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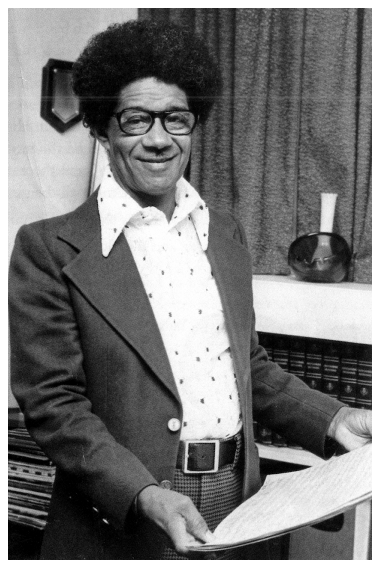
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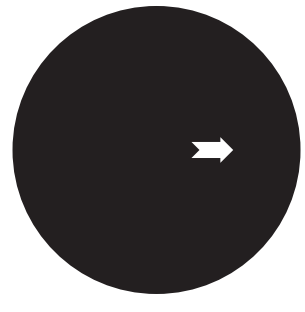
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

I AM SO TIRED. I will humble you old country way. All of my power is drained. So exhausted I can't even make typos today. You was lucky punk. I am a shell of the man I once was. Must hydrate my peepee. Mark. Mark. I will shave your pubis and spray for the cockroach. Mark.

If my door is closed, please fuck off. Not even kidding. Seriously



MELODY MARKS

The Work of Micah Simmons

By Meghan Hendley
Images courtesy of Micah Simmons

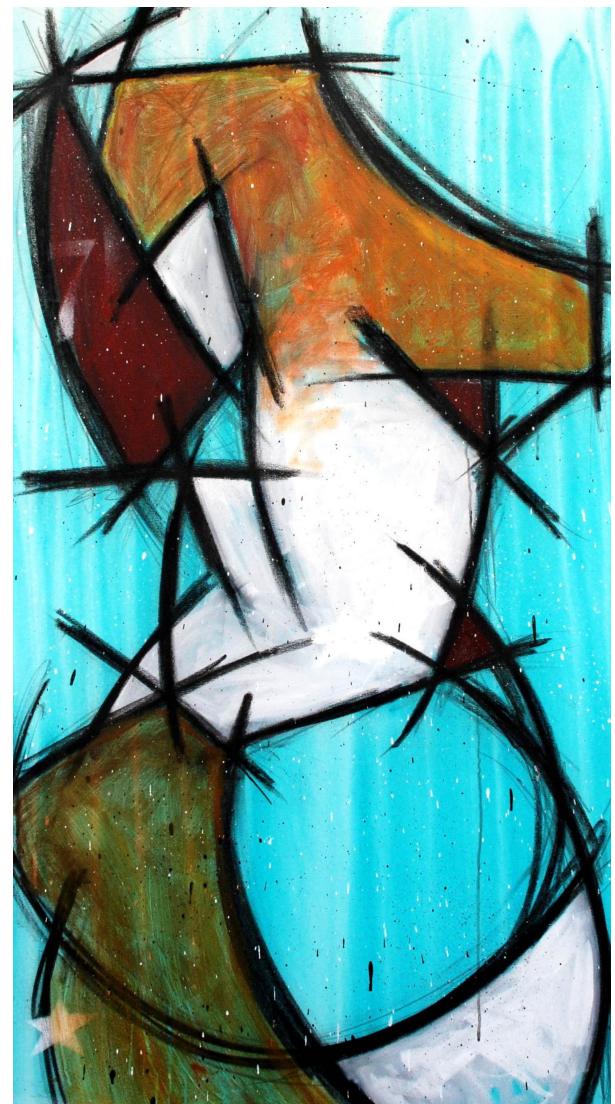
BORN IN PENSACOLA, Florida, Micah Simmons found art to be an outlet combining form and feeling as a calling in his life. Studying with painters David Swaim and Patrick Palmer, Micah's work continuously transformed through the use of the human form and color, cuing the imagination to shape a varied opinion of what was on the canvas. There isn't much in the way of written descriptions of the artist's work but the dearth of formal information allows the viewer to create a story with their own mind.

The use of the mind is a key point in Micah's work, creating an original perception while including different senses. His hands create the lines, his ears hear melodies, and his mind makes bold choices producing a unique style intertwined with classically-formed bodies and illuminated colors. Sight is often secondary, instinct guides the brush, and music helps paint the colors. His paintings give the viewer's imagination a chance to be stimulated and craft its own perception of the piece. Micah has often said that the responses from his audience offer continued inspiration and produce even more insight into his work than he had originally anticipated.

Most of his work is painted to music, allowing for the notes or lyrics to spark an idea. The music continues to lead the piece into the final outcome, becoming a statement of shaded beauty and striking lines. Micah is also known to paint in front of an audience, making it similar to a musical performance. The energy from both of these experiences resonates in his work, leading to euphoric and fluid visions.

His application of the human body ranges from the classical style of painting to the abstract silhouette all wrapped in paint strokes that always hum with light in between the colors. Some of his other works focus on pure color or objects. FPH sat down with the artist to ask him questions about his style and his progression as an artist.





Your pieces are composed of color, cued by form and feeling. How do you take forms such as the human body and contrast them with color?
I use color to create depth in and through the human form. To me, there really is no rhyme or reason but color theory does play a part.

What made you want to be an artist? What art classes helped shape your current style?
Art for me was a natural progression. I tend to like to say art chose me. I was considered legally blind for 26 years starting in the 8th grade. Art for me was about feeling [rather] than seeing, so it was natural to me because I didn't have to focus.

You wish for the viewer to use their imagination, going past the first impression. How do you craft your work in order to allow this to happen?
Well, a lot of it starts with the depth of color and the use of thick and thin layers. I want the viewer to want to walk through the abstract brushwork. To me, these days, some artists tend to produce half paintings and then create a title that leaves no room for the viewer's imagination.

Your work is often inspired by music. What parts of music resonate with your work and inspire you? What kinds of music/bands do you listen to?
Because of the lack of eyesight, music has always unlocked my ability to see by feeling. All that has been seen from my art is really an extension of how I feel at the time. Yes! I am always listening to music and often go to concerts. I love many types of house and am a huge fan of metal. Yeah, I know it's kind of weird. At the moment, I'm listening to a lot of Nu-disco, Tech house, Hounds of Jezebel (local), and Lamb of God – ha!

You've also been known to paint in front of a live audience. What is this like? What's the energy like?
This is the best for me; I love doing it. Being the fact that music is an emotional tool for me, so is the audience. The audience is as important as the paint and brushes I use. The energy alone is amazing! The closest example would be getting together with your closest friends and there's this charge in the air that it's going to be a good night out with them. I LOVE that feeling! **FPH**

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THIS ONE TIME AT BAND CAMP

By Michael Pennywark
Images courtesy of Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts
Photos by David A. Brown

SO, SPRING IS HERE and like almost everyone else you feel you should enjoy the handful of pleasant days before the sauna-like heat of Houston's summer sends us scrambling back inside. Once you manage to get past the excitement of being able to sit outside while sipping your favorite frosty beverage, you might start to wonder what other things you can see and do outside in the middle of April. Of course, you could experience the great American tradition of drinking $8 beers at the ballpark while watching the Astros chase after the league's worst record for the second year in a row. But what should you do if you leave halfway through the seventh inning–when they are down by 10 runs–or get kicked out for heckling your own team?

Luckily, Discovery Green is a stone's throw away from Minute Maid Park–that oasis of sanity amidst the concrete chaos of downtown. As you wander through the park, wondering where on Earth you parked your car, you are probably dreaming up your own awesome soundtrack and scaring away little children by performing air guitar solos to the songs in your head. OK, well, not all of us have our dignity and if you happen to be there on April 20th, you may not be the only one in the park with your own soundtrack. Daniel Bernard Roumain (also known as DBR) has teamed up with the University of Houston's Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts to present a new site-specific installation with a unique interpretation of another American tradition–the marching band. "En Masse" is a four-hour musical marathon featuring University of Houston's Spirit of Houston Marching Band as they play Roumain's recently commissioned work "En Masse Studies and Etudes." As Roumain put it, "En Masse is a deconstruction of a marching band."

Audience members can stay for as little or long as they like and will find that taking in the performance will involve a certain amount of participation on their part. Talking to Roumain, he clarified this by saying, "The band will be moving throughout the park and the audience has to make a choice. They participate in the choices that they make: to follow the band or not; to follow one person from the band or not; or to stay for the entire four hours or not. I think the best way to explain it is that the audience is invited into the piece to the extent that they deem fit. We're inviting them to make choices that ultimately will determine how much they enjoy the piece or not."

Roumain promised that the audience can expect "a good, important time. They should expect all the things that we as Americans associate with a marching band: festivity, sport, entertainment, appropriation, often times, of popular songs, and spectacle. At the same time, you should expect the furious work of an American composer and an American director. By that I mean this is an art piece. This is an installation. This is new music and this is fundamentally a new perspective on the marching band experience both from the point of view of the audience at being able to get really close to the musicians, which isn't always normal. And also by hearing them play serious music—original music."

Roumain is no stranger to collaboration, having worked with creative minds such as Bill T. Jones, Lady Gaga, Philip Glass, Savion Glover, and even 2 Live Crew. For this project, he has been working closely with director Marc Bamuthi Joseph and UH Director of Athletic Bands Troy Bennefield as they coordinate the 300-plus members involved in the performance. So just how hard is it to produce an event on this scale? According to Roumain, the piece, from conception to performance, has taken about two years. And as he explained, "It really is a way of kind of bringing to life an audible perspective to the park. So rain or shine, I think the piece is going to go on. I mean if it's an all-out downpour I think we do have to consider the instruments but hopefully the weather will be on our side. And whether people come for four minutes or for four hours, I think it will be a really wonderful way to appreciate things we oftentimes take for granted."

As long as I don't have to listen anyone play "Call Me Maybe," I'll be happy. **FPH**

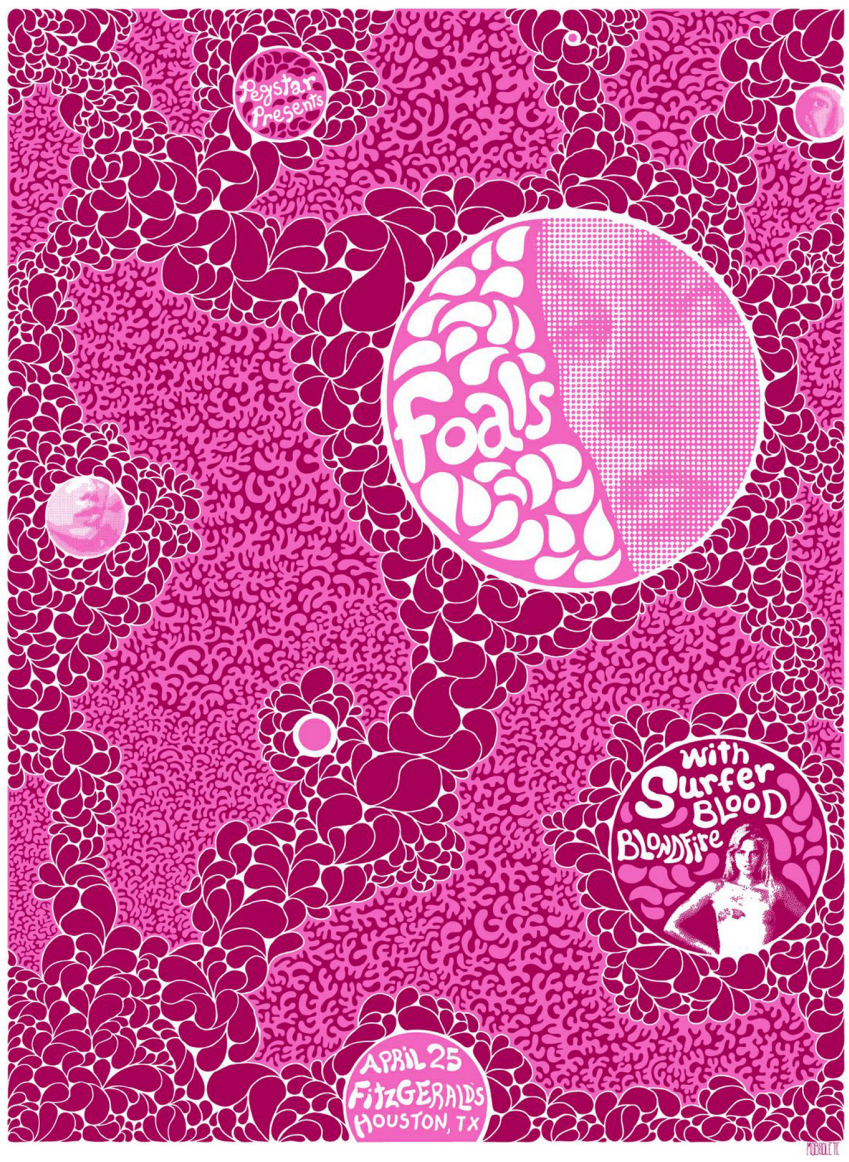


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STOKED

By Michael Bergeron

"STOKER" combines the powerful imagery of Korean director Park Chan-wook with a Southern Gothic tale of murder.

After her father dies, India Stoker (Mia Wasikowska) becomes even more taciturn and gloomy much to the dismay of her mother (Nicole Kidman). The arrival of her Uncle Charlie (Matthew Goode) opens previously repressed feelings and desires within the entire family. Charlie certainly has a secret but he may not even be the most twisted character we encounter. Dermot Mulroney, Jacki Weaver, Alden Ehrenreich, and Harmony Korine co-star. "Stoker" was shot on location in Nashville and represents Park's first film made in America.

Fans of Park's groundbreaking Korean films such as "Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance" or "Oldboy" will not be disappointed. Park's penchant for crawling insects, exploring the space where his characters live, and his sense of composition are apparent all throughout "Stoker." One particularly beautiful transition occurs during a scene where India is combing her hair. The camera slowly moves down showing her long locks before dissolving into a flowing field of wind-blown grass.



Park spoke to Free Press Houston via telephone and explained his philosophy of "setting a story in a small world while capturing the essence of bigger universality." The conversation included a translator, a gentleman named Wonjo, who took my questions, translated them to Park, and then repeated his reply back in English.

"I'm drawn to confined spaces. Some directors don't like claustrophobia, but not me," admits Park. "Stoker" was shot on film and Park teamed up with cinematographer Chung-hoon Chung, who also shot "Oldboy." "I'm interested in the technology of filmmaking," states Park, who in 2011 directed a short movie with his brother using an iPhone. "I don't see myself as an innovator like Cameron or Zemeckis, and I'm not a purist but each film has a best medium. I was the first director in Korea to shoot a film in HD and the first director in Korea to use the digital intermediate process in filmmaking," adds Park.

Some reviews of "Stoker" have commented on the story's similarity to classic Hitchcock, and, in fact, the original script was an updated version of Hitch's 1943 "Shadow of a Doubt." "I don't like comparisons per se but that cannot be helped," explains Park. "There are elements in the script that are inherent to that type of suspense even though I deleted some of the more obvious parts of the script. There are so many films that have been made that to make a film unlike anything before isn't easy."

I ask Park how he shot the hallway fight sequence in "Oldboy," one of the best-choreographed screen fights in cinema. "Oldboy" star Choi Min-sik takes on over a dozen thugs in a narrow hallway armed only with a hammer, and the entire sequence is shot in one take. "The scene is about the essence of a protagonist's journey all alone," notes Park. "Originally, it was storyboarded with many cuts and shots. During the rehearsal, we went through the entire staging and I noticed how tired Choi was afterward. It became a metaphor for his character's exhaustion." Earlier, I had inquired about how many takes were shot of the hallway scene and Park said he needed to text his cinematographer. A few minutes later he gets a reply text. "We shot 18 takes."

SXSW Recap 1.2

At last year's SXSW Film Festival and Conference there was an in-house trailer that would run before certain films. In the snippet, a West Coast hipster is attending SXSW and on the first day, all dressed up with a tie, he texts his friends about his aloofness to the whole affair.

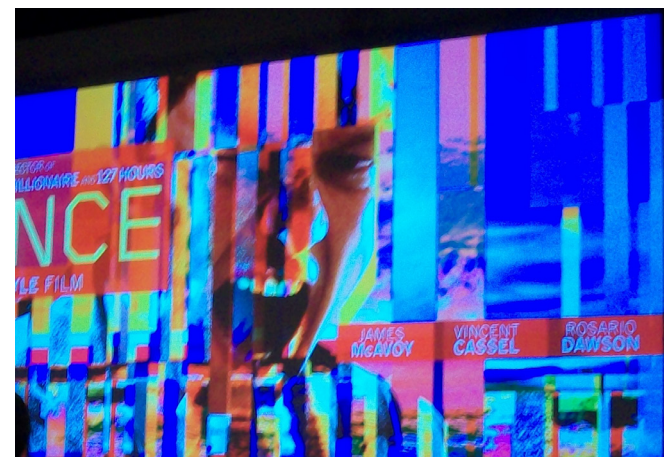
By the next day, the tie has come off and the hipster has settled into the groove. By the end of the weekend, the hipster has gone full Austin, has a ponytail and untucked shirt, and is texting his friends about his latest discovery – a tasty breakfast meal called migas.

And it's true, going to SXSW is like making the journey in "Apocalypse Now" – sell the house, you never want to come back. But then it's over and you do come back, only stuffed with memories of great films and new acquaintances.

One entertaining moment occurred when Danny Boyle introduced a segment of his upcoming film "Trance" at a seminar during the conference portion of the film festival. Only the sequence appeared to be a major spoiler for a scene with James McAvoy, Rosario Dawson, and Vincent Cassel. Boyle explained to the crowd that when they actually see the film in its entirety, a phenomenon of amnesia would take place and they wouldn't even think about the scene we just watched until it occurred in the movie.

Since "Trance" deals with hypnotism, Boyle also noted that only about 10 percent of any given crowd is susceptible to mesmerism. Boyle likened going to the cinema with going to a church: "You go into this dark place and secrets are revealed." Boyle, being interviewed during the seminar by David Carr (writer for The New York Times), talked frankly about his career including his use of electronic music in his films; the fact that he turned down a knighthood; and how he occasionally lost his temper when he was artistic director of the 2012 Olympic Games in London. Although the clip for "Trance" was only about 10 minutes long, it left me wanting and waiting for more ("Trance" opens in the U.S. in April). **FPH**



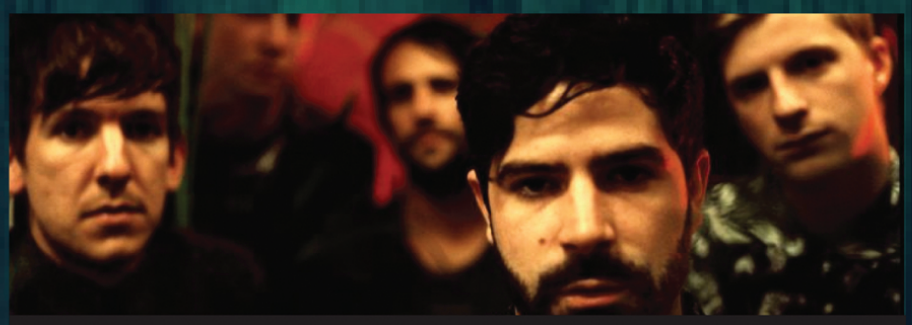


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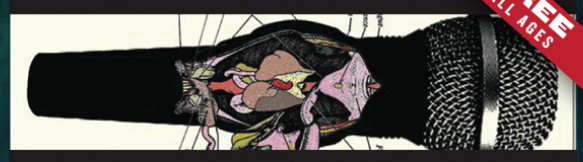
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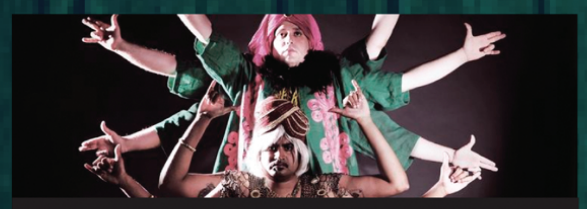
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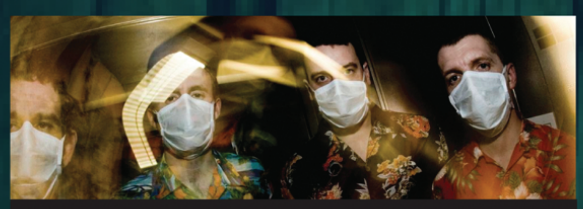
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MUSIC OPINIONS

by K.M. Anderson

(curtain opens, spotlight illuminates chair, cue intro music)

Low

The Invisible Way *Sub Pop*

The first song on this album called "Plastic Cup" is about the plastic cup you pee into for drug tests or screenings, though it is never explicitly stated. Many of the song themes on this album can be inferred, but the application of the inference lies within the listener. Though, based on the texture and tone of the songs, those assumptions might be of a darker nature. The characters are damaged, the arrangements sparse enough to invite the ghosts. Jeff Tweedy of Wilco recorded it, talking point.

Kurt Vile

Wakin On A Pretty Daze *Matador*

Kurt Vile released one of perhaps the best records of the millennium ("Smoke Ring For My Halo"), an album so good that anything he does afterward will have that album as its footnote. Vile has a style that centers around his everyman/mellowed-out voice, superbly-picked guitar, and songs that could be three or 10 minutes long that dissolve into haze. It's music for long drives and sky gazers. The title of the album is most likely a good indicator of the vibe with the use of the word daze. I anticipate this to be one of the best albums of the year because Kurt Vile is excellent. Yup, that's my actual justification.

James Blake

Overgrown *Atlas/Republic*

Hype is dangerous and James Blake is hyped. However, it is warranted, at least according to his last album. The lead single from this album, "Retrograde," is superb. It seems like he has chilled a bit on the voice effects, but his bare voice is as equally effective in setting the tone and timbre of the song. Guests include Brian Eno and RZA. That alone is reason to hear this album.

...and these have been MY MUSIC OPINIONS (theme music fades, light dims, curtain closes).





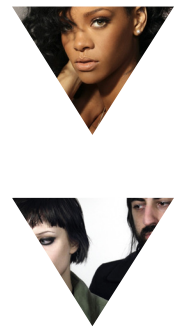














MUSIC
FPH / 04.13

SPRING HAS SPRUNG

By Will Guess

APRIL IS SHAPING UP to be a great month for live music in Houston. While it seems the talk around the city is the upcoming FPSF in June, let's not forget that there are still a ton of great shows to see between now and then. This month brings one of the best acts in rap, sleazy surf rock from Los Angeles, and a basement dwelling pop artist on the rise. And that's just three shows in a sea of other greats. Check out what you shouldn't be missing this month.

Baauer X Danny Brown

April 09 . Fitzgerald's

When you talk about the new breed of rap music and the current stars of hip-hop, Danny Brown has got to be at, or at least near, the top of your list. Brown's breakthrough album, "XXX," was released in 2011, and he has been on a fast-paced journey toward being one of the most respected rappers in the world. He stands out from the rest of the hip-hop world for doing something completely different from his competition. If there's one word to describe him, it's transcendent. His voice is unlike any other, he chooses beats that are unconventional, and his live show is one of the most high-energy events you will ever experience. With his new album, Old, a nod to former Wu-Tang member and everyone's favorite welfare rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard, Brown looks to set himself even further apart from the rest and to crown himself the king of the new school rap game. This show will be a party. Plus, that "Harlem Shake" guy is playing and we know how much you all love that shit.

Wavves & Fidlar

April 18 . Fitzgerald's

The undisputed "King of the Beach," Nathan Williams, is FINALLY releasing a follow-up to his full-length of the same name and going back out on tour. I've been waiting for this album for a long time, and if the short tease he gave us in the form of the "Life Sux EP" is any indication, this one will be even better. But the real story and band to watch here is young, Los Angeles punks Fidlar. The band has easily put out my favorite album of the year thus far. Seriously, I've listened to it at least 50 times and that's not an exaggeration. Each song is filled with lyrics glorifying staying young, drinking lots of beer, and taking drugs (these are a few of my favorite things). This music makes me want to drive my car straight off a bridge while naked, downing a bottle of whiskey. If there's one band NOT to miss this month, it's this one. Catch them before they grow up or die from being way too awesome.

Youth Lagoon

April 26 . Fitzgerald's

Trevor Powers' music sounds exactly like something that would come from growing up in Boise, Idaho. If you've ever been there, you know what I mean. It's not Disney World. Few musicians can pull off creating beautiful pop music that combines such deep elements of depression. The key to this project is Powers' voice. It's haunting and soft-spoken, but it draws the listener into a place where you can really feel what he's saying as his voice comes crackling through the speakers. Though his debut album, "The Year of Hibernation," was a stripped-down album of slow-moving anthems, his new album, "Wondrous Bughouse," takes things in a different direction. While retaining the mood of the previous album, Powers adds more production to this recording, offering a new perspective on not only the music, but also on Powers as an artist. This guy is going to be around for awhile.

04.07 - **Merchandise** at Mango's
04.09 - **Sigur Ros** at Bayou Music Center
04.15 - **Rihanna & A$AP Rocky** at Toyota Center
04.20 - **Crystal Castles** at House of Blues
04.25 - **Foals & Surfer Blood** at Fitzgerald's


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INTERVIEW: STEPHEN POPE OF WAVVES

By Will Guess
Photos by Cat Roif

MUSIC

BY THE TIME YOU READ THIS, Los Angeles surf rock band Wavves will have released their new studio album, "Afraid of Heights." With no label support, Wavves is going for a completely DIY approach, paying for the album on their own. In 2010, their album "King of the Beach" set the bar for fuzzed-out, beach-bum garage rock music and inspired numerous copycats who just didn't match up to the band's songwriting skills. With this new album, they're aiming for something completely different. FPH had the pleasure of speaking with bassist Stephen Pope about a number of topics, including being labeled a weed band, being kicked out of the VMAs, conspiracy theories, and so much more.

How was SXSW for you guys? You played seven shows in five days.
I'm disgusting right now, but I'm OK.

I saw someone just posted on the Wavves' Twitter account that you don't remember playing last night. What DO you remember from last night?
Yeah, apparently I don't. I sort of remember. I know it was a Dr. Martens event and I remember there being a Doc Martens sign on the stage. I remember crowd surfing 30 minutes before we even played. I remember eating a Double Quarter Pounder with cheese and 10 McNuggets and then let out a big sigh before I went to sleep. It was like that last breath you hear when somebody dies.

In almost every article written about your band, journalists talk about how much weed you guys smoke. Does being labeled as a weed band ever bother you?
Not really. I think it's kinda cool. Weed bands have dedicated followers. I mean, I guess we smoke weed. We're definitely potheads. I mean, there are more of them in the crowd than there are of us.

You're taking Fidlar out on the road with you and they've put out my favorite album at the moment. How'd that tour combination come together and what are your thoughts on the band?
Yeah, we're meeting up with them tomorrow in Dallas. We're friends with them. We like their band a lot, so we asked them to come on tour. I love their new album.

The new record is coming out on Mom + Pop Music. How has the experience of recording this album with a label versus the self-released "Life Sux EP" differed?
We didn't have a label while we were recording it. We purposely did that. We wanted to finish the album, make the album that we wanted before shopping it around to labels. The writing process was way different. We did "Life Sux" by ourselves, but we went in and did that in one week. With this one, we worked with a producer, John Hill, who did some work with Rihanna and Santigold, and we recorded for an entire year without any label support. I think we had a lot more freedom this time because we HAD so much time.



Nathan said he paid for the album's sessions out of pocket. Was the deal done with the label strictly for promotional and distribution reasons?
It was because we needed to get our money back. We spent the entire year not knowing if we were going to have any money because we were spending it all on the album and not really getting paid. We were broke. But, since we got to do an album ourselves, we were able to set our own terms. We wrote out what we wanted in a deal and then we shopped that deal around.

You got some publicity for getting kicked out of the VMAs in 2011. What's the real story behind that?
Nathan and I were outside the premises trying to sneak in champagne and lots of weed. I guess I got too drunk, again. I'm a loser. I guess I was looking pretty conspicuous. I got stopped by the LAPD because I was smoking a blunt while I was presenting my ticket for the Awards. So, the LAPD stopped me - it wasn't even security - I hadn't got to that point yet. They put me in what I guess was a drunk tank, it was this little holding cell, for an hour while Nathan sat next to Metta World Peace and watched the VMAs. I didn't even get in. I got to the first area, walked the red carpet, and then I got arrested.

Is NBA Jam the greatest arcade game ever made?
No. I know that's not what you want to hear, but I'd say Street Fighter or Street Fighter II is the greatest arcade game ever made. It IS a great arcade game, but I started playing it on Super Nintendo and that's the version I like the best.

What's your favorite conspiracy theory?
I've got a lot of favorites. I think people that smoke weed are really into conspiracy theories for some reason. I like the ones about the chemicals in our food, how the FDA doesn't label our food correctly - actually, I don't know what I'm talking about. Chem trails - I like that one.

When the aliens land, what one thing would you show them that you think would explain exactly what humans are all about?
Definitely "Bill and Ted." There are some things in that movie that show exactly what I'm all about. FPH



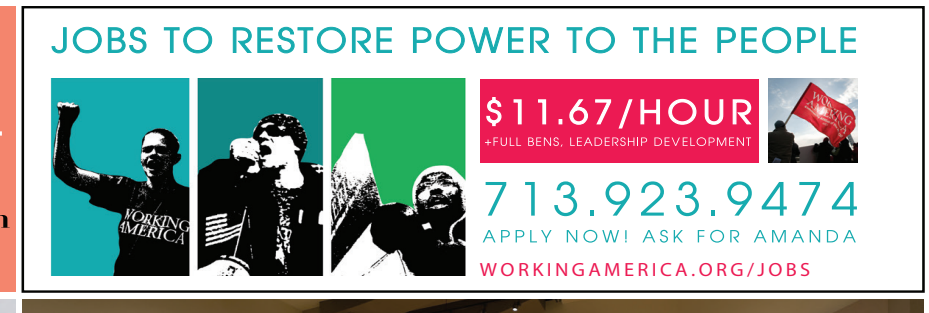


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TEN YEARS OF SUPER HAPPY FUN

By Rob McCarthy
Photos by Jet Liam and Jeff Nunnally

MUSIC

I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I walked into Super Happy Fun Land. I was about 17-years-old, and one of the bands I was in during high school was there to play a school-coordinated showcase. I wasn't there long before I found myself asking, possibly out loud, "What the fuck is this?" Being young and wide-eyed, I looked upon my surroundings with both amusement and a sense of achievement. My band was a noise-oriented, garage-punk act, and Super Happy Fun Land felt like a good fit for us. It was just plain weird. Old toys, strange decorations, a film of stale dust covering practically everything, the odd smells, the aesthetic and fashion sense of the staff––all of it made SHFL seem like an appropriate location for us to bang out frantic, energetic covers of Black Sabbath and Stooges songs. The show was a mild success for us, and all 15 kids that bothered to show up were instant fans. We even got paid for the first time in our careers! That show also happened to be our first performance at a real venue. Super Happy Fun Land is perhaps one of the most welcoming venues in the Greater Houston area. They have and continue to host some of the most far-out shows imaginable.

Ten years ago, Super Happy Fun Land got its humble start when Olivia Dvorak and Brian Arthur began looking for a place where they could create art, music, puppet shows, films, and plays, mostly for themselves. They found the Ashland Street Theater, an old building in the Heights deep in the shadow of an abandoned factory that looked as if it could be a mafia hideout. The rent was manageable, and the duo decided that they could have a few shows here and there to offset the cost of their lease but to mainly use the space for their own projects.

Soon enough, however, show-hungry bands came calling. Within almost three months of opening, SHFL received an average of 100 show requests a month. By then, both Arthur and Dvorak decided that SHFL would have to be a music venue, primarily, therefore putting showcasing art, movie screenings, and plays on the backburner.

They kept the Ashland location for roughly five years before being ejected by the landlord. "That was OK by us because we had wanted a bigger space with more than one toilet," said Arthur. Super Happy Fun Land found that bigger space when they moved to the Polk St. location and right away began booking and hosting shows. However, the city had other plans for Super Happy Fun Land and upon figuring out that the venue did not have an occupancy permit, shut SHFL down. "We figured they never cared before when we were in the residential Heights, why would they care in the warehouse district? Well, they did. We were shut down for a few months after we opened the new location, and it took us a year and a ton of money to reopen," said Arthur. In the space between reopening, Super Happy Fun Land obtained around 160 AMC theater seats and a full-sized AMC movie theater screen, filling out their enormous warehouse quite nicely.

You might say that both Dvorak and Arthur had a "compulsion" for collecting some of the weirdest stuff to ever grace the space of a venue, and you'd be right. Not only do they have an immense (and proportionate to the amount of space in the warehouse) collection of Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls, which can be both terrifying and mesmerizing, but they also happen to have giant statues of cartoon characters from an '80s Super Bowl parade. They received the statues from a man they lovingly dubbed "the crazy statue guy."

"When most people think of Super Happy Fun Land, they think of 'that weird house that looks like a Cabbage Patch Doll factory exploded, where I saw my friend's ambient-instrumental- progressive rock band play at a couple of years ago,'" said Arthur, adding, "I hear something along those lines almost as often as I get the question 'Do you guys have a bathroom in here?'"

Because of the diversity of events hosted at Super Happy Fun Land, one wouldn't exactly say that they have





a “regular” crowd. They have so many different types of events that it would be unlikely that anyone could or would appreciate every single thing that comes through but consider that a challenge.

Bands from all over the nation come to SHFL, and even the bands from cities such as Portland, Austin, and Seattle have sung the praises of Houston’s weirdest little big venue. “Performers come here all the time from the ‘cool’ cities ... and tell me how ‘this is the coolest place [they] have ever played at,’” said Arthur. “They tell me that if it was in one of those cities, Super Happy Fun Land would be jam-packed with the cool kids every night.” Naturally, neither Brian Arthur nor Olivia Dvorak, who once insisted that she be awarded the “Worst Bartender in Houston Award” and also prefers to be referred to as Puppetrina, wants to hear something like that. It’s a testament of their loyalty to our beloved city that they haven’t packed up their vast collection of knick-knacks and oddities and jumped ship for Austin or Portland or something. There was a Super Happy Fun Land in Little Rock, Arkansas for a while, though. Arthur and Dvorak franchised the Little Rock location but the venue was eventually shut down for, you guessed it, no occupancy permit. It never reopened.

Super Happy Fun Land, in its 10 years of existence, has been host to thousands of bands, maybe even roughly 8,000, but the shows that stick out to the proprietors of this venue aren’t your friends’ bands that sound like Explosions in the Sky. Instead, bands like Ooga Booga, who dress as cavemen and sing songs about killing woolly mammoths around a campfire onstage, are the bands that leave a lasting impression. “You didn’t see that show? Not surprised. We have a saying around here: ‘Of course there are a ton of people here tonight, the band sounds awful,’” said Arthur. “After seeing thousands of bands perform in what basically is our living room, it is almost always by the spectacle that we are really impressed (or horrified).”

A horrifying spectacle would be something similar to the “remarkably grotesque” Deadly Orifice, who would sometimes sodomize himself with his own mic, put it in his mouth, and scream. Then there is Jean-Louis Costes from Paris, whose act could be compared to that of GG Allin, except with humorous operatic songs to accompany the antics. Apparently, the French performer would waddle about naked onstage with a carrot lodged in his anus and a frying pan tied to his genitalia while a nude French woman covered in pudding (your guess at the flavor) would vomit cans of soup into a center stage toilet––and that’s only a segment of the performance.

Fear not, though, because for every terrifying performance, there is an equally amazing, cute, sweet, or just plain wonderful act to balance things out. There is the inspiring Captured! By Robots, who performs in chains while his band (made of actual animatronic robots) taunts him and forces him to perform cheesy cover songs. Then you have Monster Dudes, who performed with a 4-year-old drummer wearing industrial ear protection while metal clad “monsters” rigged with contact mics battled in from of him with mighty clashes and clangs.

SHFL has seen countless costumed performers, one-man shows, and exceptionally creative acts, but they have also entertained a considerable number of “normal” bands who perform great music across all genres without the gimmicks, weird instruments, or crazy costumes. It’s not uncommon to have a lineup consisting of electro-pop, punk, country, and jazz on the same night. Plenty of famous bands, ancient acts, national and international, and foreign groups have graced the Super Happy Fun Land stage. Both Dvorak and Arthur say that the biggest show they ever held was for The Rock-Cats, which is, essentially, a band made up of real cats. “They had four sold out shows in a row,” said Arthur.

“We still get teen bands but not as many shows where whole high schools would come out to our place twice a month. I kind of miss those because I have always seen running SHFL as a form of political activism. We certainly aren’t doing it for the money because, although it almost always breaks even, it still takes rather than makes money, and showing young people that a place like Super Happy Fun Land can exist kind of makes it all worth it,” Arthur concludes.

Besides bands, Super Happy Fun Land also hosts art shows, private parties, plays, and film festivals. They even hold benefits for animal shelters and other causes. They have participated in multiple venue-events such as Artcrawl, Fotofest, and CounterCrawl. They also host the annual World Naked Bike Ride as well as a nudist film screening. Needless to say, Houston has a jewel in Super Happy Fun Land and we hope that, in time, our “cool” city packs the venue with the “cool” kids every night. They celebrated their 10-year anniversary March 30, 2013 and are looking forward to 10 more years. **FPH**

EDITORIAL: LOWERING STANDARDS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

By Harbeer Sandhu
Illustration by Michael C. Rodriguez

Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.
– George Orwell

A PROPOSED NEW LAW would redefine what counts as history in Texas universities. Early in March, Texas State Senator Daniel Patrick introduced bill SB 1128 that reads, in part:

A college or university receiving state support or state aid from public funds may not grant a baccalaureate degree or a lesser degree or academic certificate to any person unless the person has credit for six semester hours or its equivalent from courses providing a comprehensive survey of American history. A student is entitled to submit as much as three semester hours of credit or its equivalent from courses providing a comprehensive survey of Texas history in partial satisfaction of this requirement.

Did you get that? Only “a comprehensive survey” of U.S. history and/or Texas history will count toward graduation requirements--no more choosing among women’s studies, African-American studies, labor studies, Mexican-American studies or other such allegedly “Un-American” activities. If this bill passes, students will be required to take dull, broad survey courses very similar to courses they took in high school, with the only choice being whether the student would take a) two semesters of U.S. history or b) one semester of U.S. history coupled with one semester of Texas history.

Usually, such survey courses are broken up into two semesters: the first semester skims over tens of thousands of years of indigenous migration, history, and culture, but gets to Columbus' arrival in 1492 within the first week. The Age of Exploration is likewise glossed over without getting into gory details about the brutal and dishonorable ways in which native people were subjugated and eliminated (which gave rise to the "necessity" of slaves for labor) under European colonialism. That all goes very quickly, because "American" history in such courses really doesn't start in earnest until the English arrive and the Pilgrims have their nice little foodie gathering at Plymouth Rock. Turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, green bean casserole, and candied yams--you know, the works.

The rest of the semester covers stuff about George Washington and cherry trees, Ben Franklin and his lost keys, the French and Indian War, the Stamp Act, maybe something about Crispus Attucks and Revolutionary War, the Articles of Confederation, the Constitutional Convention, names, dates, etc., etc., blah blah blah. This is how they want to define “American history.” The semester ends some time right before or right after the Civil War, then the next semester picks up with Westward Expansion and the Spanish-American War, gets into some of the robber baron stuff (but not too deeply into labor movements), and fortunately (for the teacher) the semester ends with time running out at about the Civil Rights Movement. Another semester has gone by with no need to cover contemporary issues--which might inspire controversy and which might require the teacher to speak to why some people, today, still hold the short end of the historical stick while others inherit the benefits of their ancestors’ land and labor.

That is what you call a "survey course." They teach a very broad, general mythology of "America." (I put “America” in quotes because America is a hemisphere, not a singular, 237-year-old nation-state.) The emphasis is on wars and external conflicts and big personalities (i.e. dead white men)--like in your typical high school history class. Not much time is spent learning about the lives of small landowners, tenant farmers, slaves, Indians, women, workers, and immigrants, and how the lives they led affect our lives today.

But college is supposed to be different. Higher education typically provides students with a more focused and specialized curriculum. Since the 1960s, scholarship has dug deeper into the lives of these “common” people--people more likely to be our ancestors than Ben Franklin or James Madison--and therefore an examination of these “common people” has the potential to teach a greater number of students about their place in today’s society than the study of “great men” ever could.

Supporters of this change seem to think that we all need to attend the same classes to be considered “educated” or qualified for a job or something. I consider myself a pretty cosmopolitan, worldly, well-qualified person, but the private university I attended in New York allowed me to take courses such as “The Evolution of Scientific Thought,” which covered medieval Arabia, Europe, and classical Greco-Roman topics to fulfill my history requirement. Did I suffer for that? No. On the contrary--it was enriching, and it took nothing away from the children’s storytime version of “American history” I got in high school, either.

So what’s really going on? Why is Dan Patrick, a second-term state senator representing the likes of Spring, Tomball, Cypress, and Jersey Village, who introduced a bill





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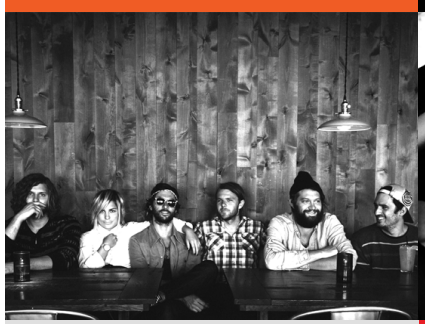
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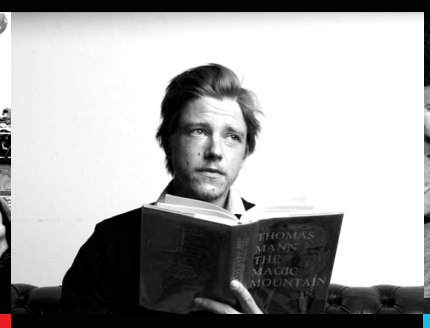
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DEVIN THE DUDE

trying to ban abortion within his very first month in office, attempting to rewrite the college core curriculum?

Critics say this bill is the beginning of an attempt to eliminate fields of scholarship such as women's studies, African-American studies, labor studies, and Mexican-American studies. (Mexican-American studies has already been banned in Arizona schools.) I would add that Dan Patrick's SB 1128 is perfectly in line with the Texas Republican Party's mission, explicitly stated in their 2012 party platform, that they "oppose the teaching of Higher Order Thinking Skills . . . critical thinking skills and similar programs that . . . have the purpose of challenging the student's fixed beliefs."

The bill is inspired by a report issued from the National Association of Scholars, a right-wing think tank founded in 1987 to take on affirmative action and "liberal bias" in academia. It is funded by a number of conservative backers including the Adolph Coors Foundation and the Koch brothers. Their recent report, called "Recasting History: Are Race, Class, and Gender Dominating American History?" looks at the reading lists from history courses at UT and A&M and rates books on their content relating to race, class, and gender. (According to this report, both "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave" and "Uncle Tom's Cabin" are too fixated on race. Go figure!) Among the report's recommendations: "Depoliticize history. Historians and professors of United States history should counter mission creep by returning to their primary task: handing down the American story, as a whole, to future generations."

Basically, the report is recommending the impossible—it calls for the "depoliticization" of history even as it politicizes history. Needless to say, the report's methodology has been called into question, but who needs valid methodologies when you ain't got no Higher Order Thinking Skills? Check and mate!

Patrick has stated in a Facebook post that the bill is intended "to be sure that our core curriculum in history represents a comprehensive understanding of our history in areas of the economy, politics, war, and other significant events that have helped shape our past and who we are today." The report's author, Richard Fonte, says he, "found that all too often the course readings gave strong emphasis to race, class, and gender social history, an emphasis so strong that it diminished the attention given to other subjects in American history (such as military, diplomatic, religious, intellectual history)."

So there you have it--they want to rewrite the past (or unwrite what's been uncovered about the past since the 1960s) to maintain the economic, political, militaristic status quo. What's strange is that nobody is suggesting that race, class, and gender can't still be studied in the same context as war, diplomacy, and religion. The UT Department of History has issued a really great response which claims that, "The report attempts to isolate race, class, and gender as something distinct and separate from other areas of study, when in fact they are intrinsic to these other areas."

The Arizona law that Dan Patrick's SB 1128 appears loosely based upon prohibits schools from offering courses or classes that "promote the overthrow of the United States government, promote resentment toward a race or class of people, are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group, or advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals." That sounds pretty reasonable, but I am here to tell anybody who alleges that "ethnic studies" and "ethnic literature" promote societal fragmentation has got it all wrong, and their plan is going to backfire. Respecting our diverse backgrounds brings people together--it promotes inclusiveness through mutual respect--whereas the bleached, sanitized, whitewashed version of history they want to promote doesn't fool anybody and only drives students away from school because they know they're being lied to.

Similar to Jan Brewer, Russell Pearce, and others I've written about surrounding the Librotraficante Caravan to Arizona, these individuals are just afraid of the USA's inevitable demographic shift. They are afraid of the browning of America, that they'll lose power and control--that when students are taught the truth about their history they learn pride, and when they learn pride they gain self-respect, and when they gain self-respect they'll stay in school and won't let the bosses push them around and exploit them. Honestly, I can't blame the bosses for being scared, but we must not let this bill pass. It will be much easier to prevent its passage than to challenge it in court or repeal it after the fact. Please, call your state legislators today and tell these "small-government" Republicans to stop meddling in collegiate affairs. **FPH**



The big trouble with dumb bastards is that they are too dumb to believe there is such a thing as being smart.
– Kurt Vonnegut

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INTERVIEW: LUPE MENDEZ

By Amanda Hart
Illustration by Blake Jones

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. SAID, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." Our history matters. And silence will not do when it comes to demanding that everyone's history continues to be included in our school curriculum. FPH caught up with Librotraficante member Lupe Mendez to find out about the upcoming battle over SB 1128.

What impact will SB 1128 have on our community?
This bill and its companion in the House, TX (R) Rep. Capriglione's HB 1938, would serve to limit the kinds of history classes undergraduates can take. Patrick and Capriglione want more "comprehensive history survey classes" that deal less with race, class, and gender. This bill, in the long run, filters out major players and parts of history, such as Frederick Douglass, the Grapes of Wrath, Cesar Chavez and Rosie the Riveter – all of whom we deserve to know more about. Currently, we don't get to learn these stories, even before college, and now the bill will ensure that we don't ever get to hear about them at all.

Why is there a push from people like Senator Dan Patrick to pass legislation that would marginalize our community's history?
Both Capriglione and Patrick are major players in the Texas Tea Party - members who want a more conservative stance, especially in education. They and their constituents want a much more controlled idea of "American History" - one that moves and thinks and acts like them – devoid of a diverse population and cultured thought. This is a party scared of a population that is changing, growing past their "Americana."

What sort of reaction and feedback did you receive when you traveled to Austin to meet with Senator Patrick about the bill?
Ha!! Well, to be honest, aside from a meeting with one of his staff members (will get to that in a second), nothing much but a Facebook post as a status about my group of Librotraficantes coming to his office. In his post, he says that we didn't meet with him, as if we didn't try to schedule a meeting (we did and since he couldn't meet with us, we had to settle for his staffer). When we asked for a second meeting, she said, "We'll let you know."

In the meeting with his staffer, we asked what the purpose of the bill was and as she explained it, "I remember taking a class in Rock & Roll History"... and she goes on to say that she didn't think that should have been a class, so she withdrew and that for her, that's what this bill was about – focusing the law so that better classes and education could prevail. When we made the point clear that this bill, if passed, would serve to marginalize courses that do speak of race, class, and gender, she played naïve and said the senator didn't have that in mind. When we spoke of AZ HB 2281 and the ending of the Mexican-American Studies K-12 program, she said that she didn't even know about HB 2281. I didn't buy it. No one buys it. And even if it were true, then that speaks volumes as to the misguided attempt to micromanage college education.

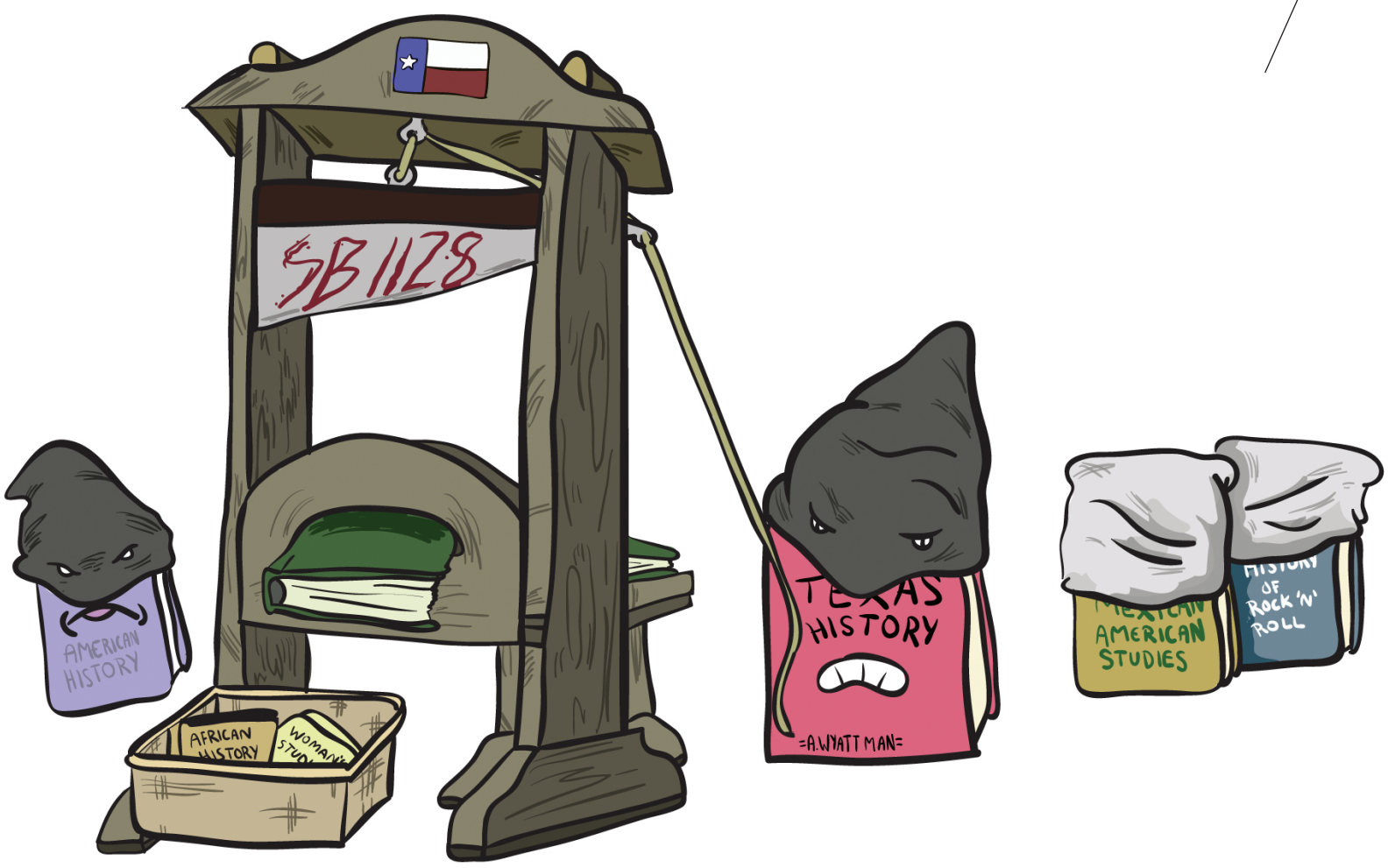
I only bring up the term "micromanage" because that's what Rep. Capriglione admitted it was.

Oh yeah, did I mention we went to his office, too – on invitation? He claimed that he could make us see why this bill, (his version) HB 1938, was in no way jeopardizing ethnic studies. He started off with a long diatribe trying to explain to us how he "gets" our position, how he understands our ethnic concern sort of speak. He explained how he is of mixed heritage, his father being Italian and his mother being a Venezuelan-born Columbian. He said it as if to clear the air a bit, to make everyone understand his perspective. He said he has to make a move because his constituents in the North Dallas area are "concerned about the type of college education their children are receiving." He even went as far as saying that he had a background in physics and engineering and that he didn't have a good handle on books.

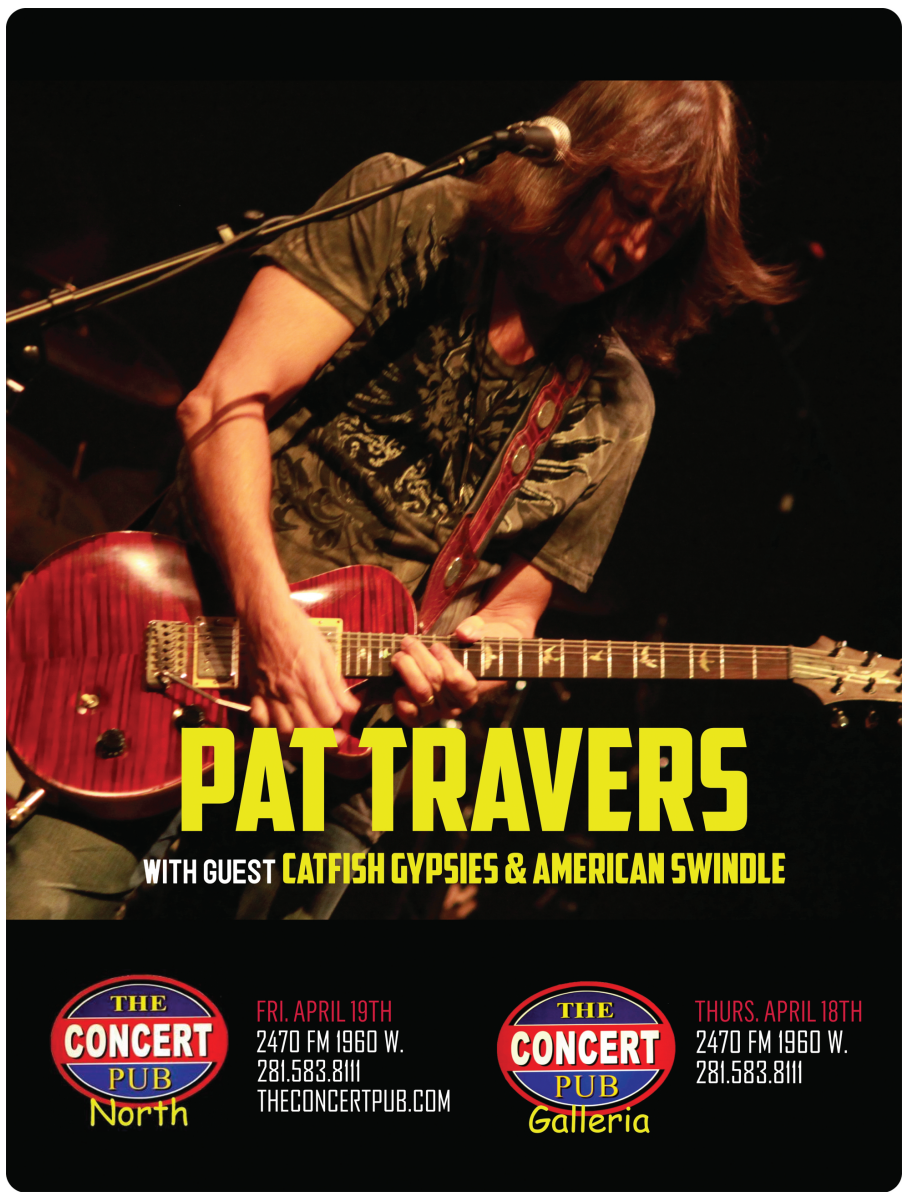
He explained the bill with a math analogy, "Say you have a calculus class and you had professors teaching trigonometry instead, right. Wouldn't you want them to teach calculus?" I responded that using his analogy, then, that the bill would need to be much more direct, so that classes with a lens of ethnicity, of gender, and of class wouldn't be removed. He brushed off my point and the points made by many others.

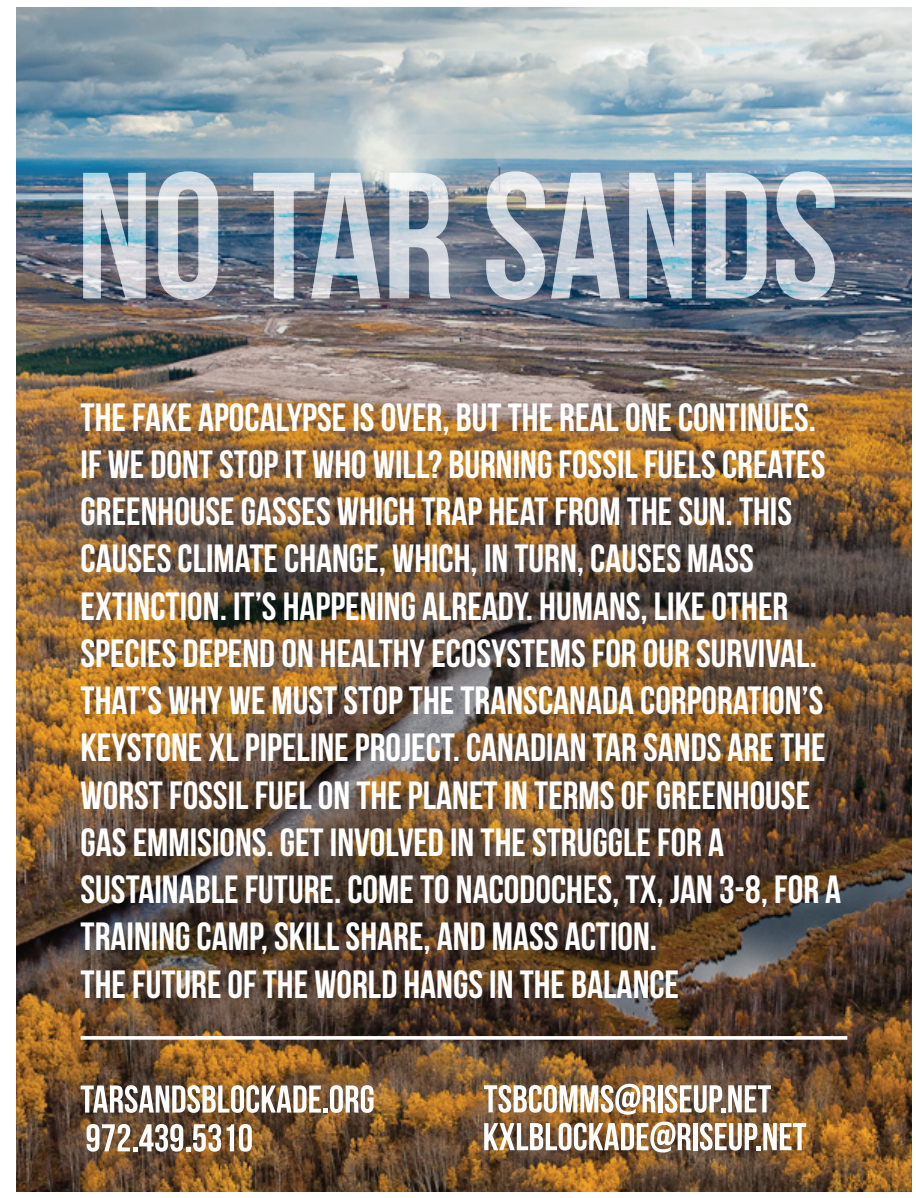
We came to talk, to find out what the intentions of these legislators were and, in fact, though we are grateful for the opportunity to speak with several senators and representatives (many of whom support us), it was Patrick and Capriglione who gave us the runaround. So you won't hear us in your office, no importa. Then you leave me with no other choice than to be the loud, Ramon Ayala-playing vecino across the street and when the public comes to my door to find out what all the noise is about, I will inform them, intelligently. We are the new face of Americana.

How can people in our community join the fight to stop SB 1128?
Read, read, read. It's what all rebels do. Sign every petition going around. Read all the articles. Log online and find out the timeline of the bills themselves. Keep informed. Attend the hearings for the bills. Call your state representative. Call your senator. Tell them to say NO to SB 1128 and HB 1938. Read the research they are using to write this stuff. Here is a good start: look up the National Association of Scholars and the report they put out that Patrick and Capriglione used to create the bill. **FPH**



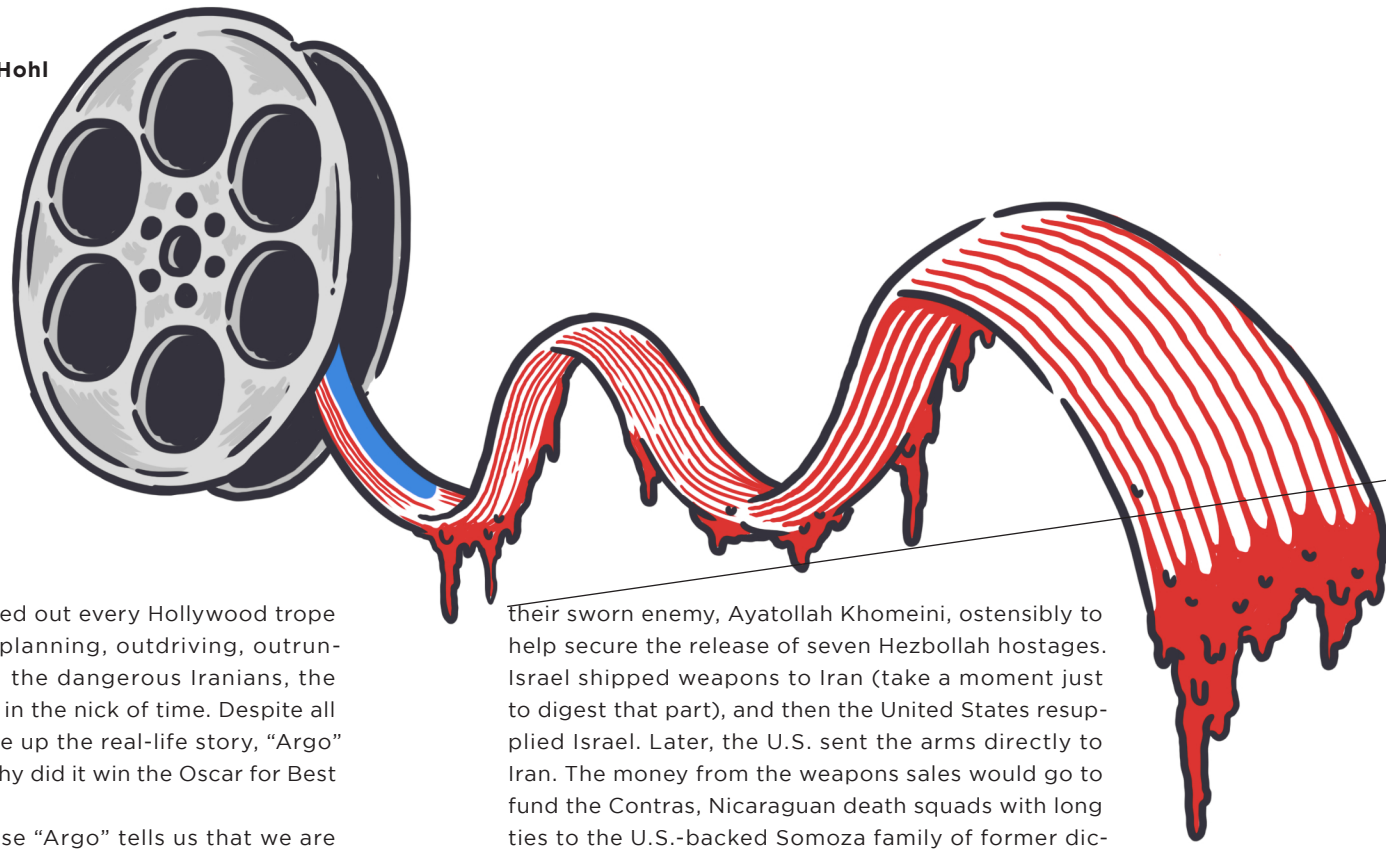

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IF AFFLECK WANTED TO MAKE A REAL IRAN ADVENTURE FILM

By Nick Cooper
Illustration by Shelby Hohl



THE FILM "ARGO" pulled out every Hollywood trope in the book. After outplanning, outdriving, outrunning, and outsmarting the dangerous Iranians, the Americans emerge just in the nick of time. Despite all of these efforts to spice up the real-life story, "Argo" was a boring film. So, why did it win the Oscar for Best Picture?

Perhaps it's because "Argo" tells us that we are the good guys and that the CIA, a benevolent force capable of outsmarting the bad guys, protects us. As the U.S. and Israel are ramping up for a new war against Iran, a film like "Argo" that portrays Americans as the saviors should be called out as military propaganda.

In the '70s and '80s, seeking to destabilize leftist governments, to justify more funding, and to score points against the Soviet Union, the CIA was training right-wing death squads to instill terror, murder, and torture. This resulted in the deaths of masses of civilians in El Salvador, Guatemala, Uruguay, Angola, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Brazil, Cambodia, Colombia, East Timor, Ecuador, Egypt, Haiti, Indonesia, Mexico, the Philippines, and many other places. The ratio of innocent people killed to innocent people saved by the CIA around that time was at least 100,000 to 1. Yet Affleck chose not to make a film about the hundreds of thousands, but about the 1 percent (well more like 0.001 percent). He chose to make a CIA-to-the-rescue film.

Whenever Affleck or anyone else in the media tries to categorize the film as 'true' or 'apolitical,' we should ask ourselves this: If a movie was released in the U.S. that portrayed as heroes some Iranian intelligence agency responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians, would it be popular? Do you think such a film could win an Oscar?

Romanticizing the work of the CIA can be seen all throughout our culture. In shows such as "Alias," "Chuck," and "Covert Affairs," the CIA is depicted as trying to do good things. The fact that most Americans aren't cynical about such portrayals shows how deeply nationalism influences our aesthetics.

If it weren't for this agenda and Affleck just wanted to make the best possible adventure film about covert U.S. action in Iran after the revolution, the Iran-Contra scandal has it all. It should be the fodder for a blockbuster.

In 1985, while the U.S. was arming Saddam Hussein in the brutal Iran/Iraq war, Reagan also decided to send arms to the other side. Reagan's White House made deals with the government of their sworn enemy, Ayatollah Khomeini, ostensibly to help secure the release of seven Hezbollah hostages. Israel shipped weapons to Iran (take a moment just to digest that part), and then the United States resupplied Israel. Later, the U.S. sent the arms directly to Iran. The money from the weapons sales would go to fund the Contras, Nicaraguan death squads with long ties to the U.S.-backed Somoza family of former dictators. The reason that such an elaborate ruse had to be set up and the money couldn't be given directly to the death squads was that Congress had passed three different amendments trying to stop exactly that from happening.

Meanwhile, the CIA helped cover the Contras selling cocaine in the U.S., which contributed significantly to the crack epidemic. The fall guy was Oliver North of the NSA, who was summoned to testify before televised hearings of a joint Congressional committee. North's plan also involved paying a million dollars and sending arms to Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega. A few years later, the United States invaded Panama, arresting Noriega so that he could spend the rest of his life in jail (in the U.S., France, and Panama). North, however, had all his convictions overturned. His celebrity established by the TV hearings, North went on to become a radio and TV host.

North's secretary, Fawn Hall, was portrayed as innocent and loyal. She helped smuggle and shred documents, and was dating the playboy son of a Contra leader. Once, she made a $10 million error by accidentally depositing the money into the account of a Swiss businessman instead of the Sultan of Brunei. Later, she became addicted to crack.

Affleck wouldn't have needed to embellish the plot or add chase scenes; Iran-Contra could write itself. However, movies can't or aren't being made right now that show our covert agencies as bumbling, criminal, and even terroristic. Out of the hundreds of TV episodes and films portraying our so-called intelligence agencies, how many show them arming death squads, training paramilitaries in torture techniques, and overthrowing moderates to install dictators?

The story of the science fiction film within "Argo" is a wink to Hollywood about the power of the narrative. It says, "Out of smoke and mirrors, we can construct realities so convincing that the bad guys will have no idea what hit them." Meanwhile, "Argo" itself gives a similar wink at covert agencies that says, "We can get the public to believe that what you do is heroic, sexy, and helpful." **FPH**


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BEN HALL'S VISION

By Alex Wukman
Images courtesy of d-mars.com

WHEN BEN HALL ANNOUNCED he was running against Annise Parker in December 2012 the only people who seemed to know who he was were the courthouse mavens and downtown politicos. Hall, who served as a city attorney in the early 1990s administration of Mayor Bob Lanier, has previously considered running for the city's highest office. In 2009, he announced his candidacy only to withdraw his name after Gene Locke entered the race. In 2011, he expressed interest in the race before ultimately deciding to sit it out.

While Parker was able to beat off a pack of mostly unknown and underfunded candidates, her slim margin of victory—she won only 50.8 percent of the vote, barely enough to avoid a runoff— has many City Hall watchers thinking she is vulnerable. Something that Hall hopes to exploit. He also plans to use his candidacy to address what he sees as the current lack of vision in the mayor's office.

"In the 16 years Mayor Parker has been at City Hall, name one serious economic policy she has advanced," Hall asked rhetorically. He went on to describe how his administration would focus on "reversing the doughnut effect" that he perceives as defining Houston. The doughnut effect is the term used to describe the idea that the outer rings of the city are populated while the inner core is abandoned after 5 p.m. Hall seeks to reverse the doughnut effect by "incentivizing businesses to do active retail and incentivizing people to live in the city."

He explained that his administration would focus on "developing a centralized retail center in downtown," and that he envisions downtown redeveloped into something similar to the Galleria. He also said that he wants to remove the food desert that exists in downtown.

"I've already been approached by major developers who are interested in forming a public-private partnership to establish an entertainment district and revitalize downtown in a wholesome, family-friendly way," said Hall. Ambitious ideas are something that characterizes Hall. When asked about his transportation plans, Hall outlined a bold, audacious idea. "We need to at least explore underground transportation options. This may not work in downtown but it could work if we know traffic is going in a certain direction, like to Katy," said Hall. He went on to clarify that he didn't envision a subway but an automotive tunnel that might run under I-10. "We'd need TxDOT to work with us, and the freeway might be the best place for it since we already have the right-of-way," said Hall. His focus on grand plans and large visions can lead to the dismissal of ordinances that many residents of Inner Loop Houston consider crucial quality of life issues.





When asked about the city's recent food truck ordinance, Hall initially waved it away as a trivial matter blown out of proportion. However, when pressed on his stance on a city ordinance that creates a protected class of favored business owners by preventing competitors from selling their wares, Hall said that he was opposed to regulations that punish business.

He also expanded his pro-business attitude toward the recent parking ordinance, which he characterized as a punitive measure, but that he believed the controversial sound ordinance needs to exist in some manner. "I drafted the original iteration of the sound ordinance in 1992, and it required officers to use a standardized, calibrated instrument," said Hall. He indicated that he believes changes to the ordinance need to be enacted that require the usage of some form of standardized instrument to measure sound.

Hall, a personal injury lawyer, was most recently in the spotlight as the attorney representing Chad Holley—the 18-year-old burglary suspect who was videotaped being beaten by HPD officers. Hall said that his work in private practice has increased his advocacy for additional racial sensitivity and sexual predation training within the department.

Hall also outlined a vision for establishing a series of safe houses throughout Houston for victims of human trafficking. He did not say whether the centers would be established in a public-private partnership, although it is highly unlikely that the city would foot the bill completely on its own. He went on to say that his advisors are already working on a policy proposal. Hall said that his overarching vision for the city is that of a change agent.

"I believe that the city should be a catalyst for the third prong of the constitutional guarantee, the pursuit of happiness," said Hall. **FPH**

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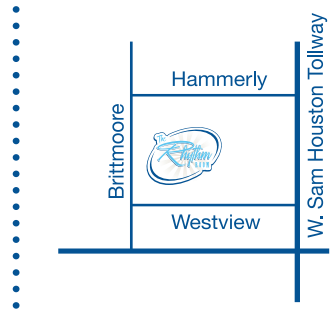




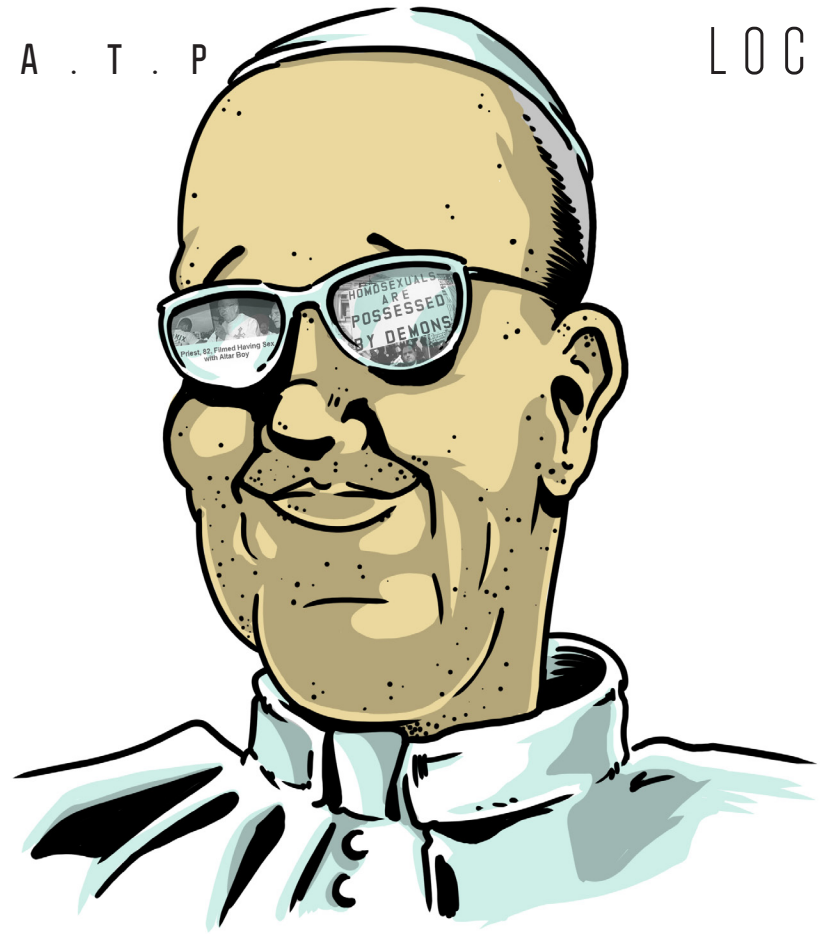
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BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTORS?

By Nick Cooper
Illustration by Shelby Hohl

ONCE AGAIN, an old white conservative man has been chosen pope. It is not just relevant to Catholics when a world leader opposes women's rights (not just abortion, but even contraception), opposes gay rights (not just marriage, but even gay adoption), fails to adequately protect children under their charge from molestation, and fails to speak out for the victims of injustice.

While it is important to respect the religious beliefs of others, that shouldn't keep us from speaking out about injustices. In addition to being religious figures, popes sit at the top of a hierarchical, patriarchal, multinational, political organization that has direct impacts on the lives of the poor all over the world.

The Vatican Collaborates with Fascists?

Pius XII became pope on the eve of WWII. Though he was willing to make strong anti-communist statements and rules for Catholics against participating in communist activities, he avoided similar decrees about rising fascism. He spoke against 'anti-Semitism,' in general, and made some efforts to save Jews, but, for the most part, wouldn't condemn discriminatory laws. Even when Catholics were being killed by Nazis, Pius XII said little.

After WWII, Nazis escaped war crimes trials by migrating to Latin America and elsewhere around the world. Alois Hudal, an openly pro-Nazi German bishop in Rome, with help from Argentinian President Perón and his famous wife Eva, helped Nazis escape to Argentina. The legacy of this Nazi collaboration was devastating for Argentina and the Americas. Twenty years later, a right-wing military coup in Argentina banned political parties, student unions, and most worker unions. 10,000 were killed in one of Latin America's dirty wars. Argentina also exported their fascism, helping the CIA train Contra death squads in Nicaragua.

In 1978, John Paul II was named pope, and though he remains extremely popular to this day, his extreme anti-communist, pro-dictatorship stances had significant impact on the lives and well-being of Latin Americans. He condemned left-Catholicism, known as liberation theology, even refusing Ernesto Cardenal, a priest and official in the Nicaraguan leftist Sandinista government, the privilege of kissing the papal ring. John Paul II is accused of encouraging the Catholic Church in Nicaragua to help the Contras.

While he was denouncing the leftist Catholics, John Paul II gave his backing to clerics like Jorge Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, who were known for speaking out against communists while remaining silent on right-wing dictatorships. Though many other Catholic leaders were willing to speak out against Latin America's dirty wars, in 1980, their most powerful voice, El Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero, was assassinated by right-wing paramilitaries. Bergoglio did not stand up for the leftist priests and Catholics who were tortured and killed by the Argentinian dictatorship. He "withdrew his support" for two priests who were soon after kidnapped and tortured.

Gay People Are the Devil?

As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Bergoglio led the fight against the legalization of gay marriage in Argentina. His position on gay marriage didn't surprise anyone but he abandoned all decency, calling gay marriage "a dire anthropological throwback," and saying, "Let's not be naïve. We're not talking about a simple political battle; it is a destructive pretension against the plan of God. We are not talking about a mere bill, but rather a machination of the Father of Lies that seeks to confuse and deceive the children of God."

He also warned against gay adoption, "At stake are the lives of many children who will be discriminated against in advance and deprived of their human development given by a father and a mother and willed by God."

Gay rights groups have pointed out in response that Jesus never said a word against homosexuality.

He Is a Humble Leader

It is hard to reconcile the riches and majesty of the Catholic Church with Jesus' teachings. The affirmation among Christians of personal wealth accumulation, or fancy churches, seems to be directly contradicted by their savior who said, "Blessed are you poor: for yours is the kingdom of God," and "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."

It was welcome news for the poor Catholics of the world that the pope strives to be humble. He has already chosen to wear considerably less bling than his predecessors. Sister Ceil of the Dominican Sisters in Houston finds hope in this, saying, "From what I understand he has lived a simple life; I hope we see that played out in his papacy."

A Mass Exodus

Since WWII, more than 10 million Latin Americans have left Catholicism to become Protestants. For them and others, the contradictions in the Vatican are insurmountable: The Church values riches, while Jesus eschewed them. The Church has collaborated with oppressive dictatorships, while Jesus took the side of those who are persecuted.

One explanation is that all institutions become corrupt with time, and the Catholic Church is the ultimate institution. Another possible answer is that in addition to inheriting a legacy of Jesus, the Catholic Church also inherited the legacy of the Roman Empire. Pontius Pilate, who authorized Jesus' crucifixion, did so to defend the interests of an oppressive government.

There is always hope that a new pope may more closely emulate Jesus, but when collaborating with governments that arrest, torture, and kill civilians, popes more closely resemble Pilate. **FPH**

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NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE

By Amanda Hart
Illustration by Sarah Welch

What Houston's Sexual Assault Kit Backlog Really Means

LAST MONTH, Mayor Annise Parker and City Council unanimously voted to test the entirety of Houston's 6,663 backlogged sexual assault kits (SAKs). For a moment, we all cheered at the idea of our local government doing the right thing for sexual assault survivors in our community. However, what seems like a victory in the name of justice is nothing more than a state-mandated decision that will yield little to no results for the survivors of these crimes. We, as a society, are better than this. While testing the backlogged SAKs is an important step, we also need to be having a conversation about why sexual assaults are so prevalent in our society. We could also benefit from having a frank discussion about why our city allowed for so many kits to sit in evidence locker rooms untested for decades and what steps should be taken to ensure that this never happens again. Instead, the conversation is being framed around how much money we can save and how proud we are of ourselves for doing the right thing but only after it was mandated. When the conversation focuses more on vindicating HPD of any wrongdoing than on the survivors of these attacks, we have a larger problem than a backlog of untested rape kits. We have a society that refuses to acknowledge the ways in which we marginalize, silence, and victimize rape survivors after they have come to us for help.



In 2011, the 82nd Texas Legislature enacted SB 1636. The bill mandated that all untested rape kits sitting in storage lockers across the state must be tested and uploaded into a state database and, in some cases, the FBI – Combined DNA Index System (CODIS). In March 2012, a mandated audit found a staggering count of 6,663 untested rape kits sitting in the HPD evidence locker. Mayor Parker stated at a press conference on the day of her big announcement, "While we had always intended to move forward with the sexual assault kits we had in the so-called backlog, the change in state law put a fine point on that and really it gave us no choice." Conceivably, there is likely a difference between choosing to do the right thing and your hand being forced. Either way, this could be forgiven for the sake of knowing that some justice would prevail for the survivors of sexual assault. However, the Houston Police Department and Mayor Parker made it clear at their press conference that very few of the cases sitting in our evidence locker will result in convictions. According to Parker, "It is not anticipated that this will generate a huge volume of reopened cases. There may be some surprises in there but, for the most part, these cases have been disposed of previously." "Disposed of" or not, the attitude conveyed appears to be coming from a place of "we did everything right and there is nothing more we can do." A more deserving approach for this situation would be a commitment to making sure we did everything right and correcting mistakes that could provide justice to the survivors of these kits.

In 2002, testing in the HPD crime lab was halted after an independent study found that thousands of convictions were questionable. This hiatus was due to findings that analysts faked test results and also took into account police theories when analyzing evidence. So after years of embarrassment, Houston City Council and Mayor Annise Parker voted in June of last year to open an independent forensic laboratory that would exist outside of the control of HPD. This was a right step in the direction of justice considering the obscene issues our crime lab has experienced over the years. It is debatable what caused such a large backlog but according to our mayor, "There's been an implication that those kits were ignored over the years. And that's been one of my frustrations and I know it's been extremely painful [for] the police department to hear that these were, in any case, something that was ignored. Now we have an oppor-

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tunity to just completely clear the books." We need to be less concerned with clearing the slate and more focused on attempting to provide some amount of closure to the sexual assault survivors in our community. Parker went on to say, "I would also point out that DNA has progressed almost unimaginably in the years that we've been collecting these SAKs and there's a lot more information you can glean today. So in one way, having these still on hand is a financial issue and in most circumstances they would have been destroyed years ago. In another viewpoint, this is an opportunity to go back and find if there was anything there that was missed over the years." This isn't just an opportunity to see what was missed; it really should be our top priority. Unfortunately for the men, women, and children who have suffered an attack, we appear to be more concerned with the most cost-effective way to ensure these kits vanish without leaving room for an admission of any wrongdoing on behalf of the city or the police department.

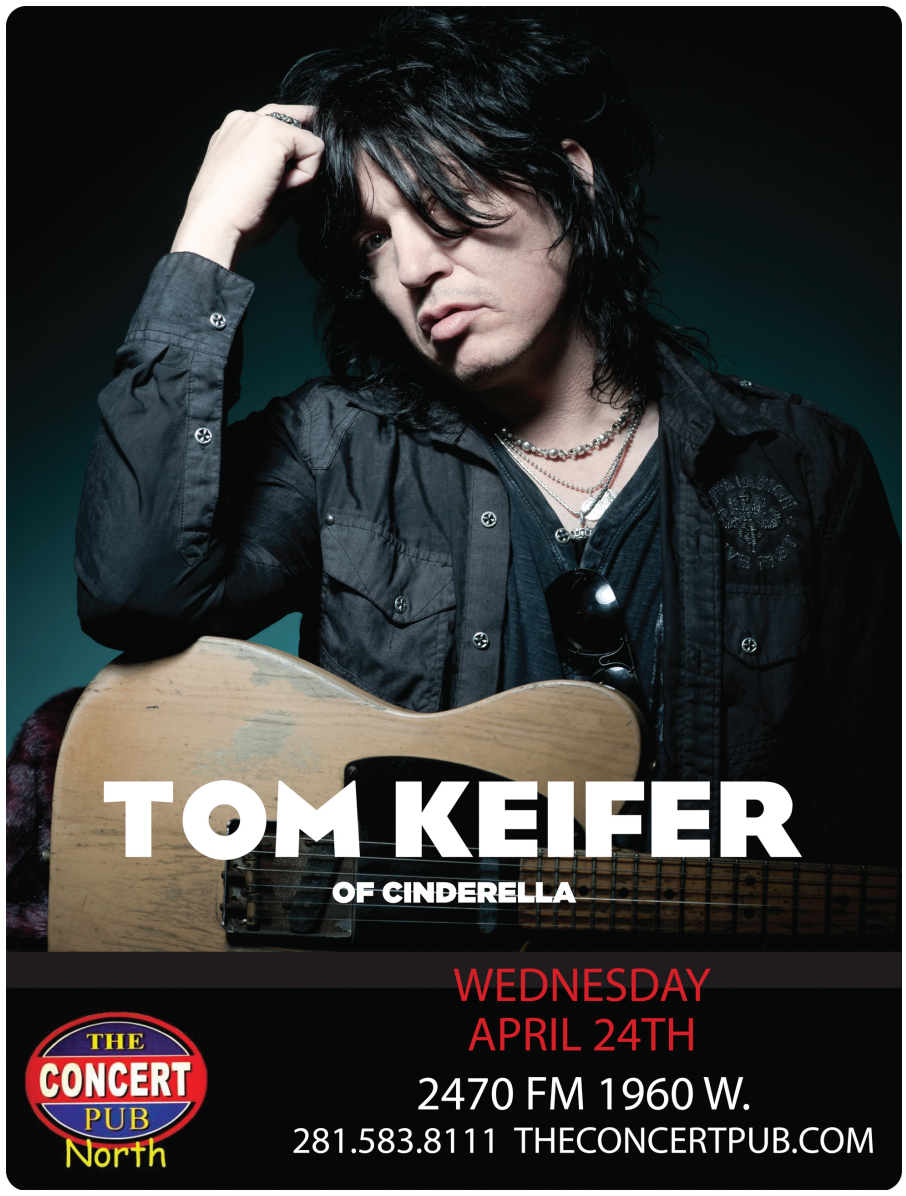
Houston is not the only major American city to tackle their backlog of untested rape kits. Cities such as Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and Detroit have all either already tested their backlog or have taken steps to begin the process. In 2003, New York cleared their backlog of 16,000 untested SAKs. As a result, the city of New York reopened and prosecuted 200 cold case files and saw their rape arrest rate jump from 40 percent to 70 percent. In Detroit, a backlog of 11,300 untested kits was discovered in 2009. Detroit acknowledged that they did not have the funds to test these kits. They began their efforts by seeking grants and raising funds from the community to start the necessary work. To date, they have managed to test 798 of the backlogged kits. Of the 798 kits that Detroit has tested, investigators say they uncovered 29 serial rapists. One kit tested dated back to 1997 and the man responsible for the attack was sentenced to up to 60 years in prison. Thanks to Detroit's County Prosecutor, Kym Worthy, these cases and survivors are given adequate attention. Detroit is not attempting to test their kits to ensure a clean slate. They are attempting to make their city a safer place and to bring true justice to the survivors of these cases. We need to demand the same responsibility from our city elects as well. This is not a chance to start over; it is a defining moment for our city to change the way in which we handle sexual assault cases.

Along with the 6,663 rape kits the city will also process 1,450 active SAKs, 1,020 non-SAK cases (property crimes), and the anticipated 1,000 SAKs that will be collected this year. The plan approved to test the backlogged SAKs will cost $4.4 million and the contract to do the testing was awarded to labs in Utah and Virginia. The city negotiated a "bulk rate" of $401 per kit with the two out-of-state labs. Mayor Parker was very adamant during her press conference about the "rock bottom" prices we received and how great this will be for the city of Houston. Listening to the mayor talk about the untested SAKs sometimes felt as though she was trying to sell us a cable package, not address a very personal and serious topic such as rape. You could hear the sales pitch when Parker said things like, "It does it in a very, very cost-effective manner because we have bundled so many cases together. We have given [the labs] a tight time frame. We are able to get essentially volume pricing, a third the cost our normal DNA outsourcing." The two labs awarded the contract will also be responsible for sending technicians to Houston when it is required that they testify in court. One of the labs will charge the city "$2,000 per expert plus travel expenses" if that service is needed. The claim that these prices are an economic win for Houston is not only false in the long run but has also managed to overshadow the real issues when it comes to justice for survivors of sexual assault.

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According to Parker, "Of all of the challenges of leading Houston over the last three years, really the most personal has been the issue of decades of untested rape kits. We are all aware of the problem. But with the serious budget challenges we faced during the recession, it made it very, very difficult to address something that was going to require a significant expenditure of funds to take care of. It's never been ignored, but we weren't interested in just a quick fix. We've been searching for the appropriate solution." When addressing such issues, our main concern as a community cannot be about funds. The dialogue needs to be centered on what the best method is to ensure that survivors in these cases see their attackers brought to justice. Instead, this system is proving to be a way for the city to wipe the slate clean and start fresh. These crimes have a lifelong effect on the individuals directly impacted by their weight and the struggle to overcome them is forever ongoing. The only beings that get to walk away scot-free are the perpetrators of these crimes and the City of Houston who has chosen to wash their hands of these cases. Unfortunately, for the survivors of these crimes they are not granted the same luxury.

Our decision to actively do very little with the results of the rape kits and the rhetoric in which we have chosen to address our backlog speaks volumes about how we view rape as a society. We need to demand more from a mayor who has repeatedly been endorsed by women's rights groups such as Planned Parenthood and EMILY's List. Something is off when our crazy, conservative state legislature has to force us into making the right decision about what to do with our nearly 7,000 untested rape kits. Each one of those kits represents a human being who was invaded in the most horrific of ways not just by their attacker but also in the hours that followed as their body was examined for evidence. The same examination that could yield possible results in each of those untested kits. In a society where only one sixth of rapists ever see the inside of a prison, it is imperative that we make serious changes to the broken system that these cases currently function under. The conversation needs to be framed around sexual assault survivors. We should be doing everything we can to take responsibility for our unacceptable backlog and go beyond what the state has mandated be done. We are doomed to repeat this cycle if a shift does not occur in the way that we view sexual assault in our communities at a local, state, and national level. **FPH**


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