to be pissed about? Or are you pissed about something that you don't have a right to be pissed about? If he's flaking on you at the last minute or treating you like a cum dump (no small talk, no after-care), you have a right to be pissed. Those are things you can confront a dick about. If he hasn't been able to see you for a while because he's busy (one of the top reasons people seek casual sex partners) or if he ended things because you wanted to keep things casual and he wanted something serious, you don't have a right to be pissed about that. Those are things you vent to a friend about.

P.S. Get tested regularly, insist on condoms, make sure these dicks know your kids are your first priority, make sure kids are your first priority, don't take it personally when a casual sex partner moves on, be the kind of casual sex partner you want to see in the world (be kind and considerate yourself), and when you're ready for a relationship again, DAMP, don't rule out guys you've been seeing casually.


**Q:** I don't know if you're watching the second season


of *The White Lotus*, Dan, but you'll get this reference if you are: I'm a married straight woman who recently got herself a personal trainer. My husband cheated on me on and off for the first decade of our marriage. He agreed to see a marriage counselor with me, and he pretended that the cheating was tied to a deep-seated psychological issue. He may have believed that. Our counselor certainly believed it, and for a while I did too. But the cheating never stopped. It's been a few years since I've had sex with him, but I don't want to leave him because we have kids, and our relationship is actually pretty loving and low conflict now that we're not fighting about cheating. (It also helps that I don't have to worry about getting gonorrhea from him ever

again.) The kids need me less these days, so I got a personal trainer about a year ago. I don't feel guilty or bad about it. But I somehow feel both guilty and bad for not feeling guilty or bad. What is that about? —**ABUNDANT PERSONAL TRAINING**

**A:** First and most importantly, APT, of course I'm watching the second season of *The White Lotus*. Mike White is a genius, I can't wait for the finale, but I never want it to end. (Here's hoping Cameron and Ethan at least make out before one or both or neither of them dies.) Moving on . . .

You shouldn't feel bad about seeking sex elsewhere—excuse me, for seeking *personal training* elsewhere—but you already know that. And if you're feeling

bad about not feeling bad . . . well, that's most likely because sessions with your personal trainer aren't just about personal training. They're about that, of course, but they're also about your marriage. Your marriage isn't what you expected it would be, APT, and now you aren't someone you expected to be—you know, the kind of woman who has a personal trainer. So, I don't think you're feeling guilty and bad for not feeling guilty or bad. I think you're feeling grief (for what your marriage was supposed to be) and relief (at making peace with your marriage as it is). Enjoy those sessions, APT, you've earned them. 

Send your questions to [mailbox@savage.love](mailto:mailbox@savage.love). Podcasts, columns, and more at [Savage.Love](https://www.savage.love)  [@fakedansavage](https://twitter.com/fakedansavage)

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Installation view, *Forecast Form: Art in the Caribbean Diaspora, 1990s–Today*, MCA Chicago, November 19, 2022–April 23, 2023. Photo: Ricardo Adame © MCA Chicago

# FORECAST FORM

## ART IN THE CARIBBEAN DIASPORA, 1990s–TODAY

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Special weekend notes losses—and strengths—in trans community

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Jeff Berry.  
Photo by John Gress



Chicago activist

# Jeff Berry

discusses advocacy  
for aging persons  
living with HIV

BY MATT SIMONETTE

For longtime Chicago activist Jeff Berry, becoming the first executive director of the Reunion Project—a national alliance centering aging persons living with HIV, which Berry co-founded in 2015—was a significant but logical professional leap.

Berry, who started in the new post in Sept. 2022, had been editor-in-chief at the publication *Positively Aware* since 2005 (he was named interim editor-in-chief the previous year as well). *Positively Aware* focuses on HIV/AIDS treatments and related information.

Berry co-founded the Reunion Project with San Francisco-based HIV advocate Matt Sharp, who was active for a number of years in Chicago. According to its website, the Reunion Project collaborates “with local and national HIV advocates, providers and researchers. Together, we convene and connect individuals and communities, sharing our experiences of survival and loss while honoring our past, and developing successful strategies for living and supporting one another—today and into the future.”

Sharp and Berry first collaborated on the organization “at a time when people were starting to talk about long term survival and what that means,” Berry said. “For those of us who survived the early days of the epidemic, we felt left behind by the very organizations that we had helped to create. The Reunion Project sprang out of this need for us to share our stories on survival and talk about resilience, and connecting to get our-

selves out of isolation.”

The issues facing long-term HIV survivors have long been expected by advocates.

“We were seeing long-term side effects from [HIV] medications,” Berry said. “But we also are starting to see people with a greater number of co-morbidities than our [HIV-] negative counterparts. We’re also seeing mental health issues—issues around isolation, issues around PTSD from all the trauma we experienced during the epidemic.”

“We were losing our friends, family and community. Folks weren’t there to pass the torch to us. We had to build these systems and organizations. Yet when we needed services around HIV and aging, they didn’t exist.”

The Reunion Project is now there to fill in the gaps as providers contend with what Berry called a “silver tsunami” of aging persons living with HIV.

He explained, “As our entire population is aging, I don’t think our country—our society as a whole—is prepared for the baby boomers who are aging, let alone people with HIV who are aging. I think that there is an opportunity for community there.”

“It’s up to us to step up and help to build those systems that are going to be there to provide quality care and culturally appropriate care that’s going to help us age with grace and dignity into our golden years.”

Back in 1989, shortly after being diagnosed

with HIV, Berry too was seeking services to help him live a healthful and productive life with the condition. He sought those services from the HIV/AIDS service provider TPAN, and also made personal and professional connections that would change his life.

He recalled, “I was at TPAN for almost 30 years. ... I went there seeking services originally, and what I found was a community of people like me who were also struggling. That was how we exchanged information back then—through support groups, meetings. This was before the age of the internet.”

“I kept getting this magazine [*Positively Aware*, which is published by TPAN] in the mail, ... I had retired from my job DJ-ing at [gay nightclub] *Bistro Too*, and was kind of just in this space where I was ready for what was next.”

Berry responded to an ad in the magazine seeking volunteers. That eventually led to a full-time position in Nov. 1992.

“I was always working on the magazine in one capacity or another,” he explained. “I started out just answering phones. ... Then I started doing distribution, and working in a number of different capacities, including maintaining the website and working on advertising.”

After years of working for *Positively Aware* though, Berry was ready for a change: “I realized that I had done all that I had set out to do with the magazine all that I had set out to do. I real-

ized that it was the perfect opportunity to kind of pass the torch and move on to something that I was passionate about.”

Berry and the Reunion Project are now hiring a full-time senior program coordinator, and planning a series of nationwide town hall meetings that assist in developing, alongside existing local community organizations, programs for long-term survivors of HIV/AIDS. Reunion Project also programs events providing resources for persons with HIV returning to work after a long time outside the work force.

“What we don’t want to ever do is go into a community or city and say, ‘Here we’ve got this program for you. Isn’t it great and wonderful?’ Then we leave two days later,” Berry said. “Rather we work with a community for a program that they want and they need, so that we can spark a network of long-term survivors in that community. That’s how we build our alliances.”

He added, “We’re very proud of what we’ve done so far and what’s coming in the years ahead.”



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# Greg Harris

Outgoing state rep and majority leader discusses historic terms

BY ANDREW DAVIS

Illinois state Rep. Greg Harris.  
Photo by Vern Hester

In November 2021, Illinois House Democratic Majority Leader Greg Harris announced that he would not run for another term—bringing an end to a historic era.

Harris was first elected in 2006, succeeding former Rep. Larry McKeon, who was part of the LGBTQ+ community and HIV-positive. However, Harris became the first openly gay individual with HIV/AIDS to be elected and eventually lead his/her/their party in the Illinois General Assembly. He also became known for, among many other things, his fights for civil unions and marriage equality before the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. Constitution guarantees same-sex marriage.

Harris recently talked with Windy City Times about his accomplishments and the future, among other topics.

**Windy City Times: I'm going to start with the most basic question: Why now?**

Greg Harris: Every two years, we have to decide if we're going to pass petitions and get our names on the ballot so it's always a question: Do I want

to keep going?

So it's been 16 years. A lot of the things I came in to do [were things] I got done: marriage equality, fighting for trans fights. I've been through four governors, one of whom we impeached and one who we bitterly fought to preserve union rights and to avoid gutting human services. That was a huge fight and marriage equality was a huge fight. We had the Great Recession and COVID. It's been a lot and I've done a lot—but at some point, you've got to say, "I've done the things I want to do and it's time to move on and make way for people who want to do new and different things."

There are a lot of younger folks who are chomping at the bit to get into politics and to begin making policies for their generation—but if those of us who are there don't get out of the way, it makes it harder for them to do that. That was on my mind during the change of speakers. [Editor's note: The new speaker is Emanuel "Chris" Welch.] In my mind, it had to be a person from a different generation and it was important to support our first Black speaker. All of those

things were on my mind.

**WCT: Was being chief of staff to Ald. [Mary Ann] Smith [for the 14 years before being in the General Assembly] the catalyst that stoked your political fire?**

GH: Actually, not really. It certainly gave me the basis for getting involved. I didn't go to that job thinking I was getting ready for a bigger job.

I went to that job because of AIDS hitting Chicago. I moved to Chicago in 1977 and, up to that job, my involvement with the gay community was bars and clubs—that kind of thing. There weren't that many LGBT organizations at that time, anyway, but I didn't seek them out then. AIDS came to Chicago and all my friends were getting sick and dying. That's when we all decided that we had to get into the fight and respond. That's when I got involved in community stuff. I had a good background: I was in management and I understood marketing and fundraising—skills that were easily transferable to this new thing. Then I learned about advocacy and political/community organizing as part of the AIDS movement.



But nowhere along the line did I think that I'd go be a state rep or elected official. As time went on, though, I looked at things that still needed to be done for the LGBT community—and a lot of them were things that came out of Springfield and state government: healthcare policy, equal rights, legal policy, family and domestic laws. So when the opportunity came along—when my predecessor, Larry McKeon, decided not to run again—I thought, “Here’s a chance. I’m going to throw my name into the mix.” I think there were about 11 candidates then.

**WCT: You never faced an opponent in a general election. That got rid of some worries.**

GH: But you’ve got to work every year to be sure—especially in a diverse district like this one, with 91 languages spoken on a daily basis—that you’re on top of things. You have to be helpful year-round. Some politicians coast during the year and then [rev things up] during the campaign season.

**WCT: Take me back to the Greg Harris of 2006, when you were first in the General Assembly. Were you idealistic and hopeful?**

GH: Yes; I was idealistic and hopeful—but, having had some government experience, I knew you had to have long-game strategies for some of these ideas that involved taking people along with you. I had seen coalitions get built so I saw how that worked. I also saw opponents can work behind the scenes to kill your ideas. Also, I had relationships with a lot of people and interpersonal relationships make a lot of these things work.

But, yes, I had a lot of hopes. I remember being introduced as the guy who was going to pass marriage equality. It turned out that a lot of people I was introduced to laughed and said, “That’s not going to happen anytime soon.” It happened seven years later—but now it looks kind of quaint. People look back now and ask, “Was that a struggle? Was that a fight?”

**WCT: It’s interesting how time can change perspective.**

GH: Yes, but the general public’s perception of marriage equality has changed so much. Even when we were doing that, a lot of the national pollsters marveled at the fact that, in the decade they had polled about marriage equality, it was [approximately] 70% when DOMA [the Defense of Marriage Act] was introduced. When we passed marriage equality in 2013, the numbers were about 64% to 70% in favor. At the time we started on the trek to civil unions, the polling data showed that wanting equal rights was the most persuasive argument at the time. But just a couple years later—as people got to know more LGBT people—the most persuasive argument became that families just want to have their relationships, experience love and have a better world.

**WCT: How concerned are you about marriage equality being lost in the wake of Roe v. Wade being overturned? [Editor’s note: This question was asked before the developments regarding the Respect for Marriage Act that Congress is considering.]**



Illinois state Rep. Greg Harris and then-Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan at the Chicago Pride Parade in 2015.

Photo by Ed Negron



Illinois state Rep. Greg Harris and then-Illinois Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon at Chicago nightclub Sidetrack celebrating the passage of the state's marriage-equality bill. WCT photo



Photo by Matt Simonette

GH: Oh, I think it’s a real concern. Illinois was the last state that was able to pass marriage equality; national strategists didn’t see another real opportunity. We were also the last state to pass it before the Supreme Court decided. At that time, the president was an Illinois native so, also, what did that say about the White House?

It’s one of these things where MAGA nationalist Republicans... No one ever thought the arc of the moral universe would turn and bend the other way, but these people are intent on taking us back to a different time where, if you’re not like them, you don’t deserve a place in society. People have been warning us about Roe for many years.

Now Illinois has its local laws so if the Supreme Court says, “The states should figure this out,” then we’re protected. But what happens if you go on vacation in Florida? I talked with [a couple] who are traumatized; they’re asking, “What are we going to do about documents and stuff like that if we go to a state where our family’s not recognized?”

Also, there’s the question of how businesses handle this issue. If the Supreme Court dissolves marriage equality on a national basis, then what do you do if you’re in Indiana? I’m not sure some people get how suddenly this could all disappear.

**WCT: What do you wish you had accomplished during your years in the Illinois House?**

GH: [Pauses] There are a lot of things that I wish we could do more of, but that’s building on previous successes. I’m having a hard time thinking of things I wish I had gotten done. There are some healthcare reforms that I wish were passed, especially for low-income people.

**WCT: What’s your advice for your successor [Hoan Huynh, who became the first Vietnamese American in the General Assembly when he was elected Nov. 8]?**

GH: I’ve been giving him plenty. We’ve been talking about basics. The first six months to a year, I’d listen to people debate topics and I’d go, “I don’t even know what this is.” [Laughs] I think he’s doing the right thing—building relationships and seeking experts in the fields he’s interested in, like healthcare, housing and immigration. Also, I’ve told him to make sure that your word is your bond; that goes a long way—don’t BS people. The other thing that I said to him—that took me a while to learn—is that you can have all the policy positions in the world but you have to have the political power and understand the process to get things done. The rules in the chamber can help bring your success or used to torpedo you in no time flat.

**WCT: What’s in Greg Harris’ future?**

GH: I have no idea. We have a veto session ahead.

**WCT: Do you see yourself running for political office again down the line?**

GH: Well, that’s a long time to look forward.

**WCT: So anything can happen?**

GH: [Harris nods.]



Arthur Johnston and Pepe Pena in a scene from the documentary *Art and Pep*.  
Courtesy of Daisy May Films



## documents the accomplishments by and love between Chicago activists

BY MATT SIMONETTE

While giving a speech at a party early in the new documentary *Art and Pep*, activist and Sidetrack co-owner Arthur Johnston says, “The only ones we gay people can rely on is each other.”

*Art and Pep* depicts how Johnston and longtime partner/co-owner Pepe Pena reached that conclusion, one that is born more out of commitment to community than resentment at the world outside the LGBTQ+ community. The film traces several narrative threads: Johnston and Pena’s childhoods; the beginnings of their nearly five-decade relationship; their opening of Sidetrack on North Halsted Street; and their activism around HIV/AIDS and anti-gay discrimination in the ‘80s and ‘90s.

The film debuted in October as part of the Chicago International Film Festival.

One other threat unexpectedly reared itself as the film was in production: the COVID-19 pandemic, during which Johnston and Pena had to close Sidetrack for a month. Johnston also became gravely ill from the virus.

Filmmaker Mercedes Kane, a longtime Chicagoan who now lives in Atlanta, said she was inspired to make the film after marketing executive Kevin Hauswirth, who would eventually be an executive producer on *Art and Pep*, told her about the couple.

“My first thought was, ‘This needs to be a documentary,’” Kane recalled.

The film shows how Johnston, a former school teacher, met Pena when the latter was bartending and, ironically, dating another man named Arthur. In 1982, inspired by a San Francisco video bar called the Midnight Sun, they opened Sidetrack as Chicago’s first video bar.

Kane documents hard challenges for the couple: vandalism against the bar, an arrest of Johnston, and an AIDS crisis that robbed Johnston and Pena of so many friends. But she also shows the triumphs in which the couple take part, among them the mobilization of the gay and lesbian community to both care for and fight for the rights of people living with AIDS, and Johnston’s

helping form the “Gang of Four” alongside activists Rick Garcia, Laurie Dittman and Jon-Henri Damski. That group eventually morphed into the Equality Illinois advocacy organization.

Convincing the couple to take part in Kane’s project took some time—both Johnston and Pena, despite often being in the public eye, value their privacy. “They were definitely reluctant subjects,” Kane said. But when I met with them, I was definitely able to see their love for each other. ... I sort of fell in love with their love in that moment.”

Kane doesn’t remember a depiction of such long-lasting love between two men on any screen, she said. “There are a lot of reasons for that. One is the AIDS crisis, which prevented many of those relationships. The other is that there has not been a lot of attention given to it.”

The film was shot over two years. Kane said that COVID—so difficult a hurdle for both the filmmaker and her subjects—ironically allowed

all involved to build an extra level of trust.

“We sort of fast-tracked that trust,” Kane said.

She was present while Johnston and Pena, like all bar and restaurant owners in the city, were faced with orders to close their businesses during the pandemic.

“Sidetrack is a really big small business,” Kane said. “They have 65 employees and customers who come in weekly, and some who come in daily. It was a fracturing of that community and a hardship for many people.”

It took time for Pena to grow comfortable around Kane’s camera, she said. While Johnston was used to being interviewed by the media, he also needed time to get used to Kane being present in their private moments.

“There was that scene where they were in bed together,” Kane recalled. “They did not want to let us get that shot. They just said, ‘You don’t need that.’ I said, ‘Listen: If this were a love story between a man and a woman, these sort of intimate shots would be in the film and no one





Images utilized by filmmaker Mercedes Kane in the documentary *Art and Pep*, including one (below) of Arthur Johnston and Pepe Pena in the the '80s.  
 Courtesy of Daisy May Films

would think anything of it. If we don't include any of that, it's going to look like a purposeful decision to not include that. That's part of your love story."

After seeing the film, Johnston told Kane, "The best thing we ever did was let you into bed with us."

*Art and Pep* also addresses inequities disproportionately felt by transgender people of color. Kane spoke with, among numerous activists and public figures, E3 Radio's Anna DeShawn, who the audience also sees interviewing Johnston and Pena. Johnston says at one point, "There was a time when all gay people were treated the same way Black trans people are treated today."

"That year [2020] had just so much unrest happen, and *Art and Pep* had been a part of that unrest for so many years," Kane said. "The community still has big fights, now more than ever. This film became even more significant politically because of everything going on right now."

She added that the film had to show that

struggles against inequities were not finished, and that "there was a new generation of people who have taken the torch from *Art and Pep*'s generation and have taken it forward in all these unique ways."

Kane said that, above all else, she "loves telling real people's stories. I say on my website that they are 'everyday exceptions'—people in the community you pass by and not realize that they are doing the work to change the world around them."

She recently finished a film about historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), although she is not yet sure about its distribution.

"Living in Atlanta, there are so many HBCUs, and I was able to work with a really diverse crew there, and I learned so much. That's another thing I love about writing stories and making films—you learn so much about history, people and their motivations."

See <https://www.daisymayfilms.com/art-and-pep>.



Stephenson's map illustrating findings from their project, LGBTQ+ Spaces Chicago.

# Chicago scholar focuses their work on LGBTQ+ seniors

BY CARRIE MAXWELL

# Their stories

When we think about how LGBTQ+ age, helping people feel connected and “seen” is just one of the many ways a community can care for LGBTQ+ elders. It can contribute to their mental health as they navigate the other challenges of aging. Frenca Stephenson is helping compile their histories.

When Stephenson, a self-described nerd for LGBTQ+ history, was faced with their masters thesis at School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), they focused their research on Queer People of Color (QPOC) and transgender seniors' experiences in Chicago LGBTQ+ spaces from the '70s-'90s.

Stephenson's interest stemmed from exploring the community-additive Queering the Map online platform when they were not in class at SAIC; that's when Stephenson first learned about the now-defunct Belmont Rocks.

“Belmont Rocks was an extremely significant example of LGBTQ+ people claiming public space for decades, only for it to be demolished,” said Stephenson. “I [yearned] to know more about LGBTQ+ spaces in Chicago. The previous semester, I had joined the LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project, an organization that brings LGBTQ+ college students and elders together in conversation and community. Through that experience, I formed friendships with those elders.”

Their thesis project took shape in a course titled Art as a Social Force, where Stephenson interviewed five LGBTQ+ elders—four queer people of color and one transgender elder—about their

history with LGBTQ+ spaces in Chicago.

“I originally wanted to know which spaces were the most meaningful to them,” Stephenson recalled. “From the interviews, I created short audio clips about two spaces each elder identified as being meaningful. These were plotted on a Google map I named LGBTQ+ Spaces Chicago, alongside archival research of queer spaces of color and transgender spaces from the '70s-'90s that was compiled at the Gerber/Hart Library and Archives.”

The LGBTQ+ Spaces Chicago map is a work in progress, according to Stephenson. They are hoping to embed the audio clips within the map to make it more interactive but need to hire a designer to make it happen.

The map is at [tinyurl.com/2t2hc9ah](https://tinyurl.com/2t2hc9ah).

Stephenson found three of these interview subjects through the LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project. Two were already friends with Stephenson. They quickly became friends with the third person. The fourth person came to Stephenson through one of the dialogue members. Stephenson found the fifth person because they were interested in talking to him after seeing him in the Out and Proud in Chicago documentary. Stephenson is also reaching out for their next cohort of interviewees.

“I also interviewed Owen Keehnen, a prominent LGBTQ+ historian, especially about the Belmont Rocks,” they added.

Stephenson called the interviewing process “incredible. I love it and get a lot of energy and

## For more information on LGBTQ+ elders resources

[centeronhalsted.org/senior.html](https://centeronhalsted.org/senior.html)

[sageusa.org](https://sageusa.org)

[aarp.org/home-family/voices/lgbt-pride](https://aarp.org/home-family/voices/lgbt-pride)

[lgbtmap.org/policy-and-issue-analysis/lgbtq-older-adults](https://lgbtmap.org/policy-and-issue-analysis/lgbtq-older-adults)

[lgbtelderinitiative.org](https://lgbtelderinitiative.org)



**Frenca Stephenson.**

Photo by Megan Stephenson

“Most of the people I talked to said they have experienced ageism within the LGBTQ+ community where they now feel invisible in certain spaces when that was not the case when they were younger,” said Stephenson. “This has made them feel isolated, and that was made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic lock-downs.”

For their next cohort, Stephenson will talk to three new elders and also do a deeper dive with three of the previous interviewees. Additionally, they will speak with Windy City Times Co-Founder/Owner and Chicago Reader Publisher Tracy Baim and transgender historian Andre Perez.

The results will be made available in the Spring but Stephenson hopes to continue with the project after they graduate because they still want to talk to many more QPOC and trans elders and learn about additional LGBTQ+ Chicago spaces.

“I hope people can see how LGBTQ+ people live(d) and occupy spaces all over Chicago,” said Stephenson. “I hope the audio stories I create help audiences visualize the space and picture it in space, regardless of whether it still exists or not. I also want to emphasize that QPOC and transgender people's, as well as elders', stories are so very important, especially when white cis voices are prioritized. With the rampant attacks on LGBTQ+ rights, especially the rights of trans people, I hope my project can make a statement that we have existed and will continue to exist, and that our lives and experiences are important.”

Stephenson said that if QPOC elders over the age of 55-60 and trans elders over the age of 40 who still live or have lived in Chicago or the surrounding suburbs would like to be interviewed for this project, they should email them at [ssteph5@artic.edu](mailto:ssteph5@artic.edu).

They are also looking to pay a web designer to make the necessary changes to their LGBTQ+ Spaces Chicago map and have asked that prospective hires email them as well.

See [LGBTQ+ Spaces Chicago](https://lgbtq-spaces-chicago.com) and [generationliberation.com](https://generationliberation.com).



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# Michael Horvich

## A caregiver remembers his talented husband

BY ANDREW DAVIS

Michael Horvich has had many roles in his lifetime, among them teacher, photographer and author.

However, one of his most important was being caregiver to Gregory Maire—Horvich's husband of 41 years, who died in 2015.

Maire was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in the 29th year of their relationship (2003); he was 55 years old.

"For the longest time I didn't want to be called a caregiver," Horvich said. "That would reduce Greg to being my patient and that was never the case. Our relationship was always built on respect and communication for more than 41 years.

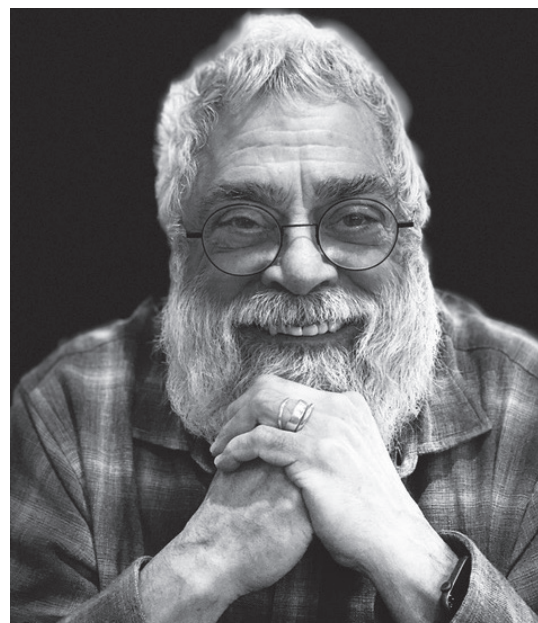
"However, as things progressed, it did turn into caregiving—and it turned into a lot of nursing care. Helping him with a lot of things he couldn't

igating his way through their Evanston building became difficult for Maire, underscoring how every aspect of the couple's lives changed because of the disease.

In addition, Horvich recalled that it was difficult to gauge what Maire would remember: "I would ask, 'Greg, did you take your meds?' and he'd say, 'Yeah, I did'—but when I double-checked, he hadn't."

Furthermore, there were other aspects to contend with, Horvich said: "Another thing that complicated things with the coming and going of cognitive ability is that you never really knew what he knew or didn't know.

"And [I had] to do that in a way that allowed me to deal with my own emotions, but not put those emotions on him. For example, I learned



Michael Horvich.  
Courtesy of Horvich

to become childlike. I remember that he got lost in a Whole Foods and there was such a frightened look on his face."

As for family and friends, Horvich said, "They were supportive. People are always good-natured and asked, 'What can I do to help?' It's hard for a caregiver to decide or ask, so it's always nicer if the person says, 'I'm bringing dinner over.'" In other words, it helps to be proactive.

When asked what he'd like people to remember about Maire, Horvich listed several of his late husband's talents. "He was a high-end architect/interior designer. He had a great knack for listening to his clients and creating [the right] scenarios for them. He was also talented with historic renovations.

"He sang; he was with the Chicago Gay Men's Chorus. We had a beautiful grand piano and he'd play gorgeous classical music; he really loved Chopin, but he did Mozart and Beethoven. For me, the concept of home was sitting and listen-

ing to him practice. When he couldn't play the piano anymore, he decided to sell it. Also, he was president of DIFFA [Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS]."

Regarding Maire, "People say, 'I'm so sorry' and I just say, 'He was ready to go,'" Horvich said. "And while I miss him terribly, I'm happy that he decided it was time. It would've been selfish of me to want him to hold on just to make me feel better.

"When you love someone, you do what you have to. A lot of people said, 'Michael, the fact that you stuck it out...' I can't imagine NOT [doing that]. If you really love someone, you don't desert them at a time like that."

Horvich's website, <https://horvich.com/>, contains vast amounts of information about various aspects of Alzheimer's. In addition, *Alzheimer's: A Love Story*—a 15-minute documentary about a week in Maire's last year—is at <https://tinyurl.com/yc75e39u>.



Michael Horvich (right) with late husband Gregory Maire.  
Courtesy of Horvich

do for himself anymore—but in a respectful way. So I was more of a caregiving partner—or there was the caregiving team, which were me, Greg, the cats, the doctors and the specialists.

"For instance, in the beginning, when we went to a restaurant, he decided what he wanted to eat. Then, I'd make some suggestions; then, I'd pick what he wanted. Eventually, toward the end, there was this period where he lost trust in me." Horvich also talked about how everything from cooking to reading ("At one point, I brought in this brand-new technology [for Maire] called a newspaper, where you turn the pages") to nav-

how to cry in our bed without shaking it [because] that would wake him. If I had a lot of crying to do, I'd take a shower."

At one point, Maire was transferred to Skokie's Lieberman Center for Health & Rehabilitation. "If I hadn't, I would've had to turn the condo into a 24/7 medical unit," said Horvich.

"Living with Alzheimer's doesn't have to be a death sentence, although it wasn't easy," Horvich emphasized. "You can live fairly well with it, although it's certainly a degenerative type of situation. You can't make assumptions and treat him a child; he wasn't, although his abilities started

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Artwork by Molly Costello



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This is only a brief summary of important information about BIKTARVY and does not replace talking to your healthcare provider about your condition and your treatment.

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# Activist Donald Bell

## reflects on aging and intersectional identities

BY MATT SIMONETTE

Longtime Chicago activist Donald Bell, a resident of the Town Hall apartments in Lake View who has been especially active in LGBTQ+ senior-related issues is keenly aware of the the significance of intersecting identities.

Bell explained, “From my lens, as an LGBT elder, having lived 73 years now—which have included the arcs of both LGBT history and civil rights history—I am of course keenly aware of the dangers which those of us in Black bodies and those of us in LGBT bodies walk around [facing] every day.”

Bell, a retired higher education administrator, has given much of his time and energy in service to the socio-economic needs of his brethren in the senior-LGBTQ+ community.

Many communities, especially Black and LGBTQ+ ones, he notes, are characterized by the need for spaces where members both feel that they are safe and that they belong. Very frequently, communities will see those spaces come under attack. Those moments, he said are when members of different generations need to step up for one another.

“Club Q is not unique,” Bell said, reflecting on the Colorado Springs nightclub that was in November the site of multiple shooting-deaths and injuries. “If young LGBT people are growing up without a sense of geographical awareness of where safe spaces are, then those of us who are older are failing in our responsibility to inform the youth—because those situations still exist.

“Just like mass shootings in communities of color are regular, normalized things, so are these kinds of things in LGBT communities. ...No matter where it happens in the world, we all experience it.”

He recalled first becoming aware of racial injustice when he was six years old, when Emmet Till’s body was returned to Chicago after Till had been lynched in Mississippi.

“I was very aware of the impact that it had on the whole community,” Bell said. “Everyone was

disturbed ... That was the first time that I had seen grown-ups cry in public. Since grown-ups are the stabilizing influence in a child’s experience—they were distressed so I was distressed. The whole thing left me, at the age of six, with the notion of the danger that I existed because I was born into a Black body.”

Bell grew up in age when gay people were effectively erased within their communities. The only references to gay folks that he remembered were to “strange old men who were effeminate and went—someplace. They weren’t out in public. Of course there was the misrepresentation linking homosexuality with pedophilia. There was danger around that.”

But Bell made a profound realization as he became aware that he was gay: “The danger came not from our community, but from outside our community. It was perfectly alright to say, ‘Kill that queer.’ It was not only legally, but culturally reinforced. Killing a gay man could legally get a straight man off in court—that was a legal excuse.”

Even as society’s understanding of injustices and inequities evolve, those injustices and inequities nevertheless persist. Club Q, Bell said, was not the only injustice visited upon the LGBTQ+ community in November. In Qatar, LGBTQ+ athletes in and visitors to the World Cup were warned against activities calling attention to themselves. The injustices were not equivalent in immediate impact, he emphasized, but did originate from the same systems of oppression.

His stress on the challenge posed for older LGBTQ+ community members loudly supporting younger generations is not meant to criticize those older generations: “When I said ‘failure’ of our older community before, I meant rise to the level of our potential for passing on legacy to younger people. Part of that legacy is the reality of what it’s like to be LGBT, particularly outside of identified LGBT spaces. ... Outside of those spaces, the coming-out experience is almost the



Donald Bell.  
Photo courtesy of Bell

same as it was before for coming out. If you’re coming out on the South side or the West side, your experiences are not the same as it may be on the North Side.

“What is incumbent upon us who have lived this experience, is to make sure that younger people are aware that, while they may find safety here, and the Pride parade might be a great and glorious fun time, [those did not originate] from fun times. They came from issues of our very existence. We can’t lose sight of that.”

Senior LGBTQ+ community members, Bell noted, are also dealing with their own challenges, such as ageism and/or homophobia in group-setting living spaces.

The LGBTQ+ community is “a community of intent—we all come from different communities of origin,” he explained, and still has much work to do to becoming sensitive to one another’s needs: “I have a personal bias because I expect that anyone who is a part of any marginalized community to use their experience of marginalization to help them understand and connect with other people who have other kinds of marginalizations.

“I have different expectations from gay white men than I have of straight white men, for example. I expect gay white men to be more sensitive

to the issues of racism and sexism than white straight men because gay men have been marginalized.”

LGBTQ+ communities are oftentimes no different from others in a continual valorization, if not outright fetishization, of youth. But Bell remarked on the importance of recognizing that his generation—the first especially out generation of LGBTQ+ community members— is “different and unique.”

“We are the ones who have lived the arc of the moment,” he added. “While the fight for the LGBT liberation goes back eons, just like everyone else’s, it is critical that we have lived the experience from the civil rights era to Stonewall and the gay rights movement. When we are gone, there will be no else who is still alive who can share that experience and those perspectives.”



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Chi Waller.  
Courtesy of Waller



## Queer rapper **Chi Waller**

# reflects on her journey, music and Chicago connections

BY ANDREW DAVIS

Many people have taken the past couple of years to take stock of themselves and take their lives in new directions (often called pivoting, of course).

Queer rapper Chi Waller has certainly done the same thing.

It was during her lowest moments in life that her creative juices began to flow like never before. However, this time she didn't recognize her voice as Aaliyah Nicole (her previous incarnation). Now, she's been "reborn" as Chi Waller, reflecting her deep Chicago ties even though she and her partner reside in Atlanta.

"I actually started this whole musical journey at 12 years old," said Waller, 30. "I grew up in the church so I've been around music all my life. I stood out to a particular member, Ricky Campbell, who was also an actor ... so I went for

it. Unfortunately, he passed away before seeing where I ended up. He set that foundation for me to start.

"From that point, I started producing my own shows and formed my first group. That's where I got that first taste [of performing]."

Waller's parents then saw how seriously she took music, propelling them to purchase software (Magix Music Maker) for her. "This particular thing changed the game for me," Waller said, adding that her mother eventually provided access to more sophisticated software and a studio. "They've always been big believers in me." From there, Waller posted music on MySpace.

Waller, at age 18, then produced her first anti-violence showcase on Chicago's West Side, where she grew up. "I was inspired to provide a platform for my peers who had nowhere to go," she said.

College (in Atlanta) was next—and it provided some intriguing opportunities. "I got the wonderful opportunity to open for R&B singer Raheem DeVaughn and to work two shows with [the late actor] Tommy Ford, who was on the show *Martin*. He gave me some amazing words."

Waller had been producing and making music as Aaliyah Nicole (not her birth name) since "I was 16 or 17. I was the only 'Aaliyah Nicole' you'd find, for a while—but that changed."

Needless to say, the COVID-19 pandemic hit many people very hard, including Waller. "That first year was rocky; things got really bad," she told *Windy City Times*. "I lost my job and we [Waller and her partner] ended up relocating to Atlanta by way of Texas. That year changed everything for me. We struggled with homelessness."

However, in the midst of this arduous trek, Waller never lost hope: "We kept [saying,] 'We got this.'" And despite this dark time [2020-21], Waller said it was the best thing for her, musically speaking: "That took me to a whole new level, creatively. However, this doesn't sound like Aaliyah Nicole; this sounds like someone else."

Although Waller initially thought there was an alter ego happening, another change beckoned. "One day earlier this year I looked in the mirror and said, 'You're not Aaliyah Nicole anymore. Who are you?'"

Then a journey toward self-discovery was launched. For this new person, "I knew I wanted a name that connected me with home," said Waller (whose birth name is actually Nicole Marie). "I wanted a name that reflects where I came from. Chicagoans are passionate about where they come from and I wanted something that connected to my West Side roots. For me, it all started on Waller Street—I grew up there and my church was just a few blocks down."

And Waller has released a single entitled, naturally, "It's Chi Waller." Not only does the song—which reflects inspiration from genres such as hip-hop, soul/R&B, reggae and gospel—honor the musician's West Side roots but it also shows the various layers of this multidisciplinary artist.

The new song "just lays the foundation for where we're headed," Waller said. "This is me reintroducing myself to the masses. When all is said is done, I want [the listener] to know that I'm proud of where I come from. I want people to see all aspects of what I have to offer. Just let me welcome you to my world for a moment and show you where we could possibly go.

"But, more than anything else, I want Chicago to feel this one. I want the West Side to know I'm a product of them as well as Oak Park, where I also grew up."

And the accompanying music video was released the day after National Coming Out Day. (Upon being told this, Waller smiled with glee and stated, "I didn't even make that connection!") As for her own coming-out story, Waller (a preacher's kid) had quite the path: "There was a certain expectation, having grown up in the church. It was an interesting journey. I still find men attractive but I tend to have more serious relationships with women. However, growing up, I'd use my attraction to men to hide my attraction to women.

"But as time progressed, I really started to learn about myself. I had my first girlfriend my senior year in high school but it was a [down-low] thing. But it was in college that I was exposed to different things and discovered who Aaliyah Nicole was. My friends knew but telling the pastor and first lady? Believe it or not, I didn't officially take my power back until I was 25 years old; I dropped a video and just owned [my sexuality] and it was well-received. I was in a relationship that helped me navigate this journey."

And with her family, Waller had the proverbial happy ending. "When all is said and done, I come from love and real support," added Waller, who counts Queen Latifah, Lena Waithe and Billy Porter among her LGBTQ+ role models. "Life is great, and the acceptance and love are all there."



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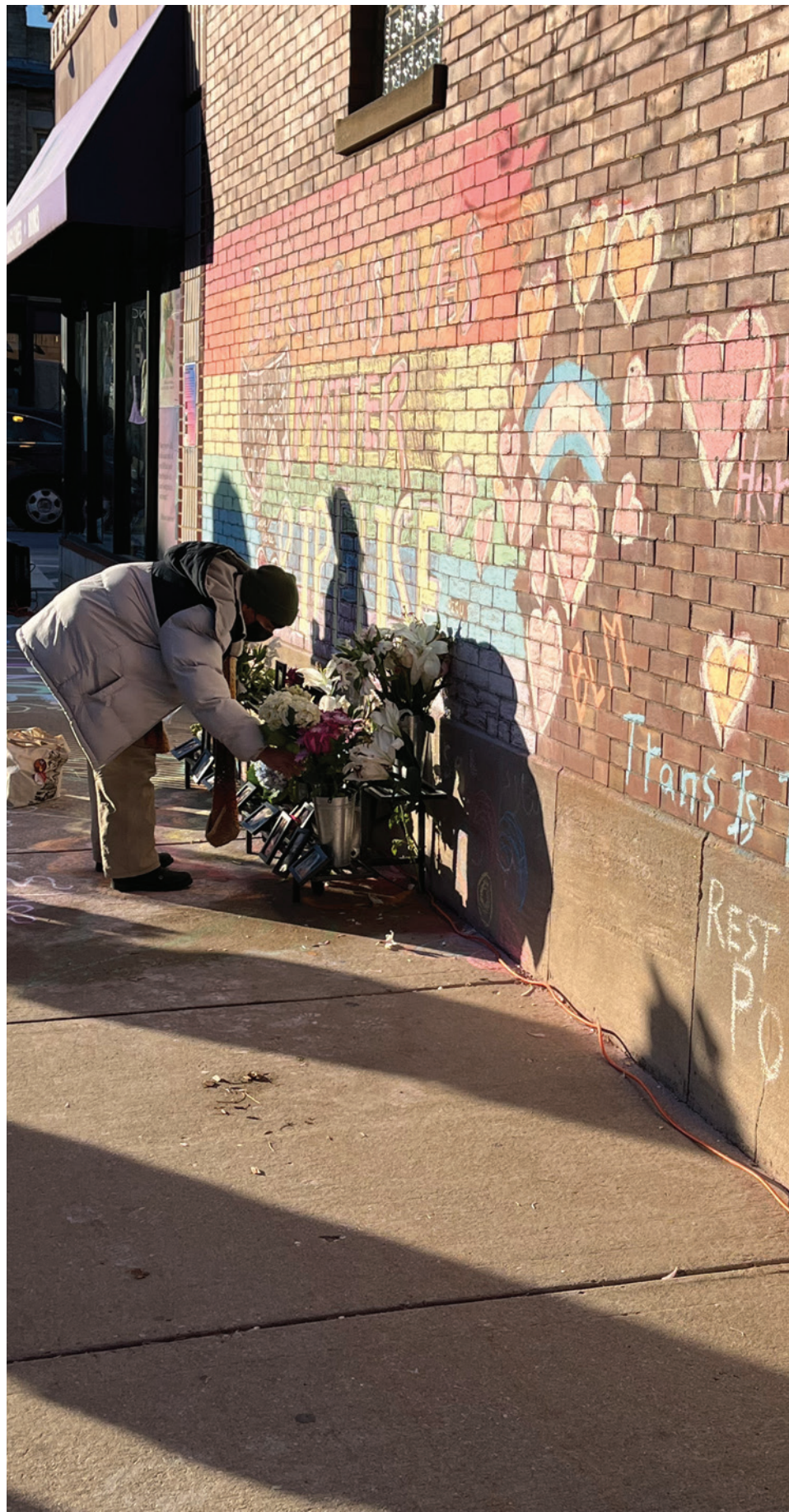
# Chicagoans observe **Transgender Weekend of Resilience**

Community members gathered across the city the weekend of Nov. 19-20 to mark the Transgender Weekend of Resilience, set aside both to remember transgender individuals who have been lost to violence in the past year and to celebrate the community's many strengths and ambitions as well. Events, ranging from a solemn vigil to an elegant dinner, took place on the West, South and North Sides that weekend, which was unfortunately darkened with the news of the shootings of multiple members of the LGBTQ+ community at the Club Q nightclub in Colorado Springs.

At a Nov. 20 observance in Andersonville, KJ Whitehead, an activist and artist, said that transgender folks "deserve the resilience" of the rest of their communities. She then invoked a quote from Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*: "More than machinery, we need humanity; more than cleverness, we need kindness and gentleness."

Whitehead then added, "No matter who you are here today, I hope you have that kindness and gentleness, before you are another hashtag."

—Matt Simonette



All photos by Matt Simonette except where otherwise indicated





Stephanie Skora (left) and Zahara Bassett.  
Photo by Carrie Maxwell



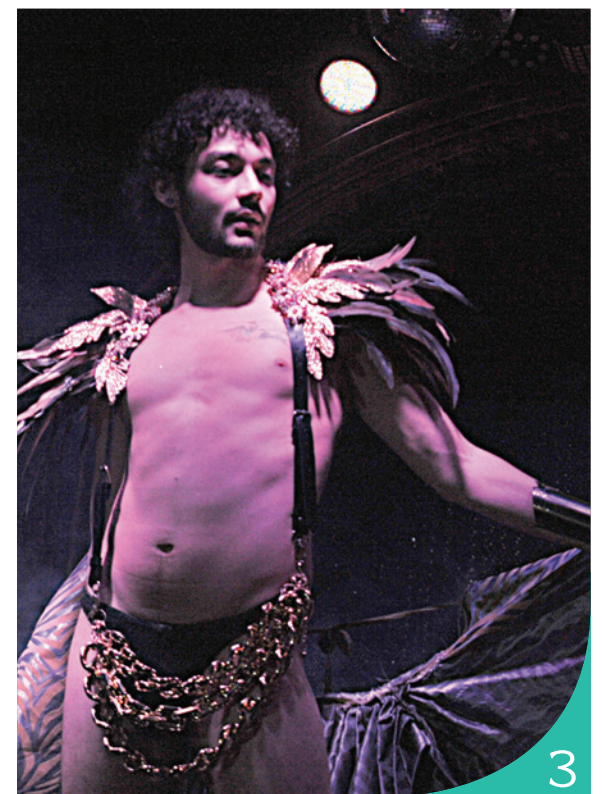
Immediate right:  
The Transgiving  
Celebration.

Far right:  
(from left) Eve Estrella  
Stiles, Maya Lozano,  
Monica Hernandez, Reyna  
Ortiz and Ginger Valdez

Photos by Vern Hester







# The art of **the dance**

## Baton unveils new male burlesque show

BY VERN HESTER

On the evening of Nov. 17, Baton Show Lounge, 4713 N. Broadway, presented Burlesque Royale, a new male review featuring local and national talent.

Produced by noted photographer Ramsey Prince, the sold-out show featured vocalists Danika Blake and Taylor Hall as emcees along with exotic dancers James Rabideau, Matthew Flowz and Damien Lenore, along with an appearance by Baton's Logan Aaron. The event was sponsored by Tom of Finland Vodka.

This inaugural event was similar to a turn-of-the-century vaudeville show—but updated for the new queer millennium—with Blake and Hall performing between dance segments and the dancers, particularly Lenore and Flowz, using elements of Sally Rand's storied ostrich feather fan dances.

As evidenced by the nearly overflow crowd, Baton's current plan is to present a new edition of the show on a monthly basis.





**1** Damien Lenore onstage at The Baton.

**2** Burlesque Royale producer Ramsey Prince (center) takes a bow.

**3** Matt Flowz onstage.

**4** James Rabideau in performance at The Baton.

**5** Damien Lenore in the audience.

**6** The Baton's Logan Aaron and friend.

**7** Danika Blake makes her entrance.

Photos by Vern Hester



5



6



7

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Joey showing off the “fabulous” 39th Street District mural. Photo courtesy of Joey Amato

## TRAVEL

# Pride Journey: Oklahoma City

BY JOEY AMATO

Since I began Pride Journeys 5 years ago, I have had the incredible opportunity to visit dozens of destinations around the world. Some destinations I visited once, while others left such an impression, that I was yearning to return. Oklahoma City is one of those destinations.

I first visited OKC while on a road trip to Las Vegas. While I was only there for one night, it piqued my interest when I found out they have a viable gayborhood known as the **39th Street District**. During that trip I stayed at a hotel in the neighborhood known as Habana. It has since been updated and rebranded as **The District Hotel** and served as my home base on this trip.

The property has changed a lot under its current ownership. The rooms especially have been modernized and are quite welcoming. During the summer months, the hotel is known for throwing outrageous pool parties drawing guests from miles around. There is also a nightclub, bar, and lounge on property for guests to enjoy.

The 39th Street District is quiet during the day but really comes alive at night. There are no less than eight LGBTQ nightlife establishments in a two-block radius, putting the city’s nightlife scene on par with major LGBTQ destinations.

Begin your evening with a cocktail at **Apothecary 39**. The friendly bar staff and patrons will always make you feel welcome. Next, head over to **Indigo Lounge**, a newer establishment with more of an NYC-chic vibe. The owner of the bar randomly introduced herself to us and told us about her collaboration with her daughter to create an open and inviting space. She gave off such a positive energy that it made us want to stay there for a few more drinks. And by the way, the drinks in OKC are strong and inexpensive. A Grey



Oklahoma City National Memorial. Photo by Joey Amato

Goose cocktail will run you about \$7. You won’t find that in NYC.

Finish off the evening at **Angle’s**, the district’s only true club. Angle’s is open Wednesday through Saturday, so if you are in town during one of those days, be sure to swing by. The neighborhood also contains numerous murals, perfect for those mandatory Instagram posts.

Everything shuts down in OKC at 2am, so don’t expect to party too late.

After a good night’s sleep, head to the **First Americans Museum**. This was my first time visiting and I was so impressed by not only the modern design of the building but also the interactive nature of the exhibits.

First Americans Museum (FAM) celebrates the 39 Tribal Nations that call Oklahoma home, although only a handful are indigenous to the state. Many were removed from their homelands

and relocated to Indian Territory. The name Oklahoma actual derives from two Choctaw words, “Okla” and “Homma,” meaning land of the red people.

The museum’s full-service restaurant, **Thirty Nine**, offers a delicious brunch menu on the weekend. Some standout items include blue corn blueberry pancakes, the FAM skillet and a hearty mushroom frittata.

After the museum, it’s time to do a little shopping. Swing by queer- and female-owned **Common Dear** for some rainbow-inspired gifts, then head over to LGBTQ-owned **Craig’s Emporium**. This is a gem collector’s dream come true. The store is enormous and features a huge variety of gems, minerals and so much more. I literally didn’t know which way to turn. The store is divided into different rooms, and you can easily get lost inside.

For the best views of the city, catch a ride on the **Wheeler Ferris Wheel** or go to **Vast**, located in the Devon Energy tower, the city’s tallest building.

One of the hottest attractions in Oklahoma City is **Factory Obscura**, an immersive experience created by local artists. Guests are given 3D glasses upon entry to thoroughly enjoy the venue. I have never experienced anything quite like this. It’s a combination of a maze, art installation and interactive playground. I’m not really sure how to describe it, but it was very cool and fun for all ages.

What many people don’t realize about OKC is that it has a thriving Asian culinary scene. The Asian District contains dozens of restaurants serving everything from traditional Cantonese cuisine to Vietnamese food, which is how it got its nickname, “Little Saigon.” Try **VII Asian Bistro**, which is located in an unimpressive strip mall. But don’t let the façade fool you. The food is delicious and inexpensive. I highly recommend the chicken lettuce wraps and moo goo gai pan.

Every time I visit, I like to walk by the **Oklahoma City National Memorial**, a site which honors the victims, survivors, and rescuers of the Oklahoma City bombing, which took place on April 19, 1995. A section of the old building still stands near the entrance to the memorial. The best time to go is early in the morning when you can take your time to walk the grounds without the crowds. It’s a very somber experience which should not be missed.

If you happen to be in town on a Sunday, there is no better place to be than **The Boom** for Gospel Brunch starring Kitty Bob Aimes and Norma Jean Goldenstein. The drag duo had us rolling for the entire hour-long show. I was so impressed by the improv talent of the two entertainers. I was told the Bloody Marys are to die for.

Spend the rest of the afternoon exploring downtown Oklahoma City, then head to the city’s **Paseo District**, a quaint neighborhood filled with shops, art galleries and restaurants.

Make a reservation at **Frida Southwest**, a modern restaurant featuring elevated Latin cuisine such as tuna tartare made with guajillo-orange marinated ahi tuna, whipped avocado and pickled onion, served with crispy corn tortillas. If you are in the mood for a heartier appetizer, try the short rib empanadas.

For an entrée, I recommend the Chilean sea bass served over a truffle corn and parmesan risotto, lobster beurre blanc and sautéed baby spinach. I’ve had Chilean sea bass before, but this dish ranks among the top I have ever tasted. And of course, you must complete your meal with the Mexican hot chocolate cheesecake because calories don’t count on this trip. The cheesecake is made with a hazelnut cinnamon brittle, chocolate dulce and spiced cinnamon-ancho crust.

I feel like all I did on this trip was eat, but Oklahoma City’s culinary scene has taken off in recent years and the city boasts so many wonderful options outside of what they are traditionally known for.

Consider visiting during their **Pride on 39th festival and parade** which is scheduled for June 2-4, 2023.

Enjoy the Journey!



TRAVEL

# Sydney WorldPride

plans a celebration like no other

Ben Graetz as Miss Ellaneous for Sydney WorldPride.  
Photo by Anna Kucera



of WorldPride with an event curated by DJs and producers Sveta Gilerman and Jess Hill. Not just a dance party, Ultra Violet will also feature burlesque, performance art, visual art, cabaret and drag king performances.

**Rainbow Republic** (March 5) closes out WorldPride with a day full of DJ sets and live performances from artists including Muna, G Flip, Peach PRC, Alter Boy and BVT. The party will be hosted by actor/musician Keinyan Lonsdale (“Love Simon”).

In addition to official events, there are dozens of related Pride Amplified events, from drag brunches to networking events and niche parties.

Events for Sydney WorldPride are already beginning to sell out, so if you want to join the celebration, you’ll want to book your tickets sooner rather than later. You might even be able to score a special Pride flight on Qantas out of Los Angeles.

Sydney WorldPride is working with approved travel providers to ensure guests are getting access to genuine WorldPride event tickets. Guests can even bundle their World Pride and flight/ac-

SPECIAL TO WINDY CITY TIMES  
BY DANA PICCOLI

WorldPride is heading Down Under in 2023. Sydney has been named the official location for WorldPride next year, and the cosmopolitan city is planning to go all-out to welcome LGBTQ+ guests from all over the world.

Consistently named one of the most LGBTQ+-friendly countries in the world, Australia has 17 days of events and activities planned with Sydney WorldPride, with an expected attendance of half a million revelers. Whether you are looking to dance into the wee hours, experience art and culture or simply be yourself with 500,000 of your closest friends, there is something at Sydney WorldPride for everyone to explore.

According to Kate Wickett, Chief Executive of Sydney WorldPride, “Sydney’s streets will be alive as thousands of people come together to celebrate the global LGBTQIA+ reunion the world has been waiting for.”

With multiple events happening daily during Sydney WorldPride, here are some standouts:

**The Human Rights Conference** (March 1-3) is considered the centerpiece of WorldPride, and will focus on “global, regional and domestic human rights issues facing people based on their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and variations in sex characteristics.” Tickets are available now and speakers include Executive Director of the Eastern Caribbean Alliance for Diversity and Equality Kenita Placide, Delaware state Sen. Sarah McBride (D) and Director of LGBT

Rights Advocacy China Yanzi Peng. It’s expected to be the largest LGBTQIA+ human rights conference ever held in the Asia-Pacific region.

**First Nations Gathering Space** will be held at Carriageworks and take place over six nights (Feb. 23—28 ). There will be free exhibits to explore, plus theater experiences, dining and drag shows.

**Mardi Gras Parade** (Feb. 25) is the largest event of Sydney WorldPride and will celebrate

**Human Progress Pride flag.**  
Photo courtesy of Sydney WorldPride



Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras’ 45th anniversary. Expect to see 12,500 marchers and over 200 floats travel down Oxford Street for the first time since 2020.

**Domain Dance Party** (Feb. 26) will be the largest circuit party in Australian history. The seven-hour party will include sets from international DJs, dancers and surprise guests.

**Ultra Violet** (March 3) celebrates the women

commodations with approved vendors.

See [sydneyworldpride.com](http://sydneyworldpride.com).

**Dana Piccoli is editor/project manager of News Is Out. News is Out is a pioneering national collaborative of the leading local queer media outlets. The collaborative includes 6 of the leading local and queer-owned LGBTQ+ publishers across the nation. Join the weekly News Is Out newsletter here: [newsisout.com](http://newsisout.com).**



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