ALICIA KEYS

Goes From Spark to Fire **By Zachary Woolfe**

Challenge
Turn a catchy phrase into a hit.

Inspiration
Make some noise until you find the sound that's right.

Photographs by Peter Hapak *Alicia Keys in her studio in August.*

ALICIA KEYS GOT the spark for the title track of her new album at a very meta-moment: while reading about herself. "It came from this interview that I did, and the woman wrote something like, 'She's like a girl on fire,'" Keys said recently at her studio. "And I was like: I love that. And I remember thinking, I'm writing a song called 'Girl on Fire' for sure."

The next question was, as she put it: What does a song called "Girl on Fire" sound like?

It might seem an obvious thing to consider, but figuring out the sounds that complement your ideas is one of the most important decisions in music. In the wake of her last album, "The Element of Freedom," in 2009 — which made its debut at No. 2 on the Billboard 200 chart and failed to make No. 1, a first for Keys — and given the fact that she was a new mother, she decided to take it slowly while working on new material, listening to some of the songs that inspire her. "I'd come in and listen to music," she said. "I was listening to some Frank Ocean, definitely some old stuff, like Nina Simone. Just whatever I thought on the day — an easy vibe, not to put too much pressure on it. And then maybe I had a rough idea, maybe something I'd started, or I'd write a little bit, or if I had an idea I'd put the idea down. Maybe it was just piano, and I'd sing some vocals for it, just see if I liked it."

One day, she was in the studio with two collaborators, the producers Jeff Bhasker and Salaam Remi, and she brought up the "Girl on Fire" concept. Together they tried different chords and melodies, but nothing struck her as quite right. "They just didn't spark anything," she said.

Then Remi, who has made hits for the Fugees and Amy Winehouse, moved to the computer. "He started going through his sample library and all these different crazy drums. And there were these loud, obnoxious, just destructive drums, and I was like, Yeah! A girl on fire is loud and obnoxious and destructive and just, like, totally unrelenting and she's free, you know what I mean?" She'd found her sound; now she could start her song. "That's what a girl on fire sounds like."

FOR KEYS, THE search for songs started way back when she was 7, living with her mother in a tiny apartment on the West Side of Manhattan and singing "I Wanna Dance With Somebody" in the mirror. When friends of the family were giving away a piano — it wasn't much, just a wood upright from the '30s — they asked Keys's mom if she'd like to have it. She took it, and Alicia started to play.

"When I was first learning songs, I'd have a favorite song, and I'd take the chords and twist them around," she said. "I'd learn the chords and then play them backward. That was my first experimenting with writing a song."

More than 20 years and four albums later — with the fifth, "Girl on Fire," set to be released Nov. 27 — her method isn't all that different. You can see it even when Keys is just warming up at the piano in her studio, a neat and airy space in New York that houses several vintage keyboards and offers expansive views over the city. She still gets ready to perform by moving through slow progressions and mutations of the chords, feeling her way toward the song.

After that initial breakthrough with the "Girl on Fire" drum samples, she wrote the song with unusual swiftness. All three collaborators started throwing out bits of melody and lyrics: "She's got both feet on the ground and she's burnin' it down." The song came together in a few hours. All that was left to do were some tweaks and to find a bridge.

The "Girl on Fire" lyrics are characteristically Keys, evocative but unspecific. You might imagine the girl-power message nods to Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of "The Hunger Games," who appears in a key scene wearing a gown of flames, but "Girl on Fire" also speaks to Keys's life, which has changed recently with marriage and a new son, Egypt. In her lyrics, her aim is to be personal while stopping shy of confessional, a technique she learned from listening to Marvin Gaye. "As a lyricist you love to hear other great lyrics or other great concepts," she told me. "I really appreciate Frank Ocean's lyrical style, I appreciate the way that he can kind of draw you into this personal space, but it's still lyrical. It's almost poetic, in a way, but it's very personal at the same time."

On a recent late-summer day at her studio, she kicked into a rendition of the finished song. "She's just a girl and she's on fire: hotter than a fantasy, lonely like a highway." The melody recalls some of the easy attitude of Pink's hit "Just Like a Pill" — the kind of punkish, rockish track that marks a departure for Keys from her calmer, more self-possessed songs in the early 2000s. But like Keys's past work, the new material has a recognizable backbone of classic soul and R&B. And the simmering emotions of songs like the quiet, longing ballad "101" have their origins in lots of listens to Prince's smoldering "Beautiful Ones" and Stevie Wonder's moody "They Won't Go When I Go."

"I wouldn't listen to it for lyric inspiration," she said of the Wonder track, "but it's more for the tone, for the sound of the vocal, for the way the piano feels and how he's delivering it. It's dark and vulnerable but still beautiful and inspiring."

Her new music is also plainly conscious of current trends. While the meat of the album — including the track "Not Even the King" — is recognizably Keys, piano-driven and stylishly smooth, the defining moments are more unexpected. The first song released from "Girl on Fire," in June, was the raucous anthem "New Day," which combines the aggressive percussion of Beyoncé's "Run the World (Girls)," with Rihanna's island flavor and pepper-shot syllables ("celebrate and say hey-ay-ay-ay-ay-ay-ay-ay-ay"). Keys's voice has become ever so slightly huskier in the 11 years since "Songs in A Minor" and its lead single, "Fallin'," made her a superstar. "Girl on Fire," with its belted high notes and exposed, soaring chorus, keeps pushing her up against the limits of her range.

Halfway through the song, she laughs. "What I'm gonna ask myself is why I wrote this song so high," she said. " 'Cause I didn't even get to the chorus yet, and I'm asking myself what made me write this song so high?"

The challenges pay off in impact. On Sept. 6, the song made its debut at the MTV Video Music Awards. Keys stood at the keyboard in a slinky top and skintight pants and pounded out "Girl on Fire." Nicki Minaj rapped a verse, and Gabby Douglas, the Olympic gold medalist, did handsprings backward and forward, smiling broadly.

The performance was posted to YouTube, where someone wrote a comment that might well have come from Keys herself: "this song (to me) is about any girl with confidence despite the trials and tribulations she may endure. so yea it could be about someone as real as Gabby or a fictional character named Katniss or it could be about YOU." ◆

The Alicia Keys Inspiration Playlist

"We All Try," by **Frank Ocean**

"Hold On," by **Alabama Shakes**

"Sabali," by **Amadou + Mariam**

"The Beautiful Ones," by **Prince**

"Sinnerman," by **Nina Simone**

"In Rainbows," by **Radiohead**

"For Emma, Forever Ago," by **Bon Iver**

"Let it Die," by **Feist**

HOT SONG Alicia Keys talks about and performs her new track, "Girl on Fire." *nytimes.com/magazine*

GREAT MOMENTS IN INSPIRATION

Interviews by Jessica Gross

ANTHONY BOURDAIN

Chef/Author
"Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly"

"It was as a young man entering my teenage years, **picking up Rolling Stone magazine and reading the first Hunter Thompson article of what would later become 'Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.'** For me, that was an electrifying moment that changed how I looked at the world. When you're an insecure, reasonably neurotic, postpubescent young man entering high school, the Thompson character was a comforting one. But I think in the end Thompson was also an important cautionary tale, because when I finally did have success with a book, I had only to look at my original hero to see the perils of playing the part. He was stuck playing the Raoul Duke character for the rest of his life."

JOE FRANK

Radio Host
"Joe Frank: Work in Progress"

"I was always drawn to absurd comedy whose purpose was to confound the listener's expectations. In one instance, when I was live on the radio at WBAI, I invited one of my actor friends to make a mock appearance as a mime on tour in the U.S. I introduced him by promoting his upcoming performance that weekend at Carnegie Hall. After a rather serious and academic discussion about the history and aesthetics of mime, I asked him if he might perform a piece from his upcoming show. **What followed was roughly 30 seconds of silence — an eternity in radio terms. The response was memorable.** Some listeners angrily called to complain about the stupidity of having a mime perform on the radio. Others thought it was one of the funniest things they ever heard."

LUPE FIASCO

Rapper
"Food & Liquor II: The Great American Rap Album Pt. 1"

"I remember watching 'The Benny Goodman Story' on TV, and I was like, **'Oh, man, I want to play the clarinet.' It was that direct, like, 'I want to learn how to play the clarinet so I can play jazz and be like Benny Goodman.'** I think I picked up the recorder, or something that was supereasy to play, and I remember playing that for a little bit and was just kind of like, 'Aw, man, I'm never going to be like Benny Goodman.' But that experience was my first thing into, 'I want to make music.' And then it went off into, 'Well I can't do that, but I can rap.'"

ADRIAN TOMINE

Cartoonist
"Optic Nerve"; "Sleepwalk and Other Stories"

"I think one of the things that stood out for me was when I was 14 or 15 and **I had made a really horrifically embarrassing, ill-advised attempt at asking a girl out, and it went as badly as could be imagined. I still, to this day, cringe when I think back on it. The whole thing played out so strangely that I went home that night and in my little sketchbook basically drew a comic book about those events.** And I don't think I intended this, but what ended up happening was it sort of slightly reduced the deep sense of shame and mortification that I was feeling by somehow putting it down on paper. I think it was also a useful way to spend my time rather than jumping off a ledge or something. And to me that's basically the same creative process I go through with all my stories today."

CARRIE BROWNSTEIN

Musician/Actress
Guitarist/vocalist for Wild Flag; co-creator of "Portlandia"

"It's actually **the footage of Nina Simone performing live at Montreux in 1976** — when I watch that, it's like I never want to sit down again. I never want to do anything that doesn't involve hunger and ache. You feel like you never want to be complacent or smug or entitled, and you want to ask and demand — not only of yourself but of the audience — to try harder, to feel more, to be bolder, to participate."

CHINUA ACHEBE

Author
"Things Fall Apart"; "There Was a Country"

"I decided to write for children as a matter of urgency and necessity. I first noticed there was a problem when I had my first child, Chinelo, and went to the bookshops to buy bedtime stories for her. This was soon after Nigeria's independence from Great Britain. The books about Africa for children were, to put it mildly, not appropriate. So I decided that if I did not like the content of the children's books, I would write my own. Now, around the same time, my friend Christopher Okigbo — Africa's greatest modern poet — was the Cambridge University Press's representative for the entire West African region. **He then came to me and said, 'Chinua, you must write a children's book.' It wasn't something I was planning to get done immediately, but Okigbo gave it an urgency.** We were both concerned that African literature for children, as it was formulated up to that point, had numerous stories in our oral tradition but nothing in published form, so I, too, understood that there was work ahead of us to do, and quickly!"

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JENNY MÖRTSELL

JUNOT DÍAZ

Hates Writing Short Stories **By Sam Anderson**

Challenge
Create a perfect story. Nine times.

Inspiration
Be receptive to everything, except your inner critic.

EVERY WRITER IS cursed or blessed with a unique creative metabolism: the distinctive speed and efficiency with which he or she converts the raw fuel of life into the mystical, dancing blue smoke of art. Junot Díaz's metabolism is notoriously slow. His fuel just sits there, and sits there, and maybe every once in a while gives off a tiny ribbon of damp smoke, until you start to worry that it all got rained on and ruined — and then, 5 or 10 years later, it suddenly explodes into one of the most mesmerizing fires anyone can remember.

Díaz's new story collection, "This Is How You Lose Her," is his first book in five years and only his third book over all. It is, like the other two, excellent.

In hopes of peeking into his artistic boiler room, I asked Díaz if he would mind bringing along to our interview a few artifacts of writerly inspiration — a lucky pencil, maybe, or some druid crystals — whatever he keeps handy to defeat all the little hobgoblins that try to drive him crazy every time he sits down to write. Díaz arrived walking stiffly — he had major back surgery just a few weeks before — and carrying a fat folder of material pinned under one arm. This turned out to contain a wide variety of documents. There was a small black-and-white photo of his father in a fascist uniform, the discovery of which, Díaz said, inspired "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao." There was a bleak photo of the New Jersey steel mill at which Díaz worked during college, a job about which he has tried, but failed, many times to write. There was a photo of his parents posing proudly next to a giant bull. There were newspaper clippings about the "dirty war" in Argentina, a subject that has haunted Díaz since childhood. There were folded-up pieces of scrap paper from his back pocket that he had used to capture ideas as he walked down the street. There were notebooks from the writing of "Oscar Wao," filled with very tall handwriting leaning hard to the right.

As Díaz pulled out one document after another, I got the sense that, if only he could have carried a big-enough folder — maybe one the size of a couple of continents — he would have packed in just about everything he has ever seen or heard or (especially) read: libraries of fan fiction, rusty knives, third-world crowds, petroglyphs, secret police. His work is defined by this kind of radical inclusiveness — the language of drug dealers and Tolkien dorks; the problems of destitute Dominican women and their more privileged American sons. This receptivity to all the possible sources of inspiration is what makes Díaz's work both so distinctively rich and, it seems to me, so difficult for him to write. It's like trying to distill the ocean down to a glass of water.

"This Is How You Lose Her" is a catalog of wrecked love affairs, multilingual violence, unsatisfying labor and stranded children. It takes place in a floating world between the Dominican Republic and the Eastern Seaboard, between Spanish and English, between the novel and the short story. After much confusion and struggle, the book ends with a moment of inspiration: the narrator, after years of blockage, begins to write a book that he thinks of as (to quote the final story's title) "The Cheater's Guide to Love." It's a book that promises to be almost exactly like "This Is How You Lose Her." And so Díaz's process becomes the product itself.

A few weeks before the book's publication, Díaz and I stood at a Midtown bar for a couple of hours — his back made it hard for him to sit — and talked about writing well, writing badly and the mysterious (but always, he insisted, clear) difference between the two. What follows is a condensed version of our conversation, edited lightly for clarity and with all of Díaz's frequent swearwords removed. *(Continued on Page 28)*

JUNOT DÍAZ

What was your plan for this new collection? I wanted to capture this sort of cheater's progress, where this guy eventually discovers for the first time the beginning of an ethical imagination. Which of course involves the ability to imagine women as human.

So you had your conceptual framework. How did the writing go? Miserable. Miserable. The stories just wouldn't come.

How many stories did you generate in total? I'll tell you what, I can name the stories for "The Cheater's Guide to Love" before "The Cheater's Guide to Love" came. There's a story called "Primo" that was supposed to be at the end of the book — that was a miserable botch. I spent six months on that, and it never came together. There was a story called "Santo Domingo Confidential" that was trying to be the final story, that I spent a year on. I must have written a hundred pages. It was another farrago of nonsense. I wrote a summer story where the kid gets sent to the Dominican Republic while his brother is dying of cancer; he gets sent because his mom can't take care of him. It was a story I called "Confessions of a Teenage Sanky-Panky," which was even worse than all the other ones put together. And that was another 50-page botch.

That must be tough. That's why I never want to do this again. It's like you spend 16 years chefing in the kitchen, and all that's left is an amuse-bouche.

There's a classic bit of creative-writing-class advice that tells us we need to learn to turn off our internal editors. I've never understood how to unbraid the critical and the creative. How do you manage that? You've raised one of the thorniest dialectics of working, which is that you need your critical self: without it you can't write, but in fact the critical self is what's got both feet on the brakes of your process. My thing is, I'm just way too harsh. It's an enormous impediment, and that's just the truth of it. It doesn't make me any better, make me any worse, it certainly isn't more valorous. I have a character defect, man.

So turn on your harsh paternalistic, militaristic critic — It's my dad.

O.K., invite your dad in: I want to hear his review of Junot Díaz the bad writer. What is wrong with that stuff? What are the mistakes you make? First of all, nonsense characterization. The dullest, wet-noodle characteristics and behaviors and thoughts and interests are ascribed to the characters. These 80-year-old, left-in-the-sun newspaper-brittle conflicts — where the conflicts are so ridiculously subatomic that you have to summon all the key members of CERN to detect where the conflict in this piece is. It just goes on, man. You know, I force it, and by forcing it, I lose everything that's interesting about my work. What's interesting about my work, for me — not for anyone else; God knows, I can't speak for that — what's interesting in my work is the way that when I am playing full out, when I am just feeling relaxed and I'm playing, and all my faculties are firing, but only just to play. Not to get a date, not because I want someone to hug me, not because I want anyone to read it. Just to play.

So you're a slow writer. Are you a fast reader? My one superpower. I read a book a week, man. And I don't have a great memory, but I have a good memory about what I read.

How do you balance the reading and the writing? I'm old enough and experienced enough to know when I'm reading to avoid. And then you gotta get back to work. And I also know — you get old enough, you know when you're forcing the writing, so you need to go hit the books.

How strategic are you in picking what you're going to read at any given moment? Some of it is strategic: O.K., I'm writing about a family, so I'll go read this because I know there's some family stuff. But there's always gotta be room for stuff to flow in. It's like "The Ice Storm," by Rick Moody. I was writing "Oscar Wao," a book about Dominicans and craziness, I was reading these history books and ethnic-studies books — but "The Ice Storm" kind of fell on my lap and gave me the idea for the deep structure of the book, which was to pattern the characters on the Fantastic Four. It fell on my lap. I wasn't looking for "The Ice Storm," dude.

Are there short-story collections that you consider touchstones? No question. There's the given, the monumental "Jesus' Son." If you could go back in time to the way people dropped the ball on certain books, "Jesus' Son" was a book that should have been like Pulitzer-everything. There's a book called "Family Installments," by Edward Rivera. It's a memoir in 13 stories. Michael Martone wrote a series of short-story collections, and no one reads them anymore. "Fort Wayne Is Seventh on Hitler's List" is one of the great all-time American short-story collections. Hilarious.

Were there any books that were particularly important in putting the new collection together? Sure. *[Díaz picks up my copy of his book and looks at the table of contents.]* Take "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars." It was always the "go on vacation" story — the disaster vacation. Matt Klam is a great short-story writer, and he had a wonderful story about a couple going on vacation. In my mind, "Sam the Cat," by Matt Klam, was always connected to this. Beth Nugent wrote a short-story collection called "City of Boys," and halfway through reading it, I said, "Screw this," and started writing "Nilda." It was for me an invitation.

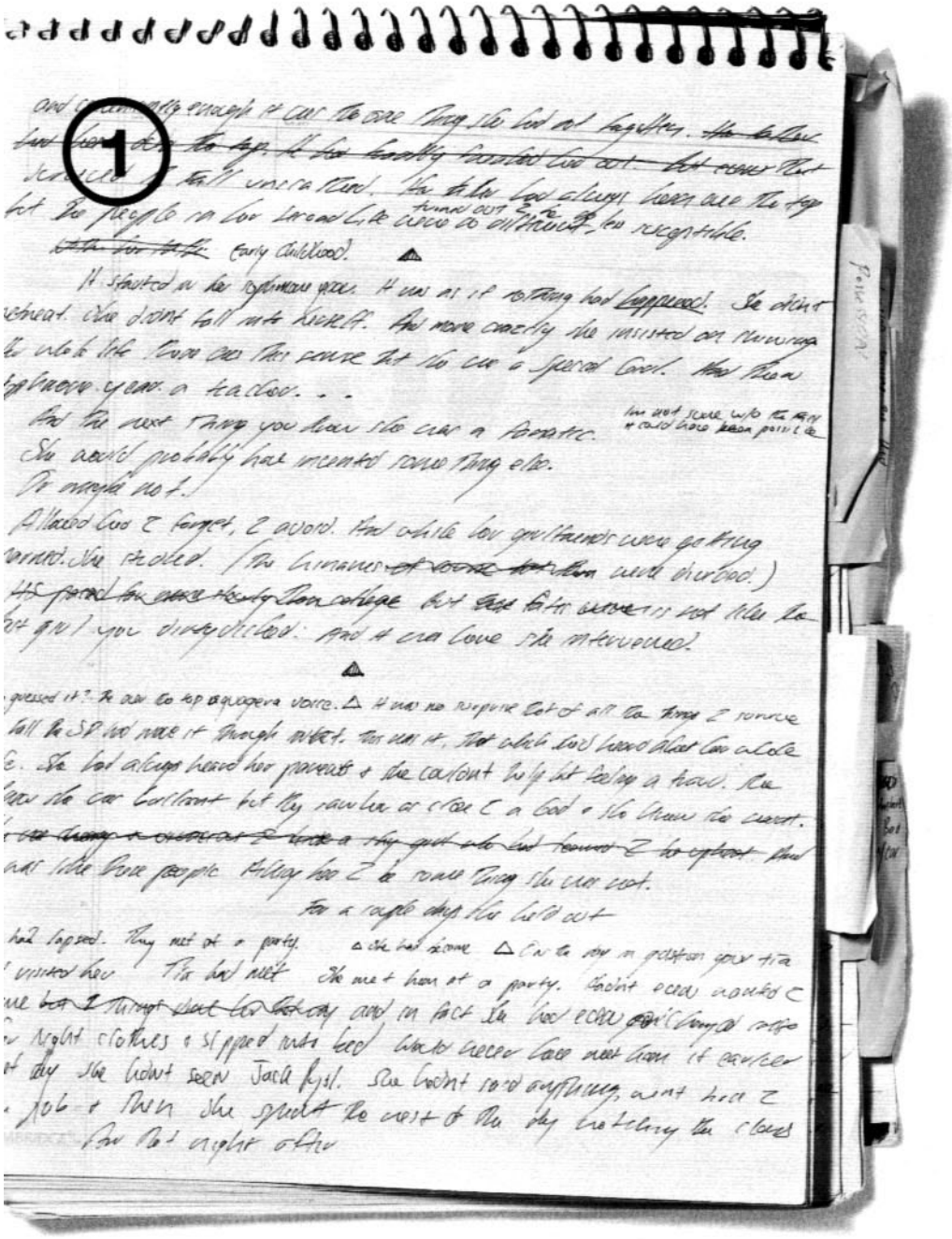
I gotta tell you, the person who does working people the best, working Latinos, is Dagoberto Gilb. His collection, "The Magic of Blood," had all these amazing stories about recent immigrants, Mexicans, trying to keep it together with these crazy jobs.

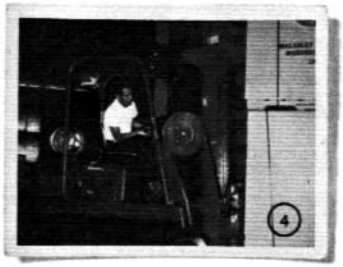
What is your book-storage situation? Are you overrun with books? I have three storage units, and that's no lie. Three storage units. All books.

So "The Cheater's Guide to Love" was the hardest story to write. There's no question, "The Cheater's Guide to Love" was the beast. This thing almost killed me.

Did any of the stories come easily? "Miss Lora" was the absolute easiest. I tried to write the first page maybe a dozen times in the last decade, and I would never get past that, so I never wrestled with it too much. And then one day it just hit, beginning to end.

That must have been a good day. It was the only good day I had in this whole book. The thing is, you try your best, and what else you got? You try your best, really, that's all you can do. And for me, my best happens really so rarely. I was so always heartened by people like Michael Chabon who write so well and seem to write so fast. Edwidge Danticat writes really well and really fast. I was always heartened by them. I keep thinking one day it'll happen. It might. ◆





From the Díaz Files

1. A page from Díaz's "Oscar Wao" notebook.

2. "This is an interesting story. It was about a young African-American kid who, messing around in a high-school gym, ends up a paraplegic. He was obsessed with superheroes, martial arts — this whole comic-book universe. I didn't know how to take Oscar's love of comics, of fantasy, and make it the whole book. This reminded me of how much people can love something like that — that it can become a life, it can become a universe."

3. Díaz's parents in the Dominican Republic. "My father's from the part of the country where they're superproud of their cattle. That photograph really spoke of the value system of the Cibao that my father participated in: these real tough characters and their love of bulls, this masculine icon."

4. Díaz's father at work in Elizabeth, N.J.

5. "This sent me into 'Oscar Wao' — discovering this photo. That's my dad. My dad was a total pro-Trujillo lunatic. And how happy and normalized this was, you know, to go get your picture taken. And yet that was the uniform of terror. He was so proud of it. He's a baby here, about 19. At his age, I was delivering pool tables and reading Granta. And he could have been torturing people. I handled this again and again and again for 'Oscar Wao.'"

GREAT MOMENTS IN INSPIRATION, PART II

Interviews by Jessica Gross

SIMON RICH

Author/Comedy Writer
"Last Girlfriend on Earth: And Other Love Stories"

"I've always been an obsessive New York Knicks fan, and John Starks is the closest thing to a messianic figure that I've ever known. It's hard to overstate it, how much I loved watching him play. Starks set the Knicks record for most career 3-pointers and most career 3-point attempts, and **the lesson I took from him is that if you shoot enough 3's, some will eventually somehow go in. I've always been a quantity-over-quality kind of guy.** I've thrown out a few terrible novels, I've thrown out two whole collections of short stories, I have hundreds of comedy pieces that are terrible that will never see the light of day. My feeling is I can't really control how talented I am, but I can control how many hours I work and how many things I write."

LAUREN ANNE MILLER

Actress
"50/50"; "For a Good Time, Call . . ."

"I was 19, and I was on a Birthright Israel trip. I became friends with this boy, and one night we took a walk around Jerusalem, and we ended up sitting on this bench, kind of high up, overlooking — I mean, it really sounds fake, the way I'm describing it. We got into one of those conversations that 19-year-olds can get into — **and ended up having what I feel like was my very first real, true, superhonest conversation with a stranger, where I revealed thoughts and feelings about myself and dreams that I had.** It was in that moment that I decided I wasn't going to go to fashion-design school anymore, that I was going to finish the semester and leave and go to film school. I think it took that moment of being in a completely foreign place, with someone who didn't know me, to give myself the permission to say, 'No, this is what I need.'"

KEN BURNS

Filmmaker
"The Civil War"; "The Dust Bowl"

"When I was working on my very first film, 'Brooklyn Bridge,' I had before me, on an easel of our own design, the photos of the construction of the bridge. It was very low-tech. **We had a couple of umbrella lights, and we had this piece of metal onto which we'd affix, with magnets, the photos of whatever archive we were at, and I'd move my camera back and forth over the photo to get a detail.** Each photo, I might take 10 different shots — pans, tilts, reveals — all filmed with a movie camera. I remember realizing early in the process that I had to listen to the photos, not just see them. Are the waves of the East River lapping? Are the workers hammering? I can remember not wanting to break the spell, not wanting to move my eye from the eyepiece, but to live in that world. It gave me a kind of key to unlock what has been, for the past 35 years, the way I've tried to wake the dead."

AMY HECKERLING

Writer/Director
"Clueless"; "Look Who's Talking"; "Vamps"

"I do remember exactly the moment that 'Look Who's Talking' came to me. My baby was a couple of months old, and she was sitting in one of those baby seats on the table. My husband at the time and I were looking at her and putting dialogue into what we thought she was thinking. **And at that moment, I said, 'Oh, no, this is my next movie.'** It's like, I know this is a gimmick that will work, and it's not even my taste in movies, but I knew I had to do it. It was like, 'I'm almost disappointed now I have to be doing this.'"

DANIEL CLOWES

Cartoonist
"Eightball"; "Ghost World"; "Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron"

"I didn't really listen to the Kinks growing up at all — I was just vaguely aware of them, like everybody else — so when I was in my mid-20s I bought a couple of their records, just on a whim, and got sort of obsessed with them. There was something that they did in their work, or that Ray Davies did in his songwriting, that I wanted to apply to my comics, which was to have this pop exterior to his work **— the surface seemed like they were sort of simple pop songs, like you could hear on AM radio — and yet underneath that was a very profound, idiosyncratic vision.** I liked the juxtaposition: where he was sort of this dandyish pop star on one level and yet this seemingly very lonely, troubled man on the inside. That was just something I was drawn to, and he came closer to doing that than any cartoonist I can really think of."

LUPE FIASCO

(Bonus inspiration!)

Rapper
"Food & Liquor II: The Great American Rap Album Pt. I"

"When you get to the bottom of a box of Kleenex, the Kleenex turns pink or peach to let you know that it's the end. You got five sheets left, so whatever you need to get done. So I'll come up with a line of: 'Time's running out/My Kleenex is turning peach.' It may not be in the next rap that I write, it may not be in the next 10 raps, but it's definitely going into the Use Me Later file. Using the metaphors — 'Time is running out, things are gettin' low, my napkins are turning pink' or 'My napkins are turning peach.' That will be a line in a Lupe Fiasco rap soon. And that's how it starts. That's that quick moment of inspiration — 'Aw, man, these napkins are turning peach, time's running out' — then it's a metaphor, in a rap, on the radio."

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JENNY MÖRTSELL

EMMA STRAUB

Becomes a Movie Star **By Samantha Henig**

Challenge
Convincingly inhabit the mind of a Hollywood diva.

Inspiration
Borrow someone else's life. But not too much.

IN DECEMBER 2009, Emma Straub came across The New York Times's obituary for Jennifer Jones, a film star from the 1940s and '50s who was known for her rocky relationships and her struggles with depression. "I had never heard of her, and I had never seen any of her movies, but I read it and I was like, 'There's a novel,'" Straub says. She was working on another book idea, but she was haunted by Jones's story. "I just kept coming back to the idea of this woman's life. This woman who made the decision to become a movie star."

Jones's life story was far from the world that was familiar to Straub, a New York City native (and daughter of the novelist Peter Straub) whose closest brush with Hollywood was a cameo in "The Squid and the Whale" (you can see her profile as she files out of a classroom). Her previous book, "Other People We Married," a collection of short stories, "was very much about my universe," she says. "And I was so sick of that. For two years you could not have paid me a million dollars to read a book about a 20-something woman in New York City. I felt like I was disgusted by it — just like, 'Get it all away from me!' I was just swimming in it."

So she started plotting out a new novel about a world-famous movie star, titled "Laura Lamont's Life in Pictures." She drew on Jones's life story to construct her title character's narrative: both Jones and Lamont were born in Middle America, spent childhood summers working at their parents' theater companies, married aspiring actors, had two children and were discovered by powerful movie producers, who christened them, on first meeting, with their movie-star names. (Phylis Lee Isley became Jennifer Jones; Elsa Emerson was reborn as Laura Lamont.) Each of these women — one real, one fictional — found herself trapped on someone else's path, following a man who essentially created her public persona for her.

Once she started writing, though, Straub avoided returning to Jones's obituary. She didn't watch any of Jones's movies. She knew that she had to let Lamont take shape as her own character.

Recently Straub was having a conversation, and Jones came up; Straub was shocked to be reminded that Jones, like Lamont, married a studio executive. "Obviously I knew that, but I had totally forgotten," Straub says. Their stories had melded so effectively in Straub's mind that she blurred the line between the real-life inspiration and her fictional avatar. Laura Lamont had truly come to life. "If I were to try and tell you Jennifer Jones's life story right now," she says, "I would just tell you Laura Lamont's life story." ◆

Emma Straub at home in Brooklyn.

Death of a Troubled Star

Jennifer Jones, who achieved Hollywood stardom in "The Song of Bernadette" and other films of the 1940s and '50s while gaining almost as

Photograph by Erik Madigan Heck

THE CREATORS OF 'HOMELAND'

Exorcise the Ghost of '24' ***Interview by Willa Paskin***

"Homeland," the geopolitically astute spy thriller on Showtime, features three bedeviled protagonists: Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes), a brilliant and bipolar C.I.A. agent; Saul Berenson (Mandy Patinkin), her mentor; and Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis), a former prisoner of war who tried (and failed) to assassinate the vice president. Much of what made "Homeland" successful in its first season was the artful way in which the show plucked from real-time history, a trick that the show's creators, Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa, honed while working together on "24." We talked to them about the challenges of writing a show that so closely mirrors the real-world shadow wars.

What were some of the cultural influences for the creation of the show? GANSA: "The Lives of Others," "Parallax View," "Three Days of the Condor," Graham Greene's "Heart of the Matter." All the Le Carré books — GORDON: "Rear Window." GANSA: I think we really were trying to tell a sophisticated novel for television, we were trying to tell our own little John le Carré play.

Were there touchstones you were thinking of for the characters? GORDON: Carrie was based on Chicken Little and Fox Mulder. Saul Berenson is a combo of George Smiley and Günther Bachmann, from John le Carré's "A Most Wanted Man," plus any number of characters from Graham Greene. Just the old-school spy.

And what about Brody? GORDON: His was a very tricky character. He became a kind of Rorschach test for everyone involved from the studio to the network to Alex and me. GANSA: Howard and I talked so much about: What was he like when he comes back? How does he relate to his family? Is he able to show emotion? We just went around and around in circles on this stuff, and didn't come down on one side until we saw how Damian played it.

How much are the writers' individual politics a factor in the room? Do things ever get politically heated? GANSA: I'll let Howard speak to the "24" room, because that was a much more politically charged story environment. There were people who had very different and divergent opinions in that room, and there were a lot of real, real conservative types, and some real, real lefty types. And that led to some really interesting conversations. I'm sort of sad to say it's a much more homogeneous group on "Homeland." But we try really hard to not be polemic or didactic in any way. We choose to ask questions and not answer them. GORDON: The thing on "24," it was a divergent group of political beliefs, but I don't think that affected the story. Occasionally, maybe. But we all recognized that storytelling is agnostic. Once you start dressing it up as a platform for some kind of ideology or point of view, it becomes propaganda, and I think the audience can smell when it's counterfeit like that.

On "24" a lot of the plot lines were attributed to politics — did that ever make you. . . . GORDON: Crazy? It was particularly disturbing to me, because the charges were as broad as stoking Islamophobia and being a midwife to a public acceptance of torture. Obviously anyone with any conscience is going to take these seriously. But look, we also recognized too that you can't just hide behind, "This is just TV show." That's a little like the Twinkie defense. So we actively engaged and reconsidered how we told stories.

Some people have suggested that "Homeland" is in a kind of conversation with "24" about those issues. GANSA: I certainly believe that because "Homeland" dealt with the same issues "24" did, it was conceived in reaction to that show. And we talked about this frankly at the beginning. Jack Bauer is an action hero. And that is not Carrie Mathison. Her intelligence work, her defense of the country, is from the neck up. GORDON: It's easy to connect the dots, but it's a little apples and oranges. "24" was a show with a very interesting and unique concept but one that was fundamentally kind of absurd. The idea that 24 hours of story can actually happen, with a beginning, middle and end, in 24 hours, is fundamentally a fantasy. [Creating "Homeland"] Alex and I had the benefit, in a way, of being in the world 10 years later, after Guantánamo, after Abu Ghraib, after two wars in various states of winding down, and the consequences of those wars were being understood. Carrie lives in a world where torture is no longer tolerated. And she lives in a world where everything doesn't happen in 24 hours. ◆

much attention for a tumultuous personal life, died Thursday at her home in Malibu, Calif. She was 90.

She was also known for a life that included bouts of emotional instability; a second marriage to the Svengali-like David O. Selznick, the producer of "Gone With the Wind"; the suicide of their daughter; and a later marriage to another larger-than-life figure, the art collector Norton Simon.

In 1967, Jones made headlines when she swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills and was discovered, near death, lying in the surf at Malibu. In 1976, Jones's 21-year-old daughter, Mary Jennifer Selznick, jumped to her death from a building in West Los Angeles.

Adapted from The Times's obituary for Jennifer Jones, Dec. 17, 2009, which inspired, in part, "Laura Lamont's Life in Pictures."

RIAN JOHNSON

Builds a Better Time Machine **By Adam Sternbergh**

Challenge
Make a thrilling time-travel movie that actually makes sense.

Inspiration
Brush up your Shakespeare.

"LOOPER" IS A film about fate, regret, decisions, revenge and the old maxim that the child is the father of the man, but mostly it's about time travel, so let's travel back in time: to 10 years ago, before the director Rian Johnson's celebrated 2005 debut film, "Brick" (or his follow-up, "The Brothers Bloom"), to the moment he first had the idea for "Looper." Back then, it was conceived as a short film, about 10 minutes long, which he never actually shot. But the script would eventually provide the opening voice-over for "Looper": "Time travel has not yet been invented. But 30 years from now, it will have been."

The film's basic idea — a young hit man is pitted against his older, wearier, wiser future self — was, as Johnson describes it, a "nice little sci-fi hook." The next step — the one that took up the next eight years of his life, while the idea rattled around in his head, and he made two other movies — was finding a bigger theme to attach it to. "My favorite sci-fi," he says, "always uses its hook to amplify some bigger theme or idea — some emotional thrust."

The result is a science-fiction film of the best sort: one that feels both thrillingly outlandish and discomfortingly familiar. Joseph Gordon-Levitt plays Joe, a so-called looper in the year 2044, who coldly kills mob patsies sent back to him from the future. His life is upended when his older self (Bruce Willis) appears as his next assignment — then escapes, and young Joe has to hunt him down.

Part of the future Joe's motivation to return to his past, it turns out — I'll do my very best here to avoid spoilers, but consider yourself warned — is to track down a future mob boss who will eventually destroy his life. In this sense, the film nods to that classic late-night dorm-room weed-addled conundrum: If you could travel back in time and kill someone like Hitler, would you do it? *Could* you do it? But what separates "Looper" from, say, "Timecop" or other rickety time-travel contraptions is that it explores exactly this kind of question to its full emotional consequences.

"For me, that's essentially the wrong question," Johnson says. "Which is weird, because you could say that, in some way, it's the question that 'Looper' eventually puts its chips down on. But for me, the real question isn't 'Would you kill Hitler?' It's 'Does solving a problem by finding the right person and killing them ever work? Or does it create a self-perpetuating loop of violence?' And that to me is not a theoretical, time-travel question. That's a real-world question."

In order to construct an airtight, internally consistent and thematically interesting time-travel movie, Johnson naturally started out by not watching time-travel movies at all. Or thinking about science fiction. (With the possible exception of "La Jetée," the classic French short from 1962, a film that, when I mention it, Johnson says, "It wasn't in my mind, but it *was* in my mind" — see adjacent sidebar.) Instead, he started with a little Haruki Murakami. Then "Macbeth" — which is, he points out, a kind of time-travel story itself, insofar as the main character is told, right at the start, what the future holds, and that knowledge affects all his subsequent actions, "right up to the fact that Macbeth does all these horrible things to retain this vision of what the future could be," Johnson says.

Another touchstone: "Four Quartets," by T.S. Eliot. Johnson conceived of the film in four acts, each related to an Eliot quote. (He reveals each of these influences somewhat painfully, it should be noted, and accompanied by a string of self-conscious caveats about sounding horribly pretentious.) He also points out that "Looper" owes more to "Witness" — the 1985 drama starring Harrison Ford about a Philadelphia cop who hides out on an Amish farm while investigating a murder — than it does to "Blade Runner." While he was plotting "Looper," Johnson sat down and watched "Witness," diagraming its structure on a piece of paper so he could dissect exactly how that screenplay worked. "It starts in the city, creates this noir-type tension and atmosphere, then transfers to the farm, but loses none of that momentum and keeps you in suspense until the end," he says. "Which is like a magic trick to me. So I studied it." One thing he noticed: "Witness" features a prologue on the farm before shifting to the city, which "helps acclimatize you to the visual world of the farm." He liked that so much he aped it, situating his own opening scene

Photograph by Emily Shur

in a sugarcane field — so that when the film shifts later to a rural setting, "it's not like we're going into a room we've never been in before."

There were other influences, of course: some conscious, some inadvertent. Johnson started writing the screenplay while he was living in Belgrade, Serbia, pursuing a love affair. "Every morning I'd listen to 'Cabaret' on my iPod and walk to this local cafe called Absinthe," he says. "There was something about writing the city stuff of the movie in this metropolis that had this romantic, foreign feel to it — Belgrade has kind of a Dublin-esque, dear-dirty charm." He wrote the second half of the film, which takes place largely on a farm, while back in sunny L.A., listening often to David Bowie's "Eight Line Poem," from "Hunky Dory," and later, to the prelude to "Das Rheingold," which is based on one swelling chord that builds to a stirring climax. "That's where I wanted to get the ending to," he says. "I think I actually talked to Nathan" — his musician cousin, who did the soundtrack — "about, Can we do the whole score in one chord? He rightly shot me down. He was like, What are you talking about?"

On close inspection, "Looper" is packed with little nods to its various inspirations, whether the French New Wave films that Johnson studied as a model for Joe's descent into hedonism (in "Looper," Joe's learning to speak French) or the bar where the loopers assemble, called La Belle Aurore. A name like that can't be an accident, and Johnson laughed when I asked about it, as though he'd been caught. "It's a Casablanca reference," he said. "If you take a close look at Joe's narrative arc, I totally just stole Rick's arc from Casablanca. So I named my bar after the bar they're at in Paris when the Germans are attacking. I figured I owed that movie something." ◆

FUTURE TENSE A video interview with Rian Johnson, director of "Looper."

A nameless man is shot, above; a figure from the postapocalypse, left.

'La Jetée'

By A. O. Scott

Chris Marker, who died earlier this year at 91, was an enigmatic figure, reluctant to be photographed and prone to biographical embellishment. A creature of the European postwar avant-garde, Marker would seem an unlikely influence on modern Hollywood. But his 28-minute "photo-novel," "La Jetée" — a shuffle of mostly still black-and-white images now marking its 50th birthday — has spawned more would-be blockbusters than any comic book or series of fantasy novels.

This is partly because of its subject, which is time travel. Marker didn't invent the concept in literature or film — H.G. Wells's "Time Machine" was adapted for the screen two years before "La Jetée" — but he did unlock its poetic possibilities. In "La Jetée," a P.O.W. held by postapocalyptic rebels is sent into the past in search of a childhood memory and then into an even more distant, technologically advanced future. The scenario was adapted and expanded by Terry Gilliam in "12 Monkeys," but the themes of "La Jetée" hover over everything from the farce of the "Back to the Future" movies to the terror of the "Terminator" franchise. Marker's fingerprints can be found on "Looper," on the most recent "Star Trek" movie and on lower-budget experiments like "Primer" and, of course, "The Future."

According to the laws of physics and the principles of philosophy, time travel is impossible. What Marker showed, with his haunting images and matter-of-fact voiceover, is that for movies, it is irresistible, even essential. The camera is itself a time machine, drawing us simultaneously forward and backward, in the film's words "calling past and future to the rescue of the present." And what drives the journey is not scientific curiosity but regret and desire, the longing to recover lost time and know ourselves for the first time. ◆

FILM

THE SPY BEHIND 'ARGO'

Out-Hollywoods Hollywood **By Mickey Rapkin**

"THE IDEA CAME from desperation," says Tony Mendez, a retired C.I.A. officer and the real-life inspiration for the character played by Ben Affleck in the coming movie "Argo." As the head of the C.I.A.'s deceptively boring-sounding Graphics and Authentication Division, Mendez was responsible for foreign agents and their cover stories — which is why he was called upon in 1979 to construct a plan to evacuate six U.S. diplomats hiding at the Tehran homes of two Canadian diplomats.

As Mendez struggled to concoct a believable cover story with which to extricate the Americans, his wife at that time had a suggestion: What if we fake the death of the shah of Iran, who the revolutionaries were demanding return to Iran for a trial? Mendez dismissed it. "That would make a nice script for a movie," he now recalls saying at the time, "but it doesn't have much bearing on what we're trying to do here."

But the word "movie" stuck in his head. He decided he would have the diplomats pose as a Canadian film crew allied with a (nonexistent) sci-fi B-movie called "Argo." That's how he ended up working with John Chambers, a Hollywood makeup artist who famously gave Spock pointy ears. They opened a real production office in Los Angeles and promoted the fake film — after which Mendez flew to Tehran to escort the diplomats out. (He denies reports he did so with a fake nose but said he had "certain appliances I was using.")

Now the fake-movie scheme (the details of which were declassified in 1997) has inspired a real movie. Mendez lives in rural Maryland, where we tracked him down to ask another question: Why call your fake film "Argo"? "It happened to be the punch line to a knock-knock joke we'd tell," Mendez said. The joke opens: "A drunk comes along and tells a knock-knock joke. Knock-knock. Who's there? Argo. Argo who?" The punch line begins "Arr, go ..." but is not printable here. It does show up, in altered form, in the new film. ◆

MICHAEL CHABON

Writes About the Moment That Inspired His New Novel

Challenge
How do you recreate the racial utopia of your youth?

Inspiration
Stumble into a tiny store in a place called Brokeland. Then write a book about it.

"TELEGRAPH AVENUE" is set in Oakland and Berkeley, but it was born in Los Angeles, on Oct. 3, 1995, the day Judge Lance Ito unsealed the O.J. Simpson verdict and made it known to the world.

To the extent that I felt anything about the case before the verdict was announced, it was only that it seemed pretty obvious Simpson was guilty and should go to jail for the rest of his life. When I heard the news from the courthouse, I was shocked but not really surprised. I was married to a defense lawyer at the time (I am still married to her, only now she writes books). I knew that the prosecution, like the defense, had one job to do, and if it did it poorly, then it ought to lose the case. Then my wife called from a federal courthouse in Downtown L.A., where she worked. "We're watching from our windows," she told me. "People are dancing in the street."

That surprised me. I turned on the television and saw scenes of the apparent jubilation of L.A.'s black community, and it caught me completely off guard. I say "apparent jubilation" because I was aware that all I knew about the response of black people to the verdict was what I could see on my television screen. There were no black people living on my block of Orange Drive, in Hancock Park. At that time I had one black friend. It wasn't as if I were going to call him up and ask him if he was jubilant.

I knew enough about television and its portrayal of black people — its portrayal of everything — not to accept prima facie the implication that all black people were delighted to see O.J. get off. But it was clear that many black people were, at least, prepared to seem delighted in front of the television cameras. And that surprised me. It surprised a lot of white people. And the more that white people like me, in the days that followed, expressed the surprise they felt at the sight of people dancing in the streets because a man who obviously murdered his wife escaped justice, the sadder I became.

This sadness had little to do, God forgive me, with the victims. It was not because of the miscarriage of justice or the way such public celebration suggested the degree to which black people felt estranged from, and brutalized by, the criminal-justice system and wanted, at the very least, some kind of crude recompense for the acquittal of the men who had beaten Rodney King three and a half years earlier. I was sad because I knew that my astonishment at the public celebration, like the astonishment of any astonished white person under the circumstances, was indexed directly to the absence of black people in my life. It was the blinking indicator on my dashboard, letting me know that my connection to the lives and feelings of black people had been cut.

IN THE FALL OF 1969, when I was 6, my family moved to Columbia, Md. Columbia was a new town, a planned community, a City of the Future built ex nihilo in the middle of what had been tobacco country, about 30 miles from Washington. It was avowedly utopian in its aims, transformative in its ambitions. It featured large, well-tended swaths of public open space, schools without classrooms, accessible public transportation, a single ecumenical worship center shared by all faiths, streets named for the works of great poets and novelists. Most wondrously of all, this particular City of the Future was integrated.

I had known very few black people up to then, and I had no real consciousness of race apart from what I derived from television and movies and

 TOP RIGHT: FROM MICHAEL CHABON. BOTTOM FROM LEFT: COLUMBIA ARCHIVES; MORTON TADDER/COLUMBIA ARCHIVES (2); COLUMBIA ARCHIVES.

half-understood adult conversation on the subject, not all of it enlightened. Martin Luther King Jr. assassinated; cities on fire; Angela Davis's Montgolfier hairstyle; Curt Flood's upsetting white baseball fat cats; my grandmother's cryptic warnings when she took me walking through her Washington neighborhood; Sammy Davis Jr.'s crooning "Mr. Bojangles" on "The Flip Wilson Show."

One day early in my first fall in Columbia, starting first grade, I found myself placed next to a little black kid. His name was Darius, and I just sat there, marveling at him, undergoing that classic — indeed trite — little-white-kid moment of First Contact. Darius's hair was dense, buoyant and lustrous, his pupils hidden in the deep brown irises of his eyes. But what amazed me most of all were his hands. The skin on their backs was an intense, complex hue that held elements of brown and a luminous purple. And when Darius turned his hands over — when he permitted me to turn them over myself — the skin of his palms was as pink as my own. Along the outer edges of each hand, and across the inside of each wrist ran a mysterious frontier between pink and brown that I patrolled with the tip of a finger. It felt as if some deep explanation, the answer to some question I could not even begin to pose, lay concealed in the pink palms of his hand and the way they contrasted with the brown of the backs.

As I came to understand it, as a child, the idea of building the new town of Columbia was to make life better in America. One way the people who built Columbia saw fit to do that was to give white people and black people the chance to engage in the radical activity of living next door to one another, unrolling sleeping bags in the den for one another's children, swimming in public pool water that had been equally tainted with the urine of those same freely mingling kids, touching one another's hands, allowing them to be touched. On the street where I grew up, there were more black families than white. I tackled, head-faked, ate dinner with, teased, admired, quarreled with, lusted after, learned to dance from, had crushes on, watched television and eventually drank beer with black girls and boys from the time I was 6 until the day I left for college.

The success of this dream, dreamed originally by James Rouse, may be open to debate, but from the day I turned over the mystery of Darius's palm, I was plunged into intimacy with black people, with all the unreserve and boldness of Rouse's and my own small, visionary heart.

I was taught by black teachers alongside black children from diverse backgrounds — poor and middle class, Southern and Northern, country and ghetto, Army brats and the children of black lawyers and doctors — that the battle for civil rights was a shining part of American history, very much on the model of the Second World War. A terrible conflict had consumed the efforts of people I considered to be my personal heroes, and then the good guys had won. For proof of this, I needed to look no further than my best friends, my neighbors, my favorite teachers, so many of whom were black. Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Dr. Charles Drew: in the City of the Future, in 1970, a young Jewish boy could look at the lives of these people and feel connected to them, indebted to them — in a very real way, descended from them. Because if there was one salient fact about the black history that I learned, from the lips of black teachers, as a boy growing up in Columbia, Md., it was this: Black history was my history too. Black music was my music, and black art was my art, and the struggles and the sufferings of black heroes were undertaken not just for the sake of their fellow African-Americans but for my sake, and for the good of us all.

When I left the City of the Future to attend college in Pittsburgh, I began the journey that eventually landed me at last in the capital of the eternal American present: Los Angeles. And on that morning of the Simpson verdict, I discovered, to my shame, to my absolute wonder and horror, that in the course of that journey I had, somehow, become a racist. To qualify as a racist you don't have to go to the extreme of slurring, stereotyping or discriminating against people of another race. All you have to do, as I realized on that autumn morning in 1995, is feel completely disconnected from them. All you have to do is look at those people in a kind of almost scientific surprise, as I looked at the African-Americans I passed in the streets of L.A. in the days after the Simpson verdict, and realize you have been passing them by in just this way, for months, for years

Michael Chabon, 14, in 1977.

Archived photographs from Columbia, Md., an integrated planned community where the author grew up.

at a time. They were here all along, thinking what they think now, believing what they now believe, and somehow you failed to notice.

That was the source of the sadness I felt when I turned on the television and watched black Los Angeles exult: the sudden, bitter awareness of my own failure, of my own blindness, of the apartheid of consciousness under whose laws I had gradually come to live, of the distance that separated the man in Los Angeles, around whom 100,000 humans could suddenly materialize, from the boy in Columbia, the son of Tubman and Drew and Rosa Parks.

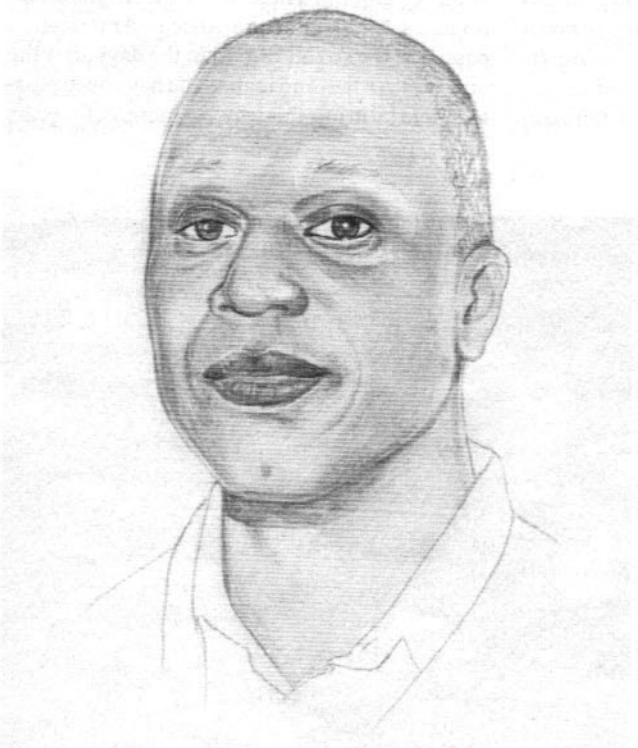
A COUPLE OF YEARS went by, and my wife and I moved up to the East Bay, to a brown-shingled house near the Berkeley-Oakland line. For the first time in years I found myself right at the heart of yet another would-be utopia, living significant portions of every day among people of color. Brokeland — my name for the seam, the joint, the ragged fringe along which Berkeley and Oakland stalk each other like a couple of cats, shoulder to shoulder, flank against flank, tails intercoiling. A land of D.I.Y. Fourierists and urban foragers, amateurs of satori, bliss gardeners and self-theorists and mystics whose visions were recorded on their skins with needles and ink. A collective of hermits, whose fierce, at times cranky attachment to their own individual development was matched by only their yearning for fellowship, for a kind of collective fulfillment, in a permanent cycle of community and schism that launched a thousand ashrams, synagogues, dojos and schools of cuisine.

I tended to encounter my fellow yearning hermits primarily in one variety of a certain style of quirky, small business in which Brokeland abounded, shops that specialized in some kind of merchandise about which it was easy to become obsessed — vacuum-tube stereo amplifiers, say, or avant-garde knitting supplies or black-and-white milkshakes — places with long counters and extra chairs to pull up for an hour's conversation with the owner or your fellows in solitude. Of all these nonalcoholic taverns of the soul, these unofficial clubhouses of the oddball and outré, the purest, to my mind, were, and remain, the used-record stores. Berigan's, dba Brown, Groove Yard, Dave's, they come and go — but there are always a few of them around, cramped and dusty or tidy and well ordered, owned and staffed by doomed heroes of fandom.

One day, not long after moving to the East Bay, I walked into one of those used-vinyl soul taverns, just on the Oakland side of the city line. There was a big black dude working the counter and a little white guy carrying in boxes from the back. The morning's customers had arranged themselves at the front counter — old, young, black, white and brown, Jews and gentiles, a dentist, a guy out of work — theorizing, opining, tearing off woof tickets. Hanging together.

I didn't kid myself that these guys were united in perfect brotherhood. They had not bound up the nation's racial wounds or invented a better America. Nobody was asking for or granting forgiveness or reparations for slavery. They were just shooting the breeze, passing the time, talking about something they loved: vintage vinyl. In a little pocket of the big world, for a little hour. Soon they would go their very separate ways, into their discontinuous and disunited lives, in the hills and in the flatlands, to Section 8 housing and to pristine Eichlers. But for the moment, for once, for the first time in years, flipping through the bins, inhaling the time-heavy perfume of moldering LPs, I was where I had wanted to be all along. I had found a place where at least a trace of what I lost on that journey from Columbia to Ito-land, the dream I had believed in, the closeness I once knew, could be found. I was home.

Not long after that, the shop went out of business — it is in the nature of Utopia to go out of business — and it has never really quite been replaced. And so, once again, as in "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay," as in "The Yiddish Policemen's Union," I found myself obliged, and eager, to recreate through fiction, through storytelling and prose, the lost utopia that never quite happened, that I never quite knew, that I have never since forgotten and that I have been losing, and longing for, all my life. ◆



TV

ANDRE BRAUGHER

Has a Homework Assignment for You

HOW EXACTLY DO you prepare to play the defiant captain of a nuclear submarine who goes rogue? If you're Andre Braugher, you read. "I got a stack of books and tried to figure out who sea captains are, what life on the sea is like and what goes into the making of a captain who can endure this kind of exile," he says of preparing for "Last Resort," an ABC series about a sub captain who commandeers a tropical island. "It's an apprenticeship by proxy." Should you ever find yourself in a similar position, here is Braugher's recommended reading list:

Blind Man's Bluff: The Untold Story of American Submarine Espionage, by Sherry Sontag and Christopher Drew

Stalking the Red Bear: The True Story of a U.S. Cold War Submarine's Covert Operations Against the Soviet Union, by Peter Sasgen

Submarine: A Guided Tour Inside a Nuclear Warship, by Tom Clancy and John Gresham

Odyssey, by Homer

The Bounty: The True Story of the Mutiny on the Bounty, by Caroline Alexander

The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition, by Caroline Alexander

Moby-Dick; or, The Whale, by Herman Melville

In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex, by Nathaniel Philbrick

Ordeal by Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party, by George R. Stewart

Adrift: Seventy-Six Days Lost at Sea, by Steven Callahan

Master and Commander, by Patrick O'Brian ◆

 ILLUSTRATION BY JENNY MÖRTSELL

FILM

QUENTIN TARANTINO

Tackles Old Dixie, by Way of the Old West (By Way of Italy) **By Quentin Tarantino**

Challenge
Make a modern-day "slavesploitation" movie.

Inspiration
Bring the cinematic violence of spaghetti westerns to the antebellum South.

This year, Quentin Tarantino's Christmas present to the world is "Django Unchained," the violent story of a slave (Jamie Foxx) on a mission to free his wife (Kerry Washington) from the plantation of the man who owns her (Leonardo DiCaprio). Tarantino's biggest influences for the film, he says, were not movies about American slavery but the spaghetti westerns of the Italian director Sergio Corbucci. Here Tarantino explains how Corbucci's movies — including "Django," which lent its name to Tarantino's title character — became the inspiration for his own spaghetti southern. (Interview by Gavin Edwards.)

ANY OF THE WESTERN directors who had something to say created their own version of the West: Anthony Mann created a West that had room for the characters played by Jimmy Stewart and Gary Cooper; Sam Peckinpah had his own West; so did Sergio Leone. Sergio Corbucci did, too — but his West was the most violent, surreal and pitiless landscape of any director in the history of the genre. His characters roam a brutal, sadistic West.

Corbucci's heroes can't really be called heroes. In another director's western, they would be the bad guys. And as time went on, Corbucci kept deemphasizing the role of the hero. One movie he did, "The Hellbenders," doesn't have anybody to root for at all. There's bad guys and victims, and that's it. In "Il Grande Silenzio," he has Klaus Kinski playing a villainous bounty hunter. I'm not a big fan of Kinski, but he's amazing in this movie — it's definitely his best performance in a genre movie. The hero of "Il Grande Silenzio" is Jean-Louis Trintignant, playing a mute. By taking his hero's voice away, Corbucci reduces him to nothing.

And "Il Grande Silenzio" has one of the most nihilistic endings of any western. Trintignant goes out to face the bad guys — and gets killed. The bad guys win, they murder everybody else in the town, they ride away and that's the end of the movie. It's shocking to this day. A movie like [Andre de Toth's] "Day of the Outlaw," as famous as it is for being bleak and gritty, is practically a musical in comparison to "Il Grande Silenzio."

"Silenzio" takes place in the snow — I liked the action in the snow so much, "Django Unchained" has a big snow section in the middle of the movie.

Corbucci dealt with racism all the time; in his "Django," the bad guys aren't the Ku Klux Klan, but a surreal stand-in for them. They're killing Mexicans, but it's a secret organization where they wear red hoods — it's all about their racism toward the Mexican people in this town. In "Navajo Joe," the scalp hunters who are killing the Indians for their scalps are as savage as the Manson Family. It's one of the great revenge movies of all time: Burt Reynolds as the Navajo Joe character is a one-man-tornado onslaught. The way he uses his knife and bum-rushes the villains, rough-and-tumbling through the rocks and the dirt, is magnificent. I heard he almost broke his neck doing the movie, and it looks it. Before "The Wild Bunch" was released, "Navajo Joe" was the most violent movie that ever carried a Hollywood studio logo.

As I was working on an essay about how Corbucci's archetypes worked, I started thinking, I don't really know if Corbucci was thinking any of these things when he was making these movies. But I know I'm thinking them now. And if I did a western, I could put them into practice. When I actually put pen to paper for the script, I thought, What will push the characters to their extremes? I thought the closest equivalent to Corbucci's brutal landscapes would be the antebellum South. When you learn of the rules and practices of slavery, it was as violent as anything I could do — and absurd and bizarre. You can't believe it's happening, which is the nature of true surrealism. ◆

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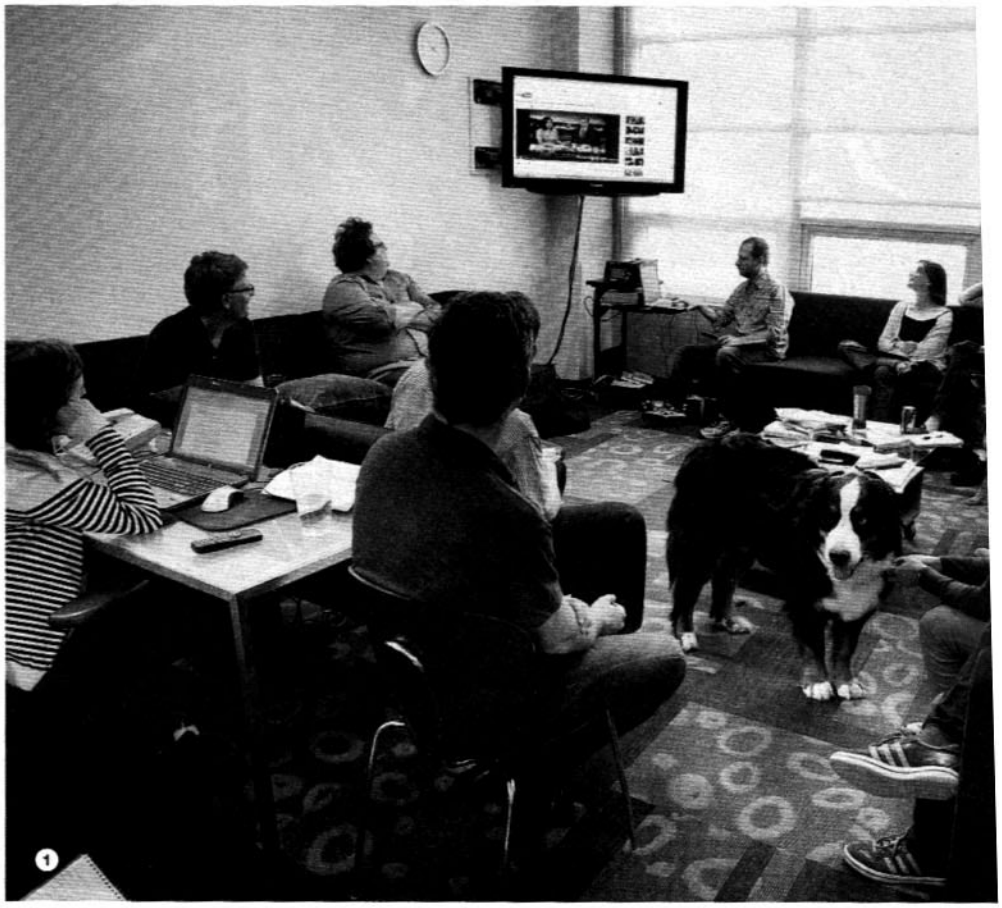
'WHAT ELSE YOU GOT?'

Interviews by Gaby Dunn

One room. Four walls. A million ideas. How?



1

The Daily Show

"Whenever I take a visitor around our office, I apologize when we get to the writers' room. People expect some sort of crazy space, and what they get are a few badly abused couches. Still, the room has everything we need: a place to sit, a TV to shout jokes at and just enough roaming dogs to lend a touch of Hooverville class."

TIM CARVELL,
head writer.

2

General Hospital

"Because the show shoots in L.A. and I'm a New Yorker, writing from my home is a necessity as well as a luxury. The other writers and I are a close-knit bunch, so they're all pretty comfortable working here — except of course when I run out of toilet paper."

RON CARLIVATI,
head writer.

3

Family Guy

"Our writers' room combines the sights of talented professionals plying their craft, the sounds of hard-earned laughter from a very tough crowd and the smells of a middle-school locker room."

STEVE CALLAGHAN,
executive producer.

4

The Walking Dead

"When you hit a wall in the room, keep everyone together banging their heads against it. It'll give way eventually."

GLEN MAZZARA,
show runner.

Photographs by Ashley Gilbertson

2

4

RICKY ROMA

Rides Again

Interviews by Mickey Rapkin

It's no surprise that "Glengarry Glen Ross," the 28-year-old Pulitzer winner by David Mamet, is returning to Broadway: what better time to remount a show about ruthless real estate agents off-loading bum property onto suckers as the nation claws its way out of a recession? At the play's center is Ricky Roma — the salesman's salesman, a shark in a sharkskin suit. There have been three legendary takes on the role: Joe Mantegna, who originated it on Broadway in 1984 (and won a Tony); Al Pacino in the 1992 film (Oscar nomination); and Liev Schreiber, in the 2005 revival (also won a Tony). Next up: Bobby Cannavale, who'll play Roma opposite Pacino in a new Broadway production this fall. (No pressure.) In interviews conducted by phone or e-mail (and edited and condensed), Mickey Rapkin consulted each of them about inhabiting Roma — and walking in one another's loafers.

JOE MANTEGNA

Original Broadway production, 1984

You were the first. What did you make of the script and of Roma? MANTEGNA: My parents never owned a house. I'd always lived in apartments. I'm reading this script — about leads and all this stuff — I didn't know what the hell Mamet was even talking about. But, you know, the guy's name is Ricky Roma. My name's Joe Mantegna. He's an Italian-American. He's from Chicago. I certainly knew hustlers. I just had to fill in the blanks. In our rehearsal process, Dave Mamet and our director brought in these salesmen. There was this very unassuming woman — a brush lady. She asked us to try to let her sell us a hairbrush. And she was unbelievable. She hit your hot button. She made you feel comfortable. This woman is making 45 cents off each brush. But she made it feel like she was doing you a favor if you buy the brush.

What was your inspiration? Is Roma a bad guy or a product of his time? MANTEGNA: There's nothing sleazy about Ricky Roma. That used to kill me when I'd read that. You want to buy this land. You just don't know you want to buy it until I spell it out for you. You're fulfilling your dreams. I'm making a sale. Everybody wins. At night, I would dress in my costume like I was a matador putting on my suit of lights. This was 1984, and I was wearing a $2,500 Versace suit. And I'm wearing jewelry. I'd go to the tanning parlor and get a tan. When I walked on that stage, my feeling was: I am that matador. And I'm gonna kill every bull that comes into the arena.

AL PACINO

Film adaptation, 1992

Had you seen Joe Mantegna in the role? Did that influence your portrayal? PACINO: The actors Joe Mantegna in "Glengarry," Robert Duvall in "American Buffalo" — all great when I saw them, but fortunately I never thought I'd do those roles. I just enjoyed them at the time I saw them. Part of what I did when I played those roles was more than likely influenced by what I saw them do, sort of like a model that you paint from memory. When I saw Paul Muni in "Scarface," all I wanted to do is imitate him if I could, that's how inspired I was by him. But if you see the two performances, they are so vastly different you couldn't possibly compare them.

Does playing an iconic role like that present its own challenges? PACINO: I like the idea that you're doing something that's been done before. By having seen a performance of it — it's almost like playing a character who really exists. It gives the actual part itself a kind of credibility and gives you a model. So many actors in companies throughout the world play minor roles like spear carriers in the Shakespeare plays; later on in their life, they play the main part in that very play. How could they have not been affected by that process? The secret is to make it personal to you, to give it your signature by your interpretation, which for the most part hopefully comes through your unconscious. In other words, it all works if you love the part.

LIEV SCHREIBER

Broadway revival, 2005

Had you always wanted to play this role? SCHREIBER: I thought it was a very poor casting choice. His name was Roma. He's supposed to be Italian. And here was this giant Ukrainian?

Had you seen it performed before? SCHREIBER: I'd seen Joe [Mantegna] do it. My father took me. I was 16 or 17. It was one of the first shows I ever went to where I thought: This is a legitimate job. I was a huge admirer. When a good artist does something, it stays with you on a subconscious level.

How do you find the character? Where do you start? SCHREIBER: It was the language. David's gonna love this, but it's like Shakespeare. With the great writers, the language defines the character. Mamet, Shakespeare, Pinter — it's impossible to read a Mamet play and not see the character.

So who is Ricky Roma to you? SCHREIBER: On opening night, someone gave me a set of steak knives with a card that read, "Kill them all!" I thought that pretty much summed it up.

BOBBY CANNAVALE
Broadway revival, 2012

You're acting opposite Pacino, who played the role on-screen. Is that intimidating? CANNAVALE: I'm not looking at it that way. Everybody else can do that if they want. That guy is a beast onstage. He's not Al Pacino. He's the character he's supposed to be — every time.

Had you always wanted to do this role? It seems like a natural fit. CANNAVALE: It was Al's idea. They sat me next to him at the Tonys. I was nominated for "---------- With the Hat." I introduced myself and said, "Mr. Pacino, it would mean everything in the world to me if you could please come see our play." He said, "I'm gonna see that, I promise you." And he came to the last show! A couple months later I got a phone call from my agent saying, "Al wants to do 'Glengarry Glen Ross,' and he wants you to think about playing Roma." So, yeah. That's a great way to get asked to do a play, for sure.

Have you ever tried to sell someone something they didn't want? CANNAVALE: Yeah. I managed a tuxedo shop when I was 18 years old. At the Broward Mall in Florida. I used to dress in a different tuxedo every day. One day, I'd be in a full white tailcoat. My friends would get a kick out of it. But it worked. The manager is wearing the clothes? It must be good.

Where does your inspiration for Roma come from? I'm assuming you've seen the film. CANNAVALE: Every actor, or anybody who wanted to be an actor in 1992, went and saw that movie. I bought the VHS *and* the DVD. These are desperate guys and desperate times, and the language is so desperate and so competitive. I read the play every day. That's my process. Delving into the words — I get off on that. And that's where I get my inspiration from. There's a line in the play that says, "I gotta eat." For me, that's the whole play. "I gotta eat." ◆

CONVERSATION

DEBRA WINGER AND PATTI LuPONE

Meet Their Matches ***Interview by Patrick Healy***

David Mamet's new play, "The Anarchist," coming to Broadway this fall, is the story of a prisoner (Patti LuPone) and her parole adviser (Debra Winger). Here the two leads talk about saying yes, saying no and how to pretend you've been in prison most of your life.

When you're considering a part, how do you know if it's the right fit for you? WINGER: I want to do parts that speak to the place I'm at in my life. It's funny, years ago you had agents who would help you. They would ask: What role did you want to explore? What was the scary role that was right for you? Now I really have to go after roles myself. You have to rely on yourself as an actor now. LuPONE: I have been offered things, but the majority of them — especially musicals — they're just not very good. But if David Mamet offers, I take and *then* I read it.

Does saying yes or no to a project come pretty easily to you? WINGER: I had an agent who said, right before we're going to pass on something, "You wake up tomorrow and so-and-so has the role, how do you feel?" LuPONE: I've been torn. Someone said to me: "If you can't say yes, the answer's no." And if the answer is "I don't know," then the answer's no.

Once you take a role, how do you go about building the character? LuPONE: The thought process is extremely slow for me. Stanislavski says, Wherever your initial instinct is, write it down, because you'll come back to that one. So I write things down all over the script. Half of my performance is done in the rehearsal room; the other half is when the audience comes in. They inform by participating. They're an inspiration about pacing, rhythms, pauses. WINGER: For the most part, I cannot go there with the audience. I cannot get into the pleasing head at all. For me, building a character is about being a research hound. All summer I took a word a day from the script and walked around the Catskills near our farm with the word in my head.

Photograph by Peter Yang

Patti, you're playing a character who has been in prison for 35 years. What do you draw on to play a character so different from your life? LuPONE: In this play, yes, I've been in for 35 years, but there has been a rehabilitation — so the 35 years have been beneficial because I've been redeemed. But when I get lost, it's all in the script. What does Actors Studio call it? "Substitution"? [The process of substituting your experience for that of the character.] It's not necessary. If I listen to what Debra's character is saying and I respond to that, that's enough. WINGER: I don't put names on it like "substitution." I was kicked out of the Actors Studio, so clearly Shelley Winters didn't think I had the knack for acting. LuPONE: I love the fact that you were kicked out by Shelley Winters. WINGER: I was crushed. She said, "You're not doing what I asked you." But anyway, inspiration is really about breathing in. I breathe in what I expose myself to. Sometimes it doesn't work, and then you just try again with the next breath. But you never, ever settle. The great thing about theater is, if we don't get it right one night, we get to come out the next night to try again. ◆

MICKALENE THOMAS

Rediscovers Her Mother — and Her Muse **By Karen Rosenberg**

Challenge
Find the beauty in personal tragedy.

Inspiration
Redefine your idea of beauty.

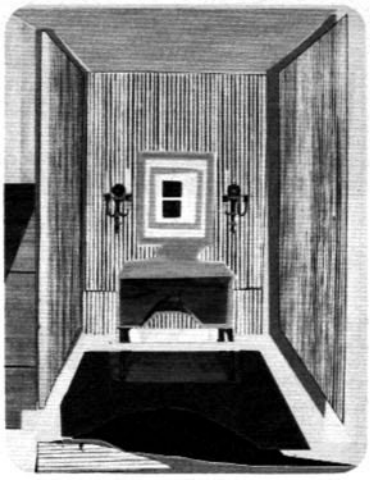
THE BROOKLYN-BASED artist Mickalene Thomas has often used her mother, Sandra Bush, a former fashion model, as a muse going all the way back to the work she made as a Yale M.F.A. student a decade ago. Mama Bush, as her mother is known, has stood in for everything from a 1970s diva to a nude odalisque in some of Thomas's exuberant, rhinestone-encrusted collage-paintings; in the 2009 video piece "Ain't I a Woman (Sandra)," Bush vamps to Eartha Kitt in a bold red-and-black sweater with big shoulder pads.

But in Thomas's first short film, "Happy Birthday to a Beautiful Woman: A Portrait of My Mother," which has its premiere at the Sept. 28 opening of Thomas's solo show at the Brooklyn Museum, Mama Bush is almost unrecognizable. Her eyes are yellow from jaundice. Her familiar Afro wig has been replaced by a different one: short and straight. She is so frail that her costume jewelry seems to weigh more than she does.

This 23-minute movie is part documentary and part emotional portrait — and it's the first piece Thomas has made about her mother since Bush became ill with kidney disease in 2010.

"One of the reasons I used my mother is because of her charisma, her beauty," Thomas says. "And I thought about how I wasn't [using her] because she was sick. And how a different type of beauty, a different type of aging, a different type of portraiture could come across on film." Bush, who was in and out of the hospital for dialysis the whole time, was initially apprehensive. "She doesn't even like looking in a mirror, seeing herself the way she looks now," Thomas says. "So that began a series of conversations: How do you feel when you look at yourself? What do you see?"

What we see, in the film, is a woman who is fighting her diminished physical presence with all of the tools at her disposal. Her posture is perfect; her shimmering sweater is carefully coordinated with her gold-and-coral necklace; her lips are painted a glossy, look-at-me shade of deep plum. "I walked into the hospital the other day and she had on a new wig and all this makeup," Thomas says. "She has this line, 'If you can't feel good on the inside, you may as well look damn good on the outside.'"



"Interior: Striped Foyer," 2012.

"Mama Bush: I'm Waiting Baby," 2010.

The mother-daughter relationship has not always been an easy one. During Thomas's teenage years, she says, both of her parents were drug addicts; she distanced herself by moving from the family home in Camden, N.J., to Portland, Ore., for college. "I didn't want to be in that environment, and I was dealing with coming out," says Thomas, who is now married to the artist Carmen McLeod.

Thomas went on to art school; Bush went into rehab. Influenced by one of her teachers at Yale, David Hilliard, who had photographed his father, Thomas started to take pictures of her mother. The modeling sessions became a kind of therapy. "I began to look at her as a person and accept her weaknesses, her failures," she says.

That process continues in this film, which is more raw than Thomas's previous paintings and photographs. "I didn't want it to be like one of my photo shoots," she says. "There's nothing in it that is fabricated. There are no props."

In the film she also asks her mother some startlingly personal questions — about her drug use and her turbulent relationship with her husband.

"There's memories you're not sure of, situations where you know part of the story but not the whole story," Thomas says. "I think we all have questions we want to ask our parents, but we just don't." ◆

Photograph by Ryan Pfluger

Desaparecidos backstage in August at the Troubadour in Los Angeles, from left, Matt Baum, Ian McElroy, Conor Oberst, Landon Hedges and Denver Dalley.

MUSIC

DESAPARECIDOS

Makes the Best Protest Music (Again) ***By Kevin Lincoln***

Challenge
Reunite — and reignite — a decade-dormant punk band.

Inspiration
Find new targets for old outrage. (Start in Nebras Then try Washington, D.C

THE PERFECT PROTEST album for 2012 happens to have been released 10 years ago by Desaparecidos, a band named after the dissenters who "disappeared" under Pinochet and other Latin American dictators. Desaparecidos was formed by Conor Oberst (more recently of Bright Eyes) and four friends from the Omaha music scene, and their only record, "Read Music/Speak Spanish," catalogs the ills of modern America, including the failure of exurban expansion ("Greater Omaha") and the warping influence of consumerism ("Mall of America"). It also eerily presaged the specter of drone warfare ("The Happiest Place on Earth").

The attacks of 9/11 took place while Oberst, Denver Dalley (guitar), Ian McElroy (keyboards), Landon Hedges (bass) and Matt Baum (drums) were mixing "Read Music/Speak Spanish." They thought about holding the record, but decided not to. "Every fast-food marquee was like, 'God Bless the U.S.A.,'" Dalley says, "and here comes us saying, 'God *Save* the U.S.A.'" During one show, a guy handed out fliers calling them treasonous. The album never took off.

In 2003, Desaparecidos fell apart. Oberst says his heart wasn't in it; during their one and a half tours, he was recording what would be Bright Eyes' breakout album, exchanging masters with his producer from whatever motel the group landed at. The rest of the band became enmeshed in other projects. Soon all that was left of Desaparecidos were occasional jokes among members about reuniting. And that one ill-timed album.

That's the advantage of good art, though: the birth date of a work doesn't matter, so long as it stays relevant and circulating. In 2010, the band reunited when Fremont, Neb., passed a law that prohibited hiring illegal immigrants. Oberst helped organize the Concert for Equality to support the American Civil Liberties Union's fight against the Fremont law, and he wanted Desa parecidos to play it. To the band, the gig seeme like a perfect reapplication of their force; a nec essary catalyst that flames a punk band bac into life. "The Concert for Equality worked, an the kids loved it, and there was a ridiculou crowd, and it was fun," Baum says. "We raise a ton of money for a really good thing, and tha law was struck down."

Earlier this year, listening to a lot of Brigh Eyes, I stumbled upon "Read Music/Spea Spanish." With its fusion of hardcore's dooms day stomp and the noble violence of punk strung together by Oberst's ragged howl, th album seemed like a welcome guidepost fo what more music should sound like in 2012. M experience was fairly typical, it turns out. Ober

AUTO-TUNE THIS A recent song from Desaparecidos called "Backsell." *nytimes.com/magazine*

Photograph by Lauren Duko

told me how a small cult following developed around Desaparecidos, as teenagers shared the album with their friends.

Earlier this year, the band reformed again, this time to oppose Joe Arpaio, sheriff of Maricopa County in Arizona and a strong supporter of the state's anti-immigration act. A new song, "MariKKKopa," challenges what the band sees as his myopic racism. (The song ends with an audio sample of Arpaio expressing pride at comparisons of him to the K.K.K.) This reunion provided enough fuel to get the band touring again this summer, which is where I finally saw them live. In Seattle, Desaparecidos's show was all efficiency and fire, including a new song they dedicated to Bradley Manning, the military intelligence analyst imprisoned for leaking documents to WikiLeaks. The crowd was a mix of indie vets and graying punks who characterized the band's initial audience, along with an impressive showing by rowdy teenagers.

What comes next for the band is a mystery. Oberst, who seems to have put Bright Eyes into retirement, is newly inspired by some of the grievances that defined Desaparecidos back in the early 2000s — albeit with some new targets. Oberst voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and performed at a benefit for him during the primaries, but like others on the left, he has been disappointed by some of the president's moves. "Obama increased drone strikes and targeted assassinations of American citizens," he told me. "All the promises he made in the course of that 2008 election, all the things that I thought I heard him saying when I was standing there in the primaries in Iowa on a frozen morning listening to him speak, the person I thought I was hearing, is not the person that is running our government."

A decade-old protest band has once again found a moment to match their music. "They want everyone to sit down and be apathetic, but we can't," Oberst said. "If there's anything we need to say, it's that this will not stand, this is not acceptable. The whole idea that you can make someone disappear because they disagree with you politically, and you're free to spy on them and hold them without charges indefinitely — what is the difference between us and fill-in-the-blank dictatorship? What is the difference? That's *desaparecidos*, man." ◆

CONVERSATION

CARLY RAE JEPSEN

Writes a Song You Can't Escape ***Interview by Gaby Dunn***

BEFORE FEBRUARY, few people outside Canada had ever heard of a "Canadian Idol" runner-up named Carly Rae Jepsen. Then Justin Bieber filmed a homemade video to her song "Call Me Maybe," which went viral and turned the song into the biggest hit of the summer. (Jepsen's own rendition has received 260 million YouTube hits.) Here, the 26-year-old reflects on how it started.

"Call Me Maybe" has inspired zillions of tribute videos. Do you have a favorite? I remember seeing the Katy Perry one and being really blown away. I remember seeing the Cookie Monster and being stoked.

Are you sick of hearing the song yet? I've sung it enough times, but I think because it has been not just a song I sing a lot but a life-changer — and the beginning of a crazy adventure — it doesn't feel like anything but a really nice warm memory. It's a really nostalgic song for me already.

Your earlier music is more folky. Whom did your parents expose you to musically? Oh, everything: Rickie Lee Jones, Bruce Springsteen, James Taylor was huge, Cat Stevens, Leonard Cohen. These are the kinds of artists we had playing in our house.

When did you start writing songs? I was going to the Canadian College of Performing Arts, which is kind of a school like "Fame." I thought I wanted to be a Broadway star, and then I got a guitar for Christmas. And I just started writing the first week.

Do you remember the first song you wrote? It was a song called "Dear You." Actually that's not true. When I was 9 years old, I wrote a protest song called "Cutting Down the Big Tree."

You're going to have to sing me some lines. It was so bad. It was like, "We're cutting down the big tree." I think that was the main hook.

Was someone cutting down a tree? I think there was some kind of logging campaign.

This is your "Big Yellow Taxi"? My young Joni Mitchell was coming on out. ◆

This *Is* Crazy Three takes on 'Call Me Maybe'

DRESSING 'THE TEMPEST'

A new production opens Oct. 23 at the Met — with costumes inspired by bones, buttons and magical beaches. **Interview by Clinton Cargill**

Ferdinand

A fairy

Ariel

Ariel as a harpy

The costume designer Kym Barrett ('The Matrix') discusses her vision for Shakespeare's starcrossed castaways.

"There was a feeling Robert [Lepage, the director] wanted of Europeans' reaching the North American coastline, which gave rise to the American indigenous motifs — the beading and the featherwork. I tried to imagine a person seeing a group of people they never imagined existed — to be surrounded by things which seemed like magic."

Ariel

"I wanted her to feel like a spirit in anguish. So she feels almost worn away — like white-bleached bones on the beach." For her harpy costume, "we did it in an old-fashioned way, with molded leather and hand-glued crystals and bits of glass."

Prospero

"The decorative elements give you the two sides of his world: the magician, behind which he's the scientist and the technical master. One of the nice effects is his cape; when they reflect the light onto the lining, it's very reflective — it's like a shattered mirror."

Ferdinand

"We looked at what people would really wear — but all the embellishments on the clothes, which would've been diamonds and pearls in reality, we made out of crystal buttons. So you get the feeling that buttons are this currency, which in one world has great value and in another world does not."

Photographs by Victor Schrager

Prospero