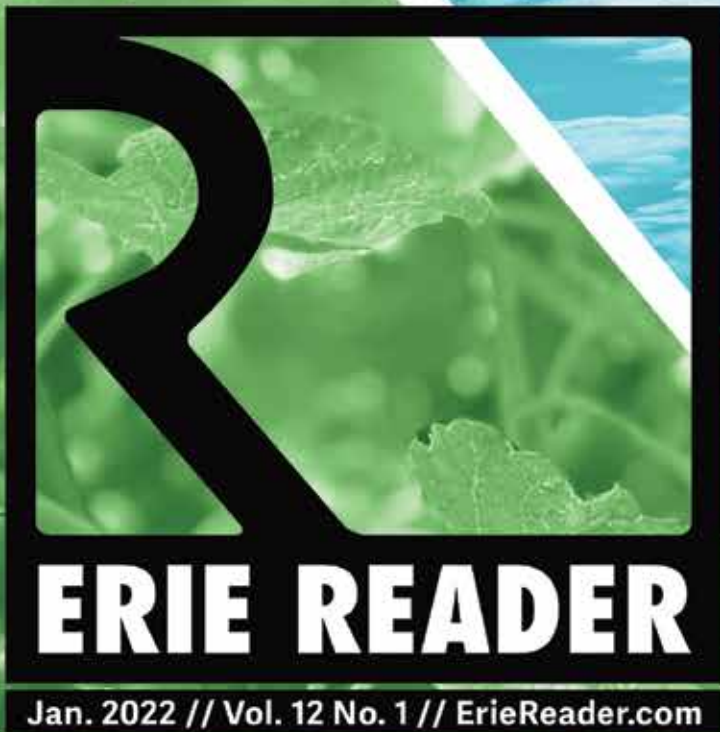


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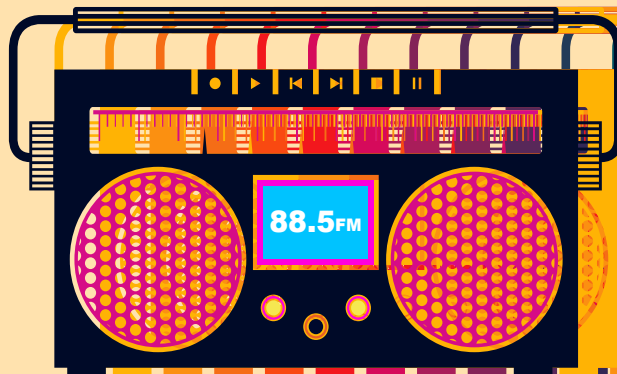
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Contributors

Liz Allen

John Bavaro

Charles Brown

Sarah Brown

Jonathan Burdick

Ally Kutz

Christopher Lantinen

Tommy Link

Aaron Mook

Brad Pattullo

Erin Phillips

Jen Sorenson

Cara Suppa

Forest Taylor

Thomas Taylor

Bryan Toy

Amy VanScoter

Larry Wheaton

Photographer

Jessica Hunter

Interns

Anna Malesiewski

Ellie Welsh

Cover Photo

Jessica Hunter

Cover Layout

Nick Warren

1001 State St. Suite 1315
Erie, Pa., 16501
contact@eriereader.com

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From the Editors

Flight 2022 now boarding

No matter where you are in the world or what calendar you follow, the ever-trendy Gregorian or any one of six others, a new year typically symbolizes new beginnings, hitting the reset button, and/or circling back around. If we should be carrying any of last year's baggage with us, we are advised to stuff it in the overhead bin and leave it behind on the tarmac. Inevitably, though, once the new year takes off, it's bound to encounter turbulence, and old issues will spill out into an aisle we are desperately trying to keep clear.

We can superstitiously eat all the pancakes (France) or pig-shaped marzipan (Germany) we want, smash pomegranates against our doors (Greece), throw our old red underwear out the window (Italy), or as many locals do, fill up on pork and sauerkraut — the winds will blow just the same. Whether we like it or not, every year humanity is due for a bumpy flight somewhere along the way. As individuals and as communities, it's all about stabilizing and steadying ourselves so we do not lose our constitution any time our fuselage is rocked.

During his swearing-in ceremony on Monday, Jan. 3, reelected Erie Mayor Joe Schember spoke of the ongoing turbulence we've experienced amidst budget deficits, the seemingly interminable COVID-19 pandemic, socioeconomic inequality, and population loss while thanking his co-pilots on the City of Erie staff. He reiterated his mission to "build opportunity, restore hope, and transform Erie" while setting forth some more tangible resolutions. First, boost vaccination rates to a level where COVID-19 could be virtually eliminated by summer. Second, bring more jobs and more people to Erie — 10,000 new residents by 2030. Those are ambitious goals, and certainly attainable, but before we get there, we're going to have to keep our seatbelts on a while longer.

As we continue to navigate challenges at a city-wide and county-wide (see Ben Spегgen's interview with outgoing Erie County Executive Kathy Dahlkemper) level and beyond, we can take solace in some excellent onboard entertainment. This month, the Warner Theatre will host the Erie Philharmonic again for the first time in nearly two years. Our community theaters continue to put on bold, vibrant, and provocative productions. The second half of the Mercyhurst Institute for Arts and Culture's 2021-22 season will welcome more world-class talents to the 814, and our events calendar remains dotted with gems on a smaller scale.

Assuming we are allowed only one carry-on, let's board 2022 with a sense of cautious optimism and the resolve to bring this year to a fulfilling resolution.

Dahlkemper Reflects on Leadership, Legacy, and What Comes Next

An interview with the outgoing Erie County Executive



Kathy Dahlkemper filled the office of Erie County Executive for eight years, serving from 2014 to 2022. She was the first county executive to serve multiple terms since Judith Lynch, who occupied the seat for 16 years in an era predating term limits. Republican newcomer Brenton Davis was officially sworn into the role on Jan. 3, the culmination of an Election Day victory over Democratic nominee Tyler Titus this past November.

I actually looked at running for mayor and for county executive since both were going to be in election years in 2013. I looked at what each branch of government does, and I really felt drawn to county-level government, a kind of government definitely about people. We don't pave roads; we don't fix potholes; we don't pick up garbage. We're about serving people, often the most vulnerable people in our community. And that was something that aligns very much with who I am and my mission in life. This may sound kind of corny, but we all need to have our life purpose in front of us. My life purpose statement is: "I lead in order to save lives."

BS: When you came into office, day one, what did you find was your biggest misconception you had thought about the office of county executive but then learned on the job?

KD: It is so much more complicated, and so much more impactful than I thought. I knew it was complex, but the complexity was something that was hard to grasp from the outside until you're actually in the middle of it.

BS: What's the biggest misconception the public has about what the county executive does?

KD: I still think there are a lot of misconceptions around how county government is probably the most impactful branch of government in terms of people's daily lives in Erie County. One of my goals was to try to help the people better understand county government in general.

BS: You started going on TV daily at the onset of the pandemic to give updates. Why was that important?

KD: There was a lot of national and global coverage, but someone needed to be the face, somebody needed to be the one who brought the information about our community, specifically — what was happening right here where

people lived, to help allay their fears, and to help give them the pertinent information they needed to protect themselves or family, and those they love. With the health department under my jurisdiction, and that being the lead agency, with a pandemic, it just felt like the right thing to do.

BS: What has been the most challenging thing for you during the pandemic?

KD: The misinformation that people have grabbed on to and believe, and the belief in that misinformation around science, around something that's a virus, became political in many ways. It's been frustrating, it's been sad, and it's been concerning because people are dying because of that.

BS: So not unlike your predecessors, you ran for a second term. But unlike all of your predecessors, except for one, you got elected to a second term. What did it mean to you to be reelected county executive, to become only the second person in Erie County history to do that?

KD: It was huge. I mean, we were doing so many good things at the time, there was so much more I wanted to get done, but it was a tight race. The community college was actually the issue. I felt like it was almost the Affordable Care Act election all over again. That was very divisive, and I was in the middle of it.

BS: What does it mean to be leaving the office now with your county having a community college?

KD: It's one of the greatest achievements that not just my administration, but collectively with others we were able to achieve in Erie County in decades. It will have many, many long-lasting positive effects on our economy. But more so, I think just on people's ability to get out of poverty to find a future, to actually live the life they want to live.

BS: You're eligible for one more term; why not run again?

KD: A lot of reasons, but my energy is waning. I'm an all-in person, and if I can't give it my all, then maybe it's time for me to step back. And I could feel my energy waning, and COVID probably had some piece of that.

BS: I tend to think there are two types of executive leaders exiting

By: Ben Spегgen

Leadership in elected office can be measured in various ways. Early-morning phone calls. Late-night emails. Battles fought and won and waged and lost between branches of government. Political accomplishments and regrets. Time spent in the office. Time spent in the community. The comparison of the state of the post before one takes the mantle to how one leaves it for those who serve after.

For Kathy Dahlkemper, Erie County's sixth county executive, by the simplest numbers to count, her leadership in the office of Erie County Executive amounts to eight years. Or, 2,922 days. Or 70,128 hours. Or 4,207,680 minutes. After all, as the 64-year old puts it, elected officials are always on.

One might also measure her time leading Erie County by counting the creation of the Erie County Community College. Or, the launch of Blue Zones in Corry; or, the NexGen Public Safety Radio System; or the declaration of racism as a public crisis.

One might also look at her leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic that rages on. Or her push for a Marine Sanctuary Designation for Lake Erie. Or economic development ebbs and flows.

Or her historic second-term election. Or, her decision not to seek reelection again despite being eligible for one more term.

Prior to Dahlkemper, Erie County voters opted for fresh leadership every four years. Only Judith Lynch, Erie County's second county executive, had won reelection. Lynch, who governed in an era predating term limits, won four reelection bids. Dahlkemper, who took office in 2014, won again in 2017, serving from 2014 to 2022 and remains eligible to serve one additional four-year term.

As she exits office, she spoke about her initial decision to run for county executive, her time as an elected official, the legacy she leaves, and what's next for her. Here she is in her own words.

Ben Spегgen: Serving as Erie County Executive was not your first time in political office. Why run for county executive? Why did that make sense to you in 2013?

Kathy Dahlkemper: I was a newbie to politics when I ran for Congress in 2007. I was involved in a lot of things that helped make a difference and found that I liked it. I liked being a public servant and was actually pretty good at it and thought there's more for me to give back to this community that I really love and care about.

JESSICA HUNTER

office: One that remains somehow politically involved, charged, in the orbit; and the other that just walks away and is done. Do you know which one of those you are?

KD: I'll be walking away, and I'm done. I'm still going to do some of the things I really believe in, like trying to convince women to run for office, because I think that's really important. But I'm not going to be out there, real politically active, and in the middle of stuff. It's not who I am.

BS: What would you say was the riskiest decision that you made in office that paid off?

KD: The community college because I almost lost a race because of it.

BS: Besides the community college, if you had to pick one — and this is probably like picking a favorite child — what do you think your biggest accomplishment has been while in office?

KD: Besides the community college, there are a lot of things I'm extremely proud of, but the Erie County Next Generation Public Safety Radio System is huge. The one I'm most looking forward to in the long run that I think

will make a big difference if it's done right, is our resolution that proclaims racism a public health crisis and the creation of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commission.

BS: The wheels of government sometimes can move very slowly. If you had a magic wand that you could wave to do something big on your way out of office for the better of Erie County, what would be your one wave of the magic wand?

KD: To have NOAA to give us our National Marine Sanctuary. That's something I really feel will make a huge difference for our community.

BS: What do you think you're going to miss the most?

KD: The people. This government really has some amazing employees who are so dedicated to their work. I'm going to miss being in the know, whether it's a transportation thing, or whether it's something in human services, or economic development, or whatever, you're in the middle of it all.

BS: What are you going to miss the least?

KD: I'm not going to miss the loss of

my personal life. As an elected official, you're always on.

BS: What's one thing that people may not yet know about you?

KD: I love to dance.

BS: Jan. 3: what are your plans?

KD: I'm hoping that we have a ton of snow [laughs]. I'm going to go to the Wilderness Lodge, and I'm going to ski for a few hours.

BS: When it comes to executive transitions, people sometimes think of the letters U.S. presidents leave for each other in the Oval Office. Two-part question: did you get a letter from your predecessor, and are you leaving one for your successor?

KD: I did not get a letter. And I've thought about leaving one, I have. I haven't decided what I would say yet, so it depends on if I feel I have something valuable to say. I've got to go back to mull that.

BS: What advice would you give Brenton Davis on the record that we could print from one county executive leaving the office to the next?

KD: I would say find the best people you can to lead each department and then let them lead and don't micro-

manage them. There are great people, not only your directors, but a lot of people downstream in these departments. And they do great work. Don't underestimate that.

BS: Twenty years from now, when an historian is sitting down to write about your time in office, what do you hope that they'll focus on for your legacy?

KD: First of all, the economic development ecosystem is in such a better place than it was when I came in eight years ago. And then the other thing is that we have done so many things internally in county government to improve the governance here. And — I mean, I could go on, because of course there's health and safety, Corry and Blue Zones.

I look back, and I know I'm handing the next county executive a very solid government.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Ben Spегgen can be reached at bSpeggen@ErieReader.com and you can follow him on Twitter @BenSpегgen.

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a Pittsburgh-based law firm, and as a judicial intern for Honorable Judge D. Michael Fisher of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit.

He earned his J.D. from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law and a B.A. from the University of Pittsburgh. He also completed a program in US/EU Comparative Economic and Commercial Law while studying in Augsburg, Germany during law school.

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Hop Aboard for 2022

Embracing the new year despite the pandemic



[left] The Sarah A. Reed Children's Center and the Sarah Reed Senior Living Center are marking 150 years of service to Erie this year. The two institutions were only named after founder Sarah Reed, pictured with an unnamed child, after her death in 1934 at age 96. [right] This 1930s brochure for the Erie Coach Company advertises bus service to the Peninsula, as Presque Isle was commonly called. Author Betty Brookhouser, who became Betty Peebles when she married, later became the society editor for the Erie Daily Times.

By: Liz Allen

Pandemic fatigue made the customary review of the old year and predictions for the new one a challenge.

But after I jogged my memory, I realized that Erie had much to celebrate in 2021. I also devised a wish list for the new year, thanks in part to an influential woman from Erie's past.

In 2021, we marked the 100th anniversary of Presque Isle State Park and a partnership was formed to operate the Presque Isle Lighthouse and the Erie Land Lighthouse with the same staff. In addition to boosting tourism, this arrangement will also help highlight Erie's historic east side.

The long-awaited and desperately needed Erie County Community College started classes, and the Erie Center for Arts and Technology opened at the former Wayne School, with a vibrant, inclusive mural facing East Sixth Street.

All Aboard Erie was chosen to lead the new Lakeshore Rail Alliance, to advocate for better passenger train service.

The Erie SeaWolves generated oodles of positive PR by reuniting cast members from the Erie-themed Tom Hanks' movie *That Thing You Do!* at the Sept. 4 ballgame, making a lot of us proud to boast "I'm from Erie, PA!"

As the year wound down, we learned that a \$16,000 grant from the Pennsylvania Humanities Council will pay for interpretive signs for "African Americans in Erie: A Trail of Shared Heritage,"

a countywide walking/driving tour.

The Erie County Public Library and the Burleigh Legacy Alliance have also engaged a professional archivist for the "Ada Lawrence-Johnny Johnson Preservation Project" to catalogue, house, and preserve primary documents about Erie's African American heritage. That work is underway as the Erie County Library observes a low-key but important celebration of 25 years on the bayfront.

It was also big news when the Hagen History Center landed an impressive collection of Frank Lloyd Wright artifacts. The Erie exhibit is expected to bring in tourists interested in Wright's architectural work between Buffalo and southwest Pennsylvania.

But the person I got to know at the History Center isn't the Wisconsin-born Wright but Erieite Sarah Reed, a philanthropist and social-service innovator who died in 1934 at age 96.

Reed's commitment to the civic good helped me to think about ways that Erie's past can shape a better future. The Hagen History Center also inspired my short, eclectic wish list for 2022:

Let's rededicate the Civil War monument in Perry Square on its 150th anniversary.

Let's commit to affordable, accessible transportation to Presque Isle State Park.

Let's listen to grassroots ideas as we improve public parks; my own suggestion is to start a Griswold festival at Griswold Plaza.

At the Hagen History Center on Dec. 5, most people were buzzing about the new Frank Lloyd Wright exhibits, including his intact San Francisco office.

But I gravitated to two displays that share space with the Wright stuff in the new Exhibit Hall.

Labeled "Keeping Up" and "Designing Erie," the exhibits include photos and descriptions of the old Erie County Home, the Pennsylvania Soldiers' and Sailors' Home, the Gertrude Barber Center, the 1915 Mill Creek Flood, the construction of the Mill Creek Tube, and Sarah Reed. That's a lot of Erie history to cover in a compact space, especially because that exhibit competes with Wright's glamorous 1930 Cord L-29 Cabriolet automobile and a model for his Butterfly Bridge, a concrete span designed but never built to connect Oakland and San Francisco.

At the "Keeping Up" and "Designing Erie" kiosk, I ran into Gary and Roberta Bukowski, longtime Erie boosters and history buffs, as they were reading about Sarah Reed.

Gary, vice president for development at the Sarah A. Reed Children's Center, has immersed himself in studying Reed's life for the Children's Center and the Sarah Reed Senior Living Center 150th anniversary, which began in 2021 and continues through 2022.

"The more I studied Sarah Reed, the more intrigued I became with her," said Bukowski. "She was really a Renaissance woman."

In 1871, concerned that the Erie Alms House was not a suitable place for chil-

CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

dren, Reed and 29 other women founded the "Erie Association for Improving the Conditions of the Poor and a Home for the Friendless," to help children and "old ladies."

Within months, they received a charter for Erie's first social service organization, secured a location and opened the doors. "There was this community spirit that exists with putting all of this together, with all the people who got involved, all the community members reaching out to each other," Bukowski said.

One year later, in 1872, Reed and two other prominent women revived a faltering campaign to raise money for a Civil War monument in Erie. Featuring a soldier and a sailor with the Union flag, the monument faces Peach Street at the west end of Perry Square.

I have no idea what Miss Reed's politics would be today, but one year after the Jan. 6 insurrection and with ongoing threats to our democracy, the monument's inscription holds special weight today: "In memory of the soldiers and sailors from Erie County who gave their lives to save the union."

Rededicating the statue for its 150th anniversary would honor the resolve and sacrifice of men and women from the Civil War era and remind us of the need to "save the union."

Thanks to Bukowski and *Erie History* — *The Women's Story*, a book by Sabina Shields Freeman and Margaret L. Tenpas, I also learned that Reed played a major role in rescuing the U.S. Brig *Niagara* from Misery Bay for the Perry Centennial in 1913.

That same year, famed urban planner John Nolen unveiled his "General Plan for the Extension and Improvement" of the City of Erie. His 1913 plan recommended a greenway around the city, lots of boulevards, a public market

NEWS & VIEWS

on Parade Street and plenty of parks, including on Erie's neglected east side.

The framed color-coded map of the Nolen plan in the History Center's Exhibit Hall shows that Nolen also envisioned a connection between Erie's east side and the tip of Presque Isle. Perhaps a ferry? I'm not sure.

But I do know about the water taxi from Dobbins Landing to Presque Isle, a delightful but expensive ride, which ended after 2019, and that the Presque Isle Express bus caters to west-siders instead of those on the east side.

Again, history holds lessons. A Blasco Library display about Presque Isle's 100th anniversary included a 1930s Erie Coach Company brochure, touting new service from 10th and State streets to the peninsula on Saturdays, Sundays, Wednesdays, and holidays; kids under five rode free. The bus company said it was "ever conscious of the needs of the public."

We, in turn, should be "ever conscious" that it's an equity issue to provide better connections from the city of Erie to Presque Isle. How many needy Erie families never have the joy of going to our beach?

Ferry service would also be a boon for tourism and the environment. In fact, a draft report for "Destination Erie," Erie County's long-range plan, pointed out that our waterfront is a jewel with a missing gem — a connection between the city and the peninsula. We can start to fix that in 2022 with a robust plan to revive ferry service. Equitable access to recreation on the waterfront's east side should also be integral to any plans for redeveloping the old Erie Coke site.

My biggest takeaway from learning a bit about Sarah Reed is that it's in Erie's DNA to care about those in need. But if we don't know the stories of women like Reed and if we aren't familiar with the history of Erie's marginalized populations, we can't remedy the deliberate and/or benign decisions that create inequities.

It might seem odd, then, that the kitchen in the Watson-Curtze Mansion at the History Center inspired another item on my wish list — a Griswold Festival in Griswold Plaza. Sarah Reed certainly demonstrated that women belonged in the world beyond the kitchen.

But seeing the array of Griswold Manufacturing items in the mansion's kitchen — a bunny-cake mold, tea kettle, waffle irons, meat grinders, muffin tins, pots and pans — made me wonder how we can celebrate Erie's manufacturing heritage.

When I read in June that a public-private partnership had proposed to upgrade Griswold Plaza, dedicated in 1930, by changing the park's name to Station Square, I was irked. The business people involved later clarified that Station Square would be the name of their organization, not the park's new name.

Still, the group missed an opportunity. When we brag about Erie, we don't just think about pepperoni balls, sponge candy, and ox roast. We also take pride in GE locomotives, Marx toys and Griswold cookware. The enduring appeal of Griswold cast-iron cookware was revealed in an Oct. 28 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette story, "Channeling his Erie roots by restoring Griswold cast-iron skillets."

The story featured former Erie resident Mike Sanders, a Pittsburgh musician, concert promoter, and restaurateur who now has a side business

restoring Griswold products. Reporter Gretchen McKay wrote: "While you can take a boy out of Erie, can you ever really take Erie out of a boy?"

Before we "improve" Griswold Plaza or any other public spaces, let's listen to Erie people beyond those with money and influence. Seek out the longtime residents and the newcomers. Talk to parents pushing strollers, the elderly chatting on benches, those who are homeless talking with each other on blankets.

Sarah Reed, who led a privileged life, might have been one of those wielding power over community decision-making today. Then again, she was devoted to helping the less fortunate, and she humbly shunned recognition when she was alive. "She refused to let anyone name the organization after her," Bukowski said.

She wanted action, not accolades. Together, I'm certain we can cook up good ideas to make all of Erie a better place.

Liz Allen can be reached at lizallenerie@gmail.com.

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Overwhelmed Medical Community Repeats Plea for Vaccines

Area's hospital systems issue direct entreaties to general public



By: Jonathan Burdick

On December 23, the Meadville Tribune ran a full-page advertisement by the Meadville Medical Center. It contained only black sans-serif text over a white background along with a desperate plea: “We are tired. We are overwhelmed. We need help. You can help. You can get fully vaccinated. You will be 14 times more likely to survive COVID-19. Please help.”

The message was simple and clear. A similar plea was shared to social media by the Cleveland Clinic a few days prior, who wrote that Ohio emergency rooms and ICUs are facing more COVID-19 patients than ever before, the “overwhelming majority” being unvaccinated.

“We’re begging you,” the post said. “This is preventable. ... We need you to care as much as we do.”

Here in Erie County, there have been over 660 confirmed COVID-19 related deaths since the pandemic began. Neighboring Crawford County, with around one-third of Erie County’s population, has surpassed 260 deaths. This doesn’t account for hospitalizations. Those who know healthcare workers likely know how this has affected them: the burnout, the frustra-

tion, and the demoralization.

“Some of you have no idea what’s going on in our hospitals and it shows,” a nurse friend of mine shared online recently.

In 2018, when I wrote about the influenza pandemic of 1918, I cited an interview with infectious disease expert Dr. Greg Poland where he said there was “absolutely no controversy that we will have another pandemic.” The only uncertainty, he said, would be the severity. He explained vaccinations would be essential as those “who have received immunizations in the past do, on average, better than those who haven’t” because vaccines provide “immunologic imprinting and memory that serves to help ensure they survive.”

At the time it was published, Poland’s comments weren’t particularly controversial, even if there was already a growing anti-vaccination movement online. Perhaps the best-known face of the movement then was celebrity Jenny McCarthy, who spread consistently debunked theories and was criticized by both sides of the political spectrum.

When McCarthy was hired for her brief stint on *The View* in 2013, a Fox News story quoted a family physician warning of the dangers of McCar-

According to data from the Erie County Health Department, 87.4 percent of local COVID-19 deaths have been unvaccinated individuals. While new variants have ushered in a spate of breakthrough cases, vaccines remain highly effective at preventing serious illness and death — a recent study by The Commonwealth Fund concludes up to 1 million additional deaths and 10 million additional hospitalizations.

thy’s influence and also included an executive of the right-leaning Media Research Center who stated that the left-leaning daytime talk show was reinforcing “its nuttiness” and that McCarthy’s “vaccine views alone mean that people should turn off the show.”

Washington Post columnist Alexandra Petri warned that “the mere existence of a movement of doubters large enough to justify the name anti-vaxxers — you don’t name a movement that doesn’t exist — bodes badly.” Still, anti-vaccination sentiment remained relatively fringe. Between 2001 and 2019, when Gallup asked if vaccines were “more dangerous than the diseases they are designed to prevent,” no political group polled over 15 percent. As late as 2015, Democrats, Republicans, and independents all polled *under* 10 percent when asked this. A 2015 Pew Research Center survey equally found that about 90 percent of self-described liberals *and* conservatives supported vaccines. Fast-forward to July 2021 and Gallup found that 46 percent of Republicans, 31 percent of independents, and 6 percent of Democrats stated they would not get the vaccine. So, what happened? Like masks, mandates, shutdowns, and seemingly everything else related to the pandemic, vaccines have clearly been politicized.

Even while writing this, I’m aware that some readers will be nodding along in agreement. Others will equally dismiss my words as merely opining to fit an agenda (if they bother to read it at all). This is fine. I am not an expert. I don’t want or expect people to blindly take my advice and, in fact, encourage readers to question and fact-check this very article, if needed. I simply want people to listen to their doctors, of which over 96 percent were vaccinated as of this past summer, according to the American Medical Association (AMA).

“[O]ne of the most powerful anecdotes a physician can offer is that they themselves have been vaccinated,” AMA President Susan R. Bailey said in a statement, saying that physicians were leading by example. “You can take it from your doctor: the COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective.”

It seems like conversations related to COVID-19 have increasingly become intertwined with our own political identities — and our political identities are more than ever intertwined with our *personal* identities, almost with a religious fervor. We live in a technological age where it is easier than ever to patch together our own preferred realities, to digitally surround ourselves with like-minded individuals and media talking heads. For those across the entire political spectrum, it is easier than ever to seek out information to confirm to ourselves what we already believe or *want* to believe.

In terms of the pandemic, in which saving lives and keeping people healthy should be prioritized over politics, it seems sometimes that no amount of data, no amount of reporting, nor the increasing pleas from the medical community will be enough to change the hearts and minds of those who are still dismissive. While much of this is due to an almost unbelievable amount of disinformation available, many also point to the ever-changing recommendations from experts as a root of their skepticism.

“The fact that recommendations are changing is not evidence [that] people don’t know what they’re doing,” explained Dr. Poland in a recent Q&A. “It’s evidence that they *do* know what they’re doing and are paying close attention to new data that’s coming along.”

New data can lead to adjusted recommendations. Yet, instead of relying on these experts in the field, many skeptics claim to do their “own research,” which has gradually become a euphemism for seeking out other people’s opinions online and repeating them as one’s own.

Recently, Pennsylvania State Senator Dan Laughlin (R-49) posted his own plea to social media, addressing

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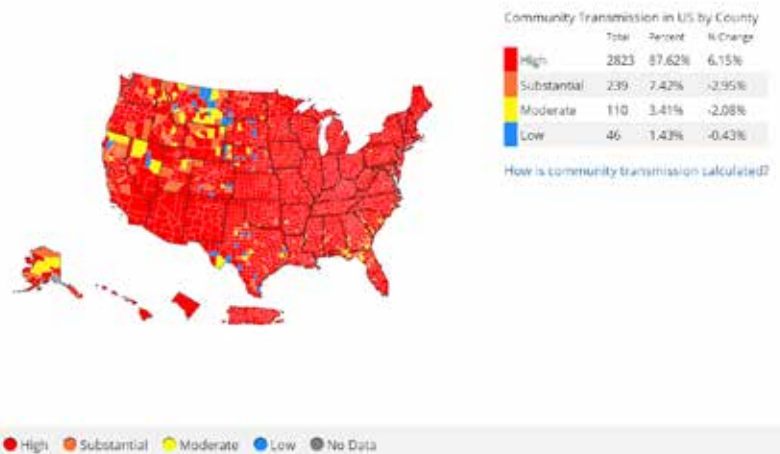


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NEWS & VIEWS

Level of Community Transmission of All Counties in US



that he lost another unvaccinated friend to COVID-19. I generally avoid comment sections out of principle, as I imagine daily exposure could take years off one's life, but in this case, I was curious. While some offered sincere condolences, there was also a significant amount of backlash (even after Laughlin stressed he was against vaccine mandates). He was accused of being a "fear pusher," condemned for pushing "an agenda," and told that he was RINO (a Republican in Name Only, despite clear evidence in his voting record that demonstrates otherwise). Another stated inaccurately that being vaccinated "probably" wouldn't have saved his friend's life while others claimed he died because hospitals weren't offering life-saving medicine. Sen. Laughlin defended his post, noting that he "talk[s] weekly with the head[s] of Hamot and St. Vincent" and "mostly, not 100 percent, it's the unvaccinated that are dying."

This statement is demonstrably true. According to data from the Erie County Health Department, 87.4 percent of local COVID-19 deaths have been unvaccinated individuals. You can still get sick enough to die if vaccinated, but your chances are *significantly* reduced. A recent study by The Commonwealth Fund further concludes that vaccines have prevented what would have been over 1 million additional COVID-19 related deaths (beyond the current 820,000) and over 10 million additional hospitalizations in the United States. Daily deaths, which peaked at around 4,000 per day, could have reached over 20,000 each day.

The good news is that we have safe and effective vaccines and they arrived much earlier than originally anticipated. This is saving lives. While

more transmissible variants are currently spreading at alarming rates, our doctors and nurses also have more tools in their medical toolbox as the science has progressed. This is saving lives too.

"In terms of the pandemic, in which saving lives and keeping people healthy should be prioritized over politics, it seems sometimes that no amount of data, no amount of reporting, nor the increasing pleas from the medical community will be enough to change the hearts and minds of those who are still dismissive."

As I reflect on these past two years, I often think back to a bit of dialogue from *Fahrenheit 451*, which I first read in high school. Author Ray Bradbury portrays a futuristic dystopian society where books are outlawed and society has been dumbed down by technology and mass media.

"[Y]ou can't make people listen," Bradbury wrote. "They have to come round in their own time, wondering what happened and why the world blew up around them."

Let's all try listening a little more — but listening, in particular, to those on the frontlines of this pandemic, not those who rely on outrage for advertising revenue, social media shares, or votes. As our local hospital asked: please help.

Jonathan Burdick runs the historical blog Rust & Dirt. He can be reached at jburdick@eriereader.com

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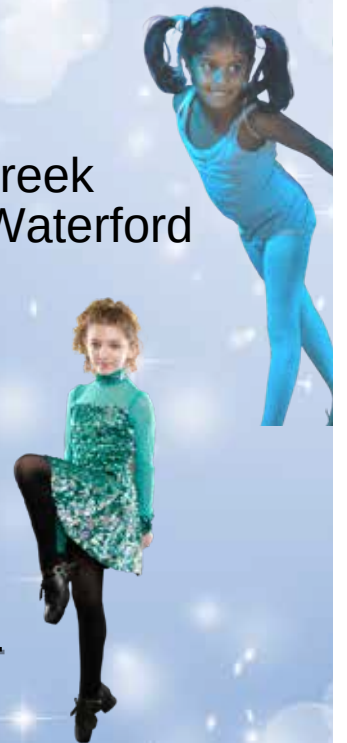
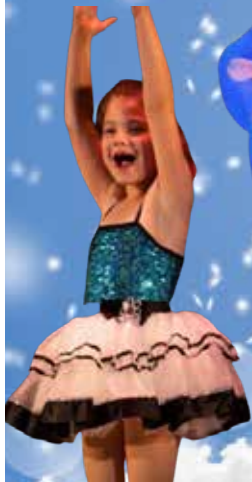


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2021 Best of Erie Winners and Finalists

Your favorite people, places, and things in the Erie area



2021 was the eighth year for the annual Best of Erie Awards, and it was our biggest one yet. More than 650,000 votes were cast in over 120 different categories (657,678 votes in 124 categories to be exact). This bested last year's total by more than 300,000 votes, nearly doubling that record-breaking count. Despite the fact that there were 19 categories either debuting this year or returning — many were rendered inapplicable due to restrictions caused by the pandemic.

Erie has spoken, and the Best of Erie Awards have struck an important chord in the community. It's certainly worth paying attention to.

There were a few surprises this year, and a few extremely close races. Some categories have seen virtually the same winners from the beginning, while some manage to switch it up annually.

Every year, nominations are open to the public for an extended period of time. This year, the month of October supplied anyone interested time to provide nominees prior to voting going live. Next year will be no exception, so keep on the lookout for the ninth annual Best of Erie Awards when they open back up in early fall of 2022.

(Runners up listed in order of vote total)

Photos by Jessica Hunter

GOODS AND SERVICES

Best Local Business

Winner: Romolo Chocolates

Runners Up: Lucky Louie's Beer and Wieners, Odis 12

Best New Business (Within Last Two Years)

Winner: Gordon's Butcher & Market, Firestone's, Paris's Cap & Cork

Runners Up: Bro-Man's Sammiches, Main Street Cakery at Copperleaf

Best Locally Made Product

Winner: Smith's Hot Dogs

Runners Up: Romolo Chocolates, Mighty Fine Donuts

Best Car Dealership

Winner: Bianchi Honda

Runners Up: Auto Express Kia, New Motors

Best Bank

Winner: Erie Federal Credit Union

Runners Up: PNC Bank, Northwest Savings Bank

Best Antique Shop

Winner: Claudine's Consignment

Runners Up: Oregon Antiques, Buttons & Bows

Best Boutique

Winner: Grasshopper

Runners Up: Lollie & Co, Glass Growers Gallery

Best Consignment Shop

Winner: Sassy Peacock

Runners Up: Claudine's Consignment, Thrifty Shopper

Since its opening in 2020, Erie has fallen head over heels for Oliver's Rooftop, winner of this year's Best Romantic Restaurant and Best Waterfront Dining categories and a finalist for Best Place for a 1st Date and Best New Restaurant.

Best Jewelry Store

Winner: Dahlkemper's Jewelry Connection

Runners Up: Sacred Piercing, Breakiron Jewelers

Best Furniture Store

Winner: John V. Schultz Furniture & Mattress

Runners Up: Arthur F. Schultz Company, Furniture Row

Best Local Book Store

Winner: Pressed Books & Coffee

Runners Up: Books Galore, Werner Books

Best Barbershop

Winner: Ruiz Barbershop

Runners Up: V's Barbershop, Colony Barber Shop

Best Spa

Winner: Coventina Day Spa

Runners Up: Panache Salon and Spa, Ambridge Rose

Best Beauty Salon

Winner: Panache Salon and spa

Runners Up: Moxi Hair Salon, Coventina Day Spa

Best Dog Groomer

Winner: Paws N Claws

Runners Up: Mud Puppies, Buzz n' B's

Best Pet Daycare

Winner: Paws N Claws

Runners Up: Peninsula Pups, Buzz n' B's

Best Place to Adopt a Pet

Winner: The ANNA Shelter

Runners Up: Erie Humane Society, Because You Care

Best Bike Shop

Winner: 814 Outdoor Sports

Runners Up: John Adams Cycling & Fitness, Competitive Gear

Best Auto Repair Shop

Winner: Bonnell's Collision Center

Runners Up: Bianchi Honda, Tires For Less - West 26th Street

Best Web Developer

Winner: Epic Web Studios

Runners Up: Erie Multimedia, DiBello Designs

Best Graphic Designer

Winner: Brink Ink

Runners Up: Sharper Images, Ali Desanti

Best Advertising Agency

Winner: RFrank Media

Runners Up: Epic Web Studios, Papa Advertising

Best Law Firm

Winner: MacDonald, Illig, Jones & Britton LLP

Runners Up: Knox McLaughlin Gornall & Sennett, Quinn Law Firm

Best Real Estate Agency

Winner: Agresti Real Estate Agency

Runners Up: Howard Hanna Agency, Marsha Marsh Real Estate Services

Best Bed and Breakfast

Winner: Victoria Inn Bed & Breakfast

Runners Up: Grape Arbor Bed and Breakfast, Spencer House Bed & Breakfast

Best Smoke/Vapor Shop

Winner: Smoker Friendly

Runners Up: Hippie and Hound Vapor Store and Lounge, Vapor Cabana

Best CBD Shop

Winner: Grasshopper

Runners Up: RISE Peach Dispensary, Hippie and the Hound

Best Tattoo Parlor

Winner: Ink Assassins

Runners Up: Wayward Tattoo, Mid-Town Tattoo

Best Florist

Winner: Potratz Floral Shop & Greenhouses

Runners Up: Allburn Florist, Gerlach's Garden & Floral

Best Greenhouse

Winner: Stan's Garden Center

Runners Up: Mason Farms, Potratz Floral Shop & Greenhouses

Best Place to Camp

Winner: Sparrow Pond Family

Campground



Runners Up: Sara's Campground, Camp Sherwin (YMCA of Greater Erie)

Best Neighborhood Grocer
Winner: Urbaniak Brothers Quality Meat

Runners Up: Gordon's Butcher & Market, Bello's Shur-Fine Food Mart

Best Landscaper
Winner: Gerlach's Property Maintenance

Runners Up: Dahlkemper Landscape Architects & Contractors, JJ Wurst Landscape Contractors and Garden Center

Best Electrician
Winner: Church & Murdock Electric

Runners Up: Dobrich Electric, Knorr Electric

Best Plumber
Winner: Tj's Plumbing and Heating

Runners Up: H Jack Langer, Jackson Plumbing

Best Residential Roofer
Winner: Angelo's Roofing

Runners Up: Brink Roofing, Dougherty Contracting

Best General Contractor
Winner: Father and Son Remodeling

Runners Up: Matt Krol Construction, Cornerstone Construction

Best HVAC
Winner: J.J. Agnello Heating & Cooling

Runners Up: Reeves Plumbing and Heating, Keep Heating & Cooling

CULTURE & NIGHTLIFE

Best Museum
Winner: Erie Art Museum

Runners Up: ExpERIENCE Children's Museum, Tom Ridge Environmental Center

Best Art Gallery
Winner: Glass Grower's Gallery

Runners Up: PACA, House of the Potter

Best Community Theatre
Winner: The Erie Playhouse

Runners Up: PACA, Mercyhurst University Theatre Program

Best Dance School
Winner: Long's School of Dance

Runners Up: Little Dance Studio, Marguerite's Academy of Dance

[top left] Panache Salon and Spa is perennially in style with Best of Erie voters, winning this year's award for Best Beauty Salon and finishing runner up for Best Spa. [bottom left] Pressed Books & Coffee, winner of Best Bookstore, has left a strong imprint on local lovers of literature. [bottom right] Railbender Scottish-style Ale is the flagship beer of the Erie Brewing Company (voted Erie's Best Brewery) and a favorite of the Flagship City.

Best Photographer
Winner: Katie Miahlek

Runners Up: Sarah Peach, Robert Frank

Best Fine Artist
Winner: Kaitlyn Page

Runners Up: Adam Stempka, Helen Tullio

Best Band (Original)
Winner: Eric Brewer & Friends

Runners Up: LUCiD, Six Year Stretch

Best New Band/Musician (Last Two Years)
Winner: Phunkademic

Runners Up: Hooligan's Holiday, Danny and the Daddios

Best Cover Band
Winner: The Geek Army

Runners Up: The Groove, Refuge

Best Vocalist
Winner: Lindsay Vendetti

Runners Up: Audra Miller, Erika Kuhn

Best MC
Winner: Jonny Evans

Runners Up: Brandi "FRESCO" Carlini, CEE Brown

Best Instrumentalist
Winner: Eric Brewer

Runners Up: Abby Barrett, Rayna Tabarez

Best DJ

Winner: Millennium Sound Productions

Runners Up: DJ BILL PAGE, BIGBAR / DJ Slide-Waze

Best Happy Hour
Winner: Plymouth Tavern

Runners Up: BIGBAR, Odis 12

Best Irish Pub
Winner: Molly Brannigan's Irish Pub

Runners Up: McGarrey's Oakwood Cafe, U Pick 6 Public House

Best Patio
Winner: Pier 6 Rooftop Bar

Runners Up: Sloppy Duck, Oliver's Beer Garden

Best Festival
Winner: Peek'n Peak Fall Fest

Runners Up: North East Wine Festival, Erie Food Truck Festival

Best Music Series
Winner: 8 Great Tuesdays

Runners Up: Sunset Music Series, Erie Philharmonic "In Your Hometown"

FOOD & DRINK

Best Restaurant
Winner: Pineapple Eddie Southern Bistro

Runners Up: Federal Hill Smokehouse, The Cork 1794

Best New Restaurant (Within Last Two Years)
Winner: Pier 6 Rooftop Bar & Grill

Runners Up: Oliver's Rooftop, Firestone's

Best Chef
Winner: Jean Paul (Pineapple Eddie Southern Bistro)

Runners Up: Jason Finnerty (The Cork 1794), Ashley Sayre de Rivas (Lavery Brewing Co.)



BEST OF ERIE



Best Bakery

Winner: Art's Bakery

Runners Up: Icing On The Lake, Ye Ole Sweet Shoppe

Best Coffee Shop

Winner: Tippy Bean

Runners Up: Ember + Forge, Brew Haha at the Colony

Best Ice Cream Shop

Winner: Whippy Dip

Runners Up: Sará's, The Straw Hat

Best Dessert

Winner: Romolo Chocolates

Runners Up: Ye Ole Sweet Shoppe, Icing on the Lake

Best Chocolates or Candy

Winner: Romolo Chocolates

Runners Up: Stefanelli's Candies, Pulakos Chocolates

Best Donut Shop

Winner: Mighty Fine Donuts

Runners Up: H & K Donut Shop, Jack Frost Donut Shop

Best Dinor

Winner: Flip Cafe

Runners Up: Gem City Dinor, Panos' Restaurant

Best Brunch

Winner: The Breakfast Place

Runners Up: Flip Cafe, Peek'n Peak

Best Brewery

Winner: Erie Brewing Company

Runners Up: Voodoo Brewing Company, Lavery Brewing Co.

Best Locally Made Beer

Winner: Erie Brewing Company - Railbender

Runners Up: Lavery Brewing Company

- Dulachan, Arundel - Caramel Apple Cider

Best Winery

Winner: Arundel Cellars & Brewing Co.

Runners Up: Mazza Vineyards, Heritage Wine Cellars

Best Distillery

Winner: Altered State Distillery

Runners Up: Luminary Distilling at Fuhrman's Cider Eatery, Erie Distillery

Best Bar Food

Winner: Plymouth Tavern

Runners Up: Odis 12, BIGBAR

Best Sandwich Shop

Winner: Picasso's

Runners Up: Teresa's Italian Deli, Lucky Louie's Beer & Wieners

Best Deli

Winner: Teresa's Italian Deli

Runners Up: Urbaniak Brothers Quality Meat, Gordon's Butcher & Market

Best Burger

Winner: Odis 12

Runners Up: Bro Man's Sammiches, BIGBAR

Best Pizza

Winner: John's Wildwood Pizza

Runners Up: Valerio's Italian Restaurant & Pizzeria, Virgil's Plate

[top left] The allure of Romolo Chocolates cannot be denied — the local confectioner enjoyed a sweet showing in this year's Best of Erie, voted Best Local Business, Best Dessert, and Best Chocolates or Candy. [top right] The Erie Art Museum is a pillar of Erie's arts and culture scene and the obvious choice for Best Museum. [bottom right] Erieites seldom hesitate to travel south for a taste of Edinboro's Flip Cafe, voted Erie's Best Dinor and a runner up for Best Brunch.



Best Wings

Winner: Odis 12

Runners Up: One Way Inn, Park Tavern

Best Sushi

Winner: Wegmans

Runners Up: Samurai Kitchen + Sushi, Chopstix Express

Best Food Truck

Winner: Bro Man's Sammiches

Runners Up: The Que Abides, The Atacocalypse Food Truck

Best Place for Vegan or Vegetarian Food

Winner: The Juice Jar

Runners Up: Wegmans, Erie Food Co-op

Best Barbecue Restaurant

Winner: Federal Hill Smokehouse

Runners Up: Underdog BBQ, Three B Saloon

Best Seafood Restaurant

Winner: Smuggler's Wharf

Runners Up: Pineapple Eddie Southern Bistro, Calamari's Squid Row

Best Asian Restaurant

Winner: Samurai Kitchen + Sushi

Runners Up: Imperial Buffet, Golden Wok

Best Italian Restaurant

Winner: Mi Scuzi

Runners Up: Valerio's Italian Restaurant & Pizzeria, Colao's Ristorante

Best Mexican Restaurant

Winner: El Canelo

Runners Up: Torero's, El Amigo Mexican Grill

Best Thai Restaurant

Winner: Like My Thai

Runners Up: Khao Thai, Thai Eatery

Best Mediterranean or Middle Eastern Restaurant

Winner: Bistro 26

Runners Up: Habibi, Casablanca Grill

Best Alcoholic Slushie

Winner: Rum Runners

Runners Up: 9th & State Beer Store & Slushies, Altered State Distillery



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BEST OF ERIE



Best Caterer

Winner: Teresa's Italian Deli

Runners Up: Cali's West, The Cork 1794

Best Waterfront Dining

Winner: Oliver's Rooftop

Runners Up: Pier 6 Rooftop Bar & Grill, Rum Runners

Best Romantic Restaurant

Winner: Oliver's Rooftop

Runners Up: The Cork 1794, Pineapple Eddie Southern Bistro

Best Tacos

Winner: El Amigo

Runners Up: Torero's, Atacolyse Food Truck

Best Health Food Store

Winner: Erie Food Co-op

Runners Up: Wegmans, Juice Jar

Best Cocktail

Winner: Room 33

Runners Up: Altered State Distillery, BIGBAR

PEOPLE & PLACES

Best Place to Work

Winner: Wegmans

Runners Up: Erie Insurance, UPMC Hamot

Best Place for a First Date

Winner: Presque Isle State Park

Runners Up: Oliver's Rooftop, Erie Otters Hockey

Best Place to Take Your Dog

Winner: Presque Isle State Park

Runners Up: Frontier Park, Asbury Woods

Best Radio Station

Winner: Happi 92.7

Runners Up: 93.9 The Wolf, Star 104

Best Radio Personality (or Radio Team)

Winner: Sammy Stone (Happi 92.7)

Runners Up: Jessica Curry Carlson (Star 104), Mojo & AC (Rocket 101)

Best TV Personality

Winner: Tom Atkins

Runners Up: Sean Lafferty, Dave Belmondo

Best Filmmaker

Winner: Jesse James

Runners Up: Jason O'Neill, John C. Lyons

Best Yoga Space

Winner: yogaErie

Runners Up: YMCA, Presque Isle Winery/yoga with goats

Best Tattoo Artist

Winner: Jason Dunn - Mid-Town Tattoo

Runners Up: Rachel Travis - Steadfast Tattoo, Garret Ybanez - InkXpressions

Best Local Actor

Winner: Shawn Clerkin

Runners Up: Zachary Hoffman, Domenic Del Greco

Best Local Actress

Winner: Adele Crotty

Runners Up: Krista Perry, Kate Neubert-Lechner

Best Nonprofit

Winner: The ANNA Shelter

Runners Up: Erie Zoo, Emma's Footprints

Best Bartender

Winner: AJ Hanson (Plymouth Tavern)

Runners Up: Sarah Mazzone (Lavery Brewing Co.), Crystal Cote (Voodoo Brewery Erie)

[top left] For over two years, Altered State Distillery (winner of Erie's Best Distillery) has been consistently lifting Erie's spirits with both its celebrated libations and regular live music. [bottom right] Although Gordon's Butcher & Market has been Erie's meat and potatoes for a long time, the seasoned business elevated itself this year with a beautiful new location housing both a restaurant (Firestone's) and a pub (Paris's Cap & Cork). These new ventures seared a Best New Business win firmly into place.

Best University

Winner: Penn State Behrend

Runners Up: Edinboro University, Gannon University

Best Fitness Club

Winner: Planet Fitness

Runners Up: YMCA, Iron Oxygen

Best Bowling Alley

Winner: Greengarden Lanes

Runners Up: Eastway Lanes, Rolling Meadow Lanes

Best Team to Root for

Winner: Erie Otters

Runners Up: Erie SeaWolves, Eerie Roller Girls

Best Lawyer

Winner: John Knox

Runners Up: Chad Vilushis, Mary Jarvi

Best Dentist

Winner: Plaza Dental

Runners Up: Beautiful Smiles, Doleski & Wolford Orthodontics

Best Golf Course

Winner: Whispering Woods Golf Club

Runners Up: Lawrence Park, Mound Grove Golf Course

Best Real Estate Agent

Winner: Sarah O'Neill - Agresti Real Estate

Runners Up: Jennie Bizzarro Bone, Levi

Marsh

Best Local Entrepreneur

Winner: RJ Messenger - Iron Empire

Winner: Clothing/Underdog BBQ

Runners Up: Kyle Bohrer - Gordon's Meat Market, Dave Freeman - BIGBAR

Best Local Podcast

Winner: Our Erie

Runners Up: Idiotville: Erie, PA's Favorite Podcast, Girls Night In

Best Hiking Trails

Winner: Wintergreen Gorge

Runners Up: Asbury Woods, Presque Isle State Park

Best Park

Winner: Presque Isle State Park

Runners Up: Frontier Park, Asbury Woods

Best Outdoor Adventure Activity

Winner: Erie Zoo

Runners Up: Asbury Woods, Peek'n Peak Mountain Adventures

Best Wedding Venue

Winner: Peek'n Peak

Runners Up: Port Farms, Whispering Trees Manor

Best Veterinarian

Winner: The ANNA Shelter

Runners Up: Glenwood Pet Hospital, Erie Animal Hospital

Best Athletic Competition

Winner: Barber Beast on the Bay

Runners Up: Save an Eye Game, Erie Marathon at Presque Isle

Best Heritage Festival

Winner: Zabawa Polish Heritage Festival

Runners Up: Panegyri Greek Festival, Saint Paul's Italian Festival



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Erie Philharmonic's Grand Homecoming

Executive director Steve Weiser talks about orchestra's long-anticipated return to renovated Warner Theatre



Fully reconstructed in all its 1930s luster, the iconic Warner Theatre marquee blazed upon Downtown Erie for the first time in 40 years this past December.

could see only 600 people in the seats. And you *feel* that when you walk on the stage and see a very empty auditorium. You notice that as a musician. One of my big driving forces was “how do we guarantee that we’re performing for full audiences and full houses?” And since that point, we’ve had something like 20 or 21 sold-out performances — an average of 1,600 to 1,700 people per concert or 2,100 for the big pops concerts. So I think we had really hit our stride right up until the moment COVID hit.

But I think we managed to blow everyone’s expectations out of the water with all the TV concerts that we did. Rather than do a pay-per-view or streaming service where we knew we’d lose so many people, we did it for free on public television. Last October, we had something like 6,000 viewers watching a TV concert in just one night. So if you extrapolate that over eight broadcasts plus online viewing, we probably saw more people last year than we did in a normal ticketed year. And I think that translated into the positive trajectory we’ve seen this year — we’ve had something like 800 new subscribers, which blows away any number that we’ve had before. We haven’t seen a live audience in almost two years and Season Pass sales are higher than they’ve ever been in our history. And I think you see a lot of things coalescing at the same time — coming back to live concerts *at all*, being on TV, doing our summer concerts (the “In Your Hometown” outdoor summer concert series), and then getting to reopen the Warner. That is the definition of a perfect storm all happening in these past few months.

MS: Let’s talk about the Warner. How will it feel to finally come home?

SW: You know, as a musician who played on that stage at the old Warner Theatre, it was a very hard venue to play in. The 1930s decor looks great, but the 1930s (amenities) leave a little to be desired. There were no bathrooms on stage level. The elevator was a closet, and for the last 25 years there was no elevator. So if you saw a really nice guest artist walk on stage in a ball gown with a million-dollar violin, that means she just walked down five flights of stairs from her dressing room. So every aspect of

By: Matt Swanseger

It might be a little late for the holidays, but the Erie Philharmonic is finally coming home. The historic Warner Theatre, which has regularly hosted Erie Phil concerts since the 1970s, is at last nearly move-in ready after undergoing a multi-million-dollar renovation.

On Dec. 3, 2021, the Warner’s front porch lights (e.g., its iconic marquee) flipped on for the first time in more than 40 years, and if things had gone according to plan, they would have welcomed a crowd of roughly 2,000 that Saturday for one of Erie’s grandest housewarming parties in decades. Instead, the Phil’s annual “Come Home for the Holidays” performances were held at nearby Erie Insurance Arena as construction delays pushed back the Warner’s public reopening to late January.

Steve Weiser, Erie Philharmonic executive director and a 2016 alumnus of Erie’s 40 Under 40, was unperturbed at the news. No matter what the tension,

he and musical director Daniel Meyer seem to have the resolution — a trend the two men were rewarded for last year as they both signed long-term contract extensions (through 2025 and 2026, respectively). It’s a testament to how deftly the Phil has conducted itself under their stewardship — especially these past two years — and the payoff is just around the corner.

I talked to Weiser about it.

Matt Swanseger: Just how is it getting back to a full season of live, in-person concerts? How was planning the 2021-22 season different from those we’d seen before?

Steve Weiser: I think for us, it’s even more special this year coming back to live concerts. The journey to get here was, I think, even longer than people imagined because we had already planned on a whole (2020-21) season in the hockey arena and then that got canceled because of COVID. So then we turned to TV concerts, and we did all the summer concerts that we did,

and then we were going to do opening night (of the 2021-22 season) on December 4 in the Warner and even that gets pushed back. So I think you have two years worth of storylines leading up to January. But getting to finally be in the arena and perform for almost 2,000 people two times in a row for those two concerts (“Come Home for the Holidays”), I know the musicians absolutely loved it. It’s cathartic to finally get back to being able to perform and having an audience reaction right away.

MS: Absolutely. Last year, during peak pandemic, you signed a contract extension to stay with the Phil through 2025. Could you discuss the timing of that as the midpoint in your executive directorship so far? How much did COVID affect where you saw things going in your first five years versus where you see them going now?

SW: If you look back to where it all began in 2015, I had played percussion with the orchestra for about three years (prior to assuming the directorship), and you

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[top left] When the Erie Philharmonic debuts the reinvented Warner Theatre later this month, the difference in experience will be obvious, according to executive director Steve Weiser. A deeper stage and wooden orchestra shell will help the Phil sound louder and clearer than ever before. [bottom] The new Warner Theatre marquee is an exact replica of the 1931 original, with certain elements, such as the colorful antique Tiffany glass being restored.

anything from a technical standpoint is going to feel good for the musicians.

With this stage being deeper, it's going to let us set up in a more professional manner. Normally when the orchestra rehearsed in Edinboro, we would rehearse in one configuration with the orchestra set up a certain way because of how big the stage was there. And then when everybody would come to the Warner, everything was different. Rather than it being a big square box (like Edinboro), the Warner used to be a really long rectangle. And there's no way to set up things in a similar fashion. So even details like that are going to be better. The new shell is going to make the orchestra sound louder. It's going to be brighter on stage. But even just the ability to play with each other is going to become better. As management, I'm looking forward to selling concerts in a brand new venue. But the musicians are looking forward to coming and actually performing in it. Everyone's excited for a multitude of reasons.

MS: Speaking of excitement, what kind of programming will the Philharmonic be able to put on with the upgrades in place that maybe couldn't be done before? The

new rehearsal hall is looking amazing.

SW: We will use that for every single rehearsal from probably March onwards. Normally, when we'd do one of our Symphonic Series concerts, we'd go to Edinboro to rehearse Monday and Wednesday nights because they let us use their space, then we would be in the Warner on Friday and Saturday. Now with the new rehearsal hall, we'll have a mini-office right here in the theater. So it just makes life so much easier for everybody to do all of it up here. And the good thing is for the first time ever, the dimensions at the rehearsal hall are exactly the same as the stage, so we'll be able to rehearse in the exact same footprint in both places. And that's something that the musicians have been begging for for decades. We'll use the space for pre- and post-concert events as well. And it's beautiful. It's two and a half stories tall. There's a curved roof. There's exposed wood beams. It's just a gorgeous space.

MS: Do you know what you'll be rehearsing for the 2022-23 season yet?

SW: We actually have next season 99 percent planned and in the books. And one of the things we're doing is utilizing

the deeper stage. We're planning two humongous works written for both choir and orchestra — that was something that was hard to do on the long and skinny Warner stage of the past. We're bringing in one pops concert that physically would not have been possible in the old Warner. And then we have two really awesome movies planned for next year as well.

MS: The Phil has been very active in the community over the past few years, bringing music to virtually anyone who'd want to hear it. Discuss those efforts and where, when, and how people might continue to listen to you beyond ticketed events.

SW: (This year) we knew we needed to have a stopgap between TV concerts ending in April and the real concerts picking up in December, and we had kind of done a trial run of our summer concerts in North East the past two summers before that, where we had a lot of success. So we decided to create one group of musicians per month. And we would get that group together. We would have them rehearse a bunch of times. And then we would schedule concerts in close succession (at various locations selected by the community via an online survey).

We were as far south as Meadville and Titusville and we did a bunch of concerts

in North East. You're looking at 500 to 800 people at each of those concerts, despite a nasty run of really hot weather in July and a couple shows that just got dumped on with rain. There's an amazing video of our brass group playing "Stars And Stripes" in Titusville in a downpour. And there's a flood all around the tent. And you see the audience in a field just getting drenched and they're just clapping along, having the time of their lives, and I think that really sells the fact that the people were excited to see any form of live music again. They came out and met us anywhere. And I really think that helped because each of those places we went we said, "Hey, we're coming to you. Would you consider coming to see concerts at the Warner Theatre next year?"

We're taking the lessons we learned from COVID and we'll be keeping them as a part of what we're doing, both with the outdoor free concerts this coming summer as well as staying on TV with other free concerts. I think it's a good gift for the community, and it just helps bring in even more audience members.

MS: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us in advance of the Warner Theatre's public reopening?

SW: If anything, I'd just like to get across how humbled and gracious we are to our audience that they stuck with us through shifting to the arena, canceling a season, going on television, coming back, and then having to pivot one more time. I think that they've proven their stripes as being the best audience around. I think it shows that we've always tried to treat our audience with transparency and honesty and be as kind as we can. But it can't go unnoticed how appreciative we are that they've stuck with us and I think they're going to be well-rewarded when they walk in and get to see what that new stage looks like. When that curtain comes up for the first time, you're going to have this beautiful new wooden shell on a deeper stage and no one's going to recognize it. It's going to look like you're looking at a brand new thing. It's a hard thing to describe until people can see and hear the difference, but man, are they going to be pleasantly surprised.

The Warner Theatre reopens on Sunday, Jan. 23 with the return of world-renowned concert pianist Emmanuel Ax, followed by "Music of the Knights" on Saturday, Jan. 28. Both events are sold out, aside from very limited single seats.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Matt Swanseger can be reached at mwsanseger@eriereader.com



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

EVENTS

PACA's Powerful *Gidion's Knot* Untangles Tough Issues

Powerhouse actors Schillinger and Neubert-Lechner drive thought-provoking play



DAVE SCHROEDER / PACA

Veteran actor **Nora Schillinger** (foreground) and **Kate Neubert-Lechner** star in the PACA production of *Gidion's Knot*, a tragic tale of teen suicide recounted through a tense parent-teacher conference.

PREMIERING FRIDAY, JAN. 7

When you see a show at PACA, it's an immersive experience. The boundaries of set and stage seem to quickly fade away as you are close enough to the action to become fully engrossed in the storytelling. This intimate setting provides the perfect space to see *Gidion's Knot*, a thought-provoking play written by Johanna Adams.

Gidion's Knot is intense and takes

place over the course of a parent/teacher conference. A grieving mother and an emotionally overwhelmed primary school teacher have a fraught conversation about the tragic suicide of the mother's son, *Gidion*. *Gidion* may have been bullied severely — or he may have been an abuser. As his story is slowly uncovered, the women try to reconstruct a satisfying explanation for *Gidion's* act and come to terms with excruciating feelings of culpability.

"This play is beautifully written and yet difficult to hear and watch," said Lisa Simonian, the show's director. "It deals with timely yet terrible issues such as abuse, bullying, and suicide that only continue to grow as our society has changed, particularly given the isolation of the pandemic and the changing mores of a society very dependent on social media. It discloses the side of children that their parents don't see when they are in school. I'm hopeful that all who watch will have a new respect for our teachers and a raised level of consciousness for the mental health and well-being of our children."

The themes of *Gidion's Knot* are complex and expertly conveyed through a cast of two local powerhouse actors, Nora Schillinger and Kate Neubert-Lechner. The two women are set

in a classroom together for 85 minutes and their chemistry together is something to witness. "There are intimate pauses throughout and the facial expressions and body language of the actors are key to telling this story," Simonian said. "There are times when the emotions simply radiate from these women into the audience and I think much of that might be lost in a larger space."

"This play is important to see because of the raw humanity, the undisguised grief, and the brief relationship between two women who are trying to cope with the unthinkable," explained Simonian. "It is important to see this play and consider our own relationships and how we might help each other survive. It is important *not* to miss the sheer blazing talent of Nora Schillinger and Kate Neubert-Lechner." — Amy VanScoter

Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. through Jan. 22 // PACA, 1505 State St., second floor // \$15, \$10 to livestream online // For tickets and more info, go to www.paca1505.org

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EVENTS

Mungion Premieres at Basement Transmissions

Chicago jam band wheels into Erie indie venue

FRIDAY, JAN. 14



ADAM BERTA PHOTOGRAPHY

ty going even when you think it's closing time.

With memorable hooks and heavy improvisation, you can definitely expect the unexpected from this creative quartet that has been jamming out since 2015. Erie's own Phunkademic will open for our friends from the Windy City, promising to groove BT into the stratosphere before Mungion takes it to another dimension.

This mid-January show should be a grand time with great vibes reciprocated between the bands and the audience. Both Mungion and Phunkademic make it a point to show you that life is meant to be enjoyed. And since this is Mungion's first time at BT, this showcase will also play as a celebration — welcoming a fun-loving act to an equally fun-loving venue. This jubilee can't come quickly enough. — Charles Brown

9 p.m., doors at 8 p.m. // Basement Transmissions, 145 W. 11 St. // \$12 advance, \$15 day of show // ages 18+ // for more information, go to facebook.com/basement.transmissions

With 2022 being a clean slate that the world could definitely use, one band that's excited to add some new life to your January will be debuting at the one and only Basement Transmissions here in Erie. That band happens to be the Chicago-based dream team Mungion. No stranger to the Erie area (after several performances at the King's Rook Club and The Gathering at Chaffee's), this fan-favorite four-piece will be rocking BT for the first time with their fusion of jam, funk, and more that will have the venue dancing all night long (seriously). Mungion seldom lets up when they take the stage and are known to keep the par-

Tick, Tick...BOOM! Set to Go Off at Erie Playhouse

Before there was *Rent*, there was *Tick, Tick...BOOM!*



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Co-stars Brandon Vogt (left), Tevis Bryant, and Jessie Thorpe rehearse for the Erie Playhouse production of *Tick, Tick...BOOM!*, an autobiographical musical about *Rent* creator Jonathan Larson.

chael is making good money working on Madison Avenue. Should he give up his dreams, or courageously continue on?

Originally performed as a solo piece by Larson starting in 1990, the work was revised by playwright David Auburn following Larson's 1996 death and premiered off-Broadway in 2001. Since then, the show has seen major success across many platforms, including West End productions as well as a 2021 film adaptation directed by Lin-Manuel Miranda and starring Andrew Garfield as Larson.

The Erie Playhouse production features Brandon Vogt as Larson, Tevis Bryant as Michael, and Jessie Thorpe as Susan.

Moving, funny, and exciting, *Tick, Tick...BOOM!* will resonate with anyone who has struggled to find their way while following their dreams. — Ally Kutz

Starting January 21st, Fridays and Saturdays through February 5th at 7:30pm, Sundays the 30th and 6th at 2pm // Erie Playhouse, 13 W. 10th St. // \$12 - \$26.40 // erieplayhouse.org

PREMIERING FRIDAY, JAN. 21

If you're familiar with Jonathan Larson, it is likely due to his success as the creator of the massive Broadway hit *Rent*, a fan-favorite for many theater-goers both young and old. But before that show could go over the moon, *Tick, Tick...BOOM!* had to explode onto the page.

An autobiographical musical, *Tick, Tick...BOOM!* is the story of Jonathan Larson's struggle as an aspiring composer. Still waiting tables and trying to write the "great American musical" in the ever-competitive New York City theater scene, Jon finds himself questioning all his life choices up to this point on the eve of his 30th birthday. His girlfriend Susan wants to get married and move out of the city, while his best friend Mi-

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Pianist Emanuel Ax Returns to Erie Philharmonic

Esteemed concert pianist set to perform at Warner Theatre



World-renowned concert pianist Emmanuel Ax (left) will rejoin Erie Philharmonic conductor Daniel Meyer to debut the renovated Warner Theatre on Sunday, Jan. 23.

Firebird: Suite" from 1945.

Ax has had a history with the Erie Philharmonic dating back to 2017 when he first debuted there. "We knew that we couldn't screw this up and we really, really needed to bring in something big," said Steve Weiser, executive director for the Philharmonic. "And we just had a very good relationship with Emanuel Ax."

Bringing his world-enlightened experience to the Warner Theatre, Ax previously played with the Vienna Philharmonic

and London Symphony, collaborating with Grammy Award-Winning cellist Yo-Yo Ma and violinist Leonidas Kavakos. He is also a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, having won awards for his interpretations of Haydn, Brahms, and Beethoven.

In the program description, Ax's reasons for selecting the piece are made clear. "Ax has chosen Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2, a near-perfect combination of rhapsodic romanticism and sinuously-drawn melodies. Chopin's concerto brims with his youthful creativity, complete with a Viennese waltz and Polish mazurka finale."

Ax was a last minute addition

to the program, as the previous featured soloist had to back out due to a scheduling change. Within five minutes of calling his agent, the orchestra had locked in its big guest, which Weiser attributes to the rapport Ax was able to build with Erie Phil music director Daniel Meyer back in 2017. "[Meyer] is such a respected force in the music community," effused Weiser. "I think people love working with him. I really think that it just speaks volumes for us." — Thomas Taylor

3 to 5:30 p.m. // Warner Theatre, 811 State St. // \$32 - 52, \$10 for students // For tickets and more information, call 814-455-1375 or visit eriephil.org

SUNDAY, JAN. 23

The Erie Philharmonic will be opening the renovated Warner Theatre on January 23 with a premiere concert fea-

turing pianist Emanuel Ax. The program will feature a variety of selections including "Rapture" by Christopher Rouse, Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2, and Igor Stravinsky's famous work, "The

Let's See Those Jazz Hands at An Evening With Branford Marsalis

Esteemed saxophonist brings band to MIAC



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Saxophonist, composer, and bandleader Branford Marsalis (left) will perform alongside bandmates Justin Faulkner (drums), Eric Revis (bass), and Joey Calderazzo (piano) at Mercyhurst's Mary D'Angelo Performing Arts Center on Tuesday, Feb. 1.

shows up as well."

It would be incredibly surprising if this man-of-many-gifts did not show up, in his entirety, at the Mercyhurst Institute for Arts and Culture, imbuing the atmosphere of Mary D'Angelo Performing Arts Center with his signature intense musicality and improvisational flair.

Alongside Joey Calderazzo on piano, Eric Revis on bass, and Justin Faulkner on drums, Marsalis the bandleader has no fewer than 15 albums from which to draw the set for the evening. Indeed, the Branford Marsalis Quartet is one of the longest continuously-running jazz ensembles in the genre's history.

Come out for an evening of spirited, multi-faceted music, but be aware of MIAC's latest COVID-19 policies.

Audience members are required to remain masked at all times, and must be fully vaccinated (at the time of publication, two weeks post-second vaccina-

tion shot) with proof.

Those with a medical exemption from receiving the vaccine must show proof of a negative PCR COVID-19 test within 72 hours of showtime. Please note that these policies may change at any time at the discretion of MIAC.

Keep yourself and others safe, so that

"When I signed on to direct, I instantly knew I wanted to work with Branford Marsalis, because when you collaborate with Branford the composer/arranger, Branford the historian, musicologist, dramatist, and raconteur shows up as well." — George C. Wolfe, director of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

TUESDAY, FEB. 1

It has been a busy couple of years for saxophonist, composer, and bandleader Branford Marsalis, the "eldest son in the first family of jazz."

The older brother to iconic musician Wynton Marsalis, as well as Jason and Delfeayo — both jazz musicians as well — Branford has been touring with his group, the Branford Marsalis Quartet,

after composing original music for the Oscar-nominated film *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which was released in 2020.

In a press release on Sony Music's website, the director of *Ma Rainey's*, George C. Wolfe, stated, "When I signed on to direct, I instantly knew I wanted to work with Branford Marsalis, because when you collaborate with Branford the composer/arranger, Branford the historian, musicologist, dramatist, and raconteur

the sparkling brilliance and the soulful power of Branford Marsalis' music can continue to be shared far and wide. — Cara Suppa

7:30 p.m. // 501 E. 38th St. // Adults: \$45, \$35, \$30; Seniors: \$40, \$30, \$25; Non-Mercyhurst Students: \$35, \$25, \$20; Youth: \$35, \$25, \$20 // For more information or to purchase tickets visit: miac.mercyhurst.edu/events

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Last Rose of Shanghai

Weina Dai Randel's novel explores the harmony to be found in dissonance



music.

As a talented piano player, Ernest soon wins over Aiyi and is hired to play in her club, but her defiance of custom causes trouble for both of them. His talent instantly amasses fame, quickly making Aiyi's club a popular destination again. But it is not without consequence, as with that fame comes suspicion from the Japanese soldiers.

Aiyi and Ernest soon grow close, realizing they share more than just a love for jazz — they fall hopelessly in love with each other. Aside from the taboo against native Chinese and foreigners mixing, the other big hurdle they face is Aiyi's engagement to another man.

As things take a turn and the war escalates, Aiyi and Ernest are torn apart by the strict Japanese regime, making their choices between love and survival more extreme by the day. As things grow grim, a chain of events sets in motion circumstances that will change them both forever.

Told in striking prose, author Weina Dai Randel recounts through fiction the horrors of occupied Shanghai during WWII and the deplorable conditions forced upon those who resided there, both native and foreign. Randel chooses her wording, weaving a magnificent tapestry that is the story of Aiyi and Ernest, both together and apart. While their story is fiction, the plight of the native Chinese and Jewish refugees in Shanghai is all too real.

Beautiful, heartbreaking, and wonderfully written, *The Last Rose of Shanghai* will keep readers hanging on until the very end. — Ally Kutz

Lake Union Publishing // 429 pages // Historical Fiction

Music can be a powerful force, often bringing together people from different cultures and walks of life. In *The Last Rose of Shanghai*, the power of music transcends race, culture, and war to bring together two complete opposites to create and cement a relationship of the most unlikely sort.

In 1940, Japanese-occupied Shanghai bustled with native Chinese citizens, refugees from Europe, and Japanese soldiers attempting to contain them all. Aiyi Shao is a young former heiress and owner of a once-popular nightclub where jazz music is a staple. Ernest Reismann, a Jewish refugee driven out of Nazi Germany, is penniless and searching for work. When he crosses paths with Aiyi, an unlikely bond is formed between the two over a love of

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The Maid

Nita Prose compels with character in new novel

Molly Gray is not your typical 25-year old. Struggling with social skills and situations, she often misreads the intentions of others, which often makes already bad situations worse. Her Gran was once able to help her interpret some of the situations, creating simple rules for Molly to follow so she could get by.

Now, a few months since Gran died, Molly is alone in trying to navigate the complexities of life in the city. Throwing herself into her work as a hotel maid, her obsession with cleaning and proper etiquette makes her the ideal person for the job. Each morning, she puts on a crisp, clean uniform, stocks her cart, and returns the rooms at the Regency Grand Hotel to, in her words, "a state of perfection."

However, the orderly and organized life Molly leads is turned upside down the day she enters the suite of Charles Black, infamous and wealthy tycoon, to find him dead in his bed. Due to her unusual demeanor and lack of social understanding, Molly soon finds herself the prime suspect in the death, along with a host of other charges brought against her.

She very quickly learns that she's being set up, and that people she thought of as friends could be behind the whole mess. Friends she didn't know she had, however, emerge to help her search for the real killer while trying to prove Molly's innocence.

Nita Prose hits the nail on the head with *The Maid*, showing readers that being different isn't necessarily bad — in fact, it can be one of our greatest assets. Written in such a way that the characters' personalities shine through, Prose brings to life Molly's journey, molding an entire world around this wonderfully unusual personality.

Each emotion can be felt alongside Molly, from heart-break and embarrassment to happiness and joy. Many aspects of Molly's life readers will be able to relate to, from losing a beloved parental figure to understanding — or at least trying to — the nuances of an everyday interaction. Filled to the brim with mystery, suspense, and a few laughable encounters, *The Maid* is the perfect book to start off the new year. — Ally Kutz

Ballantine Books // 280 pages // Mystery, Thriller



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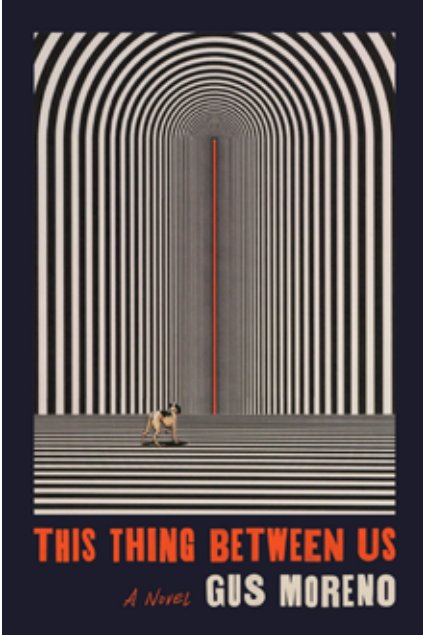
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BOOK REVIEWS

This Thing Between Us

Author Gus Moreno presents haunting portrait of grief



his recently deceased wife, Vera. He recounts a number of peculiar incidents that happened in the couple's home, beginning with the erratic "behavior" of their Itza (a voice-activated smart speaker, akin to Siri or Echo). The device seems to act of its own accord and puts a series of events into motion that leads to Vera's death. Other occurrences like cold spots, scratching in the walls, and mysterious sleepwalking events lend to the initial suspense. The story itself unfolds in a very quiet, disarming way (think David Lynch) while also taking influence from Stephen King (think a bizarre combination of *The Shining*, *Cujo*, and *Misery*). Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* gets an obvious nod as well ("I'm sorry Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that"). But the book doesn't read as derivative, and the story unfolds in a uniquely unsettling way.

"I'm afraid that when we die, we end up wherever we always thought we'd end up. If we want to go to heaven, we go to heaven. If we believe in reincarnation, we come back as a baby or an animal or a tree. If we think we're going to hell, we'll burn forever, and we'll never realize that we were the ones to put ourselves there."

I started reading *This Thing Between Us* around Halloween, as I thought it would be fun to read a horror novel during the spooky season, and this one did not disappoint. As I read, I found myself startlingly looking over my shoulder and giving our smart speaker the side-eye just to make sure she wasn't up to anything fishy. The story starts out narrated in the second person, with Thiago, the main character, speaking to

As the story progresses, the reader falls deeper and deeper into the madness of Thiago's mind, and starts to question what is real and if the events are all a projection of Thiago's grief. The book tackles the way one processes trauma, loneliness, regret, and fear. I believe the ending is intentionally confusing for the reader, as we are supposed to be feeling as Thiago is feeling: lost in his grief, lost in his head, and ultimately the one who decides his own eternity. If you'd like to creep yourself out with a twisting, unexpected, psychologically liminal story, you will enjoy getting lost in *This Thing Between Us*.
— Erin Phillips

Farrar, Straus and Giroux // 272 pages // Horror

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Crash and Burn: *Red Rocket* is a Fascinating Trainwreck

★★★★★

Mikey Saber (Simon Rex) is a despicable human being. He comes into town like a hurricane, manipulates or forces his way into peoples' lives, and then vanishes without a trace, leaving everyone he met a little worse off than before. So naturally, he's the subject of Sean Baker's (*Tangerine*, *The Florida Project*) new film *Red Rocket*. Much like the world's most fascinating car accident, you know what to expect from his story, and yet you can't look away.

Saber is a porn star who comes back to his small, East Texas hometown after burning every bridge in Los Angeles. After convincing his ex-wife (Bree Elrod) to let him stay at her place, he sets out finding a job and getting his life back in order. However, things take a turn when he meets a teenage donut shop clerk named Strawberry (Suzanna Son) and Saber begins to formulate a plan to get himself back in the porn business with her help.

Once again, Baker is telling stories about people in the most desperate corners of America, but this time, we



follow a character so loathsome, he's impossible to root for. That said, while I can't say a story of grooming and manipulation is enjoyable, there is something alluring about watching a charming idiot lure people in with lofty promises that are never delivered (the fact that the film takes place in the middle of the 2016 presidential election is telling). Simon Rex gives such a convinc-

ing performance that we are almost lured in ourselves, until that ending brings us back to the grim reality of it all. — Forest Taylor

Directed by: Sean Baker // Written by: Sean Baker and Chris Bergoch // Starring: Simon Rex, Suzanna Son, Bree Elrod, Ethan Darbone, Brittany Rodriguez, Shih-Ching Tsou, Marlon Lambert, Sam Edison Vicky, and Brenda Deiss // 130 minutes // Rated R // A24

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“In America”: *West Side Story* Brings Some Much-Needed Old Hollywood Energy

★★★★



I've mentioned before that it's been a long time since movie-goers have had a chance to see a real big-budget musical like they had all the time during Hollywood's Golden Age. There have been

some good attempts, but nothing has come close to matching what the old studio system seemed to do so effortlessly. Leave it to Steven Spielberg to finally give movie fans the jolt they didn't

know they needed with his adaptation of *West Side Story*. More than a breath of fresh air, the film contains more energy, emotion, and technical mastery than all other big studio films of the last two years combined, making it not only the best musical in decades, but also one of the most joyfully entertaining theater-going experiences in a very long time.

This tale of the star-crossed love of Tony (Ansel Elgort) and Maria (Rachel Zegler) amidst the gang war between the white American Jets and the Puerto Rican Sharks in a rapidly changing late 1950s New York City has been updated both in the filmmaking and the casting. Spielberg brings dazzling camerawork and updated choreography to the musical numbers making them feel like elongated action scenes. He also wisely cast entirely Latin actors as the Puerto Ricans and gave them a mix of English and un-subtitled

Spanish for dialogue scenes. This makes the adaptation an interesting companion piece to the 1961 original.

But the real key to this story is Tony and Maria. While newcomer Rachel Zegler brings a naive intensity to Maria, Ansel Elgort is the weak link here, often awkward and unconvincing. That said, the technical mastery of the musical numbers makes this adaptation worth seeing on the biggest screen possible. — Forest Taylor

Directed by: Steven Spielberg // Written by: Tony Kushner, based on the stage play and book by Arthur Laurents, music by Leonard Bernstein, and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim // Starring: Ansel Elgort, Rachel Zegler, Ariana DeBose, David Alvarez, Mike Faist, Corey Stoll, Brian d'Arcy James, Josh Andres Rivera, Ana Isabelle, and Rita Moreno // 156 minutes // Rated PG-13 // 20th Century Studios

Our Monthly Podcast Picks

Audio infotainment to leap into this new year

Supernatural

Hosted by: Ashley Flowers // parcast.com

On first listen, there doesn't appear to be anything special about *Supernatural* with Ashley Flowers. From its name to the fact that it appears to be one of those exceedingly clean, Spotify-produced, pre-packaged shows under half an hour, it feels almost generic at first. But those interested in unexplained mysteries, ghost sightings, alien abductions, exorcisms, UFOs, cryptids, and generally all things creepy would be remiss not to give this one a chance. While fans of those topics are bound to see some repeats here (looking at you, Dyatlov Pass), what separates *Supernatural* from other “spooky” shows is not just what they cover, but how in-depth they seemingly go in such a digestible length of time. Trust us; even if you think you know everything about MK-Ultra, you've never heard it told in such detail through the emotive storytelling abilities of Flowers — who also serves as co-host for the acclaimed podcast *Crime Junkies* — and her writers. It's easy for a show like this to fly under the radar, but if you like what you hear, this writer would recommend other Parcast original series as well. From *Conspiracy Theories* to *The Dark Side of Hollywood*, there appears to be something for everyone here. — Aaron Mook



You Must Remember This

Hosted by: Karina Longworth // youmustrememberthis-podcast.com

It's no surprise that *You Must Remember This* is one of the entertainment industry's most beloved podcasts of all time. In October of 2021, host Karina Longworth returned with a new season — this time featuring an ongoing series of episodes looking at the tumultuous history of Sammy Davis Jr. and Dean Martin.

“Dedicated to exploring the secret and/or forgotten histories of Hollywood's first century,” *You Must Remember This* presents well-researched deep dives into the movie stars and filmmakers of the 20th century. Longworth's production is top-notch, an audio bouquet combining music beds, audio clips, and reenactments, with her distinctly pronounced narration expertly at the wheel. While her intentional elocution is not only an ASMR delight, her captivating writing weaves together Hollywood history like no one else.

Introduced in April of 2014, the podcast came onto the scene fully formed. Interestingly enough, the premiere episode concerned the cosmic resurgence of Frank Sinatra in the early '80s, providing a link to its current focus on other members of the Rat Pack. With seasons centering around subjects like “The Blacklist,” “Dead Blondes,” and “Charles Manson's Hollywood” (a personal favorite of fellow reviewer Chris Lantinen), there's oodles to unpack for new listeners. — Nick Warren



Screen Drafts

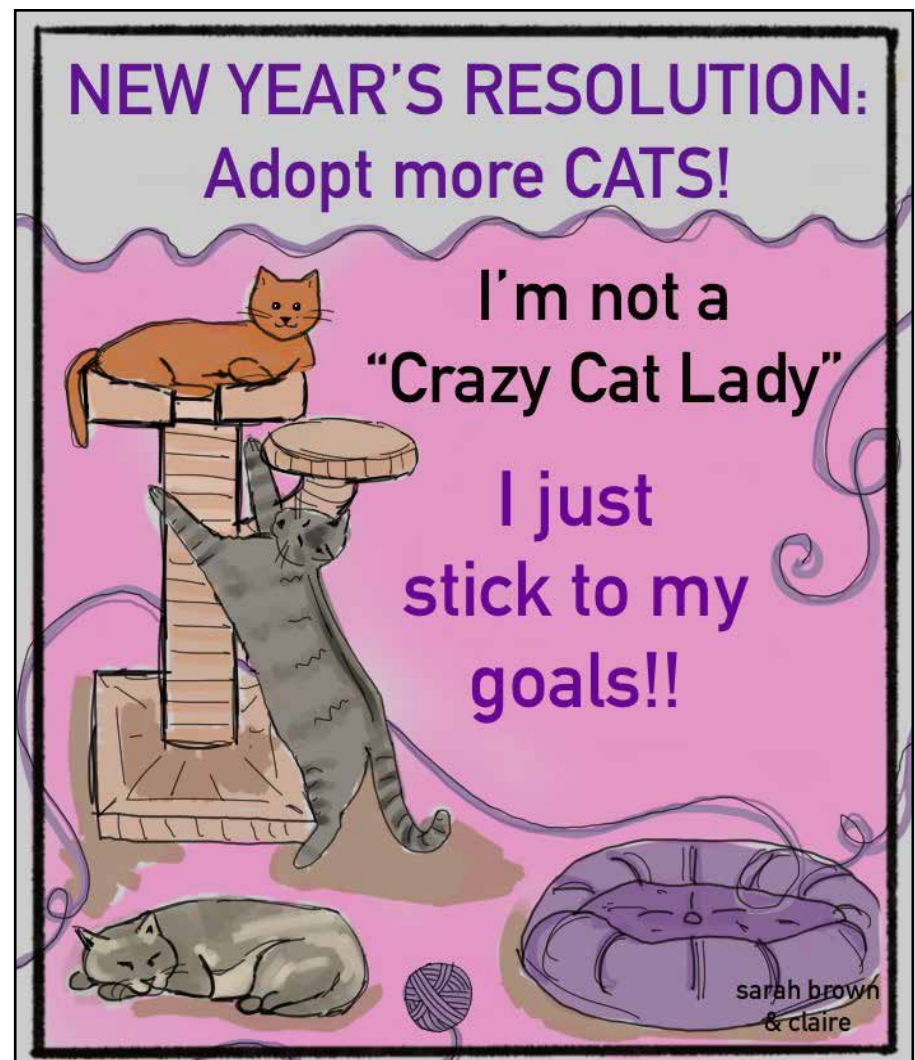
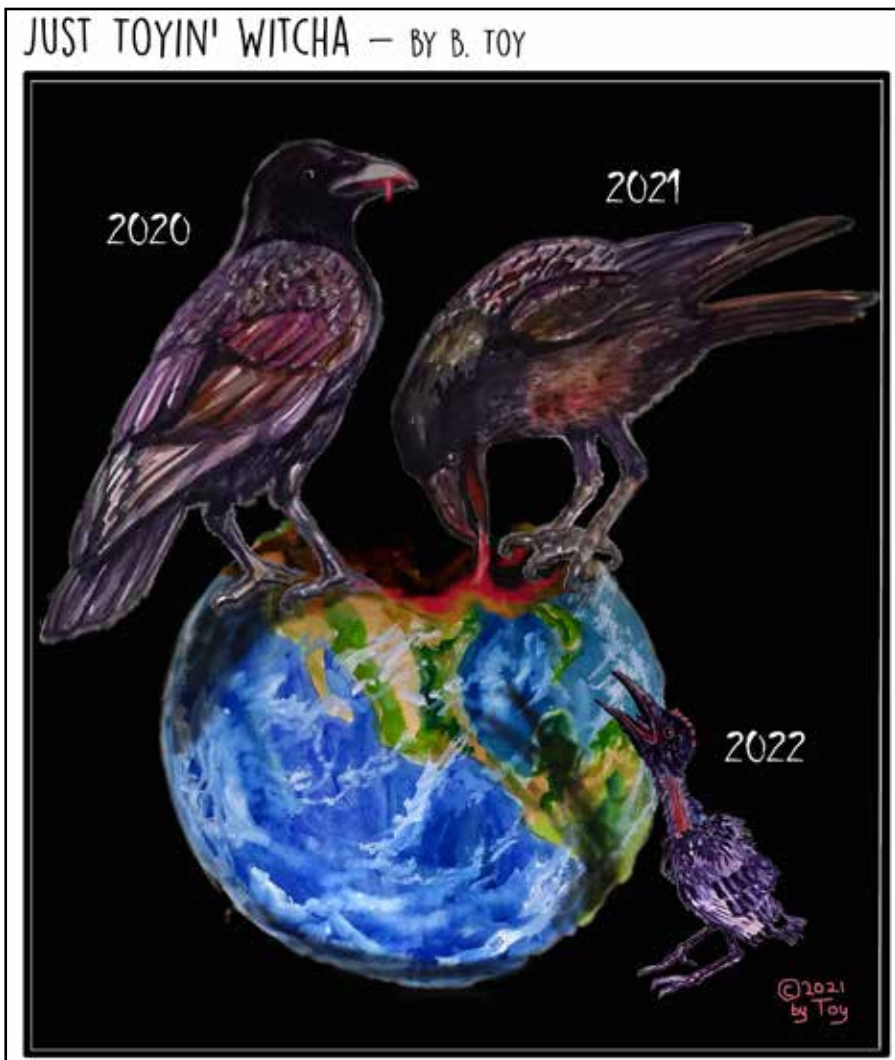
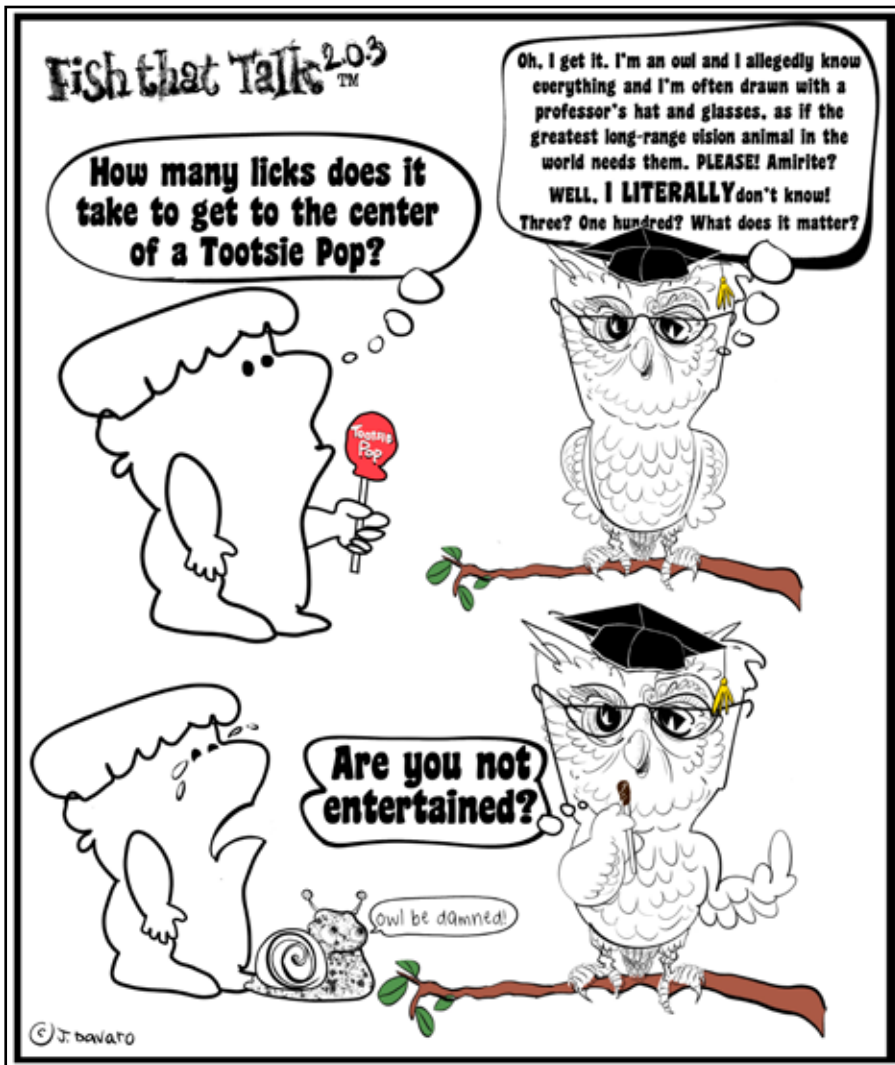
Hosted by: Clay Keller and Ryan Marker // screendrafts.libsyn.com

Here's the premise: an ever-changing lineup of guest “GMs” (general managers) rank movies within categories, such as baseball and Jane Austen adaptations, or by parameters like a certain year or a director's output. Each GM is armed with a veto, which is often weaponized to get their favorite title higher, and each has their own level of competitiveness they bring to the proceedings.

As a fan of the James Bond franchise, I devoured the over 10-hour “Super Draft” they held to rank each of the 26 movies. Guest Piya Sinha-Roy (*The Hollywood Reporter*, *Entertainment Weekly*) supplied much of the chaos, especially with her disdain of celebrated Sean Connery entries, and each participant brought a different appreciation of the character. The debate around both *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* and *From Russia with Love* are particular highlights, with panelists emphatically using vetoes on their behalf.

One additional note. I generally skip the 30-40 minutes of small talk at the beginning, jumping to the actual start of the draft. I wish they supplied timestamps for my type of consumption, but it doesn't take too long to locate this spot (it's right after they finish the trivia section of the show). — Christopher Lantinen





ALBUM REVIEWS

Abby Barrett

Then We Rebuild
Self-released



The debut solo EP from Erie musician Abby Barrett (Abigail Lynn) is both beautiful and haunting. Many are familiar with her work in The Mighty Sea, Potwhole, and various other collaborations. On *Then We Rebuild*, Barrett creates her own vision of what a solo album should be. She starts the EP off with two shorter songs, but once she has you hooked, you are on board for tracks that are up to eight minutes. The album highlights her multi-instrumental skills where she is not only the vocalist, but plays the violin, viola, cello, and guitar as well. She states that it is an album about love, consciousness, and chaos fueled by the old world ideology of Plato's Twin Flame. This duality is apparent in the way she changes from tracks like "The Trees Are On Fire" with its traditional song structure, to "2:42," an instrumental jazz-inspired track featuring saxophonist Joe Cieslak. The only other guest on the album was Andrew Todd, who played the organ and is also the executive producer of the EP. *Then We Rebuild* has crossover appeal from those who enjoy composers like Angelo Badalamenti and Jean-Michel Jarre to more modern songwriters like Cat Power. — Larry Wheaton



Daniel Bachman

Lonesome Weary Blues
Three Lobed Auxiliary



If you already know Daniel Bachman, then you know exactly what to expect from this, sonically speaking. The prolific guitarist is known for the throw-back folk of his acoustic and lap-steel instrumentals. With seven tracks at 24 minutes, *Lonesome Weary Blues* serves as an ideal doorway into Bachman's catalog. A musical scholar, Bachman is academically invested in the folk history of Virginia. *Lonesome Weary Blues* showcases him at perhaps his most accessible, as it's a cover album of traditional folk songs. Though the only track that everyone will know is the closer, "Amazing Grace," where Bachman's invigorating playing style is clearly all the listener needs to be reeled in. "They are songs that consistently bring me joy through listening, learning, and playing them around the house," noted Bachman, adding that they "have really helped to smooth over some of the rougher days of the past couple years." It's a beautiful album, one that may easily inspire the listener to binge on Bachman's substantial oeuvre whether for work-friendly playlists or rustic country driving soundtracks. The tinny, sliding notes are expressly hypnotic, and strangely welcoming. — Nick Warren



Grace Victoria

Love & Justice
Grace Victoria



From the first notes in *Love & Justice*, you know that you're in for something captivatingly unique from Grace Victoria. The NYC-based singer-songwriter is using mid-century musical prowess and combining it with lyrics that directly deal with her own experience as a Black woman in America. To either its fault or its strength, the album almost reads as a musical unto itself. There are a handful of different methods at work here amongst these dozen tracks. You have the samba-style guitar tracks like the opener "Down in Virginia" and "What Have You Got to Lose?" Then there are piano-heavy compositions like "Guilty" and the theatrical "Perhaps," along with more modern-sounding beats of "Mirror, Mirror" and "Black Looks Better on Me." Victoria is obviously well-versed in the music of the past, employing jazz chord changes that often evoke the mood of an anachronistic cabaret. Here, Victoria isn't afraid to pull any of her punches lyrically, explicitly referencing her own blackness, seemingly speaking directly to a white audience at times on tracks like the closer, "Undercover Ghetto Girl," her frankness and openness hopefully not lost on the listeners that need to hear it. — Nick Warren

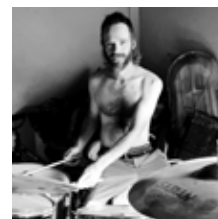


Johnny Dibs

The Catalyst
Self-released



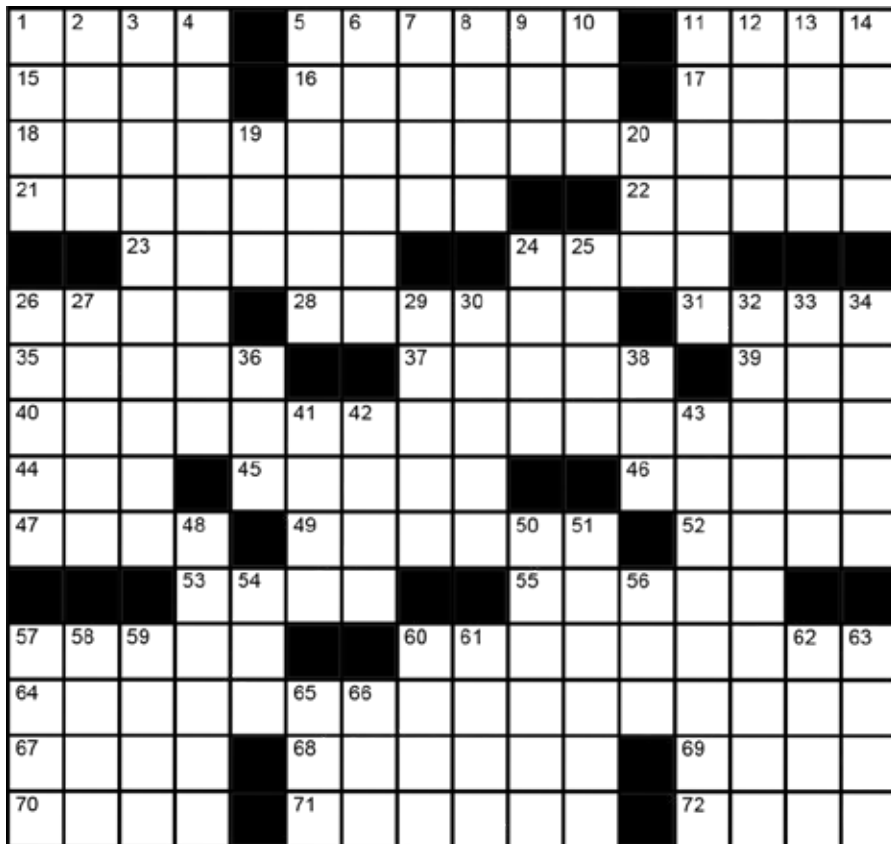
The debut album *The Catalyst* from local newcomer Johnny Dibs has a lot to drink up. There are a couple of different voices at work here among the album's eight tracks (coming in just under 30 minutes). As heralded by the opening two tracks, Dibs alternates between a lo-fi hip hop sound and folky, fingerstyle guitar compositions. The transition may sound a bit jarring, but it's almost shockingly cohesive, much the same way that Sublime's *Robbin the Hood* works (minus all the distracting audio vérité, of course). The former style features full-band instrumental loops from Dibs, with him and Brian the Fly trading low-tempo rhythmic verses, along with guests like Pilsner and Andrew Morelli. The pattern breaks with the penultimate "Folk Song," perhaps the album's standout (featuring Elle Taylor and Cheyenne Gaines on guest vocals). Throughout the album, Dibs uses alcohol as a recurring theme, his gravely, almost Tom Waits-esque voice beckoning the listener via the bottom of a bottle. The record is warm and intimate, easy to listen to multiple times. Its recording feels immediate, filled with a loose yet skilled musicianship that's far more endearing than most. — Nick Warren



TOMMY IN TOON — BY TOMMY LINK



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Across

- 1. "Nooooo!"
- 5. Artfully avoids
- 11. X-ray units
- 15. Contents of un río
- 16. WWII subs
- 17. Three-vowel berry
- 18. Person who is two-thirds German theologian but 100% Civil Rights leader?
- 21. James Bond's specialty
- 22. Actor Quinn
- 23. Rinsed (off)
- 24. Their maximum scores are 1600
- 26. Kirk _____, first actor to play Superman on the big screen
- 28. Put to rest, as rumors
- 31. Set in a man cave
- 35. Attended
- 37. "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" author Eric
- 39. Eggs on a sushi roll
- 40. Person who is two-thirds '80s R&B star but 100% "Stranger Things" star?
- 44. Actress de Armas of "Knives Out"
- 45. Fuel-efficient Toyota
- 46. Vocalized one's displeasure
- 47. Rookie, briefly
- 49. "Final Destination" actress Ali _____
- 52. Misfortunes
- 53. They're exchanged at parting
- 55. Gives a bit
- 57. Tennis star Naomi who said in 2021 "It's o.k. not to be o.k."

- 60. Common course penalty
- 64. Person who is two-thirds labor organizer but 100% boxing champ?
- 67. Its flag displays a curved dagger known as a khanjar
- 68. Disney villain partially inspired by drag queen Divine
- 69. Richard of "Chicago"
- 70. Dance partner?
- 71. Scrambled, as eggs
- 72. Killmonger's first name in "Black Panther"

Down

- 1. Julie Andrews or Helen Mirren
- 2. "Jumping Jack Flash, it's _____"
- 3. "If something can go wrong, it will" principle
- 4. Like some pride or parks
- 5. Persistently demanded payment from
- 6. First half of a Beatles title
- 7. Heisman Trophy winner Flutie
- 8. Airport locale
- 9. Horn of Africa country: Abbr.
- 10. U-turn from NNW
- 11. Debonair
- 12. Prilosec target
- 13. Delany of "Desperate Housewives"
- 14. Ink
- 19. Android alternative
- 20. Chinese zodiac rodent
- 24. Tennis' Novak Djokovic, for one

- 25. Supporter
- 26. "Dude, you gotta be kidding me ..."
- 27. 1940s-'60s singer Frankie
- 29. Use steel wool on
- 30. Brewery that co-distributes Not Your Father's Root Beer
- 32. Finds incredibly desirable
- 33. Item that may say "his" or "hers"
- 34. Sells in the stands
- 36. Bit of advice
- 38. Abate
- 41. Perry Mason creator _____ Stanley Gardner
- 42. Concern for a poll
- 43. Possible effect of doping
- 48. "The Thrill Is Gone" bluesman
- 50. Ray who sang with the Glenn Miller Orchestra
- 51. Do a price check on, perhaps
- 54. Ming in the Basketball Hall of Fame
- 56. Extreme degree
- 57. Spanish eyes
- 58. National sport of Japan
- 59. Computer science pioneer Turing
- 60. Legendary Greek mount
- 61. Ship-related: Abbr.
- 62. Actress Russell of "The Americans"
- 63. Prophetic O.T. book quoted in "Pulp Fiction"
- 65. Young grizzly
- 66. Before, to Dickinson



Answers to last puzzle



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