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THE COVID CLASS

FIVE YEARS LATER, PANDEMIC TEENS ARE STILL DEALING WITH THE TRAUMA

BY MAVEAH GRIFFITH

FILM: 1CLT Film Fest unites cinephiles ◊ **PG. 6**

THEATRE: 'Immediate Family' builds a buzz ◊ **PG. 7**

MUSIC: Te'Jani turns up the heat ◊ **PG. 10**

OPINION: CNBC was wrong about NC ◊ **PG. 14**





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Children who entered their teens in a world pandemic are now graduating high school. AdobeStock

THE COVID CLASS

Five years later, pandemic teens are still dealing with the trauma

BY MAVEAH GRIFFITH

It's 2020. You're 13 years old and in the seventh grade. Everyone is hooked on the nascent Tiktok app, and you're deadset on learning the new "Renegade" dance. Charli D'Amelio is in, VSCO girls are out.

You walk into your lunchroom one day to find that the main topic of conversation around your usual table isn't about social media at all but some new "coronavirus" that some folks say might become a terrifying pandemic.

You don't know what a coronavirus is yet, but you know a compound word when you hear it and the second part of this one is all the context you need.

One day in the lead-up to spring, March 13 to be exact, your teachers hand you a bunch of paperwork and HP Chromebooks to take home with instructions to login for the next two weeks. The coronavirus has caused a two-week lockdown for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and all public schools across North Carolina.

You think to yourself, "Okay, strange, whatever." Two weeks of not having to come to school? Who could be mad about that?

You go home and for the next two weeks you log in for online school, scroll the endless rabbit holes of Tiktok nonstop, learn new dances, watching the new Tiger King series on Netflix, learn "The Carol Baskin Song," and life is amazing.

Fast forward two more weeks, the lockdown has been extended for another month. That's fine. A longer vacation? Yay!

As your initial excitement fades, boredom sets in. Online school is still school. Your grades aren't on vacation, the end of the year exams are creeping closer and everything is just left hanging up in the air.

You struggle through math class, trying to figure out how you're supposed to grasp the concept of algebraic reasoning through a computer screen. Your teachers struggle to continue as if everything is normal when in reality, life as we knew it has been flipped upside down.

Your day of online school ends, you switch on the news and see the ticker in the corner of the screen shockingly higher than it was this morning. Three-hundred more people die in the time between the time you log in to Zoom for a single class and the time you log out.

A weird anxiety forms a hole in the pit of your stomach. You turn the TV off and FaceTime your friends. You're on a group call with two other girls, but one of them says she can't talk for long. You can tell she's downcast despite the fact that she's wearing a mask in her own home so she can regularly check on her grandmother, who's fallen ill. Meanwhile, your other friend is quarantined from her entire family because she's been exposed to the virus.

You sigh, looking forward to next month when the lockdown will supposedly be lifted. That date, however, will continue to be pushed further and further into the future. Normalcy will prove to be as evasive as the principles behind algebraic reasoning.

The world as a whole has gone through this pandemic together, but as a rising college freshman whose lived experience mirrors the story I've recounted above, I can't help but wonder about the impacts of the pandemic on teens and 'tweens like me, those who spent the prime of their formative years — years that are crucial for forming communication skills, building identity and creating lifelong connections — dealing with an unprecedented international pandemic.

With a new school year beginning in North Carolina five years after the start of the 2020-21 school year was delayed due to continued lockdowns, many who were entering their teens during the pandemic are now entering college, offering a new breath of life not plagued by the potential for worldwide disaster that has subconsciously loomed over my generation.

What exactly are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students like myself and how have they lingered on? How have the hardships endured during the pandemic shaped our identities and mental struggles?

I recently spoke to a number of young people to get their take on those seemingly unanswerable questions. But first, let's zoom out.

What do the numbers say?

Nationally, there is already a plethora of evidence to show just how detrimental the pandemic has been to adolescent mental health.

A National Institute of Mental Health study from 2023 showed that the pandemic has caused worse mental health issues and accelerated aging in brain development among adolescents as compared to their predecessors.

Two groups of adolescents were analyzed – one group that was assessed before the pandemic and another that was assessed post-lockdown. The post-lockdown group showed a thinning in the part of their brain that helps contribute to things like self control and planning. In large part, their brains resembled those who have gone through extreme childhood adversity or even grown adults under major amounts of stress.

The study also found that members of the post-shutdown group had older brain ages than the pre-shutdown group.

In North Carolina, statistics from a Bright Path Behavioral Health study published in 2021 found that 22% of NC high school students contemplated attempting suicide in that year and more than 10% of NC high school students had actually attempted suicide, a 23% increase from 2017.

The Bright Path study also found that, from 2019 to 2021, the risk of teenagers experiencing one or more major depressive episodes increased by 46%.

Violence in North Carolina schools increased as well. A report from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction stated that, "Data included in North Carolina's annual Consolidated Data Report to the General Assembly ... shows an overall increase in crime and violence during the 2021-22 school year when compared to years immediately preceding the COVID-19 pandemic."

These statistics are only part of the story.

Hearing from those who lived it

Sarah McLaughlin was 11 years old when the pandemic began. She is now 16 years old and a student at Central Piedmont Early College.

McLaughlin didn't consider herself to be largely affected by the outbreak at its onset because she was living in a low-transmission area. After moving to Charlotte in 2021, however, she began noticing the toll the pandemic was taking on her.

At 12 years old, McLaughlin began struggling with depression. Even before moving, she noticed that "everyone had become afraid of each other," making her feel as if people were "treating each other like they themselves were COVID," she explained.

"Nobody knew when the pandemic would end, which means I never knew when people would stop treating me like a disease," she told me.

McLaughlin struggled with severe mental health crises directly tied to the pandemic. "Around this time is when the thoughts of self-harm and suicide began," she said.

As time went on, McLaughlin continued to struggle with feelings of depression, which



Many rising college students still feel mired down by their pandemic experience. AdobeStock



The pandemic meant many kids learned how to socialize online exclusively. AdobeStock

escalated until she was able to access the help she needed.

"The pandemic showed me that not everything is permanent," she said.

I spoke to scores of students with similar stories to McLaughlin's.

Now an 18-year-old nursing student at Central Piedmont Community College, Natalie Tuju was 13 years old when the pandemic began.

Tuju detailed how, though at first she thought it was just "normal pandemic blues" and figured everyone our age was going through the same thing, as time went on the symptoms of her mental health struggles became more noticeable.

"I feel as though being ripped away from seventh grade, which is a very crucial time to finding who you are, and then being ripped away halfway through the year and doing the entire eighth grade online, it felt like my entire middle school experience was ripped away from me." she said.

Tuju spoke specifically about how the isolation of the pandemic impacted her decisions and overall mood, with the isolation increasing her anxiety and a sense of restlessness.

"Then high school rolls around and we're all supposed to be like, 'Yay, high school!' she recalled. "But in reality we are all still struggling from the aftershocks of the pandemic."

The start of high school did not bring Tuju any relief but instead introduced a new slate of social and emotional struggles.

"Now I'm an adult and high school went by so fast, but I still sometimes feel like I'm not where I should be developmentally, emotionally, socially," she said. "It just feels like I'm held back."

Mental health professionals see a shift

Professionals have also noticed these impacts in their clients, with some having experienced the effects themselves.

Ebube Bobby-Tasie is a certified therapist practicing at Tamarasa Therapy in Durham. She was a college student during the onset of the pandemic.

"We all felt the isolation of virtual life, the prioritization of physical health over mental health and the anxiety of an abruptly changing world," she said. "While my experience was different from that of a high schooler, the sense of uncertainty and depression was universal."

After becoming a practicing clinician in September 2024, Bobby-Tasie said she immediately began to recognize the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had made on her younger clients.

"The lack of socialization during the pandemic had a delayed but profound impact on children and adolescents. I've seen an increase in mood and behavioral disorders that continue today," she said. "For some, the pandemic was a traumatic experience — and the way each developing mind processes that trauma is unique."

She said she has seen teens who developed intense anxiety, hypervigilance and even obsessive behaviors to avoid getting sick.

"Many were essentially socialized through the internet and now struggle with in-person connection," she described. "Adults, too, have been affected — feeling disconnected, losing hope and carrying compassion fatigue."

Bobby-Tasie said she believes that children and adolescents missed critical social experiences that help shape autonomy, self-assurance, identity and belonging during the pandemic, leaving effects that will ripple forward, affecting how they connect and function as adults.

"The pandemic didn't affect everyone equally," she explained. "Minorities, low-income families and helping professionals often faced additional burdens, from lack of access to resources to burnout that changed the way they could show up for others."

A group of adolescents that may have experienced effects from the pandemic differently were student athletes, who have the unique experience of finding a family in their teams, dedicating extra time to improve their craft and training constantly.

La'Tracia Jones is owner and founder of Pursuing Peace, PLLC, a private mental health intervention and prevention practice based in Charlotte. She is also a licensed clinical social worker at the practice.

Jones earned a bachelor's degree in Sociology from NC A&T University in 2011. She has been in the mental health profession since 2014, with a focus on helping adolescents and specifically student athletes.

Jones stated that the pandemic brought an "undeniable shift" in the adolescents she serves.

"The pandemic amplified feelings of isolation, anxiety and uncertainty," Jones says. "You had athletes who suddenly lost entire seasons. Imagine playing every fall or spring for years, and then without warning, your final season is just gone."

Jones believes the effects went beyond depression or anxiety and disrupted the formation of an identity for many young people.

"That loss, it can really disrupt who you are because many athletes struggle with their identity outside of the sport that they are playing," she said. "So during that time, you had athletes experiencing identity crisis."

Despite these disruptions, Jones remains hopeful that the shock of it all can be soothed over as the affected adolescents enter college and become working and functioning adults.

"I think recovery for them is going to happen when they get to college and when they start their careers because when we are in school or working in our careers we are forced to learn how to communicate and they seem the most uncomfortable with communication and connectedness," she said.

We have passed the five-year mark since COVID-19 clamped down on America, closing schools throughout the country and causing what Jones described as an "undeniable shift" in young people. The lockdowns might be over, but those who were adolescents during that time are still navigating the aftershocks and figuring out how to rebuild the parts of themselves that were lost in that time.

It's important to continue to circle back to the pandemic and look into the ways it impacted the behaviors and struggles of this specific age group in the years to come as we enter college and the working population.

As time goes on, the impacts of the pandemic on this specific group will perhaps be forgotten or they will manifest in unforeseeable ways, but it will remain a fresh memory for those who of us who went through it.

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The Independent Picture House will host the 1CLT Film Festival. Courtesy of Jay Morong

NO MORE SILOS

1CLT Film Festival unites Charlotte's cinephiles

BY ANNIE KEOUGH

After its inaugural 2020 event saw success only to sputter out in the succeeding years, The Independent Picture House (IPH) this August is bringing back the 1CLT Film Festival, conjoining the silos of Charlotte's film scene to create a united front in celebrating the spirit of local cinema.

Returning five years after its original conception, and for the first time in person, this year more than a dozen local film organizations will present dozens of screenings at IPH from Aug. 20-24, showcasing the diverse film ecosystem Charlotte holds.

The inaugural 1CLT Film Festival in 2020 was a brainchild of CineOdyssey Film Festival founder Tre' McGriff, who was inspired by a similar concept achieved in New York.

He reached out to Charlotte Film Festival co-director Jay Morong and other local film organizations and camps to put on a virtual film festival in an effort to unite the community while raising funds for local nonprofits.

Morong said that, although the event was successful and led to plenty of connections between participating organizations, working around so many numerous organizations' schedules proved too logistically difficult to repeat in the following years. It appeared 1CLT Film Fest would become a standalone event.

Since that first event, however, Morong has consistently fielded inquiries from folks in the local film scene eager to see IPH host another like it, but in-person.

At the 2024 Charlotte Film Festival (CFF), held at IPH in September of that year, Morong and his team decided it was time to commit to another 1CLT Festival.

"Part of the mission of our venue is to engage with and enable local film organizations and educate people about local film organizations," said Morong, who is also the creative director at IPH. "[We decided to] just commit to doing this right now and set a date."

Charlotte's world-class film scene

Along with uniting the community in a time of isolation, 1CLT's initial film festival highlighted the importance of supporting local organizations and featuring Charlotte's thriving film exhibition scene.

"We really stuck to Charlotte because the idea is you don't have to go outside of Charlotte to find [genres like] international, independent, student, animation, documentaries, social justice," Morong said.

Though cities like New York, L.A. and Atlanta are celebrated as film hotspots, there is an incredible wealth of film organizations here in Charlotte, he emphasized.

"You don't have to go outside of Charlotte to get, essentially, a world class amount of films."

1CLT Film Festival offers a platform for regional, national and international filmmakers to showcase their work and amplify the voices of underrepresented filmmakers, fostering a more inclusive and unified film landscape in Charlotte.

Many organizations in the city screen compelling, diverse material year-round, Morong said.

The Black Girls Film Camp, Charlotte Asian Film Festival, Cine Casual, Charlotte Jewish Film Festival and more organizations participating in this year's 1CLT offer a blend of perspectives with one commonality: Charlotte.

Though not all of the films in the festival are set in or shot locally, they were selected by each local organization because they felt the film was important or enjoyable for people to see.

"There's enough [film] here to keep us busy in Charlotte and to keep audiences ... satiated with really great material," Morong said. "Especially material that is diverse, that speaks to lots of social and political issues, that speaks to things happening on the ground in Charlotte."

Each of the organizations have a designated block of varying run times, showing films that are representative of what the organization stands for and/or celebrates.

The Charlotte Latino Film Festival's block will feature an eight-minute short film celebrating the Carolina Migrant Network's five years of immigrant advocacy and the community bonds the organization has built.

Charlotte's LGBTQ+ film festival Reel Out Charlotte will explore the personal journey and dilemmas experienced by a late-blooming trans woman in *Clementine*.

CFF will screen *Hundreds of Beavers*, the 2022 film that became last year's runaway indie hit, following a 19th-century drunken applejack salesman's efforts to become North America's greatest fur trapper by defeating hundreds of beavers (life-sized beavers in mascot costumes, at that).

Not every film has to be a hugely important, society-changing piece, Morong said. CFF's tagline is "discover different," and knowing they had the last film block on a Saturday night, Morong wanted to book something that was a little quirky and bizarre because he knew there is a core of his audience that likes that kind of stuff.

That's the beauty of 1CLT, he said.

"It really does showcase what [specific organizations] do and then also, as a collective, all of those films together from all these different organizations showcase the real diversity and uniqueness of all of these film organizations in Charlotte," Morong said.

Creating networks in Charlotte's film scene

As CFF's creative director, Morong would love to see the 1CLT Fest bring a larger audience to his own upcoming festival on Sep. 23-28, but he also emphasizes the importance of folks attending the numerous other festivals offered locally by separate organizations.

"What we're trying to create here is showing that art organizations should not be operating in silos," he continued. "That in whatever artistic or business pursuits that you're in, it is really important that you are communal with your fellow people in that industry."

Though most participating organizations have already held their 2025 festivals, the Charlotte Asian Film Festival will celebrate its third year at the Dubois Center on Sept. 13 and IPH will host the Carolina Film Festival on Oct. 4, followed by the 15 Short Film Festival on Oct. 13.

Because 1CLT is a free event, it also gives people the opportunity to take a chance on films they wouldn't normally pay to see.

"You can look at the Charlotte Latino Film Festival lineup and say, 'I don't know if I would like that, but I could take a chance because it's not going to cost me anything other than some time,'" Morong said.

"But I think if you go to any of these [blocks] you will be like, 'Oh, that was really interesting and great, I had no idea that this is what they're doing.'"

Now with this template in mind, Morong hopes to make the 1CLT festival an annual event, bringing in new groups and collectives as it grows.

"I think the excitement that people should have for this is that it really does show that Charlotte is a world-class film exhibition city," he said.

"Seeing local organizations working together and supporting each other in Charlotte should be a very exciting thing to people ... so we're trying to say, in a nice way, you should be excited because we're excited."

Visit independentpicturehouse.org for more information about 1CLT Film Festival, including a schedule and how to reserve seats.

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'Immediate Family' director Phylicia Rashad at a media event in Charlotte. Photo by Marc J. Franklin

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Upsized 'Immediate Family' has the buzz, needs more heat

BY PERRY TANNENBAUM

Anyone who saw the fine Theatre Charlotte production of Lydia R. Diamond's *Stick Fly* this past spring can be forgiven if they feel a vague sense of déjà-vu this month at Booth Playhouse, where a revival of Paul Oakley Stovall's *Immediate Family* has been launched with ultra upscale production values by Blumenthal Arts.

Both of these family dramadies involve long-ago infidelity that led to left-out stepsisters, both gatherings may shortly involve two impending marriages, and both center around prosperous Black families about to be surprised by the race of their prospective in-laws.

In both, there's a brother on the brink of publishing or finishing his first novel ... and talk of ordering in Chinese food.

Before we discover any of this at Booth Playhouse, there's the set design of *Immediate Family*. It is almost the mirror image of the three productions of *Stick Fly* that I've seen – on Broadway in 2012, at Actor's Theatre in 2015, and at the Queens Road Barn this May – with stage right and stage left reversed. Both plays were initially presented in Chicago, Diamond's in 2006 and Stovall's in 2012.

While there is no blood relationship between Diamond and Stovall, there's a definite family link between the two most famous exponents of their scripts. As the left-out stepsister in the Broadway production of *Stick Fly*, Condola Rashad became a breakout star in 2012, and her two-time Tony Award-winning mom, Phylicia Rashad, is now directing *Immediate Family* for the third time (previously at the Mark Taper Forum in 2015 and at the Goodman Theatre in 2012).

Chicago, LA, and Charlotte. We're in good company, for Rashad has been on the QC scene tweaking the production while Stovall is also in the mix. The playwright, who was in the national tour of Hamilton as George Washington, was fine-tuning his script as the Blumenthal Arts extravaganza was previewing and gathering media publicity, already extended to Sept. 7 before its official opening.

In multiple ways, this run is upsizing the norms of locally produced theatre. Previews? Press events? Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday night performances? It's happening.

We haven't seen this much buzz over a local attraction at Booth Playhouse since Charlotte Repertory Theatre was at the height of its ambitions in 2003, when the company planned to take its production of *The Miracle Worker*, starring Hilary Swank, to Broadway.

Never mind the buzz and, if you're still pondering *Stick Fly*, don't worry about the déjà-vu. *Immediate Family* has its own story to tell, turbocharged with one big issue that Diamond never addressed.

Still, I'd say that Stovall should definitely bulk up his script — and strengthen his exposition — if he plans to fulfill his Broadway aspirations. For her part, Rashad needs to get more power and sharpness from key players.

Young Tony seems to be the darling of the Bryant family, for his hastily scheduled wedding brings his siblings, elder brother Jesse from Minneapolis and stepsister Ronnie flying in from Brussels, to Chicago on the afternoon before the wedding rehearsal. They converge at his boyhood home, now presided over by Tony's elder sister Evy and her husband Earl.

All of this proves easier for me to summarize than it was for a press night audience to see and hear. In real time, determining how Evy is related to Tony takes way more time than it should, partly because Evy is bossy – and starchy – enough in the opening scene with Tony to be his mom (or evil stepmother). And since the fancy Blumenthal Arts playbill departs from the playwright's practice of listing his characters in order of appearance, you may wind up confusing Ronnie and Evy until intermission. Or beyond.

There are no strangers onstage until after intermission, so everybody in *Immediate Family* already knows everyone else – as the title implies. There is a next-door neighbor described as the Bryants' "play sister" in the script, who could catch up with returning family and new arrivals.

To his credit, Stovall introduces her early on in the second scene, conveniently toting in trays of food that she's cooked up for the rehearsal dinner just as Jesse arrives.

They greet each other loudly enough: "...BLACK FAGGOT!" "...LESBIAN!" But the actors playing Jesse and Nina, Elijah Jones and Kai Almeda Heath, don't speak nearly as loudly or clearly afterwards, trimming off too much and making it too real for me to consistently understand them in Row H. When Jones and Heath cruised through the siblings' birth order and legitimacy, it was a blur.

As the inside outsider, Nina becomes a juicy role, so it was a shame that Heath zipped through so many of her sassy one-liners so unintelligibly. That's a problem that Rashad may have already fixed.

But the more consequential bulking up of the action is unfinished work that only Stovall can do. With their loud greetings after Evy's first exit, Nina and Jesse foreshadow the big issue that the Bryants will confront before the night is done, one that *Stick Fly* never tackled.

There's a disconnect that Stovall will expose between the widespread homophobia in the African American community and the prominent roles that gays have played in their cultural heritage. He needs to do it more often and more aggressively.

Ronnie and Evy, who will tangle more heatedly in Act 2, sideswipe the issue of homophobia before intermission. Preparing to teach a summer school class to young Black kids, Evy plans to blow their hip-hop, TikTok minds by introducing them to the pillars of their heritage, one inspiring biography at a time.

Malcolm X, MLK, Medgar Evers, Harriet Tubman, Thurgood Marshall, Sojourner Truth and Booker T. Washington are already written up. So Evy wants Jesse, the best writer in the family, to help her fill out her gallery of 50 Black heroes by completing bios of Rosa Parks, the Obamas and five more of his choosing.

Ronnie asks for a look at Evy's list and scrutinizes it closely. Where are Langston Hughes and Billy Strayhorn? It's mostly a list of political figures, Evy responds. And what about Bayard Rustin, who refused to give up his bus seat 10 years before Rosa Parks, and organized the storied 1963 March on Washington?

Cornered, Evy answers frankly that Rustin was arrested on "morals charges" several times. We don't learn until deep into Act 2 that Evy has problems saying "gay" out loud.

But Ronny can. In fact, she may have undergone a sexuality makeover while Stovall was expanding his original one-act play into its present form. Instead of calling her stepsister on her homophobia then and there, she waits until later to lobby Jesse into sneaking in bios not only of Rustin but also of Langston Hughes, Barbara Jordon, Alice Walker, and Angela Davis.

Jesse deflects when confronted with these gays – only fessing up when Ronnie plays her trump card. Lorraine Hansberry! Evy would kill him, Jesse blurts out, perfectly mirroring Stovall's own reluctance to confront the issue head-on.

Let's say it plain. Paul, you're in the New South now in 2025. Bring it, bro! (I say this all the more boldly because Stovall is already on the record saying that he wants to.)

Thanks to Rashad's casting, there's plenty more firepower available for both Evy and Ronnie to turn up the heat at the Booth. We love hating Evy almost from the moment the lights come up with all the haughtiness, bossiness and preacher's-daughter righteousness that Christina Sajous lavishes upon her.

Whether plotting to waken her summer school students or sitting down to a game of bid whist, this is one serious woman. The slow burn she does at the card table is beautifully modulated and explosive.

As hinted earlier, it's Britney Coleman as Ronnie who gets shortchanged on chances to turn up her fire – though you won't be at all disappointed when Coleman reaches her boiling point.

Not only does Ronnie miss out on a full-frontal assault on Evy's homophobic pantheon of Black icons, but Coleman doesn't really get a chance to build grandly to her destructive drunkenness in Act 2. It kind of creeps up suddenly, notwithstanding Stovall's foreshadowing in Act 1.

Less subtlety, and maybe some comical misdirection, would work better. When Stovall does detonate his denouement, albeit without sufficient build, the effect and the efficiency of his work are breathtaking.

Chemistry between the Bryant brothers could hardly be better. The scene where Jones "comes out" to Tony is simply a gem, with Freddie Fulton as fresh-mouthed to his elder brother as he was to Evy. But Tony doesn't always come off as the carefree hipster in the family.

When Jesse's partner of three years, Kristian, not only reveals himself as a man but a white man, Fulton aligns with Evy in his disapproval – drawing some of the flak reserved exclusively for her until then.

Andy Mientus's arrival early after intermission was therefore a litmus test of sorts. Those in the press night audience who gasped at Kristian's Svedish whiteness obviously hadn't opened their playbills and scanned the cast photos. I kind of envied their surprise.

Jesse's difficulties with Evy, specifically his ploy of passing Kris off as the wedding photographer, rightfully test the men's relationship, so Mientus gets to show us some strength of character as well as wholesomeness.

But Stovall doesn't stop there. There's an unexpected late-night scene, one of his best, where Mientus and Sajous are all alone by the bookcase. Nicely done all around.

Immediate Family *runs at Booth Playhouse through Sept. 7. Visit blumenthalarts.org for more info.*

LIFELINE

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"They who play it safe are quick to assassinate what they do not understand," says Erykah Badu at the close of her 2010 "Window Seat" video, in which she sheds her clothes while strolling through Dallas before dropping to the sound of a gunshot on the spot where JFK was killed. Fifteen years later, the progressive, philosophical and maverick queen of neo soul continues to push boundaries by teaming with atmospheric hip-hop producer The Alchemist on their joint LP and tour *Abi & Alan*, a nod to Badu's birth name, Erica Abi Wright, and The Alchemist's given name, Alan Maman. The LP is Badu's first since 2010.

MAD MONSTER EXPO 2025

August 22-24 • times vary • Embassy Suites, 5400 John Q. Hammons Drive NW, Concord • $35 and up • madmonster.com

Well-loved horror, sci-fi and fantasy con Mad Monster Expo was spawned by Charlotte's Mad Monster Film Festival in 2012, which established its genre bonafides by screening the most complete version of Clive Barker's troubled 1990 production *Nightbreed*. The current expo offers nearly 80 exhibitors and vendors, a film festival that includes submissions by beginning and indie artists, and an impressive blood-soaked splatter of guests including head-spinning devil girl Linda Blair (*The Exorcist*), wisecracking zombie sidekick Griffin Dunne (*An American Werewolf in London*), Blacksploitation goddess Pam Grier (*Scream Blacula Scream*), modern day man of a thousand faces Doug Jones (*Labyrinth*) and more.

AREA 704 MUSIC & ARTS FESTIVAL

August 23 • 1 p.m. • Heist Brewery and Barrel Arts, 1030 Woodward Ave. • $32 and up • area704fest.com

Billed as "an immersive celebration of art, culture and creativity," Area 704 Fest might just live up to its hype. Catering to a broad audience, the day-long soiree includes events ranging from a business summit featuring Charlotte City Council rep Dimple Ajmera to an energetic dance party curated by Carolina Panthers official DJ Carolina X and crossover DJ 2Checks. Other highlights include interactive art installations; live performances by Jai Winter, Mon'et Symone and others; a Haus on the Lawn party with music by DJs Sparky, Carson Carr and JSSE; a runway fashion show spotlighting Vogue-featured designer House of Mann; and plenty more.

AZUL, SAPPHIRE MONET

August 26 • 9 p.m. • Snug Harbor, 1228 Gordon St. • $12 • snugrock.com

Argentina-born, Raleigh-based Azul is a queer, white-passing immigrant and sexual violence survivor, but she is not silent. On her 2024 single "Disco Never Died," Azul pitches her pure, powerful vocals over glossy, percolating production that draws from Latin folk, R&B and soul. In contrast, the piano-driven "Canyons" strips bare an indomitable singer-songwriter: "*Don't tell me it happens everywhere, it just makes me madder and madder...*" On her 2025 single "Nahnahnahbooboo (dayum Baby)," Brooklyn's Sapphire Monet couples mutant bossa nova, fractured Latin percussion and vocals combining sultry Donna Summer with defiant Betty Davis to create a neo-funk rock revelation.

CHARLOTTE GANESH FESTIVAL

Aug. 26-Sept. 1 • times vary • Hindu Center of Charlotte, 7400 City View Drive • prices vary • tinyurl.com/GaneshFestCLT

Since 1981, the Queen City's Indian community has celebrated the Ganesh Festival, which honors the birthday of Hindu deity Ganesh, the remover of obstacles and god of new beginnings, wisdom and intelligence. The multifaceted festival includes music, arts and devotional ceremonies, beginning with Sthapana — "to install or lay a foundation" in English — the sacred act of placing a newly crafted Ganesha murti (idol) on a decorated platform. Musical performances include Antarnaad ("inner voice"), a journey of self-empowerment through music that features flutist sisters Suchismita and Debopriya Chatterjee as well as Maestro Harshad Kanetkar on tabla.

'RIDE THE CYCLONE'

August 28-30 • times vary • Stage Door Theater, 155 North College St. • $22-$28 • blumenthalarts.org

Rah! Theatre, is an inclusive, LGBTQ-supporting performing arts school and community theater for students in grades 6-12 that maintains a performance and rehearsal space at Light of Christ Church on Bryant Farms Road. In this dark comedy, the children of the St. Cassian Chamber Choir board the Cyclone roller coaster only to be killed in an accident two minutes later. They awaken in a strange limbo where one of them is offered the chance to return to life. The show, which explores what it means to live and grieve, contains adult language and themes, including depictions of death and drug use.



Mad Monster Expo
Courtesy of MME
8/22-8/24



Tim Meadows
Photo by Gage Skidmore
8/30

TIM MEADOWS

August 30 • 7:30 p.m. • Cain Center for the Arts, 21348 Catawba Ave., Cornelius • $53-$74 • cainarts.org

One of the longest-running cast members on *Saturday Night Live*, Tim Meadows appeared on the iconic sketch comedy show from 1991-2000. Perhaps the most memorable character he inhabited is Leon Phelps, aka The Ladies Man, a confident, suave Black dude who dispenses dubious romantic advice like, "I would probably begin with a very classy first line something like 'Hey sweet thing can I buy you a fish sandwich?'" Meadows played the character in a film spin-off called *The Ladies Man* in 2000 before playing John Glascot on the long-running sitcom *The Goldbergs* then reprising the role in spin-off *Schooled*.

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ / WORK CLOSING CELEBRATION

August 31 • 1 p.m. • Mint Museum Uptown, 500 S. Tryon St. • Free • tinyurl.com/AnnieLeibovitzClosing

Annie Leibovitz once called her Rolling Stone cover photo of John Lennon and Yoko Ono taken on the day Lennon was murdered in 1981, "the photograph of my life." Though she may be remembered for that particular image, the influential photographer redefined celebrity portraiture and the fashion industry in her unparalleled 50-plus-year career of photographing politicians, artists, athletes and musicians. The Mint Uptown concludes its show featuring a judicious mix of Leibovitz's iconic and rarely seen work with a talk by the museum's Chief Curator Jen Sudul Edwards and free admission to the exhibit.

MEET UP IN THE MAKING FEST

Sept. 1 • 6 p.m. • The Milestone, 3400 Tuckaseegee Rd. • Free • themilestone.club

The Milestone celebrates Labor Day with a free event that includes a market with local artists and vendors, paper crafts and pottery wheel throwing. And it's The Milestone, so of course there's music. The bill spotlights Charlotte's brisk, absurdist grime-rock band (and presumed Marx Brothers fans) Dollars,Taxes, celebrating the release of its *Duck Soup* EP. On their 2025 LP *Dogs With Jobs*, The Queen City's Saintlogic alternates chugging, melodic emo pop like "(Please Don't Create The) Torment Nexus" and the squalling King Missile-meets-Chrome feedback assault of "Chernobyl Dogs." On its 2025 single "Thyme," Charlotte's I Hate Dave entwines pensive alt rock and corrosive grunge.

COHEED AND CAMBRIA, TAKING BACK SUNDAY

Sept. 2 • 6:30 p.m. • PNC Music Pavilion, 707 Pavilion Blvd. • $30-$78 • pncmusicpavilion.com

Post-hardcore outfit Coheed and Cambria were once called an emo band by Rolling Stone, but emo is about the only thing missing amid the band's arsenal of crunchy riffs, chamber strings and fist-pumping anthems. The band's 2025 LP *Vaxis III: Father of Make Believe* boasts technical virtuosity and a labyrinthine, dystopian-ish storyline worthy of dark 1970s progressive rockers like Magma. Charlotte was once (and maybe still is?) home to Taking Back Sunday's singer Adam Lazzara. It's one band that can legitimately claim emo roots, pioneering and expanding the genre before moving onto a distinct brand of melodic and stylistically rangy hard rock.

SOUNDWAVE

CHARLOTTE'S LIVE MUSIC CALENDAR * AUG. 20 -SEPT. 2 *

WEDNESDAY AUG. 20

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Hippies & Cowboys w/ The Garden of Eden (Evening Muse)
Worst Party Ever w/ Camp Trash, Ogbert the Nerd, Rocks for Lizards (The Milestone)
Pleasure House w/ Groove Skeletons, Ryan Lockhart & The Night Brigade (Snug Harbor)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Fred Heintz (Comet Grill)
Josh Daniel, Jim Brock & Kerry Brooks (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
Jake Scott (The Underground)
JAZZ/BLUES
Jazz Night feat. DJAM Collective (Camp North End)
Howard McNair (Middle C Jazz)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Magoo w/ Charlotte Bluegrass Allstars (Visulite Theatre)
OPEN MIC
Singer/Songwriter Open Mic (The Rooster)*
Open Hearts Open Mic (starlight on 22nd)

THURSDAY AUG. 21

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Michael Cera Palin w/ Newgrounds Death Rugby, Kerosene Heights, blankstate. (Amos' Southend)
Great Wide Nothing w/ Once Below Joy, Mindvac, This Island Earth (The Milestone)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
Erykah Badu & The Alchemist (The Fillmore)
FUNK/JAM BAND/REGGAE
Shana Blake's Musical Menagerie (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
JAZZ/BLUES
Party with the People (Middle C Jazz)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Jim Garrett (Comet Grill)
Emily June w/ Dog Days (Petra's)
Lua Flora w/ Charles Walker, Jesse James DeConto (Visulite Theatre)

FRIDAY AUG. 22

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Cassettiquette w/ Housecat! (Evening Muse)
Mercury Dimes w/ Sandman Sleeps, Groove Skeletons, Flame Tides (The Milestone)
Paul Thorn (Neighborhood Theatre)
Bellbox w/Queen City Rejects, Caught Off Guard, My Gal Monday, Stay Out (The Rooster)
The Pink Stones w/ Carolina Down Boys, Kit McKay (Snug Harbor)
JAZZ/BLUES
The Harvey Cummings Project w/ Dre Brannon Duo (Camp North End)
Ragan Whiteside (Middle C Jazz)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Ben Rector (The Amp Ballantyne)
ATLiens (Blackbox Theater)
Deathpop: Daft Punk Night (The Underground)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Laura Vinson w/ Violent Gypsies (Goldie's)
Travis Tritt (Ovens Auditorium)
Jason Aldean (PNC Music Pavilion)
The Red Clay Strays (Skyla Amphitheatre)
COVER BANDS
The Warped Band (Amos' Southend)
Melissa Morgan sings Billie Holiday (Stage Door Theater)
The Linkin Park Tribute Band w/ With Arms Wide Open (Visulite Theatre)

SATURDAY AUG. 23

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Toad the Wet Sprocket w/ KT Tunstall, Sixpence None the Richer (The Amp Ballantyne)
Gable Price & Friends w/ Stephen Stanley, Ethan Nathaniel (Neighborhood Theatre)
Falling in Reverse (PNC Music Pavilion)
PJ & The Prairie Dangerous w/ Jade Moore, Grayson Drum & the Hi Cats (The Rooster)
Sophia feat. Camisole, Recess Party (Snug Harbor)
JAZZ/BLUES
Maysa (Middle C Jazz)
Hustle Souls (VisArt Video)
EXPERIMENTAL/MIXED-GENRE/FESTIVAL
Area 704 Music & Arts Festival (Heist Brewery & Barrel Arts)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Junkie Kid (Blackbox Theater)
COLORS Worldwide: R&B Only (The Fillmore)
Digital Noir feat. DJ Spider, DJ Villainess (The Milestone)
Lynsea w/ The Kindest People, Willingdon (Petra's)
Planet Perreo (The Underground)
FUNK/JAM BAND/REGGAE
Hunter's Travesty (Comet Grill)
Pluto 4 Planet w/ String Theory (Goldie's)
Beres Hammond & Friends (Ovens Auditorium)
COVER BANDS
The Breakfast Club (Amos' Southend)
Melissa Morgan sings Billie Holiday (Stage Door Theater)
Nirvanna w/ With Arms Wide Open (Visulite Theatre)

SUNDAY AUG. 24

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Holy Figures w/ Slow Degrade, Day Aches, Needleye, Straitjacket (The Milestone)
Susto w/ The Wildmans, Judy Blank (Neighborhood Theatre)
Summer Destructo feat. SOND, Seventh Judgement, LO (The Rooster)
JAZZ/BLUES
JD feat. Tiffany Blu (Middle C Jazz)
EXPERIMENTAL/MIXED-GENRE/FESTIVAL
Thee Phantom & the Illharmonic Orchestra (Knight Theater)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Soul Sunday feat. Guy Nowchild (Starlight on 22nd)

MONDAY AUG. 25

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

TUESDAY AUG. 26

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Clementine w/ Warp Street; Catchbliss; Endless, Nameless (The Milestone)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
AJ McQueen (Neighborhood Theatre)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Azul w/ Sapphire Monet (Snug Harbor)
COVER BANDS
Brit Floyd (Ovens Auditorium)
OPEN MIC
Open Mic Night feat. The Smokin J's (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*

WEDNESDAY AUG. 27

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
The Girls w/ True Lilith, 77 Lies (The Milestone)
Pleasure House w/ Madison's Harley, Little Mountain Kart Club (Snug Harbor)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Josh Daniel, Jim Brock & Kerry Brooks (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
JAZZ/BLUES
Jazz Night feat. DJAM Collective (Camp North End)
Lovell Bradford Trio (VisArt Video)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
CLT Bluegrass Allstars (Comet Grill)
EXPERIMENTAL/MIXED-GENRE/FESTIVAL
Quentin Talley Benefit Fundraiser (Evening Muse)
LATIN/WORLD
Eladio Carrión (Skyla Amphitheatre)
COVER BANDS
Tom Glynn: American Tune (Middle C Jazz)
OPEN MIC
Singer/Songwriter Open Mic (The Rooster)*
Open Hearts Open Mic (Starlight on 22nd)

THURSDAY AUG. 28

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Yesterday's Clothes w/ Rohna, briZB, Camisole (Amos' Southend)
Cloutchaser w/ Odd Squad, Zyphoid, Goatse (The Milestone)
Collective Soul w/ Live (Skyla Amphitheatre)
FUNK/JAM BANDS/REGGAE
Crystal Fountains (Comet Grill)
Shana Blake's Musical Menagerie (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Dawn Landes w/ Ali Forrest (Petra's)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
J-Live (Starlight on 22nd)
CHRISTIAN/GOSPEL/RELIGIOUS
Ryan Ellis (Evening Muse)
JAZZ/BLUES
Bob James (Middle C Jazz)

FRIDAY AUG. 29

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
The Lenny Federal Band (Comet Grill)*
Boy A/C w/ Benign Impact, Ego Death Machine, Mojarra (The Milestone)
Te'Jani w/ Petrov (Neighborhood Theatre)
Me Like Bees w/ The Wonderlands, The Orderlys (Petra's)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Bambii w/ Leonce (Cue @ Blackbox Theater)
JAZZ/BLUES
Emanuel Wynter w/ King Noli (Evening Muse)
Bob James (Middle C Jazz)
LATIN/WORLD
Tropa Magica w/ Noir Noir, Rugg (Snug Harbor)
FUNK/JAM BAND/REGGAE
Big Yen w/ Droze & The Drift (Evening Muse)
Davis & the Love w/ Square Roots (Goldie's)
COVER BANDS
Guardians of the Jukebox (Amos' Southend)
The Magic of Motown (Knight Theater)
Nookie (Limp Bizkit tribute) (The Rooster)

SATURDAY AUG. 30

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Umphrey's McGee (The Fillmore)
Valar Morghulis w/Aterra, Untied, Decrement (The Rooster)
Derrick Dove & the Peacekeepers (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Time Off (Petra's)
Latin Dance Party (Salud Cerveceria)*
Off the Wall: Michael Jackson Tribute (Snug Harbor)
JAZZ/BLUES
Mindi Abair (Middle C Jazz)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Toni Naples (Comet Grill)
Chris The Averageman w/ The Fool Hardies, James Delco (Starlight on 22nd)
FUNK/JAM BAND/REGGAE
U-Phonik w/ Dustin Yager Duo (Goldie's)
Father Sun (Primal Brewery)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Baylee Littrell w/ Josh King (Evening Muse)
EXPERIMENTAL/MIXED-GENRE/FESTIVAL
Seismic Summer III (The Milestone)
COVER BANDS
Knot Your Kind (Slipknot tribute) w/ New Level (Pantera tribute) (Amos' Southend)

SUNDAY AUG. 31

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Infinitefreefall w/ Ricks for Lizards, Leaving for Arizona, Groove Skeletons (The Milestone)
Lodis w/Devine, Moody Bridge, Midsummers (The Rooster)
Men I Trust (Skyla Amphitheatre)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Sam on Someday (Evening Muse)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Chandler Carpenter & The Reckless Souls (Goldie's)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Spin Wars DJ Battle (Blackbox Theater)
Hazy Sunday (Petra's)
Soul Sunday feat. Guy Nowchild (Starlight on 22nd)
Club 90s Presents: Thank U, Next (The Underground)
LATIN/WORLD
Gino Castilla & the Buena Vista Legacy feat. Yusa (Middle C Jazz)
Manuel Turizo (Ovens Auditorium)

MONDAY SEPT. 1

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
The Starting Line (The Underground)
JAZZ/BLUES
The Bill Hanna Legacy Jazz Session (Petra's)
EXPERIMENTAL/MIXED-GENRE/FESTIVAL
Meet Up in the Making Fest: Dollars, Taxes w/ Saintlogic, I Hate Dave (The Milestone)
OPEN MIC
Find Your Muse Open Mic feat. Chris Wilhelm (Evening Muse)

TUESDAY SEPT. 2

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Red Rocking Chair (Comet Grill)*
Coheed & Cambria w/ Taking Back Sunday (PNC Music Pavilion)
Simple Plan (Skyla Amphitheatre)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Get Sad Y'all's Emo Night (Snug Harbor)
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

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."



Te'Jani will release 'Life of the Party' on Aug. 29. Photo by Rudy Kovasckitz

TE'JANI TURNS UP THE HEAT

Multi-faceted musician becomes the 'Life of the Party'

BY PAT MORAN

Te'Jani pulls you into his latest single "This is Why I'm Hot," with skittering, syncopated hip-hop beats, hypnotic rap-meets-alt rock vocals and alternately grimy and ringing guitars.

"*Hot take: I don't need protection/ Don't color me too reckless/ Don't know it's too excessive/ When it comes to self love or self expression/ I'm not concerned about rejection/ That's why I never have to question why I'm hot…*"

The infectious track doesn't let go, entwining turntable scratching, chiming spiraling guitars and supple fine-grained vocals.

"It's just such a fun song to sing along to," says Te'Jani, who wanted to make a tune that included all his musical inspirations.

"My worlds are rap, hip-hop, and indie rock," he offers. "Rap was my cousin, but indie rock raised me."

The song's feel-good, hip-shaking rush owes much to its layered yet uncluttered production, guitars that effortlessly shapeshift from progressive rock to grunge, and succinct songwriting and wordplay — all the work of Te'Jani — but the tune also bears an uplifting, personal yet inclusive message.

"If you look at the verse, it isn't me comparing myself to other people," Te'Jani says. "It's me [saying] I'm going to respect myself."

"This is Why I'm Hot" is aptly named. As he charges into the second half of 2025, Te'Jani is doing much more than advancing his career; the local songwriter-producer-guitarist-engineer is on a hot streak. "This is Why I'm Hot" is the lead-off track of Te'Jani's latest album, *Life of the Party*, which drops Aug. 29 with an album release show at the Neighborhood Theatre, headlined by Te'Jani and featuring Charlotte's explosive alt-rock band Petrov.

The *Life of the Party* release follows a stunning string of singles from Te'Jani, beginning in late 2024 with "Darkslide," a buzzing, bristling guitar-driven rock tune featuring Grammy-nominated artist boyband.

"I Hate New York," Te'Jani's conflicted regretful response to being dumped by his then-girlfriend via an Instagram post, followed in 2025. Here Te'Jani's plangent spider's crawl guitar cradles his close, confessional vocals before the tune unleashes a collision of riffs, choruses and hooks. Ironically, Te'Jani calls this musical emotional wringer his "most fun song to play live."

May 2025 brought the release of "Medicine," a vulnerable, emotionally rangy alt-rock tune, inspired by a party Te'Jani attended after neglecting to take his anti-depressant meds.

"*I can't forget all the messages/ Through the broken glass on my finger tips/ And all these conversations in stranger's beds/ And they'll still remind me to take my meds…*"

On the strength of his impressive songwriting and production as well as immersive, engaging videos by Rudy and Judson Kavascitz, the brothers who created the down to earth Home Movies Music Sessions series, Te'Jani notes that his work has received love and encouragement from music industry luminaries including Limp Bizkit frontman Fred Durst, Blink-182 drummer Travis Barker and members of alt-rock band Dashboard Confessional, as well as genre-fluid Black indie artists like Bartees Strange ("Wants Needs") and Kenny Hoopla ("How Will I Rest in Peace if I'm Buried by a Highway?").

While it's good to receive notice from music industry peers, Te'Jani notes that it's not necessary to his sense of self and well-being.

"I feel like my confidence is way up and it doesn't come from external validation or results," Te'Jani says. "It comes from me believing in myself, trusting myself and actually loving myself enough to move forward."

Te'Jani also reveals that he plans this year to rejoin fellow members of the Living Quarters Collective, a group of producers, engineers and musicians that includes the likes of Ike Byers, Matt Square, Mike Larry and Tré Ahmad, who created groundbreaking genre-fluid tunes with the *Summer Camp* project in 2020. What title the reunion will go by and what form it will take are still under wraps.

Te'Jani is also the subject of a recently completed music documentary by local filmmaker Nick Will. The as-yet-untitled documentary was screened on Aug. 9 at a film and live music event called Wish You Were Here, hosted at a private home in Rock Hill. It was the second such event under the Wish You Were Here banner. The first, held at Evening Muse in June, included Te'Jani performing and hosting an open mic among its attractions.

"Te'Jani puts a lot of effort into his production and you can see it in all of the music he does," Will says. "He's telling an honest story [and] being completely honest with himself."

Between running track and tracking songs

Te'Jani grew up in a deeply religious family in JAARS, an area outside Waxhaw that takes its name from a flying missionary organization (Jungle Aviation and Relay Service) that is based in the area and focuses on providing transportation support operations for partners who work in Bible translation services in hard-to-reach areas along the equator. Will also grew up in JAARS, though he and Te'Jani did not meet until years later.

Though money was tight, Te'Jani's family found time for music. He recalls dancing to the soundtrack CD for *Prince of Egypt*, an animated retelling of the Book of Exodus.

"All my earliest memories are with music," Te'Jani says.

After his parents bought a radio, they showed their young son how to record a song from there onto audio tape. It seemed like magic.

"I vividly recall hitting record, hitting stop, hitting rewind and hitting play," Te'Jani offers. "My brain exploded. It was like I just rewound time."

Getting his first guitar at age 7, Te'Jani remembers that he played so badly that he cried. Te'Jani's determination to learn the instrument revived when his guitar teacher gave him the Nat King Cole Trio compilation CD *Jumpin' the Capitol*, but the fledgling guitarist truly got hooked when the *Guitar Hero 3* video game came out. The game exposed Te'Jani to hard rock and coruscating guitar solos, and served as gateway exposure to heavy experimental bands like Bloc Party.

"*Guitar Hero 3* is what really got me going," Te'Jani notes. "This is a common story among people in my generation who play music now."

In fact, Te'Jani often describes his music as being for "Black kids who love *Guitar Hero 3*."

Throughout high school, Te'Jani honed his performing and songwriting chops at Evening Muse's open mic nights.

"I started out rapping because I couldn't figure out lyrics and melody at the same time," he recalls.

Gradually, Te'Jani built upon his strengths and sharpened his songwriting.

His single "Hurricane" from 2018 captures the artist honing his craft. One of Te'Jani's rare rap-rock songs — the other notable example being "This is Why I'm Hot" — it couples the artist's ruminative flow with haunting, radiating electric guitar.

Attending college at Queens University, he crossed paths with members of the Living Quarters Collective, as well as the Kovasckitz brothers. He also started learning about music production and engineering while interning at Charlotte's Black Pearl Studios. He began producing other artists' music as well as his own.

"I've always [produced] stuff in my own room by myself, and I realized the quickest way to start building a community is by working with other people," Te'Jani says.

In the meantime, Te'Jani had also been focusing on a career in track. In high school he was the ninth fastest kid in the U.S. and was a seven-time state champion. Offered an athletic track-and-field scholarship, he briefly transferred to Purdue University in Indiana. Training to join the U.S. Olympic team, he was six seconds over the qualifying time for the Olympic trials.

All the time, Te'Jani's gut told him something was wrong. He knew he would have to choose between the two life paths before him — music or track. Then Te'Jani got injured going into his senior year at college. He had aimed to coach at the collegiate level or professional level, but now he wanted out.

The arrival of COVID in 2020 put the final kibosh on Te'Jani's track career. Amid the widespread uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, Te'Jani decided to focus on his music. Sitting in his room and feeling depressed, Te'Jani recognized that he didn't want to realize at age 40 that he hadn't taken chances he should have.

"I needed to accept that, and just put out the music," he says. The result was his eclectic and critically-lauded *Gimp* EP, which dropped in 2020.

His next major release, the six-track autobiographical EP *On Prozac*, followed in 2023. It marked an artistic and personal turning point for Te'Jani, but it came at a cost.



Te'Jani's birthday show/release party in 2023. Photo by Nick Will

Te'Jani turns dark thoughts into deep sounds

"Basically, in 2021 my life came to a screeching halt," Te'Jani says today. "I had every uncomfortable conversation I had been putting off. I broke up with my family, my girlfriend [and] my friends. It was crazy."

Perhaps the most unpleasant confrontation came when Te'Jani told his religious parents that he wasn't Christian anymore.

"That was not received well," Te'Jani says.

He also wasn't taking care of himself and ended up in the hospital for four days.

"They sent me back [home] with Prozac, and I was shitting my brains out," Te'Jani remembers. "Apparently SSRIs [a type of antidepressant] make you poop a lot, and I didn't know that."

Despite the side effects, the antidepressants actually made Te'Jani feel better.

With most songs stripped back to voice and guitars, *On Prozac* is a stark, courageous and honest confessional.

"The songwriting is honest and direct, and the response was great," Te'Jani says. "People were moved and touched by [the EP]."

In August 2023, Te'Jani played an EP release show for *On Prozac* at the Evening Muse, the club where he had cut his teeth as a performer through open mic nights. Lines at the venue wrapped around the block and the filled-to-capacity club turned away people at the door.

"I've never felt like I deserve love or [that I] bring joy to anyone," Te'Jani confides. "So, for people to come out like that was crazy. [For me] it solidified some belief in what I was doing."

The night of the Evening Muse show, Will met Te'Jani, who invited Will to shoot photos of the gig. After the event, Will started shooting footage for his documentary on the artist.

"Te'Jani is so precise, so exact with all of his stuff," Will says. "He's a perfectionist."

"There's not a lot of documentation of Charlotte artists, and it's really cool that someone like Will is taking the time and effort to make sure [those artists] are seen and heard," Te'Jani says. "I think these stories give other artists something to look up to and look forward to."

In October 2023, Te'Jani traveled to Boone to produce the album *Legend Tripping* by Charlotte pop-punk combo Dollar Signs. He believes the band, which he calls "legendary," hired him after hearing the snaking, swaggering sound he got on his song "Dark Slide."

Te'Jani also accepted the producing gig because it offered him his first chance to record a full instrumental band.

When Dollar Signs' second guitarist Tommy McPhail couldn't make the band's upcoming tour to support the LP, Te'Jani offered to fill in, pointing out that he knew the guitar parts for several of the songs already.

Te'Jani describes the subsequent tour, his first time hitting the road and playing for audiences night after night, as brutal and eye-opening.

"I needed to know what it feels like; I needed to know if this is what I really want," says Te'Jani.

The answer was a resounding yes and Te'Jani hopes to go on his first solo tour soon.

In 2024, Te'Jani participated in an edition of Home Movies Music Sessions, spearheaded by his longtime creative video partners Rudy and Judson Kavascitz.

In the intimate series North Carolina musicians perform in their homes using basic equipment like a camcorder, minimal lighting and a boom mic. Soon after shooting his segment, Te'Jani went from performer to partner, joining the Kavascitz brothers to record audio for the series.

Asked to describe his life at the moment, Te'Jani has one word: busy.

"I am always redlining; I have so much ADD," he says. "I have learned to be more balanced with it, but recently I've just been like, fuck it. The universe has been blessing me wildly."

Te'Jani calls his upcoming album *Life of the Party* a collection of songs that people will enjoy jamming out to or playing in the car.

"I made these songs with the mindset of ... playing them for a show," he says. "The hooks are fun, the tempos are fast and ... [there are] a lot of rock and punk vibes."

That said, the album kicks off with "This is Why I'm Hot, " a lively singalong that also happens to be a rap-rock tune, something Te'Jani has rarely done. It's as if he wants to deliberately shake up listeners' preconceptions.

"I stepped away from rapping because when you're Black and in music, you quickly get labeled as one thing," Te'Jani notes, "even though I only rap on two songs."

He points to his back catalog, where he sings on almost all of his material. *On Prozac*, for example, is all stripped-back singer-songwriter compositions accompanied by guitars.

"I'm a songwriter, singer, a guitarist and a musician," Te'Jani asserts. "It gets annoying when [people] booking shows [say], 'We don't book rappers.'" Once bookers realize he's not a rapper, Te'Jani notes, they often jump straight to assuming he's an R&B performer.

Te'Jani concludes that he needs to do a better job of telling his story and showing people who he is rather than letting them run with their own narrative.

"When people listen to my music, I hope that they realize that I'm a Black motherfucking rock star," Te'Jani proclaims.

It's an honest, startling and funny statement, but Te'Jani doesn't leave it at that. He hopes that people hearing his music come away with the recognition that everyone should feel comfortable making mistakes and that everything doesn't need to be perfect.

That humane message that runs throughout his songs, from processing a messy breakup with compassion on "I Hate New York" to the humble realization conveyed in *On Prozac* that rebuilding from rock bottom begins with finding your foundation.

"You shouldn't be afraid to fail," Te'Jani says. "You can do anything. Just do what the job requires of you and you'll be good to go."

He's speaking from compassion and experience. With a stylistically varied yet consistent body of work, Te'Jani embraces everything from pain, doubt and depression to hopes, dreams and desires. He tells us that we all deserve love, confidence and self-actuallization. That applies to everyone from a dude helped by Prozac to a motherfucking Black rock star.

PMORAN@QCNERVE.COM



HOROSCOPE

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AUG. 20 - AUG. 26

ARIES (March 21 to April 19) Your honesty might upset some people. But you inevitably win more admirers for having the courage to tell the truth when others are more likely to scramble for cover.

TAURUS (April 20 to May 20) Your efforts to defend your project begin to show favorable results. You should soon be able to win over even the most determined detractors who had lined up against it.

GEMINI (May 21 to June 20) You win praise for your selfless efforts in a very difficult situation. But be careful not to allow your generous nature to be exploited by those who have their own agenda.

CANCER (June 21 to July 22) A trusted colleague sheds light on a recent spate of puzzling workplace situations. This should give you the information you need to bring the matter to your superior's attention.

LEO (July 23 to August 22) A shift in workplace management could be helpful for talented LEOs and LEOnas who have been waiting to have their accomplishments rewarded by receptive leadership.

VIRGO (August 23 to September 22) A misunderstanding between you and someone you care for should be corrected immediately. This relationship is too important to lose over a bruised ego.

LIBRA (September 23 to October 22) A welcome piece of good news helps clear the air in a family situation. A job-related incident also eases as more information provides a clearer focus on the problem.

SCORPIO (October 23 to November 21) Quick action to heal bruised feelings pays off in a big way. Now you'll be able to move forward with your plans without a problem holding you back.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22 to December 21) Your creativity combined with a positive attitude should give you a considerable edge in finding a way to get around the negativity you've run into.

CAPRICORN (December 22 to January 19) A sudden streak of stubbornness could cause some problems. Try to be more open to helpful suggestions and more flexible in making needed changes.

AQUARIUS (January 20 to February 18) Now that a special relationship appears to be well and truly restored, you can spend more time dealing with some long-needed workplace changes.

PISCES (February 19 to March 20) A new opportunity sounds promising, but watch out for any conditions that might be attached. Before making a decision, ask that each opportunity be explained in detail.

BORN THIS WEEK: You can often get distracted by promises of good times, yet you ultimately reach the amazing goals that you set out for yourself because of your determination.

AUG. 27 - SEPT. 2

ARIES (March 21 to April 19) This week could offer more opportunities for ambitious Lambs who are eager to get ahead. But don't rush into making decisions until you've checked for possible hidden problems.

TAURUS (April 20 to May 20) Some light begins to shine on professional and/or personal situations that have long eluded an explanation. Best advice: Don't rush things. All will be made clear in time.

GEMINI (May 21 to June 20) Although you might want to protest what seems to be an unfair situation, it's best to keep your tongue and temper in check for now. The full story hasn't come out yet.

CANCER (June 21 to July 22) Work prospects are back on track, but watch what you say. A thoughtless comment to the wrong person — even if it's said in jest — could delay or even derail your progress.

LEO (July 23 to August 22) A colleague might goad you into saying or doing the wrong thing. It's best to ignore the troublemaker, even if they rile up your royal self. Your supporters will stand with you.

VIRGO (August 23 to September 22) Careful not to let your on-the-job zealousness create resentment with co-workers who might feel like you shut them out. Prove them wrong by including them in your project.

LIBRA (September 23 to October 22) Although it's not quite what you hoped for, use your good business sense to make the most of what you're being offered at this time. Things will improve down the line.

SCORPIO (October 23 to November 21) A more positive picture of what lies ahead is beginning to take shape. But there are still too many gaps that need to be filled in before you make definitive plans.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22 to December 21) Continue to keep a tight hold on the reins. This way, you don't charge willy-nilly into a situation that might appear attractive on the surface but lack substance underneath.

CAPRICORN (December 22 to January 19) You still need to demand answers to your questions. Remember, your wise counseling earns you respect, but it's your search for truth that gives you wisdom.

AQUARIUS (January 20 to February 18) You'll find people who are happy to help you deal with some difficult situations. And, of course, knowing you, you'll be happy to return those favors anytime. ... Won't you?

PISCES (February 19 to March 20) Give the special someone in your personal life a large, loving dollop of reassurance. This will go a long way in restoring the well-being of your ailing relationship.

BORN THIS WEEK: You are a delightful paradox. You like things neat and tidy, but you're also a wonderful host who can throw a really great party. You're quite versatile.

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.

	+		×		= 60
+		+		+	
	+		×		= 84
-		×		+	
	+		÷	5	= 1
= 3		= 51		= 18	

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.

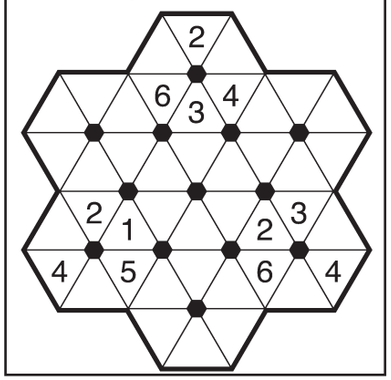
1. Untangle	__ __ __ __ L	Poe's bird nevermore	__ __ __ __ N
2. Law enforcement	__ __ __ __ C __	Mannerly	__ __ __ __ T __
3. Daddy	F __ __ __ __ __	Shaving foam	L __ __ __ __ __
4. Runner's pathway	__ __ A __ __	Pickup or semi	__ __ U __ __
5. Baseball hitter	__ A __ __ __ __	Pancake topping	__ U __ __ __ __
6. Reprimand	__ __ O __ __	Burn with hot liquid	__ __ A __ __
7. Bank employee	__ E __ __ __ __	Having more height	__ A __ __ __ __
8. Boa	__ __ __ __ F	Frighten	__ __ __ __ E
9. Anticipate	__ __ __ __ C __	Specialist	__ __ __ __ R __
10. Bird rest	__ E __ __ __	Portico	__ O __ __ __

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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.

SNYTDXELH BNQXPRFG ON NOVRXP' PQSSRPP NLFB PFNMP BNQ ZNML GXNY GELZELH BNQX NML. — NSODCED PTRLSRX

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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: **F** equals **C**

UJFGSRZD VGOZH TWFRJIK BVWTJ OJOQJDT ZSBZKT IJHC IW VRI JZFV WIVJD WH IVJ VJZC: QWU FGSIGDJ.

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TRIVIA TEST
BY FIFI RODRIGUEZ

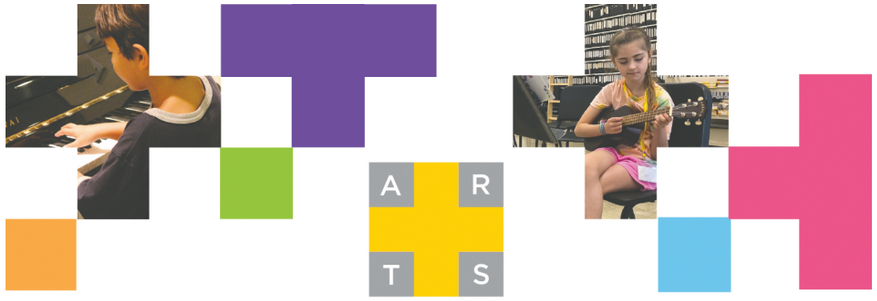
1. MOVIES: Which best original song from "Aladdin" won an Oscar?
2. TELEVISION: In what year did the animated TV comedy "South Park" debut?
3. HISTORY: Where did the Romans build Hadrian's Wall?
4. GEOGRAPHY: What is the capital of Brazil?
5. U.S. PRESIDENTS: Which president was the first to be impeached?
6. MYTHOLOGY: What is the home of the Greek gods?
7. U.S. STATES: Which state is home to the U.S. Naval Academy?
8. MATH: What is the smallest prime number?
9. LITERATURE: What is the original name of the farm in George Orwell's "Animal Farm"?
10. ASTRONOMY: Which planet is known for its large red spot, which astronomers believe is an ongoing storm?

SUDOKU
BY LINDA THISTLE

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

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.



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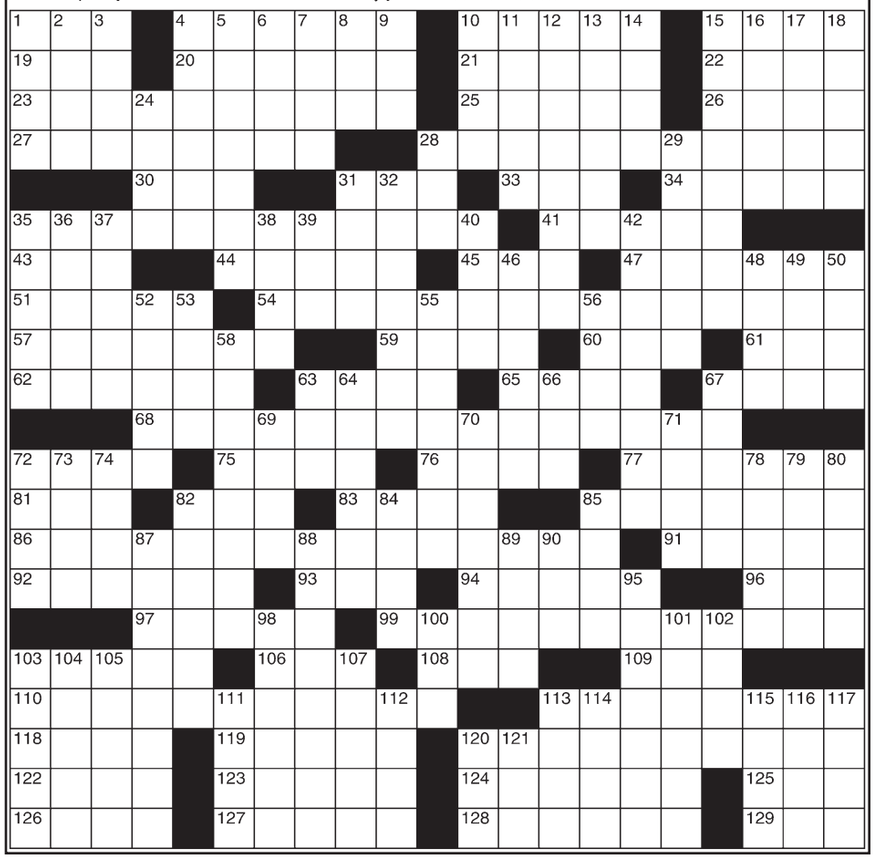


CROSSWORD
FETE-FUL FOLLOWERS

2025 King Features Synd., Inc.

ACROSS
1 Little jump
4 Brains
10 Teeny bits
15 Female horse
19 Friend, in Paris
20 Social outcast
21 Ice cream utensil
22 Female gamete
23 Cap production place
25 — firma
26 "I saw," to Caesar
27 Newspaper stories
28 Vehicle attachment to transport watercraft
30 "Get it?"
31 "Ender's Game" star Butterfield
33 Actress Long or Vardalos
34 Closes in on
35 Cry while wearing a costume
41 Some boxing punches
43 On top of, in verse
44 Divine figure
45 Feel poorly
47 Pub barrel
51 Pundits' paper pieces
54 Power to attract others
57 Unceasingly
59 Newbie at a law school
60 Sculling tool
61 Org. that screens bags
62 Patron of sailors
63 "Second gentleman" Emhoff
65 Forget to say
67 Lots and lots
68 Logical thought process
72 Some sharp turns
75 Coll. lecturer
76 Low-fat, informally
77 Piña —
81 "I have it!"
82 Hosp. test in a big tube
83 Christian of fashion
85 Led to a seat
86 Typical D.C. dealings
91 County in New Mexico or Colorado
92 Method
93 Muscle: Prefix
94 University of Maine's city
96 Neighbor of Kan. and Ia.
97 Pro at taking dictation
99 Swear words and such
103 Clear wrap
106 Says "yes" to
108 USN officers
109 Sleuth, in old slang
110 Straight, flexible wire receiving waves
113 Rather little
118 Prefix with present
119 Gorme of song
120 Post-event bash ... or where eight key words in this puzzle might appear
122 Diatribe
123 U. of Maryland team
124 Band flunky
125 Atlas feature
126 Pivotal WWII event
127 Eye maladies
128 Prods
129 "Yes" vote

DOWN
1 "Funny joke!"
2 Vizquel of baseball
3 Brad of "Fight Club"
4 Sissy of the screen
5 Gavin of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show"
6 Jester Johnson
7 Ocho — (resort in Jamaica)
8 Pothole filler
9 Sheepish
10 Colon's meaning in an analogy
11 Whale locale
12 Burrito base
13 Large arteries
14 Trade jabs
15 Apt place to make a scene
16 Birthplace of St. Teresa
17 Less courteous
18 Kuwaiti chiefs
24 Finance-related: Abbr.
28 Lamb's cry
29 Growth on an elk's head
31 Intro studio class
32 Jane of "Live and Let Die"
35 Horn blasts
36 Transplant, as a flower
37 Cara of "Fame" fame
38 Enjoy a novel
39 Element #50
40 Chronicle
42 Zealots
46 "This makes no sense to me"
48 Singer Eartha
49 Canadian gas brand
50 FBI guy, e.g.
52 Barbies, e.g.
53 Big rig
55 Poet Maya
56 Enter
58 Like numbers with more than two divisors
63 "Whoop-de- —!"
64 When a team travels, perhaps
66 TV bartender Szyslak
67 Shoelace tag
69 "Will & Grace" actor McCormack
70 Ventilates
71 Big Apple neighborhood
72 Microwaves, informally
73 Sailor's cry
74 Lassies
78 Sports center
79 Removal of govt. controls
80 Pueblo brick
82 E. Sicilian volcano
84 "Time — the essence!"
85 Forearm part
87 "How sad"
88 Cure by exposing to burning wood
89 E-addresses
90 Gmail rival
95 A Great Lake
98 "Later"
100 Rock- — jukebox
101 Alternative to a ballpoint
102 Golden State sch.
103 Fencing need
104 Ex-NFLer Rashad
105 Lisa of "Melrose Place"
107 Marsh bird
111 Fish snares
112 Scottish loch
113 Forest buck
114 Contents of Rx bottles
115 "— la Douce"
116 Go nowhere
117 Really promote
120 "How — you?"
121 Haze



NERVE ENDINGS

CNBC IS WRONG. NC IS NOT NO. 1 FOR BUSINESS

Why do North Carolina politicians from both parties cater to a ranking built on political ideology?

BY SAM GROTE

I've spent most of my career investing in and building businesses, and I currently run a nonprofit from my home in Winston-Salem that researches issues impacting our state's economic and business growth.

I believe that sustainable business growth is the surest path to a better future for all North Carolinians. After all, we spend 40 hours a week, 50 weeks a year, for 40-plus years working to build a good life. So naturally, the best way to improve people's lives is to create an economy with an abundance of great jobs and the opportunity for a great life.

That's why I was shocked last month when CNBC crowned North Carolina the No. 1 state for business. Politicians across the General Assembly, Republican and Democrat, including Gov. Josh Stein, seized on this headline as indisputable proof that their policies are working.

When I dug into CNBC's methodology, it all made sense. The key is that this is not a transparent, objective ranking based on actual results – it's a hidden state-by-state scoring system shaped by political ideology.

The effect is that states that already align with CNBC's worldview — low corporate taxes, weak labor protections, generous corporate handouts — magically rise to the top. This isn't analysis — it's PR. The goal is to promote certain policies as "good" because the people who favor them built a ranking system that says so.

Let's dive into this:

The Criteria Are Hidden: CNBC claims to use 135 metrics, but they don't list these metrics where the data comes from. This means there's no way to assess their exact methodology or even verify the math. Without transparency, the scoring system can be shaped to favor the outcomes CNBC wants.

There are Different Rules for Different States: CNBC also weighs the importance of each category differently for each state based on how much CNBC says the state talks about those issues. So if a state is performing poorly in a certain area, but CNBC decides that area "wasn't a priority," it gets a pass. That's not just subjective; it makes the entire ranking meaningless. You aren't comparing states when every state is graded with a different formula.

The Results are Ideology-Driven: Finally, CNBC focuses on policies, which are inputs, rather than results. Things like corporate tax rates and corporate subsidies, or how "hospitable" a state is to AI and crypto, matter to the corporate executives who watch CNBC and drive markets for big investors. They don't matter to small businesses and people who actually live in North Carolina.

Now look, some of those policies might be good. Others might not. The only way to know is by looking at how they actually affect performance. CNBC didn't do that.

If folks at CNBC had measured outcomes, they would have seen that our state trails most of the US on almost every key measure of economic health and quality of life, according to state and federal databases:

- 32nd in GDP per capita
- 42nd in median household income
- 31st in high school graduation rates
- 37th in pre-K enrollment
- 24th in U6 Unemployment Rate (includes marginally attached and employed part time)
- 36th in child poverty
- 40th in homeownership
- 40th in health insurance coverage
- 37th in life expectancy

And the list goes on.

This data makes it clear that CNBC's ranking is about politics, not the lives of North Carolinians.

That's why the politicians and business groups in power love these kinds of rankings. Because when the actual numbers don't look so great — when the data shows people are falling behind — it gives them something else to point to.

So what do we do with all of this? We shift the conversation away from rankings and toward results.

The people of North Carolina don't live in CNBC headlines. They live in the day-to-day reality of wages that are too low, housing that's too expensive, health care that's hard to access and schools that aren't setting their kids up for success.

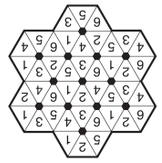
We ask tougher questions, demand better data and hold our leaders accountable, not based on what national media organizations say but on how their people are actually doing.

That's how we build a North Carolina that may not look good on paper but delivers real results for the people who call it home.

Sam Grote is CEO of the NC Business Impact Forum, a nonprofit that uses data-driven research to advance sustainable economic growth in North Carolina. This column is syndicated by Beacon Media.

PUZZLE ANSWERS

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



CryptoQuote answer

Comparing yourself to others' success only slows you down from finding your own. — Octavia Spencer

CryptoQuip answer

Peculiar human society whose members always tend to hit each other on the head: bop culture.

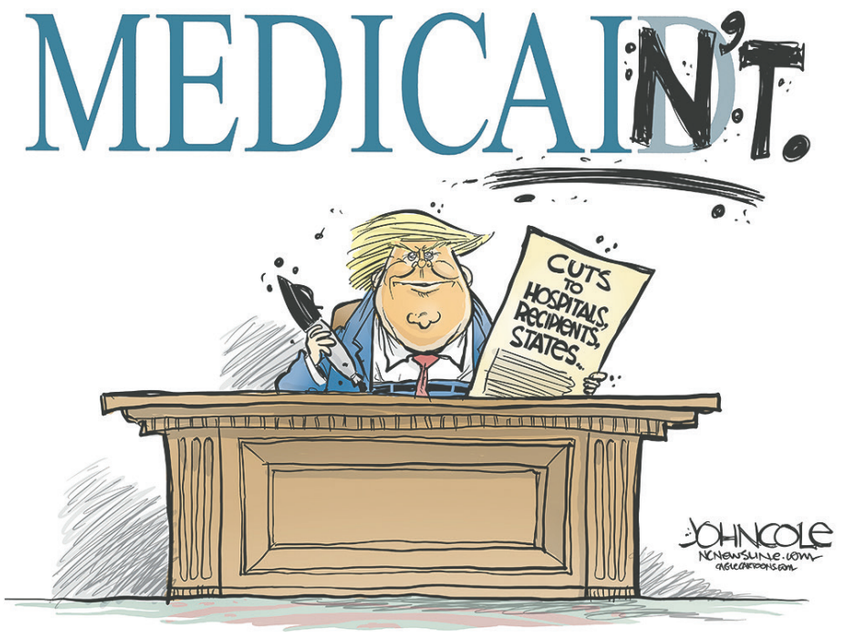
Even Exchange answers

1. Ravel, Raven
2. Police, Polite
3. Father, Latter
4. Track, Truck
5. Batter, Butter
6. Scold, Scald
7. Taller, Taller
8. Scarf, Scare
9. Expect, Expert
10. Perch, Porch

Trivia Answers

1. "A Whole New World."
2. 1997.
3. England.
4. Brasília.
5. Andrew Johnson.
6. Mount Olympus.
7. Maryland.
8. 2.
9. Manor Farm.
10. Jupiter.

1	+	9	×	6	=	60
+		+		+		
4	+	8	×	7	=	84
-		×		+		
2	+	3	÷	5	=	1
=		=		=		
3		51		18		



"Medicaid ain't what it was..." by John Cole. Originally published by NC Newsline.

SAVAGE LOVE

FOUR OPTIONS

Living then leaving a suppressed life

BY DAN SAVAGE

I'm a 31-year-old heterosexual woman who has been married for nine years. The math: My husband and I got married right after university. Like you, I grew up Catholic and as a girl/woman, all of the purity culture bullshit was foisted on me. Over the years, I've come to reject everything I was brought up to believe. I never stepped out of line and now I grieve for my younger self because I missed out on formative experiences — sexual and otherwise — that I should've had in my teens/20s. I feel stunted. It was pounded into me (only figuratively, sadly) that I would deeply regret having sex before marriage. Ironically, what I actually regret is not having sex with the kind, loving guys I dated before my husband.

In the last year or so, I've developed some very ambiguous desires and a curiosity to experience more. I wonder what it would be like to have other sexual partners and what it would be like to date now. I've talked about this with my husband and he validates that my feelings are normal given my/our strict upbringing and lack of experience but ultimately shrugs it off. After all, he says, we can't go back in time and get married later or have different partners, etc. I cannot imagine him being open to any arrangement other than what we have now: garden-variety monogamy. My ambiguous desire had no outlet until recently, when I developed a huge crush on a coworker. While we're flirtatious together, he's also unavailable, so there is nowhere for this attraction to "go." I have not felt like this for as long as I've been married. The alchemy of this crush is staggering.

Dan, what do I do if I want to experience more but I can't put my finger on what that means exactly? If I want experiences that aren't possible within my marriage, are my only options to suppress those desires or leave, when leaving could mean I would lose a mostly solid relationship for potentially nothing?

Grass Is Getting Greener Every Day

You have four options, GIGGED, not two.

Option #1: Ask. You may think you already asked your husband for permission to fuck some other men, GIGGED, but if your husband was able to shrug your concerns off — come on — you failed to communicate to him exactly what it was you were asking him for. And if you can't imagine him being open to "any arrangement" other than the one you agreed to when you married, that's because you didn't ask him a direct question about other possible arrangements. If you had, you wouldn't have to imagine. You would know. Like a lot of married people who want to open their marriages, you kept the ask vague and plausibly deniable in case he reacted with shock or anger and you wanted to deny having made the ask at all. So, ask him directly: Can we open our marriage? If he surprises you and says yes, you get the freedom you want without having to give up the husband you love. If he says no…

Option #2: Leave. This means losing your marriage — and just asking about openness has cost some people their marriages — but even if you lose him, GIGGED, you won't be left with nothing. You will have your freedom. Freedom isn't a guarantee of current or future happiness, of course, but freedom isn't nothing. You don't mention children — which would radically change the math here — and divorce is painful and messy with or without kids, but you're still young. And if you suddenly found yourself young and single, you could go out there and make up for all that lost time and all those lost dicks.

Option #3: Cheat. This is the advice that will piss everyone off but it belongs on the table because people do it, and because in some instances — not yours, from the sound of things, but some — cheating is the least worst option for all involved, including the person who got cheated on. But it's a high-risk gamble; you could get caught right away and blow your marriage up and be seen as a villain or you could get away with it but then spend the rest of your life with the Sword of Damocles hanging over your head. Some people manage to have affairs and get away with them, some don't. Some people learn to live with the stress of a secret, some crack under it.

Option #4: Suppress. Basically, suck it up. Tell yourself your marriage is good enough, your husband is good enough, and you're willing and able to go to your grave 50 years from now without ever having sex with anyone else. This is the path of least resistance — it's the path most monogamously-married-but-sexually-miserable people choose to walk. It's also the path lots of cheaters who are getting away with it pretend to walk. (For the record: Not all monogamously married people are sexually miserable.) But it's also the path most likely to rot your marriage from the inside out — very slowly — as your feelings of resentment build over time. Most people who wind up cheating were attempting to suck it up.

None of these options are perfect. All of them come with costs. But pretending you only have two choices — suppress or leave — isn't true.

I'm a 40-year-old straight married guy. This past weekend, I got a day pass to a nearby nudist club — you know, the kind with families, a lake, kayaks, tennis courts, that sort of thing. I was basically on a scouting mission to see if it was the kind of place my wife might like to spend some time. (It was fun!) Everyone was super nice and welcoming, but I always made sure to drop a reference to my wife and kids in conversation, especially with women — it just seemed to make things go smoother, given I was an unaccompanied male. At one point, though, another unaccompanied male, around age 50, approached me and started talking. It became clear pretty quickly that he was flirting. Totally fine, all good, people do that! But I then dropped in a reference to my wife, almost without thinking about it because that's what I'd been doing all day, and he ended our conversation abruptly and walked away.

I felt bad about it afterward. I think he read it as me trying to communicate my straightness to him, which I wasn't really trying to do. Or at least, I wasn't communicating anything I hadn't been communicating to everyone else all day. Is there a good way to subtly let a guy know I'm straight and not interested without making it sound like I'm trying to get out of the conversation because he's gay and I'm not? And is that advice any different when we are both standing naked in front of each other?

Needs Understanding Dan's Evaluation

You're overthinking this. In a mixed nudist environment — a mix of queers and straights, old people and young, folks there for the naked tennis and folks there for naked kayaking — you will occasionally be approached by men who are interested in your dick. So, unless you get "STRAIGHT" tattooed across your forehead (Pete Hegseth knows a tattoo artist who would be happy to do it), you're gonna have brief interactions with gay men drawn to your dick.

Now, you only had one conversation that ended abruptly, NUDE, and unless that guy was the kind of pushy jerk who felt entitled to your dick because he could see it — and pushy jerks don't do well in (and aren't welcome at) nudist resorts — I doubt he took it personally when you mentioned the wife. He hoped you might be gay, he realized you weren't, and he moved on. You most likely talked with other men that day you didn't realize were gay because 1. they were just making conversation and weren't trying to get into your invisible pants (and so they kept chatting with you even after you dropped the "wife" bomb) or 2. they were trying to get into your invisible pants but stuck around after they realized you were straight because they were enjoying the conversation.

All that said, you don't need a secret handshake or subtle wink or an appalling tattoo to let people know who you are. All you need is a willingness to make conversation and the ability to slip relevant details about yourself into the conversational flow. This advice applies whether you're wearing nothing at the nudist resort, a full gimp suit at the fetish club or a tux at your best friend's wedding.

Mid 30s straightish cis male here. I recently came out to my girlfriend as IDBND (into dick but not dude). It's something I've struggled with for a long time, as I've watched porn involving trans women for quite a while. It's not something I've ever acted on, but when I shared this kink with her — and indicated that I would be open to butt play — she was incredibly supportive. It could not have gone better. The biggest thing I've grappled with is my sense of self and what to call it. Yes, sexuality is a spectrum and it ultimately doesn't matter as long as you're not hurting anyone who doesn't want to be hurt, but I still feel like I need a name for it. Bisexual doesn't feel right. The IDBND initialism you coined is a mouthful. Queer is a convenient catchall but it could mean literally anything.

Straightish is fine, and so is heteroflexible, I guess. But I came up with a word I would like to put on your radar: enamisexual. The first half of the word comes from the Greek word enamisi (eh-na-me-see), which means "one and a half." I do not mean to suggest that trans women are not women or are half a person. Trans women are women — I don't want to offend anyone — but the presence of a penis is a differentiating factor, an additional element (and not a bad one!). I feel I am somewhere between the poles of straight and bisexual, a comfortable 1.5. Enamisexual!

Maybe it'll catch on, maybe it won't. But it's worth trying!

Seriously Entertaining More Intimacy

When you're trying to launch a new dirty word — and I've launched a few in my time (pegging, monogamish, tolyamory, etc.) — it needs to be a word for something that doesn't already have a name, it needs to be a word that the average person can pronounce and it needs to be catchy. But even more importantly, SEMI, it can't sound like a word that's already out there. So, while "enamisexual" is clever, and while you make a solid etymological case for it, I don't think it's going to catch on because there are already words to describe men like you ("straight," "heteroflexible," "phallophile"), SEMI, and unless you're hitting those vowel sounds like a Shakespearean actor who wants to be heard in the second balcony — "en-AH-m-IH-sexual" — most people are going to think you said "enema."

Now, enemas are a fine kink, don't get me wrong, but enemas aren't as popular as dicks, SEMI, and most people won't stick around long enough for you to clarify what you actually meant. That means your new word will have the opposite of its intended effect; it's not gonna get you dick, it's gonna cost you dick.

So, I think you're better off sticking with straight or straightish or heteroflexible. You will have to explain what kind of straight/straightish/heteroflexible you are to new people you meet, SEMI, but that's better than having to explain — over and over again — that you're not into enemas.

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.


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