At the Weekly, we try our hardest to chronicle the many narratives unfolding on the South Side. This week, we’re turning the work over to others.

Welcome to the interview issue.

Inside this issue you’ll find nine South Siders talking about what they do, what they see, and what they think. Some of our subjects were born here and left, while others came here from somewhere else. But they all reveal something about our half of the city. These are artists—those who work with drawings, words, hair. These are people with big thoughts about Chicago, its squalor and its beauty. These are people who have a good tale or two to tell. We’re going to let them speak, with as little interruption as possible.

We all know our own home. But we rarely get a chance to know the homes of others. Whose home is the South Side? We’re not saying these are the most important voices. We’re not here to make that call. Instead, these are nine different individuals with nine different stories. For all of them, the South Side is home.

If you want to hear more, check chicagoweekly.net for extended transcripts and extra interviews.

Carlo Rotella

Carlo Rotella is a journalist and professor of English at Boston College. His latest collection of long-form pieces, “Playing in Time,” was published in September by the University of Chicago Press. Both as a journalist and an academic, Rotella explores the narratives we use to understand cities. He grew up in South Shore in the 70s.

Where did you go to high school?

I went to the Lab School K through 12. I lived on 71st and Oglesby and 69th and Euclid. But I have not lived in South Shore since I went away to college.

Where did you hang out growing up?

I had two separate lives. I had a neighborhood life in South Shore where there was a network of driveway basketball courts. We’d just hang out by the Jackson Park golf course. There were a bunch of neighborhood people that I hung out with. I spent a lot of time on my neighbor’s stoop. They had six kids and we hung out around there.

I had a separate life hanging out with kids from school, which was more in Hyde Park. There was the regular late night trip across Jackson Park home to South Shore, which I made on foot or by bike late at night. It’s a strange landscape. It’s so alive with all these ghosts from the Columbian Expedition. The gold lady is there, the replica of the one from before. People think of Jackson Park as a dangerous park, but there was only one parking lot where stuff may go on, but really it was this long contemplative walk or run through this desolate space.

Where do you visit when you come back now?

I always make a point of going to South Shore, and I’m always struck by how physically nicer it is now. The big thing in the 70s was that the neighborhood had changed so fast that the networks, all the people knowing other people, had been swept away, so that it was kind of wilder and harder to tell who everybody was. Adults couldn’t tell if the kids hanging around the block were somebody’s kids from around the corner or from some other place.

It’s been awhile since the neighborhood turned over, so those networks have reformed, even though other things have come along to cause trouble. Crack came along when it did and there was upheaval associated with the tearing down of projects. I get the sense that today the networks are much stronger and denser than they were in the 70s and early 80s.

I always make a point of visiting in South Shore, but I also have people to see in Hyde Park. But, as is sort of predictable, I go to Chicago on business, which means I go downtown a lot and I seem to end up on Wicker Park a lot, which never happened to me when I was growing up. The book party for “Playing in Time” was in Wicker Park at some old burlesque dive turned hipster bar. You just go out in the city in different ways as a visitor.

In “Playing in Time,” you reference being hit in the head by stranger who was trying to steal your baseball glove. Can you tell that story?

The getting hit in the head part I don’t remember being particularly traumatic. I think kids get hit in the head one way or another. But what I do remember is that the kid who hit me over the head hit me with a broomstick that broke. And he was wearing pajamas with a horse head motif on them and he was trying to get my baseball glove from me, which is the part I remember much more vividly.

I wasn’t much of a fighter when I was a kid, so I kind of went with the curl up in the fetal position and don’t let go strategy. Because there was a kind of pack of kids on my block I knew that if I hung on to the glove and didn’t give it up, they would arrive and drive this kid off. So the memory is being in my driveway and seeing this kid in pajamas with horses’ heads coming at me with a broomstick and a big explosion inside my head.

There was a certain amount of chaos on the street and as any parent will tell you now, kids spent all day out in the street, which is no longer the case. In the summer, I would go inside for meals and that was basically it.

You’ve written a lot about boxing. Where does that interest come from?

Not really through Chicago... When it came to sports, basketball was the game that mat- tered in the neighborhood. There was an extensive network of pickup games and teams you could play on and that’s where all my athletic energy went. I played only on the pickup side. My younger brother was a really good player. He played for the high school team. That’s where all my athletic energy went. I played only on the pickup side.

You teach a course called the City in American Literature and Culture. What do you teach from Chicago?
South Shore is a first house neighborhood. And it has been for a long time. People buy their first house there. And sometimes it’s their only and last house. If you go back in its histo-
ry, its always played that role, and that’s a very high stakes role for a neighborhood to play. It’s where you take a foothold in the middle class. But then you start worrying, is this foothold secure enough? Is this going to be enough for me to pass on to my kids? Is it pre-
carious? Am I connected to my neighbors or am I just bidding my time until I can move to another neighborhood?

I’ll give you an example, Ron Grynwinski, a guy who founded ShoreBank, I interviewed him years ago and he was telling me he grew up further down on the east side, and he’d go to South Shore to look at the houses when he was a kid and to imagine what it would be like to buy a house there. That’s always the function South Shore has played, and I think that makes it a really powerful place to tell stories about people. Buying house and owning a house is so caught up with all these other things like class and life trajectory and your ambi-
tions and fears for your family.

If you were to pick someone to interview for this Interview Issue, who would you want to talk to?

When I started years ago thinking about writing about my neighborhood, in addition to interviewing neighbors and people who now live in the houses I used to live in, I also inter-
viewed a police commander, the parish priest, the people who had institutional oversight of the neighborhood, I was interested in correlating their vision of how the neighborhood had changed with what my neighbors had. I like that official perspective and less official one.

Also, there’s still a couple of blues places on the South Side, there’s Lee’s Unleaded and a couple of others. I don’t know who runs them but I’d be interested in hearing from them. My focus if I go back is to talk to my old neighbors and the people who have lived where I lived and my friends lived. I’ve done some of that, I went back to my house at 71st and Oglebay and talked to the people who own it now. That kind of thing can be really rich. Do you know if the Amber Bakery is still there? The thing that always gets me about the Amber Bakery was that it was a German bakery that tried to pass itself off as Dutch. I felt like going in there and breaking it to someone, saying, there’s nobody left who can draw any distinction between German and Dutch, its ok to drop the pretenses. WWI is over. It’s just funny they maintained the distinction for reasons that had to do with the earliest part of the 20th century that could not possibly have been more irrelevant when I was kid. (Tyler Leids)

**Bernardine Dohrn**

Bernardine Dohrn, an alumna of the University of Chicago and current clinical associate pro-
fessor of law at Northwestern, has lived in Hyde Park for the past twenty-five years. She is the founder of the Children and Family Justice Center and co-founder of the Center on the Wrongful Convictions of Youth. Though she has long been a respected figure in the juvenile justice reform movement, her legal work has sometimes been overshadowed by her involvement with contro-
versial anti-war activist group the Weather Underground in the late sixties and early seventies. The group’s extralegal attempts to “bring the war home” led to Dohrn being placed on the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted list for several years. In 1968 Dohrn turned herself in, and most of the charges against her were dropped due to FBI misconduct. Despite this, Dohrn and her husband, former “Weatherman” Bill Ayers, continue to face scrutiny for their past actions and supposed con-
nections with their Hyde Park “neighbors,” the Olatuna family.

**Could you begin by telling us about the focus of your legal work in Chicago over the past twenty-five years?**

My work has focused on children’s rights, broadly defined. I started the Children and Family
Justice Center as part of the Northwestern School of Law’s legal clinic as a way to be teach-
ing and also working in the courts everyday. It has been a very lucky way to advocate for those children who are the poorest Americans and who have been used as fodder for the prison gulag for the last twenty-five years. It has been a way for us to be in the day-to-day trenches and have the luxury of selecting our cases, working the hell out of our cases, doing what’s called “zealous advocacy,” and not letting go of our clients. At the same time, we are working to address policy issues along the way. We have worked on juvenile court reform...this stark use of the juvenile court which has used racist and racist terms in the past twenty-five years and which has led to white kids disappearing from the system no mat-
ter where you are, [while it is used as] a warehouse for youth from the black community.
The challenge is to live in your moment. Your generation today is smarter than we were, more global than we were, more knowledgeable about the world, more multicultural. That's a lot, you know. We were coming out of the fifties. We were just trying to fight away the blinders.

As many people know, you and Bill Ayers were drawn into the 2008 election somewhat unwillingly and accused of being Obama's so-called "radical neighbors." Do you feel there is a difficulty, generally, with being seen as a member of the "radical left"? Is it more difficult to negotiate with those who are seen as more moderate political figures?

No. First of all, I don't think we were ever very extreme. I don't accept that definition. We were part of the anti-war movement. It's been rewritten and rewritten and rewritten that Bill and I were "terrorists," but it just isn't true. The anti-war movement caused almost no deaths; at least we certainly didn't. Compared to the monstrous crimes that were being committed in our [country's] name, this was a very restrained movement. What were the choices? The people who joined the Democratic Party—did they help stop the war? The people who went to communes? Some of our friends went to factories to try and organize workers and radicalize unions...you know these are all good things to do. Was there a single right thing to do, and was that to be nice to politicians? Politicians are absolutely not going to stop the war. I don't say it's wrong to do that [practice political negotiation], but I object to this self-righteousness of moderates that "If only those radicals would go away, we could really do this." There is no evidence of that. None. I am very eclectic about where change can come from.

Do you think you and your husband have been misrepresented by the press?

Yes! Don't you? My sons all have Google Alerts on me so they can tell me what I need to know about what's going around. It's insane. We have this massive national security apparatus doing what? Monitoring the habits of two seventy-year-old people? You're kidding me! I'm a grandmother. And it's not just us. How does this happen to one of the most erudite and extraordinary ministers in Chicago history [Reverend Jeremiah Wright]? It's a very bizarre thing to be so demonized. Why is this of interest to anyone? Yes, everyone in Hyde Park knew who we were. But it's like there is a big "Brave New World"–style machine in our ears whispering something to us, no matter who you become as a person, or how you contemplate the consequences of your involvement in the crime, you can't ask for your freedom, ever.

As someone who is recognized as one of the leading figures of student activism in the sixties, do you believe the popular critique that university students—at schools like the U of C and Northwestern—are becoming less "active" and more apathetic?

Well, first of all, the sixties were overrated. This is just a fact. [The decade] has been both demonized and romanticized in equal measure. We did have the greatest music. [Laughs] But still, it's ridiculous. We wouldn't have this state of permanent war, this prison gulag, no jobs and massive debts for you guys if we had been successful. It just wasn't true that it was this state of permanent uprising. I traveled for three years as the leader of SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] and for the Lawyers Guild, speaking at different schools. No matter where you went, what you heard from the organizers at that school was, "Everybody's apathetic. We can't get anybody out. We wish we were more like Michigan State." So then I'd go to talk at Michigan State and they'd say, "It's pathetic, we can't get anyone out, we're not Ann Arbor." I'd go to Ann Arbor and they'd say, "We're not Columbus." At Columbus they'd say, "We're not Paris!" There is this constant anxiety of organizers where they just don't feel like they're at the epicenter of what's happening. But, you know, we don't get to pick our political moment. People want to feel useful and engaged in a way that inspires our best selves, but it's like there is a big "Brave New World"–style machine in our ears whispering every night that what you do won't make a difference.

It's important for the people who have all the power to make the status quo seem inevitable.

Hussein Castillo

Hussein Castillo is part restauranteur, part chirpy touristor ambassador. Only twenty-eight, he runs a restaurant called Garifuna Flava in Chicago Lawn, just west of the intersection of 83rd and Western. He's had luminaries of the celebrity food world stop in and pepper his single outfit with awards. Guy Fieri and his bleached hair are stenciled into a wall; a WT TW "Check, Please!" endorsement takes a place of pride. It's still a small, family-run affair, though, and he tries his damned best throughout to get you to take the first flight out of O'Hare and into Belize City, a prospect especially tempting on an icy day like this. He hands me a CD of his father's music as I head out the door, bookending a conversation dominated by the music of the Garifuna diaspora. As the title song of Rhodes's "In Evil" goes: "See my people dancing with pride / My culture must stay alive."

What is this music you're playing right now? It's amazing.

That's Nelson Gel. He lives here, I believe in Evanston, but definitely in Illinois somewhere. He does a lot of different styles—this song is particularly in a reggae style, but in Belize the music is known as punta. It's up-tempo, lots of drumming and dancing. There's also paranda, which is a Garifuna-based style of music.
The Garifuna are an ethnic group that lives in Central America. We’re in Belize, Guatemala; we’re in Honduras, in Nicaragua. We have an interesting history: we’re actually Africans that would travel back and forth from West Africa to Saint Vincent, which is near Barbados. It’s a small place, and those that stayed there intermarried with the Carib people and the Arawak Indians, South American Indians that we intermarried with that created this people called we’re in Honduras, in Nicaragua. We have an interesting history: we’re actually Africans that went on our boats, and that’s in this second picture here [gesturing at one of the many paintings on the walls], which shows boats getting out of Saint Vincent, onto the shores of Belize.

We were interesting, though, was that our people were not enslaved. The British told all of those emigration from the British Empire. The British came in, we got into a battle with them—a battle that we lost. What was interesting, though, was that our people were not enslaved. The British told all of those that fought: “We’re going to exile you out of this land! You can’t live here anymore!” So, we got on our boats, and that’s in this second picture here [gesturing at one of the many paintings on the walls], which shows boats getting out of Saint Vincent, onto the shores of Belize.

A lot of people didn’t make it on that journey, and it’s a big ocean, so those that did live sustained themselves on something called cassava. It’s a root that grows in warm-weather countries like Belize, and we used to make cassava bread, and it’s amazing because it’s a bread that can last six months without spoiling. This occurred over 200 years ago, so we’ve been in Central America for a long time now.

I grew up in Belize, and our Garifuna culture is more Belizean-based now. What we’re now doing here, with our cuisine, is Belizean-based cuisine. Garifuna-based dishes—all Belizeans around the world eat it. Stew chicken rice is a more Caribbean dish, Belizeans eat that. Empanadas is a Spanish-derived dish, and Belizeans eat that too. It’s a great mix of cultures that co-exist in Belize, and there are plenty of different people there. The Garifuna might only make up about 15% of the Belizean population, but so much of the culture is influenced by us. You see this especially in the music, where Garifuna music is the national music of Belize. There’s Andy Palacio, and my father went to high school with him. A few years ago, he ended up having the number one music album in the country. He’s from one of these small villages, and he ended up winning awards in Europe.

So your dad grew up in Belize?

He spent most of his childhood in Belize, yeah. Both of my parents came here in their mid-twenties, and I came here when I was about eight years old. They’re definitely one of those stories, stories of immigrants trying to make it out here in America. They spent a couple months in Los Angeles first, but it was pretty much the case that they came straight to Chicago. There’s a pretty sizeable Belizean population in the city, thousands, maybe, there’s really a lot of us here. Evanston is even known as the sister city to Belize City, and that’s how close the ties are. Evanston is the largest concentration of Belizeans, but they’re everywhere, man.

So why are you all the way down here, then?

There are Belizeans on the South Side. This wasn’t always the case. Back in the eighties and nineties most were in the Rogers Park/Evanston area, but now we’re all over the place. We have a few regulars that come from all over the city, maybe a good mile radius, but we definitely have a sizeable presence here on the South Side. Lots of South Side Belizeans come talk to me and say, “Man, we’re glad you’re here, because this way we don’t have to go all the way up north to get food.”

This is all your place, right? How long has it been open?

We’ve just reached about four and a half years now. We opened in May 2008, and it was our first time doing the whole restaurant thing. The genesis of this whole thing came from my mom and my dad, and my mom’s the one who cooks this food back there in the kitchen! So what you’re eating right now is exactly what I would eat at home. Before all this, my mom was working for Catholic charities, my dad was in the families industry, helping kids in foster homes, and so they were doing a bunch of different things first. I was at school, doing my college thing, getting through my undergrad years, doing some grad school before all of this opened. I would just always want my mom’s food, and it was always a big hit even with non-Belizeans, with all my American friends in school who would come home with me.

With that in mind, and being a Garifuna, we were looking for something to highlight our culture, because there just aren’t that many outlets for our culture: meeting spaces, places where we could get together, grow as a people together. This was an important way to bring that to our people. Belizeans come here to have their meetings; we’ve had art exhibits, we’ve hosted some delegations from Belize before, we’ve had people who were donating goods to Belize come here to have their ceremonies. And so this has become a place for all Belizeans and Garifuna people to meet so we can help our people back home, and it’s a place that didn’t exist before.

Do you go back home much?

I don’t get to go back home all the time, because this business is beyond a full-time job. [Laughs] It’s just us: me, my mom, my dad, and so it’s a lot of work. All day, every day. Business is okay right now. Things definitely could be better, but it’s a growth process, and we definitely think we have an excellent product right here. We also have a unique story, know you’re going to love the food, but it’s also: “Hey, maybe you’re going to take a trip to Belize one day, and let’s talk about that!” We’ll tell you about the Belize Day festival here, on the first Sunday of August every year, and people from all over the country come here to Chicago for that day. There are so many Belizeans in the U.S. right now, maybe as much or more than there are in Belize. There’s been a steady emigration from Belize for decades now, and there are people who have been here for a long time. There’s a woman who came in here on Sunday who said that she hadn’t had stew chicken and rice for forty years!

A man waves at us off the street and enters.

“Hey, man. How’s it going? Could I get some panades ready to go? He’s going to go to prayer first. Just one order, that’s it.

Could you get some panades ready to go? He’s going to go to prayer first. Just one order, that’s it.

Is that something that’s very common, having people from the community just drop in for their lunches?

Yeah, yeah. We get people from the community come in all the time. The guy who just ordered is from IMAN, the Inner-City Muslim Action Network, which is a really awesome cam-
Chicago Lawn’s a very mixed community. There’s been a huge increase in Hispanic migration here to these areas—Chicago Lawn, Marquette Park, and so in the past decade the population has almost doubled. You get a good mixture of people: there’s a Lithuanian Museum right down the street from here [the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture], and you still sense the huge Polish and Lithuanian communities that used to be here. You’ve got a big African-American population here too. It’s an interesting mix, and it’s something that I like. You go three blocks that way and there are taquerías and all sorts of different Hispanic restaurants right there.

What’s your own story?

I initially grew up in Rogers Park, but Bronzeville was where I spent most of my time. I used to run on the track of the University of Chicago! I went to the University of Notre Dame for a year, but tuition got a little too expensive so I moved to UIC, where I also had my grad- uate education. I put that to the side though, because I needed to get the restaurant to where it needed to be. We talked about opening this up for a long time, but talking about it and doing it are totally different things. After a while, I just dived in and helped my folks get this up and running, and now it’s four years later. I still live in Bronzeville. It’s a little further north, but I still really like the area. It’s not a bad trip out here to the restaurant at all.

But home still feels like Belize, and what you’re doing here is more than just a restaur- ant serving food.

Look, the big takeaway is that at Garifuna Flava, we want it to be a staycation. We want you to come here, enjoy our food, our culture, and if you have any questions we want people to come in inquisitive. Any time is a good time to go to Belize, really, it’s eighty degrees all the time, and days like today I definitely miss the weather back home. (Patrick Leow)

Ivan Brunetti

In the past several years, artist and Chicagoan Ivan Brunetti has taught cartooning at Columbia College Chicago, illustrated nine New Yorker covers, edited two “Anthologies of Graphic Fiction”, and published books ranging from the cartoon collection “Hit! The Morally Questionable Cartoons of Ivan Brunetti”, to the hands-on comics creation guide “Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice.” In other words, he has done a lot more with himself than he might lead you to believe in this interview. His latest work, the illustrated autobiography “Aesthetics: A Memoir” will be available in May of this year.

Where did you grow up on the South Side, and what was it like?

I moved from a small town in the rural central-eastern portion of Italy to the southeast cor- ner of Chicago, known by its inhabitants as the “East Side.” If you are downtown and buy a map of Chicago, my old neighborhood is very likely not even pictured; nothing south of Hyde Park seems to exist, at least for tourists. In any case, it is a remote, oft-neglected corner of the city. In 1976, it was home to many steel mills and factories, most of which are now skele- tons or nonexistent. There are few jobs left, although the air is cleaner, I imagine. My fam- ily lived within walking distance of Indianapolis Boulevard and thus the Illinois/Indiana bor- der. The Skyway loomed overhead. We were “drive-over country.”

I remember most clearly the tightly packed, modest A-frame houses and bungalows, the rusty steel mills, the majestic ComEd plant, the many steel bridges over the Calumet River, the slag heaps, the horrific smell from the Lever Bros. soap plant, the long pier at Calumet Park, the dingy little grocery store where my family bought huge tins of olive oil, the fresh boyan- berries (I hope?) the older kids could pick right off the neighborhood trees, and the desks at my elementary school, which had over 60 years of carved graffiti deeply gouged into them. I watched the neighborhood slowly crumble as the once-mighty force of American Industry dwindled and disappeared. Culturally, there wasn’t much to speak of, besides the tiny neigh- borhood library, my one beacon of hope, truth, and escape. Nevertheless, I still find indus- trial sites achingly beautiful, regardless of their state of decay.
What Is the best thing about Chicago?

Well, Chicago is pretty much all I know. I couldn’t function anywhere else. I’m like one of those microbes that symbiotically lives inside a crab’s anus. Change makes me anxious. The size of the sidewalk squares here simply makes sense to me. I know all our city’s smells: I can tell when a janitor walks past me on the street, because the smell of disinfectant reminds me of my first week of school in America; the landfill near Hegewisch remind me of driving to work for the graveyard shift in 1987; chocolate and Garfield Boulevard are intimately connected in my mind; a dumpling on the first really cold day of autumn smells like 1997, the year of my divorce; walking past Catholic churches fills my mouth with the dry, clingy texture of communion wafers; the North Side is blander than the South Side; there’s weariness in the air after a rainstorm; tap water has a tinge of dead fish in July...the list goes on, like an inter-sensory matrix.

Why do you draw comics? Also, because I think they’re basically the same question, how and when do you find yourself drawing comics?

I’d be lying if I claimed to be a cartoonist these days. For the last seven years, I’ve drawn maybe one to two pages of comics a year. Most of my time is spent teaching and mentoring, punctuated by drawing the occasional illustration. I’ve done a little bit of editing as well. Looking back, to twenty years ago, my general method was to force myself to draw comics on weekends and evenings, after I got home from my job. I guess I did that for about a decade. As I’ve grown older, frailer, and duller, but perhaps less repressed, I’ve lost a lot of energy, so it’s been more difficult (and logistically problematic) to draw in the evenings and weekends. My depression gets in the way, admittedly.

It’s always been amazing to me how stupid, thoughtless, and insensitive most people are when it comes to dealing with the issue of mental illness. I suppose that if you haven’t yourself ever been debilitated by such illnesses, it’s almost impossible to have empathy for those that suffer from things like depression. We’re a distasteful species overall, but despite my frustration, I honestly wouldn’t wish depression on my worst enemy. Depression is like being squished by a giant thumb, erased like a stray mark, crushed into less than a ghost. It’s so corrosive that it also turns the victim into an atmospheric poison. It’s hard to exist, much less draw while in such a clouded, diffused state. I’m sure that any comic I ever finished was the result of micro-bursts of mania and delusion. Anyway, it’s all taken a toll, and my fear...ful suspicion is that perhaps I’m spent.

Short answer: for the most part I’ve given up on myself, but I try to get a drawing done here and there. A huge chunk of me has been left unexpressed, which nags at me, but that nagging may be what saves me.

I was pretty delighted to discover that some of your stuff is on the cover of Patton Oswalt’s comedy album “My Weakness Is Strong.” How’d you end up collaborating with him?

The cartoonist Tony Millionaire introduced me to Patton Oswalt in 2006 at the San Diego Comic Convention. Patton bought some artwork from me and offered some kind words of encouragement, which I didn’t deserve but gratefuly accepted nevertheless. Over the years, Patton has commissioned me to draw things like his Halloween card. I also drew a poster for him as part of the 2012 New York Comedy Festival, but I think Hurricane Sandy interfered with the event. He’s always been great to work with, a mensch.

Are there any underappreciated cartoonists out there whose work is worth reading?

I serve as an advisor for a comics anthology (entitled “Linework”) put out by my (best) students and former students. We’re currently assembling the fourth issue, which will be out in May, right around the same time as my own book, “Aesthetics: A Memoir.” There are some great young artists in “Linework”, and I know we’ll be hearing more and more about them. Here are just a few that people can Google: David Alvarado, Kevin Budnik, Andy Bunkholder, Pete Clothfelter, Nick Drnaso, Rachal Duggan, Erik Lundquist, Marieke McClendon, Jeremy Onsmith, and the list goes on and on. The issues are on sale at Quimby’s Bookstore and Shop Columbia, in person or through their respective websites. There must be close to fifty artists that have been featured in “Linework.” Anyway, it’s highly recommended, and the fourth issue is looking to be best one yet. (Nathan Worcester)

Paul Durica

Paul Durica, owner and proprietor of Pocket Guide to Hell, tags his project with an intriguing slogan: true crime, social justice, labor history, peanuts. Why peanuts? “Peanuts make people think of circuses,” he shrugs. Under the guise of Pocket Guide to Hell, Durica reimagines Chicago’s history as something of an ongoing carnival. He’s organized walking tours, talks, and historical reenactments that all fall somewhere between street theater and LARPing, with a sneaky undercurrent of real academic fascination. As circus master, Durica has staged every- thing from a Ben Hecht house party to a real-scale reenactment of the Haymarket riot to a walking tour of Hyde Park’s own Leopold and Loeb, and he’s not yet out of ideas—he’s imagination is as fantastic as his mustache.

You seem to wear a few different hats, and I want to start by asking you where you would place yourself. Academic, tour guide, historian, writer—what are you?

I think what I’m trying to do is straddle a line between a number of different fields. So a lot of the public history work that I do has developed out of the work that I do as a more traditional academic, whatever that means. I looked at the ways in which History gets narrated in public, and I thought, “Well, I could appropriate these forms and then do something playful and interactive with them.” So that led to doing walking tours, and then public talks, and then beyond that we started these reenactments. Some people see what I do as really more of performance art, and I’m comfortable with that description as well. In fact, I’d rather have a variety of ways to talk about what I do. I like fitting into these multiple slots.

There are plenty of historians who do primary source research, but few go so far as to reenact the entire event. Why take that next step?

I think it really actually has helped me as an academic. Take the Haymarket Riot—we tried to do a to-scale reenactment, and we did, actually. We had people playing police officers to march up Des Plaines Street, and an equal number of people or more to play the historical audience. It was probably the first time since 1886 that so many people had been in that space. It was as simple as putting bodies back into the space, and seeing how those bodies move. The other interesting thing, I think, is that it also allows you to reflect on how contingent so many aspects of these events were. By doing these reenactments, you realize how chaotic a lot of these experiences were, and that whatever meaning arose often gets applied after the fact. It’s interesting to return back to that moment, when there were all these poss...
sibilities for how things happened, which you sort of experience while reenacting. You have the script, but these things are participatory, and not everyone follows the script. It gets you thinking about all of these alternatives or potentialities that didn’t get activated in the moment.

You used the phrase “public history”—that seems central.

Oh, yeah. Recently the concept’s been gaining a lot of traction and interest within the museum community. A lot of these older city institutions, at the moment, appeal to rather defined communities and demographics, but they want to survive into the 21st century. They have these amazing collections, all this wonderful material, so one way to approach the problem of these aging and shrinking audiences is to take the material and go out into the world with it and bring it to the city, and even activate these specific sites where an event occurred. I’m really excited by that; I like doing site-specific projects. I like using a place to bring the past into the present, and also having these public events where anyone can attend. So in some ways, it’s also about thinking about the past as a kind of public space, in a very real way. You don’t need to go to a museum to inhabit it, and you don’t need to attend. So in some ways, it’s also about thinking about the past as a kind of public space, of these aging and shrinking audiences is to take the material and go out into the world with it. It’s really great to be here where so much occurred, and also where people tried to wrestle with them and figure them out. And then, some day in October, when it hits 1871, I would take it outside and set it on fire.

That’s a poetic idea, to take a space and then pull it through time. You have an MFA in Creative Writing, and you’re a PhD candidate at U of C—Is Pocket Guide to Hell relevant to your creative writing?

Definitely. I think the work I’ve done as a creative writer very much influences the way I approach the historical materials. For me, I’m really interested in crafting a narrative, and this process of construction. I try to ground it in a lot of primary source research, but it’s important to me that I still have a story to tell, and that participants who come to these events get to experience this narrative as it unfolds in real time. They often even have a role to play in constructing it—I try to leave it open-ended, in some ways, which is why I try to give participants roles to play. They’ll play them in their own way sometimes, or they’ll bring in their own material. It’s always great when someone knows something idiosyncratic or specific. Like on the Leopold and Loeb tour, someone grew up in Kenwood and had a grandmother who told them her own version of the story, and I like those moments, when someone adds to the piece. So, yeah, I think story is really central to what I do, and I want the reenactments and the walking tours to feel as if someone is moving through a real-time narrative.

I’m wondering if you have a dream event, something you’ve had in the back of your mind for a while.

I’ve actually got two: coming up in 2015 will be the anniversary of Joe Hill’s funeral in Chicago. Joe Hill was a popular labor songwriter in the early 1910s. They had this big funeral; thousands of people came here in Chicago, and they sang songs, all these huge labor figures spoke. I think it would be great to kind of do that again, but as a concert to celebrate this music and also that early labor narrative. On a smaller scale—this one’s sort of crazy. People are always asking me if I’m going to do something with the Great Chicago Fire, and I couldn’t figure out how to do it. And then, recently, I figured it out. I want to make a public mural, starting in the 1830s, and gradually fill in the city up to 1870. So people could come back over time and see the city changing and evolving. And then, some day in October, when it hits 1871, I would take it outside and set it on fire.

You’ve obviously consciously chosen Chicago as the place to do what you do. What is it about this city?

I could probably do some of this stuff other places, but it’s really Chicago that continually inspires me. Particularly the period I’m most interested in—late nineteenth century to early twentieth century. There’s really so much that happened here and so many amazing things that shaped not only the moment we live now in within this city, but also, I would say, within the country at large. It’s really great to be here where so much occurred, and also where so many problems existed, and where people tried to wrestle with them and figure them out. And then all those problems still exist today, and we’re still kind of wrestling with them. And so there’s just something about the scale of Chicago, and really the swagger, as Carl Sandburg would talk about it, that’s really intriguing to me. The stakes always seem clear and apparent, and that’s really what keeps me engaged in the place, in its past and its present. There’s always a sense of urgency.
El Hajji El Shabazz has been cutting hair on the South Side throughout some of the city’s, and nation’s, most turbulent changes. Born Thomas Anthony Williams Jr., El Shabazz has manned the shears at his 87th Street Truth & Soul barbershop since the throes of the civil rights movement. The walls of Truth & Soul feature the owner with the likes of Martin Luther King, Curtis Mayfield, Oprah, and Vidal Sassoon. He hesitates neither to express unorthodox political views nor to talk up the fantastical events surrounding his life. As El Shabazz himself put it, “In my whole life I have met a very large number of well-known people, or did they have the chance to meet me?”

When I turned on the recorder, he got going...

I put the history out first. I came here in sixty-nine. I got this shop because of what they call the white flight. During that time I got it, they had two white barbers here. The thing that changed, the quick change, the blacks around here always thought it [the barbershop] was white, and the whites finna thought it was black, so I’m stuck in the middle, you understand? Ain’t nobody coming in. So I would put my white smock on and go out front when the buses is going past to let the brothers know, “Hey, I’m here now!”

El Hajji El Shabazz

...and clean right on up into a fade. And just fade out. That’s artwork, man. I’d like to... What do it say? What do it mean?

Now, a hair artist? An artist? Where you take that hair, and you take it from one way to another. That’s art work! Or you take it and you blend it in. You can make a ball at the bottom, and clean right on up into a fade. And just fade out. That’s artwork, man. I’d like to meet that guy that said, “you a barber.” I don’t call myself that. I call myself an artist.

Can you talk about the biggest changes you’ve seen on the South Side?

Yah, during the time that I came here 87th Street was one of the top shopping centers in the world. And it were black. 1984 came, the crack hit. And that’s when that revolving door of young black boys being locked up for this crack [began]. They were taking the Robbinson there and crack, and robberies started happening.

This neighborhood… it was a whole full community. People be shopping all up and down the street. Well when that crack hit in eighty-four, [snacks table] Muhammad Ali lived right here on 85th and Jeffery, You know, all these celebrities was all up and down here. They be shopping, you know, buying clothes and fixin’s and things. The property taxes was nice, now they going up on the property taxes, a lot of people leaving out because of that. So that was a change, it was a big difference between now and then.

Can you talk about your experience in the civil rights movement?

I marched with Martin Luther King for the march on Washington, I marched with Martin Luther King on Marquette Park, Gage Park, and I’m a tall you something: ain’t nothing nice. I seen some Caucasian faces made that I can’t believe what I seen. Your manure out your body is thrown at me. Beer bottles thrown at me. Piss thrown at me. Rocks too. Police gonna try to cover [us],…all this type of hatred, just hatred.

Martin Luther King said this is the worst place he ever been, where segregation is. Martin Luther King, that’s what he said. He ain’t never seen a place like this than Chicago. He came in the West Side to speak to a lot of people in the neighborhoods. But Martin Luther King also said that civil rights don’t run out. I think that Desmon Tutu said that you get to listen, you try to stop it with non-violence, but a lot of times something else will happen. I’m looking for equal rights, I want the same pie that you get. That’s the way I look at life. And my children and my grandchildren. I got some of my best buddies, I got my friends is white.

I remember one time Martin Luther King came by, and he told us when we was gonna march, and he say wear your Levi’s jeans. This used to be called a freedom suit, with a little Levi jacket, we would wear that because everything was gonna be thrown on you. So when we went to march, we would wear that.

He also used to go to a Press conference on Roosevelt and Ashland called the Christian Parish....There’s a lot of history over there. The Black Panthers, that’s on Western and Madison. They killed Fred Hampton on Western and Monroe, but the Black Panthers HQ was on Madison and Western. They used to trade fire with the police out there. And I lived right around the corner from them.

I used to come home, I had a big fro, and come home with my pick, and an old army jack- et. Police say “Ah” and they come out from somewhere, I don’t know where. [Stiff, chipped imitation of white police officer] “Alright guy, alright come here come here. Lemme see whatcha got on you.” Ain’t got nothing on me. “Where you going?” I’m on my way to my house. “Where you live at?” Right here. “We gonna give you two or three seconds, guy, till you get to that house. If you don’t be in that house, we’re locking you up.”

Now, all I had to do was go to the alley, and go up into the Black Panthers HQ. I can go out the back door, right across from them. And so, like I said, I seen the Black Panthers, I met Edward Hanrahan, I don’t wanna talk about that though. You know who Edward Hanrahan is? He killed out the Black Panthers. I seen him downtown, I met that guy that said, “you a barber.” I don’t call myself that. I call myself an artist.

So that was a civil rights symbol?

Yah, black power.

What’s your favorite haircut?

You know what, I like fading, you see, this hair is like a fro. I cut this hair with shears, this thing in my hand. I like blending in, it’s like a pain. You see, they use that word barber, I don’t like that word, barber. Why I don’t like that word barber is because, what do it show? What do it say? What do it mean?

Now, a hair artist? An artist? Where you take that hair, and you take it from one way to another. That’s artwork! Or you take it and you blend it in. You can make a ball at the bottom, and clean right on up into a fade. And just fade out. That’s artwork, man. I’d like to meet that guy that said, “you a barber.” I don’t call myself that. I call myself an artist.
E l Shabazz is supposed to be the family’s name now. So that slave name has stopped! You W HRINGWH RINGW HRING! But the thing about it was this, I didn’t play yet. So the white time I’d been in a place like that. So we run and we jump up on the stool like this, ready off, there won’t be no more Clay [Cassius Clay, Ali’s given name].

I look at them, and they would show some of their Italian culture. And I would notice, and

No, see, I’ll be 73 on February 8th of this year! [Interview conducted on February 4.]

I seen this guy, LeRoy Neiman [noted artist], when I was little. And, he was at the fights, and he was doing this. [makes hair-cutting motion] And, when I use that shear, I don’t like the name barber. But somebody got it, you barbers! I’m not that. You don’t give a damn which way they look, because they’re at that age now. They ain’t chasing nobody. So I’m mostly consulting. You know.

How about your name? It’s taken from Malcolm X’s. What’s the story behind that?

I was proud of my name, I remember, when I was young. I went to school with Italians and Mexicans. My school was on Taylor and Fillmore, an Italian neighborhood. We lived right across Roosevelt. The Italians lived on Taylor Street. And some Mexicans. And I used to hear the name Gallianni. Fieri, Lani, those were some of my old friends up in the grammar school. I look at them, and they would show some of their Italian culture. And I would notice, and I read them National Geographics, and I see Al Capone, and they identified with the Italians.

I want some identity of who I am. Friends of mine is named, O’Shea, O’Quinn, that’s Irish. And so, he say, “turn around and tell me what you see.” I was looking at the store. But I didn’t know what was going on. It was racism. I heard a guy cam e from around the counter, and went up to my boxing coach, and said, “look, these don’t like the name barber. But somebody got it, you barbers! I’m not that."

I fied. I belonged to a plantation of that name [Williams]. And when I found out about that, I wasn’t reading, and it hit me: WHITES ONLY… That’s the first time it hit me, now. That’s the first time it opened up my ear, my eyes to see that. And I’ve been careful ever since. (Josh Koven)

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Fake Shore Drive

Andrew Barber and Syrine Howard are Fake Shore Drive, Chicago’s premiere rap blog-turned- Midwest-hip-hop-empire. A transplant from Indianapolis, Barber launched the site in 2007. Since then, he and Howard have been working to take the Chicago sound from local to glob- al. The “Weekly” caught up with them last week at their headquarters inside Pilsen’s Latino Art Studio.

I feel like sometimes, when you see a quote about Chicago rap in a big national news- paper, it has to be dumbed down so much. You can’t catch everyone up on all the back- story. Are there things you wish you could say about the Chicago rap scene that you haven’t had a good forum for?

All: I was so sick, last year, of everybody hitting me up about [Chief Keef]. Eventually I had to say, “No, if you want a quote about Keef, go get it from somebody else.” If you want to talk about something positive or cool that’s going on, I’m all for it.

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ent neighborhoods, working together. But now, especially with the younger crowd, that doesn’t happen. Everyone works with whoever.

Do you think that with these crews connecting, does it lose any of that regionalism? Like, if there isn’t a cohesive sound from the West Side or the South Side, does it dilute a style?

AB: It definitely does, but it’s killing everything. It’s not just Chicago. And it sucks. I don’t know if you guys were around to have the feeling of going to a record store on Tuesday and having to wait in line for a CD to come out...

We had it for like, two years, maybe.

AB: And you guys were super young at the time. [I remember] having to have my mom walk me in to get an explicit lyrics CD, because I was too young. Now that’s all dead. Going to indie mom and pop music stores, and the guy behind the counter was like, the coolest dude...He could tell you what album is good. You miss a lot of that. Every neighborhood had a sound behind them. Common and Crucial Conflict, and Common and Twista, had completely different sounds, because they were from different sides of the city. I think the Internet has killed that.

I think one of the things that’s cool, though, is it has kind of given power back to the people, and taken away some of the power that the labels or the industry held. You had to actually go to a place, record off big reel-to-reel tapes, and then physically press CDs, get them shrink-wrapped, sell them. If you were in Chicago, you’d have to drive to Gary, or drive to Indianapolis. [The internet] makes it a lot easier now. There’s no P&D [pressing and distribution]. You’re not spending any money really on overhead. But that also takes away a lot of the fun. Outlook CDs used to be super crazy. The CD would always have a naked girl on it, all these crazy Afrocentric designs, and there would be a comic book on the inside. Or the Master P CDs. You would open them up and there would be ads for CDs coming soon, and you would be like, “Oh man, I can’t wait until this comes out.” Just the joy of waiting to open up a CD and look at the credits and read what produced what. There weren’t track lists back then...you didn’t know what was going to be on an album. Maybe one or two songs might leak. Now, an album like the GOOD Music album [“Cruel Summer”], which people kind of didn’t know...it didn’t really get a great response, but that’s because you heard six of the best songs before the album came out.

Yeah, you kind of saw it getting made. You saw different versions of songs coming out as it went through.

AB: It wasn’t like you were listening to it for the first time. I mean, you guys were alive for [50 Cent’s] “Get Rich or Die Tryin’,” right? Did you guys get that when it came out? I don’t know if you were even into rap back then...

Yeah, I remember “The Black Album,” “Get Rich or Die Tryin’” in 2003. Those were the first ones that I was really excited about.

AB: And that was the very end of that, where you could go and you didn’t know what was on it. You didn’t hear anything. It wasn’t like six songs would leak. You didn’t get much. Now you hear half the album before it comes out. It’s a flawed experience of listening. Chief Keef’s album probably would’ve been better received if people hadn’t heard half of it before.

I never thought about that.

AB: People are quick to call albums classic now. Like, dude, the hour after Kendrick Lamar came out, people were like, “Oh my god, it’s classic!”

You can’t know what’s classic for a while, that’s what makes it classic.

AB: It takes years!

Do you listen to music all day long, when you guys are sitting in the office?

AB: Yeah, all day.

Do you ever feel like it’s hard—if it’s the twelfth song somebody submitted that day—to stay fresh? To give something a real chance?

AB: I think at this point, you know who you like. This is my life, and I never get sick of listening to rap. Most of my friends that listen to rap have outgrown it. They’re not bumping [Gucci Mane’s] “Trap God 2.” They have kids.

Did the two of you do all of the work on your collaboration with Red Bull? To make that show happen?

AB: Yeah.

Was there anything in the process of bringing it to the fore that you didn’t expect? That was much more challenging than you thought it would be?

AB: Man, it’s tough. We’ve done rap concerts in the past, but not as hands-on. This is really the most hands-on booking—getting people in, and flights, and set lists, and running a show. But this went off without a hitch. It was great. I think when you have a budget things tend to go a lot better than when you’re asking people to do stuff for free, or for favors. When you have a budget and people are getting money, getting paid for it...

Everyone has a better time.

AB: Everyone has a better time. And you’re able to do more. You’re able to get this crazy lineup, and get [x][Chicago-based artist]/w] Hebru Brantley to do the artwork, and all these people involved. The energy was great and, we sold it out on a night when there was a winter storm. So that was good.

So you’ll try to do more stuff like that in the future?

AB: Yeah we’re going to be doing them all year. The next one is South by Southwest, which is March fourteenth. Our next one will probably be May or June, something like that.

How many nights a week are you out doing something related to Fake Shore versus coming home?

AB: It used to be a lot more. I’d say now we can kind of pick and choose what we go to. You know, we could pretty much go to any show that we want to.

For free?

AB: Yeah.

Damn.

AB: It’s cool.

(Jamie Kellos and Dan Reis)
John Walker

John Walker was a member of the Gangster Disciples for twenty years, from ages twelve to thirty-two. In 1999 he decided to quit and become an advocate against violence. In addition to his full-time job at Nison, he volunteers at Heartland Alliance, the UFC, the Urban League, and the South Suburban Council. He currently lives in Illinois with his wife, a correctional officer. He is in the process of writing an autobiography.

Can you talk about how you joined the Gangster Disciples?

Growing up in my community, as in most African-American communities in Chicago, gang life is prevalent. My friends, big brothers were all members. For us it was like a rite of passage to join this gang when we became older. It wasn't about shooting or killing back then, it was more about unity among friends within a neighborhood. Our primary objective at that time was to run our neighborhood, to keep outside forces from coming in our neighborhood to hurt people, rob people, victimize our neighborhood. So in a way we believed that we were policing our own neighborhood.

But the gang still committed crimes, didn't it?

Crime for the most part was done outside the community. We didn't victimize the people in our immediate community, because everybody knew everybody. You couldn't really do that. So the membership would always leave outside the community and steal cars, rob people, commit thefts—you know, jump the train and go downtown and go to the North Side. So the membership would always leave outside the community and steal cars, rob people, commit thefts—you know, jump the train and go downtown and go to the North Side.

Can you talk about how you rose up the ranks of the gang?

I first went to jail at seventeen years old. My crime of choice at that time was stealing cars. What happened was, going inside of a jail—gangs run jail, Okay? I got to prison in the summer of 1986, and I ultimately ended up going to Stateville Correctional Center, where Larry Hoover [the chairman of the Gangster Disciples] was incarcerated himself. This prison at the time was headquarters for the Gangster Disciples. Going back and forth within the justice system gave me the ability to show my loyalty to the gang leadership.

Can you talk about meeting Larry Hoover?

When I met Larry Hoover I was eighteen years old. I think that we formed a relationship based on the fact that I was different from the average gang member. I was the book guy. I could be caught in my cell, studying about various subjects. I read a lot in prison, I really got into my studies. I think this is what Larry Hoover was interested in, was members who were willing to learn and be educated, versus members that wanted to shoot and kill. They were looking for future leaders and I think I met the profile.

What books did you read in prison?

I started reading a lot of history books. I got into a lot of self-help books and books dealing with conspiracy theories, like “Behold a Pale Horse,” “The 48 Laws of Power,” “The Art of War.” Books that could really help me become more of a leader. One of the books that Larry Hoover personally put in my hand and requested that I read was a book called “Boys.” It was the biography of Richard Daley Sr. All the members were encouraged to read this book because it showed how Daley was a gang member when he was a kid, and he ultimately rose to become mayor of Chicago. I believe this is what Larry Hoover's long-term plan was. The six-pointed star that I have tattooed on my body is the symbol of the Gangster Disciples. In the original star, each point had a representation to it: love, life, loyalty, knowledge, wisdom, understanding. Well they ended up changing that, when the philosophy changed, to education, economics, politics, social development, organization, and unity. We were getting into politics, we began to vote. Some members of the organization actually ended up holding political office in Chicago. Larry Hoover ultimately came to the decision that we needed control, and the only way that we were going to get that control was through social development and politics. We had to become more like businessmen than thugs.

What was the appeal for you to rise up in the gang?

Respect, finances, money. In my community, the guys that drove the BMWs and the Mercedes were high-ranking gang members. They were tied into various illegal activities, I was willing to do whatever I had to do within the gang to get the lifestyle that I wanted. So my motivation to rise up in the gang was power and money. I wanted power and money.

How far up in the hierarchy did you get?

I made it to a governor. 1993 I walked out of Stateville Correctional Center. I was given the go-ahead to start up the Gangster Disciples in another city. I was told to go to another state and start up a branch of the gang up in another state. And I did that. I was made a city coordinator in the state. I was given a governor status just because I had the city. That was 1993. Memphis, Tennessee. I was entrusted to lead I'd say about 3000 people in the years 1993 and 1994. So it was my responsibility to make sure that whatever the gang wanted done was done in that city and that state, I made sure that it got done.

What did you focus on “getting done”?

Bottom line. Increase membership and finances.

Can you talk about the difference between gangs when you were a leader of the gang and gangs today?

When I was a member and a gang leader, law governed all. The laws of the organization and the policies that make this organization were within this booklet called “The New Concept.” You don't steal from another member. If you took the life of another Gangster Disciple, your life would be taken. That rule does not apply anymore. There are a lot of Gangster Disciples that are killing each other today, and there's nothing being said about it.

Those rules actually made us into men. You'd be surprised what the rules were. “No member shall disrespect any member or nonmember of the organization.” As a man or as a woman, because there are a lot of women in the Gangster Disciples as well, if you want people to respect you, you have to give them respect. The membership nowadays does not respect anybody. So that forty-six pages of “The New Concept,” it's really trash today, because nobody lives by it.

What made things change?

When I became a Gangster Disciple, it was about unity. It was about people who grew up with each other, hung out with each other, smoked a little weed together, parted together, stuff like that. When the drug market came out in the early to mid-eighties, people wanted money. That greed ultimately destroyed the organization.

When did you decide that you wanted to leave the gang?

1995, I was caught with a large amount of heroin. I went back in the same prison that I was in three years earlier. I began seeing the young men coming into prison with forty years, and their outlook was crazy. They didn't want to be told what to do, they didn't want rules, they didn't want to abide by the old regime. I stayed in prison from 1995 to 1999. Before I walked out, I made a decision that I was no longer going to be a part of the organization any more. I had been a member since 1979. It was 1999, and I wanted to do something else with my life. I told some of the leadership what I was gonna do with my life. “I'm going to be an advocate against violence.” And I was amazed at how so many other people were on the same page. They were tired too. I was encouraged to do what I'm doing now.

When you talk to kids today what do you tell them to convince them not to join gangs?

Basically I use my life and other people's lives as an example for them. Oftentimes what happens is, with kids today, they don't realize the severity of the acts that they commit. In rap music, they hear a lot about violence, shooting, and selling drugs, but they don't hear about the downside of all that stuff. They don't understand how bad some of this stuff is until they're hit with the consequences.

How do kids react when you talk to them?

Usually pretty good. I think I'm highly effective. I don't have a degree in counseling, but I'm able to reach these kids in a way the way real counselors can't. Kids see often times Caucasians and even some blacks as being disconnected from their generation. They don't think that [Caucasians] know what they go through every day. They're not speaking the same language that they're speaking. On the other hand, I am, I know what it's all about. It's about respect, it's about some money, it's about some power. That's all they want. If you give them that, they'll put guns down.

Hadiya Pendleton was your cousin. How did you feel when you heard the news that she was...
McDonalds, and I ended up working there for fourteen years. I was very successful there. The owner saw my potential and, within a year, I was a swing manager. Within two years I was a manager, within three, four years, I was a store manager, then after six years I was the supervisor of five stores.

I was in the process to get my own store, and that's when my son was born. He was born premature, and we had extremely high hospital bills, basically all my savings went to his medical care. And then I knew I couldn't afford to get my own store, so I got out of the [McDonald's] system. With my brother-in-law, my younger brother-in-law, actually now - I was able to buy this place. And it's been pretty successful. And more successful than I could have done with the other plan, I think. We're still here. What else can I tell you?

Who are your customers?

Mostly students, I would say fifty percent students, ten percent visitors, and the rest, forty percent, just regular people from the neighborhood. Actually, I have a lot of support from African-American Muslims, who are followers of Minister Farrakhan, most of the people from that mass come here after the mass, because most of them are vegetarian and, of course, they don't eat pork, so they love our place.

Has the restaurant always been such a success?

The first five years were very bad. Without the help of family members, we wouldn't have survived. Hyde Park is a very high rent area between rent and utilities. I still remember, I could barely survive when I first took over the business. I had only one employee and four from the family. Now I have nine employees and four of our family plus me. So now I have fourteen people who work here. It's a huge growth. In just about every newspaper, I've been written about. It really helps. You know, I was in the first-ever issue of the Red-Eye.

What do you like to cook? How did you develop your dishes?

Now I oversee everything, but I can cook everything as well. Every single recipe is mine. All the vegetarian options I learned from my mom. She was very strict when I was growing up so I had to study in the kitchen. So I would see what she was doing, and that's how I learned what to do. The meat options, I learned from the books, but of course, I have made my own changes over time. My favorite to prepare is butter chicken. My favorite to eat is butter chicken, so I guess that's why I like to make that. If I go to any Indian restaurant, that's the only thing I eat: butter chicken and naan. I've always been very fond of butter chicken. This really is a labor of love. I am here seven days a week, fourteen hours a day even single day, 363 days a year. No vacation, no day off. Basically all family members work with me, but not all of them, all of the time. My wife use to be with me here, but now she does very small part-time (shift); We give a very good personalized service to all our customers. The health department loves us... I even do catering for the health department.

Any other interesting catering requests?

Well, I have done one student wedding. It happened in Uda Noyes. It was an Indian girl and a white guy. They used to come in here all the time. The funny thing was, they were so against the Styrofoam I use, so they brought in their own plates. You know, I wish I could change those things. The other options are too expensive.

What do you wish people knew about you and your food?

Sometimes people don't believe I am from Africa—I don't why. I don't know what is so unusual for an Indian person to be from Africa! There are so many Indians in Africa, especially in Africa. So what am I supposed to do, oh! Carry a birth certificate with me?

Hmm, another thing I want to talk is people that is typically soul food has ham products – our greens, as a matter of fact, are vegan. We used to use animal products, that's how we were trained to make things in this business. Customers kept asking and we listened. We have vegan and vegetarian options. We only serve lamb, fish, and chicken. No beef, no pork, no byproducts of those [animals].

Tell me about the postcards on the wall?

Those are mostly from UofC students. They are missing the sanosias, the mango lassis. We always treated some of those students like family, you know. Actually a lot of students have come to my house for parties! I used to throw a lot of parties, not anymore, but I did.

What about the acharbat (incense) by the cash register?

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Trushar Patel

Trushar Patel is Hyde Park's resident master of mutter paneer and collard greens, proprietor of our favorite vegetarian cambo, and the top vendor in the South Side's underground incense market. On a Sunday afternoon, he sat down for a minute during his busy schedule to tell us about his role in the neighborhood's most interesting marriage: the combination of Soul and South Asian cuisine. Trushar Patel's Rajun Cajun has been serving up curries and comfort food for twenty-two years.

How did Rajun Cajun start?

Well I've been living here for twenty-two years. We knew that there was no Indian restaurateur in Hyde Park, so we decided to open one in Hyde Park. I used to live in the North Side before, but for the past fifteen years, I've been in Hyde Park. This used to be a Cajun restaurant. When I came here and I bought the place, we were going to phase out everything of the Cajun part, but it was a very new business, and also a very run-down business when I bought it. So we decided to keep some soul food items in particular. Because, you know, Cajun food has beef and pork and alligator and crawfish and all that stuff – we got rid of all those things.

Do you think soul goes well with Indian food? Do first-time customers get the concept? Not necessarily. But with the neighborhood, it goes well. I just kept it. It was working. What were you doing before Rajun Cajun? Tell me your story.

I was born in Africa, in Nairobi, and I went to school in India, and then to college in India also. My background is in Industrial Electrical Engineering, I came here [the United States] in seventy-eight and I couldn't find a job, I would have had to take two to three more years of courses to work, but of course, I didn't have any money. Three months here, with no job, I just thought okay, I need to get a job. Then I said, take whatever comes. I applied to

Mcdonalds, and I ended up working there for fourteen years. I was very successful there. The owner saw my potential and, within a year, I was a swing manager. Within two years I was a manager, within three, four years, I was a store manager, then after six years I was the supervisor of five stores.

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The agarbatti is sold there because I still pray, every morning, and in the evening also. We used to bum incense cone here and people started asking about it, and now it have like fifty, sixty different varieties of agarbattis here. They sell a lot. Matter of fact, I buy some non-com- mercial versions in India, wholesale, which is a very good, high quality incense. Also, very high end, three hundred rupees just for one packet; That’s a lot of money, just for twenty- five sticks of agarbatti. Mostly African-Americans buy it. Some white people... but mostly African-Americans.

Actually it’s a huge market here in Hyde Park for agarbatti. We’re not the only one who is sell- ing it. There is a food hall there [points down 50th street] that sells, the corner cigar store sells, I am selling it. There is a bookstore on Harper that sells, there is the dollar store that sells...it’s a huge market. For agarbatti, of course, they all don’t have very good quality.

Who picks the music?

I have always loved music. Of course, my wife was getting mad at me since I have about five thousand CDs—all Indian. From old, to new, to classical, to hip-hop, to chhenga, to every- thing. You name me a song, I can get you a song. Nothing is downloaded, I bought every single song, I have boxes and boxes of them. So, now, I’ve converted them all into MP3s, to compress it down. So I just put in one CD in the morning, which is prayers. In the morning, I always put in prayers, which lasts about five hours. Every single God’s prayers is one CD—

Do you take requests?

No.

Do you have any vinites for Rajun Cajun?

Well, now that the University has bought this building and they are my landlord, I can now redo my storefront. I’ve been wanting to put in new glass here, but haven’t been able to.

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I wish I could do that. If I do anything else it would have to be only in Hyde Park. You know, I have love for this place. I love this place. So, do you really say the name of this restaurant?

Well, it should be Raw-jan Cajun. It’s not Rape-un Cajun. But we just go with the flow, whatever the customer wants to say is fine [laughs]. At least it would sound somewhat Indian, we thought.

You know students call it Rape?

Oh, I do too. 

(Nandini Ramakrishnan)

Wine In the Wilderness and Florence

The eta Creative Arts Foundation presents two plays by groundbreaking African American playwright Alice Children. Both plays are elegiac, and birth out social and political injustice at the roots of their conflicts between characters. “In Florence” we meet two women, one black and one white, in a sepa- rated late 1940s, warring room. Set during the race riots of Harlem, “Wine In the Wilderness” follows a successful black man as he paints a black woman whose class level he downplays beneath his own. For viewers compelled by topics of race and class, the tension here is intense but has to have its release. If you see either—that is, the conflicts of race and class, or the link between these two seemingly unrelated sets of act—let’s know, via Creative Arts 4th Foundation 5709 S. Chicago Ave. Through March 9. Saturday-Sunday, 3pm. $15; students $10. (773) 328-8803.

Proof at Court Theatre

As the daughter of one of the most brilliant mathematicians at the University of Chicago, Catherine is still attempting to understand life beyond controlling for her mentally ill father. Upon the death of her father, the appearance of the Hal (her father’s former graduate student), and Hal’s discovery of a precedent-setting mathematical proof, Catherine is forced to grapple with the authorship of the original proof. Her increasingly romantic relationship with Hal challenges Catherine’s desire to look for answers to the questions of life, love, and death—trapped in her father’s mathematical obsession and mentalism. Proof at Court Theatre, 5353 S. French Ave., Chicago, IL 60637. March 9 through April 24. Thursday, Friday, Sunday, 7:30pm; Saturday, 2pm and 7:30pm. $47.50, $34.50, $21.50. etacourttheatre.org (Chris Deaver)

Patrick Leow, Josh Kovensky, Zachary Goldhammer, Hannah Soliday from Chicago playing over clips from local Chicago glitch electronics and live video-camera manipulation; Jason Vermette jamming over some scenes of aerial-flyovers in Hawaii. Bil has been active since the early eighties, and his music career became an outlet for exploring the evolving, self-cent- ered process. With his band, he integrates these various sources with his mellower harmonies and soothing vocals. If you solve either—that is, the conflicts of race and class, or the link between these two seemingly unrelated sets of act—let’s know, via Creative Arts 4th Foundation 5709 S. Chicago Ave. Through March 9. Saturday-Sunday, 3pm. $15; students $10. (773) 328-8803.

Extended Dissent is no long goodbye

Store presents a political collaboration of Little and Dave Richards. Then fresh takes on modular compositions related to different stage acts Maggie Brown. Through her queen personas and textiles, while Richards’ voice comes out in pieces of a sleepyhead in sight. The opening duo bursts with manic masses. There will likely be an all-ages audience equally pum ped.

for hardcore punk lovers. The rest of the lineup, all Chicago- based, should keep the all-ages audience equally pum ped. For those extra-sophisticated and appreciative seeking more flair, enjoy a saliva burned lover by Smol (3/23 26th 2nd floor). Toronto February 22, 7:30pm. (773) 643-4909. paul-is-slow.info (Seunghee Han)

Assistant Saws Magician in Half

It’s just a trick of the light. Though the works of George Blaustein and Susan Siwak appear to your fix while leaving your own living space undis- turbed. You’ll have to travel over to 25th Street, where New Jersey’s Katrina presents a headlining good-timey good time to your favorite music scene. The rest of the lineup, all Chicago- based, should keep the all-ages audience equally pum ped. For those extra-sophisticated and appreciative seeking more flair, enjoy a saliva burned lover by Smol (3/23 26th 2nd floor). Toronto February 22, 7:30pm. (773) 643-4909. paul-is-slow.info (Seunghee Han)

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