

STOREREPRESENT



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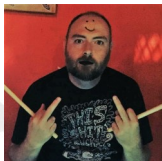
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THE QUESTION OF 42


Last February I wrote about year 42 being, according to my son, a pivotal year for me. As an avid reader of Douglas Adams, 42 is a special number for him. It is the answer to the question of Life, The Universe, and Everything. It is also the answer to 7 x 6. As Rowan and I sat down to talk one day recently, he asked me how I assessed my big year of 42. I told him I had indeed discovered the answer to the question of Life, The Universe, and Everything. The answer was death.

The concept of the "midlife crisis" is a joke. It's something that Hollywood pokes implicit fun at, it's something that advertising firms market towards. When you reach a certain age you stop going up and start slowly coming back down. Your body begins to thicken. Your wits slow. Your life choices change. You settle in for the long haul and consolidate the things you value. You freak the fuck out and blow up everything. You look around you as your heroes, your peers, your family, your best friends, one by one begin to spin off this mortal coil. Sometimes it is because illness takes them. Cancer, heart attacks, aneurisms, strokes, etc. Something that is uncontrollable. Sometimes risky behavior takes them. Driving drunk, hell, even driving sober, drugs, drink....choices one makes seal the deal. Sometimes they die for their country. Sometimes they take their own lives. However it happens, people your age, people you rub elbows with, people you talk to, make love to, share a drink with, they begin to disappear, leaving holes in your life. As time goes by, your life becomes more hole than life.

This is, of course, a very fatalistic way of looking things. With 2017 as the sort of year that many of us had in the B/CS dirtbag community you could forgive me for thinking in these terms. We lost four people this year that were next to us downtown somewhere drinking, laughing, joking, *living life* and then the next moment, they were gone. Ray Ruiz. Jessica Ramirez. Ryan Coffer. Larry Boozer. Four people that made an indelible mark on downtown Bryan. Maybe not in a way that is easily measurable. Ray made people smile. Jessica made people laugh. Ryan stunned people. Larry made people feel welcome. All four beautiful people. All four gone.

I know that this is not just a bad spot in the road that will ultimately smooth out. At my age more and more of the people around me will pass from this world. It could be me that passes next. It is hard not to repeat greeting card clichés about living like your dying, etc. But it is important to make sure those you love know you love them. Tell them. Make them feel it. Celebrate the lives of those you have lost. Remember them. Honor them. Make sure people understand that their lives *meant* something to you. It is the immortality humans seek, though in a different way than we had hoped. Our immortality is secured by the love, the shared experiences we leave behind us for others to hold close and share with others. — KELLY MINNIS

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HEXAGONS

"So, Admiral, why are you calling Mars?"

The face on the screen appraised the grubby archeologist with a grim look. "Are you alone, Dr. Greer?"

Greer shrugged. "The rest of my crew is down in the catacombs. Nobody topside but me and Martian ghosts."

"You're the foremost expert on Martian culture?"

Another shrug, as Greer leaned back and slapped ineffectually at the reddish dust on his sleeves. "I suppose I'd pass as an expert, for what it's worth. Been on Mars ten years, but we've barely begun understanding the records they left behind."

The admiral hesitated, then visibly made a decision. "What did hexagons mean to Martians?"

"Hexagons? Well, as you might imagine, deciphering any ancient culture is tricky. On top of that, we are studying an ancient race that is literally alien to us. Their symbology was derived from different cues, we don't have a shared past or history. Not to mention they were so much more advanced than—"

"Hexagons, Doctor," the admiral interrupted with the force of command.

Greer was an academic, he was startled and extremely unused to being addressed in such a way. "I believe Martians used hexagons in a similar fashion to the way we'd use an X, or skulls and crossbones. They indicated danger."

The admiral's brow furrowed. "What do you know about Saturn?"

"It's got pretty rings?" Greer laughed. "I'm an archeologist, not an astronomer. Why?"

The admiral's face switched to a grainy photo. "This is Saturn's north pole. Note the hexagonal cloud formation surrounding the pole. Each side is nearly 14,000 kilometers, longer than Earth's diameter. It was first

documented by the Voyager missions in the 1980s."

"Hexagonal clouds? Is that... natural?"

"So we thought. A few weeks ago, it began dissipating. Then our current satellites orbiting Saturn recorded this."

The admiral was replaced by a high resolution video on screen. Greer sat up as he watched chaotic, barbed shapes pouring from the vortex at the center of the hexagon.

"My god. Are those...?"

"Yes. Ships accelerating faster than anything we've ever built. And they've turned towards the inner planets. Towards Mars, and then we anticipate Earth."

"There must be millions of them," Greer said, his mind reeling. "Have you contacted them? What do they want?"

"We don't know. The only other information we've received is from Saturn itself. The planet emits natural radio waves from its interior, like this old Cassini recording from 2004. The hexagonal cloud would rotate 360 degrees over the same period as these radio emissions. It has never shifted in longitude."

Greer's skin crawled as the noises filled the room. They were eerily like sound effects used for UFOs in the ancient movies from the 20th century.

"Doctor, those radio emissions have been replaced by a short, repeating signal burst. Broader spectrum and much more powerful. The cloud is no longer spinning. Is this Martian? Can you interpret?"

The admiral played the new audio recording. Greer listened, then swallowed. "I'll need to check with our linguist, but it sounds roughly equivalent to an alert. Or an alarm."

"Saying what?"

"Prison break." — STARKNESS



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SNEAKY NICOTINE & HIS WILY WAYS

I dig Science. In fact, I revere it enough to capitalize it for this writing, and lately, I've been very interested in the often overlooked Science of things. My latest interest is Nicotine. If I were to give Nicotine a catch phrase, it would be, "If I'm not too obvious...they won't notice." What I mean by that is Nicotine's addiction is primarily a Dopamine release, which doesn't really feel like much, but makes you want it again. Just like a fidget spinner that you don't realize you've been flicking for over two hours, or like the first drink of a Tequila shot. You aren't going to feel the effects yet, but your brain is like, "Fuck yes!" Or even a conversation you are having with someone that you both surprisingly agree on something unexpectedly. High five, man!

You don't necessarily realize that Nicotine is at work. But it is. Sure, there's the buzz, and there is something to that, but that's not what I'm talking about. Unless you are very perceptive to what the elusive nature of Dopamine feels like, you are just going to feel like "Life is good" and "I love you guys", "I want this moment to last forever!", etc.

My science experiment started because I bought a vape cartridge and filled it with nic juice. I thought it would be an interesting experiment. To be honest, yeah, it's been interesting. My brain is tricky. So many people around me smoke, but I don't want to smoke. I did that in High School and College. But I like having something to do with my hands that's not swiping on my phone. Once I figured out the culprit was Dopamine, things made a whole lot more sense as far as why we get addicted. Nicotine is tricky. It's sly and subtle and gets aggressive if you try to cut him off.

Here are some things that Uncle Nicotine tries to get us to believe:

I'm not smoking as much as some people I know. You know, you have that one family member who smokes like eight packs a day and is still kicking ass healthwise. Also, of course you'd stop before you got to that point. Also, it's fun. Don't forget you love it.

I can quit at any time. Not that I'd want to, but it would be super easy. I'll quit for a day just to prove it to myself. Well, not today, but I could. For sure.

I'm not going to smoke forever. I eat well, I exercise, I am a positive person, I take vitamins, I used to be Vegetarian, I can do this for a while. Plus, I've been doing it for a while now and I still feel healthy. Maybe it's not really that bad for me. For some people it's bad, but maybe not me.

It's made me more social. Didn't I just start this pack yesterday? Oh, what is that? A clove cigarette? Shit! I haven't had one of those since High School. Sure, yeah, let me have one. Oh dang, High School was stupid. Where did you get these Clove smokes again?

It's a special occasion. Sure, I'll have another one. Remember that time we took that Spring Break trip to the Grand Canyon and all we did while driving was listen to The Cure and smoke Benson & Hedges Deluxe Ultra Lights and eat Peanut Butter and Jelly sandwiches and Hershey's Chocolate bars? Or that time we went to watch live music at Rev's? Or that time we had a couple glasses of wine at home? Or yesterday because it was maybe gonna rain today?

The Science that I found is that all of us have Nicotinic Receptors. We just do. Just like Endocannabinoid Receptors. They are in all of us. New Nicotinic Receptors sprout with the introduction of Nicotine. Meaning, the more you smoke, the more receptors your brain will produce, the harder it will be to "resist" the craving for more Nicotine. Remember that scene on *Nightmare on Elm Street 3* with the junkie and her arms sprouted a bunch of mouths slurping for the needle? "What a rush!" Why do the receptors want Nicotine? I presume it's all about Dopamine. We really, really, REALLY like Dopamine. Really. So it's no wonder that the brain is like, "yes, please! In fact, more, dammit."

The tricky thing here is that we don't notice. I liken it to when we are saying our goodbyes after hanging out with a family where our kids are all visiting as well. You know, our kids with their kids. So, our kids have learned to watch us, and they know that after we say goodbye, if we don't rush out the door immediately and start talking to the adults again, they can sneakily get out of sight and keep playing. That is, until we realize what's happened and call them back and say our goodbyes again. (sometimes this happens several times).

So, somehow Nicotine (and I assume other addiction causing things we ingest) sits still all of a sudden when you have the thought to quit or decrease the amount of ingesting, like when the person who is "It" gets super close to you, but doesn't notice where you are hiding, until the thought goes away. Nicotine is patient, and will wait a good hour or two to bring up the thought that you probably don't need to quit at this moment. I mean, maybe tomorrow...or whatever.

The whole time I am writing this, I can't help but think of Mr. Poopy Butthole from *Rick and Morty* and the episode he was introduced (S2E4: Total Rickall). The synopsis goes like this: The Smith house is locked down after parasites threaten to take over the world by multiplying through flashbacks, and it's fantastically and horrifyingly a mess. The flashbacks take over the memories and make them believe they've been there the whole time. From an uncle to a butler to Pensilvester to Mr. Poopy Butthole. Watch it. Oh, and see if you notice what's different about the title sequence. Those writers are freaking geniuses.

I guess Mr. Poopy Butthole for me is like Nicotine. He's there...fairly unobtrusive...mostly just a friend when you need one. Unless you dis him, which makes him Bruce Banner fixing a tire on a rainy night.

Science is cool. Our brains are cool. Nicotine is...um...well, it's complicated. It looks like Nicotinic Receptors take between one and three months to completely die off, so if you wanna quit, you gotta keep away for that long. That doesn't seem so bad. You could do that at any time. Easy.

As far as the experiment goes, as of this writing, yeah, I'm still puffing my vape pen, but I've been diluting the nicotine juice with plain "just flavoring" juice...but Uncle Nic thinks we need to go to the store and try a new bottle...that's not diluted. I'm considering it. — JORGE GOYCO

DRUNK DETECTIVE STARKNESS

I open my eyes to the terrible pain that is life and walk into the kitchen trying to find cigarettes and a lighter, when...

Me: Blacked Out Me... I need you here for a second. We need to discuss the FEMA disaster area you turned our kitchen into. Drunk Detective Starkness, we may need you too, but it seems clear what it is we're dealing with.

BO Me: Damn. You're hitting me up before you've even had a smoke? This isn't good, is it?

Me: Nope. Look, we're going to skip right past the 'why.' I know that answer is lost to the ephemeral, alcoholic, ether mists of Blacked Out Time and that's fine, but what I need to know, and I need to know it desperately is 'how.' Literally, mechanically, how did you manage to run the dishwasher while it was open? First of all, we don't own it, this is a rent house. Second, the machine has safeguards against that. It is specifically designed to not let that happen. There is standing water in the bottom and the whole kitchen floor is wet. Standing here, hungover, but reasonably sober, I really don't think I could intentionally do what you've done here. I would have to go to dishwasher school or something. I mean... Did you... I don't know... take some kind of dishwasher Youtube school last night and do it to see if you could?

BO Me: I... you know me boss. I don't know what was going on. I never really do. And might I just point out that ALL the whiskey is gone. It was you who decided it was a good idea to drink a liter of whiskey after that house party last night.

Me: Fine. Dick. Looks like you were at least trying to do good things. There is also a half-done load of laundry sitting on the floor between the washer and dryer, so at least your heart was in the right place, in clean up mode. Let's go see how much an ass you made of yourself online. Checks Facebook, emails, reddit, etc. Hmm, nothing really at all. Ok, you know what? This is fine. If it's just a mess in the house we have to clean, this is a win. I can deal with cleaning a mess and fixing a dishwasher. We'll buy some beer and fix this together. No worries man. High five, you crazy, shitty, dishwasher.

Drunk Detective Starkness: Whoa, slow your roll son. I want you to look around at the state of the kitchen and ask yourself, 'Is this the work of a man who wasn't also making an ass of himself somewhere else, too?' The fact that it wasn't on the Internet can only mean one thing...

Me: Fuck. You're right as usual Drunk Detective Starkness. It spilled into real life, didn't it? I have to find my phone now, don't I?

DDS: Unfortunately, that's the next step.

Me: Ah, fuck. Finds phone among all the damp laundry. Shit. Black Out Me, you gotta get back over here. I was gonna let you off the hook for last night, but now you need to explain to me why you thought sending the text:

"Look, seriously, what if instead of being able to cast only earth, air, fire, and water spells we could invoke all the elements on the periodic table individually? We

could Flourine Uranium Carbon Potassium each other whenever we wanted," to fifteen different women, a couple of whom I have to work with and think it was a good idea? Or even an idea at all. How the fuck do you think, "These women really need to know that I desire to sleep with them immediately after pondering elemental magic systems," was an actionable thought in your head, or anyone's head in the history of ever? Did you think it was funny? I mean a one off, out of the blue, text to a platonic male bar friend it might have been, but some of these people are real people. And now

I'm going to have to talk to them.

BO Me: I don't know man. *The Last Airbender* was pretty sweet and Brandon Sanderson is a pretty great author, I guess I thought it was important at the time. *Captain Planet*... I mean, come on, cut me some slack my dude.

Me: Well, yeah, they are awesome and even though the *Shalamadingdong* movie was shit, I'll throw down with *Legend of Korra*, but what I absolutely wouldn't do is text a bunch of people about how much I would love to have sex with them because I was playing some shitty JRPG at 3 AM. You see the problem here, right?

BO Me: ... yeah. I can now see how that might be uncouth.

Me: I would actually rather you went and got some drugs and woke up in some rando trap house than this. You can't bring real life into our relationship. It is now officially on you to clean up the kitchen. It's going to hurt both of us to leave this up to you, cause you'll probably fuck it up, but it's the only punishment I can think to levy at you, you fucking asshole.

I crack open a beer. — STARKNESS



The New Year often brings the challenge of new-ness. Resolutions beckon we do MORE this or LESS that, to change ourselves even as we struggle to write the correct new year without error. Regardless of what the previous year held, I always pronounce—usually in whatever forum affords me the most praise and affirmation—that I will read more in the next year. Inevitably, I laud my pronouncement with an obnoxiously feux-erudite reading list of titles and authors no one except me cares about, leading to a cricket chirping silence that, also inevitably, leads me right back to my stack of Archie comics in the bathroom. So it goes. Still, I earnestly do want to read more each year. Reading deep and reading well is a craft I hope to hone successfully in my days. This quest leads me to asking for recommendations from those I find on similar literary journeys. We book-nerds are a slim—and growing slimmer—breed. For this reason, in and out of the New Year season, let us bolster one another through our titles and volumes. Hulu, be damned! Netflix, can bite me! Caffeine, ravage me right! And with that, here's a writer I enjoy massively.

Jack Ketchum is difficult to recommend for two reasons. One, Ketchum writes horror. Two, Ketchum writes *extreme* horror. As you know, if you were to randomly hollar "horror literature" in a crowded coffee shop these days (or at any time in the past three decades), you'd likely win yourself a treatise from some wide-eyed chatterbox about their favorite Stephen King title, most likely *Misery* or *The Green Mile*. If you're in a more ritzy neighborhood, the topic may turn quickly to Dean Koontz. In a really shitty nerd bar, someone will bring up Lovecraft. And God knows where you'd have to be to find yourself pressed against a wall enduring a diatribe on the post-war merits of Peter Straub. (You might wanna get outta there!) The point—which I lost in there somewhere—is that horror literature has it's stalwarts, as all art forms do. And it has those stalwarts, primarily Stephen King, because what Stephen King does, primarily, is rather quaint. King, for the most part, is rarely even remotely grisly or wack-o. And that's good for him. It's the quaint stuff that creates a household name. Even when it comes to horror fiction, most readers prefer to sleep with the light off. Start asking about King's really nasty stuff, "The Library Policeman" or "Rage" or "The Boogeyman", and the chatterbox's eyes will glaze over and the chatter will shift to how *oh my gosh, but did you ever see Dolores Claiborne?*

Ketchum has never written a quaint thing in his career. In a Ketchum story, gratuitously Terrible Things happen to average joe people, while somebody in the story—somebody who represents us, the reader—has to come to grips with this Terrible Thing. In a Ketchum story, the Terrible Thing usually stems from a hand that relishes making Terrible Things happen to people. And, in a Ketchum story, the details of the Terrible Thing are unavoidably significant. Take, for instance, Ketchum's most famous novel, *The Girl Next Door*. Based on a true story, *TGND* tells of a young teenage girl in the 60s who is kidnapped by a neighborhood lady, tied up in the basement, and made the whipping post for all the neighborhood boys. The lady of the house oversees all the whipping and humiliation, pushing the limits to new

ON JACK KETCHUM



degrees of nasty, and assuring the boys that if anyone tells both they and the girl will endure an even worse punishment. As we know, children are born with the capacity for extreme good and extreme evil, and our jobs as family members and the communal Village is to point those kiddos towards the good. So what happens when the evil is encouraged instead? Well, to say Terrible Things happen to this poor girl is an understatement. So what could possibly be the merit of such a tale? Why either write or read something so despicable?

The answer is simple: *The Girl Next Door* is told from the perspective of a young neighborhood boy who feels conflicted about everything he's seeing in the basement, as well as his minimal level of participation. He can't sleep. He can't function. He knows what is happening is wrong, but he's terrified to do the right thing. Even at a young age the boy realizes some major aspect of his entire life is in the balance of his consistent decision to remain silent. Not to mention, the boy loves the girl. He has since he first saw her walking in her yellow sundress. But now she's bound and blindfolded. The yellow dress replaced with red stripes on her skin and deep purple bruises. It ain't quaint. The details reveal the full scope of the boys inner turmoil, perhaps even reaching deep into our own reservoir of life-altering action or inaction. As we see from the perspective of the boy who wants to intervene, compassion can be a dangerous thing.

It's here that we find the great hallmark of Jack Ketchum's writing, the thing that brings me back over and over again wishing I could bring other nerdy readers along with me: the scariest thing in Jack Ketchum's world is what happens to the one's we love. And it's for this reason that the details—as non-quaint as they appear at times—matter so greatly. Life pulls no punches. When the sun goes down, the light that guides most people is artificial. How do we approach such people? How do we let anyone we love out of our sight? Religion often seeks to answer such questions, but religion falls short when we allow our own inner light to remain artificial. We can ignore such questions. We can numb

ourselves to such questions. Or we can face questions about Terrible Things with the help of artists and storytellers and comedians who take us to dark places to determine the source of our light. Compassion shatters many layers of darkness. So far, Jack Ketchum is my favorite compassionate storyteller.

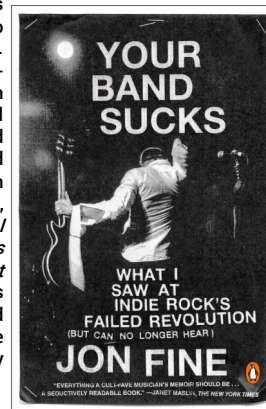
At the end of this past year, Ketchum released two new titles. The first, *Gorilla In My Room*, from Cemetery Dance Publications, collects 15 of Ketchum's most recent stories. I've read three other collections of short writings by Ketchum, and this is by far the most diverse. A few pieces are even downright literary and beautifully written. We get Ketchum at his nastiest, as in "Winter's Child" and "Cow"—two stories about the same young lady who happens to be feral and also, well, a cannibal. We see Ketchum try his hand at a Western and a comic zombie story. And we see him deal with issues of child abuse, Alzheimer's, aging, and sexual violence. In each case we, the readers, look into the moment from the perspective of a bystander, usually a family member or loved one, trying to determine how to love their hurting someone well. Compassion can be a complicated thing.

Also in 2017, Ketchum published his third novel with film-maker Lucky McKee (director of *May*, *The Woman*, *All Cheerleaders Must Die*). *The Secret Life of Souls*, from Pegasus Books, is a short, tight, emotional power-punch of a read. The narrator's perspective shifts between four different members of a single family, including the family dog, which admittedly sounds cheesy except that it just isn't. Ketchum and McKee make it work. Each narrator's voice is unique so that by the half-way point the reader can recognize a new narrator in mere words. The story here follows a young actress, Delia, and her dog, Caity, through the beginning of an exciting career. Obviously, tragedy strikes, and the perspective of Delia and Caity suddenly begins to shift. This becomes evident even to Delia's brother when his perspective begins to shift as well. Exploring the potential depths of relational bonds, Ketchum and McKee avoid Hallmark musical overtures to show that true compassion is ultimately self-sacrificing.

As I said in the beginning, I make the same goal each January to read more. Of course, the goal should encourage quality over quantity: reading more GOOD stuff rather than just stuff. It's for that reason that in 2018 I'm aiming to read everything by Jack Ketchum that I have not already. I know there's some pretty ridiculous stuff in there. Heck, the dude got his start writing sleazy detective stories for men's magazines. But there's also a depth of character and, as I've said repeatedly, compassion in Jack Ketchum's work that I've not found elsewhere in modern pulp fiction. If you need a good quick place to start with Ketchum, I recommend his novel *Red*. If you're a dog-lover, you'll want to read *Red* with your four-legged friend nearby. If you've got a strong stomach, try *The Woman*, his first novel with Lucky McKee. Both titles also have movie versions that are not too bad. Ketchum makes a cameo in each. Otherwise, Ketchum's newest titles, mentioned above, are solid winners. Enjoy the dark . . . you're there anyway. — KEVIN STILL

READING ROCKS: YOUR BAND SUCKS

Being in a band is a lot like being in the army or a gang or some other group doing terror-filled death-defying feat of daring. Survivors have war stories. They have separation anxiety. They have post-traumatic stress disorder. No one else knows what you've been through except for your brothers and sisters in arms who lived it as you lived it. Perhaps this is hyperbole, but for author Jon Fine, formerly of seminal '80s punk/indie band Bitch Magnet, rock and roll is a life or death matter. His memoir, *Your Band Sucks: What I Saw At Indie Rock's Failed Revolution (But Can No Longer Hear)* is the cautionary and celebratory tale of one who lived and nearly died for music.



Fine's story is like many other suburban kids' stories. He had no identity and felt invisible until punk rock lifted him up and gave him a place to belong. Fine tells this story with acidic wit and an eye for laughing knowingly and somewhat regrettably at the depravity, the hubris, the shameless selfishness of losing oneself entirely at all costs in the pursuit of some artistic aim. Fine describes his relationships with bandmates as those of convenience. Great drummers are precious commodities to be stroked gently like a fragile bird. Punk rock prides itself on touting for gender equality but Fine unblinkingly rattles off encounter after encounter, much like similar memoirs from members of L.A. hair metal bands like Duff MacKagan and Nikki Sixx, of band members using women to make rent and to provide groceries before being shown the door. What separates this book from plenty of others in this genre is that Fine describes his somewhat avaricious relationship with making music like a junkie describes the relationship with junk. It ruins lives. Yet Fine also describes that unwieldy attraction with the most beautiful and accurate of depictions: "There's a sheer sexual power when you fill a huge room with glorious, massive noise, playing through a guitar rig that behaves exactly as you want it. There's a magical feeling when you believe—no, you *know*—you can wave your hands or a guitar at the amp and the electrons inside instantly respond. Even after all these years it is the closest feeling to God that I know. And every time I got the tiniest taste of it, I understood why so many willingly ruin their lives for it."

Musicians will have a hard time putting this book down until completed. I certainly recognized myself in the pages of the book as well as many others I've stalked a stage and packed a tour van beside. It is a strange religion, rock and roll, and its practitioners even stranger, but Jon Fine does a remarkable job at nailing down the odd dichotomy of something so creative yet so utterly destructive. — KELLY MINNIS

DONALD TRUMP: THE YEAR IN REVIEW STILL POETRY

Hey, remember that time the US president revealed classified intelligence from an American ally to the Russian foreign minister in the Oval Office? You probably don't, and who can blame you? It happened nearly nine months ago, on March 23rd, and nine months in Trump's America is basically a million years. That said—there is a limit to how much we can focus on at once. The mountain of scandals, mishaps and inanities that have piled up so high that focusing on any single event becomes a challenge.

That fucker is like an assembly line that cranks out new feuds, crises, and headlines. If it's not classified info, it's Charlottesville. Or North Korea. Or kneeling NFL players. Or trade with China. Or terrorism. Or racist tweets about terrorism. Or the wall. Or Iran. Or repealing Obamacare. Or whining on Twitter like a teenager who's crush won't text them back. Nothing gets the attention it deserves, because every day there are is a new "Oh my God, what in the actual fuck?" moment.

There have been hundreds of articles written about how that moron benefits from his chaos. In many cases, the most egregious things he says are conveniently timed to take attention away from more serious issues—see his recent "Pocahontas" comments overshadowing debate about the tax bill in Congress or the controversy over the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. Collectively, we can't figure out if he is some kind of strategic mastermind or so random and impulsive that even he doesn't know what he will say or do next. (I'm pretty sure it's the latter)

But if this year is any indication, there is no multidimensional chess strategy playing out in his head. Looking at the Trump presidency day by day shows no strategy or plan of any kind. It looks on paper exactly how it has felt to live through: one crisis after another, with little time for rest or reflection.

To illustrate that point, I put together just some of the embarrassing, incomprehensible or flat-out stupid things from the US president in 2017 that received a great deal of attention, but only for a very short time. This list may seem long, but it's only the barest sketch of the edifice of madness we now inhabit; we could have filled a phone book with this bullshit, but then our fine editors would have way too much to do. Mad respect to <https://www.facebook.com/trumpwatchdaily/> for the help.

January 24th: Trump declares he lost the popular vote because of undocumented immigrants voting, then promises to waste huge amounts of time and money investigating this nonexistent problem.
February 1st: He refers to Frederick Douglass as a living person in his Black History Month comments.
February 2nd: Kellyanne Conway encourages viewers to buy Ivanka Trump's shitty clothing line during an interview, probably violating federal ethics rules.
February 4th: Trump throws a whiny bitch-fest directed at a "so-called judge" over the enforcement of his travel ban. He goes on to declare "the court system" a "threat to national security."
February 12th: He conducts sensitive nuclear diplomacy with the Japanese prime minister (in response to a North Korean missile launch) in the open at his golf.

resort where his rich friends can see him.

February 27th: "Nobody knew health care is so complicated." Note: Literally everyone already knew.
March 4th: He accuses Barack Obama of wiretapping him. Note: He didn't.

March 4th: Trump starts a Twitter feud with Arnold Schwarzenegger over ratings for *The Apprentice*. Arnold proposes they switch jobs. The nation hopes that Trump agrees.

March 16th: The president proposes cutting federal funding for Meals on Wheels. Why? Because fuck poor old people, that's why!

March 22nd: He says "most people" don't know Lincoln was a Republican. Note: Literally everyone knows.

March 23rd: Trump reveals classified intel from an ally (Israel) to the Russian foreign minister during a private meeting.

April 12th: He announces missile strikes in Syria by bragging that he ate the most beautiful chocolate cake.

April 14th: He drops a really, really big bomb on Afghanistan. Nothing is accomplished, unless you every war hawk and racist getting a big throbbing erection.
April 26th: He announces that the U.S. will withdraw from NAFTA, then reverses that decision when he learns what NAFTA actually is.

April 26th: Trump says he's considering "breaking up" the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. Because apparently that's a thing that the executive branch is responsible for and can do.

April 27th: He says he thought being president would be easy. Note: It's not.

May 1st: He claims Andrew Jackson would have stopped the Civil War, which literally happened 16 years after Jackson died.

May 11th: He threatens to leak audio recordings of conversations with former FBI Director James Comey. Note: They literally never existed.

May 23rd: Signs the Book of Remembrance at Yad Vashem as if it is a high school yearbook, calling it "amazing," because that is one of the six adjectives he actually knows.

May 26th: Trump shoves the prime minister of Montenegro aside to get into a picture.

May 31st: Covfefe.

June 1st: He withdraws from the Paris Climate Agreement literally out of spite.

June 4th: Trump responds to a terror attack in London by attacking London's Muslim mayor's response.

June 6th: In a shitstorm of a Middle East trip, Trump kicks Qatar to the curb via Twitter, boasts about a fake \$110 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia and fondles a glowing orb.

July 19th: Trump's "dems scream death" tweet initiates a flurry of shitty metal bands to be formed.

July 26th: Trump bans transgender people from the military based on supposed recommendations from "military experts." Actual military experts refuse to enforce.

July 27th: He brags to the Boy Scouts of America that having a yacht will get you laid a ton.

July 29th: The nation awakens to a non-sequitur presidential tweet mocking TV host Mika Brzezinski for allegedly having plastic surgery and everyone just shrugs because this is normal now.

July 31st: Trump fires Anthony "The Mooch" Scaramucci ten days into his job as communications director, further proving that his white house hires the best people.

August 4th: Leaked transcripts of phone conversations with foreign leaders, including Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull, demonstrate that Trump is as incoherent in private as he is in public.

August 15th: Trump tweets a video of a train hitting CNN days after a neo-Nazi ran over a woman with a car, killing her. The same fucking day, he uses the phrase "very fine people on both sides" to detractors.

August 21st: The president looks at a partial solar eclipse without protective eyewear.

August 25th: Trump pardons racist felon ex-sheriff Joe Arpaio—and he does so during a natural disaster because the "ratings would be higher."

September 1st: He tweets about Hillary Clinton for the 38th time in his presidency. In November, he will accuse her of being unable to get on with her life and stop talking about him. Irony dies.

September 12th: Ted Cruz's Twitter account likes some porn—not Trump-related, but funny.

September 26th: Trump attempts to delete every mention of Luther Strange from his twitter feed after he lost a special election. Trump is a fucking idiot who doesn't understand that the internet is forever.

October 23rd: Tired of feuding with Bob Corker and other senators in his own party, Trump picks a fight with a war widow.

October 25th: Trump announces he wants to increase admission to national parks during their peak seasons, while ignoring the fact that there is a project in the works to divert \$12B from federal oil and gas revenues to the national parks system, because fuck people who actually want to see nature.

November 2nd: White house releases its National Climate Assessment stating that climate change is driven entirely by human action. But fuck the Paris agreement right?

November 9th: Brett Talley, having never tried a case, rated 'not qualified' by the ABA, and having been a lawyer for three years is approved for a lifetime appointment as a federal judge.

November 23rd: Bored over Thanksgiving, Trump decides to publicly and personally attack LaVar Bell who was insufficiently grateful for intervention on his son's behalf, then played 18 holes of golf.

December 14th: Desperate to highlight accomplishments Trump held a ribbon cutting event to celebrate cutting back regulations. He pledges to continue cutting regulations without mention of what regulations actually accomplish.

December 26th: Tells a gathering of the super-wealthy at his private club "You all just got a lot richer" thanks to the tax bill he signed just before Christmas.

December 28th: Attacks the U.S. Postal Service for not charging Amazon sufficiently for delivering their packages.

December 29th: Demonstrates his continued failure to understand that weather and climate aren't the same thing, insisting that "we could use a little bit of that good old Global Warming" since it's very cold on the East Coast in the middle of winter. — STARKNESS

ON THE OCCASION OF A MASS DOLLY REQUEST TO MOVE A REFRIGERATOR OF WHICH NO ONE HAS YET CLARIFIED THE CONTENTS OF AND OF WHICH EMPTY REFRIGERATORS ARE KNOWN TO BE MUCH EASIER TO MOVE SO LET'S START WITH INTERNAL LOGISTICS BEFORE BEQUEATHING MANUAL LABORS TOWARDS THE EXTERIOR AND, ALSO, IS THERE BEER INVOLVED?

This has nothing to do with the dolly. Maybe the refrigerator.

But I need you to know because you're family:

Aldi's brand brats are the worst.

(Not "wurst", as in pun. Literally, the absolute worst

Wurst a *wahr* German would never claim.)

They do not taste like previous animals.

More like the gelatinous blue balls in Chinese bubble tea.

Don't buy them - the worst wursts or the bubble teas.

I realize Aldi's is trending *super hard* right now

- Cheap and quaint ain't much to debate.

Still, somethings warrant an extra buck
Like peanut butter and toilet paper and six-packs of Air-Heads

Not-quite-taffy-candy and, now, *wahr* wurst.

I recommend Johnsonville or Sam's Club brats.

Bring enough Miller High Life to asphyxiate brats to boil.

Simmer 18-20 minutes. Include onions prophetically.

Percolate setting with Charles Mingus' *Blues and Roots*.

Afterwards, pan fry in EVOO 2 minutes per side per brat.

Serve with solid Havarti or Swiss, stout mustard.

Employ toothpicks as proxy for forks to add

A *c'est la vie* zest to this cardiovascular disaster.

Save spoils in the crisper of a refrigerator

You should never dolly alone. But, I'm here for you,

Perhaps next time. With advance notice.

Because you're family.

—KEVIN STILL

Embroidered:
Patches | Hats | Shirts
Full Color Printed:
Shirts | Patches | Stickers
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2017 proved musically unconventional for me. Through spring and summer, I wallowed in the past more than the present. Thanks to my friend and yours, Kelly Minnis, I discovered Chick Corea & Return to Forever (*I am sincerely sorry—ed.*) around New Year's and subsequently spent months on the hunt for more jazz fusion—i.e. Weather Report, Al Di Meola, Joe Farrell, George Benson's CTI Recordings (not fusion, but solid elevator luxury), and even swankier Herbie Hancock. I still haven't listened to all I acquired, which is more confession than boast.

At 2017's onset, I also happened upon the deliciously essential *Getz/Gilberto* collaboration, which introduced me to both Stan Getz and Brazilian vocalist Astrud Gilberto, igniting a Bossa Nova kick that naturally bled into an appreciation for music from Mexico when I enrolled in a Spanish class this Fall. I listened incessantly to 2017 releases by Lila Downs, Carla Morrison, and Natalia Lafourcade for audible practice but soon fell genuinely in love with their voices and artistry—especially Lafourcade's *Musas*, which is stunning.

Still, betwixt the sonic buzzing, I managed to find a few new releases I hope follow me into next year and beyond. For the list below, I attempted to curate seven titles—in honor of the year—recommended with a personal referendum of merit. To my surprise, I landed on nine instead. Looking at this list, I'm realizing the year's loudest track was my own ADD.

1. A Sundae Drive *Versailles* — I had the pleasure of reviewing *Versailles* for *979Rep* back in March. The praise I sang then bodes repeating: these Houston garage-rock tyrannosauruses (and all around fine folk) prove the art of making an album—a singular work of musical and tonal themes—need not be a thing of the past. This was the first record I fell in love with this year. I hope you will, too. Fave track: “Fly South”.

2. Joey McGee *Terlingua Taproot* — Nepotism alert! Joey McGee is my good friend. We've shared many plates at T Jin's. But, nepotism aside, when I first heard McGee's “I'm Gone”, I went from friend to fan by the chorus' end. Do yourself a favor: find Joey's next live spot (he's prolific!) and tip his tip jar, man. Also, request “Long Road Home”, another personal favorite. Those opening lines lay me open every time. Fave tracks: aforementioned.

3. Willie Nelson *God's Problem Child* — Willie needed a solid follow-up to 2016's retreat sleeper *Summertime*, but I didn't expect Willie to deliver a goodbye letter. Damn! I'm not ready for that day. But, according to this record, Willie's made his peace and, as *GPC's* primary tone suggests, he's as surprised as any of us he's still around. Even the cover—Willie's weathered profile washed in red—harkens back to 1974's *Phases and Stages*, the concept album that proved “Shotgun Willie” was not some forgettable fairground spectacle. At 84, Willie sounds strong. Resolute even. Like he's got several records still blazin' up in him. But, as Tom Petty so boldly declared in October: no one knows the hour. I miss Willie already. Fave tracks: “Old Timer” and, Willie's tribute to Merle, “He Won't Ever Be Gone”.

4. John Mark McMillan *Mercury and Lightning*—No other album on this list commanded such a dance with my affections as this one. On one hand, McMillan infused a poppiness to *M&L* that recalls all the reasons Springsteen lost fans in the 80s. Still, when songs like “Wilderlove” and “Enemy, love” and “Death In Reverse”

and “No Country” work in their talons, you're stuck. These songs feel impenetrable: earworms that just won't quit. And I'm glad. In these songs, McMillan reminds me of things I hope to never forget. Fave tracks: check above.

5. Mon Laferte *La Trenz*a — Stop what you're doing and cue up this Chilean rock goddess' “Mi Buen Amor” or “Amarrame” or “No Te Fumes Mi Marijuana” and experience how Mon Laferte so easily absconded with my Spanish practice and replaced it with full-blown fanaticism. I'm driving around belting out lines I haven't even translated yet! So be it. I'm just praying Laferte finds her way to these Estados Unidos soon. Fave tracks: you should be rocking them already.

6. Bell Witch *Mirror Reaper* — Now we've hit the bumper side of the list. I also reviewed *Mirror Reaper* for *979Rep* in November. My primary note welcomes repeating: everything about this record appears to be a gimmick. One song. 83 minutes. Two distinct movements of slow, brooding, funeral doom guitars and drums and organs with vocals from a recently deceased former bandmate piped in for tributary reasons. It sounds almost corny, I admit. But sitting through the entirety of *MR* — as I have half a dozen times — is a beautiful experience. (“Beautiful” in the way Darren Aronofsky films used-to-be beautiful.) The second half, starting right at the 49 minute mark where it gets all ambient and drony, is hand-down my favorite record of 2017. I'd pay too many dollars to witness Bell Witch perform this album live. My bday is in September. Feel free to help me make that happen. Fave track: duh.

7. Amenra *Mass VI* — Here's some doomy, sludgy, post-something metal from Belgium that — like Bell Witch — perfectly assimilates all the things I take pills *not* to feel and then pieces that scattered grand suckery together into bizarrely beautiful chunks of meditative blister-gaze that I cannot get enough of. Crap. I love everything about this record, even that one dude's off-putting razor-gargling squealy vocals. It's a delightful piece of genuflect-able art that makes me want to be better person . . . someday. Fave track: “A Solitary Reign”.

8. Bison *You Are Not The Ocean* — After all those feelings culled and coddled by Bell Witch and Amenra, I need a swift kick to the groin to boot me out the door and back into the wild. So I appreciate an angry, nail-spitter of a record that reminds us that heavy metal is still a valuable daily resource. It's like corn: we can utilize its energy more than we realize. Bison's new record—sludging straight down from Vancouver—is all that beautiful corn for me. Fave tracks: yes. I even dig those weird little flutey bits at the end of “Tantrum”.

9. Power Trip *Nightmare Logic* — Same as Bison, but this groin kick portaled to us all the way from 1987. There's not one bad thing about this record except that it ends. I recently saw Power Trip open for Cannibal Corpse. DO NOT MISS POWER TRIP LIVE! Nor this record. Start with the single, “Executioner's Tax”, and then sample a deeper cut like “Waiting Around to Die”, which opens with a bizarre synth-esque digitized bass loop before ripping

into lightning fast riffage — a total of 1.5 minutes of intro on a four and a half minute track. I like them odds. Fave tracks: all of *Manifest Decimation*, but *Nightmare Logic* is a solid follow-up.

A few artists released 2017 albums I wanted more time with—Enslaved, Converge, Wode, Cafe Tacuba, Lea Ann Womack, Filthy Friends come to mind—but two ears can travel only so far in a year. Better luck in 2018. See you there. — KEVIN STILL

Generally, I could rant for hours about what albums I have jammed throughout 2017, but this time I thought I would cut to the chase and give a quick overview of my number one pick. It may come as a surprise, given my past reviews being geared towards extreme metal, but my number one is not on the extreme side, though it is certainly metal. My number one comes from Deutschland, an album that has flown under the radar in North America; that album is *The Gunman* by German power metallers Orden Ogan. Power metal was the first genre of metal that I fell in love with, starting with early Dragonforce (that's right, kids, I liked Dragonforce before Guitar Hero). I know...I know...power metal is often believed to be cheesy and gimmicky, but hold your stereotypes for a second.

Orden Ogan is far from being cheesy or gimmicky. These guys are true story-tellers when it comes to their art. There hasn't been such a creative force in power metal since bands like Blind Guardian, another great German power metal band. Each record Orden Ogan has put out has been a concept album. They've covered story arcs such as dystopian societies, nuclear winter, dark fantasy, and now, gothic western. The story spun for this album is a tale wherein a lone gunman seeks revenge for the death of his wife at the hands of ruthless outlaws. Since it is a gothic western, there are supernatural elements such as vampires, ghosts, and reanimation of the dead. It's as if Clint Eastwood as the nameless, cigar-smoking, gun-toting, anti-hero walked into a Bram Stoker type atmosphere.

This album features incredible clean vocals, intricate melodies, a strategic, yet very limited, use of keyboard synths, and much heavier riffs that most would not expect in power metal all bound together with an overarching classical influence. This album not only has catchy and altogether memorable songs, but also an intelligent track order. This might seem like a no-brainer for a concept album, but what I mean is that the placement of each song makes total sense because it follows the formula of a traditional story both lyrically and musically. The titular track starts strong and powerful, introducing the hero and setting the mood for the story. The second and third tracks develop the conflict. The songs in the middle continue the story by bringing it down to a middle ground between conflict and resolution. The last two songs bring us to the climactic clash between the hero and the villains before closing the story with slow, melancholy ballad.

The album plays out like a symphony. It is beautiful! The songs are ordered perfectly, with not a single one out of place, and the musicianship is superb. Orden Ogan has proven yet again that their knack for musical story-telling is still going strong. This album is everything a fan of power metal could want. — CALEB MULLINS

This musing about the year 2017 is roughly divided into five parts: a change of identify, dogs, deaths, music, and Mr. Trump.

All my life, my identity has been what I was doing: “I'm in high school. I'm going to college. I teach high school. I work for the university. I'm a reporter. I teach international students. I'm the interim director.” Now, when I say “I'm retired” since May 31st, it sounds like I'm one fall away from assisted living. The thing is I never wanted to be defined by my job; it just turned out that way. I have a great deal of admiration—and some envy—of those who define themselves.

For nearly a decade, I've seen a raft of people in downtown Bryan who play music, and that is who they are. They are musicians; most have day jobs; they're husbands and wives, significant others, partners, parents, but their identity is what they are crafting for themselves. I just wish it hadn't taken me so long to figure out. I still have a guitar and amp in the corner of my bedroom I can get out.

In January of 2017, my wife and I got a dog—Pearl, a white pit bull/Dalmatian mix. I hadn't been a pet owner since the early Eighties, but I had a dog all my life up till then. Having Pearl is going to help me live longer. The saddest thing is I'll likely outlive her.

This has been another rough year for music, but the two deaths that impacted me the most were Chuck Berry and Tom Petty. It may be just because I saw both of them play live. Heck, Chuck practically was sweating on me when I saw him at Billy Bob's Texas when he was about the age I am now. He defined rock and roll music. And Tom Petty, he was the Everyman rocker that just happened to make it, our Hemingway of rock. All those songs, all those albums—how many music stars of his stature would agree to back up Bob Dylan on tour? What a loss so young.

This past year saw me getting out less to listen to live music, a trend that started when I met and married my wife. I miss the live music, but I love my life with my wife even more. We still hear live music, but it's nothing like when I used to fill up the empty spaces of my life with every kind of music I could. This feels better, more natural.

So, I don't hear as much new music live, and I don't work as hard to find new music. I find myself digging up old music as I find myself often disappointed by new music by older favorites. I don't want to be one of those people who say the only good music is the old stuff. There's still surprises out there.

Last and least, there is Mr. Trump. That America elected such a loathsome lying bully who hates Americans is still mind-boggling. However, we are stuck with him. It's taken me a

CONTINUED >>

year to realize that I—we—can't let him shape us in his twisted image. He's like the horrible atrocity that befell us undeservedly, whether an assault or a hurricane or an accident. That scar is not who we are; Mr. Trump's vulgarity is not who I am. I have to be a better man despite him.

So, for 2018, here's to building a true identity, lots of love, plenty of new music, and being the best we can be.
— MIKE L. DOWNEY

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In a year that at times seemed rather dire I still managed to find a handful of things that really inspired me, stoked me, got under my skin, made me feel, made me think, and made me so happy to be alive.

A Sundae Drive Versailles. It is inspiring when your band besties create an album that is grandiose and far-reaching. The word "epic" is overused in our pop culture lexicon, but if there is an album that the word could truly be used to describe, it is *Versailles*. Six songs, only one less than eight minutes, filled with music that mostly starts tiny, a little birth, hushed, new, then the golden rays of sunlight shine upon its closed petals the songs bloom startlingly, and suddenly they grow, grow til bursting, like a roller coaster fall that never bottoms out, until glorious in freefall, you are brought safely and smoothly to earth. I'm so very proud for them.

Slowdive Slowdive. The old saw that bands who reform after decades apart are never as good as they were before the breakup has been proved false, or at least only true a veces. Mission of Burma was the first to show a truer path, with Dinosaur Jr., My Bloody Valentine, Ride, Guided By Voices, and dozens others following suit. Slowdive put themselves back together in 2014 after a near 20 year hiatus to perform a few dozen live shows. 2017 saw release of their self-titled album, recordings that bore a fusion of styles from their old delicate-to-ocean tide roaring selves combined with a newer sound that shows influence from the current music that Slowdive mach 1 had influenced, like Waved Out and M83. In a way, it's almost like a debut album, reintroducing new audiences to what they do best but in a language that has already been prepared for them.

Honeyrude The Color Blue. I enjoy my band peers' music and in the past half dozen years I have been more likely to listen to recordings from bands I share bills with than music from more established major artists. Honeyrude shocked me this year with an extremely well-made recording full of a muscular song-based take on the shoegaze revival sound that owes as much to the Britpop that came right after shoegaze fizzled out as it does to the effects-laden astral groove of the shoegazers.

Magnet School The Art of Telling the Truth. Not a new album, this one hails from 2013. While The Ex-Optimists was in the studio making *Bee Corpse Collector* our engineer Chico Jones told me that I should look up this Austin band, Magnet School, because they are a lot like the bands you like. I wrote that name down in the note file I keep in my phone for bands to look up but alas I never saw them on a bill or anything that I could make. Last year we somehow wound up on a show with them and I got my face melted off by their assault. True to Chico's word, they had that Swervedriver thing that I

love but combined with a '90s commercial alternative sheen and power. This album has seen many spins around the iPod's rotating discs this past year.

Blade Runner 2049. Again with the sequels many decades later usually sucking wind, but I had a near religious experience in the movie theater viewing this movie, and while I enjoyed the original *Blade Runner*, it is not a movie that I list as one of my GOAT movies. There were times in this film that I felt toyed with by the director, ready to smash into well-worn Hollywood tropes only to startle you by breaking those expectations across your lap. Certainly the best movie experience I've had all year, though I give *Dunkirk* a runner-up. It is nowhere near the movie that *Blade Runner 2049* is but the visuals are stunning and whoever decided to run a ticking watch and very little score throughout made a wise move. I don't think I ever need to see it again, but it was certainly an exciting movie experience.

New Star Wars canon novels. I was very disappointed at first to learn the news that Disney intended to wipe clean the wealth of back stories created by writers licensed to use the Star Wars universe prior to the Mouse's big takeover. I was overwhelmingly excited in 1998 to learn that new Star Wars movies were coming because I was positive Timothy Zahn's *Heir To The Empire* series was coming to film. That did not come to pass. And, sadly, much of Zahn's writing was erased from canon, but Disney wisely noted the popularity of Zahn's Grand Admiral Thrawn and Zahn's recent *Thrawn* novel was a delight. I've also enjoyed the *Aftermath* series by Chuck Wendig, *Catalyst* that tells the story of the Ersos, Claudia Gray's novels, and the *Phasma* back-story. These help to answer questions and fill in the gaps left in the current Star Wars saga.

Donald Trump. What the fuck? Really? Yes. I am of the opinion that all the negativity, the satire, the pure fuckupery of the man and the president has been good for the country. I spent many years working as a non-believer in the conservative think tank/media machinery and a lot of what Trump espoused this past year was only the repetition and ultimate fruition of political theory and ideology that had been kicked around in years of think tank research and conference gatherings. One can spend a lifetime talking about how great or how awful an idea is but never really know the results until they are simulcast in prime time to the entire connected smartphone world. The post-Goldwater/Reagan late Boomer/early Generation X conservative activist approach to government policy is what is running our country, appointed by our Beeblebrox'ian TV mouthpiece of a president. While he may be the focus, his staff and funders advised him well, and his appointees have gleefully put into place the unproven theories and mantras that were largely buried away in barely published reports. What better way to finally put to bed these ideas than to let them run amok on your country? And to piss off and politicize millions to action? I think 2018 is going to be a watershed year for political activism that the nation hasn't seen the likes of in decades.

— KELLY MINNIS

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I was driving home from work a week or so ago, and my mom called me. I answered. We exchanged pleasantries. She told me she heard George Harrison on the

radio earlier that day and it made her think of me. Fair. Then, she asked me a question I wasn't really prepared for.

"So, what have you been listening to lately?"

Well, shucks, ma. Hip-hop. A whole bunch of hip-hop.

Hip-hop's roots are planted in soil that gives a voice to commentary and storytelling on issues affecting the community of the MC—from Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" to Public Enemy's heyday or Ice Cube's *Amerikkka's Most Wanted*. This past year provided contemporary artists plenty of source material to be loud about.

Kendrick Lamar put out another fucking classic with *Damn*. King Kendrick's storytelling reigns supreme. Kendrick is Jordan in the 90s. He's present-day LeBron. Universally the best at his craft—and don't fuck with me, it ain't close—but, like Jordan and LeBron, we can't give you the MVP award every year. This might be the third-best record of the last three he's put out, but I'd still put it up against anything else from this era—and I'm not even throwing *Section.80* out there to make it four-in-a-row.

Anyways, back to *Damn*.

Over the course of 14 tracks, Kendrick addresses the fucked-up-ness of our country and what people are up against from a neighborhood to a national level. Not to be overlooked, production from MIKE WILL MADE IT on several standout tracks (DNA, Humble and XXX) amplify Kendrick's already powerful lyrics and bring urgency to his words.

[Side note, but relevant: When the guest artist list for *Damn* was released, I kind of had an, "Oh fuck, please, don't go down this fucking path" moment. Several months before the album came out, it was released that Zacari, Rhianna and U2 would lend their talents to Kendrick's latest classic. I nearly fucking died. "Jesus christ," I thought, "FUCK! Please don't go down this terrible tacky road with these over-the-hill U2 idiots! YOU ARE BETTER THAN THIS! PLEASE!" I had awful visions of THE EDGE(")'s guitar ruining a Kendrick track. I was pleasantly surprised, though, Bono actually adds really nice vocals to XXX. (I started breaking down the song, but that's a whole 'nother article). Short-story, k.dot addresses the influence and social appearance of gun culture and the machismo associated with it in his community: "You should chip a nigga then throw the blower in his lap // Matter fact, I'm 'bout to speak at this convention // Call you back ----- Alright kids, we're gonna talk about gun control / (pray for me) Damn" As the song's tempo changes, Bono delivers a very nice little vocal complement, "It's not a place, this country is to me a sound of drum and bass // You close your eyes to look around."]

I know I just spent a bunch of words jerking off Kendrick—deservedly so—but, Tyler the Creator's *Flower Boy* was actually my favorite record of 2017. When Tyler first popped up about seven years ago with the OddFuture folks and Yonkers, I wrote him off as "shock rap" and a fad. Boy, was I wrong. Tyler has grown and done great things since then with *Flower Boy* being arguably his best work. [I really need to turn this in to Kelly soon, so excuse my brevity]. The production on *Flower Boy*

shimmers. Tyler is self-aware and introspective. He's vulnerable and admits it. Two records ago, he rapped, "Growing up, you barely had a roof // Now, you got a coupe and it doesn't have a roof." On *Flower Boy* stand-out "911/Mr. Lonely", Tyler goes, "Crashed the McLaren, bought me a Tesla // I know you're sick of me talking about cars." That statement shows how Tyler doesn't give a fuck about breaking down the braggadocious materialism and expectations of rap generations past. There's honesty and humor in his rhymes and good golly, it's lovely.

My favorite track on the record is "November". "November" might not be the best track on the record, but it resonates with me because of its reflectiveness and nostalgia for the high points in our lives, "Take me back!" throughout the song. Tyler asks, "What's your November? Is it a person? Mine was the summer '06, I remember ..." Several folks finish out that section saying what their "November" is. Your author's November was Fall 2011, but I'm trying to write a new one this year.

Anyways, back to my original theme before I started to write rushed reviews of two of my favorite records from 2017. Here are my quickest thoughts on the rest of what I loved this year:

Vince Staples Big Fish Theory. Good golly, Vinny is fucking great [I'm writing against the clock, fucking trust me on this nonsense]

Gorillaz Human. To the people who were upset that this wasn't a Damon Albarn-centric record, FUCK YOU! It's a really great record and gave a crazy number of artists voices. It's definitely a sum is greater than its pieces sorta deal and definitely not commercially-g geared, but it's a good record with great, positive political messages.

I am out of time! These are the rest of my favorites from the year in no order: **Joey Bada\$\$, ALL-AMERIKKKAN BADA\$\$, SZA, Ctrl, Steve Lacy, Steve Lacy's Demo, White Reaper, The World's Best American Band, Vic Mensa, The Autobiography**; everything all of those Australian surf-punk bands like **Skeggs** and **Hockey Dad** did—who knew it was so cool down under?; Salute to **King Gizzard** for putting out four records; **Japanese Breakfast, Soft Sounds from Another Planet, Kurt Vile & Amanda Jean-Look-A-Like Courtney Barnett, Lotta Sea Lice** (they have great chemistry and their Tiny Desk and Pacific Ocean performances were AMAZING); **Cherry Glazer, Apocalipstick, Priests, Nothing Feels Natural, the Breeders** teaser single; all the great nonsense **Frank Ocean** did; **Altitude, Odds & Ends.** — JOSHUA SIEGEL



I love a Star War. I really do. After a couple viewings of *The Last Jedi*, I've concluded I just didn't like this one. Spoilers abound. *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* is a mass produced, popular film that is a part of the most popular franchise in history. It is the definition of mainstream. Its themes, metaphors and allegories are explored with the subtlety of Kylo Ren's tantrums. I get it, I really do. I just don't like it—films can't be judged on what they're trying to say, they need to be judged on how well they can say it.

Look—Rotten Tomatoes has critics at 91% fresh and fans at 50% as I write this. I just can't see how plot holes, poor writing, and jokes more suited to the *Big Bang Theory* than Star Wars has largely avoided the critical gaze. Criticism is met with cries of misunderstanding and points to great reviews. I can't imagine how difficult it is making a film with the scope of *The Last Jedi*, but somehow the powers that be failed to make a compelling Star Wars film. *The Last Jedi* knows our expectations. It was made with full awareness of the questions circulating: Who are Rey's parents? Who's Snoke? Who are the Knights of Ren? What will Luke do when he receives his lightsaber? Will he train Rey? Can Kylo be redeemed?

People who act like fandom invented these questions are ridiculous. JJ Abrams set the expectations then Johnson proceeded to shatter them. One of the early scenes sees the continuation of *The Force Awakens'* fantastic final shot, where Rey travels to Ahch-To and offers exiled Jedi master Luke Skywalker his lightsaber. A relic of his past. And Obi-Wan's. And Anakin's. A grand moment discarded as Luke inspects the lightsaber for a few seconds before casually tossing it over his shoulder. It felt like a *Saturday Night Live* sketch. If you listen close enough you can hear the laugh track. I mean, why satisfy fans that have waited for a two-year payoff? Why not dispose of the entire climax of Episode VII with a lazy flick of the wrist?

Luke Skywalker, is one of the most iconic characters in pop culture history. A bastion of reckless optimism, the farm boy who rose to Jedi knight and saved the galaxy, has completely changed. He's a curmudgeon who has lost all faith in the galaxy, in the Jedi, in himself. Lost his memory too. No call backs to Obi-Wan's issues thirty years ago. No recollection of Dagobah. Nothing to show that he can empathize with the heroes of the past and what they went through to train him. There sure as hell are a bunch of whiny flashbacks to explain the training of Kylo Ren though. We only see one Jedi training session with Rey though, focused on 'reaching out' with the force. It just so happens that she reaches out and latches on to the Dark Side of the force. Luke's only seen this happen once before. With Kylo Ren. He "wasn't scared enough then," and is now. Eerie, kind of cool, and never again explored. Tossed away with no thought. On the island is an ancient tree containing the biblical texts of the Jedi religion. Luke decides to destroy said tree and books. Giggling force ghost Yoda pops in to assist Luke via a strike of lightning. The tree goes up in flames. The archaic ways of the Jedi are destroyed. The way is paved for a new generation of the Jedi Order to be built with new traditions. Except not, because it's later revealed that Rey had the books all along. It is no mistake this destruction takes place through flames. The old generation is burnt, and the new to be forged from the ashes. If Luke burns down what remains of the Jedi religion, it is the action of a

THE LAST JEDI REDUX

bitter old man, but Yoda is the wisest being in all the Star Wars. If he approves, then it must be right. Or you just had to put Yoda in the movie because he's goddamn Yoda so that's why this stupid scene exists. Then, to represent the cleansing we don't get a phoenix or something badass to rise from the smoldering ashes; we get a fucking Porg. A walking plush toy that had to be mandated by the powers-that-be at Disney to hit ancillary sales targets.

TJL is a movie about failure. Hopes are dashed, plans foiled, allies fail to answer the call and our heroes constantly disappoint. Poe's hare-brained bombing run results in thousands of casualties. A side-quest involving Finn and newcomer Rose not only plays out like a filler episode of Star Wars Rebels but actively works against the plan of Vice Admiral Holdo (Laura Dern), whose scheme is like if the English Army evacuating Dunkirk (which was actually a good movie) only saved a boatful of soldiers. Rey doesn't turn Kylo to the light side. Snoke can't control his pupil. Shit, even the rebellion gas tanks fail. In Rian Johnson's new Disneyland park there is no room for heroes. There is no 'bad guy'. He's just misunderstood. A place where there is a horrendous twenty-minute segue to a casino for a brusque critique of unregulated capitalism. A place full of creatures stolen from Pokemon concept art, of Marvel-esque one liners and quips which break the modicum of tension built, where the protagonist is saved at the last second in the clutches of certain death. The whole thing feels like a Marvel movie with a Star Wars coat of paint.

There is a visually stunning moment where Holdo stays behind and sacrifices herself in a kamikaze hyper-speed jump into the First Order command ship. It was a moment that could have held real gravitas—except who gives a shit about Admiral Holdo? Meanwhile, off-screen, goddamn Admiral Ackbar is killed with barely a cursory mention in a line of dialogue. If that doesn't sum up the entire mindset of the film then I don't know what does.



Supreme Leader Snoke is another Marvel-esque figure of ominous power, who rules with seemingly limitless power and is shrouded in mystery. Signs were promising early in *The Last Jedi*. He sat in his blood-red throne room straight out of Dario Argento's wet dream, surrounded by guards in lobster-style armor inspired by The Imperial Guard. He's powerful enough to force-drag General Hux from within a hologram, create a mental bridge between Kylo and Rey, and when his plan comes to fruition and Rey is brought to his chambers, control her with the flick of a decayed, sinewy finger. But, as Luke Skywalker says early in the film, "This isn't going to go the way you think." Instead of executing Rey, Kylo uses the force to operate the lightsaber laying on the arm of Snoke's chair, and cuts him in half. Then we get the only real lightsaber battle of the film which plays out like a piece of fan fiction or a multiplayer match in Star Wars Battlefront II. More like Snoke the joke amirite? Which ties into the theme of unceremonious failure. All-powerful Snoke is killed by his inconsistent, morally torn and endlessly angry protegee. Blah, blah, blah, death doesn't care who you are, what your story is, it

comes upon you with the same might whether you are a king or a pauper etc. Boring. How about this: They spent one-and-a-half films setting up an Emperor-like, omnipotent, supreme villain—who was killed off like a random Stormtrooper. That's not a twist, it's a waste of everyone's time.

In the interest of not overstaying my welcome, allow me to breeze over some other major issues: General Hux goes from delivering one of the most menacing speeches of the series to being a bumbling buffoon and the victim of a 'yo mamma' joke in less than ten minutes. Finn facing certain death and a worthy sacrifice only to be saved at the last moment. Then, in the most banal scene since Anakin and Padmé discuss sand, he is immediately kissed by his savior. Captain Phasma returning in an encore performance of equal parts disappointment and shiny armor. Oh, and she's called "chrome dome" by Finn. Jesus. Or what about DJ, the

Lando stand-in, who chops and changes between being good and bad so many times that even Rian Johnson loses track. When an AT-ST shoots at a band of stormtroopers to save Finn, I was certain that it would be the stuttering Codebreaker back to save the day. But it's BB8. Again. Or that the entire plot revolves around Admiral Holdo intentionally withholding her strategy from the rebellion. If she simply tells Poe her plan, not only is Finn's quest obsolete, thousands of lives are saved. Characters constantly face death and make inappropriate jokes which drain scenes of any tension. Not to mention the litany of nonsensical decisions characters make—like, why the hell does Luke invent the hardest possible way to fish??? What about that cringe-inducing Maz Kanata hologram, who apparently travels with a camera crew while she fights. I'm fairly certain she doesn't actually know Poe. Another integral character reduced to a cardboard cutout to deliver a quest and a quip—the Marvel formula. I can forgive Rey's rapid rise to power in *The Force Awakens*. But in *The Last Jedi*, Rey wields both a lightsaber and the force with prowess that makes a joke of, y'know, the training and hard work required to be a Jedi. She continues to be a character of limitless power who can do no wrong. The climax of the film sees her displace a mountain of debris with the force to open an escape route for the rebellion—it took weeks of training with Yoda for Luke to be able to lift just one rock. Lastly, how could anyone ever forget the ultimate twist from Rian Johnson? Princess Leia seems to be dead in space after being blown from the cockpit of her ship, before returning to life and flying back into the hold like a force-wielding Mary Poppins. It's probably the most unintentionally funny scene in the history of cinema. It's the moment in a normal movie where you walk out of the theater. I can't believe a group of people who get paid to make films sat down to watch dailies, and actually gave that the nod of approval. "Yep, you nailed that one out of the park, Rian."—**STARKNESS**

Star Wars: The Last Jedi is a stronger film than its predecessor, which wasn't that bad of a movie either. *The Last Jedi* continues the new trend of Star Wars movies being made by an extremely-select number of fans rather than the creative genius of one individual. That's right—no George Lucas, the man who first imagined the Star Wars universe, who was the force—no pun intended—behind the first six Star Wars movies. And don't start disowning the prequels even though they only made more than \$2 billion worldwide. Bad cinema.

The Last Jedi is a good movie, filled with humor (much more than I expected), great action sequences (the Rey-Renn lightsaber battle in Snoke's throne room is spectacular), surprises (no spoilers here), but perhaps a bit too much sentimentality, which is understandable with what's happened with the core characters from the initial trilogy, so it gets a pass there.

Much of the criticism I've heard and read online about *The Last Jedi* are complaints about the choices director and screenwriter Rian Johnson made in the movie. What gall he has to be creative with this beloved story? He should have done this. Why didn't he answer this? That has no place in a Star Wars story. Hey, get a grip. You want to make the next Star Wars movie? Fine. Become **CONTINUED >>**

talented enough to get asked. Your opinion about the artistic choices is worth less than the Stormtrooper helmet popcorn you got.

The Last Jedi is a fine space opera action movie set in a fictional universe that I was first introduced to in 1977 in a theater in Abilene. The progress of the Star Wars storyline, whatever you personally think, is the new reality of Star Wars movies. There will be no more Lucas vision guiding the movies; it'll be a hodge-podge of directions.

The Force Awakens introduces new characters and plot lines. *The Last Jedi* ignores them or downplays them and introduces new ideas. The third trilogy will do more of the same—remember, no one creative mind anymore, multiple minds, multiple fans. Of course, these fans have their own ideas how the story should progress, and they happen to be famous directors. Get used to it.

Bottom line—enjoy the Star Wars movies. If you don't, they might reboot the "Ernest" movies.—MIKE L. DOWNEY

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I find *The Last Jedi* to be a messy affair and I would love to see a fan edit that cuts every single frame of film that has Finn, Rose, and anything tied to their characters' story arc in this movie. I hate it all. The casino planet and everything that happens on it and every character feels so much like prequel bullshit that it took me entirely out of the movie both times I've seen *The Last Jedi*. I thought Benicio Del Toro was Johnny Fucking Knoxville the first time I saw it, until the credits rolled. And the way Rian Johnson wastes Phasma is unforgivable. Why care about this character? You shouldn't, it's just "oh hey, a dumb Stormtrooper but in a cool suit. Cool. Now she's dead." The rest of the movie I can certainly live with and enjoy. I don't have a problem with Luke becoming crotchety and disillusioned. I can believe in the lack of character development, because that is a hallmark of the original movies too. It took a few movies for an audience to figure out what was going on. Largely because not even George Lucas knew where he was taking the next film exactly. Rian Johnson, however, seems to rely on you having seen Star Wars movies to put pieces together that he leaves curiously unfilled. Because the movie *feels* like the previous Star Wars films you will connect that Snokes is another Palpatine without Johnson ever having to explain Snokes to you. The previous relationship between Yoda and Luke will help you to understand that Yoda coming back to tell Luke he be tripping means that Luke really be tripping. Luke sacrificing himself so the future of the Resistance can get away is just like Obi Wan sacrificing himself so the future Jedi Skywalker can get away. Someone will sneak onto a ship and do crazy shit to it so the bad guys lose because that happens in nearly every other Star Wars movie. At least this trope Johnson turns on its head. But I digress. The point being that there's a certain laziness at work if you rely on previous movies' themes to support your current movies then perhaps one should just skip your movie and watch the old ones instead. Laziness is quite common in blockbuster movies so this again is not singular.

The opening starfighter battle was beautiful. The throne room lightsaber battle was stunning. I loved the visuals

in the final battle on the salt planet, with all that lovely blood salt just below the thin veneer of snow. It is heavy handed somewhat, but I like the lone bit of character development in the film, devoted to Poe Dameron, learning the crucial leadership skills General Leia wishes to impart to him. BB8 masquerading as a trash can droid is funny as fuck. Luke drinking blue milk straight from the teet while leering into the camera also made me chuckle. Yoda's cameo brought true humor and lightness to the film that helped to show up the sort of cheap Marvel movie attempts at humor previously in the film. And let's take a moment here to recognize the massive effect Marvel's movies have had on the action movie landscape. Johnson recognizes it and attempts rather leadenly to channel it. Hell, even Marvel sometimes can't get it right (see *Thor: Ragnarok*). Star Wars should be Star Wars and leave Marvel to what it is. But perhaps this is where one should ponder if it matters if what is or isn't "Star Wars enough". Star Wars is not locked in stone or sealed in a museum. It can be anything whoever is in charge of it wants it to be. Even if the "that's not Star Wars" old schoolers don't like it. But be prepared if people don't like it to hear them vocally complain about it. Some of the jeers at *TLJ* have maybe been more entertaining than the movie itself.

Which brings me to my final point. I have never talked and typed more about any other movie in my goddamn life, arguing with people about what was awful, what wasn't so awful, what was actually good, and the few moments I found stunning. I don't think it was Disney's desire to create a movie that found mixed reviews and so much online vitriol, but if people are talking this much about your movie it can't be all bad, can it? The thing is, they are talking about it but not returning to see it like viewers did for the last two. Combine this with news leaks of director changes and story issues with the forthcoming Han Solo movie and a distinct lack of advance marketing for it (that movie is five months away and there's no trailer and no real poster for it...for a gazillion dollar Star Wars movie?!) puts the entire franchise in an interesting position. Meanwhile, I will continue to read the fascinating new canon novels and hope for the best.—KELLY MINNIS

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This blurb has some spoilers so if you haven't seen it, keep reading so I can ruin the film for you. The newest Star Wars film works for me for one simple reason. The movie sets the viewer up for damn near every single Star Wars cliché and then gives the middle finger to the audience. Successful last minute mission that saves the "good guys"? Nope; the mission is a wash that fails. Profound wisdom during Jedi Training? Nope. The last Jedi Night Library is destroyed and the last Jedi is revealed to have feet of clay (in all fairness the film sort of rehashes the "Jedi master screws up the training which turns a promising student to the dark side" plot device so that is an exception). Big reveal regarding a main character's lineage? Nope. The potential new "Jedi" has what amount to intergalactic white trash parents. Even the big climatic light saber fight near the end of the film was in some sense an illusion. Only a film with as huge and fanatical following could take such liberties with the fans and make it work. Episode VIII has plenty of toys for the kids and needs to buy which shows that there is at least one Star War cliché that even Episode VIII couldn't kill.—RENTED MULE

GOOD MOVIES FOR BAD GUYS



The Last Jedi is a hugely popular sci-fi film that continues to tell the tragic story of the Galaxy's undisputed champion of order and the plight of doing the right thing... Kylo Ren.

Since our hero's debut in his origin story *The Force Awakens* we left our hero in bad shape... Kylo, born to two terrorists in a family with a religious zealot uncle, is forced to live in his parent's shadow (Imagine being Saddam's kid) and when he is old enough, whisked away to train to be a high priest in a kooky religion which makes him abandon all attachments and basically never get laid.

It's tough, growing up with two absentee parents, one who is a gambling smuggler type criminal who doesn't think much of his inherent gift of the force brought to him by his grandfather Vader who was the one who brought balance to the universe (which is basically like being Jesus's grandson) the other, the worst kind of terrorist, a politician who stages coups when things don't go her way. Not to mention a former trusted uncle who tries to kill him once he becomes a teenager and smart enough to have questions. Growing up with such a dark family and a lineage of criminal behavior that is actually celebrated would give anyone a complex, I'm sure he hung out with some Hutt's who didn't want to join the family business from time to time.

In *The Last Jedi*, Kylo should be celebrating bringing his transient father to justice but instead is nursing a gnarly face wound and forced to give up his mask due to a loss of faith from his adopted father figure, a powerful force figure who he had to seek out and find comfort in beyond his own fucked up biological family. Kylo, who was wrongfully portrayed by casual movie goers as "emo" in *The Force Awakens*, becomes more complex in *The Last Jedi*, poignantly showing us a powerful time bomb betrayed by his parents, their militia friends, older generations, etc. In fact, Kylo basically wants to burn down every bridge and just start over. (He's more Exploited than Dashboard now)

By the end of the movie, Kylo manages (in a true fashion Bane, Plagueis, Palpatine and Vader would be proud of) to Kill his Mentor and place himself as the supreme leader of the Order, a place he truly belongs. He also manages to track down and corner his family's extremist cell in a barricade and prepares to once and for all, end their legacy of terror and start anew.

Like all tragedies, success comes at a price. The cell escapes like rats in a wall as Rey (His uncle's new replacement for him) and Poe (the replacement son Leia tries desperately to instill her jihad beliefs on) lead the group to safety as they flee in a stolen ship (the falcon

always belonged to Lando).

Of course, the real folly of the movie is not Kylo being duped by his uncle or the rebels getting away. It was the unique fire the film came under while being wrongly interpreted. Like the Bible, Star Wars continues to be the most wrongly interpreted piece of sci fi literature we have seen. People taking snippets or scenes out of context, holding onto them for one reason or another as a reason to bash the whole work of art, are generally killing the fascinating tragic cautionary tale we could all learn from.

Maybe they weren't there... for the wait. The five year wait from *Empire* to *Return* in an age with no VCRs and kids were left to speculate what had happened to Han, and as the months ticked to years, we wondered if a third film would come at all. Then the relief... one summer day, watching reruns of *Laverne and Shirley* in your Mom's television when you finally see the preview in a commercial. Excited you jump up and down on the bed as your mom yells at you, but it doesn't matter... Han's alive. You saw him, and it will be the longest three months of your life until *Return* makes it to a theater.

Shit like that... makes you appreciate the Wars.

Maybe they didn't have to live in a world where Star Wars toys just didn't exist. Toy collectors call it the Dark Times. I remember in '97 when they finally released action figures, and SW was in the toy aisle ever since.

Maybe they never bothered to read the books, or delve into the universe beyond the major movies. A universe so rich with so many characters. Maybe they never grew up in a small community in the '80s when nerd-dom wasn't cool at all. Comic conventions were in hotel lobbies and movie stars were nowhere around as the term Comic Con stood more for "convention" and less than actual "con".

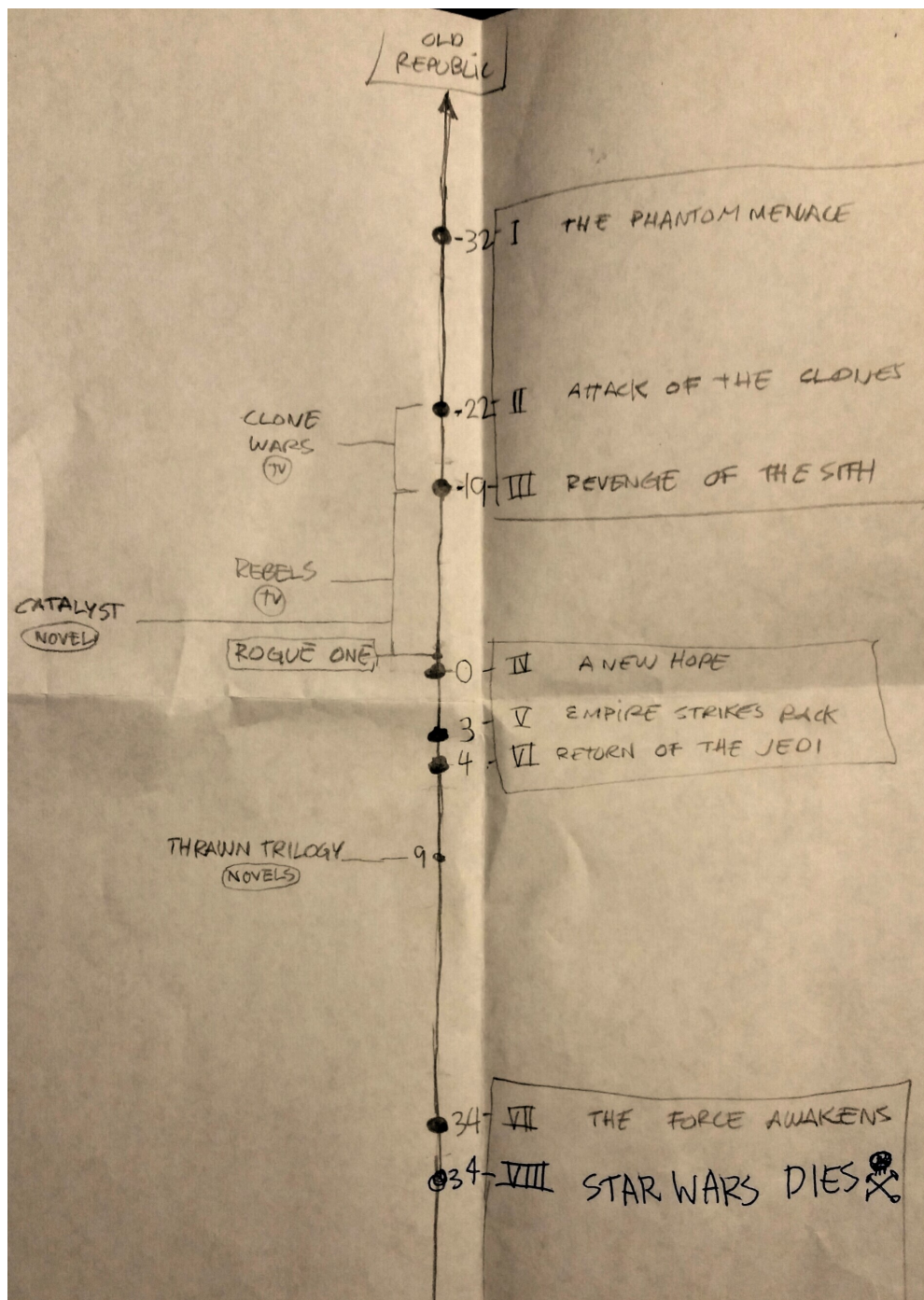
Or maybe social media and the outrage culture finally caught up with me to kill what I love. After all every "smart" mark with a computer connection and a repeatable opinion they got from other opinions in the echo chamber of the net seems to say the same thing. They complain more about "Space Leia" "Hermit Luke" or the physics of a universe where whole planets have the same climate and sound exists in space... but hey what do I know.

I know Kylo Ren. He doesn't care what they think either.
— TIM DANGER

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A STAR WARS TIMELINE

BY SCOTT MCDERMOTT





2018 A NEW BEGINNING

(OR GETTING BACK TO WHERE WE STARTED FROM)

So ends the last of T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets, entitled "Little Gidding." It also happens to be my favorite line in the whole series of poems and may very well be my favorite line in all of T. S. Eliot's poetry. I was captivated by the line when I did an intensive study of T. S. Eliot during my junior year of college. Now, nearly 30 years later, I think I am beginning to have an inkling of what Eliot was getting at.

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

-- T. S. Eliot

The return might be unsettling, I suppose, for those who have only known me through one chapter of my life, but, since I've lived with me all these years, it feels much more like finally

coming home to my real self. In C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there is Narnia, but then there is the really-real Narnia—the one for which the original Narnia was but a shadow and a proleptic glimpse of the real deal. When our explorations bring us at last to the place we started, with eyes that have matured along the way, it is both a place we have always known and, at the same time, a place we have never really known at all. Is the old mundane combined with the exciting freshness of something new.

There is something about a new year that signifies a fresh start, a chance at new beginnings. Whether you are one to make a list of resolutions or think it ludicrous, since so many resolutions have fallen by the wayside in the past, very few of us can deny the allure of a clean slate, a fresh canvas, an empty page that invited us to begin anew. Conversely, however, none of us would deny the fact that we woke up on January 1 in the very same world, family, and relationships that we'd been in on December 31. Other than the possible presence of a hangover, we are the same person on Monday morning that we'd been on Sunday night.

So can we ever really hope for any change? Do or resolutions, spoken or hidden in the silence of our hearts make any difference?

In so many different areas of my life I feel as though I am returning to the ideas, opinions, and passions of my youth, but with an understanding that I never could have had when I was in my teens and twenties. More than once over the last couple of years, people who have only known me recently have said things like, "well, after you changed your thoughts about ..." or "when your opinion changed regarding ..." However, the funny thing is that I have found myself explaining that it was not so much a change as a return. But it is not just a returning to things that I thought and cared about back in the day. It is a rediscovery that is new and exhilarating because it is as though I now understand why it was that I cared about such notions in the first place.

If nothing else, the clean slate of the new year gives me the opportunity to doodle my thoughts down and to reflect upon where I've been, where I am, and where I'm headed. The empty book invites me to reflect on who I

am. In the reflection, I often find that the series of events, memories, and relationships that make up my life have been nothing more or less than an attempt to return time and again to who I really am.

*Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.*

As we enter into this new year perhaps we can begin to hear, or maybe only half-hear, the voice of the hidden waterfall. It doesn't mean that everything is perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but it does mean that there is the slightest hint that once all of our exploring is complete, all truly shall be well.—PAMALYN ROSE-BEELER



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Texas has ruined me. When I moved here from the Midwest a decade ago, I was a bona-fide hop-head. Mo' hops mo' betta was my motto. But that's not the slogan of Texas craft brewing. Our German and Czech heritage favors malts, the intricacy of balance, and glasses full of sit-your-ass-down-and-don't-overthink-it style brews. And, after a decade under the influence, my palette has become fully Texan. I noticed the change on recent trips to Denver and even Little Rock, Arkansas, where I found myself far more interested in lagers and stouts and especially Pilsners over my traditional Double IPAs and Rye taste-bud killers. And the same was true, once again, while spending the holidays in Saint Louis, Missouri. I had the occasion to visit three breweries, and in each one I gravitated to the heavy stuff. In this regard, Saint Louis did not disappoint.

The first brewery I visited was highly touted by several trusted nerd friends, and even Tim Panik's supremely swell brother Nick, as "a must" for my visit. This was good news as **Narrow Gauge Brewing**, housed in Cugino's Italian Grill—a personal favorite for greasy fare, is situated less than a mile from my brother's house. I made three visits to Narrow Gauge/Cugino's, which allowed me to work through their entire tap line-up. The clientele, I could see, were either super giddy to be at Narrow Gauge or maybe just to be out of the house in single digit degrees. Customers sported Narrow Gauge t-shirts, had their logo enscripted growlers, and everyone seemed to be about four pints in by 2:00 in the afternoon. It was that kinda crowd. I felt at home... that is until the beer arrived. The entire Narrow Gauge line-up could be confused for a sampler of Aqua Gia cologne, even if I'm not confused for a model. I tasted nothing except perfumey disinfectant-ish *eau de toilette*. All hops. All lupulin oil. Zero balance. Terrible stuff! I've never disagreed so profoundly with trusted beer nerds. Somebody is gravely wrong here, and I'll take the blame. Narrow Gauge does make a good Porter, but I just couldn't be asked to care after the cologne gangle.

2nd Shift Brewing was new to me, but they've already topped my list of favorites in the STL area. What's most refreshing about 2nd Shift is how little they seem to care about engaging the Saint Louis brewing scene. Maybe they even try a bit *too hard* to not care, but they're particular brand of pretentiousness pays off both in their product and the atmosphere of their brewery. Situated in an old warehouse district, a la our own **New Republic Brewing**, 2nd Shift skipped the more hipster approach to brewery design and kept to the crude basics. Their tap room screams INDUSTRIAL and BLUE COLLAR and HEY, YOU MIGHT HAVE CAT DANDER IN YOUR DAMN BEER (yeah, there's cats running amotorcycle magazines. Old board games. A crowd with a median age of 65. And a piss-ton of cats. It felt like a slice of South Arkansas fell straight into my lap. What's even better is 2nd Shift's beer. They have a little number called **Cat Spit Stout** that'll knock your teeth out. According to the can, "Cat Spit Stout came to be

STILL DRINKING

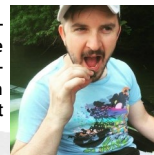
Il over the place), and this approach felt somewhat necessary. I did not see a single issue of the Riverfront Times (STL's version of The Chronicle) or any craft brewing magazines anywhere. What I saw were car and



when Steve was brewing his oatmeal milk stout. The infamous El Gato Grande was nearby, chewing on some grain and spitting it back on the floor. Seriously. We can't make this stuff up..." I met El Gato Grande. He's gotta be 30 pounds or more. He's orange in a way that would make Donald Trump blush with envy. What's remarkable about Cat Spit Stout is that, while there's nothing Imperial about the entire 7% ABV of it, it works like a meal. Finishing a single 16 ounce can takes the whole evening, and you're still sober on the other end. More of this please! Their **Technical Ecstasy Czech-Style Pilsner** was also highly kick back-able. If you can't make it to STL soon, at least check out the artwork above by tattoo artist Kyle A. Scarborough. I wish they put these sketches on t-shirts, but that's the hipster in me that doesn't belong in the warehouse district talking.

Urban Chestnut deserved two visits—even though their German kitchen deserves *all* the visits. Get *fett!* The Texan in me felt teary-eyed fondness for the German inspiration driving Urban Chestnut. I bought a sampler of eight tall cans for my brother and proceeded to drink all the **Stammtisch Pilsner**. I also threw back two Stammtisch's on my second visit, which isn't like me. I usually want to try everything I can from a brewery—a la Narrow Gauge (to great defeat)—but once I discovered Pilsner-ed perfection I couldn't let it go. My infatuation was complete and endless. And surely the big bastion on the hill, **Anheuser Busch**, is to thank for the specific supply of demands Urban Chestnut fulfills. It's easy to hate the mass market until we remember that—oh yeah—they paved the way and created the need, or at least the appreciation, for what the little man can offer—perhaps in more unique, more personalized ways. Such is the case with Urban Chestnut—a true Texas brewery in the Midwest. — KEVIN STILL

St. Louis is probably one of the oldest beer-centric towns in the US. Most people know the



city for two things: The Gateway Arch, and the Anheuser-Busch Brewery. And while the rest of the country is blissfully swimming in the Great Craft Beer Boom, it turns out that the largest brewer in the world hasn't really been pushing the little guys around in the Gateway City. If you get a chance to visit, take a second to look for a few of the fine brews the City has to offer.

The St. Louis Brewery, under the Schlafly brand, opened the way for other craft breweries in Missouri. Started by a lawyer and his colleague, Schlafly worked to change the Missouri beer laws that allow microbrews to open in the rest of the state. And for their part, they do a fantastic job of putting out fantastic versions of every kind of beer. The **Schlafly Coffee Stout** is one of the highest rated beers in the area on Untapped. They also put out a limited-edition **Double Bean Blonde**, which to drink from the bottle one would assume was a dark, full-bodied porter or stout, but pour it into a glass and it's a beautiful blonde ale. And a few years ago on their brewery tour they introduced their **Gose**, which blew the minds of the beer nerds on the tour, perfectly balancing salty and lemony, before sours and goes had really even hit the beer scene.

Urban Chestnut, with its great beer hall reminiscent of a traditional German-style, reminded me much of St. Arnold's on the inside. With names like **Schnickelfritz** and **Zwickel**, their focus is primarily German-style pilsners, hefeweizens, and weissbiers. Most notable for me is their spruce ale, which actually tastes exactly as it sounds. Once their beer hall took off, Urban Chestnut was able to open several tap houses around town, and their beers are easy to find in the greater St. Louis area both in cans and on tap.

Four Hands Brewery is definitely on the more adventurous side of the St. Louis breweries I explored, opting less for the safe, traditional styles and focusing more on milk stouts, hop bombs, and boozy bourbon barrel types, with names like **Absence of Light** for their peanut butter chocolate milk stout, and **Contact High** for their hoppy wheat ale. The adventurousness of Four Hands has helped push their milk stout to our local Specs once or twice.

And lastly, hit up the **Anheuser-Busch** brewery. The brewery sits on the same historic grounds where the founders built a modern brewery, raised a family, and grew the business. The tour guides and tour are remarkably transparent, taking you through the entire brewing process, showing off the beautiful hop-vine chandeliers, donated to A and B after the 1904 World's Fair, that hang in the four-story brew house. Midway through the tour, the tour guide actually lets you try pre-lagered Budweiser, a surprisingly interesting and delicious 9% brew that leaves you wondering why they don't find a way to bottle it.

So while St. Louis is known for being the home to Anheuser-Busch, there is far more interesting and delicious beer to be had than Bud Light. If you're ever in town, let me know and I'll make my little brother, Nick, show you around. — TIM PANIK

SALACIOUS VEGAN CRUMBS



Hey guys! A lot of you have been asking me about how to vegan, or how to vegan once a week or whatever. I think that's great and I want you guys to be successful! Each month, I'm going to throw some tips at you for easily **veganizing your day in right here in our little chain restaurant hell!**

For starters, before you go out, always **check the menu** online! Places like burger joints, steakhouses, and BBQ places will most likely only have fries, a wilted side salad with bottled Italian dressing, or a plain baked potato for you. You can also figure out if you need to **sneak something in** like Just Mayo, Just Ranch, or Earth Balance!

Check **ingredient lists** if you can. Most larger or chain restaurants will list **ingredients**, and **allergens**, so watch out for **milk, egg, fish, and shellfish**. If no ingredients are listed, you can check the **nutritional information**. Things with **0g cholesterol** are almost certainly vegan (dietary cholesterol only comes from animal sources!).

Roll into **Chuy's** and get a complete vegan Tex-Mex meal by ordering their **veggie enchiladas** with no cheese, the **guacamole soft tacos**, or the secret off-the-menu **veggie fajitas!** All of their rice and beans (including the **charros!**) are vegan-friendly, as well as all of their tortillas, chips, and the ranchero and tomatillo enchilada sauces. Ask for extra guac instead of cheese and sour cream, and top it off with a swirl marg!

Shiraz Shish Kabob has an entire side of the menu devoted to vegetarian and vegan offerings, including **veggie kabobs, falafel, dolmas**, soups, and stews. Order **rice**, their bread has dairy. They also have killer **baba ghanoush, hummus, tabbouleh**, and other vegan-friendly sides. If you're still doing honey, try the baklava (and plant some wildflowers when you get home to help native bee populations!).

Prepare your stretchy pants, **Taco Bell** is a vegan MEC-CA! You can easily change an item to be vegan by asking for **their Fresca style** (no cheese, sour cream, or creamy sauce, add pico) and **subbing beans for meat**. All of the veggies, beans, rice, tortillas/tacos (besides Doritos Locos) and non-creamy sauces are vegan friendly, so you can frankenstein up anything you want. It's easy to customize your order using their app, and you'll know exactly what's on your food. **Vegan crunchwrap AND cinnamon twists!** Yes, we can have it all!

Zoe's Kitchen is for you guys who ate too much Taco Bell on the way home from the bar last night. They serve up balanced dishes in the style of the Mediterranean diet, which happens to be very vegan friendly. The classic and harissa **hummus** (and the **pitas!**), **lentil soup**, and **veggie kabobs** are vegan, and the **power bowls** and **salads** are easily veganized by requesting no cheese and no tzatziki—add salsa verde, skhug, or harissa instead. Round out your meal with **roasted veggies, braised white beans, rice pilaf**, or **potato salad** (the only one in town!).

This is just a fraction of the **100% plant-based goodies** you can chow down on in town, and I'll detail more **each month**. If you set a goal for yourself to eat this way once a day, once a week, or for an entire month and screw it up, don't get down on yourself! Change takes time, and whether you're trying this for the **health benefits, ethical reasons**, or just to **challenge** yourself, any step towards a veganized crunchwrap is a good step! — KATIE KILLER

TALES OF EXCESS & MORAL OUTRAGE

EP. 6: NEUROSES, DIABETES & A TRIP TO THE HOSPITAL WITH A GAY HOOK-UP NOT YOUR OWN

Most people of mortal acquaintance remember a childhood friend. Mine was Bob Lombardo, whose neuroses dovetailed neatly with my own. Frinstance, Bob had a Jungian-proportions complex about getting a haircut. "Dag-stab it, Feets," his affectionate nickname for me, "I hate getting a haircut! What am I supposed to say to the stylist?" (Bob didn't go to barbers. We grew up in the hip 70s before gentrification, Man, and we weren't into the barbershop scene. Bob also wasn't into the cussing scene, so he employed euphemisms to avoid cussing and the resulting trip to the confessional.)

"Probably what style you want," I replied.

"No," protested Bob. "I mean after that—what do we talk about? It petrifies me!"

Bob's neuroses were contagious, such that, the next time I did the stylist scene, my mellow was totally harshed, Man. Bob filled me with so many complexes-by-osmosis that I had to turn one or two of them back on him.

We stayed friends through high school and into college, even though I went to school at the University of Dallas and Bob attended school near his home in Southwestern PA. We used to write letters to each other, Bob insisting that I write mine in stream-of-consciousness delirium because "I can't handle the 'fakeness' of normal letters, Feets," quoth Bob.

One Summer break when I was back in PA, I piled one of Bob's neuroses on him in spades. Bob had what the DSM-V would term a "Freudian Toothbrush Obsession." Either that, or Bob mistakenly thought the possibility of bad breath the equivalent of a raging case of the clap (not that he was in any danger of that, seeing as how his neuroses kept any mate-able female a rugby-pitch's length away from him, despite his fastidious oral hygiene). I stopped by Bob's place before I was to go on a thing unknown to Bob—a date. He was interning that night with a local paper to write a story in the pursuit of a journalistic career. When I went to his family's bathroom (yep, Bob still lived at home), I noticed Bob's toothbrush poised on the sink edge, pre-gamed with toothpaste. I perched it atop one of the light fixtures that straddled the sink mirror, in which place all 5' 5" of Bob would never espy it. I bid Bob adieu till later that evening. When I arrived back at the Lombardo domicile, he was played on the couch, frazzled and exhausted. "Ah, the little trickster," he sneered when I walked in. Heh-heh. The little bastard had his entire family tearing the house upside down trying to find the toothbrush. He was 20 minutes late for his reportage gig, but his breath was fresh for all that because after his arrival at fifth-level apoplexy, his younger sister had found the toothbrush.

However, my best working of mental-faculty failure on Bob came about by sheer serendipity (or, as Bob termed it, "the workings of bunofasitching demons, Feets.") Flash-forward six months. End of Winter break. I was to drive back to Dallas, Bob accompanying me so that he could for the first time in his 5' 5" life get out of Southwestern PA. He would then hop a flight back to Pittsburgh after a winsome sojourn in the Big D. Uh, not so winsome. Bob had a fixation on stand-up comedy, and he wanted to catch a comic's act. My roommate, Steve, entertained this idea for about 1 x 10⁻¹⁷ nano-second and opted that we venture to the Cedar Springs

area to Club 4001. Bob was a charter-member homophobe. Cedar Springs and Club 4001 were most assuredly not (but Bob didn't know that). I, Pam, and Bob went in my car. Steve and Jim Oatey (the proudly flaming neighbor across the dorm hall from me) led the way in Jim's car. Steve sold Club 4001 on its 10-cent drafts. I sold none of Club 4001's 10-cent glory holes on Bob because he would've turned inside out like a bottom-feeder fished out of the Mariana Trench. Things didn't go that bad. Bob, noticing something amiss with the Club 4001 crowd, imbibed his dime tankard from his roost in the ceiling rafters. Eventually, we talked him down and returned back to the dorm, Jim Oatey having stayed at the club.

Pam and I awoke early to get registered for classes, leaving Bob and Steve asleep in the room. When we returned, I had the sinking feeling that the ambulance outside my dorm was somehow connected to Bob. I walked into the room just as the paramedics were carting Steve out. I had neglected to inform Bob on procedures in case Steve had an diabetic reaction. There was a box of Pop-Tarts by the bed and a bottle of orange juice in the fridge. Jam a Pop-Tart in his mouth, check his swallow reflex, then wash it down with the juice. Bob was not equipped with such life skills. He awoke to the second-coming of a cocaine-addled Boris Karloff frothing and stumbling around the room, screaming "Brains! And Pop-Tarts." Bob raised the entire dorm and called the EMTs. In all the hubbub, Bob had failed to notice that Jim Oatey had indeed hitched a ride back to the dorm, and that his disheveled hook-up from the night's festivities was with him. Jim ran up to me, screaming, "Oh my g-d! I'm supposed to work Registration! I'm late! Can you take Daniel home?" Bob stared at me in horror. I said, "Why sure, Jim!"

Metroplex highways have been under construction since the European contact. Turns out that Daniel didn't want to go home but to meet his mother, a nurse, at a hospital in Arlington. These were pre-GPS days; Pam was riding shotgun, hog-tied by an indecipherable roadmap. What with the roadwork and traffic, navigation was as facile as stacking greased marbles while wearing boxing gloves. Pam got flustered, exclaiming, quite unintentionally, "This is so gay!" This prompted Daniel. "What? What is so *gay* I should like to know!" Peering into the rearview mirror, I saw Bob sorta like the monster in *Terminator 2*, pooled up and affixed to the backseat window as far away from Daniel as possible. (BTW, Daniel's oral and bodily hygiene, as was apparent to our olfactory sensibilities, what with his previous evening's activities with Jim, was not up to Bob's exacting standards.)

That night, before he was to fly out of DFW the next morning, Bob was frazzled and exhausted. I asked, "So howz your Dallas stay been, Buddy?"

"Feets," he murmured, looking every bit like Woody Allen after a dance number with the Hell's Angels, "If somebody told me a day ago that I'd wake up to some diabetic having a fit, then drive some gay to his mom in a hospital, I would've never believed him."

Bob doesn't really keep in touch with me.

And the moral of the story is: If you're driving a gay hook-up to his mom in an Arlington hospital, definitely allow it to jostle the demeanor of your homophobic friend. You can't buy entertainment like that. —RANDY BEELER

CONCERT CALENDAR

1/5—Pyreship, Monte Luna, No I'm the Leader @ Revolution, Bryan. 10pm

1/6—Colton French @ Revolution, Bryan. 10pm

1/11—Mixtape Party @ Revolution, Bryan. 9pm

1/12—Magic Girl @ Revolution, Bryan. 10pm

1/13—Magnet School, Jody Seabody & The Whirls, The Ex-Optimists @ Revolution, Bryan. 10pm

1/18—Little Image, Corusco, John Mark Kohl @ Grand Stafford, Bryan. 8pm

1/19—Passerbye, Camera Cult, The 100, Understudied @ Revolution, Bryan. 9:30pm

1/20—Cosmic Chaos, Wild Tinder Box, Mockingbird Brother, YeeHa! @ Revolution, Bryan. 9:30pm

1/26—Steph Steph Steph Fest feat. The Shutups, Prison Eater @ Revolution, Bryan. 9pm

1/27—LUCA, A Sundae Drive, Beige Watch @ Revolution, Bryan. 10pm

2/2—Bad Hombre, JC Juice, HYAH!, YeeHa! @ Grand Stafford, Bryan. 7pm

2/2—ST37, Hearts of Animals, The Ex-Optimists @ Revolution, Bryan. 10pm

2/3—Josh Glenn Experiment, Billy King & The Bad Bad Good, Electric Astronaut, Hand Me Down Adventure @ Revolution, Bryan. 9:30pm

2/16—Jay Satellite, LUCA, Magic Girl @ Revolution, Bryan. 10pm

2/23—Three33, Wellborn Road @ Revolution, Bryan. 10pm





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