

the village **VOICE** FREE

VOL. LXIV | NO. 2 MARCH, 2022

Katherine Turman
on Janis Ian's
Career, from
"Seventeen" to
70, plus Alynda
Segarra's Riff Raff
Rock

**Life in Drag Is
Certainly Not a
Drag: Michael
Musto Chats With
the Sparkling
Stars of Stages
and Screens**

**How Much Cash
Does the NCAA
Rake In From
March Madness?
Vincent Velotta
Explains Why
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a Piece of the Pie**

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the village VOICE

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Cover image: Lastenia Quizhpi
with her daughter, Jessica, at
Sure We Can, in Brooklyn.
Photograph by Ali Smith



Janis Ian has come a long way since "At Seventeen"—at 70, she's still got a good idea of where she's going.

Looking at women's history in music, politics, and on the pages of the Voice

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The Front

HARVEY FIERSTEIN CLEANED OFF HIS DESK DURING COVID

The actor, playwright, and screenwriter talks about his memoir, sobriety, women in politics, and what's next

By Frank Pizzoli

A defining figure in theater, cultural icon Harvey Fierstein reveals in his new memoir, *I Was Better Last Night* (out March 1), never-before-told stories of personal struggle and conflict, sex and romance, from his fabled career. Even those closest to him have never heard most of these tales, he tells the *Village Voice*. We spoke by phone in February, and I'm still laughing.

Frank Pizzoli: Why write your memoir now?

Harvey Fierstein: COVID brought life to a halt. I did what we all did—cleaned off my desk. Then I made five quilts. Next, my agent suggested a memoir, but I don't think of myself as a writer, never wanted to be one. My dyslexia influences that; I'm better at shorter pieces. I figured no one's going to see it anyway. Plus, so many friends have died. How will I correctly remember all that without them?

FP: But you resolved those feelings....

HF: I did. By remembering my friend Gloria Steinem's book on self-esteem [*Revolution From Within: A Book of Self-Esteem*]. She wrote that we all grow up with holes in our personality and ego. Because we don't always know how to express what we need. Others in life fill in those holes and that's what's important to remember—how they did that for you, not the TikTok “facts” involved. Her idea released me, and I gave myself permission to write my memoir.

FP: How'd you progress from there?

HF: The publisher wanted 200 pages and I wrote 400. So much for not being a writer! Eight of nine publishers pitched made offers. Some more than one, which I greatly appreciate.

FP: You performed in *The Haunted Host*, by Robert Patrick, of Caffè Cino fame. [Caffè Cino is widely regarded as the birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway.] You wrote that his play gives us a character whose problem “isn't being gay, it's being human.”

HF: *Haunted* is similar to my play *Safe Sex*, which portrays NYC gay life pre-AIDS—an underground denizen of clubs with late-night sexual activity. Then



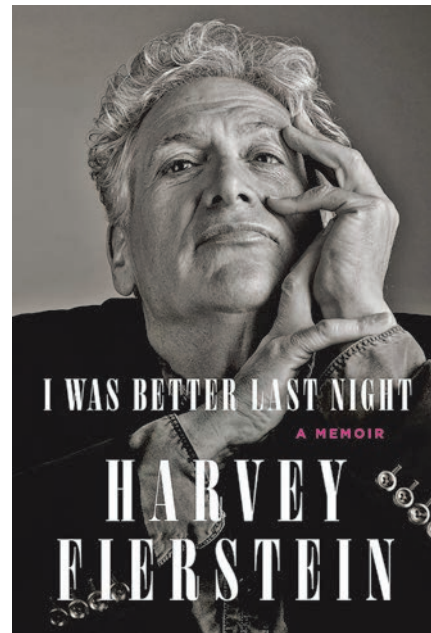
Bruce Glikas

Fierstein: You can't stop progress.

AIDS brought us into the light. We saw teachers, tradesmen, doctors, lawyers, husbands, fathers, brothers, friends, and neighbors struggling with illness and death. Now we were seen as “human beings” rather than only a “gay” guy.

FP: During its heyday, Fran Lebowitz says, the VIP room at Max's Kansas City was full of cranky, needy creative people. Your memoir notes, “The ego-feeding frenzy among the denizens of Off-Off-Broadway was a melodrama all its own.” How so?

HF: Remember that it's in the ashes we find the important stuff of Off-Off-Broadway. As playwrights and writers found success, they rushed off to their next project. The synergy among them crumbled. It was no longer about the work between them. The whole premise of Caffè Cino and other downtown scenes was to try different things. That's why I think I like acting in other people's stuff. For what I learn.



Penguin Random House

There's a saying in the antique business—“You can't go broke by selling people their childhood.”

FP: After downtown celeb Harry Koutoukas's apartment caught fire, in 1972, you authored *In Search of the Cobra Jewels*, a show about his attempt to help clean up the mess. You played Koutoukas. Your memoir recounts that *Village Voice* culture writer Arthur Bell “was arrested for holding another man's hand as they crossed the street” from the theater. Progress has been made, but with record-breaking trans deaths and a Conservative backlash, are we moving backward on queer issues?

HF: I don't believe it's possible to move backward. We must allow each generation to find its way. What we see happening now with MAGA is the death throes of a generation that *can't* stop progress. Conservatives want to move back to a time when they felt more comfortable. But that time is coming to an end.

FP: But there's such a strident push to recreate the past.

HF: There's a saying in the antique business—“You can't go broke by selling people their childhood.” Hucksters are selling back to MAGA a picture of America that no longer exists. Think of it as the difference between weather and climate. The weather changes (MAGA arises) but not the overall (political) climate of ongoing, unstoppable change. That makes them all nervous.

FP: Hyperbole abounds while critical thinking skills evaporate.

HF: My “eBay theory” helps to explain. A postage stamp for sale is displayed in a 3-by-4-inch screen image. A Rolls Royce is presented in the same image size. Over time, Internet and social media technologies have us believing all things are equal.

FP: As in, my opinion is as legitimate as your evidence-proven fact?

HF: Yes. The idiot next door is a COVID expert because he says he is. If everything is equal, then what are critical thinking skills for? As the COVID pandemic progressed, we learned new ways to treat, what/what not to do regarding transmission. It's a constantly moving target. What was true last month may not be true today, so we adjust our perceptions. We evaluate with critical thinking skills. Many have lost the ability to do that.

FP: Back to Steinem, via the late [1998] Congresswoman Bella Abzug. When Hillary Clinton ran for president, you noticed that she faced similar criticisms as Abzug—notably, that being female makes her unpredictable. Then, for the 2020 election, you wrote *Bella Bella*, stating, “Women far too often vote the way their husbands tell them to.” During a scene development session, Steinem called out “White women. The problem is white women.” Explain.

HF: Steinem, she's a religion, you know. With the 2020 election coming up, I wanted to give my friends a vehicle to raise money for women candidates. [In 2020, unprecedented numbers of women ran for office and won their races, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.] During a scene development session, Steinem stressed that white women generally cast votes based on their husbands' recommendations, because husbands financially support them. My point was that women could run the show if they all banded together.

FP: Your sobriety journey began in 1996. You wrote, “Putting down the glass was so much easier than being sober.” Meaning—although sober, one can still be an emotional mess?

HF: I've been sober for 25 years. We drink to avoid issues that are waiting for our attention, and we escape nothing. I firmly believe in the 12-Step program. People go to fancy-schmancy rehabilitation centers and come back with nothing. Some will find their way to a 12-Step program and finally set their course.

FP: You wrote in your memoir, “Artists return to paint the same landscape over and over, but they do so looking forward.” What's next?

HF: I've revised *Funny Girl*, which opens April 24 on Broadway. I have seven projects in various stages, but I can be lazy. I'm a hermit by nature. Good luck to the *Village Voice* on returning. And don't believe anything Michael Musto tells you [laughing his laugh]. ■

Frank Pizzoli is a journalist who has been covering politics, queer issues, healthcare, and literary celebrities for the past 25 years.



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Voice Lore

THE WOMEN AT THE TABLE

Though outnumbered five to one, women staffers stood tall in the Voice's early days

By R.C. Baker

In the current season of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, Abe Weissman—protagonist Midge Maisel's father—is greeted by the crabbily avuncular staff on his first day of work as a *Village Voice* theater critic. “Kennedy for President” posters are plastered throughout the bustling office, and as the editor makes introductions around a conference table plunked right in the middle of the hubbub, we meet the only woman on the editorial staff, Bernie, who is given the straightforward title “News.”

Considering that the story is set in 1960, that's about right, since at the real-world *Voice* that year, **Mary Perot Nichols** was listed simply as “News” on the masthead, editing other journalists and writing her own coverage of street-level concerns in the city.

Nichols (1926–1996) had gotten the job a couple of years earlier after she approached

Dan Wolf—who co-founded the paper with fellow World War II vets Ed Fancher and Norman Mailer—to ask that the *Voice* cover efforts to stop city planner Robert Moses from ramming a roadway through Washington Square Park. Wolf, whose title on the masthead was simply “Editor,” told her to compose the article herself and he would run it. Wolf, Nichols, and other writers beat the drum to keep cars out of the Square, eventually beating Moses in 1958, and Nichols appeared on the masthead for the first time in the September 10, 1958, issue with that broad-ranging “News” title. (Berenice Abbott, a seminal modern photographer, was listed under “Contributors” in that issue; her photos—including a striking portrait of the painter Edward Hopper accompanied by a pot-bellied stove in his Washington Square studio—graced a number of *Voices*

over that first decade.) Editor Wolf had once described the paper as “just one big unhappy family,” and Nichols bowed to none of the male staffers when it came to sharp-el-bowed political coverage: The muckraking “Runnin’ Scared” column, which premiered in the late 1960s, was originally bylined “Mary Perot Nichols and The Voice Staff.” Nichols left the paper in the mid-’70s and later worked revamping the foundering WNYC radio station through such provocative shows as “The John Hour,” which broadcast the names of men convicted of patronizing streetwalkers in order to, as Mayor Koch said, “deter people who are considering roaming New York City streets to pick up prostitutes.”

Before Nichols’s time, there had been a few women on the Voice masthead, though they long remained a minority. Out of six folks with actual titles on the very first (October 26, 1955) masthead, only one was a woman, **Nell Blaine**, listed as “Art and Production.” Blaine (1922–1996) was responsible for the classy, lissome *Village Voice* logo that ran from 1955 until 1969, but in her off-hours she was pursuing a serious painting career. In April 1960, Blaine appeared on the paper’s art pages in an ad from the uptown Poindexter Gallery promoting her solo exhibition “Paintings of Greece.” What that concise exhibition title elided was the fact that Blaine had contracted polio on the island of Mykonos and, during a difficult recovery, had trained herself to paint left-handed. Six years later, the April 14 issue of the paper featured a Fred W. McDarrah photo of Blaine in a wheelchair, but she remained undaunted as an artist—printed on the facing page was a new Poindexter ad: “Nell Blaine / Recent Painting from St. Lucia and England.”

In 1957, a new female staffer appears on the masthead, though that five-to-one ratio remained the same. Sorting through *Voice* historical materials uncovers staff photographer **Gin Briggs**’s jaunty studio stamp—replete with a box camera, squeeze bulb, and birdie—on the verso of pictures of such literary luminaries as one-time *Voice* columnist Jean Shepherd (of *A Christmas Story* fame). Briggs photographed street life, art exhibits, and many other subjects, including shooting homey portraits of Lorraine Hansberry, author of *A Raisin in the Sun*, and an occasional *Voice* contributor. In one case, Briggs herself became the subject of a front-page article, when she put a poster—“Clean up the Democratic Party”—in the window of her Village studio, a challenge to the machine politicians who had long represented the neighborhood. Her landlord threatened Briggs with eviction, and his wife told the photographer, “They’ll break your window.” But Briggs stood firm, and

“Inexperienced in the ways of Tammany politics, the five-foot-two photographer, who is not given to philosophizing, observed succinctly, ‘It’s a free country, isn’t it?’”

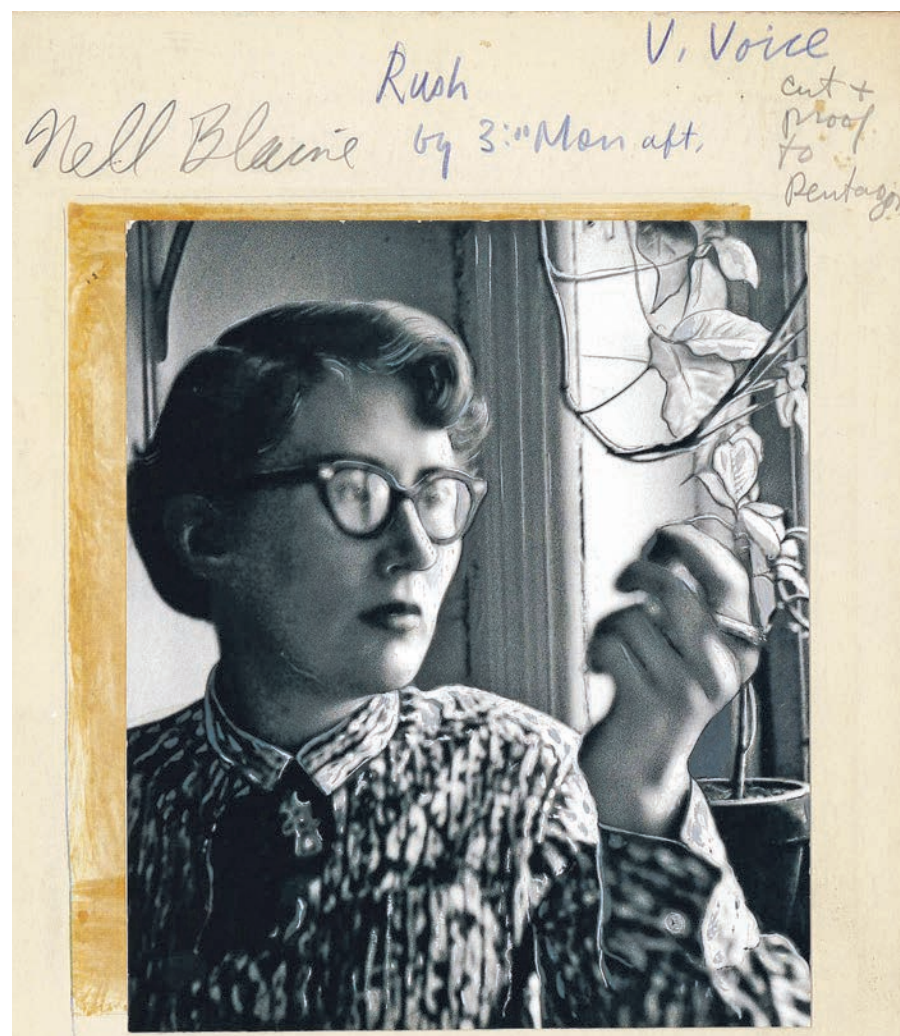
the article noted, “A native of Ponca City, Oklahoma, and inexperienced in the ways of Tammany politics, the five-foot-two photographer, who is not given to philosophizing, observed succinctly, ‘It’s a free country, isn’t it?’”

Briggs kept shooting for the *Voice* until 1962, when a notice in the August 23 issue announced that McDarrah would be replacing “California-bound Gin Briggs.” Unfortunately, the trail of her career goes cold from there.

Roughly around the time Briggs was departing, Linda Solomon (born 1937) began covering live music for the paper. In spirited blurbs, she critiqued everyone from folk musicians to bagpipers to jazz guitarists to comics, such as in this May 2, 1963, take in the paper’s “Notebook for Night Owls” section: “Concluding the line-up is comedian Woody Allen, who continues to accentuate the negative with an ounce of wit and a pound of dissension.” When Solomon wasn’t journeying among the city’s cafes, clubs, and coffeehouses, she was reviewing new albums beneath the *Voice*’s prosaic “Records” slug. In the July 25, 1963, issue, she zeroed in on *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, observing that the scruffy-voiced “citybilly ... stands outside his problems and writes a credo for people to live by,” singling out “the sharply integrationist, casually poetic, ‘Blowin’ in the Wind.’” Solomon divined that this second album by the folkie from Minnesota was going to be with us for a long, long time, concluding, “One brief listening to the emotional understatement in his voice emphasizes the power of his lyrics and his genuine concern with the state of the world.”

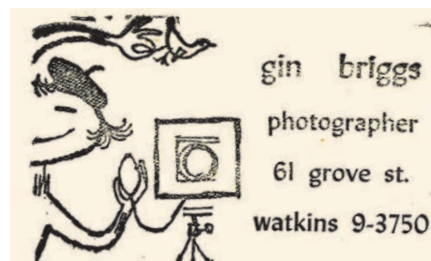
Solomon moved on from the *Voice*, contributing to ABC-TV’s *Hootenanny* and writing for *NME* and other magazines in later decades. But her early, prescient Dylan review captured the era’s zeitgeist—a “concern with the state of the world” that remains stubbornly relevant six decades on. ▮

Future “Voice Lore” columns will focus on whatever strikes our fancy—staffers, stories, artworks, ads—to illuminate the *Voice*’s 67-year-and-counting history.



Nell Blaine (photographer unknown), ca. the late 1950s. The image has been heavily airbrushed and highlighted with white retouching paint, a common practice in those days. (The “Pentagon” note in the upper-right corner may refer to the Pentagon Printing Co., one of many print service houses in the city in the postwar era.)

Images from the Village Voice historical document collection



WOMEN CHALLENGING THE MACHINE: HOLTZMAN, CHISHOLM, AND ABZUG

It's 2022, and still difficult to be female and politically powerful, but three New Yorkers helped clear the way

By Ross Barkan

New York has not been an easy place for ambitious female politicians. Until this past August, every governor in the state's almost-250-year history had been a man. A woman has never been elected mayor of New York City. Almost every woman who has won an election statewide—Hillary Clinton, Kirsten Gillibrand, and, potentially, Kathy Hochul—was first elevated to the post through a sudden vacancy. Sexism explains much of it. Bad luck matters, too. The expense of running for office here and the insular, chauvinistic nature of machine politics have frustrated female candidates for decades.

But there have been a few superstars. Elizabeth Holtzman beat back a Brooklyn Democratic establishment that wanted nothing to do with her. Shirley Chisholm, in the same borough, smashed through barriers of gender and race. And Bella Abzug, in the technicolor 1970s, was at the forefront—with Chisholm—of the feminist movement. Their histories are important to remember today, as women continue to try to shatter glass ceilings.

Elizabeth Holtzman

Long before Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, there was Elizabeth Holtzman.

A graduate of Harvard Law School, the 30-year-old Holtzman decided to mount a long-shot primary campaign against her local congressman, 84-year-old Emanuel Celler. A liberal lion who had served in Congress since the Harding administration, Celler was the co-sponsor of the Hart-Celler Act, which eliminated national quotas for immigration, and steered the civil rights and voting acts through the House in the 1960s, where he was chairman of the Judiciary Committee. Back home in Brooklyn, however, Celler was hardly visible; he had stopped keeping an office in the district. And while he was progressive on issues of race and economics, Celler was still of the old world with regard to feminism.

"Her fulminations are as useless, as we say, as a wine cellar without a corkscrew," Celler told *The New York Times* in June 1972, shortly before his primary against Holtzman. "So my conclusion is: She is as irritating as a hangnail, which nail I am going

to cut off on June 20."

Holtzman was hustling across the district day and night, shaking hands at subway stations and movie theaters, where a hot new film called *The Godfather* was drawing audiences in droves. An active reform Democrat, she was up against the powerful Brooklyn machine, which was backing Celler to the hilt. But a shock came later that month, when Holtzman edged past Celler and another candidate in the race. Turning 31 that

August, Holtzman was the youngest woman ever elected to Congress. She held the record for almost 50 years, until AOC, at 29, entered the House in 2019.

Holtzman's House tenure was even more auspicious than her upstart campaign. She was a member of the Judiciary Committee that voted to impeach Richard Nixon. She brought a lawsuit against Nixon for the bombing of Cambodia. Partnering with Senator Ted Kennedy, she authored the Refugee Act of 1980, raising the annual ceiling for refugees coming to America following the end of the Vietnam War.

That same year, Holtzman mounted a bid for the Senate. In the Democratic primary she defeated a number of candidates, including her old boss, John Lindsay, the former mayor of New York. On the Republican side, the veteran senator Jacob Javits had lost to a more conservative challenger, a relative unknown from Long Island named Al D'Amato. Holtzman appeared on a glide path to the Senate until Javits, a moderate Republican, decided to stay in the race on the Liberal Party line, angering progressives. In the three-way contest, Javits siphoned votes from Holtzman, the Democrat, and allowed D'Amato to narrowly win.

But while Holtzman was finished in Washington, she was still a force in Brooklyn. Shortly after losing to D'Amato, she became the first and only woman elected

"I met more discrimination as a woman than for being black," Chisholm told the AP. "Men are men."

Brooklyn District Attorney. The crusading liberal became the chief prosecutor, charged with locking up defendants in the crime-adddled 1980s. "It's the way you deal with issues of life and death," she told the *Washington Post*. "You're not one of 535 people ... If it goes right, you're responsible; if it goes wrong, you're responsible." Holtzman instituted a number of reforms, including hiring more women and people of color. She set up a special unit to investigate cases of police brutality. And, as she had in Congress, she focused on hunting Nazi war criminals living in the United States. She took the post seriously, but higher office was on her mind—the mayoralty, another shot at the Senate—and in 1989 she made history again, becoming the first woman elected city comptroller.



That '70s show: On August 22, 1974, three congresswomen from New York (Elizabeth Holtzman, far left, Bella Abzug, second from right, and Shirley Chisholm, far right) looked on as President Gerald Ford signed a proclamation declaring August 26 Women's Equality Day. The text read, in part, "As 1975 approaches, widely proclaimed as International Women's Year, Americans must deal with those inequities that still linger as barriers to the full participation of women in our Nation's life. We must also strengthen and support laws that prohibit discrimination based on sex."

National Archives, White House Photographic Office Collection (Ford Administration), 12/6/1973 - 1/20/1977

But her remarkable political career would go no further. In 1992, she entered the Democratic primary to take on her old foe D’Amato, but this time she also had to fend off another female trailblazer, Geraldine Ferraro, who had been Walter Mondale’s running mate in the 1984 presidential contest (which they lost to Ronald Reagan in a landslide). Both women went down in defeat to Robert Abrams, then the state attorney general. Holtzman’s attacks on Ferraro’s ethics and family finances would come back to haunt her a year later, when the Queens congresswoman furiously backed Alan Hevesi in a primary against Holtzman. With controversy surrounding a \$450,000 loan Holtzman took out for her Senate campaign the prior year—conflict-of-interest accusations arose because the bank Holtzman took the loan from had a sister company that won a bond contract with the city—Holtzman lost to Hevesi in 1993.

At 52, she was out of elected office and off to a career in the private sector, joining the law firm Herrick Feinstein LLP, where she co-chairs the government relations group. She wrote several books on the George W. Bush administration and published a memoir, *Who Said It Would Be Easy*, while continuing to be active on a range of cherished causes, including the prosecution of Nazi war criminals. And she weighed in extensively during the impeachment of Donald Trump—in 2019 publishing *The Case for Impeaching Trump*.

Shirley Chisholm

For progressive politicians across America, Shirley Chisholm is still a lodestar.

The first Black woman to serve in Congress and the first woman ever to seek the presidential nomination, Chisholm rose to fame in the 1960s and ’70s as a fiery educator-turned-politician, breaking racial and gender barriers wherever she went. Her punchy campaign slogan—“unbought and unbossed”—became a rallying cry for outsiders everywhere.

A child of Bedford-Stuyvesant, in Brooklyn, she lived with relatives in Barbados for a stretch of her youth. At Brooklyn College, she won prizes for debating; afterward, she taught nursery school and earned a master’s degree in elementary education at Columbia. As director of the Friends Day Nursery, in Brownsville, an impoverished Black neighborhood in eastern Brooklyn, and the Hamilton-Madison House Child Care Center, in Lower Manhattan, she rose to prominence as an authority on child welfare. From 1959 to 1964, she was an educational consultant in the daycare division of the city’s bureau of child welfare.

Politics, naturally, was on Chisholm’s mind. She became a volunteer with the Bedford-Stuyvesant Political League and the League of Women Voters. In 1964, she won a seat in the State Assembly and parlayed that into a tough congressional victory in 1968 over William Thompson Sr., the borough’s first Black state senator.

Chisholm was a star almost immediately. After receiving an unwanted assignment on the Agricultural Committee—Central Brooklyn was, of course, bereft

Holtzman was the youngest woman ever elected to Congress. She held the record for almost 50 years, until AOC, at 29, entered the House in 2019.

of farmland—she challenged the seniority system, fighting her way onto the Veterans Affairs and, later, Labor Relations committees. “Apparently all they know here in Washington about Brooklyn is that a tree grew there,” she said in a statement at the time. “Only nine Black people have been elected to Congress, and those nine should be used as effectively as possible.”

In 1972, Chisholm launched her campaign for president. She didn’t expect to win, especially with another popular liberal in the Democratic primary, George McGovern. But she hoped her bid would be a “catalyst for change” in an era pervaded by overt racism and sexism. Chisholm would wear a button bearing the forward-thinking slogan “Welfare Not Warfare,” and aimed to assemble a multiracial, working-class coalition to challenge those in power. Her campaign reached out to whites, Latinos, Blacks, anti-war activists, union workers, students, and the poor. “We must have this coalition,” Chisholm said. “This nation must be turned around.”

The Democratic establishment, predictably, did not embrace her, and other Black politicians were wary of such a bold insurgency. For liberals, it was a precarious moment, with the backlash to the counterculture movements of the 1960s brewing and Richard Nixon, the Republican president, cementing his popularity ahead of his re-election campaign. Chisholm ruffled feathers because she was not willing to defer to the Black male leaders who traditionally dominated the realms of politics and civil rights.

“When I ran for the Congress, when I ran for president, I met more discrimination as a woman than for being black,” she told the Associated Press a decade later, shortly before she left Congress. “Men are men.”

Chisholm later lamented that she had been misunderstood during her political career, especially when she decided to visit the arch-segregationist George Wallace in the hospital after he survived an assassination attempt, in 1972. “Black people in my community crucified me,” she recalled to the *Times*. “But why shouldn’t I go to visit him? Every other presidential candidate was going to see him. He said to me, ‘What are your people going to say?’ I said: ‘I know what they’re going to say. But I wouldn’t want what happened to you to happen to anyone.’ He cried and cried and cried.”

After the presidential campaign, Chisholm remained in Congress until 1982. She

decided not to seek re-election after her husband, Arthur Hardwick, a Buffalo liquor store owner who had served in the Assembly with her, was injured in a car accident. “I had been so consumed by my life in politics,” she said that year, “I had no time for privacy, no time for my husband, no time to play my beautiful grand piano. After he recovered, I decided to make some changes in my life. I truly believe God had a message for me.”

Chisholm led a quiet life after politics, eventually moving to Florida; she died in 2005, at the age of 80. A 407-acre park on the East New York waterfront, Shirley Chisholm State Park, was named for her in 2019.

Bella Abzug

There was no one in Congress—or anywhere, perhaps—quite like Battling Bella. For a time in the 1970s, she was a feminist icon, a politician-celebrity who turned heads in every room she entered.

Born, like Elizabeth Holtzman, to Russian Jewish immigrants in New York City, Bella Abzug was class president at her high school in the Bronx and majored in political science at Hunter College while simultaneously attending the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. In 1944, she was one of the few women to earn a degree from Columbia Law School.

Abzug took on labor rights, tenants’ rights, and civil liberties cases, practicing law at a time when women were rarely admitted to the bar. She volunteered to go to Mississippi to defend Willie McGee, a Black man accused of raping a white woman. (McGee was executed in 1951 for the alleged rape; the case attracted worldwide attention as a miscarriage of justice in the Jim Crow south.) She later became an outspoken proponent of liberal causes, including opposition to the Vietnam War.

In 1970, politics came calling, and she pulled off an upset against a Manhattan congressman, Leonard Farbstein. With her trademark wide-brimmed hats and polka-dotted dresses, Abzug was arguably the most recognizable woman in American politics. She had a voice, in the words of writer Norman Mailer, that “could boil the fat off a taxicab driver’s neck.”

In Washington, she was known as both a voluble presence and a canny legislator, attaching amendments to unrelated pieces of legislation and altering bills so that funding for almost any program included a provision banning sexual discrimination. In 1972, her seat was eliminated during the decennial redistricting process, and she decided to run against another well-regarded liberal, William Fitts Ryan. The primary was bitter—Ryan, an early Vietnam War opponent, was a reform Democrat too, and he was battling cancer—and Abzug lost badly. But Ryan died before the general election and Abzug was appointed on the Democratic line to replace him, defeating a third-party candidacy from Ryan’s widow.

Returning for another term, she became the first member of Congress to call for Richard Nixon’s impeachment. Writing in a journal that was published as *Bella: Ms. Ab-*

zug Goes to Washington, in 1972, Abzug said she spent “all day figuring out how to beat the machine and knock the crap out of the political power structure.” ... “There are those who say I’m impatient, impetuous, uppity, rude, profane, brash and overbearing. Whether I’m any of these things or all of them, you can decide for yourself. But whatever I am—and this ought to be made very clear at the outset—I am a very serious woman.”

With her talent and fame, Abzug was naturally hungry for higher office, and mounted a bid for the Senate in 1976. The Republican incumbent, James Buckley, was considered vulnerable, and Abzug entered a crowded Democratic primary to face him. Her top opponent was Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the United Nations ambassador, who campaigned to Abzug’s right, arguing for the paring back of social welfare programs that Abzug wanted to protect. The primary was so fierce that Abzug refused to say whether she’d back Moynihan if he won. She’d lose the race by a single percentage point.

Abzug’s star was bright enough that Andy Warhol was commissioned, in 1977, to paint her portrait for a *Rolling Stone* cover celebrating her next political venture: a run

“Bella Abzug had a voice, Norman Mailer said, that ‘could boil the fat off a taxicab driver’s neck.’”

for mayor of New York City. (The cover would get bumped by Elvis Presley’s death.) She was an early front-runner, but she was in a packed field that included her former colleague in Congress, Ed Koch, as well as then-New York Secretary of State Mario Cuomo and the beleaguered incumbent, Abe Beame. The campaign, coming shortly after New York’s brush with bankruptcy, was less hospitable to a proud liberal like Abzug. She finished several percentage points behind Koch, who ran hard on support for the death penalty.

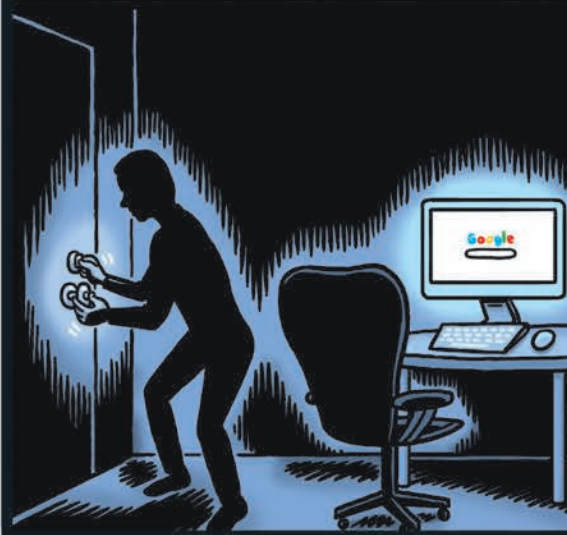
Abzug would run for Congress several more times but never reclaim political office. She continued to work on women’s rights for the remainder of her life, founding an international women’s group, the Women’s Environment and Development Organization, which focused on environmental issues, and leading a conference of nongovernmental organizations that paralleled the United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing, in 1995. In 1998, she died of complications following heart surgery, at the age of 77. Like Shirley Chisholm, a park was named for her: Bella Abzug Park was christened in 2019, at Hudson Yards, in her old House district. ▮

Ross Barkan is an author and journalist from New York City.

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PERSONAL TIME TO GET RELIEF.



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FOR THOSE WHO LIKE TO WATCH, WE
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Orientation

Left

Right

Transpolitical

Categories

Karens Mature MAGA Strangers

Russians Entitled Teens Celebrities

Fingered As A Suspect Public Shame

Queer Anon Gun Toys Pissing Match

Master Debaters Amateur Legislators

No Job Gang Harangue Cause Play

MAYBE YOU HAVE A THING FOR NURSES AND
MASKS.

AWW, DOES A WIDDLE
MANDATE MAKE YOU
SO SAD?

HOW 'BOUT
WE BE A BIG
BOY AND GET
A WIDDLE
SHOT?



Nasty Man Infantilized by Hot Practitioner

OR MAYBE A THREESOME SOUNDS ENTICING.

I DEMAND FULL
AND FREE
HEALTHCARE.
GIVE IT TO ME!!

OH, YEAH? I'M
GONNA RESTRICT YOUR
VOTING ACCESS!

OOH! YOU'RE
BOTH SO ... SO
EXTREME!



Hardcore Group Debate Penetrates Issues

OUR EXPLICIT CONTENT LETS YOU
EXPERIENCE YOUR FORBIDDEN FANTASIES.

YOUR
"RESEARCH"
IS BUNK ...

HOW GULLIBLE
CAN YOU
POSSIBLY BE?

HE
LOST,
OKAY?!



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WE AIM TO CREATE CLIMACTIC SCENES THAT
BRING YOU SATISFYING RELEASE.

ELECTION
INTERFERENCE, FRAUD,
INCITING VIOLENCE ...
THE JURY FINDS
YOU GUILTY,
GUILTY,
GUILTY!

YES ...
YES ...
YES!!



NO NEED TO FEEL ASHAMED. EVERYBODY HAS
THESE THOUGHTS. JUST ENJOY THE AFTER-
GLOW ... UNTIL THE URGE HITS YOU AGAIN.



La Dolce Musto

NYC DRAG IS ON FIRE! BUT IS THERE LIFE BEYOND DRAG RACE?

Drag queens are making it work and spreading their own kind of joy, on-screen and off

By Michael Musto



Janelle No. 5: The lines between Brooklyn (“artsy”) and Manhattan (“Broadway girls”) have blurred, and “drag in New York is becoming just New York drag.”

How me a New York City gay bar that doesn’t have drag entertainment and I’ll show you a CVS without a Beanie Baby. Drag has become part of the fabric of the gay nightlife experience, as de rigueur as DJs, gogo boys, and overpriced drinks. Ever since hookup apps started offering guys the chance to grab sex anywhere and anytime, nightlife venues have had to use other tactics to draw a crowd. Without hormonal urgency in the air, they generally rely on happy hours, videos, and drag, drag, drag.

Drag queens are the court jesters, the distractors, and the commentators of the scene. Some of them aim to be sparkly showgirls, while others adopt an outrageous, clowny persona, but either way, they

learn to work a crowd with wisecracks, pratfalls, lip-sync, and, increasingly, live vocals. In many cases, they are theater-trained actors who found that they have a better career in a dress, so they do elaborate Vegas-style numbers or well-rehearsed concerts. Last October, on the sleek third level of the sexy club the Q, which opened last year in Hell’s Kitchen, I caught the talented Lagoon Bloo belting out current pop hits and original songs, backed by a combo, for a seated crowd that had bought tickets in advance. It was sort of the drag answer to the Café Carlyle. Drag queens also populate Brooklyn’s boîtes, creating a sequin-y blur that floats back and forth over the bridge on

a nightly basis. Says Bushwick-based drag performer Janelle No. 5 (aka José Rodríguez), “When I started, it was a clear difference between Brooklyn and Manhattan drag. Brooklyn was considered more artsy and alternative and Manhattan was labeled as ‘the Broadway girls.’ But now, the lines have blurred and drag in New York is becoming just New York drag, which I really like.”

There’s so much New York drag that virtually all aspects of it have become welcome, especially by club owners looking for a packed house that’s ready to tip. Prompting the tucking mania, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*—the ongoing search for “America’s Next Drag Superstar”—debuted on cable TV in 2009, the same year the popular sex app Grindr started to dramatically change guys’ mating habits. This January, 738,000 people tuned into the season premiere, a sub-

dress like men to spoof machismo—are also still popular, and it’s just a matter of time before they get their own reality show. *Kings of the Kingdom? Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow? You’ve Got Male?* Well, there’s time to work on the title.

Drag queens of all kinds are sashaying out of my ears, and the proliferation of gender-benders couldn’t be better timed. NYC dance clubs have been under siege for years—Mayor Giuliani targeted them in the 1990s and they never made a big comeback, thanks to rising costs, restrictive community boards, and the Internet—so the “dance divas” who used to perform in clubs have become as extinct as gay mimes. But there’s always an audience for a drag queen, and a drag queen for an audience. Besides, the queens need to regularly go onstage and work out their routines and banter, so they can prepare their audition reel to send to Ru!

In the bars, it seems, every performer has either been on *Drag Race* or desperately wants to be. Those who haven’t gotten on sometimes end up feeling as unloved and marginalized as a Republican who voted for impeachment. That’s why at the slick West Village drag haven called Playhouse, I’ve seen entertainers ask the audience to “make some noise” for “local girls”—i.e., the ones who work their butts off and cartwheel around the room without the benefit of worldwide fame.

That club’s owner, Eric Einstein (who also has the nearby bar Pieces and the Hell’s Kitchen bar Hardware), has definite

Drag queens are the court jesters, the distractors, and the commentators of the scene.

thoughts on the subject. “Drag used to be relegated to a separate, small corner of mainstream gay nightlife,” says the wiry entrepreneur. “With a few exceptions—like Barracuda [a long-running Chelsea bar]—drag shows were less common, relegated to a night a week, often with just a drag hostess. The bars were often the only—or, at least, the easiest—means for gay men to meet each other. But we’ve had an incredible 15 years of drag. There’s been a confluence of greater acceptance of being gay amongst the general population, as well as the evolution of the Internet and smartphones. *Drag Race* hit its stride at the right moment and helped push drag to the forefront of the gay and now gay-friendly consciousness.”

Einstein says that in the aughts, customers started wanting more of an entertainment vibe from nightlife in lieu of the sex appeal, and drag provided that. These days, customers like to see up-and-coming queens perform so they can later applaud them on the TV show and crow, “I knew

stantial boost over the roughly 600,000 averaged the previous season. What’s more, *Drag Race* has won no fewer than 24 prime-time Emmys and has sparked spin-offs and a worldwide craze to throw on a wig and some titties and play around with gender, just for a giggle and a rush.

Not just gay male grown-ups do drag, mind you. There’s a 14-year-old cult figure named Desmond Napoles (who’s been making drag appearances since age 4); trans women (like *Drag Race* Season 9’s Peppermint—yes, you can be trans and do drag); and straight, cis males, too (like this season’s Maddy Morphosis, a gussied-up groundbreaker). Drag kings—women who

Illustrations by Joaquín Aldeguer

them when!” “Even just screening the show in a bar,” observes Einstein, “has become akin to showing the playoffs in a sports bar.” A drag queen inevitably hosts the screening and interjects commentary, as the crowd cheers, jeers, and analyzes every snapping finger and clicking tongue. It’s gay church. And the bars put on their own live mini versions of *Drag Race* too, from *Polish the Queen* at Playhouse to *Lady Liberty* at the Q. You can dress up and earn cash prizes before heading to L.A. to snag even bigger ones on camera.

Being on *Drag Race* can certainly boost your career out of the dive bars and into the mainstream. Insult comic Bianca Del Rio—winner of Season 6—regularly sells out large venues around the world and just costarred in the drag play *Everybody’s Talking About Jamie*, at L.A.’s Ahmanson Theater. (I hear the play has its sights on Broadway.) What’s more, Bianca has moved into a Palm Springs mansion and is going to launch a drag museum in L.A. She has surely “read” her way to the top! Meanwhile, the friskily funny Shangela didn’t last long on *Drag Race* Season 2 and she didn’t go all the way on *Drag Race All Stars* Season 3, but she’s worked nonstop since, from a role in Lady Gaga’s *A Star Is Born* to the current HBO documentary series *We’re Here*.

Another perk of being a *Drag Race* star is that you might very well get to host the Glams, the nightlife awards celebration that drag organizer Cherry Jubilee presents annually. This year’s was the 23rd Glams and the biggest one yet, full of colorful personalities and edgy production numbers—like Inita D, Hibiscus, and other neon-clad creations swirling and posing to thumping music in a way that would have rocked the Super Bowl. *Drag Race* alumni Brita Filter and Rosé co-hosted with high spirits, pathos, and calls to arms about the need to demand equal rights. Lagoon Bloo won Best Vocalist and Best Cabaret Show, while Best Competition went to *Lady Liberty* and Best Event went to Bushwig, the annual Brooklyn drag festival that brings the whole scene together in a haze of Aqua Net. The big award—Entertainer of the Year—was copped by the aforementioned Janelle No. 5, who certainly earned it. Janelle is sort of a human Bratz doll, with over-the-top street glamour and some tough love for the audience—“This is your year. So get the fuck up, do what you need to do and figure it out!”

When I ask the 28-year-old club staple for her weekly schedule, Janelle takes a breath and replies: “Monday, Pieces. Tuesday, the *Are You the Next Diva?* contest at Aura Cocina, in Brooklyn. Thursdays at Playhouse. Fridays, I throw two monthly parties—



Tina Twirler mixes fun and politics.

The “dance divas” who used to perform in clubs have become as extinct as gay mimes.

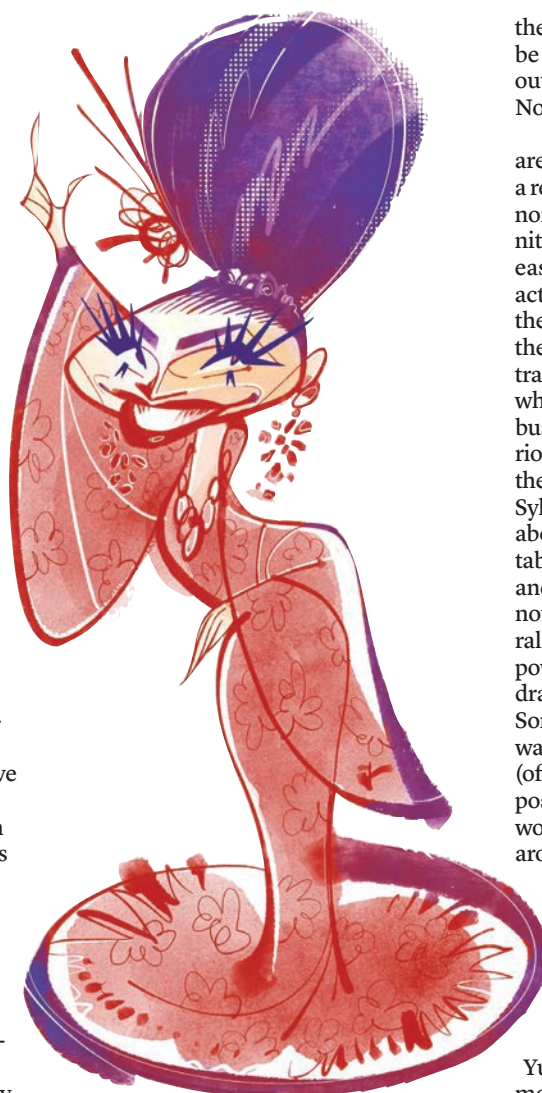
NSFU, a safe, queer bondage party at 3 Dollar Bill, in Brooklyn, mainly for POC, and a Latinx dance party, also at Aura Cocina. Saturday, during the day, I’m at Aura Cocina again for a brunch that I produce called *Shut Up, Bitch*, which is my catchphrase. At night, I’m at Metropolitan Bar at 559 Lorimer Street, in Brooklyn. It’s a weekly dance party called *Dial 559*. And on Sunday, I’m at Hardware with the lovely, hilarious Izzy Uncut. I’m only off on Wednesdays.” She’s busier than Sarah Jessica Parker!

And Janelle doesn’t just prance around, honey. “I’m producing, hiring talent, hosting, and sometimes performing,” she tells me. “It’s a lot of labor. It’s important to leave your mark, make sure people are comfortable and have fun, and you make money in the process. Create a moment of happiness and entertainment for random people.” While doing all that, Janelle happens to make such a good living that she doesn’t need a day job—a pretty good score for a performer who’s not yet been on *Drag Race*.

But can a drag queen fully flourish without getting her contoured face on that show? Well, Janelle’s “drag mother,” Kandy Muse, and “drag grandmother,” Aja, both benefited from being contestants. “But I don’t feel like that has to be your end-all or be-all,” confides Janelle. “There are so many outlets to become successful. I look at *Drag Race* as a platform. It amplifies your reach to the world.

But if it’s not your ticket, that’s fine as well.” So she hasn’t auditioned? “Yes, I have, two or three times,” she admits, and we share a laugh.

Also not on the *Race* yet is this year’s Glam winner for Best Dance Performer, Tina Twirler (aka Malachi Perkins), a high-kicking, 29-year-old diva from Chicago who flawlessly does “runway” in a bodice, thigh-high vinyl boots, and a purple answer to Jazz Age icon Josephine Baker’s shellacked finger waves. “I want to take you on a journey and make you feel happy, sad—all the emotions in one,” Tina tells me about her artistic mission.



Yuhua Hamasaki’s “lewks” range from secretarial to pixie-ish to bejeweled temptress.

Is her act political too? “Yes, especially when it comes to Black lives mattering. Me being a queer male artist dressing up in drag, any time I stand on a stage is an act of politics. Having the courage to do that takes a lot.”

As for the drag elephant in the room: “Any drag queen that doesn’t want to be on *Drag Race* ... that’s a lie. I do aspire, though if I don’t get on, it’s not my end-all. I’ll be successful, it just might take me longer to accomplish what I want to do.”

I couldn’t yank out my fake butt cheeks and relax until an honest-to-goodness *Drag Race* star spilled some final tea for me. Sure enough, I got Yuhua Hamasaki, aka Yuhua Ou, on the horn for a kiki. Yuhua is a 31-year-old Chinese-American makeup and costuming wiz who appeared on Season 10 for three episodes that impacted her life. With “lewks” ranging from secretarial to pixie-ish to bejeweled temptress, Yuhua sports two-inch lashes, multi-colored eyeshadow, and a perky but sardonic wit. She says *Drag Race* enabled her to travel and do things she hadn’t done before, “but even after *Drag Race*, we all need to continue working as well. There are still the rehearsals, the content, the performances.”

Her trajectory? “When I started doing drag, it was to express myself, discover myself, and be more confident and happy, but

then, in my mid-20s, it switched to a way to be myself but at the same time to get a check out of it. It was a hobby and professional. Now I do it because it’s who I am.”

That there are so many drag queens who are able to pay the bills via their stagecraft is a relatively new and refreshing phenomenon. In the shady past, the queer community often had a problem with drag queens’ easy access to their femininity and at times acted ashamed of them—until TV made them famous, of course. I’ve written that the LGBTQ hierarchy used to want drag and trans people to go to the back of the bus, when in fact they were already *driving* the bus. (The history-making 1969 Stonewall riots wouldn’t have been the same without them.) In 1995, I met legendary drag activist Sylvia Rivera, who always reminded people about her failed efforts within the queer establishment to increase acceptance for drag and trans folks in the 1970s. Sylvia also noted that, when the media came to cover rallies, she was shunted aside by the queer powers-that-be because they didn’t want a drag queen representing them to the public. Some straights have obviously felt the same way. At a 1990s AIDS benefit, Linda Blair (of *Exorcist* fame) told me she refused to pose with drag queens there because it would hurt the cause. My head spun around!

Only 15 years ago, says Yuhua, you wouldn’t even tell your date that you were a drag queen because it would interfere with the stereotypical imagery guys had bought into. “The media portrays gay culture as ‘You have to be in tank tops with muscles,’” says Yuhua. “And drag was not fitting into that mode, so these guys were scared and unsure. But it’s more accepting now.” “Yes!” I chime in, “in fact, I always see drag queens sporting really hot boyfriends nowadays.” “Some of them,” corrects Yuhua, with a vocal smile.

Drag has never been a feminist’s delight either—most drag queens get to appropriate the art of womanhood for a few hours before fully returning to male privilege, though gay male privilege isn’t always all that. The primary motivation to gender-bend seems to be the thrill they experience by diving into a fantasy version of themselves while getting strangers to ogle, admire, and laugh their heads off. “We work so hard,” says Tina Twirler, “and we are like prime-time entertainment because you can do so much with the drag, from the aesthetic to the hair to the numbers. We’re that release. Drag is a whole production.”

“I hope the audience leaves a little bit more happy than when they came in,” concludes Janelle No. 5, “and more intoxicated.”

Michael Musto is best known for his outspoken Village Voice column “La Dolce Musto,” which began in 1984. (With the Voice’s return, he is delighted to be back as a contributor.) He writes a gossip column for Queerty, has penned four books, found himself on the Out100 list of the most influential LGBTQs, and is streaming in docs on Netflix, Hulu, Vice, and Showtime.

Generations of Music: Track 1

AT 70, JANIS IAN SINGS THE TRUTH ONE MORE TIME

"At Seventeen" was a huge hit for a young artist; almost half a century on, there's Light at the End of the Line

By Katherine Turman

I had it all worked out. I was gonna be a veterinarian, and lifeguard in the summer. And I was going to do music on the side," say Janis Ian, chuckling at her youthful career aspirations. A preternatural talent changed that trajectory, and by age 15, in 1966, she'd released a song that remains a landmark of musical social commentary.

"Society's Child"—a poignant tale of interracial love, with lyrics including, "Why don't you stick to your own kind? / Preachers of equality / Think they believe it?"—found early support from conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein. Knocked out by the Jersey girl's bold songwriting maturity and bell-clear voice, on 1967's CBS documentary *Special Report: Inside Pop: The Rock Revolution*, Bernstein called her a "great creature." Laughing on our Zoom call, Ian notes, "That's followed me the rest of my life," adding, "But without him, I doubt that 'Society's Child' [which was banned by many radio stations] would have happened. And then I would have had a whole different career. He was really good to me."

Her career as a recording artist—which includes perhaps the truest lyrics ever about the agonizing emotions felt by high school girls, in 1975's "At Seventeen"—is coming to an end via the aptly titled 12-song album *The Light at the End of the Line*. Ian is vibrant, in a life filled with non-musical endeavors that include journalism, a science fiction anthology (she's been a rabid fan of the genre since she was young), and more—rather than "retire," she prefers "rewire." From her sunny home on Florida's Gulf Coast, where she lives with her wife of 19 years, Ian is equally bright and open, over-ear headphones and a ready smile in place for a day of remote interviews.

Frankly, though, she is tired. "I've been in the music business since I was 12, 13. I've been self-managed now for going on 20 years. So, with no arrogance, I've seen a lot. I've watched it grow from being a business to an industry. I'm tired of business," she states.

Caring deeply can be exhausting. Performers, Ian believes, are "supposed to be magic. That's our job. When I walk out on-stage, nobody's supposed to know that I've been at that venue since two o'clock, that I've spent five hours already on the show. That I have to get up at 5 a.m. for a 6 a.m. depart the next day. That's not their problem."

Of course, some artists do less, but Ian simply can't. "What they don't see in ownership is not just the terrible responsibility that



Janis Ian: 17 going on 71.

comes with it—because to me, it's a terrifying responsibility. But also just the sheer amount of work it takes to protect it, to shut down people who are misusing it making T-shirts, putting on plays, whatever. It consumes you," she admits. "It's not good for your work. So for me, the only way to get back to my work is to say I'm done. Done with all this other stuff."

So, along with her final album, Ian's master tapes and publishing rights are up for sale. But as a socially conscious activist whose new song "Resist" addresses female genital mutilation, among other long-standing outrages, don't think she's "selling out." "You're selling out for free time, because that's about the only thing that money can buy you. Maybe good health care," she opines. Hence the divestment: Ian started Rude Girl Records in 1992, and to date, there are more than 25 Ian albums and tons of additional Ian footage under its auspices.

In closing this chapter, she remains vigilant. The title track to *The Light at the End of the Line*, a goodbye song to fans, was "too hard" a way to end the album, she felt. "I really wanted to end it with 'Better Times Will

Come,'" she explains. "That last guitar chord is the arc of COVID in my life: 'Yeah, we're good.' 'No, we're not.'"

"Better Times," clocking in at 7:29, is a song of hope that begins quietly a cappella, growing to include a panoply of joyful instrumentation: New Orleans-style sax, clarinet, trombone, fiddle, and mandolin. Plus, guests: Vince Gill on acoustic guitar, lovely scatting by Diane Schuur, great vocals from newgrass singer John Cowan, and in the coda, sustained rock guitar shredding from Jim Oblon.

It had been nearly 15 years since she'd made an album, but Ian was constantly creating. "I had a whiteboard that I kept for years of songs that I thought were the best

Like many women, some of Ian's experiences have remained buried for decades. In 2015, she spoke on social media about Bill Cosby. When Ian was 16 and backstage for her appearance on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, Cosby spotted the teen resting her head in the lap of her female chaperone. He spread the word around Hollywood that Ian was potentially a lesbian and thus not suitable family entertainment.

"I felt very lucky that I was too young for him to be interested. All he wanted to do is destroy my career. He didn't rape me," she says bluntly. When Ian finally did open up about her Cosby story, she says, "I got some blowback. But, you know, truth is truth." The singer adds, "I think people mistake his being released for his being declared not guilty. And he is guilty."

Likewise, Ian minces no words in "Resist," a song that took several years to craft to her satisfaction. Lyrics are crisp indictments: "Put her in high heels, so she can't run / Carve out between her legs so she

"Fuck anybody who says to me, 'Are you still making music?' What!? I'm not having a hit record or on your TV screen? So I'm dead?"

can't come" ... "Funny how I whisper and you think it's a roar / You ask me to the table then you seat me on the floor."

Her powerful aural statements have not gone unnoticed by peers: Ian earned nine Grammy Award nominations and two wins (in 1976, for best female pop vocal performance for "At Seventeen," and in 2013, for best spoken-word album for *Society's Child: My Autobiography*).

But it's the fans who matter to Ian. "If you're me, approaching 71, you've got people who have followed you for 55 years. Your work has been with them literally from cradle to grave. Your records have been buried with their parents."

"These are the things that you remember as an artist, and the older you get the more grateful you are. Not because of the ego drive. But because you were allowed to have an effect, and you did no harm."

Those fans will get to enjoy Ian on her upcoming tour dates. But past that? Her plans, which she's worked so hard to manifest, sound magnificent: "I would like a couple of months where I don't have to be on email. I don't have to carry a phone. I could actually take a walk without thinking about business."

"I know that I'm not going to be sitting around, because that's not in my nature," Ian concludes. "The hardest part is just learning to say no. That's the tough part." ▮

Keith Stokes

ALYNDA SEGARRA EXPLORES LIFE ON EARTH

Taking a transformational journey with Hurray for the Riff Raff

By Katherine Turman



Alynda Segarra: "I'm always trying to figure out what scares me."

Alynda Segarra raises their right forearm to reveal a new tattoo: a simply rendered machete. "I definitely get power tattoos, things that feel mostly connected with ancestral work," the singer-songwriter explains over Zoom. "Machetes are really important to Puerto Ricans. It's like this old-school form of protection, independence, and resilience." A butterfly is another strong symbol—and tattoo—for Segarra, tied to their chosen middle name: Mariposa. "I feel like butterflies have always represented the ancestors to me. Also, they defy borders, and they transform. So I really wanted it for my middle name, because I feel like I transform a lot and shed skin."

Segarra, who makes music as Hurray for the Riff Raff, has unpeeled a lot of layers since leaving the Bronx at 17 and settling in New Orleans, in 2007. Over eight albums, the daughter of a lawyer/politician mom and music teacher dad has explored life both internal and external, their just-released *Life on Earth*—a gorgeous 11-song LP

recorded in late 2020 and produced by Brad Cook (Waxahatchee, Bon Iver)—full of totemic tunes. An inveterate explorer, Segarra's journey began in New York City. Growing up, "I definitely had a bit of a mythological mindset about the future of my life. Like, what is my fate? What is my destiny? What kind of Hero's Journey do I have to go on?"

Reading beatnik poetry and hanging at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, Segarra felt early on that "if I didn't feel like I could go through these normal society landmarks [like college] and I had to make myself useful somehow, I knew I had to sacrifice. I knew I had to do something that was difficult." As a child, they'd gone through a *Rent* (the musical) phase, seen Tina Turner in concert with their aunt, and had a dad who was immersed in salsa and Latin jazz. But soon, all subways pointed to the arts and activism center ABC No Rio, on the Lower East Side, along with punk rock shows. Hanging out in Tompkins Square Park, the teen Segarra met kids who were on their own, traveling the country. "At the time,

there were still squatters in the Lower East Side. And anarchists and punks of the '80s were teaching us, 'Oh you kids, back in my day....'"

So Segarra became, in their words, a "hobo," riding the rails, joining a community of like-minded souls exploring the country and life, and also forging a connection with nature that influenced what they call the "nature punk" of *Life on Earth*. Though that era of life is more than a decade past, the COVID lockdowns allowed Segarra time for rumination. "You're sleeping in bushes, you're hiding under trees. If it rains, you get wet," they recall of the travel time. "You're an animal. And you have to be very in touch with your intuition. Whether you want to call me female or whatever, it's just the reality that no matter how I identify, there's so much danger."

Akasha Rabut

Though their expressive, wide-set brown eyes appear calm, the artist is drawn to danger, of a sort. "I'm always trying to figure out what scares me," Segarra explains. Making *The Navigator* concept album in 2017 "scared the hell out of me, it really challenged a lot of negative self-talk that I had ingrained in me," they admit. In creating the LP, Segarra traveled to Puerto Rico and to their Bronx birthplace, giving *The Navigator* a story line about a teen in an overgentrified city in the future, basing the character on their own 16-year-old street-kid self. After that successful creative journey, nonetheless, "the next thing was this little voice that was, 'Well, I don't know if you're brave enough to really bare it all anymore.'" When first writing songs in their late teens, Segarra's compositions were "brutally raw." That's not to say they

shy away from pain on *Life on Earth*. But sometimes, as with the tale they tell in a lovely rap voice on *Life on Earth*'s "Precious Cargo," it's not their own pain.

"I have two men I was visiting in immigrant detention during volunteer work here in rural Louisiana," the singer explains. "I felt like it was really important to go to these places and to try to be useful, but also share a story." With the men's approval, Segarra recounted their journey of harrowing river crossings, I.C.E. agents, and sleeping on the floor "for 17 days"—"you sleep on the floor like a dog," Segarra sings. "I just felt like that's a part of the tradition with songwriting, being a witness and putting something in the history books right now, saying, 'This is an important thing that I don't want to get erased, because it's so brutal, because it's so ugly.' We want to ignore it. I want to write it down so that we remember that this was happening to people."

And happening to the earth, as well. As to the impetus of the title track, Segarra claims an otherworldly influence for the

phrase and the feeling "life on earth is long" in a nearly six-minute song with a spare, melancholy waltz feel. "I was joking with Brad in the studio, like, 'I didn't write that line, some 200-year-old tortoise put that in my brain,'" they say, laughing. "Because sometimes I feel like artists get these downloads of something. And you're like, 'What the hell does that mean?' So that's how that song came to me." Segarra strove to discover the meaning. "I've got to find it in the darkness, figure it out. It becomes, like, that's the treasure. I've got to find the map, and it does mean a lot of different things. It can be agonizing, how long [life] can feel, and it can also feel so short that you're like, 'Are you being sarcastic?' It goes like that, right?" they say, snapping a finger.

To its creator, the song is also a sort of "prayer mantra" of believing in the will of

"I didn't write that line, some 200-year-old tortoise put that in my brain. Because sometimes I feel like artists get these downloads of something. And you're like, What the hell does that mean?"

humanity to survive, "but not just humanity, of all creatures. I believe in the power of this planet." While Segarra is at once fearful for and entranced by the natural world—witness 'KiN,' the album closer, which is their field recording of the Singing Oak (a tree hung with wind chimes, by artist Jim Hart), wind, and birds in City Park, New Orleans—they've cultivated an internal strength: "I've got some tools on my belt now, how to walk through this world and be present." Those tools include preservation, of self and of the planet. "How do I take care? I kept thinking with *Life on Earth* I wanted to get this regenerating quality of energy. I wanted to not just put out and not just take in, I wanted to find a way," they say, "of finding out how I sustain myself and care for myself while also giving honest work that I think could be healing to people." Brutal, beautiful, or both, whatever Segarra sings about, they conclude, "honesty is the point." ■

Katherine Turman has written for Entertainment Weekly, Spin, Billboard, and other publications, is the author of Louder Than Hell: The Definitive Oral History of Metal, and produces the classic rock radio program Nights With Alice Cooper. She lives in Brooklyn.

Environment

A REVOLUTION IS TAKING PLACE, ONE CAN AT A TIME

“Waste pickers” are helping the planet while paying their bills—it’s time to show them some respect

Story and photos by Ali Smith

What do you see when the temperature is 23 degrees and you pass a small woman folded into the shape of a question mark digging through the trash on a street corner. She’s maybe around 70, and she doesn’t look unhappy, just matter-of-fact, as she goes about her business of adding bottles and cans to two enormous plastic bags balanced on top of a shopping cart with one wonky wheel.

Even just a month ago, I might have assumed she was an outsider, desperate. But knowing what I do now, I see her for what she is: part of a revolution.

WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) estimates that there are 8,000 to 10,000 “canners”—waste pickers who collect containers and redeem them for money—working on New York City’s streets. Of the 900 served regularly at Sure We Can, New York’s only nonprofit bottle and can redemption center, the same study reports that 55% are Latinx, 24% are Black, and 18% are Asian. A third are over 60, and 80% live below the poverty line.

But those are stats. Who are these people?

When I visit Sure We Can, Pedro Romero is climbing down from the storage locker he shares with his wife, Josefa Marin. He smiles at me and looks positively Lilliputian under the enormity of the bags he carries, but he handles his burdens with ease before depositing them in front of Josefa. Her eyes are dark and lively and she smiles so much as I try to be understood in my halted, broken Spanish that I can’t help but wonder if she’s laughing at me—until I realize how effortlessly she laughs with everyone around her. The two chat and toss bottles and cans across each other into bags, separating them by distributor: Union Beer, PepsiCo, Manhattan Beer.... It’s the end of a long weekend of hard work, and it will now take them around nine hours to sort their haul. They will make 5 cents a container, plus 1 to 1.25 cents more from Sure We Can for sorting them.

Another canner, Lastenia Quizhpi, is polite but reserved. Her daughter, Jessica, 19, studies operations management and analytics at Baruch College; the part of her tuition that is not covered by financial aid is paid for by her mother’s canning. Jessica collected with her mother until she was 12,

when a neighbor reported them to Child Protective Services. Although she doesn’t do it full-time, when Jessica sees an opportunity to collect containers now, it’s hard to resist. “It’s like when I see a penny on the

floor, I pick it up even though it isn’t worth much. It was embarrassing when I was a child, not now.”

The lot is full of movement. People sort containers, stack crates full of bottles 10 feet high; mountains of bags full of water bottles teeter intimidatingly overhead. It is an unexpected oasis in this industrial section of East Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Which is ironic, since the space has no running water. Still, it offers canners a (composting) toilet, much-needed PPE, and food grown in a garden irrigated by captured rainwater through a system built out of found tubing.

There are solitary figures who enter the lot, too, and leave without interacting much with the rest. But they are paid for their work—\$4, \$10, \$30. Some are here casually for the extra income, others are facing barriers to more formal employment, such as homelessness, digital illiteracy, poor education and language skills,

and addiction. While there are vast income differences between the top and the lowest earners, the average daily income for a New York City canner is, according to WIEGO, considered to be only \$18; \$14 at the height of the pandemic, when restaurants and bars closed and canners were, like the rest of us, hesitant to go outside. And those numbers are due, in part, to the fact that the redemption rate of 5 cents per container hasn’t gone up since the Bottle Bill set it in 1982. It’s hard to come up with any other expense or salary that hasn’t gone up in 40 years.

Since COVID hit and life turned upside down, Ryan Castalia, Sure We Can’s executive director, has seen an increase in formerly casual canners who now rely solely on this work. One such man, likely in his 50s, who chooses to remain anonymous, is shy and reticent but very diligent and open-hearted. He surprises me by saying, “I think of canning as a form of therapy, mental entertainment.” He adds, “I worked for 40 years doing cleaning service in a six-floor apartment building. They fired me in June 2021 without a reason except ‘because of the pandemic.’ Recycling is how I’m able to pay my share of the rent and feed and dress myself.”

Canning is access to work for those who want it. But don’t think for a second it’s easy work. To make real money takes long shifts. There aren’t any redemption centers in Manhattan, and there is a restrictive daily limit for redeeming at stores and machines, so most canners haul their bags and carts to redemption centers in the outer boroughs. Fifty-five percent of canners are women, and they often work at night, capitalizing on that sweet spot between when businesses and apartment buildings set their garbage curbside and when official collection begins. All of this work is carried out while being subject to frequent harassment, public stigma, and theft. In hopes that greater visibility and legitimacy will help them avoid these pitfalls, Sure We Can issues safety vests and ID cards to their members, as requested.

What is that stigma all about? Why do we judge canners? Carolina Palacio, organizing member of the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers and self-titled “militant organizer,” has a theory. “There are New York citizens who survive only by going through other peoples’ garbage. People who have had to invent a new source of work—part of a ‘survival economy’—because there isn’t work guaranteed by the state or the private sector.” In a city that boasted 99 billionaires amongst our ranks in 2021, she adds, “This can make people very uncomfortable. Worldwide, waste pickers are a symptom of a workforce that is not working. If we see them as that, we need to address that the system is malfunctioning.”

Pope Francis says of people like waste pickers in grassroots “popular” movements, “You are social poets, because you have the ability and the courage to create hope where there appears to be only waste and exclusion.” (An initiative of Pope Francis, the World Meeting of Popular Movements works to create an “encounter”



Chicago Crosby at Sure We Can, New York’s only nonprofit redemption center.

between Church leadership and grassroots organizations to address the “economy of exclusion and inequality.”)

According to WIEGO, canners belong largely to communities hardest hit by COVID. Their ability to continue to earn a living at the height of the pandemic was decimated not only by shuttered businesses and lack of access to proper PPE in order to work safely but because many got ill or had to care for sick or dying family members. And while most of us working in the formal economy got our stimulus checks with relative ease, many canners had no access to what they were owed, for reasons such as a lack of digital literacy or access, or having no bank account or permanent address. Chicago Crosby is a mother who quit her high-pressure job in the fashion industry to care for her sick mom in 2012. When asked about the risk of canning during COVID, she says, “We just have to get out there and do it or else we’re going to end up with nothing.”

So why do I see a revolutionary when I see a canner?

First, canners are helping to save the planet.

Second, CANNERS ARE HELPING TO SAVE THE PLANET!

It’s a “green job,” part of the “circular economy,” the type of job that leaders like AOC, Bernie Sanders, and President Biden



Josefa Marín and Pedro Romero: Saving the planet, one can at a time.

will tell you is the only sustainable way forward. According to Christine Hegel, associate professor of anthropology at Western Connecticut State University and board member at Sure We Can, the 900 canners who came through their lot in 2019 alone diverted 12 million containers from landfills and funneled them back into the re-

demption system, which is where they belong. “We keep careful records,” says Hegel, “and have provided this data to the DSNY (the New York Department of Sanitation) in the past as part of helping them track diversion rates.” The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation puts the state-wide number of con-

tainers diverted by waste-pickers at 5.5 billion in 2020. And that’s a pandemic year.

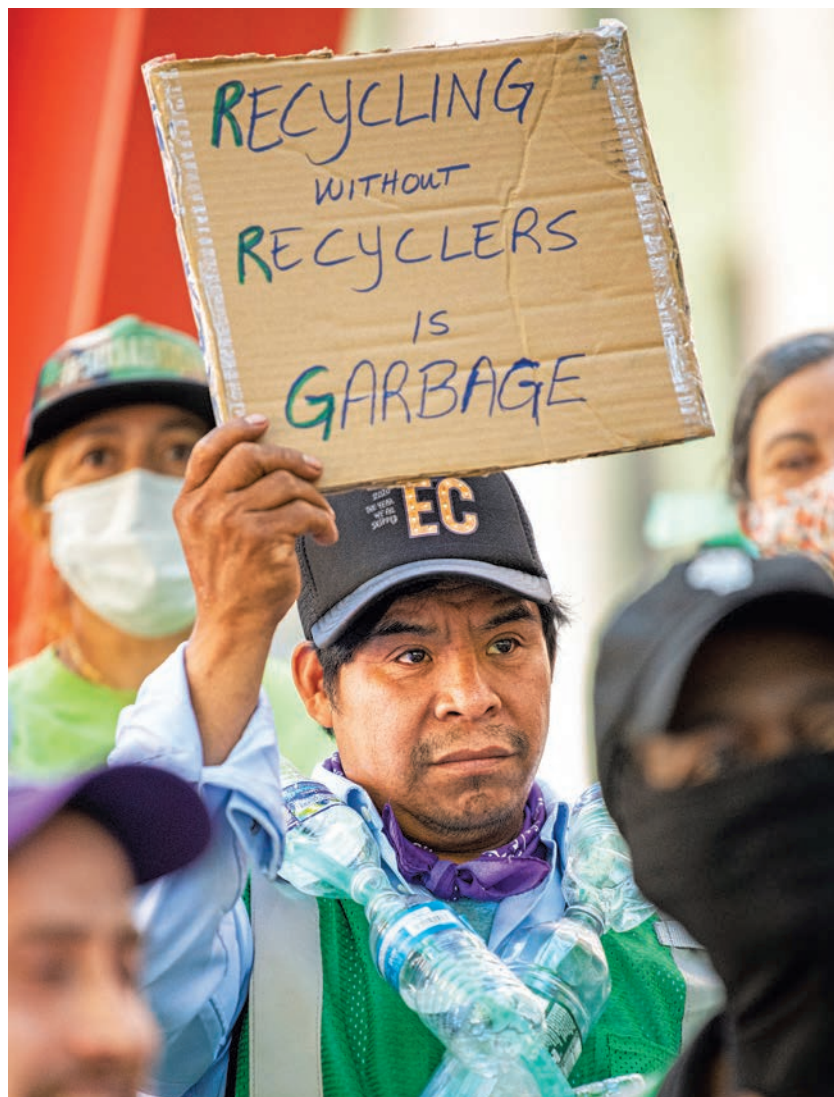
When we buy a drink, we pay 5 cents extra on the container—which containers are included changes from state to state, country to country. In Montreal, even milk cartons have this fee attached. In NYC, your Snapple (noncarbonated beverage) and Jack Daniels (liquor) bottles don’t. The hope is that we’ll be incentivized to return what we buy to the store, where they’ll pay us back our 5 cents. That store returns our container to the original distributor and collects that nickel back, plus a 3.5 cent handling fee. The distributor then takes on the burden of handling the material they’ve put into the world. The assumption, naturally, is that they will properly reprocess it. This is the concept of EPR—Extended Producer Responsibility: a “cradle to grave” system meant to make corporations responsible for how their packaging choices impact the environment. In 2022, French and German distributors will have to adhere to EPR standards, and many individuals, lawmakers, and eco-organizations, like the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, are pushing to make this policy worldwide.

But most of us don’t return our containers to the store, because it’s boring and we’re busy and there’s that old stigma that we talked about. It makes us feel a vague

sense of embarrassment. Most of us, instead, toss ours into curbside recycling. But when we recycle in this way, the financial burden falls to us. Our taxes pay for their pick up and for the private company that sorts and recycles our waste. We pay twice on each container—once when we purchase it, once when we finance the city’s contract to process it. But redeemed containers fed back into the redemption system (by consumers or canners) require no third-party collection and are returned to the company that distributed them and recycled on their dime, which incentivizes corporations to make more sustainable choices. Which is key. Plus, unfortunately, there are always going to be those consumers who toss their recyclables into black garbage bags. Canners pull from those as well, salvaging containers otherwise headed straight for landfills.



The part of Jessica Yauri’s college tuition that is not covered by financial aid is paid for by her mother’s canning.



Pedro Romero stands up for his rights. “Waste pickers” are part of a green revolution.

The question about what percentage of any collected material—redeemed, municipal, or otherwise—is actually being properly recycled is another issue that hinges on shifting factors, such as resale value of the material. So, if we care about waste, the trend must always be toward reuse and sounder packaging choices. There is no other real solution. But in the meantime, we are chest-deep in the flotsam and jetsam of a modern society, and we must deal with it.

Another reason to care about this work is that providing people with low-barrier entry points to the workforce is a basic human rights issue. According to Oxfam America, COVID has created an explosion of wealth among the 1%, while one person in the 99% is dying, on average, every four seconds from COVID or related issues such as hunger due to poverty, lack of access to good healthcare, and the inability to buy sufficient PPE.

Considering all of this, we have to ask: Who benefits from keeping canners marginalized, their work informal and stigmatized, their efforts undercompensated? The bottom line is: Waste has value. And in New York City, we live in the bull's-eye of a capitalist society.

Sims Metal Management—an international conglomerate with a state-of-the-art processing facility in Long Island City, Queens—is currently in the middle of a 20-year exclusive contract with the DSNY to process all of the city's metal, glass, and plastic residential recycling. Under their contract, not only is the company paid by

the city but Sims can sell recycled materials back to the industry. Metal has the most resale value, then plastic, and, finally, glass. So, managing the city's residential waste offers Sims two revenue streams: contract and resale. Other waste management companies profit from contracts for commercial pick-ups. This means that when bars and restaurants work out relationships with individuals instead, it interferes with waste management companies' profit opportunities.

The DSNY needs Sims, and Sims profits from the arrangement. So it's not hard to imagine why both have, in the past, publicly referred to canners as "scavengers" and "thieves." Even the 311 system provides a protocol through which to report "individuals on foot scavenging small quantities of recyclable material." And while the definition of "scavenger" is technically correct, the word brings to mind carrion-feeders.

I reached out to the DSNY to ask if their opinion had changed at all. Joshua Goodman, assistant commissioner for public affairs, responded: "Those old quotes do not accurately reflect the position of the Department of Sanitation in 2022. We believe in keeping recyclable material out of landfills, and do not oppose any New Yorker redeeming cans and bottles to make ends meet. Anyone who recycles metal, glass, plastic, or paper is helping the City meet its Zero Waste goals, and that is a good thing."

Hopefully, this shift in tone is being felt on the streets and will be reflected in policies. But when I asked Sims whether it

Pope Francis says of people like waste pickers in grassroots "popular" movements, "You are social poets, because you have the ability and the courage to create hope where there appears to be only waste and exclusion."

might be open to the incorporation of canners into the waste management system, a representative declined to comment.

In 2016, then-Mayor Bill de Blasio set the lofty (and distant) goal, with the Mayor's Zero Waste Challenge, of sending no waste from NYC to landfills by 2030. Since then, the DSNY has begun to fund community composting centers with grants, but there are no known comparable plans to support the work of canners. As Sure We Can's Hegel points out, "There should be multiple points of entry for this work. There is enough waste to go around."

I can't help but wonder about another reason the political will might not be there to raise the 5 cent redemption rate, which could motivate more people to return their containers. Before 2009, profits from unclaimed bottle deposits (those that were never redeemed) were returned to distributors. But since then, 80% of unclaimed benefits go to the New York State Department of Taxation and Finance.

Meanwhile, this workforce undulates, like a wave in a consumerist ocean; unseen, but shaping the landscape, helping New York City reach its purported zero-waste goals. An invisible workforce. That is, until now. Because, for the first time in history, canners worldwide are unionizing. The first step, as in any other revolution, is drawing up an outline of beliefs and principles, a list of aspirations and non-negotiables. A constitution.

It's no easy task to articulate the needs of such a varied group living in different countries under diverse circumstances. But the move, facilitated by WIEGO, the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers, and organizations worldwide, is not unprecedented. Street vendors, with the Street Vendor Project, and domestic workers, with the National Domestic Workers Alliance, have had their constitutions ratified by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which gives their union leaders a seat at the negotiating

table with government reps and policymakers. Before the ILO was founded, in 1919, all workers were informal workers, until widespread acknowledgment of the need for protections made its creation inevitable.

Canner Josefa Marín is one of the authors of this global constitution, which calls for, among other things, safer working conditions, protection from harassment (Asian canners report a sharp rise in victimization since the pandemic began), an expansion of networking and organization worldwide, and improved access to childcare to abolish child labor. Once ratified, regional groups will have more tooth to their fight. In New York, this fight will include working toward getting the redemption rate raised from 5 cents to 10. When asked if she feels empowered by this process, Marín says, "Of course. I am giving something of myself so that our fellow recyclers can be recognized. Other people will learn about those who clean the streets and help the environment."

As far as raising the redemption rate, Carolina Palacio adds, "Any change that happens in New York City influences not only the rest of the country but potentially the whole world, especially in regard to EPR." For examples of waste pickers successfully organizing, she points to Buenos Aires City, where they wear uniforms, receive benefits that include childcare, and get a salary for their official involvement in waste management. Palacio makes it clear, though, that this, plus similar successes in Colombia, Africa, Brazil, and India, were all hard-won and met with initial resistance.

While many constitutions are flawed or fall far short of lofty goals (the U.S. Constitution tacitly endorsed slavery while avoiding using the term outright), in general, their intention is understood as offering redemption—from strife, oppression, abuse. In this case, the redemption being asked for by canners is literal. For the rest of us, it may be moral. I now understand these peoples' rights as a revolution in the way that David was a revolution against Goliath: proving that might doesn't equal right and that all giants can be toppled, sometimes by the most unassuming forces.

It's noon, and a shaft of sunlight reaches under the looming Williamsburg Bridge, on the Lower East Side's Delancey Street. A woman sits on the curb, alone. Before I notice her, I notice the blue plastic trash bags that surround her, filled to capacity with bottles and cans. She takes a bite of a sandwich, closes her eyes, and lets the sun shine on her face. Maybe she's thinking about her sandwich. Maybe she's thinking about nothing at all. But I hope she has a sense that there's a better time ahead, when the work she's doing will be recognized. A time when she will feel like this vast metropolis, which is currently engulfing her, has got her back. ■

Native New Yorker Ali Smith is a photographer and writer whose work, focused on women's lives, human rights issues, and the environment, has appeared in the Village Voice, The New York Times, the Guardian, and others. Her most recent book is Momma Love: How the Mother Half Lives.



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The 400 blows: The edges of the weapons are blunted, the impacts are not.

New York Mirror

BRINGING MEDIEVAL MAYHEM INTO OUR NEW MILLENNIUM

In today's armored combat arenas, teams of fighters face off with broadswords, axes, and hammers

Story and photos by C.S. Muncy

Simon Rorich's match at the 2016 Armored Combat League Eastern Nationals, in Swedesboro, New Jersey, wasn't going great. His teammates were down, lying on their backs in the sand at his feet, and a group of tall Canadian fighters had pinned him in place.

The rules governing this medieval style of fighting have always been straightforward: Stay on your feet or you're done. But when there's a group of aggressive Canucks working you over with poleaxes, things have a way of going sideways. So far Rorich was still upright, but one of the op-

posing fighters had managed to get an arm around his neck and put him in a headlock, while another kept slamming away with the poleaxe from behind. He didn't feel the first hit, which cut the leather strap holding his helmet in place, nor the second one that knocked it loose, but he felt the third one, which punched a hole in his skull, driving a piece of bone the size of a quarter into his brain.

Everything stopped, and the arena went silent. The ref immediately called a halt to the fight and all the combatants backed off—but the damage had been done. Knocked onto his back, an oily pool of blood began to form in the wet sand beneath Rorich's head. "I felt a sharp pain," he said later, "and then people started freaking out."

At first glance, one might look at the armored fighters and think they're LARPing ("Live Action Role Playing"), but this is not a description that goes over well with most participants. LARPing brings to mind teens in the woods fighting with foam swords or tossing tennis balls at each other while screaming "fireball!" Instead, it might be more accurate to think of to-

day's armored combat as a form of ultimate fighting; technically, it's considered a Western/medieval form of martial arts. The armor is expensive and ridiculously heavy, averaging around 80 pounds of steel, leather, and chain mail, and the weapons run the gamut from axes to hammers to broadswords. The sharp edges have all been blunted and the rules preclude stabbing, but the wooden handles carry the weight and strength of a baseball bat, while the metal blades are as dense as an anvil. Even blunted, these are, as Rorich's example shows, weapons still capable of causing serious damage. Injuries aren't usually as serious as his was, but they're not uncommon either.

The history of armored combat goes back hundreds of years, but the modern version really began in Russia, in the late 1990s. Colloquially called "steel fighting" or "buhurt" (derived from the Old French term for "wallop"), it rapidly expanded during the early 2000s. Today, active teams, encompassing an impressive spectrum of races, genders, sexualities, political beliefs, and socioeconomic backgrounds, can be found in almost ev-



Comrades in arms: Marie Brooks celebrates in time-honored fashion.



Urban warfare: chain links and chain mail.

ery corner of the globe. The matches can range from one-on-one to dogfights to far larger melees. Because this is still an emerging sport, melees in New York City tend to be smaller and more intimate: maybe four or six people at a time. In larger tournaments, though? That number can swell significantly. The Battle of the Nations, a yearly armored combat tournament first held in 2009, featured a massive, three-hundred-person melee at the Smederevo Fortress, in Serbia, in 2019.

It's next to impossible to boil down the identity of a fighter into generalities. And in such a diverse group, sexual dynamics and pairings within the various leagues are nothing if not fluid. The image of Fight Club's Tyler Durden in steel-plate armor certainly exists, but that type of fighter constitutes only a fraction of the wide-ranging buhurt demographic.

Crush injuries, concussions, and lacerations are the most common and obvious dangers fighters face, but they're not always the most life-threatening. Some fighters, particularly those who are working at improving their endurance, will literally fight until they vomit. Getting to that point is a difficult feat in itself—fighting through more than three or four matches while wearing armor will burn hundreds of calories in a very short period of time. Retching while strapped inside a helmet can be incredibly dangerous, since it can cause suffocation, but removing the helmet in a hurry can be difficult for someone already disoriented. “The body wants to purge everything in the system to be faster and lighter,” says Dani Schorn, a fighter who works outside of the ring as a full-time certified EMT. “A lot of animals do it when they're being chased by predators. It's a danger from a [medical] perspective because it can cause aspiration and lower blood pressure quickly. If the



Winter is coming: the thrill of combat.

fighter does not take their time, they can risk passing out, dehydration, and further injury.” Another major danger comes from a lack of armor maintenance. “Axe shots to the face are pretty common, [but] I've seen injuries such as broken hip plates, multiple broken fingers, panic episodes [which Schorn calls “helmet horrors”], and serious hemorrhages. Put your energy into your armor and you can mostly avoid this.”

Knowing when to call a halt or to take a knee—signaling an end of the fight to the opponents and referee—is just as important as knowing when to keep pushing forward, but for many fighters, satisfaction comes from trying to get past that point and keep swinging. “There have been plenty of times where I've been so gassed and gasping for air,” Danielle Sanders, one of the female combatants who make up roughly a quarter of buhurt enthusiasts, explains. “I thought I might just pass out

from the stress alone. In those moments there's a little voice in my head that says ‘I won't quit until my body does.’ So no matter what, I'm going to give it what I got, and once I leave the list [arena], I can crumble to the ground.”

Steel fighting in the United States really took off in 2011, after the Battle of the Nations. The original team consisted of 29 fighters and support staff, and, for a while, things were copacetic. This group evolved into the Armored Combat League; the international team was the USA Knights. In 2019, the leaders of the ACL divided into two groups—what started as a single community split, as organizers began to fight over ownership of the sport. The two most public-facing leaders within the community, Andre Sinou and Jaye Brooks, went to court to decide the issue. Following litigation, an agreement was reached to dissolve the ACL as a single entity, replacing it with Armored Combat Sports and Ar-

mored Combat Worldwide. For a while, this schism caused a noticeable division in the otherwise tight-knit community.

Sanders started as an ACL fighter before moving on to Armored Combat Sports, following the big schism. Today, she describes herself as a mercenary, or “merc.” When the league split into separate entities, some fighters felt they had to take sides. At the time this was a practical issue, both in terms of organizational structure and access to funding and training areas. However, as time has progressed and tempers calmed, this schism is not as polarizing as it once was. “As a merc, I can roam the earth fighting with whomever,” says Sanders. Schorn takes a similar view, mentioning that she will fight for any league that's active. “[That is] pretty common in fighters,” she explains. “A lot of people don't care

The rules governing this medieval style of fighting have always been straightforward: Stay on your feet or you're done.

for the drama because they want to fight ... a few people stay loyal to their leagues, but for the most part fighters don't care about who is hosting.” For many, it's about the fight itself, not about the flag. “The fun part about being a merc is I can fight with both men and women,” Sanders adds. “I



The agony of defeat: too late to take a knee.

feel a sense of moxie when I'm in the list, co-ed style!"

"As a woman, I love the idea of being strong and fighting for myself," says Schorn, who describes herself as an independent buhurt fighter. "It's motivation to be healthy, to make new friends, to travel the world. I wouldn't change this hobby for anything." Sanders started as a spectator before joining in. "I overheard the steel fighting event planners saying we needed more female fighters, and I said, 'Great, Sign me up!' I have a dream of being one of the U.S. female fighters of color to represent our states overseas one day. That's a beautiful dream."

At this time there are a number of separate organizations in the United States. American Medieval Combat Organization and Armored Combat Worldwide are two of the largest, but here in New York, there's another group: Gladiators NYC. The formation of Gladiators NYC wasn't easy. Issues with the training location and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic prevented fighters from training in groups—a necessity for this type of sport. Damion DiGrazia, the group's founder, devised a solution. Instead of waiting for an indoor space to open up, he started bringing fighters to Central Park, after getting his ducks in a row with the police, insurance for the fighters, and permission from the city. DiGrazia then began practicing with members of his team out in public; he says, "Central Park had us increase to a \$3 million certificate of insurance to be able to do our activities" in the park. This action soon began to catch the attention of both locals and tourists, and what started as a small group of five or six fighters and a handful of bystanders quickly turned into a monthly event, with dozens of fans, photographers, and Internet personalities showing up for a piece of the action.

DiGrazia came to fighting from a rather incongruous background. An Air Force veteran, he made his name in the business world before turning his attention to buhurt. "For my career in finance, I started with internship and analyst roles

"I have a dream of being one of the U.S. female fighters of color to represent our states overseas one day."

in investment banking at boutique investment banks, along with other related roles at the United Nations and Bloomberg," he explains. After receiving a master's in finance at Harvard, he worked in various capacities at Morgan Stanley. DiGrazia is thin, almost slight compared to some of the juggernauts who fight with him, and he will often show up to the arena wearing his signature black business suit. The suit might be as much a part of the performance as the armor itself—it stands out among the mix of old-school rock-and-roll T-shirts and medieval tunics.

Getting Gladiators NYC off the ground has been a passion project for him. By bringing it out of the gyms and into the public sphere, DiGrazia says, "[I wanted to make] the sport accessible to all New Yorkers, by removing the price tag from the normally expensive classes, and then trying to let them use armor for free." Additionally, DiGrazia makes an effort to help new fighters travel to tournaments for lowered prices, sometimes covering the cost completely. He describes this as a necessary part of helping New Yorkers recover from the pandemic, "to help raise their spirits after a rough couple of years," adding, "Our events in the park are free because we're in the middle of a pandemic, and when everything kind of sucks we want to uplift the city." Still, such public events are also recruiting tools—and typically, they're effective. DiGrazia's end



Waiting on war.

goal is to make the NYC team the most competitive in the country, with plans to eventually take the organization national.

And despite the cracked skull, Rorich never really stopped fighting. When the ambulance finally arrived and the EMTs started cutting through the leather straps on his armor—which is expensive and time-consuming to repair—Rorich says he shook off the restraining hands and began removing the armor himself. In shaking, jerky motions, he stood and shucked it off like a lobster molting a shell before walking himself to the stretcher. In the end, 14 staples held the skin on his head together. As tough as he was, though, there was still a long-term recovery to deal with. "I flew home [to Phoenix, Arizona], but there were traumatic brain injury issues from the beginning." He had trouble coordinating his movements with his intentions, and would sometimes trip over small ob-

jects. "I wasn't prepared for the emotional fallback of a traumatic brain injury, and as a result of my ignorance I lost a very lucrative consulting job, because I lost control of my emotions during a stressful meeting."

Thankfully, after a few months the difficulties began to clear up. Returning to the arena was never in question, though. "There has never been a point [since the head injury] where I have had to say 'stop' except for a torn ACL [in my] knee, and that was only because I couldn't get my leg working properly. Otherwise, I've never stopped fighting." ▮

C.S. Muncy is a photojournalist and writer based out of New York City who has worked with a wide range of publications, including The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, Newsday, and the Village Voice.

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BRINGING THE WAR HOME TO 11TH STREET

The Weathermen thought they could change the world with bombs, but their self-inflicted disaster was the beginning of the end of their revolution

By Robert Rosen

Modernistic, almost avant-garde, all acute angles and big vertical sheets of glass jutting toward the street, the red-brick structure stands in the middle of a row of mid-19th-century Greek Revival townhouses, on a tree-lined Greenwich Village block between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. In its mismatched eccentricity, 18 West 11th Street cries out to be noticed, and I noticed it—and the Paddington Bear in the window—right after I moved to the neighborhood. I don't remember what kind of costume the bear had on that summer day in 1991 (probably a bathing suit and sunglasses), just that I stopped to look and wonder why the house was so different from every other house on the block.

I'd learn soon enough that it was a New York landmark. Tourists liked to be photographed in front of it, but they were different from those who'd one day converge on Carrie Bradshaw's house from *Sex and the City*, a few blocks crosstown. The house on West 11th Street beckoned to "dark" tourists, as they're known, people attracted to historical places associated with death and tragedy, like Auschwitz and Chernobyl. They were drawn to this unusual piece of Manhattan real estate because it had once been the site of a Weathermen bomb factory. A splinter group of Students for a Democratic Society, the Weathermen, named after a lyric in Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" ("You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows"), were so enraged by President Richard Nixon's war without purpose in Vietnam and the Chicago police assassination of Black Panther leader Fred Hampton—as well as the exploitative and imperialistic nature of the capitalist system—that they declared war on America, intending to commit mass murder to stop the killing.

To accomplish this, the five Weathermen living in the townhouse in early 1970 decided to build a dynamite-and-nail bomb, and by March 6 they were well along in its construction. But the two people working on the device that morning didn't know what they were doing, and just before noon they blew themselves up, along with the house, succeeding only in making 18 West 11th Street a monument to terrorism.

In October 1971, 18 months after the explosion, I joined a subversive, anti-au-

thoritarian student newspaper at the City College of New York. I knew that the *Observation Post* had ties to the radical antiwar movement. A few people on the staff had been there since 1966; they'd covered the SDS and Weathermen in real time. Others were draft resisters themselves. But none of this interested me—because I'd recently pulled a draft-lottery number that reduced to almost nil the chances of my ever being drafted. Though the war continued, for me it was over, and I'd relegated the antiwar movement to the irrelevant past.

Twenty years later, more knowledgeable about history and the connections that can exist between seemingly unrelated events, my encounter with the Weathermen house got me thinking anew about *OP* and the

war. An editorial from early in my tenure, "Kill the Pigs," had always stuck in my mind. "There's nothing left to do but throw bombs or go off and fuck," it concluded. Now I wondered if there might be a connection between the newspaper and the house. I also wanted to know what I should have, as a journalist, sought out in 1971: *Who were the bomb-makers? Why'd they do it? Why in that house? And how did they die?* The house on 11th Street, I thought, might be a portal to information I'd ignored for too long. Many times I returned to just stare at the house, thinking that if I looked long and hard enough I'd see something I hadn't seen before. But the Paddington Bear was the only thing that changed. Every day he had on a different costume. If the Yankees

Village Voice archives

'I Am the Lord Krishna' – see page 5



Voice: Fred W. McDarragh



THE POLICE called the \$275,000 town house at 18 West 11th Street that blew up on Friday a bomb factory that could have destroyed the entire block. Actor Dustin Hoffman lived in the adjacent house, No. 16, which was severely damaged.



A 'Bomb Factory'?

The House on 11th St.: Digging Up the Debris

Details from the front page of the March 12, 1970, *Village Voice*. Staff photographer Fred W. McDarragh rushed to the scene of the explosion, which took place not very far from the *Voice* offices, which were on Sheridan Square in those days. McDarragh singled out Dustin Hoffman from the crowd; the rising actor lived next door to the carnage. Note that in 1970, the townhouse was worth \$275,000.

were in the World Series, he'd be wearing a Yankees uniform. If a nor'easter was coming in, he'd be wearing a rain hat and slicker.

What the house wouldn't tell me, I searched for at the public library, reading microfilm of newspapers from the time of the explosion. I scrutinized photos of the Weathermen. The men, often bearded and a little scraggly, and the women, with that "hippie chick" appearance (as it was called at the time), looked like people I'd worked with on *OP*. And one of the Weathermen, Ted Gold—stocky, athletic, with red hair that in black-and-white photos appeared to be a dense mass of black curls—reminded me of a kid I'd hung out with in 1966. We were 13-year-old recreational terrorists, building and detonating bombs for the hell of it. One afternoon when his parents were gone, we packed flash powder from a few hundred firecrackers into a cardboard toilet-paper tube, added a fuse, sealed it, and debated what to blow up. *Put it in a gas tank and blow up a car?* Instead, we placed our bomb on the outside windowsill of a first-floor apartment in the back of my friend's building. He lit the fuse, and as we sprinted toward the street we heard an ear-shattering boom, followed by the sound of breaking glass. Two days later we returned to inspect the damage. Plastic sheeting covered the blown-out window, but we never heard a word about it and we never told a soul. Our bomb-making days were over.

Like me and my friend, the 11th Street Weathermen debated what to blow up, though their appetite for destruction was more voracious, as I discovered through multiple media sources: *A dance at an officers club in Fort Dix, New Jersey, because that is a military installation? Low Library at Columbia University because the military and CIA conduct on-campus research? Both?* They settled on Fort Dix. Not under debate was their intent: to kill as many people as possible to "bring the war home." Because despite Nixon's promise to end the war, it continued with no end in sight—as TV networks beamed into American living rooms news of U.S. casualties approaching 50,000, of Vietnamese children incinerated by napalm, of a massacre in My Lai, of summary executions, of an entire country ravaged by the toxicity of crop-destroying Agent Orange, and of B-52s making every effort to carry out Air Force general Curtis LeMay's threat to bomb North Vietnam "back into the Stone Age." Yet America itself remained unscathed.

This is what incited the Weathermen to kill. But on that mild winter morning in 1970, the bomb exploded prematurely.

I was still in high school when I heard the news that day, feeling as disconnected from the people who built the bomb as the bomb-makers felt from the people they wanted to kill. City College, *OP*, the SDS, and the Weathermen (or Weather Underground, as they'd begun calling themselves to avoid any sexist connotations) were part of a world I barely knew existed. Though I was only five months short of draft age, the war seemed a distant nightmare, one that couldn't touch me—I couldn't imagine dying in Vietnam. And even before open ad-

missions would allow me to attend City College for *free*, my high school average, good enough to get me into some half-assed college somewhere, was a ticket to a coveted four-year student deferment—and when you're 17, four years is eternity. I felt just safe enough to let other people worry about the war.

But my reasons then for having no interest in the Weathermen were more personal: My family was lower middle class. My parents never got beyond high school. My father, a law-and-order Republican, owned a candy store and discouraged political activism of any kind—*You'll end up on a blacklist!* I didn't know anybody who lived in a townhouse. My friends lived in crowded apartments where the privacy necessary to build massive dynamite bombs was a pipe dream—and they lacked the resources to acquire crates of high explosives, which, unlike firecrackers, can't be hidden in a desk drawer or hollowed-out book.

The Weathermen in the house at the time of the explosion were of a different world. The offspring of prominent families, most of them were red-diaper babies, their highly educated parents—including a doc-

The house on West 11th Street beckoned to "dark" tourists, as they're known, people attracted to historical places associated with death and tragedy, like Auschwitz and Chernobyl.

tor, a lawyer, a professor, and a politician—dedicated to left-wing and Communist causes. These were not public-university working-class heroes but upper-class and upper-middle-class Ivy League revolutionaries, people for whom a felony arrest might be only a minor inconvenience, not a financial disaster—because raising bail wasn't a problem and the best criminal lawyers were a phone call away. It was as if a certain social status were required to join their sex- (they believed in free love) and death commune—a status that I lacked.

These Weathermen had chosen that particular townhouse for their bomb factory because it belonged to Cathlyn Wilkerson's father, James, executive vice president of the Young & Rubicam advertising agency and owner of a chain of Midwestern radio stations. The 25-year-old Cathlyn, known as Cathy, was a passionate advocate of social justice, as well as a former SDS leader and editor of its newsletter, *New Left Notes*. She broke with the SDS

when she came to believe that violent insurrection was the only way to destroy the capitalist system, smash racism, and end the war. Raised in Stamford, Connecticut, and educated at boarding schools and Swarthmore, a Quaker college, Cathy, a reader of Mahatma Gandhi, was free at that time on \$5,000 bail after an arrest for aggravated battery. During the Days of Rage antiwar demonstrations the previous October, as the Weathermen rampaged through Chicago, she'd attacked a cop with a four-foot club. She'd been arrested at least four other times, too, mostly on disorderly conduct charges but also for inciting a riot. Cathy's father and stepmother, on vacation in St. Kitts, had reluctantly agreed to let her use the house while they were out of town. But they were due back later in the afternoon, and she didn't want them to know that in their absence, revolutionaries had turned the place into a bomb factory. Clad only in a pair of jeans, she was ironing a cotton bedsheet in the kitchen in preparation for their return when the bomb went off. The ceiling came crashing down and the floor collapsed beneath her—only the wall-to-wall carpeting under her feet prevented her from falling through.

At that same moment, another social-justice activist and child of privilege, Kathy Boudin, 27, girlfriend of SDS co-founder David Gilbert, was taking a shower in a bathroom above the kitchen. Valedictorian at Bryn Mawr—she double-majored in Russian and literature and spent her senior year studying in the Soviet Union—Kathy had grown up nearby, in another Village townhouse. Her father, civil-liberties attorney Leonard Boudin, had represented or would soon represent a who's who of left-wing clients: blacklisted singer Paul Robeson; the Cuban government; Daniel Ellsberg, of the Pentagon Papers; and antiwar-activist Dr. Benjamin Spock—author of *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, one of the best-selling books of the 20th century—who had been charged with conspiring to help people violate draft laws. Kathy's brother clerked for a Supreme Court justice. She, too, had been charged with aggravated battery for attacking a cop during the Days of Rage, and was free on \$10,000 bail. When the bomb detonated, it engulfed her in a cascade of wreckage and sent her crashing through the floor, leaving her stunned and scraped but otherwise unhurt. As Cathy Wilkerson describes in her memoir, *Flying Close to the Sun: My Life and Times as a Weatherman*, she heard Kathy cry out and was able to grab her hand and pull her forward. As the interior of the townhouse disintegrated, the two women, in a state of shock and barely able to see through the dust and debris, stumbled toward daylight into the street, and stood in front of the smoking ruins.

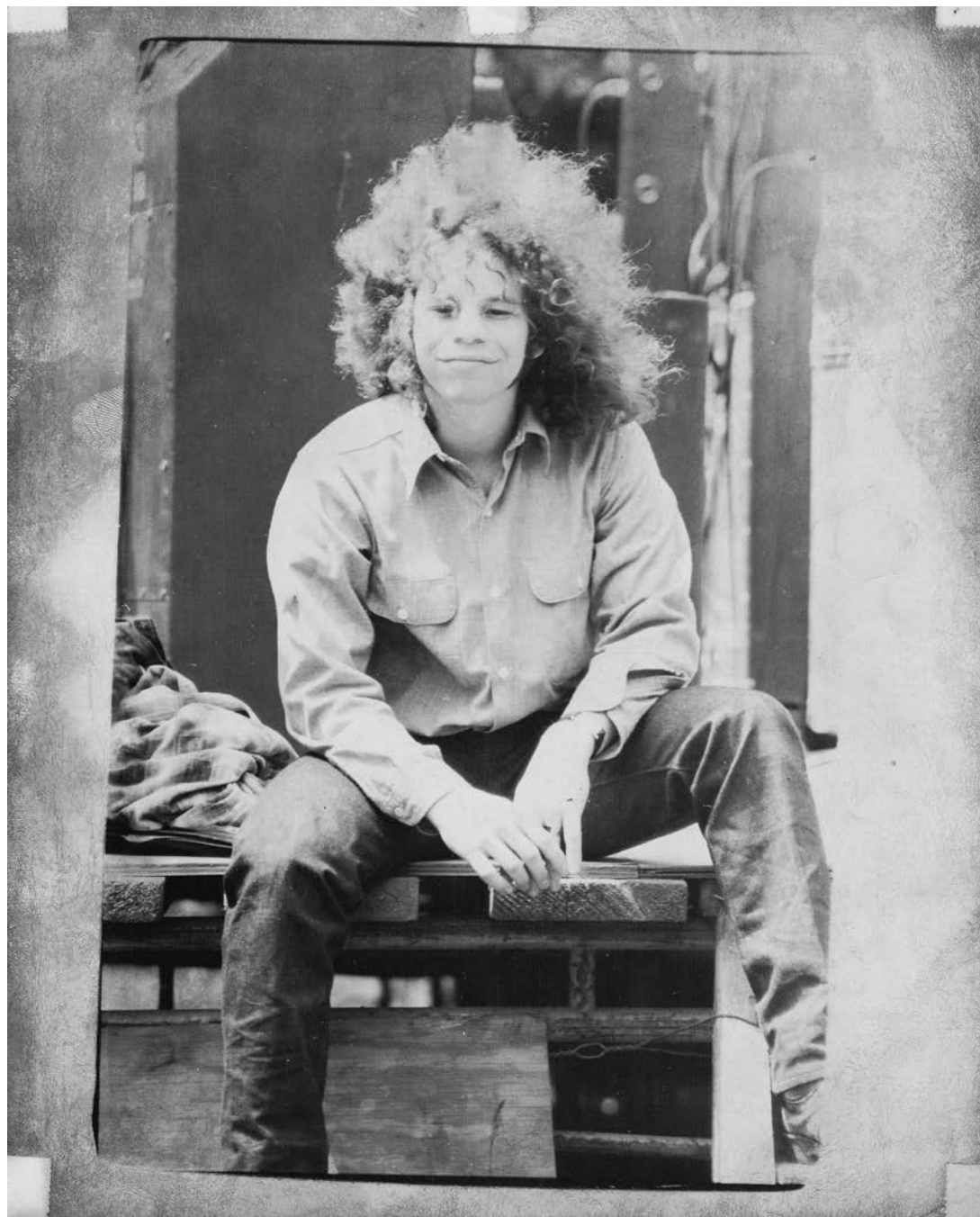
A neighbor, Susan Wagner (one of Henry Fonda's ex-wives), was passing by. She thought she'd witnessed a gas explosion. Then she saw the two dust-covered women—a half-naked Cathy Wilkerson, her jeans in tatters, and a completely naked Kathy Boudin. Wagner took them to her own townhouse down the block and asked her housekeeper to help them clean up and

give them clothes to wear. When Wagner went back outside to watch the burning house, Cathy began rifling through the drawers and closets; she grabbed a subway token and Wagner's favorite footwear, a pair of pink patent-leather boots. Knowing they had to move fast, before the cops came looking for them, the pair, ignoring the housekeeper's objections, slipped out of the house, walked to the subway five blocks away, went through the turnstile together with the one token, and vanished into the underground.

Soon, photographs of these two young women would be all over the news and hanging in every post office in America, on FBI wanted posters accusing them of interstate flight, mob action, homicide, riot, and conspiracy. But they didn't look like dangerous criminals—they looked like women you might ask out on a date if you could somehow get their phone number. Cathy Wilkerson, who sometimes wore horn-rimmed glasses, had light-brown hair and a freckled face. She might have been mistaken for a graduate student who spent a lot of time in research libraries. (As reported in *The New York Times*, Cathy's mother, Audrey Olena, made a public appeal to her daughter five days after the explosion, saying, "There is nothing else we need to know, except that you are safe, and nothing we need to say to you, except that we love you and want desperately to help.")

Kathy Boudin, with her darker, shoulder-length hair framing features less delicate than Wilkerson's, looked more like the "girl next door" (especially to residents of West 11th Street), somebody you could talk to if she were sitting next to you in a bar. Together, they served as a reminder of the sexuality at the core of the Weathermen ethos: Opposed to monogamy, which they thought was an underpinning of the capitalist system, the group believed, according to their unofficial slogan, "The army that fucks together fights together."

Ted Gold, 22, a founder of the Weathermen, was the son of a New York doctor who also taught mathematics at Columbia University. Gold had attended Columbia, majoring in sociology. Active in the civil rights and antiwar movements, he led demonstrations against on-campus military recruiting and traveled to Cuba and Vietnam with Kathy Boudin and other Weathermen to discuss peace with Vietcong and North Vietnamese representatives. Just before his graduation, Columbia suspended Gold for his political activity; he then became a teacher of disabled children. But, like his Weathermen comrades, he came to believe that violence was the only way to ignite a revolution and stop the war. According to *Days of Rage*, by Bryan Burrough, during the week before the explosion, Gold's 11th Street neighbors saw him directing workers unloading crates from a truck. The crates contained 3,000 pounds of dynamite, purchased, at two cents a pound, from a New Hampshire explosives company. The day of the explosion, Gold was returning to the house from a drugstore with a box of cotton balls the bomb-makers needed for their device. The bomb went off as he stepped through the front door, and a section of the



The author in 1973.

building fell on him, crushing his chest. His was the first body recovered.

Diana Oughton, 28, had grown up on a farm in Dwight, Illinois, where her father, a liberal Republican state legislator, taught her to hunt and to ride horses. She attended an exclusive boarding school and, like Kathy Boudin, was an honors student at Bryn Mawr. Upon graduation, she worked as a teacher in Guatemala with the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker organization dedicated to bringing peace and social justice to the world. Then she joined the Weathermen and grew close to Bill Ayers, the organization's co-founder. According to *The New York Times*, on the Christmas before the explosion, she'd gone home to Dwight and tried to explain to her mother why the Weathermen had embraced violence. "It's the only way, Mummy," she said. "We've got to bring the war home." In Oughton's mug shot—she, too, was arrested during the Days of Rage—

her dark hair is fashioned in a kind of Beatles-'64 cut, and her eyes, behind round wire-framed glasses, seemed to communicate only defiance. She'd arrived at the townhouse on March 5 to work on the bomb.

Born in Queens to a father who worked in a garment factory and a mother who'd attended a public college, Terry Robbins was the plebeian exception in the exclusive New York chapter of the Weathermen bomb-building club. A photo of Robbins taken during the Days of Rage shows him leading a march down a Chicago street with four other Weathermen. On his right is Ayers, wearing a football helmet to protect himself in the likely event the police start bashing in his head. Robbins, 22, his hair fashionably long, looks like what he is: an English major and poet who dropped out of Kenyon College. Now a Weathermen leader, he's wearing black-framed glasses, a white hoodie, and jeans. Raising two

clenched fists in the air, his mouth open, he appears to be shouting. As Cathy Wilkerson recounts in her memoir, five months later, at the house on 11th Street, Robbins decided he was fed up with the dinky Molotov cocktails they'd been tossing at police stations, ROTC buildings, and the homes of certain judges. Firebombs, Robbins said, just didn't do enough damage; they didn't even make the news anymore. It was his idea to graduate to the serious stuff used in a real war: dynamite. It was safer, too, he said. It wouldn't go off by accident. You needed a triggering device, like a blasting cap. (Ayers and the other Weathermen leaders agreed.) Robbins had spent the night before the explosion in bed with Cathy, talking about their plans and fears and his insecurity about his lack of bomb-building skills. He knew next to nothing about dynamite, electricity, or how the fuses worked. In the documentary *The Weather Underground*, Carl Oglesby, an SDS leader, describes Robbins and Ayers as "crazy" men with a "Butch Cassidy and Sundance attitude—they were blessed, they were hexed, they would die young." And Cathy Wilkerson's book suggests that Robbins was entranced by the violent

ending of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Whatever might have been spurring Robbins on, his machismo streak was wide, and he wasn't going to let a little ignorance stop him from constructing a nail-laced explosive device designed to cause mass casualties.

As if animating the opening line of Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues"—"Johnny's in the basement mixing up the medicine"—Robbins, with Oughton by his side, groped his way through the instructions in a bomb-making manual as they went about their task in the sub-basement, at a workbench that Wilkerson's father used for refinishing antique furniture. But they'd neglected to rig a safety switch to test the bomb without detonating it. And as they were putting the finishing touches on the device, Robbins accidentally touched a wire to the wrong terminal. The bomb blew up in their faces and they died instantly, their bodies torn to pieces as the explosion

obliterated the basement, the first floor, and the façade, leaving the top two floors sagging and near collapse and shattering windows up and down the block. In the adjoining house, No. 16, a little while before the bomb went off, actor Dustin Hoffman had gotten up from his desk in the living room and gone out. The bomb blasted a hole in the wall, destroying the desk.

Four days later, as heavy machinery was clearing the wreckage, a cop on the scene spotted pieces of a body amid the debris in a crane's bucket. The coroner would determine through a thumbprint that these were the remains of Diana Oughton, whose head was never found. Sometime later, police located Terry Robbins's corpse, too mangled

In the adjoining house, No. 16, a little while before the bomb went off, actor Dustin Hoffman had gotten up from his desk in the living room and gone out. The bomb blasted a hole in the wall, destroying the desk.

to identify. Two months passed before a Weathermen communiqué acknowledged that the body was his.

By the time all the rubble was cleared, in addition to a gray mass of dynamite adorned with nails and blasting caps investigators had found 60 more sticks of dynamite, more blasting caps, and unwrapped packages of dynamite. The FBI determined that if all the explosives had detonated, the blast would have leveled the entire block on both sides of 11th Street. Thus, the Weathermen had brought the war home—to the very house they lived in—killing only themselves.

Inevitably, the smoldering remnants of the house were torn down, the land sold, and in 1978, another townhouse, the modernistic one, was built in its place—despite the neighborhood association's objections that the radical design was a desecration of the block's character. Inside this lavish residence, in one of the big windows jutting toward 11th Street, the owners, metals magnate David Langworthy and his wife, Norma, would display the Paddington Bear of cognitive dissonance. A passerby might have been struck by the incongruous-looking structure and the adorable bear, but unless they were steeped in local history,

they'd never know that they were gazing upon the scene of a mini-9/11, a house (today valued at about \$21 million) marking a location of death and destruction, the place where one disastrous moment seemed to serve as a line of demarcation, a prelude to the horrors of the months to come. In May, the National Guard would murder four students at Kent State, and 11 days later, Mississippi police would murder two students at Jackson State, an outrage overlooked in the shadow of Kent State. The '70s were underway.

It seemed inevitable, too, that a former *OP* editor in chief would know someone who lived and died in the house.

Two weeks after the explosion, the March 20, 1970, issue carried Ken Kessler's remembrance of a childhood friend turned bomb-building revolutionary. That edition's masthead listed the names of people I'd be working with in 18 months, people who'd bridge the gap between a politically motivated *OP* and the *OP* that I'd become part of, one torn between the dying energies of the past and an encroaching maelstrom of quasi-nihilism—a descent into hard-core pornography and punk-like outrage for the sake of outrage that, by the end of the decade, would provoke the college administration to pull the plug on the paper after a 32-year run. It was the old *OP*, the one that still had a sense of purpose, that published 800 words conveying a truth no mainstream media organization was willing to acknowledge.

The article, "Ted Gold, he spoke quietly"—a reference to the way Gold had directed picket lines during a demonstration at Columbia—ran across the top of page one. Kessler had written a story of pain, connection, and loss, humanizing a bomb-building Weatherman, even as the local papers focused on his "sickness and frustration" and "how he decided to take out his troubles on society." They had no idea who Gold was, Kessler said, or why he did what he did, shedding "what the Weathermen call white skin privilege" to become a "full-time revolutionary" and pick up "arms against imperialism." He recalled their days at Joan of Arc Junior High and Stuyvesant High School, where Gold, "a good kid" from a "well to do" family, with "a good mind and good prospects," was an honor student and political activist who liked baseball and wanted to be the kind of doctor his father was—one who "hates disease more than he loves money."

"The last place [Gold] went was a brownstone on west eleventh street in the village," Kessler wrote. And though "very possibly he made bombs," he "was willing to give up all this society had to offer so that his brothers and sisters might be free. He was willing to give up his life."

The Weathermen, meanwhile, now fugitive terrorists and increasingly skillful bomb-makers, continued lashing out at America wherever they could. They'd detonate 25 more bombs in the ensuing years, causing extensive property damage at such symbols of imperialism as the Capitol, in March 1971; the Pentagon, in May

1972; the State Department, in January 1975; and the Kennecott Copper Corporation, in Utah, in September 1975—a response to the mining company's complicity, two years earlier, in the Chilean military's overthrow and murder of Salvador Allende, the Marxist president. Kennecott was their final terrorist act. But in the aftermath of the 11th Street explosion, the Weathermen had come to the realization that committing mass murder would only hurt their cause, and not one person was killed or injured in any of the subsequent bombings.

Cathy Wilkerson remained underground for 10 years, moving through a series of safe houses and communes and giving birth to a daughter. In 1980 she surrendered to police, pleaded guilty to unlawful possession of dynamite, and spent 11 months in prison. She later taught math in adult education programs.

Kathy Boudin and her partner, David Gilbert—whose son, Chesa Boudin, born while they were underground, would grow up to become district attorney of San Francisco—spent more than a decade on the lam. Then, in 1981, in an attempt to re-energize the sputtering revolution with a substantial cash infusion, they drove the getaway car for members of the Black Liberation Army during a \$1.6 million robbery of a Brink's armored truck, in Nanuet, New York. A guard and two policemen were shot to death. Boudin and Gilbert were captured the same day. Represented by the best lawyers her well-connected family could provide, Boudin pleaded guilty to felony murder and robbery. She remained in prison until 2003, and upon her release, Columbia University hired her as a professor in their School of Social Work. Gilbert, choosing to represent himself, pleaded not guilty but was convicted of felony murder and sentenced to 75 years to life, making him eligible for parole in 2056, when he'd be 112. He'd served 40 years in maximum-security prisons when New York governor Andrew Cuomo, hours before resigning, in August 2021, commuted his sentence. Aware of Chesa Boudin's campaign for his father's release, Cuomo cited Gilbert's prison work in AIDS education and the fact that he was the driver of the getaway car, not the murderer. Gilbert was now eligible for immediate parole, and two months later he was freed.

So that was it: The Weathermen were over. Some were dead, like Gold, Robbins, and Oughton, but most survived and are now free, like Wilkerson and Boudin, who did their time and, like their parents, became upstanding American citizens. And I'd learned enough about the bomb-makers who once resided in my neighborhood to be able to stand in front of 18 West 11th Street, see a house that's no longer there, and imagine all too clearly what happened inside on March 6, 1970. ▣

Robert Rosen is the author of *Nowhere Man: The Final Days of John Lennon*. His latest book, *A Brooklyn Memoir*, will be published in July by Headpress. This article is adapted from a work in progress about America in the 1970s.

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ROBERT ROSS NEVER THOUGHT IT WOULD BE THIS HARD FOR THIS LONG

On playing guitar with the blues greats as a “White Boy Lost in the Blues” (and being ignored by Jimi Hendrix)

By Rafael Alvarez

When Robert Ross and his guitar take the stage in Memphis the first week of May, he will carry with him the dust of a vanished New York City club scene and the ghosts of legends with whom he has played for over half a century in a most unforgiving game. The blues.

More than 30 years ago, during a break between songs at a Lower East Side parlor salon on Orchard Street, Ross said to me of his journey, “You don’t think it’s going to be this hard for this long.” I had befriended Ross when he played Baltimore with slide guitar great J.B. Hutto in the early 1980s; in NYC I invited him to a friend’s apartment to play a few songs between readings of poetry and short fiction and plates of crab cakes brought north from Baltimore in a plastic cooler. By then, he’d already been playing professionally for two decades.

All these years later, Ross is hoping that the International Blues Challenge, on Memphis’s Beale Street, will provide the break he’s been reaching for (so close, so very close) for more than half his life. Born in Brooklyn’s old Beth El Hospital 72 years ago and raised in Queens, he made it to this year’s IBC (the Blues Foundation’s signature event) after winning a regional competition near his home, in Boynton Beach, Florida. “When I was coming up, every club advertised in the *Village Voice*,” Ross tells me, rattling off the names of his favorite joints: the Bottom Line, Folk City, Tramps, Dan Lynch, Lone Star Cafe, the Village Gate, Max’s Kansas City, various locations of the Ritz, the quickly shuttered Pop’s Place, and Manny’s Car Wash. “All gone,” he adds, from his home in the Sunshine state. “But I’m still standing.”

Gone like the blues giants with whom Ross played on those Gotham stages and elsewhere: from Hubert Sumlin to Lazy Lester, John Brim, “The Chief” Eddie Clearwater, Louisiana Red, Sunnyland Slim, Eddie Kirkland, Lightning Hopkins, Homesick James, and Otis Rush, among many others. “I have just about every booking calendar going back to the late ’70s,” he says. “I played with or opened for a lot of people.” Ross has been pursuing the echt of genuine blues since the days

when white kids in England made them popular in the mainstream for a long, sustained moment of feedback during his days as a student at Queens College. He has since traveled the world, guitar in hand, a hunk of metal on his pinky to play slide: an obscure practitioner—despite being inducted into the New York Blues Hall of Fame, in 2011—of a marginalized art form.

“Understanding the masters,” explains Ross, “is different from learning to *play* and *sing* and *write* like they did.” And oh, the masters at whose feet he learned, touring with J.B. Hutto, opening for John Lee Hooker, and, very early on, performing with such old school blues royalty as Big Mama Thornton, Victoria Spivey, and Big Maybelle. “In 1969, I didn’t even know who Big Maybelle was,” says Ross, who backed her up that year with his Tangerine Blues Band. “She sang with a hard edge, grit, and gravel when she needed to em-

“Understanding the masters,” explains Ross, “is different from learning to play and sing and write like they did.”

phasize something. A titanic voice, but she could sing sweetly, too.”

Although Ross briefly jammed with (and was ignored by) Jimi Hendrix during Easter week ’68 at a Greenwich Village go-go club called the Eighth Wonder (both he and Hendrix had turns in groups backing singer Curtis Knight), it was playing with the blues shouter from 12th Street and Vine in Kansas City that tops Ross’s cache of professional memories. “Playing be-



Robert Ross blowing harp at Hurricane Dockside Grill, in Boynton Beach, Florida.

Clay Goldstein

hind Big Joe Turner at Folk City [Manhattan] was one of the greatest thrills of my life,” says Ross of the man who hit it big with “Shake, Rattle and Roll” and “Flip Flop and Fly,” and with whom Ross went on to perform and record in 1978. “It was a weeklong gig. It wasn’t too long after he’d had a stroke, but the voice was still titanic.”

And who did Ross have to thank for the honor of that gig? The great songwriter, blues shouter, and Brooklynite Doc Pomus [born Jerome Solon Felder, 1925–1991], who said that without Big Joe, “rock and roll would never have happened.” Pomus had cautioned Ross against playing one of his own songs (based on the Fats Waller tune *Black and Blue*), called *White Boy Lost in the Blues*. Booking managers have never rated high in Ross’s (or many other musicians’) estimations, but Doc Pomus most certainly did. Ross’s lyrics flip the originals, written by a white man, Harry Brooks, and a Black man, Andy Razaf, and later famously covered by Louis Armstrong. Ross says his interpretation—“for some time, it was my signature song”—

talks about what he has experienced: “reverse racial prejudice in the blues business.”

Musically, Ross built the song around a Blind Willie Johnson lick from the song *Mississippi Blues*, with the turnaround borrowed from a Count Basie tune. Lyrically, it’s a memoir: “*I’m black inside, it’s just my skin is lily white, when I get low down, the world says I ain’t got the right....*” “Doc could be brutally honest but the tone of his voice had genuine concern for me,” says Ross. “He was offering his wisdom and experience to help me avoid making a mistake that might sidetrack my career. He told me, ‘You’re gonna have a lot of trouble with that song. Some people ain’t gonna like it. You never picked cotton.’”

Nope, thought Ross, I have not—*Cotton? I’m a Jew from New York!*

Ross has dealt with the “white guys can’t sing the blues” prejudice throughout his career. “One club owner told me in no uncertain terms that he was no longer booking me because, ‘White guys just don’t sing the blues as well as Black guys,’” Ross tells me. He says he then told the



The New York hot spots of yore.

Village Voice archives

man, “That may well be, but how many Black musicians can sing as well as Muddy Waters or B.B. King—not too many.” He released *White Boy Lost in the Blues* on a 1981 Baron Records EP. Though it proved a crowd-pleaser, he hasn’t dusted it off in some time, saying in retrospect, “Maybe Doc was right after all. Hell, he usually was.”

And maybe the locomotive called Freddie King (1934–1976) was, too. “My band [Firewater] opened for Freddie at some club, either late ’69 or early ’70—it might have been Queens or Nassau County,” recalls Ross. “We played our hearts out. I remember that we did a version of ‘Texas,’ which the Electric Flag recorded on their *A Long Time Comin’* debut.” The song, Ross says, was likely a tribute to King, born on a farm in Gilmer, Texas, during the Great Depression, before moving to the south side of Chicago with his family as a teen-

ager. After Firewater’s set, Ross was talking to some folks in the corner when, he says, “I felt a big, meaty hand on my back. I turned around. It was Freddie King, all six-foot-four-inches of him. I was just shocked that he had come over to me. He shook my hand and said, ‘I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your guitar playing. You are really a very good player.’” To which all Ross could reply to the man heralded as one of the three “Kings of the Blues” (along with B.B. and Albert) was, “Thank you very much, Freddie.”

Ross has a guitar case (a solid body Carvin is his go-to workhorse; for slide, a Gibson SG) full of such tales: stories of traveling with bona fide bluesmen and -women from whom he absorbed everything he could. The list includes Homesick James, Junior Wells, Matt Guitar Murphy, James Cotton, Pittsburgh-born jazz drum-

mer Art Blakey, and, even further removed from Mississippi or Chicago, a private chat with John Lennon.

Ross was performing with Curtis Knight’s group Tribe at an Apollo Theater benefit for prisoners at Attica, the upstate New York penitentiary where a September 1971 riot left 43 dead. Tribe had just released the single “Attica,” and the rumor was that Lennon—who released his own song about the carnage a year later—might show up. He did, and, says Ross, brought some very good reefer with him. The native New Yorker not only found himself sharing a joint with the former Beatle, but—to his later mortification—realized that in his marijuana haze he’d been explaining music theory to the founder of the Fab Four. “God, what an idiot I am,” exclaims Ross, telling the story a half-century later. “In the midst of a terrific conversation, I insulted one of the greatest songwriters in the history of the Western world. He got up and walked away.”

And then there was Washboard Doc, a throwback to the jug band days of Ma Rainey. “Doc and I played in Greenwich Village and Washington Square Park,” says Ross of Joseph Doctor, born in 1911 on Johns Island, South Carolina, and dying in Brooklyn, in 1988. “A very distinguished old gentleman, very proper and respectable—always wore a very old tuxedo and a starched white shirt. The shirt was always buttoned right up to his neck no matter how hot it was outside.” Ross was introduced to Doc by the guitarist’s longtime bandmate Bill Dicey, a Maryland-born harmonica player who died of cancer in 1993. Doc “scrubbed” the washboard with thimbles on his fingers and accompanied himself with a small cymbal and pots and pans, very much the one-man-band busker. Ross accompanied Doc on a lot of old-time songs from the early days of commercial blues—the ’20s and ’30s—in en plein air sets in the park, as well as at Folk City and private parties.

Rub-a-dub-dub, baby. A gig is a gig. Like the time in the mid-1970s when Ross sold a song to a puppeteer, having scoured the classifieds of the *Village Voice* for work. “I went to his apartment, I’m pretty sure it was in the Village. Very small but neat. He had a bunch of cowboy puppets—they were twice as big as I expected—and wanted a song for one of them to sing,” says Ross, who doesn’t remember how much he got paid and did not attend the performance. The song was called “Palomino,” in which, notes Ross, “the horse is the hero.”

Washboards, lectures on cultural appropriation when it comes to the blues, gigs at nursing homes where half the audience is asleep, and low-rent Howdy Doody shows. Ah, showbiz! “My entire life I have been moved by music, thrilled by it, chilled by it, choked up by it, and tickled by it,” Ross says. “Through some of the journey I was lost. I had no idea if I would play the blues, the whole blues, and nothing but the blues, or rock and roll in all its variations. But I stuck with what I loved and got me an education in hard-knocks-

“In the midst of a terrific conversation, I insulted one of the greatest songwriters in the history of the Western world.”

blues adversity.” In Memphis, Ross will be one of a hundred competitors fighting it out in brackets as intense as those in the NCAA March Madness basketball tournament. Perhaps even more than Doc Pomus, he owes that chance not to a musician but to Hall of Fame ballplayer Ted Williams, the “Splendid Splinter.”

Over the summer of 1965, Ross attended a Williams baseball camp in Massachusetts for kids who believed they were good enough to dream, or if they weren’t, dreamed anyway. “I was 16 and talked my parents into sending me. I desperately wanted to be a big-league ballplayer,” says Ross, who’d been given an eight-dollar acoustic about the same time, but wasn’t serious about it. On the final day of camp, all the kids stood in line to have the last man to bat .400 in the major leagues critique their swings. One by one, they’d step to the plate, take their cuts, and the Fenway icon would pass judgment.

And, one by one—*Voila!*—kids heretofore flummoxed were smashing the ball to all fields. “Guys who couldn’t buy a base hit with a government grant would suddenly be hitting screaming line drives,” remembers Ross. Then it was young Robert’s turn. He couldn’t wait, he said, “for the doctor to fix what ails my hitting. I wanna be a feared slugger!” Ross hit a nubbler to the mound, fouled one to the top of the batting cage, and swung at and missed another. Turning to Williams for the insight that only a man with 20/10 vision and a .344 lifetime batting average could provide, Ross waited for the diagnosis. “He said, ‘Kid, you have a perfect swing. I have no idea why you can’t hit the ball.’”

And that was it.

“I owe my music career to Ted Williams’s analysis of my swing,” concludes Ross. “A year later, I decided to swing with the blues. One dream dies, another dream is born.” ▮

Rafael Alvarez met Robert Ross in 1981 when Alvarez was covering blues for the Baltimore Sun. A former staff writer for the HBO drama The Wire, Alvarez is the author of a dozen books, both fiction and nonfiction, about Baltimore.

POETRY, PROSE, AND POLITICS IN POST-DICTATORSHIP CHILE

Alejandro Zambra's new novel, Chilean Poet, treads a shaky line between cultures

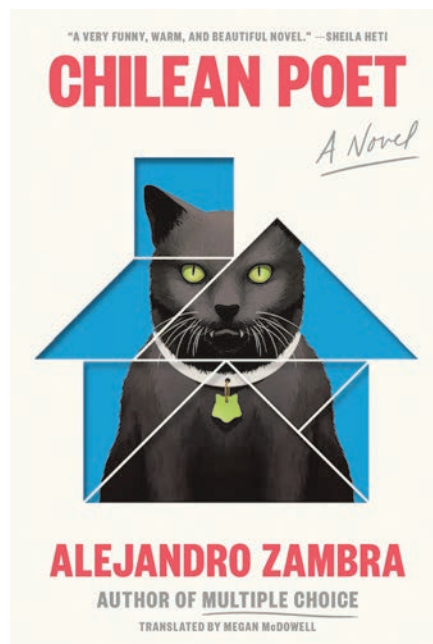
By Daniel Felsenthal

Who glorifies poets better than Latin American novelists? For Roberto Bolaño, Valeria Luiselli, César Aira, Isabel Allende, and José Lezama Lima, bards are politically oppressed geniuses, horny teens, and implacable idealists, sometimes simultaneously. A couple of these fictionists were poets, too, and their stylistically varied prose gazes across mediums for manifold reasons. Verse is vital in the Hispanophone Americas, yet aside from 38-year-old Luiselli, these authors all lived in murderous autocracies that stifled the art form. Should you hear a lazy opinion about poetry's death, remember poetry's vigor: Authoritarians feel threatened enough to censor it.

Alejandro Zambra is a star in the constellation of poesy-interested prose writers. He published two collections of verse in his native Chile before gaining an international reputation as a novelist whose "community was always poetry." Born two years after Pinochet's 1973 military coup, Zambra was 14 when hard-won free elections finally replaced the tyrant. He recalls in his 2010 essay collection, *Not To Read*:

Even if people accepted that it was legitimate to write, to want to write, our generation was still suspicious ... that was something we had in common: our childhood under dictatorship, and now this sudden, supposed democracy.

Mostly, Zambra's fiction explores life in Chile's rapidly globalizing, post-despot republic. Young and cultured, his protagonists listen to indie rock and pretend to read Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*: "The truth is that those were the most important months of my life as a reader," a character in his 2006 novel, *Bonsai*, lies. They hang out like countless New Yorkers, with a weed delivery service and a trusted bodega. We learn in *Ways of Going Home*, a 2011 novel that toggles between the hushed oppression of 1985 and the 21st century: "I spent the afternoons reading novels or watching TV for hours, smoking tobacco or marijuana, drinking beer or cheap wine, listening to music or listening to nothing." The Internet changed their lives, as Zambra describes in his phenome-



nal 2013 story collection, *My Documents*: "Max didn't watch the news anymore, or waste any time playing the guitar or drawing: when he came back from the university he would immediately turn on the computer." As though recovering from the country's frequent earthquakes—catastrophes that occur throughout the author's work—his characters watch the world get rebuilt around them, and so they see youth's possibilities with astounding clarity.

Zambra's biggest influence is the aforementioned Roberto Bolaño (1953–2003), who had an inverse experience with Pinochet, having fled Chile as a nascent leftist when the junta took power. Both authors' prose is sunbaked and plainspoken, but Zambra's new novel, *Chilean Poet*, makes their lineage clearer than ever. Politics hangs heavy over Latin America's Parnassus, yet for these writers, poetry is also an eternal lifeway, passed between generations of young and young-hearted.

First published in Spanish in 2018, and available now in Megan McDowell's English translation, *Chilean Poet* focuses on multiple generations of bards, including Gonzalo—a stepdad who hates his own

"trivial and fairly pretentious" poetry collection and flees his family for New York to get a doctorate—and his stepson, Vicente. The near-400-page saga saves some room for the boy's mother, Carla, whose own working life is ignored, and a 31-year-old writer from New York, Pru, who sleeps with Vicente while traveling in Santiago and writes a piece for a "magazine of growing importance" back in New York about the Chilean fascination with poetry. At its best, the book is self-aware, smattered with metafictional intrusions whose playfulness is sadly passé in today's literature. Whenever *Chilean Poet* feints toward following a character to New York, the author switches perspectives to stay in Chile. "You guys are like Bolaño characters," Pru tells Vicente. Zambra understands who influenced him, but on another level, he mocks a New York intellectual who associates all Chilean fiction with perhaps its most admired practitioner.

At its worst—well, Zambra writes about Brooklyn. Before her trip to Chile, Pru lived in Williamsburg: "In an old clothing workshop converted into a gigantic apartment where ten people could live comfortably, but where around twenty were living uncomfortably." Thankfully, such hackneyed depictions of poor-by-choice bohemia don't take up much real estate, and one of the novel's most successful sections finds Pru visiting Chilean poets both fictional and real, such as the sui generis poet and physicist Nicanor Parra (1914–2018) and the polymath Armando Uribe (1933–2020). Yet neither Zambra's reflexivity nor his cast of thousands can overcome the book's narrow social perspective.

Zambra tells us that Gonzalo and Carla reconnect at a Chilean gay bar because friends "dragged him" there "who were obsessed with proving to Gonzalo that heterosexuality was something like a chronic but curable disease." In the bar's bathroom, Carla kneels "with his penis throbbing in her mouth," both a leaden scene and a grossly appropriative opportunity to spice up a straight couple's amorous reawakening. (As someone who knocks reminds them, "Hey, the bathroom is for everyone, you aren't the only ones who want to fuck!") A fistfight breaks out at a party, among males of course, and a character is knocked unconscious: "A gay poet rushes to give him mouth-to-mouth, which doesn't seem necessary—the first aid evolves into a tongue kiss and right away Álvarez stands up...." There's believable lesbian romance in *Chilean Poet*, yet gay men cruise along the narrative's borders like stereotypes of desperate queens, sinking *Chilean Poet* from being uncharacteristically uneven to becoming dastardly.

It's a shame, since Zambra's self-awareness redeems sections that would drown capital-R realist prose. The novel's long beginning follows Gonzalo and Carla's dull relationship, with details that want to be dry-toned but end up sodden: "They never cleared the leaves from the gutters on time." Vicente's interiority, though, injects the book with rejuvenating insights, clueing us in to the possibility that Gonzalo's boring narration was a deliberate reflec-

As though recovering from the country's frequent earthquakes—catastrophes that occur throughout the author's work—his characters watch the world get rebuilt around them.

tion of his lackluster verse. Vicente, however:

Believes it's the poet rather than the prose writer who has a responsibility to notice absolutely all the details of every lived experience, not in order to relate them later, not so he can shout about them in a story, but to inscribe them, so to speak, in his sensibility, in his gaze: in a word, to live them.

One passage of *Chilean Poet* shines particularly bright with this profound core, sparkling unlike the myriad moments when Zambra's sensibility fails his characters:

And then Pru thinks about staying in Chile, but her life is not a splendid bad movie, so she gets on the plane, and I would really like to get on it with her and keep her company and follow her everywhere she goes, but at this very moment there are about a million novelists writing about New York, probably while they listen to and hum along with that beautiful song that goes, "New York, I love you / but you're bringing me down," and I want to read their sophisticated novels, which I nearly always like, in fact I'm going to try to read them all to see if Pru or someone like Pru is in any of them. Anyway, I really would like to get on the plane with her, but I have to stay in Chile, with Vicente, because Vicente is a Chilean poet and I am a Chilean novelist, and we Chilean novelists write novels about Chilean poets.

I am not a Chilean critic, but I am a gay critic, and we write criticism about homophobic novels like *Chilean Poet* while keeping them at arm's length, especially when, as is the case with clever, capable Zambra, the author should know better. ■

A regular contributor to the Voice since its relaunch, Daniel Felsenthal also writes frequent criticism for Pitchfork and publishes fiction, essays, and poems in other publications. In 2019, his novella Sex With Andre appeared in The Puritan.

BILLION-DOLLAR BRACKETS

March Madness generates huge profits for the NCAA, but how about paying the college students who make it happen?

By Vincent Velotta



Guess which has an 18 trillion times better chance of striking, lightening or a perfect bracket?

One in 9,223,372,036,854,775,808. That's over nine quintillion, for those of you who gave up after the fourth comma. Those are the odds of a coin-flipping novice filling out a perfect March Madness bracket, calculated by realizing the two possible outcomes for every game in every round, expressed 2^{63} . The astronomical odds dwarf the likelihood of death by a vending machine falling on you (2 people per year in the U.S. alone, or 1 in 112 million) or winning Powerball (1 in 292 million). In fact, with the CDC stating the odds of being hit by lightning are 1 in 500,000 in any given year, you're more likely to be zapped 18 trillion times before predicting the outcome of every match in the famed college basketball tournament, which explains why nobody ever has since the tradition was born back in 1977 within the walls of a Staten Island bar called Jody's Club Forest. The near impossibility of producing a perfect bracket accurately reflects the volatility of an event known for its wild gameplay and massive upsets, hence its name (which is why the NCAA itself emphasizes that even a college hoops aficionado has only a 1 in 120 billion shot at perfection). But the true "madness" is the fact that in a billion-dollar-plus produc-

tion, the workers still aren't paid a cent.

The NCAA generates roughly \$870 million every March from television and marketing rights alone, thanks to a gargantuan multi-billion-dollar deal with CBS and Turner that extends until 2032. In 2019, Ya-

"The NCAA is not above the law," Justice Kavanaugh wrote in a series of scathing remarks.

hoo ranked that agreement as the third-most lucrative sports deal ever, pulling in ahead of Premier League soccer and Major League Baseball. What's more, ticket sales net college basketball in the neighborhood of \$180 million, bringing earnings up over \$1 billion per year. And that's just the money that the NCAA sees. With thousands flocking every year to take in the madness, the 14 host cities stand to see

hundreds of millions in revenue when the tournament rolls around their way. For instance, Minneapolis reported an uptick of \$143 million in tourist dollars in 2019 after hosting the Final Four.

Then there's this little thing called sports betting, which has become infinitely more accessible after the Supreme Court struck down the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act, in 2018, allowing states to legalize gambling. The results have been staggering, as dollars come pouring in on a monthly basis at the state level. New York, for example, became the new No. 1 legalized sports betting market in the United States after bringing in \$1.6 billion in just four weeks of mobile betting on sports of all kinds this past January.

As expected, legal sports betting has affected how money is spent by bettors. According to *Forbes* and the American Gaming Association, about 47 million Americans were expected to place bets on March Madness in 2021, accounting for \$8.5 billion wagered, regardless of legality. But with bettors planning to bet online rising by 206% in 2021, and those looking to place physical bets going up by 79%, it's no stretch to suggest that 2022 and beyond will continue to see more of that nearly 10 billion dollars go on the books.

The bottom line is that the 1,020 college hoops players across 68 March Madness teams are the engines that run a multi-faceted product that generates billions of dollars per tournament. This is one of the most momentous

events of the annual sports cycle, and the athletes who make that possible should be tangibly compensated. Many argue that the NCAA's reinvestment of Madness cash into Division I schools for scholarships is enough, when, in reality, it's the bare minimum. The cost of handing out scholarships can easily be overblown. Sure, top schools like Duke may cost around \$60,000 annually, but how much of that is covering the cost of living for the student versus charging for the "prestige" of attending an acclaimed university? *SB Nation* noted in 2018 that even if the actual cost to schools was generously marked at \$50,000 for every scholarship slot in the tournament, the total cost would've been just 5% of the NCAA's profits made from television deals that year.

While scholarships may be a great vehicle for rising stars who just need an audition for NBA scouts, what about the college players who won't be successful pros? What about the vast majority of athletes, who graduate with something like an accounting degree and move on with their lives? The bottom two-thirds of every roster is just as important as the top third when it comes to running the show. And when you realize that March Madness

makes over \$200 million more annually than the National Hockey League does in the television department, and that gambling on the tournament nearly doubles the \$4.3 billion wagered on the Super Bowl in 2021, it's hard to argue that these kids—superstars or role players—are not professionals in everything but name. This year specifically, students will be asked to take on another professional responsibility: risking their health to keep the show alive. March Madness will return to its traditional 14-city format this year, after spending 2021 exclusively in Indianapolis. As we went to press, of the 14 cities hosting the indoor showdown, five of them are currently below the United States' average COVID vaccination rate, while three are above the average for new daily cases.

The pros have a reason for taking the risk: a salary. So why not pay students at least the equivalent of the federal minimum wage for their efforts? The equivalent of a year's salary at \$7.25 an hour would cost the NCAA just over \$15 million, or about 1% of the annual March Madness earnings, and every player who participated in the tournament would get a modest \$15,080 check for helping their schools—and businesses—generate billions of dollars. Plus, with a flat rate, the argument that richer schools would have a competitive advantage would be moot (though this modest across-the-board salary would probably not trump such incentives as national championship counts and track records of channeling players into the NBA that recruiters would present to high school prospects).

This is just one idea, but the fight for compensating college athletes has been ongoing in America's highest courts. And 2021 was a big year for the cause—the Supreme Court affirmed a ruling from the lower courts that deemed the NCAA as violating antitrust law by capping the amount of education-related benefits schools could provide their athletes. In the same year, the NCAA ceded its authority on name, image, and likeness (NIL) rules, allowing student athletes to seek out paid endorsement deals. The idea of these players receiving some sort of salary could come to fruition sooner rather than later, too, if Justice Brett Kavanaugh's opinion on the matter is any indication. "The NCAA is not above the law," Kavanaugh wrote in a series of scathing remarks. "The NCAA couches its arguments for not paying student athletes in innocuous labels. But the labels cannot disguise the reality: The NCAA's business model would be flatly illegal in almost any other industry in America."

With the tremendous progress made last year, it seems inevitable that someone will take the justice's argument and make a legal bid for some sort of pay-for-play scenario for college athletes. But for at least this March, more than 1,000 student hoopsters will continue to churn out billions for colleges, sports books, sports bar owners, and broadcast networks—free of charge. ▮

Vincent Velotta is a New York City-based sports and film writer.



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