

STOREPRESENT



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979represent is a local magazine for the discerning dirtbag.

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CULTURE WAR > BIG ELECTRIC

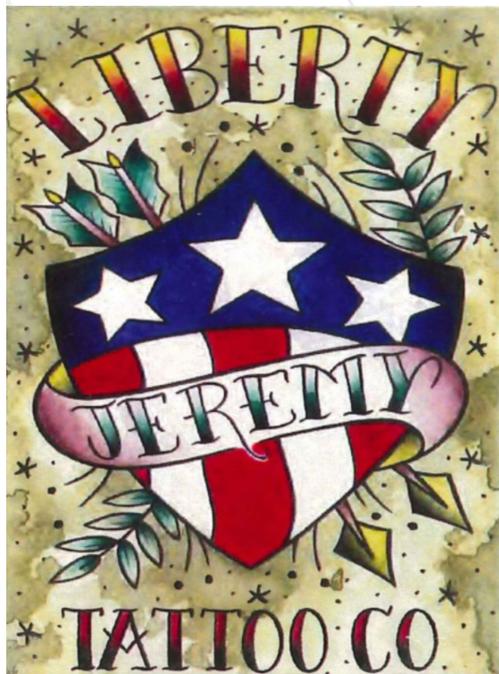
Gov. Greg Abbott has been hella busy lately, working for the best interests of his Texas citizenry. However, his best efforts have not been dedicated in the direction you would think are the most useful to the majority of Texans. Greg Abbott is busy spending all his time and energy trying to lock down women's uteri (uteruses? uterpeople? uterpersons?) and wall off Messco rather than focusing on the national guffaw that is the Texas power grid.

You see, it's hot as fuck outside. This is a duh statement. Anyone who has spent any significant amount of time in the state knows that Texas has three weather patterns: hot as balls; flood; and maybe eight weeks of not hot as balls. Starting in May Texas goes from most folks' summer ambience to tossing a fuckload of purse hot sauce on it to, you know, to *kick it up a notch*. And then it stays that way long past the time you grow weary of it. Texans cope by fleeing quickly from one air conditioned environ to the next with brief periods in-between, browning in the summer oven. A good HVAC is not a luxury. It is a god-damned necessity.

This winter the entire nation got a good view of the complete bureaucratic shitshow that is the Texas power grid and ERCOT's mismanagement therein. Because it's already August hot six weeks early Gov. Abbott wants you fine Texas citizens to "do your part" and turn your thermostats to 78 during the day and 82 overnight to minimize brownouts and blackouts to the already-stressed power grid. So let's get this straight. When Texas got that once in a century blast of real winter ERCOT couldn't handle that. But now that a normal summer is a few weeks earlier than usual ERCOT can't handle that either?! What *can* ERCOT handle? Apparently not much. Yet, the governor is out there stumping for ERCOT, urging youse to make that sacrifice. It's been four months since Big Winter laid the grid low. That's plenty of time to begin figuring out how to make the system actually work efficiently for average Texans. However, Gov. Abbott has spent his time and political currency instead trying to raise money to finish Trump's Wall and to push the Supreme Court to ban abortion by passing the most egregious test of Roe Vs. Wade to come out of any state house this year.

Polls suggest that Abbott has misspent that political currency. In the wake of ERCOT's gentle request of you to turn your homes into personal saunas for the greater good Texans were asked whether they felt that Abbott was placing his priorities in the proper order and, surprisingly for Texas, its citizens expressed concern that Gov. Abbott would try to drum up money for the Wall rather than drum up money to fix the ailing power grid. Some have comically suggested that perhaps ERCOT should attach their grid to a uterus to entice Gov. Abbott to do something about it. Maybe not every Texan has a womb but every one of 'em gots A/C and by god you better keep yer hands off a my thermostat.

The culture war plays very well for politicians when things are going fairly okay to really good. But when shit isn't working at the fundamental level for everyone it tends to backfire atrociously, even for rock-ribbed dyed-in-the-wool rights deniers like hardcore Texas Republicans. It's bad form to beg your citizens for money to build a useless wall that most Texans don't want but then tell them to turn their A/C up to face-melting levels instead. — KELLY MENACE



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BROOKSHIRE BROS. ROCK CITY

Brookshire Brothers on George Bush past Wellborn across from campus. Yeah, really.

But first...

So, I do the grocery shopping at our house, and sometimes I like to try different places. I've tried most of the HEBs (Harvey Mitchell and Wellborn is my favorite), one of the Krogers, Aldi's and Wal Mart. I heard about Brookshire Brothers opening up and thought I'd check it out.

First thing's first: new grocery store means new carts. There's nothing like a smooth cart.

Second thing, it's smaller, so doesn't have everything, but seriously, just two things I couldn't get on my list. Not bad.

I was about to check out, sauntering past the food court area, then over by the bar, then over by the stairs that led to a seating area overlooking the store.

Wait, hold up.

I left my cart and decided to go upstairs. Holy shit! There are couches, a foosball table, tons of seating and places to plug in, even outside areas with tons of seating. Woah.

Let me go back to the food area and see what that's about. Breakfast tacos, burgers, pizza, BBQ. What the hell? The bar has tons of taps. The food dude told me to go check out the stage. Oh yeah! There is a stage. I forgot.

So, the stage area is incredible. Speakers all over, big overhead display screen, tons of seating. Nice stage. And what looks like maybe a green room?

I decide to find out who books and manages this area.

Her name is Lisa. She was awesome. Super informative. She took me backstage and showed me around. The stage is so cool. Loads of power and direct XLR inputs all around. They run their own sound and provide monitors. The green room was amazing. Nice and cold AC, stocked fridges, changing rooms, mirrors, a TV. Dang. A lowly Rev Rat could feel a bit like royalty in here.

She said there's a camera that records and gets pushed to the TV's in the store along with the music getting pumped through the store.

And she said they pay artists.

I was floored. I thought of all the musicians I know in the area and was like, oh, shit. They need to be alerted of this magical place of wonder.

Oh, and I drove around the back to see where load-in is. There's a fucking elevator. I'm like, yes please.

It's a new place, so it's gonna be a bit of a task to get people regularly out there, but seriously go check it out. I am gonna go and chill on a couch when I need some "me" time. One might even take a date there or study or read comic books while waiting for someone and having a beer or some pizza.

My brother lives in Austin and took me to a Whole Foods that has this type of setup, and I was like: we need a place like

this in our town.

It's here. Good work Brookshire Brothers. This has got to be the next evolution of the grocery store. Will Kroger remodel or will HEB be next? Or will a whole foods or Trader Joe's come to town? We will see.

I will be telling ALL the people about it.

How cool would it be to see Tongue Punch, Electric Astronaut, The Ex-Optimists, Mary-Charlotte, Wisdom Cat, Benghazi Osborne, Mutant Love, and whatever other bands emerge after the big unpractice pandemic killed some of the local groups?!

I suggest you go grab a beer, slip into the venue, maybe a Friday night, and check it out. They remember you need milk.

It looks legit fuckin killer.

Sure, Lisa said it's gotta be "family friendly", so no "Let's Take Acid on Valentine's" or "So Much Fucks", but ALL the other stuff! She said sound ordinance is all good because there aren't any residences close.

This could be cool. Sure it's not in downtown Bryan, but it's still here. — JORGE GOYCO



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SALACIOUS ROCKY MOUNTAIN CRUMBS

Summer is stupid and hot, so Michael and I ran away to the beautiful, cool mountains of Wyoming for a week. We flew to Laramie, WY, where my brother and his family live, and then drove across the state to Jackson Hole and holed up in a secluded, bear-adjacent cabin. Here's some stuff that happened and some things you can eat while you're in Wyoming, because Wyoming is pretty great!

We left on a hot summer afternoon and got into Laramie on a winter evening (by Texas standards), HONGRY. Our original dinner plans fell through, so my seester RAN-DOMLY picked a restaurant in town called Jeffrey's Bistro, called them, and they had TONS of vegan options! Michael doesn't dabble in the meats either, and we were able to share a tofu avocado sandwich with vegan ranch (yes, vegan ranch in WY) and a noodley stir fry. I checked out the menu and they have vegan mac, vegan tacos, vegan nachos, all kinds of stuff! I cannot buy a sandwich with non-animal-based protein in this BCS. But I can in a teeny tiny town in Wyoming!

The next morning, we set off across the state. I thought the drive across Wyoming was going to be boring flat plains, and there are a lot of plains, but on the plains there are all sorts of things! Snowy mountains, rocky formations, plateaus, canyons, hills, rivers winding right up against the roadway. We saw dust devils, and there was leftover SNOW ON THE GROUND!

There's a big fancy Whole Foods in teeny little Jackson Hole, so you can get anything your little vegan heart desires. But we stopped at the Albertson's because we're not one of the billionaires who has a cabin overlooking the Tetons, and they had all sorts of great vegan stuff. I got tempeh bacon, already seasoned and ready to roll for packed trails lunches, and these really great Chao cheesy shreds! If you're ever in a more civilized town, find those shreds (I've also found them at Sprouts)! They were so good! There's also good liquor store right next store, with lots of local beers.

We stayed in a Lincoln Log cabin in Moran, between Jackson and Yellowstone, up this really windy mountain road. On one side, the mountain went up and up, covered in aspen trees—they were bare when we arrived, but flush with new leaves when we left! On the other was a sheer drop to a valley below, flat and covered in sagebrush, grasses, and scrubby shrubs, with a windy oxbow river. We'd see elk and deer whenever we went out. We saw a BEAR run in front of us across the road one night about half a mile from the cabin—after that, I didn't go outside alone at night because I'm a little extra juicy and plump right now, and I'd be a great treat for a bear.

We spent the first couple days in Yellowstone, and I know people are like, you simply muuust visit Monte Carlo, or you just haaaave to see Paris in their snooty private jet voices. But you have GOT to see Yellowstone. It was the first national park established in this country, and it's a HECK of a park. There are all sorts of landscapes, formations, and wildlife, and on top of that the earth beneath it is ALIVE—moving, bubbling, steaming, and always changing. It was different from the last time I saw it, and it will be different next time. It's massive and amazing and scary and beautiful. It's a testament to why preserving nature is important, to indigenous cultures, to the animals that inhabit the land, and to us as visitors so that we know that nature is special, and fragile, and irreplaceable. Try telling a Republican that, though.

We visited Old Faithful and the geyser basin nearby (basically a big fart park), the rainbow pools in the Midway geyser basin, the mud pots, some dizzying waterfalls, and barren, steaming wastelands. We visited Lake Yellowstone, a massive lake, still partially frozen over, with geysers, deep black pools, and mud pots on its shoreline. This place isn't real. It was the most beautiful place I'd been in the park, and we stayed for a long time just looking out across the expanse of partially frozen water. There are vents and cones that poke up above its water line, gurgling boiling water and melting the ice. Parts of the road had melted away in other parts of the park from volcanic activity, but this thing was still covered in ice.

The big features in Yellowstone are really touristy (and accessible!)—there are boardwalks to direct you, so everyone's sort of squeezed onto the same path. But the earth underneath the boardwalks is thin crust, covering acidic hot springs and sulfuric pools. People die every year from falling into the pools, and they're boiled alive and dissolved into nothing by the acidic water.

There were bison EVERYWHERE. As soon as we hopped out of the car at Old Faithful, we saw one in the parking lot, being directed out by a park ranger's car. There were two moseying across the roadway in front of Old Faithful, walking in front of the cars like they weren't even there. We saw BABIES. FROLICKING. When I was in elementary school, they told us that wild bison didn't exist anymore. I thought I'd never get to see one in the wild!

Oh, and we discovered Peepee Rock, a formation near a picnic pullout that's known for its grand ability for being a target to pee on.

The cabin was nice, but it was about an hour's drive from

Jackson with such a narrow and windy road, so getting into town for food was a trip. It was about three hours round trip to pick up food, so we tried to make sure that we made really good decisions about what we were getting. Luckily, my seester has a vegan friend who gave her some recs, so we visited Thai Me Up and Handfire Pizza. Thai Me Up is a Thai place that has food and is also home to Melvin Brewing. They had loads of good beers, including a fancy craft malt liquor (yes, a craft 40), and lots of great vegan or easily veganizable options. We got fried b sprouts with tofu, pad thai, and fried rice, no fish sauce please! and it was so tasty, we visited twice! Handfire Pizza was awesome, and really made me remember how disappointed I am in our locally owned BCS pizza places that don't have a single vegan protein or cheese for their pizzas (yes, YOU Rx, I'm calling you out, it's 2021, get some vegan cheese or something!). They have lots of different already vegan pizza combos to choose from, and use Impossible meat on their pies. I got the vegan Mo' Bettah BBQ pizza, with homemade BBQ sauce, Impossible meat, vegan cheese, onions, jalapenos, and pineapple, and it was perfect. It was so good. And gigantic. I ate it for dinner for two nights and packed it to eat on a hike and polished it off on the car ride home.

We spent the next couple of days in Grant Teton National Park, which is breathtakingly beautiful. Unless you're the guy who told everyone they were stupid for watching the sun set behind the mountains because there was one measly elk (wow, such view, such majest, much mammal). When you leave Jackson Hole going towards the park, you can't see the mountains, until you go around this bend and they open up right in front of you like a surprise. Teton Park Road runs through the valley at the foot of the mountains, with elk and bison on either side, and huge panoramic views of the Tetons. The natural geography couldn't be better for a drive by of the park. There are loads of turnouts, and it's a particularly great place to go star gazing at night.

We hiked near Coulter Bay and came across BEAR ISLAND, an island at the end of a land bridge that turned out to be closed because of a strong bear presence. We took a ferry across Jenny Lake to hike up to Inspiration Point with my niece, but were foiled when saw a little kid who had slipped, dangling from his dad's hand off a cliff, on a particularly narrow and slippery part of the trail. The Inspiration Point hike and the extra leg that goes up to the big rock that looks over Jenny Lake are worth the steep huffing and puffing (I've seen tiny kids and old grandmas go up it)—just not when the trail is snowy and muddy, with about six inches of passable trail, with a sheer drop down to a waterfall on the other side. We hiked around the lake instead and saw a chunky little marmot and a mountain snek!

Michael and I snuck away the last morning for a solo hike in the Tetons around String Lake, and it was FRAUGHT. About five minutes into our hike, we saw something moving across a narrow point in the lake. Michael said it was a log. I, who get my eyes check every year and wear contacts, thought it looked like a bear. I pretended to believe Michael, but maybe five more minutes down the trail, with me leading, we went through a thick patch of trees, and on the other side, about 20 feet away, BLACK BEAR! Just pawin' around for some snacks. And me, lookin' like a juicy snack, I turned around and scampered out of there to tell the other groups that had been behind us. They all banded together to offer their children and babies as bear fodder like this was any old Tuesday. For the rest of the hike, I was bearanoid. Every twig snap, leaf rustle...BEAR! There was also lots of deep snow, but we were also sweaty? So I don't know what was going on. I didn't know you were allowed to sweat when there was snow out.

When it was time to drive back to Laramie, we stopped in a little town called Pinedale. They have a cool little deli and food store called Obo's that had lots of good vegan snacks and options. We also visited a shop called Nested West, a woman-owned store that sells all kinds of little artsy gifts by woman-owned businesses (Wyoming is the equality state). Everyone got something cool there, and if you're ever in the middle of Wyoming, and need souvenirs for your friends who are checking on your pets, it's a nice little stop! Also visit the visitors center and ask for stickers! It's a thing!

Once we were back in Laramie, Michael and I broke off to go get our own secret special adults only dinner at Sweet Melissa's, a local vegetarian and vegan restaurant. We'd been here before and I was excited to go back—we polished off two orders of queso last time! This time, I got a boozy chai drink—they have all kinds of boozy drinks like white russians that they can make vegan with soy or almond or coconut milk! We munched on crispy orange cauliflower with coconut rice, and falafel pitas, but their food runs the gamut from classic homestyle veggie meatloaf to veggie fajitas, stir fries, junky cauliflower wings, and big ol' burgers. We also visited Coal Creek Tap around the corner, a small brewery and coffee shop with really nice beers, and really crazy glassware. There's also a great big co-op there, like a gigantic Village Foods, with a good selection of vegan specialties. Laramie is a really nice place, and actually has really great vegan options, even though it's such a small town. It's puts BCS to shame.

When we got back to Texas, we did what every Texan (who can't eat at Whataburger) does when they get back from out of state, eat their weight in Tex-Mex. — KATIE KILLER

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TIM ON FILM

ASK CREEPY HORSE



LUCA (2021)

I have to admit, when I first saw the trailer and synopsis for *Luca* I got serious *The Little Mermaid* vibes. And to be fair, anyone who sees this is going to make a few assumptions and comparisons to a few movies. That's fair, because it is all ground that has been addressed in some way or another, and it isn't offering anything really new.

But... I will say that this movie struck a few chords with me.

Luca is for lack of a better term, a sea monster. Some type of merman, gigantic cartoon version of those old sea people ads you used to send off for in the 80s from cut out comic book ads. His dad raises "show crabs" and his mom is worried about keeping up with the neighbors. This leaves Luca to herd the local small fish every day. I was wondering what exactly the family does with the fish, but from what I can see, Luca's only job is to keep them away from boats.

The sea monsters, are afraid of the land monsters (us) and Luca is forced to promise never to leave the water. Turns out, sea monsters can easily look like humans once they get dry, but the second any part of them gets wet... boom... things get fishy.

Long story short, Luca meets Alberto, an older sea monster who lives on an island and collects human stuff making him an "expert". The two become fast friends, and with the love of human inventions (in particular, the Vespa scooter) and adventure, everything is going well until Luca's parents discover he has been visiting land.

The parents make arrangements for Luca to live with his transparent deep sea uncle Ugo in the deep. The prospect of being uprooted from his home and his only friend, to live in the deep sea where there is nothing to see or do, prompts Luca to run away with Alberto, to live in the nearby town of Portorosso where "no one would bother to look for them."

In town, they meet the usual Disney townsfolk: Old people who wave and yell at kids, kids who play ball in the courtyards, a villain with Gaston similarities, and a new human friend, Giulia. Giulia is a misfit tomboy who is training to compete in the local race against the town bullies and wrangles Alberto and Luca to join her team. As they get to know each other, Luca becomes infatuated with Giulia and knowledge of the human world. Alberto then becomes visibly jealous. The inevitable rift occurs leading us to a broken team the day of the race but our little ragtag team overcomes to win the darn thing after the boys get exposed as sea monsters.

Yeah, there's a lot going on and nothing at the same

time. It's a movie with a lot of plots and a 90 minute runtime. But none of it seems rushed, and that might be the charm to this flick. *Luca* KNOWS it's trading on tropes and familiarity. It's nothing you haven't seen before, but it is a PIXAR flick so you have to know, that it's also going to be smart about it. And here we have a film, despite it's numerous plots and short runtime, that seems to just go with the story. It let's the ideas tell the story, rather than the story tell you its ideas....

Let me explain.

I feel Luca's struggle. As a kid, growing up in a strict Catholic family in a small town, I quickly fell in love with punk rock. It was bound to happen, my parents, like Luca's, kept too tight of a leash on me. They forbade me to watch television shows like *Three's Company* and scoured the novels I bought from garage sales for bad words leaving me to read in secret. When punk rock came along, it was over. Rebellion and anarchy wrapped up in three chords... my parents' rules never stood a chance.

My first show was a lot like Luca's first trip to the land. It was scary as **. After lying to my parents about a friend's house I was staying at on a school night, we drove two hours to a club. I still remember being terrified as I gave five bucks at the door and got my hand stamped, making the walk through the hallway leading to the stage and audience floor, the place looked like it was held together strictly by flyers and band stickers. It smelled like piss. In the bathroom someone offered me acid, and I think someone was either having sex or getting beat up in the stall next to me. At one point in between bands I sat down on a chair and leaned my head against the wall to catch my breath. As I pulled my head away, a piece of the wall came off attached to the sweat on my head revealing a family of bugs underneath. It was gross. I loved it.

I remember coming home that night. Highway 59. I was awake. Not just awake, buzzing. My adrenaline was at a high. Lying to my parents was cool, because here was this world I never would have known if I followed the rules. Going back to normal life during the week sucked. School sucked. The longer I spent my time "out of the water" at the shows, the more I loved music. I made friends there, Life-long friends. Bands and music spoke to me. When I say punk rock saved my life, it is not a joke.

Eventually my parents found out. By then I had a stage name and was already working a part time job. I left the house at 17, working multiple jobs just to pay part of a rent on an apartment and have enough money for five dollar shows and whatever beer was on special.

Was it dangerous? Hell ya. Did my parents have a right

to worry. Yup. I was not a good kid. But they had to let go. That's part of it. That's growing up. It doesn't end well for everyone, and I got lucky, but if I watch *Luca*, I am not thinking about a life lesson learned or the importance of listening to my parents.

I'm thinking... "Man I'm glad Luca got on that train."
7 outta 10

=====

OXYGEN (2021)

I like single set movies. Well, I like well done single set movies. That being said, when I saw the trailer for *Oxygen*, I got a little excited.

The movie, opens like other sci-fi movies that mostly have one setting, a confused person waking up. Our main character Liz wakes in a panic as she finds herself in some type of high tech coffin. Her co-star in the movie, is mostly the onboard computer, MILO who talks in a calm manner often offering to sedate Liz, and informing her she only has 35% oxygen left and it is dropping rapidly.

Things become more complicated as the first half of the movie moves on. MILO isn't necessarily the most cooperative computer system. It's one of the perks of being not human and dependent on oxygen. MILO has certain directives. He can only open the pod with an administrative code, and it is not advised. This means even if Liz suffocates he will not help. But he can make calls for Liz, connect her to her social media account to help her remember things, so the first few half is Liz basically trying to figure out what's going on.

As Liz is able to call the police, she starts to get the impression that something is being kept from her, so she continues to dig through lost memories and MILO's help accessing photos and phone calls to figure out the situation. The whole time, the constant pressure of less air and claustrophobic themes.

Although Netflix has asked people reviewing the movie not to divulge the "twist" it's pretty predictable and not a big surprise, but director Alexandre Aja does a great job. The situation is predictable yeah, but that doesn't make it anymore pressing for those of us watching to get some closure. The eventual reveal is done well. Mostly because of unraveling in real time we are forced to listen to the oxygen levels dwindle to single digit numbers and we finally see a reveal of the environment around her cryogenic pod. It's science fiction, it's suspenseful, and if you aren't squeamish for a little tight space, it's worth a watch.

6 outta 10
- TIM DANGER

Today I danced in the rain.

I played with my cat LBJ.

I made the best cup of coffee.

I spent time with my dad.

I called my nephew for his birthday.

It's taken a lot of work but I am at peace and mindful of my actions. This has not been an easy process whatsoever but very necessary for my longevity and well-being.

I've learned to love and care for myself.

In the past three years, I've lost a lot of people in my life. From death to religion and politics. My uncle and stepdad died a few months back. A couple close friends have died in recent weeks. My aunt is at home dying from liver failure. My best friend died in her sleep on a family vacation with her husband and son celebrating her first Christmas as a mother.

I say this not for attention seeking not sympathy but it just made something click suddenly.

I can't continue to determine my happiness based on whether I'm encountering pain or troubles. Life is pain and trouble and inertly unfair. It hurts. It's fucked sometimes. It's fucked most of the time. Whenever it's fucked, it's fucked. Plain and simple.

I'm sober. I exercise and try to eat well. I meditate. I do my best to be mindful of others and of myself.

I also take a ton of meds for depression, anxiety, ADHD and PTSD. I have a therapist I see twice a week and a psychiatrist I see once a month. These two have saved my life. Literally. It's been a very hard fought battle that I'm actually winning. I never knew I could feel or live this way. I couldn't imagine not living like this.

I'm at peace. I'm happy. I've moved on. I'm happy with my life and the direction I'm going in.

Date yourself. Buy yourself special things as a gift like you would if it was for a loved one. Buy that fancy bath bomb and smoke a blunt. Take yourself out for cocktails and read a classic novel. Go to a fancy restaurant and order dessert first.

You can also get help with issues you may have. You don't have to live like this. There are good folks out there that want to help you. Yeah, it's work but aren't you worth it? The answer is yes. Just say yes.

Treat yourself with all the love and respect you do to others. Leave a legacy. Be a cool person. Eat ice cream. I love you all. - CREEPY HORSE



SAYING GOODBYE TO A HOUSE

Due to extenuating circumstances, we are moving from our house that we've lived in since we got to the BCS area (15 years ago), and into town (Southwest Parkway/Dartmouth area).

It's gonna be super different. Our house at the moment is out in the country, and it's not perfect, but it's really nice being out where there aren't a ton on people, where we have a whole acre between us and any neighbors, can see the stars, can walk the dog in the middle of the street, and among other things, can pee outside without having to be too cautious about if someone might accidentally see my weiner.

There are things we are gonna miss about being out there, but one of the big things is that we are about 15 minutes from just about anything (not awesome), and with the kids getting jobs in town and getting their driver's licenses and stuff, being in town is gonna be better all around.

We will be renting a duplex. Yeah, I know, that's gonna be VERY different. We really have no idea what we are getting into, but we are all up for it. Sure, there will be some bullshit to contend with, but ultimately, we are gonna do our best to stick with the temporary living arrangement for the time being. It's transitional. We understand that.

Leaving the house that has so many memories is gonna be difficult to a certain extent. It's pretty much the only house any of the kids remember, even my oldest, who was 4 when we moved there.

We've updated the house, taken care of it, dealt with issues, and mowed that fucking lawn so many times. Grass and weeds just keep on growing! Some weeds are pretty, some weeds are assholes.

I've learned many things at this house: How to change a broken water heater as well as pull up ruined carpet because of it; I've painted pretty much every room a couple times; I've cut down dead trees and learned how to burn a burn pile (as well as our whole field a couple times); and I've put in a fence, sidewalks, fixed sprinklers, taken down walls, ceiling fans, etc.

Most of our family pictures are in rooms in this house.

We look in our massive archive of digital pictures every once in a while, always commenting on needing to organize them at some point, but never actually doing that. We still have physical photo albums, which will just go into storage for a while until we get into a permanent place, which might be a while. Affordable digital cameras came into existence right around the time we had our first (19 or so years ago), so although a bunch were printed, many are in folders on a hard drive.

What will the next family do in our house? Will they build a two story treehouse with a bridge to another treehouse? Will they paint murals on a couple walls and fill them up with paintings done by everyone in the family? Will they have 41 animals living on the property at one time? Will they have to clean up the gory carcass of a

goat that got ravaged by coyote pups? Will they find milk snakes in their hallway? Will they have chickens? Ducks? Turkeys? Hedgehogs? Will their chicken coop catch fire and permanently make one of the chickens naked in the butt area?

What did that last family do? Did their daughter almost accidentally hang herself from the blind cords because she was acting like a horse? Did they have a dog that killed a ton of snakes but liked sleeping in the road, which ultimately got her killed? Did they write a secret mystery about the death of "Momma Oak" and the conspiracy and battle between the evil one and the local squirrels? Did they rehome around 17 raccoons to a forest about 3 miles away? Did they accidentally shoot a gun in the house?

There are several animals buried on the property, some cremated ashes sprinkled on there too. So much music and laughing and crying happened in that house. There are probably tools buried on the property as well as notes and candy wrappers. There are messages and drawings painted over and even a bullet hole that got spackled over and hidden in the living room (.22 caliber btw). The garage that got transformed into a rec room has had so much screaming at the TV while playing *Call of Duty* and *Skyrim* and so many more games in between. It also must still resonate from all the Shoobiedoobie practices and karaoke sessions that happened.

I will miss all the perfectly distanced trees where we hung up multiple hammocks and fell asleep or read comic books or listened to music. Maybe I'll figure out how to hang one up at the duplex.

So many tears have been cried in this house. So many meals have been cooked (and sometimes burned). So many poops have been pooped, and since it's on septic, we are leaving a little bit of us in the half acre leach field. We will miss the horses running around in the adjoining field, and the neighbors battling with bigger and better fireworks twice a year. I will miss my octogenarian across-the-street friend who is just so sweet and kind and gentle and remembers all the kids' names. We will miss being the secret judges to the houses in the neighborhood unofficial Christmas lights competition (they will never know who gave out the prizes).

Sure, the house doesn't contain all that, but as with any object, memories are attached. I'm sure we will drive by every once in a while on the way to friends' houses and cow pasture visits. Maybe we will even ask if we can take a look in the house in 20 years from now and let the memories flood in.

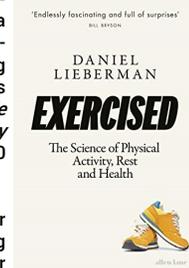
One thing we are considering is leaving journals and stories about the things that went on in the house while we lived there. Some sad, some terrible, most happy. It will be very weird to see the house empty, devoid of all our stuff, but we will also learn to love our new digs.

We will miss the house, but are ready for our new adventure, wherever it will take us. Maybe some of us will travel away at some point. Maybe some of us will live together for a long time. For sure we will stay connected, and will always have our memories.

At the moment, the house is kinda boring and grey and doesn't look like us at all, but the realtor suggested we make it look like this so they could fill it with their own ideas and creativity and decorations. So the transition to finally saying goodbye to the house has begun in stages. Stage 1: boring, tidy, grey, not decorated with bloody skulls, weird art, and kawaii and pop culture stuff. Changes will always come. We just have to figure out how to deal with it all, and hopefully not lose too many people along the way. — JORGE GOYCO

MIKE READS REAL GOOD

There are thousands of books out there about exercise and its benefits and all that, but this is probably the only one you need to read. The downside is that it's tough to read in places since Harvard evolutionary biologist Daniel Lieberman is an academic, and — bless their hearts — academics have to use all that knowledge they've gathered. That said, Lieberman, a pioneering researcher of human physical activity, is a compelling writer who can communicate in clear and entertaining language, and that's what makes *Exercised: Why Something We Never Evolved to Do Is Healthy and Rewarding*, his nearly 500 page book, worth the time.



Lieberman sets out to shatter many of the myths surrounding exercise and the way we live our lives. One thing driving his book is the question: if we all know how beneficial exercise is for us, why do most of us spend our lives trying to avoid it? Other questions include whether sitting is bad for you, does running wreck your knees, how much exercise is enough.

"Exercised" ranges across academic studies (Lieberman has read them for you and condenses them wonderfully) and the author's own personal history with exercise. He tosses in fun facts like how poorly humans are designed for running fast by showing that the greatest sprinter of all time — Usain Bolt — couldn't even beat a squirrel in a footrace. Overall, Lieberman has fun with his findings and communicates that delight in his writing.

Lieberman's field studies include living with hunter-gatherer tribes around the globe to see how much "exercise" is normal for humans. He attached sensors to entire villages, lugged a treadmill into jungles, observed our evolutionary predecessors in the ape family, researched early man. One dominant finding was humans like to take it easy as much as possible and avoid unnecessary exertion. It's just natural, which explains why exercise comes so hard for so many, Lieberman found. However, as we all know, modern life is very different from the past, and where we once "exercised" enough in a normal day, we have to be more deliberate about exercise, Lieberman writes. Yet, it doesn't have to be drudgery. Dancing is as valid a form of exercise as marathons, and walking is as worthy as running for weight loss.

Lieberman's myth shattering about exercise is a charming discovery spread over the pages of his book. One of his purposes is to remove the guilt and shame visited on those who don't exercise for whatever reason. That certainly has not worked over the decades in America for sure. Lieberman does research one international company who requires its employees to exercise. Another direction of Lieberman's research is revealing how much exercise can help us live better as we age.

Finally, here is the gist of Lieberman's advice about exercise: "Make exercise necessary and fun. Do mostly cardio, but also some weights. Some is better than none. Keep it up as you age." Good advice. — MIKE L. DOWNEY



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Do you like exploding barb wire death matches? How about double cage matches? What if you could see women wrestle hardcore and open LGBTQIA wrestlers fighting on a main card? Then AEW is for you. Did you grow up in the heyday of Ric Flair, Rowdy Roddy Piper or beginning of the attitude era? Then AEW is for you.

In April, I had foot surgery and was subjected to having to lie down with my foot propped up for a month. Keep in mind, by March, I'm pretty sure I'd seen everything Netflix, Disney+ and YouTube had to offer. Now I had to spend a month by myself with my foot propped up.

What's a girl to do? Well, my roommate, Rented Mule, turned me on to AEW Wrestling. He'd been recording it for months so there was a huge backlog he hadn't kept up with. He didn't really have a lot of interest in the show but I was immediately transfixed. This was the wrestling I grew up on. 80s to early 90s heyday, modern and evolved.

Backstory time: I grew up with two older brothers, I grew up on the Macho Man Randy Savage and Elizabeth storyline, the very first appearance of the Undertaker, The time Sherry got caught in a love triangle with Shawn Michaels and Rick Martel. I could go on. I'm also a pretty big fan or westerns and kung fu movies but I digress.

I LOVE wrestling. I have books about luchadors. I've been to indie and corp wrestling matches alike. Rented Mule and I even once almost got arrested for being punk rock after twilight leaving a midget wrestling event where the wrestlers chided me for my height.

I love love love wrestling and you're sexist if you don't think a girl can love wrestling a lot too. Just putting that out there for all the boys, gals and non-binary friends.

I hadn't really watched wrestling a whole lot though as the general option was always WWF/WWE. It was boring and overproduced. You'd wait upwards of 15-20 minutes before any wrestling would even take place and still be just a squash match.

AEW is very supportive of the LGBTQIA family and is currently selling shirts that donate 100% to the Trevor Network and Trans groups. They also have several folks active in the main roster that are also LGBTQIA. I never thought I'd see an openly gay man do a death drop finishing move in better eye makeup and lashes than I've

ever done. To watch a strong beautiful Transwoman win a title belt on the women's division and have the respect of her peers and fans. One of the Vice Presidents of the company is openly bisexual and wore his pride colors on a nationally aired event.



Wrestler Dusty Rhodes son, Dustin Rhodes aka Goldust, has a trans flag over his logo. You have luchadors fighting alongside New Japan wrestlers. Indie circuit old hands aside young, new and fresh talent cutting their teeth. There's so much empowerment with typically marginalized minority groups. Let's call it for what it is, wrestling has a dark and complicated history of racism and sexism.

So does America. Anyhow, a female referee works a lot of the major matches. There's a gay

The promos are at times downright ridiculous. There's a hipster wrestler that in every way is the "anti" of all a wrestler is. It's fucking hilarious. Or when Chris Jericho and Maxwell Jacob Friedman (one of the best heels since Rowdy and Flair imho) broke out into a crooning song and dance number after one upping each other with their steaks. In a previous promo they'd go on a bender in Las Vegas and smoke weed on camera. Mike Tyson once broke up a fight between the two. Shaq would get a drink dumped on his head and would proceed to wrestle Dusty Rhode's other son, Vice President of AEW and very active wrestler, Cody Rhodes.

Snoop Lion (Dogg), did a finishing move in a match. Sammy Hagar had a wrestling tag team named after him and later filmed a thank you to that team. Mark Henry and The Big Show are commentators on the assorted AEW shows. On their roster they have well known talents, Vicki Guerrero, Sting, Miro (formerly Rusev on WWE), assorted members of the Four Horsemen, notably Arn Anderson and Tully Blanchard. Dean Ambrose is now Jon Moxley and wrestles in actual barb wire exploding death matches as well as works with the newer talent to give them a push even if he's destroying them.

AEW is the live note from the fans to all the wrestlers that paid their dues whether they were indie or mainstream. It's run by pro wrestlers for pro wrestlers. It's just a bunch of old timers and kids that are still green having fun and enjoying themselves. The promos are insanely ridiculous. They really are fighting and putting their bodies through a lot even if it's choreographed to a story line. We all know that. We watch for the fun and you should too. — *CREEPY HORSE*



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T/HERE

On a clear day, when the wind stays home to rest and the waters of the lake stay as placid as can be, it's possible to cross from Here to There.

Go down to the lake's edge just after morning's first light, when the sun has begun to wake but not yet fully roused from its bed. The passage is easiest then, when there is neither night nor day and nothing is either fully one thing or the other. It's important that you go at first light and not last though. It's the only way you will make it. As the old stories have it, the crossing is made easier if you fill your pockets with stones, but in truth there is no need to weight yourself down so. Fill your pockets instead with gifts, candies, perhaps a handwritten card or letter painstakingly penned and marked with the name of the one you seek. You will sink either way.

Of course, you should not seek out your other-self if you're There; you will not find their face There, as you surely know. Your passage is a trade, not a gift.

If you have chosen to go There, it is almost certainly to seek out one that you have loved, and lost, Here. If this is so, take the first calm day you can find and Go. These things have a way of averaging themselves out, over time, There hewing close to Here, Here cleaving to its own reflection in turn. Each place is both reflection and reflected, and such a finely-tuned mirror does not tolerate imperfections.

Kneel by the shore and find your own reflection. Wait for a moment, watching carefully. If you reach for your reflection first, it will reach back for you; if it reaches first, you must be ready. Lean into its embrace and hold your breath. When you land on the other side, your feet on the sandy sky and your head hanging over the unreachable blue ground, do not look back. Time is precious There just as it is Here and you have none to waste looking to see which way your reflection has gone.

You may wonder at the stronger, deeper color of the sky; at the way the whole world seems to tremble when a breeze drags its fingers across the surface. But breath will come as naturally to you as it does Here, and though you may doubt it until you tumble through to the other side, you will not feel awkward, not frightened in the least, to walk upside down. You will never doubt that your heel, with each strike, will cling to the inverted

cobblestones. Indeed, you may feel, for the first time in ages, that the weight of all the sky is not pressing down on you and driving the air from your body.

Hurry to your lost one's door—your own door, perhaps, or another. Its color will be the same as you remember but you must go north where you remember south, bear left when you would have turned right. When you grab instinctively for the doorknob, you will find it on the wrong side from what you expect. Your key will not fit the lock; be sure to knock loudly.

Savor your time together. You may get another opportunity; you may not. Weather is fickle and so is the threadbare curtain between life and death. Say the words you never said; give the pieces of yourself that you always hid away against a perfect moment that never came. No moment is perfect until polished to a bright shine by human hands. Use your hands now.

Eventually, as the sun slips away from the sky, Here will come tugging at the tethers that bind you to one world and not the other. Do not try to bring your lost one with you, even though they cling to your hand, even if they ask what's come over you, beg you to stay, just a moment longer, just one more cigarette, just one more cocktail. If they try to make the passing without their own reflection to accept them, they will be lost all over again. This is not your world and this is not your loved one and the time you steal would come due, in turn; the tug at your heart will become a noose about your neck.

When the lake is calm, look for your reflection's face and wait once more for that moment of perfect calm. Tumble through one another, you bubbling upward, your other-self sinking away below.

You should hurry home. Enjoy the evening meal, the warmth of the fire, the embrace of your parents, the smile of your pretty-one, the laughter of your children—whatever gifts this life has granted you.

It's best not to linger too long on who your other-self might have come here seeking.

These things have a way of averaging out over time. You should enjoy however much is left to you. —
STARKNESS

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CRITICAL RACE THEORY

If you find yourself around someone who is wildly misinterpreting the purpose and foundations of critical race theory, this is a way to quickly argue with someone on the book of face. Especially when Jordan

Peterson and other 'right wing thinkers' consistently blow this dog whistle. America has deeply-embedded *systemic expressions* of racism, from law to banking and more. Because of this complex and multi-generational problem, marginalized/minority groups generally, but black folks specifically, have been denied the sort of compounding wealth that whites were not. And before we go any further, I have to say that it isn't "whiteness" that makes it so, it's just the fact that white folx happen to be the dominant group, and so it only makes sense that our society would benefit the dominant group. In a different timeline, who knows, maybe the roles are reversed. But it is the power relationship that's at the core of the issues.

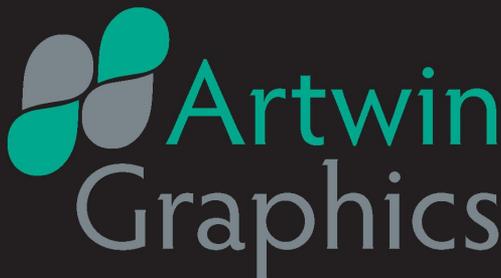
Even when we don't consider the *direct* ways in which blacks were denied these things (think Tulsa race massacre, Jim Crow, etc) the subtle systemic problems all combine to oppress people over time. And the really insidious thing about systemic factors is that *no single person can even be responsible*, so there isn't really anyone to "blame". Sure, sharecropping was a "real" thing we can point to as an example of actual racism, but what about how that went on to influence the generational wealth of black farmers? That's more complex and nuanced. Redlining was a "real" thing, but what about how that went on to impact black homeownership? How did these things create the rural/urban divide over time? How might bank loans being rejected to black families generations ago impact how a current family lives? My great grandparents got a loan to start a gas station in a small town when cars were becoming a *thing* post WWII, and we all now live relatively comfortable middle-class lives. I wonder how the trajectory of our family might have been different if that wasn't the case. And what if that was similar for all families who even *looked like us*?

When you hear a right wing pundit call these things "irreversibly racist" or say "the division will always be there", it is spoken in a pejorative sense, as if to say it's

bad for us to think of our country this way. When sociologists discuss these things, they are discussed as neutral social realities of a system which was established in a certain way, to benefit some people more than others. The academic discipline is concerned with *understanding these divisions* so that we might alleviate them. In the course of my life, and throughout my political science education at Texas A&M University I was never made to feel guilty for being white. No one ever asked me to "atone". I haven't done anything wrong. But I do see that I benefited in many subtle ways from a system I had no hand in creating. This idea that white people are inherently evil and that we should feel bad is a right-wing fiction (either amplified from some infinitesimally small corner of the left, or invented outright), and it's helpful because it triggers our defensive side. It sets the tone of the conversation before it even starts. It's the system which is at fault, and its deficiencies are easily fixable. But that's not a discussion right-wing politicians want to have. Even if they did care about the issue, fixing it would be *expensive* and they know it.

Another interesting point is the US military being overwhelmingly white even at the enlisted level. One of the major ways for poorer Americans to have a shot at guaranteed healthcare, a reasonable salary, reasonable housing costs, etc has about 70% of the enlisted service members as white, and among flag officers it's closer to 90%. Does knowing about past racism, and how that past racism influences the current time, make soldiers divided? And this says nothing of the black soldiers who might be happy this is finally getting talked about. The critique is of the system, not of white people. But that said, when a person defends a deeply unfair system, they line up to take the heat in the same way.

I genuinely believe most Americans have an innate sense of fairness. When politics are stripped away, many of us can point to a crap situation and say "that's unfair, and we should make it more fair". Critical Race Theory seeks to understand the dynamics of human interaction, and hopefully use that knowledge to make better societies.— *STARKNESS*



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Last month Joni Mitchell's much celebrated 1971 album *Blue* officially turned 50 years old. Many folks with greater skill than I have written amazing paens to the immense impact of Joni's music on culture. *Blue* isn't really my Joni Mitchell album, but I have been greatly interested in reading all the think pieces that have accompanied this anniversary and it's got me thinking about Joni, her place in the culture of pop music and in culture at large, our society's love of symbolism, and the very nature of what happens to a song once it is freed into the world.

Let's start with my relationship with Joni. My brother and I have claimed Joni as our spiritual mother (he claims Ginger Baker for his father and I claim Neil Peart for mine...if you have spent time with either one or both of us this is painfully accurate). I came to Joni through her mid-to-late 70s foray into jazz-fusion. Those albums juxtapose musical sophistication with cinematic orchestration, ethnic drumming, saxophones, and a penchant for trading off intensely private personal narratives and the injection of self into other characters' stories, from prairie cowboys to feminist pioneers to blues singers to regular people. It was the music itself that drew me. The open, big sky Midwestern plains of the phased double-tracked guitars, the way Jaco Pastorius "sang" duets with Joni through his fretless bass guitar, the way Larry Carlton widens that space by emulating a pedal steel with his electric guitar, the soft shuffle of Don Alias's congas. I would buy every album of hers I'd come across and the pre-1974 Joni albums would sit on the shelf, largely unlistened to, while I wore out those 1975-1978 albums. Joni's jazz period was polarizing at the time. It is largely her 1970-1974 period that has secured her place in pop culture, particularly *Blue*.

What is it about this album in particular that has captured its place in so many people's hearts? I suppose it's important to first figure out how Joni got to that point. She began her career as a Joan Baez-esque folksinger in the Canadian Midwest. Like Joan, Joni had a commanding control of an amazing vocal range. Unlike Joan, Joni was driven towards writing her own material and it is through her songwriting, as performed by others, that Joni began to make her reputation. Many of her best-known folk era songs are better known in versions recorded by other more established artists of the time. Joni's first two albums are very much about Joni trying to figure out who Joni Mitchell the singer/performer wanted to be versus Joni Mitchell the songwriter. By her third album, 1970's *Ladies of the Canyon*, Joni began to put some rock & roll and more openly of herself into her songwriting. I say openly, because Joni's songwriting has always largely stemmed from personal experience, but often Joni's early material saw her injecting herself into other characters with oblique references to personal matters. If one looks at the canon of folk music it was largely protest songs, murder ballads, and country blues. Songs were passed on (or rather stolen) from one person to another and were sometimes rewritten in the process. Thus began Bob Dylan's storied career.

Once Bob came on the scene he began to shape it in his image. His protest songs, often rewritten from other folk standards, shook the nation and ultimately destroyed folk music just as it truly got its feet underneath it. Bob turned away from his character of Bob The Self-Righteous almost immediately after becoming commercially successful with it. People were now stealing his half-stolen songs and turning "Bob Dylan" and the songs

JONI & SYMBOLISM

into monolithic cultural statements. The power scared him and he largely turned away from it and pointed himself towards the American Romanticism of the late 19th century poets and then ultimately towards the "wild mercury sound" forging rock and poetry before he kinda scuttled off into protector of American roots music. Joni came up in this folk scene that had largely been written and codified by Bob via Joan and it took her awhile to find her own voice. Last year's first *Archives* release captures 100+ recordings of Joni Mitchell's beginnings from 1965-1968. You can hear for yourself Joni struggling with the accepted folk canon and, ultimately she had to write her own way into a place where she could feel musically comfortable.

At first, the Joni character wrote oblique tales, often inserting herself into medieval characters. Her best songs from that period were songs that told of young adults finding their way into the world, looking for experience, songs like "The Circle Game" and "Both Sides, Now". It wasn't until Joni followed Bob Dylan's lead and created her own Joni Mitchell character that she truly found her voice. Her process was then mirrored overall as folk music evolved into the singer-songwriter movement, or one could say that the music of self-righteousness gave way to music of the righteousness of self. Bob may have popularized folk music and gave it its purpose, but Joni shaped it in her own image and gave it its soul.

Joni's character *lived*. She broke hearts, often her own in the process. She experienced the so-called freedom of the sexual revolution and reported back from the front lines. In some ways, Joni is a scientist. She experiments on things and reports the findings, often with whimsy, good nature, and humor, but just as often she reports on those findings with frustration, melancholy, regret, and anger. *Blue* is perhaps her greatest hypothesis statement on the condition of her times. She lives, loves, fucks up, and does it all over again. For millions, Joni's experiences are relatable, either because they too have gone through similar events in their lives or because they want to or they identify with the *feeling* imparted by the music.

We as a society absolutely *love* symbolism. We love to assign meaning to things that sometimes have the strength to withstand all the external weight placed upon them. As a fellow musician I understand that Joni's ability to write so straight-forwardly about herself is admirable from an artistic standpoint as well as from an emotional standpoint. I cannot write like that. I hide myself in every song I write. I know the phrases that



have the most meaning to me. I can't be as direct as Joni Mitchell can. I lack the creativity to make something interesting out of direct pathos and ennui for starters. Also, I don't want to feel it in front of an audience every night for life. Not to say I don't put myself in the songs, but I've learned that a good song makes room for all the people that need to be up in it: the me that wrote it and the you that puts themselves in it. This is the beauty of Joni's music. It

is constructed artfully with foundations strong and broad enough to sustain the weight that everyone who's taken this music into their hearts has pressed upon it. We may not know exactly what inspired Joni to write "River", but for those who hate the Christmas season they understand what it means to wish they had a river to skate away on. If you've never felt the giddy crush of infatuation with a new lover the way Joni seems to have felt in "All I Want" and "Cary" you can relate to wanting to feel it and living vicariously through Joni's perceived experience. You may have never been on airplane flying away from someone and wishing they'd turn this bird around on this flight tonight, but many people have experienced walking away from someone and wanting to turn right back around. And while perhaps many may not know the experience of giving up a child up for adoption many have loved a child or lost a child and understand the gravity of emotional that goes along with being separated from a child. That she can sing about it with a faintly regretful stoicism is empowering for those trapped in grief. You too can climb out the other side.

The personal symbolism has with time also made room for the cultural symbolism written into good art. Did Kurt Cobain set out to make a cultural statement with *Nevermind*, capturing the emotion of a generational time set in amber and 1's and 0's? Nah. And neither did Joni with *Blue*. But it is with time and analysis that *Blue* now also bears the additional weight of speaking in large generalities about the reality of the sexual revolution. Yeah, the stigma of non-marital sex, non-monogamy, "free love", and "tune in, turn on, drop out" had largely been removed and many people were experimenting with it and failing. Joni provided an outlet for the feelings associated with those failures. That may not have been Joni's intent but the music is strong and can bear that load. At the time, 21st century Joni is much more able to handle being a generational spokesmodel than she was in the 70s. The comment that Joni should "save something for herself" because she put too much of herself into her songs rankled her and she would spend the latter half of the '70s juxtaposing those personal exposes with inserting herself either directly into characters (as she did in 1979's *Mingus*) or as a direct comparison/contrast with characters (like her friend Sharon, Amelia Earhart, Don

Juan's reckless daughter, Furry Lewis, among others). It is harder to find oneself symbolically in those tunes and by that time most of Joni's intense fans had gravitated towards other singers. By the 1980s few people were paying attention to her new music in the same way they did in the early 1970s. She was unburdened at least from that side of the "star maker machinery".

Joni doesn't necessarily speak directly for me, but I do understand using "the refuge of the road" as a place to work some things out for myself and I definitely enjoy the voyeurism of peeking on Joni's world which is, admittedly, far more vivid and exciting than mine. I do understand the predicament she's been placed in, from one songwriter to another, that her songs aren't entirely her own anymore. In a way singers have a unique position of being able to move themselves in and out of their songs. I may have connected to the writing and sometimes the performing of my own songs in their original context early on but I don't always connect to them in the same way now. My emotional relationship to a song often changes over time. I may not feel the same way later as I did when I wrote the song. Sometimes I'm a character that still feels that way. Sometimes I'm holding that song up for others to see it and find their own way in the song. Sometimes I reconnect back to it in a different and sometimes more profound way. Latter period Joni seems bemused about the symbolism attached to her music. She has not struggled with the burden the way Kurt Cobain did, and the cooption of her music was also done benignly. The hijacking of Kurt Cobain was done without his expressed consent (though many have argued [wrongly] that he was asking for it) and was a contributing factor to his suicide. With Cobain there are snippets and pieces that are autobiographical. It's largely the trappings and the extra-musical factors that support his generational symbolism. Joni's is nearly all focused on her direct narrative. Perhaps Kurt should've claimed Joni as his spiritual mother as well. There is a direct tie between the two that neither perhaps could have foreseen. After all, it's the wanton of the Boomers that directly fueled the angst of Generation X. Free love often ended in easy divorce. "Smells Like Teen Spirit" is the ultimate outcome of the vague warning of "needles, guns, and grass" in "Blue". Cobain's legacy tells the warning perhaps stronger than Joni's almost tossed-away mention.

I am very pleased that the near-lionization in reassessment of Joni Mitchell at this stage of her life is happening while she's still alive and able to appreciate it and possibly enjoy it, if not able to subtly steer it away from anything perhaps nefarious or negative. She has been placed on a pedestal right beside contemporaries such as Miles Davis, James Baldwin, and Pablo Picasso. I know this attention is far more preferable to Joni than being renowned as the most infamous old lady to other more famous male musicians. Her merits are her own and not because they are filtered through her associations with a white man, something that the spirits of Miles and Baldwin would certainly appreciate. I'm sure she would've preferred this attention while she was making those "difficult" albums that she was critically panned for but it's better late than never. Mostly, I have appreciated the recent miles of column inches devoted to the critical reassessment of Joni's work so that it occupies the same space academically that it does culturally and emotionally and if it takes a milestone such as *Blue*'s 50th anniversary then by all means I am for it. — KELLY MENACE

READING ROCKS



Nothin' But a Good Time is an oral history of 1980's hair metal done in the style of books such as *Please Kill Me* and *We've Got the Neutron Bomb*. Interviews with the

primary participants (band members, managers, record executives, and hangers on...) are woven together into a chronological narrative chronicling the "rise" and "fall" of Hair Metal. The authors of *Nothin' But a Good Time* make excellent use of their sources with over 300 primary and secondary players of this scene quoted in the book. For me, the main take away from this book is the extreme, almost myopic, work ethic these bands had. Notwithstanding the sexist, empty headed, but very catchy nature of hair metal music, these bands busted their collective asses to get to rock star platinum. Their tunes might have been about a non-stop party but getting there was very hard work. Every band in this book paid their dues in spade: packing their bags/selling all their possessions to move to Los Angeles to "make it", band members sleeping on friends/girlfriends couches (if they had a place at all to live at all), or living 4-5 band members in one room shack (in one case a band members came up with a scheme to rob drug dealers for money; with predictable results), papering Sunset Blvd with thousands of flyers, recording demos, sending demos to record companies only to face multiple rejections from Mr. Big. I don't know of many bands willing to put in this kind of work in 2021.

This book harkens to a time where getting a record deal from Mr. Big was all important for success and MTV had the power to make or bury a band. On more than once occasion in *Nothin' But a Good Time*, the producer would give the band the infamous "I'm not hearing the hit" line and the band would scramble off to write "the hit" (Warrant's "Cherry Pie" for instance). Often they pulled it off. Of course, the few bands that did "make it" behaved like kids in Wonka's chocolate factory indulging

in the standard excess of drugs, parties, and groupies. The stories of misogynistic treatment of female fans by the bands has not aged well and is not recommended for the woke of heart. These stories are touched upon

but not covered excessively as they have been covered in many other books and documentaries. While *Nothin' but a Good Time* tells the story of the Biggest metal acts fairly well—Mötley Crüe, Van Halen, Poison, Bon Jovi, and Guns & Roses (I don't think they really count as a hair metal band but I'm not the one who wrote the book), this book's greatest strength is telling the story of the bands that had a hit or two but didn't quite go all the way—Ratt, Stryper, Faster Pussycat, LA Guns, White Lion, Warrant, Cinderella, Dokken, Faster Pussycat, LA Guns, Winger, Kix. The difference between a single hit and a multiplatinum album could be as simple as timing, a bigger push from the label, a better looking lead singer, a more interesting video, or just luck. Such are the ways of Mr. Big. This book captures the tantalizing "so close, yet so far away" feeling of these bands once their career stalled after a

few hits.

Like all good parties, the hair metal party came to an end. By 1990, the market was saturated with bands that looked alike and sounded alike. Do the bands Pretty Boy Floyd, Tuff, Trixter, Bang Tango, or Danger, Danger ring a bell? Probably not. While some of musicians interviewed rolled out the "Grunge killed Metal" party line, most freely admit that hair metal had become stale and had run out of ideas; not that they had many to begin with. However, after lying low for most of the 1990's many of these bands have returned on nostalgia tours. While they aren't doing Van Halen numbers they are doing well enough to make a decent living at it. As of this writing, Lita Ford/Warrant are playing downtown Houston this weekend and will likely do the same numbers as when I saw Lita Ford 2-3 years back. While the party may end, there is always another party right around the corner. — RENTED MULE



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RECORD REVIEWS



The Spotnicks Guitars From Out-A-Space

Instrumental music has occupied a prime spot in rock since its inception, and The Spotnicks from Sweden have left their mark. Sometimes labelled a Swedish surf rock band, the Spotnicks—who spun their name from the Sputnik satellite—recorded more than two dozen albums before breaking up a half century ago. Versions of the band did continue though.

This vinyl compilation album features 18 tracks from the original group who were known in its heyday for performing in astronaut suits complete with bubble helmets. The record cover is a stylized depiction of a four-piece band in said suits, reminiscent of one of The Spotnicks' better album covers.

On the positive side, these instrumentals hold up fairly well. Always focused on tasteful licks and earnest production, there is nothing too "out there" on the album although the strings on "Hava Nagila" border on Muzak. "The Spotnicks Theme" is a typical gentle guitar rendition tastefully done. "Thundernest" is probably the best of the lot as it generates more heat than many of the other tunes. "Galloping Guitars" and "High Flying Scotsman" are other solid originals.

Like most instrumental groups of that time, The Spotnicks did a number of cover tunes. "Ghost Riders in the Sky" and "Orange Blossom Special" are among the covers, all credible versions. On the negative side for this compilation album is some of the song choices. The record cover notes by the label proudly declaim "instrumental music does not date as fast as most vocal music" from earlier eras. Then why focus an album on an instrumental guitar band...and include four tunes with vocals? What were they thinking? What a waste of 180 gram vinyl. The Spotnicks have hundreds of songs the Not Now Music label could have selected, but it appears the company was too lazy or too cheap to do a better

job.

In the end, having fourteen quality instrumental hits outweighs the shabby inclusion of too many vocals. While The Spotnicks deserve better treatment, at least their sound is being preserved. Surf on. — MIKE L. DOWNEY



Starlight Ritual Sealed in Starlight

There are those moments when you get music suggestions that are flops, or just okay, but then there are those that slap you right in the face like a steel glove. Starlight Ritual is a five-piece Canadian band that is the brainchild of guitarists Dan Toupin and J.F. Bertrand (also known as "Athros" from the black metal band, Fortresse) which began as a psychedelic doom metal act, but has since evolved into a fully formed traditional heavy metal band. The band brings such mature musicianship that one listen to their debut album, aptly titled *Sealed in Starlight*, makes it clear that Starlight Ritual is not playing around in the least!

First, let's talk about that artwork. Normally, a nearly monochrome presentation is not something that catches my eye, but considering it's a bare-chested barbarian holding two swords aloft against the foggy starlit sky under the light of the full moon, I have to say I like it! Musically, the standout aspect about *Sealed in Starlight* is the balance between the guitar work and the vocals. One unfortunate problem with traditional heavy metal is that sometimes the music can be too heavily focused on one or the other as if they are in competition, but Starlight Ritual easily overcomes this hurdle by creating a record wherein the guitars and the vocals are equally showcased.

Dan and J.F. have constructed some incredibly catchy guitar riffs, old school melodies with plenty of varied tempo gallops, and some perfectly executed solos as displayed in "Marauders", "One For the

Road," and "The Riddle of Steel." The vocal work of Damian Ritual is nothing short of incredible, and when he belts out phrases like "Look out!" and "king of rock n' roll", I get goosebumps. It is quite clear that he is channeling the late great Ronnie James Dio. However, it should be noted that Damian is not attempting to imitate Dio, but that his vocal style feels as if he has he had studied at the feet of the metal master himself. Damian's range can reach gruff lows, soaring heights, and flawless midis; this versatility makes him sound like a vocalist who has done this for years.

Most of the lyrics are fairly typical of traditional heavy metal and include everything from songs about heavy metal itself, life on the road, Conan the Barbarian, mysticism, and surprisingly, zombies and the undead. A special treat for horror fans is that band utilizes sound sampling from *Return of the Living Dead* in the intro to "Civilization Lost." It's these little moments that make *Sealed in Starlight* so fun. Major kudos should also be given to the song arrangement, as the listener is not stricken with speed, smothered by mid-tempos, aggravated by aggression, nor maddened by mildness. The record is truly well-rounded, and a quick listen to "Marauders" in comparison to the title track ballad truly gives the listener an accurate scale of the band's scope of abilities.

The other beautiful thing about this record is that it rocks; I don't mean that it "rocks" as in that it's really freaking good (which it is), I mean that it has a rock n' roll ethos that makes it very accessible even to non-metal fans. Like other bands in the New Wave of Traditional Heavy Metal such as Traveler, Haunt, High Spirits, and Cauldron, *Sealed in Starlight* occupies a niche which recalls a time where rock n' roll and metal were kissing cousins. Many times, metalheads seem to forget this fact, and while it is understandable, it is severely tragic; this is partly why bands like Starlight Ritual exist.

So what are my gripes about with *Sealed in Starlight*? I have none. From start to finish, this record grabs you and doesn't let you go. It is not new, nor innovative, and that's perfectly fine. Dio's legendary influence can be felt in everything from the art, the vocals, and guitars, and fans of the earliest heavy metal bands will eat this up. For all these reasons, *Sealed in Starlight* gets and easy 5/5 from me. A contender for album of the year! — CALEB MULLINS



black midi Cavalcade

I find black midi to easily be one of the most interesting and unique bands to emerge so far this century. This quartet of young Britains does insane shit to progressive rock, post-rock, math, art rock, noise, avant-garde, and agit prop with world-exploding glee. That said, all that kinetic energy could be tiresome in action. At times, their debut album *Schlagenheim* was tiring to listen to. Not that their music is like, say, the endurance sport of listening to Philip Glass or La Monte Young but all that sudden tension and release, jump cuts, and lullabies to paralyze could be a little much sometimes. The band's new effort, *Cavalcade*, understands that weariness and while there are still elements of instantaneous ADHD 0-60 whiplash, for the most part *Cavalcade* shows a band recognizing its clichés and empowering them while growing towards a more holistic approach.

Lead-off track "John L", starts off where *Schlagenheim* ends. Manic start/stops and 80s King Crimson gamelan guitar interplay veer off into schizoid man style rhythmic jerks with unison violin and horns. It's a hectic five minute ride that encapsulates all that black midi has stood for to date. But second track, "Marlene Dietrich", stuns by, well, by being sensitive. Tones are muted, the instruments make a soft, beautiful bed for singer/guitarist Geordie Greep to sing a tender ballad in a style not unlike that of Mark Hollis. In case you are worried that "John L" is a lone volley, there are plenty of moments of prog rock showmanship, like the galloping Slint of "Chondromalacia Patella", the atonal skronk meets Fripp arpeggios of "Slow", and the junk shop hubcap rattles of "Hogwash and Balderdash" that demonstrate that the band isn't quite ready to sluff off into easy listening. But it is the moments on *Cavalcade* where the band eases off sugar rushed sheets of sound to explore a softer pallet that are so stunning and

forward-looking for black midi. "Diamond Stuff" (sung by bassist Cameron Picton) has all the ticking clock suspense of Slint with the cinematic gravitas of a string and horn section making round, hushed counterpoints to the creeping drag of the banjo-like acoustic guitar. This is not unlike when Radiohead discovered and implemented progressive rock elements into their groundbreaking *OK Computer* album. "Dethroned" opens with a forlorn late-night oboe before drummer Morgan Simpson comes in tapping like an Adrenalid addict ass-out between refills. Album closer "Ascending Forth" is a beautiful acoustic guitar ballad where Grep claims that everyone loves ascending fo(u)rths (it's this album's "she moves with a purpose") but the band seems pleasantly drunk on the promise of texture and subtlety.

comparison lightly. While Radiohead came to the subtlety and archaic twilight beauty of progressive rock from the direction of commercial alternative rock, seeking a solace from the hit-making mill of big choruses and bigger guitars, black midi seek the same solace from within the aggression of progressive rock's tropes of unison syncopated blasts towards the muted pastoral beauty of balladry and the expanded orchestral pallet of grandiosity. The best way to combat one's artistic clichés is to confront them head-on, decide what you like and don't like about them, then incorporate the latter into something bigger and move forward. Not moving on from it, but packing from it lightly and, heh, "ascending forth". This is not perhaps the black midi album that fans were expecting, but goddamned if it isn't the one we deserve. — **KELLY MENACE**

I don't make the Radiohead



CONCERT CALENDAR

- 7/2—Traitor Joes, Binomial Rhapsody @ Grand Stafford, Bryan. 8pm**
- 7/2—Rickshaw Billy's Burger Patrol, Mutant Love, Wisdom Cat @ The 101, Bryan. 9pm**
- 7/9—From Parts Unknown, Mutant Love, Sykotic Tendencies @ The 101, Bryan. 9pm**
- 7/24—The Ex-Optimists, Jay Satellite, A Sundae Drive @ The 101, Bryan. 9pm**
- 7/30—Mary-Charlotte Young @ The Beer Joint, College Station. 9pm**
- 8/28—12th Jam Music Festival @ Kyle Field, College Station. 1pm**
- 9/25—Colony House, Fluerie @ Grand Stafford, Bryan. 7pm**
- 10/15-17—LOUDFEST XIII @ The 101, Bryan.**



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