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Rolling Stone

MARCH 2020
ISSUE 1337

WOMEN
SHAPING THE
FUTURE

THE TAKEOVER

SZA

Megan Thee
Stallion

Normani

MUSIC'S NEXT
SUPERSTARS



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On the Cover

SZA, Megan Thee Stallion, and Normani (from left) photographed in Los Angeles on January 28th, 2020, by **Campbell Addy**.
Produced by Rachael Lieberman. Set design by Ali Gallagher at Jones Mgmt. Fashion direction by Rachel Johnson. Tailoring by Kimberly Mackin. SZA: Hair by Randy Stodghill at Opus Beauty. Nails by Teana Nails. Makeup by Ernesto Casillas for The Only Agency. Styling by Dianne Garcia for The Only Agency. Pants by Karl Kani. Boots by Heliot Emil. Belt chain by Martine Ali. MEGAN THEE STALLION: Hair by Kellon Deryck. Nails by Coca Michelle. Styling by EJ King. Bodysuit by Bao Tranchi. Top and bottom by Zana Bayne. Boots by Jennifer Le. NORMANI: Hair by Yusef at Factory Downtown. Nails by Yvett Garcia. Makeup by Rokaël for Rokaël Beauty. Styling by Vincent Smith for Mastermind Management Group. Shoes by Stuart Weitzman. Skirt by Marina Hoermanseder. Belt and bra by Zana Bayne. Anklet by Laruicci. Necklaces by Laruicci and Adore Adorn. Bracelets by Laruicci, Alexis Bittar, and IZA by Silvia D’Avila Jewelry.

FLIP THE RAINBOW →



← TASTE THE RAINBOW

Remembering Neil Peart, 1952-2020

The virtuoso drummer and lyricist for Canadian prog-rock giants Rush died on January 7th. ROLLING STONE is covering this tragic loss extensively, with new tributes including senior music editor Hank Shteamer's essay on the intricacies of Peart's playing ("Rock has maybe never known a greater overthinker... a player and conceptualist for whom no detail was too minuscule to sweat") and a special episode of the *Rolling Stone Music Now* podcast, featuring unheard interview audio from senior writer Brian Hiatt's 2015 RS cover story on Rush. For continuing coverage of Peart's life and legacy, visit RollingStone.com.



VIDEO

The Rise of Black Pumas

The Grammy-nominated soul duo talk about their surprising breakthrough on "The First Time." "The first time that we got together," says singer Eric Burton (left), "it was like these two worlds collided and made something that we hadn't heard before."



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MUSIC

Rufus Wainwright: My Life in 15 Songs

The singer-songwriter, who has a great new album out this spring, reflects on 20-plus years in music, through early success ("Foolish Love"), decadence and addiction ("Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk," "Poses"), family drama ("Dinner at Eight"), lasting romance ("Tiergarten"), and much more.



'Rolling Stone' Goes to SXSW

Every spring, the music business converges in Austin to find the next big thing at the five-day South by Southwest Music Festival. We'll be there all week, catching jam-packed club shows from tomorrow's arena headliners — plus must-see local acts and visiting veterans. Keep an eye on RollingStone.com for our reports on the festival's best offerings.

NEWSLETTER

RollingStonePRO

Inside the Music Industry

Subscribe to our new RS Pro newsletter to get our best reporting, our most incisive takes, behind-the-scenes details of our investigations, and the latest ROLLING STONE charts — plus intriguing rumors and the freshest industry drama — in your inbox every week.

PHOTOS

Backstage With Yola on Her Big Night

British singer-songwriter Yola is one of our favorite new artists. We were there with her as she got ready to perform at the Grammy premiere ceremony and walk the red carpet.





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The Voices of the Future



WHEN "ROLLING STONE" staff writer Charles Holmes arrived in Houston to meet with Megan Thee Stallion, he was ready to be hit full-on with the no-holds-barred energy on display in her twerking videos and brash free-styling. Up close, he discovered, the "Hot Girl Summer" rapper is like so many twentysomethings — "earnest, stressed, chaotic, but deeply ambitious." The same is true of the boundary-pushing young artists who join her on the cover of our second annual Women Shaping the Future issue. SZA is infusing R&B with millennials' generational anxieties and eclectic pop-culture references. Ubiquitous pop star Normani is finding a bold new voice as a

stand-alone act after breaking free from the group Fifth Harmony.

All three have overcome hardship on the road to success. Normani faced racist trolls and profound loneliness as 5H's lone black artist. SZA has soldiered on in the studio through earth-shattering grief after the death of her friend and mentor, the rapper-singer Mac Miller, and months later, her beloved grandmother. And Megan, who also suffered the losses of both her great-grandmother and her mother last year, is simultaneously working toward a degree in health care management at Texas Southern University. One teacher "was really hating on me, because I told her that I was about to go on tour," Megan told Holmes. "But we ain't going to quit."

Consider it a rallying cry for all of the extraordinary women in this issue. Oscar winner Regina King is bringing gender parity to Hollywood. Stacey Abrams, who narrowly lost the Georgia gubernatorial race in 2018, is battling voter suppression — and just may be the Democratic candidate for VP later this year. Former CNN anchor Soledad O'Brien is holding the mainstream media's feet to the fire (on the right *and* the left) to demand truthfulness in reporting. Scientist Katharine Hayhoe is converting evangelical Christians to climate-change believers. And artists like the essayist Jia Tolentino, the chef and author Samin Nosrat, and the actress-writer-producer Natasha Lyonne are flying the flag for being fiercely yourself on page and onscreen.

They're also not sticking to one lane. Senior writer Alex Morris notes that her time with Lyonne "became less of an 'interview' and more of a real conversation when we began discussing criminal justice and reproductive rights. I expected her to go deep, but I didn't necessarily expect her to also go so broad."

It's a sentiment echoed by everyone who worked on this issue. As Holmes puts it, "I went into the interview thinking Megan could take over the world. I left thinking Megan could take over the world sooner than I imagined."

ALISON WEINFLASH
MANAGING EDITOR

GOT A HOT NEWS TIP?

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Plastics pollution in Bangladesh

INSIDE THE STORY

Uncovering the Plastic Crisis

The staggering scale of a secret environmental calamity

THE SCOPE OF OUR single-use-plastics problem is almost unfathomable: Every year, we produce half a trillion plastic bottles, and by 2050, the plastic in our oceans will weigh more than all the fish. For most, the repercussions seem distant. "Prior to writing this story, I'd failed to clue into an environmental catastrophe hiding in plain sight," senior writer Tim Dickinson says. Six months of reporting revealed the devastating impact on the oceans and the developing world, where most waste ends up. "Plastic is inescapable in our modern society," he says. "Just as with climate change, solving this requires rethinking the idea that we can consume without consequence."

UPDATE

An Expansive Oral History of 'The Office'



OVER THE COURSE of 16 years with **ROLLING STONE**, senior writer Andy Greene has conducted more than 1,000 interviews: everyone from Howard Stern (for a 2019 cover story) to Weird Al (eight different times). His passion for the minutiae of his favorite classic-rock acts is

office legend: It's a rare joy to hear him recount every detail of how there came to be two versions of the band Yes in the 1980s. Now, he's channeled that passion into his first book. On March 24th, Dutton will release *The Office: An Oral History*. Greene unpacks what made the series a modern classic, interviewing more than 85 subjects, from cast members and writers to a set painter and a caterer. "The Office is one of the most groundbreaking shows in TV history — and one of the funniest," Greene says. "I think even hardcore fans will learn a ton they didn't know."



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“2019 was the Year of Lizzo. It’s hard to find a current pop artist who is more positive, fun, or infectious than she is right now.”

—Marcus Hecht, via Twitter



Radioactive America

Thank you ROLLING STONE and Justin Nobel for doing the work so badly needed to get this deadly hazard out in the public’s view [“America’s Radioactive Secret,” RS 1336]. The oil-and-gas industry must be held accountable.

—Sandra Steingraber, via Facebook

Allowing roads to be sprayed with radium-laced [oil-and-gas] byproducts as a de-icing agent and comparing it to the potassium in a banana just about captures the current state of the EPA.

—Jeffrey Kirkwood, via Twitter

Lizzo’s Relentless Joy

For our February cover [“The Joy of Lizzo,” RS 1336], the pop superstar opened up to senior writer Brittany Spanos on self-love and heartaches that paved the way for success. Readers couldn’t get enough of her positivity, or David LaChapelle’s photos. “I love seeing how commanding she is,” wrote Lena Oliver. “All around so excited for more of this energy in 2020.” Jonathan Leon wrote, “Finally, a photographer that isn’t trying to cover her up. The glory!” Megan Crabbe put it simply: “This is art.” Others found empowerment. “I wish I had one percent of her confidence,” Roberta Rox wrote.

“Women have the right to feel good as hell about themselves, as they are,” wrote Melissa Blake. “Lizzo is telling us that on the cover of ROLLING STONE. Are we going to listen?” Self-love wasn’t the only thing holding readers’ attention. Izzy Novaes wrote, “Thankful for her body-positivity, but also for genuine song lyrics.” Conor Behan tweeted, “The cover piece is an excellent sum-up of how she got to such a specific point in pop culture.” As for the haters, Sophie Edwards responded, “Lizzo making people uncomfortable because their privilege is under attack — keep it up.”



@dedre001:
I would gladly pay for a poster size to be in my living room.



Hottest Music Scenes Today

“Nobody wants to be referred to as the next Austin [“The Best Music Scenes Right Now,” RS 1336]. Not saying Austin isn’t wonderful, just that Tulsa strives to be a better Tulsa. Thanks for the ink though.

—Sonny Dalesandro, via Twitter

It’s important that the music world and the country at large know that Portland, Maine, isn’t “just all white people and Bean boots.” It’s great to see our talent being recognized, and if you haven’t heard of these folks, search them out and get familiar.

—Mosart Nunez, via Facebook

REACTION

Readers Respond to Rush Drummer’s Death

The shocking death of Rush drummer and lyricist Neil Peart — who succumbed to brain cancer at the age of 67 on January 7th — spurred an outpour of grief from our readers. Our obituary garnered nearly 2 million page views, causing readers to share their memories of Rush concerts and express how much the drummer meant to them. “First time I saw Rush,” wrote a fan on Twitter, posting a photo of a ticket stub from a 1981 show in Atlanta. “My senior year of high school. We



camped overnight at the mall for tickets. My mom came to take me home. I wouldn’t go.” “I am actually crying hard in my office right now,” Steve wrote, while Jaime posted, “Bawling like he was my family. But, in a way, he was — to everyone that listened, loved, and related to his music.” Zach Walentiny also wrote, “The loss of Neil hit me pretty hard, and it still feels fresh. I’ve been listening to Rush every day, and I don’t think a loss of a musician has made me as emotional as losing Neil.”

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Chika: True to Herself, No Matter What

TWO YEARS AGO, Jane Chika Oranika posted a Twitter video of a freestyle rap verse admonishing Kanye West's political antics – over West's own “Jesus Walks” beat, no less. It's been viewed more than 6 million times. But the 22-year-old Montgomery, Alabama, native says that even if she hadn't gone viral for her lyrics, she would've found another way to get her activism across to the world.

“Whatever occupation I landed in, I would've used that position to stand up for what I believe in,” she says. “Yes, hip-hop is wonderful, but on a human level, I'd always have to say something.”

Born to Nigerian immigrants and raised in the South, Chika describes her upbringing as a black, queer, plus-size woman as “no joke.” As a teenager, she got in trouble in school for putting up a “Black Lives Matter” flag in the hallway.

“I remember the shift between my mom being mad about that to her understanding,” Chika recalls. “I explained to her that I felt like my dad could've been Eric Garner.”

Chika got into Berklee College of Music but couldn't afford tuition; after a year at the University of Alabama, she dropped out to pursue music full time. Soon everyone from Cardi B to Wale was sharing her videos, even before she signed to Warner Records last summer.

Her music often contains socially conscious messages, like in the autobiographical “High Rises,” but she's also got a knack for tender love songs, such as the Charlie Wilson-featuring “Can't Explain It,” which follows her path from nervously crushing on a girl at a party to finding her confidence as a lover and partner. *Industry Games*, her upcoming debut EP, will include next to no collaborations – just Chika, plain and simple. “I'm super excited for everyone to see a little bit more into my brain and my heart,” she says. “I'm going to look back on it and be like, ‘Wow, we did that, and look where we are now.’” **CLAIRE SHAFFER**

“Yes, hip-hop is wonderful, but on a human level, I'd always have to stand up for what I believe in.”

Chika in Los Angeles in January





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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

Katie Crutchfield's New Morning

An indie-rock visionary taps into classic Americana and makes her most powerful album yet



Photograph by Erica Hernandez | 21

➔ WAXAHATCHEE

KATIE Crutchfield recently came across a diary entry from when she was 17. “It was really sad,” she says. “I talked about how I wanted to quit drinking, and that was so long ago.”

It’s 11 a.m., but Crutchfield, who performs under the name Waxahatchee, is still in her pajamas, sitting in her twin sister Allison’s backyard in Los Angeles. Now 30 years old, she’s been sober for a year and a half. “I feel like I came back to the person I was before I started drinking,” she says. “I returned to my roots, musically.”

Crutchfield’s career began in her hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, where she and her sister formed the feminist punk band P.S. Eliot, in 2007. They won devoted fans and critical raves before disbanding in 2011, at which point she took the name Waxahatchee, from a creek near her childhood home. (Allison moved on to a new band of her own, called Swearin’.) Crutchfield has since released four Waxahatchee albums, full of sharp melodies and hard-hitting intimacy, playing for crowds that seem to grow exponentially with each tour.

“When I was a teenager, I wasn’t making any money [on tour],” she says. “The whole point was to travel around the country and play music and meet people, and a lot of that was drinking. It’s so prevalent in musicians’ day-to-day life. You’re in charge of creating people’s fun night out.”

By the time she finished touring 2017’s noisy *Out in the Storm*, she knew it was time for a change. “I didn’t go to rehab or anything like that,” she says, “but I have a lot of sober friends, and I have a lot of people I can talk to. I did a lot of reading, a lot of spiritual soul-searching, a lot of self-help therapy. I had

time to fully get back into whatever headspace the next record was going to be.”

The result of that reflective time is Crutchfield’s new album, *Saint Cloud*, in which she leans confidently into Americana and country. “I’ve become so obsessive about people like Lucinda Williams, Linda Ronstadt, and Emmylou Harris,” she says. “All these country powerhouse women. I wanted to step into that power a little bit.”

Saint Cloud signals a distinct shift in sound from her previous work. “I knew [*Out in the Storm*] wasn’t going to be super sustainable for me, because it’s so loud and abrasive,” she says. “I needed to have that experience, but I also knew that I was going to need to take a sharp turn on the next one.”

Many of the songs on *Saint Cloud* reference place names with personal significance for Crutchfield; the album’s



SWEET HOME ALABAMA Top: Crutchfield performing as Waxahatchee at the Primavera Sound Festival in Portugal, 2018. Above: With twin sister and early bandmate Allison (right) in Alabama, 2010

title comes from her father’s Florida hometown. “It’s a little nod to my dad,” she says. “Because a lot of this music – the old country music – that’s my parents’ music.”

She wrote “Fire,” a folky slow-burner, while she and her partner, musician Kevin Morby, were driving from Birmingham to their shared home in Kansas City, Kansas. “You have to drive straight over the Mississippi River, and it’s so epic,” she says. “Memphis is a place I grew up going to a lot on family vacations. So it has this sweetness and heaviness to it for me.”



Five Essential Katie Crutchfield Albums

P.S. Eliot: 2007-2011

2016 This excellent comp covers the years the Crutchfield twins spent in Birmingham’s largely male punk scene.

American Weekend

2012 On the first LP she made as Waxahatchee, Crutchfield paired acoustic guitars with lyrics about moonshine, bathtubs, and more.

Cerulean Salt

2013 A year after her solo debut, Crutchfield went electric and pushed further into grungy pop.

Ivy Tripp

2015 Her first fully realized indie-rock masterpiece, complete with searing riffs (“Poison”) and pop melodies (“La Loose”).

Out in the Storm

2017 Fueled by heartbreak and backed by blazing guitars, Crutchfield recorded her most turbulent album live.

was like pulling teeth. I had all this frustrating creative energy. I knew that I had so much to say, and I knew that it was there, but I just couldn’t get it. I feel like it was on the tip of my tongue.”

“Lilacs,” the final song she wrote for the record, came together at her piano in Kansas City, with lyrics that surge with unruly emotion: “I get so angry, baby, at something you might say/I dream about an awful stranger, work my way through the day.”

“It was definitely one of those days,” Crutchfield recalls. “I was just in a bad mood. Through all of my personal growth and the path that I’ve been on, you have these days where you slip back into bad behavior and patterns of thought. When I wrote that chorus, I was like, ‘All right, we’re going to make this a little bit of a light at the end of the tunnel.’”

The song’s hopeful refrain mentions the lilac flowers that she’d taken from her front yard and placed in glass bottles of Topo Chico water on top of the piano. “Lilacs have a longer lifespan if they drink soda water,” she says. “A little tip from me to you.”

Crutchfield fell into an easier working groove when she began jamming with Bobby Colombo and Bill Lennox of Detroit indie-rock band Bonny Doon last summer. They cut *Saint Cloud* at Sonic Ranch studio in July, over 10 days in the sweltering West Texas heat. “It just completely clicked for me,” she says. “My astrologer had oddly told me, ‘This one week in July is going to be so important for you.’ And when I went back and looked, that’s the week that I picked. It was so kismet and cool.”

Today, clean since June 2018, Crutchfield feels like she’s reverted in some ways to her ambitious, bright-eyed teenage self. “When I was young, I was so Type A and so productive – almost annoyingly so,” she says with a laugh. “Almost in a Leslie Knope kind of way. I have come back to that, and it’s great. It’s a really personal thing, sobriety. I feel like myself again.” **ANGIE MARTOCCIO**

RS RECOMMENDS

OUR TOP POP-
CULTURE PICKS OF
THE MONTH

2



7



9



6



1

EXHIBIT

1. Studio 54: Night Magic

As the epicenter of New York nightlife at the peak of the disco era, Studio 54 has become synonymous with Seventies decadence. This exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum celebrates the club's coked-up legend while examining its impact on pop culture and the sexual revolution.

DOCUSERIES

2. Hillary

Decades after she first entered public life, Hillary Clinton remains a polarizing figure. Hulu's revealing new series tells her life story, including a uniquely unfiltered glimpse of the 2016 campaign.

SINGLE

3. Dixie Chicks' "Gaslighter"

A pop-music lifetime after their anti-Bush views made them Nashville exiles, the Chicks are about to release a bold new LP. Its first single is personal, not political, chronicling the slow collapse of singer Natalie Maines' marriage.

BOOK

4. Broken Faith

Two veteran journalists take you inside North Carolina's extremist Word of Faith Fellowship. It's harrowing stuff, especially their descriptions of "blasting," i.e., restraining congregants and screaming at them until their demons are released.

COMIC

5. Strange Adventures

Last year, CIA-agent-turned-comics-author Tom King gave the vintage DC series *Mr. Miracle* an experimental makeover. Now, he's done the same thing with DC's 1950s spaceman Adam Strange, turning it into a radically inventive metaphor for the "19th-century European dream of colonialism."

TOUR

6. Rage Against the Machine

We were deep in the Great Recession the last time these rap-rock lefties got together. Well, capitalism still sucks, RATM still rule, and this is an awesome must-see reunion.

PODCAST

7. No Dogs in Space

Marcus Parks, co-host of the great horror-themed *Last Podcast on the Left*, dives deep into the stories of his favorite bands, starting with punk heroes the Stooges. Even die-hard fans will find it revelatory.

ALBUM

8. The Kids That Grew Up on Reggaeton

Marco "Tainy" Masís has shaped modern reggaeton, producing albums for Daddy Yankee, J Balvin, and Bad Bunny. His new

album introduces us to a generation of future stars.

WEED CONFERENCE

9. Cannabusiness

From March 18th to 21st, South by Southwest's second annual Cannabusiness Track is tackling social equity, looking at how the pot industry can ensure people of color get a fair shot, with guests like advocate Steve DeAngelo.

MOVIE

10. The Climb

Michael Angelo Covino expanded his 2018 short about two guys out for a bike ride into a feature — and the result is the sort of independent comedy that makes you feel like the Nineties never really ended. If you only see one film this year featuring a chubby guy doing a pole dance in a suburban basement, make it this one.



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and more,
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Stone.com**



*Real-life advice
from a guy who's
seen, done, and
survived just about
everything*

My husband had prostate surgery a few years ago and is no longer sexually functional in any way. I don't want to divorce the guy (he's the love of my life), but would it be so wrong of me to seek sex elsewhere?

—Cathy, NV

I'm sorry about your guy, but I'm sure he's sorrier than I am. If he says you should get laid, then you could. But if you just go do it, it's going to hurt him. It would be disloyal, not loving. It's not his fault he got sick. And getting laid isn't that important. I say that even though it was the most important thing in my life at one point. I was a caboose to my dick. But if you love this guy, don't do it. It'll break his heart.

My son is 17 and I worry I've been a failure as a father. No matter what I do, he does nothing all day long but stare at his phone. What can I do?

—Dave, WI

A ton of parents are in the same situation. A lot of kids I know spend all their time gaming. They don't go out or even have friends. Don't blame yourself because it doesn't help. Say to him, "Let's go get a burger or take a walk on the beach." It can be anything, but get him out of the house. Try your best to get him to participate in the real world. I think kids that act like him are not happy with their lives and are looking for a place to hide. I would take a look at that and try to figure out why this happened.

**GOT A QUESTION
FOR CROZ?**

Email AskCroZ@
Rollingstone.com

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: BARBARA KINNEY; KEVIN NIXON/CLASSIC ROCK MAGAZINE; SHUTTERSTOCK; ERICA ECHENBERG/REDFERNS; SAMANTHA BURKARDT/GETTY IMAGES; DUSTIN PITTMAN/COURTESY OF THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM



ON THE ROAD

Dublin Rock City

How Fontaines D.C. went from packing hometown pubs to ruling major festivals

THE FONTAINES D.C. began five years ago when bassist Conor Deegan III texted his classmates at British and Irish Modern Music Institute in Dublin a big idea: “Do you want to start a band that sounds like punk Beatles?” Soon, they got to work developing a sound that indeed fused the “Please Please Me”-era charm of the Fab Four with the frenetic energy of the Clash – which they fully realized on their 2019 debut, *Dogrel*, one of the most acclaimed rock albums of the year. Songs like “Big” and “Dublin City Sky” are packed with references to their boundless ambition (“My childhood was small/But I’m gonna be big”), their hometown, and the destructive forces of gentrification ripping it apart (“Money is the sandpit of the soul”). The group’s success has catapulted it from pubs to giant U.S. festivals, and even a slot on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*. In December, the band – which is named after Johnny Fontane, the crooner in *The Godfather* – played a back-to-basics tour of pubs around Ireland, and photographer Kevin Condon joined them to capture the madness that ensued. “A pub tour like that will probably never happen again,” he says. **ANDY GREENE**

▲ PUB ROCK

Frontman Grian Chatten at the group’s favorite bar, Mike the Pies, in County Kerry. “Playing there doesn’t feel like work,” says guitarist Conor Curley.

► TRAIN IN VAIN

The band members are huge *Simpsons* fans. They especially love the famous monorail episode, which is why drummer Tom Coll (right) and the others were psyched to ride one in Kerry.





◀ THE DUBLINER

Deegan reads a book of poetry backstage in Dublin. Curley says the band draws influences from “not just music, but Irish mythology and writers like James Joyce.”

▶ GOING BUCK WILD

Curley downs a bottle of Buckfast. “It’s a sweet wine with lots of caffeine in it,” says guitarist Carlos O’Connell. “It’s great, but you can’t drink it every night.”



◀ SHIRTS OPTIONAL

O’Connell, Coll, and Chatten (from left) unwind after a Vicar Street gig. A couple of years ago, they lived in a flat across the street.

▼ HOMECOMING

The crowd at a tiny pub in Monaghan, Curley’s hometown. “A lot of these people are friends I’ve known my whole life,” he says. “That was a wild gig.”



◀ KICK OUT THE JAMS

O’Connell pulls off a balancing act in Dublin. “I feel like a kid when I’m onstage,” he says. “Nothing else matters in that moment.”

▶ EYE OF THE STORM

Chatten likes to go crazy onstage, but also likes dramatic pauses. “He’s a true performer,” says O’Connell. “It’s in his DNA.”



Can Elvis Presley Rise Again?

The Presley estate's earnings have slipped in the past decade – but a new team is hellbent on overhauling his image

By DAVID BROWNE

ELVIS PRESLEY may have died 43 years ago, but on a recent morning in midtown New York, plans were underway to resurrect him. In a conference room in the offices of Authentic Brands Group, the firm in charge of licensing and marketing Presley, executives are discussing the many projects they have been working on since taking over the estate in 2013. There's an Elvis filter on Snapchat, which gives you his face, pompadour, and bedazzled jacket. There's a plan to release a video of Elvis and all of his beloved animals on the Dodo, a popular pet site (you will also be able to buy CBD-infused Hound Dog treats). There are film and TV projects, including *Agent King*, an offbeat animated series coming to Netflix next year. Co-created by Priscilla Presley, the show will aim for a *BoJack Horseman* feel, where a cartoon Elvis goes undercover as a crime-busting government spy. At the head of the table, CEO Jamie Salter confidently promises that next year will be “probably the biggest year in the history of Elvis Presley.”

These plans are all part of a major effort to make Presley cool again. More than 60 years after his first momentous sessions at Sun Records, his empire is in need of a reboot. While the Presley estate was annually pulling in \$60 million a decade ago, that number has fallen by 30 percent, according to *Forbes*. Sales of memorabilia dropped from nearly \$4 million in 2017 to less than \$1.5 million last year, according to Invaluable, which tracks auction houses. This winter's *Elvis: Seen and Unseen* tour, featuring surviving members of his TCB band playing along to video footage of Presley, was postponed, for the second time, due to “unforeseen circumstances” with the archival footage. According to the *Guardian*, a 2017 U.K. poll found that nearly 30 percent of respondents ages 18 to 24 had never heard one of Presley's songs.

Given that Presley was one of the first rock stars, the campaign to bring



ALL SHOOK UP A fan at the Graceland gift shop. The Presley home draws about a half-million people a year.

him back amounts to what one music executive calls a “canary in the coal mine” for the future legacy of rock & roll. Can it possibly work – and what does it mean for the future careers and earnings of artists like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Bob Dylan, who followed Presley?

One possible path forward is Team Presley's branding push, the most aggressive in decades. “Brands die as they get older, and the reason brands die as they get older is because the older generation goes away,” says Salter, whose company also represents Marilyn Monroe and Muhammad Ali. “If you don't push those brands to the younger generation at all times, eventually you age yourself out. And that's what was going on with Elvis.”

TODAY, THE PRESLEY ESTATE IS estimated to be worth between \$400 million and \$500 million, according to one Presley exec. That's less than the Beatles (whose song catalog is said to be worth more than \$1 billion) and Queen (thanks to *Bohemian Rhapsody*, the surviving members top Presley at \$575 million). But its income is still impressive: “Forty million a year for a guy who died over 40

years ago is fucking incredible,” says an executive who works with a leading classic-rock act.

It took a lot of work to get there. In the years immediately after he died, there almost wasn't a Presley estate at all. In 1973, his manager, “Colonel” Tom Parker, arranged for Presley to sell royalties for his entire back catalog to that point – upward of 1,000 songs – for a flat \$5.4 million. That deal, made necessary by Presley's outrageous spending and Parker's gambling debt, still has repercussions today: The Presley estate sees no record royalties on many of his biggest hits. (It does co-own the copyrights for some of the songs Presley covered, resulting in additional income.) In Presley's and his manager's minds at the time, they would lean heavily on touring revenue for income.

All that changed with Presley's death in 1977. By the early Eighties, his estate was tanking, plagued by a \$10 million IRS bill and income slumping to less than \$1 million a year. Around that time, his ex-wife, Priscilla, took charge and put together the first of several new teams to overhaul the estate. In 1982, Graceland opened to the public, allowing fans to get access to the main

floor of Elvis' home, plus his cars and his gun collection. It pulled in 3,000 people on its first day and went on to draw 700,000 attendees a year. By the end of that decade, the Presley estate was making \$15 million annually.

In 1993, Elvis' daughter, Lisa Marie Presley, turned 25. Per his will, she was put in charge of a new trust to run the family business, Elvis Presley Enterprises. (Priscilla had acted as an executor but was not in the will, since she and Elvis were not married when he died.) Hoping to make the business more profitable, Lisa Marie sold an 85 percent interest in the company in 2005 to CKX, the company that also owned *American Idol*. “You have to either grow or go down,” she said. But it didn't grow. Plans to expand Graceland fell apart after the 2008 stock market crash; in 2011, CKX was sold to a private-equity firm, which two years later put the Presley estate on the market. Authentic Brands Group snapped it up in a \$145 million deal.

In the current arrangement, ABG is in charge of the licensing and merchandising of Presley's name, image, and likeness. Lisa Marie still retains ownership of Graceland and her father's personal possessions, and she

still owns 15 percent of Elvis Presley Enterprises. (She is currently in the midst of a lawsuit with her former business manager, claiming he squandered her \$100 million inheritance and left her with only \$14,000.) Priscilla, too, remains aboard as a consultant, appearing at important Presley events. When the new team came in, the day-to-day management of Graceland went to Joel Weinshanker, a former rock manager who moved on to the profitable collectible and memorabilia world. Taking over what, he says, the previous owners deemed a “declining asset,” Weinshanker turned Graceland into an Elvis theme park, complete with museums, restaurants, and a theater. He also built the Guest House, a four-star luxury hotel that opened nearby in 2015. Today, Weinshanker says, Graceland remains the most profitable part of the Presley business.

Yet, as previous estate owners have learned, modernizing Elvis can involve a certain amount of heartbreak. In 2005, the jukebox musical *All Shook Up* closed on Broadway after only six months. A few years later, Cirque Du Soleil mounted a Las Vegas show, *Viva Elvis*, featuring Presley footage accompanied by dancers. But attendance was disappointing, and the show closed after just more than two years.

At the ABG offices, Matt Abruzzo, who oversees the licensing of Presley products, flips open a brochure with Presley stats that the company has compiled. Some are surprising: After the U.S., his second-biggest market is Brazil? But another chart leaps out as well: The bulk of his fan base is 35 and older, with only 11 percent below the age of 34. Those 17 and under only account for 1.6 percent. “That generation is harder,” concedes Salter.

That statistic lies at the heart of the issue facing the future of classic-rock revenue. The industry still has monetary legs — over the past decade, the combined road earnings of the Rolling Stones, U2, Bruce Springsteen, and Elton John were \$3.4 billion. There are still hundreds of classic-rock radio stations, even if they attract smaller numbers than country, Top 40, and adult contemporary. But the future looks daunting, especially with many classic-rock acts retiring from the road and CD sales slowing every month. “It’s weird,” says the manager of one classic-rock act. “Will the assets depreciate in value? Will there be a resurgence? What do you do?”

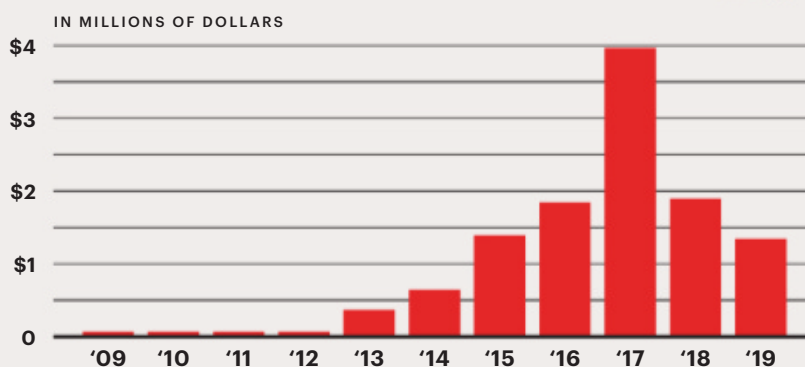
With Presley, the solution is to go younger. The approach applies not only to *Agent King* but also to an untitled Presley biopic to be directed by Baz Luhrmann. Set to start filming in

HOW ELVIS MAKES MONEY

Though Elvis Presley has been dead for more than 40 years, his business machine never stopped. After a period of serious decline, his estate is doing all it can to keep the King relevant in the 21st century. Here’s what his team is tackling.

MEMORABILIA

Since 2017, sales of Elvis collectibles at auction houses have fallen by more than 30 percent, according to Invaluable (their chart below). But there’s still hope. At an auction at Graceland in January, an alpaca vest Presley gifted a DJ in the Fifties went for \$42,500.



RECORD SALES

Presley isn’t moving as much physical product as he once did, but the new releases keep coming. The 11-disc box set *Live 1969* — featuring complete performances from his Vegas comeback — is the latest. It moved only a few thousand units. (By comparison, Bob Dylan’s *Rolling Thunder Revue* box sold 40,000.)

LICENSING DEALS

At one point, the Elvis estate had product deals with hundreds of companies. When Authentic Brands Group took over the business in 2013, it cut down on tchotchkes and made deals including a \$100 Dolce & Gabbana T-shirt, a \$9,800 Andy Warhol surfboard, a baby book, and Elvis Juice craft beer.



GRACELAND

The most lucrative part of Presley’s business draws about 600,000 fans annually, a 14 percent dip from a decade ago. Tickets range from \$42.50 to \$180. They recently opened a hotel nearby.

STREAMING

Last year, Presley earned 544 million streams. The most-streamed song? “Blue Christmas,” with 66 million. “Can’t Help Falling in Love” is not far behind. Michael Jackson, Frank Sinatra, and Biggie are streamed more; Whitney Houston and Bob Marley rank lower.

Australia soon, the project stars Austin Butler, known for playing Manson acolyte Tex Watson in *Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood*; Tom Hanks will play Parker. “Baz doesn’t do a movie like *Walk the Line*,” says Weinshanker. “It’s very, very different. It’s not a linear, week-by-week biopic. It deals with a lot of perspective and emotion.”

Elvis’ team is also making headway in the streaming world. Helped by the use of “Can’t Help Falling in Love” in *Crazy Rich Asians*, his songs were streamed a respectable 544 million times last year, ranking him in the top 200 most-streamed artists of 2019 — well behind everyone from Drake to Michael Jackson, but ahead of Creedence Clearwater Revival and Guns N’ Roses. To appeal to Gen Z, ABG is interested in commissioning more dance remixes like Junkie XL’s 2002 hit version of “A Little Less Conversation.” “We feel strongly that will help us with that generation,” says Salter. “They’re not growing up with rock.”

The estate is also considering subtler strategies. There’s talk of downplaying Elvis’ age during birthday celebrations (his 85th happened in January, with tickets as high as \$875, which included a Graceland tour guided by Priscilla). “When we get to his centennial, that’ll feel like he’s old,” says John Jackson, the Sony Music VP who oversees Presley’s back catalog. “How much more emphasis do you want to put on that?” As part of the plan, you’re more likely to see photos of the younger Elvis, not the jumpsuit-era King.

Team Elvis is also planning to de-emphasize Presley’s connection to rock. “He’s the guy who was 18 and straight out of a not-great high school, trying to make something of himself,” says Jackson. “That’s all that Drake and Justin Bieber wanted. You don’t present him as a rocker. You present him as this iconic American story.”

It’s an ambitious plan, but it leaves some observers skeptical. “If you’re going to try to be as important as Billie Eilish or Post Malone, you’re fighting a fool’s errand,” says an executive in the classic-rock field. “The idea of trying to get the younger audience involved makes no sense to me. An Elvis cartoon? I don’t know the point of that.”

In an office at Sony, Jackson is at work on a box set documenting the 50th anniversary of three intense days of 1970 Presley sessions, and he’s also in the midst of supplying master tapes for Luhrmann’s biopic. “There’s been no more beautiful of a human being than that, right there,” he says, pointing to a box set with a photo of peak Fifties Presley on its cover. “It needs to remind people that, ‘Look, that guy existed once.’”

SPOTLIGHT

City Girls Are Finally Free

Half of the hottest duo in rap went to prison just as they blew up, but that's in the past

ALL THROUGH 2019, Jatavia “JT” Johnson tracked the rise of her duo, City Girls, by watching the size of the jewelry worn by her musical partner, Caresha “Yung Miami” Brownlee, in their frequent video calls. “Things were getting bigger,” JT says with a giggle. She spent most of last year in a Florida prison, serving out a sentence for credit-card fraud that began the day after City Girls’ feature spot on Drake’s smash “In My Feelings” introduced them to the world, in 2018. Hearing from Yung Miami, who handled all of the duo’s performances and promotional work on her own during JT’s time behind bars, was a lifeline.

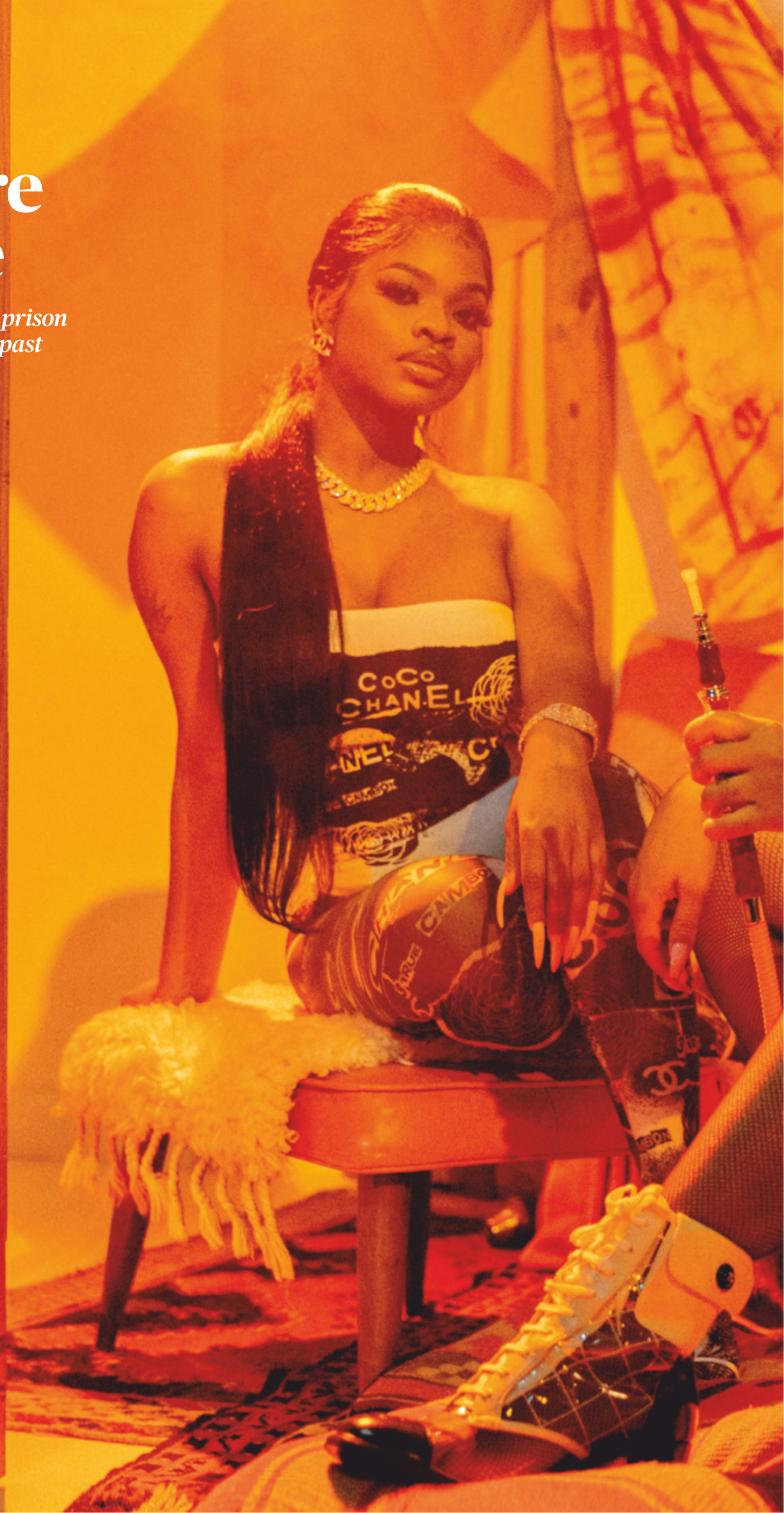
JT has been living in an Atlanta halfway house since October, and her sentence officially ends this month. After that,

the duo – who are signed to Quality Control, the same label that launched Migos and Lil Baby – will get back to work on their second album of catchy, sisterly trap music. (Their first, 2018’s *Girl Code*, was recorded in a hurry before JT’s jail term began.) “It’s still women empowerment,” Yung Miami says of their new music’s themes. “City Girls don’t take no ish from a man.”

With Yung Miami raising two children in the city she’s named after, and JT unable to leave Atlanta for now, they’re still spending more time apart than they would like. “It’s not going to be right until I get off this shit,” JT says. Still, Yung Miami says she is already feeling much more confident with her best friend by her side whenever she visits Atlanta: “It’s what was missing.”

BRITTANY SPANOS

JT (left) and Yung Miami in Atlanta in January





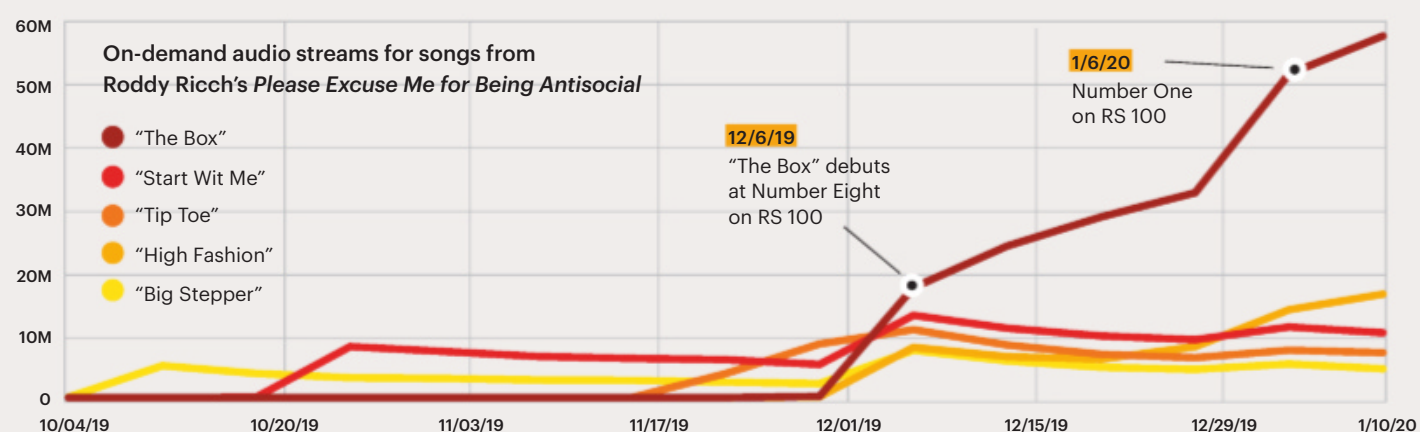
Roddy Ricch's Surprise Smash

At the beginning of this year, the Compton rapper's 'The Box' was untouchable on the RS 100, holding off Drake, Future, and Justin Bieber with help from a squeaky ad-lib

➔ **IT WAS SIX IN THE MORNING** at Manhattan's Jungle City Studios when Roddy Ricch asked his engineer to load up a beat that producer 30 Roc had sent over the previous night. Roddy had something special to add. "Eeeh-uuuur, eeeh-uuuur," the Compton rapper squeaked into the microphone, sounding something like a broken windshield wiper or a door in dire need of WD-40.

"I was sitting there looking at him, laughing, like 'Yo, you crazy,'" recalls Keefa Black, Roddy's Atlantic Records A&R. "He was just like, 'Bro, trust me. This shit gon' go.'"

Two months and 313 million streams later, "The Box" is the year's biggest hit so far, thanks to that sticky ad-lib and a deluge of TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube memes. For the first five weeks of 2020, it was Number One on the Rolling Stone Top 100 Songs chart, holding off formidable competitors like Drake and Future's "Life Is Good," and Justin Bieber's "Yummy."



While Roddy released three singles ahead of his debut, *Please Excuse Me for Being Antisocial*, "The Box" is the runaway smash. Its success is emblematic of a new kind of hitmaking, based more on small, memorable moments over big, lab-tested hooks. Roddy's squeaky sound helps

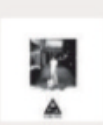
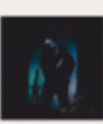
the song stand out on streaming playlists and radio, and it's simple enough to mesmerize children and adults alike.

"A sound is easier to speak than a word," Black says. "You don't have to understand the sound, just know the feeling. It's just an energy that it carries." **CHARLES HOLMES**



Roddy Ricch

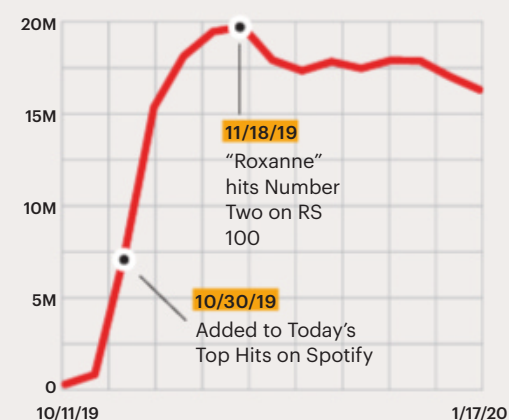
Top Songs of 2020 So Far

			SONG UNITS
1		Roddy Ricch The Box Atlantic	1.80M
2		Future feat. Drake Life Is Good Epic	896K
3		Arizona Zervas Roxanne Columbia	643K
4		Tones and I Dance Monkey Elektra	635K
5		Post Malone Circles Republic	629K

This list ranks the top songs from January 1st, 2020, through February 2nd, 2020. Songs are ranked by song units, a number that combines on-demand audio streams and song sales using a custom weighting system.

From TikTok to the Charts

Like "Old Town Road" before it, Maryland singer Arizona Zervas' hit "Roxanne" owes it all to TikTok. After making waves on the platform in October, the bouncy, Post Malone-indebted track was added to major streaming playlists, and by January it was all over the airwaves. To date, "Roxanne" has seen more than 236 million on-demand audio streams.



Aussie Dance Mania

Long before it became a global smash, "Dance Monkey" was a song that Toni Watson, a.k.a. Tones and I, busked on the streets of Byron Bay, Australia. After breaking chart records Down Under, it pranced to the RS 100's Top 10 in early January, and has stayed there since.



The Wild Pop Drama of Selena Gomez

PEOPLE USED TO try to dismiss Selena Gomez as a mere Disney moppet who stumbled into the pop-star racket. But nobody makes this many brilliant records by accident. Her new single, “Rare,” is her best ever: She hiccups in her breathy ASMR whisper, a shy girl riding a bass line that’s pure confidence. Selena always sings about her feelings like she’s terrified of them, which is why some of us relate. She wants to run and hide, but the bass urges her to stay and fight. It’s yet another perfect song about getting bombarded with way more drama than one girl should ever be asked to handle.

Selena might seem like an enigmatic blank slate at times, but she’s stuck around for years, while so many pushier personalities just fade away. She’s assembled the makings of a classic greatest-hits album, from “Slow Down” in 2013 to “Hands to Myself” in 2015 to “Bad Liar” in 2017, always singing in her own awesomely contorted private language. Her power move is to keep you asking “Wait, did she really say that? Why is she talking about the Battle of Troy? ‘Your metaphorical gin and juice?’” It just adds to her allure.

Lately, she’s had to face high-profile turmoil of the sort most people have the luxury of suffering through in private: lupus, a kidney transplant, breaking up with Justin Bieber several thousand times, dating the Weeknd. But she’s ready for it all. Her records come preloaded with positive messages about healthness and well-fullhood and self-empowertude, with an ever-escalating sense of “Seriously, this time I mean it.”

Once upon a time, the world saw Selena as a star doomed to be defined by her bad romance with Bieber.



Some of us are still traumatized by their appearance together at the 2011 VMAs. He brought his pet snake. Selena stood by the Bieb on the red carpet while he introduced the snake to the cameras: “His name is Johnson!” You could see stoic agony all over her face, as she seemed to be silently asking, “How is this happening? Can I go home now?”

Over the years, Selena and her ex batted hit songs about each other back and forth, litigating their breakup-makeup drama all over the radio. Then he abruptly married someone else. But Selena sounds liberated – like she’s having the time of her life. So in “Rare,” she kicks her weirdly sexual toaster metaphors over that funk throb. She testifies about emerging from stormy personal tribulations until she’s “holding hands with the darkness and knowing my heart is allowed.” Which means...something? When Selena sings it, it means *everything*.

It’s an unlikely evolution for a child star who got her start singing lullabies on *Barney and Friends*. When she starred in the 2009 Disney Channel movie *Princess Protection Program*, she didn’t even get to play the princess. Now, on “Rare,” we listen raptly as she sings about being madly in love with someone she doesn’t like or respect too much. She’s sick of this – and she vows she’s never going to make the same mistake again. (Spoiler: She will, as soon as the next song starts.) Her voice is full of mixed-up confusion, but she battles on through the emotional chaos. That exquisite tension is what makes her hits play like a long-running saga about the impossibility of ever getting all those emotions under control. Well, maybe she could. But why would she want to?

Three Cheers for Netflix’s ‘Cheer’!

College cheerleaders go for the gold, and we can’t stop binge-watching

LIKE SO MANY PEOPLE, I tuned in to the Netflix docu-series *Cheer* for a cheap kick, figuring it’d be a laugh to visit the parallel universe of college cheerleading. Instead, it’s *Apocalypse Now* with pompoms, starring real-life coach Monica Aldama as the Robert Duvall figure who rules her squad in a small Texas town. *Cheer* goes deep cover on campus at Navarro College. Since most of us rarely think about cheerleading, except when Kirsten Dunst needs to learn some life lessons, it’s disturbing and fascinating. Monica’s minions brave all the injuries of college sports, except without even the hope of turning pro, since – you hate to mention it – there’s not much pro cheerleading. They live for her commands. One of the team gushes, “I would take a bullet for her,” but most of us would rather take our chances with the bullet. (It’d finish with you faster.) It’s not tough to see why America is obsessed with *Cheer*: At a time when our democratic ideals are smashed to pieces, threatening all our illusions of leadership, *Cheer* offers a fantasy cheer-ocracy, with Monica as a scarily credible cheer-tator. But there’s little sentimental tough-love cliché, no pretense she’ll make you a stronger person. Instead, you’ll be lucky to keep a few of your ribs. R.S.





On Newsstands Now

Wherever Magazines Are Sold

MANDY MOORE is more famous these days as an Emmy- and Golden Globe-nominated actress on the hugely popular family drama *This Is Us*, but she's never stopped thinking about the music that came first. Moore, now 35, became a *TRL*-era superstar at 15 with the bubblegum-pop hit "Candy," and made a series of more-adventurous, indie-inspired albums like 2007's *Wild Hope*. But she put music on hold after marrying Ryan Adams; Moore told *The New York Times* last year that his controlling behavior led her to stop releasing songs. Moore found a new teammate in Taylor Goldsmith of Dawes, whom she married in 2018. Together they wrote and recorded *Silver Landings*, which includes Fleetwood Mac-inspired highlights like "When I Wasn't Watching," a sparkling, folky song about personal growth. "I'm looking at the mountains, and it's a beautiful sunny day with beautiful skies," she says from her home in L.A. "That's what I imagined this record to be like."

Your new song "Fifteen" makes being thrust into fame at that age sound overwhelming. How do you feel about that time now?

As I've gotten older, I've looked back with greater affection. Anybody would look back on their high school years like, "Why did I choose to wear that outfit?" But in my case, it wasn't just the clothes I was wearing – it was the music I was recording. I didn't have a ton of creative control. Gaining a little bit more wisdom and distance 20 years on, I've learned to embrace that part of me too. She still lives in me. I was doing my level best. There's people out there that really enjoy those records and that music. It's not necessarily my cup of tea!

You were constantly compared to Britney Spears and Jessica Simpson back then. Did you feel like you were always fighting for respect?

I was always third or fourth in line, in terms of being



Q&A

Mandy Moore

On making music again after becoming one of TV's biggest stars and why she's all in on Mayor Pete

By BRITTANY SPANOS

mentioned in the gaggle of gals – Britney and Christina [Aguilera] and Jessica Simpson. I think because I never found the degree of success that those women did, that allowed me the freedom to continue to make music that I wanted to make – but also as an actor. I was able to find some success in that arena because I wasn't a one-name pop star that people would watch on-screen and just go, "Oh, I know everything about her

life." I was a little bit more of a mystery.

Did your roles as an actor, in turn, help you grow as a musician?

Everybody's always going to put everyone in a box. I want to be able to do something I've never done before. That was something I found more troubling until recently: Not being able to get in the room, because people only saw me in one light. For what it's worth, nobody ever told me how to answer questions or

what to wear. They certainly told me [what to] record, but nobody gave me any direction otherwise.

You joined several other women in speaking out against your ex-husband Ryan Adams' alleged emotional abuse in 2018. Were you hesitant about coming forward?

It's so tricky to talk about. I never had any hesitancy, especially once I realized how many people were speaking out. I feel really heartened

that emotional and psychological abuse is a topic of conversation that women are very hungry for. The outpouring that I received on social media, DMs on Instagram... I'm still getting stuff. Women are fighting to be heard and to be understood and to be recognized. A story like this can make people feel a little bit less alone and recognize that it is not an anomaly. I feel good to be a part of something like that, but it's horrific, and I'm glad that it's behind me and I can move forward.

What was it like to work so closely with your current spouse on the new album?

Taylor is truly one of the most unbelievably talented people on the planet. I feel so lucky to be under the same roof with him. For the past five years that we've been in each other's lives, he is always at a piano or holding a guitar in his hands – just noodling or practicing or writing a song. It was a foregone conclusion that we were going to make music together, but he has been my biggest champion. He was like, "I just want to play guitar on your record. It may be fun to go on the road together!"

You've campaigned for Pete Buttigieg, and you're close friends with his husband, Chasten. What makes Mayor Pete your ideal candidate for president?

I'm not the most publicly vocal about politics, but I remember when Pete ran for the DNC chair in 2017. That's when I first heard about him, and he was captivating to me then. I'd never heard him publicly speak until about a year ago, here in Los Angeles, and I just was blown away. I was like, "He's our next president." He's a Rhodes scholar who speaks eight languages. He's a veteran. He's unbelievably qualified – but he's also a real human being. I think he can be the one to bridge the gap and bring people from both sides together. I'm excited to see how the rest of this campaign season evolves. And I'll be right there championing him along the way. 🇺🇸

Random Notes

Miami Nice

Diddy recently said he “semi-retired from music.” But he didn’t have any problem firing up the crowd at ROLLING STONE’s Super Bowl bash in Miami, as he performed a brief set of Bad Boy Records classics with his protégé DJ Khaled. “He’s the blueprint,” Khaled said of Diddy.



▲► I'M ON FIRE

Bruce Springsteen admitted in his Broadway show that he’s “never held an honest job in my entire life!” Not the case for his son Sam, who recently joined the Jersey City Fire Department. Sam, 25, was sworn in to become a firefighter after joining the department as a trainee over the summer. “We’re very proud,” said Bruce, who was on hand, mingling easily with Sam’s new co-workers. Meanwhile, there are strong indications that Springsteen is getting back to work on his first LP with the E Street Band since 2009, recording a set of new songs at his home studio in New Jersey and gearing up for a release at some point in 2020. “I wrote almost an album’s worth of material for the band,” he recently said. “It just came out of almost nowhere.”



◀ HIGH SEAS

Kris Kristofferson hooked up with reggae great Lee Perry, who got onboard at the Jamaica stop of the fifth annual Outlaw Country Cruise. On the trip, Kristofferson sat in on a songwriting course taught by Steve Earle, and performed alongside Earle, Lucinda Williams, and Shooter Jennings at an intimate concert.



TEAM TANYA

Amid her huge comeback, Tanya Tucker was honored in Nashville by Margo Price and others.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: SACHA LECCA; WILL BYINGTON; DERREK KUPISH/DKUPISH PRODUCTIONS; JENNIFER BROWN/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK, 2



▲ VAMPIRE WEEKEND AT BERNIE'S

Days before the Iowa caucus, Vampire Weekend headlined a rally in Cedar Rapids for Democratic presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders that also included an acoustic set by Bon Iver's Justin Vernon. "I don't feel like I'm separating my values and my pragmatism by supporting Bernie," said Ezra Koenig. "Bernie can win."



RIDE THE LIGHTNING
Metallica's James Hetfield displayed his classic cars at an L.A. auto show.



CRAZY IN LOVE

Jay and Bey at their pre-Grammy brunch, which was also attended by Rihanna and Meek Mill.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JOSHUA MELLIN; MICHAEL TULLBERG/GETTY IMAGES; RACHEL MURRAY/GETTY IMAGES; ALEX J. BERLINER/ABIMAGES; KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES

RANDOM QUOTE

"I'm not some horrible monster to work with, you know what I mean? I'm cool as fuck."

—Liam Gallagher



▲ TYLER TAKES OFF

Tyler, the Creator and Greta Gerwig were honored at L.A.'s Kodak Maverick Awards, just days after Tyler took home a Grammy for Best Rap Album. He'll be playing Pharrell's Something in the Water fest in April.



MIDNIGHT VULTURES
Beck and Bridges at an L.A. Grammy party.

Beck to the Future

Jay-Z and Beyoncé's annual Roc Nation brunch was the most exclusive party of Grammy weekend, but there were plenty of other star-studded events going on all over L.A. The night before the show, Beck hung out at CAA's Grammy party with Texas soulman Leon Bridges, who will hit the road opening stadium shows for Maroon 5 later this year.



The MAGA Mouthpiece

On the Hill with Florida Rep. Matt Gaetz, Trump's most shameless loyalist

By RYAN BORT

MATT GAETZ DOESN'T WANT to shake my hand when I walk into his office. Considering what he is doing, I'm glad he doesn't. "I don't want to get concealer on you," he explains, turning away from his mirror to greet me. "I promise I'm not doing this for effect for your interview." A MAC Cosmetics case sits open on a nearby table. He turns back to the mirror and resumes dabbing his face. "Go right ahead with your questions," he says.

Gaetz, a 37-year-old Republican congressman from Florida, is in a rush. It's mid-January

and a House procedural vote related to President Trump's impeachment had run long. Now he's due in a neighboring House office building for a Fox Business appearance. Before the vote, he'd done a hit for Fox News Radio and another for *War Room*, a podcast hosted by former Trump guru Steve Bannon, former Trump campaign staffer Jason Miller, and former Breitbart London editor Raheem Kassam. That evening, he'll head to a studio to appear live on *Hannity*, the premier platform for any Trump-loving lawmaker. Gaetz is a regular guest.

Outside of maybe President Trump, there isn't a politician in Washington who exerts as much care over his media presence as Gaetz, who since 2017 has represented Florida's ultra-conservative 1st District, a swath of Panhandle known for its large military presence. He plasters his face across Fox News; he feuds with his enemies on Twitter; he orchestrates controver-

PARTY LINE
"It's almost a function of growing up in a powerful political family," one Gaetz friend says. "He's not used to his voice not mattering."

sial publicity stunts like inviting Holocaust denier Charles Johnson to the State of the Union in 2018 (Gaetz later claimed he didn't know about Johnson's anti-Semitism), or introduces dead-in-the-water legislation to disband the Environmental Protection Agency. Following this year's State of the Union, he announced plans to file a bogus ethics complaint against House Speaker Nancy Pelosi for ripping up a copy of Trump's speech.

The result has been headlines, which are worth their weight in committee assignments in the reality-TV fun house Trump has fashioned out of Washington. Gaetz can't seem to go more than a week or two without manufacturing a clickbait-ready piece of chum to throw to the press, which has largely obliged him.

"Look, after 10 months I figured out that you only really matter if you can move substantial sums of money, or substantial blocs of votes,"

he says. “If you couldn’t do one of those things you are an extra in the movie in the United States Congress. I had no interest in that. I started to realize that to serve my constituents, I had to bring forces to bear outside of that traditional paradigm that they teach you in orientation.”

Gaetz has claimed it’s all done in the service of delivering “outcomes,” but what happens if what he’s trying to accomplish for his district doesn’t jibe with the president’s agenda? Trump’s haphazard carnival barking may have put him in the White House, but where will it lead Gaetz and others aiming to capitalize on the disoriented media landscape? Isn’t it inevitable that the endorphin-fueled drive to rack up engagement stats, to cater to the outrage-chasers, to get headlines at any cost, to own the libs, will hinder a lawmaker’s ability to make life better for the people they’re supposed to represent?

I ask Gaetz about this, but he doesn’t particularly care for the question, visibly taking offense at the suggestion that an agenda predicated on clicks should be carried out with caution. “It’s a hell of a note from a ROLLING STONE reporter to tell me I’m too entertaining,” he snaps. “I guess I’ll take it as a compliment.”

He also, sitting in his office, has other things to worry about, and he’s still in a hurry. “I’m having a terrible hair day,” he says, “but we’re going to have to go anyway.”

‘YOU’RE BAD LUCK,” Gaetz tells me once we arrive at the Cannon House Office Building’s rotunda. “This has never happened to us before. Hundreds of TV hits. Two years of doing it. We’ve never had a cameraman bail on us.”

The cameraman who was scheduled to shoot his spot on *Making Money With Charles Payne* is out to lunch – literally. Gaetz tells his chief of staff to text the producer. She already has. While we’re waiting, she shows me some of the metrics they keep of Gaetz’s media appearances. In 2019, he appeared on TV 264 times, with 174 of those appearances coming on Fox News or Fox Business. Gaetz talks about his media presence as if it’s a carefully curated financial portfolio, noting that he does around two MSNBC or CNN hits a quarter, and that he’s trying to diversify his presence with hits on platforms like Cheddar, the streaming news network founded in 2016. Everything is quantified. “If you don’t measure it, it doesn’t really matter to you,” he says.

“The great thing about social media is that you get instant feedback on the extent of your engagement,” Gaetz says. “I know within three minutes whether or not one of our tweets is going to be widely consumed. There are times when we’re able to inform the content of our social media based on the engagement.”

Over the course of so many media appearances, so many talking points tread and re-tread, Gaetz has attained a kind of flow state with his performative self. “I try to stay in a constant state of preparation,” he says. “Walking around here, a reporter can stick a microphone under your nose and ask you a question

at any moment in time, and they frequently do with me. I think the relationship I’ve built with the press is that they expect an honest answer from me.”

Gaetz certainly makes his arguments to the press with conviction, but, as is the case with Trump, the bombast often seems to be in service of obscuring the truth. Throughout the impeachment process launched by House Democrats last fall, Gaetz enthusiastically cycled through a Rolodex of dubious talking points – that Trump is sincerely concerned about corruption, that the career officials who testified as part of the inquiry were not credible, that Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff is a liar who needs to be investigated – in an effort to absolve the president of any wrongdoing.

But part of the reason Gaetz has been able to elevate himself is that he’s willing to take it a



GAME TIME Gaetz at the World Series with Trump. “I’m stronger in Washington because I work closely with the president,” Gaetz says. “I don’t regret any of that.”

step further, as he did in October when he put together a stunt in which a group of House Republicans stormed a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility where Intelligence Committee members were deposing witnesses with knowledge of the Trump administration’s dealings in Ukraine. Gaetz’s move was arguably illegal, and at the very least set a dangerous precedent for ignoring rules to safeguard national security. Gaetz didn’t care, nor did he care about the need for the depositions to be conducted in private so witnesses couldn’t coordinate their testimony – something that, as a lawyer, he surely understood. But the move got headlines, and thus Trump’s approval.

This kind of fealty to Trump is at the heart of Gaetz’s media presence and political stature, and along with the president’s precious online nods and phone calls, it has garnered him IRL invites to Mar-a-Lago and the World Series, where Gaetz made sure to snap a selfie to broadcast back to his constituents.

Considering Florida’s 1st District voted for Trump over Hillary Clinton by a 40-point margin in 2016, his strategy makes sense. “I think he’s a pretty calculating guy and that he’s looking to where the puck is going in his party right now,” says Steve Schale, a Florida Democratic strategist and friend of Gaetz’s for years. “I think he sort of plays for that audience. Matt, at his core, is a raw political creature.”

ONE OF THE REASONS Gaetz is so effective at garnering media attention is that he isn’t simply mimicking Trump. Gaetz was just as controversial and liable to feud publicly with those who opposed him during his time in the Florida House of Representatives, where he served from 2010 until his election to Congress, in 2016.

“The issues were different and there wasn’t as much Fox News coverage, but you could argue he was doing the same things in the state Legislature,” says Schale, adding that Gaetz was a “disruptive force” who “wasn’t afraid to take a shot at his own colleagues” and that “there were people who grudgingly respected his ability to create his own news cycle.”

He was able to do this by occasionally bucking party orthodoxy – Gaetz has a strong libertarian streak and (at times) has expressed support for legalized marijuana and LGBTQ rights – but also by using his trollish social media presence. In 2012 he mocked “the gays” holding a “kiss-a-thon” to protest Chick-Fil-A’s anti-LGBTQ ownership. A year later, he lamented the sight of a woman whose back was “covered in tattoos” using a welfare card at a grocery store. In 2015, he singled out two black lawmakers from a group of 13 Florida state senators who filed a lawsuit related to the health care expansion, blaming them for what he felt was a poorly drafted lawsuit. The tweet drew bipartisan condemnation, and Gaetz issued a non-apology.

Gaetz’s father, Don, was a powerful figure in the state Senate, serving as president from 2012 to 2014. “The rub I heard on Matt Gaetz was that he always had an entitlement mentality,” says John Tobia, an ally and former roommate of Gaetz’s while the two served in the state Legislature. “Not necessarily financially, but heck, his dad was in leadership over there in the Senate. You heard that if that wasn’t the case then he wouldn’t be sending out tweets that were directly counter to leadership positions.”

Tobia makes clear that this isn’t how he felt personally, only that it was the sense he got from others whom Gaetz had rubbed the wrong way. This includes Cris Dosev, a Trump-loving combat veteran who ran for the House seat Gaetz won in 2016 before unsuccessfully trying to primary him two years later. “He had a lot of cover from his dad,” says Dosev. “The kid knows how to make sure he has an umbrella of protection over him, and he’s very effectively done the same thing with President Trump.”

Circling around the second floor of Cannon, I bring up the entitlement issue with Gaetz. This question, he doesn’t mind at all. “I think it’s a sign of strength, not weakness, to build strong partnerships,” he says. “Of course I was stronger in the Legislature because my dad and I worked together on projects. So was he. Of course I’m stronger in Washington because I work closely with the president. I don’t regret any of that.”

GAETZ PERFORMS his role as Trump’s pre-eminent impeachment defender during his spot on *Charles Payne*, which eventually goes forward thanks to a cameraman borrowed from Fox News. The segment

begins and Gaetz comes to life, cycling through bite-size quips with the enunciation and energy of a boardwalk pitch man.

“We’ve been playing pin the tail on your favorite impeachment theory,” he says with a flourish. “It’s sort of like staring at the ink blot and hoping that you see the same thing they see,” he adds of the Democrats. “Like an addict can’t get off something they’re addicted to, Democrats can’t get off impeachment as their political strategy.”

But the conversation ends on a thorny issue for Gaetz: his decision the previous week to buck Trump and vote in favor of a House resolution to curtail the president’s war powers. He was one of only three Republicans to support the measure, and his office sent an email lobbying others to do the same, according to *The Washington Post*.

Many of Gaetz’s colleagues were shocked by the move, including House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, who implied on *Lou Dobbs Tonight* that Gaetz was a RINO, a Republican in Name Only.

I ask Gaetz if he was surprised by the intensity of the reaction from the right. “What reaction?” he says dryly. When I explain, he ultimately blames fake news. “I do think that some of the blue-checkmark brigade backlash on Twitter that you all in the media so predictably overreact to is non-organic,” he says, using the Trumpworld shorthand for “verified” Twitter users. (Gaetz is a verified Twitter user.)

“As a matter of fact,” he continues, “I got back a poll from the Florida Chamber of Commerce today, and Republicans in Florida would do unspeakable things for the numbers I have with the base.”

But the blowback over the vote was real, both in Congress and back in Florida. “A lot of people were very upset about that,” says Jeff Hinkle, GOP chairman of Okaloosa County, Florida, which lies in Gaetz’s district. “There was a lot of ‘Who can we find to run against Matt? He’s blown it. This is ridiculous.’”

Hinkle concedes the ire toward Gaetz in the panhandle is likely temporary, but the uproar is a reminder that residents of northwest Florida bow to the president and expect their congressmen to do the same – unconditionally.

Though Gaetz claims his relationship with Trump is as rosy as ever, the president was clearly frustrated. When the White House released a list of eight House Republicans to assist with his impeachment defense in the Senate, Gaetz wasn’t on it. He chalked up the omission to a personal vendetta by Trump adviser Eric Ueland. “I don’t know why it would serve someone in the White House to manufacture a divide between the president and one of his best communicators during impeachment,” Gaetz told Politico.

But there are other indications Trump wasn’t happy. *The Post* reported Trump “fiercely complained” about Gaetz after he learned of his lobbying efforts, and as of early February, Gaetz hadn’t appeared on the president’s Twitter feed in any form since the January 9th war-powers vote. He did however acknowledge Gaetz during

his hourlong victory speech the day after the Senate acquitted him of impeachment charges.

ASSUMING GAETZ IS back in the fold, it will be interesting to see if he’ll dare take another stand against a president who demands total supplication, and whose endorsement is arguably more valuable to Gaetz than anything he could accomplish legislatively for his constituents – like, say, voting to constrain the president’s war powers on behalf of the military members and their families in his district.

Gaetz has also split with his party on climate change, an issue of pressing relevance to his Gulf Coast district. While he undercut any serious claim he might have to being an environmentalist with the stunt bill to abolish the EPA, he recognizes the validity of climate science. But he rarely brings it up when he’s in front of a microphone. “It’s a fair critique that I’ve been unsuccessful in convincing many of my Republican colleagues about the challenges associated with climate change,” he says.

It took a while for Gaetz to find his footing in a Washington tailor-made to beat the idealism out of young lawmakers. He describes his first 10 months in Congress, which he says included only one television hit, as “frankly some of the most unhappy times of my entire life.”

Gaetz’s disgust with how Congress works matches what many lawmakers say – though typically not on the record. “What I hated is that you were supposed to spend most of your time at bended knee for the lobbying corps,” he continues. “Either sucking up to them for money, or serving as their valet in the halls of Congress. I hate doing both of those things.”

So, as Schale describes it, Gaetz “set himself on fire,” blitzing the airwaves to defend Trump in the face of the Mueller investigation, casting the lone “no” vote against an anti-human trafficking bill, appearing on the radio show of conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, and inviting Johnson to the State of the Union – in just over a month. The media’s attention quickly followed. So did Trump’s. “It’s almost a function of growing up in a powerful political family,” Schale says of the means Gaetz took to make himself relevant. “He’s not used to his voice not mattering.”

Gaetz says his affiliation with Trump has made him a power broker. “I figured out that if you can favorably impact the president’s perspective on something, you have the ability to impact outcomes beyond the halls of Congress,” he says. “I became aware that the president was frustrated with the Paul Ryan view of congressional service in the Trump era, which was that Trump was a condition to be managed. I view it as an opportunity to be seized, to break from the shackles of this place and actually engage and excite the public, and also have substantial impact on the administration in a good way.”

To what degree Gaetz is able to “impact” the administration is unclear. And is he really so unshackled if he isn’t even able to advocate for a constitutionally conservative position like giving war powers back to Congress without Trump blackballing him?

READERS’ POLL

Do you think fracking should be banned nationwide?

53%
Yes

47%
No

Go to Rolling Stone.com for next issue’s poll.

When I ask Gaetz if there are any Democrats using new media effectively, he cites Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. But, unlike Gaetz, her internet savvy and gift for online engagement has allowed her to push party leadership to keep its promises to constituents and institute the type of big changes that make the party’s traditional industry allies uncomfortable. Gaetz, on the other hand, says the feedback he’s received from GOP elders has mostly been “encouraging” as the party has now congealed around “Drain the Swamp” messaging while embracing lobbyists en masse. As of 2019, Trump had appointed 281 lobbyists to his administration, four times as many as Obama appointed in his first six years, according to ProPublica. This is what Gaetz, who bemoans the influence of special interests in Washington, is supporting.

Gaetz relishes the idea that he is a contrarian firebrand who wants to subvert the political establishment, party be damned. But unlike with his father, the cover he’s received from Trump is far from unconditional. Gaetz may not have as much leeway to stray from the orthodoxy of the new establishment that’s been created around Trumpism, which seems just as oppressive as the “traditional paradigm” that frustrated Gaetz when he arrived in Washington.

But he’ll always have his engagement metrics, which he can goose at any time with the flick of a tweet. Two days before I meet him in Washington, he generates headlines after attacking Chris Latvala, a nemesis from the Florida state Legislature, for posting a picture of himself with Al Sharpton. Latvala fired back, accusing Gaetz of starting a contest while he was in the state House in which lawmakers were awarded points for sleeping with various categories of aides and legislators. Gaetz denied any knowledge of the game. After his spot on *Making Money*, I ask him why he felt the need to attack Latvala, which only seemed to result in speculation that Gaetz was behind a demeaning sex game.

“He was bestowing honor to Al Sharpton, someone who deserves no such honor,” Gaetz says, later slipping in that Latvala’s “dad was against much of what I was doing in the state Legislature.”

This often seems to be the point for Gaetz, to demean those who oppose him, lib or otherwise, even when there are far more important issues at hand. I bring up a heated exchange in the Judiciary Committee last fall in which Gaetz repeatedly dredged up what he viewed as racist remarks Sharpton made decades ago. Sharpton had been called to Congress to discuss policing practices alongside Gwen Carr, the mother of Eric Garner, an African American father who was killed on camera in 2014 after being put in a police chokehold, famously pleading to the officer, “I can’t breathe.”

Gaetz’s badgering of Sharpton drew rebukes from committee Democrats, who argued the line of inquiry was “non-germane” to the life-and-death issue at hand. Gaetz had a different take on how his turn questioning Sharpton went. “That,” he beams, “was one of our most highly viewed YouTube videos.”



In Iowa, the primary system's flaws have been exposed.

CAMPAIGN 2020

Why the Democratic Primary Is Broken and How We Can Fix It

By ANDY KROLL

AS PRIMARY SEASON continues, troubling questions and palpable dismay linger on the minds of many voters. The same tired fights of 2016 are playing out yet again four years later, as Donald Trump's approval rating creeps higher while the Democratic unity looks like a pipe dream. Defeating Trump was always going to require a once-in-a-generation campaign. Now, it's beginning to feel like Trump could run away with this thing. What happened?

Think back to the summer of 2019. The field of 20-odd contenders was a rowdy and diverse lot, a true cross-section of the modern Democratic Party. Senators and House members, governors and mayors. Young and old, black and white and Asian and brown, gay and straight. They were, as DNC Chairman Tom Perez said, "the most diverse field in our nation's history."

But by the time of the first primary contest, the field had shrunk to a mostly old, mostly white, mostly wealthy crop of established candidates who – apart from Mayor Pete Buttigieg – could scarcely claim to represent something new. At the same time, two billionaires, Tom Steyer and Mike Bloomberg, had bought their way into the top tier of candidates by spending hundreds of millions of their private fortunes.

"They wanted a big, fluid, multicultural field – they didn't get it," says Jeff Roe, a Republican

political consultant who ran Ted Cruz's 2016 presidential campaign. "They wanted a new generation of leadership – they didn't get it. They didn't get any of the things they wanted."

And that was before the calamitous Iowa caucuses denied any of the candidates the springboard they'd hoped for, like the one that propelled Obama in 2008. Instead, the story out of Iowa was about how the Democrats – who hold themselves out as the defenders of safe and secure elections – bungled a caucus they had four years to prepare for and damaged the public's trust in the outcome. Whatever the opposite of "hope and change" was, well, this was it.

The chaos of Iowa did, however, make the strongest case yet for why the Democratic Party's primary process must be revamped from top to bottom. Here are four ideas.

Replace Iowa with Georgia

Why invest so much money and manpower in a small, overwhelmingly white state with little significance in the November general election? If Democrats want to build the party of the future, they should replace Iowa with Georgia. A growing and diversifying state with a healthy mix of urban and rural populations, Georgia is already seen as a state that could turn purple, thanks in large part to the voting-rights work led by Stacey Abrams. Want to accelerate Geor-

gia's leftward shift? Make Georgia the first primary state in 2024. Two-dozen presidential candidates building grassroots organizations and spending tens of millions of dollars on advertising will do wonders in Georgia.

Get rid of the debates

Let's face it: Primary-season debates do more harm than good. Candidates don't have enough time to adequately explain their positions on nuanced issues. News organizations that host the debates care more about conflict and ratings than informing the public. And in the case of the 2020 race, the DNC's debate rules penalized grassroots candidates (like Andrew Yang) and non-East Coast candidates (like Govs. Jay Inslee of Washington and Steve Bullock of Montana) who didn't have high name recognition. Save the debates until the general election. Stick with town halls or issue-focused forums. At least that way voters will learn something.

Reward states that make it easy to vote

Democrats should reshuffle the order of their primary states and reward those states that make it easy to vote. Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina – three of the four opening contests in 2020 – all have some of the most restrictive voting-rights laws in the country. The Democratic Party must reward the states that use automatic or same-day registration, secure voting technology, early voting, and mail-in ballots.

Demand candidates take a 'Ban the Big Money' pledge

As long as Republicans have power, Congress won't lift a finger to rein in the legalized bribery and corruption unleashed by decades of misguided legal decisions, including *Citizens United*. In the meantime, Democrats should demand that their primary candidates vow that they won't take money from Super PACs, use wealthy bundlers, or accept corporate money. Such a pledge would build trust with voters, give upstart candidates a fair shot, and make the Democratic Party responsive to the working people it claims to represent.

WHOEVER THE DEMOCRATIC NOMINEE is, the usual choice between "turning out the base" versus "winning over swing voters" is a false one. Trump's re-election campaign is spending vast sums of money to not only mobilize those who voted for him last time but to also find and register millions of new voters. Democratic operatives say it will take a multiracial movement like the one that elected Obama in 2008 to inspire Democrats and independent voters alike. "There's a lot of headroom both for Trump and for the Democratic nominee," Ben Wikler, chairman of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin, says of the 2020 race. "It's going to be radically different" from 2016.

The point of a presidential primary is to pick a nominee and set up that candidate for success in the general election. This time around, it can feel as if the opposite has happened. Win or lose in November, a reckoning is in order. **R**

MONEY ILL-SPENT

Democratic presidential candidates spent nearly \$70 million on TV ads — plus millions more on field organizing — in Iowa leading up to the state's first-in-the-nation caucus. The result: a mess of a result with no clear winner.

**Women
Shaping
The
Future** ▶▶▶▶▶

Rap's boldest, brashest new voice is poised for a huge 2020 – and she's doing it all while mourning her mom and chasing a degree

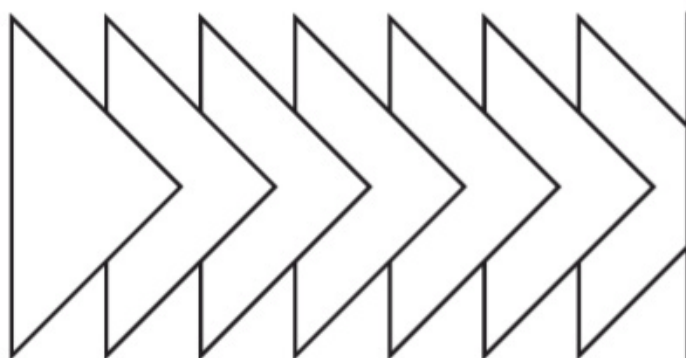
MEGAN

THEE

By Charles Holmes

PHOTOGRAPH BY
Campbell Addy

STALLION



IT'S A BRISK DECEMBER DAY IN HOUSTON, AND MEGAN THEE STALLION IS GIVING detailed notes on how, exactly, she wants her dancers to twerk. The beat to Yo Gotti's "Pose" pulsates through White Oak Music Hall as the 25-year-old star prepares for a hometown show 24 hours from now, her biggest headlining concert in Houston to date. She is in an unbreakable trance, watching her choreographer and troupe with a strained eye. For hours, butt cheeks flap, knees dip, asses clap, legs split, feet stomp, and gravity is defied. The dancers are talented – but Megan sees imperfections no one



else can. “I just want the movements to match the beats,” she says, exasperated. She shows them how it’s done. She has them try again.

At one point in the afternoon, the rehearsals taper off and Megan disappears. It’s not until later that it becomes clear where she went: to the parking lot, to rap. Upon her return, a new freestyle over Biggie’s “Hypnotize” is uploaded to Twitter, to the delight of her 2 million followers. It’s the sort of thing she seemingly does reflexively.

Megan took the rap game by storm last year. At five feet 10, and with the quick wits of a hip-hop veteran, she went from holding her own in YouTube cyphers to proving herself one of the best lyricists of her generation on projects like 2018’s *Tina Snow* and 2019’s *Fever*.

All the while, she was becoming as well-known for her rapidly expanding digital footprint as she was for her impressive bars. When Megan wasn’t slipping away for a freestyle, she was persuading a rotating cast of celebrities (DaBaby, Lizzo, Fabolous) to let her “drive the boat” – a juvenile but entertaining exercise in which Megan would pour expensive brown liquor into someone else’s mouth – and dropping twerk videos that forced the collective consciousness of the United States to marvel at the strength of her knees.

It’s that combination of viral-ready charm and a willingness to rap everywhere and anywhere that made Megan a new kind of star – a rapper’s rapper who no one could ignore. When she dropped “Hot Girl Summer,” an anthem featuring Nicki Minaj and Ty Dolla \$ign, the song became both a chart-topping hit and a catchphrase that inspired Hotties (Megan’s stan army) and non-Hotties (everyone else) to scorch every hater in their path.

And she accomplished all of this while losing her mother – her first manager and the woman who introduced her to hip-hop – and chasing a health care management degree that she still refuses to give up on, even as the demands of stardom make finishing coursework a near impossibility.

For Megan, rapping comes easy; it’s navigating the minutiae of her new life that’s proving more difficult. A week before her hometown show, Megan found herself presenting at the American Music Awards in Los Angeles. “I was like, ‘Oh, my God, am I going to have to read this, or is it something I could memorize?’” she said of the challenges presented by the teleprompter. “That was really the only time that I got nervous.”

Later that night, she would be caught on camera confidently freestyling in the parking lot, wearing the same crimson gown she wore at the ceremony.

IF MEGAN WERE to direct a movie of her life, she knows how it would open: “It’s me in the back seat of my mom’s car, on my way to school, listening to some UGK shit.” Megan remembers exactly how her mom introduced new music. “Every time she put on a new song, [she would say] ‘Put you on some real shit right quick,’” she says.

Megan’s mother, Holly Thomas, was a bill collector and early-aughts Houston rapper known as Holly-Wood, who raised Megan on UGK and Biggie; she was also Megan’s first manager. Megan characterizes her mom’s music as “hardcore gangster.” “When I started rapping, and cussing and shit, she was like, ‘I don’t know where you get it from,’” Megan says, and laughs. “She was a potty-mouth, worse than me.” Megan’s father was a “full-time hustler,” imprisoned for the first eight years of her life.

Hailing from Houston’s South Park, Megan describes her neighborhood as a place split between “hood shit” and a “family environment.” In middle school, she was the captain of the cheerleading team and co-captain of the dance team; in high school she was on the drill and dance teams.

By her freshman year of college, though, she knew she wanted to be a rapper. Her moniker was inspired by grown men calling her a “stallion” – Southern slang for a voluptuous woman – in high school. “Believe it or not, I used to be a little shy,” Megan says. “I never wanted anybody to know that I could even rap. Even when I got to college and I told my best friend I could rap, she’ll be like, ‘OK. Well, then rap.’ She wanted me to rap and I wouldn’t do it. But then we went to a kickback and I just started rapping.... I was confident in myself, but I didn’t really know how people would react to how I thought about myself on the inside.”

Over the next few years, Megan’s confidence began to pay dividends. By 2016, her hometown freestyles started going viral and, not long after, Megan quickly went from regional star to national brand. But as Megan Thee Stallion’s dreams finally came to fruition, the core of Megan Jovon Ruth Pete’s life was taken from her. In March 2019, Megan lost both Holly, to brain cancer, and her great-grandmother, with whom she was also close. In person, she tears up mentioning the two women who helped get her to this moment.

“This year, I lost my mom and my grandmother in the same month,” she said in a since-deleted Instagram video. “Although all these positive things have been happening to me and I’ve been trying to do good, been trying to keep a smile on my face, stay strong, to stay happy for me and my other grandmother and the rest of my family, it’s pretty hard.”

After the deaths, Megan put on a brave face; her searingly painful spring would soon give way to her “hot girl summer.” It was a phrase she created “talking shit” on Twitter, an evolution of the way she’s come to describe her fans (“Hotties”) and her clique (“Hot Girls”). It soon went viral. “I didn’t even know it was going to be this big of a thing,” Megan recalls. “People talking about ‘Let’s be us. Let’s be free.’... I was telling my manager, ‘Can y’all believe this? Jada Pinkett [Smith] is having a hot girl summer.’”

For many, the idea of a hot girl summer was a positive force that transformed as their needs did – it’s a catchphrase that means whatever you need it to. Months later, when Megan decided to capitalize on her cultural touchstone with an actual song, it soon went platinum. Predictably, brands like Wendy’s, Forever 21, and Maybelline co-opted the message; it also inspired a “No Pigeons”-like remix called “Hot Girl Bummer,” and so much bootleg merchandise that Megan would eventually trademark the term.

For Megan, the phrase came to describe her own resilience. “[The losses] weigh on me, but I know what my mom and my grandma would want me to do,” she says. “My mama is a very strong woman. She raised me to be super strong. If I got the platform to spread positivity, I’m gonna do it.”

LIKE RHYTHM, ASS, or generational wealth, a vision is something you either have or you don’t. And back before Megan Pete remade herself as Megan Thee Stallion, she was a freshman at Houston’s Prairie View A&M University and a filmmaker of considerable, if provocative, vision. Megan and her two best friends, Kelsey and Daren, became campus celebrities off the strength of short twerking videos that they would post online. As their filmography grew in popularity, so did their notoriety. Inevitably, their exploits caught the attention of school administrators – *nonvision havers* – and the trio were called into a meeting.

“The ladies were super uppity. They didn’t want us to wear shorts,” says Megan. “It was fucking summertime in fucking Texas. But, you



Megan’s late mother was a rapper who made “hardcore gangster” music. “She was a potty-mouth, worse than me,” Megan remembers.



see her hips and her ass, you see why they don't want us to wear no shorts."

In the boardroom they were summoned to, a screen slowly descended. The three women watched their iconic short videos play, one after another, and couldn't stop laughing. "I was like, 'God damn,'" says Megan. "I'm really in trouble [for] twerking right now!"

"They was like, 'Is this what you guys want to be known for on campus?'" she continues. "In my head, I was like, 'Yeah, we lit! What you mean?'" In exchange for their parents not being informed of their exploits, Megan, Kelsey, and Daren were expected to write research papers.

Whatever lessons the papers were meant to impart, they didn't exactly stick. Megan is currently putting on a twerking clinic at her own shows, and her commitment to higher education has only strengthened since she transferred to Texas Southern University. Even as she became famous, she remained a part-time student.

Megan estimates she has seven classes left to complete her degree in health care management. A few days before I meet her, she admits on Twitter that she's rushing to finish a six-page research paper on the health care supply chain, due the same night she has a photo shoot scheduled. Even superstar rappers with a million in the bank get worried about late assignments.

What, exactly, does a six-page term paper for a health care management course entail? "Cotton balls in the hospital, right? You have to buy X amount of cotton balls before you even about to start running out of them hoes to keep the shit on the floor where it's moved," she says. "It's literally a whole system behind you even ordering fucking cotton balls, or ordering sheets for the beds in the hospitals. You would think that this is a simple-ass process, but no."

Her most pressing concern at the moment isn't how she's going to follow up her breakout year, or handling life as a celebrity. It's simply getting to graduation day. Even with her success, she refuses to drop out of school. "My grandmother would be very pissed off at me if I just stopped college right now. My mother would've been like, 'It don't matter.' I got to get this degree. I already started it, and I'm interested in what I'm doing because I want to open up assisted-living facilities in the city."



Megan onstage at Astroworld, November 2019

There's another small problem: someone Megan calls her "biggest hater." "I made an incomplete on one of my classes because this lady, the teacher, she was really hating on me because I told her that I was about to go on tour," Megan says, exasperated. "But we ain't going to quit."

WHILE TALKING TO Megan, I let slip that I, personally, did not have a hot girl summer in 2019, despite the heights to which her philosophy rose across the nation. "I don't know what pain you holding onto," she says, concerned.

"First step, you got to spend more time in the mirror," Megan explains – for me, but possibly for herself as well. "Because once you get in the mirror and you start finding shit that you do like about yourself, you're going to stay in the motherfucking mirror trying to perfect that.

That's how I am. Like, 'OK, what do you got going on? Bitch, you look good as fuck today!'"

She's giving this mirror pep talk while literally staring at a gilded mirror in her home in Houston, wearing an oversize Nirvana T-shirt. Rehearsals are over, and she and her friends are doing their makeup back at the house before the show. Like a typical college student, Megan lives in the chaotic, amiable near-squalor of one's early twenties, a time when you'd rather add water to the nearly empty hand soap than run to CVS to buy more. Unlike your typical college student, though, Megan lives in a large suburban house with neoclassical pillars and a circular gravel driveway.

"Daren, she looks really sweet, but she's a meanie," Megan explains of the two women she calls sisters. "Kelsey is very business-minded, very organized, very on-time. I'm like, 'You should quit your job and be my assistant.'"

Megan pauses mid-monologue. Her nostrils flare, and she looks down at Topsy, one of several puppies roaming the house, in disgust. "It smells like somebody pooped." This prompts Daren to worry about her dog eating his own excrement. Megan informs the group that Topsy could get E. coli.

This – obviously – leads to a discussion of how the girl in *The Ring* managed to live in a well for seven days, and how one would survive on a deserted island with no food or water.

"I'm going to happily die," Kelsey says with glee. "I ain't drinking my piss."

"You want to die!" Daren exclaims.

"No, I'm not going to drink it."

"You going to have to drink that pee, bitch!"

Since she's become a public figure, Megan has had to change her life – occasionally at the expense of the clique's social life. "Sometimes I feel like, damn, maybe we shouldn't go to the club and get no Staten Islands tonight." [Editor's note: Megan may have meant to refer to the popular alcoholic beverage the Long Island Iced Tea.] "You got to be careful what you're doing in public because sometimes people spin it like it's something else."

Much of Megan's life as a celebrity is colored by a specific misogyny reserved for young black women. If she's photographed next to a man – whether it's Daniel Kaluuya at the BET Hip Hop Awards or Trey Songz at a club – it quickly becomes an all-consuming story [Cont. on 94]

SZA

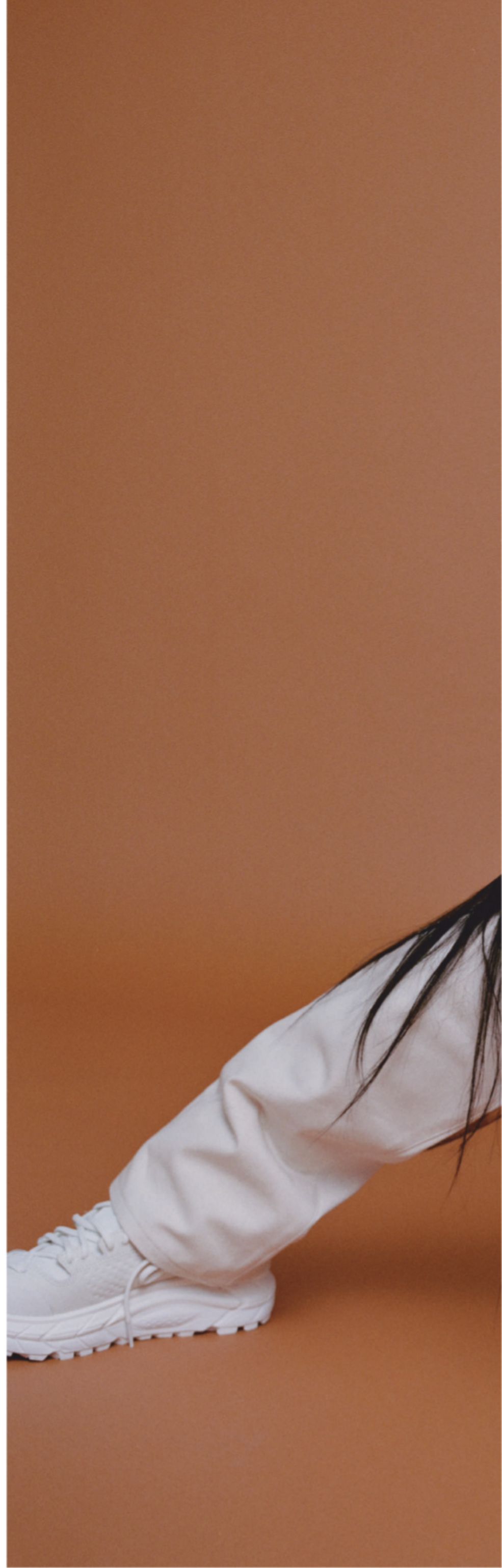
She transformed R&B with her honesty and warmth. Fans are desperate for new music – but first, she’s working on herself

By Emma Carmichael

PHOTOGRAPH BY
Campbell Addy

IT’S PAST MIDNIGHT AT SZA’S HOME IN LOS ANGELES WHEN SHE disappears to retrieve her set of sound bowls. There’s a car arriving in just under three hours to take her to the airport, where she’ll be catching a 6 a.m. flight to Hawaii, but she’s not concerned about her suitcase. “I’m not packing shit but T-shirts,” she says giddily. Kauai, where she will go on to write at Rick Rubin’s house for the next six days, “is a very healing place. It fits my brain.”

SZA, 29, returns and arranges seven bowls, ranging in size from cereal to oversize salad, on the wood floor of her living room, carefully resting each one on a small circular base. She’s been using them in the studio, recording low frequencies for some of her new tracks – you can barely hear them, she says, but the bowls create “an internal hum that feels right.” One of them broke recently,





and it made her cry like she had lost a person. She couldn't bring herself to throw it away, so she wrapped it in a T-shirt and left it at the base of a tree in her backyard.

"Each of these are toned to different chakras in your body," she says, pointing to them one by one. "So this is a low D. This is your high B, which is your astral plane of your crown chakra." She continues down the line. Each bowl's material dictates its healing properties, she explains: Selenite and pink salt are for cleansing, morganite is for love and kindness. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, she begins to play them by drawing her mallet around the bowls' rims. "You pick whatever note comes to your mind naturally, and you imagine it squeezing out of your body. You compress it, like this," she says, pressing her hands to her chest. "Push it out." A note emerges from SZA's lips, clear and full.

As the sparsely furnished room starts to vibrate, she joins her bowls in a duet, singing out brilliant, single-note tones as the mood strikes her. All of the sounds start to meld together, surging and falling. Five minutes pass like this, just SZA sitting cross-legged on the floor in sweats, contentedly playing a one-woman sound-bowl show in the middle of the night. When she is feeling dark, SZA says as she plays, she will pick a word and sing it with intention. "I'm blessed, I'm well, I'm well," she sings out suddenly, in tune with one of the instruments. She pauses for a moment and sighs. "It works. I feel, like, 10 times better already."

GROWING UP IN suburban Maplewood, New Jersey, Solána Imani Rowe felt she had a chip on her shoulder. In high school, she recalls, "I wanted to be liked and have a good time, but it just wasn't in the books for me." She skipped her prom to go to South Beach with her mom and a few close friends, and one night found herself partying in the VIP section of a club, not far from Lil Wayne and Diddy. The trip, she says, "kind of cracked the door open. I was like, 'Fuck this, I don't have any friends anyway. There's nothing to stick around for. I might as well go chase more.'"

She went to college to study marine biology, then worked retail and service jobs while making music on the side. Around 2012, back when artists could still develop a following off of self-released SoundCloud tracks, she started generating buzz online with songs like "Aftermath," whose heady lyrics ("I am not human/I am made of bacon, fairy tales, pixie dust, I don't feel") helped draw in fans.

One of them was the author Ta-Nehisi Coates, who copied another line from "Aftermath" ("You don't have to kidnap/I'd like to be kidnapped") into a notebook while writing his 2019 novel

The Water Dancer. "When I hear SZA's lyrics, it feels like it's definitively her — this really human, young, black woman who is sometimes insecure about her body, other times feels really sexy, sometimes falls really hard," Coates says. "That's what an artist is supposed to do. Once they get into that specificity of who they are, that's when they're touching the most human aspect of it."

Top Dawg Entertainment co-president Terrence "Punch" Henderson took notice, too, signing SZA as the label's first woman artist in 2013. *Ctrl*, the debut album that followed in 2017, made her a star. She stood out by writing the way a woman's internal monologue might actually sound, oscillating between public-facing bite and what are usually privately-held insecurities. ("Let me tell you a secret/I've been secretly banging your homeboy," she sang 43 seconds into her hit "Supermodel," before allowing, "Wish I was comfortable just with myself.") As millennial coming-of-age texts go, *Ctrl* is on a level all its own: It sounds like a vulnerable twentysomething's stream of consciousness, brimming with anxieties, discontented love stories, and a range of pop-culture references one can only absorb from growing up on the internet.

Since being signed, SZA has garnered nine Grammy nominations, performed on Coachella's main stage, and written and sung on tracks by superstars from Beyoncé to Post Malone. "All the Stars," her 2018 collaboration with labelmate Kendrick Lamar for the *Black Panther* soundtrack, has been streamed nearly 700 million times on Spotify. Still, she says she feels dogged by a sense of guilt, like she needs to do more. She considers herself to be shy and awkward, and to this day says she still doesn't feel worthy when she steps onstage: "I'm always shocked that people are there."

It's been nearly three years since *Ctrl* was released, and SZA's very committed fan base has grown impatient. When she tweets these days, no matter the subject, the replies invariably turn into a chorus of inquiries about her next project ("Honey, I want some new music pls not facts about dinosaurs' farts," to cite a recent example), and the few snippets she's shared have been carefully cataloged online. Even SZA, when we first sit down together in late January, asks me warily, "Is this supposed to be about the album?"

When I arrive at her spacious two-story Tudor house around 10 p.m. on a Tuesday night, SZA has just finished cooking dinner for herself and a couple of friends. She looks ready for bed, in gray sweatpants and a cropped green Champion sweatshirt. Instead, she sprawls on her plush white carpet with the comfort of a former gymnast, which she is, and slowly rolls herself a joint.

The free-associative, playful way of thinking that SZA's known for in her songwriting comes across in conversation as well — an aside about how much she admires a certain musician, for example, turns into extended musing about men in the industry who possess "Johnny Bravo energy" (a work-in-progress list: King Krule, Frank Ocean, Future). She flashes her eyes conspiratorially when she's amused or intrigued, and shows a true stoner's dualism: external curiosity and inward-facing thoughtfulness in equal measure.

She says she's nervous about her first proper interview in a year, but speaks so openly that it almost seems like she's been waiting for an opportunity to explain herself. It has been, in SZA's words, "a wild-ass fucking year," full of grief and introspection. She's just beginning to process it all, through wellness practices and, in stages, through her music.

About that: "Music is coming out this year for sure," she says. "An album? Strong words." The much-reported rumor that she was planning on releasing a trilogy of albums and then retiring, she says, is nonsense.

"I can always make music. It's who I am," she says. "So if I started making fucking sculptures and decide to take up entomology, I'm still probably going to drop something. I am also getting to know myself. Because if I keep trying to regurgitate the

same girl, y'all are going to hate that shit. And I don't want that either."

She's aware of the pressure, though. "I've dropped nothing but features," she says. "People don't know who the fuck I am, right? They think I'm on some stupid superstar shiny shit. I know people are tired of seeing that. They want to see me. I owe people that. So I'm going to do that."

She's been drawing inspiration from jazz (Miles Davis, John Coltrane) and a truly eclectic playlist she made "from my childhood," which jumps around from the Beach Boys to Ella Fitzgerald to Australian neo-soul group Hiatus Kaiyote. "I don't even give a fuck about cohesion," she adds. "If you sound like you, your shit's going to be cohesive. Period."



You really have to choose to feel better. Because if you don't, you just die. I'm trying to remind myself that I'm worth something and talented.





SZA
performing
in London,
2018

“She has so much range,” TDE’s Henderson tells me later. “She can do alternative rock, traditional R&B, hip-hop, country. It’s a new chapter. She’s not scared to try certain things now.”

SZA recently spent time in the studio with Timbaland (“He played fucking Brazilian jazz-type beats, and I popped off to that”), and she had a revelatory session with Sia (they wrote three songs together, and SZA says the “Chandelier” singer “manifested the best of me”). And back in October, she took a phone call one morning from a man with a thick, put-on accent, asking her to perform at some international festival. After a while, he dropped the ruse and told her, “This is Stevie.” “I was like, ‘Stevie who?’ He’s like, ‘Stevie Wonder.’”

He asked her to join him onstage at his annual Taste of Soul festival in L.A. the next day, and she flew her dad out to see it. She jokes that it was the first time she’d ever gotten up for a 9 a.m. soundcheck. Before they performed, she and Wonder spent two hours together in his trailer, freestyling at the piano. She plays me a bit from the recording – just her and Wonder exchanging vocal riffs over his keys – and mentions that she’s excerpted it for five different potential beats. “I have nowhere else to go from here,” she says, laughing. “That was scary for me, because that’s the top of my bucket list.”

SZA lights up when she recounts that morning with Wonder, and the more she talks, the clearer it is why: It was a bright spot amid a sequence of intense personal losses that have made her

fans’ insatiable hunger for new music feel even more overwhelming. First, her close friend and collaborator Mac Miller died from an accidental overdose in the fall of 2018. Then, in early 2019, her maternal grandmother Norma’s health took a turn for the worse.

SZA spent much of last year traveling frequently between L.A. and New Jersey, where Norma was in hospice care, making it difficult to get in a creative groove in the studio. Everything felt up in the air. “I’ve been in the airport on the way to see my grandmother on life support,” she says, “and [fans] are like, ‘Aw, girl, what are you doing here? Can I get this picture now?’”

At home, she helped change her grandmother’s diapers and colostomy bags, and tried to be there for her own grieving mother. “My grandma was like my best friend,” she says. “It was the longest five months of my life.” In May, when Norma was really struggling, SZA performed on *Saturday Night Live* with DJ Khaled, which made her feel immense guilt.

Recounting all this from the floor in her living room, she starts to cry – first silently, and then in steady, quiet sobs. “I didn’t want to make music,” she says. “I didn’t. I was just trying to not kill myself, and not quit, period. Because it was really fucking hard, and lonely as fuck.”

Norma died in June, at age 90. Five months later, in November, SZA’s maternal aunt died unexpectedly. “I’ve buried so many people in my life, you would think that I would be used to it, or just have a threshold. But my grandma

broke the threshold for me. It was so weird to not have any...” – her voice breaks – “I don’t know, any control over anything.”

To begin what she calls “my own journey out of this dark-ass depression,” SZA leaned into exercise and wellness. She committed herself to going to the gym every day and practicing Pilates; she got into crystals and meditation and sound bowls. (In December, she performed with the latter publicly for the first time at a chapel in Rancho Palos Verdes, California.) She says all of these things, bit by bit, started to help.

“You really have to choose to feel better. You have to. Have to,” she says through tears, pounding her floor for emphasis. “Because if you don’t, you just die. I decided I’m going to choose that shit for my fucking self, for real. I’m just trying to do everything that is meaningful, and do shit that’s passionate, and remind myself that I’m worth something and talented and a nice girl. Just basic shit.” She pauses and collects herself. “So that’s what the fuck I’ve been doing.”

A WEEK LATER, SZA is back in L.A., fresh off a productive trip to Kauai. She extended her stay for an extra day, building a “crystal grid” around her microphone, working from 3 p.m. to 4 a.m. each night, and writing four new songs, including one that she describes as “a trap song from the perspective of Joni Mitchell.” She swam in the ocean under the stars and saw a sea turtle swimming next to her. “I broke into tears on the second night,” she says. “There were so many stars it made me feel like, ‘Oh, God, where am I, for real? What is this planet?’”

After a single night at home, she’ll get on another plane, to Miami, to work with Pharrell, whom she’s idolized for years: “I’ve stalked him my whole life.” Their paths first crossed when she was a teenage intern at his clothing company, Billionaire Boys Club. One day, she was tasked with bringing clothes to a N.E.R.D. music-video set, and they had her pose for the cameras. (Sure enough, 37 seconds into the “Everyone Nose” video, there’s high school SZA.) A decade later, she’s writing music with him.

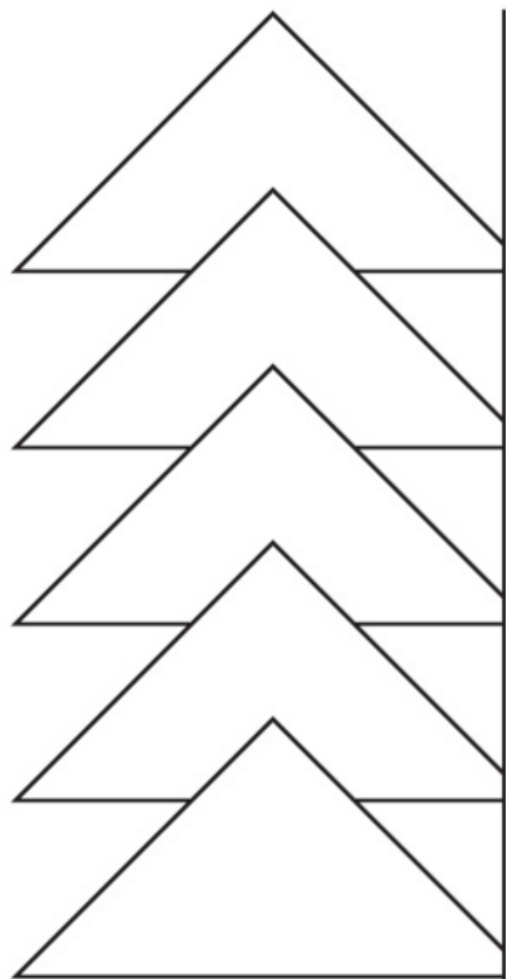
Lately, she’s been working toward gradual growth, instead of seeing everything happening all at once. “It’s about recording every single day, with the idea and intention that you’re chipping away at this invisible thing that will eventually reveal itself,” SZA says.

In Hawaii, she adds, “every day became its own nucleus of ideas and experimentations, which led to making some shit I haven’t heard before. Usually when I hear something that I haven’t heard before, I hear it from somebody else. It’s exciting when I’m hearing shit I haven’t heard before, and it’s coming from me.” **R**

NORMANI

She's a superstar in the making who counts Rihanna and Janet Jackson as fans. Right now, she's figuring out what it means to be on her own

By *Brittany Spanos* PHOTOGRAPH BY *Campbell Addy*



SOME POP STARS MIGHT GO THROUGH A FEW different versions of the video for their first solo hit; Normani went through about 50. Written with Max Martin and Normani's tour-mate Ariana Grande, "Motivation" was a blast of airy, sexy, rhythmically savvy pop. In the video, released last summer, Normani romps through scenes from videos she loved as a child (J. Lo, Britney Spears) while performing some truly sick choreography, including a bit where she kicks, spins, and bounces a basketball off her butt.

Everyone loved the video – except Normani, who endlessly kept tweaking it. "I obsess over things like that," she says. "She was really in tears at one point," her dad, Derrick Hamilton, adds. Eventually, things got so bad that a member of Destiny's Child had to talk her down. "I literally sent it to Kelly Rowland before anybody else," Normani says. The pair had met when Rowland served as a judge on

The X-Factor a year after Normani competed on the show. "She was like, 'You bugging just a little bit.'"

Normani's perfectionism comes from a place of early-career trauma. In Fifth Harmony, the singing group that also gave the world Camila Cabello, she was the underdog. As the only black member, she often felt like "the other one in the room." She was targeted by racist bullies online after a subset of Harmonizers believed Normani had slighted Cabello by calling her "quirky." Trolls posted Photoshopped images of her being lynched; others sent death threats. "She's still scarred from that," her dad says.

In the studio with 5H, she sometimes felt similarly disregarded, pigeonholed as "the dancer." When she was the only member whose vocals were left off a song, she began to question what the hell she was even doing. "I was devastated," she admits. "So many



things start to go through your mind, like, ‘Maybe this is my fault? What could I have done differently? Am I not working hard enough? Am I not as talented? What’s wrong with my voice?’”

Since then, much has changed: After Fifth Harmony ended, RCA Records signed Normani to a solo deal. She became the Beyoncé she wanted to see in the world, presenting herself as a type of performer who feels almost old-school at this moment in pop: a big-voiced dance machine with a flair for diva-like showmanship.

She scored hit duets with Sam Smith and Khalid, and slowly found her own voice. In 2018, she re-created Janet Jackson’s “Pleasure Principle” routine at the BMI R&B/Hip-Hop Awards, as Jackson looked on from the audience like a proud mom. Nicki Minaj called her “that bitch” while accepting a VMA. Beyoncé told her she’s “proud” of her. Rihanna tweeted, “Ugh why can’t I be you?!” after the star’s dance performance on the Savage x Fenty NYFW runway. Normani was later named the lingerie line’s first brand ambassador. “I’m at a loss for words because it’s just all of the women that made up who I am,” she says. “They respect what I do. Like, they actually respect what I do and want me to win. Little-girl me would have never been able to even comprehend that.”

When I meet her one January day, at a go-kart track outside L.A., she’s dressed-down in black basketball shorts and a matching black Aaliyah shirt. Last month, she went go-karting for the first time, during a friends’ trip to Austin that otherwise mostly consisted of listening to the new Harry Styles album over and over. Today, she wants to try again, though it’s really an excuse for a self-professed introvert to get out of the house.

Lately, she’s been trying to prioritize the parts of her life that make her feel like she’s 23, like friends and dating. Her faith is a grounding bit of normalcy: She’s a devout Christian, frequently attending services in L.A. Even her high-profile friendships slant toward ordinary. Recent bestie and former Kardashian associate Jordyn Woods joined her on a January girls’ trip to Jamaica. While touring with fellow night-in enthusiast Grande over the summer, they watched *Bohemian Rhapsody* on the bus and did face masks together. “I know her to have a heart of gold,” Grande says. She picked Normani for the Sweetener World Tour and hyped her up on Instagram every chance she got during and after their trek. “She is such a gracious person, and I love seeing people win when they deserve to – both inside and out.”

Despite some go-karting bravado – she quotes Will Ferrell’s “If you ain’t first, you last” mantra from *Talladega Nights* – Normani comes in fourth, just ahead of the two novices she had

to coach (her friend Josh and myself, fifth and last place, respectively). She’s only semipressed about the fact that her manager (second place) had been the one to crash into her on the track.

Soon she’ll have to get back to working on – if not obsessing over – her next big career milestone: her long-awaited solo debut that could turn her into a superstar. She estimates she’s about halfway through the album, and hopes to have a single out by summer. It’s a monumental step for someone who spent six years not having a say in her music. She’s learning how to open up so that maybe all the painful experiences weren’t a waste of her youth. “I want to be able to feel like I was represented in the most authentic way possible because I know what it feels like coming from a girl group and being told who to be,” she explains. “[It’s] just overwhelming now to have the opportunity to be all that I want to be.” In short, she’s figuring out what it means to be Normani, rising superstar.

BY THE TIME she was a teenager, Normani knew exactly what she wanted out of life: To be one of the “greatest entertainers of all time.” Her dreams of grandeur had started early. Soon after the Hamiltons relocated from Atlanta to New Orleans, a restless, three-year-old ‘Mani began taking dance classes. “[My family] were like, ‘We got to get this girl in dance because she is bouncing off our walls,’” she recalls. Dancing was in her blood: Her mom was a trained dancer and her grandma had been a majorette.

In Louisiana, she spent most of her time with her maternal grandma while her parents, a flight attendant and a union president, traveled for work. Normani was shy but had a tightknit group of best friends. In 2005, when she was nine, her father was working in Tennessee when reports of Hurricane Katrina began to hit the news. Derrick realized his family needed to get out of the city, and the Hamiltons hunkered down outside Baton Rouge. Their home was destroyed in the storm, and the family moved to Houston. “It was hard for ‘Mani,” Derrick says. “That’s all she knew. There were people that we knew on our block that didn’t make it. It was really traumatic.”

In Houston, Normani tried out four different schools before finding the one that made her feel

the closest to comfortable. By sixth grade, however, her family decided she should be home-schooled – to better nurture her big dreams. “I was that young kid and my mom was that momager,” Normani jokes. The pair would travel back-and-forth between Houston and Los Angeles for literally any audition that came their way: acting, singing, dancing. She recorded a couple of songs that never saw the light of day, and auditioned for *America’s Got Talent* but never made it past the producers. “Girl, I was just trying to make it, recording trash songs,” she says.

While Normani was trying to make it big, her parents were struggling to make ends meet. “They never allowed me to see that or put that burden on me,” she says. Her career moves continued without pause. “Dance competitions that we probably weren’t able to afford. Singing lessons that I shouldn’t have been at I still did.” Now, her mom joins her on tour while her dad continues to put in long hours as a longshoreman in Houston. Normani credits him with giving her his work ethic. That came in handy when her career went full-throttle.

The members of Fifth Harmony had all auditioned for *X Factor* as solo artists, but were deemed not strong enough to continue competing on their own. Until the show’s “bootcamp” week, the members were strangers. Inspired by the success of One Direction on the U.K. version of the show, judges Simon Cowell, Britney Spears, Demi Lovato, and L.A. Reid put the five girls together in a group.

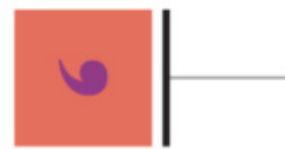
Though they finished third on the show, Fifth Harmony continued to get the 1D treatment: They were pushed out as a pop group that met at the intersection of Spice Girls and Destiny’s Child, with brash, empowering songs about being a “BO\$\$.” A handful of those songs became pop-radio staples, and their six years together revolved around an unenviable schedule of constant touring and promotion. The girls would only go home for the holidays, and even those periods were cut short by other commitments.

“We paid our dues,” Normani says, wide-eyed, remembering a time when they were on two tours at once, simultaneously opening for Lovato and headlining their own trek. “For us to be able to get through that... Basically, what I’m saying is, I could do anything. That shit made anything in the world easy.”

L.A. is where she has lived and worked for some time, but she still doesn’t consider it home. She goes down South as often as possible to see lifelong friends in Houston and New



“Pop” becomes a negative label when a black girl like me is singing it. Let’s celebrate the fact I’m able to have a record with Sam Smith and with 6lack!





Normani
(second from
left) and Cabello
(center) in Fifth
Harmony, 2013

Orleans, as well as her parents. When Normani would come home from 5H tours, life was moving forward without her. She missed out on prom and college, both of which her close friends experienced together. “I felt left out of some of those conversations,” she says, “and I couldn’t relate to the extent that they could because I wasn’t living that.”

For Normani, there was not much room for mental recovery on the road, especially while dealing with racist trolls. During the ordeal, Cabello came to her defense, but Fifth Harmony were ill-equipped to handle the situation. Normani describes it as “them not knowing how to be there for me the way that I needed it because it wasn’t their own experience, and because when they look at me they don’t see me.”

Fifth Harmony went the same way as most pop vocal groups: Cabello had been primed for solo success, teaming up with Shawn Mendes and Machine Gun Kelly for duets. In late 2016, after four and a half years as a quintet, Fifth Harmony announced Cabello’s departure, saying they had been informed she was leaving through her representatives.

In Cabello’s absence, however, Normani seemed to become the group’s de facto leader, dominating the solos and choreography. Her onstage confidence came to the forefront and caught the attention of both Tunji Balogun, who launched RCA’s Keep Cool imprint with her as the lead artist, and manager Brandon Silverstein, who began working with her in late 2017.

“Whenever I would see [Fifth Harmony’s] videos or performances, she always stood out to me,” Balogun says. He had met her through

Khalid and Silverstein, but wasn’t sure he would be able to sign her because of 5H’s contract with a different label. Still, Balogun wanted her involved with “Love Lies,” as did Khalid, her duet partner on the song. Both were fans of her “star energy.”

Fifth Harmony released one more record together, then went on “indefinite hiatus.” Cabello became the first member to release an album and have a hit. Since then, every member has released solo music, to varying degrees of success. Normani is diplomatic when discussing the group, but she has kept a healthy distance from social media in the years since her traumatic bout of bullying. “I try not to take it personal, even though sometimes it does get personal,” she says. “I try my best not to say anything because nobody’s opinion is going to dictate where I’m going or what I’m going to do. Only I have the control to do that.”

ON THE SUNDAY of the Grammy awards, a couple of hours before Normani and I are supposed to meet for lunch, Kobe Bryant’s helicopter crashes 18 miles away. Normani is a basketball fan who loved Kobe. Like the rest of Los Angeles, she’s devastated and postpones our meeting by a few hours. When we finally grab dinner at the vegan restaurant Gracias Madre, there’s a makeshift shrine in front, complete with candles and a box where patrons can drop in notes for Bryant.

Like many 23-year-olds, Normani is just beginning to learn how to cope with death. Her grandma on her dad’s side died a year before, and Kobe’s death resurfaced some of those

tricky feelings. “I’m still trying to figure out how to move forward even when things like this happen,” she says.

A bigger challenge, these days, is just learning to be vulnerable. Her competitive dance and gymnastics background primed her for a life of performing through pain with a smile on her face. Even when she was bullied, she didn’t take time off work. Now, though, she’s trying to figure out how to go easy on herself and take her time.

When Normani posed for a photo with Janet Jackson last year, Jackson shared some advice. “I’m not going to say verbatim,” Normani says, “but she was telling me to be me first before I’m anything else. I can do whatever I want to do. You can have a super pop record with a super R&B record.”

Normani has been thinking about genres a lot lately, especially as she inches closer to the end of her album. She’s tired of “pop” being an insult. “It’s almost like [pop] becomes a negative when it’s a black girl that looks like me, singing the records that I choose to sing because I loved them. Let’s celebrate the fact that I’m able to have a record with Sam Smith while also having a record with 6lack!” Just an hour before dinner, she watched Lizzo take home a Grammy in a pop category, which she finds inspiring.

In the studio, she hasn’t felt constrained by either genre, working with everyone from recent pop songwriting heavyweights like Victoria Monét and Tayla Parx (both known for their work with Grande) to experimental R&B producers like Joel Compass (FKA Twigs, Jorja Smith). “I was trying to wrap my mind around it, feeling the responsibility and the pressure like I owe it to both sides,” she says. “Just now I’m coming to the realization I don’t owe anybody as much as I owe to myself first. I’m the one that has to perform these records for the rest of my life.”

Normani wants the album to be a confessional statement, less focused on hits and more on the longevity of her career. “I feel like I’m not the most open person,” she admits. In learning how to open up, she wants to write songs that connect on a deeper level with a fandom that has grown up with her. “I want every girl out there to feel like I’m going through the same thing.”

As for those Grammys across town, Normani isn’t too concerned about taking one of the golden gramophones home. She’s thrilled for friends like Lizzo and Rosalía, but the Christian side of her calls the awards “materialistic.” She’s survived the good, bad, and ugly of the industry, and being where she’s at now is enough of a reward for her.

“Oh, I’ve seen the ugly,” she says with a smile. “Even with those things, it amazes me how I bounce back. I didn’t know that I was as strong as I’ve been.” 



SOLEDAD O'BRIEN

After a new executive pushed her out at CNN, she became one of the mainstream media's biggest critics *By EJ Dickson*



SOLEDAD O'Brien likes to tell a story: Eleven years ago, a senior employee at CNN – “my boss’s boss’s boss” – called her into his office

to upbraid her about a comment she had made while promoting her multipart series *Black in America*. At a panel, O'Brien had said she had interviewed black parents from various socioeconomic backgrounds, all of whom said they had conversations with their sons about how to navigate interactions with police. The superior, who was white, told her this experience was not specific to people of color, and that white parents had this discussion with their sons too. He requested that she stop publicly speaking about young black men and police brutality.

O'Brien was stunned. “I’d spent 18 months working on that doc,” the veteran journalist recalls in the office of her company, Soledad O'Brien Productions. “But the idea that I would come back with something that challenged his belief was just not acceptable.” Nonetheless, she wanted to keep her job, and she knew that speaking out would be career suicide. “I didn’t tell that story,” she says. “Until I was telling it on Twitter.” And once she started telling stories, she found she couldn’t stop.

For the first 25 years of her career, O'Brien, 53, was a high-profile broadcast journalist, winning Peabodys for her coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill, and gracing the pages of *People*’s 50 Most Beautiful list. Yet over the past few years, she has become one of establishment media’s most fiery critics. On Twitter, where she has more than a million followers, O'Brien regularly blasts outlets for coverage that minimizes the threats posed by Trump’s administration. “A hot mess,” she tweeted about a CNN interview with a Trump-supporting congressional candidate. Of a quote from *New York Times* executive editor Dean Baquet about how Trump’s victory was impossible for the media to predict: “This, folks, is bullshit.”

Early in her career, O'Brien, the daughter of an Afro Cuban mother and an Irish Australian father, graduated from local NBC affiliates in Boston and San Francisco to MSNBC and NBC; when she was pregnant (she has two daughters

MAKEUP BY TODD HARRIS FOR SALLY HARLOR

and twin sons, ages 19, 17, and 15, respectively), Maria Shriver gave her tips for how to gracefully vomit in a trash bin off camera. In 2003, she moved to CNN, where she helmed the *Black in America* series and won an Emmy for her coverage of the 2012 presidential election. In 2013, however, while she was hosting the morning show *Starting Point*, her CNN career ended abruptly when she was pushed out by then-incoming president Jeff Zucker.

O'Brien is sanguine about the terms of her departure. "When Jeff came in I knew they were gonna go a different direction, so I was ready," she says. It also helped that, as part of the terms of her exit, CNN became the first client for Sole-dad O'Brien Productions, airing documentaries like 2014's *The War Comes Home*, which focused on veterans with PTSD. She now heads up a staff of 11 from its headquarters in New York, traveling one night a week to shoot her syndicated TV talk show, *Matter of Fact*.

Being her own boss has given O'Brien the freedom to spotlight stories told by marginalized or underrepresented voices: *Hungry to Learn*, her recent documentary with filmmaker Geeta Gandbhir, shines light on low-income college students too mired in debt to afford food. It has also given her the freedom to publicly hold major media figures and outlets accountable. "When you're largely self-employed, you have a lot more latitude to call it as you see it," says her former executive producer Kim Bondy, who first met O'Brien at NBC News, in 1997. "There's no calling her to the principal's office. She is the principal."

In person, O'Brien is quick to voice her criticism of well-known media figures, from CNN media reporter Brian Stelter ("He cannot call out the hypocrisy within his own company — he just can't") to *New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens ("I think he's just lost his way") to Chris Cillizza ("That's a person I really think is terrible"). She bristles at a CNN representative's recent comment, in response to O'Brien's criticism of a much-maligned Cillizza column, that she has become "more of a liberal activist than a journalist." Such a categorization, O'Brien says, is only accurate "if you consider yelling at people on Twitter activism. I'm in the service of telling people, 'This is just bullshit. This is just not true.'" Still, she seems to derive glee from burning as many bridges as she can, though she acknowledges that as the CEO of her own company she is in a "very rarefied position" to do so. "Often people will DM me and say, 'Listen, that's so true. But I'm trying to be a guest on *Meet the Press*, so I can't say anything,'" O'Brien says. "I don't want to be booked on *Meet the Press*. I'm OK with that. I've done a lot of stuff, and it's just not my path now." 

Kathleen Hanna

The riot-grrrl pioneer returns with Bikini Kill in the era of Donald Trump, just when their feminist fury is needed most

 "SINCE trump was elected, there've been all these times when the news is on and I'm singing a Bikini Kill song in my head," says Kathleen Hanna. "It's like I need to hear these songs."

She's not alone. Since reuniting with Bikini Kill bassist Kathi Wilcox and drummer Tobi Vail in 2019, ending a 22-year break, Hanna has been performing songs like 1993's "Rebel Girl" for their biggest crowds ever. "With the #MeToo movement and a president who says, 'Grab them by the pussy,' it's hard not to feel like, 'OK, feminism's coming back,'" adds the singer, 51.

Hanna discovered feminism at age 19, when she first read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Soon, she was performing spoken-word poetry about sexism and violence, and later packing clubs with Bikini Kill. Onstage, she screamed in dresses and body paint, the word "slut" sometimes written across her stomach. After Bikini Kill disbanded, Hanna kept pushing forward with new bands Le Tigre and the Julie Ruin. She wasn't sure at first about reuniting: "I didn't want to be a parody of myself in my twenties," she says. "But I was so excited to be hearing the songs live again that it felt natural and right."

One thing that's changed since Bikini Kill's first run is the wholehearted way the world has embraced them this time. "We are getting so much more positivity and love than ever before," Hanna says, "and we're not having to spend all of our energy being upset that



a fanzine we like just wrote a whole article about my ass."

In 2016, Hanna played New York with the Julie Ruin just days after Trump's win. "It ended up being cathartic," she says. "At least we weren't all at home crying to Cat Power records." She's still mulling whom to support as this year's Democratic primary heats up, but notes, "I believe in [Eliza-

beth] Warren. I would love to see her win."

In the meantime, she'll spend this spring and summer on the road with Bikini Kill, starting with a pair of benefit shows in their hometown of Olympia, Washington. "It's definitely what I call, 'these troubled times'" Hanna says. "But [performing] is... nourishing." **BRENNA EHRLICH**



NATASHA LYONNE

The actor took a painful childhood and brushes with death, and wrote herself the part of a lifetime *By Alex Morris*



"I FEEL LIKE I haven't used the bathroom at Veselka since the Nineties, but I'm going to go for it," Natasha Lyonne announces from within an

aura of red curls and cigarette smoke when she arrives at the Ukrainian eatery in New York's East Village one night in December. She does an about-face, joins the bathroom line like any regular schmuck, and returns with this to say: "Well, it hasn't changed. That's my book report on the bathroom at Veselka. As harrowing as ever. But I bet the blintzes are still good." She orders eight pierogies from a no-nonsense Eastern European woman wearing an ugly Christmas sweater and a strange, sequined protrusion on her head. "Great outfit. Ten out of 10," Lyonne observes. "Do you have any applesauce?" Then she leans back in her chair and, primal needs accounted for, prepares to go deep. "I mean, it's a problematic thing, being a person. Shame and the meaning of life," she says with a shrug. "Let's get into it."

It's these very topics, of course – along with quantum physics, addiction, death, rebirth, nostalgia, childhood trauma, religion, aging, mental illness, and the perpetual haunting visited upon us by our past selves – that Lyonne plumbs in her acclaimed Netflix series, *Russian Doll* (which she produces, directs, and stars in). And it's preparing for the second season that brings her back to her hometown of New York. She arrived on a red-eye this morning, she tells me. "But then again, what is time? These are the kinds of questions I ask now. These are the things I consume my days with."

The rhythms of borscht-belt vaudeville being her natural cadence, this sounds like a joke, but Lyonne means it quite literally. For the past couple of months, she's been working in a writers room in Los Angeles – the city where she sometimes lives with her boyfriend, Fred Armisen – trying to figure out the future of *Russian Doll* and perhaps also of her character, Nadia Vulvokov, who in Season One was constantly dying and then being reborn in the fun-house bathroom of the apartment where she's celebrating her 36th birthday. Nadia ultimately makes it her mission to discover the cause of this glitch in the time-space continuum and to probe the layers of reality – both conscious and subconscious – that have gotten her to this point. This involves many a campy romp through the East Village of Lyonne's own youth, and a kind of pop existentialism that sometimes veers into something breathtakingly deeper. Developed by Lyonne, Amy Poehler, and playwright Leslye Headland, the show was nominated for four Emmys. It also created a new layer of reality for Lyonne, one of unmitigated success and wide artistic license.

Which wasn't necessarily a layer Lyonne was expecting. In fact, *Russian Doll* was its own sort of reincarnation, born from the ashes of a show called *Old Soul* that Lyonne conceived with Poehler some years back, when she was still emotionally and professionally coming out of what she refers to as a "well-documented Keith Richards era." As she tells it, "Amy called me one day out of the blue, and she said, 'I've been thinking about you, and as long as I've known you' – which had been about 20 years – 'you've always been the oldest girl in the room.' And I said, 'Thank you for calling and insulting me on this day. Also, I agree.'" Poehler suggested they make a show about it. Lyonne considered. "I looked around the room. I found nothing but

empty containers of food and a laptop: Sold!" When NBC passed on that show – in which Lyonne was to play an ex-gambler who runs a poker ring for her godmother, Ellen Burstyn – Poehler doubled down. "She turned to me in a car and said, 'Kid, I know this show didn't hit, but if we could make any show we wanted to make, what is it we really want to say together? What is it we're really after?'"

What Lyonne was after, then and now, was some sort of way of making sense of mortality. Though it's decidedly Not Natasha Lyonne's Favorite Topic, that well-documented Keith Richards era had included a well-documented heroin addiction that had not just landed the onetime star of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, *Slums of Beverly Hills*, and *American Pie* in the crosshairs of a massive public shaming (AS TAXPAYERS, WE ASK THAT THE CITY PLEASE DO SOMETHING ABOUT NATASHA LYONNE, a 2006 Gawker headline once gawked), but had also put her in the hospital for five months with a collapsed lung and endocarditis, an infection – known colloquially as "heroin heart" – that eventually required open-heart surgery. In an alternate reality, she could have died. In this reality, she didn't.

And because she didn't, all of that "shame and the meaning of life" stuff made its way into *Russian Doll*. "I had taken cracks at some drafts early on where I was realizing that I was always perceiving life through the lens of a dead person, essentially," Lyonne says. "That the closest version to my experience of my present-day life was as somebody who had already lived and died, and was for some reason doing it all over again, which continues to be a surprise to me."

It didn't surprise others around her, at least not the existential bent Lyonne was mining. "She's a very profound person, and there's nothing surface about her," her best friend, Chloë

Seigny, tells me. “Just the way she looks at a problem or relationships, it’s always surprising, always inventive, and just brilliant.” Being asked to play young Nadia’s mother – in what turned out to be some of the show’s most potent scenes – was a heady experience for Seigny. “I don’t think people understand the gravity of that, how much of the show was based on things around her mother,” she says. “It was very emotional and upsetting and cathartic. On a human level, on a best-friend level, it was pretty deep.”

Lyonne’s Talmudic toughness can be traced back to growing up with a boxing-promoter father who created a “tough-guy ethos” in their unstable home. When Lyonne was eight, her father moved the family to Israel, where “his dreams were about bringing Mike Tyson to the Tel Aviv Hilton and becoming the Don King of Israel.” She grew up watching movies like *Scarface*, *Taxi Driver*, and *The Godfather*, and cultivating a clench-fisted, tomboy stance that she hoped would endear her to distant parents. She didn’t have many female friends. She thought she might grow up to be a spy, though she now realizes that the “hypervigilance I was experiencing was more about being a kid in an unsafe home.” After her parents divorced and she moved back to New York with her mom, things got only more precarious. Her pot-selling enterprises got her got kicked out of the fancy Upper East Side yeshiva where she had been on scholarship, a have-not in a sparkling world of haves. She started NYU at 16, thinking she’d learn to be a filmmaker, then dropped out at the thought of having to dissect *Apocalypse Now* with a bunch of 18-year-olds from the suburbs.

In the many alternate realities she can create in her mind, she wonders what would have happened if someone had put a pen or a camera in her hand instead of, as she says, “a peace pipe. Let’s call it a ‘peace pipe.’ I just want to protect your gentle readers.” Probably, she thinks, she would have ended up in the same place she is now, but sooner, without “throwing 15 years in the toilet, which, to be clear, is the de-romanticized version of drug use.” She doesn’t want me to write about all of this, of course. It’s an old version of Lyonne, a layer of reality buried now beneath so many others. But it’s the layer that keeps bending the time-space continuum; it’s the layer that keeps coming back to haunt her.

THE PIEROGIES ARE eaten. The bill arrives. “It’s \$400, which feels like a typo,” Lyonne jokes, deadpan, before gathering herself into a coat with hugely exaggerated shoulders (“It makes an entrance, but does it make an exit?”) and plopping on a black fedora she says she stole from a castle in Wales (“Fred was very mad. I thought it was an

appropriate action at the time”). Outside, the air is clear and bracing, the right sort of air for this sterilized, gentrified version of the East Village overlaid on the grimier one Lyonne remembers well. “I mean, I’ve lived all over this neighborhood for the past 20 years, and the ghosts of the streets are real,” she’d said earlier. “It’s funny that you can walk through waves of them. It’s funny that memory is as Fellini experiences it.”

I’m seeing the ghosts too. We walk half a block to the first apartment I had in New York, a prewar walk-up with all the grungy charm of a Jim Jarmusch film. I tell her that my room used to look out on a mortician’s storefront. “Ah!” she barks. “That’s the New York I remember: Morticians on every corner!” In the spot where I think the funeral home used to be, there’s now a pizza franchise (“All their pizzas come embalmed”), which we glare at from under the light of Christmas trees being sold across the street. “They love putting Christmas trees here,” Lyonne observes. “I stole one of these Christmas trees once – on my life, I did. A *New York Post* van was delivering papers, and we stole the tree, tipped the driver, and had him drive it back to my place.”

We wander near Seigny’s old apartment, where Lyonne says she spent many nights, probably never imagining that she would one day write a TV show in which her mother is incarnated by her closest friend. In fact, Seigny is a large part of the reason Lyonne got the chance to do so. When she was still “on the mend,” as Seigny puts it, Seigny talked the director Scott Elliott into giving Lyonne a theater debut. The next year, Nora and Delia Ephron cast her in a play with Tracee Ellis Ross, Tyne Daly, Rosie O’Donnell, Samantha Bee, and Rita Wilson. “And they really kind of took me in,” Lyonne says. “I had gone so far from what’s standard practice of being a dropout in this town, that I was forever surprised when someone like Nora Ephron would give me the keys to her house and say, ‘Go stay there. I’m out of town.’ I would be, like, very confused, because I didn’t understand why she wouldn’t think I would steal her stuff, you know? And I guess she could see in me, long before I could, that I wasn’t in that place in my life anymore. And that was the type of stuff that started rebuilding my sense of trusting myself, of wondering what I could do. There was a sort

of sweeping power of sisterhood that washed through me and created an engine in me.”

That engine propelled her into the part of Nicky Nichols on *Orange Is the New Black*, where Lyonne was again “taken into this community of women who really rebuilt me.” The show finally gave her the type of role she had grown up idolizing, yet felt had eluded her. “I mean, I’m somebody who’s been in fucking a hundred movies for 35 years, and there’s like three things that I can remember that I’m in,” Lyonne says. “I think that in *Orange Is the New Black* I was really allowed to be the sort of New York, male, Seventies actor that I wanted to be, with an arc, a storyline, and a fully animated thought life.”

Nadia has all those things, over and over again. She thinks, dresses, moves, acts, and talks like few women we’ve seen onscreen. And now that Lyonne is in New York to bring *Russian Doll* back, she finds herself in an interesting moment, one in which her success stems inextricably from going down the wormhole and reanimating those ghosts of her past. “Of course, it’s a fictionalized show, but it was scary for me to be so honest and autobiographical,” she tells me. Then again, it’s good to “envision something

from dust,” she says as we head east. And it’s good to be reminded of who we no longer are. “I like getting older,” says Lyonne. “My main pitch to young women is to stick in the fight, because it’s a total lie that it’s great as a teenager and in your twenties.”

We make our way to Lyonne’s block. Armisen is on *Saturday Night Live* tonight, and she needs to get ready. Seigny will be there, as will Maya Rudolph, a friend of Lyonne’s from the Nineties who introduced her to

Armisen, and who runs a production company with her. They’re currently working on nine projects, which will allow Lyonne to continue directing and producing. “The writing-directing-producing stuff is really, for me, the joy of my life,” she says. “I can’t believe I’m getting paid to sit with these brilliant women every day just to think about things. It’s my fantasy.” Rudolph recently covered the fridge in their office with photos from their many years of friendship. “I started crying,” Lyonne continues. “It was just like, ‘Holy shit. I have a home base in this.’”

This is the family Lyonne has built, the ones who’ve put a pen and a camera in her hand and helped her see what to do with them. In the meantime, life goes on, with all its ghosts, all its wormholes, all its wonderful, frightening absurdities. Lyonne tips her stolen fedora and disappears into the East Village night. ®



I like getting older. My main pitch to young women is to stick in the fight, because it’s a total lie that it’s great as a teenager and in your twenties.





Maya Rockeymoore Cummings

A candidate sets aside her grief to take her fight to Congress

AT 8 A.M. ON A FRIGID JANUARY morning, Maya Rockeymoore Cummings, 49-year-old widow of legendary Rep. Elijah Cummings, stands on a busy street corner in

Baltimore, enthusiastically waving at passing cars next to a campaign sign with her name on it. “I’m not riding in on my husband’s coattails,” she says. “I’m running hard and I’m running to win.”

Just weeks after the congressman passed away in October, Maya underwent a preventive double mastectomy. She took only three weeks to recover before fully immersing herself in the race for her husband’s seat – which has no fewer than 32 other contenders in the primary. “That month was mind-numbingly painful and surreal,” she says. “But never did I say I’m gonna toss it all in.”

Cummings, a Ph.D. in political science and the former chair of the state Democratic Party in Maryland, says she inherited a passion for social justice from her parents, who grew up in a small West Texas town in the Jim Crow South, the third generation out of slavery. “The thought of anyone filling Elijah’s shoes is daunting,” she says. But “we are at a critical time. Trump has unleashed a Pandora’s box of hate that covers immigrants, religious minorities, people of color. And I just believe our country is better than that.” **LAURA BASSETT**

RIGHT: ASHLEY RODGERS/TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

KATHARINE HAYHOE

An evangelical scientist with a mission to spread the word on the climate crisis and find solutions for the road ahead

AS AN ATMOSPHERIC scientist, Katharine Hayhoe

understands the realities of climate change more deeply than most. As an *evangelical Christian* atmospheric scientist, she understands her religious brethren – and their propensity to doubt man-made climate change – probably better than anyone. So she’s made it her mission to help them see the light.

For her, science and faith have never been at odds: “I grew up with the idea that science was the coolest thing you could study. Every summer my dad would have a project for us: wildflowers, bird calls, learning about fractals.”

The Toronto-born daughter of missionaries and the wife of a pastor in Lubbock, Texas, Hayhoe has had a life-long master class in the art of evangelizing. But she’s not so much trying to convert people on climate change as show them that they already care. “They just haven’t connected the dots,” she says.

She’s found the skepticism usually isn’t rooted in theology, but politics. “I’ve literally had people say, ‘I agree with everything you say, but if I agree with you, then I would agree with Al Gore. I could never agree with Al Gore,’” she says. Which is why she is not only director of the Climate Center at Texas Tech University, but also a mem-

ber of its poli-sci department. “It’s become so politicized by those who control the power and wealth in this world.”

She’s been inundated with so much hate mail she concealed her email address online, but the hate just shifted to social media, where she blocks as many as 100 people a day. It hasn’t slowed her down. No speaking en-

mate Assessments and specializes in translating climate projections into actionable information on the local level, whether it’s for a city water board or a group of farmers. “The finer scale you go to, the more you’re able to talk about visible, tangible solutions, and the easier it is to bypass the politicized rhetoric,” she says. She led a land-



gagement is too small: living rooms, Rotary Clubs, tiny Baptist colleges. She does about 80 percent of her talks online to lower her carbon footprint. “She gets a lot of credit for being a wonderful communicator,” says Kate Marvel, a climate scientist with NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies. “But she’s also a brilliant scientist.”

Hayhoe was a lead author on the past three National Cli-

mate Assessments and specializes in translating climate projections into actionable information on the local level, whether it’s for a city water board or a group of farmers. “The finer scale you go to, the more you’re able to talk about visible, tangible solutions, and the easier it is to bypass the politicized rhetoric,” she says. She led a landmark 2006 study of California that compared two futures: one in which the state weened itself off of fossil fuels and one where it didn’t, “really bringing it down to the nitty-gritty,” she says, on water supply, agriculture, air quality. It prompted the state to pass the nation’s first cap on greenhouse-gas emissions. “Hope comes from acting,” she says. “So I’m acting myself.” **PHOEBE NEIDL**

**Women
Shaping
The
Future**

Brooke Raboutou & Kyra Condie

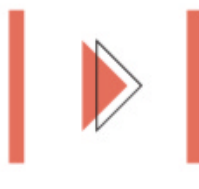
The first American women to
qualify for Olympic climbing
are revolutionizing the sport
By Andrea Marks

PHOTOGRAPH BY
Samuel Trotter



Raboutou (left)
and Condie at the
Front Climbing Club
in Salt Lake City

BROOKE RABOUTOU & KYRA CONDIE

 KYRA CONDIE ALWAYS climbed: up trees, on top of the refrigerator, in the rafters of her parents' Twin Cities home. She got hooked on the sport at a

birthday party in a gym when she was 11. At 13, her career nearly ended before it began, when she had to have 10 vertebrae fused with metal rods to correct severe scoliosis. The surgery marked a turning point. After, all Condie wanted to do was climb – and be the best. “As soon as I had the idea of climbing being taken away from me,” she says, “all those times going to the gym instead of the park with friends felt worth it.”

The dedication paid off. In 2019, Condie, 23, and her friend of a decade, Brooke Raboutou, 18, qualified as the first American women to compete in Olympic climbing when the sport debuts at the Tokyo games this summer.

Raboutou started young too. She comes from a family of climbers in Boulder, Colorado, where her mom, a former champion, runs a gym. She's been climbing since before she can remember. Condie noticed her for the first time at a national competition in 2010: “This girl was a lot younger than me, and just crushing everything.”

As the sport has increased in popularity, teenage girls are emerging as its new stars. Their superior weight-to-strength ratio may give them an edge. In 2016, teens swept the women's national championships, and Raboutou herself set several records before she turned 12. They're also gaining on men. Last fall, a nine-year-old girl became the youngest person to scale Yosemite's 3,000-foot rock formation, El Capitan.

At the Olympics, climbers will compete in three disciplines: lead climbing, where they ascend as high as possible in six minutes; speed, where two climbers race side by side; and bouldering, where they try to complete the most routes possible of the same wall in four minutes. “It's not just about being strong,” Raboutou says, “but solving the problems in front of you.”

The preparation is grueling. In Colorado, Raboutou practices for up to 11 hours a day, fine-tuning runs, doing mobility exercises for her shoulders, and to build strength, dangling by three fingers from a ledge... and then doing pull-ups. Condie, who trains in Salt Lake City, powers through with a reggaeton playlist.

Inevitably, they face mansplainers. Condie gets plenty of “tips” online (sample comment: “You need to work on getting bigger biceps”), but doesn't let it get to her. Having Raboutou helps. “In climbing, there's an amazing community of women who are all superstrong,” she says. “Nobody takes the bullshit.” 

ALEXIS SABLONE

She's got a degree from MIT and designed a public sculpture in Sweden. And she just might take skateboarding to the Olympics



SKATEBOARDING OUTSIDE the Brooklyn townhouse she shares with five roommates, Alexis Sablone soars through a shaft of January light with her hoodie pulled over a beanie and her five-foot-four frame swimming in baggy jeans. A seven-time X Games medalist, her movement is effortless.

Yet Sablone, 33, is more than just one of the world's best women's street skaters. She has a master's degree in architecture from MIT. She designed a skateable public sculpture in Sweden, and is in talks for similar projects in the U.S. In a studio, she builds large-scale sculptures with found materials; at home, she designs decks as art director for WKND Skateboards and is working on a graphic novel about nuclear waste.

These days, it's skateboarding that takes up most of her time. Sablone is close to qualifying for the Tokyo Olympics, where the sport is making its premiere in August. While she's currently ranked second in U.S. women's street skating,

only 20 from the whole world will compete in that category. “It's funny, because skateboarding always represented freedom,” she says. “School was structure. And right now skateboarding is so structured.”

Growing up in Connecticut, Sablone got her first skateboard when she was 10. She was drawn to the straightforward method, where repetition got results. “You put in the effort, you see things changing,” she says. “There's always something you're working on.”

Trevor Thompson, a pro skater and Sablone's best friend since childhood, says her reserved demeanor and gutsy style work in tandem. “She's small and not very loud, so when you see her in action, there's something about the contrast that strikes you.” As kids, “she'd be skating better than you, falling harder than you. What are you gonna say?”

In grad school, Sablone showed similar dedication. “She was known for working all hours of the day and night,” says Skylar Tibbits, an associate professor at MIT. It was there that Sablone was inspired to try sculpture. “A big part of architecture school is using different tools to make weird stuff,” Sablone says. “But in architecture, ideally we want to be able to re-create it. [After graduation] it was exciting that I could still make stuff but not

have that limitation. I was like, ‘I can make anything!’”

For a long time, building a career in skateboarding was tough for women. “That's why I got into competitions in the first place,” she says. “There wasn't really the other avenue to make a living.”

But in the lead-up to the Olympics, women have seen increased visibility. In 2014, Nike signed Leticia Bufoni; in 2017, Adidas signed Nora Vasconcellos. Last year, Sablone landed a sponsorship with Converse and designed a shoe with her name on it. Shortly after, Sablone, who is gay, appeared in a 50th-anniversary Pride campaign. Having a platform as a queer athlete is something she's still adjusting to. “Skateboarding is something that's always been for everybody, not just one type of person. That's the spirit of skateboarding,” she says. “But in practice, it appeared for years to be mostly straight men, and that's changing. To be a queer woman, it puts you in some kind of spotlight.”

As she enters the final months of qualifiers, Sablone is looking ahead to the other side of this milestone – a schedule with room for her next project. “It's gonna feel really weird I think,” she says. “But, then, probably exciting to think about all that other stuff again.” **ANDREA MARKS**



Sablone
airborne in
Brooklyn
in January



Nosrat in
Berkeley, in
January

SAMIN NOSRAT

A chef and author who's changing the face – and the heart
and the soul – of cooking on TV *By Maria Fontoura*



EVERY TIME Samin Nosrat laughs, it's like someone's opened a bottle of champagne. It pops in a bright, round burst and then leaves a

delightful fizz in the air, the lingering feeling of everyone within earshot smiling. And when you have a conversation with Samin (who's a first-name-only star to her legion of fans), it adds up to a lot of champagne.

That infectious spirit, on full display in her Netflix show, *Salt Fat Acid Heat*, has made Nosrat a star. Based on her award-winning 2017 book of the same name, the series is a few years' worth of culinary school in three revelatory hours of television. Where most cooking shows (and cookbooks) present recipes, Nosrat teaches you how to cook – what to do with fundamental ingredients when and, most important, why. Each episode explores one of the four pillars of good cooking name-checked in the title, in a different location across the globe: Japan, Italy, Mexico, and the U.S. The show is joyful, captivating, and deeply informative. As much knowledge as she brings to the table, Nosrat is irrepressibly curious, and that signature laugh – not to mention a face of Chaplin-level expressiveness (see: Samin tasting seaweed pulled straight out of the ocean; Samin tasting salsas made with sour honey) – buoys her small talk at outdoor markets, cooking tutorials with a language barrier, and convivial meals. Even in a strange land, Samin is never a stranger.

Which is ironic, since she's always felt like an outsider. "Brown people, kids, queer people, fat people, all sorts of people see themselves in me," Nosrat says of the Saminiacs who now accost her (sweetly) wherever she goes. "And I think what it is about me is that I'm always looking for where I belong. That is the eternal question in my heart. I've always felt like I don't fit in. So the way that I've chosen to respond to it in my work is that everyone is welcome here."

Born in San Diego to Iranian immigrants, Nosrat grew up eating dishes like *khoresh bademjan*, a stew of eggplant and tomatoes with sour grapes, while her friends pounded chicken nuggets and fries. As a girl, she helped her mom "pick mountains of herbs or peel a ton of pomegranates," but she wasn't drawn to the kitchen until her first experience with fine dining: a dinner at Chez Panisse, that renowned lodestar of California cuisine, while she was a student at Berkeley in 2000. Awed by her meal, she wrote the chef, Alice Waters, a letter, offering – pleading – to work for her. She started sweeping

LOCATION COURTESY OF BERKELEY BOWL WEST

floors and busing tables there, and the rest is Samin history: an apprenticeship in the kitchen; a gig teaching the writer Michael Pollan to cook (when he was a patron at another restaurant where she worked, she passed him a note asking to audit his graduate-level journalism class); a column for *The New York Times Magazine*; a book deal; a blockbuster show. On paper, it all seems bold, confident, and self-determined. The reality, she admits, is different.

"It's funny, I don't feel so courageous. Often I feel very lost," Nosrat says, describing her life as an arduous swim through that sense of otherness, constantly searching for mentors to guide her. As an aspiring writer, she was already bucking expectations for most first-generation children (doctor, lawyer, engineer). But the safest and most obvious career paths for English majors – advertising, marketing, maybe a Ph.D. – didn't speak to her. Cooking "presented itself," Nosrat says, and she took a chance. "I was like, 'This is a beautiful thing, I'm gonna go toward this.' So, I'm just kind of blindly stepping through the world looking for the thing that feels good, and where good people are."

Twenty years on, cooking is still fortifying for her, a way of making her feel rooted, capable, and present. She considers it the ultimate antidote to the toxicity of modern life. Thinking back to the previous week, Nosrat recalls a day where she was feeling down. She decided to make chicken stock and woke the next morning to the satisfying sight of "three gallons of this magical, liquid gold." She gulped down a cup for breakfast, then invited some friends over to cook and eat some more. After a boisterous few hours of chatter and children and dogs and food and no internet, she says – with more than a little amazement – her cloud had lifted.

"It's so funny, it's the thing that I'm always trying to get everyone else to do, yet every time, I'm surprised, like, 'Oh, my God, it works!'" Her big laugh unfurls. "Cooking really is a reprieve. It gives you a chance to use your nose and your ears and your hands, and to feel and to smell and to taste. It reminds you that you have a body, and that there are people that we share this Earth with."

It's this feeling that she wants to impart to others through her teaching – not a bunch of perfect brunch recipes. "A big part of it is self-sufficiency," she says. "Some measure of feeling like you can do something for yourself and for the people around you. If I need to be the cheerleader to make you feel like you can do that, that's a really easy thing for me to do. But I think the thing I always remember is that as much as I'm cheerleading everyone else, part of me is just cheerleading me, too. I just want people to feel a little more human." ®

Supermajority

2018 was just the beginning. Activist superstars join together to fight for fair representation for women



AFTER THE 2017 Women's March, women kept stopping

Cecile Richards on the street, on the subway, at events. They all had the same question: "What am I supposed to do now? I've marched, I've called my member of Congress, but I know there's more I can do," says Richards, who helped build Planned Parenthood into a political juggernaut during her 12-year tenure as president.

She wasn't alone. Ai-Jen Poo, co-founder of the National Domestic Workers Alliance in Chicago, and Alicia Garza, who helped build the Black Lives Matter movement from Oakland, were having the same conversations.

"We had this sense that women were on fire and ready to take action," Garza says. "And maybe also a little bit anxious that energy was going to peter out, that women would turn away and go back to their lives."

So in 2019, Richards, Poo, and Garza combined their considerable powers to form Supermajority, a community of women activists now 200,000 strong, offering training in the "nuts and bolts" of organizing. The name is a nod to the numbers: Women, Richards says, comprise not just the majority of voters in this country, but also the majority of activists. And yet the issues that impact women the most – reproductive health care, equal pay, child care, sexual violence – are treated as ancillary in the political conversation.

Consider the fact that one of the Democratic debates took place on the second anniver-

sary of the #MeToo movement going viral, when 12 million survivors of sexual harassment and violence spoke up about their experiences, but "not a single question came up during the debate about sexual violence and how we would support survivors," Poo says.

Or the fact that women are now the majority of payroll

elected in 2018; the Equal Rights Amendment is the closest it's been to ratification in a century – and Supermajority hopes to build on that success in 2020. Its goal is to organize 2 million women ahead of the election with voter education, registration, and turnout drives. It plans to target specific states, like



Richards (left) and Garza

earners in the U.S. while still being the vast majority of caregivers, and in some states child care is more expensive than housing costs. "The fact that [the burden of caregiving] essentially falls on women, who are now the majority of the workforce, is just completely unsustainable," Richards says. "There is literally no plan."

There have been strides – a historic number of women

Michigan, where more than a million eligible residents are not registered to vote – and where the 2016 election was decided by 10,700 voters.

"Women want to win," Garza says. "We're tired of being told that just because there's one woman somewhere that equality has been achieved. We're not passive agents here. We're actually the people that this country's been waiting for." TESSA STUART

REGINA KING

**After more than 35 years
in Hollywood, the actor-
director is finally positioned
firmly on top – but no
way in hell she’s resting**
By Maria Fontoura

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
Yana Yatsuk





King in L.A.
in December



ON THE SUNDAY morning before Christmas, Regina King shows up alone at the Villa Carlotta in L.A. That is, unless you count her dog, Cornbread,

a 14-year-old Lab-Akita mix with yellow fur, one brown eye and one blue, and a walk that says he's still too proud to start limping. Everybody on staff knows "Mr. Bread" at this private short-term residential hotel, a refurbished 1920s-era apartment complex where Hollywood luminaries such as the director George Cukor, the actress Marion Davies, and the producer David O. Selznick once lived. That's because King holed up here for six weeks not too long ago, while work was being done on the home she owns nearby.

Given the history, it is a fine setting for a chat with modern Hollywood royalty, though it's clear King doesn't think of herself that way. After doling out greetings (hugs from her, sniffs from 'Bread), King, dressed in ripped jeans, gold Nikes, and a Baja poncho with the hood pulled up, bypasses the elevator for the stairs.

King is in town for only a few days before she'll head back to New Orleans, where she's in production on her first feature as a director. *One Night in Miami* is based on a fictionalized account of a real night in 1964, when Muhammad Ali (then Cassius Clay), Malcolm X, Sam Cooke, and Jim Brown hung out in a hotel room after one of Ali's bouts. Though she's been working steadily for more than 35 years, the project caps a two-year period of peak Regina King. In 2018, she won her third Emmy, for her role as a mother whose son is killed by cops in the miniseries *Seven Seconds*. A few months later, she snagged an Oscar for playing another mom rocked by tragedy, in Barry Jenkins' adaptation of the James Baldwin novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*. This past fall, she starred in one of the most talked-about TV series in recent memory, Damon Lindelof's bold reinterpretation of the seminal comic book *Watchmen*. (Yes, she played a mom again, only this one was a masked vigilante who kicks white-supremacist ass for fun.)

The accolades have left King unfazed. When we're done talking, she'll be doing a Costco run. One of the few celebrity perks King allows herself is occasionally hiring a driver (she's had the same guy, Brian, for 17 years), who she'll send into a store if it's mobbed.

"He's not on call – it's not, like, Beyoncé and Jay-Z," she says quickly. She recounts advice she received from a friend of her mom, that she shouldn't waste her paychecks on a big house. The advantage of making good money, the

friend said, "is so you don't have to deal with the bullshit. And you should always put yourself in a position to not have to deal with the bullshit, because you earned it. You worked for it."

No bullshit pretty much sums it up. King is warm and disarming, but if something hits her funny, she will not hesitate to let you know. In 2010 – five years before #oscarssowhite – she published an open letter on HuffPost calling out the Emmys for routinely overlooking actors of color. When she won a Golden Globe for *Beale Street* early last year, she used her acceptance speech to call for gender parity, in and outside of entertainment, vowing to start with her own production company.

She is just as forthright with her collaborators. Consider a conversation she had with Lindelof after she got the script for Episode Seven of *Watchmen*. It concerned a pivotal moment when King's hero, Sister Night, a.k.a. Angela Abar, is coming down from an overdose of the drug Nostalgia. Barely conscious, she's taken to the cavernous compound of the scientist-mogul Lady Trieu, the only person who knows how to extract the toxin from Abar's body. In the script, Sister Night is in full costume when she wakes: black leather pants, hooded robe, her painted-on mask melting down her face.

Arriving at the scene while reading, King called Lindelof. "Yeahhh... that's some comic-book shit," she says she told him. "Lady Trieu's not doing that. Lady Trieu is gonna clean this bitch up." In King's view, the show had established Abar and Trieu as "powerful alpha women who move a certain way when they cross paths." The idea that one would find her adversary in a vulnerable position and allow her to remain in her armor simply didn't track. "To strip Angela from her comfort zone, from what she hides behind, is much more powerful," she says. "That's what Lady Trieu would do."

In the show, Angela wakes wearing an emerald-green jumpsuit, face washed clean.

KING IS IMPOSSIBLY TINY compared with her screen presence, maybe five feet three, and looks easily a decade younger than her 49 years. She's an expressive talker, clapping to emphasize a point and locking her golden-green eyes with mine as she takes in a question.

Growing up with her mom and her younger sister in the Windsor Hills neighborhood of Los Angeles, King was always "on punishment," she says, grinning, as Cornbread slumps between us to solicit pets. "I would say I had a smart mouth. Probably caught a few backhands from my mom here and there. I was not one to mince my words. I was the kind of kid who would rather say nothing than to not share how I *really* feel."

Because her mother was a teacher, punishment often consisted of being sent to her room to write an essay about her latest offense. While this house arrest was a breeze for her sister, Reina, Regina (both of their names translate to "queen") hated it. "I would rather get a whupping and get it over with, because I did not want to stay in," she says. "I like to be out and people-watch and breathe the outside air and walk barefoot in the grass. I'm an explorer."

Until the third grade, she attended a school for Religious Science – "not Scientology" – a philosophy that holds that God exists in every aspect of the universe, and we can learn to harness that power to become our fullest selves. Her mom raised both girls in the religion, even after Regina moved to a different school. King says those teachings helped her to dispel the

fear and self-doubt that cripple so many of us when we're kids.

"As a teenager, you don't know why you're having bad feelings or anxiety," she says. "Maybe it's hormones or, shoot, the freakin' news. But my mother would say, 'Well, when that's happening, just change your thought.' And it sounds like" – she rolls her eyes and sighs like Brenda, the teenager she played on the Eighties sitcom 227 – "but I started doing that, and it started

changing how I felt. I may not have been able to articulate it at the time, but I was very much aware that I can determine how I want to feel. It was a very powerful way of thinking."

This rootedness and moral clarity come through onscreen. King is the North Star of everything she's in, no matter the role. In *Jerry Maguire* – a film that featured the world's biggest movie star in Tom Cruise, was a breakout for Renée Zellweger, and won Cuba Gooding Jr. an Oscar – King's Marcee Tidwell, wife to Gooding Jr.'s egomaniacal wide receiver Rod, is the emotional touchstone. She's the one character who never stumbles, whose love, faith, and grit are unwavering. In *Watchmen*, her renegade cop Abar beats a man till blood pools outside of the interrogation room, and you still feel like she has the high ground every step of the way.



I would say I had a smart mouth. Probably caught a few backhands from my mom here and there. I was not one to mince my words.





After five years on 227, King enrolled at USC, at her mom's insistence. She liked acting but was considering becoming a dentist, until the director John Singleton cast her in his debut, *Boyz n the Hood*, and then in his follow-up starring Janet Jackson and Tupac Shakur, *Poetic Justice*. After that, she left school, and has had at least one credit every year since but one.

Along the way she worked with, well, everyone, and made friends on every rung of the Hollywood ladder. She became a big enough star to be a regular guest at Prince's post-Oscars parties. Actually, she became a big enough star to drink a little too much champagne with Reese Witherspoon en route to one, konk out on a couch head-to-head with her while their embarrassed husbands played pool nearby, and still get invited back.

"Who falls asleep at a Prince party?" she says, cackling at the memory.

Her self-possession, combined with what Lindelof calls "incredible taste," allowed King

to navigate Hollywood with basically none of the missteps and misfortunes so many actors experience. No scandal, no regrettable projects. Her life has not been without heartbreak — she endured her parents' painful divorce as a girl, and then her own, in 2007, after 10 years of marriage to the father of her 24-year-old son, Ian — but rather than metastasize into lasting psychic wounds, it seems only to have fortified her.

"After she won the Oscar, a part of me was like, 'Oh, that's gonna be the thing that finally changes her,'" says Lindelof, who first worked with King on his HBO series *The Leftovers*. "But it somehow humbled her even more. She didn't do that thing actors do, where they're dismissive; she understands the Oscar means something. But she identifies the things that are real and authentic and doesn't waste time on the rest."

Her close friend of 20 years, Gabrielle Union, tells me, "Some people, their attitude, their personality, the access they allow, depend on how they're doing. She's been the exact same.

With all the awards, the same. When you're in a drought, the same. She's consistent, authentic, and clear in who she is. And she's fun as fuck."

DIRECTING A MOVIE has King energized in a new way. She's helmed plenty of TV episodes, but *One Night in Miami* is her first time being a field general on a project of this scale. "I'm a control enthusiast, so it works out really well," she jokes.

Perhaps the only part of the process she's not looking forward to is answering questions about whether she's picked up the gauntlet she dropped at the Golden Globes: making the production 50 percent female. Though her company isn't overseeing the film, she and her producers reached for parity — and ran into problems that plague so many industries.

"In a lot of places — construction, special effects, makeup, gaffers... there just aren't women that even do those jobs," she says. "So, I've been talking to the men who were hired in those positions about outreach programs. Because there are a lot of women in regular construction who probably have no idea that construction workers are needed to build sets." She also plans to suggest that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences begin similar initiatives with performing-arts schools. "They have the tentacles to create [change]," she says, "but it probably takes a person like me to say, 'Have we ever thought about this? What can I do to help it happen?'"

Of course, King knew from the moment she issued that challenge she'd have a steep uphill climb. And despite the obstacles, she notes that 74 of the 129 people thus far hired to work on *One Night in Miami* are either female or of color.

"I did say, 'It's not gonna be easy,'" she says. "But no one heard that. Women that understand this from an experiential place heard it and knew this was a call to action for *all* of us. But I saw a couple of writings, by white men, that were like, 'This is ridiculous that she would say this.' Well, just the fact that you said this is ridiculous means that you're one of those people that's the wall or door that we have to kick the fuck down, and say, 'Stay down!' as we go and get people on board to make sure we have a future that's reflective of our population."

The intensity of her gaze recalls a point earlier in our conversation, when she talked about the moment acting grabbed ahold of her as a young girl. She described seeing Sally Field's Oscar-winning portrayal of a single-mom-turned-labor-organizer in the 1979 biopic *Norma Rae*. "I just remember thinking, 'I want to make people *feel*,'" she'd said, her eyes widening. "I was not old enough to really understand what was going on, but I knew she was fighting for something, and I knew she believed in it." [®]



Tolentino at home
in Brooklyn with
her dog, Luna

Jia Tolentino

A self-deprecating essayist who captures the 'systemic dread' of her generation

WHENEVER SHE'S WORKING on an essay, Jia Tolentino pretends nobody will read it. "I don't know if it's a self-protective impulse, or like a chip missing, but I tend to only think about making myself happy," she says. "The reward is satisfying whatever itch made me write in the first place."

But as an increasingly high-profile essayist for *The New Yorker* and the bestselling author of 2019's *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* – a now-seminal text for millennials stumbling through late-stage capitalism and social media malaise – it's getting harder to pretend she's writing into a void. "I'm kidding myself a little bit," she says. "I need to kind of admit people read what I write."

Tolentino, 31, started her career with the Hairpin before moving to Jezebel. A witty 2014 evisceration of the song "Rude" by Canadian reggae-fusion band Magic! forecast inventive Tolentino takes to come. "It's the aural equivalent of a man listening to reggae for the first time in his race-car bed, slowly fucking the hole in a Kidz Bop CD," she wrote.

"I stand by that blog post," she says. "I hate that song."

In conversation and writing, Tolentino's thoughts – almost always candid and self-deprecating – seem to sprawl. A single essay roves from C.S. Lewis to DJ Screw to MDMA, but she spools them together into a big-picture theme. In *Trick Mirror*, she returns again and again to selfhood, and how our identities are warped by the constant performance and monetization of them in the internet age. "I just have this natural suspicion about any narrative we make up about ourselves," she says.

The daughter of Filipino immigrants, Tolentino was raised in a Houston megachurch community, but says her parents gave her the freedom to follow her interests. "I never felt supervised, but I always had a ride to wherever I needed to go." From early on, writing was how she processed ideas, she says. Sometimes a concept would snap into focus; other times she'd feel challenged. She wants readers to feel similarly destabilized – in a productive way. "I like it when writing can help you feel that you are capable of changing," she says.

The success doesn't seem to be going to her head – she'll try to shut down any feelings of awe you might have for her by reminding you how much weed she smokes. The comparisons to Joan Didion are flattering but make her uncomfortable. "I think it's just because she wrote about systemic dread bubbling up, and so do I," Tolentino says. "The joke I started making on the book tour is that it's a disservice to both of us, because she's a better writer, but I'm obviously a way better hang." ANDREA MARKS



ESTHER PEREL

A therapist who's redefining how we connect and communicate – at home and at the office

"LOVE AND WORK are the two pillars of our life," says Esther Perel in the prologue of her new podcast. And we're bad at communicating in both of them. As the office increasingly becomes our second home, and social movements like #MeToo reshape how we interact, a lot of people need help navigating the changing landscape. That's where Perel comes in. The Belgian psychotherapist rose to fame with her bestselling books on intimacy and *Where Should We Begin?*, her 2017 couples-therapy podcast. But when she noticed patients using words like "vulnerability" and "trust" while discussing their work lives, she knew a cultural shift was afoot. "In 1960, the primary reason for work was to make sure you had food on the table," Perel says, "not that you were going to develop, experience fulfillment, be excited when you wake up in the morning." Her latest podcast, *How's Work?*, finds her counseling people who work together in everything from setting boundaries with managers when you feel unsafe to maintaining a business when your partner becomes your ex. The core of it, she says, is helping colleagues understand they have a "relationship résumé," too. "You bring your whole self to work," she says. "Your family, your culture. So let's put [it all] out there, because it will help people work better together." HANNAH MURPHY





STACEY ABRAMS

The Democrats' brightest star is building a new kind of political machine in the Deep South
By Tessa Stuart



STACEY ABRAMS slips out of a chauffeured black Escalade and through the hotel caterers' entrance. She snakes down the hallway to the step-and-

repeat, where she snaps a few quick photos with Democratic Party officials, sweeps past the cash bar, slowing to shake hands with Congressman Hank Johnson, then ducks through the ballroom's side door to take her place at Table One.

This is her third year headlining the Gwinnett County Democrats' annual gala. Fifteen years ago, Gwinnett was a mostly rural, majority-white Republican stronghold. Today, it's Atlanta's largest suburb, the state's most racially diverse county, and the epicenter of Georgia's transformation into a battleground state.

Abrams, in a midnight-blue tuxedo jacket and sparkling teardrop earrings, is the center of gravity inside the neon-blue-lit ballroom. Party leaders, donors, and newly declared candidates revolve past the table to say hello, introduce their children, take selfies. She greets each warmly, bouncing babies on her knee, nodding appreciatively every few minutes when someone mentions her name from the stage. You'd never know that she hates this part of the job.

"'Hatred' is a strong word," Abrams says. "I deeply dislike it, and would prefer not to do it."

"She's very good at it though," Abrams' right-hand woman, Chelsey Hall, mutters under her breath.

That morning, inside a different hotel ballroom, in a different Atlanta suburb – a room you needed to sign a non-disclosure agreement to get into – Abrams was doing the part of her

job she actually enjoys: putting together a plan to combat the arsenal of new voting restrictions and suppression tactics she expects will be deployed in polling places around the country this November.

It was day two of a summit hosted by Fair Fight, one of the organizations Abrams formed after her narrow defeat in the 2018 Georgia governor's race – an election plagued by voter-roll purges, poll-site closings, and a thousand other problems ranging from the grossly incompetent (voting machines missing their power cords) to the truly sinister (tens of thousands of mostly black voter registrations placed on hold).

In 2018, largely thanks to Abrams, Georgia's Democratic Party had a full-time voter protection director; there was a hotline to report problems, volunteers to chase down provisional ballots, lawyers ready to go to court to keep polls open. It wasn't enough, it turned out, against Abrams' opponent, Georgia's then-secretary of state, Brian Kemp, who was in charge of overseeing his own election – but it nearly was.

Now, with \$21 million raised in 2019 alone, Fair Fight is training similar teams in 18 states. "I don't have the capacity to sit still and wait for the next term, the next opportunity for me to stand for an office that let's me do the work," Abrams says.

Dozens of Democratic heavies descended on the summit that morning, including Michael Bloomberg, who has donated \$5 million to Fair Fight. "Voter suppression efforts are happening across the country," Bloomberg tells ROLLING STONE, "and there is no one better to lead the counterattack than Stacey."

The billionaire former mayor of New York is the latest in a string of high-profile presidential candidates to seek a sit-down with Abrams in the past year. "Those meetings went unre-

marked upon until I met with the [former] vice president,” Abrams sighs. “And then there was a rumor started.”

She’s being diplomatic: Before Joe Biden got in the race, advisers to his campaign publicly floated the idea that he and Abrams might announce a joint ticket even before primary voting began. Abrams swatted down that report. (At the time, she was still considering her own run for president.) Biden isn’t the only one who has seemed interested: Bernie Sanders praised her abilities; Elizabeth Warren – who campaigned for Abrams in 2018 – said she’s open to naming a female VP; Pete Buttigieg met with Abrams privately and phone-banked for Fair Fight Action, stoking speculation he might tap her as a potential running mate.

And why not? Abrams is a young, charismatic Democrat from a potentially flippable state, a prodigious fundraiser, a captivating speaker. She is also black, like a large portion of the Democratic base (and unlike any of the leading candidates), with a record of motivating voters of all races. Latino and Asian-Pacific Islander turnout tripled when she ran for governor, and she got the highest level of support from white voters of any Democrat in Georgia since Bill Clinton.

She has an overachiever’s résumé – a graduate of Yale Law, a college professor, co-founder of a financial-services firm, bestselling author – but the personality of someone you’d actually want to hang out with. She’ll rap with you about her favorite *Star Trek* episodes, or country music (Dolly Parton and Earl Thomas Conley are favorites), or provide a detailed explanation of why the platypus is her favorite animal (“It is such an odd creature, makes no sense – it’s both mammalian and reptilian”).

Her team of aides address her as “Leader” – a holdover from her days as minority leader in the Statehouse but one that sounds quasi-cultish because of staffers’ obvious affection for her. She inspires a similar reaction in strangers: After the 2018 election, Abrams took her first vacation in years, to Turks and Caicos. “I had to stay inside because there were a lot of people that kept trying to hug me,” she says.

She even won over Republicans she worked with during her time in the Statehouse. In 2011, one GOP appointee predicted Abrams would be president someday: “Once she puts her mind to something, there is really nothing she can’t do.” Abrams herself has come around to that idea, answering, when she was asked recently if she saw herself in the White House within the next 20 years: “I do.”

So, of course potential Democratic nominees want her. The question is, What does Stacey Abrams want? If she was interested in a fancy title and stuffy office in Washington, D.C., she

could have succumbed to the immense pressure to run for one of her state’s two open Senate seats. But she didn’t. That’s because Abrams has a very specific idea of what she is after, and here in Georgia, she’s already building it.

TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS AGO, Abrams was 18, heartbroken, and sitting in the Spelman College computer lab. She’d just been dumped by her boyfriend, and if her life felt like a bit of a mess, at least she could find relief in the neat rows of a Lotus 1-2-3 workbook. In one column of a spreadsheet she entered a list of goals (publish a bestselling novel, become a millionaire running her own business, be elected mayor of Atlanta). In another, the age by which she intended to have accomplished said goal (24, 30, 35, respectively).

None of it happened on schedule. She’s the author of eight romance novels written under the pen name Selena Montgomery – inspired by Elizabeth Montgomery, the actress who played Samantha and her evil twin, Serena, on *Bewitched* – but the first wasn’t published until she was 28. She took a pen name not because she worried that being a romance novelist would hurt a future political career, but because she worried her novels wouldn’t sell if readers knew she was a nerd. “If you Googled my name, the first thing that came up was that I’d written an article at the age of 17 on Mesopotamian astronomy. Both I and my publisher were concerned that people would not want to buy a [romance] book written by, well, not Neil deGrasse Tyson, but basically by Stephen Hawking.”

With only a few minor adjustments, Abrams has had a pretty firm sense of what she’s wanted since that night in the computer lab. “I don’t like just the idea of doing stuff,” Abrams says. “I think you need to create a structure for it.” She still updates the spreadsheet (now an Excel file), adding new goals or revising old ones. She swapped out mayor for governor after a stint as deputy city attorney. “The mayor can do extraordinary things, but she will always be thwarted by a state government that, especially in the South, strips you of your power,” Abrams explains.

She was elected in 2006, but it took years of toiling before she was in a position to pursue the governorship. In the meantime, she was laying

the groundwork, starting an organization – the New Georgia Project – that would register the tens of thousands of voters she knew she would need to have a chance at winning.

It still wasn’t enough. Kemp had purged more than 1.4 million voters from the rolls in Georgia between 2012 and 2018. He’d ordered the arrest of black organizers for registering voters ahead of a school-board election, and put the registrations of some 53,000 new voters – 70 percent of them black – “on hold.”

On the night of the election, “the incoming fire hose of problems – it was worse than I would have imagined,” says Lauren Groh-Wargo, Abrams’ former campaign manager and a co-founder of Fair Fight. “I had all these scenarios sketched out, and we were in Scenario Z, basically the clusterfuck scenario: that we don’t have enough information to know what’s even happening because there were such big voting problems.”

Abrams lost by 54,723 votes. She has resigned herself to the fact that she will probably never have full understanding of all the factors that conspired to arrive at that particular figure. “One of the ways suppression is so effective is that you never see all of it,” she says quietly.

Ten days after the election, she delivered a speech ending her bid; her youngest sister, Jeanine Abrams McLean, stood behind her, ashen. “I wish I didn’t look so pissed in the photo,” Abrams McLean says. “I thought my face looked neutral, but every time I see it, I’m like, *You motherf—*.” Jeanine still gets choked up thinking of how much, in that moment, Stacey reminded her of their mother.

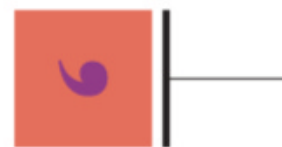
As teens, both Abrams’ parents were active in the civil-rights movement in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. When he was a teenager, Abrams’ dad, Robert, was arrested for helping register black voters. “My mom, across town, was doing the same work – she was just smart enough not to get caught,” Abrams jokes.

Her parents, who both became pastors, brought their six children with them to vote in every election and raised them to value public service: Abrams’ sisters are a federal judge, a college professor, and a Ph.D. working in public health; one of her brothers is a social worker, the other worked on hurricane recovery efforts in Mississippi.

“My mom and my father shared the same belief systems,” she says. And both, like Abrams, are storytellers: “When my dad does a sermon, there’s usually a really compelling story, an



Most people who go into politics, they want to be in politics. For me, policy is the reason we do this. It’s, “How can we make people’s lives better?”



Abrams with
Obama in 2018



anecdote to get you drawn in. But you're also confused half the time, like, 'Where is he going with this?' And it all makes sense in the end. My mom builds layers of understanding. She's very deft with anecdotes, but her structure is much more about 'I want you to leave here not just remembering the part that made you think, I want you to have to think about the part you didn't get.'"

When Abrams was little, visiting her grandmother, with her some 16 first cousins running around, she was the one in the corner, holed up with a book. She loved Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Silas Marner*, *Little Women*, *Jane Eyre*, *Ender's Game*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *Atlas Shrugged* ("But not for the Paul Ryan reasons. . . . There was something about how [Ayn Rand] highlighted the capacity of a person to be more than.") She loved mythology. "Greek, Norse, Roman, Cherokee. If I could reach it, I would read it," Abrams says.

Her mother, Carolyn, had dropped out of the fourth grade in part because her family couldn't afford bus fare. The way Abrams tells the story, she found her way back thanks to the kindness of others – a neighbor who offered odd jobs to help her save a little money, a teacher who tucked a note in her file vouching for her – but it's really a story about poverty and the structural barriers of escaping it.

"I came from a family that struggled financially. We had lots of education, but we are congenitally disposed toward poverty because

my parents got master's degrees and then went back to Mississippi to become poor ministers," she joked onstage at the Gwinnett gala. "My sister became a judge after leaving one of the wealthiest law firms in America because we just don't know how to do this right."

She plays it for laughs, but Abrams' larger point is about how difficult it's been for her and her family – people who have done almost everything right – to stay on firm financial footing. And if there was one line of attack that seemed to stick to Abrams during the 2018 election, it was around the fact that she was \$227,000 in debt. (Republican ads called her "fiscally irresponsible.") Abrams started accruing the debt – a mix of credit cards, student loans, and deferred taxes – in college, and continued to rack it up supporting her brother, who struggled with a drug addiction, and helping her parents, who are raising her brother's daughter.

But the narrative that she is bad with money runs contrary to the rest of Abrams' biography, being a successful tax attorney, co-founding a thriving financial-services firm, and as city attorney going toe-to-toe with then-NBA commissioner David Stern during negotiations over the WNBA's Dream moving to Atlanta. ("He screamed at me. It's my claim to fame. Made me really popular with my brothers.")

Coincidentally, Abrams' role with the Dream meant she was, briefly, the lawyer for Georgia's newest U.S. senator, Kelly Loeffler, a bitcoin market executive who Gov. Kemp appointed in

December. Abrams negotiated the team's deal with the NBA when Loeffler and her partner purchased it in 2011. But that doesn't make them allies. "I deeply disagree with the policy positions she has espoused and the approach she is taking, and I do not support her," Abrams says. "I'm going to be very actively involved in ensuring that a Democrat wins that seat."

Abrams ended up settling her outstanding debt this past May with the money she made from her bestselling 2018 memoir, *Lead From the Outside*. She's now in the final stages of writing her next book, *Our Time Is Now*, on voter suppression, scheduled to hit bookstores in June. When we sat down to talk in January, she'd just received word she'd sold yet another book, the details of which she wasn't ready to publicly disclose. One of her earlier romance novels is being developed into a television show at CBS, and she's working with the Emmy- and Oscar-nominated director Liz Garbus on a documentary about the history of voter suppression.

"I'm a good loser," Abrams concedes, reflecting on the 14 months since her loss to Kemp. But even with everything she has going on, there's always space for new ideas, bigger ambitions, and more cells on the spreadsheet.

ABRAMS' VOICE CARRIES across the hotel ballroom in a way, one imagines, she must have learned from her parents. She is retelling a story her grandmother told her, about a time shortly after the Voting Rights Act passed, when Abrams' grandfather was struggling to coax her grandmother to the polls: "I remember the last time we tried," she told him. "The billy clubs and the dogs, and they spray you with those hoses."

It was the shame she felt over her own fear that forced Abrams' grandmother to the voting booth that day. She never missed another election. "Across Gwinnett, across Georgia, there are folks who are afraid of their power, who are afraid of what they remember, and they're afraid to try this time," Abrams is saying. "In 2020, our responsibility is to erase their fear, to take their hands and walk with them. . . . Yes, they have been silenced. . . . but this time they are not going alone."

It brings the house down.

This crowd has good reason to take Abrams at her word. They are already direct beneficiaries of the work she's done here. When she was elected minority leader back in 2010, the Georgia Democratic Party was in a beleaguered state. It had lost every statewide office – Republicans held a supermajority in the state Senate and were only a few seats short of one in the house.

[Cont. on 95]

A photograph showing a vast, high-ceilinged industrial warehouse filled with a massive, sprawling pile of discarded plastic waste. The waste is a chaotic mix of colors and shapes, including plastic bottles, bags, and fragments, stretching far into the background. The warehouse's metal structure and roof are visible at the top of the frame.

**How Big
Oil and Big
Soda kept
a global
environmental
calamity
a secret for
decades**

Planet Plastic

By Tim Dickinson



MOUNTAINS OF WASTE
An Australian warehouse
filled with unsorted
plastic waste destined
for a landfill — recycling
proved too expensive



EVERY HUMAN ON EARTH is ingesting nearly 2,000 particles of plastic a week. These tiny pieces enter our unwitting bodies from tap water, food, and even the air, according to an alarming academic study sponsored by the World Wildlife Fund for Nature, dosing us with five grams of plastics, many cut with chemicals linked to cancers, hormone disruption, and developmental delays. Since the paper's publication last year, Sen. Tom Udall, a plain-spoken New Mexico Democrat with a fondness for white cowboy hats and turquoise bolo ties, has been trumpeting the risk: "We are consuming a credit card's worth of plastic each week," Udall says. At events with constituents, he will brandish a Visa from his wallet and declare, "You're eating this, folks!"

With new legislation, the Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act of 2020, Udall is attempting to marshal Washington into a confrontation with the plastics industry, and to force companies that profit from plastics to take accountability for the waste they create. Unveiled in February, the bill would ban many single-use plastics and force corporations to finance "end of life" programs to keep plastic out of the environment. "We're going back to that principle," the senator tells *ROLLING STONE*. "The polluter pays."

The battle pits Udall and his allies in Congress against some of the most powerful corporate interests on the planet, including the oil majors and chemical giants that produce the building blocks for our modern plastic world – think Exxon, Dow, and Shell – and consumer giants like Coca-Cola, Nestlé, and Unilever that package their products in the stuff. Big Plastic isn't a single entity. It's more like a corporate supergroup: Big Oil meets Big Soda – with a puff of Big Tobacco, responsible for trillions of plastic cigarette butts in the environment every year. And it combines the lobbying and public-relations might of all three.

Senior writer TIM DICKINSON wrote about the 2020 battle for the Senate in December.

Americans have occasionally crusaded against "problem plastics" – scapegoating packing peanuts, grocery bags, or drinking straws for the sins of our unsustainable consumer economy. We've been slow to recognize that we're actually in the midst of a plastic pandemic. Over the past 70 years, we've gotten hooked on disposable goods and packaging – as plastics became the lifeblood of an American culture of speed, convenience, and disposability that's conquered the globe. Plastic contains our hot coffee and frozen dinners. It is the material of childhood, from Pampers to Playmobil to PlayStation 4. It cloaks our e-commerce purchases and is woven into our sneakers, fast fashion, and business fleece. Humans are now using a million plastic bottles a minute, and 500 billion plastic bags a year – including those we use to bag up our plastic-laden trash.

But the world's plastic waste is not so easily contained. Massive quantities of this forever material are spilling into the oceans – the equivalent of a dump-truck load every minute. Plastic is also fouling our mountains, our farmland, and spiraling into an unmitigatable environmental disaster. John Hocevar is a marine biologist who leads the Oceans Campaign for Greenpeace, and spearheaded the group's response to the BP oil spill in the Gulf. Increasingly, his work has

centered on plastics. "This is a much bigger problem than 'just' an ocean issue, or even a pollution issue," he says. "We've found plastic everywhere we've ever looked. It's in the Arctic and the Antarctic and in the middle of the Pacific. It's in the Pyrenees and in the Rockies. It's settling out of the air. It's raining down on us."

More than half the plastic now on Earth has been created since 2002, and plastic pollution is on pace to double by 2030. At its root, the global plastics crisis is a product of our addiction to fossil fuels.

The private profit and public harm of the oil industry is well understood: Oil is refined and distributed to consumers, who benefit from gasoline's short, useful lifespan in a combustion engine, leaving behind atmospheric pollution for generations. But this same pattern – and this same tragedy of the commons – is playing out with another gift of the oil-and-gas giants, whose drilling draws up the petroleum precursors for plastics. These are refined in industrial complexes and manufactured into bottles, bags, containers, textiles, and toys for consumers who benefit from their transient use – before throwing them away.

"Plastics are just a way of making things out of fossil fuels," says Jim Puckett, executive director of the Basel Action Network. BAN is devoted to enforcement of the Basel Convention, an international treaty that blocks the developed world from dumping hazardous wastes on the developing world, and was recently expanded, effec-

"Plastics are just a way of making things out of fossil fuels. They sold people on recycling, but it's a myth."



tive next year, to include plastics. For Americans who religiously sort their recycling, it's upsetting to hear about plastic being lumped in with toxic waste. But the poisonous parallel is apt. When it comes to plastic, recycling is a misnomer. "They really sold people on the idea that plastics can be recycled because there's a fraction of them that are," says Puckett. "It's fraudulent. When you drill down into plastics recycling, you realize it's a myth."

Since 1950, the world has created 6.3 trillion kilograms of plastic waste – and 91 percent has never been recycled even once, according to a landmark 2017 study published in the journal *Science Advances*. Unlike aluminum, which can be recycled again and again, plastic degrades in reprocessing, and is almost never recycled more than once. A plastic soda bottle, for example, might get downcycled into a carpet. Modern technology has hardly improved things: Of the 78



PREVIOUS SPREAD: JASON SOUTH/“THE AGE”/GETTY IMAGES. THIS PAGE: ZIKRI MAULANA/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES

billion kilograms of plastic packaging materials produced in 2013, only 14 percent were even collected for recycling, and just two percent were effectively recycled to compete with virgin plastic. “Recycling delays, rather than avoids, final disposal,” the *Science* authors write. And most plastics persist for centuries.

As the globalized economy boomed, the toxic reality was hidden overseas. Plastics tossed out here were picked over at domestic recycling facilities, which targeted easier-to-sort-and-reprocess clear plastic bottles, milk jugs, and detergent containers. The leftovers were tied up in dirty bales and shipped to Asia. “China took them because there was some high value of material in there,” a former Waste Management executive tells *ROLLING STONE*. Oftentimes, he says, Chinese recyclers “would dump those bales into the river to separate the materials and pick the better stuff out. And then they simply let

the rest just go downstream.” The target plastics weren’t recycled in state-of-the-art facilities, rather shredded and melted down in rudimentary factories – often staffed by whole families, children included – eking out a toxic living amid mountains of imported trash.

Seeing political danger in its growing pollution crisis, China blocked most plastic imports in 2018, and this “National Sword” policy roiled international recycling markets. Attempts to re-create the China model in less authoritarian economies of Southeast Asia have backfired in pollution and protest – pulling back the curtain on what one waste executive describes to *ROLLING STONE* as “our dirty little secret”: Americans who believed they were diverting plastic from the trash were, ironically, fueling a waste crisis

OUTSOURCING TRASH

Cattle graze in Indonesia. For decades, America has exported plastic waste. “Our dirty little secret,” one executive calls it.

half a world away. “It is easy to find American and European packaging polluting the countryside of Southeast Asia,” states a 2019 report from the Break Free From Plastics coalition, which coordinates an annual global audit of plastic waste. “When people in the global north throw something ‘away,’ much of it ends up in the global south because there is no such thing as ‘away.’”

THE WORST of our global plastics crisis is borne by the oceans. Roughly 8 billion kilograms of plastics enter the world’s waters every year, and the problem is most acute in emerging coastal economies. The volume entering oceans can be hard to comprehend, admits Jenna Jambeck, an engineering professor at the University of Georgia who has published pathbreaking science that quantifies plastic “leakage” to the oceans. “It’s equal to five grocery-size bags full of

plastic for every foot of coastline in the world,” she says. “If you imagine us all standing, hand-to-hand, covering the coastline of the entire world, this is what’s in front of each one of us.”

Marine plastics picked up by the currents collect in massive ocean “gyres” – the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is now twice the size of Texas. These are swirling petrochemical spills, but unlike crude oil, the long molecular chains in plastics don’t exist in nature and don’t meaningfully biodegrade. “The same properties that make plastics so versatile,” the *Science Advances* authors, including Jambeck, write, “make these materials difficult or impossible for nature to assimilate.” Instead, bulk plastics wear down into microplastics – a category for particles smaller than 5 millimeters, or roughly the width of your pinkie fingernail – deteriorating further into nanoplastic particles.

In the open water, plastics are consumed by fish, seabirds, and mammals – which are washing up dead in harrowing numbers. Last year, whales in Italy and the Philippines died just weeks apart, their stomachs packed with indigestible plastic bags. In December, a sperm whale washed ashore in Scotland with more than 200 pounds of plastic in its gut. The pollution visible on the ocean surface represents just one percent of what humans have dumped into the oceans. The rest lies beneath, including seven miles deep in the Mariana Trench, where researchers have spotted plastic bags and measured microplastics at concentrations of 2,000 parts per liter.

Without dramatic change, the amount of plastics entering the oceans every year, already intolerable, is projected to more than double by 2025.

The story on dry land is hardly more comforting. Plastics are widely used in agriculture and “microplastic pollution is somewhere between four and 23 times higher in the soil than in the sea,” says Lili Fuhr, editor of *Plastic Atlas*, which documents the reach of global plastic pollution. Microplastics, thought to be carried by the winds, have been found in pristine terrestrial environments, including the polar ice caps. In Colorado, plastic fibers have been discovered in precipitation. “It’s in the rain, it’s in the snow,” lamented United States Geological Survey researcher Greg Wetherbee. “It’s a part of our environment now.” Even landfills may be creating long-term hazards. A 2019 study in *Water Research* found microplastic contamination as high as 24 parts per liter in landfill runoff, offering “preliminary evidence... that landfill isn’t the final sink of plastics,” the researchers wrote, “but a potential source of microplastics.”

This pollution is planetwide, impossible to fully remediate, and threatens to disrupt natural systems – including those that allow the oceans to remove carbon from the atmosphere. “Humans are conducting a singular uncontrolled experiment on a global scale,” write the researchers

in *Science Advances*, “in which billions of metric tons of material will accumulate across all major terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems on the planet.”

We are all guinea pigs in this experiment, as plastics accumulate in the food web, appearing in seafood, table salt, and ironically even in bottled water. Many plastics are mixed with a toxic brew of colorants, flame retardants, and plasticizers. Joe Vaillancourt is the CEO of a company that refines waste plastic into fuel – a process that requires removing such contaminants from curbside recycling. “In one little 10-pound batch,” he says, “we found a thousand different chemicals.” Some of these additives are linked to cancer and severe health problems. As plastics break down over time, they can also absorb toxins from the environment, including PCBs.

The threat to human health is complex and poorly understood. “There are a lot more questions than answers at this point,” says Mark

Plastics were industrialized in the early 1900s by Leo Baekeland, a Belgian immigrant whose Bakelite polymer withstood high temperatures and insulated against electricity. Touted as “the material of a thousand uses” – its logo a “B” floating above the mathematical symbol for infinity – Bakelite became integral to the automotive and electric industries, as well as to consumer goods like dominoes, telephone receivers, and 78 rpm records.

Plastics wove themselves deeper into American life with the invention of nylon in the 1930s. And their versatility made them indispensable to the military in World War II, featuring in parachutes, tires, and Plexiglas windows. Plastics boomed as a hallmark of America’s postwar consumer culture, yet this material of abundance also became a marker of soulless excess that horrified Dustin Hoffman’s character in *The Graduate* when buttonholed about his future career prospects at a party – and pitched on “Plastics... There’s a great future in plastics.”

The virtues of plastic are as real now as they were then. “Plastic allows us to do more with less,” insists Steve Russell, vice president of the Plastics Division at the American Chemistry Council, which represents petrochemical companies. (Russell announced his retirement in early 2020.) “Whether it’s to make cars lighter so they use less energy or buildings more efficient. They allow us to deliver a safe and sanitary drinking water through plastic pipes that don’t corrode.” Pointing to the pervasive use of plastics in medicine, he highlights their peerless “benefits of hygiene and health and safety.”

Yet beyond this slate of essential, durable, or technically demanding cases, plastic has also twinned itself to modern throwaway culture. As much as 40 percent of plastics produced today go into packaging. *The Graduate* debuted in 1967, and that era marks a pivot point for the industry. At the First National Conference of Packaging Wastes in 1969, Dow Chemical’s chief environmental manager presented a paper on the explosive growth of single-use plastics in “cafeterias... universities, hospitals, airlines, restaurants, etc.” While praising the performance of these “durable materials that might conceivably last forever,” he sounded an alarm about “disposal problems.” He foresaw a coming deluge of plastic waste and called out the industry for turning a blind eye – “and there are those who have elected to do just that.” He insisted that incineration was the “ultimate solution,” but confessed, “It’s going to cost somebody a lot of money.”

Far from financing a solution for plastic waste, the broader corporate response was to fund public relations blaming consumers for the pollution instead. Keep America Beautiful – a nonprofit quietly funded by industry – began airing famous public-service announcements in 1971 of a crying “Indian” (actually a spaghetti-Western star) paddling through waters strewn with refuse like styrofoam cups, with the tag line “People start pollution. People can stop it.”

In fact, KAB had been founded to head off state bans on single-use packaging, according to notes reviewed by *ROLLING STONE*. And industry boosters from the era were proclaiming



DEATH BY PLASTIC

A seabird suffocated by plastic. The oceans have suffered the worst pollution, with plastic found seven miles deep in the Mariana Trench.

Hahn, a toxicologist at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution who studies microplastics. Some plastic likely passes through the human gut like so much sand, he says. But scientists have found that tiny plastic particles can insinuate

themselves into the bloodstream of mussels and the organs of fish. Airborne nanoplastics can also be inhaled into the lungs. “Are they lodging somewhere and physically blocking something, or causing an inflammatory reaction,” Hahn asks, “or are they carrying their additives and contaminants and delivering them somewhere – you know, to the brain?” Hahn, a sober and skeptical scientist, is concerned about the rising tide of plastic in the environment. “If there is a problem now,” he says, “it’s only going to get worse.”

THE STORY of how we got into this fix is short, modern – and American as hell. In the late 1860s, a bush-bearded inventor in New York sought to claim a \$10,000 prize by developing an alternative to ivory. With a primitive polymer, John Wesley Hyatt created – and later peddled to the consuming public – plastic billiard balls, piano keys, and false teeth.

the end of refillable beer and soda bottles as a “growth frontier” because every reusable bottle taken out of circulation “means the sale of 20 one-way containers.” By 1978, Coca-Cola adopted its first plastic soda bottle – sparking a shift that has conquered the planet. Four decades later, the world is using half a trillion plastic bottles a year.

To help keep pollution out of sight, the top companies of Big Plastic have continued to fund KAB, which organizes volunteer labor to pick up trash on land, as well as the Ocean Conservancy, which sponsors volunteer international coastal cleanups. Since 2017, the top 10 categories of trash collected in the beach cleanups has been made of one material: plastic.

Ocean Conservancy says it is dedicated to “ending the flow of trash at the source,” but critics accuse the group of a sin of omission. The cleanups tally waste down to the last plastic bottle (1,754,908 in the most recent effort), but don’t link the waste to the corporations that produced it. Only in recent years has Break Free From Plastics launched a competing network of cleanups, recording the branding they discover. In 2019, its audit called out a trio of the world’s richest consumer brands as the top plastic polluters: Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and Nestlé. “I was personally saddened by it,” says Bea Perez, Coca-Cola’s chief sustainability officer, of the company’s number-one ranking. “We don’t want to be that number.”

Both KAB and Ocean Conservancy insist their work is not compromised by corporate funding. A representative for KAB – whose directors include executives from Keurig, Dr. Pepper, Mars Wrigley, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Nestlé Waters, Dow, Philip Morris, and the American Chemistry Council – rejects the “narrative” that KAB is a corporate front group: “We’re not. We’re an independent organization.” A vice president at Ocean Conservancy – which placed executives from Coca-Cola, Dow, and the American Chemistry Council on the steering committee of a recent report on ocean plastics – tells ROLLING STONE that the problems of plastic waste are so systemic and complex that “we need everyone – including corporations – at the table.”

IM PEERING DOWN from a crane operator’s chair on the third floor of a waste-to-energy facility – into what looks like a real-life version of the trash compactor in the Death Star.

Far below lies a rectangular pit, 35 feet deep, where municipal garbage trucks dump their loads. The trash there awaits “the claw” – a 7,500-pound grapple with six retractable steel talons that scoops up to two-and-a-half tons of garbage on every lift. The operator next to me hoists trash out of the pit, releasing it onto a mountainous mixing pile, “fluffing” the waste to create a blend that will burn evenly. With each pass, the grapple pops Glad bags like pustules of trash, leaving behind ragged streamers of plastic.

The top alternative to burying plastic in a landfill is not recycling. It’s fire. Over the past six decades, far more plastic has been inciner-

ated than collected for reuse. This incinerator, outside of Oregon’s capital, Salem, is operated by Covanta, which runs similar waste-to-energy plants on the East Coast that burn trash for New York and Philadelphia. For months after China roiled recycling markets in 2018, Philadelphia tasked Covanta with burning half the city’s “recycling” that had nowhere else to go.

Roughly a third of the trash is plastic. Households served by this plant have recently been

The Secret Fossil-Fuel Crisis



Plastics produced in 1950

2 billion kilograms

Plastics produced in 2015

380 billion kilograms



Peak plastic waste exported by the United States in 2015

2 billion kilograms



Percentage of plastics now used in packaging

40

Annual value of plastic packaging lost to waste after one use

\$120 billion



Percent of U.S. tap-water samples contaminated with plastic pollution

94.4



Plastic bags used globally every year

500 billion

Years a plastic bag will persist in nature

Up to 1,000



Single-use plastic bottles used every year

Half a trillion



Percentage of seabirds with plastic in their stomachs

90



Year by which the plastic in the ocean could outweigh all the fish

2050

instructed to toss out hard-to-recycle plastics (yogurt containers, beer cups – anything with a recycling number higher than 2), and those items now come here to burn. When the operator is satisfied with the mix, he hoists a grapple load to a height of 90 feet and dumps it into the hopper – fueling the incinerator that generates electricity for the local grid. The extreme temperature of the burner, 2,000 degrees, creates a near-complete combustion that neutraliz-

es most toxic compounds in plastic. But incineration returns plastic to its origins as a fossil fuel, creating carbon pollution that escapes through a candy-striped smokestack, in a white wisp that’s visible for miles.

The greenhouse-gas profile of plastics is simply unsustainable. As the world begins to wean itself off of fossil fuel for transportation, Big Oil giants from Texas to Saudi Arabia are turning to plastic to support future growth. The International Energy Agency predicts that “oil demand related to plastic consumption overtakes that for road-passenger transport by 2050,” and its top executive warns plastics are “one of the key blind spots in the global energy debate.”

The industry is counting on a tidal wave of new demand from emerging economies. A 2018 IEA report underscores that advanced economies use up to 20 times more plastic per capita than consumers do in India or Indonesia. And it warns that increased recycling and single-use bans in places like Europe and Japan “will be far outweighed by developing economies sharply increasing their shares of plastic consumption (as well as its disposal).”

Global plastics production and incineration currently creates the CO2 pollution of 189 coal plants. By 2050, that’s expected to more than triple, to the equivalent of 615 coal plants. At that rate, plastics would hog about 15 percent of the world’s remaining “carbon budget,” or what can be emitted without crossing the 2-degrees Celsius threshold in global temperature rise that scientists warn can trigger calamity.

THE PLASTIC INDUSTRY’S damage to the planet is vast, but not immeasurable. In fact, the industry has published a detailed accounting that reveals its pollution is on pace to cause trillions in environmental harm by midcentury.

The American Chemistry Council is a trade group that represents the large oil and petrochemical companies that produce plastic resins – the back end of Big Plastic. In 2016, the ACC commissioned a study by the consultancy Trucost – “the world’s leading experts in quantifying and valuing the environmental impacts” from industry. The ACC paid for the study to demonstrate that plastics are not easily replaceable, and that many common substitutes – particularly glass – carry higher environmental costs when factoring in weight for transportation.

The Trucost finding that the ACC does not trumpet? “The environmental cost to society of consumer plastic products and packaging was over \$139 billion in 2015,” the report reveals. Without a dramatic change in course, Trucost predicts, that annual figure will soar to “\$209 billion by 2025.”

In an interview with ROLLING STONE, Steve Russell, the ACC’s vice president for plastics, acknowledged that \$139 billion “is a big number.” An attorney, Russell has an affect more folksy than slick. But that’s far from straightforward. The giant sum, he says, is “not a literal debt on the balance sheet.” But that is precisely the point. Trucost measured externalities – or the costs that companies don’t have to [Cont. on 96]



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Reviews

Music

GRIMES CRANKS UP THE HEAT

The adventurous pop artist delivers a concept record about climate change (sort of)

By CLAIRE SHAFFER



Grimes

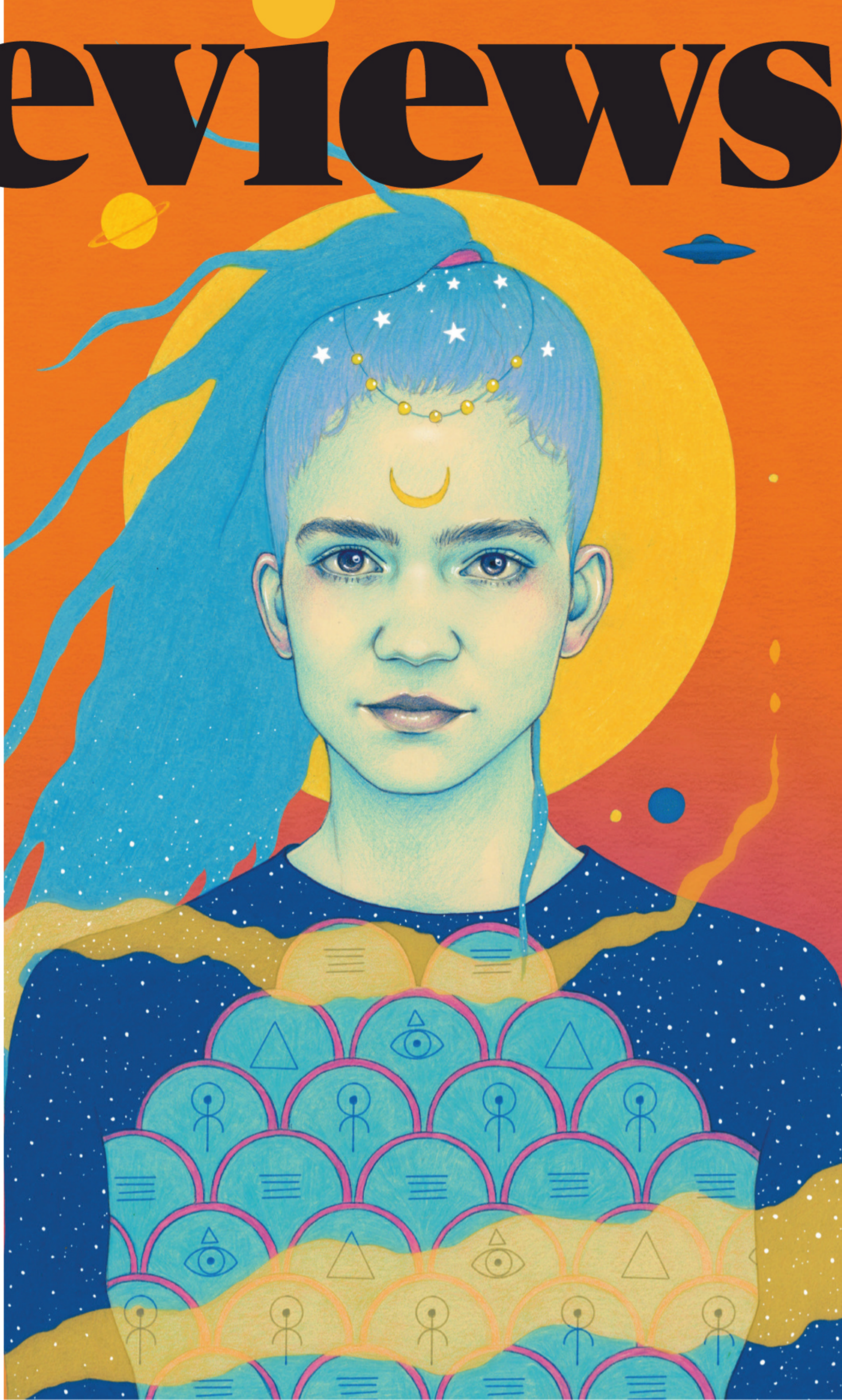
Miss Anthropocene

4AD

★★★★☆

FOR THE PAST DECADE, Claire Boucher has been releasing deeply weird, often gorgeous, occasionally terrifying music under the name Grimes, chasing her own thrillingly strange notion of genre-less pop ecstasy. Boucher sings in a voice that evokes Siri possessed by a demon, and her goth-bubblegum sound seems to pull equally from Mariah Carey and Nine Inch Nails. She first broke through with “Oblivion,” a haunting depiction of being a woman alone after dark, from her 2012 LP, *Visions*. Her 2015 follow-up, *Art Angels*, was just as challenging, but also brighter and shinier, the work of an ambitious artist looking for the biggest stage possible. ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Natalie Foss



➔ GRIMES

Grimes has become notorious for her provocative online persona: Despite being an outspoken feminist, she's decried "cancel culture" and made remarks that have been called transphobic. Twitter went code red in 2018 when she and tech mogul Elon Musk confirmed their relationship, and she recently announced that she was expecting her first child through a nearly naked, hyperreal Instagram photo.

Grimes' latest LP, *Miss Anthropocene*, is her most high-concept record to date. According to her, *Miss Anthropocene* is a supervillain: climate change personified as a malevolent goddess. Appropriately, the music inside is a primordial ooze, the sound of existence eating itself. Poisoned smog seeps through the air on tracks like the six-minute opener, "So Heavy I Fell Through the Earth." On "Violence," Grimes (or her fictional antihero) takes a sadomasochistic approach to human exploitation of the planet's resources, taunting, "I'm, like, begging for it, baby/Makes you wanna party, wanna wake up/Baby, it's violence." On "My Name Is Darkness," she sings, "You know me as the girl who plays with fire/But this is the song I wrote you in the dark," describing "imminent annihilation" as "so dope."

The album's genuinely innovative high point, "4ÆM," opens with a tropical collage of sounds, then twists a late-night come-on into a "Ride of the Valkyries"-like battle hymn, built around a vocal sample from the Bollywood film *Bajirao Mastani*.

Yet, even as she indulges in images of a world on fire like a cyberpunk Nero, many moments on *Miss Anthropocene* suggest Grimes' real-life concerns are more inward-facing. The semiacoustic "Delete Forever" delivers a halfhearted apology for her online antics. By the album's end, she's abandoned her muddled sci-fi concept altogether in favor of a utopian fantasy. "We could play a beautiful game/You could chase me down/In the name of love!" she sings ecstatically on "IDORU," over bird calls and shimmering keys. Pretending you can transcend the apocalypse seems fitting coming from someone who says she wants to sell her soul to AI when the going gets tough. Unfortunately, the rest of us aren't lucky enough to have that option. **R**



Williams

BREAKING**Squirrel Flower's Dark Folk-Rock Majesty**

"ALL MY FRIENDS ARE at the party/But I've got other plans," Ella O'Connor Williams, the indie singer-songwriter who records as Squirrel Flower, tells us. Her time alone is well-spent. *I Was Born Swimming* is a fully realized debut album, with the raw-boned intimacy and darkly distressed grandeur of Mitski or Lucy Dacus. Williams started releasing music as Squirrel Flower when she was a college student in Iowa, and you can hear a stark Midwestern expansiveness on songs like "Streetlight Blues" and "Home," folk-rock mini epics where her fear and hunger are primal and transporting. **JON DOLAN**

SISTERS FIND THEIR VOICE

Gifted sibling country duo team with Brandi Carlile for an excellent LP By JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

THE FOURTH ALBUM from Alabama sibling duo the Secret Sisters is the stunning country-soul opus their talent has always promised. Laura and Lydia Rogers have been at it since 2010, making solid LPs with high-profile producers (T Bone Burnett, Dave Cobb) while lending their Southern

**Secret Sisters**

Saturn Return

New West

★★★★☆



Laura and Lydia Rogers (from left)

church harmonies to legends like Willie Nelson and Elvis Costello. In 2017, the pair enlisted singer-songwriter Brandi Carlile to co-produce their third LP, *You Don't Own Me Anymore*, helping them up their game in a set of songs about piloting life's

hardships, delivered with tender intimacy. Carlile is back for *Saturn Return*, a spare, gorgeous, relatably realistic set. "Late bloomers on parade" is how the group put it on the Elton John-meets-Dusty Springfield declaration "Late Bloomer."

That well-chosen sentiment is truth in advertising.

Carlile and Jacob Hoffman's supple piano playing lend a warmth that complements the Rogers' dexterous vocals. The duo don't sugarcoat their litany of career challenges: "It's not glamour, it ain't fortune," they sing in note-perfect unison on "Nowhere, Baby." Yet, they sound more comfortable than ever throughout this elegantly sparse collection, singing solo leads for the first time, coming together with heartening beauty on the songs' choruses.

The record taps the melting-pot influences native to their hometown of Muscle Shoals, from hymnal ballads like "Tin Can Angel" and "Hold You Dear" to the Joan Baez-like noir folk of "Fair." They honor vintage sounds, but also play with them: "Silver" feels like a 17th-century-style English ballad, telling the tale of a woman who realizes she's going gray, but what feels like a lament soon becomes a speedy roots rocker with a winking defiance against the stigma of aging.

A tension between Southern gothic darkness and churchy salvation has always simmered beneath the surface of the Sisters' music. Here it feels like that fault line might erupt, as they segue from bluesy rage ("Cabin," inspired by the Brett Kavanaugh hearings) to dreamy retro-pop pastiche ("Hand Over My Heart").

The effortlessness with which the Secret Sisters articulate their musical ambitions places *Saturn Return* among recent country-roots gems from songwriters like Jason Isbell and Pistol Annies. If working through their struggles has been a strange process, the wait was more than worth it. As they tell us with pride, "It doesn't matter when you bloom/It matters that you do." **R**

Quick Hits

Ten new albums you need to know about now

Soccer Mommy
Color Theory
Loma Vista



SOPHIE SOARS Indie-rock prodigy Sophie Allison delves into darkness and vulnerability while maintaining the same dreamy, melodic drive that made her 2018 debut, *Clean*, so memorable.



Cornershop
England Is a Garden
Ample Play



BRIMFUL OF FUN The first new album in eight years from Tjinder Singh's alt-pop crew is as great as their Nineties high points, a hazy, globalist British rock that's loose and optimistically eclectic.



Caribou
Suddenly
Merge



SWEET TRIP After the festival-ready R&B house of 2014's *Our Love*, Dan Snaith packs a triple-LP's worth of twisted disco, sample-drunk collage, and psychedelic warmth into a 45-minute thrill ride.



U.S. Girls
Heavy Light
4AD



DANCE THERAPY Disco self-care from Toronto art popper Meghan Remy, with stomping dance tracks and lush ballads, interspersed with interviews in which people give advice to their teenage selves.



Brandy Clark
Your Life Is a Record
Warner



CLASSIC COUNTRY One of Nashville's sharpest storytellers leans on her singer-songwriter side, exorcising a breakup over Sixties-style countrypolitan strings and dueting with Randy Newman.



Ozzy Osbourne
Ordinary Man
Epic



BACK IN BLACK Facing poor health, Ozzy explores real-life terror, with help from members of the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Guns N' Roses, plus Post Malone's producer. The results are surprisingly moving.



Stephen Malkmus
Traditional Techniques
Matador



FOLKED UP The former Pavement leader's last solo set was quasi-electronic. This is a mostly acoustic folk set, indebted to faves like Fairport Convention and Bert Jansch, and full of fireside beauty.



Nathaniel Rateliff
And It's Still Alright
Stax



SAD SOUL Rateliff found success singing big retro-soul tunes; his new solo album is much more somber, influenced by the death of musician friend Richard Swift, and at times recalling Leonard Cohen.



Mandy Moore
Silver Landings
Verve Forecast



BACK FOR MOORE Her first album in more than 10 years settles on muscular, tasteful adult pop that's often autobiographical, including "Fifteen," a clear-eyed look back at her late-Nineties days as a teen pop star.



Best Coast
Always Tomorrow
Concord



BETH COASTS Bethany Cosentino affirms her new life since becoming sober, and you can hear how much the change means. But she's traded her band's catchy guitar buzz for bland 1980s-rock retreads.



UPDATE

NEW-LOOK SYNTH-POP

Singer-songwriters deepen their music by embracing sleeker sounds

ADD THESE TWO LPs to a growing list of albums by singer-songwriters (including Sharon Van Etten and Kacey Musgraves) who've modernized their sounds without sacrificing craft. Margaret Glaspy's latest hits as hard as her rugged, guitar-driven 2016 debut, *Emotions and Math* – not in spite of her music's starkly sleek new textures, but



Margaret Glaspy
Devotion
★★★★☆



Caroline Rose
Superstar
★★★★☆

because of them (see the plaintive, vocoder-steeped ballad "Killing What Keeps Us Alive"). Caroline Rose used to make alt-country. Her fourth LP doubles down on Eighties glitz. Rose's ace narrative writing occasionally takes a back seat to her neon keyboards and dance beats, but when she stumbles upon a fine groove (the Prince-inspired "Feel the Way I Want"), it's irresistible. "I feel as though I need a change," she sings. The one she went with works fine. JONATHAN BERNSTEIN



Ozzy

CONTRIBUTORS: JONATHAN BERNSTEIN, JON DOLAN, KORY GROW, ANGIE MARTOCCIO, CLAIRE SHAFFER, SIMON VOZICK-LEVINSON

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LORNE THOMSON/REDFERNS; ADELA LOCONTE/SHUTTERSTOCK; BURAK CINGI/REDFERNS; SUZANNE CORDEIRO/SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK

Essential LPs from Nineties rock's feminist revolution

By ROB SHEFFIELD

‘WHAT IS riot grrrl?” asked a punk zine in 1991. “Riot grrrl is because we girls want to create mediums that speak to us.... Because every time we pick up a pen, or an instrument, or get anything done, we are creating the revolution. We *are* the revolution.” Starting in the early Nineties, young feminists around the world seized the opportunity to express themselves in punk rock, just because they had something to say.

The riot grrrls took inspiration from 1970s punk pioneers like the Raincoats and X-Ray Spex. But they were doing something new, and you could feel their influence throughout the Nineties on everyone from Kurt Cobain to Alanis Morissette to the Spice Girls. It remains a vital force — Bikini Kill, Sleater-Kinney, and Team Dresch all did superb reunion tours last year, and the most startling thing was how young the crowds were.

Riot Grrrl

Carrie Brownstein of Sleater-Kinney in 1999

Must-Haves



Bikini Kill
Bikini Kill EP
1992

In one of their earliest riot-grrrl zines, Bikini Kill issued a dare: “Find the biggest bitch in town and start a band with her.” Bikini Kill came together in the college town of Olympia, Washington, starting with the motto, “Revolution Girl Style Now!” Their 1992 debut EP was raw but powerful, produced by Fugazi’s Ian MacKaye. Kathleen Hanna snarled about misogyny, abuse, and violence over the feral riffs of “Suck My Left One” and “Double Dare Ya.” “Feels Blind” was her testimony of growing up trapped by gender roles: “I’m the woman I was always taught to be: hungry.”



Sleater-Kinney
Call the Doctor
1996

The shot heard around the world: three young women making their own heroic noise. Corin Tucker and Carrie Brownstein knew each other from the Olympia scene: Brownstein with her band Excuse 17, Tucker with Heavens to Betsy. But when they played together, something lit up. “It just felt like I had fused with her,” Brownstein told *Rolling Stone*. *Call the Doctor* was their story about being young and female in a hostile world. It all erupts in “I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone,” where they lay down a challenge to everything stale and complacent about America, as Tucker yells, “I’m the queen of rock & roll!”



Bikini Kill
The Singles
1998

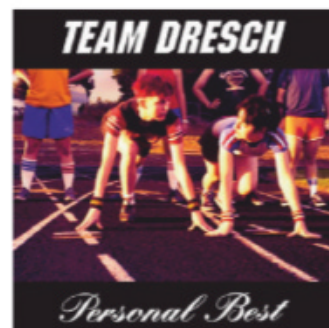
The definitive Bikini Kill document. Like so many other punk hell-raisers, Bikini Kill thrived most in the concise format of the two-minute vinyl blast, and *The Singles* collects the bombshells they kept dropping until their 1997 split. “Rebel Girl” is their anthem — “in her kiss, I taste the revolution” — with producer and fan Joan Jett blasting away on guitar. *The Singles* also has Jett and Hanna playing the old clapping game “Miss Mary Mack,” along with the wild romps “I Like Fucking,” “I Hate Danger,” and “New Radio,” where Hanna rants, “I’m the little girl at the picnic/ Who won’t stop pulling her dress up.” *The Singles* is one of punk’s most exhilarating artifacts.

Further Listening



Bratmobile
Pottymouth
1993

Bratmobile rooted their sound in the political and musical possibilities of the playground chant: “Girl germs! No returns! Can’t hide out, they’re everywhere!” They made some of the era’s fiercest and funniest singles, with Allison Wolfe dropping one-liners over Erin Smith’s surf guitar and Molly Neuman’s drums: *Pottymouth* is their low-fi debut album, with “P.R.D.C.T.” (“Punk Rock Dream Come True”) and a gender-flipped bash at the Runaways’ “Cherry Bomb.”



Team Dresch
Personal Best
1995

These Portland queercore pioneers formed at a time when it was tough for gay kids to find one another in the punk scene. This is their agonizingly real snapshot of LGBTQ youth, summed up in “Fagetarian and Dyke,” which confesses, “I spent the last 10 days of my life ripping off the Smiths.” Team Dresch just released a new protest song, “Your Hands My Pockets.”



Sleater-Kinney
Dig Me Out
1997

Nobody expected Sleater-Kinney to top *Call the Doctor*. But S-K got even better when they found their punk-rock-dream-come-true of a drummer, Janet Weiss. *Dig Me Out* is their most brazenly confident music, as Tucker and Brownstein trade off vocals in a thrilling rush. “One More Hour” is all romantic torment, while “Words and Guitar” sounds fired up to take on the future.



Le Tigre
Le Tigre
1999

After Bikini Kill signed off in 1997, Kathleen Hanna took everyone by surprise with Le Tigre’s debut LP, full of synth-pop beats and playful girl-group vocals. On “Hot Topic” they shout out to a few of their heroes over a Motown-style drum loop: “James Baldwin!” “Sleater-Kinney!” “Billie Jean King!”

Going Deeper



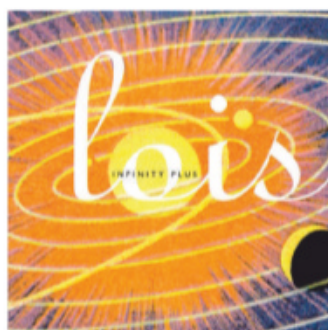
Slant 6 Soda Pop Rip Off 1994

Slant 6 had all the flash you'd expect from a power trio named for a legendary Chrysler muscle-car engine. So much of the early riot-grrrl culture came from the cross-country kinship between Washington, D.C., and the Pacific Northwest: Slant 6 held up the capital city's end with grooves like "Time Expired," goofing on Sixties garage rock, but with a sense of menace.



Heavens to Betsy Calculated 1994

Even before Sleater-Kinney, Corin Tucker had her own voice, and in Heavens to Betsy she wasn't afraid to go all the way there. "My Red Self" is still the greatest rock song ever written about surfing the crimson wave: "What is the color, the color of shame? Is it red?"



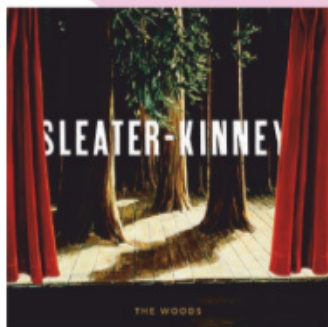
Lois Infinity Plus 1996

With her acoustic guitar, tea-cup, and wry grin, Lois Maffeo seemed like the scene's wisest auntie. *Infinity Plus* is a lost Nineties classic full of heart-shredding ballads like "Capital 'A,'" "Summer Long," and the Elliott Smith duet "Rougher."

FURTHER READING

The Riot Grrrl Collection

The *Riot Grrrl Collection* is a crucial part of the story, an anthology of the punk fanzines that shaped the music's spirit. This book — edited by Lisa Darms, with an intro by Johanna Fateman — shows how kids created a coast-to-coast network of kindred spirits with radical new ideas, using old-school media tools like copy machines and staplers.



Sleater-Kinney The Woods 2005

Sleater-Kinney have always had an unabashed classic-rock jones, covering Creedence's "Fortunate Son" and Springsteen's "The Promised Land." But they really unleashed their megaheavy psychedelic side on *The Woods*, right up to the 11-minute climax "Let's Call It Love." Brownstein's stripped-down ballad "Modern Girl" became a theme song, with the sad refrain, "My whole life was like a picture of a sunny day."

Her Noise

More great songs from the riot-grrrl explosion

"I WALK ALONE"

Mecca Normal, from *Mecca Normal*, 1986 A shocking sound in the Eighties: Vancouver poet Jean Smith walks down the street, over David Lester's skeletal guitar. All she wants to do is walk alone, so why does she have to take her life in her hands? Rock dudes always love to brag about walking alone, but she makes it sound terrifying.

"SHOVE"

L7, from *Smell the Magic*, 1991 The great L.A. grunge queens were fellow travelers to the riot-grrrl scene. This Sub Pop single, released a year earlier, vents the urge to shove the entire world out of your way: "The neighbors say I jam too loud/America thinks it should be proud."

"SHE SAID 'BOOM'"

Fifth Column, from *All-Time Queen of the World*, 1990 Fifth Column started in the Eighties as a collective of queer Toronto art students set to smash the patriarchy. (An early album title: *To Sir With Hate*.) As Caroline Azar said, "'She said boom' are three simple words that, for us, mean being responsible for your own pocket-size revolution."

"DEAD MEN DON'T RAPE"

7 Year Bitch, from *There's a Dyke in the Pit* compilation, 1992 A point-blank manifesto from the Seattle band, and a highlight of the classic seven-inch EP *There's a Dyke in the Pit*. 7 Year Bitch made a searing appearance in the 1995 teen drama *Mad Love* as the band Drew Barrymore sneaks out to see, perhaps the most Nineties scene in any movie.

"HER JAZZ"

Huggy Bear, from *Taking the Rough With the Smooch*, 1993 "This is happening without your permission," Huggy Bear announce in this U.K. broadside, an

early example of bands around the world tuning in to riot-grrrl spirit. "Her Jazz" was the Brighton band's split single with Bikini Kill's "Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah," calling for "girl/boy revolution."

"SOME JINGLE JANGLE MORNING"

Mary Lou Lord, single, 1993 No rage or noise here, just a wistful folkie strumming her heart out, with Bikini Kill's Tobi Vail and Kathi Wilcox as well as Donna Dresch. "Some Jingle Jangle Morning" captures how it feels to stumble through your twenties, seeing sunny people go dark on you, watching friends fall apart or drift away.

"SEVENWHATEVERTEEN"

Excuse 17, from the *Periscope* compilation, 1994 Carrie Brownstein's first band was this pop-punk trio, releasing two promising albums before Sleater-Kinney blew up. Their best moment (from the crucial Yoyo label comp *Periscope*) is a deceptively catchy lament for a girl who loves you only when her boyfriend's not around.

"HELLO YUCKO"

Emily's Sassy Lime, from *A Slice of Lemon* compilation, 1995 SoCal teenage sisters Amy and Wendy Yao decided to form a band after getting in trouble for sneaking out to see Bratmobile and Bikini Kill gigs. Emily's Sassy Lime had their own fantastic style of fractured brat punk. "Hello Yucko" is their kiss-off to a loser dude, sneering, "Hang your head in shame/ You're all the same."

"I WISH I WAS HIM"

Kathleen Hanna, from the *Rock Stars Kill* compilation, 1994 Teen indie prodigy Ben Lee wrote this ode to the Lemonheads' Evan Dando. (The ultimate Nineties compliment: "He even understands the words to Pavement songs.") But Hanna gives it a whole new level of gender irony in the sly way she sighs, "He thinks he can be a girl better than me."

"TARGET PRACTICE"

Various Artists, from the *Free to Fight* compilation, 1995 *Free to Fight* was more than an album — it was "an interactive self-defense project" released on Candy Ass Records, involving comics, poetry, and stories of sexual violence, as well as songs by Heavens to Betsy, Excuse 17, Lois, and others. "Target Practice" is a blunt lesson in fighting back, with voices chanting, "Eyes, knees, groin, throat!"

"ROMANCE"

Wild Flag, from *Wild Flag*, 2011 Six years after *The Woods*, two-thirds of Sleater-Kinney burst back to life with their new band, Wild Flag. Brownstein and Weiss teamed up with Helium's Mary Timony for "Romance," yelling, "Sound is the blood between me and you." It's a credo they've spent their lives living up to.

"SOCIAL DEATH"

gSp, from *gSp*, 2017 The name is pronounced "girlspem." A trio of lifers from Bikini Kill and Skinned Teens show everyone how it's done, with guitar squalls over Vail's rock-steady beach-party drums. "Social Death" is about refusing to give up on life, forcing yourself to leave the house and show up places — the same struggle riot grrrl has always been about.



REBEL GRRRLS
L.A. punk rockers L7, making America proud in 1992



Cole as Lindbergh (left), with Turturro as his adviser

TV

A DARK 'PLOT' MADE ALL TOO REAL

The creators of 'The Wire' tackle a Philip Roth tale of fear and bigotry with frightening parallels to today



ALAN SEPINWALL

WHEN PHILIP ROTH published *The Plot Against America* in 2004 – an alternate history where pilot Charles Lindbergh is elected president in 1940 on an anti-war and barely veiled anti-Semitic platform – George W. Bush was nearing re-election and NBC was debuting the second season of *The Apprentice*, a game show judged by cartoonish New York real estate mogul Donald Trump. With the country at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, this wasn't

a happy time for the U.S., but Roth's story read more like a path thankfully avoided (the real Lindbergh was an isolationist and anti-Semite, but never ran for office) than as an ominous prophecy.

With HBO's six-part mini-series adaptation from *The Wire* creators Ed Burns and David Simon, what was once fanciful now feels agonizingly prescient. Like Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* (albeit more compact), it's chilling in the ways that life has begun to imitate its source material's art. But it's yet another example of how Simon and his collaborators manage to craft riveting entertainment out of incisive commentary on the way we live now.

We experience this wrinkle in time through the eyes of a fictionalized version of Roth's family (here renamed the Levins) in Newark, New Jersey, led by insurance

salesman Herman (Morgan Spector) and housewife Bess (Zoe Kazan). Older son Sandy (Caleb Malis) is an artist who idolizes Lindbergh (Ben Cole), while young Philip (Azhy Robertson) just wants to enjoy his stamp collection and dinners with his aunt Evelyn (Winona Ryder) and cousin Alvin (Anthony Boyle).

Lindbergh's political rise plays out much like Trump's. First, he's satirized in ways his critics believe will sink him but that he proves immune to. Herman dismisses him as "an airplane pilot with opinions," in the same way Trump's reality-show fame was initially treated as a disqualifier. Then, Lindbergh's viewed as a use-

ful idiot by his party. "This is how it starts: everyone thinking they can work with the guy," laments Herman. "Like Hitler: Everyone believes he doesn't mean what he says."

With the help of Evelyn's rabbi boyfriend Lionel Bengelsdorf (John Turturro) – a Southern-raised Jew who serves as a religious adviser – Lindy is able to win election. (A disgusted Alvin sug-

gests Bengelsdorf is "koshing Lindbergh" for the non-Jews, so they'll feel comfortable voting for a man they know is a bigot.) Soon, Bengelsdorf is parroting talking points about who is and isn't a "real American," and how the Jews can be better "absorbed" into the allegedly more authentic rural vision of the country. Meanwhile, Lindbergh's ascendance gives tacit approval to everyone who shares his ugly views to take violent action. "The hate was there," Herman realizes. "It's like dry leaves waiting on a spark."

The Lindbergh-Trump parallels feel more blatant than some of the political points Simon and Burns have made in their careers (like how *The Wire*'s third season was an Iraq War allegory). But Trump is a figure for whom subtlety and nuance have always seemed irrelevant. The specific dynamics of the Levins – Herman's stubborn belief in America's better nature, Evelyn's hunger for recognition, Bess' fear for her kids – and the lavish period details provide some separation from our current mess. The performances, too, are strong, particularly Kazan's as the one member of the family who clearly sees what's happening at each stage of this slow-motion nightmare.

Roth is also far from the only author whose story of a demagogue's rise now seems to be playing out on cable news. In one scene taken straight from the book, New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia quotes Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*, then admits, "It is happening here." Because of those clear links between Roth's parallel past and our very real present, *The Plot Against America* can

be as difficult to watch as the toughest moments of *The Wire*, *Treme*, or *The Deuce*. By the end, Simon and Burns make their story even darker than the novel's, but in a way that feels sadly true to today. **R**

The Plot Against America

NETWORK	HBO
AIR DATE	March 16th
STARRING	Zoe Kazan Morgan Spector John Turturro Winona Ryder

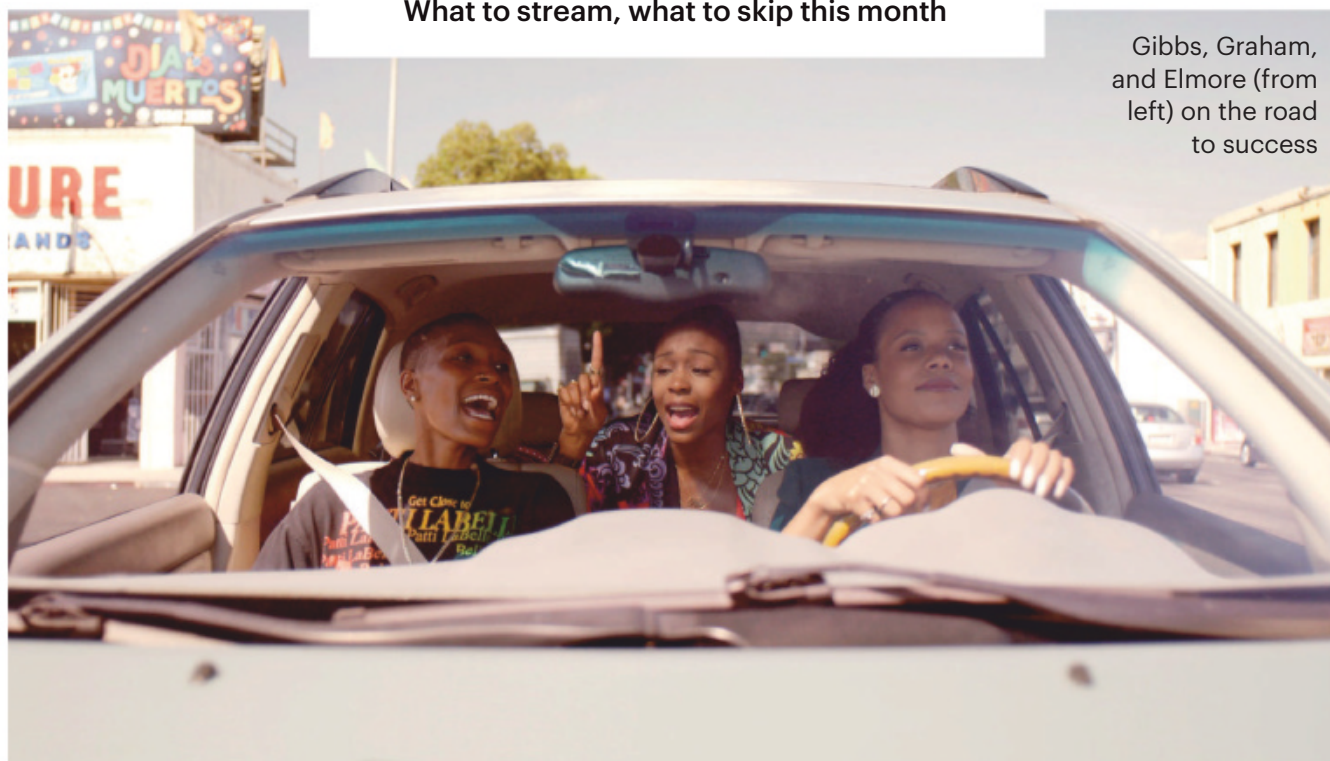
★★★★☆



Kazan as matriarch Bess

WATCH LIST

What to stream, what to skip this month



Gibbs, Graham, and Elmore (from left) on the road to success

SQUAD GOALS

Twenties

NETWORK	BET
AIR DATE	March 4th
★★★★☆	

In the premiere of this dramedy about friends negotiating love, life, and showbiz, Marie (Christina Elmore) praises a black movie simply for existing, arguing, “We should support black shit.” Hattie (Jonica T. Gibbs) replies, “We should support good shit that just happens to be black.” Hattie is laying down a gauntlet on behalf of *Twenties* creator Lena Waithe, for whom she’s an obvious stand-in. Waithe doesn’t want us to like the show just because it’s about black female friendship, nor because Hattie is a rare gay woman of color on TV. Fortunately, *Twenties* is good shit that just happens to be black, and queer. It’s not always as funny as it aspires to be — outside of a great running gag where yoga instructor Nia (Gabrielle Graham) is baffled by her boyfriend’s refusal to own a phone — but in its use of Old Hollywood movie music and the buoyantly physical and expressive lead performance by Gibbs, it has the verve and bounce of a Forties musical.

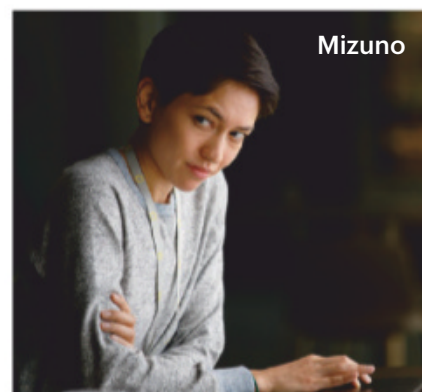
THE DARK WEB

Devs

NETWORK	FX on Hulu
AIR DATE	March 5th
★★★★☆	

One character describes the events of this sci-fi thriller as “transcendently weird.” This is

about right. On the one hand, the plot — in which the mysterious plans of a Silicon Valley mogul (Nick Offerman) threaten the existence of one of his coders (Sonoya Mizuno) — has long stretches that are inscrutable. Even those in the know often accuse one another of not understanding what’s happening. On the other hand, every episode is written and directed by *Annihilation*’s Alex Garland to be spectacularly unnerving, in both the baroque imagery (much of the



Mizuno

action takes place inside a giant floating gold cube) and a score (by Ben Salisbury, the Insects, and Geoff Barrow) that will follow you into your nightmares. Offerman’s understated affect plays incredibly well (and very different from Ron Swanson) as a master of his universe. And *Devs* finds compelling things to say about this industry — “You need to stop seeing them as a tech company,” a friend warns our heroine. “See them as the Mob” — about free will, and even about the act of watching television itself. (You may find yourself wanting to go outside and play Frisbee after each episode.) What are Offerman and his minions, including a whip-smart Alison Pill and a terrifying Zach Grenier, really up to? Damned if I knew half the time, but I was riveted by the entire season.

CLASS WARFARE

Little Fires Everywhere

NETWORK	Hulu
AIR DATE	March 18th
★★★★☆	

Reese Witherspoon and Kerry Washington team up to produce and star in this miniseries adaptation of Celeste Ng’s bestseller, in which two women with wildly different lives — Witherspoon’s Elena, a wealthy supermom; Washington’s Mia, a nomadic artist — find their families painfully entangled with each other in 1990s suburban Ohio. In the book, Mia is white; casting Washington allows writer Liz Tigelaar to add more layers to Ng’s story of white liberal hypocrisy gone awry. Washington is dynamite as an enigma who only opens herself up to daughter Pearl (Lexi Underwood), and not even entirely to her. Witherspoon’s also great, but typecast to within an inch of her life, as it’s not hard to imagine



Witherspoon

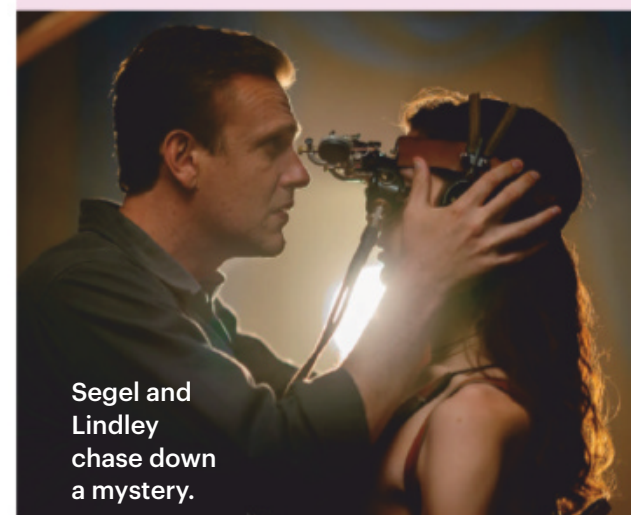
Tracy Flick ending up the queen bee of Shaker Heights (or Madeline from *Big Little Lies*, if she had a bit less empathy and self-awareness than that character). Tigelaar tries to be generous to both antagonists, but her sympathies are so clearly (and rightly) with Mia that *Fires*’ burn can sometimes feel painfully slow. **A.S.**

SNAPSHOT

The King of Quirkiness

With AMC’s ‘*Dispatches From Elsewhere*,’ Jason Segel is maximizing his oddball appeal

Jason Segel is a weird dude. From the day the teenage Segel was cast as wanna-be drummer Nick Andopolis on *Freaks and Geeks*, he has made a comic art form of lingering on the border between kind and creepy. With his gangly frame, broad smile, and aw-shucks demeanor, he’s a master of playing nice guys who never realize when they’ve gone too far. *Freaks* producers Judd Apatow and Paul Feig used this quality to mortifying, hilarious effect in portraying the hopelessly one-sided romance between Nick and Linda Cardellini’s Lindsay. For the series finale, they gave Segel its comic



Segel and Lindley chase down a mystery.

centerpiece: a graceful yet too-intense disco dance routine set to Heatwave’s “The Groove Line.”

Segel would ironically become famous by bottling his inner goon; as Marshall Eriksen, married best friend of *How I Met Your Mother* hero Ted Mosby, he was primarily the show’s straight man. But its success allowed him to make movies where he wrote to his own bizarre strengths, like the overly emotional dumpee in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* or a puppet’s older brother in *The Muppets*. That’s the energy he’s harnessing as creator and star of the new AMC anthology series *Dispatches From Elsewhere* (premieres March 1st). It’s an aggressively quirky tale in which he plays Peter, a bored-to-death wage slave who finds new purpose (alongside new friends, played by Sally Field, André Benjamin, and Eve Lindley) in a war between an evil corporation and a society of artistic renegades. On paper, this Peter could seem relatively normal, but the mere fact of Segel playing him makes him a suitably eccentric fit for an offbeat story. To thine own weird self, be true. **A.S.**



Moore, as Steinem, leads a protest.

Movies

PORTRAITS OF WOMEN ON FIRE

In telling the story of feminist pioneer Gloria Steinem, Julie Taymor leads a fierce wave of take-charge women directors



PETER TRAVERS

HAVING BEEN famously shut out by the sexist Oscars this year, women directors are again making their presence felt. You can find their artistry on display at the multiplex, on streaming services, and at film festivals such as Sundance 2020, where nearly half of the competition films were directed by women.

Look hard at *The Glorias*, which premiered at the film fest: a riveting rambling of a road movie from director Julie Taymor that encompasses the turbulent life and times of feminist groundbreaker

Gloria Steinem, an advocate for women's rights since the 1960s. Taymor has cast four actresses as Gloria: Ryan Kiera Armstrong plays her as a child; Lulu Wilson as a teen; Alicia Vikander in her twenties and thirties; and Julianne Moore from her forties to the present. They all do her proud.

Oscar winners Vikander (*The Danish Girl*) and Moore (*Still Alice*) bring humor and gravitas to their roles in a way that makes sure that Gloria's personal story isn't lost in the sweep of history. There's her career in journalism, her going undercover as a *Playboy* bunny to expose sexist working conditions in Hugh Hefner's empire, her co-founding of *Ms Magazine* in 1972, and her partnership with New York Rep. Bella Abzug (a dynamite Bette Midler)

to create the National Women's Political Caucus. These *Glorias* never stop, moving on to the 2017 Women's March on Washington. For Steinem, now 85, these ideals are even more urgent when battles previously won for gender parity, reproductive rights, and the end of sexual harassment are being fought again in the repressive Trump era.

In adapting Steinem's 2016 memoir, *My Life on the Road*, to the screen, Taymor and screenwriter Sarah Ruhl

The Glorias

STARRING Julianne Moore, Alicia Vikander, Bette Midler, Janelle Monáe, Lorraine Toussaint, Lulu Wilson, Ryan Kiera Armstrong, Timothy Hutton

DIRECTED BY Julie Taymor

★★★★☆

never resort to sermonizing. The director is a visionary — see her brilliant stage version of *The Lion King*, and her dazzling if divisive film forays into Shakespeare (*Titus*, *The Tempest*) and Beatlemania (*Across the Universe*). Her visual tangents aren't for everyone. On a Greyhound "bus out of time," all four *Glorias* join together to discuss their agenda. Jarring? Maybe. But these scenes are also essential. Shot in black and white by the great Rodrigo Prieto (*The Irishman*), the more fantastical moments emphasize Steinem's role as a part of a female collective in which the individual only triumphs as part of a surging whole.

The biographical details of Steinem's life are sketched in as Gloria grows up in Toledo, Ohio, as the daughter of a rootless traveling-salesman father, Leo (Timothy Hutton), and a journalist mother, Ruth (Enid Graham), who was forced to write under a male pseudonym and suffered bouts of depression.

Taymor is out to capture Steinem in the exhilarating act of inventing herself as part of a revolution. And the movie reminds you that it wasn't just white women on the front lines, either — it's also such multicultural reformers as Dorothy Pittman Hughes (Janelle Monáe), Flo Kennedy (Lorraine Toussaint), Dolores Huerta (Monica Sanchez), and Wilma Mankiller (Kimberly Guerrero as the first woman elected principal chief of the Cherokee Nation). Taymor's tendency to rush ahead when we want to stay and go deeper are minor flaws in the face of the exultation that comes from watching these women in action. When Steinem herself appears onscreen, it's hard not to cheer. She's built an army of *Glorias*, men included, with no intention ever of calling it quits. **R**



FROM TOP: DAN MCFADDEN/SUNDANCE INSTITUTE; KATIE JONES/VARIETY/SHUTTERSTOCK



Campers at Jened

READY, WILLING & DISABLED

Crip Camp

STARRING
Judy Heumann

DIRECTED BY
Nicole Newnham,
Jim LeBrecht

★★★★☆

PRODUCED BY

Michelle and Barack Obama and directed by Nicole Newnham with Jim LeBrecht, this indispensable documentary defines what it means to call a movie inspiring. Their

raucous fist-bump of a film is a 1970s origin story about Camp Jened, a New York summer getaway for kids with disabilities located near Woodstock and run by inexperienced hippies.

Through amazing archival footage, we see how these kids, who feel like outsiders due to such conditions as cerebral palsy and polio, soak up their first sense of belonging. Sex, drugs, and rock & roll all play a part, wheelchairs be damned. Cheers to the buoyant touch of co-director LeBrecht, born with spina bifida, who attended the camp. So did future activist Judy Heumann, a force of nature at speaking her mind.

It was Heumann and other camp attendees who turned their experiences into a national movement. Using their voices for sit-ins and protests, they helped pass 1990's Americans With Disabilities Act. They are still changing the world. How? See *Crip Camp* and have your faith in humanity restored. **P.T.**

Flanigan (right), with Ryder, fights for her right to choose.

RIGHT TO CHOOSE

Never Rarely Sometimes Always

STARRING
Sidney Flanigan,
Talia Ryder

DIRECTED BY
Eliza Hittman

★★★★☆

AUTUMN, played by a wonder of a first-time actress named Sidney Flanigan, is 17 and anxious. She needs an abortion. But Pennsylvania, where she lives, demands parental consent. Since that's not happening, Autumn persuades

her cousin Skylar (a warmly sympathetic Talia Ryder) to join her on a bus to New York, where things should go off without a hitch.

As if. *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* – a reference to a doctor's cold questions about Autumn's sexual history, and which is explained in a truly devastating sequence – puts you in the empathetic care of Eliza Hittman (*Beach Rats*), a writer-director who takes the pulse of her characters without judgment or *Roe v. Wade* speechifying. Though her film has elements of Romanian filmmaker Cristian Mungiu's harrowing drama *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, Hittman relies on the eloquent but unspoken bond between two teen girls to nurture the healing process in a world of toxic masculinity and clinical indifference. Her urgent film is an emotional wipeout. It's hard to watch. It's impossible to forget. **P.T.**



Moss as Shirley Jackson

ACTION JACKSON

Shirley

STARRING
Elisabeth Moss,
Michael Stuhlbarg

DIRECTED BY
Josephine Decker

★★★★☆

WHAT STARTS as a teasing psychodrama about Shirley Jackson, acclaimed horror author of *The Lottery* and architect of her own fragile mental state, ends as something far more

perversely fascinating. Thank Elisabeth Moss, who brilliantly plays Jackson as a volcano on the verge of eruption, and director Josephine Decker, whose experimental *Madeline's Madeline* reveled in leaving folks in a twist. With this trippy take on Susan Scarf Merrell's 2014 novel, which spins events from Jackson's life into a fictional thriller, Decker's at it again.

Ms. Jackson plays at being a Fifties faculty wife at Vermont's Bennington College to her cheating professor husband, Stanley Hyman (Michael Stuhlbarg). To cool his wife's bouts of hysteria, Hyman moves his young teaching assistant Fred (Logan Lerman) and his pregnant wife, Rose (Odessa Young), into the house. It's a setup straight out of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Truth hardly matters here. As Moss fuels the flames and Decker explodes midcentury myths about a woman's place, this movie wants to keep you up at night. And you can bet Shirley has the last word. **P.T.**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: STEVE HONIGSBAUM/SUNDANCE INSTITUTE; THATCHER KEATS/SUNDANCE INSTITUTE; ANGAL FIELD/FOCUS FEATURES; WARNER BROS./KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK



Aykroyd and Chase rocket to Russia.



RECONSIDERED

Russian LOLs: 'Spies Like Us'

LONG BEFORE America worried about Russia using Facebook to fuck with our elections, there was the 1985 Chevy Chase-Dan Aykroyd comedy about two bumbling, low-level federal employees sent to fuck with the Soviet Union. The hope is these two knuckleheads can distract the Kremlin long enough for a pair of real spies to execute a legit mission and save the world from nuclear destruction. Chaos, naturally, ensues. It's no *Ghostbusters* or *Fletch*, but seen now, this John Landis-directed farce is a priceless Cold War time capsule that remains shockingly funny – see the scene in which Chase and Aykroyd meet a group of health care professionals in Afghanistan and manage to say the word “doctor” 20 times in a single minute. Maybe it's time for a sequel where they head back overseas and try to infiltrate a Russian troll farm. **ANDY GREENE**

Spies Like Us
1985

AVAILABLE ON
**YouTube, Prime
Video, Google Play,
iTunes, Vudu**

➔ MEGAN THEE STALLION

[Cont. from 47] about who she’s dating that’s rarely rooted in fact. During the first week of February, Megan caught the ire of the internet after G-Eazy posted an Instagram story featuring him kissing her on the face. In true Megan fashion, she’d joke a day later that the Bay Area rapper just liked the taste of Fenty makeup, while denouncing any rumors.

“These are my immediate girlfriends, and we all have a lot of guy friends,” she says. “But now, it’s just a public thing. People think that if I’m hanging out with anybody, it got to be, ‘Oh, they’re having sex.’ Why can’t I just be turned up with my friend tonight?” she asks. “They’re just doing this shit because they want some attention, and I cannot feed into it. I have a little anxiety, because I’m still going through the grief from losing my mother and my grandmother. Then I have to get on the internet and see these motherfuckers talking about me? That shit really be pissing me off sometimes.”

Megan assures the room that she’s strong in mind, confident, and loves herself, but the constant deluge of Instagram comments, gossip blogs, and opinions sometimes take their toll. One of the drawbacks to becoming a sex symbol is how quickly the public strips you of your humanity, and relegates your likeness to a product. “Because I don’t really clap back and I don’t show I’m feeling sad on the internet, and I’m showing that I’m pissed off,” she says, “they probably think, ‘Oh, she’s a celebrity, so she’s not going to care about this.’”

Megan is prepping a new album, titled *Suga*, modeled after a new persona. Typically an alpha on the

top of the rapper food chain, she wants to show a side of herself that’s “sensitive” in ways Megan Thee Stallion has never allowed herself to be perceived. On lead single “B.I.T.C.H.,” Megan flips Tupac Shakur’s “Ratha Be Ya N.I.G.G.A.” to open up about a toxic relationship, rapping, “But it’s 2020, I ain’t finna argue ’bout twerkin’.”

“I feel like sometimes guys be trying to be too controlling over me,” Megan says of the line. “I’m like, ‘No. I’m still gon’ shake this ass. I’m gon’ shake this ass every night at my shows. I’m gon’ shake this ass with my friends, with my fans.’”

It’s the first project she’s putting out into the world without the guiding hand of her mother. Megan hopes to drop *Suga* on a special day in the spring – “May 2nd is my mom’s birthday.” So far, she has written or recorded in Cabo, Miami, Los Angeles, and Texas. SZA, Kehlani, and the Neptunes are confirmed for the project. Pharrell has dubbed her “Megan Thee Machine” for her work ethic.

Megan is still in awe of Pharrell after recording with him in Miami. “I would go in and write a song and the beat would sound one way, but by the time he gets done to it, it’s a whole new song,” Megan says. “I had never worked with a producer before that goes back in on his own beats and changes a bunch of stuff, like post-production. ‘Wow, these beats don’t even be done? That’s crazy.’”

In the new year, Megan the student and artist is looking to change. She’s taking two online classes this semester and is determined not to repeat the same mistakes she made in 2019 as a full-time rapper and part-time student. “I could’ve did better,” she says with a sigh. “I still passed. This semester I really want to take my time with sitting down and actually

studying for my tests, getting my homework out the way earlier. I’m already off to a pretty good start. Took my first quiz and exam, and I made A’s on both of them.”

Similarly, as a musician she has begun to think about what her younger fans might need to hear from her. “When I started making music, I was making music that I liked,” Megan tells me hours before she hits the stage. “But I wasn’t thinking about anybody else in my music. When I’m looking at who’s in the crowd, and I’m looking at even my god-sisters – they’re six, seven, eight – and they’re singing my songs, I’m like, ‘OK, let me give y’all something a little deeper, because I definitely want to grow with my music.’”

But before Megan can get to any of that, she has a hometown show to get through. A room full of Hotties, Houston rap legends (Bun B, Paul Wall, Slim Thug), and friends (Kelsey and Daren are obviously waiting in the wings) are all present for a very specific, very Texas moment in history. The TSU marching band arrives onstage to perform Megan’s “Big Ole Freak,” a fitting dedication for a classmate. A few moments later, fog fills the air, the bass begins to hum in earnest, and Megan Thee Stallion emerges, riding a rotating merry-go-round horse. Ginuwine’s “Pony” rattles the speakers.

Megan performs the songs that made her a star, and the Hotties scream back every single word. Toward the end of the show, she lets them all on her stage to twerk – probably imperfectly – and looks on with pride.

“I want to cry a little bit,” Megan told me a few hours before, as I left her house. “We going to cry, but we still doing bad-girl shit.” 🐘



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➔ STACEY ABRAMS

[Cont. from 77] “There were two employees. They were barely keeping the lights on. It was a wreck,” Rebecca DeHart, who Abrams tapped to help rebuild the party, recalls. “Stacey – always thinking long-term – knew she wanted a strong party structure in Georgia.” By the time Abrams ran for governor in 2018, the party had 150 employees and \$25 million in the bank. “We built it to where we wanted it to be,” DeHart says. That year, they flipped 16 seats.

Now, Abrams is creating a new kind of political machine, poised to reshape the Georgia electorate from the ground up. It began in the days after the 2018 election, when she was sick and depressed sitting on the couch in her Kirkwood townhouse, bingeing episodes of *Doctor Who*.

“I had a notepad, and I’m sitting in the corner of my couch, and Jeanine would come by every day to make sure I’m not committing ritual suicide,” Abrams jokes. “I had drawn this chart, and it had three circles. It said, ‘Voting,’ ‘Census,’ ‘Policy.’

“These are the things that I just don’t trust [Kemp] to do,” she told her sister. “If I believe in what I’ve been saying, my job is to make sure it gets done anyway, even if I’m not able to use the platform of a governorship to do it.”

The circles are now four stand-alone organizations, each run by a different trusted female deputy: Fair Fight, the political arm; Fair Fight Action; Fair Count; and the Southern Economic Advancement Project, a think tank intended to, in Abrams’ words, “translate good policy into Southern.”

Of the organizations, Fair Fight Action – which is spearheading a lawsuit accusing Kemp of systematically disenfranchising lower-income and minority voters – is the best known. But the organization that has the potential to make the biggest immediate impact on Georgia is Fair Count, the nonprofit Abrams conceived to combat the undercount of minority communities in the 2020 census, which will decide how more than \$1.5 trillion in federal resources are allocated and how congressional districts are drawn. The predicted undercount of black men alone in Georgia is expected to cost the state \$154 million annually – enough to pay for Medicaid expansion in the state.

“The undercount in Georgia [in 2010] had a visceral effect on the work I was able to do as a legislator,” Abrams says. “I knew communities were simply erased from the narrative.”

Abrams asked her sister Jeanine – who was working with epidemiologists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, studying the spread of gonorrhea – how she would go about trying to ensure every person in Georgia was counted. “Her job was to literally find people who did not want to be found,” Abrams recalls. “I said, ‘How would you do that?’”

Jeanine quit her job and joined Fair Count. From a small clapboard house in Atlanta’s Grant Park neighborhood, she, DeHart, and a team of 23 employees are figuring out how to reach every person in Georgia. Because 2020 is the first time the census will accept responses online, they’re giving away iPads and Chromebooks and installing internet routers in places like churches, barbershops, soup kitchens, day cares, and community centers.

“There’s really no other organization like Fair Count in the nation,” DeHart says. “It’s not surprising – it was born out of Stacey’s brain.”

ABRAMS HOPS UP into the Escalade and exhales. It’s late, she is exhausted, and she still has a long drive home from Gwinnett. She got a call from her mom earlier that day. Carolyn said she heard the Fair Fight summit had gone well – a friend of a friend told her the strategy session set her “on fire.” Abrams smiles at that thought. “To believe in possibility in Mississippi when it comes to voter protection? If we can pull that off, then it was really effective.”

Abrams may not have enjoyed all the glad-handing she had to do at the fundraiser, but at least she can feel satisfied knowing she’d done her part. She jokes that her father used to get in trouble for telling his congregants that they were “going to hell because they weren’t doing enough good work.” You get the sense that this idea – that she’s not doing enough – haunts Abrams.

“Most people who go into politics, they want to be in politics. They enjoy the rigor of the campaign as much as they do the policy,” she says. “For me, policy is the reason we do this. It’s *how do you make people’s lives better?*”

That’s what Stacey Abrams wants. And if there is a political office from which she can do it, that’s great. And if there isn’t, she’ll find another way. “The goal I can plan for is, most likely, governor. There are other opportunities,” Abrams says obliquely. “But I have no control over how that happens.”

She doesn’t shrink from questions about the vice presidency, though. “I think it’s not only disingenuous, but it is inappropriate as a woman of color, when presented with that as an option, to dismiss it out of hand,” Abrams tells me. “Because the idiom ‘You can’t be what you cannot see’ is true. How do you get things if people don’t know you want them? For me, it’s not that I want that for itself, but if people ask me if that’s a job I would take? Absolutely.”

The most obvious clue that she’s keen on the prospect surfaces when I ask her what she wishes more people knew about her. Her answer: that she has a lot of foreign-policy experience. (An aide later emails, unprompted, a 13-point list of Abrams’ foreign-policy experience, including seven international fellowships.)

“I believe that there is value to serving as the chief lieutenant to someone who has to remake the world that’s been broken by our current administration,” Abrams says.

Her interest, as always, is contingent on the work she would be able to do there. “If you look at H.R.1 and H.R.4” – legislation to expand voting rights and limit gerrymandering that’s languishing while Republicans have control of the Senate – “there are blueprints that have already gone through Congress. One of the jobs I would love to have is making sure that those laws actually become real,” she says.

But what she wants more than anything – more than the governorship or the vice presidency or for the organizations she’s created to thrive, is for those organizations to cease to exist.

“I would love for the work we do to be rendered obsolete by the permanence of protection for those who need it,” she says. “The permanence of policies that serve to benefit the communities that are most vulnerable. I mean, that’s the goal. The goal is obsolescence. If we have good leadership, if people actually get to vote, if those who are marginalized actually wield their power effectively and elect leaders who see them, then you don’t need organizations to remind them and to teach them how that power can be used.” ®



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→ PLANET PLASTIC

[Cont. from 83] pay for, but instead slough off on society – including those created by “greenhouse-gas emissions; air pollution; land and water pollution; water depletion; [and] ocean impacts.”

Trucost warns that the business model of the plastics industry would be upended if new government regulations, or consumer backlash, forced it to “internalize” and pay for these costs – a development that would pose “a serious risk to the future profitability of the plastics industry.”

MUCH OF THE WORLD is waking up to the plastics crisis. As China has shut its doors to the global plastic-waste trade, the European Union, Canada, and India are stepping up bans on single-use plastics like cutlery, plates, straws, and ear swabs. “How do you explain dead whales washing up on beaches across the world, their stomachs jam packed with plastic bags?” Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau asked, introducing his country’s initiative. “As a dad, it is tough trying to explain this stuff to my kids.”

But under President Trump, the United States is lurching in the opposite direction, promoting the plastic industry’s aggressive expansion. “It’s war,” says Puckett of BAN, “between policies that are totally at odds with each other – of making more plastics and banning plastic.”

American fracking is literally fueling the global surge in plastics. The glut of cheap natural gas here has sparked an explosion in new plastics infrastructure. Since 2010, according to the ACC, U.S. companies have ramped up “334 chemical and plastics projects cumulatively valued at \$204 billion.” Europe has built new plastics plants fed by fracked U.S. exports. Environmentalists warn that these facilities will lock in demand for fossil-fuel consumption for a generation.

Trump is an unabashed booster of plastics – in keeping with his service to the fossil-fuel industry. The former CEO of Dow led Trump’s manufacturing council. And last July, the president visited a new Shell plastics complex outside Pittsburgh. “This facility will transform abundant natural gas – and we have a lot of it – fracked from Pennsylvania wells into plastic,” Trump said. That material, he boasted, would be embossed with “that very beautiful phrase: ‘Made in the USA.’”

With the president championing its interests in Washington – and even triggering the libs with Trump 2020 campaign-branded plastic straws – the plastics industry is working to undermine grassroots activism in cities and states across the country.

The Plastics Industry Association, or PLASTICS, is a top trade group headquartered on K Street in Washington, D.C. Hiding its handiwork inside a nestling doll of front groups, PLASTICS has worked to thwart state and municipal bans on single-use plastics. PLASTICS has gotten an assist from the American Legislative Exchange Council, or ALEC, which pushes right-wing state legislatures to pass nearly identical bills. In 2013, the plastic trade group wrote a pitch to ALEC members, arguing a ban on plastic “results in the picking of winners and losers in a ‘not-so-free’ marketplace.” By 2015, ALEC began advocating state laws best known for “banning bans” on plastic bags, but which are often far more sweeping, prohibiting limits on styrofoam and “auxiliary containers” – a catchall term for to-go packaging.

PLASTICS obscures its involvement in these state fights through a “special purpose” front group called the Progressive Bag Alliance, which rebranded in January as the American Recyclable Plastic Bag Alliance. The organization runs public relations through another front group, Bag the Ban, which touts plastic as “the most environmentally friendly option at the checkout.” (The bag alliance claims it is self-funding, but PLASTICS employs its director, per IRS filings, and the groups share offices and overhead.)

Plastic bags get caught in trees and clog gutters, and for cities they’re an obvious target for regulation. “They’re a visible reminder of consumer single-use culture, and something that people feel like they can do something about,” says Jennie Roemer, an environmental lawyer who built PlasticBagLaws.org and now directs plastic-pollution projects for Surfrider. Banning bags is often the first step in a radicalizing journey, says Roemer, as consumers become vigilant about the harms of single-use plastics more broadly. “Plastic-bag laws have been a gateway to other laws on plastics,” she says. San Jose, for example, passed a 2011 ban on bags that spawned a statewide California ban, later defended by voters in a 2016 referendum the Bag Alliance spent more than \$6 million to put on the ballot. Last year, California nearly passed a ban on single-use plastics. “I don’t think we get there,” Roemer says, “unless we can start with the plastic bags.”

The success of blue states, from Hawaii to New York, in banning plastic bags has been countered by the industry-led push. PLASTICS says it has parted ways with ALEC, but some 15 red states now have laws pre-empting local plastic bans, with Oklahoma, North Dakota, and Tennessee joining the pack in 2019. (ALEC did not respond to questions from ROLLING STONE.)

For now, the state bans on bans are holding up in court. The city of Coral Gables, adjacent to Miami, has seen a pair of ordinances struck down under Florida’s plastics pre-emption law, and Mayor Raúl Valdés-Fauli is furious. “We have 200 miles of coastline,” he tells ROLLING STONE. “We banned plastic bags. We also banned styrofoam. We’re going onto plastic straws. It’s vital for us to prevail on these in order to preserve our environment.” Coral Gables is taking the fight to the state Supreme Court.

Florida’s powerful Retail Federation insists it shouldn’t have to contend with a patchwork of local regulations. But Roemer sees a darker motivation at play. “It’s hard to change a statewide law,” she says, “if you don’t have the ability to work locally.” By striking in statehouses, she adds, “the industry is able to kill the grassroots movements.”

AS THE GLOBAL PLASTICS crisis grows – and photos of albatross chicks decomposing around the indigestible plastic waste that killed them go viral – the industry is quietly agonizing over backlash from the metal-straw and Hydro-flask-toting members of Generation Z. “The [plastic] water bottle has, in some way, become the mink coat or the pack of cigarettes,” a senior sustainability manager for Nestlé Waters confessed at a conference last year. “It’s socially not very acceptable to the young folks, and that scares me.”

In contrast to climate change, the plastics crisis has not been met with corporate denial. The companies of Big Plastic are instead seeking to convince consumers and regulators that – despite having unleashed this torrent of pollution on the planet – they can be trusted to pioneer solutions that will make plastic use sustainable. They’re touting a “circular

economy,” in which used plastic doesn’t become waste but, instead, a feedstock for new products. A cynic might translate the concept into: Recycling, but for real this time. “There are a lot of different corporate commitments,” says Shilpi Chhotray, a leader of the Break Free From Plastics movement. While some show promise, others “are just greenwashing,” she insists, with the intent of giving the industry cover for its true aim: “growth.”

There’s a marked split in the seriousness of the industry response between the back-end producers of plastics and the consumer brands closest to the backlash. On the producer side, the American Chemistry Council has taken on a global role in crisis management. It has adopted voluntary commitments that give its members decades to change habits. ACC members have pledged to make all plastic packaging “recyclable or recoverable” by 2030, aiming for this material to be “reused, recycled, or recovered” in practice by 2040. “They’re very ambitious,” the ACC’s Russell insisted of the goals. “There was a lot of heartburn in articulating them, because we didn’t know that we could go that quickly.”

Yet even as it promotes “the drive toward a circular economy,” the ACC is also championing technology that turns waste-plastic back into fossil fuels, including diesel. The ACC calls this “advanced recycling.” Puckett, the BAN chief, calls that malarkey: “They’re going to try and market burning plastic as some kind of green coal,” he warns.

The ACC also helped launch the Alliance to End Plastic Waste. Its members are primarily producers – ExxonMobil, Shell, Dow, Total, BASF – but also include Procter & Gamble. Like many consumer brands, P&G is targeting emerging economies by selling single-serve plastic packets of soaps and detergents. These “sachets” are unrecyclable and a top form of trash in plastic waste in Asia. Alliance members are vowing to spend \$1.5 billion over five years to “minimize and manage plastic waste . . . to keep it out of the environment.” Large on its face, this \$1.5 billion commitment represents a fraction of the damage the industry is causing to the oceans in a single year – \$13 billion, per the United Nations. And a pilot project to keep plastics out of the Ganges relies in part on distributing equipment to turn waste into fuel. No one from the Alliance would speak to ROLLING STONE. But the ACC’s Russell admitted that “\$1.5 billion is not enough,” emphasizing, “It’s a start. It’s not the end.”

A more ambitious initiative comes from the consumer-facing brands of Big Plastic. The New Plastic Economy is run through the London-based Ellen MacArthur Foundation and supported by corporate giants like Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and Unilever, as well as the U.N. Environmental Program. Remarkably, the project has gotten plastic-dependent companies to reveal for the first time just how much they use each year. The tallies are staggering, led by Coca-Cola at 3 billion kilograms, PepsiCo at 2.3 billion, Nestlé at 1.7 billion, and Unilever at 700 million.

The New Plastic Economy’s goals include eliminating some problem plastics, committing to a 2025 “ambition level” of 100 percent “reusable, recyclable, or compostable plastic packaging.” Sander De-fruyt, the project’s leader, is quick to call bullshit on plastics-to-fuel initiatives – “that’s not recycling,” he says, “and it is not part of a circular economy” – and admits that project members have shown “an enormous lack of progress” on pioneering essential models for reuse. He insists the world cannot recycle its way out of this problem. The circular economy is “not about keeping today’s system and increasing

the recycling rate,” he says. “It’s about fundamentally changing the system.”

No company stands astride the currents of the global plastic crisis quite like Coca-Cola. The company’s plastic dependence is stark. It produced 117 billion plastic bottles in 2018, according to its sustainability report. The company boasts a 52 percent recycling rate for these bottles – far above average. But the same math indicates that more than 56 billion of its bottles became waste. That’s roughly seven containers for every human on the planet.

Coca-Cola recently ended its membership in the Plastics Industry Association – “our values did not align,” Perez, the company’s chief sustainability officer, tells *ROLLING STONE*. It has also committed to its own World Without Waste initiative, vowing to “collect and recycle the equivalent of every bottle or can it sells globally” by 2030.

Perez’s brief is expansive: She also serves as the company’s chief of communications, public affairs, and marketing assets. Coca-Cola’s sustainability initiatives likewise seem nested within a marketing context. In a recent investor presentation, the company was pressed on whether young people adopting refillable flasks was a threat to the bottom line: “What’s interesting,” Perez replied, “is the more educated they become around the circular economy and turning it into something else, the more receptive they become” to plastic.

Coca-Cola deflected questions about switching to a material like aluminum that has more intrinsic value and is less hazardous as waste. Perez highlights, instead, the company’s efforts to make its plastic bottles lighter and easier to recycle. Leaving open that the “bottle of the future” might be made of a “more responsible” material, Perez insists that plastic is “a viable package as long as we get to the circular economy.” But getting there, she adds, will take coordinated global action. “We’re going to act, and we’re going to ask others to join us. We need everyone to play the part,” she insists, “because time is running out.”

ACROSS THE PLASTICS INDUSTRY, executives buzz about the potential of “chemical recycling” – a process that breaks down plastic to its molecular components, which can then be reprocessed to make like-new plastic. “We could truly keep all of these materials in circularity without any degradation,” Kim Holmes, the vice president of sustainability for PLASTICS, tells me. “I like to think of it as getting us to that infinite polymer state.”

To assess the viability of the technology, I visit an Oregon company called Agilyx, which sells itself as providing “the world’s only circular-economy solution for plastics.” As I pull into the parking lot, in an industrial zone outside Portland city limits, I encounter a middle-aged man unloading long styrofoam blocks, nearly as tall as he is, from his van into a grubby dumpster marked PUBLIC POLYSTYRENE DROP OFF.

Agilyx recycles that notorious eco-villain, styrofoam. The feedstocks here include coolers from transporting frozen fish, foam packaging for TVs, and styrofoam bricks used by the timber industry to grow seedlings for replanting. On the day of my visit, these weathered bricks are piled some 20 feet high inside the company’s warehouse. “We don’t need to preprocess it,” says CEO Joe Vaillancourt. “We don’t need it cleaned. We’re going right back to the molecule.”

The process begins by crushing styrofoam and breaking it into pebbles that resemble quartz. This material is mixed with shredded pieces of unfoamed

polystyrene – material used to make red Solo cups. The mix travels up a conveyor belt and gets dumped into a reactor that turns the plastic into a gas, unzipping the plastic polymer to produce a styrene oil that’s cooled and pumped into black barrels for shipment back to a styrofoam manufacturer.

The factory handles 10 tons of material a day. But it’s not waste-free. The reactor spits out a heavy, black-carbon residue from the contaminants in the plastic, and produces a propane-like waste gas that’s flared into the atmosphere. The gasification process – known as pyrolysis – is also energy-intensive, relying on heat and high pressure. But Agilyx insists its product creates 70 percent less greenhouse pollution than starting with fossil fuels.

Vaillancourt pitches chemical recycling as environmental-harm reduction. Those who dream of a plastic-free world are doing just that, dreaming: “There are 7 billion people in the world whose daily lives increasingly depend on it,” he says. “It won’t go away.” The world is using nearly 400 billion kilograms of plastics a year – and demand is growing. “You can ban single-use all you want,” he says. “It’s really not going to get rid of the amount of plastics appreciably.”

Chemical recycling is in its infancy. And many environmentalists dismiss it as a “distraction” that has yet to prove itself as anything other than an expensive niche technology – joining bioplastics and compostable alternatives that have long been hyped as offering a path to sustainability, but failed to claim any real market share. Coca-Cola recently touted a batch of soda bottles made with chemically recycled waste from the sea. But it made just 300 of the containers, underscoring questions of cost and scalability.

Vaillancourt admits that “the existing waste and recycling industries have never been set up” to supply companies like his, and that many companies can make more money landfilling waste plastic. “For this to really scale very large,” he says, will require disruption – including from the government. “Some companies are just gonna wait till it’s legislated,” he says. “Because of the profit motive, there’s no reason to change.”

THE INDUSTRY’S VOLUNTARY actions to curb plastic pollution are driven by two clear motives: One is protecting the environment, the other is protecting profits from regulation. “None of us want to live in a world where waste is unmanaged,” says Steve Russell of the ACC. “None of us want to have either the environmental or the legislative consequences of an unmanaged system.”

In Washington, the plastics industry is asking government, and American taxpayers, to foot the bill to revitalize the moribund recycling industry. The RECOVER Act – backed by both PLASTICS and the ACC – would offer \$500 million in federal-matching funds for investment in new infrastructure. This summer, PLASTICS showed off a demonstration project with high-tech, near-infrared scanning machines that can segregate plastics by their polymer type, improving on human sorters who can’t distinguish between two identical-seeming yogurt cups, each made from different plastics.

For Sen. Tom Udall, our involuntary ingestion of plastic waste is proof that the country can’t wait decades for plastic polluters to reform their own practices, or rely on half-measures to bolster the current recycling system. “We are beyond the crisis point on plastic waste,” he says, “and people are starting to wake up.” Udall wants consequences for an industry

that has sloughed its environmental harms onto the rest of us for long enough.

Washington is late to the game when it comes to plastics regulation, and Udall’s strategy is to adopt best practices from across the globe. The Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act would mimic Europe in banning commonly polluted single-use plastics, including plastic bags, styrofoam cups and carry-out containers, and plastic utensils. Plastic straws would be allowed only by request.

The bill would expand the market for recycled plastics by creating a minimum recycled content for beverage containers, while also imposing a 10-cent deposit on each container sold – roughly nationalizing the models of Michigan and Oregon, where residents return nearly nine in 10 containers for recycling.

The bill would create “extended producer responsibility” – making the industry responsible for the waste it creates by requiring that producers “design, manage, and finance programs to collect and process waste that would normally burden state and local governments.” Udall emphasizes that today’s industry is hardly trying, often slapping an unrecyclable label on an otherwise recyclable bottle. He insists regulation will drive innovation, so that recyclability becomes a top goal of product design. “We’re trying to turn the industry around,” he says, “to do this in a more environmentally sustainable way.”

The legislation would formally ban the U.S. from exporting plastic waste to developing countries, in alignment with the Basel Convention. Perhaps most controversially, the bill would halt construction of new plastics facilities, giving the EPA time to craft new regulations. Udall insists his bill can return value to the economy, and save consumers a lot of money, noting that every year plastic worth up to \$120 billion “is lost after one short use.”

The senator is not naive. He knows he’s going up against some of the deepest pockets in the corporate world. “This is not going to be easy,” he says. “Major industry players are going to oppose some of our efforts.” Indeed, PLASTICS is already blasting the single-use ban in his bill, insisting that “bans of otherwise completely recyclable materials will not solve our country’s waste-management issues.” But Udall believes the issue of remediating plastic pollution has the potential to transcend the bitter divides of our current politics. The notion that we’re all consuming a credit card a week turns the stomachs of Republicans just as much as it does Democrats. “We don’t know the human health impacts,” he says. “But we can only imagine they aren’t good.”

The bill’s lead sponsor in the House, Rep. Alan Lowenthal of California, insists his motivation isn’t punitive. He points to regulations he helped pass as a state legislator to clean up air pollution at the Port of Los Angeles, which improved public health while modernizing a port that now makes more money than ever: “We’re not interested in destroying the people who provide products to bring our goods to market,” he says. But Lowenthal insists change is coming: “We have to start this process. There’s no quick fix, but we also know that time is not on our side.”

The companies of the plastics industry, Lowenthal says, are ultimately “going to have to deal with the sticker shock that they are now responsible and they’re going to have to pay” to keep plastics out of the environment. The alternative, he insists, has become untenable: “What we have in plastic is something that has made our lives more convenient and easier. But unless we figure out how to keep this out of the waste stream, it’s just going to kill us.” 

Debbie Harry

The New Wave icon on becoming Blondie and what Iggy Pop taught her

What's the most indulgent purchase you've ever made?

One of the first things that I bought that I considered indulgent at the time was something from [designer] Issey Miyake. I don't know how you would describe it – it was sort of like a long, quilted, sleeveless, Japanese peasant-style jacket. It

Debbie Harry tells the story of her life in music in 'Face It: A Memoir,' out now.

was very uniquely him, and I just went for it. I don't know what else I would consider self-indulgent. Probably everything.

What's the best advice you've ever received?

From a manager that I had a long time ago. His favorite answer to a lot of things was, "Well, there's no such thing as a free lunch." I was very disappointed about that, because we were being taken out to lunch *a lot*, but I understand the underpinnings for that. And then the serious best advice that I got was to get good legal advice.

How has that helped you over the years?

Well, I'm not a trained businesswoman, and there are some real complexities with authorship, and publishing, and recording, and the different ways that your recordings can be used or sold. So it's not as simple as I imagined it would be at one time.

And did you learn that early in your career?

Not early enough!

In Blondie's early days, Tony Ingrassia introduced you to the theory behind Method acting. What do you think you gained by using Method techniques to create the Blondie character, instead of being a more genuine version of yourself onstage?

Initially, it helped me to really bring strong emotional content to songs that I didn't write. The hard part is – and it's the same for actors as for singers – to make choices for yourself that are going to resonate within your life experience and your emotional world. When I started out, [the Method] gave me that overview kind of thing, where you're looking down at yourself. This, to me, was a tremendous advantage.

Your fame came a bit later in life than for some musicians. How do you think it benefited you that you started Blondie in your late twenties?

Perhaps to have a little bit more flexibility with my ego.

How so?

Well, to realize that sometimes you hold strong on what your idea is and sometimes you step back and accept another person's idea, and you know that nothing is so precious. A little bit of age gave me that.

You grew up idolizing Marilyn Monroe. What's your favorite movie of hers and why?

I guess, off the top of my head, *Some Like It Hot*, because it's so much fun and she's so beautiful to look at. One of my favorite lines at the end of the movie is when Jack Lemmon reveals himself



to Joe E. Brown. Joe E. asked [Lemmon] to marry [him], and Jack says, "I can't," and he pulls his wig off and says, "I'm a man." And Joe E. Brown turns and says, "Nobody's perfect."

Your first tour with Blondie was opening for Iggy Pop and David Bowie. What did you learn from watching them perform?

There was a certain amount of improvisation in their performances. It wasn't robotic, and the passion was there. Mr. Pop is passionate. It's pretty obvious he's kind of a wild guy, but he has standards; he has a controlled madness, and this is what it's really all about.

Did you find yourself changing as a performer after that tour?

Probably. Experience is everything and I was sort of in an odd position as being a woman in a man's band, and I tried not to be too coy or too cute – other than the fact that I *was* cute – but I tried to bring other elements into it. Whether I always achieved that is another story.

You've spoken before about your love for wrestling. Do you still watch WWE?

[Laughs] No, not so much. I think I've done my wrestling. I've wrestled with wrestling. It's very entertaining, but I don't follow it as I once did. I guess I just moved on.

What advice would you give your younger self?

Don't be cruel. That would be it. Whether it's in thought or in action, just leave cruelty alone.

ELISABETH GARBET-PAUL

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