FALL CULTURE GUIDE 2020

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1. Land Rover Defender 110 is fully depreciated in year one.
2. Luxury car depreciation can continue year two at $14,176, year three at $8,506 and $5,103 per year for each succeeding year until the vehicle is fully depreciated or sold.

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In many ways, this is how the last year or so has felt for Nevada Public Radio, and by extension, for me, as its Chairman. As I step down from the Chairmanship next month, I want to reflect for a moment on how far we’ve come since September/October 2019, and how optimistic I remain about Nevada Public Radio’s future.

As any devoted listener or member knows by now, Nevada Public Radio found itself in a dire financial position last year. We were millions of dollars in arrears with many of our most important creditors. Our revenues had been declining and our expenses rising for years. Our financial reporting and accounting was wholly unreliable. Our management team and staff were disconnected and largely unaware that we were on the brink of closing our doors. In short, for the first time in its 40-year history, Nevada Public Radio faced a truly existential threat.

In times of crisis (and certainly we are seeing it now, on an even larger scale, with COVID-19), people either band together, provide leadership and work the problem, or they scatter and run for cover. I am proud to say that from the first moment we learned the truth about our desperate financial condition, through the end of our financial earthquake (and it has indeed ended), our Board, our senior leadership, our staff, and our devoted supporters never hesitated and never wavered, and that is what got us through. I am pleased to report that as of today — a little over a year since our troubles surfaced — we are 100 percent current on all of our bills; we have taken extraordinary steps to stabilize our financial condition; and we have restructured our organization from top to bottom. None of that could have been accomplished without the selfless contributions of so many.

Under the leadership of our Board Treasurer Kathe Nylen, one of the true heroes of our story, we have completely rebuilt Nevada Public Radio’s finance and accounting functions from the ground up, turning a glaring weakness into a true strength, while also implementing robust financial controls that will better protect the organization from future financial mismanagement or wrongdoing. On day one of the crisis, our Governance Committee Chair Renee Yackira, the undisputed moral compass of our Board, plopped herself down in KNPR’s offices and effectively led the organization through some of its darkest moments. More recently, she spearheaded the tightening up of our governance and organizational protocols, providing another key check and balance against future misbehavior. Our Fundraising Committee Chair Bill Grounds became (perhaps somewhat reluctantly) an expert in the sale of FCC licenses and radio transmitter leases, positioning us to maximize the future value of our assets. Our Investment Committee Chair Bob Glaser brought invaluable insights and relationships from the investment community that helped mightily in righting the ship. Our incoming Chair, Richard Dreitzer, was a consistent sounding board for me, and a calming voice for the Board around a variety of sensitive legal and human resource issues. Beyond that, each and every Board member played an important role at just the right time. I want to thank all of our Board members for their efforts.

Equally important to our survival was the entire Nevada Public Radio staff, who bore the brunt of the fallout, both emotionally and organizationally. I would not have been surprised by (and in some ways, I would have expected) mass departures and crushing morale problems after they understood the scale of the crisis and the painful work that was ahead of us. Instead, the Nevada Public Radio team came together in new and unexpected ways, took ownership of their budgets and their strategic plans, and never sacrificed the core mission, despite the uncertainty that they undoubtedly felt, personally and professionally. I want to thank every single member of the NVPR team for their efforts.

And through it all was Jerry Nadal, our immediate past Chairman and our acting CEO. Beginning with a (slightly panicked) phone call last year — which began with me simply seeking Jerry’s wisdom on finding a new leader for NVPR, and ended with Jerry saying without hesitation (okay, maybe a little hesitation), “I’ll do it!” — Jerry has led the transformation of NVPR, organizationally, financially,
and even philosophically. From the e-mails I receive from staff literally begging that Jerry remain CEO, to the existing and new donor relationships he has somehow fostered in an incredibly unstable environment, to the obvious, newfound cohesiveness and transparency of the management team, to the fresh and innovative thinking around some of our newest programming, I (and, I hope, you) can see and feel the changes he has made. I want to thank Jerry for his past and future stewardship of Nevada Public Radio, without which I suspect we would not have made it through.

Lastly, I want to recognize all of you, our supporters, our listeners, our members, our key partners and vendors, all of you who rose to the challenge in so many ways. You are the lifeblood of Nevada Public Radio, you are who we serve, and you ultimately determine the fate of Nevada Public Radio, as you always have. Thank you.

So, we made it, right? What could possibly go wrong now? You can’t have back-to-back existential threats, can you? Well, apparently you can, because the COVID-19 tsunami is upon us all, impacting Nevada Public Radio as it has impacted your businesses and your lives. I am only thankful that there was a bit of a gap between NVPR’s financial crisis and our current global crisis. Had they occurred simultaneously, I doubt we would have made it.

Therefore, as I relinquish the Chair — but not my passion for or commitment to this critically important organization — I have one final request: Please continue your support of Nevada Public Radio. If you are fortunate in this difficult time to be able to give more, give more. If you are struggling, give less — but don’t stop giving. And if you’ve never given, but continue to partake of the very best news and information that Nevada has to offer, please start giving. In the end, Nevada Public Radio’s continued viability rests not on the shoulders of the Chair, or the Board, or the CEO, or the staff. It rests on your shoulders, on our shoulders, together, as Nevadans. Thank you in advance for your continued support, for all that you’ve done, and for all that you will do. In due time, but only with your help, the flood waters will recede, Nevada will be back in business, and Nevada Public Radio will be there, as it always has been.

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There’s a place we can go where stacks of joy-colored rocks remind us that we do good in the desert, too.

ONES TO WATCH
How does an artist deal with social shutdown? With ingenuity, technology, lots of moxie, and hard work. These six Las Vegas creatives show us how.

2020 has taken a toll on the arts scene, for sure. But plucky, devoted creators have found ways to create work, either for in-home or socially distant enjoyment. Here’s where to find it.
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THE BETTER TRUTH

Do you remember, in the first weeks of the spring shutdown, all those silver linings we scrounged up from our strange new lives at home? Time to take up yoga, time to try our hand at sourdough, time to uplink with the fam beyond the standard endearments lobbed between twitching with our phones. Now we seem to be in a nameless new phase — comprising some mix of resignation and grudging adaptation — that suggests not so much that life goes on as it does that grim, resentful acceptance is a totally underrated lifehack. Okay, I’m projecting a little bit.

The bright minds we highlight in “Ones to Watch” are certainly running on a higher octane than a certain defensively glum editor currently has in the tank. Here is creativity, innovation, and optimistic enterprise — playwrights connecting to their heritage through unexpected pathways, poets and musicians experimenting with new platforms out of creative necessity. And — look, another faint gleam of something resembling hope! — there’s still a stubborn pulse thrumming from our arts scene, too, as evidenced by our pando-friendly fall culture guide. Whether you’re stir-crazy or still locking down, we’ve got virtual events as well as socially distant art shows and live talks.

Desert Companion is adapting, too. We’ve launched an email newsletter, Fifth Street, which features fresh stories, commentary, riffs, and unaccountable gusts of cavalier whimsy delivered to your inbox every week. Subscribe at knpr.org/about/enews for (okay, fine, I’ll close the circuit, yolo) a little silver lining from us.

Andrew Kiraly
EDITOR

1. Leave it to our intrepid food writer Greg Thilmont to find an amazing chicken salad sandwich on sourdough in a gas station deli in Ash Springs of all places. There are tons of hidden-gem eateries and dining spots dotting our regional map — peep this pastrami from Pioche! Road trips are not only pandemic-safe, responsible fun, but they may just help you keep your sanity during these kee-razy times. Check out our roundup of road-trip-worthy diners and eateries at desertcompanion.com


3. Got a good Vegas story to tell? Share it with StoryCorps. Since 2003, StoryCorps has been collecting and sharing the personal stories of Americans from all backgrounds. In response to the pandemic, StoryCorps has launched a Virtual Mobile Tour this year to allow participants to share stories safely. And, good news, Vegas is a stop on the virtual tour! From September 16-October 23, StoryCorps is scheduling interview sessions with prospective Vegas storytellers. Visit storycorps.org for more information.
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Harsh Light

Criticized for racial inequities and other workplace issues, the Neon Museum finds itself in an unaccustomed glare

BY Summer Thomad

Since its founding in 1996, the Neon Museum has established itself as one of Las Vegas’ foremost cultural institutions, a home to treasured artifacts that embody the city’s vivid history: neon signs. It’s a simple mission, really, to protect and preserve iconic neon signs, as well as the stories and people that the signs represent. But recent events and allegations have complicated the museum’s public image, portraying it as an organization ill-equipped to meet the diversity and workplace challenges of the current moment.

The issues of systemic racism brought to the forefront by the George Floyd protests can be especially problematic for museums and other cultural organizations. They are widely presumed to adhere to progressive values and practices, yet often have leadership teams and boards made up primarily of affluent whites. The recent Black Lives Matter movement has sharpened these longstanding criticisms, and the Neon Museum is far from the only institution facing such scrutiny.

It began in late June, with a black square on the museum’s Instagram feed. Around the globe, businesses and nonprofits had posted such squares to express support for racial equality. The Neon Museum had not. When a local artist found that the black square contained not the expected BLM statement, but rather a graphic about museum safety, she reportedly left a comment about racial justice — only to find it restricted. She and fellow artist Justin Favela subsequently determined that the account was restricting or deleting comments related to BLM, Favela says.

A former programs administrator and volunteer coordinator for the Neon Museum, Favela responded with a series of Instagram stories condemning attempts by his former workplace to tokenize Black history and employees rather than addressing BLM. His posts also alluded to the lack of diversity in the museum’s leadership.

“It was not their inaction or silence that made me react,” Favela says. “It was the
All Things

silencing and deleting of comments on their Instagram. I was done protecting an institution that treated people with little to no respect.”

He says a subsequent phone conversation with Neon Museum CEO Rob McCoy and a couple of board members didn’t allay his concerns, particularly when McCoy rejected Favela’s suggested changes to a draft of the museum’s BLM statement. When it became apparent to him that “management of the Neon Museum does not have the best interest of their staff or community at heart,” he posted “An Open Letter to the Neon Museum” on change.org. In collaboration with former and current staff, Favela outlined the steps he says need to be taken to address the institution’s equity and inclusion problems. Those include robust BLM and inclusivity statements, qualified diversity training, more hiring of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) — and McCoy’s removal.

In response to our interview request, McCoy offered several rebuttal points — including that Favela’s “grievances are with the leadership that preceded me” — but otherwise indicated the museum has nothing to say beyond its previous public statements.

“I was tasked with making the necessary changes so we could move the museum forward,” McCoy said in his email response. “Change management is not easy... It comes with risk and reward and a lot of accountability. I’m incredibly proud of what we have accomplished in the last four years and even more proud of what Team Neon has become.”

As of press time, Favela’s change.org petition had gathered more than 1,900 signatures and spawned a related document, “Share Your Neon Museum Workplace Story.”

As a nationally recognized artist and a popular podcast host, Favela may be a prominent critic on his own — but he’s not the only one. Eight former employees, five of whom asked to remain anonymous, have come forward with stories concerning a range of alleged toxic workplace conditions at the museum. Not all of them bear on issues raised by or related to those aired at the museum. Not all of them bear on issues involving sexual misconduct among employees. Although his actions were reported repeatedly to higher-ups, former employees say he faced no major repercussions before being let go amid a recent round of layoffs.

In June, while the museum had not yet publicly acknowledged BLM protests, a video appeared on the museum’s Instagram in which Tiffany, a museum ambassador and the only Black worker then employed there, described the history of the Moulin Rouge, the historic Black-owned casino. The timing of the video made the request to feature her in it feel tokenizing, according to several former employees. This underscores how easily even a well-intentioned move can turn awkward, and suggests the tricky path institutions have to navigate between doing the right thing and gesturing to the right thing.

As more social media posts criticizing the museum appeared, a photo emerged of the museum’s social media manager, Amanda Riley, who is white, dressed for Halloween as a stereotypical caricature of a Latina “chola.” (Nationally, a number of politicians and media figures have faced criticism or lost their jobs when similar photos emerged.)

“It’s no big sin to be appropriative,” says Karla Lagunas, a former docent (known at the museum as interpreters). “People can learn and grow from that. My main concern was the reaction of leadership specifically — that they were combative to any kind of outside accountability by the public. It seems like there’s a priority to make sure that the people within their own administration are not held accountable for their actions.”

At an organization-wide sexual harassment meeting, the museum’s head of HR allegedly carried out a presentation that several former employees who were present describe as shocking. During the meeting, witnesses recall the presenter allegedly suggesting that employees should resolve issues involving sexual misconduct among themselves, so as not to waste company time.

According to the same former workers, the person leading the meeting also said that oftentimes allegations of sexual assault are false, and that what is worse than being sexually harassed or assaulted is someone who’s been falsely accused of doing so. To underscore their point, the presenter reportedly displayed a photo of Supreme Court Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh and his family, reminding employees that “a false accusation ruined this man’s life.”

The human resources executive in question did not reply to a request for comment.

In an email, McCoy offered some bullet points: “Of the museum’s 22 board members, five identify as LGBTQ+, one identifies as Hispanic, one as Black and one as Asian-American.... The Neon Museum’s front-line staff comprises 58 percent LGBTQ+, people of color and Latinx.”

He also touted the Museum’s artist-in-residence program, which has featured artists from diverse backgrounds, including Favela, Lance Smith, and others. He noted Favela’s involvement in a 2017 bilingual tour program, and said the museum has taken pains to properly contextualize signage — such as a restored sign from Chief Hotel Court which depicts a Native American wearing a war bonnet — now widely considered insensitive.

(Favela notes the irony of the museum using his projects to tout diversity, when, he says, they weren’t particularly well-supported. “It’s a perfect example of what happens with ‘diversity’ programming. They act like it’s an opportunity for us, then it’s not really supported, and then there is no follow-up. Just a way to check off a box.”)

While Favela’s Open letter centers on the organization’s alleged disregard for diversity, equity, and inclusion, former employees say the division doesn’t end there. While administrative staff and leadership work in an air-conditioned office space adjacent to the museum, docents face harsh weather conditions, including extreme heat, cold, high winds, and rain while working in the Neon Boneyard. Interpreters often work four-to-eight-hour shifts primarily outdoors.

The signs themselves don’t help. “One hundred fifteen degrees on a weather vane is very different than 115 degrees also surrounded by metal and reflective surfaces,” Lagunas says.

Museum leadership has reportedly told workers that the Boneyard will close if temperatures reach 110 or above. But former employees say that when these temperatures hit, management would often claim that temperatures weren’t as hot as thermometers showed.

“Being out there five days a week, eight hours a day takes a physical toll,” a former interpreter said. “Your body just cannot handle it. I would get home, and I was subhuman.”
Even the signs are suffering from exposure, they say. “One of the signs when I first started less than two years ago, the chapel by the courthouse, was pristine. It looked brand-new. A very large portion of the facade of the sign has peeled away, and it looks like shit now,” a former employee said.

**IN RESPONSE TO** Favela’s letter, the Neon Museum has announced plans to address some of the issues described in his call to action.

In a written statement posted to the museum’s Instagram on July 13, McCoy announced the creation of a Cultural Diversity Council comprising museum staff who will evaluate operations and make recommendations for change. Additionally, the museum’s board of trustees has formed a diversity committee to seek community input and consider ways the museum can progress in its diversity efforts.

Favela has also been in dialogue with the chair of the museum’s board, Mike PeQueen. “(PeQueen) assured me that there would be some changes coming and that they were listening to us,” Favela says. “Three days later, they announced the beginning of a diversity council that would include Neon Museum staff members — the opposite of what was asked for in the letter. I communicated this to Mike: You cannot ask the people that are being oppressed to fix the problem.”

“Justin’s view on this is important to me,” PeQueen says, praising Favela’s passion for the museum and the community. “But I am not sure that I see this one exactly the same way that he does.” While staffers will have a voice in the process, “we are purposely not burdening them with doing the work themselves.” The museum has retained an outside firm to confidentially query current and former workers on the subject, and is forming a board-level committee to study and recommend inclusivity measures in hiring and “the guest experience.”

Former employees who left the museum shortly after the diversity council was formed say it’s too early to tell if it will yield any real changes. “I think it’s a step in the right direction, but it rings hollow when other instances were never properly addressed,” one former employee said.

Among the diversity efforts outlined in McCoy’s statement were plans to refurbish the Moulin Rouge sign, which is significant, as the Moulin Rouge played a role in ending segregation on the Strip.
SPORTS

Special Team
Denied the usual in-person skills camps and outreach programs, the new team in town finds other ways to join the community

BY Paul Szydelko

he pandemic shrunk their playbook for in-person involvement, but the Las Vegas Raiders are diagramming new routes to help the hibernating youth sports community and their beleaguered Nevada home.

Since their relocation announcement in 2017, the Raiders have initiated a number of local outreach programs and partnerships to parallel longstanding efforts in Oakland, according to a team spokesman. They have focused primarily on education, health and fitness, volunteerism, civic involvement, and charitable giving.

When they officially became the Las Vegas Raiders in January, owner Mark Davis pledged $500,000 toward eliminating student meal debt in the state. Ambitious plans for personal appearances when coaches and players arrived in Southern Nevada were curtailed with COVID-19’s onset, so more creative efforts have prevailed.

The Raiders hosted a virtual clinic for the Southern Nevada Football Coaches Association. They partnered with USA Football and Intermountain Healthcare on free webinars for local youth coaches in June. Among the topics: practice planning, teaching technique
and scheme, and safety. The Raiders cover costs for tackle and flag coaches to complete USA Football certification coursework online and have worked to develop USA Football's regional presence.

“Since the Raiders announced, they’ve really been fantastic for the community,” says Ben Joffe, National Youth Sports Nevada cofounder and director of operations. “They’ve done a great job in a number of different ways.”

Joffe says he is working with the Raiders to develop digital content to help young athletes train at home and stay active during the pandemic. “Our young athletes who are 6-14 years old are going to gobble that up,” he says.

The Raiders host weekly virtual chats for high school football programs in collaboration with the Clark County and Washoe County school districts. Former Raider Lamarr Houston spoke during the team’s first ELITE (Education, Leadership, Integrity, Teamwork, Equality) chat for Rancho High on August 13.

Twenty-nine varsity athletes and Rancho head football coach Leon Evans participated in the 45-minute Zoom meeting. “It was a great opportunity for our kids to have contact with the Raiders, not just seeing them on TV, but have that personal interaction,” Evans says. “We appreciate the Raiders showing their support for youth sports because that’s where it all starts.”

“WE ALL KNOW that most of our kids aren’t going to get even to the collegiate level, but it's something to aspire to,” Joffe says. “All of our sports teach different things, different life lessons. With football ... all 11 guys on the field are reliant on each other. Strongest link, weakest link — everybody matters on a team. That lesson is really paramount to today’s society, and we’re excited to be a part of the Raiders helping grow that lesson and every other lesson that sports can offer.”

Before training camp began, fullback Alec Ingold discussed personal finances virtually with high school students who are part of UNLV’s Young Executive Scholars Hospitality & Tourism Program. Ingold stressed the importance of managing
Running back Jalen Richard became a spokesman for the Discovery Children’s Museum, recording a video to support fundraising efforts and share updates about the museum’s Raiders Kids Construction Zone, an interactive replica of Allegiant Stadium.

In addition to their talent and time, the Raiders have been generous with their treasure during the pandemic:

• Davis and the team pledged $1 million to the Nevada COVID-19 Task Force; $25,000 to The Actors Fund during the Mondays Dark livestreamed telethon to support sidelined entertainers; and $10,000 to feed residents and members of Share Village.

• Ingold and teammates Josh Jacobs, Foster Moreau, and Hunter Renfrow issued a challenge on social media to encourage donations for Three Square Food Bank to provide more than 31,000 meals to Las Vegas residents.

• Wide receiver Henry Ruggs III, the Las Vegas Raiders’ first-ever draft pick, launched a commemorative T-shirt for sale with a portion of the proceeds going to Three Square.

• Tackle Trent Brown partnered with CCSD to donate $20,000 to provide teenagers with Chromebooks for remote schooling.

“We’re obviously going through some tough times,” defensive end Maxx Crosby said during the Athletes Doing Good Radiothon fundraiser. “A lot of people are losing jobs, families are struggling, and there’s a lot of sick kids out there. … I feel like being in my position and having this platform, I’d be doing myself an injustice if I didn’t go out in the community and meet people who are really struggling right now. What it is all about at the end of the day is giving back to the people who really need it.”

Like the Vegas Golden Knights, which prioritized community involvement before the first skate was laced, the Raiders are demonstrating what major-league athletes and coaches can and should be before their first game, Joffe says.

“We know that they’re going to be a supporter and help us — all these parents and young athletes — get to the other side of this crisis,” Joffe says. “They’re a key member of our community now. They’re going to be there, and they’ve already proven what they want to be here.”

Pity the Las Vegas sports lover. At long last, he’s reached a once unimaginable point of superabundance: a storied NFL franchise and new stadium, a hockey team surging toward the finals, WNBA, triple-A baseball in the minor league’s best ballpark, semi-pro soccer, and even some UNLV teams worth following. With the Raiders in place, his city has arrived, and so has the Singularity — the Vegas superfan is about to merge with the wide, wide world of sports.

Only to be thrown for a loss by COVID-19.

Now, sure, sports will (probably) go on. There will be games, stats, and excitable Tony Romo babble. But, watching from home, glum from the fake crowd noise in his empty arena, the superfan can’t wallow in the yowling, cheering, beer-spilling, expensively hot-dogged, backslapping fullness of it. Because fandom at this level is the opposite of social distancing. It’s about ecstatic communion with the likeminded, the mad love of your team, being part of the action. All impossible now.

Fortunately, there’s a phrase known to every sports lover that might help; four words that, season after season in all sports, already assuage millions of fans: **Wait ‘til next year.** Scott Dickensheets
A n earthmover churns up the hillside, lifts its great yellow claw, and pulls a pine tree until it snaps. The trees will give way, one after the next, the branches gathered and discarded. Tomorrow there will be nothing but stumps; what was green will be brown, what reached upward will be flattened. A staircase to the hilltop will have been alchemized into rubble. Soon the hill itself will be gone, and the seats below, and the stage, and the shell which once supported a canopy of sails long since blown away in the great and terrible storm of June 2018. The Henderson Pavilion, this place that promised music under moonlight, will be gone, supplanted by another place extending other promises: walls and a roof and climate-control and a hockey rink and young men gliding in their armor and the people of my city, shoulder-to-shoulder, cheering them on. I should embrace the new promises made, but I cannot stop lamenting the old one broken. This is the summer of 2020, life is under assault from assailants seen and unseen, reason has given way to rhetoric, and the two remaining modes of discourse appear to be panic and denial. There is a body count and a deadening of souls. Who am I to mourn, in such times, a place?

It happened so fast. On February 6, the Vegas Golden Knights announced that they
had purchased a minor-league hockey team. On February 13, Henderson Mayor Debra March informed us that the team would come to Henderson, that it would play at the corner of Paseo Verde and Green Valley parkways, and that the structure that occupied the corner, the Henderson Pavilion, would give way to a new arena. Among the townpeople, household whispers led to social-media bewilderment: In a city with so much raw land, why here, in place of this? Wasn’t it possible to love both our hockey and our Pavilion? On March 9, the city held a public meeting at which a man gave a PowerPoint presentation about all of the ways in which the Pavilion was unworthy — too old, too hot, too expensive to repair and maintain. At the end of the presentation, an elderly woman stood up. She was told she’d have a chance to comment to the city’s note-takers at the breakout sessions, but she said she would comment right now, to the people of her town, assembled here elbow-to-elbow in a plague season. “How many of you have ever been to the Pavilion?” she asked. Every hand in the room went up. “How many of you have ever had a bad time there?” All of the hands went down.

In the breakout sessions that followed, there was a corner to talk about traffic flow for the new arena, a corner to talk about parking, a corner to talk about design. There was not a corner to talk about saving the Pavilion.

On March 11, the president of the United States appeared on TV to acknowledge at last the danger of a renegotiated strand of RNA known as the coronavirus. For the next month and a half, time stood still, streets fell silent, and the air grew clean with quarantine.

The people’s hibernation coincided with the new arena’s gestation. By May 19, the city approved $42 million for the arena, to be matched by $42 million from the Knights. Architects were hired; renderings were produced. A group of Hendersonians gathered almost 3,000 signatures on a petition to put the matter on the November ballot. The city rejected the petition, arguing that each signature page did not explain exactly what would happen if the initiative blocking public money for the arena were to make it to the ballot and pass. (As a signatory, I understood quite well that if the initiative blocking public money for the arena were to pass, public money for the arena would be blocked.)

The grounds around the Pavilion were fenced off, the adjacent farmer’s market was moved a block away, and on August 18 the earthmovers arrived, and I pulled my car over to mourn the trees.

I am trying to write not from a place of outrage but of love. My love for the Pavilion helped me fall in love with this city. I was raised not a Hendersonian but a Las Vegan, out on the far-edge frontier once known as Flamingo and Sandhill. After a decade away, I moved back to the valley in August 1999 and found myself suddenly a resident of Henderson, a place I had previously associated with a sulfurous thing called “The Henderson Smell.” Now I associated it with the morning scent of mountains wet after monsoon rains.

In 2002, about five miles from our little house, the city opened its Pavilion, an amphitheater crowned by a lovely green hill with sapling pines at the top and seating at the bottom and a canopy that looked like a quiet fleet of sailboats or an arriving flock of doves. The place, designed by Denver architects Anderson Mason Dale, cost $10.3 million, and the result looked well worth the investment, a place, like any public building worth its salt, it was built to serve our children’s children.
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The Dream Is Over

Parting thoughts on the end of the ever-changing Le Rêve

BY Mike Weatherford

A global nightmare put an end to Le Rêve, French for “The Dream.” But the aquatic revue at Wynn Las Vegas had a charmed life for most of its 15 years, provided you could keep up with that ever-shifting quality people associate with their own dreams.

Granted, you don’t expect a lot of solid footing in a water show, where the audience surrounded the high-divers and the acrobatics staged in and above a pool. And only in Las Vegas would we already have one.

When it opened in 2005, Le Rêve was dismissed as a bungled knockoff of Cirque du Soleil’s O. But on it ran, rarely sitting still as it worked to distance itself. The hotel was always adding and revising, with a lot of chefs in the kitchen, so to speak. And some of the most specific decisions, down to the music and costumes, were made by the chef who had a whole company to oversee: Steve Wynn.

August 14 brought the news that Le Rêve would remain closed even after the COVID-19 pandemic subsides, ending another old-Vegas anomaly: The show was 100 percent owned by Wynn Resorts, and its cast and crew were hotel employees. Nearly every other theater space in town was leased to independent producers who took on most of the risk. But it’s also a likely explanation for why the hotel chose not to wait out the pandemic.

Brian Burke was the show’s artistic director for six years, and is now a producer on NBC’s America’s Got Talent. He says that compared to California, Nevada officials haven’t done a good job of coordinating a reopening plan with its entertainment industry. “You can’t buy a show ticket, but you can sit down in the restaurant next to the Le Rêve theater and have dinner,” he notes. If a show isn’t even allowed to test whether it could, say, run three times a day for a one-third capacity house, “Nobody can sustain paying people for that long.”

Le Rêve wasn’t supposed to be a direct competitor of O. It evolved from plans for a short outdoor water show to be staged several times a day. But it evolved into more of what people expected it to be, a schizophrenic mix of what was then expected of Cirque-era Vegas,
and the restless ambition of Wynn and former Cirque director Franco Dragone. “People were dumping money down the street at KÀ (the Cirque show that cost at least $165 million), and Franco wanted to make a human-based show,” Burke recalls. But Wynn pumped at least another $25 million more into making Le Rêve lighter and brighter. His obsession — some would call it micromanaging — with the aquacade hearkened back to an earlier, pre-corporate era of Las Vegas, when properties were defined by their entertainment and the colorful figures in charge of it.

Wynn and Dragone had already transformed the Strip with Cirque’s Mystère and O, but their relationship was, well, complicated, and for a time Dragone was out of the picture altogether. “I prefer Cézanne, and he loves Matisse,” Dragone once explained.

Changes came early and often, starting with a quick and drastic overhaul in the week after Dragone shocked some patrons of a charity premiere by showing them “pregnant” women doing belly flops and fishing nets dredging up eerie reminders of another global catastrophe — the previous year’s Indian Ocean tsunami. (“I am not the same man I was in ‘98,” Dragone explained. “I have seen 9/11. I have seen the Iraq war. Katrina. ... Yes, Le Rêve is darker, but why not?”). And it was still being tweaked by yet another creative hand, Broadway director Philip McKinley, almost up to the week in February 2018 when Wynn resigned as chairman of his company amid accusations of sexual misconduct.

“The friction sort of became the gold in a way,” Burke says now. “Those guys are dreamers, they’re big thinkers, and I feel the influence of working with them.”

Le Rêve was sure sexier than its Cirque counterpart, once it settled into a storyline focused on the erotic longings of a “beautiful dreamer,” as the old song goes. “It’s very hard to take the Cirque references out,” Wynn noted in late 2007, as he explored new corners of pop culture by recruiting Maksim Chmerkovskiy, of Dancing with the Stars, to add ballroom dancing to the aquatic mix. “Everyone was there as a collective, and even though it was run by a corporate entity, it was intimate, personal, hands-on,” Burke says. “It was a family environment, and everyone really believed in it. Everybody didn’t become a number. And that’s why people have such passion about the fact that it closed.”

The price of longevity is becoming just another fixture on the Strip’s landscape, one that locals tend to forget until visitors came to town. But, unlike the faded showgirl opus Jubilee!, no one imagined Le Rêve would close after “only” 15 years. Jubilee! was another rare hotel-owned production, and its closing was said to owe less to the waning appeal of showgirls than the desire to get all those cast and crew members off Bally’s payroll. It wouldn’t be wild speculation to wonder if, once the pandemic is over, an outside producer — maybe even one named Dragone — would turn the spigots back on and stage a new show on the water.

“My ultimate hope would be that the pandemic ends, and Franco and I would be the ones to get to do the new Le Rêve,” Burke says. “We don’t just want to go in like a vulture, but it’s like a piece of your soul and your heart is there.”

BOOK

Up from Below
A new book follows people attempting to escape life in LV’s storm drains

Underground is typically a term you use to romanticize your estrangement from the mainstream, but for some people — as author Matthew O’Brien showed us in his 2007 book Beneath the Neon — it’s a tragically literal description of lives almost wholly estranged from society. Subtitled Life and Death in the Tunnels of Las Vegas, O’Brien’s book introduced readers to the homeless people who live down in the storm-drain system undergirding vast tracts of the city. It was a bracing reminder that a city’s prosperity is no bulwark against the personal and social ills that create an underclass the rest of us don’t see (or want to).

Thirteen years later, O’Brien is back with a follow-up, and as its title makes clear, Dark Days, Bright Nights: Surviving the Las Vegas Storm Drains (Central Recovery Press, $18.95), this book has a new mission: to highlight former tunnel-dwellers who have reemerged into society, often with great difficulty. (In that time he also founded Shine a Light, a nonprofit dedicated to helping them.)

In a sense, this book is a corrective. As O’Brien points out in his introduction, the grim spectacle of social castoffs living in the neon-tinged twilight below Sin City proved irresistible to national and international media, particularly against the backdrop of the Great Recession. The author himself led many journalists into the tunnels. The resulting notes from underground tended to play up the gritty drama and danger of the situation — with little attention paid to successful escapees. Dark Days, Bright Nights tells some of their stories.

Using the oral-history format (and employing his subjects’ street names), O’Brien arranges their narratives into the very human up-and-down rhythms of lives centered by addictions, mental illness, and poverty. There are compelling glimpses of rock-bottom (“He showed me his little spot, broke out some crack, and I smoked with them,” Tommy says. “That’s how I ended up down there”), and from every stage of getting clean, finding hope, relapsing, trying again. “The first two or three nights back we cried ourselves to sleep,” Pretty Boy Steve confesses. “We couldn’t believe we were down there again.” (“I do see better things ahead,” he says later.)

Not every outcome is conventionally inspiring. “I’ll probably be dead,” Zero says toward the book’s end. “Live fast, die hard, and leave a decent-looking corpse.” But you can’t help but pull for a survivor like Cyndi. “I’d like to open a treatment center in Vegas and help people in the tunnels,” she tells O’Brien. “That’s my ultimate dream.” Or David, who says, “My focus is being the best grandfather I can be,” and whose fondest hope is to escort his granddaughter on her first date seven or eight years from now. Such a very above-ground thing to want. Scott Dickensheets
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What Goes Up

Change is a constant in Las Vegas. Implosions are dramatic and swift. What comes down is memorable. But what goes up? Hardly exhilarating. From this vantage, though, I saw an opportunity to record history and the reshaping of our city.

I began shooting CityCenter when it was just a barren field. After five years of quixotic commitment, shooting from the same spot every two or three months, I had accumulated hundreds of shots. What next? Each phase of the building process was interesting, but not stunning. The notion of layering hit me, inspired by those cellophane pages of human anatomy in old encyclopedias. I would compose a time-lapse in depth, using only slivers and bits of images from various intervals.

I used basic Photoshop elements — no trickery or embellishments. Every image is in its genuine location. CityCenter (2006-2010) honed my technique for High-Roller (2014), then T-Mobile Arena (2015-2016), before the ambitious Allegiant Stadium (2017-2020), which holds some 300 images from a span of three years.

While construction isn’t as enthralling as demolition, I hope this series manages to scramble time and remain coherent, reflecting the dynamic growth of a city forever thirsty for reinvention.

— Armand Thomas

The Las Vegas Layered series is on exhibit indefinitely at AW Gallery in the Arts Factory, 105 E. Charleston Blvd. See more of Thomas’ work at armandthomas.com.

Music

‘For Musicians, by Musicians’

Live and Direct 702 has elevated local virtual showcases with professionalism and intimacy

Before COVID-19, Renaldo Elliott was a very busy man. The former corporate clock-puncher turned career skinsman had gigs on the Strip five or six nights a week. But on March 15, a flood of emails from MGM, Caesars, and other gaming outfits canceled all live entertainment and, by extension, Elliott’s livelihood. As weeks passed by with no curtain-rise in sight, the veteran drummer settled into a funk much different than any he helped lay down onstage. “There was accomplishment and then regret,” Elliott says. “(Musicians) were deemed nonessential.”

Not making him feel any better were the shoddy Facebook live videos of bands performing in isolation. “I was like, this can’t be what the future is,” Elliott says. So he reached out to former bandmates CoCo Jenkins, Greg Mayeda, and Ryan Mappala and launched Live and Direct 702, a YouTube channel featuring local musicians performing alone in the National Southwestern Recording studio at Downtown’s 11th Street Records.

Music

SOUND IDEAS
Above, musicians Vondre “DreWay” Ficklin, Kennedy King and Renaldo Elliott. Right, Ryan Mappala, head of production.
The 30-minute, one-take videos that comprise the channel’s Today We Play music series not only stand in stark contrast to the lo-fidelity streams from early in the pandemic, but offer you-are-there intimacy sans the usual chatter and clatter. Each act is front and center, tastefully surrounded by candles and amplifiers. There are no jump shots or stylistic lenswork — just the simple, Jedi-like focus of Mappala’s video gaze. Every lyric is clearly projected, every note as clear as a die, from rapper Mike Xavier’s redemptive narratives to Droogs AG’s Chason Westmoreland pecking out skittering soundscapes on his MPC. “It’s for musicians, by musicians,” says Jenkins, who helps choose the performers and promotes their showcases on her popular There’s Nothing To Do in Vegas Instagram account. “We have so many amazing creatives that deserve not just our attention but our support.”

The most striking thing about the videos, besides the talent they exhibit, is their plague-defying spirit. Try not smiling back at beaming performers like Kaylie Foster, Sonia Barcelona, and Cameron Calloway, who have all debuted material on their respective sessions. For many of the participants, Live and Direct 702 provided their first gig since the virus silenced every PA in town.

“They jumped at the opportunity,” Elliott says. “Many artists were hurting financially because they lost their jobs. It was like a depression. What we’re providing is an escape.” Mike Prevatt

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Slow & Low has captured the classic Old Fashioned in a can.

PHOTOGRAPHY Sabin Orr

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2020 | DESERT COMPANION 31
It’s a bit of irony that the pandemic closed the bars and made many of us need a stiff drink at the same time. But humans — and especially Las Vegans — know how to adapt. Here are some tips on keeping your spirits up (literally) during the downtime.

**KITS AND PREMIX PICK-ME-UPS**

As takeout food has gone from pizza and drive-thru fare to multicourse gourmet dinners, beverage options have kept pace. Through its pantry, **Sparrow + Wolf** (sparrowandwolf lv.com) offers two original cocktails to go, made right before you arrive and decanted into environmentally responsible packages. The Easy Peasy infuses Ketel One vodka with mint and snap peas; It’s Hot in the Dining Room is a rendition of a Caipirinha with Cachaça, passion fruit, and lime.

Along with a plethora of pasta, **North Italia** (northitalia.com) has a half-dozen kits and pre-mixed drinks that put flavorful twists on classic libations. There are mimosas and spritzers and red sangria; the Sicilian Margarita gets its name and flavor from...
**PORTABLE POTABLES**

Sparrow + Wolf's Easy Peasy with Ketel One vodka and fresh mint; North Italia's Sicilian Margarita with Solerno blood orange liqueur

Solerno blood orange liqueur and a splash of sangria, which add a sort of fruity, floral richness to the Gran Centenario Anejo, while the Milano Mule spikes vodka and ginger beer with aperol and lime. Downtown's Tacotarian (tacotarianlv.com) serves up margaritas to go with your elote or enchiladas. There are also margaritas in the mix at China Poblano's to-go window (chinapoblano.com), which come in their own shaker. The Prickly Pear is given a light, citrusy touch with Milagro Silver tequila with grapefruit and lime; the watermelon version with mezcal and chile has a richer flavor that fits well with fall.

**CANNED & BOTTLED**

Premixed cocktails have been around for decades, but they've come a long way from the bottles of Brass Monkey or Long Island Iced Tea I used to drink in Central Park during my misspent youth. Liquor store shelves are full of options that are more upscale-mixologist than well-drink-by-a-rookie-bartender, and they can add a bit of festivity to any picnic or outdoor cocktail hour. 10 Torr Distilling & Brewing (10torr.com) is a Reno company with several varieties of distilled spirits, but its collection of canned cocktails are bubbly refreshers perfect for warm weather. The vodka-spiked Lavender Lemonade combines subtle-yet-present flavors to make it something special either out of the can or on the rocks, and its Cucumber Cooler is like spa water with a buzz factor. Joia Spirit (joiaspirit.com) is another purveyor of fizzy lifting drinks—originally a gourmet soda company, it creates bubbly versions of classic cocktails. The Sparkling Greyhound's grapefruit has hints of chamomile and cardamom, and the Gin Gimlet is touched with hibiscus and ginger. Fling Craft Cocktails (boulevard.com/fling) also makes a line of cocktails in cans covered with cute, kitschy art. The Mai Tai and Mojito make for especially pleasant sippers, even if they don't quite carry as much octane as their regularly mixed versions. If it's octane you're looking for, consider Slow & Low's Rock and Rye (drinkslowandlow.com), a complete Old Fashioned in a can, with carefully sourced honey, orange, bitters, and a pinch of rock candy.

If you want something a bit stronger both in taste and ABV percentage, a number of coffee-based cocktails on the market will help keep your day drink from slipping into naptime. Beagans 1806 Coffee & Cream (beagans1806.com) is like a Frappuccino's evil twin—coffee and cream sweetness that disguises a vodka kick, but Cutwater's Horchata Cold Brew Cocktails (cutwater-spirits.com) hit you with the vodka and cream liqueur up front before settling in with a little cinnamon buzz.

Unlike most companies dealing in the premixed market, On the Rocks (ontherocksocktails.com) uses a variety of brands in its cocktails. The Jalapeño Pineapple Margarita is made with Tres Generaciones Tequila—it's sweet without being cloying and spicy without being hot, and slides easily from one to the other like any fine cocktail should. It also takes on the less-obvious Aviation, capturing the cocktail's opalescent color and delicate flavor. Unscrew the cap, pour into a cup with ice, and any drive-in or driveway becomes your own swank speakeasy.

**MEADOW GIMLET**

The addition of a little basil and blueberry goes a long way to turning the gimlet from something you sip to something you have to make sure you don't gulp. You can adapt this recipe to other herb-berry combos, like rosemary and blackberry or lavender with strawberry.

- 3 oz. gin or vodka
- 3/4 oz. fresh lime juice
- 3/4 oz. basil simple syrup (see below)
- 10-15 blueberries
- Muddle blueberries with lime juice in shaker. Add gin/vodka, simple syrup and plenty of ice. Shake and strain into cocktail glass, garnish with several berries on a pick.

**Basil Simple Syrup**

Put all ingredients into a saucepan and bring to a boil. Let simmer for several minutes, then remove from heat and let steep for 30-45 minutes. Strain out basil leaves and store in a sealed glass container.

**3 cups water**
**1 cup sugar**
**1 cup basil leaves**

**3/4 oz. basil simple syrup**

**3/4 oz. fresh lime juice**

**MIXING IT UP AT HOME**

Of course, if you want to do your own shaking and stirring, there's no dearth of exotic bottles in the liquor store and elaborate recipes online. However, Keith Bracewell of Esther's Kitchen (estherslv.com) has advice for aspiring mixologists. "Start simple. A simple daiquiri—light rum, fresh lime, and sugar—or an Old Fashioned, then you can start departing from those things. What can you add to give it a kick?"

Kat Kinsman, senior editor at Food & Wine, suggests a few bottles that can add a new flavor to old classics. "Domaine de Canton is a ginger liqueur. I pop it in anywhere as the sweet element where I otherwise might use Triple sec or Curacao because it adds a little heat and is almost savory," she says, adding, "Punt e Mes (vermouth) is unexpectedly versatile as an ingredient as a standalone. It's got that almost amaro thing in its bitterness and just feels like it has an extra octave."

But you don't always need to buy a new bottle to add a kick. Alyssa Ocampo, manager at Sparrow + Wolf, suggests "making syrups at home. You probably have all of the stuff in your pantry. It's sugar and water and you can add whatever flavors you have. If you have herbs that might go bad, throw some basil, some thyme in there. If you have vanilla, you can make a vanilla simple syrup." She also suggests that bitters become a part of your home bar setup. "You can completely change the taste of a cocktail by adding bitters. The two everyone should have are an Angostura and an orange."

Bracewell draws attention to another ingredient many overlook: The ice. "If your ice is made with tap water as opposed to purified water, that's a really important detail. I think a lot of people overlook." He also encourages a lot of ice in the shaker. And don't hesitate to go big. "If you have a spirit-driven cocktail with no juice or little juice, use a bigger cube. It will melt slowly and you'll have less watery cocktail. If you have juice-driven cocktails, use smaller ice." He also stresses the use of fresh juices. "Always have citrus in your house. If you're going to make cocktails, you need to have limes, you need to have lemons, you need to have oranges." Still, don't let yourself get stressed out. If you make a mistake, just toss it in the sink and start over. "Experiment and have fun. There's really no wrong way," Ocampo says.

**SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2020 • DESERT COMPANION | 33**
The heart of many a small town can be found in its diner, where old friends meet and strangers stop by, where pie and gossip are served with a smile. Whenever people tell me that Las Vegas is, at heart, a small town, I imagine that heart beating somewhere between the grill top and the coffee urn at Vickie’s Diner.

For 65 years — most of them 24 hours a day, seven days a week — Vickie’s was where tourists at the end of a bender crossed paths with locals at the start of a workday, where boisterous family brunches took place next to subdued post-one-night-stand breakfasts, all of it held together by the soothing goodwill of grilled cheese, turkey club, and two eggs any style. But the beloved local institution flipped its last burger on August 16, and is now seeking a new home.

I made my first visit to Vickie’s on my second Vegas vacation, and it became a requirement of every trip thereafter. Back then, it was known as Tiffany’s Café, a bland white room, save for the always-entertaining view of Las Vegas Boulevard foot traffic, the enormous collage of snapshots of regulars, and an artwork known as “That Painting” that would develop its own fan base, its own Facebook page, and its own writeup in The Wall Street Journal. A piece of outsider art created long ago by a now-forgotten patron, it was a conventional, above-the-sofa landscape painting… with the crudely rendered addition of a long-haired, narrow-eyed Western gunman looming up in one corner. Some thought it was Clint Eastwood, others thought it resembled John Travolta, but everyone took their picture with it.

But not even “That Painting” could outshine what was on those sturdy white diner plates. The omelets were plump and fluffy, finished off with a neat orange square of just-melted cheese applied with as much care and flair as any shaved truffle or drizzled coulis. The patty melt became my go-to meal in times of trouble, the comfort and cure for my intense hangover, ravenous hunger, or abysmal despair — the grill-top burger coated lightly in grease, topped by a pillow of grilled onions and smothered in gooey cheese, all of it held fast and firm by two slices of whole wheat. There was no liquor license, but one of my party would slip into the adjacent White Cross market for a pint of whiskey to spike our coffee — the waitresses had finely tuned radar for topping off any cup that dropped to two-thirds full, but they also knew when to look the other way.

Sure, Las Vegas has plenty of other all-night kitchens, loads of other establishments dishing out French toast and meatloaf, but Vickie’s was the original to which all Peppermills and Hash Houses aspire. With their trade where ham steaks once sizzled, the White Cross closed and redecorated the place in retro pink and the hours shortened to focus on breakfast and lunch, but the food and the clientele remained unchanged.

After 65 years, it wasn’t coronavirus that took down Vickie’s Diner, but gentrification. The building itself will disappear soon, yet another distinctive piece of Downtown bought up and torn down by bros from L.A. — no doubt sushi chefs or baristas will ply their trade where ham steaks once sizzled, and the groovy, mid-mod script and bubble bulbs of the White Cross sign that has ridden high over Las Vegas Boulevard since Little Richard topped the charts will be another pile of plastic and glass in a dumpster. During the final weekend, dozens of people began lining up shortly after sunrise, eager to grab a last ham-and-pepper bite of Denver omelet, a final bounce on the pink vinyl window seats, a farewell selfie with Clint/John, a big tip, and heartfelt goodbye for their favorite waitress.

Opened in 1955, the White Cross was a drugstore/liquor store/post office/mini mart/souvenir stand. Combined with a ‘round-the-clock diner, it was basically a village unto itself. Tom Wolfe dropped into the White Cross during a mid-60s visit to Vegas and wrote of the pregnant customers with “buttocked decollete aft and illusion-of-cloth lingerie hanging fore” and “old mom’s-pie pensioners” cranking away at slot machines, finding here the serene acceptance of the outrageous that would come to characterize Las Vegas. Did I mention that it was where Elvis used to get his prescriptions filled?

The White Cross closed and re-opened as a more upscale market, which itself closed after a year or two, but Tiffany’s Café held strong. In 2014, longtime waitress Vickie Kelesis bought Tiffany’s, renaming it Vickie’s Diner; her uncle, Pete Kelesis, had run the café for years. A TV show redecorated the place in retro pink and the hours shortened to focus on breakfast and lunch, but the food and the clientele remained unchanged.

A fond farewell to Vickie’s, the classic Downtown diner by Lissa Townsend Rodgers

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The hotel shuttle shot past me and the trans woman waiting, so we looked at each other incredulously, sure we’d just been abandoned. Sometimes I can see the future, and as she walked closer I knew we were about to bond in that American occurrence we call outrage.

“Did he just drive right past us?” the trans woman, whose name I’ll say was Sarah, asked.

“Maybe we’re in the wrong spot,” I started to say, but Sarah was already shaking her head. She had a nose ring and dyed black hair cut in straight bangs across her small forehead. “I checked,” she said, like a person who’s spent her whole life checking to be sure she isn’t in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I said maybe he didn’t see us, but the worry had already set in: Were we in the wrong spot? Was this the right time? Would he come back, or were we forever stuck in limbo at the Las Vegas airport?

We decided we’d wait 10 minutes then call the hotel, but soon the shuttle circled back. The driver, Oscar, a Hispanic man, north of my middle-age
but not yet old, said he had seen us standing there but had been cut off on the busy street. He had to circle around the airport because the streets were one-way, and came back to get us as soon as he could. Sarah, no longer outraged now that our salvation was in sight, laughed at something Oscar said about Vegas traffic. I was worrying about sleep. I’d woken up at 3 a.m. in Kansas, in the heart of the heart of the country, and now, not long past dawn, had arrived at the Las Vegas airport weary and unsure why I was there. I'd been invited to a book festival panel to speak on the relevance of the personal essay in a world where everyone knows everything about us already, and wasn’t sure I had anything to say on the subject that hadn’t already been said. I knew Facebook mined our data and sold it to conservative think tanks, and that our phones were spying on us, and even though both those things are true, they sound like conspiracy theories when you say them out loud. I knew the confessional essay was making a comeback because of a sudden need to hear about lessons learned on the value of other’s lives. But I didn’t have anything to confess besides the fact I sometimes want to say “not all men” when I know I should be listening to women’s stories, so I wasn’t sure what to contribute, except maybe some vague, professorial mention of W.H. Auden’s poem “The Unknown Citizen,” after which I would lean back and strike a pensive pose and hope everyone found me acceptably erudite.

But the panel was paying me, and I’d never been to Vegas before, and now, not even 8 o’clock in the morning, I’d already formed a bond with a trans woman wearing a nose ring and forgiven a Hispanic man for making me wait an extra 10 minutes, so maybe I could come up with a few words on the relevance of reflection in such dark times. I was already considering a confessional essay of the kind that gets published in WaPo or HuffPo, one of those Po places, in which I’d tell about the trans woman and Hispanic man and how quickly I was, in my white maleness, able to forgive them for being different from me. The comments section would stretch to 10 miles, most of them telling me to shut the front door on my privilege, but any press is good press, as we all know.
But that sort of navel-gazing foolishness isn’t acceptable to the professional I profess to be, no matter what Po it’s published in. It’s an easy answer, and not a particularly good one, to state that one is aware of one’s own privilege. It’s too close to claiming how “woke” one is, a sort of virtue signaling I think we can all do without. It’s better than being unaware, certainly, but awareness is only the first step, and not a particularly hard one. To get to the heart of the matter, I’d have to actually listen to others, not as easy, especially considering my fatigue and what I was calling world-weariness, even though my flight had been barely three hours.

While we loaded our bags in the back of the shuttle, a few more people showed up. Joe was in his 70s, retired from some line of work that was too banal to even bring up — his words as he waved the question away. He wore cargo shorts and those half-shoe/sandal things I don’t even know what they’re called, but they seem to have been embraced by older men especially, so I assume they’re comfortable. He had on a polo shirt and a wristwatch he wore face down.

Besides Joe there was a Latina, Becca, who spoke with Oscar in Spanish. Maybe it’s my prejudice against my own people, but I expected Joe to say something about language and leaving the country. Instead he asked, in Spanish, where Becca was from. From my high school Spanish was too rusty for me to make out her answer, but Joe said something back and as Becca replied, Oscar said “Amigo” like he meant it and took Joe’s bags.

Behind Becca were two interracial couples: one a middle-aged white man whose name I thought was maybe Milquetoast, and a 20-something biracial woman who never spoke above a whisper. I thought maybe Milquetoast had kidnapped her, most likely because I’d seen a sign about sex trafficking at the airport, but I only skimmed it like most of us do news articles we later quote on social media as if we’ve actually read it all. But Milquetoast was too milquetoast for kidnapping, I assured myself, harmless as far as committing major crimes went. And I don’t mean to make fun of sex trafficking, which is a real fear for many women, or of middle-aged white men, which is another real fear many women rightly hold, and of which I happen to be one. I only mean to say that I carry some preconceived notions with me sometimes, and other times jump to conclusions, which is where the importance of reflection comes in. I know where this is going. But I’m also trying to see how I got there, how we arrive at where we end up, with all our prejudices and ill-formed opinions, which means exploring all the petty ways we look at one another without understanding what we’re looking at, whether it’s weird shoes or shade of skin.

The other couple comprised a Black man from New York and a white woman from Tennessee who had a deep Southern accent worthy of an early Cormac McCarthy novel: \textit{Child of God}, maybe. The man, whom I’ll call Darryl, had a deep, loud voice that he used often. Two minutes inside the shuttle he knew all our names. His big hand engulfed mine when he offered it. I sat in the way back, too tired to think of much other than a nap, vaguely listening, and hoping some idea for the panel presented itself, but Darryl was ready to get down, he said. He wanted to gamble. He wanted to eat at In-N-Out Burgers because he’d once gone to one in California and it was the best burger he’d ever had so he wanted to get one here. He wanted to smoke weed. He wanted to get one of those “big-ass bloody Marys.” He wanted to go to the top of that big building — you know the one, he said.

This was all before Oscar started the van. When he climbed in and the radio came on — Snoop Dogg’s “Gin and Juice” — Darryl started dancing in his seat, singing along with Snoop: “But I, somehow, some way, keep comin’ up with funky ass shit like every single day.”

Halfway through the song Darryl told Grandpa Joe to get down. Sarah smiled. Oscar, looking in his rearview mirror, swayed side to side as he drove. I expected Grandpa Joe to tell us he didn’t “get down,” but when Darryl said, “I bet you listen to country and western,” Joe shook his head.

“What then?” Darryl asked. “Classical? Beet-hoven, or some shit?”

Let me interject to say that Darryl wasn’t being rude. He was a big guy with a loud voice, and normally, at such times — too early in the morning, tired, worried about what I’m going to say in front of people who will expect me to say something intelligent — I would have disliked Darryl. I would have wanted him to shut the fuck up so I could close my eyes for a few minutes. I would have told him no one cared about In-N-Out Burgers in a city that had some of the greatest chefs in the world. Or that the weed here is watered down because the casinos don’t want to people too stoned to play a slot machine. Or that those “big-ass bloody Marys” will cost $23 and taste like tomato juice and tailpipe.

But Darryl’s laugh was infectious, and it’s hard to hate a guy who clearly loves living so much that he wants everyone around to live with him. A man who gets excited about a fast-food hamburger is a man who will laugh alongside you, even at 8 in the morning on an airport shuttle.

Grandpa Joe seemed to understand this as well. And Grandpa Joe, despite his conformist shoes and cargo pants in weather that was already turning toward winter, even in the Vegas desert, was not a country music fan.

“Rock,” Joe said, and, unbelievably, pulled out his air guitar and pantomimed an arpeggio worthy of Yngwie Malmsteen. “Does anyone play rock and roll anymore?”

“You stole rock and roll from us,” Darryl said, light-punching Joe on the arm. “So we had to create rap.” Joe said something I couldn’t hear over the sound of Dr. Dre starting up “Nuthin But a ‘G’ Thang.” It could have been a tense moment had Joe tried to deny that his kind had ever stolen anything from anyone, or fallen back on that old mantra that music can’t be owned, but Darryl had leaned in, and so I assumed Joe was assuring Darryl he did indeed know that the white community had stolen rock from Black musicians, or at least borrowed it without their consent.

By this time we had left the airport and pulled out onto the highway, where we could see the Strip: Bellagio and the MGM Grand and Mandalay Bay. Luxor, named after the city in ancient Thebes. New York-New York. The Strip seemed like a whole new history set before us, rebuilt here in the desert with the low brown mountains ringing us all around, and we fell quiet looking at the spectacle. We went past the Mandalay Bay Events Center, where I’d often watched on pay-per-view Ultimate Fighting Championships in which men beat the living hell out of each other just to see who was stronger. Past the casinos where high-stakes poker championships were held on TV, as if we all wanted to see who could keep the straightest face. Past Treasure Island, with its not-so-subtle reference to getting rich, a nod to that innermost desire of so many of us struggling. Past the Eiffel Tower and...
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the Strat, reminiscent of Seattle’s Space Needle, as if even in Vegas people want to be reminded of somewhere they’d rather be.

When we went past a sign for In-N-Out Burgers, Darryl got excited again. He tried to get Oscar to pull in. He would buy us all a burger, he said, but Oscar kept on, toward Downtown, what someone said was Old Vegas, delivered with a sort of reverence, as if the old ways were still the best. Oscar drove like a madman, which seemed part of the scene. I suspected he had been told to get people where they’re going quickly, so they can get down to the business of why they’re here, which is forgetting why they’re here. Forgetting for a few days about work and mortgages and college tuition for their children, enveloping themselves in the lights and the noise and the liquor and the hopes of making enough money to pay off all the things that need paying off. In this way I’d say Vegas is the great American distraction, but we can find the same thought processes anywhere in the world, from pro football games to pro futbol games and every arena in between, not only of the sports variety, but music or monster trucks or backpacking through the mountains, anything we can do to distance ourselves from our everyday lives.

The woman with Darryl seemed asleep. Or maybe she was used to letting Darryl do the talking. I still don’t know if they were married, lovers, friends of the sort who might fly together to Vegas for the weekend and sleep in different beds. I don’t know. He was a large Black man from the Northeast, and she was a medium-sized white woman from the mid-South, but I’ve seen odder couples, including Milquetoast and his perhaps-kidnapped date, so thought nothing of it until we came to Trump Tower, standing just off the Strip in its gold-plated garishness, at which point Darryl coughed into his hand and said “Asshole” quite audibly.

The woman with Darryl sat up. “He’s not an asshole,” she said in her Southern accent, suddenly angry, or at least sounding so. “Best president we’ve ever had.”

Grandpa Joe, who had been half-turned to talk to Darryl behind him, suddenly looked straight ahead. Sarah was suddenly staring at her phone, and Oscar was suddenly concentrating hard on the road before us, only none of it was sudden, for I’ve seen the same reaction a hundred times: the looking at something else to avoid looking at the thing coming. “I voted for him once,” Tennessee woman said, “and I’ll vote for him again,” followed by an announcement that she was certainly wasn’t going to vote for “Killary,” as if HRC was running again in 2020.

Suddenly it was sitting in the shuttle with us, the thing we all wanted to escape: the late-night arguments on social media with uncles we’ve mostly lost track of, the news articles that send us to despair over our avocado toast or Count Chocula. The TVs turned to Fox or CNN in every waiting room in the country, the constant bombardment of ideas we don’t agree with from the other side. The demeaning of each other in our desire to see our country put on the right track, the constant disagreement of what that right track is, and how to get on it.

Darryl, however, was not deterred from his good mood. Perhaps he’d had practice deflecting her before, or perhaps he was only saying “asshole” to rile her up, knowing that here they held no common ground but could always agree to disagree. I don’t know their relationship. I don’t know how two people with wildly different views can spend time together, but maybe that’s a failing on my part. I still shake my head when I learn that one half of a couple likes Duke and the other half Carolina, wondering what keeps them still in love amid such high stakes as college basketball.

Whatever the reason, Darryl held up his hands in surrender. “All right, all right,” he said, “We ain’t going to talk about all that.”

Tennessee woman seemed to relax, but I could see in the set of her shoulders the conviction that Trump was indeed the best president we’ve ever had. She wanted to go on, to tell us how she had been wronged. “He’s the only president who cares about white people,” she said, but Darryl held up his hands again and she broke off.

I wanted her to continue, even though I was afraid of what she was going to say. It’s been my experience that people who use “Killary” are the ones who believe that Hillary Rodham Clinton, lawyer, former first lady, former senator and secretary of state, personally oversaw a child sex-trafficking ring out of the basement of a pizza place in D.C. that doesn’t have a basement. It’s been my experience that people who believe white people need extra attention from the president have their own problems in understanding the racism and bigotry others face every day, but perhaps I am stereotyping, so I wanted to hear what she had to say.

Then I wanted her, for all of us, to listen to Darryl, who wore a different color skin than hers, and who had, I’m sure, been wronged far worse in his past than she had. I wanted to ask trans-Sarah if she’d ever been assaulted, physically or verbally or simply by a pointed stare, for the way she carried herself. If Oscar had been told to speak English or to go back to where he came from. Maybe Milquetoast and his biracial girlfriend were quiet because too many times they’d been forced to answer for the universe drawing them together, all of which made me wonder how Tennessee woman felt about the divisiveness in this country, that conviction that everyone different from us politically is an enemy.

I wanted to know why Darryl thought Joe listened to country music, what idea of others we form from social media or those TVs tuned to one extreme or the other. I want to know what the news we hear every day does to us: white cops shooting Black men, and white women calling the cops on Black families barbecuing, and immigrant children caged, and rallies of white supremacists who look a lot like my college students screaming in the smoke from their torches. I had suspected Joe might tell Becca to speak English because he was old and white, because the rhetoric coming from men who look too much like me has led me to expect such behavior, even though it unnerves me endlessly to hear such generalizations about myself.

But we had no time for all that. We were on a shuttle from the airport to the hotel, where we would spend the next few days gambling or drinking or trying to understand why stories are important. I was too tired to answer. Darryl wanted a drink and Joe only wanted to enjoy his retirement, so he turned back around and said, “We came here to forget all that,” and the moment passed.

And perhaps that’s the beauty and sadness of Vegas, which is, of course, simply a reflection of ourselves: We often need to forget. The purple mountain majesties are too often brown and dull, and the buildings are too often gold-plated. The rest is just
light and noise and alcohol, a big-ass bloody Mary to help us with our hangover, a ham-

burger to ease the hunger we feel about all the things in the world we know we never will have.

That wanting too often leads to insecurity. Insecurity leads to the belief that someone else has more than we have, and that conviction too often leads to anger, too often aimed at those we see as different than we are, when really it’s the gold-plat-
ed towers pointing at the sky causing all our concerns.

Tennessee woman said nothing else, except to ask if it was okay to say “Black,” or if she had to say “African American,” as if the extra syllables were a burden she had to bear. There are a lot of things I could say about all this — about odd couples, the dream of getting rich in Vegas, the work Black people still have to do to educate white people, about getting along despite political differences. About listening to the stories of others.

And I don’t want these people on the shuttle to become characters in a story I’m writing about myself. I’m not writing about myself. I’m writing about the country outside this room where I write. I’m writing about that shuttle, that trans woman whose name wasn’t Sarah. Grandpa Joe with his weird shoes and air guitar. That couple, the Black and white one, with their political differences so vast it seems they could swallow Trump Tower whole. I’m writing about the decisions that drive our small shuttles from one place to the other, wondering how we ever live with ourselves.

But it is a story. It’s only ever going to be a story, one that starts with me. If I’ve done it correctly it will end with you, but it starts with me. It is a simple story, about the people I met on one single airport shuttle, but it can be magnified and multiplied a million-million times, from a microcosm of America into the whole real shining image. The decision we have to make to-
gether is whether it’s our story. Is this the story we want to read? And what is the story anyway? Is it a story about a mid-
dle-aged white man watching everything around him without acting? Is it a story of two people from opposite poles finding each other even amid the crumbling rhetoric of our country, allowing themselves space to exist together without tearing each other apart? Is America a story of diversity or difference? I feel a better person would know the answer to this, but I’m not sure where to find one or how to become one, so I keep stringing sentences together against the darkness I sometimes feel overwhelm-
ing me, like directions to some place we’ve never been before.

When we got off at the hotel Darryl shook hands with everyone. He said he hoped we all won a million dollars. The next morning I saw him walking through the hotel and we nodded at each other. He said “Hey, hey,” and I said “Hey, man,” and we went on our separate ways. Tennessee woman was with him, and she gave me a little half-wave and I gave one back. We were no longer on the shuttle but I think we have always been on the shuttle, looking out the windows at some place that isn’t what we expected, hoping it holds everything we dream of. I think we are always talking with people unlike us with the understand-
ing that we’ll soon go on our merry ways and we won’t have to deal with them any
longer, until the realization sets in that we will. And we should. Because every story is just as valuable as the one we’ve already written, the one in which we’re the heroes and everyone else is somewhere off to the side, unimportant. My biggest problem with politics is gold-plating. My anger at America is aimed toward people who tend to forget they once came here looking for freedom or fortune while others were displaced or dragged in chains.

In two days I would get back on the same shuttle driven by the same Hispanic man, only now there would be a stoned Black girl and a woman from Australia and a quiet Mexican 20-something, and we would all be too tired to contemplate politics or culture or why we so often disagree. We would speed past the Strip with hardly a second glance, then, in the airport traffic, would find ourselves going down a one-way street, unable to circle back around. When we finally reached where we were going, we would rush inside the airport. We would go back to our small homes and tell our loved ones all the sights and sounds of Sin City, leaving out the difficult parts: the homeless, dirty and hungry in the alleys and byways, the stoned teenagers and street performers, the middle-age men puking into garbage cans from too many big-ass bloody Marys.

But before the ride home and the flight and the reflection, someone in the crowd at the literary festival asked how I knew when I had material for an essay. How do you know when it’s an important enough event to write about? they asked, and I told them this story: about the shuttle and the interracial couples, about Grandpa Joe and Trump Tower and a divided America. I didn’t know where I was going, but I kept talking, hoping it would make sense at some point. I told them about the trans woman and the Hispanic man, about rap music and racism. About Darryl and Tennessee woman, with their differing views but ability to spend time together. About the Strip, which signifies some of our highest achievements and lowliest entertainment. The long low mountains ringing us around like bruises or barricades, the gilded towers and unimaginable greed, the prejudices we carry around without realizing it and the understanding we can come to if we try. And here’s the thing: They listened, like you did just now. As if I knew what I was saying. As if they had once heard how beautiful this place could be, and only needed to be reminded. ✦
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Nothing irks RJ Owens more than when some wise-ass stranger mentions his size. Sure, he stands a towering 6-foot-5, wears size 17 shoes, and recently tipped the scales at 475 pounds — a quarter of a ton. Indeed, he has made that largeness his calling card: For years he’s worked as an actor, magician, and comedian, most recently playing the role of the cuddly Bebe François in Cirque du Soleil’s long-running Mystère at TI. His girth has broken chairs and collapsed tables.

On the street, you can’t miss him with his shaved head and denim overalls. But walk up and call him big man, big guy, or big fella, with an emphasis on big, and see what happens. “It’s like I’ve never...
heard that before,” he sighs. “Usually, I’ll respond with ‘Hey, little dude,’ or just ‘Hey, tiny.’” But he reserves a special zinger for those who suggest that he lose some weight. “I’ll say, ‘My grandfather was as large as me, smoked five cigars a day, and every night before he went to bed ate a piece of pie, with some wine and a glass or bourbon. And you want to know his secret to longevity? He minded his own business.’”

For his part, Owens describes himself as “a man of a certain size.”

Still, at age 50, he’s grown weary of the clichés about his weight, the implication that he lacks self-control and suffers personal hygiene issues. Actually, unlike some of his larger-sized brethren, he’s agile and even graceful, can hold his palms to the floor and, friends say, can shred a dance floor. He’s a good cook and considers the kitchen his therapy.

None of that was why, in July, Owens made a life-changing call: to lose a bunch of that weight by undergoing bariatric surgery — reducing his upper stomach from the size of a woman’s shoulder bag to a small, banana-like pouch. The procedure is designed to reduce the amount of food he can eat and quell his appetite. This is, he says, a “deep soul search.”

(He’s chronicling this provocative new personal adventure in his podcast, Man of a Certain Size, available at manofacertainsize.com, which he calls “a fat guy’s journey to and through bariatric surgery.”)

No, Owens decided to change after realizing one day that his size could kill him.

Months ago, he called Adam Sachs, his best friend, fellow stage performer, and a lawyer, with a question: Should he take advantage of his employer’s offer to match his 401(k) contributions, sacrificing his buying power in the short run to pave the way for a more lucrative retirement starting at age 62.

Sachs was blunt.

“I asked him, ‘Are you going to be around to get that money?’” Sachs says. “I guess it hit him
more than I thought it would. But he is a big man, and that’s not good for his heart. All of his friends worry about him.”

In the weeks before his mid-July procedure, Owens pondered the pros and cons of his elective surgery, which he knew would bring about a radical change of life and, at least in the beginning, much physical discomfort.

He also wondered whether becoming a man of a smaller size would dramatically alter the comic persona of a performer who has always been big. “I’m committing career suicide,” he joked back then.

But for Owens, the situation brings up a more profound question: Is fat funny? As he acknowledges on his website, the answer isn’t immediately obvious. “For my entire adult life I have been an entertainer. I have used my size in every comedic way possible,” he writes. “I’m an actor, magician, and Cirque du Soleil clown. My size has played an incredible role in each of these professions. Herein lies the question: Does Fat equal Funny? Is it my crutch or my cement clown shoes?”

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ROBERT JEROME OWENS grew up in Greenfield, California. His father was a school principal; his mother ran a clerical staff at Soledad Prison. By age 14, he was already 6 foot-5 and weighed 280 pounds. He attracted eyeballs and even as a kid felt comfortable before a crowd.

Not all the attention was welcome. He recalls waiting in line at the grocery store when a boy turned around and gaped.

“Daddy, that man is fat!”

“Son, you don’t say those things,” his father said.

Then Owens’ pager went off, and he moved to grab it.

“Watch out, Daddy!” the boy yelled. “He’s backing up!”

As a youth, Owens’ first acting role was playing a character that was “big as a house, dumb as a fencepost, and honest as the day is long.” Later, he worked at a theater company in Salinas, California, mostly as a technician and stagehand, until, as he writes on his website, “a director of one of the shows shouted out … ‘Who’s the fat kid? Gimme the FAT KID!’ The rest is, as they say, history.”

He developed his passion for the kitchen when he was 13 and his parents divorced. After 29 years of marriage, his mother said she was done with cooking. So Owens began tuning into PBS cooking shows and a near-300-pound Julia Child was born.

Wherever Owens went, his weight followed. Still, he describes himself as “a graceful fat man. I am exactly like every other human,” he says. “I just need a special office chair to support my weight. Plastic lawn chairs don’t stand up to me at all.”

In 2012, Owens broke a series of chairs while touring with a production in Europe, until the cast began keeping a running tab that pitted “chairs versus RJ.” At one stop in Austria, a manager found one up to the task,
an aluminum beast with no arms. He stole it. Problem solved for the rest of the tour.

On Christmas Eve of that year, Cirque du Soleil cast Owens as Bebe François, the bonneted clown whose innocent, toddler-like antics quickly became a crowd favorite, though it seems not everyone approves. “Critics ask, ‘What’s the deal with the big fat baby?’” he says. “There’s something about size that some people find offensive.”

Not all the characters’ laughs were planned. In one show, Owens leapt atop a large rubber ball, which exploded under his weight, prompting him to face-plant on the stage floor. The crowd roared. Later, his manager asked, “Can you make that happen every night?”

The weight mishaps came offstage, as well. Sachs recalls a night he and Owens went to a Thai restaurant for dinner. The place was empty, but a waitress told the pair they’d have to wait a half-hour. “She didn’t want RJ there. She wanted us to leave,” Sachs says. “I could tell RJ was upset. He said, ‘This happens to me all the time. People think I’m lazy, that I have no self-control.’”

Owens is anything but lazy. He’s a connoisseur who makes his own bourbon, roasts his own coffee, cures his own sausages, and makes ice cream. “I’m a foodie. I love food, but I am not an overeater,” he says. “People would be gobsmacked to know I eat little.” Part of the problem is when he eats. “I never eat before shows, so 80 percent of my meals come after 11 p.m.”

As he looked into bariatric surgery, Owens talked to dozens of people. What he learned scared him. For the first three months, he would be restricted to an all-liquid diet, and after that soft foods only, servings that amount to half-a-cup in size. He read about the “minefield” of things that can go wrong, such as busted sutures and a reaction known as “dumping syndrome,” when the body struggles with too much starch or sugar. Unable to break the substances down, the stomach dumps it into the intestines, causing havoc.

“You make two commitments with this surgery,” Owens says. “To completely change your habits” — pack-a-day cigarette habit is out the window — “and to see a doctor once a month for the rest of your life.”

And Owens knows this about himself: He’s vain. He’s going to work with a trainer. “I hope to tone,” he says. “Any leftover fat flaps are going to be removed, let me tell you.”

“For RJ, it’s like stepping into the void in the hopes he’ll live longer,” says friend
Brett Alters. “It’s going to be a true evolution, a rebirth. But I tell him, ‘You’re an outlier, a 6-foot-5 bald dude. You’ll find your own new image, your own new weirdness.’

But will he be as funny when he’s not as fat? “It’s a loaded question,” Owens says. “Is it because of my size that I’m where I am today?” Coworkers who’d heard of his surgery asked: Who’s going to play Bebe François? His bosses assure him that the role will still be his, even if he has to wear padding.

Owens can’t wait to try out the new him. He didn’t get fat in order to be funny, he says. “I developed my sense of humor before I developed my size. My weight isn’t funny. I have to find the funny in situations.”

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THE MOMENT HE woke up from his surgery, Owens didn’t feel very funny. He was groggy and in pain. He hurt all over. “Recovery is weird,” he says.

Johnny Miles, a fellow Cirque du Soleil performer, drove Owens to and from the hospital. “He was in better spirits when I picked him up than when I dropped him off,” he recalls. “On the way home, he asked if I wanted to stop and get breakfast someplace. That’s RJ. He’d give you the shirt off his back. Only after the surgery it won’t be as big.”

Sachs also gave Owens a couple of Face-Time calls at the hospital.

“I learned that having a bunch of plastic tubes stuck up his nose is not a good look for RJ. Neither are hospital gowns,” he says. “But a few hours later, he looked great.”

And while surgeons may have removed a large part of his stomach, they left his humor intact. “One day, I thought I saw my penis,” he says of his recovery, “but it turned out to be my big toe.”

By mid-August, he had lost 63 pounds. He finally put aside his sweats and rummaged in his closet for pants he hadn’t worn in years. He found a pair of jeans that almost fit him perfectly, except for a fistful of space at his waist. “I’m a drop-your-pants kind of clown,” he says. “But now my pants drop themselves.”

Now, every day brings a different experience, like Bebe François encountering a whole new world. While friends are encouraging, they know that he will have to quit cold-turkey much of what once defined his life: cigarettes, whiskey, rich foods.

He’s back in the kitchen, too, with a new attitude he might not have recognized a few years ago: “It’s amazing what a full meal a bowl of miso soup with a bit of tofu can be.” In his downtime, he’s playing with the idea of writing a cookbook showing post-op bariatric patients that they can still love food, just less of it. He’s going to call it A Meal of a Certain Size. ✦

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How’s your new normal coming along? *Listens and nods in glum sympathy* Well, good news: It’s just been enlivened by a roster of safe, sane, and socially distanced fall happenings that prove Las Vegas is a master at adaptation. Here you’ll find drive-by theater, radio read-alongs, YouTube opera, Zoom poetry, and in-person art exhibits with plenty of elbow room. Mask up, wash them germy mitts, and enjoy your 2020 fall culture guide.
**Visual Art**

**This Exhibit Is Long Overdue**

Through Nov. 29/In-Person

Libraries are many things — research centers, gathering places, repositories of cultural memory, somewhere to play **Minecraft** for free. In **Unshelved**, UNLV Fine Art MFA candidates investigate the roles libraries play and consider imaginative possibilities in painting, drawing, sculpture, and other forms. (AK) **Sahara West Library, 702-360-8000**

**Opera**

**Oh, Go Ahead. Make Us Miss It Even More**

Ongoing / Online

So dedicated to the production of *The Magic Flute* were Opera Las Vegas artists, so disappointed by the cancellation of the in-person performance, that they produced a series of videos showcasing the talents audiences would have witnessed in person if they’d had the chance. Installments in the YouTube collection, titled *The Magic Flute: What Would Have Been*, range from black gown-clad soloists belting out arias alone onstage (except for their piano accompanists), to the reimagined character of Tamino in COVID-era isolation connecting with his true love through Bumble. It’s a uniquely online sampling of the cast’s creativity that works to whet the appetite for the coming live season … whenever that may be. (HK) **free, youtube.com (search “Opera Las Vegas”)**

**Theater Talk**

**Funny You Should Ask...**

**Sept. 3-4/Online**

The Utah Shakespeare Festival canned its 2020 season, but fans who can’t wait for June to start barding it up can visit the Virtual Seminar Grove for a series of play and production seminars. The final two installments are an extra-meta theater critic’s criticism of current theater criticism and an engineer’s nerd-out on lighting design. In “I’m Not Throwin’ Away My Shot” on September 3, University of Hartford professor Frank Rizzo asks what the post-*Hamilton* future of theater commentary will look like. Designer Donna Ruzika mixes creativity with how-to and memoir in *Let There Be Light* on September 4. Those two seminars can be seen on the festival’s Facebook page, and the entire suite of this summer’s seminars is available on the festival’s website. (HK) **$20-75, lvlt.org**

**Reading**

**This Is Your Brain on Brain**

**Nov. 4/Online**

We’ve come a long way in reducing the stigma surrounding mental-health issues, but myths and misconceptions die hard. Novelist and essayist **Esmé Weijun Wang** takes them on with a writer’s sensitivity and researcher’s analytical eye. Her essay collection, *The Collected Schizophrenias*, chronicles her own diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder, but also dives into the complexities and nuances of diagnosis itself, as well as the clinical, societal, and ethical dimensions of how we think about mental illness. In this live virtual event, Wang will read from her collection and discuss mental health and chronic illness in the age of COVID-19. (AK) **7p, blackmountaininstitute.org/live-experiences**

**Radio**

**Let’s Be Alone Together**

**Sept. 20**

Raise your hand if you’ve spent most of lockdown binge-watching *Floor Is Lava* while eating peanut butter for dinner. Just me? Oh. Anyway, mad credit to Black Mountain Institute for offering cerebral entertainment that courageously leans into this fraught pandemic era:
Big doings at UNLV’s Barrick Museum — in a supple response to both COVID-19 and the ongoing movement toward racial justice, the Barrick has reformatted its operations. Subdividing its large space into smaller exhibit areas will make more work available to more people in socially distanced circumstances, and allow the museum to focus more on local artists at a time of reduced resources. A year-long programming partnership with the Las Vegas Womxn of Color Arts Festival will highlight work we don’t see enough of in galleries. Thus the festival is sponsoring Ashley Hairston Doughty: Kept to Myself, available in the center gallery through October 9. This is a solo show by designer and UNLV professor Doughty uses video, illustration, fiber art, text, and more, to explore the dilemmas of being a Black woman in contemporary society. Meanwhile, with the exhibit Excerpts, the Barrick offers some 35 deep cuts from its various collections — recent acquisitions, pieces from the heralded Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection, all the way back to works gathered by the Las Vegas Art Museum. “This,” according to the museum, “is the first time a single major exhibition will feature works from every area of the Barrick in dialogue with one another.” Look up the list of artists involved; count how many you’re familiar with; get excited. (Through December 18.) Yerman: Peaks and Valleys features Ryan Brunty’s Yerman the Sad Yeti, which he devised eight years ago as a way to explore his own clinical depression and advocate for mental health awareness. (Through October 9.) Being a body in a landscape — that’s the unifying idea behind Still Here Now, an eight-artist group show featuring Linda Alterwitz, Chris Bauder, Elaine Parks, Brent Sommerhauser and more. In addition, the Barrick is building out a video library. (SD) unlv.edu/barrickmuseum
In July, BMI launched Severance Radio, an on-air book club discussing Ling Ma’s satirical, dystopian novel Severance with a revolving roster of guests from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. In this episode, “On Solitude,” Desert Companion’s own Senior Staff Writer Heidi Kyser interviews CSN professor Shelley Kelley and UNLV assistant professor Natalie Pennington about what solitude means in the current moment, and what the long-term effects of solitary living amid a pandemic might be. (AK) 7p, KUNV 91.5 FM; stream live at kunv.org/live

Can I Just Give Up? (No.)
But I Want to. (No!)

Dec. 2/Virtual
This is sure to be a heart-healthy session for writers, artists, and people who love writing and art, as two great essayists get at the fundamental creative question of right now: “How do we keep writing when…?” With the world’s dashboard blinking with so many warning lights, what good are words, stories, art? What can they even do? In “Launch Your Laptop Into the Sun,” the sagacious and funny Samantha Irby (Wow, No Thank You) and the passionate and wise Megan Stielstra (The Wrong Way to Save Your Life) will help us all figure out why it’s still worth doing. I hope! Counting on you! (SD) 5p, RSVP required, blackmountaininstitute.org

As American As You Get

Sept. 23-Oct. 1/Online
Try this for some much-needed perspective: “Earth who does not know time is patient.” That’s a line from the poem, “Let There Be No Regrets” in the forthcoming collection An American Sunrise, by Joy Harjo, a native of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and U.S. poet laureate. The nonprofit Poetry Promise is Zooming Harjo to Southern Nevada and, working with Clark County and the Las Vegas Jewish Film Festival, has put together a raft of online events around her appearance. The series includes a viewing of the documentary Unspoken: America’s Native American Boarding Schools, followed by a film discussion with the country’s second Native American state supreme court justice and a leading genocide scholar; a reading of selections from An American Sunrise by Harjo; and a book discussion between Harjo and author Terry Tempest Williams. (HK) free, poetrypromise.org/joyharjo.com
American and African diaspora studies; and Gloria Browne-Marshall, a professor of constitutional law at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. They’ll track the history of policing from 19th century slave patrols through the War on Drugs, and into the 21st century. The event is sold out but will be available virtually starting at 7p. The October 14 panel is “The Push for Change: Legislative Pathways to Police Reform.”

Look for Nevada Attorney General Aaron Ford; policing consultant Roberto Villaseñor; Wesley Juhl of the Nevada ACLU; and Nevada Assemblyman Tom Roberts. They’ll “assess proposed and recently enacted reforms designed to overhaul police policies and practices.” Begins at 7p. Admission is free with museum admission ($16.95); it will also be available virtually.

( Те ат е r)

ROMANCE UNDER THE STARS
SEPT. 24–OCT. 11 / IN-PERSON
Playwright Adam Szymkowicz had enough time in COVID-19 isolation to (a) figure out indoor theater wasn’t coming back any time soon; (b) write a play about it; and (c) nail down an outdoor location where it can actually, legally be performed. (How do you feel about your three-and-a-half pages of Netflix pilot now?) Directed by Majestic Repertory Theatre’s Troy Heard, the interactive romantic comedy is quintessentially 2020 — conceived as a drive-in performance for two actors living together and titled ... you guessed it ... The Parking Lot.

(HK) $50, The Funk Yard Parking Lot behind Majestic Repertory Theatre, 1217 S. Main Street, majesticrepertory.com

GARDENING
WINTER IS COMING, ON MANY LEVELS
SEPT. 27/IN-PERSON
What crops should you grow this winter besides the metastatic despair spreading through your soul like a creeping spectral frost? Vanessa Portillo has the answer! She’s the executive director of the Garden Farms Foundation, and she’ll discuss ideal winter crops to

VISUAL ART

THE CREATURES ARE COMING FROM INSIDE YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS!
THROUGH NOV. 7 / IN-PERSON
As Kd Matheson wanders the local landscape, he sometimes lets his imagination gene-splice a contemporary lizard or desert bird with a prehistoric water monster that might’ve swum the seas that once covered this land. Then, tapping into a collective subconscious, he’ll imbue that hybrid creature with a deep, mythical ... presence ... and an almost-human sentience. And that’s just one way that he comes up with the paintings, sculptures, and masks that are grouped creatively — better yet, engulfingly — in the huge exhibit Immersion/Diversion.

(SD) Core Contemporary, 900 Karen Ave. #D222, corecontemporary.com
grow in the Vegas desert, as well as recommend plants that do well in small spaces and containers. In a touching gesture of hope for the future, free seed packs will be given to all attendees.

(Conversation)

Poetic Justice

NOV. 16/ONLINE

In her latest collection, Just Us, poet Claudia Rankine presents samples of conversations she’s had with random white male strangers, 911 call transcripts, and startling statistics to frame racism in its less visible — but no less vicious — manifestations. With The Believer poetry editor Jericho Brown, she’ll discuss race in America and the role of literature in moving this difficult but crucial conversation forward. (AK) 5p, blackmountaininstitute.org/live-experiences

(Visual Art)

THE APOCALYPTIC CONTENT WE ARE HERE FOR

THROUGH OCT. 31/IN-PERSON

Late last year, in what would become a grimly prophetic discussion, artists associated with the landmark North Las Vegas gallery Left of Center began talking about the Book of Revelation. You know: The four horsemen, the *prophecy points unlocked* plagues. Now, the hoofbeats and the disease are upon us, and so is Revelations 6, the group show that grew from those talks. The artists involved: Dayo Adelaja, Dyron Boyd, Harold Bradford, Tamara Carter, Jeannie Earhart, Adolfo Gonzalez, Rita Maroun, David Murry, and Jack Wilson. It promises to be a set of vivid, unsettling visions, in the best way possible. (SD) 2207 W. Gowan Road, leftofcenterart.org
ringleader herself, Diane Bush. The show will end with a November 2 Election Eve reception that could be a party — or a funeral. (SD) 1300 S. Main St. #110, priscillafowler.com

VISUAL ART
EVERYONE COUNTS
OCT. 1-DEC. 20/IN-PERSON
The census seems like a good idea on paper: counting our people to inform the decisions we make about policies and resources. But when artist Tiffany Lin puts it on paper, the census becomes fraught with complexity: What does it mean to be counted, categorized, catalogued? Her exhibit 23 VIEWS questions the purported objectivity of the census as it relates to history, race, and immigration, in cryptic drawings that are as much a form of social practice as they are social commentary. (AK) Spring Valley Library, 702-507-3820, tlinart.com

(Books)
Return to Gilead
OCT. 2/ONLINE
Two words that should have you inputting the above date on your e-calendar: Marilynne Robinson. The author of the classic novels Gilead, Home, and Lila will be talking about Jack, her fourth novel set in Gilead, Iowa (to be published September 29). Lovers of compelling fiction are already clearing the date. Presented by Black Mountain Institute. (SD) 5p, blackmountaininstitute.org

(Photography)
The Sights of Those Sounds
SEPT. 17-NOV. 17/IN-PERSON
Emily Matview loves going to concerts (remember those? #hadto), but you’re more likely to find her studying good angles stageside than shouting along with the chorus. That’s because she’s a diehard concert photographer, and in this exhibit, Explosion of Silence, you’ll get a glimpse of the propulsive energy of the communal musical experience that is a live show. Pictured: local band Be Like Max. (AK) Whitney Library, 702-507-4010
THEATER

DOING THE RIGHT THING
OCTOBER 15-24 / IN-PERSON
Like all theater companies, the Lab LV is struggling to comply with state pandemic orders regarding live performances while continuing to exist. Its solution? An outdoor, by-appointment viewing for a limited number of guests wearing masks and sitting six feet apart. If that sounds like a lot of trouble, rest assured the show itself will be worth it. The company’s Sabrina Cofield directs Antoinette Nwandu’s Pass Over, a drama that asks its audience to consider the value of ordinary young Black men’s lives.
(HK) Reservation information at 857-600-2753, thelablv.org

VISUAL ART

Sea Changes
SEPT. 22-NOV. 22/IN-PERSON
I could go on and on about artist Shinoid’s paintings, and how they’re these oozily compelling amorphous whorls of psychedelic mystique and dynamic whimsy, but I’ll hand the mic to Shinoid’s disarmingly poetic artist’s statement, which captures both her approach and this exhibit, Ocean of Stories, so well: “I like beautiful but strange things, like the small planktons floating in the water or the filaments of mushrooms extending miles underground. I often gaze into my drifting mind to discover hidden dreams and symbols.” Exactly! (AK) East Las Vegas Library, shinoid.com

(Visual Art)

FALL FOR THIS ART THIS FALL
OCT. 6-JAN. 3/IN-PERSON
Operating since 1996, the Las Vegas Artists’ Guild has long been a lively community hub for some of Vegas’ most enthusiastic and prolific artists, and its Juried Fall Show is the best event for catching up with its artists.

(Books)

WANNA GO CLUBBIN’? BOOK CLUBBING!
OCT. 25/IN-PERSON
From one histrionically despondent quar-an-sloth who hasn’t changed his Slanket for a week to another, maybe it’s time to get off the couch and into some classic literature for a tonic dose of them eternal human verities! The Centennial Hills Library has you covered (but not with a Slanket!) with its Classic Book Club. Call ahead to find out what book they’re discussing, though ngl, it’d be funny if everyone who showed up read a different book. Itself a literary metaphor for the utterly confounding Babel of these crazy times! Why do I go there? Also takes place Nov. 22. (AK) 3p, Centennial Hills Library, 702-507-6107

Story Corps

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Fall 2020
nevadapublicradio.org

JUSTICE TAKES ITS TIME
SEPT. 30/ONLINE AND IN-PERSON
The case of Frank LaPena defies easy summary in a blurb. Convicted, on flimsy evidence, of being involved in the 1974 murder of Las Vegas socialite Hilda Krause, he spent decades in prison proclaiming his innocence. (He served more time than the plea-bargaining felon who admitted to the actual killing.) At one point, released while awaiting a retrial, he refused an offer to remain free if he’d only plead guilty. He lost the retrial. He finally got out of prison in 2005 and was fully exonerated last year. In the Mob Museum program titled “Slow Justice,” LaPena recounts his story. In-person event is free with museum admission ($16.95 for locals). (SD) 7p, 300 Stewart Ave., themob-museum.org

THE MANY VISIONS OF JUSTICE
OCT. 20/ONLINE
Following the spring and summer of American discontent, the UNLV Department of Art issued a call for art submissions on the theme of #Justice. It makes sense: From George Floyd protests to trans rights; from pandemic inequality to monument topplings, many believe it’s time for the moral arc of the universe to start bending more urgently toward justice. Can art play a role? Should it? These are some of the concerns to look for when the juried exhibit goes live. (SD) unlv.edu

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During these difficult times, Touro University Nevada wants to thank first responders, medical providers, educators, and everyone who is doing their part to keep our communities safe and healthy.
In a moment when the culture is bunkered down, these six creatives are using new methods — or stubbornly rehabbing old ones — to provoke, connect, and inspire.
ONES TO WATCH 2020

HAILEE SMITH
dancer
LAS VEGAS ACADEMY

by HEIDI KYSER

KODAK EPP 6005

EPP

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2020
DESSERT COMPANION

DESERTCOMPANION.VEGAS
in a dance studio at the Charleston Heights Arts Center one hot August morning, Hailee Smith and other members of the Contemporary West Dance Theatre spent three-quarters of an hour warming up before actually dancing. Sweat streamed from people’s heads onto the parquet as they bent forward to stretch. Far from exhausted by the lengthy conditioning, however, Smith came alive as she began crossing the room diagonally with the other dancers, two-by-two, repeating combos that company rehearsal director Avree Walker had shown them.

Smith masters the necessary moves — torso erect, lifted leg nearly vertical, toes pointed, and so on; the company wouldn’t have taken her on, even as the apprentice she is, otherwise. But what’s remarkable about her style is how present she is. Each movement appears deliberate, but not stiff. She’s focused, yet still relaxed. As other dancers chat distractedly, or stare obsessively at themselves in the mirror, Smith is just 100 percent … dancing.

“Hailee is affectionately known by her peers and mentors as ‘the beast,’ and it’s meant with so much love and honor to her work ethic,” Walker says. “She’s like dynamite. Once that fuse is lit, the light and explosion don’t stop. She’s such a generous artist with her gift.”

He’s been coaching and mentoring Smith since her first class, and, as a teacher at Las Vegas Academy, where she’s a senior this year, he still does. It hasn’t been that long, though. In dancer years, Smith didn’t begin until middle age — 10 years old.

“I was aware that I was older than most of the people in the levels of class I was taking, but it didn’t faze me, because I found a passion for it,” she says.

As a third grader at the Gilbert Academy of Creative Arts magnet school, Smith first focused on acting, which included a dance requirement. After taking that class, she switched tracks. She’d found her calling.

And she made up for lost time. In fifth grade, she joined a before-school program run by Nevada Ballet Theatre called Future Dance. Her performance there earned her a scholarship to attend a program of the same name at Nevada Ballet Theatre, where she studied for six years.

The summer after fifth grade, Smith also attended her first of many dance camps at the West Las Vegas Arts Center, which would prove to be pivotal to her dance career.

“Being there, I haven’t just learned dance technique and acting and drumming,” Smith says. “I’ve learned discipline and how to be a better person. Marcia Robinson, the head of the center, has always instilled in me ‘excellence without excuse.’ That’s her motto. She taught me how to always stay on my toes, stand in the front, be the person asking questions, so I know what’s ahead before the next person does.”

The center was also where Smith first studied with Walker, and where she met another source of inspiration, Bernard Gaddis, founder of Contemporary West, which is the Charleston Heights Arts Center’s resident company. The connections and experiences she’s made and had at the West Las Vegas center have helped to define her as a contemporary/modern dancer and led her to gigs with Cirque du Soleil’s Michael Jackson ONE and Mystère.

“I like to flow through movement as well as hit it,” Smith says. “I have a very strong physique, so I like to move fast through movements and make sure things are placed. I don’t like to just move and not know where I’m going.”

Where she’s going next is a career in dance. After graduation, she plans to attend college — she has her list of preferred schools narrowed down to four — and double-major in dance and physical therapy. After that, she hopes to join the Dallas Black Dance Theatre.
the pandemic forced many artists to try new things, and Dulce Valencia is no exception. When producing her play became impossible, she adapted it as a podcast drama. When lockdown anxiety got to be too much, she picked up a brush and began painting. But in both cases, the embrace of the new brought her in contact with a sense of history and heritage: Her reimagined podcast saga recalls the gripping radionovelas that were popular growing up in her village of Zihuatanejo in Mexico; her vibrant paintings find a focus in the iconic image of a strong woman inspired by her mother. In adjusting to a chaotic present, Valencia found new paths to explore her past.

“The impulse to paint comes when I’m at a place where just I need a release, and I need to not think about things,” the 24-year-old artist and immigration activist explains. “Painting is my form of meditation.” What began as stress relief evolved into a kind of ritual tribute as she began producing a series of colorful, stylized portraits of a woman wreathed in a swirl of seasonal flowers and plants. “Subconsciously, the same person kept coming to me, and it was a very still female face, a contrast to the chaos. Throughout my entire life, I’ve been surrounded by strong females, so when I paint, I want to paint my reality, and that’s women being strong and bold.” Women such as Valencia’s mother, Maria Sanchez,
who left Zihuatanejo for Las Vegas in 2007, bringing along 12-year-old Valencia and her two siblings to build a new life.

The process of building that new life in Las Vegas supplied Valencia with plentiful raw material for her other passion, writing. Her five-play cycle aims to explore the immigrant experience of several women over several generations, based largely on her own family’s experience. But before she put pen to paper, Valencia had to get through some creative blocks.

“I used to feel a lot of pressure in representing the immigrant experience, and that held me back for quite a bit,” she says. “But then I realized I’m never going to be able to capture the complete immigrant experience, but I can capture my story and what my experience was, and that will resonate with someone who can then write a different part, and then slowly we’ll have these pieces that complete the puzzle.”

Valencia is currently developing her first play in the cycle, *The Disappearance of Cristobal Suarez*, into a 14-episode podcast, and hopes to complete it by the end of the year. That’s also when she’ll graduate from UNLV with a bachelor’s degree in theater studies. After that, she’s considering grad school in New York, depending on how abnormal the new normal is. But amid the uncertainty, she says she won’t stop working to realize her vision, a lesson learned from one of her inspirations, *Hamilton* creator and star Lin-Manuel Miranda. Earlier this year, Dulce appeared in an episode of the Apple TV+ docuseries, *Dear…*, in which she talked about how Miranda as a professional role model galvanized her commitment to both art and activism.

“Something he said once was, ‘Nobody’s ever going to write your perfect show, so you have to do it yourself,’” she says. “I would always get a little frustrated with the roles I saw out there or the plays I saw being produced. So, I was like, no one’s going to write my perfect show. So let me try. And I started writing.”
tsvetelina  Stefanova is well-known in Boulder City and music circles from her and her husband, James Adams’, rock band Same Sex Mary and their promotional company, Bad Moon Booking, which devotes special attention to cultural events and festivals in the small town to Las Vegas’ south. But it’s Stefanova’s latest gig, as executive director of the Dam Short Film Festival, that landed her on this list. She became festival director in January, and she’s already made a couple interesting changes. Considering her energy and enthusiasm for promoting the arts, they’re likely the first of many.

“I truly believe in the greatness of everything I put my time into,” she says, “especially the film festival. It’s like lightning in a bottle. It’s very special.”

Before I get to those changes, a short résumé is in order: Stefanova moved to the U.S. from Bulgaria in 1996. She went to Las Vegas Academy of the Arts as a piano major but switched to guitar her junior year and art portfolio as a senior. She graduated from Northern Arizona University in 2009 with a bachelor’s degree in biology, chemistry minor, and moved back to Southern Nevada, where she and Adams decided to give the rock-and-roll thing a try while they were still young. The band’s DIY spirit led to Bad Moon Booking, whose concert promotion business led to organizing festivals, such as Life Is Shit. For that event, Stefanova and Adams solicited art, poetry, and prose based on the LIS theme and used it to produce zines.
A few trends emerge from this history: Stefanova’s artistic eclecticism, a contact list spanning multiple cultural fields, the desire to share good finds with a broader audience, and a strong maker ethic.

“When you’re in an indie band, you do everything yourself, so you realize the things you’re good at,” she said. “I just kind of took on the management and marketing role.”

Thus, when the Dam Short Film Festival, for which she’d been volunteering since her return to the Vegas Valley, needed a social media manager, Stefanova was the obvious choice. She went from that to the board of directors, where she headed development, to her current role as executive director.

Her innovations along the way reflect her knack for bringing in new audiences. In 2017, she floated the idea of a music video showcase, which other organizers said they’d tried unsuccessfully in the past. Using her music-world cred, Stefanova was able to grow it from a pre-festival highlight into one of the festival’s permanent judged categories, with abundant submissions, since 2018. Last year, drawing on her experience with the Life Is Shit zine, she added a festival poster art contest. Graphic artists submit their original poster designs which hang in public for a viewing — for instance, at the grand opening of the Boulder City Co. Store during the town’s annual wine walk last year — and are judged for a grand prize of $500. All designers earn festival tickets, and the posters go on to adorn the directors lounge.

“I love that there’s so much creativity to marketing,” Stefanova says. “Las Vegas is a small town. It really is. In our arts community, we all need to support each other. Bringing arts together — things like poster art and independent film — is a great way to put the film festival on the radar of other artists who might not have thought about going to it otherwise.”

The 2021 festival is scheduled February 11-15, but Stefanova doesn’t know yet whether it’ll take place in its traditional format at the Historic Boulder Theatre, be a live-online hybrid event, or switch to an outdoor format such as a popup drive-in. For now, the team is focusing on the strengths that have earned the festival international praise. There will plenty of time in the future, Stefanova says, for more innovations.
so, yeah, poetry jumped onto the web with everything else, going from the coffeehouse to Instagram at COVID-19 miles per hour. Time to adapt. Zoom readings, selfie videos. In many cases, that transition wasn’t so bad; some poetry works just fine in the digital void between reader and listener. But slam poetry? That’s an art form in which, if you’re gonna do it like a boss, you typically want to embody your poetry, to engage it with your physical self, and that’s best done in the live energy flux between performer and audience.

Here’s Ashley Vargas — stage name: Ms. AyeVee — recalling her very first slam outing, in a 2016 Battleborn Slam event at The Beat: “I felt so alive. It felt so full of passion. And the people in the audience, they were so into it — they were cheering, giving you snaps, clapping. It was the first time in a long time I had one of those moments: ‘Oh, my gosh, this is what I’m supposed to be doing. Aha!’”

Sounds amazing, a sweet rush of validation. How’s that gonna work online?

It’s not a question of merely idle aesthetic interest to Vargas, who coordinates Beyond the Neon, a monthly three-round slam competition on Instagram under the auspices of the local nonprofit Poetry Promise. She knows firsthand the value of that sense of community. In her late 20s, after writing poems since about age 8, many of them exploring her less-than-idyllic childhood, she signed up for her first poetry reading. Her words and stories, she says — “my truth” — needed to get out. “I had never even dreamed that I would say these poems aloud — let alone on microphones in rooms full of people.” That first one wasn’t easy, what with her nerves and all. She read from a sheet, “hiding behind my paper a little,” she recalls. And quickly left when she got offstage. “I was so nervous.”
Vargas rebounded quickly, taking third place in that first Battleborn slam event. And found herself amid a supportive community that valued her poems about family, pain, and finding strength. She joined the Battleborn team in 2016, traveled to out-of-state contests, got noticed by Def Poetry, became a mainstay in the FreeVerbLV slam team, and this year saw it all skid to a pandemic halt.

Which brings us to Instagram: “How,” she asks, “can we revolutionize what’s happening while still staying true to the mission of sharing stories, transparency, connection with our own community now that we’re online?” Her one-word answer: freedom. With its first two rounds comprising video submissions, Beyond the Neon’s competitors can present their work any way they like. From lo-fi cellphone footage to a real production with a director and everything. Vargas recalls a local poet who added a charged visual urgency to her poem about reproductive rights by filming herself reciting it in front of Las Vegas City Hall.

This has turned out to be the compensatory upside of being cut off from your live audience. Poets are now free to imagine visual dimensions to work they once regarded primarily in literary and performance terms. This has upped the level of creativity, fostered collaborations with other artists, and added a new verve to what might’ve been a fairly typical online event.

“Ashley has been leading the hottest new slam scene,” says Bruce Isaacson of Poetry Promise, “an Instagram Slam, a wham-bam-Vegas-video-slam. Real poetry’s in the streets, in the lives of real people struggling. Ashley’s giving them a place to dream.”

“It’s so beautiful to see, and it’s unexpected,” Vargas says. “When I created Beyond the Neon, I didn’t anticipate it. The poets really brought that.”

Aha!
if there’s never a good time to take an impetuous risk (like opening an art gallery), it follows that there’s never a truly bad time, either (like during a global pandemic). So artists Holly Lay and Homero Hidalgo have opened an art gallery during a global pandemic. “It’s always going to be hard, with or without (COVID-19),” Lay says. “So let’s do it.”

And do it they did, thanks in some measure to stubborn determination, and in some other measure to a good deal on a spot in New Orleans Square: Available Space Art Projects opened in July with a show by Krystal Ramirez. Perhaps here is where we should clarify our terms: While “art gallery” may be a not-inaccurate shorthand, what ASAP really is is a “project space,” which amounts to a sense of exuberant permission expressed as square footage. Here, artists are encouraged to experiment, to workshop their still-gestating ideas, to test the viability of works in progress during weeklong pop-up shows, in hopes the feedback will clarify their fine-tuning. Situated in the interzone between the messy privacy of the studio and the polished gestalt of a traditional gallery, Available Space aims to facilitate the sort of try, fail, fail-better dynamic that, in theory, will keep the arts scene fermenting with new ideas.
“The artist is in charge of everything (during an exhibit),” Hidalgo says. Other than selecting the artists, who might be at any point on the career spectrum, from emerging to established, “there’s no curatorial influence from us.”

Needless to say, Available Space isn’t going to survive on sales. Not that Lay and Hidalgo would take a commission, anyway; nor will they charge artists to use the space. (But they do accept donations.) “It was important for us to make it free,” Lay says, so artists can put every resource into the work. The pair will keep the space running however they can.

While debuting a physical space seems contraindicated during the present thunderdome of pandemic hardships, how else could Hidalgo and Lay expedite the kind of project-incubation they’ve long felt the valley is missing? Even as culture swarms online, what an internet presentation can’t capture are very often the in-situ elements that the artist needs to work out. “They have to have a brick-and-mortar place to do it,” Lay says. Both arrived here in the last decade from areas where such spaces were more common, Lay from Indiana and Hidalgo from San Francisco.

Working in favor of ASAP’s longevity is their conviction that the arts scene absolutely needs an experimental space like this — pressed to name others, they could only come up with the student gallery at UNLV — as well as the cross-pollinating milieu at New Orleans Square, where a new arts hub is patiently taking shape. They’ve got shows booked into January, Hidalgo notes, including by artists Heidi Ryder and Alisha Kerlin, who says, “I’m excited to see local artists carving out space for people to try something new in a noncommercial, relaxed, and experimental setting.”

“We had zero doubts,” Lay says. “The city is hungry for more arts spaces.” After all, artists don’t stop working just because the world’s falling apart.
hold on. Hear me out. Yes, Ugo Rondinone’s Seven Magic Mountains has been ad nauseam’d to death in your social feeds, its novelty and glamour dissipated in hella selfies. I can see why, after four years, you might be over it. But I’m not, so here we go.

On a heat-sealed August morning, I leave my pandemic hidey-hole to visit 7MM for the first time since quarantine. What I’ve loved on every visit to these seven stacks of garishly painted boulders is their bright panache — even impudence — in the face of so much desert austerity. Their insistence on visual pleasure amid so many wavelengths of brown. Something about that dissonance gives me a little serotonin fizz every time. And maybe this time that’ll help chillax the mood centers of my brain, currently plotzing overtime thanks to the daily doomscroll of pandemic life.

Riding shotgun on the 25-mile drive out there are the recollected voices of two friends with whom I’ve talked about 7MM quite a bit: William L. Fox, director of the Center for Art + Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art, primary sponsor of the installation; and Joshua Abbey, head of the Jewish Film Festival, son of desert contrarian Edward Abbey, and fierce critic of the Mountains.

Fox poses a question: “What are the secular monuments of America going to be?” The answer suggested by Seven Magic Mountains is large-scale works that remind the overmechanized 21st century of our species’ deepest impulses of way-finding and place-marking. “Human beings stack rocks,” he says. “We’ve been doing it since before we were human.”

Abbey sees it instead as a “Day-Glo monstrosity.” “I just think so-called environmental art, land art, is a very inappropriate intrusion in natural spaces,” he says. Artists, of all people, should know better.

They’re still carrying on in my head as I arrive, each idealizing in the opposite direction. Fox: As commercial development consumes more land, it’s vital that we reserve that same prerogative for purposes higher than another suburban Walmart. “Why can’t I be allowed to displace as much dirt as a strip mall in order to create some art?” Abbey: “It sends a signal that it’s okay to alter nature for human aesthetic expression.” Which sounds to him a lot like something a miner might say.

The stacks are as ebullient as I remember, so gaudy in the summer sun that they might be a lithic iteration of Electric Daisy Carnival — land art you can dance to. Hugging the shade of the first stack, I keep trying to consider how these boulders engage, contend, or otherwise get jiggy with art history, but the insistent buzz of nearby I-15 brings me right back to Fox and Abbey.

They’re both right, of course. The piece is an intrusion into the natural world. One of many. I go back to something Fox said: “It’s in a disrupted landscape.” No kidding. Humans are indisputably here. In addition to I-15, heavily trafficked when it’s not outright gridlocked, there’s a rail line. A few miles back, at a junk-encrusted shooting range, boisterous fans of that secular monument, the Second Amendment, plug the hills with lead. Beyond that, a cement factory. Clusters of billboards. Trash. Dirt roads. Fencing. On Google Maps you can see the epic scar of a quarry not far away.

Amid all this remorseless human impact, Seven Magic Mountains is the only thing that wants to redeem our presence. That gamely tries to mitigate the ugliness we’ve imposed. That represents more than a grimly utilitarian or, in the case of the shooters, recreationally destructive stance toward the land. By using the ancient technologies of rocks and joy to remediate this bruised landscape, Rondinone has built a monument I find inexhaustibly appealing. Does that somehow make it a metaphor for Las Vegas? It can be if you want it to.

As Fox and Abbey take their conversation to a quieter part of my brain, I watch a family of four, in masks, wander up, phones rising. Nearby, a model tries not to fall out of her low-cut dress as she straps jewelry to a thigh, her photographer sweating patiently.

Surprisingly, a third voice intrudes in my head, that of long-dead Swiss-German painter Paul Klee, who’s here with his famous quote, “One eye sees, the other eye feels.”

I think he’s suggesting I take a selfie, so I do.
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