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THE STATE OF THE PLATE

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From the Editors

Maintaining an appetite

“I’m finishing writing a story about hot dogs and, not gonna lie, it feels pretty meaningless and stupid right now.”

Our own Jonathan Burdick (@RustDirt) tweeted this just moments after reports emerged that Russia had initiated its “special military operation” in Ukraine after months (but really *years*) of built-up tension, with Russian missiles striking cities across the expansive country, including the capital of Kyiv. Citing pleas for help from the Ukrainian separatist territories of Donetsk and Luhansk (in the Donbas region), Russian President Vladimir Putin accused the pro-Western Ukrainian government of fomenting wide-scale Russophobia and even genocide, with a nationalistic fervor reminiscent of the Nazis. Furthermore, he argued that Ukraine’s very existence as a sovereign nation was a myth that had more than run its course, and its history and culture integrally belonged to Russia.

Burdick wasn’t the only one who lost his appetite. Countries across the world, including the U.S., members of the European Union, and others united in their disgust for Putin and Russian aggression, throwing their economic support behind Ukraine. While no Western ally has yet joined the Ukrainian forces in combat as of this printing, there is concern that the *mise en place* for World War III is already on the counter, and that’s a meal that almost no one wants to eat.

When stress reaches its visceral peak and adrenaline spikes, our only craving is personal safety. In Erie, we are half a world away from the Ukrainian conflict, but with the increased connectivity of the Digital Age also comes a broadened sense of locality. It can be hard to stomach the images coming across the airwaves and go about daily business as usual, even with COVID restrictions starting to be lifted on a national scale.

Two years later, we’re *still* chewing on the leftovers of that global pandemic, with impacts that are more than a little tough to swallow. Here at the Reader, it’s surreal to us that our very last print edition prior to the first COVID cases being reported in Erie County was “The Food Issue.” The restaurant and hospitality industries reeled with the changes overall, but many of our local establishments admirably demonstrated the ability to cook up innovative solutions under pressure, and residents were hungry to show their support.

Of course, stress over time — and oh have we had our share — drives cortisol production, and by extension, the appetite. It’s a biological impulse to find rich fuel sources to fight away our troubles, and this issue’s contents prove that there are plenty of those available in the 814, from Greek dogs to Mighty Fine donut ice cream sandwiches and everything in between. And despite the challenges of the past couple years, new businesses like Purrista Cat Cafe, Loco Taco, and the vendors of the Flagship City Food Hall continue to give Erie and its taste buds new experiences, and the comfort that a recovery may be underway.

At home and abroad, there’s a lot of stuff going on — and there always will be. So eat and rest up. Carry out and carry on.

State of the Plate in Erie

After crushing economic blows dished out by the COVID-19 pandemic, the restaurant sector in Erie is starting to cook up a healthy recovery



Few businesses were spared change from the COVID-19 pandemic, an event that ultimately broke the piggy banks of many restaurant owners. It has taken time, but two years later, the leisure and hospitality sector is slowly trending in the right direction.

individual grants to 100 Erie businesses. Hoffman expects the city to begin accepting applications again by May.

Other good news: "Our leisure and hospitality sector is doing quite well. It's one of the better performing sectors that have emerged from the pandemic," Louie says.

According to the most recent Erie Leading Index report, issued in January by ERIE, Erie's leisure and hospitality sector, which includes restaurants, suffered the greatest amount of employment loss from the pandemic — a "staggering 54 percent," or 7,500 jobs, between January and April in 2020. As of November 2021, the sector had rebounded somewhat but still lags just over 10 percent (or 1,400 jobs) behind pre-pandemic levels.

Yet, things are trending in the positive direction. According to Louie, more recent data from ERIE shows the job recovery rate of that sector to be closer to 80 percent overall, which is slightly ahead of that of Pennsylvania as a whole and about 20 percentage points higher than the Erie economy's overall recovery to date.

Another positive indicator: A near 9 percent positive increase in real average weekly wages for those in the sector. But that good news might need to be tempered.

"Given the supply demand forces, workers in Erie are beginning to experience a pickup in their earnings in that sector," Louie says. "The caveat here is that we're not sure whether the inflation is a temporary blip, or whether inflation is going to continue. And therefore, if nominal wages do not continue to rise, and inflation does, then in real terms, workers may still suffer a reduction in their real disposable incomes."

For context, Louie noted, inflation has been consistently hovering around 2 percent. With rates of 7-plus percent, we'd have to look back to 1982 to see a 12-month period of inflation that high.

"We don't know what inflation will do," Louie says. "There's still disagree-

ment in the economics profession. Some say that it's temporary. Others say it may be longer term. I think it's too early to tell."

No matter the length of the tail of inflation, Louie says that it's important to note that its overall impact at both the local and national levels isn't equitable. "If its impact is severe, it's likely to disproportionately impact individuals in lower-income brackets to a greater degree."

If the pandemic continues to keep Louie up at night, what helps him get any sound sleep? He says the answer is easy and comes from his firsthand experience of working in and with the Erie community.

"I think we're so fortunate that we have so many dedicated, loyal people in Erie that are tenacious," he says. "They are devoted to their city. And they work so hard, and always try their best to improve the quality of life for everybody in the community."

"I would not sleep as well, if I didn't see as many dedicated people who are committed to improving our city."

Louie adds that the best antidote to continue to treat the impacts of the pandemic is the continued investment in human capital.

"Being more educated and investing in better health care, in the long run, will help alleviate some of the problems and some of the predicament we're in," he says. "If we don't invest enough in education, if we don't invest enough in human capital, then those would be severe impediments to further growth."

Local bars and restaurants do more than quench a community's thirst and satiate its appetite; they feed and nourish its soul and psyche. So raise a glass and fork to the food and beverage industry pivoters and the adapters, and to those with the audacity to try and launch new businesses amidst an unpredictable storm of public health and economic events. Because in 2022, after two years during a once-in-a-century pandemic, there's a lot to be excited about for the state of the plate in Erie.

Ben Speggen can be reached at bspeggen@ErieReader.com and you can follow him on Twitter @BenSpeggen.

By: Ben Speggen

There's a lot to be excited about when it comes to the food scene in Erie right now. New restaurants have emerged to much excitement (for example, see: Bar Ronin in the West Erie Plaza). Old spaces are filled with new ideas (see: Local Eat & Pour in the former 1201 space). Area stables are expanding (see U Pick 6's new Bay House Oyster Bar and Restaurant). And the Flagship City Food Hall brought a mix of eight both new concepts and familiar favorites (like Lucky Louie's Beer and Wieners and Shawarma Station) into the core of the downtown.

The list goes on.

So do the continued challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To require or not to require masks — what does the CDC or local government say today? Will something different be reported tomorrow? "Help wanted" — the signs still adorn the windows of businesses small and large. Supply chain issues — have the broken links been welded back together yet? With COVID's continued presence, these questions remain concerns.

"Not to sound alarmist, but I'm afraid that [the pandemic] is still somewhat high on my list of priorities," says Dr. Ken Louie, director of the Economic Research Institute of Erie (ERIE) at Penn State Behrend, regarding what he sees posing the greatest threat to the leisure and hospitality sector. "I think we need to make even more progress in stamp-

ing out the pandemic and the associated negative economic consequences."

That — the uncertainty brought on by the pandemic that continues to loom — is what Louie says continues to keep him up at night.

Some good news: help is on the way soon. The City of Erie designated \$500,000 of the \$76 million of American Rescue Plan Act funds it will receive for the Restaurant and Entertainment Venue Relief Grant.

The call for applications went out in early January. Less than a month later, on Feb. 7, the city announced it would be pausing the applications, citing an overwhelming volume of submissions.

"We want to ensure we are giving each application the attention it deserves," says Jennifer Hoffman, business development officer for the city's Department of Economic and Community Development, which is overseeing the administering of the ARPA funds.

The Restaurant and Entertainment Venue Relief Grant is for businesses with eligible NAICS (North American Industry Classification System) codes. That covers a wide range, from take-out to full-service restaurants, to breweries and distilleries, to bed and breakfasts and inns, to theater and dance companies. It also includes promoters of performing arts and sports as well as travel agencies.

The rationale for \$500,000 in his bucket amongst the \$76 million, according to Hoffman, is to make available \$5,000

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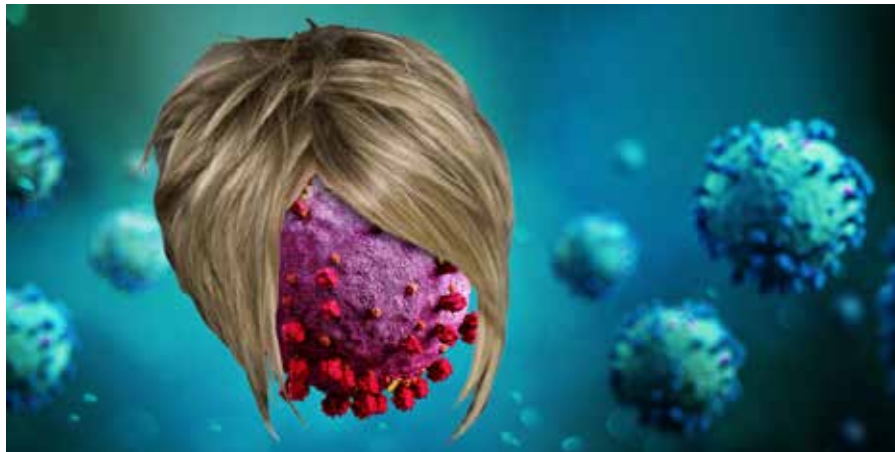


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NEWS & VIEWS

Erie at Large: COVID Karens

The dangerous precedent of indulging false victimhood



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Although mask mandates in schools are starting to be lifted, columnist Jim Wertz believes the outrage over public safety measures as an affront to freedom has been greatly overblown, as typified by “COVID Karens” (with the signature “Karen” hair as modeled by this coronavirus) and “COVID Kens” and their histrionics at school board meetings.

By: Jim Wertz

We’re all tired of the masks. We are. But most of us who choose to wear them do so because we know that wearing a mask prevents us from unintentionally spreading coronavirus to people who may be at greater risk for serious health complications.

Call it adulting. Call it common courtesy. Whatever you call it, it’s just the right thing to do.

That’s what makes the past few weeks so comically depressing. In what seems like an all too common occurrence, the evening news and our local newspaper features women and men attending school board meetings throughout Erie County to demand that each district lift their respective mask mandates. The courts, and slowly health officials, are overturning the decisions that put those mandates in place during much more dangerous times, and the nation — for the most part — is coming to terms with the reality that sooner or later we’re going to need to find our new normal.

Unfortunately, that new normal includes COVID Karen and COVID Ken, the bleach blonde moms and balding dads who stand before our school boards, tears in their eyes and lips quivering as they recite juris Latin, mask-scarred children at their side.

I imagine the prelude to these meetings goes something like this:

“Get dressed, kids,” says mom. “We’re going to school tonight.”

“But mom, we already went to school today,” reply the children.

“I know, kids. But we have to go back and fight for your freedoms,” mom de-

clares.

“Fight for our freedoms! Just like the Ukrainians? We learned about that in class today,” the kids share.

“Yes,” mom says with a tear in her eye. “You’ll never have to breathe your own breath again.”

It’s absurd.

In late February when the Millcreek School Board met to reconsider its masking policy, one mother was quoted in the Erie Times-News as having told the board, “too little, too late.” For parents like her, their children have suffered some irreconcilable harm, although there is little evidence as to what such harm might be. Missing toothy smiles, I suppose.

Another parent told the school board that this was a violation of parents’ choice, a concept that informs a parent’s option to choose an alternative to public schooling, not an ideal that allows them to dictate curriculum or behavior inside the school.

A student also spoke at this particular school board meeting to inform the board that students were mandated to wear masks “against their will, and the will of their parents,” the Times-News reported. Should we also exempt students from the math and science classes that many of them lack the will to attend? Perhaps he “opted out” on the lesson of the tragedy of the commons.

The real effect of this pandemic on our school students remains to be seen. In addition to the educational lag created by districts and families that lacked the basic resources to educate students remotely over the past two years, the impact of students watching their parents model outrageous behavior in pub-

lic fights that conflate common good and individual liberty will be even more damning for society once we’ve established our new endemic normal.

Less than a generation from now, the children of Karen and Ken will rebel against speed limits, seat belts, and the kind of mayonnaise used to make their sandwiches because it doesn’t suit them.

The good people who run for office, having been fed up with the wayward rantings of Karen and Ken over the size and shape of tater tots in their children’s lunch, will all have resigned their offices for a more meaningful existence.

For the freedom fighters, it will be like Fight Club, but without purposeful violence or Bob Paulson’s bosom to lull them back to civility.

Let’s hope I’m wrong.

In the end, the best we can hope for is that the new normal includes safe communities driven by smart decisions.

As acting Pennsylvania Secretary of Health Kearsa Klinepeter recently said, “moving forward does not mean ignoring COVID-19. We have the knowledge and tools needed to make smart decisions guided by public health research to keep ourselves and our communities safer.”

But in too many corners of our lives, our leaders are choosing to do less — or what little they can — in order to silence the real woke mob of social media warriors and the emboldened spokespeople of the ignorant class motivated by the misinformation that populates their own personal echo chambers.

If that’s the legacy of this moment, this pandemic and its artificially scarred masses might just live on forever.

Jim Wertz is a contributing editor and chairman of the Erie County Democratic Party. You can email him at jWertz@eriereader.com and you can follow him on Twitter @jim_wertz.

Purrista Cat Café Opens in Downtown Erie

Founder Dena Rupp teams up with Because You Care to launch an Erie first



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

[left] The cat lounge at Purrista Cat Café allows patrons to interact with prospective feline adoptees in a clean, stress-free, relaxing environment. [bottom middle] Purrista Cat Café owner Dena Rupp celebrates the grand opening of her business at 30 W. Eighth St. on Monday, Feb. 14, 2022. [bottom right] Human-feline interaction at Purrista Café is entirely optional — patrons who are allergic or do not want to pay for cat lounge time can enjoy a standard café experience from the other side of a glass partition.

through the glass and visit the café side without a reservation.

Besides the felines, the snacks offered at the café have been extremely popular. “I cannot keep up with the local baked goods from **Sundae, Herb & Honey, Crumb Cake, and Flower Kitchen**. Their items are flying off the shelves. They are all from or located around the Erie area. Two of them share store spaces with other businesses and the other two work out of their homes. Everyone has a unique touch to their goods. Vegan, traditional, floral & fruit infused, and puff pastry. It is all equally delicious, however,” said

Rupp. There is also a supply of Purrista merchandise for sale including coffee mugs and clothing that is quickly finding homes with visitors.

Rupp says she is excited for the opportunities and future of the café within the community. “I can’t wait to see what the future brings with all the cat adoptions and local partnerships. This business model was focused on collaborations and helping others from the beginning. I am so happy to see it already thriving,” said Rupp.

Purrista Cat Café, 30 W. Eighth St. (814) 520-8494, is open Wednesday through Sunday. For specific hours, more information, or to reserve space in the cat lounge visit purristacatcafe.com.

Amy VanScoter shares her home with two cats, Rumi and Mirabai, and has fostered kittens in the past for Because You Care and Anna Shelter. She can be reached at avanscoter@gmail.com.

By: Amy VanScoter

Erie’s mew-est café has much more to offer than just their coffee, tea, and delicious snacks. Purrista Cat Café officially opened their doors at 30 W. Eighth St. on Valentine’s Day. Since then, they’ve been leaving visitors feline good after supporting and playing with adorable, adoptable cats.

Walking into the modern cat-themed café, you may not notice anything different at first. But as you sit down to enjoy your purchases and glance across the room, you’ll see a large glass partition. Peep through and you’ll discover an entirely new room with other patrons playing with lovable cats and kittens — all available for adoption. The cat lounge is designed especially for their comfort with a large wooden cat tree in the center and plenty of spaces for jumping, lounging, and playing.

Erie’s first cat café offers a relaxing social environment serving fine espressos, specialty coffees, flavorful teas, and tasty treats while also allowing visitors to interact with the cats in a clean, stress-free, relaxing environment.

Cat cafés are a concept that started in Asia, but are now

quite popular in America, including in the nearby cities of Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Buffalo. Owner and Erie native Dena Rupp says she is thankful she has received so much paw-sitive feedback and support from the Erie community.

“I have a thing for a good coffee shop atmosphere and a deep love for animals. Traveling and exploring the last 10 years of my life has shown me that it can be done and it works very well. I think this space will bring a lot of education as well as focusing on animal therapy and how our mental health is very important. Animals can help with that. Especially during the difficult times with COVID and other hardships in our lives,” Rupp said.

Purrista Cat Café consists of two areas separated by a glass partition, allowing patrons to choose their interaction levels with the furry friends. “As of right now, we keep 10 cats in the lounge. So far, three cat adoptions have been approved and went home with their furever families this past Sunday, on Adoption Day. We also have three more applications pending for this upcoming week,” said Rupp. The adoptions are handled in partnership with **Because You Care**.

All BYC adoption applications, standards, and procedures apply to the cats in residence at the café. Applications continue to be screened by the Cat Center manager, and all adoption fees are payable directly to BYC. Reservations to the cat lounge are suggested by visiting purristacatcafe.com. A fee of \$15 for 50 minutes with the cats helps to provide for their care. Visits to this area are somewhat limited so as to not overwhelm the cats but, you can always watch their antics



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New Brick House Coffee Owners Percolate Plans

Jim and Jackie Cross freshen up historic Millcreek homestead



Pictured in front of Brick House Coffee is the family who keeps it all running: Michael (Jim and Jackie's son), Jackie, Jim, their daughter Nicole, and their son-in-law Tony.

By: Erin Phillips

Brick House Coffee at 3741 W. 26th St. has been a fixture in Millcreek for the better part of the past 20 years, but the house itself has been there much, much longer than that. Likely built around the Civil War, this home looked over acres of farmland when Millcreek was not much more than a rural, wild, sparsely populated hamlet. New business owners Jim and Jackie Cross have brought the Brick House back from its abrupt closure in 2017, and are proud to return this coffee oasis to West Millcreek and give the old, brick house a purpose once again.

Jim Cross never had a strong desire to own a business; working in his family's fourth-generation business, the James H Cross company (specializing in industrial cutting tools), it was not something at the forefront of his mind. He often noticed Brick House on his way to work, but didn't really think beyond that. That was until he noticed it suddenly closed, then becoming overgrown, and that concern

(in combination with the timing of Jim's retirement) sparked a phone call to the owner. In March of 2019, Jim put a proposal together, and by June they were the proud new business owners of Brick House Coffee. "The way I see it, there's a huge gap from Asbury to Pittsburgh Avenue and Brick House already had a good following. We didn't know much about coffee except that we like it, so we did a lot of learning. The customers are thrilled that we're back, though we've definitely made some changes. We really tried to make it Jim and Jackie's Brick House."

Among those changes, the most dramatic are the hours, the menu, and scope of the business. The previous owner had a liquor license and was open until midnight, operating both as a cafe and bar, but that was not what the Crosses were looking to take on. They chose to serve only breakfast and lunch, and have really streamlined the menu and the schedule. "We didn't have an espresso machine, so we knew that was an expense. We said, if we're going to be good, we're going to be really

good, so we invested in an Italian Simionelli Espresso machine. We're having fun with the different challenges. And we're very busy."

The Crosses took over the business in June of 2019, and, as we all know, by March of 2020 — just 8 months later — everything shut down. Luckily, due to the layout of the home, they were able to reopen the drive-thru by May. Jim admits, "That drive-thru is absolutely what saved us." They were able to eventually fully reopen in June of 2020 and business has been bustling ever since.

The Crosses have completed a number of projects to get Brick House back up and running, while making sure it looks and functions the way they prefer. They painted and refreshed the entire interior, including the tables and seating. They did a ton of landscaping; outdoor projects being what Jim particularly enjoys.

As we tour the 150+ year old building, Jim points out the different functional sections of the upstairs and basement, including storage and kitchen equipment, but my eye is drawn to the wide plank original hardwood floors spanning the second floor, the millwork around the doors and windows, the decorative banister, the stone foundation, the original doors and hardware, including pocket doors, multiple fireplaces, etc. There is no denying this Brick House was once a home with a rich history.

Tax records state that the home at 3741 W. 26th St. was built in 1880; however, according to census records as well as noting some of the style elements of the home (like the stone foundation and rough hewn beams in the basement), I believe the home is more Civil War era, likely built in the 1860s. The home is known as "The Carter House." John High Carter was born in England in 1821 and came to Erie in 1837 with his older sister, Henrietta, when he was 16 years old. In 1848, he married Anna Heidelberg and settled into this area of Millcreek and started farming. According to Carter's obituary: "He was a self-made man in the highest sense of the term, came to this country a

poor boy and through his own efforts, became one of the most prosperous farmers in this county." This description leaves out the fact that his wife came from prominent early settlers of this area, who likely provided the land for the Carter family to farm. John Carter died in 1900, Anna remained in the home until her death in 1910.

In 1913, the home was sold to R.S. McCreary, whose family owned multiple tracts of land in West Millcreek and Fairview for generations. Ralph was a dairyman and local tax collector in Millcreek, eventually getting into politics, serving in the PA House of Representatives. He owned the home for about seven years before it was purchased by Charles Foht and his wife, Rhea Sturgeon Foht. Rhea's family goes back to the very establishment of Fairview, and two of her great grandfathers were integral to the incorporation of the town: Jeremiah Sturgeon and Rev. Johnston Eaton. If you look at an 1855 resident map of the town of Fairview, it is dominated by the names Sturgeon and Eaton. The Jeremiah Sturgeon house built in the 1830s still stands and currently serves as the headquarters for the Fairview Historical Society. Rev. Johnston Eaton was the first minister to come to Fairview, before there was much there at all, and gave his first sermon in a crude cabin at the mouth of Walnut Creek on the lake-shore. He went on to establish the first church west of the City of Erie in 1810 and aided in the establishment of the Westminster Presbyterian church that today stands just down the block from the Brick House. Rhea was intimately involved with the church for most of her life. It is fitting that the Foht family ended up settling here, as there are deep family connections to this area of Erie.

Both Charles and Rhea's parents owned grocery stores on West Eighth Street and this is likely how they came to meet each other. Charles continued on with the grocery business, and by the time they moved to the Carter House, he was a wholesale candy salesman. Later in life, upon his retirement, he became the treasurer for the Millcreek School Board and also drove a school bus for the district. The couple never had any children and Rhea

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A passionate animal lover, owner Jackie Cross loves snapping a picture of the canine customers of Brick House enjoying their pup cups. Twenty percent of proceeds from mug sales goes to local animal rescue group, Because You Care.

Crosses are doing, but the canine patrons agree: the Brick House has the best pup cups around. Jackie is a passionate animal lover and enjoys passing out cups of whipped cream topped with dog bones to anyone coming through the drive-thru or relaxing on the patio with a canine companion. She has partnered with the local animal rescue organization Because You Care to offer pet-inspired products (mugs, decorative plates, and specialty coffee) from which the business donates 20 percent of the proceeds to help the homeless animals in our community. Jackie comments: "This was not only to give back to our community, but to get these types of loving and caring shelters the extra help and or items they deserve and to help our furry friends in need. The individuals that do this work are amazing and have huge hearts! We are so happy to be able to give back some of what we are so fortunate to

have."

The menu offers plenty of breakfast items, including bagels provided by Jon Edwards' New York Bagel and Deli, fresh made Belgian waffles, and croissant sandwiches for lunch. They bake a variety of fresh cookies in-house each day and offer other baked goods provided by Tiffany from Tasty Bakes. All of their coffee beans are provided by Millcreek Coffee Company, as the couple makes every effort to support local whenever they can. Not only do they offer the standard coffee and espresso drinks, they also offer decadent and flavorful original coffee creations like "Bananas Foster" and "Frozen Caramel Cookie Dough." They also offer frozen Italian Sodas, berry smoothies, and seasonal drinks. There is something for everyone at Brick House, whether you come for the coffee, the pup cups or just to ogle the amazing historic architecture. The Brick House is not one to pass up.

Erin Phillips runs the Instagram @olderieonfoot, an in-depth look at local architecture "by foot, stroller, papoose, bike, and occasionally minivan."

lived in the home until her death in 1977, at 91 years old. It was shortly after that when the home at 3741 W. 26th St. turned into a business. Operating as a cigar store for a while, it was the Weeks family who eventually, in the early 2000s, turned the home into a coffee shop, which was purchased by

Tony Campanella in 2009. And it is now Jim and Jackie Cross who are carrying on that project. Jim comments: "From a Millcreek standpoint, I'm sure a lot of people appreciate what we're doing here."

It is not just the human patrons of Brick House that appreciate what the



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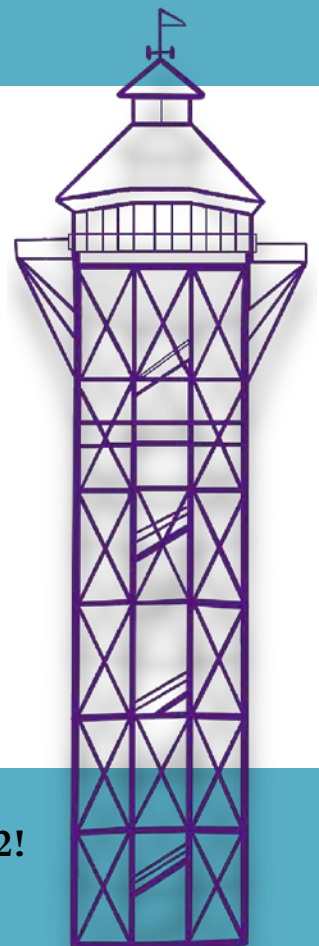
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Erie's Greek Dogs: A Slow-cooked History

How one of Erie's irrepressibly messy delicacies came to be



JESSICA HUNTER

By: Jonathan Burdick

According to the Hot Dog & Sausage Council (which I bet throws some delicious holiday parties), over \$3 billion is spent annually on hot dogs at United States supermarkets. People simply love hot dogs. Journalist H.L. Mencken, who once called them “rubbery, indigestible pseudo-sausages,” later had a change of heart, saying that they had been elevated to an “art form.” Betty White credited hot dogs (and vodka) for her long life. Maya Angelou loved hers with an ice-cold Corona. Anthony Bourdain preferred his with mustard and sauerkraut. Even for those who’ve seen the infamous YouTube video with 88 million views showing how hot dogs are made, for many, a good hot dog is difficult to resist (and even for those who don’t eat meat, there are plenty of meatless options nowadays).

In Erie, the hot dog that inspires the most passion is undoubtedly a Smith’s. And of all the ways to fix Smith’s famous frankfurters, it’s the Greek dog that gets the most glory — a skinless wiener on a warm, slightly squished bun, smothered in onions, mustard, and that glorious, greasy, savory, *unforgettable* Greek sauce.

For those who grew up in the Erie area, it was likely one of those local foods that you thought were everywhere until you began traveling and noticed that hot dogs, hamburgers, and French fries weren’t offered Greek-style elsewhere — or if they were, the item you ordered might arrive at your table much different than expected, bearing little resemblance to Erie’s famous frank.

In 2012, renowned food writer J.M. Hirsch described a Greek dog inspired by

spanakopita. This Greek dog is layered with feta cheese, diced yellow onions, dill seeds, tzatziki, and sautéed spinach. In Salem, Oregon, a once popular hot dog joint named Capitol Dog smothered their Greek dogs (described in their local paper as a “delicious mess” that required a fork and a knife) with artichoke hearts, tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, olives, feta, and a vinaigrette. There are similar examples throughout U.S. cities with their own unique “Greek” twist on the hot dog — but few with that name resemble Erie’s.

Instead, Erie’s Greek dog is part of a long and connected lineage of immigrant-created regional hot dogs. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, German, Polish, Italian, and Greek immigrants, among others, operated hot dog stands across the country that helped increase their popularity. Jewish vendors also expanded their reach by offering kosher all-beef dogs. The competition between these vendors inspired innovation as they competed for customers, discovering new toppings and flavors to add to their dogs. Soon, regional styles began to emerge, among them: Chicago dogs, Coney Islands, slaw dogs, Rhode Island hot wieners, Maine red snappers, southwestern Sonoran dogs, and D.C. half-smokes.

According to Becky Mercuri’s *The Great American Hot Dog Book*, as early as 1913, Greek vendors were using mustard with a unique Greek chili sauce on their hot dogs. Around this time, they were also sharing their knowledge and recipes with other Greek immigrants who were starting their own stands and tweaking recipes. “Some immigrant groups, notably the Greeks, formed networks and even provided a basic ‘Coney Island’

“Greek dog” has a different meaning depending on where you are, but in the Erie area, it’s unmistakable — a Smith’s wiener garnished with less-than-lean ground meat “Greek sauce,” slow-simmered and generously seasoned.

sauce recipe to friends and associates seeking to establish hot dog eateries,” Mercuri explains. These networks are why so many regional dogs, while distinct in flavor to the hot dog connoisseur, still share many similar characteristics.

In 1964, Erie Daily Times columnist Gene Cuneo mentioned Greek hot dogs by name for the first time in the local paper. He described them as similar to Buffalo’s Texas Hots (sometimes called a slime dog) or the more well-known Coney Island hot dog, both of which were also innovated by Greek immigrants. Years later, Gene’s son Kevin Cuneo wrote a love letter to the Greek dog in his own Erie Daily Times column. In it, he argued that a Coney Island was more of a *chili* dog and that Greek dogs were topped with a distinct sauce, not chili, an assessment that remains popular today.

He also noted that the sauce was “darn near impossible” to duplicate at home. Part of this near-impossibility is likely because there are numerous recipes for Greek sauce across Erie restaurants. Some of the recipes can be found online or in old local newspapers while other Greek sauce recipes remain a family secret. Most include a less-lean ground hamburger (the grease is part of the flavor, after all), but I’ve also seen some include a mixture of ground lamb as well. Some swear it must include tomato sauce, while others argue that *true* Greek sauce does not. Blends of spices differ slightly from recipe to recipe as well, although almost all include a lengthy slow-cook on low heat.

In a 1991 article, when the Greek dog was already a beloved staple of the Erie Greek Festival and We Love Erie Days, reporter Chuck Eschweiler noted the superiority of Erie’s Greek dog to other regional hot dogs. “They’re sloppy, greasy, and loaded with cholesterol, empty calories, and sodium,” he wrote. “But so what? They’re great.”

Erieites must continue to think so... even after they’ve moved away. Gordon’s Butcher & Market packs and ships an Erie Greek Dog Box anywhere in the United States. One can also buy the lo-

cally-made and bottled Pulos Original Greek Chili Sauce in stores or online. In Erie, dozens of restaurants have Greek dogs, burgers, and fries on their menu, including Red Hot Restaurant, Panos’ Restaurant, Lucky Louie’s Beer & Wieners, Triple D’s Tasty Grill, Stevo’s Pizza, Ringside Restaurant, Rum Runners, McGarrey’s Oakwood Cafe, One Way Inn, Alfee’s Pizza & Sub Shop, and just about every local dinor. Most of these sauces are homemade and slightly different (some even substitute cheese for the mustard), but all are worthwhile.

The pinnacle though is Erie’s beloved New York Lunch, which first opened in 1927 and has been owned and operated by Nina and Stephen Paliouras for the past 52 years (along with the help of their son, Constantine “Gus” Paliouras, and staff). Jim Martin wrote in the Erie Times News about New York Lunch in 2019, noting how Nina believes loyal customers and great staff are why they have been so successful. Certainly, that loyalty is *in part* due to the welcoming atmosphere (where you will often see Nina and Stephen themselves), but certainly, one can assume that their delicious, savory sauce (which Martin described as “cauldrons ... which begin with about 80 pounds of ground meat ... made two or three times a week”) plays a part as well. It also doesn’t hurt that the Peninsula Drive location of New York Lunch, on the other side of town, has a drive-thru.

In many ways, the history of the hot dog is the history of us: our communities, our people, where we come from, and, of course, loyalty to our local flavors. Bruce Kraig describes in his book *Hot Dog: A Global History* how the hot dog has become a symbol of American identity. “When Americans eat hot dogs,” Kraig writes, “they are celebrating their common identity, making the little sausages all the better-tasting.” So, the next time you’re munching on one (or two... or three) of those mouthwatering Greek dogs, wherever in Erie you get them, don’t fret over the calories and sodium. Instead, remind yourself that you’re merely partaking in a celebration of Erie culture and history — a celebration of us.

Jonathan Burdick runs the historical blog *Rust & Dirt*. He can be reached at jburdick@eriereader.com

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A Few of Our Favorite Can't Miss Dishes

Some of our Erie-area favorite menu items

By: Erie Reader Staff

Allow us to introduce you to the third annual installment of our “can’t-miss dish” list. Do you have a favorite thing to order at your local eatery? We hope so, but if not, here are some of ours to get you started. With a couple tips from some of our loyal readers and followers, we were able to put together quite the enviable spread. With dine-in, takeout, and options to order online available at nearly every one of these fine establishments, there’s all manner of ways to check these off throughout the coming months. Bon appetit!
(alphabetical by location)

What: Thick Cut Pepperoni & Chorizo Fried Buns



JESSICA HUNTER

Where: BAR RŌNIN
Vibe: Beautifully Balling
On the Menu as: Izakaya Snacks
Price: \$9

With wasabi ranch and garlic furikake, Bar Ronin’s very first item on the menu grabbed our attention. Their Thick Cut Pepperoni & Chorizo Fried Buns suspiciously feel like a clever deconstruction of one of the most Erie foods ever: The pepperoni ball. The combo never tasted so elegant. It’s also all but a requirement that one orders (and Instagrams) their Empress Rickey gin cocktail, with its photogenic purple bubble.
948 W. Erie Plaza Dr. // (814) 920-1400 // roninerie.com

What: Polish Boy Sandwiches



NICK WARREN

Where: Chippers Seafood and Southern Fusion
Vibe: Soulfully Scrumptious
On the Menu as: The Erie Polish Boys
Price: \$9.99 - \$13.99

You’ll want to get the napkins out for this regional take on the New Orleans classic po boy, with Chipper’s offering deep-fried kielbasa (making for the quintessential Cleveland-style Polish Boy sausage sandwich), fried shrimp, fried fish, or chicken tenders stuffed on a toasted hoagie bun, topped with cilantro coleslaw, blueberry hill BBQ sauce, and a heaping pile of seasoned fries — which are easily some of the best in town.
1023 State St. // (814) 920-9006 // chippersseafood.com

What: Frutti Di Mare



JESSICA HUNTER

Where: Colao’s Ristorante
Vibe: Shellfishly Splendid
On the Menu as: Frutti Di Mare
Price: \$25

With its romantic atmosphere and killer bar selections, Colao’s Ristorante is a local favorite for many reasons. In addition to traditional Italian favorites (try their lasagna, for example), they have a nice selection of seafood dishes. The Frutti Di Mare (or “fruit of the sea”) features U-10 (i.e. 10 or fewer per pound) day boat scallops, shrimp, fresh calamari, garlic, and house-made marinara with linguine pasta. Like many Colao’s entrees, it comes with a house salad, Italian bread, and of course, their house-made dipping oil.
2826 Plum St. // (814) 866-9621 // colaos.com

What: Brisket Cheesesteaks



JESSICA HUNTER

Where: Federal Hill Smokehouse
Vibe: Fanatically Fantastic
On the Menu as: Specials
Price: \$12.50

Listen, at Federal Hill, we just do whatever the butcher paper says. Sometimes it tells you when they’re out of an item, and sometimes the opposite. There are certain Thursdays when you’ll definitely want to pay atten-

tion to these marked messages, because they let you know that Brisket Cheesesteaks are available. These first-come first-served treats are a BBQ take on the classic Philly — a nice cut of Federal Hill brisket, with grilled onions, and a slathering of melted cheese. Wow.
2609 Peach St. // (814) 920-4695 // federalhillsmokehouse.com

What: Burrito California



JESSICA HUNTER

Where: Loco Taco
Vibe: Earth-shatteringly Enwrapping
On the Menu as: Burritos
Price: \$9

You might not expect that one of the best places to get mouth-watering Mexican food would be located in a gas station, but lo and behold, there’s your next favorite place, Loco Taco. With a full menu worth sampling, a few of us couldn’t stop ordering the Burrito California — a white flour tortilla with rice, black beans, shredded cheese, sour cream, and your choice of chicken, steak, shrimp, or chorizo, with lettuce and pico de gallo.
1002 Liberty St. // (814) 520-6501 // toasttab.com/loco-taco-1002-liberty-st

What: Royal Japchae



JESSICA HUNTER

Where: Noodlelove at the Flagship City Food Hall
Vibe: Richly Rewarding
On the Menu as: Wok Selections
Price: \$12

Just in case you get a little paralysis of choice when building a create-your-own bowl, Noodlelove has got you covered. One of our favorites was clearly their Royal Japchae. With its glass noodles, roasted crimini mushrooms, onions, (lots of) garlic, spinach, carrots, scallions, sesame seeds and sesame soy sauce, you’ll

FEATURE

be slurping it down in no time. Initially vegan, add your choice of protein (roasted chicken, umami shrimp, Korean flank steak, roasted tofu, or lump crabmeat) to give it a boost fit for a king.
22 N. Park Row // (814) 983-0999 // flagshipcityfoodhall.com/noodle-love

What: Kamikaze Roll



JESSICA HUNTER

Where: Samurai Kitchen + Sushi
Vibe: Rockingly Rolled
On the Menu as: Sushi Special Rolls
Price: \$16.95

Samurai Kitchen + Sushi has become the top place to go around town for a good roll or two. Their packed menu has hibachi dishes and a ramen selection as well. One of our favorites was the Kamikaze roll, with spicy crab and avocado topped with salmon and yellowtail,

served with spicy mayo and eel sauce. Each special roll comes with clear or miso soup or a salad (and you gotta love that miso dressing).
2767 W. 12th St. // (814) 833-0293 // samuraisushierie.com

What: Loaded Tots



NICK WARREN

Where: The Skunk and Goat Tavern
Vibe: Tuberiffically Tantalizing
On the Menu as: Starters
Price: \$14

Though it seems pretty unassuming compared to the rest of the Skunk and Goat's top-quality menu, their loaded tots have been ordered by us countless times. Perfect as a takeout option, it's a huge portion of russet potato tots, three-cheese blend, cheese sauce, bacon, scallions, and chipotle sour cream. Adding pulled pork just makes it all the better, for an appetizer that you'll want to feed on many times over.
17 W. Main St., North East // (814) 347-9078 // skunkandgoattavern.com

And for dessert ...
What: Donut Ice Cream Sandwich



JESSICA HUNTER

Where: The Straw Hat Sundae Shop at the Flagship City Food Hall
Vibe: Meltingly Mighty
On the Menu as: Specials
Price: \$4

Do you like donuts? Do you like ice cream? Well the folks at the Straw Hat Sundae Shop went a little crazy and we're all in luck. They take your choice of world-famous Penn State Berkey Creamery selection and put it into a Mighty Fine glazed donut, as Erie County meets State College. It's just as ridiculously decadent as it sounds, just make sure to eat it all before it melts! Yes please.
22 N. Park Row // (814) 347-5166 // thestrawhaticecream.com

Hangry that your favorite isn't on this list? Email contact@eriereader.com to suggest something for next year.

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Q: What has been the biggest boon and the biggest blow to your restaurant business throughout the pandemic so far?

Photos and Interviews by Jessica Hunter

Speaking of opportunity, I think that we have started to move into a time where it's very important to understand diversity and opportunities for women in business. That is something that is becoming quite apparent that there is a serious gap. And I think that there are some systems in place to start to address that.

The pandemic affected everybody. The ability to figure out how to snap back from that, the ability to figure out how to pivot. I know it's made us think about other revenue streams besides just operating a day-to-day restaurant. We have seriously started to look at how we can, you know, develop a revenue stream that is going to generate funds, besides worrying about filling the seats in the restaurant. — Karen Thomas, Pineapple Eddie Southern Bistro (With Adrienne Paul at right)



During the pandemic, not only were we faced with the challenges of being closed for three months, when we were doing strictly takeout — which only represented a fraction of what we normally do in terms of business volume — that was a challenge. But we also had an opportunity. We've been making our own homemade limoncello now for 20 years. So the pandemic gave us the opportunity, through the state's permission, to be able to sell cocktails by the bottle, and our limoncello by the bottle, where over a four-to-five-month period of time, we sold 800 to 900 bottles of it. So that was a great opportunity. Unfortunately, they revoked that in the end, when they lifted all the emergency restrictions.

We were very fortunate in that we were able to retain a lot of our employees over the duration of the pandemic. But like everyone else, we can stand to gain a few more employees in some critical areas, particularly in the kitchen. We're actively looking for good talent for that as well. So that's a challenge. — Saverio "Cee" Colao, Colao's Ristorante



I think the biggest blessing was that so many people came out in support of the service industry, people that normally didn't order out would eat out like three times a week. People were definitely conscientious that that was an area of industry where we couldn't just work from home. If we weren't able to open we couldn't make money. I feel like people took note of that and really came through.

So I was working from home and then coming in for four hours to do specials, but it was something different every day. But being that it had to be packaged up for takeout, it gave me the opportunity to just like, f**k around and find out. It forced you to be more creative. The more weird I got with things, the more people responded to it. I feel like my creativity expanded a lot because I'm like, "Let's do a garbage plate, but let's do it vegan." Like "let's see what happens," and then that sells out. — Ashley Sayre de Rivas, Lavery Brewing Co.



This is definitely something that we consider to be a hospitality job — it's taking care of people, it's creating an environment for people to enjoy themselves, connect with people, etc. Food just happens to be the vehicle for that. Then that got taken away during the pandemic, because we couldn't have people inside. At 1201, we had no outdoor space. Our first and foremost concern was keeping our employees working.

So, when I was out at Noosa, I was driving by South Shore [Wine Company], and obviously, the whole Mazza family — we're lifelong friends. I drove by and saw the patio, and thought, "We can do something out here." And it doesn't make sense that Mario would even have let us do that with his business because it didn't really benefit him at all. But if that wasn't the — I don't want to say "the heart behind hospitality?" Helping somebody out when you don't need to, then I don't know what is. — Dan Kern, Bar Ronin, Noosa, and 1201 Kitchen (With Adam Williams at left)

EVENTS

Optimistic Apocalypse Highlights Life Through Art and Sound

CD release party also serves as art show for multi-talented artist

FRIDAY, MAR. 4



BROOKE SURGENER

March 4 will be a precious day for indie-rock artist Optimistic Apocalypse. You might've heard her angelic sound over the years touching the hearts and souls of those who have witnessed her from stage to stage in the Erie area.

Beginning her songwriting at the age of eight and then playing music a few short years later, Optimistic Apocalypse (aka McKenzie Sprague), has made a name for herself while remaining humble and dedicated to her passion. With a new album prepped for release titled *Above The Land*, people will get a chance to dive into her world on a deeper level for a glimpse inside the mind and heart of the young singer-songwriter.

The *Above The Land* album release party will also serve as an art exhibition for Sprague's paintings, with the entire event being held at Erie's City Gallery.

"I've always had a vision to keep my art and music together," says the artist. "I get to express myself visually with art, whereas music is a deeper emotional outlet for me." And as an artist, Optimistic Apocalypse goes by the moniker "Vivid not Timid" to show an extension of herself. The young vocalist admits that her artwork is heavily inspired by her lyrics that use the imagery of flowers, water, and other motifs.

The inspirations behind *Above The Land* are even more thematic, which Sprague says are nature, life, death, her garden, and the raw emotions that she's endured throughout the last several years. Optimistic Apocalypse fittingly

Optimistic Apocalypse — aka McKenzie Sprague — will celebrate the release of her new album *Above the Land* with a live performance and exhibition of her artwork on Friday, Mar. 4 at City Gallery.

has a pleasant perspective on the world through it all, and hopes that others will view our existence in the same light.

"I want people to leave my album release thinking about how lucky we are to live on such a beautiful planet," says the singer. "I hope it makes people realize how important coexisting with nature is."

As if her positive sound and vibrant watercolors aren't enough to appease your senses already, Sprague has put quite a lineup together leading to her performance, featuring Slim and Red, Brooke Surgener, and Tiny Paper Boats. Remarkably, at least one member from each band had a part in the making of *Above The Land*, from backup vocals and instrumentation to mastering.

She would also thank her partner and bass player Brent Knight who provided a feeling of comfort and "laid-backness" that helped her to record her sophomore project. With a four-year process making the album come together, using a mobile studio that allowed her to record anywhere, the indie-rock artist wanted to present her album in a special way that'll leave people in awe and — dare I say it — optimistic about the present time.

— Charles Brown

5:30 p.m. // City Gallery, 1503 State St. // All Ages // Free // facebook.com/OptimisticApocalypseMusic

Scott Bradlee's Postmodern Jukebox Swings Back to Town

High-energy retro troupe stops at Mercyhurst for their Grand Reopening Tour

WEDNESDAY, MAR. 16



NICK WARREN

Scott Bradlee's Postmodern Jukebox is returning to Mercyhurst University on their Grand Reopening Tour. This will be the third time they have brought their swing-inspired pop interpretations to the Mary D'Angelo Performing Arts Center. The group made a name for themselves when bandleader Scott Bradlee became a viral pop sensation with a series of YouTube videos where he reworked modern pop songs into vintage styles. Today they have over 5 million followers on YouTube and have played hundreds of sold-out shows across the globe.

The "band" itself is a rotating collective of musicians and vocalists, changing costumes and singers depending on the genre and song that is being performed. Most of the songs are re-interpretations of modern songs as jazz and swing numbers. Postmodern Jukebox aren't limited to just playing jazz and swing, they have taken songs like Daft Punk's "Get Lucky" and turned it into an Irish folk song and turned the theme from the show *Friends* into an evolution of musical styles throughout the 20th century. They began with hot jazz of the 1920s and finished in the '90s, where in the video, had a guest appearance by "I'll Be There For You"

On Wednesday, Mar. 16, Scott Bradlee's Postmodern Jukebox visits Mercyhurst's Mary D'Angelo Performing Arts Center for a third time, reinterpreting songs of the past 30 years in the style of the big band and swing era, complete with period-appropriate costumes.

performers, The Rembrandts. They continue to reimagine pop songs with their most recent release of The Weeknd's 2015 hit "Can't Feel My Face".

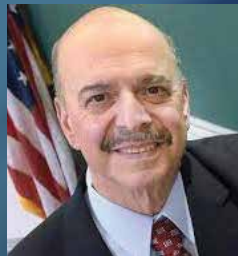
Watching these modern classics get a retro spin isn't just toe-tapping, it gives you a different perspective and appreciation for newer pop songs that you may have missed. It brings to light the nuances and talent that it takes to write a pop song and shows that no matter how different the artists that they cover are on the surface, their songs have layers that transcend the genre they are known within. You can expect plenty of dancing, a tight live band, top notch vocal performances, retro costume changes, and even some amazing tap dancing.

— Larry Wheaton

7:30 p.m. // Mary D'Angelo Performing Arts Center at Mercyhurst University, 501 E. 38th St. // \$30-\$45 for adults and \$20-\$35 for students // For tickets and more info, go to miac.mercyhurst.edu

Dan Morhaim, M.D.

ADVANCED MEDICAL PLANNING



Tuesday,
March 8 @ 7 p.m.
Jefferson Educational
Society

While Americans strive to control nearly every aspect of their lives, many of us abandon control of life's final passage. The realities of 21st-century medicine allow most of us to be empowered in end-of-life situations, yet most Americans are not taking the simple, free steps that allow this to happen. The implications for us personally, for respect for our own individual values, and for our loved ones are primary, but there are legal and economic aspects as well. Dan Morhaim, M.D., Emergency Medicine Physician, 24-year Maryland state legislator, and a 16-year veteran faculty member at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health provides practical guidance – and a lively and engaging speaking style – to this challenging and universal topic, one we tend to avoid but ought not to.

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Leonard Calabrese, D.O.

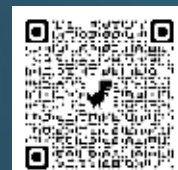
THE ROLE OF THE HUMAN
IMMUNE SYSTEM
DURING COVID-19



Thursday,
March 31 @ 7 p.m.
Jefferson Educational
Society

The global pandemic of COVID-19 has taken a heavy toll on our society and its impact has not been equally distributed across the population. Given that our immune health is directly tied to our behaviors and environmental exposures, advances in the understanding of how to modify our behaviors and exposures as well as understanding the impact of factors such as pollution and global warming may offer hope for greater population-based immune health to prepare us for future pandemics and offer greater resistance to chronic diseases. Dr. Calabrese is a Professor of Medicine at the Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine of Case Western Reserve University and Director of the RJ Fasenmyer Center for Clinical Immunology at the Cleveland Clinic. He spoke at the Jefferson Global Summit in 2018.

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EVENTS

On Rented Time With *Between Riverside and Crazy*

PACA production of Pulitzer-winning play humorously explores life and death



DAVE SCHROEDER / PACA

PREMIERING FRIDAY, MAR. 18

With strict limits on how much landlords can raise prices, New York City's rent-controlled apartments are of exceptional rarity in the 21st century — the apartment building has to have been built prior to 1947, and the resident has to have lived there continuously since before 1971.

In Manhattan, where people pay a premium to squeeze into a shoebox, a spa-

cious rent-controlled apartment would make an enviable prize. But on Riverside Drive, home to the borough's most coveted properties? You'd go just about crazy to get one, and you'd certainly be crazy to let one go.

Between Riverside and Crazy is exactly where retired NYPD officer Walter "Pops" Washington finds himself in Stephen Adly Guirgis' aptly-titled play. With greedy landlords breathing down his neck and

Stephen Adly Guirgis' *Between the Riverside and Crazy* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 2015 for its darkly comical confrontation of race and class issues and matters of life and death. The PACA production stars Collis Allen Jr. (left), Jordan T. Gilmore, and Char Newport.

an assortment of colorful (and at times sketchy) characters crowding his space, Pops remains stubbornly resolute — he's not going anywhere if he can help it.

However, his discrimination lawsuit against the NYPD is still pending a full eight years after another officer shot him out-of-uniform and off-duty. Meanwhile, Pops' recently paroled son Junior has just moved back into his apartment and his life, with girlfriend Lulu and recovering addict Oswald often accompanying. Others pop in and out, and their intentions aren't always clear or pure.

But such is the way of the typical Guirgis play, which consistently delight in moral contradiction and conflicted characters — morbidly humorous but with an un-

deniable undercurrent of humanity. This theatrical blend won *Between Riverside and Crazy* a 2015 Pulitzer Prize, as well as the 2015 New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play. The Pulitzer committee summarized: "nuanced, beautifully written play about a retired officer faced with eviction that uses dark comedy to confront questions of life and death."

This is all par for the course for a PACA (Performing Artists Collective Alliance) production, wherein audiences are often pushed to both think and feel as they watch the action unfold onstage. PACA's interpretation of *Riverside* is directed by JR Fabin and stars Collis Allen Jr., Gabriel Martinez, Alex Staley, Alycia Oliver, Char Newport, Jordan T. Gilmore, and Jennifer N. Perry.

We highly recommend signing the lease agreement on this one. — Matt Swanseger

Fridays and Saturdays, 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. (through Apr. 2) // PACA, 1505 State St., 2nd Floor // \$15 // paca1505.org

An Epic Night of Rachmaninoff at the Erie Phil

Soloist Olga Kern takes on the demanding concerto of *Shine* fame



CHRIS LEE

have the opening and closing sections from the legendary composer.

And last, but certainly not least, is Piano Concerto No. 3. Referred to simply as "Rach 3" in some circles, it is, essentially, the most challenging piano piece ever written. With ever-moving chords utilizing a wide handsan, there's an incredible amount of stamina required from the soloist to pull off the 40 minute epic. So taxing is this piece, that it served as the chief obstacle in the Oscar-winning 1996 film *Shine*, chronicling the life of David Helfgott and his subsequent breakdown.

Russian Pianist Olga Kern is ready for the challenge. Born in Moscow, she has both won and placed in numerous piano competitions across the world. In 2016, she even launched the Olga Kern International Piano Competition in Albuquerque, N.M.

Kern will play the Rach 3 on the Philharmonic's brand new Steinway grand piano, thanks to a generous gift from Pete and Ellie Scibetta. — Nick Warren

8 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. // Warner Theatre, 811 State St. // \$23 - \$56, \$12 for students // For tickets or more information, call (814) 455-1375 or visit eriephil.org

SATURDAY, MAR. 19

The latest Erie Philharmonic event is set to feature three different pieces, concluding with Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3.

The evening will open with "Along the Western Shore," by the neo-romantic composer Elinor Remick Warren. This symphonic suite in three movements is an illustrative tone poem to the western coastline. Spending the majority of her 91 years in Los Angeles, Warren was one of the most in-demand composers of her time.

Following that will be both "Prelude" and "Liebestod" from Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*. Rather than the opera's approximate full running time of 4 hours and 46 minutes, here we

Dramashop's Shorts Festival Showcases Original Scripts

Eight unique shorts from local playwrights debut for one weekend only



NICK WARREN

Dramashop's Shorts Festival features eight succinct scripts from local playwrights both aspiring and established, performed for one weekend only. Pictured here are Tim Blair (left) and Benjamin Snyder rehearsing Adam Rossi's "Grim Reaping."

Other authors include Bre Womble ("The Kinda Okay Psychic"), Adam Rossi ("Grim Reaping"), Rebecca Styn and Marggo Wolfe ("The Funeral"), and Char Newport ("The Making of a Cat Lady"). As one can surmise from just the titles alone, many scenes explore the darker side of humor, something that's no wonder considering the events of the last two years.

Separating the group into different rehearsals for each individual scene, five directors split the duties — Jasse Camacho Vera, B.J. Waide, Marshall Mack, Zachery Hoffman, and Michael Wachter.

The cast includes Karen Biebel, Tim Blair, Eli Coppock, Leslie Ford, Jamie Foster, Monica Harden, Raina Harden, Karalyn Headly, Kerrylee Hinkson, Justin Karns, Benjamin Snyder, Judy Stow, B.J. Waide, and Nick Warren. — Nick Warren.

Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. // On demand April 1-15 // Dramashop, 1001 State St., Second Floor // For tickets and more information, go to Dramashop.org

FRIDAY, MAR. 25 - 26

In a wholly original production, Dramashop presents their Shorts Festival. Casting a net for local playwrights, both aspiring and established, the theater company put out a call for submissions. They narrowed the list down to eight finalists, all of which will be brought to life on stage for one weekend only.

The majority of the scenes are riotously funny, with some venturing into the wondrously heartfelt (Anna McJunkin's *Biffles*), to the somber and moving (Zach Flock's *A Conversation with a Friend*). Expect many a hilarious turn from the cast, from "Audition" (written by Michael Wachter and Benjamin Snyder) to "Sam and the Krakaren" (penned by Snyder, as part of a longer work in progress).

Explore *The Haunting of Hill House* with All An Act Theater

Local theater company adapts Gothic horror classic



MIMADEO

PREMIERING FRIDAY, MAR. 25

Starting on Friday, March 25, All An Act Theater will be bringing their adaptation of *The Haunting of Hill House* to their stage. In this classic haunted house tale, Dr. John Montague rents an ominous, mid-Victorian house known to be haunted and “a place of evil” in order to make a breakthrough in the field of parapsychology. Once there, he invites visitors with psychic abilities to help him investigate the house’s secrets.

Of course, many may be more familiar with Mike Flanagan’s ever-popular, critically acclaimed Netflix series, but it was actually adapted from an original Gothic horror novel written by American author Shirley Jackson. Released in 1959, the novel has since become known as one of

the best literary ghost stories of the 20th century; the story is noted for the complex relationships between its characters and the events they experience in the house. The story has been adapted for film twice as *The Haunting* (in 1963 and 1999), and in 1964, it was adapted for the stage by F. Andrew Leslie.

All An Act’s adaptation is being directed by J.D. Mizikowski, and will feature Tori Snyder, Robin Rastatter, Chad Santos, Stephen Salchli, Lisa Simonian, Suman Kumar Pallerla, and Marnie Foss among its cast. Additionally, La Bella Restaurant is offering a special dinner and theater package for Friday and Saturday performances. This deal offers guests prompt dinner service, a 15 percent discount on their bill, and 20 percent off tickets for the show. Proof of vaccination or a negative COVID test taken within the past 72 hours is required for entry. — Aaron Mook

Fridays & Saturdays 7:30 p.m., Sundays 3 p.m., Mar. 25 - Apr. 10 // 652 W. 17th St. // \$15 with discounts for seniors, students, and children // Proof of vaccination, photo ID, and masks are required // allanact.net

Sweat Tackles Race, Class On the Playhouse Stage

Impassioned anxiety overflows from Oregon to Reading to Erie



RICK RAY

PREMIERING FRIDAY, MAR. 25

Lynn Nottage’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Sweat* tells the story of working class Americans in Reading, Pa. A close-knit community, these friends and co-workers have spent the majority of their lives sharing everything from drinks to secrets to laughs while working on the same factory floor.

When layoffs begin and picket lines emerge, the now-former friends find themselves pitted against each other in a fight to survive above the poverty line. What once brought these workers together could ultimately be the thing that tears them apart in this heart-wrenching, emotionally charged confrontation of the issues of race, identity, and mid-

dle-class life as we know it.

The play debuted at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2015 before productions both Off-Broadway and on Broadway in 2016 and 2017, respectively.

The Erie Playhouse’s production of *Sweat* will star Curtis Jones III, Abraham Sangye, Aaron Holman, Mike DeCorte, Andre Concepcion, Karen Schellinski, Krista Perry, Nora Schillinger, and Jermaine Beason, with four actors making their debut on the Playhouse stage.

The theater will also be partnering with Brandon Wiley and his company, Opened Eyes, to present several talkbacks and panel discussions regarding the many relevant and important topics addressed in the play. Opened Eyes is a local non-profit designed to help create a positive identity via a holistic diversity perspective. — Ally Kutz

March 25, 26, and April 1, 2, 7, 8, and 9 at 7:30pm; April 3 and 10 at 2 p.m. // Erie Playhouse, 13 W. 10 St. // \$15 - \$24 // For tickets and more information, visit erieplayhouse.org

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Jennifer N. Perry

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EVENTS

Do Not Throw Away Your Shot at Seeing Leslie Odom Jr.

Mary D'Angelo Performing Arts Center to be the room where it happens



TONY D'URAN

SATURDAY, MAR. 26

When *Hamilton* hit the stage of the Richard Rodgers Theater in 2015, the world turned upside down for Leslie Odom Jr.

Having made his Broadway debut at the age of 17 in a production of *Rent*, and despite a number of television, film, and stage credits to his name at that point, Odom's turn originating the role of Aaron Burr catapulted him into the stratosphere of fame.

The Mercyhurst Institute for Arts & Culture is bringing this Tony-winning, Oscar-nominated phenom to the Mary D'Angelo stage for one night in March, a reschedule from the originally planned December 6 engagement, which was postponed due to COVID.

Odom, who has also released four studio albums and penned a memoir reflecting

on his journey to success, was initially set to promote and perform based on his latest studio release, *The Christmas Album*.

Odom's latest non-Christmas album, *Mr.*, is heavily jazz influenced, described by the artist himself as "the music that Nat King Cole might make today." He tours with a five-piece band, including a pianist, guitarist, bassist, percussionist, and drummer.

Guests to the Mary D'Angelo theater should bear in mind that attendance is restricted to vaccinated guests only, or a negative COVID test from within 72 hours if the patron is unable to be vaccinated.

With the rapidly changing CDC guidelines, guests are also asked to adhere to theater's masking policy, whatever that might be at the time.

Odom's star continues to ascend to the highest heavens of entertainment, with a talent that is so charismatic and so multifaceted. While Odom may be something of an "it" guy for now, his mastery of the craft remains timeless. — Cara Suppa

7:30 p.m. // Mary D'Angelo Performing Arts Center, 501 E. 38th St. // Tickets start at \$50 for adults // For full performance and ticket information and to purchase seats, visit: miac.mercyhurst.edu

Ten Tenors Touch Make MIAC Home Bass

The Australian dectet sure to be a high point for concert-goers



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

for over 90 million people worldwide. In the 27 years since their formation, TTT has headlined over 2000 concerts in 29 countries and shared the stage with artists such as Lionel Richie, Andrea Boccelli, and Christina Aguilera, among others.

A large part of their appeal comes from the unique blend of classical and contemporary numbers they perform, but of course, their biggest draw comes from the group's expansive and impressive ten-part harmonies. More than just singing, TTT is also known for their dynamic stage presence and carefully choreographed performances.

The current Tenors are Cameron Barclay, Daniel Belle, Michael Edwards, Keane Fletcher, Paul Gelsumini, Nathan Lay, Jared Newall, Boyd Owen, JD Smith, and James Watkinson. — Aaron Mook

7:30 p.m. // 501 E. 38th St. // \$35 with discounts for seniors, students, and youth // For tickets and more information, go to miac.mercyhurst.edu

WEDNESDAY, MAR. 30

The Ten Tenors return stateside on Wednesday, March 30, when they are slated to perform at the Mary D'Angelo Performing Arts Center at Mercyhurst University. The stop is part of the ensemble's *Love is in the Air* tour, based on the 2019 album of the same name. This international tour is built upon classic love songs (with the setlist including "Somebody to Love," "I've Had the Time of My Life," and "Unchained Melody" among others). You may have heard these songs before, but you've never heard them quite like this.

The Ten Tenors (TTT) are an Australian music ensemble that have performed

Here We Go Again: Thoughts and Predictions for the 2022 Oscars

Getting a read on the room for the 94th annual Academy Awards



By: Forest Taylor

Once again we have reached the season where artists and technicians will compete for a little gold, bald man. While the pandemic turned last year's ceremony into a goofy spectacle (easily the worst ceremony in the 25 years I've been watching), with COVID restrictions winding down it seems like the Oscars are returning to tradition. For example, this will be the first hosted ceremony in several years. Like always, this year's nominations left us with some surprises and disappointments. So, without further delay, let's discuss them here.

Best Picture: At the beginning of the year, I was certain that Kenneth Branagh's semi-autobiographical drama *Belfast* had it in the bag. It's the type of film that seems factory-built to win Best Picture. However, Jane Campion's fascinating character study *The Power of the Dog* has garnered all the attention so far. Not that I'm complaining (it's the better film by far), but it is surprising that the Academy is gravitating toward the more cerebral work than the big emotions film. Of course, Ryusuke Hamaguchi's *Drive My Car* is gaining steam as well and could pull an upset of *Parasite* proportions. And then there's *West Side Story*. Steven Spielberg's lovingly retold old-school musical is the kind of thing the Academy dies for, but right now, Campion's film is the one to beat.

Best Director: The directing category comes down to a three-horse race between Campion, Hamaguchi, and Spielberg. Much like her film, Campion has all the momentum behind her at the moment and this is basically hers to lose. That said,

it's a feat in itself that Hamaguchi got nominated for a basically plotless three-hour character study. A win is less likely, but it would be a welcome surprise. As for Spielberg, giving the 75-year-old his third Oscar for his most masterful technical achievement since *Saving Private Ryan* would be an incredible capper to an incredible career. Still, Campion's win would mean back-to-back wins for female directors and that's pretty impressive too.

Best Actor: If this were my choice, Best Actor would come down to Benedict Cumberbatch's powerful, nuanced role in *The Power of the Dog* and Denzel Washington's haunting take on the Bard in *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. However, it seems like all attention is being paid to Will Smith. I know it's the Oscars and crowd-pleasing performances based on real people usually win out in the end, but it's a shame that two great performances (one a career-best) are taking a backseat to a merely serviceable one, but that's just the way the Oscars are sometimes.

Best Actress: Once again, at the beginning of the season, it seemed like Kristen Stewart would be the easy frontrunner and understandably so. She practically disappears into her role as Princess Di. But she has lost a lot of momentum that has been picked up by the woefully miscast Nicole Kidman in *Being the Ricardos*. At this point, this is the hardest award to predict but those two are a good guess. The Royal Family and Show Business are two stories the Academy loves to shower with praise. Of course, Olivia Colman is there as well and she's always a dark horse. I would have loved to see some new faces in this category (both Rachel Zegler in *West Side*

Story and Alana Haim in *Licorice Pizza* would have been welcome additions) but aside from Stewart, this category is full of the usual suspects. Tough to guess, but I think Kidman gets it.

Best Supporting Actor: Thank goodness Jesse Plemons' subtle, understated performance was chosen over Jared Leto's Super Mario Brothers audition tape, but now he may split the ticket between him and his *Power of the Dog* co-star Kodi Smit-McPhee. At this point I think that Smit-McPhee still has the best chance to win and rightfully so. His performance stands out in a film overflowing with amazing performances. But a split ticket has happened before (Frederic March and Wallace Beery in 1932) and if that's the case we could see a surprise. It would be interesting to see Troy Kotsur win for his lovable performance in *CODA*. However, I'm still certain that Smit-McPhee will take this one.

Best Supporting Actress: This may be the easiest one to predict as Ariana DeBose has been generating momentum that has been unstoppable. If she does win, she and Rita Moreno will join Marlon Brando and Robert De Niro along with Heath Ledger and Joaquin Phoenix as actors who have won an Oscar for playing the same character. The only real competition I can see for DeBose would be Kirsten Dunst in *The Power of the Dog*, but at this point I'm more confident in DeBose's win than any other category in the ceremony.

Best Screenplay: Much like Best Director, Jane Campion seems to have the best shot at winning Best Adapted Screenplay. It's understandable as *The Power of the Dog* is a great film (possibly her best film

Jane Campion's *The Power of the Dog* is an almost surefire bet to take home at least one Academy Award, as it has been nominated for a whopping 12 Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Supporting Actress.

yet), but there is a worthy challenger in the form of Ryusuke Hamaguchi and Takamasa Oe's screenplay for *Drive My Car*. Their adaptation of Haruki Murakami's short story is an incredible work (although Hamaguchi's *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy* also from 2021 is even better) and it could take the prize. And then there's the surprise nomination of *Dune*. I don't think it's going to win, but it's nice to see science fiction get recognized. As for Best Original Screenplay, once again I thought that Branagh had it for sure, but plenty of attention is moving toward Paul Thomas Anderson. The 11-time nominated writer/director hasn't won an Oscar yet, and his likable script for *Licorice Pizza* may be his best chance to do so. I'm also happy that Joachim Trier's amazing dramedy *The Worst Person in the World* got some attention. It probably won't win, but being nominated is enough to make me happy.

Best International Feature: There's not much to say about who's going to win (because it's going to *Drive My Car*, hands down), but I want to talk a little about the selection process. The Academy had a chance to go very weird with this one (both France's *Titane* and Romania's *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* were in the running). Of course they didn't, but I'm just happy that some countries are willing to consider decidedly non-mainstream works when selecting their pick for the Oscar. As for who will win it, there is a slight possibility of an upset from *The Worst Person in the World*, but there can really only be one choice and it's *Drive My Car*.

Forest's 2022 Academy Awards Predictions: Best Picture — *The Power of the Dog*, Best Director — Jane Campion (*The Power of the Dog*), Best Actor — Will Smith (*King Richard*), Best Actress — Nicole Kidman (*Being the Ricardos*), Best Supporting Actor — Kodi Smit-McPhee (*The Power of the Dog*), Best Supporting Actress — Ariana DeBose (*West Side Story*), Best Original Screenplay — Paul Thomas Anderson (*Licorice Pizza*), Best Adapted Screenplay — Jane Campion (*The Power of the Dog*), Best International Feature — *Drive My Car* (Japan)



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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Major Coin Accepts Love

Aaron Rennel on the making of
the recent *Accepting Love EP*



ALEX STALEY

By: Charles Brown

Entrepreneurial hip-hop group Major Coin have been on the grind to expand their name for years, drawing more and more people into their blueprint of music and fashion. Consisting of rappers and siblings Kenny Ba\$e and Aaron Rennel, along with producer/engineer Chauncy Bill\$up, the “Make It Stack” team continues to carve their own path, locking themselves in the studio to create memorable moments for the world to hear.

This past February, a surprise EP surfaced online on Valentine’s Day titled *Accepting Love*.

I had a chance to talk with Aaron Rennel about the thought process of putting the EP together.

“The overall theme and tone of the tape is what the title suggests; the acceptance of love,” says Rennel. “As an independent artist, it can be easy to pay more attention to what’s seemingly not going right than what is. So this was our attempt at cutting through the dissonance and existing as we truly are.”

The first track off of the EP, “That’s On

Aaron Rennel makes up one-third of the entrepreneurial hip-hop group Major Coin (along with Kenny Ba\$e and Chauncey Bill\$up), which dropped their *Accepting Love EP* unannounced this past Valentine’s Day.

Me,” is a fun track that could easily kick off the summer with a braggadocious flow that explores the themes of independence and attracting love or lust because of it.

Falling into the Donnell Jones-inspired track “No Chasers,” you can hear a bouncy pattern of rhymes that dives into a small story about an unhealthy relationship that calls for an important change in pace and discovering another option.

The songs and bars being traded between Rennel and Ba\$e are something that the two songwriters have been doing for some time and their chemistry continues to grow.

“The idea of putting out a Valentine’s Day tape came a few weeks before the actual date. I was sitting down discussing a potential drop with Kenny Ba\$e at which point he suggested we do an EP, as we both were itching to put out new music.” And as always, the duo was able to execute flawlessly. While Chauncy Bill\$up has been the go-to producer for

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

their sound throughout past projects, this time he stepped back into an engineering role, focusing on mixing and mastering vocals more than beats.

"Bill\$up actually didn't produce any of these," Rennel says. "He handled the engineering." The production was taken care of by producers outside of the squad, yet still delivered a Major Coin sound that we all love and enjoy.

OmarWya, Geeohhs, and Julius Swervin' are just a few of the beat-makers who helped bring "Accepting Love" to life, but almost unintentionally. Rennel states, "We work with a variety of producers on a regular basis. So it felt like a move done in stride. The EP reads more like a compilation tape. The music that made the cut wasn't made specifically for this tape, but curated to create this experience."

What is unique about this body of

because it is a reflection of our truest selves."

With Chey Honey, a female vocalist, as the only feature on the record, the transparency shines through in both a playful and serious tone between the artists. Whether it's date night or you're just getting your weekend started, this seven-track package is ready-made for many occasions, though it steers toward romantic themes.

Major Coin has prided itself on allowing the music to take people on a colorful expedition to please the ears. Each individual from the team has proven to us that they can hold their own separately, but when it's time to link up to work with one another, magic happens. *Accepting Love* is a wonderful post-Valentine's gift for us all to unwrap and cherish. The new project can be found on Spotify, Apple Music, and more.

Find out more about Major Coin at facebook.com/MajorCoinCo and majorcoinco.com.

Charles Brown can be reached at charlesbrownncj@gmail.com.

"Ultimately, we are both artists who value authenticity and who don't have an issue with expressing ourselves, our sentiments, or our viewpoints in this medium. We know what to talk about in our music because it is a reflection of our truest selves." — Rapper Aaron Rennel on his work with sibling and creative partner Kenny Ba\$e

work is that although it's an enjoyable ride, it comes from a real place that resides in both Rennel and Ba\$. Rennel claims that "*Accepting Love* was born out of the place both me and Ba\$e were at mentally when the plan for the EP was hatched. Most of the songs were already recorded and needed polishing, so it's hard to say how we knew what topics to speak on. We didn't even know this EP was going to be a 'thing' at first."

Rennel wagered that "ultimately, we are both artists who value authenticity and who don't have an issue with expressing ourselves, our sentiments, or our viewpoints in this medium. We know what to talk about in our music



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Devil House

Rocker John Darnielle’s writerly riff on the true crime genre

John Darnielle is an accomplished guy. As the frontman of The Mountain Goats, an indie-punk band with a very loyal cult following, he has recorded 20 albums over a 30-year period. His music always had a narrative flair, exploring the challenges of adolescence, alienation, bullying, and domestic abuse in relatable terms. In fact, that relatability briefly turned a 20-year-old song titled “No Children” into a viral TikTok trope last fall, introducing his work to a new generation of disaffected Zoomers.

In the late aughts, Darnielle added “writer” to his resume. His novels mirrored the themes introduced in his music, namely loners with extremely specific interests who find themselves in dangerous situations. His latest (and most ambitious) work *Devil House* is no different. It centers on a successful true crime writer who agrees to purchase a home where a grisly murder occurred decades earlier to properly immerse himself in his latest work of nonfiction.

The murder in question could easily

be the subject of a two-minute Mountain Goats banger. In the mid-’80s, a group of teenagers begin squatting in an abandoned porn shop, transforming it into a playground of vintage metal-head décor. Eventually, just after Halloween, a double-murder occurs — fitting the moral hysteria of the “Satanic panic” era all too perfectly.

outskirts of Silicon Valley during the tech boom of the early aughts. And as a metacommentary on “true crime” as a genre, it asks necessary questions about the ethics of stirring up other people’s dirty laundry — even as its protagonist lays out a clear moral code as he attempts to do so.

In our era of tiger kings, “favorite”

In our era of tiger kings, “favorite” murderers, Epstein sleuths, and homegrown “evil geniuses,” *Devil House* adds a necessary moral reckoning to the zeitgeist. If you find yourself attracted and repulsed by the true crime genre simultaneously, Darnielle’s novel may help you work out your issues.

But *Devil House* has more on its mind than the typical exploitative page-turner. Set in the real-life town of Milpitas, Calif., it examines gentrification on the

murderers, Epstein sleuths, and homegrown “evil geniuses,” *Devil House* adds a necessary moral reckoning to the zeitgeist. If you find yourself attracted

and repulsed by the true crime genre simultaneously, Darnielle’s novel may help you work out your issues. — Dan Schank

MCD // 416 pages // Fiction, True Crime, Horror



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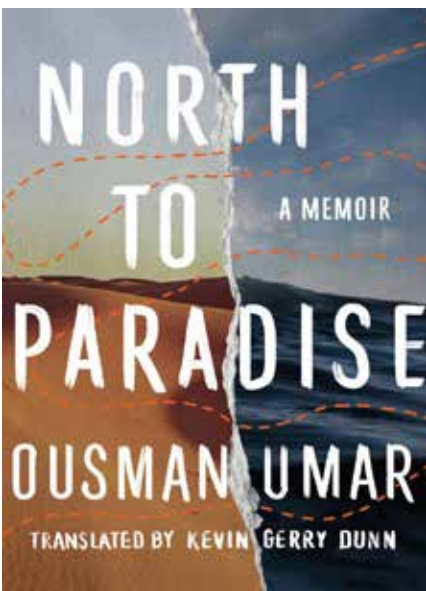
North To Paradise

Ousman Umar’s stunning biography tracks five-year journey from Africa to Europe

When Ousman Umar began the incredible journey that would change him forever, he only had one goal in mind: to find a better life. Born the son of a shaman in a small Ghanaian village, Ousman had luck on his side from the start. After his mother died in childbirth, it was customary to leave the child for dead because it was assumed that they were cursed. However, his father’s position of power in the community allowed him to save his son, becoming the first of many lucky circumstances Ousman would experience in his life. While he grew up in a good community with support and care, he was always dreaming of bigger things.

At the age of 12, he set out on what would be a perilous journey north that many young Africans — many of whom do not survive — take in search of better circumstances. His travels would ultimately take him on a five-year trek through the Sahara desert; the cities of Accra, Tripoli, Benghazi, and Casablanca; and eventually across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. Once in Europe, Ousman faced further troubles: he found himself living on the streets of Barcelona and begging for work. The better life he had so often dreamed of seemed far out of reach, until the kindness of a stranger set off a series of events

that would prove to him that he had made the right decision all those years ago. Translated from the original Spanish by Kevin Gerry Dunn, *North to Paradise* by Ousman Umar is a riveting, eye-opening, and ultimately heartwarming story that will make readers think: of how lucky we are to live the lives we do, of how unfortunate it is that so many African children choose to make this harrowing journey, and of how wonderful it is to hear of a happy ending for Ousman Umar, a kid who dared to dream. — Ally Kutz
Amazon Crossing // 127 pages // Nonfiction, Biography



Our Monthly Podcast Picks

Audio infotainment to pass the late-winter blues

The Trojan Horse Affair

Hosted by: Brian Reed and Hamza Syed // [nytimes.com](#)

In 2013, an anonymous letter came across the desk of a Birmingham City Council member in England. In this letter, details were presented about an alleged plan for takeover of several schools in the area in order to introduce an “Islamist” culture into the school system.



While letters like this had plagued the council for the previous two decades, something about this one was different. Code-named Operation Trojan Horse, the story quickly spread and took off in the press, causing national panic. Before it was over, multiple investigations were launched, England’s counterterrorism policy was revised, and the education system was massively changed.

Watching all this occur was Hamza Syed, a Birmingham native and doctor-turned-journalist. To him, the entire scandal didn’t seem quite right, with no one asking the most basic questions: Who wrote the letter, and why? A chance meeting with Brian Reed, host of *S-Town*, leads to the investigation to find the truth and ultimately answer the question: Who wrote the Trojan Horse letter? And why don’t those in power want anyone to know?

Predictably, their quest for insights is fraught with tension and frustration, as probes into the local government and interviews with local politicians seemingly lead both everywhere (including all the way to Perth, Australia) and nowhere.

The latest podcast from Serial Productions (acquired by the New York Times in July 2020), this eight-part series concluded in February of 2022. — Ally Kutz

Welcome to Our Show

Hosted by: Zooeey Deschanel, Hannah Simone, and Lamorne Morris // [iheart.com](#)

Welcome to Our Show has all the ingredients that make a rewatch podcast successful. Hosting together are on-screen and off-screen best friends Zooeey Deschanel, Hannah Simone, and Lamorne Morris. Viewers will know that Deschanel portrayed the titular *New Girl* herself, Jessica Day, while Simone served as Jess’s best friend Cece Parekh, with Morris playing Jess’s goofy roommate Winston Bishop.



Fans of *New Girl* (2011-18) will get behind-the-scenes intel on how characters were cast, which lines were improvised, the development of particular show quirks, life outside the studio for the cast members, and the writing process behind significant storylines. In episode three of the podcast, “Kryptonite: 102,” Deschanel shares that writers didn’t want to put her and Jake Johnson, who plays fan-favorite Nick Miller, together in too many storylines because they initially had too much chemistry. “And I was like ‘What? Isn’t that a good thing?’”

The structure of the podcast is lax which allows for plenty of conversation, digressions, and comedy bits from the three. They all share memories and anecdotes from that week’s focused episode and conclude by playing “True American,” a game from *New Girl* that doesn’t seem to have any true rules, but has been reinvented by the hosts for the podcast. The chemistry and rapport between the loft 4D gang that drew viewers in for seven seasons easily translates to audio, providing fans with more much-needed *New Girl* content. — Hannah Wyman

Don’t Look Under the Internet

Hosted by: Jason, Mike, & Doug (Last Names Unavailable) // [Independent](#) ([patreon.com/DLUTIPOD](#))

It always feels good getting in with a podcast on the ground floor, and if you’re into analog horror and ARGs, there’s never been a better time to start *Don’t Look Under the Internet*. (This is especially true if you don’t know what analog horror or ARGs are.) While this listener got hooked on their coverage of the currently expanding “Monument Mythos” series on YouTube, there are plenty of accessible entry points and stories to discover. Some might recognize the name of Twitter accounts such as The Sun Vanished or Gr3gory88, which listeners can actually read along with the episode for additional context. With clear nods to *The Last Podcast on the Left*, *DLUTI* largely skips the paranormal and true crime in favor of creepy internet mysteries, which they occasionally debate the legitimacy of from episode to episode.



While the show is partially marketed as comedy, hosts Jason, Mike, and Doug do a great job deep diving and retelling stovries from the darker corners of the internet. *DLUTI* also successfully replicates the feeling of sharing a few drinks and scary stories with friends, from expanded creepypastas like “The Backrooms” to seemingly real Reddit posts from escaped cult members. This small but growing podcast is also extremely grateful towards their listeners, so if you run through their back catalog too quickly, feel free to consider subscribing to their Patreon for bonus episodes covering cryptids and SCP stories. — Aaron Mook

SQUISHY FUR BABY

BY BRAD PATTULLO
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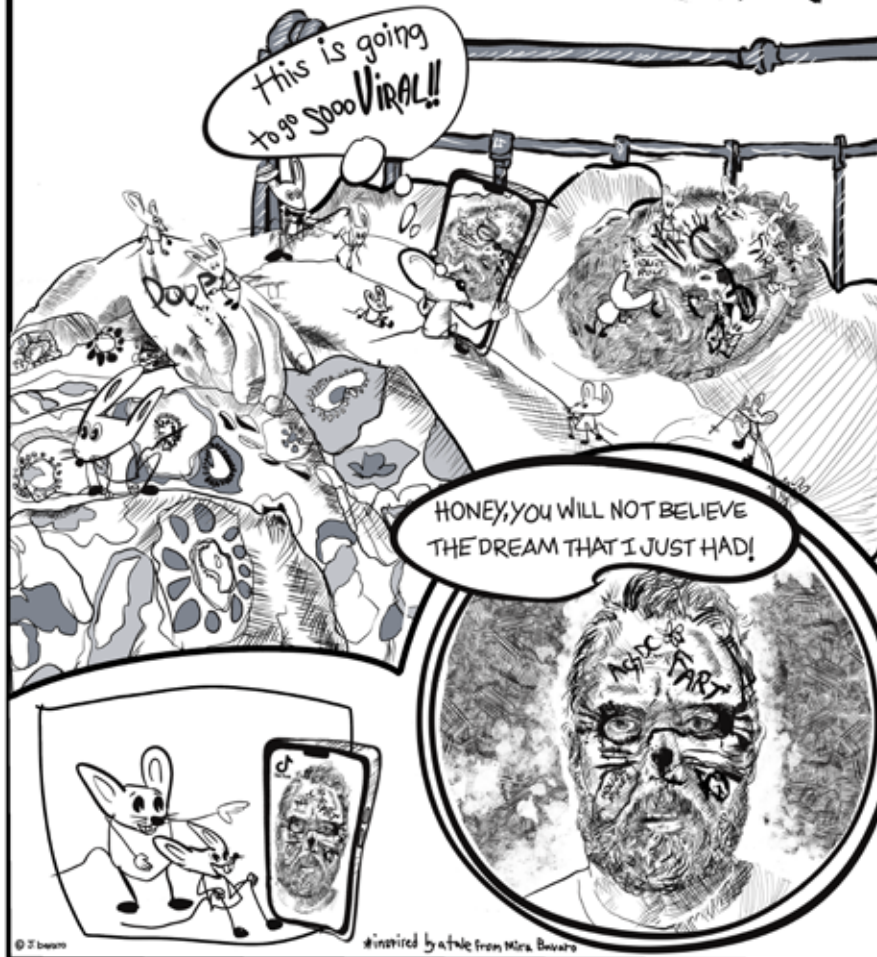
JUST TOYIN' WITCHA — BY B. TOY

SO WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO WITH ALL THIS STUFF NOW??



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STUDIES SHOW READING BANNED BOOKS CREATES LEAN, STRONG BRAIN MASS.



WHEREAS NOT READING BANNED BOOKS CREATES FAT, FLABBY HEADS.



ALBUM REVIEWS

Oliver Tree
Cowboy Tears
Atlantic Records
★★★★

The world — or at least Oliver Tree fans — thought he was done. The songwriter turned meme announced his retirement before the release of “his first and last” album, *Ugly is Beautiful*, and it seemed like it might be better that way. The formulaic pop-punk tinged album was low on highlights and running on the fumes of the singer’s viral fame. But who could expect him to stay gone for long? Oliver Tree returns with *Cowboy Tears*, a shockingly solid “country-emo” album that sounds more like a blend of ’90s pop and modern indie rock. Take “Cowboys Don’t Cry,” the album’s lead single, or “Swing & a Miss,” the single directly following it. Immediately, these songs feel different, more timeless than those that came before. The writing remains broad — “We’re riding ‘round this carousel if you catch my drift” — but in a way that makes the songs feel universal and relatable. *Cowboy Tears* is light, designed like a soundtrack to a sunny day, a combination of acoustic guitars and electronic drums that brings to mind Sugar Ray of all things. Although Tree’s Tom DeLonge-esque delivery can still be grating, there’s nothing as outwardly challenging here as there was on *Ugly is Beautiful*. With any luck, Tree will continue to experiment with styles, considering his knack for melodies. — Aaron Mook



Cloakroom
Dissolution Wave
Relapse Records
★★★★

In the pantheon of modern Hum disciples (including their peers in Nothing), Cloakroom is lucky enough to have a direct relationship with the kings of riffy space-rock. Their debut, *Further Out*, was produced by Hum frontman Matt Talbott, who makes an appearance here. On their first album, the band sounded like David Bazan fronting heavy machinery. On their follow-up, *Time Well*, the band stretched themselves to the extremes of both dream-pop and borderline doom metal for over an hour. Now, on *Dissolution Wave*, Cloakroom returns to a warmer, more melodic sound while retaining their trademark fuzz. The best example of this is on lead single “A Force at Play,” which builds upon mostly clean guitars and dreamy keyboards while incorporating a single, discordant chord in its otherwise catchy progression. The band excels at forging memorable hooks out of dirty-sounding instruments, highlighted by the angular guitar solo in the opening track “Lost Meaning.” Though with heavy distortion abounding, some listeners may be surprised at how skillfully the band handles the quieter moments here (the prettiest of which, “Doubts,” arrives at the end of the record). Still, *Dissolution Wave* is sure to please long-term fans of the band and may even earn them some new listeners, serving up a more balanced portion of what the sludge-loving shoegaze band does best. — Aaron Mook



The Twirpentines
Goodnight, Porchlight
A-F Records
★★★★

It’s been 20 years since Meadville pop punk/post hardcore band The Twirpentines released their final album *Goodnight, Porchlight* and thanks to A-F Records (Label and Home to Pittsburgh punks Anti-Flag), you can relive a time when everyone was playing *The Sims* and watching *The Osbournes*. The album was initially recorded in April of 2002 at Mud Hut Studios in Sharon, Pa., with the band playing all the songs live, only overdubbing the vocal parts. The group was led by singer/songwriter Fred Oakman, who continues to make music as both One If By Land and Fred Oakman & The Flood (featuring Twirpentines alumni Troy Messerall). You can hear the influences by artists like Hot Water Music on the track “Forever In Song,” Alkaline Trio on “Havali-na,” and Sunny Day Real Estate on “The Seams,” with an inkling of folk in the acoustic number “Against All Odds.” As Oakman points out “the music that comes from this area has a Pennsylvania sound to it; it’s hard to describe but I swear I can hear it in the songs that come from bands in our area.” This is the first time *Goodnight, Porchlight* has been released on vinyl and the digital transfer sounds great on your stereo, this is a must have for anyone who collects local music. — Larry Wheaton



Mitski
Laurel Hell
Dead Oceans
★★★★

Anyone who knows me knows how much I absolutely adore Mitski. I’m quick to note that out of the four perfect five star reviews I’ve given since 2017, two of them have gone to Mitski albums. *Laurel Hell* doesn’t make for a third perfect record (or should I say, a fourth, as I was never officially able to cover *Bury Me at Makeout Creek*), but it’s certainly no slouch. In my opinion, this is the fourth-best (of six) offering out of the artist’s nearly untouchable discography. Confusing numerical rankings notwithstanding, a “decent” Mitski album is still far better than nearly any other out there. It starts off softly, in step with past openings, yet fails to gain steam for a curious bit (despite the excellence that is “Working for the Knife”). The strongest, and most memorable points come during the middle section of the 11 tracks. From “Heat Lightning” to “Should’ve Been Me,” Mitski taps into an ’80s sound, exemplified by “The Only Heartbreaker.” An uptempo dance number, it’s easily my most-played song of the year so far. From its very first seconds though, Mitski’s lyrics are dense and darkly entrancing, assisted by her longtime producer and musical collaborator Patrick Hyland to make a synth-heavy opus of the highest order. — Nick Warren



TOMMY IN TOON — BY TOMMY LINK

WHAT YOUR FAVORITE SING ALONG SAYS ABOUT YOU

SWEET CAROLINE

- life of the party
- natural leader
- drama queen

SO GOOD!
SO GOOD!
SO GOOD!

PIANO MAN

- the quiet type
- until you get them talking and they won't stop
- loves a good story

...but it's better than drinking alone!

COUNTRY ROADS

- bonfires over bars
- is killing time until festival season
- old soul

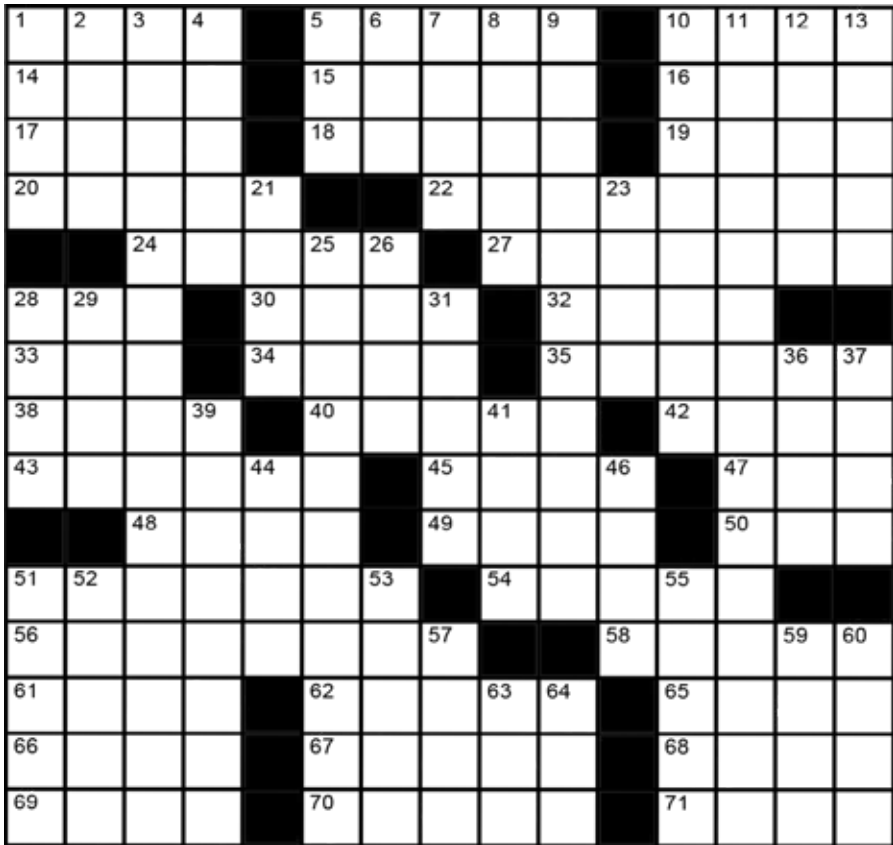
...to the place...
I BELOOOOOOOOOOONG!!!

WAGON WHEEL

- um... no
- we're not doing this
- sorry, we have standards here

Wait, what? Oh, c'mon!

CROSSWORD



Across

1. Toot your own horn
5. 1980s-2000s Texas senator Phil
10. Discoveries of Michael Faraday
14. Morrison who wrote "Love" and "Beloved"
15. Apt first name of Fleming's Goldfinger
16. "Doggone it!"
17. It may be topped with tempura
18. Gable's costar in "Gone With the Wind"
19. Ruination
20. Gut feeling
22. Jig, say
24. State flower of New Mexico
27. Wee bit
28. Inoculation location
30. Depression era wanderer
32. World of Warcraft spellcaster
33. Dairy farm sound
34. "Chocolat" actress Lena
35. Ipecac, e.g.
38. "That's my cue!"
40. Try to stop
42. King or queen, but not princess
43. Hoedown move
45. Apt name for a car mechanic?
47. Dove's sound
48. Classic moonroof alternative
49. Subj. for Janet Yellen
50. Some ESPN highlights,

for short

51. Morphine and codeine, for two
54. 2003 #1 hit with the lyric "Shake it like a Polaroid picture"
56. Cost of a bag to feed the birds in the "Mary Poppins" song "Feed the Birds"
58. Cutting-edge brand?
61. James played by Beyoncé in a 2008 biopic
62. Oklahoma city with a Golden Driller statue
65. Affliction for many a vet
66. Ridiculously funny person
67. Celebrations of lives, for short
68. Law enforcers, in slang
69. Model/actress Sastre
70. GPA booster
71. Polite reply to a schoolmarm

Down

1. A/C measures
2. Traveled by horseback
3. Sound of an unnamed person sneaking around?
4. Cutting-edge brand?
5. Gadot of "Wonder Woman"
6. Regret
7. Scorched
8. "Bad and Boujee" trio
9. Person who only raps about a podiatric concern?
10. Items that can open

doors

11. Kids' game that uses carrots for X's and pumpkins for O's?
12. FDR veep John ____ Garner
13. 17th-century Dutch painter Jan
21. Cavern sound
23. Width of a cir.
25. Feeling when you put a sandal on in the winter?
26. "____ Baby" ("Hair" tune)
28. Surrounded by
29. QB-turned-commentator Tony
31. En pointe, in ballet ... or how to describe 3-, 9-, 11- and 25-Down
36. Clothing brand since 1938
37. Co. captains?
39. Rain-on-the-roof sounds
41. Scratch the surface?
44. Shower love (on)
46. Cameo stone
51. "SNL" castmate of Shannon and Gasteyer
52. World leader who's a judo black belt
53. Subject of lessons at an island resort
55. Like some small dogs
57. Yale students
59. Recipe amts.
60. "Hamilton" Tony winner Leslie ____ Jr.
63. Pigpen
64. "Sex Education" actor Butterfield



Answers to last puzzle



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