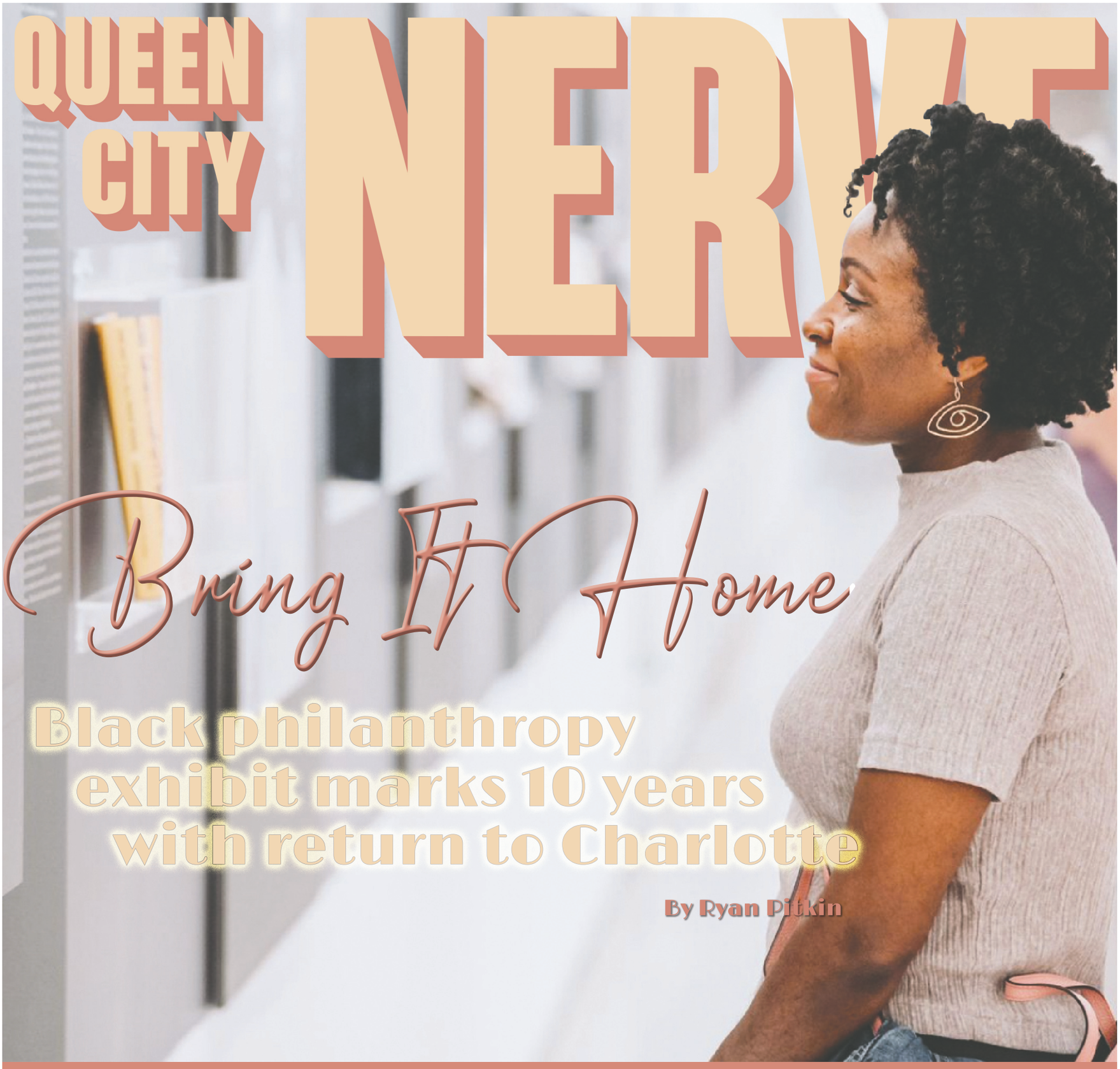
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QUEEN CITY NERVE



Bring It Home

Black philanthropy exhibit marks 10 years with return to Charlotte

By Ryan Pitkin

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ARTS: Mixed Metaphors makes the struggle real ♢ PG. 10

MUSIC: Belis returns home and finds voice ♢ PG. 14

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Members of youth educational advocacy org GenerationNation at a recent event. Photo courtesy of GenerationNation

A HARSH REALITY

How federal cuts to education funding could impact local schools

BY MAVEAH GRIFFITH

On July 10, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Board of Education (CMS BOE) Chair Stephanie Sneed and fellow rep Summer Nunn, who chairs the board's Intergovernmental Relationships Committee, sent an open letter to the US Department of Education (DOE) and North Carolina lawmakers voicing their "deep concern" with the DOE's decision to withhold more than $6 billion in approved federal education grants for public schools across the country.

This delay in federal funding that was congressionally approved and signed into law by President Donald Trump in March places more than $12 million in allocated CMS funding at risk.

"Without access to this critical funding, CMS faces two untenable options, both of which would have severe consequences for students, educators, and the broader community," reads the letter, which was addressed directly to Hayley Sanon, principal deputy assistant secretary at the DOE.

"1. Understaff classroom support positions and absorb budget shortfalls for already-hired staff. Such measures will directly impact the quality of education and the ability of students to thrive academically," the letter continued. "2. Incur $1 million in monthly debt, diverting resources from vital educational priorities. These funds, once redirected, cannot be recovered for student use, further worsening the challenges faced by our schools."

The ramifications of Trump's latest funding freeze will extend to public school budgets, teacher salaries, before- and after-school programs, community learning centers, teacher development programs and more. Impacts include less nutrition funding, larger class sizes, an end to free lunch programs and a number of ripple effects that will affect students in all situations.

Then there are those vulnerable populations of students who will feel the effects more directly. English language learners who are new to this country and struggling to simply fit in with their peers, students living in food deserts who depend on the free lunch programs, Black and brown students who are statistically more likely to end up in prison without a proper education.

Four days after Sneed and Nunn sent their letter, with just over a month left before classes were set to start again, NC Attorney General Jeff Jackson joined representatives from two dozen other states in filing a lawsuit against the Trump administration demanding that it release the funds as was scheduled to occur on July 1.

"Public schools across North Carolina, especially in rural areas, need this money to keep teachers in the classroom and keep kids safe while they learn," Jackson said in a statement announcing the suit. "It's unlawful and unconstitutional for the Department of Education to withhold money that Congress has appropriated. I'm going to court to get this money for our students, our schools and North Carolina families."

The Trump administration, which had insisted its officials must review where the funding would go to ensure all spending aligned with Trump's "priorities," announced on July 21 that it would release a small fraction of the funding — around $36 million of the $165 million that was being withheld from North Carolina schools.

On July 22, as Queen City Nerve approached its print deadline, CMS confirmed it would not receive any of the newly released funding, with $12.5 million in Title II, Title III, and Title IV grants previously approved for the district still being withheld.

The district announced a plan to use carryover funds from last year to cover the difference. This will mean placing its own district-wide freeze on spending, with cuts focused on external contracts, services and vacant positions rather than reducing current employees.

"While the temporary plan protects the student experience for the upcoming school year, it is not sustainable beyond 2025-26," stated Kelly Kluttz, chief finance officer for CMS. "If federal funding is not released, CMS will be required to make $12.5 million in cuts during the 2026-27 budget planning process."

What will the impacts of a funding freeze look like?

Central Piedmont Early College (CPEC) is a magnet school that opened in 2023. Despite being an early college program, the school is still a part of the CMS district and receives federal funding from the state. The announced freeze in funding immediately impacted way CPEC officials are preparing for the coming school year.

CPEC Principal Erik Turner spoke briefly about expected changes and impacts that his school has already experienced or is anticipating experiencing, saying that his school has already had to let go two staff members: a teaching assistant and a security guard.

"The teaching assistant position was key in providing instructional interventions for students that were not on grade level in math and reading, and she also provided additional support for our students that are English language learners," Turned explained. "So this year, we won't have that support through staffing, so we have to try to find alternative ways to support students that have additional academic instructional needs."

Gov. Josh Stein has estimated that, without the previously approved funding, around 1,000 teachers would lose their jobs statewide. With cuts to other staff positions, those teachers who remain will be forced to take on the roles of other positions.

"You may have class sizes that were, you know, 25 and 27, maybe even 30. But now, it will not be uncommon for CPEC and other unique schools and traditional schools to have classes in the 40s and 50s moving forward because of these cuts," Turner said.

"Who suffers in those situations? The students suffer, but then also the teachers," he continued. "I would be shocked if these cuts and these changes to the policies that are coming down from up high don't have a negative impact on teacher retention."

North Carolina and the United States as a whole are already struggling with a teacher staffing shortage. Studies have repeatedly found that low-income students are usually the most affected by teacher shortages.

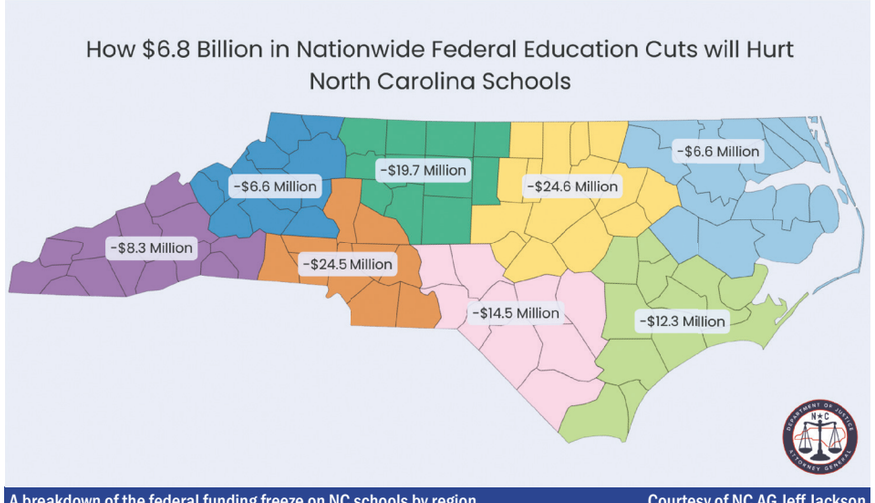
"I think that it's going to expand the gap between the students that were already achieving and the students that were not meeting the achievement metrics and expectations that we have," Turned speculated.

"In particular, I think students of color, students that are English language learners, students that have learning differences, students that have 504 plans or [Individualized Education Plans], all of those students who are not just students of color are all going to suffer and have a steeper hill to climb to reach their potential academically and to meet their academic goals that the school districts have set for their students in the schools."

The bigger the school, the deeper the cut

It won't only affect smaller institutions such as CPEC, as bigger schools in the area may find themselves struggling to keep up with the demands that a large student population brings.

Morgan Winston is a rising senior at East Mecklenburg High School, where she'll serve as the school's president of Student Congress in



A breakdown of the federal funding freeze on NC schools by region. Courtesy of NC AG Jeff Jackson



The CMS Board of Education, including Chair Stephanie Sneed (back, center). Photo courtesy of CMS

the coming year. She is also the co-president of GenerationNation's Charlotte Mecklenburg Youth Council.

"I think it's very unfortunate and misguided that the administration put a freeze on money allocated for students with disabilities as well as English learners in an effort to fulfill their agenda on cracking down on so-called DEI," Winston told Queen City Nerve. "Education is about students and this is a move that will really hurt a lot of students and their families."

She pointed out that East Mecklenburg is one of the county's most diverse schools, which could make the effects of the funding freeze that much more harshly.

"Our school has a high number of ESL students as well as students with special needs. So I worry about the serious impact that this freeze could have on students and programs at my school," she said. "These are real lives that the decisions of these policy makers have an impact on."

Former CMS student Nas Issofou now serves as a program and civic literacy facilitator with GenerationNation, a Charlotte-based organization that aims to get CMS students and other local young people more civically engaged.

Issofou also serves on the North Carolina Black Youth Wellness Advisory Board and previously served on the Charlotte Community Relations Committee.

As a facilitator with an organization focused not only on Charlotte youth, but more specifically underrepresented youth in a government environment, the recent funding freeze has been weighing heavily on his mind since its June 30 announcement.

"Education should be the backbone of youth development, and seeing it under attack is really disheartening," Issofou said. "For students going into the upcoming school year, especially our rural areas, they're going to face a harsh reality.

"Beyond what they experience in the classroom, these students are growing up in an environment where the very leaders they're supposed to look up to are at odds with providing them a quality education," he expanded. "I couldn't imagine; that kind of environment has deep psychological effects."

Issofou believes that CMS made progress last year in its efforts to improve student growth and performance, but he worries that a cut in funding only threatens that.

"When funding is cut in ways that impact teachers directly, reduce individualized support, or strip resources from classrooms, that kinda progress can quickly stall," he said.

"Students who need more tailored instruction, especially those in Charlotte's underserved communities, are almost always the first to feel the effects ... When something as basic and universal as education is up for debate or under attack, it really makes you wonder — if we can't agree on the value of investing in our kids, in our future, then what can we agree on?"

Students and staff are entering uncharted territory for this upcoming school year, and will potentially have to deal with the effects for years to come. The choices laid out in Sneed and Nunn's letter make a few things clear; regardless of which way the district goes, teachers will struggle under the weight of additional responsibilities under the new freeze, expected to manage classrooms of 40 to 50 children, a number that has been proven to harm a child's opportunity to get a proper education.

Unless funds are unfrozen and released, more students will continue to slip through the cracks in a system still reeling from the effects of the COVID pandemic, all in the name of a political movement.

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Oreo is a puppy recently placed up for adoption by North Meck Animal Rescue. Courtesy of NMAR

DOGGED OUT

A Charlotte scammer story where the victims aren't people but canines

BY CYNDY ETLER

She was like that kid in The Sixth Sense, the one who told his psychologist, "I see dead people." Only for Beth Phillips, starting at age 4, the line was, "I see injured animals." Dogs, cats, baby birds, wounded lizards. They were everywhere, and no one else seemed to notice them.

From the passenger seat of her dad's car one day, Phillips spotted a dog on the side of the road. "That's someone's pet," her dad said. "They're out looking for it right now."

Phillips replied, "If you don't stop this car, I'm jumping out."

Phillips' father sat in the blistering South Carolina heat as she gathered up three terrified pups, one of which was injured from being hit by a car. Within a week, she had helped nurse it back to health and found a home for it and its siblings.

With stories like this in mind, it was no surprise to anyone who knew Phillips when she reached adulthood and opened a no-kill nonprofit rescue called North Mecklenburg Animal Rescue (NMAR) in 1999. Since then, the rescue has facilitated 4,600 adoptions and saved well over 5,000 animals.

The work itself has come naturally to Phillips, but now her organization faces one of the toughest struggles it's come across over more than 25 years of helping animals. Phillips and her team are now struggling to recoup more than $200,000 in donations that disappeared under the rescue's former executive director.

It's a Charlotte-based Anna Delvey story, but instead of socialites, the victims are dogs.

A recent fundraising gala exceeded expectations in helping to start on that long road back to financial sustainability, but with no building to operate out of currently, it could take the organization years to get back to where it once was.

The beginnings of North Mecklenburg Animal Rescue

Before launching NMAR, Phillips kept seven strays in her own home and begged friends to take in the others who constantly appeared in her path. Eventually, an accountant friend suggested she create a nonprofit so the vast sums of money she was spending would at least be tax-deductible.

At its start, NMAR was foster-based, but there are always far more dogs than fosters or adopters.

"The need flies at us constantly," Phillips says. "Requests for help come from everywhere all the time. Animal shelters, random people that found a dog or cat, people wanting to rehome their animals, often for the most minor of reasons. The need is never-ending."

There are so many animals needing help that meeting the demand would be impossible. But NMAR consistently tries.

I met Phillips when I rescued our beloved dog Oscar from NMAR 14 years ago and have been a donor to the organization ever since. Our first adopted pup Eli was a demanding terrier mix. He needed a playmate. We arranged to meet Phillips and one of her adoptable dogs at a dog park, but Eli wasn't interested in playing with the dog, so we kept looking.

A few weeks later, Phillips sent me an email that said, "I don't know why, but I have to tell you about this sweet dog. It's clear he's had a rough life. He runs around the yard all day, scared of the other dogs but smiling anyway."

Though she had moved to a town called Old Fort outside of Asheville at that time, where land was affordable and zoning laws were more accommodating to rescues, Phillips drove Oscar down to meet us in Huntersville.

Eli, who liked almost nobody, ran to greet Oscar like a long-lost soulmate. Probably using that sixth sense of hers, Phillips knew that Eli and Oscar were meant to be together.

The rescue saw one of its biggest wins in 2010, when a grant from Pepsi enabled NMAR to purchase a foreclosed building in NoDa that, after a massive fundraising effort, was later traded up for a larger one with room for more dogs.

Finally, the rescue could house dogs for which there were no fosters.

As Phillips was pulled away more often to care for her ailing parents, she decided to hire someone to run day-to-day operations.

A trusted veteran NMAR volunteer with a long history in the rescue community had expressed a desire to start a career in animal welfare. She seemed like a perfect fit and in 2016, she was brought on as NMAR's executive director.

Uncovering bad deeds

About six years later, Phillips and the NMAR board found the rescue to be in financial straits. Despite what seemed like a solid base of support, it was nearly impossible to cover operating costs each month. After two years of barely scraping by, they made the difficult decision to sell the building they had worked so hard to purchase.

At around the same time, for reasons related to job performance, the woman hired to serve as executive director was notified that she would be let go.

"She indicated that she needed $100,000 in severance pay for her 'service' to the rescue," Phillips says. "I struggled with that for months, knowing that a true rescue person would never expect that from a nonprofit — that even large corporations don't offer that type of severance."

With alarm bells ringing, Phillips declined to meet the demand. Those alarm bells would only get louder from there.

The executive director had been the lone person with access to certain information about NMAR that Phillips needed in order to transition back to a foster-only rescue, including email lists of adopters and fosters, Facebook lists of NMAR volunteers and alumni, and the Venmo account to which donations were sent.

The former director refused to turn them over. She alone held those lists as well as many of the organization's passwords. She even had sole access to the building's security system.

She repeatedly claimed to be gathering the needed information and, to Phillips, the frenetic, emergency-room nature of rescue work lent credence to her stalling. Finally, she turned over all that she claimed to have — but the most vital information was missing.

According to NAMR policy, the rescue never deleted emails, as they were frequently used for reference. But the organization's entire email history had been wiped clean, along with the contact lists and information for fosters, annual event supporters and other key contacts.

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NMAR rescue Lainey takes part in "puplates.' Photo courtesy of NMAR

"The NMAR Venmo page was the longest holdout," Phillips says. "We had to say we were hiring legal counsel before that was given."

That's when NMAR hired a lawyer and stopped paying the former executive director's salary.

They filed a suit alleging that the executive director embezzled more than $200,000 from the rescue. The discovery process, in which both parties involved in a civil action must present each other with all relevant information that might be used in a trial, uncovered shocking details behind the former executive director's misdeeds — actions she had carried out not only since her firing but throughout her employment.

"The first document had clearly been altered," Phillips says. "When we got the original records from Venmo, they showed many, many transfers directly from NMAR to her personal Venmo. Over a seven-year period, there were enormous donations for adoption fees, in the tens of thousands, sent to her account that were never transferred to NMAR nor accounted for."

The documents showed that the former executive director had authorized pet owners to receive treatment at the veterinary office affiliated with NMAR and charge it to the rescue's account "to get the discount."

The vet bills were paid by NMAR but the pet owners sent payment for the treatment to her personal Venmo account.

These transactions, which totaled close to $100,000, weren't justified by documentation of any kind. Staggered by what she was seeing, Phillips called her to confront her about the facts.

Phillips recorded the call without the former executive director's knowledge, which is legal in a one-party consent state like North Carolina. During the call, the former ED claimed the money sent to her personal Venmo went to the dogs but could not explain how or when, nor could she show proof.

"This was a huge learning curve for us," Phillips says. "Our small board was only focused on saving animals and trying to hold onto the building. We failed with due diligence around employees and finances."

The rescue has since established strict protocols and multiple-person check offs to prevent any similar circumstance.

While still on NMAR's payroll, the former executive director and a partner established and began soliciting donations for a separate dog rescue. When Phillips learned this fact during discovery, the scrubbing of NMAR's fosters and other contacts made sense.

In 2024, the former executive director's name and home address were cited under "founder" on the organization's website. Today, the website doesn't name her at all, instead listing a PO box for a mailing address.

In total, more than $200,000 went missing, all of which was slated for rescuing dogs. The two parties came to a settlement "to avoid the time, expense, and uncertainties of continued litigation," according to court documents.

The former executive director paid $150,000 to NMAR, of which $30,000 went to legal fees.

"The settlement had a no admittance of liability clause," Phillips says. "We believe the settlement payment, which she accepted in exchange for not seeking criminal prosecution, speaks for itself."



The long road back

Since 2009, NMAR has been meeting the needs of desperate animals. And they're not stopping now. On July 13, more than 130 people gathered to celebrate NMAR as the organization began its rise from the ashes of financial loss.

The Wags to Riches Casino Fundraiser, a gala held at Hunter House in Huntersville, was described by one long-time foster as "the best-attended NMAR event ever." In elegant rooms and on the front porch, attendees plunked down bright, rubbery casino chips and made their bets.

Others perched on velvet settees catching up with old friends. Convivial bartenders poured signature cocktails, the Greyhound Derby and the Purring Paris. The weather was hot and humid; the vibe was mellow and happy.

Each gambling table had its own group personality. The downstairs blackjack players, laughing quietly at inside jokes, were like the cool kids who sneak outside to smoke. The craps table was popular and rambunctious as a Lake Norman party boat. Upstairs, a second blackjack room was grown and sexy, with intimate tables set up for non-gamblers. And the poker table was sophisticated and quiet as a meditation room.

As the emcee for the event, I spoke to each table, thanking the attendees and sponsors for their generosity. I shared a few facts about NMAR's history and added a personal reflection.

"I like and trust animals," I said. "Humans? Not so much. But tonight I have this strange feeling: I like everyone in this building. If you're NMAR people, you're good people."

One hundred donors provided items for the Wags to Riches auction and raffle, including a seven-night stay at a private home on Pawley's Island and resort rooms in Cancun, Antigua, and Barbados. NMAR's goal was to raise $5,000, but the total amount raised at the event exceeded $14,000.

Phillips couldn't make the two-plus-hour drive to the gala. Her 14-year-old rescue dog is terrified of thunder and after a week of earth-shattering storms, another was forecasted for that night.

Phillips currently has seven dogs living at her house while NMAR volunteers desperately seek fosters.

As I write this, she has been communicating with CMPD's Animal Care & Control (AC&C), trying to pull the scared, scruffy stray terrier picked up in my neighborhood yesterday.

When AC&C staff called the number listed on the dog's chip, the owner said, "I don't own that dog. I gave him away."

Like Phillips said: "The need is never-ending."

Visit northmeckanimalrescue.org to learn more about the organization.



The Giving Back exhibit visits Chicago. Photo courtesy of Giving Back

BRING IT HOME

Black philanthropy exhibit marks 10 years with return to Charlotte

BY RYAN PITKIN

It was 18 years ago that Valaida Fullwood set out to tell the story of Black philanthropy in Charlotte. Fullwood had launched the New Generation of African American Philanthropists [NGAAP] in 2006, tired of misperceptions about giving in the Black community.

"I was working in philanthropy as a consultant ... and I was frustrated and lamented the absence of Black stories in philanthropy and the fact that, when we were included, it was solely on the 'in need' and the beneficiary side," she recalled.

"Advancing the idea that we only have our hands out or looking for a hand out, that Black people don't give. I'd heard that expressed in a variety of ways and was just frustrated by it and ticked off by it, frankly, and wanted to lift up another story because I personally knew and had witnessed and experienced and benefited from Black philanthropy."

This racist narrative especially frustrated Fullwood because she knew that the data told a different story: Black households donate a higher share of their wealth than white households, giving 25% more of their income annually than white households.

And so in 2007 she set out to share that story in a creative and personalized way, leaning on her penchant for storytelling and engaging with community. She approached Charles Thomas, then the education director at The Light Factory, about putting together a book that could pair the stories of local Black philanthropists with his poignant portraiture and other photography.

The pair released their first joint project, a book titled *Giving Back: A Tribute to Generations of African American Philanthropists*, in 2011, but what they hadn't envisioned was the way this one-off would evolve into an exhibit that continues to thrive and have an impact nearly two decades later.

Having premiered at Johnson C. Smith University in 2015, Fullwood and Thomas' Giving Back: The Soul of Philanthropy Reframed and Exhibited has since traveled to 35 cities nationwide, changing the narrative and often inspiring the launch of localized giving circles and philanthropic funds within a respective city's Black community.

On July 15, the exhibit celebrated its CLT Homecoming with an opening at Charlotte Museum of History (CMoH), where it will run through Oct. 19. As they've seen occur naturally in so many communities where the exhibit has shown, Fullwood's NGAAP Philanthropic Collective is capitalizing on the moment to establish a new fund centered on racial funding equity, with a goal of raising $12 million.

We talked to Fullwood and Thomas following the mid-July opening to hear about the new trust as well as their thoughts on the homecoming exhibit and what it's accomplished over its decade of countrywide showings.

Queen City Nerve: You both are widely considered to be community leaders in Charlotte, though perhaps more so for your work in consulting and community engagement rather than visual art. How much does art, be it creating or curating, play into each of your identities and your other work?

Charles Thomas: This project started while I was in the midst of my photography career working at The Light Factory. It very much aligned to me creatively at the time. I can understand now, every day I'm not wearing photography or art as how I'm doing my day-to-day work [as Charlotte Director with Knight Foundation]. At the same time ... this is another component of the work I do. What's been beautiful the past 10 years for the exhibit in the 35 cities that it's traveled to is that, in each of those cities, it's not only been an artistic piece but it's been a community engagement and civic engagement piece. It's something that's galvanized our community to tell their stories but also to take action. In several cities, they've created funds to support Black-led nonprofits or support the Black community philanthropically. So this resonates with the work I do today with a strong focus from the Knight Foundation in the Historic West End. It is about advancing community economic mobility for a community that has been left out. And as a part of that, it's still narrative storytelling, as well as ensuring access to capital and resources for those who are proximate to the issue. That's what Giving Back: The Soul of Philanthropy is about: Black folks telling their own stories and then Black folks seeing themselves.

Valaida Fullwood: I definitely identify as a creative; it's been core to who I am since I was a little girl and loved to draw and create. I would say that, around 2006 or so, after I'd been involved in a lot of civic initiatives here in Charlotte on a broad scale, I remember saying to somebody, "I really want to do something where I can lean more into my creativity." And this idea landed on me a few years later and it really has been a tremendous vehicle for my multiple interests. My moniker is being an "idea whisperer," so I'm always having ideas, and being able to bring them in and lean into my culture, Black culture, has been a gift in terms of this project.

How closely have you all stayed attached to the exhibit wherever it is at any given time?

Valaida Fullwood: We follow it. We're closely tethered to it. And again, we approach it as a civic engagement initiative, and to some degree as a consultancy in terms of advising and guiding the development and presentation of the exhibit. Early on, when we were seeking funding for the exhibit, we got advice from the program officer at the Institute of Museum and Library Services — which funded this 10 years ago and also is under threat under the current administration at the moment — and their advice was, "Yes, the exhibition is nice, but the programming, the community engagement and public programming is key. That's the real opportunity." So we've always looked at the exhibit as being a vehicle for civic engagement to advance conversations and explore themes and topics around how culture, faith and art influence and shape how and why people give. And we've seen that play out in the various cities.

The new CLT Homecoming iteration of the exhibit at Charlotte Museum of History includes some new additions, such as The Souls series that highlights some of Charlotte's leaders in giving in the hallways leading into the original. What are your thoughts now having had a chance to visit the new exhibit?

Charles Thomas: I was just blown away. I'm always in awe of each of the communities, how they interpret the exhibit. It's just for me as an artist, it's just like, "Wow." Valaida plays a big role in the artistic direction of each of the exhibits, I get to come and see how people have interpreted it. We try to hold to certain exhibit standards, if you will, that Valaida holds to branding and all that, but the way [CMoH] uses the rotunda, the way they use visual displays, the audio/video that's there — which is an intentional part of the exhibit so that it engages all of us in different ways that we hear,



A patron checks out the exhibit in Denver, Colorado. Photo courtesy of Giving Back

see, and touch things — just how they laid it out, I thought they did a great job.

I really appreciated the lead-in of the honorees of our local philanthropists. Those photographs were taken by Alvin C. Jacobs, so those were not taken by me, and this has occurred in all of our communities where a local photographer matches the work or responds to the work that we've created and then creates their own local stories. In Detroit, they had like 90 portraits, and they had a whole wing dedicated to their local exhibit in philanthropy. In New Orleans, it had the curation ... that represents their own community and culture. There are stories of how people give. I had never heard of rent parties and there are ways they talked about philanthropy that I've never heard of before.

Valaida Fullwood: That's always a treat with every city and each exhibition. We have our core Soul of Philanthropy content that Charles and I created, and seeing how it is installed and how the local exhibition designer chooses to use their space to present the content is always a lovely surprise, because no space, no gallery is the same and just the level of creativity around that is wonderful. And then to see how they bring their localized content and the stories they want to share and complement the core philanthropy content is wonderful. Seeing it here in Charlotte with familiar names and people, being a part of those 10 local honorees, was wonderful. Again, a joy to witness every time.

We're celebrating 10 years of the exhibit with this homecoming. Charles mentioned that he didn't expect this to have such longevity when you all started it. What does it mean to you for it to be a decade later now and knowing all the impact that this has had across the entire country and to see it back in your hometown?

Valaida Fullwood: It's super significant and important. Over the last decade, since it opened at Johnson C. Smith in 2015, we've learned a lot, and we want to applaud some of that learning here in Charlotte. So Charles and I have witnessed how the exhibit has been a catalytic force to launch new Black funds, new Black giving circles, new initiatives to advance philanthropic work and to advance Black communities in other cities. Seeing that and how folks are taking stories that have roots here in Charlotte with two Black creators here in Charlotte, we wanted to bring it home to not only celebrate that 10-year milestone and the successes of the past 10 years but also to create something that is really new here in Charlotte to ignite community interest and engagement around creating a new trust. So our philanthropic collective, NGAAP, has been around for 19 years now, and we truly recognized over the last five years since the pandemic what an important role we play in Charlotte and a vacuum that we are filling. And serving as a volunteer-based group and operating as we have, we've seen the imperative to bring infrastructure and create an entity that can have longer range impact and that can be sustainable particularly around racial funding equity.

So we intentionally celebrated this homecoming as part of a civic engagement strategy to build awareness around NGAAP and its work over the last 19 years as well as generate civic and cultural



From Giving Back: The Soul of Philanthropy Reframed and Exhibited Photo by Charles Thomas

pride around the Soul of Philanthropy and how it's ignited a movement in other communities around Black philanthropy and inclusive philanthropy, and to generate support and buy-in for establishing the new trust, which we envision as the region's first Black-founded, community-rooted, public philanthropy trust. There's a reason and purpose for this exhibition beyond the celebration of the 10 years and elevating Black philanthropy. We really want to leverage it, as we've observed in other cities, to create something new here in Charlotte.

Both Charles and I have often said that the gratification and the attention and the publicity we've received over the last decade is wonderful, but it really means nothing if that work doesn't lead to change here in Charlotte, given our commitment to this community and our vision and hopes for this community. So this exhibition is meant to launch that and create something new and sustainable and powerful here in Charlotte.

So what's the next step? Where do you go from here in pursuing that goal and launching the trust?

Valaida Fullwood: Well, one, the exhibit carries on ... It's going to Akron, Ohio after this. But here in Charlotte, there's a series of community programs. We had our first [on July 19] at the Stratford Richardson Y in collaboration with West Boulevard Neighborhood Coalition. So there are a series of programs and gatherings and events at the intersection of Black philanthropy and neighborhoods and community building, faith and religion, the arts, with young kids and the next generation of givers, and a whole host of programs all leading toward building buy-in and pride and dollars to establish the new trust.

So we've had the great benefit of receiving nearly a half-million dollars from [the W.K.] Kellogg Foundation in support of our developing and establishing the new trust. Our goal is to raise an initial $12 million to establish the new trust and we're currently working toward that. And again, this exhibition and the community engagement is a key element as we work toward it over the next few years.

Anything else you want to mention about the goals of this homecoming and what you want folks to take away from this showing?

Valaida Fullwood: Our hope is that while the exhibition may inspire people, our real hope is that it encourages people to lean into their generosity and giving, especially now, and to be empowered, to see themselves as philanthropists, as being able to affect change and shape the future with their giving and generosity. It doesn't have to be big dollars. You can just bring your full self, what financial resources you have to give, as well as your identity, your time, your talent, your gifts, to the work. So that's the bottom-line message, and I think it's the message we need now more than ever in the current political and social environment.

Charles Thomas: One of the pieces that is important in this whole journey is to share our stories. Especially in these times where it feels like communities are seeing their stories and their histories are being erased or being disappeared, if you will, that it's critical that another piece of this is: I know we all want to be humble about giving, humble with how we serve, but one of the things that challenged me as a part of this exhibit was when people either didn't show up for their portrait or didn't want their portrait taken, they were being humble. I think in this day and age of the attention culture and everything that we have, it's really important that especially those that are really servant leaders that are really leading the work, that their story is uplifted. Otherwise, other narratives will take over.

The Soul of Philanthropy: Homecoming exhibit is included in general admission at Charlotte Museum of History through Oct. 19, 2025. Visit charlottemuseum.org for more information on the museum or new-philanthropists.org for more info on Valaida Fullwood's organization, the NGAAP Philanthropic Collective.

RPITKIN@QCNERVE.COM





Inside QC Family Tree's Big Blue House with the characters of 'It Be Like That Sometimes. Courtesy of MMP

THE STRUGGLE IS REAL

New immersive production brings patrons into the home to deal with family matters

BY DEZANII LEWIS

The Reynolds are your typical 21st-century family.

Natasha Reynolds, the matriarch, suffers from insomnia and anxiety related to her struggles with unemployment. Her daughter Kasey, a recent graduate of East Mecklenburg High School, feels intense pressure to be perfect going into college. Then there's Auntie Torie, who's fully burnt out from hosting the aforementioned mother-daughter duo while Natasha searches for a job.

And it's in this context that you're invited to visit the Reynolds family at their home in west Charlotte.

That's the idea behind Mixed Metaphors Productions' (MMP) newest play, *It Be Like That Sometimes*, which dissects how systemic narratives are projected onto individuals and the ways folks can find joy by rejecting them.

"We're looking at mental health, but we're really looking at it through this lens that a lot of what we consider as individual mental health issues are actually systemically related," said MMP founder Kat Martin.

"We feel like the lack of attention that gets put on the systemic component of mental health is erasing a really big part. It's something really personal for us inside of our ensemble and inside of our collective."

As with past MMP productions, *It Be Like That Sometimes* is an immersive experience, bringing a select number of patrons through Aunt Torie's home to spend time with each member of the family, hearing their struggles and learning their coping techniques.

Running from July 24-Aug. 3, the performances will take place at the QC Family Tree's Big Blue House in Enderly Park, where the company also performed *Kudzu: A Story of Belonging* last year.

The Reynolds family is a composite of all the interviews and information Martin and her team compiled while doing research for the play.

"It's in a very Mixed Metaphors-y way," she said. "It's a blend where we're drawing from actual interviews, actual real-life people's stories."

Martin found during her research that more than 20% of Mecklenburg County residents report having eight or more days a month of "not good" mental health, and that it takes on average 11 years from when a person first experiences mental health symptoms to receive treatment.

"It shouldn't take much imagination to realize that when folks are threatened, denied resources, displaced from housing, and restricted from adequate health care, their mental health is negatively affected. This is the reality of many of our neighbors and community members in Charlotte," said Helms Jarrell, co-director of QC Family Tree. "These issues are as real as the COVID pandemic, when a threat to our bodies, our families and our communities' survival also took a toll on our mental health."

Martin said that it's easy for people to internalize their negativity surrounding their circumstances and ignore that so much of this isn't in their control.

She said she hopes that anyone who "ever had the kind of day that drained you, where lists of demands felt overwhelming, where you felt the shame of not being enough" leaves the play feeling seen and renewed.



Auntie Torie, Natasha and Kasey in 'It Be Like That Sometimes.' Courtesy of MMP

"We really want this piece to be a place where when you leave, you feel like you let some of those narratives go," she said. "You can take a deep breath and you can say, 'Hold on a second, that's not me, that's the system.'"

Setbacks and searching for solutions

Martin said the title of the play has a two-fold intention. The first is tied to the fact that a simple phrase like "It be like that sometimes" can be something that connects community members, even complete strangers, whether in line at the DMV or in some other situation where the struggle is real but it's out of your hands.

It's a fully relatable sentiment, but it's also a nod to the fact that some things are systemic, not based on the behavior of the person going through it.

"These are things that are outside of what we can control. These are things that are outside of our normal self-care routines," Martin said.

"So we think that it's connecting us and it's pointing the finger and pointing the mirror at the way that a lot of what people deal with that's labeled as mental health is things that are much larger and way outside of the control that one person can 'work on it or fix it,'" she continued, using air quotes. "Or these are much larger things, and sometimes it does be like that sometimes."

Last winter, MMP went through its own situation in which the team just had to make one of those "visceral shrugs," though they didn't realize it at the time.

In December 2024, the company lost its rehearsal space and most of its set pieces and inventory when a driver careened into the front of Martin's house.

Prior to the accident, MMP had just announced a new partnership with QC Family Tree and Martin felt the company was about to hit full stride "where you're like, 'We're solid. We're together. We're hitting all of our personal benchmarks.' And then boom, something happens that's outside of control, and it involves a lot of systemic issues."

The driver who hit Martin's house was under the influence and one can only wonder what was going on in their life that led them to crash into someone's home. Still, that one action led to a domino effect for MMP, which has continued to experience setbacks and barriers in the wreck's wake.

"The aftermath of that with insurance companies, which is another part of systemic barriers to being good and solid and feeling secure, and then working with CMPD — it's been this whole additional layer," she said.

"And if you are also systemically underemployed and underpaid, if your housing was insecure, all those things on top of each other is exactly the thing that can lead to mental health crises."

MMP hosted a fundraising gala in April to help rebuild what was lost and Martin said they were able to successfully reach their goal to put on this production, though they are still accepting donations to allow them to fund future projects.

"We're really proud of the whole team for — I hate to use the phrase because it's a part of the systemic thing that leads to our bad mental health, but I don't have better language for it — we really had a bootstrap moment of being like, 'We're going to put this together because it's important and we want this story to be told,'" she said.

"And we really want the community to have a space where we can start to question and push back on some of these things that are written onto us."

It do be like that sometimes.

Getting immersive

To achieve the full effect of what they're trying to accomplish, MMP, true to form, will employ a number of immersive components into the production.

As patrons journey through the QC Family Tree's Big Blue House, each room will center on a different member of the Reynolds family. There will be recordings from some of the interviews conducted during MMP's research and projections of live sketches by one of MMP's visual artists, Bambi.

There will also be moments of participation by the audience to create dialogue between performer and patron.

The company has prepped the house by creating interior designs that make everything appear as a 2-dimensional sketch, which plays into the motif that the home is the space where the family is able to write its own narratives and express internal truths.

Martin said all of these facets will allow people to enter the minds of the characters while stepping into this space will conjure "that feeling that when you enter into the home, you've left the outside room behind and you've come into the domestic space that's supposed to be our safe space and protect us."

Martin said that she hopes people feel a sense of connection with their fellow audience members at the end of the piece, which will help foster conversation and more empathy and understanding.

She also hopes the production will provide people with new coping mechanisms to help protect their peace and mental health.

"We really hope that people, through going through this very hyper-intimate theatrical experience, that you feel connected to each other, that you feel like, 'I heard you mention that you also dealt with anxiety. Me too,'" she said. "So that people leave having taken that breath but also having some tools that, when they're in those moments where it be like that, sometimes they can reflect and say, 'Hold on, I almost let that into my mental space. I almost let that into me. And I need to actually remember that it's not. I don't have to put this into myself. I can set this aside.'"

While the topics that *It Be Like That Sometimes* are built on have depth and weight, Martin emphasizes that there's a light at the end of the tunnel, one just has to take the journey through to find joy and authenticity on the other side.

"It's not just about the things we have to fight against," she said, "but also about the beauty and how we do that."

Sometimes, it doesn't always have to be like that — it can be better.

Find tickets for It Be Like That Sometimes *at tinyurl.com/ItBeLikeThatSometimesMMP.*

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The Comedy Zone - Charlotte
900 NC Music Factory Blvd. B3
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EST GEE

July 24 • 8 p.m. • The Underground, 820 Hamilton St. • $37 • fillmorenc.com

Blending stark storytelling, lurid wordplay and Southern flow, Louisville rapper EST Gee has never been shy to bleed publicly and profusely while diving deep into the darkest recesses of life. The title of his current LP, *I Ain't Feeling You*, as well as those of his three previous releases, *Ion Feel Nun*, *I Still Don't Feel Nun*, and *I Never Felt Nun*, are supremely ironic, since EST Gee feels — a lot. On *I Ain't Feeling You*, EST Gee's raw, unvarnished emotions run riot on "RIP LU MIKE," a tribute to his protégé EST Lu Mike who was shot to death in 2024.

ROYAL IMPROV FESTIVAL

July 24-26 • times vary • Stage Door Theater, 155 North College St. • $22 • blumenthalarts.org

The joy — and frustration — of improv lies in its ephemeral quality. A performer can slay with a sudden flash of inspiration that seems to come out of the ether. At other times, they got nothing. Artist collective and nonprofit Queen City Comedy hosts this annual four-day event featuring improv groups from around the world. Troupes, including Mom's Adhesive Improv, Pineapple-Shaped Lamps, Shameless Society Improv, Get-a-Long Gang, Improv Charlotte and more take the stage to entertain with scenes and games, all created on the spot from audience suggestions. In addition to shows, the fest also includes workshops and improv jams.

'SEX, LIES, AND A SYCAMORE TREE'

July 24-Aug. 3 • times vary • VAPA Center, 737 North College St. • $15 • charlottesoffbroadway.com

The suburbs are a deadly jungle with neatly manicured lawns and barely concealed infidelity in Charlotte playwright Elaine Alexander's *Sex, Lies, and a Sycamore Tree*. Two midlife marriages and the last remaining Sycamore tree of the Sycamore Grove subdivision are put to the test during a not-so-neighborly summer patio party in this satirical comedy, which explores how a hastily planned development imperils trees, destroys the character of older neighborhoods and sparks a backyard battle that pits neighbor against neighbor. New Yorker magazine praises the "funny, sharp, smart and bold [show] for landing a laugh while ... creating dimensional, flawed, yet empathic characters."



Modern Alibi
Photo by Brandon Burdette
8/2



PEARL
Via Facebook
7/30

WEIRD AL YANKOVIC

June 26 • 8 p.m. • Skyla Amphitheatre, 820 Hamilton St. • $62-$208 • skylacuamp.com

Weird Al Yankovic's punning, satirical songs trace the history of pop through the MTV '80s, the rap/grunge '90s, the boy band 2000s and beyond. Being lampooned by Weird Al is a badge of honor for artists ranging from Lady Gaga to Eminem, and his parodies have hit Billboard's Hot 100 — "White and Nerdy," a riff on Chamillionaire's "Ridin'," made the top ten. Puddles Pity Party, a depressed clown with an astounding voice, adds an absurdist touch to the bill.

PEARL, OH! YOU PRETTY THINGS, LILY OF THE SEA, I HATE DAVE

July 30 • 9 p.m. • Snug Harbor, 1228 Gordon St. • $12 • snugrock.com

With a knowing drawl, PEARL's frontwoman Chloe Torres propels you on a take-no-shit tour of America's transactional hell on the Wilmington quartet's single "Dead Rat": "*Pinhole vision, drooling men/ Please sir, please sir, just fucking spend!*" The dynamic, vocal-focused, punk music is as uncompromising as the lyrics. Charlotte's dramatic alt-rock five-piece Oh! You Pretty Things delivers a compassionate, pro-LGBTQ+ and fiery feminist message. NYC grunge-folk artist Lily of the Sea conjoins climate grief, femininity and mythology. On "Billionaires," foursome I Hate Dave applies distortion, swagger and malice towards the titular plutocrats. Expect a full night of heartfelt, complex and committed rock.

GRAVITATE 8TH ANNIVERSARY

August 1 • 8 p.m. • Petra's, 1919 Commonwealth Ave. • $10 • petrasbar.com

Talking to Queen City Nerve, DJ DOMii revealed the elemental allure of house music: "You're communicating with the crowd and the crowd is also communicating with you." Celebrating its eight-year anniversary, Gravitate is one of Charlotte's most eclectic dance floor give-and-take conversations, adding Afropop, funk, jazz, mutant disco, neo-soul and polyrhythmic Latin beats to house's steady four-on-the-floor foundation. Resident and guest DJs Oba Shaanti, Steve Howerton, Charles Gatling, Duane Powell and DJ LA set bodies in motion while live percussionists Claudio Rafael (Bravo Pueblo) and Sweat Transfer enhance the mind-body bio-feedback loop that comes from the collective exchange of rhythms, movement, and energy.

THE ART OF DEVOTION OPENING

August 2 • 5 p.m. • Mint Museum Randolph, 2730 Randolph Rd. • $10-$15 • mintmuseum.org

The Santos de Palo, "saints made of wood," are a sacred Puerto Rican folk-art tradition dating from the 1500s. These small, symbolic artworks were introduced by the conquering Spanish clergy to indoctrinate the gospel in the island's indigenous population, but over the centuries, the Santos de Palo became a powerful symbol of Puerto Rican identity, adorning humble home altars and acting as intermediaries between heaven and earth. The show is drawn from the Santos collection of Nitza Mediavilla Piñero and Francisco Toste Santana, who recently relocated to Charlotte from Puerto Rico, and is the first showing of the exhibit in the U.S.

MODERN ALIBI

August 2 • 8 p.m. • Visulite Theatre, 1615 Elizabeth Ave. • $17-$20 • visulite.com

On Charlotte alt-rock combo Modern Alibi's 2023 single "Boy You Better," leathery Brit-rock guitar riffs collide with frontman and band founder Holden Scott's urban Julian Casablancas-meets-Richard Hell drawl to tell an eternal tale of helpless infatuation. That crunchy track joins 11 others on the band's 2025 album *American Radio*, a dynamic blend of captivating chord structures, surprising time signatures and irresistible melodies. This stuff rocks, is catchy as hell and takes a lot more chances than you may catch on the first listen. Nashville's The Band Light finesses a similar blend of modern and retro rock with cuts like the pulsing borderline chaotic "Dreamboat."

UNDENIABLE: TYRONE BURSTON

August 3 • 2 p.m. • Comedy Zone, 900 NC Music Factory Blvd. • $33-$42 • cltcomedyzone.com

"Hartford raised me, Charlotte made me," says Connecticut-born, Queen City-based comic Tyrone Burston. From getting booed onstage at Showtime at the Apollo to being named Queen City Comedian of the Year twice, Burston boasts a colorful decade-long career in the field. "Undeniable isn't just the name of my comedy special, it's how I've lived this entire journey," he says. Burston films his first-ever comedy special live at The Comedy Zone, and the show is much more than stand-up. The full, family-friendly experience also includes live music and spoken-word poetry. It's also "Burston with comedy," he says, because who can resist a pun when it's staring you in the face?

KESHA

August 5 • 7 p.m. • PNC Music Pavilion, 707 Pavilion Blvd. • $40 and up • pncmusicpavilion.com

Despite garnering 10 Top 10 hits, four number one singles, and two chart-topping albums, Kesha will probably be forever identified with her lawsuits against former producer Dr. Luke, alleging sexual assault and battery/harassment, emotional abuse, shady business practices and more. Nearly a decade after the suits were settled out of court, Kesha weighs in with one of her strongest albums, . — yes the title is just a period, featuring fearless funny tunes like the maximalist rap/pop "Boy Crazy." Campy disco-besotted collective Scissor Sisters were genre- and gender-bending long before it was mainstream-ish. Rose Gray knits club beats and sugary pop with soulful vocals.



Kesha
Photo by Raph PH
8/5



Duane Powell of Gravitate
Courtesy of Duane Powell
8/1





Belis Photo by Gabriella Larson

SOUTHERN BEL

Rapper and singer Belis returns home and rediscovers her voice

BY PAT MORAN

Bryce Gotta opens the video for her latest single "Gucci" in an abandoned industrial park at night. Illuminated by a pulsing searchlight, Gotta, who raps, sings and crafts sensual, relatable and mysterious songs as Belis, glances over her shoulder. Her expression is inscrutable, like Mona Lisa without the smile. Is she giving the viewer a come-hither look, a wordless challenge or something else?

As an artist, Belis is similarly complex. The progeny of a musical family — her grandmother performed in a French Cajun band — she learned to play piano and guitar, sang in church choir and began recording and posting her original music online at age 16. Then, at age 17, she was struck down with a debilitating disease.

While most of her peers were socializing and going to high school, Belis was relearning how to speak and sing.

The "Gucci" song and video seem to reflect a pensive ambiguity informed by Belis' health crisis, a sense that safety and risk are never far apart. As slightly eerie, Farfisa organ-style keyboards wobble and waver, skittering trap beats stutter and Belis strides through the abandoned complex.

Facing the camera, she conjures with rippling hand gestures that both beckon and hold the viewer at bay. Belis' signature high-pitched, slightly slurred vocals are an instrument in the mix, with slippery syllables threatening to dissolve into harmonics. Her sweet melodic voice belies the bold self assurance and sense of adventure in her lyrics.

"I love it when they're cheerin'/ Scream it louder and louder and louder/ Are you down?/ I'm gonna make some noise..."

Like much of Belis's recent work, "Gucci" is fluid, assured and personal. It merges the processed production and high energy of 2010-era hyper pop with the melodicism and deft lyricism of early 2000's indie pop and the rhythms, rhymes and poetic impact of hip-hop and trap music.

When warranted, as in "Gucci," Belis is not above a bit of shit-talking.

"Aye I heard it through the wire/ That she broke your trust prior/ Her whole life sound like satire..."

While the production on the song is layered and polished, the accompanying video boasts a rude, run-and-gun vitality. Shot in NoDa by her friend Deven Knight, Belis knocked out the edits on the visuals herself and threw it online.

"'Gucci' was a zero-dollar budget thing," Belis says. "I [was] getting bored in the house. I really want[ed] to go outside and give something to YouTube."

On July 18, nearly three months after the "Gucci" video dropped, Belis premiered her new video for "Pretty Without the R," a song she originally recorded in 2023 in collaboration with Estonian indie-pop composer and performer Destroy Boring.

The tune recently hit over 1 million streams. A day later, on July 19, Belis returned to Los Angeles, a city she called home for four years, and played a gig as part of her summer 2025 Third Times the Charm tour. The tour will take her to Snug Harbor on July 26.

The tour will lead into the release of her debut full-length album, *East Coast Baby*.

Belis regains her voice and creates her sound

Belis' current flurry of artistry and activity is all the more impressive because of the health obstacles she's had to overcome in recent years. It started eight years ago when one side of her face went numb.

"In 2017, I had my first neurological issue," Belis remembers. "The left side of my face was paralyzed. I couldn't feel anything."

At 17 years old, Belis was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS), a chronic, often unpredictable autoimmune disease that affects the central nervous system and can cause muscle weakness, fatigue, coordination difficulties and cognitive changes.

She didn't know anyone who was going through similar hardships.

"Your friends are like, 'Your face looks fucked up. What happened? Did you do drugs?'" Belis says. "I didn't look like myself or feel like myself."

Distraught and feeling isolated, Belis stopped going to classes at Hough High School in Cornelius. She continued her studies online, eventually graduating via remote classwork, a process that only added to the isolation.

The experience did have one silver lining: It gave Belis plenty of time to work on her music. MS had no effect on Belis' pitch or range, but diction was a different matter.

"When your cheek goes paralyzed, you have to move your [facial] muscles differently to talk," she notes. One result is Belis' signature vocal slur, giving new meaning to the term "mumble rap."

"My words [can be] unintelligible," she says. "You can't make them out sometimes."

By 2019, Belis had gained a social media following, which helped her find and connect with others who were either living with MS or knew someone who was.

"Relating to people online was useful because I didn't know anyone in real life that was also going through what I was dealing with at the time," she said.

Belis says her MS has been under control since 2019. While she was recovering she had devised her sound, which she describes as influenced by early 2000s pop and indie pop as well as by rap and trap music from 2010-20.

"Charlotte has a diverse community," Belis maintains. "I got into a bunch of different styles of music and I wanted to make my own [style] that was a mixture of all of it."

In the process, Belis realized that her music could be more than a passion project.

"I wanted to do more [with music] than what I've seen my family do, like take it to another level," she notes.

Having built a committed online following, Belis saw some of her songs go viral on Twitter. She started getting offers for record deals and made trips to New York and L.A. to meet with record company representatives.

In Los Angeles, the independent West Hollywood-based label Amigo Records (Kim Petras, Joy Oladokun) brought Belis and some producers she had worked with previously into a studio to create the song and video "Intel."

Blonde in the video, bedecked in bejeweled eyeshadow, and moving across glistening backgrounds, the usually dark-haired Belis may look different to fans in the "Intel" visuals.

The song, however, is definitely hers, with a straight-forward yet ethereal rap flow, ticking slippery beats and wobbly interstellar electronics.

"I made that song just thinking about what my future could be like, and what I would be leaving behind in Charlotte if I moved," Belis says. "I was questioning if I actually wanted to [move], and just how that made me feel."

In 2019, Belis signed with Amigo and has remained with them ever since. Soon after the signing, she moved to L.A., as it made more sense to be in the same city as her label, availing herself to its resources.

"I didn't have a team in Charlotte at the time, " Belis remembers. "I was young and wanted some direction. I was trying to find it out there."

Her Hollywood experiment lasted four years.

"It taught me a lot about what I want out of my life and my music, and what is fulfilling to me," Belis says. "And it's not Hollywood. I don't like the parties and the social ladder climbing."

With the L.A. scene proving not as wholesome as she hoped, Belis started building a team back in Charlotte, with an eye toward moving back to her hometown.

Collaborations, returning home and hitting the road

While in L.A., Belis discovered that she enjoyed doing features, or guest spots, with other artists. The collaboration with Destroy Boring, "Pretty Without the R," is just one tune off *place4us*, a full album Belis recorded with the Estonian composer in 2023.

Belis also guested on "Clear Conscience," a tune by dream-pop/noise artist BOMBEI.exe., Seoul-based electronic artist 404's single "NUMB U" and more.

Belis says most of her features are paid commissions, a side hustle to help pay for her own tours, which she plans, books and puts together with no input or financial support from her label.

"[Features] give me the money to go out and play music for people," Belis notes. "I also get to meet new people online and collaborate with people [whose music] I might not have known about before."

Belis does some features just for fun, like her collaboration with pop artist Mia Gladstone.

Belis' interlude on Gladstone's witty, wicked parody of internet culture, "Talking Online," is like an unexpected oasis — the eye in the center of the song's whirlwind take-down of online stalking, over-sexualization, inappropriate DMs and sham mental health interventions.

Her appearance on the song gave Belis an opportunity to address the sexism she encounters as a woman rapper in the music industry.

She recalls going into studios where men would assume — and act — like she was a girlfriend and not an artist.

"Overall the music scene is more inclusive to women now, especially in the rap scene, [but sexism] definitely still happens," Belis says.

Nowadays, she avoids such issues by surrounding herself with a team of trustworthy friends and colleagues.



Belis will perform at Snug Harbor on July 26. Photo by Gabriella Larson

After moving back to Charlotte in January 2024, Belis started recording with her friend and engineer JStacks at his private studio in Mint Hill. All of her merchandise is printed by Gordo Martinez In NoDa and Gabriella Larson does all her photography.

Seven months later, in August, Belis premiered the video for "Normally," a song that will appear on her forthcoming debut album *East Coast Baby*.

Shot in Dilworth, the pensive, painterly video depicts Belis walking, almost drifting, in a hazy dreamlike reverie through a darkened house.

Her high vocals suggest an alluring siren's song, not about a temptress that draws men to their doom but the mutual, often inexplicable attraction that pulls opposites together in a relationship that may be ill-fated from the start.

"It's my favorite song off this upcoming album," Belis says. "It's about having a crush on somebody that's a little different than you and doesn't see things in your perspective."

The "Gucci" video, depicting Belis' alternating day-and-night explorations of an urban wasteland, dropped in April 2025. She says the propulsive tune reflects her thoughts and feelings about coming home.

"That song is about moving out of L.A. and things I didn't like [there], like gossip and drugs," she says. "When I got away from all that, my energy level went up. So, I wanted the song to be high-energy."

The new video for "Pretty Without the R," Belis' 2023 collaboration with Destroy Boring, dropped on July 18.

The elliptical, celestial-sounding song suggests the music of the spheres, the harmonious sounds that astronomer Ptolemy (100-170 A.D.) said emanated from invisible crystalline spheres that moved all we see in the night skies.

In contrast, the luminous tune's lyrics suggest a put down of a formerly trusted but now unreliable friend.

In the video, Belis hangs out with girlfriends as the camera spins and prowls restlessly around the table where they're seated.

Suddenly, she's riding with a guy in a sports car, then standing in a parking lot at night while the car spins its wheels and burns rubber. The effect is disorienting, dreamy and disquieting.

Meanwhile, Belis has been putting her reclaimed energy to good use. She recently revisited L.A. to play a show on her Third Times the Charm tour. As the name indicates, this is Belis' third DIY tour.

Her first tour in summer 2023 took nearly half a year to plan.

"I just reached out to everybody that has ever hit me up to book a show and [said], 'Can I come play at your venue?'" she recalled.

After micromanaging every detail, Belis felt incredibly stressed, but the tour itself, in which Belis billed with local acts from the cities she played in, was a success.

For the second venture in summer 2024, Belis invited Mia Gladstone to hit the road with her. Again, they brought out local acts to fill the bill at each venue.

The current tour kicked off in early July with a show at a rooftop bar in Brooklyn and will include Belis' first stop in Texas.

After three years of running annual summer tours, Belis says she's gotten a handle on them, with a better sense of what she's physically able to do before she gets tapped out and tired.

She's also learned where to play, where she is likely to get the biggest audiences and most receptive crowds.

On July 26, the tour comes to Snug Harbor, Belis' favorite Charlotte venue.

"Their sound people are so helpful and the staff is so kind to artists," Belis says. "As someone who manages their own events, I really appreciate that."

Moving forward, Belis says she'd like to do less planning and managing of her own DIY tours and transition into playing larger festival gigs.

"I don't have to manage [a festival]," she notes. "I just have to show up and it's a platform to get new listeners."

Once the current tour ends, Belis plans to drop three more singles from her upcoming album before releasing it in full. She doesn't have a release date for the album yet.

Like "Gucci," *East Coast Baby* is about coming home, after spending so much time away, Belis says.

"It's about things I miss, things I don't like and things I love," she adds. "It's things I learned that inspire me to try something new."

For Belis, change and growth seem the only constants in a career defined by contrasts — ethereal sounds vs down-to-earth concerns, and tangible emotions compared to mysterious, if sometimes hard-to-decipher words.

Like the best and most inquisitive artists, Belis may just be touching the infinite from time to time, delivering songs and sounds that can inspire listeners to do anything they can dream.

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SOUNDWAVE

WEDNESDAY JULY 23

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Ryan Adams (Knight Theater)
Actor Observer w/ Water Culture, Dull Mourning, YTHGRP (The Milestone)
HiDAZE w/ M143, Ghost Brain, Alright (Snug Harbor)
Hatebreed (The Underground)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Timothy Chandler (Comet Grill)
Josh Daniel, Jim Brock & Kerry Brooks (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
JAZZ/BLUES
Jazz Night feat. DJAM Collectve (Camp North End)
FUNK/JAM BAND/REGGAE
Widely Grown (Evening Muse)
COVER BANDS
Everyday People (Sly & the Family Stone tribute) (Middle C Jazz)
OPEN MIC
Singer/Songwriter Open Mic (The Rooster)*
Open Hearts Open Mic (Starlight on 22nd)

THURSDAY JULY 24

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Todd Rundgren (Knight Theater)
Survival Tactics w/ .Memoria, Guard Dog, Doshinthegiant, Youngdeathgod (The Milestone)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Whiskey Myers (Skyla Amphitheatre)
FUNK/JAM BAND/REGGAE
Shana Blake's Musical Menagerie (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
JAZZ/BLUES
DSG (Middle C Jazz)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
EST Gee (The Underground)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Sam Wilson Norris (Comet Grill)

FRIDAY JULY 25

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Seven Year Witch w/ The Simplicity (Evening Muse)
Bridgeburner w/ Buried Truth, King of the Monsters, The Johnstown Flood, Division Point (The Milestone)
The Jokes Aside w/ string lights, Samuel Samuel (Petra's)
Goo Goo Dolls w/ Dashboard Confessional (Skyla Amphitheatre)
Nozen w/ Skewer Rat, Y'all're (Snug Harbor)
JAZZ/BLUES
Lindsey Webster (Middle C Jazz)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Neal Carter (Birdsong Brewing)
Kayla McKinney Band w/ Square Roots (Goldie's)
LATIN/WORLD
Intocable (Ovens Auditorium)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
The Eras Party (Amos' Southend)
Manifest Presents: Alignment (Blackbox Theater)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Erick Baker (Evening Muse)
Hudson Westbrook (The Underground)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
Dynasty w/ Janelle Sy'mone (Camp North End)
Badd Wolf (The Rooster)
COVER BANDS
School of Rock All-Stars (Snug Harbor)

SATURDAY JULY 26

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
shy blossom w/ Wilde Green (Evening Muse)
Nail Bite w/Dying Oath, Strange Culture, Sid Stratton (The Rooster)
The Campfire w/ Wine Mom, GoRyanGo (Starlight on 22nd)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Outlaw Music Festival (PNC Music Pavilion)
JAZZ/BLUES
Lindsey Webster (Middle C Jazz)
MUSICAL COMEDY
Weird Al Yankovic (Skyla Amphitheatre)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Valentino Khan (Blackbox Theater)
Dance Circle feat. Jihad Muhammad, Selectress Mizzkae (Cue @ Blackbox Theater)
BBMAK w/ Jessica Carter Altman (Evening Muse)
Digital Noir feat. DJ Spider, DJ Misstep, DJ Squeaky (The Milestone)
Belis w/ S6farie, Spook, Lil Degen, Depreston (Snug Harbor)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Ben Gatlin (Comet Grill)
Quinn Crowe (Primal Brewery)
COVER BANDS
Caligula Blushed (Smiths & Morrisey tribute) (Amos' Southend)
Chris Taylor & the Rumor w/ Pluto Duo (Goldie's)

SUNDAY JULY 27

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Reign of Z w/ Drown the Deep, Messy Stains, Leaving Echoes (The Milestone)
Parkway Drive w/ Killswitch Engage, I Prevail, Beartooth (PNC Music Pavilion)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Soulful Sounds feat. Guy Nowchild, Cree, J-3, Vincent Tyson, James Bethea (Starlight on 22nd)
LATIN/WORLD
Chuck Prophet and His Cumbia Shoes (Neighborhood Theatre)
COVER BANDS
Watkins Glen Summer Jam '73 Revisited (Visulite Theatre)

MONDAY JULY 28

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Spiritual Chaos w/ Novumora, Reverya, Mourning Lotus, The White Horse (The Milestone)
JAZZ/BLUES
The Bill Hanna Legacy Jazz Session (Petra's)
OPEN MIC
Find Your Muse Open Mic (Evening Muse)

TUESDAY JULY 29

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Red Rocking Chair (Comet Grill)*
Bocanegra w/ Solemn Shapes, Jack Phantom & the Exquisite Corpse Cabaret, CFFNDRGGR (The Milestone)
Rod Stewart (PNC Music Pavilion)
OPEN MIC
Open Mic Night feat. The Smokin J's (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*

WEDNESDAY JULY 30

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
We Came As Romans (The Fillmore)
Pearl w/ Oh! You Pretty Things, Lily of The Sea, I Hate Dave (Snug Harbor)
Descendents (The Underground)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Josh Daniel, Jim Brock & Kerry Brooks (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
JAZZ/BLUES
Chrishawn Darby Quartet (Middle C Jazz)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
The Break Plans w/ Caught Off Guard (Evening Muse)
OPEN MIC
Singer/Songwriter Open Mic (The Rooster)*
Open Hearts Open Mic (Starlight on 22nd)

THURSDAY JULY 31

FUNK/JAM BANDS/REGGAE
The Fool Hardies w/ Pam Taylor & the Flyin' V (Evening Muse)
Shana Blake's Musical Menagerie (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
Miracle of Blood w/ Bog Loaf, Auroras Hope, Goatse (The Milestone)
Carver Commodore w/ William Hinson & the Echolocations (Neighborhood Theatre)
20 Watt Tombstone w/ King Cackle (Snug Harbor)
JAZZ/BLUES
TMG (Middle C Jazz)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Vince Gill (Ovens Auditorium)
Mandako w/ Propolis, M143 (Petra's)

FRIDAY AUG. 1

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
The Lenny Federal Band (Comet Grill)*
Glenn Strange w/ Modern Mammals (Evening Muse)
Overturn w/ Conflict of Interest, Crooked Cult, Shindig, Red Eye (The Milestone)
Paint Fumes w/ The Girls (Snug Harbor)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Gravitate (Petra's)
JAZZ/BLUES
Jonathan Butler (Carolina Theatre)
Art Sherrod & Lin Rountree (Middle C Jazz)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
An Evening with Cam & Clee (Evening Muse)
Anna J Band w/ RC Roadshow (Goldie's)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Pony Bradshaw (Neighborhood Theatre)
Thomas Rhett (PNC Music Pavilion)
COVER BANDS
Shotguns N Roses w/ Barnstormers (Amos' Southend)
Rize of the D (Tenacious D tribute) (The Rooster)
The Broken Hearts (Tom Petty tribute) (The Underground)
Jerry Garcia Band Cover Band (Visulite Theatre)

SATURDAY AUG. 2

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Tiny City w/ Campanula, Chase Zilba (Evening Muse)
Monster Wave w/ Adrianne Blanks & The Oracles (Evening Muse)
Mafia w/ Fault Reset, Divinicide, Jawjacked (The Milestone)
AJR (PNC Music Pavilion)
Wet Hot Punk Rock Summer 2025 (The Rooster)
Impending Joy w/ The Coyotes, The Silver Doors (Snug Harbor)
Modern Alibi w/ The Band Light (Visulite Theatre)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Kream (Blackbox Theater)
Denim & Durags (Cue @ Blackbox Theater)
Latin Dance Party (Salud Cerveceria)*
Molly Santana (The Underground)
JAZZ/BLUES
David Benoit (Middle C Jazz)
MIXED-GENRE/EXPERIMENTAL/FESTIVAL
Woody w/ Dirty Flowers, Sinners & Saints
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Beatfreaq (Starlight on 22nd)
LATIN/WORLD
Sabin Rai & The Pharaoh (Amos' Southend)
COVER BANDS
Joey Boretti Band w/ Abbey Elmore Band (Goldie's)
Grateful Dudes (Heist Brewery)

SUNDAY AUG. 3

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Stinkbugg w/ Septix, Family Friend, The Ruff'tons, Saca Moco, Buried Asunder (The Milestone)
JAZZ/BLUES
Open Blues Jam feat. DejaBlues (Heist Brewery & Barrel Arts)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Vandoliers w/ Nate Bergman (Amos' Southend)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Hazy Sunday (Petra's)
COVER BANDS
Christine Cunningham (India Arie tribute) (Middle C Jazz)
Lovesong (The Cure tribute) (The Underground)

MONDAY AUG. 4

JAZZ/BLUES
The Bill Hanna Legacy Jazz Session (Petra's)
OPEN MIC
Find Your Muse Open Mic feat. MA (Evening Muse)

TUESDAY AUG. 5

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Red Rocking Chair (Comet Grill)*
ITtheverb w/ Schiavoni & Friends (Petra's)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Kesha w/ Scissor Sisters (PNC Music Pavilion)
OPEN MIC
Tosco Music Open Mic (Evening Muse)
Open Mic Night feat. The Smokin J's (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*

*WEEKLY EVENTS THAT MAY BE SUBJECT TO CHANGE.
VISIT QCNERVE.COM FOR THE FULL SOUNDWAVE LISTING

QUEEN CITY NERVE

The Soundwave is Queen City Nerve's comprehensive guide to live music happening in Charlotte every night of the week. This list is pulled together by our editorial team every other week from combing through Charlotte music venue calendars and separated by genre. None of these listings are paid advertisements. We understand that many non-traditional music venues offer live music like coffee shops, breweries, art galleries, community events and more.

This list may not have every event listed. To have a venue included in the editorial compilation of this list, please send an email to info@qcnerve.com with the subject "Soundwave."



Jazz N Soul MUSIC

THIS SUMMER FROM JAZZ N SOUL MUSIC

FRIDAY AUGUST 1ST

JONATHAN BUTLER

WITH TONI TUPPONCE
FT. A SIGN OF THE TIMES

CAROLINA THEATRE

MIDDLE C JAZZ



FRIDAY AUGUST 8TH

ADRIAN CRUTCHFIELD AND CEELO GREEN

CAROLINA THEATRE



EVERY SUNDAY
Soulful Sunday Concert Series



EVERY THURSDAY
Cool Like That Concert Series



EVERY 1ST FRIDAY
First Friday Concert Series



EVERY 3RD FRIDAY
Artist Collective Open Mic

AT THE JAM SHAK AT ROZZELLES FERRY LANDING



Rob Clement with his late wife, Franki, and their children before Franki's passing. Photo courtesy of MHC

FAMILY MAN

Rob Clement bounces back from tragedy to transform Meshugganah's business model

BY ANNIE KEOUGH

When Meshugganah owner Rob Clement's wife, Franki, was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer in 2022, Rob took a step back from the food industry.

He had built up his name in Charlotte's food scene, becoming a beloved chef in The Porter's House before launching his own venture with Meshugganah. But as much as he loved the kitchen, his family came first.

In January of this year, Franki passed away at just 35 years old following a courageous battle. Rob was forced to reevaluate his priorities once again, faced with balancing his personal and professional life as a young widower — a single father of two in an industry that required his physical presence in the kitchen at nearly all hours.

"It's just very difficult to cook and be a family man," Clement said. "It's a difficult balance to achieve."

Since his wife's death, he's explored his options in returning to the workforce, both in the kitchen and fully outside of the restaurant industry. What he's landed on is a new venture that allows him to capitalize on his 20+ years of experience in restaurants without demanding the hours that come with running one.

Enter Clement's newest business model: Meshugganah Hospitality Consulting.

A tragic loss and the transformation that followed

Originally a Jewish pop-up deli launched out of Free Range Brewing in 2020, Meshugganah's famous pastrami sandwiches could be found in breweries, coffee shops and similar spaces across the city in its early years.

Building on the popularity of the pop-up, Clement signed a lease to open Meshugganah's first brick-and-mortar location. After that fell through in the 11th hour, Clement operated in a ghost kitchen inside City Kitch, a shared-use commercial kitchen in west Charlotte, until Franki's diagnosis in early 2022.

"When that happened, I kind of put everything on pause, wanting to be available for my wife and for my kids," Clement told Queen City Nerve. "I kind of just took a step back and reevaluated everything, tried to figure out how to be the best husband and father I could be and food kind of took a back seat to that."

During Franki's battle with cancer, Rob worked with prior employer Jon Dressler of Rare Roots Hospitality — the restaurant group behind establishments like Dressler's, Fin & Fino, The Porter's House and more — to run Meshugganah as a mainstay within Joan's Bakery & Deli, which opened in Midtown in December 2023.

After fighting valiantly for four years, Franki Clement passed on Jan. 8, 2025. Rob shut down Meshugganah in March.

Having taken a year-long break from the business's social media page, he took to Instagram on July 16 to announce the reason behind his hiatus and the his plan moving forward.

"...[Franki] was the fiercest person I've ever known — my partner in life and in business — and the heart behind everything Meshugganah stood for," Clement said in the post. "In the wake of that loss, I've had to rebuild. As a father. As a human. And now, as a professional — on new terms."

Through his wife's illness and in the wake of her death, Clement did a lot of soul searching to figure out what exactly makes him happy in life.

As a father of two, the common denominator he continued to come to was his family.

The first week that Clement went back to work after Franki's passing, his 7-year-old daughter Calliope came down with strep throat. Family members who had been in town to help since his wife's death were no longer there, and Clement quickly realized he couldn't be in two places at once.

Being physically present was a requirement in the bakery, something that would take away from the time he spent with his kids.

"I realized that it was going to be very difficult for me to be physically at the bakery and then also available for my kids when they needed me in a time where they probably need me more than ever," he said. "So I decided to take a little break, which I did, and then since taking that break to kind of regather myself and figure out what was next."

During that time, Clement began interviewing for jobs outside of the food industry in an attempt to be more present for his kids.



Clement's pastrami is famous in the Charlotte culinary scene. Courtesy of Meshugganah Hospitality Consulting



Rob Clement Photo courtesy of Meshugganah Hospitality Consulting

"I kept struggling with the fact that I was trying to make a resume that had only food experience work in the non-food world," he said. "I would interview with people and I find myself just talking about restaurants and the way they work and the way they operate and how I was a part of that."

After countless interviews, Clement came to the realization that he could still balance a job in the food industry while being present for his kids, he just needed to be creative about how to do it.

While he may not be able to be physically present in front of a stove anymore, that didn't mean he couldn't be a part of a restaurant's daily operations.

When an opportunity to participate in restaurant consulting arose, Clement jumped on it.

With 20 years of kitchen experience working in several successful restaurants — and a few failures — Clement's firsthand knowledge of the restaurant business isn't going to waste in his new venture.

Learning the ropes in a new venture

Since Meshugganah's transformation from a pop-up deli shop to a hospitality consulting firm, Clement has worked with several businesses — varying from restaurants to food trucks to breweries — to provide a fresh set of eyes and guidance for their business behind the scenes.

Clement said there are two folds to the services Meshugganah now provides — one for new businesses and one for existing establishments.

Clement takes on new business projects on a case-by-case basis. Every food-related business has different needs from a consultant ranging from full menu development and organization to hiring and training staff.

He's purposeful about ensuring he can help each of his clients reach their full potential.

"As people come to me for different opportunities, I reevaluate what the scope of my work is and what I'm capable of doing," he said.

When existing businesses come to Clement, he focuses more on providing a fresh perspective on their issues from someone who's been through either the same problem or a similar one.

Using his experience working with successful restaurants comes in handy but Clement said the experiences he's had in businesses that failed are more important to his consulting work.

Looking back on his faults with Meshugganah, for example, allows Clement to see the mistakes that led to him being unable to open the brick-and-mortar restaurant.

"Those were all learning experiences and they've made me better at what I do," Clement said. "I'm grateful for the journey I've been on and I'm hopeful for the future and what I can help do for people in the business that I love."

Although the business is still in its infancy stages, Clement has already worked with established businesses to update their menus, retrain staff, develop hospitality analytic programs and track inventory.

"People tell me what they need and I come up with a strategy on how I can help them achieve their goals," he said.

Consulting also gives him the creative freedom that he lacked in Meshugganah's former concept.

The deli was famous for its pastrami sandwiches. No matter what changes Clement implemented to keep the business successful, he would have to continue making pastrami sandwiches, he said.

Now, Clement is excited to be a part of creating and expanding upon different menus and taking on multiple projects at a time while helping business owners make connections among existing clients.

While Clement couldn't tell Queen City Nerve the exact projects he's working on, he's excited to announce them soon.

"I want to do good in the industry," Clement said. "I'm very passionate about the industry, and I want to do my part to help small businesses, especially nowadays when it's so difficult to operate a restaurant in today's climate."

Making time for family

While starting his business from scratch, Clement is working more hours than he was while in the kitchen. The difference, however, is that he's able to be more flexible with that time.

While his kids were in school, Clement would wake up at 5:30 a.m., get his kids ready for and to school then work while they were away.

Although some aspects of the job such as training staff have to be done in person, Clement estimated that he's able to do 85% of his work remotely.

After he picks the kids up from school and gets them to bed, he's back on his computer to finish his work.

"I'm there for my kids," he said. "I can be available on the weekends ... at night for dinner and bedtime and all those things that are so important to raising your kids."

Clement is also able to cook for his kids instead of slaving away behind a restaurant stove on nights and weekends. That alone wasn't a capability he had when he started Meshugganah the first time, he said.

"My kids are first and foremost," he said. "It's being able to show them that there's ways to be resilient in the worst possible times and show them that life doesn't always deal you the hand you expect, but you can figure it out and have a life that you enjoy and that you're happy with and proud of if you work hard toward it."

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HOROSCOPE

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JULY 23 - JULY 29

ARIES (March 21 to April 19) A misunderstanding tests the temperament of the sometimes headstrong Aries. But instead of blowing your top, take time for a pleasant diversion while things cool down.

TAURUS (April 20 to May 20) A workplace problem could make the divine Bovine see red, but talk it out before you consider walking out. Some surprising facts emerge that could change your earlier focus.

GEMINI (May 21 to June 20) You face a choice between ignoring your uneasy feelings about your relationship with a special person and demanding explanations. A close friend offers wise counsel.

CANCER (June 21 to July 22) A change you'd been hoping for carries an unexpected complication. Stay the course, and things will work themselves out. Also, be sure to make time for family and friends.

LEO (July 23 to August 22) Aspects favor spending time with loved ones. On the job, new ideas are generally welcomed, but some demands for changes could cause problems. Be ready to defend your choices.

VIRGO (August 23 to September 22) Good news: A workplace problem is close to being resolved with results that should please everyone. Take time off to indulge in your love of fun and games.

LIBRA (September 23 to October 22) Most of the time, you are the most unflappable person around. But be ready to be thrown off-balance in the nicest way when Cupid takes aim in your direction.

SCORPIO (October 23 to November 21) It's not often when someone tries to "sting" the sharp-witted Scorpion, but it can happen. Continue to be skeptical about anything that seems too good to be true.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22 to December 21) Your strong sense of self-esteem helps you serve as a role model for someone who needs personal reassurances. Your efforts pay off in an unexpected way.

CAPRICORN (December 22 to January 19) Someone close considers revealing a painful secret. Withhold judgment. Instead, open your generous heart and offer dollops of your love and understanding.

AQUARIUS (January 20 to February 18) Your talents as a peacemaker are called upon once more as an old problem reemerges with new complications. Move cautiously to avoid falling into hidden traps.

PISCES (February 19 to March 20) Your artistic side is enhanced with the reception given to your new project. Use this success as encouragement toward fulfilling your larger goals.

BORN THIS WEEK: Your natural sense of leadership is combined with a deep sense of responsibility. People trust you to give them both guidance and understanding.

JULY 30 - AUG. 5

ARIES (March 21 to April 19) Technology snafus tax your patience. But before you throw your computer or other bulky hardware into the trash, take a deep breath and call someone knowledgeable for help.

TAURUS (April 20 to May 20) Don't be too upset if your generosity goes unappreciated. These things happen, and rather than brood over it, you should move on. Meanwhile, a new friend could open up some exciting possibilities.

GEMINI (May 21 to June 20) A loved one helps you get through an especially difficult emotional situation. Afterward, spend the weekend immersed in the restorative powers of music and the other arts.

CANCER (June 21 to July 22) You are pretty much in charge of what you want to do this week. However, it might be a good idea to keep an open mind regarding suggestions from people you know you can trust.

LEO (July 23 to August 22) Another chance to shine (something always dear to the Lion's heart) might be resented by others. But you earned it, so enjoy it! The weekend brings news about a family member.

VIRGO (August 23 to September 22) A suggestion that never took off could become viable again. Dust it off, update it if necessary, and resubmit it. In your personal life, a new relationship takes an "interesting" turn.

LIBRA (September 23 to October 22) Confronting a new challenge to your stated position could work to your advantage. You can settle all doubts once you're able to present a solid defense that is backed up by equally solid facts.

SCORPIO (October 23 to November 21) You enjoy doing nice things for others, but this is a good time to do something nice for yourself as well. You might want to start by planning a super-special getaway weekend.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22 to December 21) Some changes you feel like you need to make might be reasonable and appropriate. But others might lead to new problems. Think things through carefully before you act.

CAPRICORN (December 22 to January 19) Good instincts usually keep the sure-footed Goat on the right path. What others might see as stubbornness on your part reflects your good sense of what is worth supporting.

AQUARIUS (January 20 to February 18) A period of introspection could lead to some surprising conclusions and equally surprising changes involving a number of your long-held positions on several issues.

PISCES (February 19 to March 20) The financially practical Pisces might want to take a sensible approach to spending as well as investing. Being prudent now pays off later. In other news, a romantic situation moves into another phase.

BORN THIS WEEK: Your sense of curiosity keeps you continually alert for what's new about people, places and things. You know how to stay on top of trends or even start them yourself.

GO FIGURE!

The idea of Go Figure is to arrive at the figures given at the bottom and right-hand columns of the diagram by following the arithmetic signs in the order they are given (that is, from left to right and top to bottom). Use only the numbers below the diagram to complete its blank squares and use each of the nine numbers only once.

	+		×		= 44
-		+		-	
	+		÷		= 12
×		+		+	
	+		×	9	= 72
= 6		= 16		= 12	

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

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Even Exchange

by Donna Pettman

Each numbered row contains two clues and two 6-letter answers. The two answers differ from each other by only one letter, which has already been inserted. For example, if you exchange the A from MASTER for an I, you get MISTER. Do not change the order of the letters.

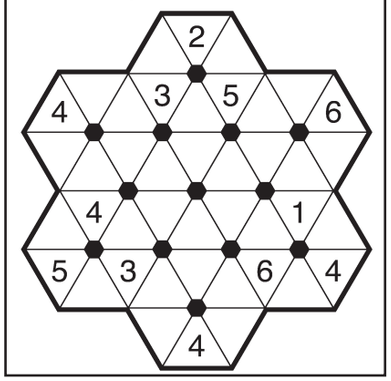
1. Bowling score	__ __ __ R __	Gardening tool	__ __ __ D __
2. Pack animal	D __ __ __ __ __	Curious George, e.g.	M __ __ __ __ __
3. Twig	__ __ A __ __ __	Late morning meal	__ __ U __ __ __
4. Steam engine	__ R __ __ __	Sawyer's creator	__ W __ __ __
5. Calm, quiet	__ __ D __ __ __	Governing body	__ __ N __ __ __
6. Linguini or ziti	__ __ __ __ A	Glue	__ __ __ __ E
7. Spring festival	E __ __ __ __ __	Quicker	F __ __ __ __ __
8. Postage sticker	__ T_ __ __ __	Rascal	__ C __ __ __
9. Attractiveness	__ __ __ U __ __	Ned or Warren	__ __ __ T __ __
10. Concise	__ __ R __ __	Nervous	__ __ N __ __

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SNOWFLAKES

by Japheth Light

There are 13 black hexagons in the puzzle. Place the numbers 1 - 6 around each of them. No number can be repeated in any partial hexagon shape along the border of the puzzle.



CryptoQuote

AXYDLBAAXR
is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, **A** is used for the three L's, **X** for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each week the code letters are different.

FPACA TM YU AAB MU MEQBB HNF TF PUWAM FU HAVUEA Q SPQBA.

— ZACEQY WCUJACH

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CryptoQuip

This is a simple substitution cipher in which each letter used stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Solution is accomplished by trial and error.

Clue: **Z** equals **P**

EG MUJ ZAJZOA KWA ZOKIIEIP K VJIXZEWKVT UDEOA PJOGEIP, KWA MDAT JI K VJOOSXEJI VJSWXA?

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TRIVIA TEST
BY FIFI RODRIGUEZ

1. MOVIES: How many dream levels does the crew enter in the film "Inception"?
2. U.S. STATES: Which state's nickname is "Treasure State"?
3. LITERATURE: Which 1969 novel begins with the line, "All this happened, more or less"?
4. ANIMAL KINGDOM: What is a baby horse called?
5. ACRONYMS: What does the acronym GIF stand for?
6. U.S. PRESIDENTS: Which president served the shortest term?
7. TELEVISION: In which fictional town is "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" set?
8. GEOGRAPHY: What international city's nickname is "The Eternal City"?
9. GENERAL KNOWLEDGE: How many time zones exist on Earth?
10. SCIENCE: Who is known as the father of medicine?

SUDOKU
BY LINDA THISTLE

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	3	6	4	1	7		5	2
5	4		2	9	8	3		
	8	2					4	7
		8						5
	1	5			2			3
	7			3	5	6		8
					3		6	9
8	5	9	6		1			
						7		1

PLACE A NUMBER IN THE EMPTY BOXES IN SUCH A WAY THAT EACH ROW ACROSS, EACH COLUMN DOWN AND EACH SMALL 9-BOX SQUARE CONTAINS ALL OF THE NUMBERS ONE TO NINE.

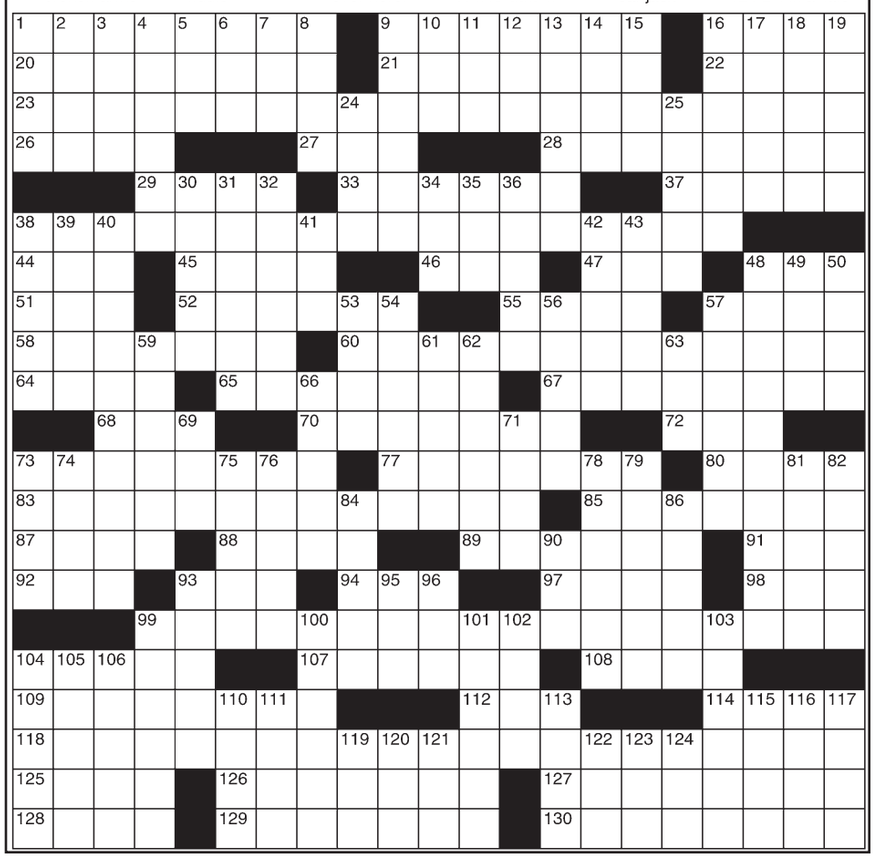


CROSSWORD
"WHERE'S THE BEEF?"

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ACROSS
1 Predicaments
9 Metallic car trims
16 Sporty German cars
20 Cosmos
21 What a flushed person has
22 Uncommon
23 Start of a riddle
26 Advance, as money
27 Japanese pond fish
28 Bad with musical pitches
29 Letter-shaped girder
33 Feared fly
37 Wine barrels
38 Riddle, part 2
44 Before now
45 Indent keys
46 Poodle, e.g.
47 Org. fighting trafficking
48 Particular mag. edition
51 Letter following 36-Down
52 Supports for broken arms
55 Supersonic speed unit
57 Scissor cut
58 Fetuses-to-be
60 Riddle, part 3
64 BLT offerer
65 Listen (to)
67 Post-workout discomfort
68 Swelled head
70 Queued up
72 Comedic sort
73 Like the pope
77 Trattoria rice dish
80 Wee bits
83 Riddle, part 4
85 Ottawa's province
87 Seoul soldiers
88 "A little dab'll —"
89 Noisy napper
91 Marina — Rey
92 Corrosive cleanser
93 Place to input a PIN
94 Frat party dispenser
97 Language of Pakistan
98 — Fridays (restaurant)
99 End of the riddle
104 Father of Hector and Paris
107 Ready to go, as a car
108 Actor Dick Van —
109 Reaps
112 Spunk
114 Use a keypad
118 Riddle's answer
125 Beef cut
126 Attacked with a jump
127 Refrigeration slows it down
128 Paquin of "The Piano"
129 Intertwists
130 Tinkered (with)

DOWN
1 Two-in-one
2 Facts or stats
3 — fire under (roused)
4 No matter whether
5 Sea, to Jules
6 "Rocky III" actor
7 Bat wood
8 Try to find
9 Sailing outing
10 "You! Look over here!"
11 Nutrition fig.
12 Frequently, poetically
13 Lusterless photo surfaces
14 Cave sound
15 Not hidden
16 Like many white gowns
17 Features of zebras' necks
18 Inflict, as havoc
19 Medieval menials
24 Cousin of emo
25 Joe causing no jolt
30 Itsy- —
31 Like a clock with hands
32 Giovanni of "Avatar"
34 Roush of baseball
35 Albeit, for short
36 18th Greek letter
38 Abhorred
39 Best competitive effort, slangily
40 Surprised second look
41 IRS datum
42 Like Popeye and Rambo
43 Former anesthetic
48 Apropos of
49 Knights, e.g.
50 1974 CIA spoof flick
53 Pop's Stefani
54 Big scissors
56 "Plus" point
57 Hyundai model
59 The "R" of ERA
61 College "Eli"
62 Bracelet sites
63 Hem, e.g.
66 French spa city
69 "Nice one!"
71 Twelve p.m.
73 Key near Alt
74 Cry on a ship
75 Samsung or LG product
76 "Where — from ..."
78 Really hot
79 In the future
81 San — Padres
82 Not at all iffy
84 Made of a certain sturdy wood
86 Place for a car jack
90 "— Lips Are Sealed"
93 "Bibleman" star Willie
95 Nest nugget
96 "Aw, shucks"
99 Cuban capital
100 Sight-related
101 Simple putts
102 Greek Mars
103 In fine — (doing well)
104 Big city in Penna.
105 Betray by blabbing
106 Novelist Shaw
110 Store lure
111 Subsequently
113 "You! Look over here!"
115 Calendar unit
116 Calendar unit
117 — out a living (barely scraped by)
119 H.S. transcript stat
120 & so forth
121 "The Simpsons" tavern keeper
122 Fed. cleanup group
123 DeLuise of "Silent Movie"
124 Drink a little



NERVE ENDINGS

A PLACE FOR 'THE ROOM'

Don't let the algorithm ruin what makes weird art great

BY JOSHUA ROBBINS

Growing up in the late nineties and early 2000s, I spent countless weekends watching episodes of Mystery Science Theater 3000, which highlighted bizarre films like *Soul Taker*, *Merlin's Shop of Mystical Wonders*, *Mitchell* and *Werewolf* to name a few.

I had of course seen plenty of bad movies before discovering MST3K, but outside the lampooning the hosts would give each flick, I found myself enthralled with the movies the show would screen — obsessed even.

As the years progressed, I saw some of these campy movies hit the mainstream (Snakes on a Plane or Sharknado, for example) but the difference in appeal for something like *The Room* — the 2003 film that has become a tour de force as perhaps the most bizarre American movie of the 21st century and will screen at Independent Picture House on July 25-26 — is in intent.

Your Sharknados of the world winked at the camera while true auteurs like *The Room* director Tommy Wiseau or folks like Fred Olen Ray, Andy Sidaris, William Lustig and Larry Cohen provide windows into their souls through their work.

There's an authenticity you can feel when you turn on a movie made by folks like that and, while many of them understand the absurdity of their work, they're rarely if ever parodying the genre they represent.

Queen City Nerve staff writer Pat Moran is familiar with the so-bad-it's-good category of film, sometimes referred to as nanar.

In 1991, Moran wrote and starred in *Vampire Trailer Park*, in which a detective and a psychic investigate a series of murders at a trailer park and suspect that some of the residents are doing the killings (and they are vampires).

"Sometime in the early '90s Fred Olen Ray told me and my partner Steve Latshaw that, 'No one ever sets out to make a bad movie,'" Moran recalled to me. "Wiseau's reach exceeds his grasp, but at least he's reaching, and I find that endearing."

The Room is 100% Wiseau. Some of the choices in the movie can certainly be chalked up to amateurism in a first-time director, but that doesn't explain certain others such as the framed pictures of spoons.

Where else in life can we get these true snapshots of a singular mind? Less often than we used to, for sure.

I hate to break into the cliche "back in my day" bag, but even outside of film you once had pockets of this in culture — whether it was a local restaurant, independent music venues, street vendors or quirky roadside landmarks. Versions of this still exist and should be cherished.

There's a flattening of culture that happens when franchises and condominiums take over the landscape. I recall going to gift shops all over the country where I could pick up pieces specific to the region. What's replaced that is a vibe that there's one site where all gift shop items are ordered instead of local vendors and artists.

Now when I travel it's harder to tell what makes any specific area its own place. Every City, USA pushes that out in favor of symbols you recognize.

The same can be said in film. There's a certain look, a filter that pushes everything into the center. The algorithm favors what has succeeded before, so we chase a known vibe hoping to capitalize on what hits. You see versions of the same Instagram post, singles that use the same beat that worked in the last hit song, and recycled memes plastered on timelines over and over.

This is the sanding of the edges of what makes any one thing special.

That's not to say Starbucks isn't convenient and a pop song can't be transcendent, but it's important to take big swings outside of our comfort zones in order to create or experience great art.

As I spoke with Greg Sestero, who starred in *The Room* and will be at Independent Picture House to screen that and Wiseau's new film *Big Shark*, it was clear that he was driven by this same willingness to experiment.

"I had no idea what I was getting into," he insisted of his experience with *The Room*. "It was, you know, sort of helping a friend, making this movie. I just had to learn as much as I could and soak up the experience ... Movies are really hard, especially at that time, to get traction. So I really didn't expect anything at all from *The Room*."

I haven't been able to screen *Big Shark* ahead of the upcoming double feature, but in an age where every moment is shared in trailers and online videos, it's a refreshing thought knowing that I'll experience it for the first time in a room full of fans.

Sestero is looking forward to returning to IPH, where he screened *The Room* to mark the movie's 20th anniversary in 2023. He's been attending screenings like the one planned for Charlotte for two decades now, with *The Room* having become an absurd 21st-century version of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* complete with certain points in which the audience knows to call out together.

"At this point, I love sharing the movies with a grateful audience and a great venue with good people who appreciate crazy cinema, and it's just been a blast for the past couple of times," he said. "It's a chance to come and hang with friends and sell these movies in a great cinema. So, yeah it's just been a good time."

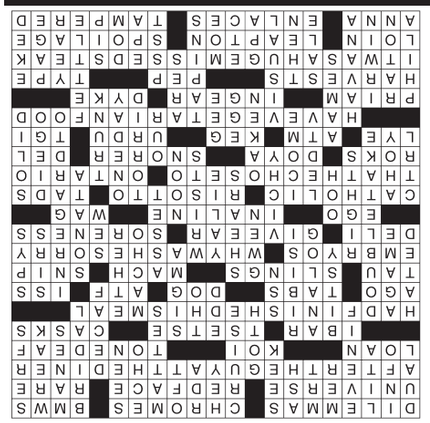
Places like Independent Picture House are also wholly unique, contributing something that isn't owned by a chain or a faceless multinational conglomerate who sells pesticides on the side. So while we still can (pointing at myself here, too) pick up a ticket and support local cinema.

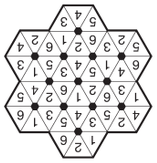
Greg Sestero will host a screening of The Room *with live commentary on Friday, July 25, at 7:30 p.m. and a double feature screening of* The Room *and* Big Shark *on Saturday, July 26 at 7:30 p.m. Visit independentpicturehouse.org to get tickers and visit qcnerve.com to read Joshua's full discussion with Sestero.*

INFO@QCNERVE.COM

PUZZLE ANSWERS

9	3	6	4	1	7	8	5	2
5	4	7	2	9	6	3	1	6
1	8	2	3	5	6	9	4	7
3	9	8	7	6	4	1	2	5
6	1	5	9	8	2	4	7	3
2	7	4	1	3	5	6	9	8
7	2	1	8	4	3	5	6	9
8	5	9	6	7	1	2	3	4
4	3	6	5	2	9	7	8	1





CryptoQuote
answer

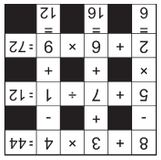
There is no eel so small but it hopes to become a whale.
— German proverb

CryptoQuip
answer

If two people are planning a conspiracy while golfing, are they on a collusion course?

Even Exchange
answers

1. Spare, Spade
2. Donkey, Monkey
3. Branch, Brunch
4. Train, Twain
5. Sedate, Senate
6. Pasta, Paste
7. Easter, Faster
8. Stamp, Scamp
9. Beauty, Beatty
10. Terse, Tense



Trivia Answers

1. Five (four dream levels and limbo).
2. Montana.
3. "Slaughterhouse-Five" by Kurt Vonnegut.
4. A foal.
5. Graphics Interchange Format.
6. William Henry Harrison, who died 32 days after taking office.
7. Sunnydale.
8. Rome, Italy.
9. 24.
10. Greek physician Hippocrates.



SAVAGE LOVE

FADING AWAY

The BFF with TMI

BY DAN SAVAGE

I'm a cis bisexual woman in my 30s, married to a man. I am an American and I've been living in Europe for the past decade. I'm self-employed, and it's a pretty lonely existence sometimes. I don't speak the local language well. It's a very tight-knit culture and everybody seems like they've had their friend groups since birth. I've had a really hard time forming close relationships with people here. My husband and I tried opening our marriage around 2018 and slept with other people on and off until last year. I don't feel like the experience was a net positive for me; it really exacerbated my loneliness and anxiety but we're monogamous again and our marriage is fine. In the midst of all of this, I met a woman and we became friends. It came up in conversation that I've been to certain nightclubs in Berlin and, after dancing around the topic, we both admitted to being in open relationships. Since then, whenever we hang out, she spends a lot of time talking about her dating life and how great it is, going into really explicit detail. I've told her that I'm not dating anymore. I've cried in front of her, telling her the effect that it all had on my mental health, but it doesn't seem to stop her from viewing me as her kinky, open friend that she can talk about this stuff with.

I have hardly any friends, so I'd hate to lose her, but I also don't enjoy her company when it's so much about her amazing sex life. I get really anxious hearing about other people's sex lives, which I recognize is a "me" issue. It's not like I'm her only outlet for sex talk, because she tells me (brags, even) that she can talk very freely about her sex life with other friends, coworkers, and even her siblings. Do I politely decline her invitations to hang out until she gets the point and stops reaching out? Do I tell her directly that listening to her stories puts me on the verge of a panic attack? Do I work harder in therapy?

I Can't Hear You

Fading away — declining your friend's invites until she gets the hint — will definitely send a message, ICHY, but it'll be a vague, self-defeating, and needlessly cruel message.

Zooming out for a second: this woman would have to be dense not to realize you don't wanna listen to her sex stories. But some people are dense. You met her when you were open, and you cried in front of her when you shared your own story. Someone of reasonable emotional intelligence might think, "Hey, it might be painful for my friend to listen to my stories about KitKatClub when her experiences there were so painful." But this friend — if she is a friend (more on that in a moment) — might figure you're okay hearing about her stories since her experiences aren't the ones that made you cry.

If you haven't told her that hearing about her sexual adventures dredges up your own painful memories, your friend — if she's really that dense (and some people really are) — might not know she's upsetting you. And if she really is that dense, she's not going to be able to figure out what she did wrong when you ghost her and might obsess over what she did wrong.

Or — hey — maybe she knows hearing about the last four dicks she sucked is making you miserable, and she doesn't care.

There's only one way to find out whether your friend is either a well-meaning but clueless dolt who might be capable of a course correction or whether she's a self-involved asshole who doesn't care about you: Speak the fuck up. If you say something — if you politely ask her to spare you the sex stories — you might save this friendship. If you ghost her instead, you're definitely going to lose one of the few friends you have. Seeing as you feel isolated, ICHY, it seems to me that you should err on the side of saving this friendship.

If you can't find the words, ICHY, feel free to copy, paste and send this to your friend: "I like spending time with you but when the conversation turns to your sex life it makes me feel anxious — not because you're doing anything wrong but because I'm still processing the fallout from my own experiences with openness, which weren't great. Remember how I cried? You've got lots of other people you can talk to about this stuff — even your siblings — so I want to be the friend you talk with about anything and everything else. Deal?"

If this woman is an asshole, the next time you get together, she'll launch into a story about her last visit to KitKatClub and you can feel free to ghost her. If she's not an asshole, she'll talk with you about the shows she's binging or the museums she visited in Berlin when she wasn't getting fucked on the dance floor at Berghain and you can keep hanging out.

I recently signed up for a free fetish website and discovered I LOVE sharing photos of my body and getting anonymous comments/likes. However, I'm keeping things pretty PG-13 for fear of my identity somehow being exposed. I literally worry about an ex recognizing my butt freckles or a roommate seeing our shower tiles. And the imagined consequences: how it might impact my job, my family, my reputation in the community, etc. I'd be turned on by posting more NC-17 or even R-rated content, but have been quelled by my fears. Any advice? Should I go for it with the naughty stuff or stay modest?

Posting Online Smut Entails Risk

Millions of people are going to share dirty pics online today, POSER, and most will face no negative consequences. But your fears are not unfounded; people have lost jobs, friends, and spouses — and gotten in trouble with their roommates — after making their homemade smut public. You can protect your identity by using a fake name and burner email, scrubbing metadata from your photos (don't ask me how; I have to ask my husband's boyfriend to turn on the TV), cropping your face out of photos and blurring out uniquely identifying features, e.g. tattoos, freckles, shower tiles, framed family photos on your nightstand, etc.

And remember: Even if you delete an image seconds after posting it, someone may have already saved it and/or some bot may have already scraped it — and an image you posted to one website (or shared privately) can end up on a million other websites. (A friend posted a photo online 15 years ago that became iconic in gay kink circles and wound up on coffee cups.) But in addition to the billions of dirty photos already in circulation and the millions that will be added today — to say nothing of the advent of AI porn and the penumbra of plausible deniability it has created ("Sure, that's my face but that's not me that's AI!") — your dirty pics will most likely get lost in the pile. And with almost everyone having shared a few dirty pics online these days, dirty pics have less power to destroy a person's life than they once did.

P.S. No risk, no reward.

P.P.S. Not giving a fuck who sees your photos is also an option.

I've been seeing this boy I really like for six months. I'm writing to you and not some other advice columnist because I don't want my hangups to screw up the best relationship I've ever had. He's into latex (he owns *so* much latex clothing) and loves BDSM. When he has kinky sex with someone, he's absolutely euphoric afterwards. Nothing we do together makes him feel the way a "play" session with a dominant man makes him feel. He says he enjoys vanilla sex with me and I shouldn't think he's lying about that because he initiates all the time. But he only watches kink porn, never vanilla porn, and it's hard not to get in my head about it. We're both gay and in our twenties. He's a little younger than I am but he's way more sexually experienced. He tells me that he's never met someone in the kink scene he wanted to date (although some kinky men have wanted to date him), and he's sure he wants a vanilla life partner. How do I know that's not a lie? How can I be sure he won't catch feelings for some kinky guy he plays with? I could never do the things he needs because I can't bear to hurt him (or anyone!), and he says it wouldn't work with me doing it to him anyway. Tell me why you don't think he's lying to me and how I can relax and enjoy this relationship. Tell me it will work out. And please don't beat up on me, Dan, as I'm not the one who's into that.

Very Anxious Nerd In Love Lacking Assurances

I won't beat you up — you're not into that — but I'm not going to lie to you.

This relationship might not work out. Most relationships don't. And your boyfriend could be bullshitting you about what he wants. In his kinky heart of hearts, your boyfriend might want a life partner who shares every single one of his kinks. But then he met you, VANILLA, and he really liked you … and he really enjoyed having vanilla sex with you … and right now, he's thinking about settling for you.

That sounds awful, I realize, but being "settled for" isn't a bad thing. No one gets everything they want in a relationship, VANILLA, which means there's been some compromising — there's been some settling — on both sides of every successful long-term relationship. There's no settling down without settling for. So, if giving up on finding a kinky life partner is the price of admission he's willing to pay to be with you, VANILLA, you can let him pay that price. And sucking up your insecurities — willing yourself to take his "yes" for an answer — will be the price of admission you pay to be with him.

Now for the good news: It's entirely possible your boyfriend is telling you the truth. Some kinksters don't like to mix romance and kink. Someone like your boyfriend may need his kinky play partners to be fantasy figures. VANILLA, and while life partners can make good or even great sex partners (and it sounds like you guys have good sex), life partners are not fantasy figures. They're reality figures. And the fact that your boyfriend is young and experienced argues in favor of him telling you the truth. If he's played with and dated kinky guys, he's speaking from experience when he tells you that mixing kink and love doesn't work for him.

So, it's entirely possible your boyfriend isn't settling for you at all — well, at least not where his kinks are concerned. And so long as you don't make the mistake of asking him to choose between your insecurities and his kinks, this could work.

It actually sounds like this relationship is already working, VANILLA, and will keep working — and may even work out — if you don't let your insecurities screw it up.

Got problems? Yes, you do! Email your question for the column to mailbox@savage.love; or record your question for the Savage Lovecast at savage.love/askdan; podcasts, columns, and more at Savage.Love.


CAROLINA
THEATRE
Live music at the Carolina Theatre
GOODTIMES BADTIMES
The Led Zeppelin Experience
Saturday, July 12 | 7:30 p.m.
Listen to her heart
The Tom Petty Experience
Friday, July 18 | 7:30 p.m.
Jonathan Butler
Friday, Aug. 1 | 7 p.m.
Adrian Crutchfield
CeeLo Green
Friday, Aug. 8 | 7:30 p.m.