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After becoming a TikTok music phenomenon during the pandemic and co-producing Charlotte Cardin's 99 Nights, Montreal's Lubalin just officially launched his music career with a live show, a debut album (Haha, no worries) and a giant suit.

Cover photo by Aime-Elle

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Cult MTL is a daily arts, film, music, food and city life site. Visit us at

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Cult MTL is published by Cult MTL Media Inc. and printed by Imprimerie Mirabel. Entire contents are © Cult MTL Media Inc.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada.

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Nauseously optimistic for 2025



BY TOULA DRIMONIS

In last year's year-in-review for Cult MTL, I wrote that "Quebecers, Canadians and, I suspect, most of the world feel a little worse for wear these days as we collectively navigate rising political tensions, stubborn inflation, creeping culture wars and global existential angst about what's to come next."

Well... 2024 came and went, and we're about to embark on a brand-new year. And, while I hate to be a "Debbie Downer," it's not looking great.

Trump is back, fascism and kakistocracy (a government by the worst, and may I add, most unqualified) seems more of a reality than ever south of the border. Trump hasn't even returned to the White House yet and he's already issuing barely concealed threats to everyone — including Canada — which doesn't bode well for the working relationship between the two neighbours.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has sparked increased regional tensions across the Middle East and contributed to the rise of antisemitism around the world as Netanyahu's right-wing government continues to pummel Gaza. Tens of thousands have been killed in Gaza, the West Bank, Israel and Lebanon since the war began, and thousands have been displaced, while the situation for those who remain in Gaza grows more dire by the moment.

Here in Quebec, thousands of students in post-secondary institutions have been protesting for months, demanding their institutions divest from companies with ties to Israel and calling on the federal government to take a stance against the war in Gaza. While students have a democratic right to protest, the constant demonstrations and the occasional introduction of certain bad-faith actors in these gatherings (not to mention some blatantly antisemitic acts

and taunts) have caused fear and unease among Montreal's Jewish community. It feels like everyone I come across — no matter what they support — is on edge.

Both Quebec's CAQ and Canada's Liberal governments are suffering from Tired Government Syndrome. Voters are expressing fatigue with both François Legault and Justin Trudeau, who've each led long-standing governments nearing the end of their mandates. The opposition leaders gunning to take their places appear more than willing to push all the required buttons to rile up partisan support.

RISING POPULISM AND NATIVISM

I wish I could offer some positive news, but I don't see that rising tide of collective angst slowing down anytime soon. I don't think Donald Trump's re-election south of the border is good news for Americans and women's reproductive rights, for us as Canadians or for global politics in general.

I don't think Pierre Poilievre's continued popularity in the polls and probable win in the next Canadian election bodes well for Canada. Nor do I think that the Parti Québécois, which stands a good chance of winning Quebec's next election, and its continuous shift to the right (especially its ease in scapegoating immigration), harbours any good news for those of us hoping for less division and less marginalization of minorities.

I worry that a global rise in nativism and populism, which in turn breeds more intolerance of all "others," will create the conditions for the most vulnerable among us to be targeted the most. Around the world, politicians willing to exploit people's fears and insecurities continue to be rewarded with voter support.

A LOOK BACK AT 2024

Over the past year, I wrote about how the deaths of migrants at the U.S.-Canada border exposes dangerous border policies and the double standards many seeking help face. I wrote about how Elon Musk — someone who'll soon have a key position in the Trump administration — was lying about undocumented migrants to stir up hate and resentment against them.

I wrote many articles detailing how the CAQ's anti-immigration policies have made family reunification for Quebecers a total nightmare, with many of the affected family members forced to wait three and four times longer to reunite with their loved ones than they would in other Canadian provinces.

I warned about the Trumpification of Canadian politics. "Political strategy that thrives on aggressive opposition and leverages pre-existing discontent," I wrote back in April, "often fixated on elected officials, could lead to the steady deterioration of our political institutions." As we embark on a new year, my worries haven't dissipated.

If anything, as I watch Conservative Party leader Pierre Poilievre lean even more into these divisive politics, with constant rage-baiting and Canada-is-broken narratives that only aim to weaponize people's fears and discontent with the state of the world, I worry that many Canadians will simply vote for a political leader who has shown no signs of maturity or offered any real solutions to what ails Canada, merely out of a desire to "stick it" to the current status quo that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau represents.

I wrote about how the preservation and protection of the French language has often been used as a weapon by Quebec's CAQ administration to stir up discontent, all by a government that's been slow to offer up real investments and support to newcomers wanting to learn the language. Despite the CAQ's rhetoric that protecting French is a top priority, the government has been slashing francisation classes and letting go of teachers offering classes to newcomers.

Demanding asylum seekers communicate with the government solely in French within six months, without providing them the tools to do so, is like "newcomers being asked to dig a hole without being given a shovel," according to those on the ground working to help them integrate.

And while Quebec's healthcare and education systems continue to deteriorate, and the housing crisis worsens, a good chunk of Quebec's political and pundit class appear irrationally obsessed with "wokeism."

UNEASY HOPEFULNESS FOR 2025

Right after Trump was re-elected, I saw a social media post describing people's current state of mind as "nauseously optimistic." I laughed, but I also shook my head in recognition. It's a term that I think perfectly captures the current zeitgeist and best describes the trepidation and uneasy hopefulness many of us share.

As we figure out how to fight for something better, it's important to remember we're not at it alone. Even if it all feels rather bleak right now.

A newsletter I subscribe to recently reminded me of celebrated author Toni Morrison being asked the question, "How do you survive whole in a world where we're all victims of something?"

To which she replied, "Sometimes you don't survive whole, you just survive in part."

I suspect a lot of us survived the pandemic "in part" and it's starting to show, as I see too many people around me unravelling.

Morrison went on: "But the grandeur of life is that attempt. It's not about that solution. It is about, you know, being as fearless as one can, and behaving as beautifully as one can, under completely impossible circumstances."

Many of us — for different and perhaps even opposing reasons — feel that we are currently living under impossible circumstances. What we each hope for may feel like an impossibility right now: Peace, civility, harmony, functioning democracies, justice, a roof over our head, access to a doctor, a salary to cover our basic needs, not constantly worrying about our families in other countries, goodwill towards one another, kindness and empathy for those who have lost and who may stand to lose even more.

But we can't afford to give up.

Even if the entire world feels weary and old these days — a universe that sounds more and more like a creaking tree — we need to keep moving forward, insisting that we can collectively create a better tomorrow. As divided, as devastated and as woefully misunderstood as we may all feel today.

To quote the luminous Toni Morrison once again, "Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow."



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Sean Pavone

BY LORRAINE CARPENTER

“It was a mixture of heaven and hell, Philadelphia.”

David Lynch has often stated that Philadelphia was his greatest inspiration, and anyone familiar with the American filmmaker’s work might guess that it was a dark place when he lived there — at least from his point-of-view, in the 1960s. The “fear, insanity, corruption, filth, despair, violence in the air” that Lynch has often spoken of, and that apparently influenced his first film, *Eraserhead*, are certainly not on display anymore, at least not to tourists sampling the city for a few days.

Even with a metropolis-worthy share of surface-level grime and sleaze, Philadelphia has all the aesthetic charm, cultural richness and exciting buzz that you’d want in an urban getaway destination.

The only notable darkness we encountered there was the lingering unease following the U.S. presidential election. Losing Pennsylvania seemed like the nail in the coffin for the Harris campaign, which had ended on Philly’s famous “Rocky steps” outside the Museum of Art the previous night. Just over a week later, some Harris/Walz flags and lawn signs remained as a sad reminder of what could have been, and of the political hellscape to come. As a blue city in a red state, likeminded locals were prevalent, even if their opinions — including ideas about moving to Canada, and Montreal specifically — were voiced in hushed tones so as not to offend the douchebags that might have been within earshot.

If the American Empire is truly in a downward spiral, the birthplace of the United States is a fascinating spot to be

— between New York City and Baltimore, and just across a bridge from New Jersey (where a few of Philadelphia’s best restaurants are allegedly located). Philadelphia’s “Old City” is where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were written and signed, and Independence Hall, the cracked Liberty Bell, Betsy Ross’s house and other historic sites are there for you to enter and tour in depth or simply pass by on a scenic stroll.

A very different type of tour is available for fans of the debauched sitcom *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, even though both the interior and exterior of the fictional Paddy’s Pub aren’t located in Philly. *Always Sunny* vibes can be caught at Mac’s Tavern, however, as the pub — which serves food and is open all day despite its distinctly dive-y aesthetics — is co-owned by Rob McElhenney and Kaitlin Olson. Cast photos adorn the walls alongside a bar-side poster for Wrexham A.F.C., the soccer club McElhenney co-owns with Ryan Reynolds.

Another all-day, full-service and (somewhat) dive bar worth a visit is across the city in Fishtown, the Verdun of Philadelphia. Johnny Brenda’s is a busy music venue by night, a common stop for small to mid-level touring bands in the hipster end of town, which has been building (and gentrifying) for nearly a decade. But there are active pockets of nightlife scattered across the heart of Philadelphia, aka Center City (ie. downtown). These include the more posh Rittenhouse Square (featuring an excellent French bistro Parc) to Midtown Village (a concentration of LGBTQ+ bars and businesses, known as the “Gayborhood”) to the dives of South Street.

South Street is a busy retail artery that’s a go-to for niche shopping, whether you’re looking for vinyl (Repo Records), comic books (Atomic City) or sex toys and lingerie (the Pink Pussycat Boutique, among a surprising number of others).

It’s also the site of the Philadelphia’s Magic Gardens, a labyrinthine outdoor folk-art gallery by mosaic artist Isaiah Zagar — it’s worth a stop to complement the diverse range of classic and contemporary art you’ll find at the grand Museum of Art.

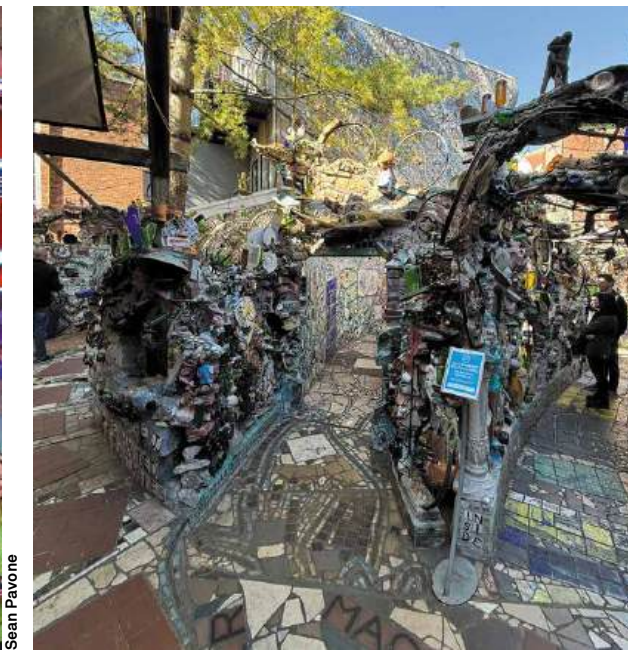
Philadelphia is nothing if not a food city, and before we talk restaurants, another must-see shopping destination is Reading Terminal Market. While it’s partly a Jean-Talon-Market-style one-stop for produce, baked goods, meat, liquor and what-have-you, it’s also the site of an ice cream shop that dates back to 1861 (still in its original location) and loads of restaurant stalls selling myriad types of cuisine, from Asian seafood to poutine to the famous Philly cheesesteak.

For the uninitiated, a Philly cheesesteak is a sandwich that packs roughly sliced or shaved steak (usually rib-eye or top round) into a hoagie roll with peppers, optional onions and cheese. THE Philly cheesesteak spot according to several local sources — and confirmed by my husband, who tried two of these decadent indelicacies during our trip — is Angelo’s Pizzeria, and the cheese they swear by (along with most hardcore/old-school cheesesteak enthusiasts) is Cheez Whiz. The most dedicated cheesesteak vendors apparently make their own Cheez Whiz, which begs the question: aren’t they doing themselves a disservice by still calling it Cheez Whiz? It’s a mystery of life.

While researching the best restaurants in Philadelphia and making reservations, I booked two places that turned out to be located within the Four Seasons at Comcast Center, a massive office building in Center City that houses the cable TV company that also owns NBC. For some reason, the hotel (established in 2019) hadn’t come up in our initial search for Philadelphia accommodations, so we got extremely lucky:



Reading Terminal Market



Philadelphia's Magic Gardens



Philly cheesesteak

This turned out to be the most impressive hotel we've ever stayed in.

After taking an express elevator to the lobby on the 60th floor, the doors opened onto the sight of freshly installed, hyper-glamorous Christmas decorations, piling the lobby high with black, gold and silver balls and a massive gold glass reindeer sculpture. Just off the lobby was Skyhigh, the lounge and bar above the restaurant Jean-Georges, named after French chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten, who owns restaurants around the world. While we didn't opt for the opulent tasting-menu meal at Jean-Georges, the relatively casual Skyhigh served excellent food and cocktails that I'm still thinking about weeks later — the ginger martini with a touch of jalapeno had us coming back daily.

The design of the bars at Skyhigh — and throughout the hotel, really — stood up to the grandeur of the views from

the top floor of the tallest building in Philadelphia. The city panorama was equally impressive from the pool on the 57th floor, overlooking One Liberty Place, Philly's answer to NYC's Chrysler building — it was that building that broke the "gentlemen's agreement" that no structure in the city should be taller than the William Penn statue on top of City Hall. Adjacent to the pool were the changing rooms — where my husband wound up in the sauna with former Habs player Jonathan Drouin, now with the Colorado Avalanche — and, just down the hall, a full sauna and gym. All the facilities were luxurious and in perfect working order, and while we didn't try out the spa services, the Four Seasons is always a solid bet in that respect.

Our room on the 51st floor was a beautiful space with yet another stunning view of the city. And while the hotel's other restaurant, Vernick Fish, didn't have the views (being on the ground floor), the raw menu, cocktails and

seafood offerings there provided an excellent cap to a memorable trip.

One of Philadelphia's tourism taglines is "Come for Philadelphia, stay for Philly," suggesting that it's the unexpected aspects of the city that will charm you the most. The tagline works so well because the reasons for visiting and the things that surprise you are different for everyone, but both of those elements are bound to hit you. Without the media exposure and instant familiarity of L.A. or New York, "the City of Brotherly Love" is one of the U.S.'s many second cities, and the things you think you know — from American history, or from the media, whether it's *Rocky*, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* or David Lynch's warped memories (not to mention U.S. election coverage) — are just shards of a true reflection of Philly.

I'd absolutely go back to see more of that picture.



Four Seasons Hotel Philadelphia at Comcast Center

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Four Seasons Hotel Philadelphia at Comcast Center



Four Seasons Hotel Philadelphia at Comcast Center

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:the 1st half



BY PAUL DESBAILLETS

Both the English Premier League (EPL) and Major League Soccer (MLS) have delivered captivating storylines, setting the stage for an exciting 2025.

The current EPL season has been marked by big competition and surprising developments. Liverpool FC leads the standings with 31 points from 11 matches (circa the end of November) boasting a goal difference of +16. Their dominance is largely attributed to Mohamed Salah, whose contributions have been pivotal. Analyses suggest that without Salah's goals and assists, Liverpool would be much lower in the table, making him indispensable. Despite this, he still has no official offer from the club to secure his services for the next few years. It's crazy that this is not finalized.

Manchester City follows in second place with 23 points from 12 matches, maintaining their reputation as formidable contenders. Chelsea (*GO BLUES!*) and Arsenal are tied with 22 points each, holding the third and fourth positions, both showcasing consistent performances.

Brighton & Hove Albion and Tottenham Hotspur have

also impressed, each amassing 22 and 19 points respectively, showing just how competitive the race is for European qualification spots.

They all want that Champions League Money.

At the other end of the table, Southampton struggles with just 4 points from 11 matches, facing a challenging battle against relegation and it's not even January.

The MLS season has been equally exciting, coming together in the playoffs. Inter Miami CF, led by Lionel Messi and co, clinched the Supporters' Shield with a record-breaking 74 points, highlighting their dominance.

But the playoffs have been unpredictable as football always is. Favourites like Inter Miami, Columbus Crew and FC Cincinnati and LAFC were all eliminated earlier than expected. Losing Miami was a huge blow for the MLS, Apple and Adidas as much was planned for them to go all the way and be ready to party at this summer's FIFA Club World Cup.

The LA Galaxy emerged as strong contenders, advancing to the Western Conference final after a commanding 6-2 victory over Minnesota United.

In the Eastern Conference, Orlando City SC is set to host the New York Red Bulls in the conference final, with both teams vying for their first MLS Cup title.

The upcoming year promises to build on the excitement of 2024. In the EPL, the title race is expected to intensify, with Liverpool aiming to maintain their lead and rivals like Manchester City and Chelsea striving to close the gap. The battle for European spots will likely see clubs like Brighton and Tottenham pushing for higher finishes.

Relegation battles will also be a focal point, with teams at the bottom trying to stay and keep their Premier League status.

The January transfer window could play a crucial role in shaping the second half of the season, as clubs look to strengthen their squads.

In MLS, the conclusion of the 2024 playoffs will set the tone for 2025. Teams will analyze their performances and make strategic decisions during the offseason. The potential for new signings, including international stars, could grow the league's profile even further.

Additionally, the expansion of MLS with new franchises is anticipated, bringing fresh talent and fanbases into the fold. Looking at you San Diego FC.

The league's growth should make for an even more competitive and entertaining season ahead.

Special news for CF Montréal fans: November saw defender Joel Waterman sign a three-year contract extension.

The EPL and MLS have delivered compelling storylines in 2024. As we look forward to 2025, fans can expect high competition, strategic moves in the transfer markets and the showcase of new talents, all adding to the always moving landscape of soccer.

Bring it on, 2025.

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food

Star power

BY CLAY SANDHU

Controversial as it may be, a Michelin Star remains one of the most prestigious accolades in the culinary world, awarded to restaurants that showcase outstanding cooking based on five universal criteria: ingredient quality, harmony of flavours, mastery of techniques, the personality of the chef as expressed through their cuisine and consistency across the menu over time.

As we eagerly anticipate the release of the MICHELIN Guide for Quebec in 2025, here are our predictions for which restaurants might earn this coveted recognition. While we don't expect any restaurants to earn 3 or even 2 stars, the following restaurants include potential one-star locks and standout Bib Gourmand options:

1 STAR

MON LAPIN

As Canada's reigning best restaurant (according to Canada's 100 Best), Marc-Olivier Frappier and Vanya Filipovic's Little Italy spot is a likely 1-star lock. Frappier and co-executive chef Jessica Noël's menu has a clear identity and consistently delivers thought-provoking, exceptionally rendered food.

TOQUÉ

While Toqué has fallen further down best restaurant lists in recent years, Normand Laprise's fine-dining institution has been one of the city's most respected tables since 2005. An easy lock for quality, consistency and personality.

MASTARD

Chef Simon Mathys's ode to seasonal Boreal cuisine has made Mastard an industry darling. Meticulously sourced ingredients, refined execution and a concept with Michelin written all over it.

BEBA

While potentially too casual or understated for a 1-star distinction, Ari and Pablo Schor's Verdun restaurant is both a deeply personal reflection of their cultural heritage and a masterclass in ingredient sourcing and intentional cooking. If merit truly comes from what's on the plate, Beba is an easy lock.



CASAVANT

Dominique Lafond

LE MOUSSO

Let's be honest — Michelin has a type, and that type is le Mouso. Run by the iconoclastic, self-taught chef Antonin Mousseau-Rivard, le Mouso is a product of the Golden Era of Nordic cooking, rendered with the very best local ingredients. From artful plating (and the hand-thrown ceramic plates themselves) to the overall refinement of the dishes, le Mouso is another easy prediction.

ÎLE FLOTTANTE

Chef Sean Murray Smith's Expo 67-influenced restaurant on St-Viateur has been charming locals and visiting gastronomes since opening in 2017. If there's such a thing as «Oscar bait» in dining, then Île Flottante is Michelin bait. Smith is best known for awe-inspiringly beautiful presentations of delicious (if a bit eccentric) dishes and a tasting menu with the best value for money in town.

LAWRENCE

Sourcing the best quality local ingredients has been part of Lawrence's DNA since it opened in 2010. Historically, Chef Marc Cohen focused on serving hearty dishes made of quality Quebec meat and vegetables with a noted British inflection. Since moving operations to a smaller storefront, running the kitchen solo and broadening his influences, Lawrence has become one of Montreal's most thoughtful, refined and best-executed restaurants. Certainly deserving of a star.

CANDIDE

“Love and precision, warmth and refinement, but in the end, Candide is an excuse to make people smile.” John Winter Russell's celebrated restaurant is always carefully considered and thoughtfully executed. It's got all the makings of a Michelin-star restaurant.

BOUILLON BILK

Bouillon Bilk is all about nuance, precision and finesse. Having recently moved to a new location, they've only dialed things up. This is a highly skilled, highly technical team putting out beautifully intricate dishes. Seems ripe for a star.

MARCUS

Chef Jason Morris is an ingredient obsessive, overseeing a kitchen that regularly works with the highest quality seafood available in Canada. While Marcus's supper-club reputation might preclude it from a star, the seriousness of the food makes a legitimate argument for recognition.

JOE BEEF

If identity, consistency and legacy (not to mention good eats) have any bearing on who merits a star, then Joe Beef is an absolute lock. Since 2005, Joe Beef has been a taste-making restaurant that has not only redefined Montreal's dining culture but has influenced chefs and restaurants around the world.

JUN-I

Among Montreal's premier sushi restaurants, it's one of the few local Japanese spots operating at a 1-star level. Chef Junichi Ikematsu's style combines Japanese and French techniques to create a cuisine that is entirely his own.

HOOGAN & BEAUFORT

Having recently cooked for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and French President Emmanuel Macron, Marc-André Jetté's pedigree is only growing. Refined wood-fire cooking, artful plating and a focused Quebec-forward identity.

OKEYA KYUJIRO

Montreal's first reservation-only Omakase restaurant specializing in Edomae sushi. Using exceptional quality fish imported from Japan and sourced locally, the restaurant would follow in the footsteps of many high-end sushiyas, including Okeya Kyujiro's Vancouver location, which earned 1 star earlier this year.

HÉLICOPTÈRE

Easily Hochelaga's top fine-dining destination, Hélicoptère operates at a 1-star level with its innovative seasonal menus. Chefs David Ollu, Natacha Lehmann and Youri Bussières-Fournel bring a unique style that blends local ingredients with creative, vegetable-forward dishes, offering an elevated and thoughtful dining experience.

MONTRÉAL PLAZA

Founded by Charles-Antoine Crête and Cheryl Johnson, Montréal Plaza is a confluence of their culinary prowess and Crête's unmistakably playful personality. Known for its eclectic menu, the chefs combine classic French

techniques with global influences. A likely 1-star based on the chefs' pedigrees, the clear identity and the quality of the food.

CABARET L'ENFER

Led by Massimo Piedimonte, Cabaret l'Enfer delivers an innovative, often unorthodox and always playful dining experience rooted in traditional Italian cooking. Piedimonte, who cut his teeth at Maison Boulud, le Mousso and Noma, comes with a Michelin-level pedigree. There's personality in spades here and tons of technique to back it up — an easy pick for a star.

MAISON BOULUD

Daniel Boulud's Ritz-Carlton restaurant is about as sophisticated and refined as they come. Boulud himself is no stranger to Michelin (2 for his eponymous Manhattan restaurant Daniel, and 1 each for le Pavillon and Joji) so he certainly has an understanding of what it takes to get a star — though his Toronto outpost, Café Boulud, was noticeably omitted from the Toronto guide. /

BIB GOURMAND

The Bib Gourmand category recognizes "restaurants that offer high-quality food at a reasonable price." This somewhat nebulous description is usually awarded to high-calibre restaurants providing a more casual experience.

BAR ST. DENIS

BSD is easily one of the city's best tables, thanks to the consistently inventive and brilliantly executed food by chef and co-owner David Gauthier. The bar backdrop, however, hurts its star potential.

PICHAÏ

Jesse Grasso's considered take on regional Thai fare is as focused and quality-driven as any on this list, though the casual nature of the restaurant likely precludes it from earning a star.

LE VIN PAPILLON

While at least one of the Joe Beef group restaurants is likely to get a star (my money is on the flagship), the more casual Vin Papillon is an obvious Bib Gourmand lock.

CASAVANT

Bustling energy, beautiful food and a stunning dining room — Casavant has plenty going for it. After a year or so of praise and nods, the Villeray bistro deserves a Bib Gourmand mention.

ALMA

Since shifting their focus from Italy and Catalonia to chef and co-owner Juan Lopez-Luna's native Mexico, the level of precision, intention and personality has skyrocketed. Alma is Bib Gourmand at a minimum and a good candidate for a star.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

Key to the star rating system is "consistency over time." Restaurants are usually visited multiple times before they are eligible to earn a star. Below is a selection of restaurants that might not make the list this year but likely will in the next edition of the guide.

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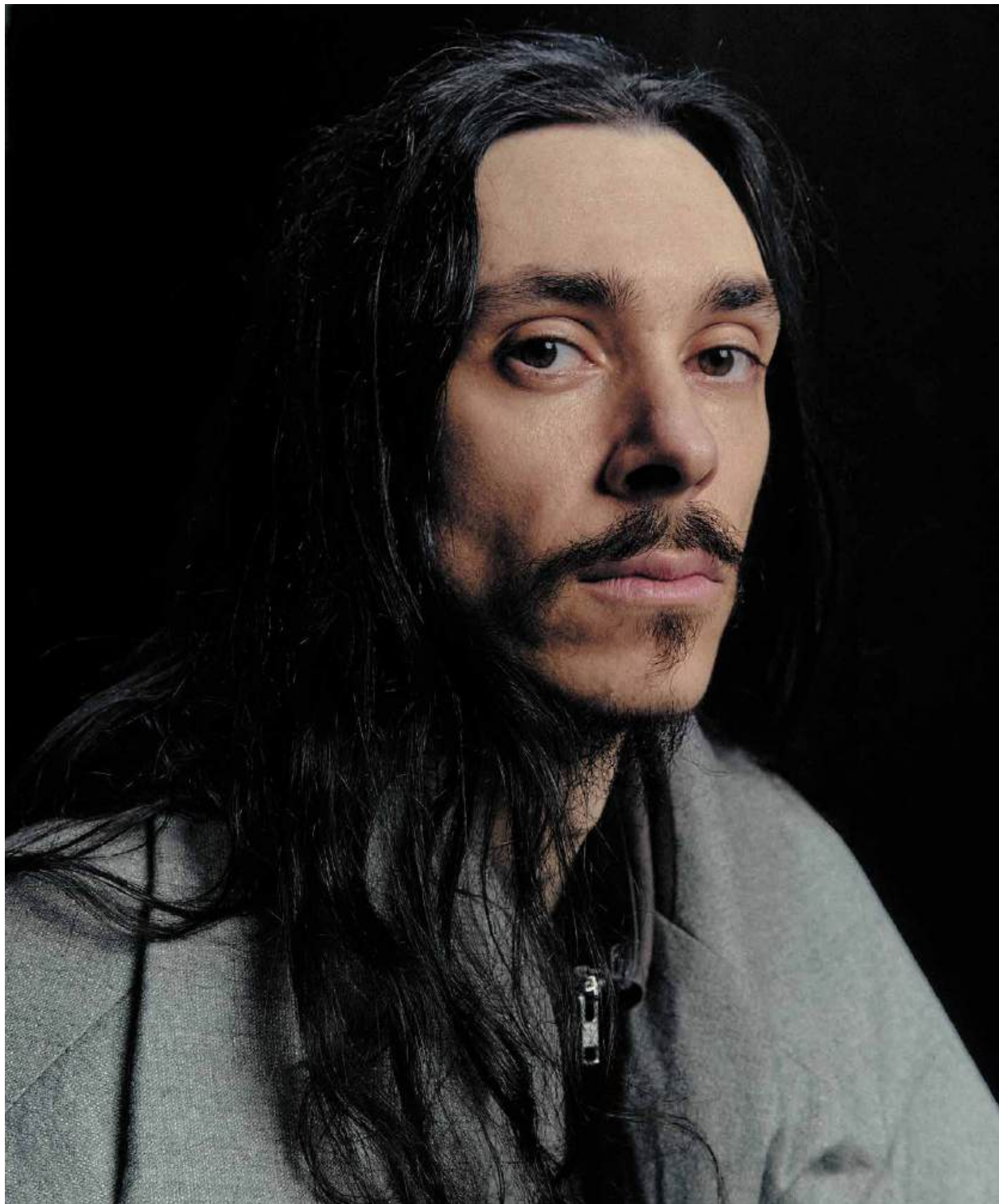
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It's all coming up Lubalin



BY STEPHAN BOISSONNEAULT

Back in 2020, in the thick of the pandemic, a Montrealer who goes by the moniker Lubalin became a viral TikTok sensation.

In his hilarious and catchy “Internet Drama” series, the Cult Nation label artist took odd conversations over Facebook and Marketplace Ads and crafted them into highly produced pop bangers. Featuring broccoli casserole recipe slander, a 15,000-pound horse and attorney general threats, these Internet Drama videos led Lubalin to collaborate with Jimmy

Fallon and Alison Brie while quietly becoming one of the producers for Charlotte Cardin’s *99 Nights*, which won a Juno this year.

Now, Lubalin is close to releasing his debut album, *haha, no worries*, an album that takes the catchy pop of the 2000s, drum & bass, indie and a dash of alt-rock and seamlessly blends them all together. It was also all recorded in studio, a first for Lubalin, who was used to making his rare form of pop music on the computer. Much of this new process came from working with Cardin for months on *99 Nights*.

“It was cool seeing how she writes songs and what their priorities are in terms of a song’s core,” says Lubalin.

“For me, I write, I record, I produce, I mix ... I do the whole thing. So it becomes very easy to accidentally try to fix a songwriting problem with production or a production problem with the mix. And so after that, I was like, ‘Okay, let’s just step away from the computer altogether and make sure the song works on its own.’”

One of the songs that really conveys Lubalin’s distinctive style is the lead single from *haha, no worries*, “Pale Blue Dot,” a track that begins as a muted and dreamy R&B song à la Frank Ocean and then explodes into an alternative emo rock anthem about staring at the stars and feeling small.

“I love that song,” Lubalin says with a Cheshire grin. “I started with the kind of guitar arpeggio on classical guitar — and I’m not a guitar player, I’m very much a producer who dabbles, but the drums were just asking to be included, and then the rest was very intuitive. It was a magical two days.”

The *haha, no worries* crafting process also saw Lubalin producing and mixing 12 songs from a hefty 50 demos.

“You suffer a bit for it,” Lubalin says. “You work songs to death and in the end, you really have to start trusting people around you because after you’ve listened to a song 10,000 times, you can’t really hear whether it’s working anymore.”

Behind Lubalin is an oversized grey suit hanging off a closet door, the same suit he wore at his debut concert at Club Soda during M for Montreal last month. This giant suit has become somewhat of a trademark for Lubalin’s persona and style.

“When I put on the suit, there is an effect to it,” he says with a chuckle. “I guess I wanted people to take me more seriously. But there is a persona that comes with it. I’m not sure it’s dialed in, but maybe that will be revealed to me more in time.”

There’s more to the suit than that. This thing is marvelous. Everything is oversized; the pockets, the linings, the trail, the lapels... It kind of looks like a Victorian vampire’s cape from the side and for Lubalin, it’s an absolute must.

“The fashion designer Remi van Bochove really blew it out of the water,” Lubalin says. “We went to him and said, ‘We need you to make the biggest suit you’ve ever made,’ and it’s not just a normal suit that is upscaled, but everything has been adjusted to make it a working and aesthetic suit. I love it.”

And when he moves in it, as he did during the Club Soda show, you can’t help but smile — at the comedic factor yes, but also the fact that this guy is doing whatever the hell he wants and he doesn’t care what anyone thinks. This very notion even comes down to the moniker he chose for himself, named after the graphic designer Herb Lubalin.

You see, back before he was even a viral sensation, Lubalin, the pop producer and singer, was feeling a bit discouraged. He had imposter syndrome and was not sure if his music and production skills were up to snuff. He also hadn’t released anything. But first, he needed a name.

He stumbled upon a book about Herb Lubalin’s work, and suddenly everything clicked.

“So he does a logo for some really big company. And they were like, ‘Oh, we’re not sure, can we make this change?’ And he was like, ‘No. Take it or leave it. If you don’t like this, go somewhere else.’ And I was like, ‘Wow.’ I needed that,” he says. “I was like, you know what? Fuck it. I’m gonna start doing shit. I’m Lubalin now, and this is who Lubalin is and what he wants, and he doesn’t care what people think, and he just posts shit. It really unblocked something for me and I’ve taken that same energy into everything I do.”

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The best music of 2024



STEPHAN BOISSONNEAULT

BEST ALBUM

Yoo Doo Right, *From the Heights of Our Pastureland* (Mothland)

Alix Fernz, *Bizou* (Mothland)

Vampire Weekend, *Only God Was Above Us* (Columbia)

The Cure, *Songs of a Lost World* (Fiction/Lost Music)

Magdalena Bay, *Imaginal Disk* (Mom + Pop)

Mannequin Pussy, *I Got Heaven* (Epitaph)

Godspeed You! Black Emperor, *NO TITLE AS OF 13 FEBRUARY 2024 28,340 DEAD* (Constellation)

Chelsea Wolfe, *She Reaches Out to She Reaches Out to She* (Loma Vista)

Chat Pile, *Cool World* (The Flenser)

Ducks LTD., *Harm's Way* (Carpark)

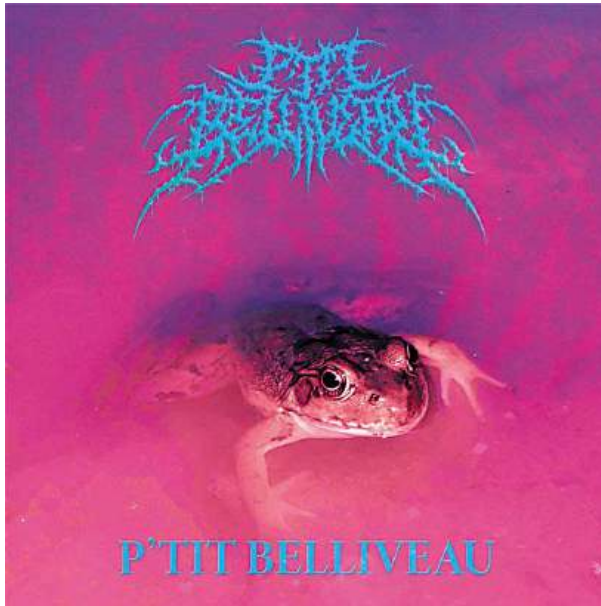
BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT

Kendrick Lamar's *GNX*.

BEST CONCERT

Mannequin Pussy, Osheaga, Aug. 2

When I attended Osheaga this year, I managed to catch almost all of Mannequin Pussy's set on the main stage. I had always known the name but was not prepared for this onslaught of vicious punk/noise and vocalist Marisa «Missy» Dabice's charming demeanour. But it wasn't charming in a normal way; Missy has a way of introducing her songs, going on little diatribes about the darker side of capitalism and the church, and bringing her voice to a hushed, tantalizing whisper that pulls you in. I found myself getting closer and closer to the stage. She then explodes into a scream and the band unleashes. At one point, bassist Colins «Bear» Regisford took the microphone and sang lead, which is probably the closest I'll ever get to seeing someone like Bad Brains. The album *I Got Heaven* is good, but this band is meant to be experienced in the live setting.



DARCY MACDONALD

BEST ALBUMS

P'tit Belliveau, *P'tit Belliveau* (self-released)

Kendrick Lamar, *GNX* (PGLang/Interscope)

Blu & Exile, *Love (the) Ominous World* (Dirty Science)

Doechii, *Alligator Bites Never Heal* (Top Dawg)

Safia Nolin, *UFO RELIGION* (Gladiateur Sourire)

Hawa B, *better sad than sorry* (Duprince)

Brown Family, *Durags & coeurs brisés* (7ème Ciel)

Common & Pete Rock, *The Auditorium Vol. 1* (Loma Vista)

Brother Ali & Ant, *Satisfied Soul EP* (Travellers Media)

Joey Valence & Brae, *No Hands* (self-released)

BEST CONCERT

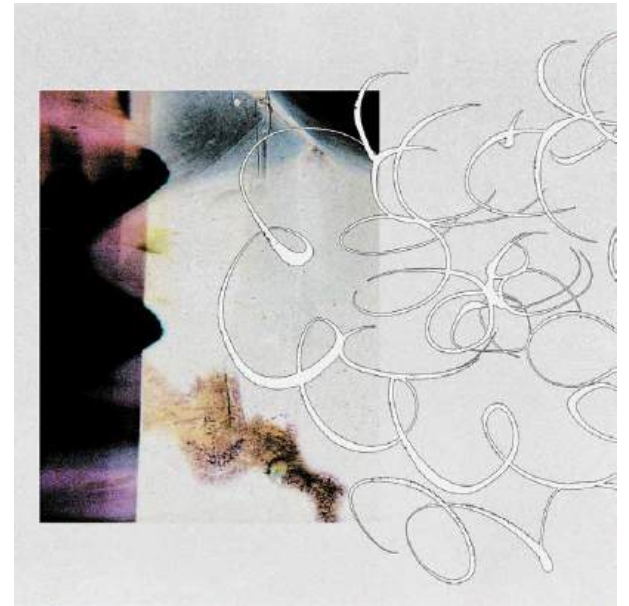
Queens of the Stone Age, Place Bell, April 13

BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT

Kaytranada's third LP, *Timeless*, is anything but.

Compiling year-end lists is hardly an exact science. At *Cult MTL*, our music team is mandated not to ascribe any numerical order to our Top 10 picks, allowing us to praise our personal favourites rather than arbitrarily rank the importance or impact of a project.

It's therefore doubly disheartening that hometown hero Kaytranada's third outing couldn't keep my attention for more than a few listens when it dropped in June, whereas its predecessors, *99.9%* and *Bubba*, have never left my rotation. Overlong and overstuffed with guests who insist on singing along to basslines, *Timeless* is low on heart. One of the most creative, gifted musicians of his generation, Kaytra's production here sounds bored and uninspired. Granted, a mediocre Kaytranada project is still a decent album by any standard. But mediocrity has never been his jam. Here's hoping he got whatever this was out of his system and finds his way back to making truly exciting sounds. And for the love of music, can we please bench the charismaless Lou Phelps now? Take Your Little Brother to Work Day has been cancelled indefinitely.



DAVE MACINTYRE

BEST ALBUMS

Bibi Club, *Feu de garde* (Secret City)

Charli XCX, *Brat* (Atlantic)

The Cure, *Songs of a Lost World* (Fiction/Lost/Polydor/Universal/Capitol)

Fontaines D.C., *Romance* (XL)

Gulfer, *Third Wind* (Topshelf)

Jamie xx, *In Waves* (Young)

Kendrick Lamar, *GNX* (PGLang/Interscope)

Porter Robinson, *Smile! :D* (Mom + Pop)

salute, *TRUE MAGIC* (Ninja Tune)

Tems, *Born in the Wild* (RCA/Since '93)

BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT

A close tie between la Tulipe's closure, Gulfer disbanding and Pitchfork being swallowed up by GQ.

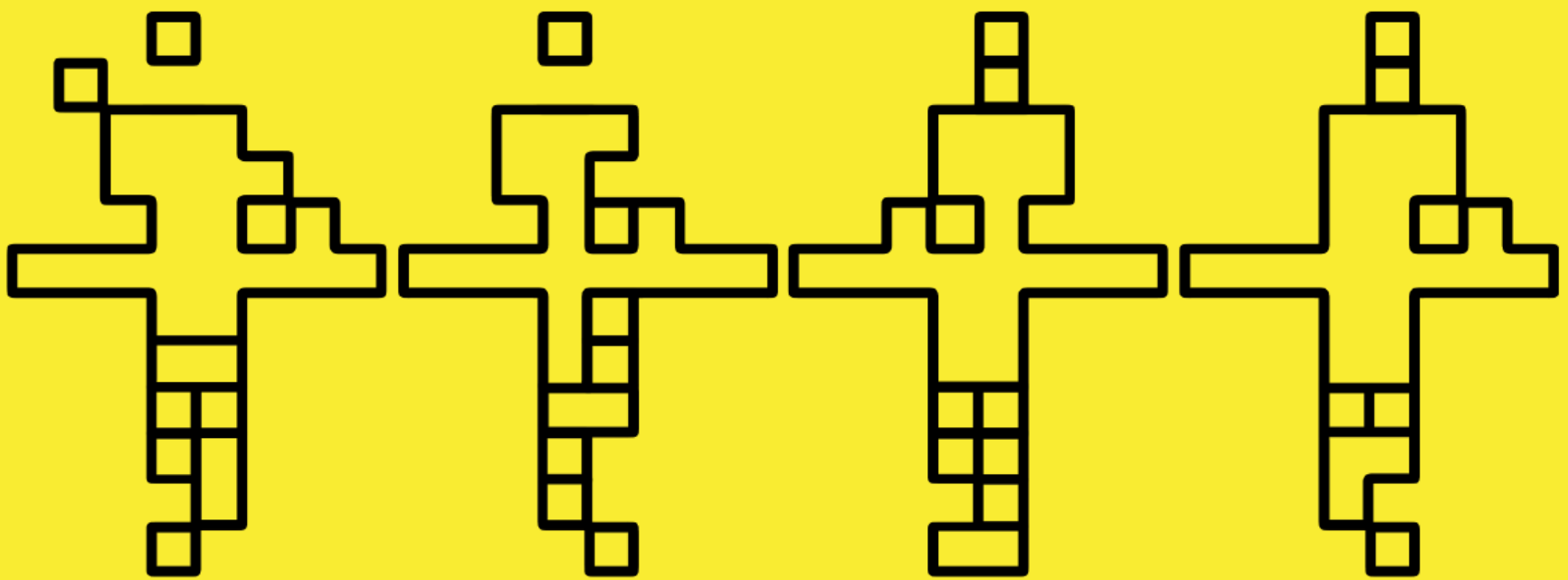
BEST CONCERT

Population II at la Tulipe during this year's Taverne Tour.

There were many Best Concert contenders for me this year: Chappell Roan's instantly iconic mid-afternoon Osheaga set. SZA, Confidence Man and Romy's sets that weekend stand out, too, as do regular old shows from Porter Robinson, Tems and a hugely entertaining Vampire Weekend concert in Laval.

But I think Population II — a band I saw live three times this year, including in front of a woodworker's garage in Baie-Saint-Paul — takes the cake for the first time I saw them, at the maddeningly now-shuttered la Tulipe. The proggy, psychedelic krautrock trio used the relative expansiveness of the room to their advantage, creating an ominous and freaky atmosphere with the use of red and green lighting, loud, punishing basslines and tunes that were experimental yet simultaneously very controlled and calculated. That was in February, and it stood tall throughout the rest of the year as my favourite 2024 gig.

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film

On Screen



Babygirl



Nosferatu



The Girl With the Needle



A Complete Unknown

BY JUSTINE SMITH

End of the year means a combination of Hollywood Spectacle and that final push for awards season. Probably this winter's biggest release is Barry Jenkins' first Disney project, the "live-action" *Mufasa: The Lion King* (Dec. 20), which is a musical origin story about Mufasa. The film features an all-star voice cast including Seth Rogen, Billy Eichner, Beyoncé, Donald Glover and Mads Mikkelsen.

For something completely different, director Robert Eggers (*The Witch*, *The Lighthouse*) tackles Dracula in his adaptation of *Nosferatu* (Dec. 25). Bill Skarsgård, Willem Dafoe, Lily-Rose Depp and Nicholas Hoult star in this classic vampire tale about Count Orlok's obsession with his visitor's young and beautiful wife.

Kraven the Hunter (Dec. 13), an adaptation of a lesser-known Marvel comic, will hit the screens mid-December. Aaron Taylor-Johnson stars as the titular Kraven in this vengeance-motivated origin story about the character's complex relationship with his father, which sets him down a path towards villainy.

As always around this time of year, there are a lot of family-friendly films. One of the year's most critically acclaimed animated features, *Flow* (Dec. 13), is a dialogue-free, Latvian-French co-production about a cat displaced by a great flood who finds refuge on a boat with various species. The animals will have to navigate the challenges of adapting to a new world together. For an older group, an anime prequel, *The Lord of the Rings: The War of the Rohirrim* (Dec 13), tells the story of the Helm Hammerhand and his people as they fight off a terrible siege. *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* (Dec. 20) sees Sonic, Knuckles and Tails reuniting to fight a powerful new adversary. Team Sonic must seek out an unlikely alliance to protect the planet. The beloved Paddington franchise also returns with their third instalment, *Paddington in Peru* (Jan. 17).

Among the other major releases to expect this holiday season, Timothée Chalamet stars as Bob Dylan in *A Complete Unknown* (Dec. 25), set in the early 1960s as the unknown Dylan arrives in New York for the first time. Daniel Craig stars in the year's second Luca Guadagnino film (after *Challengers*), *Queer*, an adaptation of a novella by William S. Burroughs about a man named Lee who wanders Mexico in search of a fix. Nicole Kidman will grace our screens in *Babygirl* (Dec. 25), a salacious erotic thriller about a high-powered CEO who puts her career and family on the line when she begins a torrid affair with a much younger intern. In one of the year's weirder films, *Better*

Man (Jan. 10) is a Robbie Williams biopic which inexplicably features the British pop star as a CGI monkey.

There are a handful of other important award season contenders worth checking out. *The Girl With the Needle* (Dec. 6), which premiered in competition at Cannes, tells the story of a young factory worker who finds herself abandoned and pregnant while striving to climb out of poverty in post-WWI Copenhagen. *The End* (Dec. 13) is a bizarre post-apocalyptic musical starring Tilda Swinton and Michael Shannon. It's the first feature film from famed documentary filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer, best known for *The Act of Killing*. Pedro Almodóvar returns to the big screen with his English-language debut, *The Room Next Door* (Jan 10). Julianne Moore and Tilda Swinton star as former best friends who reunite after a long separation.

If you're looking for something to watch in mid-January that isn't an awards contender, *Wolf Man* (Jan. 17) is a survival horror film set in a remote farmhouse where a family is attacked by an unseen animal, starring the usually reliable Christopher Abbott and Julia Garner. As the night progresses, the father begins to transform.

For some local content, Philippe Lesage's anticipated follow-up to *Genèse, Comme le feu* (Dec. 6), hits the big screen this month. Seventeen-year-old Jeff stays at film director Blake Cadieux's wilderness lodge after being invited by his friend Max's family. When strange events occur, Jeff suspects something is amiss with the director and his retreat.

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A slight utopia

BY SRUTI ISLAM

It's hard to read Jacob Wren's latest novel, *Dry Your Tears to Perfect Your Aim*, without thinking of Palestine.

In an interview, Wren agrees, but clarifies that, for him, the thinking for this novel really started in 2019. And while bad things were happening then too, of course, it is hard not to feel particularly overcome thinking about the many international events that have followed.

Set in an unnamed war-ridden territory, readers follow a western (and likely white) narrator as he navigates his existential qualms amidst the backdrop of bombs. It is a book full of discussions. Nearly every page has a question. Readers will feel the need to interpret our narrator's impulse to flee to this warzone as some sort of moral sanctity, but he himself is quick to correct any such assumptions. Existentialism being a privilege in and of itself — to question the meaning of one's existence implies that one's existence is secure enough to add meaning to, a thing that is hard to do when you're trying to stay alive in the first place.

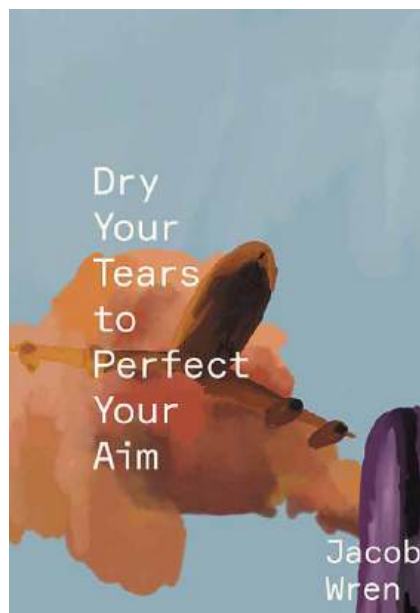
Wren marks the early seeds of this novel around America's "Shock and Awe" campaign as they commenced their

invasion in Iraq in 2003. "They bombed, mercilessly and constantly," says Wren. "And, it just felt so violent and insane to watch that happening on television. All these people protested the thing and then the thing happened anyway. It kind of makes me feel insane to feel like that's the world I live in. And my first impulse was: I want to go there, even though that makes no sense and would help no one."

Wren's narrator, too, is overwrought with helplessness. He's in awe of the perseverance of the local people he encounters and the deterministically relational society its survivors attempt to build from the ruins of its native nation. This is what I mean when I say this book is full of conversations. It's a novel made up of vignettes of actual discourse. And what's more, those Indigenous to the land feel no such awe in their own tenacity. For them, the need for survival and betterment is just a given. It made me wonder: Could it be that optimism was in fact just... realistic?

"At one point in the book, the narrator (refers to) a practical utopia," says Wren. "I think maybe one way that the utopia in my book differs from other utopias is that it's not actually that utopian. It's maybe just a little bit better than what we currently have. It's not, you know, miraculously better in every way. Anything you can do that might improve someone's life or help people who are oppressed is worth doing, even if it's not a miracle."

On p. 25, Wren has the narrator reflect something that, to me, reads as a tragically pure Wren sentiment: "And why must I view all works of art through my political desires?"



"Yeah," Wren admits, "I would say this protagonist is the character that's closest to myself that I've ever written. It's me imagining myself in a place that's more politically hopeful than where I currently live." And, "Yes," he continues, "all my work is about the relationship between art and politics. That is definitely true. And that relationship is enormously complex and full of doubt and confusion."

"In some deep way, I feel I need to be an artist. I have no choice," says Wren. "But I don't actually think what the world needs right now is art. I think it needs activism and it needs people who are really able to get out there and fight. I think art can maybe do something, but it's not the primary driver of change. I think art is probably more a reflection

of the world than driving change in the world."

"But nonetheless, since I need to be an artist and art is the main thing I'm able to do, I need to think, you know, what kind of art is most politically helpful? What kind of art would be most meaningful for me politically? I feel injustice, so if the only band-aid I have to put on that pain is art, I have to make the most of it even though it's deeply insufficient."

Citizens, readers, and most likely peers of Wren, who are doom-scrolling as we speak, will feel reignited by Wren's capsule of self-doubt. After all, we are all interrogating ourselves with these very questions: What can I do? How can I be of help? And what is the meaning of art? Though Wren never claims to answer anything here, he has written a book that at least reminds us that the point of questioning has never been the answer. The point has always been to ask.



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IN THEATRES JANUARY 31



: weird era



BY SRUTI ISLAM AND ALEX NIERENHAUSEN

More about books you should read, and the authors who wrote them, that were recently featured on the Weird Era podcast.

NOTE: Last week, Weird Era celebrated the publication of its 100th episode! In celebration, we've released a special episode where Sruti and Alex reflect on just a few of their favourite conversations throughout the years. Tune in!
May Our Joy Endure by Kevin Lambert

This story hits close to home, set right here in Montreal. Lambert delves into the lives of the rich and famous in his newly translated novel, brought to life by Donald Winker's rhythmic prose. The book introduces Céline Wachowski, an internationally acclaimed architect and accidental digital-culture icon, as she unveils her first major project in Montreal: the Webuy Complex. While this should be a milestone in Wachowski's career, it instead

sparks heavy criticism from both the media and local residents. Who are these people, so indifferent to the impacts of gentrification? Yet, as Lambert asks, isn't art meant to be adorned without price? This novel offers a glimpse into the world of Montreal's elite, presented with empathy. In this episode, I speak with Lambert about the Montreal housing crisis, female ambition, how the design of our spaces shapes our lives and writing from the perspective of the so-called "bad guys." (SI)

Us Fools by Nora Jean Lange

Every now and then, I have the privilege of meeting a kindred spirit on this show, and Nora Lange was one such encounter. *Us Fools* is a raw, down-to-earth American novel, set in the farming lands of Chicago. It follows two sisters with eccentric parents as they navigate their family dynamics and the financial crisis of the 1990s, all through the lens of Greek mythology, feminism and literature. Lange writes with passion, ensuring readers feel the deep, flesh-and-blood love between the characters, despite the layers of trauma that unfold. Both Bernie, the narrator, and her bold

sister Jo — who, despite all odds, is determined to have a child of her own — will capture readers' hearts. In the days following the U.S. election, I spoke with Nora Lange about horny parents, how revenge is often a desperate form of imitation, mythology, bodies and femininity, and asked her: where are the eyes? (SI)
Hi, It's Me by Fawn Parker

In the novel *Hi, It's Me* by Fawn Parker, a young woman (also named Fawn) explores grief in the 24 hours after her mother's medically assisted death by cataloguing the items and extensive notebooks in her mother's room in the farmhouse where she lived. The farmhouse's other occupants, four older women, follow a strict (bordering on cult-like) set of rules — the primary rule being that they do not speak to men. Fawn, a city girl through and through, teeters between wanting to flee the rural farmhouse, but can't help but to envision a life there. *Hi, It's Me* is one of those novels that catches you by surprise over and over again... it's honest, it's comedically pitch-black and it's experimental in unexpected and fresh ways. In my interview with Fawn, we discussed the line between fiction and memoir, humour in death, the ways in which parents compete with their children, and so much more. (AN)

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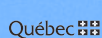
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: game jam



BY NATALIA YANCHAK

Two Falls (Nishu Takuatshina) is a narrative exploration game in which you follow the story of two characters whose paths intersect: that of Jeanne, a young shipwrecked Frenchwoman who finds herself stranded far from the French colonies, and Maïkan, an Innu hunter who tries to cope with the rapid changes that threaten the land of his ancestors.

With an interactive movie feel, players will explore the wild Canadian territory through the two radically different points of view of Jeanne and Maïkan. As you cycle between protagonists, you find they each have their own distinct artistic directions, which immerses the player into each character's perspectives.

Detective-like scene inspections and branching narrative paths are the main gameplay mechanics, with indie titles like *Firewatch* and *What Remains of*

Edith Finch as definite inspirations. With an expected playthrough time of between four to nine hours, the singleplayer game is replayable due to your choices directly impacting each character's traits.

In the most basic and broad terms, *Two Falls (Nishu Takuatshina)* might be described as *Valheim* meets *Pocahontas* — *Valheim* for the experience of surviving in the brutal majesty of nature, and *Pocahontas* for giving larger audiences access to an Indigenous story in the face of colonialism. And while *Pocahontas* does a great job of whitewashing the past, it also reminds us of the power and importance of empathy, as *Two Falls (Nishu Takuatshina)* does.

The studio behind the game, Unreliable Narrators, is based in Mile End, and is a member of the Indie Asylum co-operative group. Employing about 20 developers, the studio has been making headlines recently, touting *Two Falls (Nishu Takuatshina)* as the "first" video game to incorporate Indigenous perspectives.

Two Falls (Nishu Takuatshina) was made by a team that included many Indigenous creators: composer Eadsé, 3D artists at Awastoki, actors and Wendat writer Isabelle Picard. The project was also supported by a Council of Innu and Wendat Elders and other Indigenous partners, including the Tshakapesh Institute, who ensured that the Innu

culture, traditions and legends of these people were respected. They helped the developers by advising and guiding which versions of the story to put forward.

In an interview with Unreal Engine, game designer Francis Rufiange offers a local perspective: "Our heritage as a French Canadian Studio definitely made *Two Falls (Nishu Takuatshina)* the right story to tell for us. Many of us grew up here and learned in school about the fascinating stories of the first settlers arriving in Canada, with *coureurs des bois* — fur traders — surviving long and arduous journeys in the wilderness. But we also learned, in much less detail unfortunately, about the tragedy of colonization and religious conversion."

Two Falls (Nishu Takuatshina) hopes to encourage more dialogue about reconciliation by providing a unique opportunity for accessibility to their stories in an educational setting. "We really want to work with schools to integrate it into the curriculum so that teachers can use it to spark conversation with the students," says the game's general director Kim Berthiaume.

→ *Two Falls (Nishu Takuatshina)* is available now on Steam and on the Epic Games store. The game is coming to consoles in 2025.



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