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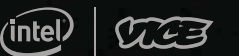
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# The TERRY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS



Monkeys in Fujikawaguchiko-machi, Japan, perform Kabuki theater, their version of which includes sunglasses and lots of power struts and backflips. Photos by Ed Zipco.

VOLUME 18 NUMBER 6

Cover by Tim Freccia

<b>BOVINE KAMPF</b> Swiss Cow Fights Are Our New Favorite Sport . . . . .	<b>TRINKETS OF TERROR</b> Osama bin Laden Collectibles Are Where It's At . . . . .
<b>SERBIA NEEDS WOMEN</b> And to Lay Off the Sauce . . . . .	<b>THE WEIRD OLYMPICS</b> Documenting Sochi's Makeover for the XXII Winter Games . . . . .
<b>GENOCIDAL GRAFFITI</b> Dutch Soldiers Poked Fun at the Srebrenica Massacre with Stupid Doodles . . . . .	<b>RELATIONSHIP STORY</b> . . . . .
<b>ABRACADABRA INSURANCE</b> Magicians Need Coverage Too . . . . .	<b>HIDING THE HORROR</b> Concealing—and Beating—a Fear of Spiders . . . . .
<b>TINKLE TWEAKING</b> Extracting Methamphetamine from Urine Is Fun . . . . .	<b>SOFEX WAS SO-SO</b> Experiencing the Military-Industrial Complex's Trade Show . . . . .
<b>OVUM EASY, PLEASE</b> Is Vaginal Discharge the Breakfast of Champions? . . . . .	<b>THE HEART OF BLEAKNESS</b> Sifting Through the Wreckage of Congo's Conflict Economy . . . . .
<b>ENTER THE DRAGON</b> The Intriguing Genitalia of Fantasy Creatures and the People Who Love Them . . . . .	<b>HIGH SCHOOL RIPPER</b> Puro Instinct's Guitarist Does Her Biology Homework Backstage . . . . .



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TABLE OF CONTENTS



The Kabuki monkeys are usually dressed in immaculate kimonos, but this one is in a monkey suit, which is both hilarious and very troubling.

Masthead .....	20	The Cute Show Page! .....	126
Employees .....	25	Skinema .....	128
DOs & DON'Ts .....	58	Sheppard's Video-Game Pie .....	130
Fashion: Happy Hanami! .....	66	Reviews .....	134
Fashion: Suicide Practice .....	76	Stockists .....	142
Toupee: Bald at the Zoo .....	122	Bob Odenkirk's Page .....	145
The Learnin' Corner .....	124	Johnny Ryan's Page .....	146

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# PUNK ROCK.

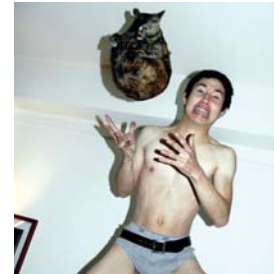


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**PATRICK TSAI**

Patrick Tsai has never taken a picture that hasn't made us go "Awwwwwwwww." We first came across his work back when he was one half of My Little Dead Dick—our all-time favorite pair of photographic lovers. After going to school in New York, Patrick moved to his ancestral homeland of Taiwan, making his living writing for a local English-language kids' show about a mad scientist. Ummm, what else? He told us the best thing about Taiwan is all the delicious fruit, but to watch out for the purple dragon fruit because it makes your poop purple, which is sound advice. For this issue, Patrick shot his friends having a picnic on the last day of *hanami*, the Japanese cherry blossom festival.

See HAPPY HANAMI!, page 66



**TAO LIN**

Tao Lin is that author you've got an opinion about that we don't want to hear. Tao's written three novels, a short-story collection, and two books of poetry. He also runs a small press called Muumuu House, is working on some sort of film project with Megan Boyle, and maintains a consistent online presence, which we've come to realize is the most grueling, thankless work of all. When we asked him who he saw playing the characters Haley Joel Osment and Dakota Fanning in the film version of his last novel, *Richard Yates*, he said, "Jesse Eisenberg and Nicolas Cage." When we asked who would play him, he said, "Sasha Grey." Tao lives in [bum bum babbbh] Brooklyn.

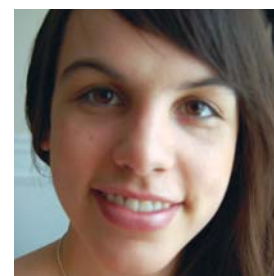
See RELATIONSHIP STORY, page 90



**MARTIN PARR**

Martin Parr is one of Britain's best-known photographers and one of the longest-standing members of Magnum Photos, probably the best photo agency in the galaxy. But that's not why we love him. Well, it's largely why we love him, but we really, *really* love him because he is one of Old Blighty's most celebrated collectors of random cultural ephemera. To see his flat full of garbage from the last 30 years of humans making garbage would bring a tear to any pack rat's eye, but his *pièce de résistance* is his collection of memorabilia featuring and inspired by Al Qaeda mastermind Osama bin Laden (RIP). When we heard the news that the old goat had been shot in the face, Martin was the first man we called.

See TRINKETS OF TERROR, page 52



**KARA CRABB**

Kara grew up in Windsor, Ontario, which is right across the river from Detroit. Not only is Windsor economically tied to that sinking brick of the American car industry, but it's also upwind, so it lives under a semipermanent brown fog from Michigan's refineries. We don't know what kind of effect it has on the average human, but it has made Kara's brain work in a way that makes us think she is either a full-bore genius or a potential serial killer. Great example: When we started work on this issue she told us she wanted to determine whether or not cervical mucus could be cooked and eaten like eggs. After dry-heaving for several minutes, we asked her how the question had come up. She said, "Well, it kinda looks like eggs."

See OVUM EASY, PLEASE, page 40



**TIM FRECCIA**

Tim Freccia got his start in the 1980s taking pictures for Karl Lagerfeld, but it wasn't long before he shifted gears from fashion houses to conflict zones. Since then he's been extracting beautiful, haunting images from some of the world's most chaotic places. We went with him to survey the extremely dodgy technological-minerals trade in the wilds of eastern Congo, where we've heard the locals sincerely believe that Tim is a ghost. We don't know if playing into that belief is ethically sound, but there's something comforting about trekking through the jungle in the dead of night with a guy who has not only repeatedly escaped death, but who has also produced go-go records and played guitar with D.O.A.

See THE HEART OF BLEAKNESS, page 112



1



4



2



3



5



6

# BOVINE KAMPF

Swiss Cow Fights Are Our New Favorite Sport

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY VICE STAFF

Aproz lies in a remote mountain region in southwest Switzerland. It's a place where the local population feverishly anticipates heavyweight bouts between contestants with names like Dynamite and Tyson. These 1,400-pound gladiators aren't very dangerous under normal conditions. But once a

week during the spring the town's heartiest cows (as in udders, not balls) are marked up with white numbers, led to a dusty circle surrounded by bleachers, and literally lock horns in one of the slowest forms of combat we have ever witnessed. It's like watching two ancient bag ladies with all-titanium joints fight over a grocery cart full of aluminum cans underwater (i.e., very funny but also kind of sad). Outside the ring, vast quantities of dry white wine are chugged by fans, who loyally attend every Sunday until the national finals in the fall. Only then can the citizens of Aproz sleep soundly, knowing that a new queen of the herd has been crowned. *VICE*

1 To get things moooving along, officials known as rabatteurs grab combatants by their collars and butt their heads together. Then this happens. The cows are Eringers, a breed known for its aggressive tendencies.

2 The villagers take cow fights almost as seriously as their boozing.

3 The cows' workout routine consists of eating grass and pooping.

4 Spectators trickle in throughout the day, with attendance reaching as high as 14,000.

5 Unlike bullfights, injuries are rare in cow combat. Sometimes a horn pierces the skin of an opposing cow, but this usually results in only a superficial wound.

6 The winning cow, Manhattan, with her loving breeder and his family. As prize money he gets a cowbell and a leather strap worth 500 Swiss francs, not to mention all the warrior milk he can drink.



A Serbian dad carrying the flame for old Yugoslavia.

## SERBIA NEEDS WOMEN

*And to Lay Off the Sauce*

BY BABY BALLS

PHOTO BY  
CLAIRE MACDONALD

The breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia hit Serbia a little hard. Slovenia made off with the money (fuckin' bitch), Bosnia got most of the heavy industry, Croatia and Montenegro took the seaside, and Kosovo got something or other that Serbs seem to find important. And like your former friend who broke into his ex's apartment after being dumped and carved up her mattress with a kitchen knife, Serbia didn't exactly handle it well. Keep in mind this is a country where the term *week-end warrior* refers to men in the 90s who punched the clock on Friday afternoon then hopped on a paramilitary APC bound for the freefire rape markets of Bosnia. They also started hitting the bottle.

I've been in Belgrade for less than a week. Already my skin's turned a pale, cheese-ly shade of yellow, my gut's grown an inch of diameter, and last night I pushed the back of my teeth with my tongue and one of them went *creeeeeeeek* forward. It is the unhealthiest I have felt in my entire life, and I'm just barely keeping up with the locals.

Serbia's only 25th in Europe in terms of per capita alcohol consumption, but according to local researchers almost half the country drinks daily and one-sixth of the population are alcoholics (and this is by Serbian standards).

You don't see the kind of hilarious fall-down drunks here that Poland and Russia provide for the internet, just men who've been slowly basting themselves in brandy for the past 15 years. Which is actually worse. I'd *rather* watch old guys laugh and slip in each other's barf than hang out in a nightclub while men with faces a decade older than their bodies sit and sullenly do shots until seven in the morning.

"There's two different kinds of martyr complexes you have to understand here," our translator Iva told me while we looked at the uncleared ruins of the Serbian army headquarters blown apart in the NATO bombing 12 years ago. "Bosnians are into sorrow, like emotional sadness, whereas Serbs really relish the idea of being hurt and showing off their wounds."

Serbia's history has provided them plenty to be sore about, but the past two decades have been real pay dirt. Our working days here start around 10. Which means our drinking days start around 11 (per interview subjects' request). Which means scabs are fully peeled by noon and we're being buttonholed about how America forced the breakup of Yugoslavia to suppress Serbian workers' rights and how the '92-'95 Bosnian war was a proxy conflict between American and French intelligence services and how the NATO bombing was designed to make Serbia dependent on Western corporate interests. All of which sounds like classic paranoid drunk talk until you consider that most of the left-leaning journalists we've met are being paid by the National Endowment for Democracy (CIA) and our fixer won't shut up about the apple pie he was once baked by his friend from the "Company" (also CIA).

Anyway, it's fun to blame the country's booze blues on international politics, but demographics is the real thinking man's game, and right now Serbia's shooting bricks. The birth rate has been plummeting since the 60s, and the death rate is a taint hair behind Russia's. Worst of all, they're low on ladies.

Belgrade's ratio of guys to girls is comparable to a college bar with a bad door policy, but once you get out in the sticks it's a full-on sausage party. The problem in most towns is that while all kids want to get the fuck out, only the girls are able to navigate Serbia's horrendous economy (20 percent unemployment as of April) and make it to the cities, while the dudes are left watering the cows. I visited a farming village in southern Serbia (the historical seedbed of rabid Serbian nationalism and not the kind of place you want to drive a car with Albanian plates) where the shortage of unwed women is so dire there are charities who pay Albanian women 500 euros to drive up and marry one of the locals. It's basically animal husbandry for people. *WTF*

To get more depressed by Serbia watch The VICE Guide to the Balkans, starting in August on VBS.TV.

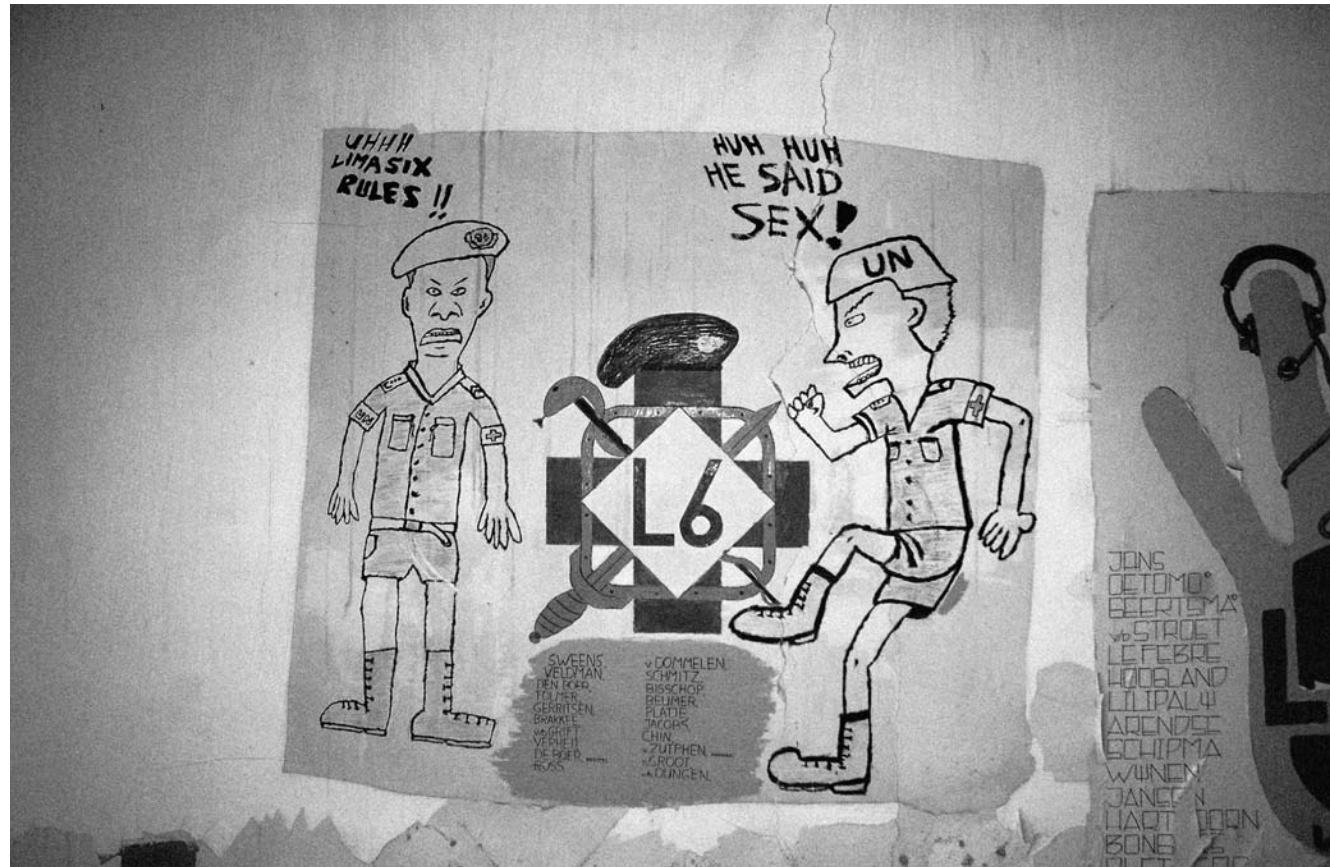


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GENUINE SINCE 1937



Unit mascots for Lima 6, one of the rotations of Dutch UN soldiers in charge of maintaining the "safe zone" in Srebrenica. We can only imagine the pit this must carve in Mike Judge's stomach.

## GENOCIDAL GRAFFITI

*Dutch Soldiers Poked Fun at the Srebrenica Massacre with Stupid Doodles*

WORDS AND  
PHOTOS BY  
GIACOMO COSUA

In July 1995, Serb forces overtook the town of Srebrenica, Bosnia, and killed more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslims. It was the most horrific instance of mass murder in Europe since the end of World War II. Even more troubling, the region was a designated "safe area" supposedly under the protection of the UN. There are untold questions about the atrocity that might finally be answered with the apprehension of Ratko Mladić, the commander of the Serbian military at the time of the massacre and, until a day before we went to press, the most wanted fugitive war criminal on earth.

Contributing to the horror of the situation was the understaffed UN Protection Force, which consisted of a 400-strong Dutch battalion known as DUTCHBAT. They were ordered to refrain from firing their weapons unless fired upon, despite the UN previously describing the situation in Srebrenica as a "slow-motion process of genocide."

In 2002, the entire Dutch cabinet resigned after an investigation by the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation found top Dutch officials and NATO

negligent for failing to prevent the slaughter. Four years later, a subsequent Dutch government awarded service medals to veterans of the Srebrenica operation, precipitating protests in the Netherlands and Bosnia.

Whether the Dutch soldiers deserve blame or honors, they left their mark in the form of vicious and repulsive graffiti that is undoubtedly one of contemporary history's greatest eyesores. Today the drawings can still be seen at the former battery factory that served as the battalion's headquarters from 1994 to 1995 (and now houses the Srebrenica Genocide Memorial). The illustrations shed light on the soldiers' attitudes toward those they were assigned to protect: crude drawings and captions that make fun of the situation in a way that makes us want to hunt down the responsible parties and chop their hands off with a rusty hacksaw dipped in gasoline and dog shit.

Perhaps the most telling inscription can be found scribbled above the entrance: the words *Sex Bar*, along with an arrow pointing up the adjacent staircase. To put things into perspective, an estimated 20,000 rapes occurred in Bosnia during the conflict.

The horrors of Srebrenica can never be rectified, but we can present photographs of these inexcusable defacements to serve as a painful reminder of the sins of an era that should never be relived.

*If you happen to be in Venice, Italy, before June 15, you can check out the following photos and more at Giacomo's exhibition "Buongiorno Bosnia" at the Biblioteca Civica. For more information, visit [www.cosua.it/giacomo](http://www.cosua.it/giacomo).*

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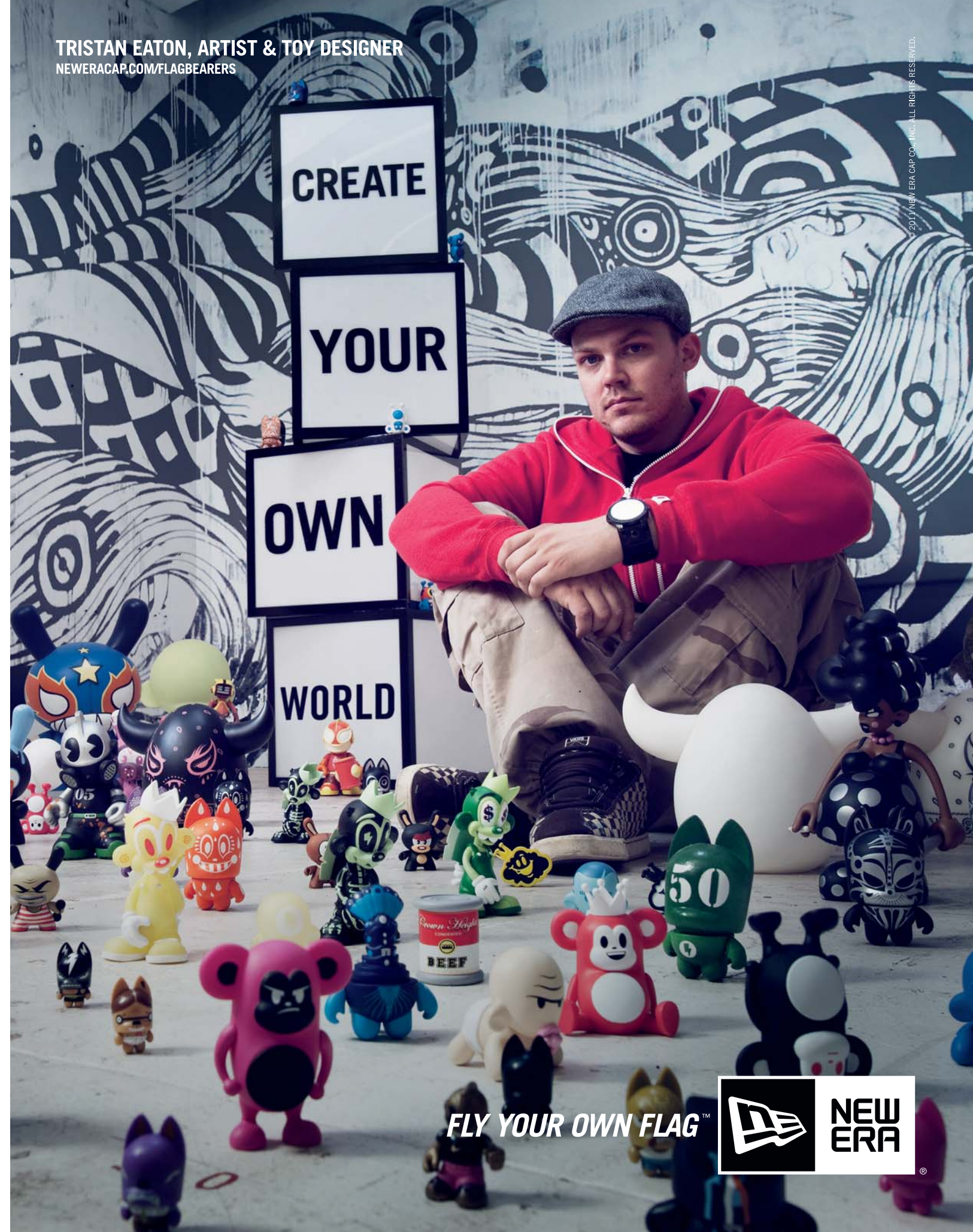




A hand-drawn calendar for the back half of 1994 with classic mechanics' pinup. During this period Srebrenica was under full-blown siege by Serbian forces and receiving supplies for its 40,000-odd residents on an airdrop-by-airdrop basis.



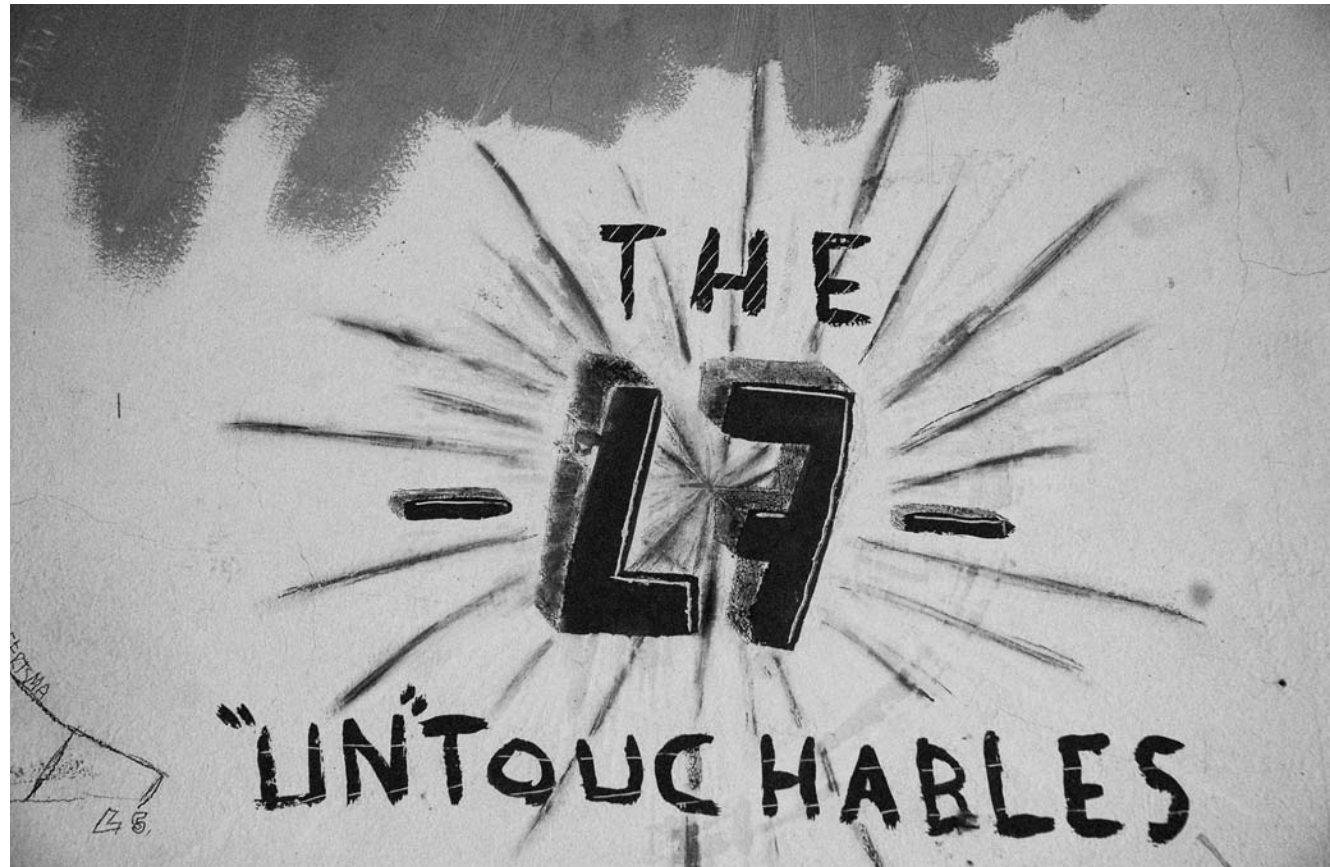
TRISTAN EATON, ARTIST & TOY DESIGNER  
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"Lima 7" was the designation for the last rotation of Dutch soldiers who were supposed to be safeguarding Srebrenica from exactly the type of atrocities that went down there in 1995. Why they would need to declare themselves "UNTouchable" we don't like thinking about.



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 PORTRAIT BY THEA O'CONNOR  
 ILLUSTRATIONS BY BOBBY N.

*If you can get past the ridiculous goatees and rabbits constantly shitting in your top hat, being a magician doesn't seem like such a horrible gig. The hours are flexible, donning a velvety cape commands a certain amount of mystique, and it doesn't take much convincing to make your penis disappear inside a failed-model-cum-assistant's vagina (we don't mean to be sexist, but when's the last time you saw a lady magician?). But like most things in life, it's just not that simple. There's a myriad of specialized insurance policies that magicians must purchase in order to protect themselves against audience members' medical bills and nasty lawsuits. Sydney-based magician and "bizarrist" Terence Brabazon knows all about the real-world dangers of lying to people while holding a wand. Here Terence reveals his greatest secrets for making lawyers and debt-collecting doctors vanish into thin air.*



### PUBLIC LIABILITY

During a magic show, I have general public liability for anyone onstage or in the room. The coverage is very particular, though. For instance, I'm covered if a card flicks out and stabs someone in the eye. I've never heard of that happening, but I know of one guy who got stuck with \$1.2 billion worth of damage because some chick got a paper cut during a card trick and contracted tetanus. The magician told the judge, "She must have gone home and rubbed rust into the cut." The judge replied, "You lie and cheat for a living. Why would I trust your testimony now?"



### BLOCKHEAD

My insurance provider covers mishaps related to driving sharp objects into my face with a hammer, but it comes with strict stipulations. It took a good three months to work out an agreement that didn't drive my premiums through the roof, and it did come in handy once when I messed up my blockhead trick. Now, if I want to shove something up my nose, like a nail or an ice pick, it can only be up to five inches long. I make a little etching at the five-inch mark of the object so I don't accidentally stab my brain and kill myself.



### EATING INEDIBLE THINGS

I can't do anything that messes with my circulatory system. If I feel like munching on some glass, it has to be clear. If it's colored or frosted, that's a big no-no because the chemicals they use to color it can enter my bloodstream. As for razor blades, bright steel is OK, but stainless isn't. There are loads of weird restrictions on what sorts of things are OK to jam down one's throat.

### MAKING OBJECTS VANISH

I won't perform any trick that could potentially result in losing or damaging an audience member's personal property. I know a magician who was hired for a gig on a boat. He attempted to make someone's engagement ring disappear, but the trick malfunctioned. He was stuck on that boat in the middle of Sydney Harbor saying, "Holy shit! That just went over the side." It was an \$18,000 ring. He just handed over his business card and said, "Please contact my insurer." If they didn't cancel him after that, I'm sure his premium went through the roof.



### FIRE BREATHING


I've got personal health coverage through a company that insures magicians and clowns. But like all types of insurance, there are loopholes and stipulations that can screw you. Take fire breathing, for instance. They won't cover anyone with facial hair, and in my case I'm uninsurable due to a condition called "fire lung." The affliction is unique to fire-eaters or fire-breathers because the trick requires holding oxidized kerosene in your mouth. When you inhale, some of the gas is too heavy to come out. So it collects, and you end up with a layer of flammable residue in your lungs. I have two millimeters of that junk inside my chest right now. I always say to people, "Have you ever seen a 70-year-old fire-breather?" There's a reason.

### PICKPOCKETING

I won't pick pockets anymore either. I've had problems with people trying to scam me, saying I stole their wallets. There are also cases of magicians making an audience member's fake Rolex disappear, just to have them bring it back and say, "Mine was a real one." Things like that put you in court—it's happened to three guys I know. One stole the judge's watch while sitting in the witness box. The judge said, "Explain how you did it," and he replied, "Very simple. I make the watch vanish and look—it's here! Is this yours? I don't have another watch. It's that simple." The judge dismissed the case and penalized the person who initiated the suit.



### HYPNOSIS

I also have hypnosis insurance. If a volunteer has a severe overreaction that causes mental instability, I'm covered. It's a fairly common skit: I tell a volunteer to regress to the age of six. On one occasion I neglected to set up a safety, which involves saying something like, "You're going to a happy place." As a result, the girl I hypnotized relived her sexual abuse onstage in front of a bunch of strangers. The entire fucking audience was in shock. Her family was sitting right in the front row. I actually think the person who abused her was there, because she was calling out her dad's name. I was like, "Oh fuck! That better not be her dad right there!" I pulled her back out quickly and told her that she was going to forget everything that had occurred. Then I gave her the number of a good hypnotherapist. 

# TINKLE TWEAKING

*Extracting Methamphetamine from Urine Is Fun*

WORDS AND PHOTO BY DR. NEPHROS OURON



Artistic rendition of a methamphetamine urine lab.

In 1669, the German alchemist Hennig Brandt furtively heated a retort containing the extract of 1,453 gallons of putrescent urine (alchemically coded “□”). He watched as it transformed into a series of salts, oils, and assorted vapors, which preceded a curious substance that luminously fell from the retort’s mouth into a pool of water.

Brandt had produced white phosphorous, a hitherto undiscovered chemical element present in (almost) every living organism and the first to be isolated since antiquity. From this golden stream came a discovery that would catalyze the development of modern chemistry, yet today’s alchemists who extract the psychostimulant essences of their urine are subject to scorn and imprisonment. Where did we lose our way?

It is now understood that human urine contains a complex assortment of amino acids, urea, creatinine, and many other compounds—but the body also employs urine to excrete the metabolic byproducts of many drugs we ingest and biosynthesize on a daily basis. Aspirin, caffeine, cocaine, and methamphetamine all find their way into our urine, sometimes unchanged, other times conjugated and rendered inactive, and on some occasions biotransformed into distinct pharmacological entities called active metabolites.

Though alchemists believed the ultimate chemical feat to be the production of gold from urine, pharmaceutical companies have developed a technique for isolating human chorionic gonadotropin—a hormone 3,000 times more valuable than gold—from the urine of pregnant women. On average, an expecting mother passes more than \$15,000 worth of the substance each day, which Organon and other pharmaceutical companies hungrily collect and purify to be sold under brand names like Pregnyl. It has been hailed as a wonder drug for dieters and anabolic-steroid users who wish to avoid the plight of testicular atrophy. Drugs like Pregnyl are considered neither repugnant nor desperate but technological feats, so why the double standard shaming those who extract methamphetamine from their urine?

As a species, the collective mark of our urinary metabolites is so great that it has begun to alter the global hydrosphere. In 2005, a scientific paper confirmed the presence of the cocaine metabolite benzoylecgonine in Italy’s Po River, concentrations of which were used to estimate the number of cocaine users surrounding the river’s basin. In the years since, the urinary metabolites of stimulants, anabolic steroids, psychedelics, and opioids have been detected in river sediment and urban water systems internationally—from morphine in the Ebro River to bromazepam in the Rhine to the great ciproflaxin rivers of India. The levels of pharmacopollutants in our environment are so great that archaeologists will one day examine sedimentary layers of pharmaceutical stone, banded chronologically with the epochs of medicinal chemistry. The quantities of ritalinic acid, amphetamine, and paraxanthene excreted in the bathrooms of a typical college library during exam week alone would be enough to stimulate a small and extremely tired village, yet the metabolic byproducts are wasted out of fear and ignorance.

This brings us to the humble tinkle tweaker, modern disciples of Hennig Brandt who reconsume their crystalline essences in ourboric infinitude out of a love for the Earth. Let us learn from them. In 2005, recycling-depot employee Daniel Zeiszler immolated in an act of selfless ecological compassion when he spilled solvent on his arm and then accidentally lit himself on fire with a cigarette

while extracting methamphetamine from his urine in a San Francisco hotel room. A small foible, which should have been met with wry smiles and aloe-vera gel, was received with derision and a five-month prison sentence: Another Galileo faces the Roman inquisition.


In 2007, police in Minnesota broke into a storage locker suspected of housing a meth lab to find 50 one-gallon jugs of urine used for methamphetamine extraction, or so they claimed (the officers on the scene were too disgusted to collect the pee for forensic analysis). The technique has become popular enough for the Meth Awareness and Prevention Project of South Dakota to advise, “Anyone who notices containers of a yellow liquid in someone’s garage, refrigerator, or property should be wary of the biological and chemical hazards, as well as the potential danger of dealing with a tweaker.” And the Colorado Department of Health reports, “We have performed activities in residences containing dozens upon dozens of two-liter soft drink bottles filled with urine waiting to be processed. In such labs it would not be uncommon to find as much as 100 liters of stored urine.” Such accounts are a testament, I say, to the tenacity of the human spirit.

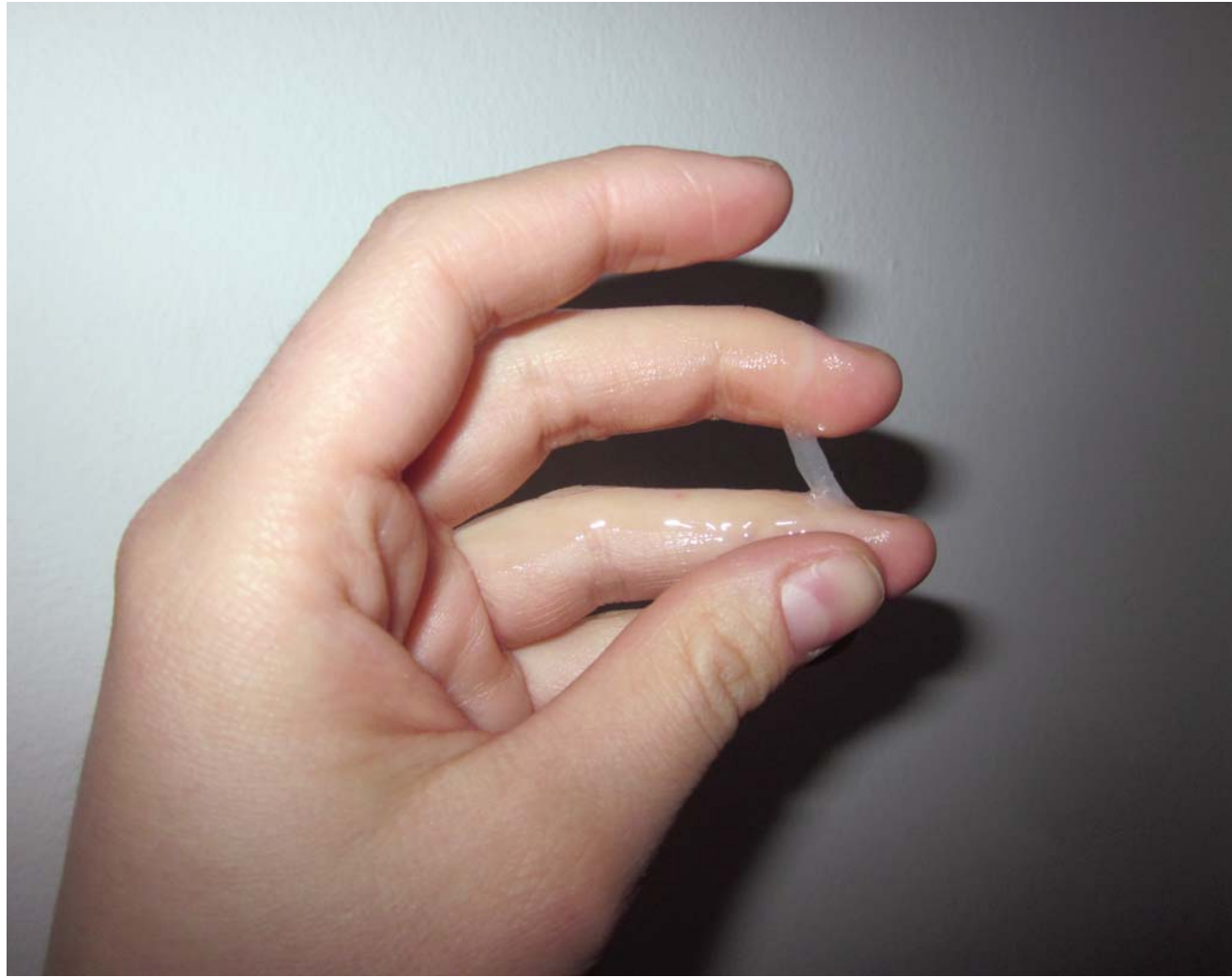
I called a young chemistry prodigy to discuss his experience of being caught extracting methamphetamine from his liquid waste:

“I wasn’t running a specialist urine lab or anything like that, my interest was truly scientific. But years ago I was hospitalized for overdosing on barbiturates, and some crow-begotten, rat-bastard guttercunt of a paramedic narced me for possession. His tip-off caused filth to raid my lab, and the urine-extraction project was fouled before I got through the reaction and could hydrolyze the goodies. The look on the pigs’ faces when, among the evidentiary photos of my glassware and reagents, they found jugs containing gallon after gallon of morphine piss almost compensated for the trauma of being forced to explain what a glucuronide conjugate is to a bunch of unthinking swine. To add to the injustice, I was already prescribed opiates, so I was merely regenerating a drug that I had obtained legally. They were so confused by my lab that they thought I was manufacturing chemical weapons and had the bomb squad blow up all of the urine jugs. No shit.”

Though the extraction of many drugs is derided as desperate and depraved, the extracting of the above chemicals (methamphetamine particularly) from human urine is actually quite efficient. A single dose of meth is eliminated over the course of 48 hours and unchanged quantities of enantiopure S-isomer (which is produced in the classic reduction of pseudoephedrine-containing cold medicines) have been found to be as high as 43 percent, with 6.4 percent metabolized to amphetamine, and a fraction of a percent converted to p-hydroxymethamphetamine. With the current trends leading to the increased monitoring of pseudoephedrine-containing remedies and reducing agents such as red phosphorous, the need for piss labs is greater than ever. Dare we shame those who conserve our planet’s finite resources?

To bring things full circle, next time you are extracting methamphetamine from your urine, why not isolate some white phosphorous as well, follow that with a quick allotrope conversion, and use it in your next pseudoephedrine reduction?

Stand tall, tinkle tweaker, Hennig Brandt would be proud. 



Cervical mucus or egg whites? Does it even matter?

## OVUM EASY, PLEASE

*Is Vaginal Discharge the Breakfast of Champions?*

WORDS AND PHOTOS  
BY KARA CRABB

Those blessed with a vagina or a girlfriend with functioning genitals may be aware that a female's reproductive organs occasionally excrete a gloppy white fluid.

The technical term for this substance is "cervical mucus," and it has the consistency and appearance of egg whites. It got me thinking: Is girl gravy the human equivalent of the stuff surrounding a chicken yolk? And if so, is it edible? As far as I could tell, there have been no serious scientific inquiries to resolve this question. The only way to find out was to collect samples of my own ooze and throw it into a frying pan.

A few days later it occurred to me that it might be wise to seek the advice of some sort of expert before

beginning my experiment. Not wanting to pay anyone (or look them in the face while asking them questions about this), I sent an inquiry to a "medical expert" at the always-informative beinggirl.com:

*On Feb 17, 2011, at 9:10 PM,*

*Question:*

*I was just reading about albumen, aka egg whites, because when I'm ovulating I swear to God egg whites come out of my vagina. Is it pretty much the same thing?*

*Thanks,  
hymenator*

*Sun, 6 Mar 2011 23:14:38 -0500*

*Re: Ask Iris*

*No, that doesn't happen. It is discharge leaving.*

*Your Beinggirl Expert Panel*

Fuck you, Iris! She obviously doesn't know shit when it comes to cooking cervical mucus, and I certainly

# KR3W

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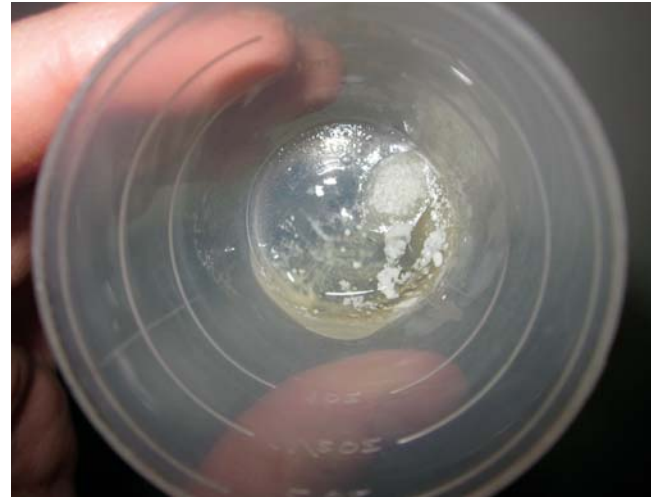
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Do you like ketchup on your vaginal discharge?



Mmmmmmm.



I prefer my bodily fluids well done.



I hope my vagina doesn't taste like this stuff.

wasn't about to let a virtual gynecologist stomp all over my dreams. Her answer only steeled my desire to complete this challenge, and for weeks I waited and patiently collected my secretions. I hypothesized that a month's worth of bream cream would equal roughly one serving of scrambled eggs.

The process, as expected, was demanding, extensive, and completely disgusting. At times I grew weary and disheartened because, day after day, my panties were spotless. During the third week of March, in the middle of a phone interview with a potential employer, my vagina had a eureka moment, and I was able to harvest a respectable yield. With the phone nestled between my shoulder and neck, I flung the entire mess into a sealed plastic container and placed it in the fridge.

A few weeks later I suffered a devastating setback when I went to check on the mucus. Seconds after opening the container my entire kitchen immediately reeked of an unholy mixture of rotting compost and dirty belly buttons. I was bummed to discover that cervical mucus has a shelf life. But, hey, guess what else does? Eggs!

I was much more careful with batch *numero dos* of *huevos vabeena*. The fact that I was visiting my parents at the time made it a bit of a challenge, but I persevered. I hid my cervical mucus at the bottom of my closet in my old bedroom, and when my folks were asleep I tiptoed to the kitchen to oil a pan and heat it up. I felt nervous and guilty, but also weirdly hungry.

When I dropped my goo into my mom's frying pan, it first shriveled up into a tiny ball. I pressed it with a spatula, which caused it to bubble, hiss, and snap. The bubbles were huge; it reminded me more of gelatin than egg whites. Then I sprinkled some sea salt on the mess but there was no reaction, so I slid it out of the pan and onto a plate.

By this point I had lost my appetite and procrastinated on the inevitable taste test for a while, but eventually thought, "My vaginal discharge isn't going to eat itself," and slid it into my mouth. Oddly enough, it tasted like salty molasses. It wasn't sweet or sticky, but it was... baky? So, yeah, there you have it. Cervical mucus may look like eggs, but it fries up really weird and tastes like molasses. *WCS*



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The Anthro-Dragoness

## ENTER THE DRAGON

*The Intriguing Genitalia of Fantasy Creatures and the People Who Love Them*

BY KARLEY SCIORTINO

PHOTOS COURTESY OF  
BAD DRAGON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
NARSE

**B**ad Dragon is a company that designs and manufactures fantasy adult toys in the most literal sense imaginable: giant sea monster cocks, scaly dragon-vagina Fleshlights, and neon orca penises that ejaculate mock cum, to name a few. This might seem strange to some people, but many of us have dreamed of having sex with things that

don't exist in reality. Who hasn't fantasized about giving head to Trent from *Daria* or jerked off to Jessica Rabbit? By comparison, simulated dragon sex isn't such a huge leap.

A guy known as Varka founded Bad Dragon in 2007 when he began crafting dragon dildos in his college dorm room in Scotland. Today, the operation sells hundreds of toys a month to customers around the world, making it possible to ream and be reamed by dragons, aliens, horses, snakes, aquatic anthropomorphic creatures with tentacles, and so on. Each toy is displayed on Bad Dragon's website ([bad-dragon.com](http://bad-dragon.com)) next to an extremely detailed illustration of the creature it was



THE TELLY

**VZ** VONZIPPER



Elden the Faerie Dragon

modeled after and a lengthy description of the creature's supposed qualities and interests. Some of my favorites include Razor the Doberman—a bisexual and bipedal dog who's the captain of his school's soccer and basketball teams and moonlights as a stripper—and David the Werewolf, who wears a jean jacket and is endowed with some very serious testicles.

All of Bad Dragon's toys are cast by hand, which means clients can custom order them in almost any size, color, and firmness. The toys are quite pricy, ranging from \$60 to over \$200, but, according to the overwhelmingly positive feedback on the website's forums, they're well worth it.

The people who purchase these fantastic fucksticks are furies, gamers, toonophiliacs, and fantasy freaks. I spoke with Varka, who now serves as the company's CEO, and two of Bad Dragon's biggest fans to find out what makes mythical cock so hot.

**VICE:** Why dragon dildos?

**Varka:** I was at university, and I started looking at sex toys to see what was available. I realized that there weren't any well-made toys that catered to fantasy fetishes. Recently there's been the *Avatar*-Fleshlight crossover thing and some other stuff like *Twilight* sex toys, but back when I started, the options sucked.

**Do you wish dragons existed so they could fuck you with their massive scaly dongos?**

I have an interest in dragons and fantasy creatures, but I would define what I'm sexually interested in as "world building." The main thing about role-playing games—like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Mass Effect*—is that you take on a persona of your own and live vicariously through that alter ego's actions. You can create anything—a new world.

**Who is your primary clientele?**

The biggest single identifiable group is the furry fandom, but there are a wide variety of people who take an interest in our stuff. You'd be surprised how many find us through the darker side of *World of Warcraft*. But the common denominator between our buyers is that they find fantasy and nonhuman sex really hot.

**When I first looked at the site, I was surprised that you mainly sell cock-shaped toys. Fantasy sex, to me, seems like something that mostly guys would be into.**

The typical gender split we see in our orders is about 70 percent male and 30 percent female. We get a surprising number of female customers coming out of the woodwork and getting really excited that they can get a miniature hot-pink sea-dragon cock. We've also had quite a few male customers say, "I'm straight, but I like things in my butt."







David the Werewolf

**How do you decide which characters get the Bad Dragon treatment?**

Sometimes a movie or a game will come out with a character that makes us collectively say, "Oh God, that's hot. We really want that." We look for inspiration in pop culture to see what people are into. For example, there are a couple characters in the *Mass Effect* games that people have gone absolutely crazy over. Of course, you never get to see what any of these characters' cocks look like, so really we have this artistic license to create whatever we want. That's what makes it so fun!

**I noticed that fans also submit their schematics and prototypes on the forums.**

Since the beginning we've encouraged people to come forward with their ideas and work on them together on our forums, and if there's a lot of support for a specific idea then we'll make it.

**Can you tell me about that cum lube you make?**

The lube is hilarious. If you look at the fan art of all these characters, it's full of idealized fantasy sex with buckets of spunk everywhere, cocks as big as thighs, and screaming. I decided it would be fun to make the lube look *exactly* like cum to heighten the fantasy. I have a photo of a cum arc shooting out of a toy that must be five or six feet high.

**Are you surprised that your toys are so popular?**

Not really. If you have something that's hot but far outside the normal constraints of physicality, then people are going to jump all over it. What makes these characters so appealing is that we know so much yet so little about them. If you look into sci-fi, there are many cases in which you have some pretty raunchy alien sex going on, and the main reason it's so interesting is because it's so different yet so similar.

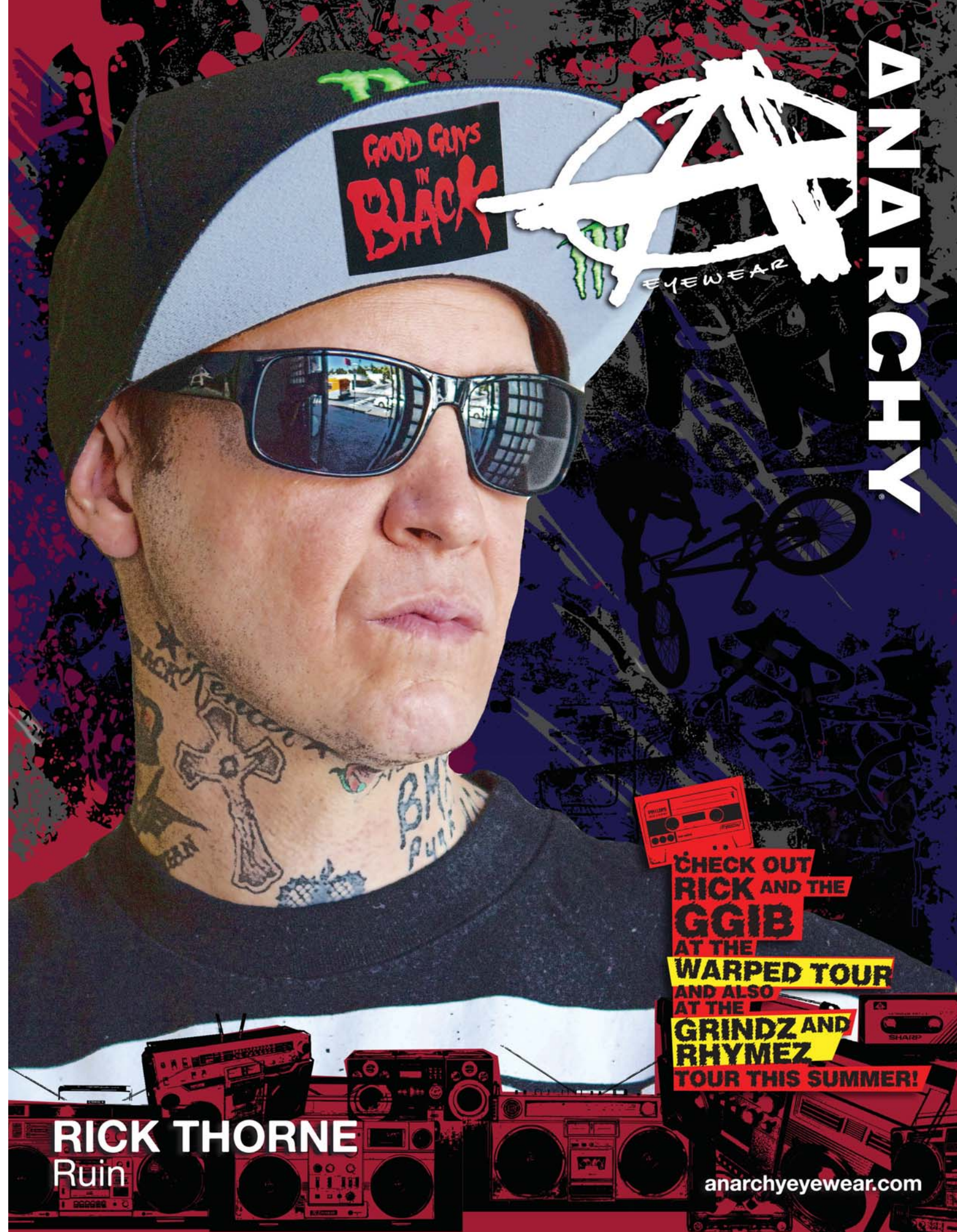
**ALEXA, 19, lives in Las Vegas and is a college student studying cartoon animation.**

**VICE: What is your favorite way to use your toys?**

Alexa: Since I have two Dukes [a handsome black dragon who is also "CEO of an international modeling firm by day, adult entertainer by night," according to Bad Dragon's website], I love to double-penetrate myself. I'll keep going at it until I'm about to pass out from all the orgasms.

**How does sex with Bad Dragon toys compare with fucking a human?**

Despite how much of a kinky, fetish-loving, porn-watching lady I am, I'm a happy virgin! And I plan on staying this way, since I have no interest in people.

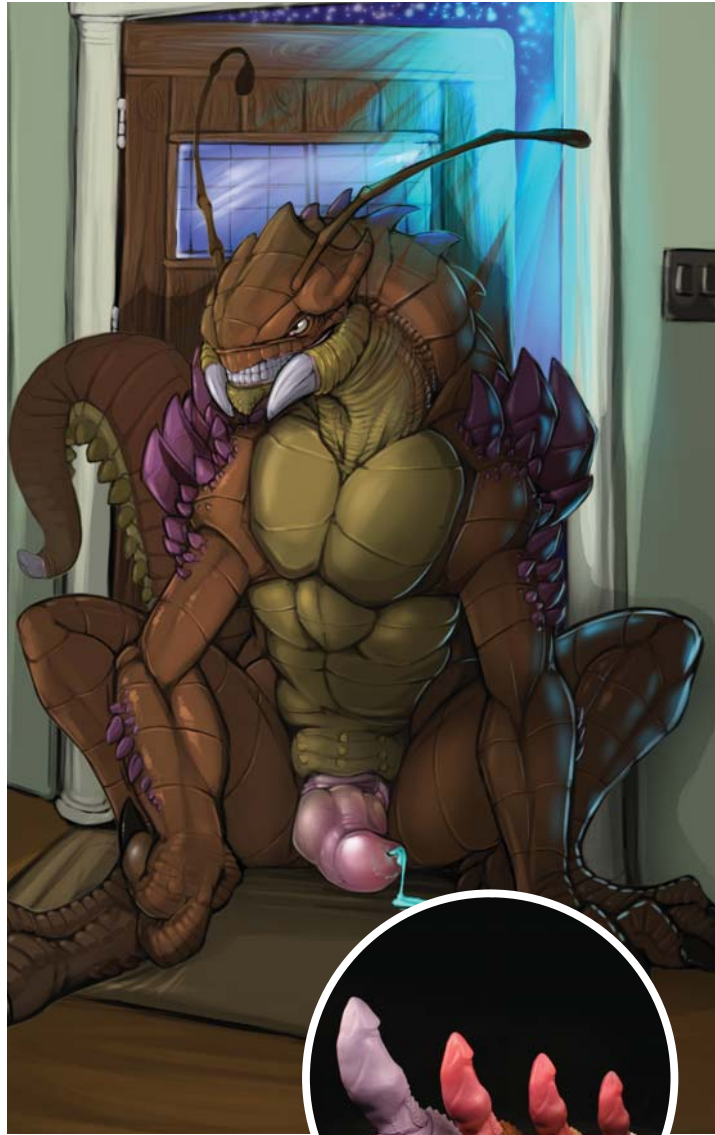


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Xar the Karabos

Why do you like fictional characters more than real people? With characters, you already know their personality and quirks. With people, you don't know what the hell they'll do or say, but the fictions can be however nice or vicious you want them to be in your own mind. Another thing for me is size. Perfect Cell, for instance, is at least seven feet tall and totally buff, which I find extremely sexy. In real life, a guy would have to be on fucked-up steroids to be that big, and that's just not hot. No one likes a pimply back or 'roid rage.

**"MASTERHERETIX," 33,** lives in Turkey and asked that his real name not be disclosed.

**VICE:** How many toys do you own, and what are they?  
**MasterHeretix:** I have five Bad Dragon toys: Chance the Stallion, Razor the Doberman, David the Werewolf, the Gryphon, and Mary the Mare. I also own a canine dildo from another site.

**Do you consider yourself a furry?**  
 Yes, I like anthropomorphic [aka yiffy] art, the community, and its acceptance. I love animals, and I enjoy that I can have another persona—someone I can portray in artwork and see do all these crazy shenanigans.

**Who is this persona?**  
 My furry persona, or "fursona," is an Australian shepherd dog. He's in anthro form, meaning that he has more human characteristics than dog. He's more or less like me, except more naive.

**Would you say the people who use Bad Dragon toys and frequent their forums are mainly furies?**  
 It's totally a mix. I have a partner who is not a furry, but he fucks his ass with a gryphon [a half-lion, half-eagle "king of beasts"] dick because he likes anal penetration, not because he wants to get fucked by a gryphon. He thinks gryphons are cool, though; they're his favorite creatures whenever we play *Heroes of Might and Magic III*.

**Is sleeping with a mythical creature a fantasy of yours?**  
 Totally! I mean, imagine it: You have a half-human, half-dog (or whatever tickles your fancy) with a nice hard cock wanting to fuck you. It's so dominant and feral and it follows its instincts. Raw, unbridled sex turns me on.

**Have you had any bad experiences with Bad Dragon toys?**  
 Back when I didn't know about enemas and preparing, I had a shitty toy experience—no pun intended—and needed to stop and run to the shower. Other than that, no.

**How does sex with Bad Dragon toys compare with human sex?**  
 It's just different. The toys have more texture, more feeling, and last as long as you need them to. My partner is seven inches long, but what if I'm craving something that's longer and thicker? I have my Chance for that. What if I want to be knotted? [This term refers to the base of a dog's penis, which is wider than the middle of the shaft and is sometimes called a "knot."] I have my Werewolf for that. It really all depends on what I want that day. *CS*

**Do you consider yourself a furry?**  
 No, but I consider myself a toonophile and a fictosexual, so I find cartoon characters and fictional characters to be fine, sexy beasts. Nonhuman creatures are just so beautifully exotic that I can't help but be attracted to them.

**What do you think about when you masturbate?**  
 I've fantasized about Pyramid Head from *Silent Hill*, General Grievous from *Star Wars*, and Bowser from the Mario Brothers games. The character I'd most love to have sex with is Perfect Cell from *Dragonball Z*. I regularly masturbate thinking about him panting and moaning above me as he fucks me mercilessly. It's getting me hot just thinking about it.

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# TRINKETS OF TERROR

*Osama bin Laden Collectibles Are Where It's At*

INTERVIEW BY ANDY CAPPER, PHOTOS BY MARTIN PARR

It's a well-known fact that VICE favorite Martin Parr is one of Britain's finest photographers. But few people are aware that he is also an avid collector of tacky memorabilia inspired by terrorists, dictators, and other nefarious characters. I also collect this kind of stuff, and learning of our mutual hobby made me feel less deviant for owning dozens of objects that depict monsters who specialize in mass murder.

Martin told me that last month, when it was announced that Navy SEALs had shot Osama bin Laden in the face and chucked his body into the ocean like a bearded bag of garbage, his reaction was the same as mine: We were instantly excited for all of the death-themed bin Laden merchandise that would soon appear on eBay. Listings for the new ephemera appeared within days—yet another testament to the incredible work ethic fostered by Chinese and Indian sweatshops. Of course, we both placed large orders.

After becoming aware of our mutual pastime, it seemed like God (or Allah, if you prefer) was almost forcing me to ask Martin to photograph some of his most prized pieces and find out why they mean so much to him.

**VICE:** When did you begin collecting all this, um...

**Martin Parr:** Political ephemera?

Yes.

I started with Margaret Thatcher stuff, and as time went on it accelerated. When the internet and eBay and everything really got going, it became a lot easier to find stuff.

My dad had a life-size cardboard cutout of Margaret Thatcher, which he used to keep in his "office" at home, aka the garden shed. Then there were the *Spitting Image* toys.

I've got all of those things, the squeaky dolls—eBay is full of them. And now that bin Laden is dead, there's a whole new batch of stuff coming out, which I'm accumulating. I've got things from India and Hong Kong that celebrate his passing.

**Apart from the fact that it's fun to fill your apartment with things that makes guests uneasy, why are you so interested in this stuff?**

I think that there's always this shadow of human folly looming over world politics, and many of these objects reflect that.

**What are the favorite pieces?**

The *kulfa* balls, which were made in Pakistan in bin Laden's honor. It's so ephemeral and bizarre.

**Are they tasty?**

Oh I don't know, they have to remain as a sealed package. I hope they're well preserved because they won't ever get eaten.

**I bet they taste like something that dripped out of a dialysis machine.**

It's quite remarkable that somebody manufactured them, and in such great quantities. He was a real hero in certain parts of Pakistan.

**Do you think the US is lying about his death? Conspiracy theories are for nut jobs, but I feel like there's something fishy going on.**

I'm pretty convinced because his family and Al Qaeda have confirmed it. Actually, when it was announced I was on eBay and managed to buy a watch that contained the photo circulated right after his death—the one where his face is all shot up.

**Yeah, that photo looked like a junior high student made it with Microsoft Paint, but it was still amazing. Some would argue that it's a work of art.**

The watch was made in India very soon after that photo was released. A day later it had been removed from the site and I haven't seen it for sale since, but I've got one coming to me soon.

**What's the most you've ever spent on one of these items?**

I once paid \$500 for three Gaddafi watches because, as far as I could tell, they were the only ones for sale on the internet. It seems like a high price because they are pretty cheaply made, but it's not like you can pop down to Tesco and pick up one up, is it?


**It's also an investment of sorts, because the demand for these trinkets is growing by the day.**

The bin Laden market on eBay has expanded immensely since he died. Before, it was something like a couple hundred items, but now it's in the tens of thousands. There have been times when it's been even more intense. When Saddam died, that was a very good time to buy. The pro-bin Laden stuff, such as the *kulfa* balls, is getting trickier to find in the West.

**A friend once gave me a Hezbollah paperweight he brought back from Pakistan. I cherish it.**

The bin Laden things are taking up all my attention at the moment—that and the Gaddafi watches. I don't know how you would go about getting one of those without going to Libya, which is quite hard to do at the moment.

**Is the difficulty of obtaining these objects one of the reasons you're so enamored with them?**

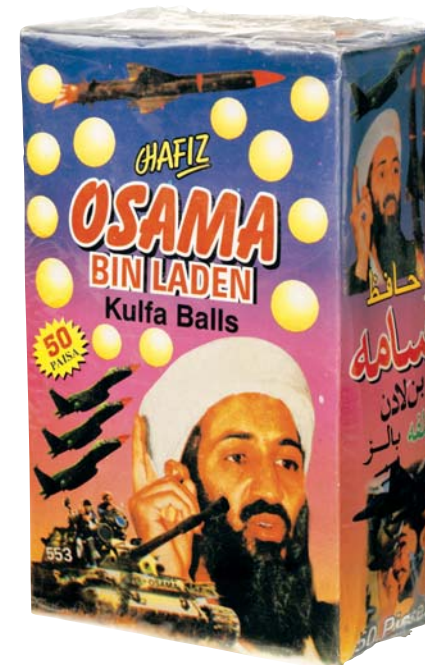
It's an intuitive thing, and that's why I do it. All of these failed dictators with massive egos allowed these goods to be produced. It speaks volumes about their personalities. 



Before 9/11 you could stroll onto a plane brandishing a knife while smoking a cigar laced with crack. These days you can't even squeeze a beer fart into your seat without someone accusing you of being a terrorist.



Martin's first post-bin Laden piece of memorabilia. It was for sale days after it was announced Osama was dead. What better way to relax after all those years of hunting down and killing the world's most wanted man than having a nice cuppa?



*Kulfa* balls are the Pakistani version of gobstoppers. What child can resist a coconut-flavored candy in a box that features the face of famous war hero Sheikh Osama? Deeeeeeelicious.

Fans of postmodernism will cherish this pocket watch, which appropriates pre-World War I dandy fashion and contextualizes it for modern times with the face of the man who started World War III. As an added bonus, inside you'll find a portrait of Saddam Hussein. DOUBLE WHAMMY!



Dead or alive! This proud, finely painted American eagle swooped down from the clouds of freedom to clench the nation's greatest enemy in its talons of justice. Have a nice trip to hell, Osama!



Declare butt jihad on Al Qaeda by wiping the remnants of last night's falafel all over Osama's face.



This 9/11 war rug was made in the good ol' US of A and is much classier than the Afghan variety, which typically features cartoons of planes flying into buildings and stick people plummeting to their deaths.



www.gshock.com



GD100-1B

GW7900B-1

GA110-1A

# UPSIZE YOUR STYLE



G7900A-4

GX56-1A

GA100-1A4

GA100A-7A

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Taking “Careless Whispers” to the food courts and classrooms of Southern California is a nice gesture, but it’s preaching to the converted. If you want to see people making a *real* difference take a look at the true sax missionaries out in the field, bringing blistering riffs and sultry squealing bleats to those who need it most.



Can you believe all the neocon frat boys still gloating over the end of the cold war like Reagan did it or that the resulting liberalization of the markets didn’t leave Eastern Europe awash in corruption and instability? Or that it doesn’t hurt the shit out of this guy’s feelings?



Here’s another question: If Serbia lost the war how come our TV hosts are all dowdy spinsters in Talbots blazers while their look like someone fed the phrase “literally more woman than you can handle” into the *Weird Science* computer?



Wacky piping always seems like a jacket dealbreaker, but sometimes you just have to bite the bullet and let the jacket take your personality where it will. Even to the set of *Boner Academy IV* starring Bobcat Goldthwait.



Man, remember crushing out on some weird, unexpected friend of yours and how fucking wrecked you felt the second you realized it was on? This girl must be like the Rogue from *X-Men* of that feeling because her touch looks like it is literally killing him.



## DON'Ts



I would love to see a version of *Jersey Shore* where all the kids have enormous buck teeth. Instead of “Gym, Tan, Laundry,” GTL can mean “Gums, Teeth, Listerine.” And someone who’s DTF is “Down To Floss.” They can call it *East Coast Choppers*.



All this Jesus-is-my-homeboy shit is obnoxious, but combining it with Kim Jong-il and those goddamn, motherfucking triangles is like making your arm a time capsule for how fucking worthless the 2010s have been so far.



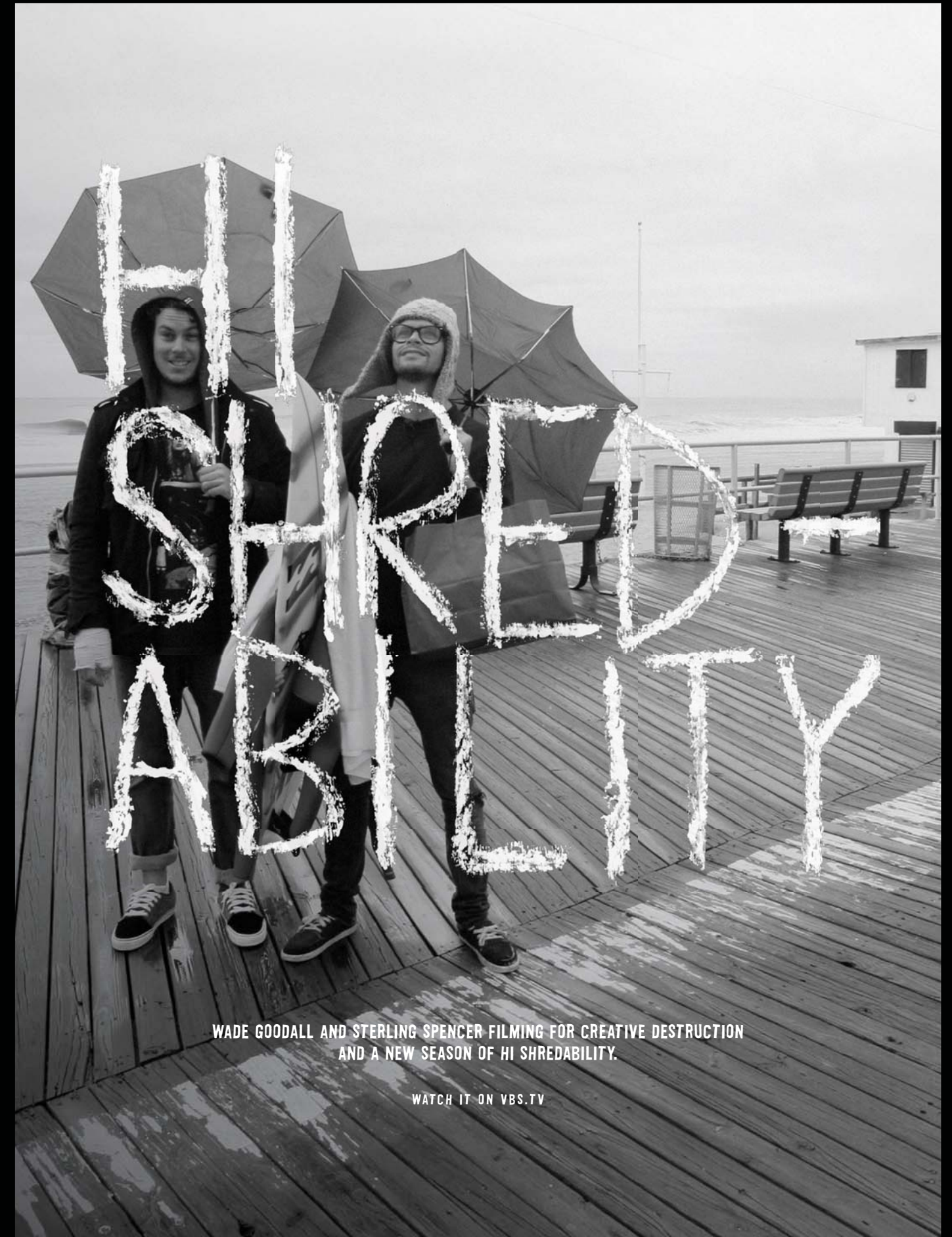
Ah yes, the cute girl playing the ironic angry trailer-park housewife. Very funny. This must be a still from someone’s *SNL* audition tape who will soon be making more money exchanging bawdy sitcom repartee with David Spade than I have made in my entire life.



When you dine at the Ye Olde Hooters prepare to be transported back to an ancient time when men were men and Mountain Dew was served by a comely wench with Mike Tyson tattoos all over her tits.



Billiards is the ultimate game of precision and skill. It takes expert hand-eye coordination and the patience of a Zen master. A thinking man’s game. Especially men who enjoy thinking about how they’re never going to get laid.



WADE GOODALL AND STERLING SPENCER FILMING FOR CREATIVE DESTRUCTION AND A NEW SEASON OF HI SHREDABILITY.

WATCH IT ON VBS.TV



Quit telling high school students to march to the beat of their own drummer. All it does is get a half-full milk carton chucked at their head while the entire lunchroom stands to laugh at the resulting *splooch*. If you want to give the kids some real guidance, tell them to *drum* to the beat of their own drummer (which is them). That's the kind of counseling that can turn your average Angus into a sweat-caked teenage pussyhound.



The only thing wrong here is the chest tattoo, but even it ties into the overall Frida-Kahlo-Miranda-goes-to-Monaco package, so we're going to resume making our plans to dump all our current friends and find a place that sells spats and nosebags.



I know people say don't wear your heart on your sleeve but fuck those nerds. If you heart a girl, wear that shit all over your sleeve. Hell, put it on the front of your shirt then park yourself in front of her favorite bar like a human "Eh? Eh?"



See? Shirts work. Shirts bring people together, shirts keep people together, and shirts let people know which people are together and will stay together until they are both stretched out and yellowing under the armpits. I bet God's shirt is a picture of these guys in their shirts.



Hey, it's Pvt. Troy "Eagle Eyes" Larson. I had you! Complete with Cybershock® Power Gauntlet and Tactical Antenna Pack. So now you're a person, eh? Hope Afghanistan's going better than Hunter Eden's yard. We lost a lot of good men on that lawn.

# 2011

WeActivists  
SHOT BY  
CHERYL DUNN  
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WESC  
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## DON'Ts



Take a look out there, pardner. There's a whole world that's waiting to be lassoed, dragged off to the reservation, and forced to make shitty leather fedoras for men whose relationship with their children is strained and emotionally taxing for anybody who has to listen to him talk about it (which is anybody, period).



I've heard about this. Grimace-skin coats. Baby grimaces are hunted and beaten with clubs and then stripped of their skin. The skin is made into coats that are packed inside Happy Meals and sold only at McDonalds in Beverly Hills and Dubai. Sick.



Ooh la la! This looks like the perfect place to buy your tuxedo once Phish are inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Dogshit.



I just updated my last will and testament to say after I die I want my eyes and brains boiled down into a hot, thick paste, which will then be spread all over this girl's stomach.



The URL says it all. If you want to barf, or if you want a crazy night (that will probably involve a lot more barf), then this dude will hook you up.



# THE



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# HAPPY HANAMI! 花見楽しんで!

PHOTOS BY PATRICK TSAI  
STYLIST: YOSHI MIYAMASU

*Stylist's Assistants: Kazuya Oginuma and Atsushi Nagao  
Models: Kengo, Mari, Yosuke, Sarika, Gorow, Kazuya, Yoshi  
Special thanks to Junsuke Yamazaki, Natsumi Anderson, and Daryoush Haj-Najafi*



Anntian top, American Apparel shorts, Nike sneakers, A'N'D bracelet



Lacoste jacket, American Apparel shirt and vest, Bless pants, Cosmic Wonder Light Source shoes, Giraffe tie, Fjallraven bag; Lyricism vest and shorts, Karen Walker shirt and necklace, American Apparel socks, Nike sneakers, Ambush X Candy ring



*LyricisM vest and shorts, Karen Walker shirt and necklace, American Apparel socks, Nike sneakers, Ambush X Candy ring, vintage bracelet*





Cosmic Wonder Light Source dress, Annitian tights, adidas Originals boots, A'N'D bag



Annitian top, Karen Walker necklace, A'N'D bracelet; Lacoste jacket, American Apparel shirt and vest, Bless pants, Giraffe tie; Cosmic Wonder Light Source dress, Annitian tights; adidas Originals shirt, shorts, and hat, Giraffe bowtie; adidas Originals jacket, René Gurskov shirt and pants, vintage glasses and scarf; LyricisM vest, Karen Walker shirt; Phillip Lim shirt, Patrick Stephan hoodie.



Lacoste jacket, Bless pants, Fjalraven bag



A'ND bracelet



# SUICIDE PRACTICE

PHOTOS BY ANGELA BOATWRIGHT  
STYLIST: ANNETTE LAMOTHE-RAMOS

*Makeup and Hair: Brandy McDonald; Photo Assistant: Brayden Olsen  
Models: Casey, Christina, Natalie, Emily, Daryl  
Special thanks to Casey, Toothi, Mike, and Ryan*

*ASOS top and jeans, Vans sneakers, Forever 21 bracelets*



Roxy tank top, Volcom jeans, Airwalk sneakers, Volcom sneakers



Matthew Williamson vest, Insight dress, American Apparel socks, Airwalk sneakers





insig dress, Airwalk sneakers, Forever 21 bra and belt



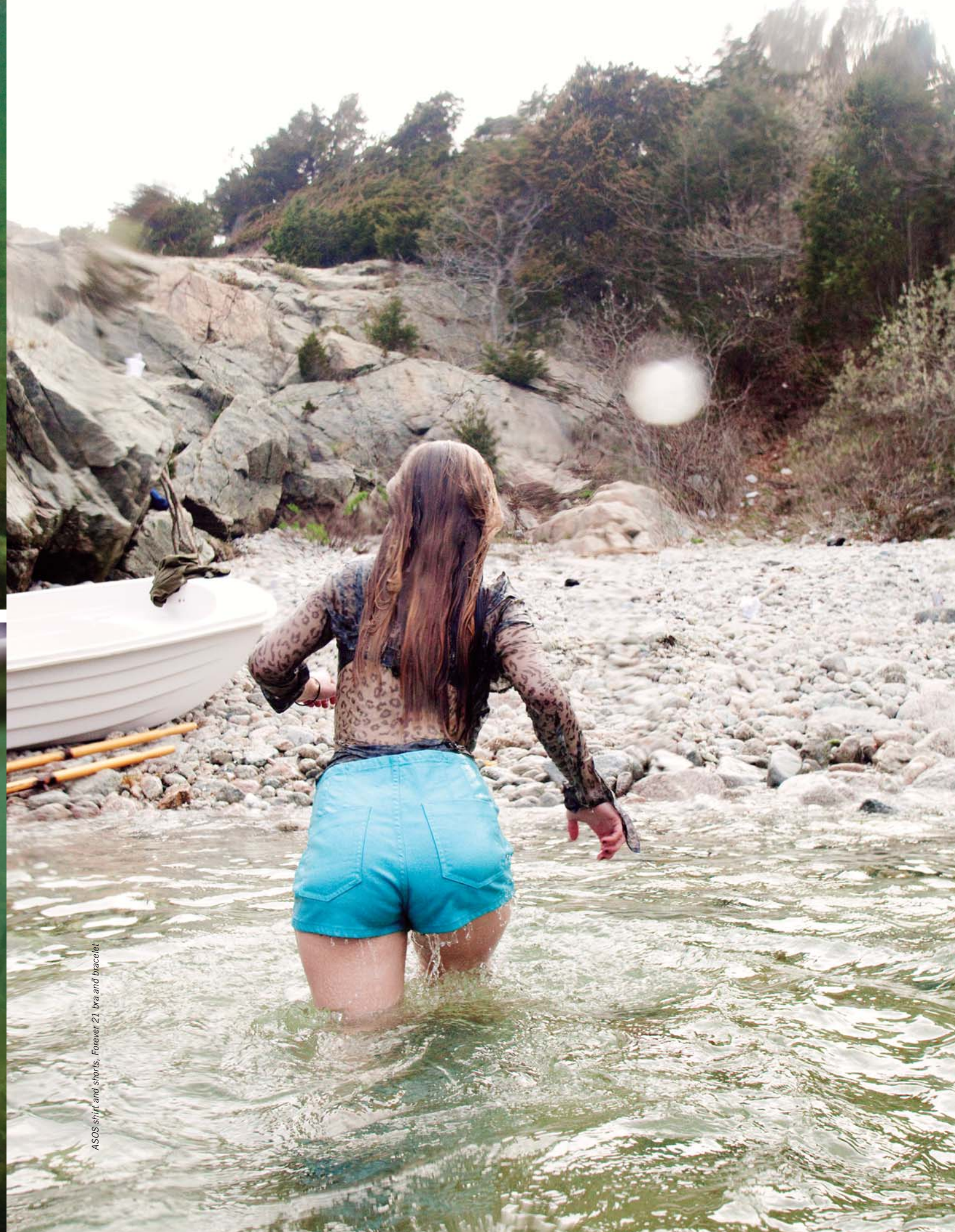
insig dress, Airwalk sneakers, Mango bracelets and rings, WesC tank top, ASOS shorts, Airwalk sneakers



Volcom tank top, Forever 21 necklace and bracelet



ASOS tank top and pants, Forever 21 bra and bracelet, American Apparel socks, Vans sneakers



ASOS shirt and shorts, Forever 21 bra and bracelet

# THE WEIRD OLYMPICS

*Documenting Sochi's Makeover for the XXII Winter Games*

PHOTOS BY ROB HORNSTRA

Situated on the shore of the Black Sea, Sochi is Russia's largest resort destination. It's a place so beautiful that Josef Stalin kept a dacha there during the golden years. The region's charm will soon be forced down the throats of a worldwide audience when Sochi hosts the 2014 Winter Olympics.

Contrasting its seemingly sunny and laidback atmosphere, Sochi's past is tarnished by conflict. Russia has tried—with varying degrees of success—to control the area for more than 200 years. Today the city is an amalgam of ethnicities, all with competing histories and claims to independence.

When Sochi won the Olympic bid in 2008, the city lacked world-class athletic facilities (which made its selection all the more peculiar). The Russian government has since pledged \$12 billion to refurbish the city—by some estimates, the most that has ever been spent to bring a site up to Olympic standards.

Photographer Rob Hornstra and writer/filmmaker Arnold van Bruggen have rigorously documented the region's extraordinary changes for a multimedia enterprise they call the Sochi Project, which will continue through the closing ceremony of the games. Rob was kind enough to provide us with a few images that capture a type of socioeconomic flux unique to the region.



Each year, Mikhail Pavelivich Karabelnikov (77) makes the approximately 2,000-mile trip from Novokuznetsk, Russia, to summer in Sochi. During the Soviet era, millions of workers were sent annually to the city's famed sanatoriums, in hopes of reviving their spirits and strengthening their bodies. Today, they remain booked year-round and are mostly filled with elderly or disabled Russians. By 2014, almost all of these historic buildings will have been converted into luxury hotels to house Olympic athletes, officials, and spectators.



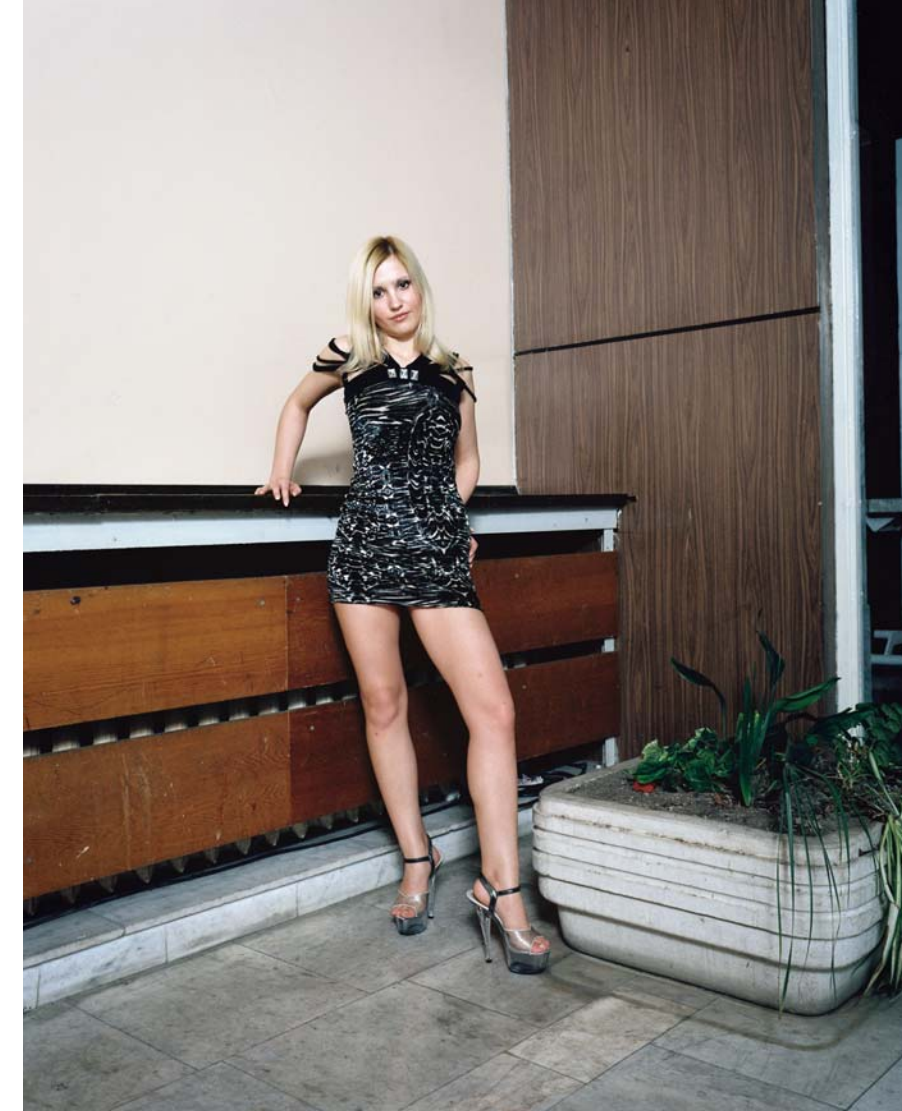
OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: Young Dima submerges his injured leg in a tub at the Matsesta spa. The water supposedly contains a surplus of hydrogen sulphide with unique medicinal properties.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM LEFT: Masha, a 20-year-old Sochi goth, hangs out at an aquarium in the center of town. At the time this photo was taken, she was busy rehearsing for the Miss Sochi competition. A few days later she was engaged to her boyfriend, Vladimir. It was apparent that she had no say in either decision.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM RIGHT: Disco night at the Club (its actual name) on the top floor of the Metallurg sanatorium. Evening schedules vary from dance nights to karaoke to more exotic forms of entertainment, like perfume testings and talent shows.

RIGHT: Aliona, a stripper, moments before beginning her act at a late-night restaurant located on the top floor of the Zhemchuzhina Hotel.


BELOW: The twinkling allure of Sochi, Russia, in 2011. Once considered the "pearl" of the Soviet Union, the city's postcommunist architecture is an absurd hodgepodge of grandeur and nondescript tourist flats. The landscape will undergo drastic changes over the next few years as the city prepares for the Olympics.



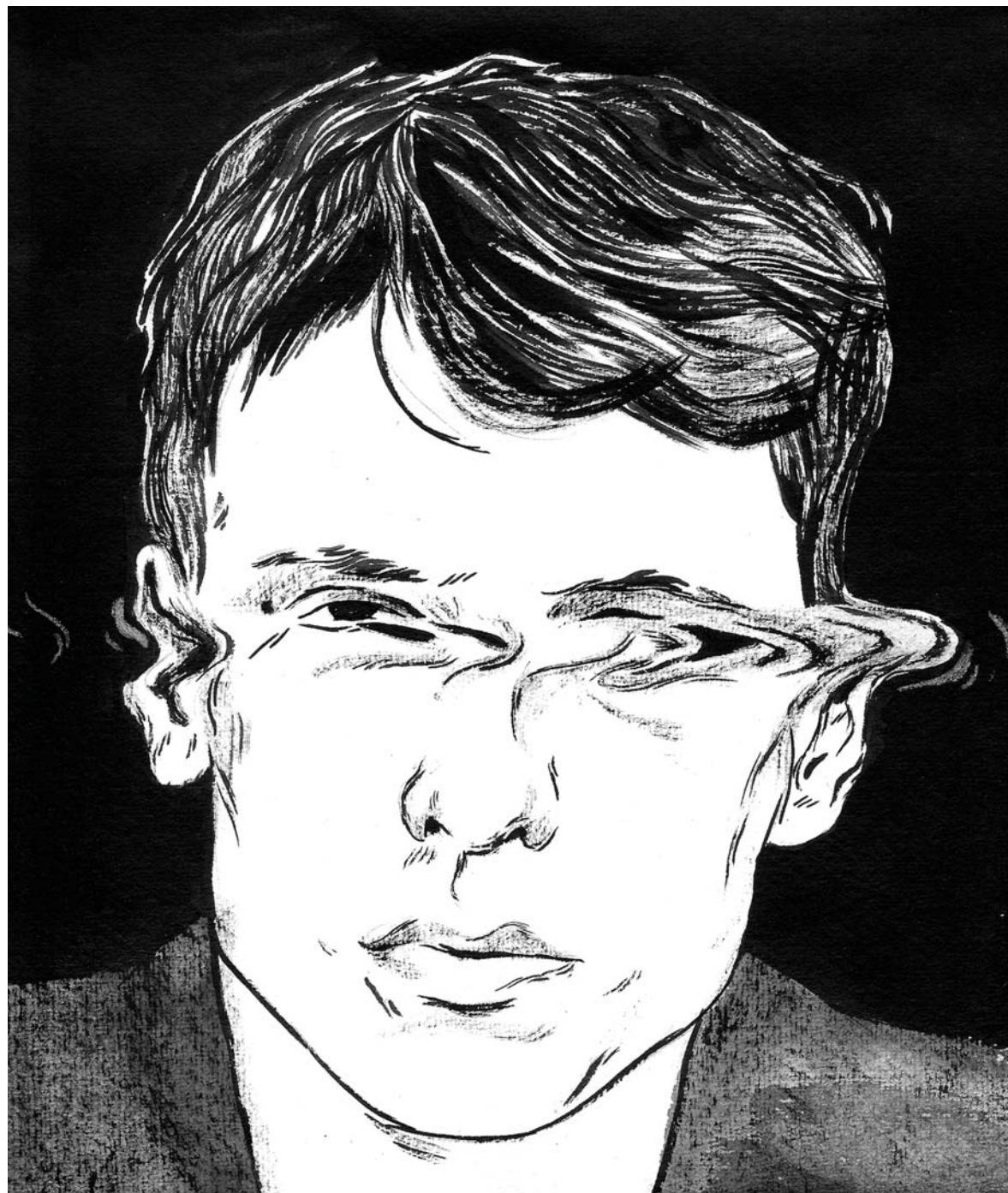


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It's common for Sochi restaurants (and eateries throughout the country) to feature singers who, night after night, rely on a fixed repertoire of Russian *chansons*. The term "background music" is a foreign concept to these performers—often the volume is cranked up to 11, and instead of talking, patrons dance and sing. The photos this page are part of an ongoing subseries Rob is currently compiling. They were photographed in Sochi and neighboring Alder. 

Watch Rob hard at work in Sochi on a new episode of Picture Perfect at VBS.TV, and afterward delve deeper into his mission at [thesochiproject.org](http://thesochiproject.org).



# RELATIONSHIP STORY

BY TAO LIN  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANTHONY CUDAHY

*Below is a new story by Tao Lin. Our 2007 Fiction Issue included Tao's "Shoplifting From American Apparel," which he later expanded into a novella. Things have gone all sorts of ways for him since then, but we think his future is very bright and are certain that all of us will be hearing various things from and about him for years to come. Those familiar with the author will most likely vehemently hate or thoroughly enjoy this selection, which is the appropriate divide for the kind of fiction we will be publishing in VICE, every month from here on out. Each story will be paired with photography, paintings, drawings, and other works of art, such as the following illustrations by Anthony Cudahy. Now brew a nice pot of tea, draw the shades, turn off your phone, and enjoy a few moments of silence while enjoying the archaic yet splendid activity known as "reading literature."*

One night in March, entering a café grinning uncontrollably, as he almost always did at this point in a new relationship—two weeks after kissing—Paul somehow didn't expect Michelle to enlarge in his vision as he approached where she stood (idly looking down at a flyer, one leg bent) and felt a comical, bewildering fear as she rapidly and somewhat ominously increased in size. This amusingly foreboding manner of experience, equally calming and surprising, characterized most of their first two months together. It seemed they would never quarrel, and in the structural innovation of that (a relationship without complaint was a new concept to Paul) the nothingness—and bleakness—of the future gained a framework-y somethingness that felt privately exciting, like entering a different family's house as a small child.

At some point Paul began to feel bad when apart from Michelle. In May, on a night when she was out with friends, he cried a little (forcing it, to some degree, though honestly feeling neglected) on his bed in Brooklyn as his MacBook quietly emanated one of her favorite songs. A few weeks later, in his room after they cooked and ate pasta, he meekly—without looking at her face—complained that she never helped wash dishes. She stared silently at him for some time before her eyes became watery, the extra layer of translucence materializing like a shedding of something delicate, and Paul stared back, weirdly entranced then suddenly dizzy with emotion. It was the first time he'd seen her cry. He crawled to where she sat on the wood floor, hugged her, apologized.

By July Paul most days was either visibly irritated or mutely, inscrutably despondent—as if he alone had a vast knowledge of horrible truths, which he knew he didn't—but was still able to feel good after coffee, beer, or various prescription drugs. He liked what he half-projected as Michelle's view of drugs—that tolerance made them unsustainable as an unstaggered lifestyle, but that the word *sustainable* seemed suspiciously meaningless in a context of impermanence. They were somewhat reliant, at this point, on their occasional drug use (by August it was usually the future event they focused on most) to mutually enjoy each other's company, and had recently been ingesting methadone, supplied by Michelle's friend who had fallen down stairs, once or

twice a week to sedately enter and exit stores for a few hours and see movies with budgets exceeding \$80 million or below \$2 million before eating expensively garnished salads or giant steaks in darkly lit organic restaurants and retiring to Paul's room to hold each other in darkness, allowing the simple insistence of the drugs, like a long chord progression, to abstract them into something nucleus-like—satisfying and directionless as a final, apolitical achievement. Ten to 14 hours later they would wake—in the early evening or late afternoon, the light outside a science-fiction-y red.

"Hurry, we need to hurry," said Paul, mock-urgent, one of these nights, in Sunshine Cinema's basement theater, sensing Michelle somewhere behind him as he moved unstably forward. Seated, near the front, he slid a hand nonsexually between her thighs and discerned the movie with a wantless, proliferating fondness, like a dye underwater.

"Brunch," he said in bed a few hours later. "Cornbread."  
"Yeah," said Michelle in a sexy voice and undulated her backside against the front of Paul as he said "Guacamole," a bit loudly, as if ordering it, and tried to remember what movie they saw, remembering instead their plans to visit his parents in December. "I'm excited to be in Taiwan," he murmured. "It'll be warm there then, I think."

Two days later he exited the library after looking at the internet for three hours with his next novel open in one of the ten-plus windows that had accumulated on the screen, almost surreally unmanageable, and walked across the street to Washington Square Park to meet Michelle after her last class of the day. They hugged for what seemed like a very long time, as if grieving, and walked east without a short-term goal or holding hands, operating within the assumption that they would, at some point—after 60 to 90 minutes of going into one bookstore, two grocery stores, maybe three restaurants—eat dinner somewhere. After a few blocks of silence Paul said something about Michelle's slow response times, earlier that day, to his text messages. Michelle said she had been with Genie and didn't hear her phone vibrate. Ahead was a sushi restaurant Paul ate sweet-potato sushi from one night in college, six or seven years ago, friendless and bored;

as they passed, Michelle asked Paul if he was upset. “Yes,” said Paul with a sensation of non sequitur and stopped walking, at an intersection—“literally,” he thought, feeling only a little self-conscious, and stared across the street with a grim expression. Michelle observed him with something like mild, bored concern and, in the ensuing discussion about text messages, said “Sorry” three times. Paul was aware of a small dog near his legs as he said “It’s just inconsiderate” and gazed far into the distance—at a brick wall, maybe 50 feet away—continuously thinking “I hate myself,” as if holding down a button for “I hate myself,” and said he was going to the library.

“Jesus,” said Michelle. “You’re going to the library?”

“Yeah,” said Paul, somewhat uncertainly.

“You’re going to the library,” said Michelle.

Paul stared at her blankly, with some nervousness. Sometimes during an argument he would suddenly grin fully—feeling like he had previously been acting in a movie, for money, and the scene was now over—causing Michelle to grin, implying between them an agreement that life is fleeting and one can “simply” choose how to feel, within which they would be able to resume doing things together, but that didn’t happen now.

“Relationship problems,” said Paul in the library on Gmail Chat to Kyle, the only friend he retained after meeting Michelle (he viewed friends as means to girlfriends, contrary to Michelle

who valued friends as ends; they’d discussed this and concluded, to some degree, that Paul had his writing, Michelle her friends).

“Maybe you need to spend less time together,” said Kyle.

“I feel lonely when she hangs out with other people.”

“Seems bad you feel lonely if she’s busy. You should feel OK. Well, there is nothing you ‘should’ feel.”

Paul stared at what Kyle had typed with a not entirely sarcastic fear.

“It’s just something I read from Rilke,” said Kyle.

“Seems like I automatically would do the opposite of Rilke,” said Paul while thinking “General Tso’s chicken” with a vague longing and a bleakly sarcastic etymological interest.

“Then I think you are OK,” said Kyle.

“I don’t know. Seems like we won’t talk again tonight.” They didn’t, but the next day Paul text-messaged her and they ate dinner together and drank beer and watched a movie, not arguing again until late the next night.

In August they visited Michelle’s separated parents in Pittsburgh. Michelle’s father gave Paul his 650-page, self-published memoir. Her mother brought Michelle and Paul to a Chinese restaurant that was one gigantic room, high-ceilinged and low-lit as a natural-history museum. The next night Paul had a fever and Michelle gave him Tylenol Flu and cream-of-broccoli soup and, on her L-shaped sofa, holding each other, they watched a

movie about a blind woman hanged for murdering a man who raped her after stealing her life savings. Michelle, who was staying home a few more days, dropped Paul off at the airport the next morning and he stood in line feeling both zombielike and feathery, like he might unidirectionally collapse, for about 30 minutes before learning that his flight was canceled. He called Michelle and she returned and he crawled into the backseat hazily imagining a heavily medicated version of himself holding hands in IKEA with an affectionate Michelle who was watching him sip an interesting, miso-y broth. “Can we go to IKEA?” he said, on his back, eyes closed.

“You want to go to IKEA,” said Michelle.

“Yes, can we go to IKEA?”

“OK,” said Michelle after a few seconds.

“Did we pass IKEA?” said Paul, waking, sitting a little.

“I missed the exit. I asked you what I should do. You didn’t respond.”

“I was asleep.”

“Do you still want to go?”

“Why wouldn’t I want to go? I asked... and you said OK.”

“It seemed hard to get back to the exit. I wasn’t sure if you wanted to go home to lie in bed. That’s why I asked. But you didn’t respond.”

“I was asleep,” said Paul in a monotone.

“Do you want me to turn around?”

“Just do what you think is right,” said Paul after a few seconds and closed his eyes. He woke to the car park-

ing. He walked unsteadily toward IKEA, about 15 feet behind a faster-paced Michelle, and said, “I feel really bad toward you right now.” Michelle said she felt the same about him and Paul said he “couldn’t believe” she felt bad toward him. “We agreed to go to IKEA, then you put me in a position... like I’m in fifth-grade,” he said, vaguely confused.

“Why do you feel bad toward me?” he said.

“Because you’re acting like a child. Don’t yell at me.”

“You put me in this position... like I did something wrong, when I’m really sick. I don’t want to be treated like this. We’re not in a relationship anymore,” said Paul and entered the car’s backseat while realizing they’d turned back at some point. In a strange voice with undertones of curiosity and resentment he asked Michelle if she could drive him to the airport, feeling distantly like he was in a taxicab.

“I’m taking a walk,” she said, crying, and left the car.

After staring through the windshield for a few minutes—there was a median of grass, a street—Paul remembered how as a small child he would lie alone in backseats while his mother bought groceries and that, once, he had felt afraid when, sitting in a full bathtub, he couldn’t see its bottom.

Michelle entered the car, not crying anymore. “Can you drive me to your house?” said Paul. “I’ll take a cab in the morning.” At her house, on one side of the L-shaped sofa, he grinned—something

in him previously dead now resurrected, bemused, moving around and touching things—at Michelle on the other side. Her expression seemed intentionally obscure. Paul said he wanted to be in a relationship and didn’t mean what he’d said before, then crawled to Michelle and hugged her and, with a feeling of secrecy, grinned with his head beyond the back of her head.

On the plane back to New York City Paul lay facedown—forehead on forearm, like he’d done in high school—on his dining tray for about 15 minutes, “hating himself,” then drank a small cup of coffee and read some of Michelle’s father’s memoir: sexual frustrations with Michelle’s mother, something about his failing law firm, five years of “transcendent sex” with his new wife. In Paul’s previous relationships he experienced dissatisfaction as an empirically backed enthusiasm for the future, in that it implied the possibility of a more satisfying relationship with some as yet unknown person in forthcoming months or years. With Michelle, whom he felt closer to than his previous girlfriends (he’d told her this a few times, truthfully), he reasoned that if he was unhappy there was something deeply—genetically, maybe—wrong with him.

Over the next few weeks they each ended the relationship once (Michelle calmly saying one night that maybe they should just be friends; Paul stoically agreeing, feeling a bit sarcastic; Michelle a few hours later emailing that she didn’t know why she’d said that; Paul a few days later, with indirect language, causing around ten days of intermittent contact) and were now more firmly together, though perhaps also more crudely, like a refrigerator magnet that keeps falling off until, at some point, you rip off the magnetized piece of metal and tape it on. In early October, for about a week, Paul felt bad in a complexly layered, intellectually formidable manner that, because of its inability to be sourced, articulated, or even discerned seemed like it could be blocked out completely—as a legitimate solution—through willpower or some honed form of apathy that might develop if he was a different person, which, he knew, he was not. His thought processes took on a non sequitur quality that made it difficult to be certain what he was thinking about. Michelle began to spend some nights alone, in her dorm by Union Square, talking to her friends from Pittsburgh. One night she said it seemed like Paul “hated” her and Paul was quiet a few seconds before citing a recent night when he was nice. Michelle said he was on drugs that night. Paul grinned and illogically said “No.” Another night Paul complained that he always offered Michelle food or drink before eating or drinking something himself, then—after she said she’d be happy to do that, now that she knew it mattered to him so much—said it didn’t matter to him and that she shouldn’t change her behavior. One afternoon Michelle emailed that she might study abroad in Berlin from February to May; that night, outside Whole Foods, where they’d met to see a movie, Paul said he didn’t know

if he wanted to be in a relationship with someone whose level of commitment allowed them to consider being apart four months. Michelle said she was in a different time of her life. “Maybe I shouldn’t,” she said, earnestly pensive, in bed, and was quiet, then said, “Where do you see us in five years?”

“Ideally, together, I think,” said Paul after some time.

A few days later, in a candlelit restaurant, waiting to be seated, Michelle said she’d decided not to study abroad, but wanted to visit Genie in Italy over Christmas or New Year’s. Paul stared at the tiny trophy on Michelle’s metal belt buckle and said he felt a little disappointed that she wanted to spend a holiday away from him. Michelle said she could visit Genie after New Year’s, then—that she also wanted to be together on holidays. After ingesting methadone and Xanax and quietly sharing three appetizers Paul said in a placid voice that if Michelle wanted to spend a holiday with Genie then he encouraged her to do that. The only way he wanted to influence her to stay, he said (aware, with some amusement, that the drugs were making him much more rational and articulate, as if he had somehow traveled to and was speaking from the future as part of a panel of logicians and relationship counselors), was by being nicer to her, resulting in her naturally wanting to stay. He’d said this before, he knew, mostly as a reminder to himself and Michelle—and two previous girlfriends and, for a few months, his mother—that complaining was not his ideal behavior.

“I want to spend New Year’s with Genie,” said Michelle, and Paul sincerely encouraged her to do so, and she moved to his side of the table. They hugged tightly and then fed each other little spoonfuls of the shadowy insides of a slice of pumpkin pie, soft and colorless as a baby food. One of them mentioned plane tickets to Taiwan, that they hadn’t bought them yet, and Michelle said they should tomorrow and Paul said “Yeah” while aware, seemingly without interest—as if he wouldn’t be alive tomorrow—that he wouldn’t feel like doing it tomorrow, when he wouldn’t be on drugs, though maybe he could force himself to if Michelle initiated.

She didn’t, but for some reason the next few weeks were calmer—there was less quarreling and then only in a low-level manner, something slightly motherly emerging in both of them. Paul began to feel philosophical in situations where he previously might have felt agitated—or maybe at this point he was unable to discern his relative calmness as simply a lack of irrational thought but actually something transcendental—and seemed to experience most phenomena with a once-removed disbelief, which manifested most days as a midlevel inattention, both outward and inward. He mostly focused on remaining calm, which somehow seemed more—not less—difficult with each successful day of not complaining.



One night at a restaurant he returned from the bathroom and stood above a seated Michelle and felt almost scarily alone as she slowly opened a bottle of coconut water and drank from it, not acknowledging him as he stared at her face, which was exemplifying the offensively stupid expression of a person unself-consciously alone in a public area. She seemed to notice him, glaring at her, probably, and asked if he wanted some coconut water. “No,” he said, concurrently resenting her and remembering having said it didn’t matter if she offered him things first or not. Over the next few minutes the memory wandered feyly away, not indicating where it was going, disappearing in a sort of half-life, as the resentment increased in presence, against logic and willpower.

Outside, walking to a magazine-release party in Chelsea, Paul felt resigned to not speaking. They were out of drugs and unmotivated to get more. It was raining a little. Paul felt more like he was “moving through the universe” than “walking on the sidewalk,” a sensation that might normally console or excite him but currently made him feel, if anything, schizophrenic. He stared ahead with a mask-like expression, occasionally feeling cold, and weakly tried to remember where he was last November.

“Are you OK?” said Michelle after a few blocks.

“Yes,” said Paul without thinking.

Near the gallery, after eight blocks of not speaking, he glanced at Michelle and saw her grinning and began to grin uncontrollably while feeling “horrible.” He looked away and suppressed his grin and said “What” in a monotone. There was a belief in him, somewhere—distant and minuscule but detectable by its shrinking movement—that Michelle liked him enough to be able to endure this and finally overpower his negativity, which perhaps was always the hope, throughout everything.

“Nothing,” said Michelle.

“What are you grinning at?”

“Nothing. Just, life. The situation.”

There was someone at the party Paul had said vaguely negative things about a few years ago, on the internet, and so when he and Michelle entered he quickly walked to David, an acquaintance who was easy to talk to, and engaged him in conversation about movies they’d recently seen. Michelle peripherally moved away and then returned, smiling a little, to ask Paul if he wanted alcohol. Paul said he would like a beer and she brought him one and then moved away in a circular, animal-like, nearly “loping” manner, which Paul stared at while thinking “Seems like she wants to be alone, or let me be alone” with some confusion.

About an hour later they were holding their third or fourth drinks, sitting in chairs in a corner, facing 40 to 60 people who seemed like one large group of friends. Dancy electronic music was playing loudly. Paul stared at a woman’s red boots, then a man’s thick-rimmed glasses, then moved his chair close to Michelle’s and with unclear purpose touched her shoulder,

tentative and reckless as a two-year-old petting a large animal that was looking elsewhere. Michelle’s depressed expression seemed both affected and unaffected, the willed and natural overlapping in a hallucinatory bleakness. Paul asked if she wanted to eat dinner somewhere and she asked if he did and he said, “I don’t know.” One night, months ago, they’d sat on a curb on Lafayette Street to continue an argument in a resting position and Paul had felt distracted by how pretty she was and began to forget the argument, even while saying things agitatedly, as he became fixated, with increasing gratitude, on how she liked him enough to not simply leave and never speak to him again.

“I’m going to go introduce Kyle to someone,” said Paul. “I’ll be back in, like, five minutes.” Kyle was standing alone in a dense area of people, as if at a concert, and seemed drunk. “Do you



want to meet Kristen?” said Paul about someone he had described as “her blog gets a lot of hits” and Kyle had described as “really hot.” Kyle said he did and, after chugging another beer, walked with Paul to the hallway outside the gallery. Five people shook hands in various combinations as Paul, grinning nervously, stared at one person, then another, then noticed Michelle sitting alone, against a wall in the distance, and walked toward her—the front of his head feeling suddenly foreign as a plastic bag, stuck there in a wind—aware that she’d

maybe seen him grinning at an attractive girl. “Do you want to go now?” he said, looking down at her.

“You can talk to Kyle more if you want,” said Michelle. “I don’t want to,” said Paul, looking toward the gallery. The possibility he’d felt earlier, that Michelle might successfully console him, now seemed insane.

“Are you sure?” said Michelle, not standing.

“I’m going to say bye to him, I’ll be right back,” said Paul and walked robotically through the crowd, thinking “Lost in the world...” in a precariously near-earnest tone, and stood by Kyle and said, “I think Michelle feels like I’m not giving her enough attention.”

“That’s funny,” said Kyle after a few seconds. “Because Gabby, after one of our parties, said you gave Michelle so much attention and were always next to her talking to her, and that I’m always talking to someone else, and that I don’t love her.”

“Damn,” said Paul. “What did you say?”

“That I love her and give her attention,” said Kyle loudly and Paul noticed that someone, Gabby, was introducing him to a Vietnamese girl and the girl’s boyfriend—also named Kyle—who was holding two unopened beers in one hand. Paul distractedly intuited that life was troubling and weird, like someone else’s irrational behavior expanded into an entire universe that contained, then, its own people. “I’m going to leave now,” Paul said and waved vaguely while turning and mumbling “Bye.” He didn’t see Michelle when he walked into the hallway, then saw her sitting on the floor more than 50 feet away, stereoscopic and crouched

as a rare animal, not apparently doing anything. He walked there, feeling affected by the vulnerability of the situation, and asked why she was so far away.

“I’m waiting for you,” said Michelle. “You said you wanted to leave an hour ago.”

She quickly walked ahead on the sidewalk, hands in her jacket pockets as if to better escape Paul with a more streamlined form, though it was also still raining and they had no umbrella.

“What do you want to do now?” said Paul.

“I don’t know,” said Michelle. “I’m not hungry anymore.” They crossed Tenth Avenue in a diagonal, not at an intersection—through headlights of a parked taxi—onto the opposite sidewalk, and continued downtown, crossing 22nd Street, bodies bent forward.

“Can we stop walking for a minute?” said Paul.

They stopped walking and stood on the sidewalk, both facing forward.

“What’s wrong?” said Paul, after a few seconds, slightly accusatorily.

“You’ve been ignoring me all night,” said Michelle.

“I moved close to you and hugged you, when we were sitting.”

“Once we got inside you walked away and started talking to other people.”

“I saw you walking away from me,” said Paul. “I felt confused.”

A deli worker stood under an awning looking into some unspecified distance, honestly uninterested. “I’ve never felt you act this way before,” said Michelle, unsteadily, looking down; something in her previously assured, or at least focused, was now tired and scared, the protest of it having dispersed to something negotiable or seizable. They stood not looking at each other as the rain fell on them in an idle, general insistence of somethingness. Paul felt himself trying to interpret the situation, as if there was a problem to be solved, but there wasn’t anything, or maybe there was but Paul was three or four skill sets away from comprehending it, like an amoeba trying to create a personal webpage using CSS.

“I’m just naturally losing interest,” he finally said, a little improvisationally.

Michelle began crying and said she hadn’t expected this, had thought they’d been closer than they’d ever been, the past two weeks.

“I think I was affected by the study-abroad thing,” Paul was saying.

“Go back to the party,” said Michelle, looking away. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“I don’t think we should leave each other right now,” said Paul, confused by how she’d thought they’d been close recently.

“Have a good time with your friends,” said Michelle sincerely.

“Wait,” said Paul. “If we leave each other now it’s over.”

“It doesn’t have to be like that. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“I only go to things to find a girlfriend,” said Paul, quoting himself, and they stood silently for about a minute, mostly looking at the ground, until Paul asked if she wanted to eat dinner with him.

“I don’t want to talk to you right now,” said Michelle. Paul said he didn’t want to be in a relationship “where it was like this” and Michelle said she didn’t either.

“I’m going back if you don’t want to do something,” said Paul.

“I’m going home,” said Michelle. “Good night.”

“OK,” said Paul and turned, aware they hadn’t parted like this before, and crossed 22nd Street and turned to cross Tenth Avenue when he saw Michelle disjunctively running and walking in his

direction. She stood at a red light with the posture of a depressed teenager—Paul distractedly thought about how she liked Nirvana a lot—and then crossed the street.

“Paul,” she said, and touched his upper arm.

They stared warily at each other, not moving, and then Michelle lowered her hand, to her side. “What are you doing?” she said, somewhat defensively.

“What do you mean?” said Paul.

“Aren’t you going back to the party?”

“Yeah,” said Paul, a little confused.

“You said you were going back to the party.”


“I thought I was,” said Paul slowly.

“Fine,” said Michelle and they stared at each other and then she said, “Why are you standing here?” seeming almost “honestly curious,” as if she’d forgotten something.

“You... came back,” said Paul.

A small group of people—from the gallery, maybe—walked toward them, and Michelle turned and stepped into a soil-y area lower and darker than the sidewalk. She leaned on a low metal fence, between spires, her left profile toward Paul who after about a minute of watching her quietly cry—thinking with theoretical detachment that he should console her, then feeling dumbly tranquil, staring at the curve of her back, gently convex as a beginning yoga exercise—asked in a near monotone if she wanted to go eat dinner with him somewhere. He thought that maybe the discomfort of her arms being pressed against the thin metal of the fence had created a place accessible only to herself, to relocate to in a kind of shrinking, away from what she currently felt.

“What do you want to do?” said Paul and she turned toward him a little, moving her head to see through her hair, and in a tired and only slightly antagonistic voice, as if waking from a nap, said, “What are you doing?” and leaned back on the fence. After not thinking anything specific for an unknown amount of time Paul asked again, tonelessly, if Michelle wanted to eat dinner with him, at the Green Table. Michelle began walking away, her long legs scissor-like in their little, orderly movements. It would take her thousands of steps to get anywhere, Paul thought vaguely, but she would get there easily, and when she arrived, then, in the present, it would seem like it had been a single movement that brought her there. Did existence ever seem worked for? One seemed simply to be here, less an accumulation of moments than something continuously gifted from some inaccessible future. As Michelle’s form became smaller Paul distantly felt the implication, from his previous thoughts, which he’d forgotten, that the universe in its entirety was simply a message, delivered to itself, to not feel bad—an obscure but comprehensive rhetoric against feeling bad—and he was troubled by this, suspecting that his thoughts and intentions, at some point, in April or May or years ago, in college or as a small child, had been wrong, but he had continued in that wrongness, and was now distanced from some correct beginning to such a degree that the universe (and himself, a part of the universe) was articulately against him.

In his tiredness and inattention, staring now at nothing (Michelle was out of view), these intuitions manifested in Paul as an uncomplicated feeling of bleakness, that he was in the center of something bad, whose confines were expanding, as he remained in the same place. Faintly he recognized in this a kind of humor, but mostly he was aware of the rain, continuous and everywhere as an incognizable information, and he turned and walked onto the street, gleaming from wetness, to return to the party. 



# HIDING THE HORROR

*Concealing—and Beating—a Fear of Spiders*

BY SAM McPHEETERS  
PHOTOS BY JOHN MICHAELS

*In Western civilization, arachnophobia is a mainstream disorder. According to one British study<sup>1</sup>, more than half of all women and nearly a fifth of all men are scared of spiders. For most of these people, arachnids never rise above an icky annoyance. But for a small minority, the dread is so intense that it manifests in rituals that seriously affect one's day-to-day life. Even more troubling, extreme arachnophobia can be a direct route to the worst sort of agoraphobia: a crippling preoccupation with the enemy invading the sanctuary of home via countless imperceptibly tiny chinks and gaps. Fortunately, it's a curable condition.*

<sup>1</sup> Davey, Graham, *Phobias: a Handbook of Theory, Research, and Treatment*, (London: Wiley, 2000).

*The molted ruins of a Goliath bird-eater tarantula.*



It was only a few years ago that I came to appreciate the severity of my own arachnophobia. Although I could tolerate tiny spiders, anything larger than an average-size black widow activated instant terror: My hands moistened with sweat, my heart raced, and my skin twitched in anticipation of contact. More important, I would do anything to get away. A photograph, or even a one-second glimpse of a spider on TV, could conjure these reactions. Webs and cartoon spiders were also triggers. I've worked desk jobs where the adrenaline jolt from a simple Google image search for "tarantula" replaced my afternoon caffeine fix.

There's no mystery to how I acquired this affliction. The culprit was *The Brady Bunch*. Specifically, "Pass the Tabu" (season 4, episode 2), when the gang goes to Hawaii and a tarantula crawls up a bedspread toward a terrified Peter Brady. This aired when I was three, and although I don't remember the rest of the episode, the scene is an indelible part of my childhood. One of my earliest memories is of trying to fall asleep in my old bedroom in Troy, New York, waiting for the tarantula to come creep-crawling up my blanket. Normally, an event even this innocuous would precipitate a lifelong trauma—point A to my present point B. But in between these points, I took a detour from my fear that I still can't fully explain.

In the summer of 1985, I spent a month camping in the jungles of Panama. I was 16 and had been accepted into the School for Field Studies (SFS), a Massachusetts-based undergraduate environmental study-abroad program. SFS offered rigorous on-site research intertwined with rugged physical challenges. After meeting our American instructors in Panama City, my group traveled by train and boat to an inlet east of Lago Gatún. We pitched camp in a clearing, ate a lot of Spam and mangos, drank hot cola, and learned how to survive in an alien ecosystem.

We set up camp adjacent to the jungle, and our minds hacked a winding pathway through foliage so dense it made the trail seem like a covered hedge maze or a leafy hallway. Workdays began with a walk through this cool, murky passage. A five-minute stroll led to an open field and, from there, the sites of our research. Returning to camp in the afternoon, it was impossible to ignore the huge web just to the left of the entrance to the path. A hairless spider—definitely not a tarantula but still gigantic, with legs like jointed knitting needles—dangled in the dead center of the web. It never moved, except to sway when the wind caught its web. One of us had named it Mike. Every day we would greet Mike, usually with a machete salute, as we headed back to camp. Returning from the field on our last day, I noticed that Mike was missing from his web. My field partner and I paused and laughed and dared each other to step back into the hallway. It seemed like a trap from a horror movie. But after a few laughs we continued on. It wasn't that scary.

Why would it be? SFS paperwork included warnings about the local fauna. We learned that large wolf spiders could inflict a painful bite, but they weren't fatal. We'd also been warned not to shake any trees, lest one dislodge a Goliath bird-eater tarantula (so named by a 19th-century explorer who allegedly witnessed one devour a hummingbird). In the vast pantheon of jungle-dwelling creepy-crawlies, however, spiders ranked somewhere in the middle. They were scarier than the scorpion I dislodged from my boot, but nowhere near as chilling as a half-glimpsed slither of a monster python, or waist-high anthills, or howler monkeys whose distant, inhuman shrieks brought conversation to a nervous halt. When I returned home at the end of the month

and greeted my mother, I said, "Well, I guess I'm not scared of spiders anymore."

A few years later the fear returned, and by the early 90s I was fully aware that I had some form of arachnophobia. Between 1989 and 1993, for example, I had to approach my Manhattan PO box by a roundabout route, so that I could avoid Forbidden Planet comics and its illustrated window display of a sexy woman kissing a huge spider. While researching this article, I quizzed old friends to see if they'd known of my spider problem. Almost uniformly, they did not. Somehow, throughout an adulthood defined by an inability to keep my private affairs secret, I'd carefully concealed this lone vulnerability.

My pal Adam confirmed my suspicion. "If we'd known, we just would've tormented you with rubber spiders." (In his defense, I would've done the exact same thing if our positions had been switched.) I called my pal Christina, whom I'd known from high school (meaning, since before Panama) through the 1990s, when she roadied for my band. She told me that she didn't have much insight into my phobia. Eventually the conversation turned to her recent trip to Ecuador and a hotel room in which a giant spider had "crawled up out of the fucking toilet." I had a nasty jolt, visualizing a map of South America with Ecuador fading to black—one more place I'll never visit.

## My pal Adam confirmed my suspicion. "If we'd known, we just would've tormented you with rubber spiders."

Phobias are essentially errors of recording, byproducts of traumatic events committed to memory through the amygdala and lodged deep inside the reptilian brain. Many phobias spring from trivial childhood incidents that live on only through a ghostly afterimage of fear. For many phobics, the physical or visual presence of their fears can set off a series of instant physical reactions: sweating, shaking, confusion, nausea, breathing difficulty, and other responses. Phobias can either mimic or accentuate other panic disorders (like OCD or PTSD), but they are stand-alone conditions, and an accurate diagnosis hinges on both the presence of disproportionate fear and the self-awareness that one's fear is irrational. Survival instincts dictate that spotting a dangerous snake—or any snake—in the wild should evoke a reaction of fear. Viewing a photograph of the same snake should not.

In the annals of humbling dreads, arachnophobia occupies a special spot. Most major phobias—fear of germs, flying, or needles—have a foothold in logic. But there are people who are terrified of things like cats, trees, and pickles—aversions so extreme that they are easily recognizable as mental disorders. Arachnophobia occupies a sketchier middle ground, neither logical nor bizarre. Unlike most phobias, fear of spiders carries a whiff of immaturity and childhood frights carried over into adulthood. Perversely, horror and humiliation act as binding agents to keep sufferers trapped in their phobia. Many arachnophobes never consider professional help.

It doesn't help that some phobia therapists can make the process seem like a trip to Orwell's Room 101. In 2008, the National Geographic Channel aired a nasty, trashy special on

*Unlike most phobias, the fear of spiders can infantilize adults by making it seem like they never overcame childhood fears.*

arachnophobia therapy in which an arachnophobe named Alfred visits a doctor for whom phobia recovery is nothing more than an exertion of willpower. (“We’re talking about courage. [He’s] going to have to say, ‘Look, I’m going to persist in the face of my fear.’”) Poor Alfred is forced to confront live spiders and at one point is left alone and barefoot in an empty room with a hairy tarantula. During the climactic tarantula-in-the-hand scene, Alfred describes his fear level as “90 percent.” The process works—the episode wouldn’t have aired otherwise, of course—but how many viewers were scared away from treatment due to the severity of the process?

Last spring, I finally decided to look into arachnophobia treatment for myself, safely outside the confines of a television program. I knew that I needed to uncover a method that didn’t require superhuman levels of masochism. I found more than I expected: systematic desensitization, cognitive-behavioral therapy, virtual-reality treatment, something called Fast Phobia Cure, and good old-fashioned hypnotherapy. I’d been wary of this last approach. It wasn’t just the perception of this method’s slippery New Ageyness (many LA-based hypnotists offer phobia therapy alongside help for “feeling low,” “motivation boosts,” and “past lives”), but also that many hypnotists advertise their wares with websites featuring clip art of dark forests that no arachnophobe would ever set foot in.

## I was plotting how I would get to the door and, absurdly, realized that my brain had included the window as an escape route.

Further research and phone calls made hypnotism seem more attractive. Even the most promising systematic-desensitization doc could spring a giant spider on me. A lot of the specialists were booked. Many were far too expensive. Then I spoke with Brennan Smith, an LA-based hypnotherapist lauded on *Extra* as the “stop-smoking hypnotist to the stars.” Brennan said all the right things, and his website featured no forests. I made an appointment.

The following week, I arrived for my appointment a half hour late after racing through traffic. I was tense and frustrated, and not particularly in the mood to wrestle with my deepest fear. Brennan’s office, on the fourth floor of a Beverly Hills banking building, consisted of a tiny room, not much larger than a closet, containing two chairs, two end tables, and a larger comfy chair with a throw blanket. Next to the door, drawn blinds discretely covered a long window. The space wasn’t nearly as New Agey as I’d expected. Neither, for that matter, was Brennan. He was a slender, long-fingered man who vaguely resembled a young Bret Easton Ellis and spoke with the authoritative, soothing voice of an airline pilot. I found him instantly likable.

Smith told me he had once grappled with arachnophobia himself. Unlike my variation, his was of all spiders, large and small. He too had experienced immediate recoil, a phenomenon familiar to most arachnophobes. Brennan dealt with it through hypnotherapy. He described a moment when, one night after completing his own sessions, a spider crawled over his bare chest. Instead of screaming, he merely shrugged and said, “Huh.”

Brennan probed the parameters of my fear. I described a recent trip to California Adventure, a lesser offshoot of Disneyland. At some point, my wife and I stumbled

into a 3-D movie “experience” called *It’s Tough to Be a Bug!* I’d forgotten I had a phobia until it was too late. The house lights dimmed, and a school-bus-size spider trundled onstage in all three dimensions. Boxed in by families with kids, there was no way to leave without drawing attention to my shameful fear. I closed my eyes, and despite my racing heart, I was able to laugh at the absurdity of my predicament. At the end of the show, huge animatronic spiders descended from the ceiling and stopped close enough to brush my hair. I crouched low, head between my knees, in an attempt to thwart hyperventilation. As we left the theater, several children cried in the distance. I could relate.

While surveying my physical reactions, Brennan pointed to a table in his office and said, “Imagine that the lamp base is a tarantula.” (The lamp’s three curled supports had a diameter of an LP.) This prompted an instant physical response. Within a few seconds, my palms were so sweaty I couldn’t grip anything. Brennan asked me to break down my reaction: I was plotting how I would get to the door and, absurdly, realized that my brain had included the window as an escape route. If faced with a spider this size, I would have no qualms with plunging through a window. I said this out loud, and Brennan laughed. “That’s reinforced security glass,” he said. I chuckled as well, although I doubt it was very convincing.

Brennan sketched out a simplified overview of the brain, and the regions affecting my phobia. A large horizontal band represented the anterior cingulate gyrus—the bouncer of the nightclub that is my subconscious, separating the conscious 12 percent of the mind from the murky 88 percent below. Brennan told me this determined which thoughts were allowed in or out of the tavern of my subconscious, according to previously established negative and positive associations. Soon his diagram filled with so many little plus signs that it looked like a cartoon graveyard. I felt a twinge of fear. What if the treatment didn’t work? I’d soon find out, because it was time to get hypnotized.

I moved to the comfy chair, and the lamp—which, in my mind, had returned to its original form—was dimmed. Brennan instructed me to close my eyes and led me, through several visualization exercises, to a slightly lower plateau of relaxation than I was accustomed to. I could hear him talking, but his voice remained in the background, addressing me from far away. I’ve experienced a sensation like this before, trying to sleep in moving vehicles while the front-seat passenger and the driver conversed. Soon it was easy to forget that this soothing voice was directed toward me. Occasionally he asked me to respond to queries with my index finger, which I outstretched like a tarantula leg rearing up in aggression.

Brennan had me visualize a movie theater in which I was both projectionist and sole audience member. Through the square hole overlooking the seats, I was told to picture myself sitting in the front row, watching a film about spiders. I imagined the film as a brief documentary of a trip I took to the Santa Ana Zoo, when I happened on a Goliath bird-eater in its cage. Brennan had me replay this brief, humiliating encounter, each time adding a layer of ridiculousness. I was instructed to paint the scene in Day-Glo and add clown shoes to each of the massive arachnid’s eight spindly legs. Finally, Brennan started singing, with real gusto, the theme to *Sanford and Son*. He suggested I add my own soundtrack and to “pick something fun.” I chose “Yakety Sax,” the theme from *The Benny Hill Show*.

I know enough about therapy to understand that sudden epiphanies do not really ever happen. And yet this felt exactly like one of those moments. As proved on YouTube, there aren’t many of life’s disasters that can’t be made at least slightly funnier with the addition of this “Yakety Sax.” Why should spiders be any different? Brennan pulled me out of the hypnosis and wrapped up the session. He asked me how long I thought it’d taken. I guessed high—18 minutes—actually believing it was closer to ten. He smiled and said, “28 minutes.”

That night, I dreamed about spiders: I was outside, after dusk, on a shady lane whose regularly spaced street lamps created a series of bowers extending off into the distance. I glanced up into the tree closest to me and was just able to make out the shiny, metallic body of a huge spider. It was smaller than a person but larger than a dog, creeping through branches with the slow, inexorable movement of a horror movie. I realized that the trees were full of huge spiders. I had a second realization: They had their world, we had ours. I was surrounded by them, which could potentially be a serious problem. But it wasn’t an issue at that moment. Instead of screaming, I merely shrugged and said, “Huh.”

I thought about the dream, and “Yakety Sax,” over the next few days. Could it really be this easy? In the name of science, I headed back to the Santa Ana Zoo. Not far past the main entrance, I found a comically thatched hut labeled BAUER JAGUAR EXPLORATION OUTPOST. Nearby loudspeakers blared the sounds of jungle life that I’d once, in a previous lifetime, heard in person.

Almost immediately, I recognized the gravity of my mistake. A plastic spider in a display case was enough to make me freeze, then speed-walk back to the entrance.

From there I could see the Goliath enclosure in the hut’s corner. Infuriatingly, it was blocked in by waist-high displays, leaving no easy escape route. I stepped back inside the structure, determined to touch the glass separating myself from my greatest fear, veering close enough to read a placard marked GOLIATH BIRD-EATER TARANTULA. Not one of those words was good.

Three feet from the glass, I froze. No force on earth could have compelled me to take those last few steps. I glimpsed the animal, motionless and enormous, in the back of the terrarium. I’d had many opportunities for one of these things to fall on my head in Panama. How would I have dealt with a Goliath bite on my neck, or nose, or eyeball? I weakly hummed “Yakety Sax,” but at this point the song seemed to be more about me than the spider.

The open rafters of the false hut took on an air of imminent menace. I thought of the descending spiders from California Adventure. The skeletal remains of a different tarantula rested on top of the enclosure. Had one escaped and died? I pulled my hooded sweatshirt even tighter. A series of children stepped between me and the Goliath, examining the beast at eye level, gleefully slapping their little palms against the glass and exclaiming, “Daddy! What a big *spwi-dab!*” It occurred to me that any grown man skulking around a zoo in a hooded sweatshirt probably looked like a child molester. Disgraced, I fled.

The stink of shame followed me for days. The Goliath had deeply frightened me. But why? What was it about that configuration of shapes that caused fear? I could glue two billiard balls to some pipe cleaners and probably freak myself out. I’d pondered this question for years, and although I’d never deduced any logic for my fear, I had located its locus. It wasn’t their fur, or legs, or even that creepy sidling

*Before his hypnotherapy treatment, the author could barely even look at a spider in captivity.*



walk. It was those bulbous little abdomens. This is why crabs and scorpions and even a video of the Japanese Kondo Kagaku spider robot don't frighten me, and why a "spiderish" configuration of wet leaves in an underpass did.

The hypnotherapist's treatment was subtle but successful.



## The brain will expel phobic thoughts, much the same way a recovering smoker will hack up bits of tar.

Brennan began our second session with an incident he was surprised he'd forgotten. As a teenager in Kansas, he'd attended a rural summer camp. The camp's meeting space was inside an open-air building. On one occasion he glanced over and noticed that a tarantula was ambling up to the meeting house, perhaps curious what all the fuss was about. He remembered pointing frantically and trying to form the words to warn the others. Finally, a camp counselor approached the spider with a broom, shooing it with sweeping gestures. Brennan remembered thinking, "That guy is dead."

I understood. He'd thought that the tarantula would run up the broom faster than the human eye could follow, perhaps attaching itself to the counselor's face—like a facehugger in 1979's *Alien*—or, worse, scamper into his clothing. I would've thought the exact same thing.

The day after my second session with Brennan, I realized I was able to read an entire *National Geographic* article about tarantulas without flinching. I spent the rest of the afternoon learning about the creatures. I'd had no idea they were cannibals with milky blue blood, or that they molted. I spent an hour reading about the molting process, marveling at the insane complexity of it all. If tarantulas don't have enough energy, for example, they can die trapped in the ruins of their old bodies.

This made me a tad sympathetic. The more I read, the harder it became to dislike them. Their method of eating—pumping digestive liquids into prey and then slurping out the innards—was certainly disgusting. But was it any more disgusting than us humans grinding and liquefying food with our mouths? Also, the myth of the human-attacking spider started to rub me the wrong way. Tarantulas seem to

have a pretty good handle on us being fast and strong and several hundred times heavier than they are. Even their one threatening posture seemed sadly impotent, the rearing-up "attack position" that mimics a human hand performing parlor magic (or, for that matter, stage hypnosis).

I was far more horrified to read about its enemy, the spider wasp perversely known as the tarantula hawk. This brutal, two-inch-long freak of nature has large red wings and hooks for claws and lives to torment its namesake. Tarantula hawks hunt tarantulas by chasing them into their burrows and stinging their prey into paralysis. That the spider can even survive this is a feat; the sting of a tarantula hawk has been described as one of the most painful injuries a nonmammal can inflict on a mammal, an attack that can literally shut down the human mind with agony. But the tarantula does survive, only to be dragged by the wasp back to its lair and implanted with a single egg. When the tarantula-hawk larva is born, it feeds off the tarantula's nonvital organs, finally bursting through the spider's abdomen when it grows too large. Tarantulas, it turns out, are the good guys from *Alien*, not the monsters.

This was real progress. Perhaps too much progress. I considered that I might be getting overconfident. In my next session with Brennan, we set about defining what constituted "cured." Holding a tarantula in my hand would be a nice way to prove that I've overcome this phobia, but certainly not the only way. The goal, he reminded me, was merely to arrive at a point where my quality of life was no longer affected by an internal fear response. It would be good for me to be able to explore my attic, or to not break out in sweats when a spider popped up on TV. I didn't need to go spelunking in search of hairless Mexican cave tarantulas.

We agreed on a simple tolerance comparison: sewer rats. In New York, I remember watching rats scamper on subway tracks as relief from the boredom of waiting for a train. If one had walked over my foot, I would've recoiled, kicked it away, and then gone on with my day. I should have the same reaction to spiders.

Before I left, Brennan gave me a heads-up: He explained that the brain will expel phobic thoughts, much the same way a recovering smoker will hack up bits of tar. Like Ebenezer Scrooge, I was told to expect visitations, a final round of spider-related nightmares as my brain purged a deeply ingrained fear.

"It's a good sign," he reassured me.

I visited the Petco near me to gauge my progress. Previous Petco trips had always been hurried affairs. No matter how badly I needed pet supplies, it seemed irrational to knowingly enter a building with a live tarantula in it. This time, I didn't encounter any of fear's physical manifestations: sweaty palms, a creeping expectation, or the peripheral vigilance. As I approached the Scary Animals aisle, I felt only annoyance. Petco used the same floor scheme as the Santa Ana Zoo, forcing me into one of the narrowest aisles in the store.

I approached the spider tank slowly, finding no wall of fear. A small true zebra tarantula (a Costa Rican species known for its speed) huddled in a back corner, motionless. Its abdomen looked like a squeak toy. One wee cricket bounded about obliviously. In days past, I would've felt real pity for this guy, trapped with a nightmare. Now I felt like the spider deserved a few more of these Happy Meals.

A new sensation came over me: Fear and the absence of fear existed simultaneously. It was like seeing a small shiny

object in bright sunlight, the glint reflecting in just one eye. In one part of my consciousness, the true zebra was still a monster, something ancient and Lovecraftian. In another part of my mind, it was the ugly duckling in a pet store full of adorable animals. It would never have to face the tarantula hawk, but it would also never know the security of its own burrow. And while the spider had a cushy existence in this pet store, its sheer ugliness ensured that it would eventually wind up in the care of the very worst sort of flaky pet owner, slated for a life with someone who would probably forget to feed it, or spill bong water on it, or let it get eaten by a larger, less exotic pet. Overlapping these contradictory sensations was a third realization: I was calm. This was the closest I'd ever been to a tarantula.

Soon after my revelation, my wife bought me a plastic tarantula at Target. The toy was from a line called TARANTULA PLANET—its logo a cartoon tarantula standing guard over its own little planetoid—and featured SOUND ACTIVATED CRAWLIN' ACTION. The back of the box showed the full line: Octane "the Racer" (blue with black flames on its abdomen), Tango "the Soldier" (camo, with comical little army helmet), Red Beard "the Pirate" (black, with tiny hat, hook, and parrot), and Spike "the Rocker" (purple Mohawk, studded wristbands, light-up eyes). She bought Spike. This seemed only one small step removed from the clown-shoed Goliath of my hypno-movie. It wasn't much effort to hear the yakety sax.

The next day I popped off the detachable mohawk and studded bracelets. It looked a lot scarier. For an hour I was alone with my fear. Then it stopped being scary. By the end of the day, I saw the plastic tarantula as emblematic of exotic adventure, like the model schooners decorating my living room.

Each night, I fell asleep with a dread of nightmares. I'd never been guaranteed bad dreams, although this could be another smoker parallel, similar to the vivid dreams caused by nicotine patches. When the nightmare finally came, it was laughably amateurish: a wire-and-fur tarantula with googly bike-reflector eyes popping up next to my bed, like a cheap fright in a county-fair haunted house. I'm not one for lucid dreams, but I remember looking at it and laughing in contempt. That was the best my brain could do?

My final session with Brennan felt more like a debriefing than therapy. I'd spent the last week exposing myself to spiders in every sense except tactile, without any reaction. For all practical purposes, I'd beaten my phobia in three sessions. With a hint of suspicion, I asked if this was unheard-of. He smiled and said my experience was common. People assume that because their emotional response is so huge, that it will take months or years of therapy to overcome. In fact, such neural pathways are fragile and can be easily disrupted, like cobwebs.

After leaving Brennan's office, we loaded up on mixed nuts—adequate protein being essential for a steady emotional state—and drove to Medusa, a highly recommended exotic-pet store in west LA. Even though he'd mastered his own phobia, Brennan had never actually held a tarantula and enthusiastically wanted in on this ritual of completion.

When we arrived, the manager was busy with a customer. I respected that he didn't drop everything to schmooze the press, so we browsed for the spider. There was a large selection of exotic fish and corals. The old me would have resented the contrast between the relaxation of watching swimming animals and the horror of glimpsing crawling animals. We passed large plastic bins of small, beautiful

A tarantula crawls over the hand of the author—proof that he is no longer an arachnophobe.



snakes. I searched myself. What emotion was I feeling? My nervousness seemed more social than phobic. I wanted to make sure I wasn't being rude, dragging my hypnotist and photographer around someone else's tiny shop.

We met up with the manager, Josh, whom I'd spoken with by phone. He produced a plastic animal-storage bin with a rose hair tarantula. The rose hair is passive, slow, and not a particularly strong climber—a good starter spider for phobics. The shop didn't offer any obvious surfaces, so we stepped out into a back alley where the light was strong. This added a slight absurd feel to a rather important milestone in my life, as if we were conducting an illicit pet transaction.

Josh delivered a shocking warning: Tarantulas are fragile. For a burrowing spider like the rose hair, a fall from even waist level on a human adult would "shatter" it. He meant this literally. If it fell, its body would crack and it would die. I wasn't quite sure what a shattered tarantula would do for my phobia, but I was pretty sure what it would do for my morale, karma, and journalistic integrity. We gathered protectively around the small, unnamed female as Josh scooped her out of the plastic terrarium and placed her in Brennan's outstretched palm. Brennan's hand trembled slightly and he said, "It's so light!"

I asked questions, perhaps to delay my own moment of truth. Did an animal like this require special handling? It did not. For many tarantulas, maintenance is low: a decent terrarium, a brick of Bed-a-Beast, a half-log hidey hole, food, and water. Was this an expensive tarantula? No, she cost \$18. Was there a risk of bad pet owners—lazy-eyed stoners looking for a laugh—buying one? None, Josh said with solemn assurance. Nearly everyone looking to buy exotic pets possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of their

animal. Only once or twice he'd refused to sell to people who didn't seem responsible. One of his biggest problems was people looking to buy unusual animals as presents.

"And insect venom," he said with a sheepish grin. "That's another problem for me. I'm really allergic."

My moment had come. I wasn't sure how to gauge the absence of fear (after all, when are we ever truly safe in this world?). But I could tell my own dread was as close to zero as possible. For one brief moment, there was a glimmer of the old fear as the spider turned to face me with its many tiny eyes, each black, alien, incapable of transmitting emotion. Then it gingerly stepped down into my cupped hands.


It was indeed light, like balsa wood, or the branch of a fern. The wind picked up for a moment, and it huddled to steady itself. Then it decided it wanted to explore my hand. Its gestures were catlike, just in a different configuration. Slowly I turned my hands over and it climbed down from one to the other, like a toy Slinky.

A second gust of wind blew through the alley, and it—she—turned toward me. Suddenly, those black dots became real eyes conveying a real need, a fear of the breeze that could easily snatch her up and send her smashing into the ground. I felt another internal switch click. I was holding something furry and vulnerable. In an instant, the tarantula had been anthropomorphized, the greatest possible defense an animal can have in a world ruled by humans. Like my phobia, this feeling was internal, psychosomatic, but felt incredibly real, tapping into a different but equally ancient core of my brain.

Those tiny eyes spoke to me now:

*Be my friend.*

*Protect me.*

*Don't let me fall.* 

*The author enjoys a post-finally-cured-of-arachnophobia celebratory jump.*



# Iron Fist



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LACEY DAYS VELVET BLAZER

GYPSY DREAMS SEQUINED TANK

VENUS IN FURS LEGGINGS

LOVE BITES FLAT

# SOFEX WAS SO-SO

*Experiencing the Military-Industrial Complex's Trade Show*

BY SHANE SMITH  
PHOTOS BY JOSEPH PATEL AND MATT RUSKIN

“You know, it’s weird, man. It’s like everybody’s real cordial with each other. But, at the end of the day, we’re, like, buying weapons to destroy each other. I don’t want to, like, sound liberal or anything. But it’s really not glamorous. This shit fucking kills people.” Shockingly, the guy who said this wasn’t some antiwar hippie who had just dropped acid. He was a 6’4” Marine Corps Force Recon sergeant who had recently returned from two tours in Afghanistan. We were both attendees at the 2010 Special Operations Force Exhibition (SOFEX) in Jordan. His booming reaction was prompted by the trade-show floor—a sea of displays and kiosks from weapons companies hawking missiles, machine guns, tanks, and bombs like they were next year’s luxury sedans. Even more unsettling, the expo’s biggest sponsor was the USA.



Photo courtesy of Dillon Aero.

The Dillon Aero M134D Gatling Gun, a “six-barreled, electrically driven machine gun chambered in 7.62mm NATO that fires at a fixed rate of 3,000 shots per minute.” It was one of countless killing machines featured at SOFEX.



The Ultimate Warrior Competition is sponsored by KASOTC, a "counterterrorism training facility" in Jordan founded by King Abdullah.



Just like at any other trade show, product demonstrations and live tests are the norm at SOFEK. This helicopter-repelling demonstration was part of King Abdullah's "show of force," a smorgasbord of special-ops exercises that preceded the sales portion of the conference.

On arriving at SOFEK, I was reminded of when I was a punk kid and it was fashionable to say things like, "The military-industrial complex is taking over the world." At the time, I didn't know what "military-industrial complex" meant, but the conference rapidly provided me with a very literal definition of the term.

SOFEK takes place every two years in Amman, and is largely the brainchild of Jordan's king, Abdullah II, who has a penchant for special operations and massive displays of artillery. Over the course of a week, more than 12,000 attendees tromped around 30-odd tents staked across the desert, hosting approximately 300 vendors. The atmosphere was insidious but open, an organized free-for-all in which American companies like Northrop Grumman, Boeing, and General Dynamics sold weapons to almost anyone who could afford them.

I've been to hundreds of depressing media trade shows, and SOFEK's salespeople are no different from the rest, except that their wares are designed to destroy things and kill people. I witnessed representatives from almost every nation spending millions of dollars on heavy munitions; I was wondering if the transactions were padded by foreign aid from the US and other countries. I heard high-ranking soldiers say things like, "When I retire I'm going to be on the other side of the table—ha ha ha ha." What this means is that it's not uncommon for generals with government-controlled salaries around \$100,000 a year to spend the twilight of their careers purchasing billions worth of munitions from arms companies who, in turn, offer these same senior officers state-side "consulting" gigs with multimillion-dollar salaries. It's blatant payola, the whole thing so corrupt it borders on absurd. Absurdity, as it turned out, was a running theme of the conference.

## Generals came dressed to the nines; it was like Dr. Evil decided to host a fashion show.

Every SOFEK commences with a "show of force" arranged by King Abdullah. This time it consisted of elite military training exercises focused on antipiracy special ops. I watched as mock combatants fell from the sky with purple smoke coming out of their asses as they overtook a "boat" made of a bunch of shipping containers, marooned in the middle of the desert. I thought, "What the fuck is happening here?" No one seemed to have a grasp on reality.

When the conference opened each day the scene resembled a free booze party on the Lower East Side, but instead of hipsters crowding the bar to get free vodka, generals stood five deep trying to place their orders for laser-guided weapons and truck-mounted rocket launchers, both of which were the stars of the show.

Generals from every tin-pot army in the world were in attendance, and they came dressed to the nines; it was like Dr. Evil decided to host a fashion show. The sharpest were the African generalissimos, with their gold-braided mauve outfits and huge hats. The scariest were the guys from the ex-Soviet republics who looked like cold-blooded killers and mafiosi. They were right out of central casting—the evil bastards that James Bond or Rambo, against all odds, has to terminate. But the weapons they were selling were all too real and really, really crazy. One vendor peddling Javelin missiles said, "[They've] been incredibly successful not only for US troops, but also for other forces as well."



LEFT: Lt. Colonel Jafar S. Al-Droubi and Shane.

ABOVE: The Jordanian soldiers were very much open to photo ops.

**It was shocking to discover that just about any country could purchase surface-to-air missiles.**


I took this to mean that American soldiers *and* their enemies could potentially be using the same weapons to blow each other to smithereens—meaning straight-up profits for the companies selling them.

It was readily apparent that SOFEX's conceit is a thinly veiled excuse to sell US arms to any military with the means. American armament companies are theoretically prohibited from selling to rogue regimes, but there's a loophole that says it's OK for "nations friendly to Jordan" to buy their weapons.

I spoke with another ex-Marine and Iraq war vet who identified for me some of the weapons for sale at SOFEX that had been used against him and his comrades during his tours in Iraq and Afghanistan (one of the worst offenders was China's Norinco, whose missiles are widely used by insurgents in Iraq). It was shocking to discover that

just about any country could purchase surface-to-air missiles specifically designed to knock planes out of the sky. There were also "dual purpose" configurations; it's illegal for some countries to purchase all-inclusive murderous vehicles ready for combat, but perfectly kosher to acquire one company's vehicle and another's armaments—then put them together like a set of killer Legos to create a super-killer *Airwolf*. Not-so-friendly places like North Korea and Libya have already mastered this kind of Frankensteining.

Surprisingly, everyone at SOFEX was clamoring to talk to me, because they assumed I worked for *Jane's*—the premier military and arms trade publication. It was the equivalent of being from *GQ* or *Vanity Fair* during Paris Fashion Week. The region's economy relies on exploiting terrorism, fear, paranoia, and counterterrorism, and I can see how people get caught up in the brouhaha. It's undeniably fun to fire RPGs at old tanks, watch Gatling guns cut a house in half like butter, and launch rockets into the night sky. Then you turn around and there's a steely-eyed war veteran who sobers you right up: "This shit has one purpose. It kills people."

Oh yeah, right. 

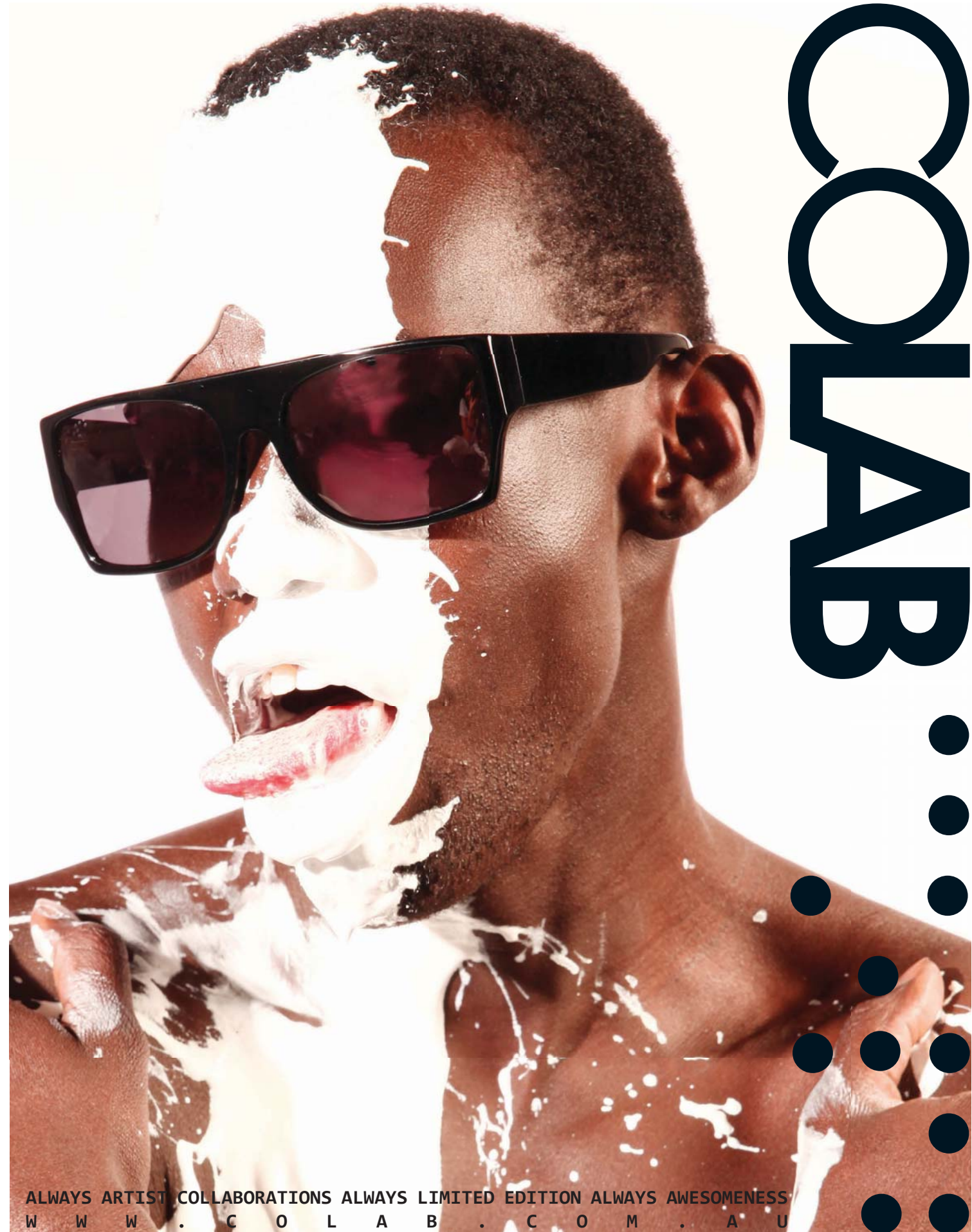
Watch Shane navigate SOFEX in all its explosive glory later this month on VBS.TV.



LEFT: Much of the equipment was subtly designed and tastefully displayed, but this missile resembled something out of a Bond movie.

TOP RIGHT: Shane at the helm of Boeing's Avenger Air Defense Turret. It is the Honda Civic of automated anti-air systems: cheap, lightweight, and reliable.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Heckler & Koch, a German company, sells guns like the G36, bigger guns like the MG4, and grenade launchers that conveniently attach to the aforementioned weapons. Their displays seemed to be inspired by Foot Locker.



ALWAYS ARTIST COLLABORATIONS ALWAYS LIMITED EDITION ALWAYS AWESOMENESS  
W W W . C O L A B . C O M . A U



A young man in a green military uniform stands on a dirt path in a lush, hilly landscape. He is holding a rifle across his chest. The background features dense green vegetation, including palm trees and tall grasses, with misty hills in the distance under a bright sky.

# THE HEART OF BLEAKNESS

*Sifting Through the Wreckage of Congo's Conflict Economy*

BY JASON MOJICA  
PHOTOS BY TIM FRECCIA

*A member of the Mai Mai militia patrols his camp. Legend has it that the Mai Mai are shape-shifters who can fly and that bullets pass through them as if their bodies are made of water.*

Walking through the jungle in the dead of night with a group of Rwandan rebels best known for their expertise at rape and murder wasn't exactly what we had planned for our first trip to the Democratic Republic of Congo. All we wanted was to make a little film about the controversy surrounding the so-called conflict minerals that make our cell phones work, drop a couple Conrad references, and drink a Primus. Just one Primus.

A week earlier, our team landed at N'Djili International Airport in the capital of Kinshasa, formerly Leopoldville. The place looks like it hasn't had a scrub since Muhammad Ali dropped by for the Rumble in the Jungle in the early 1970s. After having our yellow-fever cards checked for the first time in our well-traveled lives, we ran a gauntlet of sweaty police officers and other officials—each with his own laundry list of infractions that we had apparently already committed. In an amazing stroke of luck, they were willing to overlook all these violations for a small fine, payable in person, to them.

We'd come to Congo to try to find out more about the developed world's thirst for coltan, cassiterite, and the other colorfully named minerals that make the electronics industry go round. These are part of a group of

natural resources that have been dubbed "conflict minerals" because of the alphabet soup of armed groups (FARDC, CNDP, FDLR, PARECO, etc.) who have found them a very portable and highly profitable way to fund their activities—which mostly consist of killing people. Since 1996, these guerrilla insurgencies have led to the deaths of more than 5 million people, and in one particularly horrific year—2006—the rape of approximately 400,000 women.

After giving up on ever seeing our luggage again, we stepped out onto the streets of Kinshasa. The city is probably the closest real-world equivalent of a zombie apocalypse—an oppressively hot, dusty, and decrepit landscape where somewhere between 7 and 10 million people try to eke out a living any way they can, whether that's selling knotted plastic bags of water to the thousands of people caught in the never-ending snarl of traffic on the city's crumbling roads, or the occasional late-night ambush of out-of-towners dumb enough to go walking around on their own.

It was difficult not to be rattled by the crushing poverty: amputees, shantytowns, and hustlers on every corner. We wondered, "How the hell does a place like this get to be a place like this?" Can you really just blame it all on "colonialism" like some dreadlocked freshman anthropology student? In this case... maybe you can.

In 1885, Leopold II of Belgium established the Congo Free State, a little project that involved stripping the

## Kinshasa is probably the closest real-world equivalent of a zombie apocalypse.



*Just another day at the office for one of eastern Congo's "artisanal" miners, aka step 1 in how cell phones of the future will be made.*



*This is coltan, an essential component in many electronics like video-game systems and mobile devices. Eastern Congo contains 80 percent of the world's supply.*

*A handful of gold, tourmaline, and other minerals that make rebels' hearts go pitter-patter.*



After our Land Cruiser got stuck in mud for the umpteenth time, these fellows appeared out of nowhere and took the edge off with good vibes and a helping hand. They looked like they shopped at a thrift store from the future.

Congo of its natural resources as fast as humanly possible. Actually, the king liked things to be done faster than humanly possible, and he motivated some of his “workforce” by chopping off their hands. Fortunately for Leo, his adventure in Congo happened to coincide with the advent of the automobile, which meant that manufacturers were clamoring for Congo’s plentiful supply of rubber. He managed to get very rich while halving the population, but soon a group of more-civilized Belgians reined in the king’s entrepreneurial activities and ran Congo as a colony that they felt they could be proud of. And why shouldn’t they be proud? When Congo took its first baby steps as an independent nation, in 1960, the Belgians had left the country with 16 college graduates, a military consisting of 25,000 low-ranking troops, and over half its population illiterate.

After we spent a few days in our own stink, our bags finally arrived and we were able to start our journey in earnest. We knew very little about Congo before we came, but the one thing that had been drilled into our heads was “do not fly on Congolese airlines.” Conventional wisdom says that between the beat-up Russian planes and their drunken Russian pilots, and the occasional crocodile in the overhead, if you fly a Congolese airline—you *will* die. But what else could we do? Walk? This is a country the size of western Europe, with the infrastructure of rural West Virginia. As it turned out, our Congolese Airline flight would be the most comfortable experience of the days that followed.

**W**hen we arrived in Goma, the capital of the North Kivu province, the atmosphere was considerably better than in Kinshasa: cleaner air and nicer weather, and we were now working with a brilliant and brave Congolese fixer named Horeb and the veteran conflict photographer Tim Freccia. Having failed to prepare for the possibility of cold weather in Congo, we hit some secondhand-clothing shops in Goma (there did not appear to be any firsthand clothing shops), which were stuffed with donated fashions from the past few decades. We left for our journey into the mountains a few dollars lighter and one bootleg Wu Wear jacket richer.

Our crew piled into a Land Cruiser and rumbled toward a mining town called Numbi in South Kivu. We were told that the mines around Numbi were a good example of conflict-free mines: government-controlled, no rebels in sight.

When we arrived at the mine trailed by a few local government minders, there were in fact no rebels in sight. Government troops were also nowhere to be found. No child laborers, either. In fact, there were no laborers of any kind—the place was empty. Evidently, the West’s sudden concern about the money trail of the Congo’s mineral

**We left for our journey into the mountains a few dollars lighter and one bootleg Wu Wear jacket richer.**



A UN soldier waits on a landing strip adjacent to rows of barracks. This outpost is exclusively made up of Indian blue helmets famous for their hospitality, biscuits, and chai tea. If you’re a journalist or NGO employee working in the bush, it’s Congo’s equivalent of a desert oasis. If you’re not, you’re shit out of luck.

trade had folks around these parts spooked. A provision in the recently enacted Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, signed into law by President Barack Obama in 2010, requires American companies to disclose their use of “conflict minerals,” which is basically like asking them if they still beat their wives. In anticipation of the new rules, big corporations have simply avoided purchasing minerals from Congo altogether. Congolese sales of tin ore—used to solder circuit boards together—fell more than 90 percent in May alone.

We decided to ditch our minders and get an unvarnished look at an active site by spending the night in Numbi and sneaking out at the crack of dawn. Consequently, we had to climb to an altitude inhospitable to city folk. As we tried to keep ourselves from vomiting, we wondered if it was really necessary for us to *personally* see where coltan comes from.

After reaching the summit, we looked down on a shockingly primitive scene—workers wielding pickaxes and shovels, sifting soil through their callused hands. It’s something they call “artisanal mining,” which kind of makes it sound like the work of snooty craftsmen who wax their

mustaches. In reality, it’s a bunch of mud-caked guys in galoshes hacking at the earth for \$3 a day. If they’re lucky.

This was mining in the eastern Congo on a good day, when the country is ostensibly at peace. But should fighting break out again, conditions will rapidly shift from primitive to barbarous, as different groups of very patriotic armed men with a strong interest in minerals move into the area.

For the time being, these rebel groups have been pushed deep into the bush and are held at bay by joint military operations conducted by the UN and FARDC—Congo’s poorly paid and poorly organized armed forces.

Naturally, after hearing so much about these armed groups and how our addiction to Twitter was somehow enabling their murderous tendencies, we wanted to meet them. So Horeb and Tim pulled some strings and managed to make contact with a Mai Mai group in North Kivu known as the Patriotic Alliance for a Free and Sovereign Congo (APCLS) and led by General Janvier Buingo Karairi. The term *Mai Mai* is shorthand for the wide assortment of local militias in eastern Congo who have collectively terrorized the region over the past decade, frequently accused (but rarely convicted) of employing child soldiers and massacring and raping civilians in Katanga’s “triangle of death.” The Mai Mai claim to possess superhuman powers, say that bullets pass through their bodies as if through water, and, if the situation warrants, that they can morph into animals. They are the African-guerrilla version of the Wonder Twins.

**The Mai Mai claim to possess superhuman powers, say that bullets pass through their bodies as if through water.**



*Mai Mai General Janvier (right) makes sure his Rwandan secretary is keeping thorough minutes.*



*On arriving in a mostly empty and burned-out village in the middle of the Congolese jungle, this spindly Rwandan (a member of the feared FDLR) greeted the author and his crew by saying, “We have the power to make you sleep in the mud tonight.” Before they discovered exactly what he meant, his demeanor mysteriously changed and he agreed to provide armed escorts for the second leg of the journey to the Mai Mai camp. Unbelievably, this all took place less than four miles from the UN outpost.*



*Shortly after the author’s arrival at the Mai Mai camp, General Janvier’s men paraded around two of their prisoners—Congolese government troops who’d wandered onto their turf. The Mai Mai wanted to demonstrate how humanely the prisoners had been treated during their internment.*



The Mai Mai version of mugging for the camera.

The notion of heading into the dense Congolese jungle in search of superpowered Mai Mai was terrifying enough without the local UN troops upping the ante by politely asking us to copy down our personal information, specifically our passport numbers. It was, they insisted, “just a formality”—one that would assist American embassy officials in figuring out where to pick up our mutilated corpses.

In Africa, you have to be careful what you ask for. As we wound our way through the humid jungle, in what immediately felt like our own Bataan death march, we encountered—you guessed it—a group of armed men. But when it became clear that our fearless fixer and his armed interlocutor were each speaking a different language, we realized that these guys were not the local militia we were trying to locate, but members of the FDLR, a group of Rwandan Hutu rebels far from home.


We stood around trying to act casual, avoiding eye contact with a group of soldiers who appeared too young to remember the 1994 Rwandan genocide upon which the group was built. Meanwhile, one of them radioed ahead to Hutu troops at a camp down the road to allow us safe passage through their territory—and to visit a guerrilla group that, we’d thought, were avowed enemies of the FDLR.

Things didn’t become any more clear when we finally met the Mai Mai and sat down with General Janvier. One of his group’s primary demands is that all Rwandans leave Congolese soil immediately. So why did Rwandan FDLR troops escort us to his camp? How did General Janvier’s Rwandan secretary feel about that? You might find this

strange, but as we sat there surrounded by Janvier’s men... well, we didn’t really feel like asking those questions.

VICE cofounder Suroosh Alvi asked General Janvier what he thought about the world’s addiction to electronic devices—and, necessarily, coltan. The general was forthright at first and said that the average Congolese citizen does not benefit from mineral extraction, which was “one of the reasons why we are fighting.” He seemed to imply that if the Mai Mai controlled the mines, they would redistribute the wealth. But when asked to expand on the issue, the general played coy, saying that minerals “may be around here... but we don’t dig,” flatly denying that his fighters have any sort of interest in the mineral trade.

Congo is a complicated place, but not so complicated that we should write it off.

It’s easy to pin the country’s problems on the past—the Belgian colonialists, kleptocratic rulers, and grievances with neighboring nations—but that doesn’t make any of them go away. Maybe if we demand conflict-free electronics the rebel groups will simply melt away into the jungle, or maybe we’ll only succeed in making the poorest country in the world a little poorer. 

Keep your eyes peeled in the coming months for the VICE Guide to Congo on VBS.TV.

**Maybe if we demand conflict-free electronics the rebel groups will simply melt away into the jungle.**



VICE cofounder Suroosh Alvi considers turning back before working up the nerve to cross a “bridge” constructed out of bamboo shoots and vines that leads to the Mai Mai stronghold.

# TOUPEE: BALD AT THE ZOO

BY BRETT GELMAN, PHOTOS BY JANICZA BRAVO



They took my toupee. Wouldn't give it back. Pigs never let you have anything you want. That's part of the fun of being a pig. You can take anything you want, and no one can do shit about it. Except richies, but who's rich in the fucking desert? If you were living in the desert and suddenly became rich, the first thing you'd spend money on would be getting the fuck out of there.

Desert pigs are the worst, though. They hate the fact that they live in the land of sand and would rather be in the city acting like some big shot on *Law & Order*. And who do they take their frustration out on? People like me who are just trying to make a few bucks to keep ourselves juiced up. They took my fucking toupee! They want to see a little light go out of my eyes and die a little in this slop hole. That makes a pig's dick harder than a shaven porn puss.

My cellmate isn't exactly a class fucking act either. He's a serial rapist named Herbert, but for whatever reason I'm supposed to call him Grunt. He's says that if I use his real name he'll kill me. What is this, fucking *Stripes*? Grunt is a 300-pound hulk mountain. It's hard to tell what percentage of his body is muscle and what is fat. If I was sure it was mostly fat, I'd slug his weak ass to sleep if he said more than four words to me. But he's got one of those bodies where you just can't tell. So I can't do shit, except sit here and listen to his boring fucking rape stories.

"Oh boy, you should have seen me. I was the best. I was the king. I used to call myself King Rape. I could rape in less than five minutes. I had a whole system. Knew all the best spots. I'd find the spot and say, 'This is my spot.' And then I'd wait in that spot. Then I'd do it in that spot, and next time I'd find another best spot. Never the same spot, that's my motto."

Guy won't shut his dumb fucking mouth. I hate rapists. It's a coward's crime.

The yard's no fun either. It's neo-Nazi methhead central. They're your best bet if you want to get high, but the tradeoff is that you gotta listen and nod your head to all their Hitler bullshit.

"If Hitler was alive today he'd be doing meth just like us."

"Yeah, he'd get the best meth too."

"He'd get the best meth because if he was alive when meth was invented, he would have been the one who invented it."

"Yeah, and he would have a shaved head just like us too."

"How amazing would it be to lift weights with Hitler on meth?"

"Yeah that would be really cool. He'd spot us and everything. And after we were done, we'd all hit the showers and give each other rat tails with our towels."

Rat tails in the shower? I tell you, if Hitler was reincarnated, came to America, and saw that these were the people "carrying on his legacy," he'd shoot 'em all in their dumb cue-ball heads and call it a shitty day. Nobody even knows how to be a fucking skinhead anymore.

Also, the torture's a real whack to my dick's hairy friends. Three times a week the pigs bring me and a few other zoo animals into the basement. They strip us down and start asking us trivia about their own dead fucking lives.

"What's my favorite red-meat food?"

"What's my wife's favorite color?"

"How much do I wish I weighed?"

Of course, me and the other fuck 'n' sucks get every answer wrong. And every time we give them an incorrect answer the torture buffet is served. For an appetizer they shit and piss on our naked backs. The main course consists of spraying us with a fire hose point blank. And for dessert, electric wires hooked to our ballsacks. It's not original, but it hits home. Makes us chatter our fucking teeth like we're in an ice factory. Then, when it's all over and done, we go back to our cells, cry, and shut the fuck up.

Can't believe they took my toupee.

Read previous excerpts from Brett Gelman's Toupee at [Viceland.com](http://Viceland.com)

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## THE LEARNIN' CORNER: BARYOGENESIS IS VERY GENEROUS

MICHAEL J. RAMSEY-MUSOLF AS TOLD TO ALEX DUNBAR, ILLUSTRATION BY KAMRAN SAMIMI



*Michael J. Ramsey-Musolf is a professor of physics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research concerns the interface of theoretical nuclear physics, particle physics, astrophysics, and cosmology.*

We think that the universe started with a big fireball, aka the Big Bang. After that, there was a period of rapid expansion, or inflation, as the universe cooled. At the end of this inflation, it's likely that there was just as much matter as antimatter in the universe. This, however, presents a unique problem: If there were an equal number of quarks and antiquarks, we wouldn't exist because they would cancel each other out. Since we *do* exist, we know there must be more quarks than antiquarks. If you assume that, at the completion of this inflation, the universe began with a balanced amount of matter and antimatter, that still doesn't explain why we can touch and see certain things. This form of matter consists of particles called baryons, which are made of quarks. It was after the universe's initial period

of inflation that we believe baryons came to be. Another name for this process is baryogenesis. A simpler way to put this is the act of getting something from nothing.

One amazing facet of baryogenesis is something called the baryon asymmetry, which provides a basis for measuring the probability of baryons, aka any matter, existing in the first place. Since we know that for every  $10^{10}$  antimatter particles, or antibaryons, the universe must have  $10^{10} + 1$  baryons, we are also certain that the baryon-favoring asymmetry is one part in  $10^{10}$ , which means the probability of any matter existing at all is minuscule.

Baryogenesis theories attempt to address a fundamental question of particle physics and cosmology, basically, "What is the origin and

composition of all the matter and energy in the universe?" There's the biggest fraction, which is dark energy, and dark matter, the next biggest fraction. After that, there's the smallest fraction, but the one most relevant to everyday life: the baryon fraction. None of those components can be explained by our standard cosmology and model of particle physics. The real question is to understand how all these things came to be at a fundamental level. Understanding baryogenesis is one piece of that pie.

Soviet nuclear physicist Andrei Sakharov realized that the early universe would need three basic ingredients in order for baryogenesis to be successful, which are now known the Sakharov conditions: One is that the baryon number must be violated. The second condition is that both C-symmetry (the symmetry of physical laws under a charge-conjugation transformation) and CP-symmetry (which takes place when a system doesn't change under both charge-conjugation and parity) were violated at some point in the early days of the universe. The third is that, at some point, the universe shifted out of thermal equilibrium. Imagine a day where the weather's so muggy that water starts to condense into little droplets—what's known in physics as a phase transition, which is also an out-of-equilibrium phenomenon. To determine whether Sakharov conditions were in effect during the nascent universe, we must use instruments like the Large Hadron Collider, which may provide us with clues about phase transitions that happened immediately (as in  $10^{-11}$  seconds) after the Big Bang, and insights into dark matter and dark energy. Equally important are very low-energy, highly precise "tabletop" experiments that look for properties of atoms and neutrons that—if found—would be the "smoking gun" of CP violation.

The more we learn about baryogenesis, the closer we will be to understanding why we exist, as well as how and when existence happened. It's a question so fundamental that even partially answering it will change the meaning of life in ways we can't imagine.

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## THE CUTE SHOW PAGE!

BY ELLIS JONES, PHOTO BY RICHARD AUSTIN



### Badgers

*Watch a brand-new episode of The Cute Show! featuring these mischievous rascals later this month at VBS.TV.*

A badger cub is just like an annoying little brother who's constantly getting into trouble, usually while covered head to toe in bits of food and dirt. You can't help but love them, even if they smell a little like poop. These short-legged omnivores are members of the weasel family, and the cubs are boisterous, curious, and funny little critters. We quickly became smitten with these furry little fun balls after spending the day at Secret World Badger & Wildlife Rescue Center in Somerset, England. They have a very busy and desirable daily routine that consists of hide-and-seek, looking like smart-asses, climbing on one another, lots of napping, and eating copious amounts of food in the messiest fashion possible (which typically means rolling around in their meals and results in incredibly sticky and unbelievably endearing scenarios). We wish we could drop out of life and spend the rest of our days playing with these adorable critters, getting into all kinds of cuddly tomfoolery.



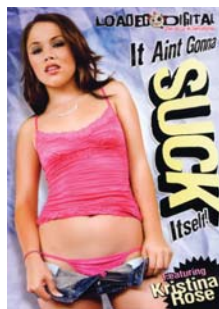
# HUMAN POTENTIAL

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## SKINEMA

BY CHRIS NIERATKO



**IT AIN'T GONNA SUCK ITSELF!**

Rating: 4

metromovies.com

The sad thing about the title of this film is that it's true; it's *not* going to suck itself. As a teenager I would lie in the tall grass down by the brook, looking up at the clouds moving across the gray Jersey sky, dreaming of a future when it would be possible for it to suck itself. I envisioned a world where all penises could bend and fold in a way that would make the impossible seem ordinary. I'd think to myself: "Someday, somehow, I'm going to get out of this town, and I know, just across that county line, anything will be possible." But it wasn't. I've crossed every county and state line in this great nation of ours, and nothing has changed. Two decades later, my dick still cannot suck itself.

I'm not saying I've given up hope—not yet, not with a black president in office—but I just don't know if it's going to happen in my lifetime. Time is passing me by, and my penis and every dong I see in porn seems exactly as they were in the past century. All I can do is pray that my sons will enjoy a better way of life that allows them to work hard and know that their blowjobs will not depend on anyone else. I have to believe that there are better days ahead and that the wangs of tomorrow will be marvelous, self-sufficient creatures.

Because as I watch nine girls attempt to suck faceless men to completion, I can't help but think that not getting a blowjob would be better than any of

the blowjobs in this movie. Some girls acted like they'd never seen a pecker before, barely holding the rod with two fingers, as if they were trying to avoid dropping a fragile beaker full of I-Have-No-Fucking-Idea-What-I'm-Doing. I felt the same giddiness one experiences while watching blind people navigate a maze. Was she going to put it in her ear? Her eye socket? Oh my God, she's completely lost! I wish they still showed porn on *America's Funniest Home Videos*, because any one of these girls would have won big bucks.

As the saying goes: If you want a job done right, you have to do it yourself. And since I'm not getting any ribs removed, I really need scientists to perfect this self-sucking cock already. Not for me. Never for me. But for my children. I don't want them to suffer the way I did as a child, enduring toothy, uncoordinated BJ's, having to explain, "It can go in farther," or "Goddamn it, look me in the eyes," or "We could get through this a whole lot quicker if you just try and get your mouth and hand to sync up," to every other girl. It's mentally exhausting having to constantly train and retrain talent (and I use that word loosely), and I don't want that kind of life for my boys. So I beg of you, Santa/Jesus/Allah/Easter Bunny/whoever is on duty today, please, oh please, hurry the fuck up and let it suck itself already.

*More stupid can be found at [Chrisnieratko.com](http://Chrisnieratko.com)*

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VICE  
BOOKS

## SHEPPARD'S VIDEO-GAME PIE

BY STEPHEN LEA SHEPPARD



### MORTAL KOMBAT

Platform:  
Xbox 360

Publisher:  
Warner Bros.  
Interactive  
Entertainment

The new *Mortal Kombat*, which is technically the ninth of the franchise, is almost everything I want from an MK game.

I'm a longtime fan of the series—hell, I even like the movies—and it's not because of the explicit violence. In my younger days, I was obsessed with video-game story lines (now I merely enjoy them, when they're present), and MK is the only fighting-game franchise with a story that's worth a damn. Also, the characters were fun to draw when I was a kid.

A while back I bagged on MK in my *Street Fighter IV* review, mostly because nowadays I'm enamored with good mechanics, which MK games never had, and because I'm still a bit embarrassed at my ability to effortlessly rattle off Sub-Zero's biography. (I was always a bigger fan of Sub-Zero than Scorpion, and right there is your basic division of MK fandom.) Finally, here's an MK game I can proudly support.

Although I've read some essays suggesting that the new MK's gameplay falls short of *Street Fighter IV*'s tournament-level standard, it's much more balanced than previous iterations. Also, following the current fighting-game trend, characters are rendered in 3-D, but all of the action takes place on a 2-D plane like the first three MK games. The controls have been updated—the four attack buttons now execute a “forward” or “back” punch or kick, rather than the previous “high” or “low” varieties—but the special moves are mostly based off old standards. Also, fireballs work *way* better when characters can't sidestep them. NetherRealm Studios, the game's developer, also added a Super Meter, which powers up special moves, blocks combos, and unlocks X-ray attacks—moves

that cause the camera to zoom through the victim's skin as bones are broken and organs crushed. This is probably the most genre-appropriate addition to the series since, um, Fatalities, which is to say it's the *only* befitting conceptual addition since the first damn game. Thankfully, filling the Super Meter doesn't take long, so fun powered-up moves and X-ray attacks can be executed fairly often. Admittedly, this gets a bit ridiculous during long fights when a guy's liver is pulverized twice in a row.

Another throwback to the first few games is that the narrative is again front and center, featuring a story mode that, thank God, revolves around lengthy cinematics that play between plot-based fights (as opposed to the previous games' story modes, which were all about running around a map completing tedious fetch quests). It begins with Shao Kahn on the verge of killing Raiden—the only two characters who are still alive. The Thunder God sends a telepathic vision to his past-self moments before Shao Kahn finishes him. What follows is a retelling of MKs 1 through 3 from the perspective of the past-Raiden, plagued by half-understood apocalyptic visions that cause him to attempt to rectify his future. It's a cool idea, and a heaping helping of nostalgia for longtime fans. It also ensures that the game focuses on cool pre-MK4 characters from before the series got stupid. Hooray for ninjas!

People who spent countless hours and quarters trying to pull off Shang Tsung's Kintaro Fatality—especially those of us who were disappointed by everything that followed MK4's switch to 3-D—should certainly check this one out, and for new fans it's an ideal jumping-on point.

## GIRLS WE HATED IN HIGH SCHOOL



BAGGAGE BY JEFFREY CAMPBELL



Skylar hangs out with a bunch of shaggy teenage layabouts, then has to run to unlock her locker before class. Later, she brings the jams.

## HIGH SCHOOL RIPPER

*Puro Instinct's* Guitarist Does Her Biology Homework Backstage

SKYLAR KAPLAN  
AS TOLD TO  
BEN SHAPIRO

PHOTOS COURTESY  
OF SKYLAR KAPLAN

*Three years ago, 13-year-old Skylar Kaplan and her older sister, Piper, formed Puro Instinct. They began writing songs that were ghostly and girly and gooey and guiltless and full of gusto and all other good descriptors that start with g. Soon they were releasing records and touring all over the US, forcing Skylar to balance high school duties with getting paid to play guitar. As a service to aspiring high school musicians everywhere, we asked her how she's able to pull it off without wanting to strangle her teachers with an E string. Guileful little gherkin that she is, Skylar acted like it's no big deal.*

I'm a sophomore at a public high school for the arts in Los Angeles. It's pretty rad. I'm majoring in theater so that I can make my way into film. In a way, it's good that I'm enrolled here rather than a regular public school. I'd probably have been kicked out by now for being on tour so much.

My biggest problem is doing homework on the road. It's really shitty, but in order to get everything done and not be totally screwed over when I get back to school, I have to. On the way back from a show in New York, I had our guitarist Cody help me with some biology assignments. It was just basic Punnett squares and genetics and dominant traits and stuff like that. When I got back to school I was like, "Fuck yeah, dude! Cody's my new tour tutor!"

I'm actually finding that I'm kind of into science and the basic rules of biology, which is good because I have a major test coming up next week. There was one night when I was really hyped up on coffee backstage. I was going through the biology book and freaked out by what I was reading: You can totally apply biology to interactions between people in the band, it's crazy! It enlightens you about everything!

I feel lucky because there aren't any real jocks or anything at my school, but there are a lot of haters. I'll admit, there *are* a few meatheads, but they're either music-nerd or visual-artist meatheads so it isn't that bad. You can tell that they're super into showing off their muscles in PE, which is kind of lame.

Thankfully, I don't have to deal with the high school cliques, but there are still the typical problems of people "fitting in" and acting superficial. I hang out with a smaller group of punk kids who are pretty rad. There's a group of music kids who are constantly scattin' the tunes that they have to remember for the next day, and a bunch of really eccentric "artists" with hair that's always bright pink or something. Then there's a group of hippies who are really introverted and always scouting for a good place to escape. They've got a spot on campus, but I don't want to say where because it would be awful if somebody read this and then told the principal, who would then probably go scavenging for stoners or whatever.

I'm dying to get my driver's license, but I just don't have time because I'm touring with John Maus over summer vacation. I'm so jealous because all my friends are like, "Ooooh, I just got my permit!" or "I just got my *license!*" It pisses me off so much! I'm stoked but also really afraid, because when you're driving, it's just you and like 3,000 pounds of killing machine! **VEB**

Watch live sets from Puro Instinct and a bazillion other bands on Noisey.com.



## REVIEWS



### BEST ALBUM OF THE MONTH: BLACK LIPS



#### MAIN ATTRAKIONZ *Blackberry Ku\$h* Self-released

Unstoppable production, futuristic flows, and flirtations with the psychedelic make Main Attractionz one of the best rap groups out today. If only people would stop calling this shit “cloud rap” they’d be golden. Seriously, I thought we’d established genre-name rock bottom with “witch house.”

GAPE RAZE



#### PRAYERS FOR ATHEISTS *New Hymns for an Old War* Strange Famous

Prayers for Atheists is punk-rap for the Dead Prez set. What sets PFA apart from most rock-rap acts is that MC Jared Paul has some real flow mastery. Meantime, his bandmates play more than just the standard chugga-chug bullshit you might expect from this sort of genre fusion. Comparisons to Rage Against the Machine are obvious, boring, and missing the point entirely.

ALEX DUNBAR



#### EMINEM AND ROYCE DA 5'9" *“Fast Lane”* Self-released

Let’s clear the air real quick: Eminem is one of the greatest rappers of all time. He’s put out a few Ambien- and methadone-fueled stinkers, but he’s still an MC of preternatural technical gifts—and those gifts are only

enhanced when displayed in the presence of a worthy challenger. Royce Da 5’9” is just such a match for Em, and from this first track it looks like *Hell: The Sequel* might live up to its 14-year build-up.

YO GODDI



#### LIL WAYNE *Tha Carter IV* Young Money

Dear Judge Charles H. Solomon, Thank you very much for sending Lil Wayne to jail. He’s been one of my favorite MCs ever since he was in the Hot Boy\$. I loved the *Dedication* and *Drought* tapes, but when *Tha Carter III* came out it seemed like Wayne was falling off. All that touring, syrup, and attention were changing him. Without your prison sentence forcing him off drugs and back onto his notepad, Wayne would’ve wound up another Southern rapper dead at 33 from codeine and sleep apnea. Thank you, Judge Solomon, for saving one of the greatest MCs ever and for serving justice once again!

JAKE TRAMES, LAKE FOREST  
ELEMENTARY CHARTER SCHOOL



#### JOHN MAUS *We Must Become the Pitiless Censors of Ourselves* Ribbon Music

When John Maus started releasing music almost ten years ago I doubt he ever imagined he’d be held up as a kingpin for a scene of freshly showered, overeducated sensitive dudes who plunk away at bass guitars over crappy drum machines and meandering synths. There’s

simply no way to predict that one day you will be looked on as the Magnetic Fields for the Tumblr generation. Luckily, he doesn’t seem to be buying into too much of his own hype. If you dug “Rights for Gays” you’ll probably like “Cop Killer,” and if you linked the video for “Do Your Best” to a crush’s Facebook page you’ll likely to do the same with “Hey Moon.”

MARLOS JUANZALEZ



#### HANDSOME FURS *Sound Kapital* Sub Pop

Handsome Furs are a married Canadian couple, so this music should be boring. Thankfully, Dan Boeckner and wife Alexei Perry must still be fucking each other in a completely fulfilling fashion because this album makes me want to mainline shitty coke cut with Tylenol. Slightly sloppy lubed-up electronic music written entirely on keyboards, *Sound Kapital* is Handsome Furs’ first album that doesn’t sound like a side project.

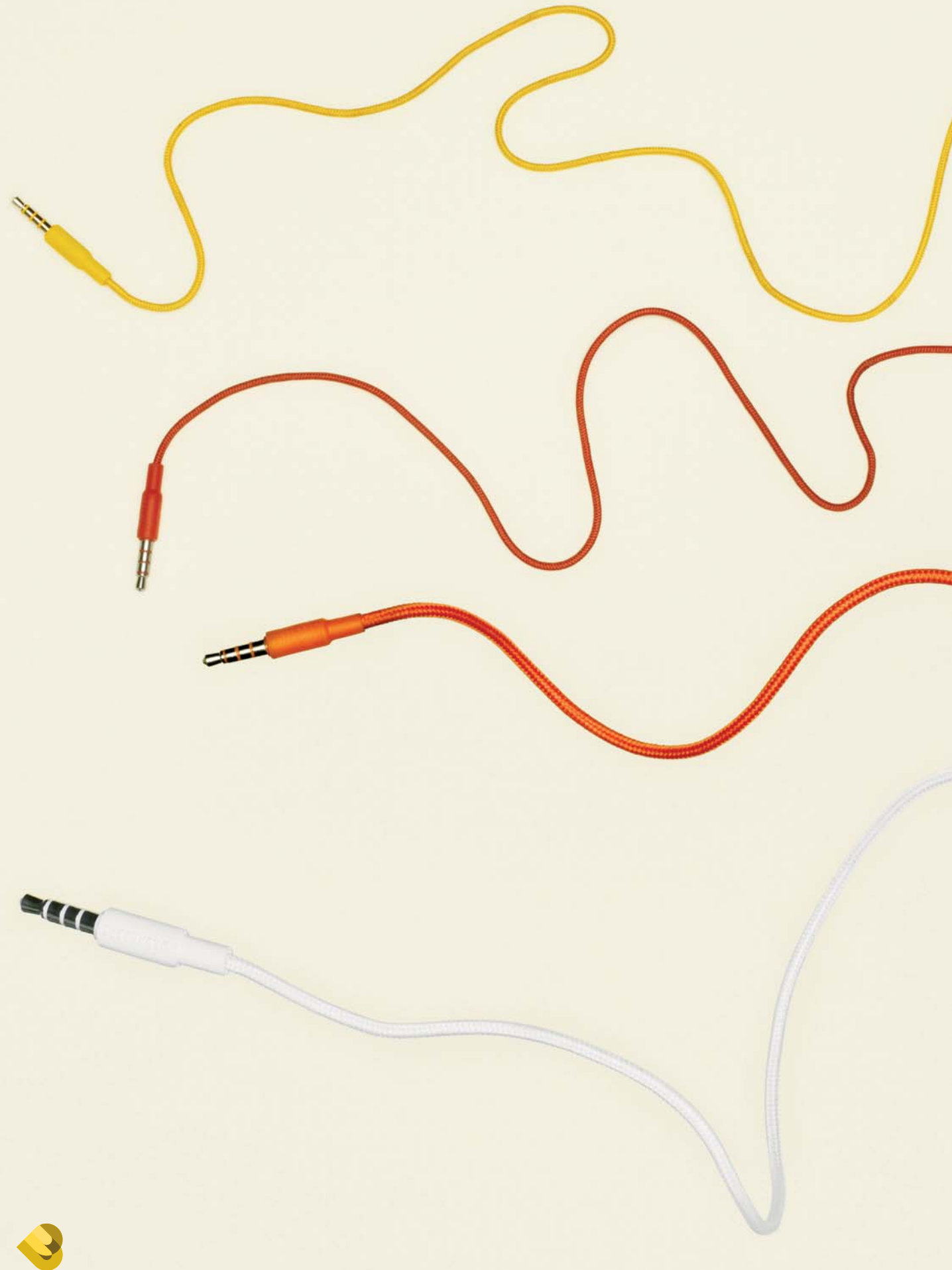
BOWIE CAT



#### CULTS *S/T* Sony

Despite their suspiciously high Google ranking (how the fuck did they beat out both Thrill Kill and THE Cult?), Cults are a delightful little band with an audible love for Phil Spector. They’re also doing that sampling-people-talking-from-the-TV thing no one’s done in the last few years, and no one’s done this well since the Glove. I also find it very difficult to dislike a band that uses a xylophone so often.

BOB WOODWORD



## REVIEWS



### WORST ALBUM OF THE MONTH: TEDDYBEARS



#### BLACK LIPS *Arabia Mountain* Vice

I don't care that we're putting this out, "conflicts of interest" are for lawyers and lazy bloggers with pill problems. This album is the cat's ass. The songy-songs belong in the 21st-century version of Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* and the rockin'-out numbers belong in my head all day while I get shit done with maximum prejudice (I typed that last part so hard it loosened a key). There's even a song that partakes of the D-A-G golden ratio of chord progressions, joining the pantheon of ELO's "Do Ya," Sweet's "Fox on the Run," and that Subway Sect song that sounds like that Pete Townshend song. This is everything that's good about Atlanta in summertime, which is everything that's good about everything anywhere always.

BABY BALLS



#### PLEASURE LEFTISTS *S/T* Fan Death Records

I can usually get behind the whole postpunk-angular-guitars-with-androgynous-singing thing, so I was open to the idea of some kids in Ohio giving it a shot. But—hold on—I'm also detecting a strong melodic undercurrent of midperiod Hüsker Dü, and the girl singer's yelps and cries leave Siouxsie scrambling for answers. I almost want to blast this from a boom box as I roll down to the Lady Foot Locker parking lot and smoke cloves in my Nana's Buick. Rest in peace, Nana.

STEVE KERR



#### BLOODHUFF *S/T* Price Tapes

The best part about this way-too-short tape is that once you listen to it 5 million times—which you will—you'll find yourself sweetly singing the word "raper" in the grocery store and other public spaces frequented by people's moms, thanks to the sing-alongable gem "Raper Charlie." Let this cassette seed your heart and make you fall in love with fun all over again.

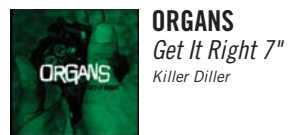
KELLY MCCLURE



#### THEE OUPS *Taste of Zimbabwe* Slovenly

Bazooka Joe won't stop fucking bugging me about reviewing this fucking record. Every day it's, "Did you review Thee Oups record?" and "When are you going to review Thee Oups record?" Here's my review: It's fast, blown-out hardcore with a lot of treble and not much bass. There's a nice Minor Threat cover on here. Now LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE!

NICHOLAS GAZIN



#### ORGANS *Get It Right 7"* Killer Diller

An amazingly weird 7-inch that comes with a flexi, this record is mostly good old-fashioned nostalgia rock. Then there's this song "Get It Right," which is a piano ballad where the key hammering gets more intense as the song's lyrics tell the story of a Murry Wilson-Brian Wilson relationship with a father who would hit him and scream "Get it right! Get it right!" as he practiced piano

until his fingers bled. I guess those memories turned out good for something.

ANAL SUNSHINE



#### TY SEGALL *Goodbye Bread* Drag City

Ty Segall's last album, *Meltd*, was a real epic destroyer. Each song was a banging, clanging hit. In between then and now he released an EP of T-Rex covers, and it seems like he's still in T-Rex mode, making slow songs that are a little smoother and slower. There's one song that goes, "She. Says. She. Wants. To. Buy. A. Couch... I said why do we have to. Buy. A. Couch." This is no party record, but it is a good one for rockers who feel sleepy.

KATEY LIVINGSTON SEGALL



#### SUPERSONIC PISS *Umbilical Noose* Rotted Tooth Records

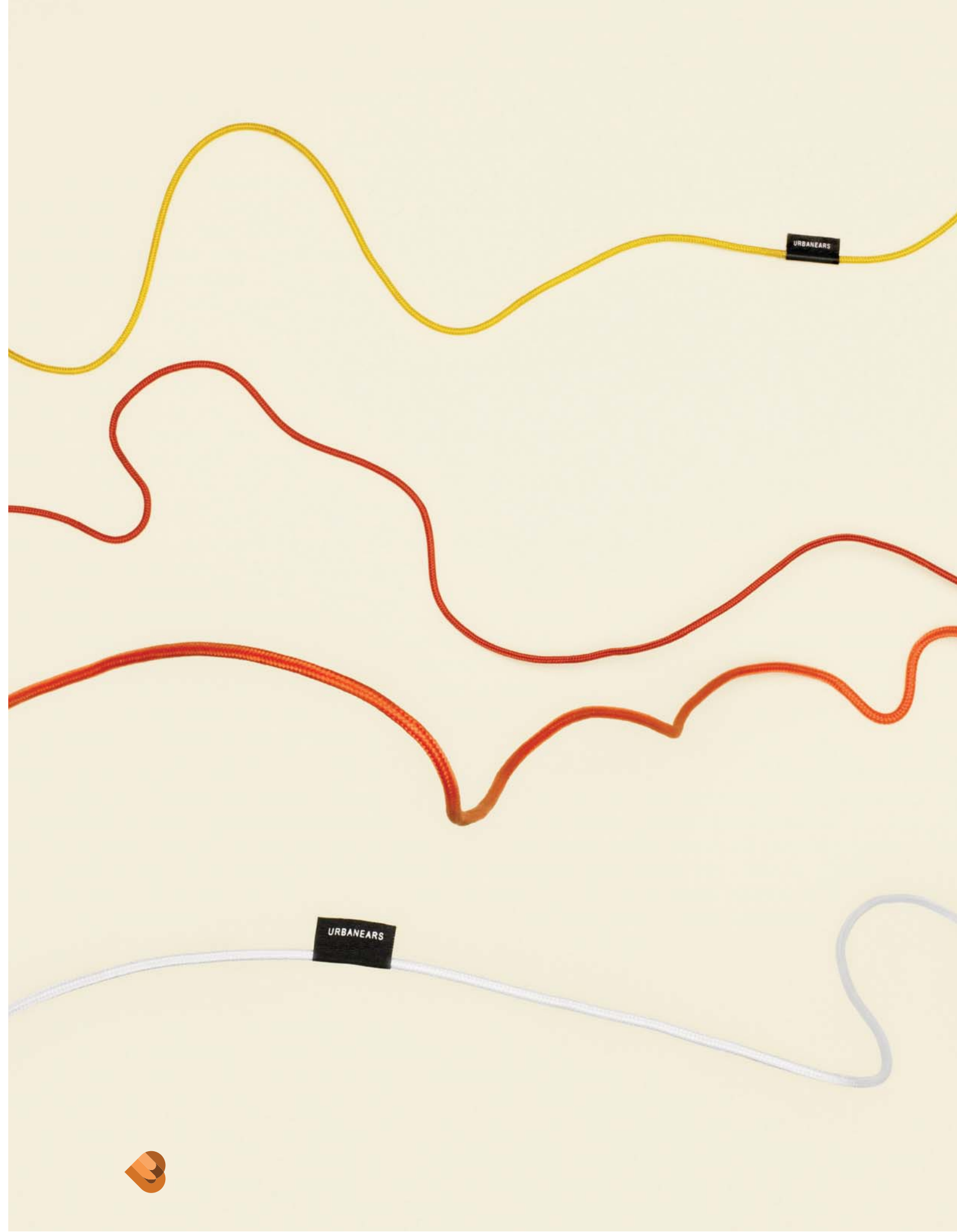
Proving Iowa has more to offer than corn and gay marriage, a lady singer and pack of degenerate scummy scumscums blast through 20 minutes of "songs" about important stuff like getting drunk and getting really, really drunk. They even manage to squeeze in not one but TWO Teenage Jesus covers. Go see them at whatever godforsaken "art punk" space your buddy calls his basement.

BILL WENNINGTON

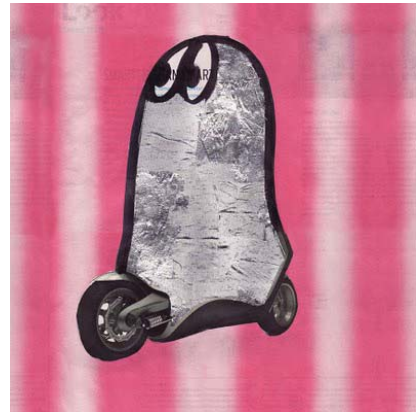


#### MAKING FRIENDZ *Social Life* Last Bummer Records

Tami Hart, bassist for MEN and haver of many projects, makes some of the best dancey punk music keyboards



## REVIEWS



can fry. On *Social Life*, Tami unleashes some beastly fur on the spry cordage of her bass, belching around cheap drum machines and toothy microKORGs. The second track, “Luv Cruizin,” with its refrain, “All your records sound the same to me,” is the perfect anthem for this very reviews column. ALEX DUNBAR



Fucked Up will continue being a great band until pretty, jangly guitar leads floating atop pop-punk bass lines and double-time drums stop being the perfect thing to scream over. It's like the music's triggering all those feel-good feelings while the screaming's telling you to get enjoyably angry. Fucked Up is dancing music, partying music, and bone-bangling music. JOEY BUSTNUTS



This is totally an album for grown-ups and will make you feel a lot of emotions. An example of the emotional roller coaster that *Gold Rings and Fur Pelts* took me on is as follows: Track 1: “What the fuck is this, the *Steel Magnolias* soundtrack?” Track 2: “Oh, this is pretty. I should play this while entering the bone zone.” Track 3: “I should probably start looking at all of my ex-girlfriends' Facebooks.” Track 4: “I feel embarrassed.” This sort of sultry, bluesy, singsongy music may be great when you're having a private

## BEST COVER OF THE MONTH: DEVIN, GARY & ROSS

emotional moment/menopause, but I'd be way uncomfortable if anyone I knew saw this CD in my house. It also kind of reminds me of the Renaissance Faire. OMAH BALLS



By now, everything that was remotely interesting about “chillwave” has been subsumed by a new generation of rap producers with their attention divided between the luminiferous aether and Twitter. With ears moving on to a more swagged-the-fuck-out version of this musical sensibility, what place is there for Washed Out outside the Fader Fort? MICHAEL MORLEY

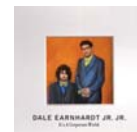


Brontosaurus is only a baby (they've only been around for one year), but their full, no-bells-or-whistles sound is at the level of a college-town bar band at best. Nicholas Kelley and Nicholas Papaleo are the dudeskis navigating this bro-ship, and their use of Mars Volta-esque guitar tangents and shoe-licking (one step beyond “gazing”) lyrics makes for a clean and simple album that's not gonna blow your panties off unless you're at a kegger and weren't wearing any in the first place. The amount of putrid music being put out over the past five years has pretty much turned everyone's portable listening devices into urinal cakes with headphones—then again comparing these guys to an environment that doesn't reek of piss is probably undue praise. PATTY O'FURNITURE



**TEDDYBEARS**  
*Devil's Music*  
Big Beat/Atlantic

One time I had no food in the house, so I ate a few spoonfuls of apple jelly. A couple of minutes later I started feeling fat so I got down on the carpet and began doing push-ups. After the fourth push-up, a little bit of barf crept up my throat and it burned so bad. I thought of that incident while listening to Teddybears. This Swedish (eugh) band makes music preapproved for Coke commercials. Enjoy this record if you like farts all over your face. KELLY McCLURE



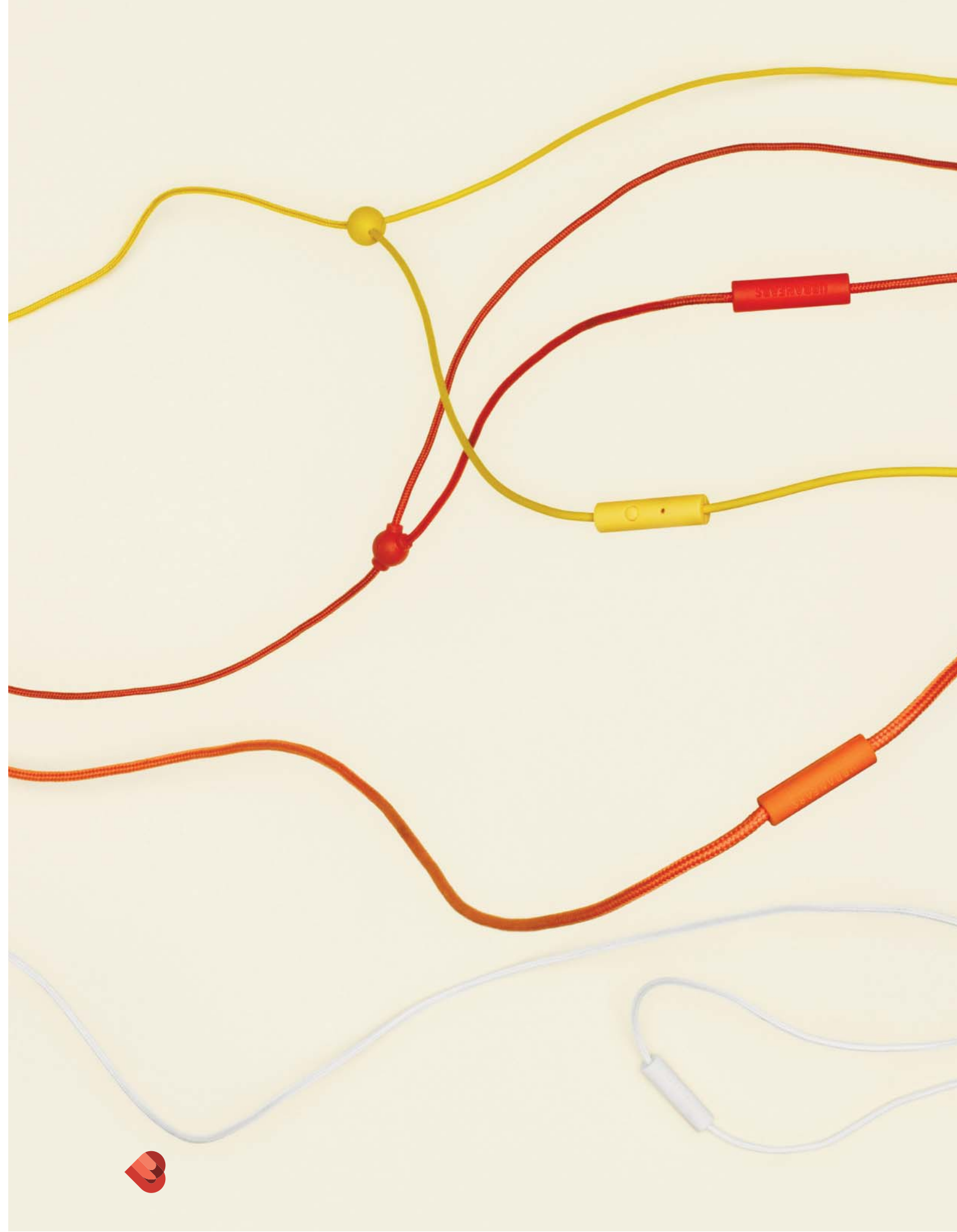
**DALE EARNHARDT JR. JR.**  
*It's a Corporate World*  
Quite Scientific

In about a year this band's going to be the new Vampire Weekend, so I gotta get my blows in now: At their best, Dale Earnhardt Jr. Jr. sound like Jamiroquai made an *Unplugged* record. At their worst, they're the latest incarnation of Beatles-worshipping twee bullshit that's been around for the past, umm, 60 years. They're cloying, precious, lame, and I hope their name gets their van keyed if they play either of the Carolinas. JEFF GORDON



**EMA**  
*Past Life Martyred Saints*  
Souterrain Transmissions

Erika M. Anderson, formerly of Gowns, approaches the compositions on her debut as EMA with a winning formula: Borrow all the best vocal and guitar harmonies from Elliott Smith, substitute



## REVIEWS



### WORST COVER OF THE MONTH: DALE EARNHARDT JR. JR.

a charming female voice, and pretend you're part of a Meat Puppets cover band from Southern California. This record moves slowly and deliberately without ever sounding fainthearted. One of *Past Life Martyred Saints*' best moments comes when Ms. Anderson sings "20 kisses from a butterfly knife" in a lullaby lilt. CROMB



**DEVIN, GARY & ROSS**  
*4 Corners Bounce*  
Arbitrary Signs

Famed artsy cartoonist and occasional set designer Gary Panter and oftentimes animator Devin Flynn and a guy I know nothing about have teamed together to make a new EP with each song being written and played in a different style. The first song is a slow psych track. Then there's a skronked-up electric track, a loungey jazz number on which Gary plays trumpet, and a spooky country number. The fifth one sounds like something off an Italian horror soundtrack and is called "Peppermint Pattie vs. the Phantom of the Opera," and the last one is pretty guitar with sounds of dripping water. *Highly* recommended to marijuana enthusiasts. HOBBIT BITCHES



**LAUREL HALO**  
*Antenna*  
NNA Tapes

I'm going to go ahead and say it: NNA Tapes is the best tape label out there. Started by Toby Aronson and Matt Mayer in late 2008, NNA consistently puts out some of the most interesting—yet

listenable!—music you'll find anywhere. Their catalogue runs the gamut from Skaters-ish blunted psych-pop to that minimal industrial-revival junk all the kids are clamoring for these days. This Laurel Halo release falls somewhere right between those two. As the ska drummer said when his trombonist dropped the lightbulb, "Pick it up, pick it up, pick it up." ALEX DUNBAR



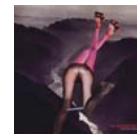
**ORCHESTRE POLY-RYTHMO DE COTONOU**  
*The 1st Album*  
Analog Africa

The Analog Africa label's been titty-twisting my mind for a bit now. It seems every month they reissue some of the wildest Afrobeat you've ever heard. Orchestre Poly-Rythmo is, apparently, a house favorite over at Analog Africa, as they've been featured extensively on previous releases—and not without good reason. OPR is one of the most diversely influenced, innovative, and prolific African bands. If you fancy yourself an Afrobeat fan because of that one Fela Kuti song on your iPod, give OPR a spin and you'll learn what shirtless Nigerians are *really* all about. SJOB THE SLOB



**DOS**  
*dos y dos*  
clenchedwrench/ORG Music

Two people old enough to be my parents playing stripped-down music on two electric basses. Like, one bass guitar in the left speaker, the other in the right. Sometimes the woman sings, but only on a few songs. Oh, and their former bands defined modern American rock music. SLOOP JAH B



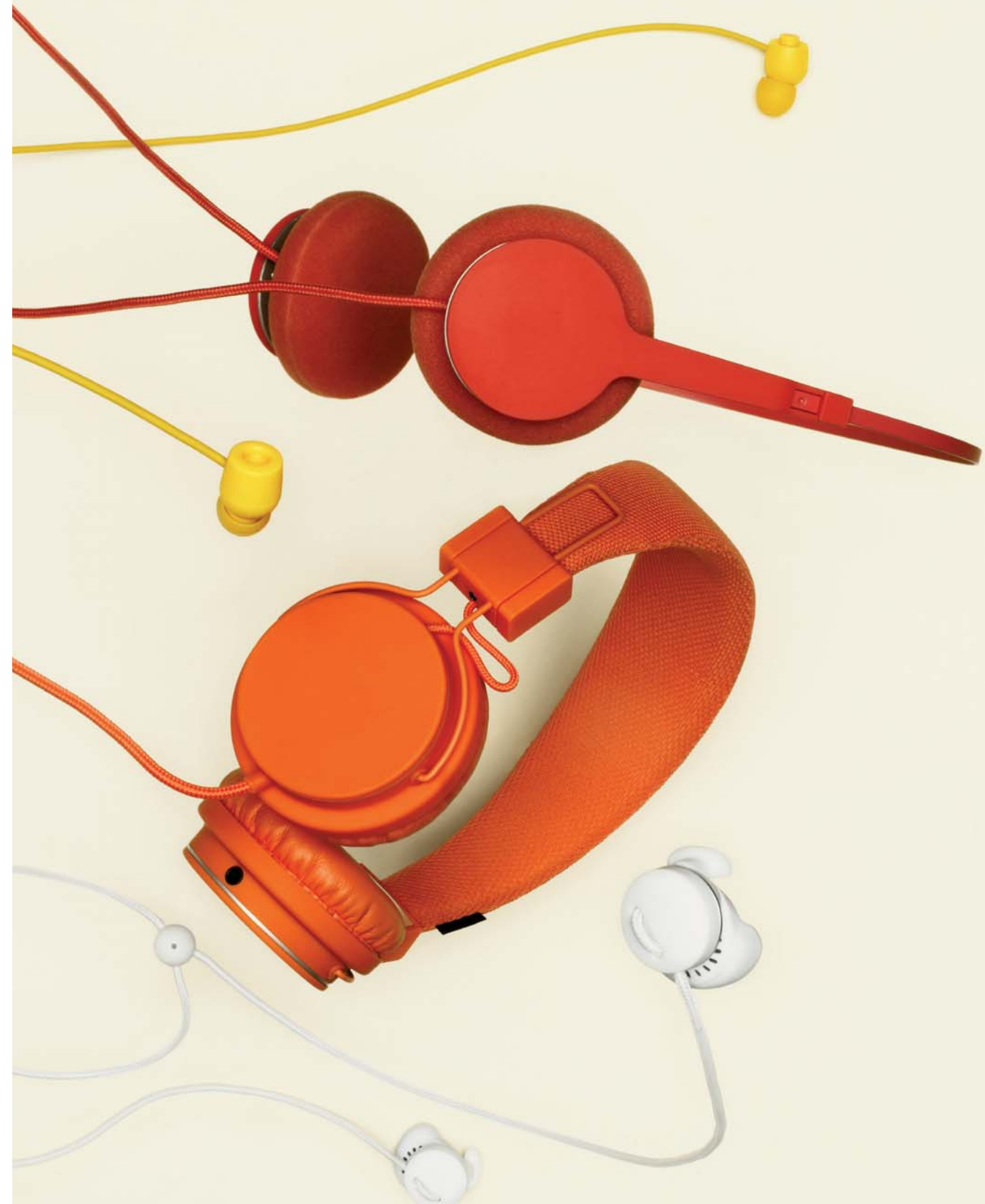
**NO SURRENDER**  
*Medicine Babies*  
ZerOKilled Music

This may be the sleekest package of boring ideas I've seen in the past two years. The double-gatefold digipack with the 8x foldout insert poster seems to re-up the visuals from, like, the first Black Eyes LP and that one Paradise Island LP, which is weird. Then you've got a lyrics sheet on the flip side that looks like a design draft for a Sneaker Pimps disc (irregular column layout set in stock 9-point Andale Mono?! Really?!). It reads and sounds the way it looks: aggressively stale Brooklyn-fusion with awful vocals. SOME NERD



**PAUL MCCARTNEY**  
*McCartney II*  
Hear Music/Concord Music Group

Ranking the Beatles is the apotheosis of horrible coke-talk, but come on, Paul wins. Eeeeasy. If your Beatle list doesn't go Paul, then George or Ringo, then Ringo or John, then the other one, you are a drama-club nerd with bad breath and a goatee who considers himself a *sophisticate*. Paul tried to keep the band together, he never embarrassed himself with religion or politics, and he never got so drunk he had to ask his butler who beat up his wife (and it was him). Also Wings. Even on this synthesizer cash-in album from 1980 where he's clearly just fucking around with the tape rolling, he is still head and shoulders above John's half-assed attempt at musique concrète and George's sitar bullshit. Although I've often wondered how shitty he felt about titling a song "Frozen Jap" like a month before John got popped in front of Yoko. GRIMGROM



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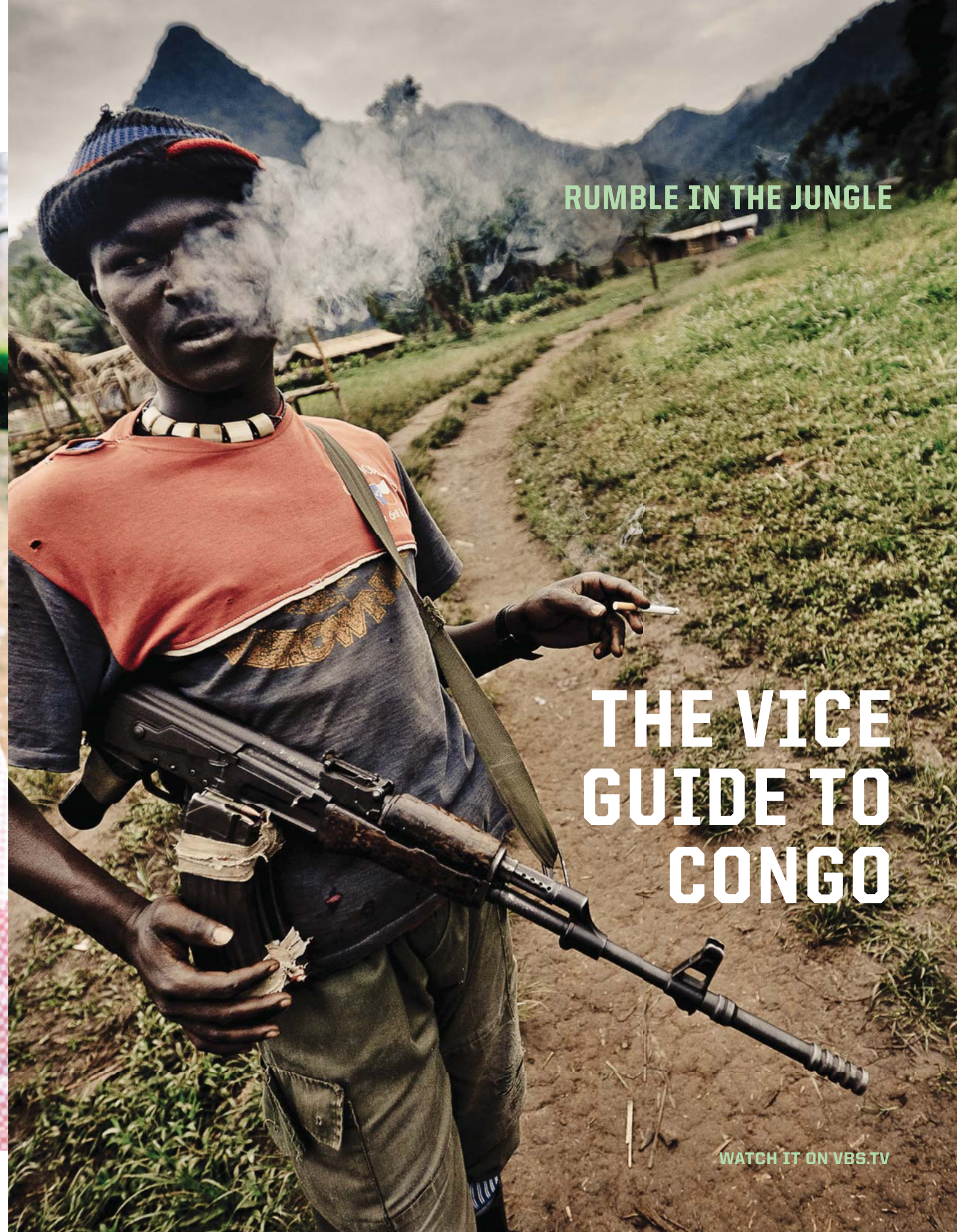
## VICE FASHION STOCKISTS

Photo by Patrick Tsai, see page 66.

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