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QUEEN CITY NERVE



It Still Matters

2025 Local Election Guide

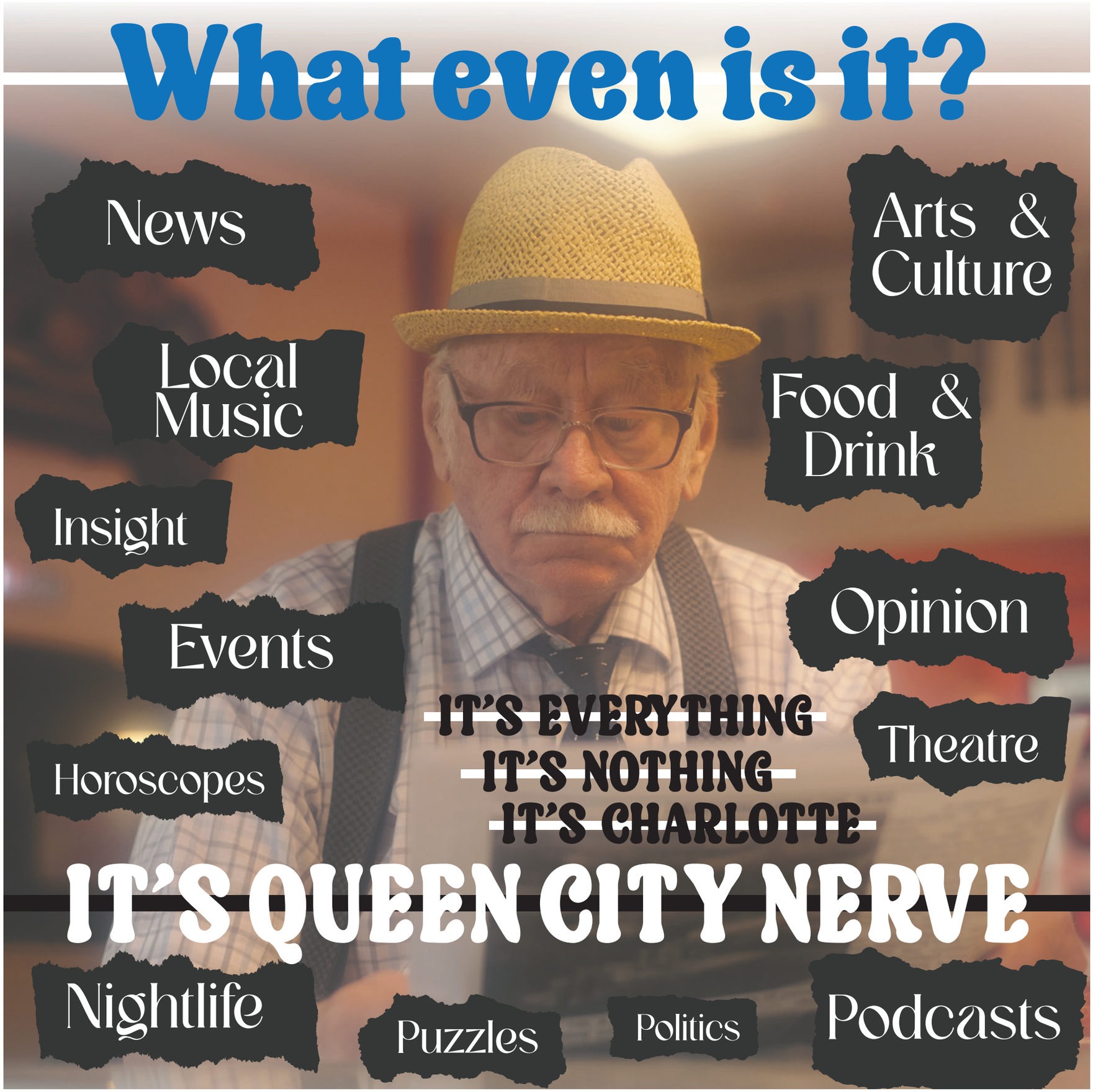
ARTS: The Long Room holds up ◊ **PG. 6**

MUSIC: Heidi Sidelinker's unfinished journey ◊ **PG. 8**

FOOD & DRINK: The Improper Pig in Plaza Midwood ◊ **PG. 11**

OPINION: A Charlotte murder, exploited ◊ **PG. 14**

What even is it?



IN YOUR CURBSIDE RECYCLING

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MAILING: PO BOX 6007
RICHMOND, VA 23222
INFO@QCNERVE.COM

BUSINESS

PUBLISHER ◇ ART & DESIGN
Justin LaFrancois
jlafrancois@qcnerve.com

MARKETING & AUDIENCE GROWTH
Alex Kastanas Holladay
aholladay@qcnerve.com

SALES

MEDIA SALES DIRECTOR
Renn Wilson
rwilson@qcnerve.com

ADVERTISING SALES EXECUTIVE
Jamie Bluto
jbluto@qcnerve.com

EDITORIAL

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Ryan Pitkin
rpitkin@qcnerve.com

STAFF WRITERS
Annie Keough
akeough@qcnerve.com
Patrick Moran
pmoran@qcnerve.com

CONTRIBUTORS
Matt Cosper, Martin Henson, Amanda Loren, Jake Rothwell, David Schiliro and Dan Savage.

FIND US ONLINE
www.QCNERVE.com
@queencitynerve

Support Local Journalism in Charlotte: qcnerve.com/memberships

COVER DESIGN: Justin LaFrancois

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LaWana Slack-Mayfield is running for reelection at-large. Photo courtesy of candidate's campaign

ELECTION GUIDE 2025

City government and the board of ed hits the ballot

BY ANNIE KEOUGH

It's that time of year again, folks. If you didn't get the chance to vote in the primaries in September, now is the time to make up for it.

This year's general election will decide who represents you on Charlotte City Council and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Board of Education (BOE).

No matter who you vote for, please do so with an educated conscience, whether that be through this guide or on your own. Below, we will run through the full list of candidates for Charlotte City Council. Please visit qcnerve.com to check out our full guide to the BOE election, as well.

Early voting will start on Oct. 16 and last through Nov. 1.
Find your early voting polling location at tinyurl.com/EarlyVotingCLT25.
Election Day is on Tuesday, Nov. 4.
Find your Election Day precinct at tinyurl.com/PrecinctCLT25.
Check your voter registration at vt.ncsbe.gov/RegLkup.

Incumbents

CHARLOTTE MAYOR

Vi Lyles (D)*

Vi Lyles is running for her fifth term as mayor of the Queen City. From expanding affordable housing to improving public safety and investing in Charlotte's infrastructure, she says that she is delivering real results.

"But, there is still work to do - and I'm ready to keep doing it," Lyles said on her Facebook page.

Lyles and a few council members were subject to a recent controversy when they voted in a closed meeting to approve a settlement for CMPD Chief Johnny Jennings as a proactive measure of appeasement for the chief, who had threatened to sue the city for harassing texts he received from then-council member Tariq Bokhari in 2024.

Lyles has stood by the decision to settle with Jennings and this campaign season appears to be focused on lobbying for the passage of the one-cent sales tax referendum to fund the city's transit plan.

Rob Yates (L)

Rob Yates is the only Libertarian on the ballot and believes that the best person to make decisions on what is best for you is you.

"If you want to trust an expert, then you should be able to, but we wholeheartedly and utterly reject the idea that an appointed bureaucrat or a politician who campaigned solely to get elected has the authority to violate your personal or bodily autonomy," his website reads.

Yates has served as the Charlotte chair and the North Carolina co-chair for the Foundation Against Racism and Intolerance for nearly five years, participated in community walks and fundraising for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and works as the communications director for the Libertarian Party of North Carolina. His mayoral campaign platform centers on electoral reform, affordable housing, transportation and public safety.

Terrie D. Donovan (R)

Terrie Donovan is a small business owner and real estate agent whose platform centers on public safety, prioritizing more funding for police, stricter enforcement of our current laws, support for victims' rights and promoting more after-school and mentorship programs, according to her X account.

Donovan recently voiced her support for the Charlotte Fraternal Order of Police's request that the National Guard be sent to Charlotte in the wake of Iryna Zarutska's murder, posting an AI-generated photo of Charlie Kirk embracing Zarutska in the moments leading up to her death on Facebook.

CHARLOTTE CITY COUNCIL AT-LARGE

Dimple Ajmera (D)*

Dimple Ajmera was the first Asian-American and youngest woman to be elected to Charlotte City Council. The four-term incumbent immigrated to the US at age 16 and started a successful career in finance. She represented District 5 in east Charlotte before winning her at-large race on a platform of public safety, sustainable infrastructure, affordable housing and economic opportunities.

"I ran – and won – my race on a proven record of achievements that include Public Safety, Affordable Housing, the Environment, Women's Equality, Economic Development, and Infrastructure," she writes on her website.

James "Smuggie" Mitchell Jr. (D)

West Charlotte High School alumni and incumbent James "Smuggie" Mitchell spent much of his career working in construction as director of business development for Barton Maslow and president of R.J. Leeper Construction — a position that led Mitchell to resign from City Council in 2021 following stakeholder concerns related to the firm's work with the city. He was reelected to council in 2022 and cleared of any wrongdoing by the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Office in 2023.

"Mitchell has always been a servant leader, after a brief absence from public office he decided there is more work to do in Charlotte," reads his website. "It is because of that love of service that Mitchell filed to run and won an at-large seat in the 2022 elections."

Mitchell has served as vice president of the Black Political Caucus and has the organization's endorsement this election. He currently works as director of business development at McFarland Construction.

LaWana Slack-Mayfield (D)*

Incumbent LaWana Slack-Mayfield served as a District 3 representative for eight years before taking a three-year hiatus then winning her at-large seat in 2022. Mayfield is endorsed by several LGBTQ+ organizations, the Charlotte-Metrolina Labor Council and the Black Political Caucus.

Her priority issues include affordable housing, economic development, employment opportunities, and ending racial and gender bias to "create a city that is truly 'Welcome to all,'" her website states. "I don't play the game of politics. I do the work of service."

Victoria Watlington (D)*

Incumbent Dr. Victoria Watlington is a licensed professional engineer and certified project manager. She joined the council in 2019 as a District 3 representative before winning an at-large seat in 2023. Her platform includes building strong neighborhoods, engaging community leaders, infrastructure and investing in workforce development.

"Charlotte is in the midst of a leadership transition," her website said. "I want your support to be that pragmatic, progressive, professional leader that our community deserves."

In May, Watlington called actions by the council "unethical, immoral, and frankly, illegal" in relation to Jennings' settlement, though she has since walked back that language a bit. Regardless, she was not in support of the settlement as approved by the majority of her fellow council members.

Misun Kim (R)

Born and raised in South Korea, Misun Kim immigrated to America in 1991 and became a small business owner in 1992. A single mother to two adult children, Kim "understands the challenges working families face and brings a deeply personal perspective to public service," her website said.

Despite being an immigrant herself, Kim wrote on Facebook about her beliefs that undocumented immigrants "knowingly contravened the law" by entering the country, so even children of undocumented immigrants should be sent back to their parent's home country because, though they may "not have committed a crime, ... they are part of a family that has broken the law." She added (wrongly) that undocumented immigrants utilize



James H. Bowers (D3) Courtesy of campaign

public resources without contributing to the tax base.

Kim is a proud supporter of Donald Trump, has spoken against allowing transgender folks to work as teachers or public service providers, criticized DEI initiatives and appears to oppose vaccines. She recently shared the "uplifting story" of her son, who previously identified as gay but has since "undergone a significant transformation" and is now engaged to a woman.

"As they prepare to get married, I am reminded of the incredible power of prayer and the love and support of our family and friends, including my biostatic group," Kim said on Facebook. "This remarkable journey demonstrates that individuals struggling with sexual identity confusion can find clarity and live fulfilling lives."

Edwin B. Peacock III (R)

Edwin B. Peacock III served as the Charlotte City Council At-Large member from 2007-2011 and was elected as the interim District 6 representative in May to complete Tariq Bokhari's term following Bokhari's resignation.

Peacock told The Charlotte Observer that the most important issues facing Charlotte now are crime and transportation. He said he will address crime by developing an updated public safety plan in coordination with the CMPD chief and District Attorney Spencer Merriweather.

CHARLOTTE CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT 3

Joi Mayo (D)

Joi Mayo is a community advocate and former middle school math teacher who founded and serves as board chair for Transforming Nations Ford, a community development nonprofit that advocates for the Nations Ford/Arrowood Road corridor. Mayo also serves as a board member with Steele Creek Community Place.

Mayo's campaign centers on affordable housing, equitable development and community empowerment.

"Joi's passion for community engagement and commitment to improving neighborhoods led her to run for District 3 Representative for the Charlotte City Council," her website reads. "Her journey from being a middle school math teacher to becoming a community leader and advocate for equitable development is a testament to her unwavering dedication and passion for creating thriving neighborhoods."

James H. Bowers (R)

James Bowers moved to Charlotte in 1987 and has sold cars, mortgages, retail furniture, fuel and now insurance. Bowers has been a minister since 1997 and currently serves in that role at Children's Church. He is a Captain in the Young Men of Valor boys organization and served five years on the Mecklenburg County Motor Vehicle Review Board.

"In today's political environment I've noticed that lawlessness is pervasive and tolerated, and that makes Charlotte less safe," Bowers writes on his website. "And the need for transparency and working with our law enforcement departments is crucial in 'Making Charlotte Great Again.'"



Kimberly Owens (D6) Courtesy of campaign

Robin Emmons (Independent)

Robin Emmons is the only unaffiliated candidate on the ballot, having gathered the 1,382 signatures (1.5% of registered district voters) necessary to do so.

Emmons was honored as a CNN Hero for spearheading an urban farming initiative to sustain Charlotte food deserts. She was also awarded the Eisenhower Fellowship, received the Athena International Woman's Leadership Award, recognized as one of Mecklenburg Times' 50 Most Influential Women and given the Margaret Fuller Award for exceptional service and community stewardship.

Her priorities lie in affordable housing and stability, economic opportunity, public safety, and healthy and connected neighborhoods.

"Fueled by a lifelong dedication to service, our campaign is a call to action to reignite our commitment to governance for the people, revitalize civic engagement, and restore the Middle - those who understand the value in rebuilding what we've lost. I'm running because I believe reclaiming that is worth it," her website reads.

CHARLOTTE CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT 6

Kimberly Owens (D)

Kimberly Owens has practiced law in Charlotte since 1994, giving her the negotiation, litigation and practical business experience to serve Charlotte well on the City Council, her website states. She has also participated on the Council for Children's Rights, providing due process to students facing expulsion and long-term suspension, and served as a chair for nonprofit boards like RAIN and its housing program The Havens.

Owens advocates for causes she believes in through Moms Demand Action, Planned Parenthood, Rotary Youth Exchange and Lillian's List Action fund. Her platform prioritizes smart housing policies, transportation that works for everyone, public safety, sustainability and supporting small businesses.

"I want to be your voice on the city council and be the bridge between our community and the resources we need most," Owens' website said. "No good policy is developed behind closed doors. No plan should proceed without citizen input."

Krista Bokhari (R)

Krista Bokhari is running to replace her husband Tariq Bokhari, who resigned as the District 6 representative earlier this year to take a short-lived role in the Trump administration. As a former marketing director in the manufacturing, hospitality and tourism industry, Krista hopes to bring "checks and balances" to city council.

"Currently the council is dangerously unbalanced with 10 of the members being Democrats and only 2 being Republican," she said on her website. "The District 6 seat is one of the two seats standing between zero guardrails, accountability or transparency."

Bokhari has been outspoken in her opposition to the settlement that council reached with CMPD Chief Johnny Jennings in the wake of his tiff with Tariq. She's earned endorsements from a number of local Republicans and conservative organizations and supported the Charlotte FOP's request for the deployment of the National Guard into Charlotte.



Joi Mayo (D3) Courtesy of campaign

REFERENDUM

Mecklenburg County Public Transportation Systems Local Sales and Use Tax

Residents will vote for or against a 1% sales tax increase that would raise the county's sales tax from 7.25% to 8.25% to fund transportation infrastructure.

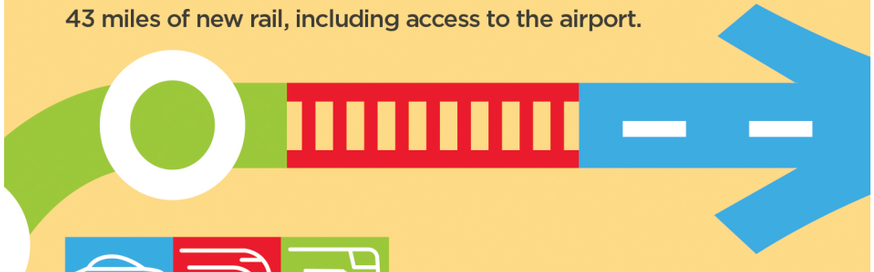
The generated revenue from the sales tax would go toward the formation of the Metropolitan Public Transportation Authority, rail line development, Better Busing practices and retrofitting roads with bike lanes and sidewalks.

Supporters of the referendum say the tax would foster faster commutes, increase job access and create better roads. Opponents worry the tax will accelerate gentrification and lowest-income households will foot the bill.

Visit qcnerve.com/transit-tax-debate-feature to learn more about that issue. And be sure to visit qcnerve.com to learn more about your CMS Board of Ed candidates.

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Meck Connect is roads with more sidewalks, crosswalks, and enhanced intersections. It's also smart traffic signals to help ease congestion. There's 50% more bus service, 15-minute frequency on busy routes, and 18 new Microtransit zones for on-demand pickup. And there's 43 miles of new rail, including access to the airport.



MECK CONNECT



Tango Brunch at The Long Room. Photo by Amanda Loren

THE LONG GAME

The Long Room approaches cultural diversity with a purpose

BY MATT COSPER

The Long Room opened in the fall of 2023 with lots of fanfare and a slate of performances from established names in Charlotte's underground scene; early shows included work by modern dance troupe Baran Dance, freak folk royalty Andy the Doorbum, and local musical theatre juggernaut QC Concerts.

Located at the corner of Central and Hawthorne avenues, the venue is technically located in Belmont where it borders Plaza Midwood and Elizabeth, all the businesses along that stretch of Central are considered to be part of Plaza Midwood in most outbound travelers' minds.

As the brainchild of founders Sarah Hayes Harkins and Matthew Seneca, The Long Room has proved to be a welcome addition to the area's entertainment ecosystem, remaining true to the area's past as an essential artistic hub while feeling of a piece with the small business ethos managing to hang on in the face of the city's continued late-capitalist expansion and aggressive beigeification.

I spoke with Harkins and Seneca two years ago for a story in these pages, and was struck at the time by the duo's clear-eyed focus on creating a business model that would serve the soul of the city while keeping the doors open.

This is no mean feat and should be considered wildly ambitious in a business climate where the majority of real estate is owned by private equity and soul is an abstraction evoked to raise property values.

At the time Seneca told me, "Creative people in Charlotte struggle to find space, and we are often at the mercy of those who own space, be it corporate developers who want to see a profit, breweries who need to sell alcohol, churches which are unlikely to host, say, an LGBTQ ecstatic dance party … I wanted to take one big swing in my life and open a space where my value system, one that prioritizes the arts, holds sway."

In the two years since, they've made good on the promise of its premise; the spot is a cozy and breezily elegant home for drag performances and "sultry" floorwork dance classes led by Lydia Heidt, along with perhaps more staid affairs: a chamber concert put on by WDAV and an evening with an opera soloist singing accompanied by two pianists.

Most exciting for me recently have been the presentations of hybrid engagements like contemporary tango-fusion performance Una Noche Entre Sueños and Mariah Van Kleef's mytho-poetic music and dance ritual INFAELITH.

I caught up with Hayes and Seneca recently to find out how the work progresses, what they are most proud of and what the future holds for The Long Room. Enamored as I am with the inherent unpredictability of performance, I was keen to find out where the unexpected had emerged for Harkins and Seneca — what had surprised them.

For Harkins it's been the role The Long Room has played for emerging artists, those who in Harkins' words "want to express themselves or start something new and need a place to do it.

"I have given so many tours to people who are yearning to show a part of themselves to their community that they never have before," she explained.

Both Seneca and Harkins note the diversity of performers, mediums and genres that have sought refuge in their space. Musicians and dancers, theatre creators and chefs are among the various creators who have been lured to The Long Room by the prospect of having the perfect venue for their project.

Seneca lists the variety of musical genres that have been performed at The Long Room and it's clear that the identity the venue is developing is at the very least eclectic.

The Long Room has presented performances by artists working in country, rap, classical, jazz, New Age, folk, electronica, EDM, opera, art song, indie singer-songwriter, Broadway musicals, a capella groups, blues, R&B, Latin music and more.

Much of this work has been curated by choreographer and filmmaker Megan Payne.

In terms of what's missing, or rather, what Hawkins and Seneca would like to see more of at The Long Room, there is once again the familiar balance between culture and commerce.

While Seneca waxes poetic about wanting to see more theatre productions in the space, especially Shakespeare, Harkins says, "We would love the opportunity to host more corporate and larger nonprofit events. This would be of mutual benefit to us, of course, but also put us in front of people who I think would really appreciate what we are doing."

This speaks to a truth that any cultural or artistic enterprise has to deal with if they want to be financially viable at this moment in history: In an economy designed by corporations and financiers to be accessible only to corporations and financiers, you are going to need to develop a client base whose tentpoles are — you guessed it — corporations and financiers.

This is true from the perspective of client revenue but also at the level of exposure and brand building. (Wow, I literally threw up in my mouth a little writing about the need to build a brand.)

The plain truth is that the class of people initially and most urgently drawn to arts spaces are not the class of people who can fund arts spaces. You have to invite the barbarians in.

It should probably be noted that it is entirely my own opinion. Both Seneca and Harkins strike me as eminently reasonable people who bear no ill will toward the ruling class.

So, Brad from International Arms Sales and Tina who is Senior VP of platitudes and blatant falsehoods should not feel discouraged from booking the venue for their upcoming seminar, "It's not crime if you do it from the c-suite."

In all seriousness, I think The Long Room is doing a good job with good intentions in what is quite frankly an apocalyptic scenario. It's heartening to see them hosting programming like their recent Una Noche Entre Sueños.

Like their regular Tango Wednesday's events, Una Noche does something critical to the longevity of The Long Room; it expresses clearly and effectively the inner life and taste of the proprietors. Programming is passion, programming is purpose. Anyone who says that they are neutral about their programming is either dishonest or too vapid to be in a position of power.

And don't get me started on the folks who say they have to program "what the people want." It's 2025 and we're in Charlotte, Mr. REDACTED. There's no such thing as some mythical discerning theatre audience demanding specific work. If they are demanding anything it's the stuff you advertise to them, dammit.

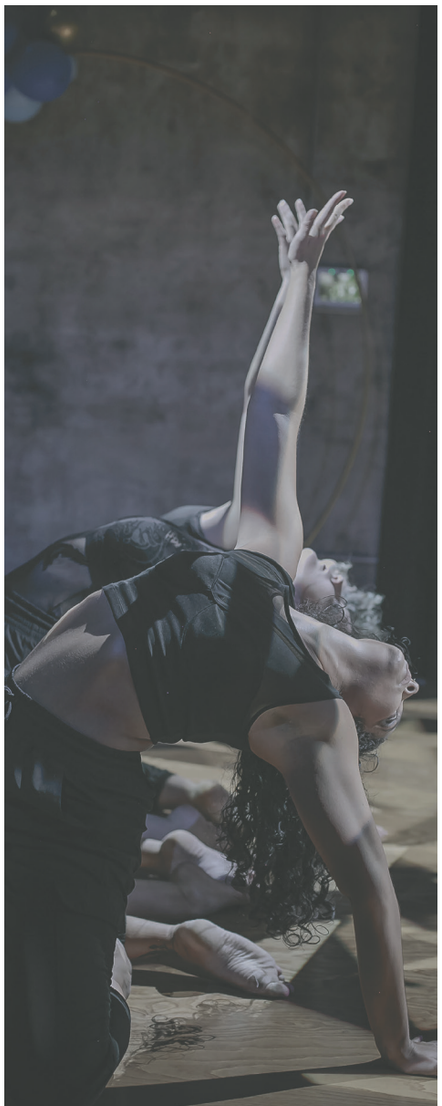
Anyway, putting work into productions like Una Noche is smart in the long term because it actively resists the monoculture. It is a statement of purpose and proof of life. Like one of those "I am not a robot" check boxes you see online, but for a performance space.

If we are what we do, then putting your passions and preferences on the stage as a producer and presenter lets your audience know who you are.

That's why I want The Long Room to book those sweet, sweet corporate events. This kind of programming may or may not be a home run for the immediate bottom line, but it reaffirms the humanity of the enterprise.

And where we're headed as a culture, affirmed and bona fide humanity is going to be in short supply and worth a pretty penny to those who know.

INFO@QCNERVE.COM



Baran Dance during Fright Night at TLR. Courtesy of TLR

BIG GIGANTIC

Oct. 17 • 7:30 p.m. • Black Box Theater, 421 E. Sugar Creek Road • $41-$46 • blackboxcharlotte.com

Formed in 2008 by saxophonist Dominic Lalli and drummer Jeremy Salken, Denver-based Big Gigantic essays EDM instrumentals that fuse dub step and off-kilter hip-hop with occasional jazz-adjacent lead saxophone. With the 2014 single "The Night is Young," Big Gigantic embraced vocals with contributions by synth-pop Tennessee duo Cherub. Coachella and Bonnaroo beckoned and Big Gigantic didn't look back. Recent single "Flourescence" fuses Lady Blackbird's dramatic and soul-jazz vocals over funky house beats and apocalyptic bass then caps it off with a saxophone coda that evokes Mel Collins heart-tugging work on King Crimson's "One More Red Nightmare."

BIKETOBERFEST

Oct. 19 • noon-6 p.m. • The Barrel Room at Triple C, 2832 Griffith St. • $25-$45 • biketoberfest.rallybound.org

Sustain Charlotte launched Biketoberfest in 2015 to highlight how bikeable South End and Uptown can be and to raise funds to support the nonprofit's mission to expand greenway networks, build protected bike lanes and advocate for equitable policy decisions around housing and transportation options. Ten years later, Biketoberfest has grown to span multiple neighborhoods and in the process has become Sustain Charlotte's largest annual fundraiser. The family-friendly event offers participants the opportunity to spend time with family and friends exploring Queen City neighborhoods via bike, scooter, public transit or on foot. Children under 12 participate for free.

CHARLOTTE SYMPHONY ON TAP

Oct. 21 • 7:30 p.m. • NoDa Brewing Co., 150 W. 32nd St. • $43 • charlottesymphony.org

The Charlotte Symphony Orchestra's popular On Tap concert series launched in 2016, when the orchestra partnered with NoDa Brewing for three performances. Now in its 10th season, On Tap features an intimate orchestral experience highlighting a range of composers within a laid-back environment. The evening's program of expressive chamber music includes Svendsen's "String Quintet in C Major" and Dvorak's "String Quintet No. 3," which is noted for its viola-driven Bohemian and American folk influences. (Dvorak was an accomplished violist himself.) The selections are performed by cellist Allison Drenkow, violists Benjamin Geller and Wenlong Huang, and violinists Hanna Zhdan and Cynthia Burton.

TRUE OPTIMIST W/ DISASTER ARTIST, ANNIE LEETH, HOMEMADE HAIRCUTS

Oct. 22 • 8:30 p.m. • Snug Harbor, 1228 Gordon St. • $12 • snugrock.com

True Optimist's *Parlor Palms*, a tropicalia, soca and new-wave influenced double LP, is one of this years' most stylistically rangy works by a Charlotte artist. At Snug, Optimist-in-chief Evan Plante, along with wife and co-writer Susan Plante, plays songs from his masterwork with an eight-piece band to celebrate the double-LP release on Oct. 24. Philadelphia's Disaster Artist, composed of identical twin brothers Jo and Chris Mayo, have carved out an unimpeachable indie-rock fiefdom with story-driven tunes like the alternately delicate and clangorous "Today." Athens, Georgia-based Annie Leeth crafts delicate/whiplash electro-trap pop on her 2025 LP *Phantom Limb*. Columbia outfit Homemade Haircuts crafts pensive alt rock with instrumental variety and lived-in lyrics.

DOECHII

Oct. 23 • 8 p.m. • Bojangles Coliseum, 2700 E. Independence Blvd. • $80-$130 • boplex.com

With her musically diverse 2024 mixtape *Alligator Bites Never Heal*, Doechii became the third woman in history to win the Grammy for Best Rap Album. The brash Tampa-born rapper-singer fuses hip-hop and R&B in tracks that pair aggressive beats with introspective storytelling. After self-releasing music independently for years, Doechii blew up in 2021 when her satirical and sensual "Yucky Blucky Fruitcake" went viral. On her latest single, "Beat A B!tch Up," Doechii teams with Sudanese-Ethiopian singer-songwriter Alemeda for a kiss-off track to a lame ex-lover that is also a soaring pop banger giving Avril Lavigne energy.

STRANGE CHARLOTTE FRINGE FESTIVAL

Oct. 23-25 • times vary • The Arts Factory, 1545 W. Trade St. • $20-$75 • queencitycomedy.com

The Queen City Comedy collective curates the Strange Charlotte Fringe Festival, billed as three eerie evenings of the wild, the weird, the wicked and the deliciously strange. It sounds ghoulishly good to us, since The Queen City could use a healthy serving of rituals, oddities and things that are simply unclassifiable to shake things up every now and then. Promising the strange, surprising and spectacular, the fest gathers a rogues' gallery of actors, comedians, musicians, dancers, mediums and storytellers for expressly adult entertainment. Offstage, the fest offers workshops, jams and after-parties to keep the celebration going long into the night.



K Fest
Via Eventbrite
10/25



Sneakspeaks
Counrtesy of Mint Museum
10/26

'MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS'

Oct. 24-Nov. 9 • times vary • Theatre Charlotte, 501 Queens Road • $20-$34 • theatrecharlotte.org

The funniest put-down we ever heard about the grand dame of British mystery Agatha Christie is that she perfected the who-cares-whodunnit. It's a witty jibe, but it misses the mark on what's so entertaining about cozy murder mysteries. Divining the killer is the least of the genre's pleasures; the real fun is seeing actors essay the gallery of stuffy/sinister/satirical suspects. Theatre Charlotte's *Murder on the Orient Express* exchanges the sprawling manor home of most golden-age Brit mysteries for the titular snowbound train, where an unsavory victim has been stabbed eight times, and mustachioed sleuth Hercule Poirot must determine whodunnit.

K FEST

Oct. 25 • 2-11 p.m. • Seoul Food Meat Company, 421 E 26th St. • Free • tinyurl.com/KFestUDM2025

South Korea has emerged on the world stage as a cultural powerhouse. South Korean cinema boasts classics in all genres, including the Oscar-winning black comedy *Parasite*. Consider too, the ever-increasing popularity of K-Pop groups like BTS with young Americans. Now in its second year, K-Fest showcases the fact that there's far more to the Korean peninsula than kimchi and Kim Jong Un. The fest offers an immersive deep dive into Korea's culture, arts and cuisine. The event includes Korean games, music and cuisine, also highlighting performances and cultural displays like a K-Pop dance contest, a karaoke contest and martial arts demonstrations.

SNEAKSPEAKS

Oct. 26 • noon-6 p.m. • Mint Museum Randolph, 2730 Randolph Rd. • Free • mintmuseum.org

This special edition of the Mint's Party in the Park celebrates Future Now: Virtual Sneakers to Cutting-Edge Kicks. The exhibit explores how cutting-edge technologies, unexpected materials and new ideas are transforming footwear, spotlighting digitally designed and 3D-printed shoes as well as sneakers made from mushroom leather and reclaimed ocean plastics. Attendees can visit a custom sole station, see a panel discussion about sneaker concept and design, take a sneaker stroll and witness a final sneaker battle in the Wallace Atrium. The event also features food trucks, a live DJ, a cash bar and free museum admission to see the exhibition.

ODDISEE

Oct. 28 • 8 p.m. • Neighborhood Theatre, 511 E. 36th St. • $22-$26 • neighborhoodtheatre.com

Staunchly independent Brooklyn-via-Washington, D.C. underground rapper/producer Oddisee issues muscular tracks that ask how much we're willing to compromise for the sake of success. On "The Start of Something," the lead-off track on his 2023 LP *To What End*, he answers that question when he raps, "*I'm going off, how to make a million without going soft...*" The opening track to Oddisee's latest EP *En Route*, "A Rare Thing" blends jazz textures and soulful lyricism into a snapshot of an artist in constant motion in search of meaning. Charlotte's Ahmir, a producer and rapper who draws on Southern roots and soul, is well matched with Oddisee.



Heidi Sidelinker performs at The Evening Muse. Photo by Jake Rothwell

A LIVED EXPERIENCE

Singer-songwriter Heidi Sidelinker draws on life's journey

BY PAT MORAN

Heidi Sidelinker was in her second year at Appalachian State University when she finally admitted that something was wrong.

Though she loved living on her own away from home and had been succeeding in school, Sidelinker felt drawn to make music.

So, she loaded her 12-string guitar and her 100-pound Black lab into her newly bought Subaru, stashed all the money she had under the floor mat and hit the road.

"I remember the feeling [of] getting in my car and driving towards Asheville and having music on and the windows down," Sidelinker says. "It was like, 'Oh my God, I can go anywhere.' It was so big, but also humbling."

Sidelinker's journey took her from the North Carolina mountains to the rocky beaches of Coos Bay, Oregon, then back again.

"It was the beginning of the rest of my life thus far," Sidelinker recalls.

The trip kickstarted her transition into the singer-songwriter she was meant to be. It would not be the last time she settled into a situation only to eventually leave so she could experience more.

The freedom promised by the beckoning highways, railways and riverways looms large in American music, but if Woody Guthrie's journey was bound for glory, Sidelinker's is bound for growth.

"Growth comes with being older and experiencing things that you can't write about until you experience them," says Sidelinker, who is now 44.

This wisdom garnered in the course of living imbues the singer-songwriter-guitarist's work. It haunts the driving, percussively strummed "Cold and Lonely Hill," Sidelinker's dry-eyed ballad addressed to a deceased lover with whom she has unfinished business.

"*There's no heat or running water/ Granite Quarry's done you in/ Wrote your songs, wrote your letters/ Tombstone's your only friend…*"

A similar gravitas is present in the spiraling, guitar-driven "Help Me Love You," an emotionally conflicted secular hymn. It's also ingrained in "Undress Your Heart," where resonant piano and Sidelinker's silvery 12-string underpin her heartfelt duet with Statesville singer-songwriter Edan Aldridge.

"*Gonna clothe myself in kindness/ And hang it out to dry/ Undress your heart now/ so I can give you mine…*"

"You've got to feel it before you can write it," says Sidelinker, who's scheduled to play a solo set at Petra's on Oct. 17.

The road to self discovery and rock

Growing up in Hickory, Sidelinker was surrounded by music. Her father, a pianist and middle school band teacher, had played in pop-rock band the Barracudas, which scored a gold record in 1968 for the tune "No Matter What You Do."

Despite this pedigree, Sidelinker never considered music for a career, even after she discovered her father's six-string classical guitar while in high school and taught herself to play.

It was at App State where Sidelinker realized her calling. When not attending classes or studying, she played open mics and wrote songs. She recorded two CDs while in college, *Dreamtime* and *Poetry, Essence, and Romance*, but considers them juvenilia.

"I was young and figuring out songwriting without having the material of living," she says.

Then came the trip where Sidelinker started collecting that necessary material. She told her parents that she had decided to drop out of school and pursue music; they gave her their blessings.

"They said, 'Whatever you decide to do, do it fiercely and with passion and we'll see where it goes," Sidelinker remembers.

On her road trip, Sidelinker slept under the stars, busked on streets and played her 12-string in coffee shops for cash. Halfway through her journey, Sidelinker attended a beachside Fourth of July celebration in Coos Bay. She had wrapped her dog's leash around her wrist when a firework spooked it. The animal took off and Sidelinker's wrist suffered a spiral fracture.

Though the injury hurt, Sidelinker has always had a high tolerance for pain. She continued to play guitar and refused to cut her trip short.

By the time she returned home to Hickory, constant playing had exacerbated Sidelinker's broken wrist. She needed surgery and had no insurance. Luckily, she found a musical community in the Davidson/Hickory area. Tim Helfrich, co-owner of Summit Coffee in Davidson and musicians in his own right, hosted a benefit concert that raised $10,000 to help pay for Sidelinker's surgery.

Despite sustaining an injury that could have permanently inhibited her ability to play, Sidelinker considers her cross-country trip necessary.

"I had to go that far and try all these new things … to be able to come back and feel comfortable in my own skin," she notes. "I realized everything I wanted was within me."

With fellow musician Josh Pender, Sidelinker formed the duo Autumn and August, which relocated to NoDa, then still a funky arts district dominated by art galleries. She befriended Evening Muse co-owner Joe Kuhlmann and started tending bar at the music venue. In the meantime, she continued to play in Autumn and August while performing her own songs solo, often at Muse.

At Neighborhood Theatre, Sidelinker opened for national acts including Blues Traveler and Iris Dement. She briefly joined Charlotte alt-rock band The New Familiars, occasionally touring with the outfit.

At Evening Muse, Sidelinker also met the members of Lowry, a touring, indie folk-rock band from New York City. When Lowry members asked her to join the band as a vocalist, she couldn't resist the lure of the road. After a heart-to-heart talk with Kuhlmann, who encouraged Sidelinker to embark on her next adventure, she jumped into the band's van for a three-month tour. After the tour, in 2006, Sidelinker moved with the band to NYC.

Although Sidelinker wrote all the harmonies on Lowry's new material, she didn't mind setting her solo songwriting career aside to be the band's singer.

"[Playing solo] I did all my booking [and] I made my press kits; I was completely self-sufficient," Sidelinker says. "I had this longing to play with other people, putting the guitar down and just getting to sing."

During Sidelinker's time with the band, Lowry released a few albums, toured nationally and traveled overseas to Europe.

Though Sidelinker was overwhelmed by European audiences' enthusiastic reception of the band, she also realized that her time with Lowry was coming to a close.

"I was [wondering why] I was not happy anymore and starting to feel empty," Sidelinker says. "I know now that [it was] because I'm a songwriter and guitar player. It's what … I need to be doing."

Sidelinker embraces motherhood and returns to songwriting

Sidelinker left Lowry in 2010 and got engaged to Dave Schiliro, a NYC-based cinematographer. The couple married in 2013 and in 2014 Sidelinker gave birth to her daughter — with no medical intervention or pain medications.

For the next few years, she set playing music professionally aside and threw herself into motherhood. She home-schooled her daughter and continued to nurse her until she turned 3.

"I got to a point where I was [being] mama to baby all day, every day — and I was missing music badly," Sidelinker says.

While still nursing her daughter, Sidelinker started playing solo at a pizza joint across the street from the family's apartment in Astoria, Queens. She would rush back home and nurse between sets. Starting from scratch after so many years away from songwriting and playing publicly, Sidelinker slowly reestablished herself in the city's music scene.

In January 2020, Sidelinker became pregnant a second time. Then in February, COVID struck the city. She remembers it as a frightening time and place.

"It was like a zombie apocalypse going into Times Square for my doctor's appointments," Sidelinker says.

Sidelinker and Schiliro decided to move back to North Carolina to be closer to Sidelinker's family. While her husband worked, Sidelinker packed up the family's belongings and took on the task of moving.

Then, seven-months pregnant, in the middle of COVID and on her birthday, Sidelinker woke up with one half of her face paralyzed. The prognosis was Bell's palsy, a paralysis caused by inflammation of the cranial nerve that controls facial muscles.

Concerned about the effects of prednisone on



Sidelinker will perform at Petra's on Oct. 17. Photo by David Schiliro

her unborn son's health, Sidelinker refused the corticosteroid medication for her condition, opting for acupuncture instead. To this day, one of her eyes shuts when she sings.

Despite these hardships, Sidelinker's family made the move to Sneads Ferry outside Winston-Salem, where her son was born. The family ultimately settled in Huntersville. Here, Sidelinker once again started from ground zero, rebuilding her career as a professional singer-songwriter and guitarist.

"All these years of having babies, going through COVID and my face being paralyzed — just the journey, those life experiences — that's where the songwriting comes from now," Sidelinker maintains.

Sidelinker formed folk-rock combo Heidi and the River Down, a rotating crew that includes mandolin and banjo player Mike Orlando, guitarist Billy Jones, bassist Phil Skipper and multi-instrumentalists Aldridge and Helfrich. In September, the band played its second annual Ramble On Fest, an event the group launched last year in Davidson.

Orlando calls Sidelinker "an emotional open book, which makes collaboration more genuine."

"She can deliver a song in such a genuine way [and] light up the room like few performers I've been around," he says. "People are attracted to her talent and the warmth that pours out of her on stage."

Sidelinker also plays in a duo with Aldridge, as well as different configurations with Charlotte musicians like singer-songwriter Shana Blake and drummer Jim Brock.

She has also revived her solo career. On her website she has posted two recent demos that sound unlike anything she's recorded before. The mysterious and untitled tunes feature jazz-pop piano, skittering percussion and swarming ethereal harmonies. Sidelinker's guitar work, whether rippling and meditative or striking dissonant chords, is also pushed to the forefront.

Sidelinker is also set to release three completed tunes in October. Like the demos, they are also currently untitled, and they seamlessly fuse the dusky folk-inflected ruminations of Sidelinker's work with Heidi and the River Down with delicate madrigal-like pop and feathered jazz phrasing reminiscent of Joni Mitchell.

Sidelinker states that her goal has always been to make music that moves people.

"I would like to think of myself as a connector," she says. "I love having an intimate audience, where people walk away after listening to the music just feeling something."

Despite producing a personal songbook informed by a life well-lived, Sidelinker at 44 is far from done with her artistic odyssey.

"I think I will always long for the road," she says. "Once my children are grown, I would love to … drive out west to do some songwriting and self-reflection."

It's hard to imagine Sidelinker's music without that elemental siren's cry to move on and experience more. Her work personifies a bone-deep calling that tugs the heart like the tides and turns wanderlust into wisdom.

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WEDNESDAY OCT. 15

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Chew, w/ Giant Day, Forceghost (Snug Harbor)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
Saul Williams w/ Carlos Niño & Friends (Neighborhood Theatre)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
John Dungan (Comet Grill)
Josh Daniel, Jim Brock & Kerry Brooks (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
JAZZ/BLUES
Jazz Night feat. DJAM Collective (Camp North End)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Lightnin' Luke w/ Bob Fleming & the Cambria Co., Ryan Lockhart (The Milestone)
LATIN/WORLD
Bez Obmezhen (Amos' Southend)
COVER BANDS
House of Funk: Funk of the '60s (Middle C Jazz)
OPEN MIC
Singer/Songwriter Open Mic (The Rooster)*
Awesome Open Mic (Starlight on 22nd)

THURSDAY OCT. 16

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Ruminations w/ Machine Country, .Memoria, Syndicate99 (The Milestone)
Everclear (Neighborhood Theatre)
JAZZ/BLUES
Java Band (Middle C Jazz)
FUNK/JAM BAND/REGGAE
Hot Pocket (Comet Grill)
Shana Blake's Musical Menagerie (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
Kevin Gates (Skyla Amphitheatre)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
96.9 The KAT Rising Stars Concert (Coyote Joe's)
Ben Sollee w/ Jeri Katherine Howell (Evening Muse)
OPEN MIC
The Spark Session (The Rooster)

FRIDAY OCT. 17

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Dogpark w/ Edgehill, The Ocho (Amos' Southend)
Eric Johnson (Carolina Theatre)
Ace Monroe w/ The Retrograde (Evening Muse)
The Cult w/ Patriarchy (Ovens Auditorium)
Seether w/ Daughtry (Skyla Amphitheatre)
Tiny Tiny City w/ Alex Jacobs, Ennie Arden, Henry Luther & the Blackouts (Starlight on 22nd)
Colony House (The Underground)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Big Gigantic (Blackbox Theater)
Swimming Paul (The Music Yard)
Here Come the Mummies (Neighborhood Theatre)
JAZZ/BLUES
Lee Ritenhour (Middle C Jazz)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
Lil Man J (The Rooster)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Ryan Bingham & the Texas Gentlemen (The Amp Ballantyne)
Jason Eady w/ Gabe Lee (Evening Muse)
Kolton Moore & the Clever Few w/ Love Bug Junkie (Visulite Theatre)
CLASSICAL/INSTRUMENTAL
Charlotte Symphony: Dolly Parton's Threads (Knight Theater)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Jade and the J'Ukes w/ Danielle Howle, Heidi Sidelinker (Petra's)
COVER BANDS
Confetti Cannon w/ Caleb Davis (Goldie's)

SATURDAY OCT. 18

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Tedeschi Trucks Band w/ Little Feat (PNC Music Pavilion)
Hindsight Hero w/ Gypsy Caravan, Mechanical Blvd (The Rooster)
EXPERIMENTAL/MIXED-GENRE/FESTIVAL
Water for People Benefit (Heist Brewery & Barrel Arts)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Kai Wachi (Blackbox Theater)
KAYKO w/ Lost Stars, Josh King (Evening Muse)
Gigi Perez (The Fillmore)
Digital Noir feat. DJ Spider, Circuit Preacher (The Milestone)
Iglesias (The Music Yard)
WeTouchGrass: Anime Rave (The Underground)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
Ray Singleton (The Long Room)
JAZZ/BLUES
Jeff Bradshaw (Middle C Jazz)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Noah Reid (Carolina Theatre)
The Turnstiles (Comet Grill)
CLASSICAL/INSTRUMENTAL
Charlotte Symphony: Peter & the Wolf (Knight Theater)
Charlotte Symphony: Dolly Parton's Threads (Knight Theater)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Lua Flora (Primal Brewery)
Rigometrics w/ Droze & The Drift, Driftwood Drive (Snug Harbor)
AE the Cool w/ Sanpriest Patton (Starlight on 22nd)
COVER BANDS
Thurston Howell Band (Amos' Southend)
Hey L80s w/ Bald Brothers (Goldie's)
Barstool Rodeo (Widespread Panic tribute) (Visulite Theatre)

SUNDAY OCT. 19

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Callback w/ Shelf Life, Warp Street, Froggy Nights (The Milestone)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
David Childers (Free Range Brewing)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Jonas Conner w/ Kyle Crownover (Evening Muse)
The War & Treaty (Neighborhood Theatre)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
Hobo Johnson & the LoveMakers w/ Budman. (Visulite Theatre)
CHRISTIAN/GOSPEL/RELIGIOUS
Grace & Glory Tour (Bojangles Coliseum)
CLASSICAL/INSTRUMENTAL
Bit Brigade (Amos' Southend)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Hazy Sunday (Petra's)
Billie Eilish (Spectrum Center)
Soul Sundays feat. Guy Nowchild (Starlight on 22nd)
FUNK/JAM BANDS/REGGAE
Shake Down Sunday feat. Eternally Grateful (Heist Brewery & Barrel Arts)
COVER BANDS
Let the Ladies Sing (Middle C Jazz)

MONDAY OCT. 20

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Cheem w/ Cinema Stare, Oldsoul, Little Mountain Kart Club (The Milestone)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Nourished By Time (Neighborhood Theatre)
Get Sad Y'all's Emo Night (Snug Harbor)
Billie Eilish (Spectrum Center)
JAZZ/BLUES
The Bill Hanna Legacy Jazz Session (Petra's)
OPEN MIC
Find Your Muse Open Mic feat. Sam Perry (Evening Muse)

TUESDAY OCT. 21

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Violent Life Violent Death w/ This Island Earth, Godseyes, Haunt Dog, The Johnstown Flood (The Milestone)
Stevie Nicks (Spectrum Center)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
Jade Million w/ Kiya Lacey (Evening Muse)
CLASSICAL/INSTRUMENTAL
Charlotte Symphony On Tap (NoDa Brewing)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Gannon Fremin (Amos' Southend)
Robbie Fulks (Neighborhood Theatre)
Ruston Kelly (The Underground)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Sam On Someday (Petra's)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Tall Juan w/ Ronnie Stone, Human Pippi Armstrong, DRMOFO (Snug Harbor)
Saint Motel (The Underground)
OPEN MIC
Open Mic Night feat. The Smokin J's (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*

WEDNESDAY OCT. 22

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Billy Raffoul w/ Theo Kandel (Amos' Southend)
Cannibal Corpse (The Fillmore)
Those Dogs w/ Jokers Republic, Mega Infinity, Pwrup (The Milestone)
Disaster Artist w/ True Optimist, Annie Leeth, Homemade Haircuts (Snug Harbor)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Ben Mignogna (Comet Grill)
Josh Daniel, Jim Brock & Kerry Brooks (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
JAZZ/BLUES
Jazz Night feat. DJAM Collective (Camp North End)
Lovell Bradford Trio Jazz Jam (VisArt Video)
FUNK/JAM BANDS/REGGAE
Mac Saturn (Evening Muse)
OPEN MIC
Singer/Songwriter Open Mic (The Rooster)*
Awesome Open Mic (Starlight on 22nd)

THURSDAY OCT. 23

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
The World Is a Beautiful Place & I Am No Longer Afraid To Die w/ MX Lonely, Pretty Baby (The Milestone)
Pam Taylor & the Flyin' V w/ Grayson Drum & The Hi Cats, Ephraim Scott Sommers (Petra's)
FUNK/JAM BANDS/REGGAE
Smokin' Jays (Comet Grill)
Shana Blake's Musical Menagerie (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
The Jam Crew (VisArt Video)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Shadowgrass (Visulite Theatre)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
harf. (Evening Muse)
Hannah Bahng (The Underground)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
Doechii (Bojangles Coliseum)
The Dope Nobody Tour (The Rooster)
COVER BANDS
The Voltage Brothers (Middle C Jazz)

FRIDAY OCT. 24

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
The Lenny Federal Band (Comet Grill)*
No Anger Control w/ Self Made Monsters, Fireblood, 77 Lies (The Milestone)
Pet Bug w/ North by North, Alexa Jenson (Petra's)
Invent Animate w/ Silent Planet (The Underground)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
Elora Dash w/ Cosmic Collective (Camp North End)
JAZZ/BLUES
Brian Culbertson (Carolina Theatre)
Four80East (Middle C Jazz)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
The Vegabonds (Amos' Southend)
FUNK/JAM BANDS/REGGAE
Nathan Harris & the Flood w/ Oof (Evening Muse)
CLASSICAL/INSTRUMENTAL
Charlotte Symphony: Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 (Knight Theater)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Aly & AJ (Ovens Auditorium)
The B-52s (PNC Music Pavilion)
Tate McRae (Spectrum Center)
COVER BANDS
The Hi-Moods w/ Nate Randall Duo (Goldie's)
Elvis Meets The Beatles (The Rooster)
The Chain (Fleetwood Mac tribute) (Visulite Theatre)

SATURDAY OCT. 25

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Sap w/ The Abstratica, Auroras Hope, True Lilith (The Milestone)
Carolina Headbangers Ball (The Rooster)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Sullivan King (Blackbox Theater)
Latin Dance Party (Salud Cerveceria)*
JAZZ/BLUES
Marcus Anderson (Middle C Jazz)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Comfortable Shirt (Primal Brewery)
FUNK/JAM BAND/REGGAE
Hunter's Travesty (Comet Grill)
Comfortable Shirt (Primal Brewery)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Josh Grider w/ Michael Cansler (Evening Muse)
July Turner w/ Claudia Hoyser (Goldie's)
Della Mae (Neighborhood Theatre)
Sinners & Saints w/ The Poontanglers (Snug Harbor)
Lainey Wilson w/ Ernest, Drake Milligan (Spectrum Center)
The Fool Hardies w/ Jordan Sledge and the Saucepan Band, Chase Zilba (Starlight on 22nd)
LATIN/WORLD
Ultima Nota (Petra's)
CLASSICAL/INSTRUMENTAL
Charlotte Symphony: Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 (Knight Theater)
COVER BANDS
84 (Van Halen tribute) w/ Satchsquatch (Amos' Southend)

SUNDAY OCT. 26

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Crunk Witch w/ Jelly Diver, Mikal Khill, January Knife (The Milestone)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
NBA Youngboy (Spectrum Center)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
DOUBLECAMP (Neighborhood Theatre)
Soul Sundays feat. Guy Nowchild (Starlight on 22nd)
Jukebox the Ghost w/ Boys Go To Jupiter (Visulite Theatre)
CLASSICAL/INSTRUMENTAL
Charlotte Symphony Youth Orchestra Fall Concert (Knight Theater)
Charlotte Symphony: Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 (Knight Theater)
JAZZ/BLUES
Joe Grandsen feat. Noel & Maria (Middle C Jazz)

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



A selection of The Improper Pig's Asian-barbecue menu. Courtesy of NiceDay

TAKE YOUR SEAT

The Improper Pig wants to see people dining in again

BY RYAN PITKIN

When the Pizza Peel & Tap Room opened in the heart of Plaza Midwood in 2014, the garage doors of the former Woodward's Gulf gas station opened up onto a turf lawn that would become the eatery's defining feature.

Picnic tables bordered the artificial green at the corner of Central and Thomas avenues, with a disc golf basket set up in the middle and plenty of room for kids to run around.

Will Bigham, Pizza Peel's owner and founder of the Stomp, Chomp & Roll restaurant group, put the basket there because he is an avid disc golfer, but over the decade that the restaurant operated at the busy corner, he came to regret the decision.

"I'm a huge disc golfer … so it was fun, but then we had kids ripping frisbees into the street or customers drinking a beer and getting hit," he recalled to Queen City Nerve, laughing. The lawn came to be known as a haven for children. "Some parents don't always watch their kids and it's like, well, our servers aren't babysitters."

Count it as another lesson learned for the restaurateur who launched his company in 2010, starting with franchises such as Flying Biscuit and Mama Fu's before opening his own independent restaurants, Pizza Peel and The Improper Pig.

Bigham and his team shut down the Plaza Midwood Pizza Peel location in May 2024 and have been working since then to transition the space into the flagship location of The Improper Pig. That Asian-barbecue fusion restaurant opened its first location in 2014 and currently operates in two spaces: Rea Farms in south Charlotte and Fort Mill, South Carolina.

When the new location opens up later this fall, the disc golf basket will be long gone, replaced with Adirondack chairs and fire pits.

"We're still welcoming the kids and all that, but it's not a playground out there," said Bigham.

In fact, as the first Stomp, Chomp & Roll restaurant to open since COVID changed the face of the restaurant industry in 2020, Bigham is hoping to make Improper Pig a gathering place for family and friends in a time when delivery and to-go meals have become the new norm for diners throughout the city.

He said all of his establishments have pivoted to some extent to cater more to delivery and to-go customers, but his focus remains on the experience one takes from dining in.

"That's what we really want is people to come in, sit down, have great food, enjoy the experience of it all, the music, everything," he said. "I still want to focus on that in-house [experience], people coming in … We've created so much more waste now as consumers because everybody's eating from to-go containers as opposed to coming in, sitting down, having a good meal, and actually taking time with each other and looking each other in the face."

What makes the Pig Improper?

Bigham opened the first Improper Pig restaurant in Cotswold in the space that had previously been home to Mama Fu's for 10 years. Having opened his first independent restaurant, The Pizza Peel, in a former Mellow Mushroom location, he knew how to build a menu around what equipment was in the kitchen.

In the case of Mama Fu's, that meant working with a big wok. He started to envision a mwnu that blended three styles he had never seen put together before: barbecue, vegetarian food and Asian flavors.

"I always loved barbecue being from North Carolina," he said. "I was like, 'Hey, let's do something fun.' Being that we had a ton of vegetarians that used to come eat at Mama Fu's, I wanted to highlight a lot of menu items that were still vegetarian, and at that location, we still had the big wok in the kitchen, so we did a lot of Asian flavors as well."

What resulted was a mish-mashed menu that ranges from ahi tuna and chicharrones to Southern hush puppies and baked mac and cheese — and those are just the appetizers.

Vegetarians enjoy the smoked tofu, collard greens and No Pig Sandwich, which features a marinated portobello mushroom cap topped with roasted red peppers, pickled onions, smoked tomatoes, mixed greens, goat cheese and a drizzle of pesto.

"I love to add fresh jalapenos to it because I do like spice, but that sandwich has got so many layers," said Bigham. "It's just killer."

The top seller for meat eaters is the Improper Charcuterie, a sampler platter of sorts that includes pulled pork, sliced brisket, andouille sausage, St. Louis-style ribs, pimento cheese, house chips, slaw, pickled onions and hush puppies.

"If you want to really experience barbecue at its best and be able to taste the gauntlet of everything, that's the best way to go," said Darius Amidi, operations manager at Improper Pig. "I always recommend, get a charcuterie plate, that's enough for two people to share, then get a side plate so you can pick four side items that you want to try with it."

Amidi met Bigham while working for Harper's Restaurant, which Bigham's father owned in part. Having come up working alongside his own dad in the hotel industry before joining Harper's, Amidi brought a specific hospitality experience to the job when he joined Stomp, Chomp & Roll nearly 14 years ago.

He has since brought on his kids to work for the company, starting his son as a dishwasher at Pizza Peel and his daughter as an hourly employee at Flying Biscuit. They now work as a general manager and head of catering, respectively.

Amidi shares Bigham's vision for The Improper Pig in Plaza Midwood becoming a gathering spot rather than simply a go-to for to-go customers, as so many establishments have become.

"We're wanting to bring back that dining experience to people so that people don't get so complacent on wanting the convenience factor, but wanting the experience factor instead," Amidi told Queen City Nerve.

"That's the hardest thing I think I struggle with is that I'm like, man, I really don't understand why so many people are so hooked on spending the extra money on a third-party platform versus coming in and letting us serve them, take care of them and build that experience."

Bigham said that, when he first opened The Improper Pig in 2014, some people scoffed at the idea of an Asian-fusion barbecue joint in a state known for a very specific, traditional type of pork, but in the decade-plus since arriving in Cotswold and then expanding to south Charlotte and South Carolina, folks have built an understanding of what he's doing.

"We did get some pushback from some people, and we still do; some people, it's too flavorful for them," he said. "We'll get a complaint like, 'Oh, there's just too much flavor, it's too spicy,' or this and that. But that's just who we are. We're bold at it. That's the way I like food. It's bold."

Bold, perhaps, but far from improper.

RPITKIN@QCNERVE.COM



On the grill at The Improper Pig. Courtesy of NiceDay

HOROSCOPE

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OCT. 15 - OCT. 21

ARIES (March 21 to April 19) A bid for you to swoop in and take over an incomplete project could prove to be an excellent learning experience that you can take with you when a new opportunity opens up.

TAURUS (April 20 to May 20) It's a good time for socializing, both with family and friends. Your aspects also favor developing new relationships, any or all of which might become especially meaningful.

GEMINI (May 21 to June 20) Your success in handling a recent difficult situation prompts a request to handle another workplace problem. But this is one you should accept only if you get all of the relevant facts.

CANCER (June 21 to July 22) New information about a past decision raises some unsettling questions from an old friend. Be prepared to explain your actions fully and, if necessary, make adjustments.

LEO (July 23 to August 22) This is not a good time to share personal secrets, even with someone you've known for a long while. What you don't reveal now won't come back to haunt you later.

VIRGO (August 23 to September 22) Pushing yourself to meet a project deadline is admirable. But be careful not to leave out important details in your rush to complete your work and send it off.

LIBRA (September 23 to October 22) Watch that you don't take on more than you can handle when offering to help someone with a personal problem. There might be hidden factors you weren't told about.

SCORPIO (October 23 to November 21) A major move you've been considering could come sooner than you expected. Make sure that you'll be ready with the facts you need when decision time arrives.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22 to December 21) Languishing relationships can benefit from a break in routine. Get out of the rut, and do something new and maybe a little unpredictable this weekend.

CAPRICORN (December 22 to January 19) Although you don't think of yourself as a role model, your ability to make a tough decision at this time sets an example for others, who admire your courage.

AQUARIUS (January 20 to February 18) You need to move any remaining obstacles out of your way before you can take on a new challenge. Seek out advice from close, trusted friends and associates.

PISCES (February 19 to March 20) A career change appears increasingly likely to happen during the next several weeks. It's a good idea to start now to prepare so that you can be ready to make the move when the time comes.

BORN THIS WEEK: You have a strong sense of obligation to justice, which inspires others to follow your example and do the right thing.

OCT. 22 - OCT. 28

ARIES (March 21 to April 19) Caution dominates the Sheep's monetary aspect this week. Rams and Ewes might want to shear their big spending plans until a more favorable financial picture begins to emerge by week's end.

TAURUS (April 20 to May 20) Thrift counts both at home and at work. So, you might want to rethink major purchases or investments. Also, be wary of a so-called revelation about a previous business decision.

GEMINI (May 21 to June 20) Both household budgets and workplace accounts might benefit from some judicious trimming of unnecessary expenses. Meanwhile, a business partnership could lead to an unexpected challenge.

CANCER (June 21 to July 22) A previously overlooked opportunity could reemerge with a new travel-related matter. Check this out carefully to see if it's what you really want before you decide one way or another.

LEO (July 23 to August 22) This could be the start of a new career-changing phase, so start marking down your many accomplishments for those who need to know how much you have to offer. Good luck!

VIRGO (August 23 to September 22) It's not too early for the sometimes procrastinating VIRGO to start making some long-distance travel plans. The sooner you decide where to go, when to go and how to go, the better.

LIBRA (September 23 to October 22) Financial matters once again figure in any major action you might take regarding career, travel or other endeavors. You'll want a ready reserve to help you back up your moves.

SCORPIO (October 23 to November 21) Trying to resolve a problem in a personal relationship could be more difficult than you'd expected. Look into the possibility that someone might be interfering for their own reasons.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22 to December 21) A workplace project you once rejected might be more attractive because of changes that you feel you can now work with. The weekend is especially favorable to family matters.

CAPRICORN (December 22 to January 19) This is a good week for the gregarious Goat to enjoy being with the people you care for. You might even want to show off the creative kitchen skills you're so adept at.

AQUARIUS (January 20 to February 18) A colleague might think your attitude is patronizing, or even outright insulting. True, but this might be their problem. Still, you might want to take some reassuring steps anyway.

PISCES (February 19 to March 20) It's a good time to jettison old concepts about a family matter that you might have been holding on to. This will help make room for a new and more enlightened way of dealing with it.

BORN THIS WEEK: You like to analyze a puzzling situation before you try to resolve it. This makes you excel at getting things done the right way.

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.

	+	7	÷		= 13
+		-		+	
	+		+		= 15
÷		÷		÷	
	-		×		= 27
= 2		= 2		= 1	

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.

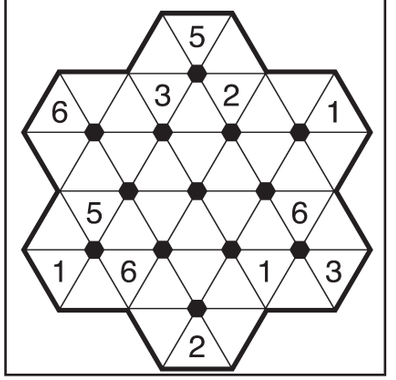
1. More than enough	__ M __ __ __	Granny Smith, e.g.	__ P __ __ __
2. Veranda	__ __ R __ __	Kangaroo's pocket	__ __ U __ __
3. Lag behind	__ I __ __ __ __	Extended	__ O __ __ __ __
4. Hay measure	__ __ __ __ __ L	Completely worn out	__ __ __ __ __ D
5. Model Crawford	__ I __ __ __	Gum drop or licorice	__ A __ __ __
6. Span	__ __ __ __ H	Respond	__ __ __ __ T
7. Realm	E __ __ __ __ __	Baseball referee	U __ __ __ __ __
8. Coldplay singer	__ __ __ T __ __	Singer Gaye	__ __ __ V __ __
9. Theme	__ __ P __ __	Gin and _____	__ __ N __ __
10. Brag	__ O __ __ __	Explosion	__ L __ __ __

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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.

OLGZR PKO EMZUOHH ZV
RZTM HOJMUK FBPKZTP
HTUUTNXBLW PZ PKO
EMOHHTMO ZV PKO MOHTQP.
— FBQQ VOMMOQQ

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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: **O** equals **G**

BUKB OQF UKL KR ZHCBSCRKV
WUKMKWBZM CEEVF LSHSVKM
BC K FCQRO HKVZ UCMLZ.
UZ'L LC WCVB-UZKMBZE.

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TRIVIA TEST
BY FIFI RODRIGUEZ

1. GEOGRAPHY: Which U.S. state is the only one that borders on two oceans?
2. LITERATURE: Which famous author used the pseudonym Richard Bachman early in his career?
3. ANIMAL KINGDOM: What is the national animal of France?
4. MATH: What is the sum of the interior angles in a triangle?
5. HISTORY: Who was the first American president to win a Nobel Peace Prize?
6. GENERAL KNOWLEDGE: Which ancient civilization built Machu Picchu?
7. ACRONYMS: What does the computing acronym API stand for?
8. MOVIES: What is the name of Elle Woods' Chihuahua in "Legally Blonde"?
9. MUSIC: Which musical instrument has 88 keys?
10. TELEVISION: Which television sitcom character is famous for saying, "Did I do that?"?

SUDOKU
BY LINDA THISTLE

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

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

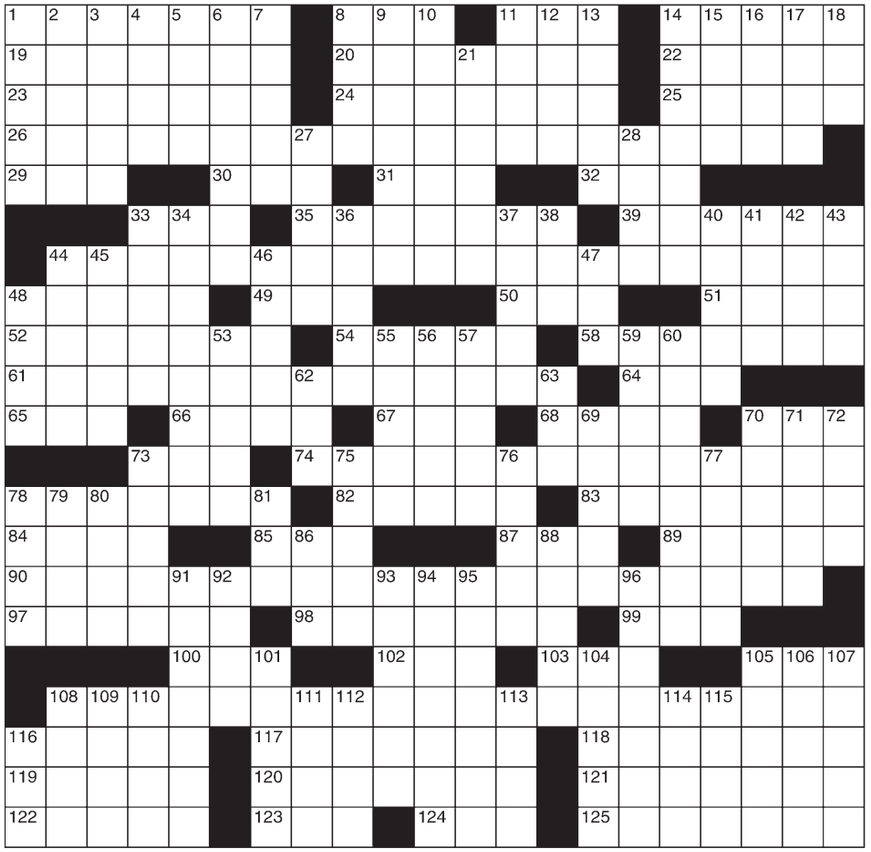


CROSSWORD
THINK INK

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ACROSS
1 Direct applause toward
8 Finder's cry
11 April follower
14 Mimic a bird
19 Singer Patti
20 Take by force
22 Capital on the Red River
23 Art studio
24 Phases
25 "Tiny Dancer" singer John
26 Start of a riddle
29 Booming jet of old, in brief
30 Inseparable
31 Spike of corn
32 Olive bugged by Bluto
33 Prefix with light or night
35 Part of AOL
39 Thing with rungs
44 Riddle, part 2
48 Zac of 2017's "Baywatch"
49 German linking word
50 Org. for teachers
51 "Sure, we should do it!"
52 Desperate, as a situation
54 Syrian president
58 Auto racer's warm-up circuit
61 Riddle, part 3
64 In-vogue thing
65 Brand of fuel additives
66 Forearm bone
67 Crew tool
68 "You folks," in the South
70 West of "Diamond Lil"
73 "General" of Chinese cuisine
74 Riddle, part 4
78 Museum overseer
82 Golfer Sam
83 Eighth parts of circles
84 Redding of soul
85 Sly laugh sound
87 Gp. with merit badges
89 On a cruise
90 End of the riddle
97 "Strut" singer Easton
98 Affirm strongly
99 Flying geese formation
100 High peak: Abbr.
102 "No more details!," in texts
103 Sushi tuna
105 Archer's skill
108 Riddle's answer
116 Really virile
117 Apollo 7 astronaut Wally
118 Annuls, as a law
119 Resilient strength
120 Certain support group for adolescents
121 Lay out for printing
122 Gather bit by bit
123 Ad- — (improvise)
124 Zig's reverse
125 Rind-shaving tools

DOWN
1 Feline nails
2 Trellis strips
3 Skip — (flutter, as the heart)
4 Bombard
5 French policeman, informally
6 Butterlike product of beef fat
7 Air again
8 Many a prep sch.
9 Star of the past
10 Shows up
11 Part of 102-Across
12 Johnson of old comedy
13 Simple kind of question
14 Place with beakers, in brief
15 Disease-free
16 Engrossed by
17 Building top
18 Wrestling win
21 Game of falling shapes
27 Find out
28 "The Clan of the Cave Bear" heroine
33 Rosebush sticker
34 Hurricane hazard
36 Win gold, say
37 Rice of Bush's Cabinet, informally
38 Prop- or hex- ender
40 Meted
41 Mano-a-mano fight
42 "At Last" singer James
43 Filing tool
44 In progress
45 Common baby ailment
46 Scheduled to arrive
47 Interval
48 Ice cream brand
53 Inuit dwelling
55 Feel faint from ecstasy
56 Divide up
57 Vital blood line
59 Insurer with a duck icon
60 Sch. with a Fresno branch
62 Univ. dorm supervisors
63 Thesaurus word: Abbr.
69 Score — (earn some points)
70 Minister's residence
71 Modify
72 Anna's sister in "Frozen"
73 Eat a bit of
75 "Poppycock!"
76 "Sounds likely to me"
77 Unglossy photo finish
78 Simple beds
79 Neighbor of Colorado
80 Initiation, e.g.
81 Pi-sigma link
86 Very bad grades
88 Scandinavian "Salut!"
91 1986 #1 hit for 19-Across and Michael McDonald
92 Vow
93 Revel at a really hoppin' party
94 "Carlos" star Edgar
95 Neighbor of Ethiopia
96 Sinister gaze
101 Like some congestion
104 Rival of Avis
105 Demean
106 Lazybones
107 Ship spars
108 Postmarked pieces
109 Zapzyt target
110 Perlman of "Cheers"
111 Roman 651
112 "Moby-Dick" captain
113 Zingy flavor
114 Smartphone games, often
115 Cross paths
116 Soup flavor enhancer, for short



NERVE ENDINGS

A MURDER EXPLOITED FOR BLACK BLOOD

The killing of a white woman by a Black man on a train in Charlotte became the latest incident used for political convenience by our leaders

BY MARTIN HENSON

In 236 years of American presidential rule, there has rarely been a sitting president who has actively recommended the death penalty for a civilian murder.

That said, it did not surprise me that when President Donald Trump called for the death penalty, the case involved a Black man as the perpetrator. I expect a narrative justification of Black criminality to start my day, one that frames the 13% of Black people in America who make up 37% of the prison and jail population as normal. The daily headlines represent this, subscribing to the mantra, "If it bleeds it leads," and that blood is almost always Black.

I saw the mugshot of a Black man first, which came without surprise. Racial connotations must be associated; my body prepares for what I will somehow be indirectly blamed for as a Black man.

The focus is to advance power. The news has informed me that I should know Iryna Zarutska was killed on Aug. 22 by Decarlos Brown Jr., a man suffering from severe mental health issues on a Blue Line train car in Charlotte.

How is this death different from the young man who was killed at a Durham hotel, the house party mass shooting victims in Catawba County, or the little boy that was killed by a stray bullet in Charlotte? All of them newsworthy, but none of them capturing the attention of a sitting president and legions of online keyboard warriors.

Now we know: The groundswell of political narratives follow shortly after the screen pans away from the initial image of Brown's mugshot, preceding the supposed solutions that would have prevented the murder.

The victim and perpetrator's names fade away and I see President Trump calling for the death penalty, the North Carolina legislature making comments about a 2020 racial equity task force and the death penalty, and a preemptive attack on the Democratic candidate running for a 2026 Senate seat.

Soon, North Carolina's Republican-majority legislature will rush through what they call anti-crime legislation, "Iryna's Law." Lawmakers hope to increase the use of the death penalty, knowing that Black people are nearly eight times more likely to be wrongfully convicted of murder than others. North Carolina's Democratic governor, Josh Stein, plays along with this cynical plot and signs the bill.

The murder falls into the background.

In fact, none of these urgent declarations or actions would have prevented Iryna Zarutska from being murdered. Experts on violence say that Iryna's Law isn't a serious attempt to curb such violence. These efforts, just for one example, do not provide the mental health services that Decarlos Brown Jr. desperately needed.

These people, one a victim of murder, the other of mental illness, become a series of identity-based taglines that political opportunists exploit for familiar plot lines that they sell us day after day.

A dangerous Black man, a pretty white woman — a politically convenient victim. Unfortunately, another reason why political actors want to exploit this murder: It occurred with a knife and not a gun. That allows us to conveniently ignore that 82% of all homicides that occur every year in North Carolina happen with a gun, according to EveryStat and federal data.

San Francisco had its own version of a similar crime in 2018, except the victim was a Black woman, Nia Wilson. She was killed by a white man, John Lee Cowell, who was also navigating a mental health episode and wielding a knife in a place where people take public trains.

Back then, President Trump did not break from presidential decorum to remind us of the death penalty; he did not state, as he did in response to the Charlotte murder, "We have to be vicious, just like they are." He was not interested in meddling in judicial affairs to respond to the murder of a Black woman. Not then, not now, never, unless she is one of the "they" he is supposedly trying to protect society from.

In my 36 years, I have only seen Black people used as political pawns. I have learned to absorb what I am supposed to know. I would like for this world to be different — where Decarlos Brown Jr. gets the support he needs and where Iryna Zarutska is still alive.

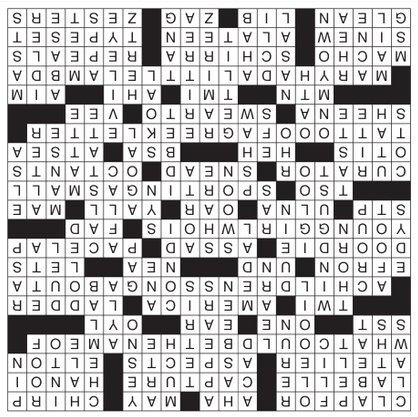
We can still work toward that, but society has to stop squeezing every unfortunate event for as much political juice as possible and focus on solutions that actually help people and solve problems.

I will be watching the news tomorrow. As always, I have no doubt, the blood will still be Black.

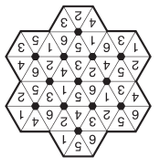
Martin Henson lives in Raleigh. He is an advocate and executive director of BMEN Foundation, which convenes Black men to address issues in their lives and communities. See his work at MartinHSpeaks.com. This column is syndicated by Beacon Media.

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PUZZLE ANSWERS



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



CryptoQuote
answer
Enjoy the process of your search without succumbing to the pressure of the result.
— Will Ferrell

CryptoQuip
answer
That guy has an emotional character oddly similar to a young male horse. He's so colt-hearted.

Even Exchange
answers
1. Ample, Apple
2. Porch, Pouch
3. Linger, Longer
4. Bushel, Bushed
5. Cindy, Candy
6. Reach, React
7. Empire, Umpire
8. Martin, Marvin
9. Topic, Tonic
10. Boast, Blast

2	=	2		1		
5	-	2	×	9	=	27
		÷				
÷		÷		+		
4	+	3	+	8	=	15
+		-		+		
6	+	7	÷	1	=	13

Trivia Answers
1. Alaska; Pacific Ocean and Arctic Ocean.
2. Stephen King.
3. The Gallic rooster.
4. 180 degrees.
5. Theodore Roosevelt.
6. Incan.
7. Application Programming Interface.
8. Bruiser.
9. Piano.
10. Steve Urkel.



SAVAGE LOVE

LOVE & LEASHES

Old kinks on a comeback

BY DAN SAVAGE

Flashback: My last serious girlfriend was kinky. I am pretty vanilla — I'm not a natural sub — but I was game. We got into D/s play and we went to some big fetish parties together. Her favorite "foreplay" was having me kneel between her legs while she showed me guys on dating apps she'd matched with and make me beg for her pussy. I was never into cuck stuff, but I have to admit that was hot (and obviously cuck-adjacent). Her fantasies weren't my fantasies, but it turned her on so much it turned me on. And these really were her fantasies; she had an alt Twitter account since she was a teenager that was all FemDom content and pictures of tied up guys. We wound up breaking up for reasons that had nothing to do with our sex life or her kinks. We don't live in the same city anymore but we still follow each other on Instagram and DM on birthdays. Nothing inappropriate. We were together for three years and it's been five years since our breakup.

Flashforward: My current serious girlfriend dug through my ex's Instagram account and found pictures of us at fetish parties. She didn't snoop on my phone — which means she didn't read my DMs (thank God) — but she did scroll through hundreds of old posts on my ex-girlfriend's account. She wound up finding pics of me in bondage and being dragged around by my ex on a leash at a few parties. (Was that snooping?)

Now my girlfriend says she wants to "get into" my kinks. I told her that the things she was in those old pics weren't my kinks. It was fun, I got into it because my ex was into it, but being dominated isn't something I need. I would be down to explore it (or anything else) with my current girlfriend if it felt like it was coming from an honest place, but it feels like she's in some weird competition with my ex. We've been together for two years and she can be insecure and now she's worried I'm bored with our sex life and I'm going to break up with her for someone kinkier.

The fact that I "refuse" to do kink with her is becoming a thing. But this feels fake to me, since she never mentioned kink until she saw those pics (which my ex took down when I asked), but my girlfriend claims she is interested in kink even if she only realized it when she saw those photos.

I'm not sure what my question is or what I want you to tell me to do.

Vanilla Boy Kinky Past

I'm always gonna err on the side of telling a straight boy to get down on his knees and beg his girlfriend for her pussy — so, if you're a regular reader, VBKP, you knew that was coming. And since you knew I was gonna tell you to do that, I suspect being told to do that was what you wanted. (Are you sure you're not a natural sub?)

Zooming out: You could leverage this moment — brought to you by the not-quite-snooping-but-close your current girlfriend was doing — to have a conversation about your authentic kinks and your hard-wired sexual interests (which you don't list) and your current girlfriend's authentic kinks and her hard-wired sexual interests (which you also don't list).

If you're both interested in more than just the vanilla sex, or your girlfriend is interested in trying new things, now would be a great time to compare your lists of non-vanilla sexual interests to see if there's any overlap.

Dominant women are rare — that's why dominant women can charge for it while dominant men have to give it away for free. Your odds then of dating two "naturally" dominant women in a row are pretty slim. But they're not zero. So, while your ex-girlfriend seems to have been consciously aware of her kinks from an early age — as her long-running alt Twitter would seem to prove — it's entirely possible seeing those pics of at a fetish party made your girlfriend aware of her kinks for the first time.

Not everyone with kinks and/or in the kink scene was consciously aware of their kinks at 13 and that's especially true of cis women, who tend to become aware of their kinks in adulthood whereas cis men tend to become aware of them in adolescence.

So, I think you need to allow for the possibility that your girlfriend's sudden interest in D/s play is just as authentic as your ex-girlfriend's long-standing interest in D/s play, VBKP, and seeing those old pics of you was the inciting/exciting incident that brought your girlfriend's into focus. And even if it turns out your girlfriend is just going through the motions for silly reasons (and competing with someone you dumped five years ago would be very silly), what's the harm?

If she doesn't enjoy it, VBKP, or you don't enjoy it — if D/s play doesn't work for you and the current the way it worked for you and the ex — you don't have to keep doing it.

P.S. I would hate to be in a relationship with someone who would freak out if they stumbled over evidence that I'd sent a nice note to an ex on his birthday.

Love your show, really helpful stuff. This is my first time writing in. I'm a 52-year-old bisexual man married to a lovely lady who's five years older than I am. I feel like my soul (super melodramatic here) is shriveling up and dying. I'm sick of monogamy, sick of comfortable missionary-position sex once a week, and I'm really sick of the subtle bi-shaming comments like "that's the gayest shirt I've ever seen." She's trying to be better, she really is, but navigating our divergent needs in our 12-year relationship is leading to communication breakdowns. Making matters worse, I have this awful habit of bringing difficult stuff up when I'm stoned — pot helps with my inhibitions (it also helps me sleep, so I'm stoned pretty much daily) — but she hates talking to me when I'm stoned. But everything is so fraught when it comes to my needs that I can't talk about it when I'm not stoned. Basically, I'm tired of missionary-position sex once a week and I would like to wear a gay t-shirt once in a while without being judged or shamed. I feel like I'm being hollowed out. Anyhow, I need to figure out a fun non-stoned way to discuss without the conversation ending in tears.

High Isn't Gonna Help

It's the dick, right? You miss the dick? And the lack of dick in your life — other than your own — has you feeling unfulfilled? And does your wife sense that? Or does she know it, HIGH, because you blurt it when you're high? And you're high every night? And could her anxiety about you wanting to open the relationship for dick be why she's making bi-and-gay shaming comments about your t-shirts?

If you can't talk about your needs when you're not high and your wife doesn't want to talk to you when you are high — could be true or could be an excuse to avoid the conversation — your best bet is a couple's counselor. You won't be high (or shouldn't be high) when you're sitting on that couch in the middle of the day, HIGH, and you won't be able to avoid — a good counselor won't allow you to avoid — the conversation you made the appointment to have.

But first you've got to figure out what you actually want. Would you feel fulfilled if you and your wife had more and better sex — not once-a-week missionary, but something freer and queerer? (Is the wife willing to peg you?) Or do you need the freedom to have sex with other men? If it's the first thing, say that; you love her, but you need more variety. If it's the second thing, say that too — and that's a hard thing to say, I realize, and an even harder thing to hear … so, yeah. It's a conversation that may result in tears, but those kinds of conversations, as difficult as they are, rarely end in tears. Eventually, you have stop crying and start talking again. And that's when the real work — and the real negotiations — can begin.

P.S. For the record, bisexual people can make and honor monogamous commitments. HIGH has, up to now, honored the monogamous commitment he made to Mrs. HIGH. Monogamy isn't for everybody — gay, straight, bi, pan, omni, whatever — and it's not always forever.

I was interested to see your response to MOMS, who is unsure how and when to tell her children she's non-monogamous. I'm at a different stage of that quandary. I know that you believe that romantic partners shouldn't be introduced to kids until the relationship is well established, and I agree with that. When my son was a baby, though, I often brought him on coffee dates (as long as my date didn't mind, of course). Now he's almost 2, and he sometimes hangs out with me and my boyfriend, a man I kiss and hug who isn't my husband/his father. (I would no longer bring him on coffee dates with strangers – that just plain wouldn't work!) Right now, this doesn't seem any different to me from hanging out with any good friend of mine (I kiss and hug friends too – it's not like I'm making out with anyone in front of my son). But I wonder what needs to change as he gets older and gets more aware of, well, everything. Should I restrict the time he spends with other romantic partners until they're very well-established? I wouldn't think twice about introducing him to a new friend and my other partners aren't potential new parents for him, so does it matter? Is this an opportunity to normalize non-monogamy right from the start? I'm inclined to be as open and casual about it as possible, but I understand your advice to MOMS — being "ethical" isn't more important than my child's feelings of comfort and safety.

My Open Marriage Matters Also

Adults are entitled to a zone of erotic autonomy — and parents are allowed to have sex lives — but kids are entitled to a zone of plausible deniability, at least where their parents' sex lives are concerned.

So, if you routinely hug and kiss your friends, I see no reason you shouldn't hug and kiss your boyfriend in front of your son — as long as we're comparing apples to apples here. If "kissing a friend" means a peck on the cheek and "kissing a boyfriend" means a tongue down the throat, those kisses aren't the same. But if you're physically affectionate with your boyfriend in the same way you are with friends — brief, casual, non-sexual touch (in the case of your friends) and plausibly non-sexual touch (in the case of your boyfriend(s)) — that's fine. So long as your kid can't detect the difference, you're not forcing a conversation about your other romantic partners before he's ready.

That said, if new boyfriends are constantly entering and exiting your life, you'll want to draw a line between them and long-term friends who are fixtures in your world and your child's life. Romantic attraction can be unstable — sometimes your instincts about a new partner are right, sometimes they're wrong — which is why we don't introduce new romantic partners to our families until after we're relatively certain our instincts/intuitions/genitals were right about them.

So, if your boyfriend has been around a while and the vibe is stable, I see no reason to hide his existence. When your son is old enough to ask questions, answer honestly but age-appropriately. There are lots of kids out there with openly poly and/or non-monogamous parents who are doing fine. But we don't (or shouldn't) have kids to normalize non-monogamy — he's your son, he's not the tip of the spear.

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