

WHO'S
AFRAID OF
SUPERMAN?

the eye

the eye

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STRIPPING TO THE CORE

URBANITIES



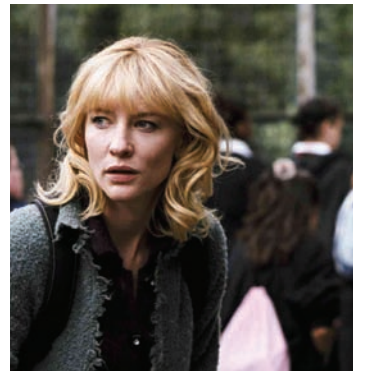
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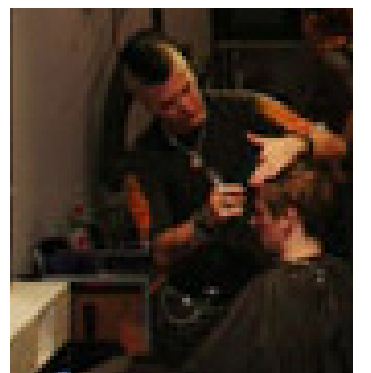
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From the Editor...

For Lent I was going to give up my BlackBerry.

I've called it the worst thing that has ever happened to me. Got a lot of e-mail? Check your BlackBerry. Uncomfortable in public? Read the *Times* on your BlackBerry. Can't remember what block the bank is on but you've already spent \$50 this month on 411? Google from your BlackBerry. There are all types of rules about how long you should wait before you respond, so people don't come to rely upon immediate response. I subscribe to none of these.

In the Winter 2007 issue of *N+1*, Mark Greif writes an ostensible biography of my BlackBerry back-and-forth, calling my experience, "a life of permanent dissatisfaction and a compulsion to frenetic activity." He then attributes to my ilk and me an "Anaesthetic Ideology," a self-protecting interest in Epicureanism, Stoicism, drugs, and general disaffection. I've flirted with all of them. I've

even bought *Real Simple*, and in so doing added a magazine devoted to cleaning up life's mess to my already toppling heap of publications.

Greif is hard on the news; current events are empty narratives of problem and (non)resolution, and the newspaper is a "frame for diverse, incommensurable disasters." And be warned: the lust for news is limitless. Greif cites couch potatoes who report feeling comforted as they watch cars pile up and salmonella wreck their peanut butter. By the sheer quantity of information we receive, Greif explains, we become immune to its impact. But there's nothing here that Georg Simmel hasn't already steered us against.

Greif claims that we no longer live in an era of the arts, an art object being special, and occupying outside of the everyday. In that case, Greif's polemical doesn't go far enough: 436 galleries will be represented at this week's Armory Fair. And the walls of the

salon looked busy!

Tellingly, Greif spends much time describing the problem, but only two paragraphs prescribing a cure, or justifying one. And when we finally unveil the question: "Would there be anything there when we found it?" Well, is there a God? Is there?

What Greif understandably rejects is the lack of real, deep meditation of the self, mediated (sometimes) by close connections with others. We are distracted from ourselves. Assuming for a moment that there is a deeper self that isn't socially constructed, superficially, trouble is certainly afoot: iPods on the subway and so forth.

But if there's one thing that fast-paced media is good for, it is developing identities. There's no inherent reason that online profiles are any less "real" than our face-to-face personality. If anything they're more honest because reception is virtually uncontrollable. Nor should online interactions be consid-

ered mutually exclusive to physical contact: witness online dating.

I receive an excess of e-mail—at 4:37 p.m., 10 press agents thought of me, or *The Eye*, or the listerv one of us happen to subscribe to. Gmail allows me to archive any junk within a few quick keystrokes. I become a stronger filter. The sheer volume guarantees a greater pool of information from which to cull, so I am forced to be more aware of what I want, and what I want to do.

In this issue, we select stories for you that fit your demographic, which, given your demographic and academic niche, is quite similar to ours. Max Foxman brings you a meditation on comics and academia (page 7): take your pick. We scour the city for Manhattan's best cupcakes (page 5), and Sara Davis brings you New York's most serious socialite (page 3).

Choose your reading wisely.

AG

INTERVIEW

By Sara Davis

Snap, Crackle, Poppy



COURTESY OF POPPY DE VILLANEUVE

Photographer **Poppy de Villeneuve** *has quite a pedigree. Her dad once dated the infamous Twiggy, and her mom is a model. She and her illustrator sister Daisy have garnered a reputation as socialites, and are often spotted out on the town in their native London. Enthralled with glitzy photos of Poppy on WireImage and what I thought was an ad campaign featuring her beribboned backside, I was prematurely intimidated by her cool. Instead, Poppy was genuinely friendly, and very “real deal” with regards to her work. Far from snapping haphazard shots at hip parties, de Villeneuve emphasized the slow, painstaking rate at which she works. Nor are her subjects all bright young things: her current project, “The Strangers,” is a series of portraits of death-row inmates in Louisiana.*

Is there anything you're working on in particular now?

I'm doing a personal project called *The Strangers*, that's the inmate project. I've been working on that for two years.

The prison's in Louisiana?

Yeah, it's the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

So do you still need to go to Louisiana, or are you done with that part?

I'm pretty sure I've done most of that, and, in fact, I'm only allowed to go when they have a rodeo on, which is in April, so if I had to go it would be in April.

Why are you only allowed to go when they have a rodeo on?

Because they let media in. Otherwise it's quite hard to get in.

Oh. What's the rodeo like?

Very strange. They have ... it's like gladiators. It's totally bizarre.

Wait, the inmates do the rodeo?

Yeah.

Really weird.

Well, it seems a bit strange, but they actually have freedom for one day in a certain way because they're riding horses and things like that. And lots of people go and see it.

So is there bull-riding also?

Yeah. They win money, so it has a kind of purpose.

What was it like interacting with the inmates?

It's really pleasant, actually. When you meet someone like that I don't think you can judge someone by one event—I think you look at the bigger picture. A lot of them have been there for, like, 30, 40 years and it's a confusing thing, like, how you feel about a person and, like, most of them are there for murder. But when I'm photographing I'm not thinking too much about what they've done, I'm thinking more about the image. You kind of go into a different mode.

How do you pick the inmates?

It's kind of whoever happens to be in the vicinity because I'm outside and I set up a white background...

At the rodeo?

Yeah. So it's sort of, like, who happens to be around. Sometimes they'll line them up and say, who do you want to pick? I find that uncomfortable but I just have to do it. Some faces are more interesting than others...

All the clothes and hats and stuff, it's all what they were wearing?

Yeah, that's their uniform. And they wear stripey shirts sometimes and that's for the rodeo. Which is quite bizarre.

So do you like New York? What kind of stuff do you like and not like?

Americans connect very quickly but sometimes it can be a little bit surface, but maybe that's the nature of it, like, America's quite quick and New York's quite, like, everyone's on the go and I find that a little difficult. Like, you have to really like make sure someone sits down and has a connection with you.

Professionally or just making-friends-wise?

In general. But it's a really functional city to work in, and I think the attitude is really good. Even things like renting equipment is much easier here.

Have you found yourself going to Tea and Sympathy much?

No, I'm OK for that. I mean, I was literally in London last week so that's fine. I do miss having good English tea, though.

What kind of tea do you brew at home?

Barry's tea. You get it in Ireland. It's really good, it doesn't have that, like, horrible tangy aftertaste.

What made you decide to become a photographer?

Well my father's a photographer and my mother's a model—she still does a lot of stuff. So I've always had really good images in my life and always amazing books. I've always been a visual person. And photography just kind of made sense, like, if you're dyslexic...

You're dyslexic?

Very. Like, my spatial awareness is very good but it's very hard for me to do certain things.

But you can read for pleasure?

I can read properly just very slowly.

And is it fun for you?

Yes, definitely. Reading, for me, is quite connected to photography because it's a narrative and you have to tell a story. So, yeah, that's one of my favorite things, and I've been reading lots of different short stories. I like being in America and reading Salinger.

Do you have a favorite photo that you've taken or someone else has taken?

As far as my own work, it's hard because the moment I do something I understand my craft better, so my technique is constantly getting better. Recently, I've been using a large format camera and I have a very specific controlled way of photographing. I like to have control over the situation and maybe I'm a bit of a control freak but I like having control—I'm not a snap photographer *at all*. I mean, my work is very slow.

Of those recent works do you have any favorites?

Recently, I photographed a plastic surgeon who has an all-female team in her operating theater in London and it was just such an incredible experience being there. So that's maybe one of my new favorites.

What photographs do you have at home?

I actually just bought this photo by Robert Ball, who's a forensic photographer, and he did this series on pacemakers. You can't throw pacemakers away since they're not biodegradable, so in the hospital you've got to have a box with all the pacemakers in it. And they look like ... creatures. It's really beautiful.

Also, on the Internet, I saw this picture of your butt with ribbons on it.

That's actually not my butt.

Oh! Whose is it?

I have no idea!

Then why did they say it was yours?

Well, because I've been in her [that photographer's] campaigns and I *shoot* her campaigns, but I'm still confused as to why they thought it was me. But it's OK because I don't think the butt's too bad.

No, no. It's a very respectable butt.

Thank you. That's a bit embarrassing actually because a lot of people see that. You know, people obviously *do* Google you because people keep saying, oh, I saw this thing. It's quite funny. ■

urbanities

Classical Music's Dirty Little Secret

Beta-blockers help arts students beat stage fright

BY ALISON BUMKE

Laura Usiskin, CC '05, still shudders when she recalls how she once felt when playing her cello for audiences. "My bow would shake so hard I could hardly control it," she says. "My fingers felt like they were moving through mud." Teachers assured her that she'd become less scared with repeated performances and auditions, but she proved them wrong. "I tried for six years, but it just wasn't working."

Everything changed her first year at Columbia. Before her audition for the joint degree program with Juilliard, her teacher suggested she take beta-blockers, a class of drugs usually prescribed to treat heart conditions that blocks the brain's adrenaline receptors. The drugs, which are popular among professional musicians, worked miracles.

"It's amazing, because mentally, you're just the same, but physically, your body isn't completely run over by adrenaline. Your heart's not pounding, your hands aren't clamming up, and your body's calm. It's very cool," she remembers.

Since that audition, Usiskin has earned a Masters of Music from Juilliard and acceptance into Yale's ultra-competitive music graduate program. Some musicians would argue, however, that beta-blockers have played an unfair role in her success. The drugs carry a stigma in the classical music world because some consider their calming effects to be performance-enhancing, making the music created under their influence less authentic.

"Most professional musicians use them, but they don't talk about it with each other," says Karen Smith, a private lesson instructor in Columbia's Music Performance Program, who uses beta-blockers. Karen Smith isn't her actual name—she prefers to have her real name omitted from this article, for the same reason that keeps musicians from discussing the drugs with each other.

"It's not that I'm embarrassed," explains Usiskin, who also avoids talking about her beta-blocker usage, especially with people who don't experience severe performance anxiety. "People who don't take them feel like it's a crutch ... If I didn't get nervous, I could see myself feeling that way."

How prevalent are the drugs in the classical music world? The secrecy that surrounds their usage makes it hard to come up with concrete numbers. Most agree, however, that they're almost ubiquitous in professional settings. Cellist Taylor Cowdery, CC '09, says that his former teacher, a member of the Orpheus Orchestra, estimates that close to 80 percent of Orpheus members use them. The drugs are also popular in conservatories, like Manhattan School of Music. "They're everywhere—tons of the students here use them," says Alicia Kravitz, CC '06, and current Manhattan School of Music student.

Beta-blockers aren't medically sanctioned to treat stage fright—the drugs are used to affect the heart and circulatory system for use in reducing blood pressure or treating chest pain, migraines, tremors, and even frequent heart attacks. Usiskin asserts that the medication is "innocuous," so there's no harm in taking them for an off-label purpose. She says that Health Services at Columbia prescribed beta-blockers to her in her first year, back in 2001. She claims they knew she was using them to treat performance anxiety, not the heart problems for which the medication is intended. Still, "they didn't flinch," Usiskin says. "Beta-blockers are so innocuous, Health Services passes them out like water."

Although Health Services is unable to comment on Usiskin's specific prescription because of confidentiality policies, Associate Medical Director Marcy Fernschneider offered this statement: "Beta-blockers are sometimes prescribed by doctors to treat the physical effects of performance anxiety—if, for

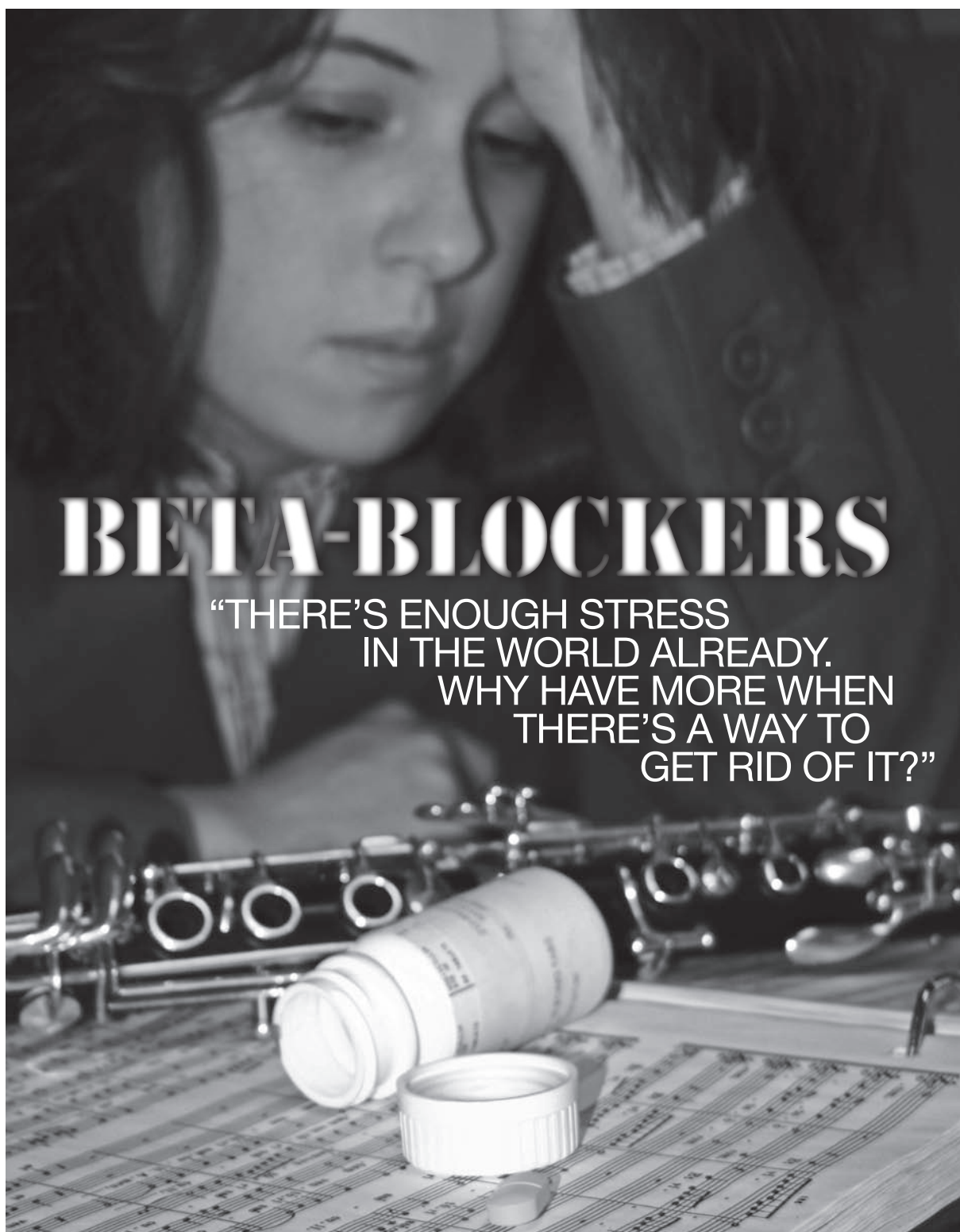


PHOTO BY NICOLE FRIEDMAN

BETA-BLOCKERS

"THERE'S ENOUGH STRESS
IN THE WORLD ALREADY.
WHY HAVE MORE WHEN
THERE'S A WAY TO
GET RID OF IT?"

example, a musician were experiencing stage fright. This common practice is known as 'off-label' use, which is the prescribing of a medication for purposes outside of the indications on its label. Health Services at Columbia infrequently prescribes beta-blockers for this purpose."

While heart patients tend to take 20 to 100 mg dosages of beta-blockers, musicians get by with much smaller amounts, usually hovering around 10 mg. Musicians experiment to determine a dosage that calms them without dulling the energy of their playing. There are no definitive studies on the side effects of taking too much of the medication for the treatment of performance anxiety. Still, musicians seem unfazed by the risk they may be taking. "10 mg has always worked for me, so I was just lucky, I guess," Usiskin says.

Musicians are often psychologically dependent on beta-blockers, convinced they need them to perform well in front of audiences. Mark Seto, assistant conductor of the Columbia University Orchestra, cites an extreme case of a girl he knew who was so intimidated by her conductor that she took beta-blockers before every rehearsal. Smith has a similarly dependent colleague, who takes about 70 mg of the medication before rehearsals. This is compared to Smith's 5 to 7 mg dosages, which she takes only for high-stress performances.

Though Smith uses beta-blockers more sparingly than her colleague, she admits that she takes them mostly for their psychological effect—the sense of empowerment they provide.

The debate rages on about whether teachers should offer

the medication to their students. In 2004, a Rhodes College music instructor was fired for giving the pills to her students. Despite this widely publicized crackdown, the instructors of some Columbia students have offered them the medication. Gwen Dipert, BC '09, says that her high school flute teacher recommended she use beta-blockers, but she turned them down. "I felt like my nervousness was something I should work through, and beta-blockers should be a last resort," she explains.

Some believe that extra adrenaline can even be useful in performances. Violinist Patrick O'Donnell, CC '09, says he knows musicians who "turn their anxiety into positive performance energy." He explains, "It adds a bit of spontaneity and extra musicality to their playing." Cowdery agrees, saying that without extra adrenaline pumping during a performance, you'll lose "a good deal of spontaneous energy."

Still, Dipert sympathizes with musicians whose intense performance anxiety makes the medication almost a necessity. "I don't consider it cheating. It's like taking antidepressants—the people who take them need them."

Smith also uses the antidepressant analogy. "If a medication can help a severely depressed person get through the day, why not take it?" Regarding beta-blockers, she explains, "There's enough stress in the world already. Why have more when there's a way to get rid of it?"

For Usiskin, there was no turning back after her first audition with beta-blockers. "I feel like I tried for so long to perform without them that now, I'm worthy. I passed the test." ■



Taking the Cupcake

A survey of the seven wonders of New York

BY COURTNEY CHIN

In a city of eateries dedicated to almost anything (Hummus Place, Dumpling Man, and Peanut Butter & Co., to name a few), it's no surprise that many a bakery has dedicated itself to the art of the cupcake. Small, sweet, and portable, cupcakes are the perfect confection. They even have a measure of nostalgia about them: who doesn't love the childish pleasure of biting into your own personal cake topped with sugary frosting?

That is not to say, however, that all cupcakes are created equal. In fact, as I traveled to seven bakeries around Manhattan (in the process consuming more sugar than is recommended for an entire year), I wondered what, exactly, makes the perfect cupcake? I felt that despite my extensive experience with cupcakes, I could not make such a grand decision on my own. I commissioned a few friends to help me judge, and trust me, it didn't take much convincing.

In an attempt to construct a relatively objective judging system, we based our decisions on each bakery's classic vanilla cupcake. The basic criteria were moistness, crumble consistency, flavor, and texture and sweetness of the frosting, resulting in an overall numerical rating from one to 10. On principle, no cupcake should earn below a five.

Our first tasting was at Burgers & Cupcakes, a cutesy, brown-and-pink-themed joint on 23rd Street near Eighth Avenue. The cupcake looked absolutely flawless: an oversized, golden vanilla cake, artfully frosted in pink. Unfortunately, it did not live up to expectations: both Rebecca Salley, CC '10, and Alexander Slotnick, CC '10, agreed that although the cake was moist and didn't crumble, it was too dense, and too similar to a muffin. The frosting proved too buttery—Salley called it “overwhelming”—and the

cupcake garnered a rating of six-point-five.

Next in line was Billy's Bakery's on Ninth Avenue near 21st Street. Although the bakery employees—all young, trendy males—were certainly pleasing, their daisy cupcake with blue vanilla frosting wasn't: not only was the cake extremely crumbly, but the frosting was excessive and inordinately sweet. Salley aptly summed up the cupcake after only one bite: “I just turned diabetic.” We each gave it a disappointing six.

We then decided to go with something different and tried a cupcake from Alice's Tea Cup on 73rd Street near Columbus Avenue. Although Alice's does not specialize in cupcakes, their varieties are all meticulously decorated; I picked up a vanilla cupcake with pink buttercream frosting. We agreed that though it had a nice flavor, was relatively moist, and had good, buttery frosting, it was still “underwhelming” and deserved no more than a seven.

Crumbs, on Amsterdam near 75th Street, was received much more enthusiastically. This cupcake, significantly larger than the others, with a top that overflowed out of the liner, was decorated with white buttercream frosting and rainbow sprinkles. Salley deemed its presentation “flawless,” and its taste “significantly more delicious than the others.” Slotnick called it “melts-in-your-mouth delicious” and praised the extra-large top for its “biting leverage.” The cake itself was perfectly moist, and the frosting was sweet with a great consistency. Although I thought that the frosting could have been a tad more buttery, the other judges each rated it a perfect 10.

Had we found the perfect cupcake already? I hesitated to endorse any of our selections to this point, especially as we hadn't even hit the two most famous bakeries, Buttercup (Second Avenue

between 51st and 52nd Streets) and Magnolia (Bleecker Street and 11th Street), long touted as the best cupcakes in the city.

Both fell short of our expectations. At Buttercup, the vanilla cupcake was floury, dry, and coarse. The buttercream frosting was good, but didn't compensate for the cake, leaving Buttercup with a seven overall. Magnolia's version of this cupcake had a much better texture, but the frosting was incredibly sweet and slightly pasty. It received another weak seven-point-five.

Extremely let down, we decided to try some of their other flavors. Magnolia's chocolate cupcake with chocolate frosting was even more of a bummer. The texture was powdery, and unimpressive even for chocolate lovers, receiving an almost impossibly low five. Buttercup's red velvet cupcake with cream cheese frosting, however, was surprisingly delicious. Slotnick thought the frosting was “awesome” and swore he could “taste the red.” Salley said, “This cupcake feels like love!”

After all of our trials, there were no arguments: Crumbs' vanilla cupcake with buttercream frosting was the unanimous winner. Adorable, moist, and perfectly frosted, it exceeded all of our expectations and was much more satisfying than both of Manhattan's most famous bakeries. There's no question as to why Zabar's, Bloomingdale's, and Dylan's Candy Bar all sell Crumbs' cupcakes in-store. We couldn't help but to try their peanut-butter cup and s'mores cupcakes, and these too were both received very warmly.

It's hard to believe that the perfect cupcake isn't hiding down in the West Village or Chelsea or even Midtown East, but it's true: the best cupcake in New York City is only a few stops away from us on the 1 train at Crumbs. ■



Rude Food

Global manners guide to teach you right from gauche

BY ANNE REILLY

“Strong and able, keep your elbows off the table.” Sound familiar? For many Americans, this slogan may bring back memories of family dinners or evenings at cotillion class, recited by bland teachers preaching proper etiquette. But a walk through John Jay or Ferris Booth might call into question whether some of those mind-your-manners mottos were lost in the transition from child seat to adult table.

In a world of multi-tasking and meals-on-the-run, table manners easily fall by the wayside ... next to that napkin on the floor. But what may seem rude to some at the table is perfectly polite and customary to others. A tour of table manners around the globe provides insight into more than just proper etiquette, as eating a meal in any country is about more than satiating hunger—it’s a reflection of a society. Could we be a little more specific about the profundity of manners?

Beside the basic napkin-on-your-lap rule, everyone knows not slurp their soup or burp at the table ... or do they? Actually, burping is a sign of apres-meal gratitude in many Asian settings. In Japan, sonorously slurping up udon shows appreciation of the meal, while noisy noodles will gain gawks from most Western diners. In China the “clean plate” is an insult to the hostess, insinuating that the diner is still hungry, while many other cultures frown upon the leftover entree. “If I didn’t eat what was on my plate when I was a kid, I could forget about watching television that evening,” Brooklyn-born Luis Quero, CC’10, says. “My mom would say, ‘I cooked all day and this is the thanks I get?’”

Lauds to the chef and gratitude to the service staff play an important part in any gourmand’s etiquette. Yet in Europe, tips are unheard of by most waiters and diners alike, since restaurants either calculate them in or don’t practice tipping at all. One French first year, wishing to remain anonymous, says, “I never tipped back home, so leaving a gratuity here did not occur to me. Then a waiter chased me down the street after dinner while on a date. I would consider myself a good tipper after that.”

Luck and superstition play an important role in many gastronomic practices internationally as well. Never point chopsticks upwards at fellow diners in China—it’s considered bad luck. In Germany and Austria, not looking someone in the eye when clinking glasses during a toast could illicit seven years of bad sex, not to mention the scorn of one’s company. And don’t flip fish on the plate to avoid bones when feasting in Europe—this is thought to bring bad luck to the entree’s catcher.

Chopsticks, fork-and-knife, and even the tortilla scoop each have a certain *modus operandi*, depending on location. The polite American cuts with the right hand, sets the knife down, and passes the fork to the right hand, before eating with the right. Think, “cut, pass, eat,” in contrast to the unfortunately frequent “spear-and-swallow.”

Many, however, find this manner inefficient, preferring the faster and equally acceptable Continental style. Here, the fork is held in the left hand, prongs pointed downward, while the food is cut and directed with the knife in the right hand. According to etiquette expert Emily Post, however, prongs may be reversed if the food is too finicky to be skewered by a fork. “A friend of mine from England eats like this, but she refuses to turn her fork around—ever. She considers it ‘shoveling food.’ Watching her eat rice is entertaining. She won’t even attempt peas anymore,” Cristina Astigarraga, CC’10, says.

The hand-utensil dynamic is a complicated one when eating abroad. When in Thailand, cut with the edge of the spoon—knives are rarely found at the table, since they are considered aggressive symbols. Don’t put a fork in your mouth either: all Thai meals are meant to be spoon-fed. On the other hand, remember to keep your spoon on the table while enjoying pasta in Italy. Twirling your tagliatelle is taboo.

If mastering the fork and

knife is elementary for most, finger food etiquette is an advanced course. Depending on the service, setting, and style of the occasion, forgoing the fork is often confounding. For instance, in Eastern cultures, asparagus are perfectly eaten by hand, assuming they’re not in a sauce or sauteed to the point of soggi-ness. While “Seinfeld’s” Mr. Pitt may prefer his candy bars with a fork and knife, just about anything found in JJ’s is fine for the fingers.

Dipping usually goes hand-in-hand with finger foods, bringing up another question of protocol. Eating pommes frites with one’s fingers is fine, but don’t ask for ketchup to accompany them while in France. That request is the ultimate coup d’état of culinary insults. Double-dipping is considered a mortal sin among American diners, but this stigma varies internationally. “In Israel, we eat a lot of foods without utensils, using pita bread for a scoop. Double dipping is usually assumed. No one cares,” Olivia Schmid, CC’10, said.

When dining internationally, sticking to the adage of “when in Rome...” is best. Brushing up on the table manners of your country du jour wisely secures enjoyable dining experiences, especially since etiquette varies so widely throughout the world. Wherever the meal, though, gratuitous gastronomy always demands a gracious consumer, from the use of utensils to pre- and post-meal propriety. ■

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TRIPPING TO THE CORE

Article by Max Foxman

Graphics by Phyllis Ma and Ben Weinryb Grohsgal

On the first day of his class, Art Spiegelman, without his habitual cigarette, sits with a handful of eager, shy students in one of the more remote basement rooms in Columbia's Heyman Center for the Humanities. Dressed somewhat anachronistically in a vest and no tie, he quips a little with some students and furiously tries to arrange library reserve books before he starts his lecture.

He confesses that his primary motivation for teaching Columbia's new seminar, *Comics Marching into the Canon*, originated from the recently closed "Masters of American Comics" art exhibit. "Masters of Comics" toured across the country and featured 15 of the most influential comic artists in the history of the medium, from turn-of-the-century *Little Nemo* creator Winsor McCay, to original *Mad Magazine* artist Harvey Kurtzman, to Spiegelman himself, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his graphic novel *Maus* in 1992.

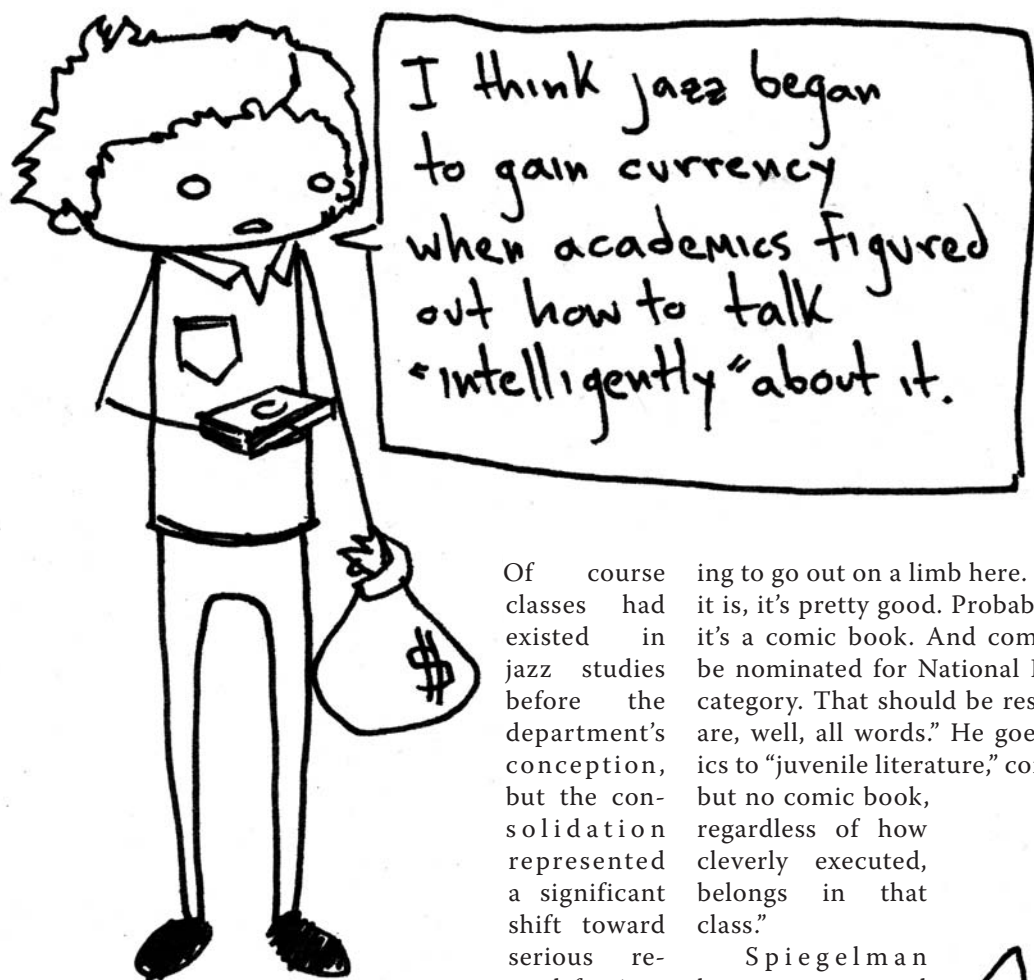
The exhibit, Spiegelman explains, was the culmination of a "10-year lobbying effort" to get the museum world to recant for the Museum of Modern Art's display of comics next to high art renderings in its "High and Low" art show in 1990. "I know that I was at very least an early adaptor and probably an engine for a sea change that's taking place in this comics stuff in the last few years," Spiegelman admits. "Something's changing very recently. When I proposed that show to the curators 10 or 12 years ago, it

really couldn't happen, it was like proposing a show on socks ... "

But, indeed, "Masters of American Comics" did happen, starting at two museums in Los Angeles and working its way across the country, finally ending late last month in New York. Once in New York, Spiegelman withdrew his art for reasons both geographic (part of the exhibit was being shown in Newark) and political (some of the artwork had been censored) as well as personal. From there Spiegelman came to the Columbia campus to introduce "Comics Marching into the Canon," the first full course on comics offered at the school. Consequently, the class has helped legitimize the genre in a university that prides itself on upholding the established canons of the core.

The battle to allow comics to depart from their decidedly cultish audience (New York's Comic-Con, one of the largest gatherings for comic fans, is being held this weekend) and breach academia is not drastically different from the one fought by other forms of mass media throughout the last half of the 20th century. At Columbia, as well as many institutions, the introduction of such popular media as jazz, film, and pop music at first seemed both vulgar and childish.

Columbia's Center for Jazz Studies was not founded until 1999. At that time, founder and director Robert O'Meally explained to *The Record*, "How would modern American music sound had there been no Louis Armstrong, no Duke Ellington, no Bessie Smith, no Charlie Parker, no John Coltrane?"



Of course classes had existed in jazz studies before the department's conception, but the consolidation represented a significant shift toward serious regard for jazz on campus.

Jazz has now become a highly respected genre at Columbia and, with the help of such staff additions as MacArthur genius George Lewis, its method, history, and theory is being studied with utmost rigor.

Kate Sain, CC '07, came to Columbia specifically seeking a jazz program. "I'm in the ... first group of students to graduate with a jazz studies concentration," Sain says. "The difference I found when I was looking at other schools is that they would offer some jazz studies courses or a jazz history course or they might offer jazz performance lessons or something like that, but Columbia was the only place I could find that wasn't a conservatory specifically that had an established department." This points to how new the acceptance of jazz is in academia. "When I came to college I was right on the edge of that change," Sain says.

Sain, who works part-time at Jazz at Lincoln Center, is quick to point out how drastic the change is. "Wynton Marsalis [jazz artist and artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center] himself has taken a lot of steps to bring jazz back into education," she says. "Just the fact that he's bringing jazz and putting it on a concert stage speaks to the fact that it's a more highly regarded art form than just a club scene."

Like jazz, comics have been on campus, albeit incognito, for some time. Nelly Rosario incorporates a comic writing exercise when she teaches Narrative Forms for the writing program, and Maura Spiegel includes Harvey Pekar's graphic novel, *Our Cancer Year*, in her class, American Literature After 1950. Additionally, students have studied comics independently, including working on graphic novels as senior writing projects. Still, the addition of an official course represents a very different level of inclusion, one not unlike the changes in jazz studies.

The presentation of comics has changed commercially as well, from its early days in daily strip form to the recent influx of Hollywood films based on comic book heroes. Today, they're finding increased legitimacy and marketability as full length books under the somewhat overused term "graphic novel."

Still, not all have received comics so warmly. Even some of the hippest venues of pop culture still denounce the medium. When Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*, was nominated for a National Book Award in 2006,

ing to go out on a limb here. First, I'll bet for what it is, it's pretty good. Probably damned good. But it's a comic book. And comic books should not be nominated for National Book Awards, in any category. That should be reserved for books that are, well, all words." He goes on to equate comics to "juvenile literature," concluding with "Sorry, but no comic book, regardless of how cleverly executed, belongs in that class."

Spiegelman has encountered such biases before, both from reviewers and academia. "The main thing is," he says, "nobody would argue with novels being taught in colleges, right? But back in the day, back in the 1820s, this was the comic book of its moment, you know. This was seen as vaguely sub-culture. And not meaning subculture, but below culture."

In the University, this low brow classification is applied to pop music, where the survey class on rock music hasn't been taught for at least a year but students are required to study the Western Classical canon and theory in depth.



at Columbia's Computer Music Center, however, which specializes in studying the methods and history of electronic music composition, avant-garde music is played alongside Madonna and Trent Reznor in classes like CMC head Brad Garton's MIDI Music Production Techniques. "I don't make any real distinction between 'pop' music and 'serious' music. I can cite a bunch of ethnomusicological reasons why (music as a social function)," Garton writes, via e-mail. "In my case, it's probably because I pay a lot more attention to how music is constructed, especially with respect to the technology involved. Often 'pop' music is doing really radical stuff in that way that 'serious' music doesn't, so I go where the action is!"

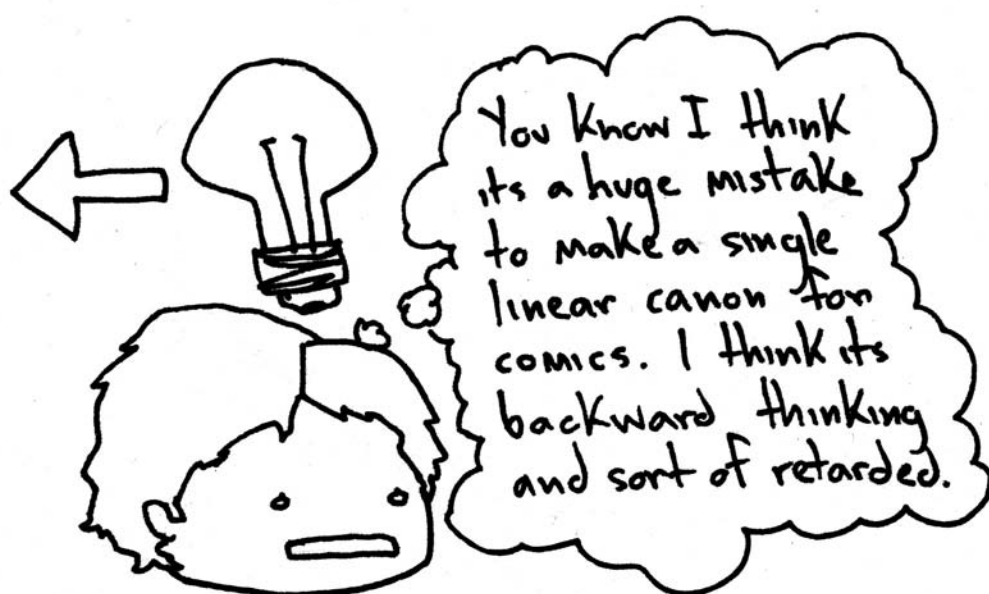
Garton laments those who must draw distinctions between the study of pop and avant-garde electronic music. While he admits that the CMC often focuses on technique, meaning the lines between pop

Wired magazine columnist Tony Long denounced the decision. In October 2006, he wrote, "I have not read this particular 'novel' but I'm familiar with the genre so I'm go-

and art music can blur, he still discerns that some treat studying certain genres unequally. He likens it to understanding the "language" of a medium or genre with its acceptance into academic culture. As he put it, "Academics love a good theory!"

Garton compared this conflict to jazz's struggle. "I think jazz began to gain currency when academics figured out how to talk 'intelligently' about it. There is much of jazz discourse that is informed by contemporary social/critical theory, and that's probably what opened the doorway."

Although comics have been widely distributed and associated with various artistic movements since the beginning of the 20th century—including cubism by Lyonel Feininger, one of its practitioners and 'Masters'—it has only been in the last 15 years that an analytical explosion has



developed.

For Brown University professor Ralph Rodriguez, who has taught comics since graduating from the University of Texas-Austin in 1997, it was a 1992 conference at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign that started changing the way people viewed what came to be known as cultural studies. "It was a way of breaking down the divide between high culture and low culture, doing more kinds of anthropological studies of culture and sociological studies," Rodriguez explains, adding that it gave universities around the country a "back-pat to do stuff like detective fiction, romance novels, graphic novels, so that was one of the big drives ..."

Rodriguez, who has eagerly used comics in classes about Latin American literature, points to some other institutions and events that helped legitimize comics over the last few years. The *New York Times* published an article in 2004, "Not Funnies," which interviewed some of the most prominent contemporary artists like Chris Ware. The addition of serialized comics to the Sunday magazine also helped. "But to make it into the *New York Times* in that magazine piece was all of a sudden to say, oh, wow this is important, intellectually," Rodriguez says. He also indicates that this perhaps is a second boom for comics, which had renewed interest in the mid-'80s with the publication of Spiegelman's *Maus* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*.

Besides teaching a 95-student course called Guns and Graphics, which looks at comics along with detective fiction, Rodriguez has also organized an exhibit at Brown for "Los Bros Hernandez," two of the most renowned Latino comic artists who epitomized the Los Angeles punk scene in their series, *Love and Rockets*. The exhibit intentionally confronts some of the conflicts between the culture of comics and academia. On display until March 19 in one of the larger rooms of the John Brown House, the exhibit

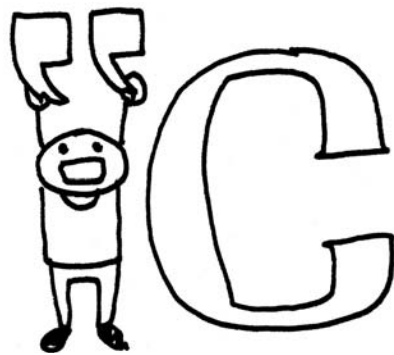
is filled with collage-style black-and-white excerpts of the comics wallpapering the building, along with larger excerpts which are "taped" DIY-style to the wallpaper. The ambiance is completed with an '80s-style green velvet chair, true-to-date beer bottles, L.A.-area punk bands playing on a television, and other bands like Richard Hell and the Voidoids on continuous loop over speakers.

A more direct response to the Masters exhibit is a book by Dan Nadel, *Art Out of Time: Unknown Comics Visionaries 1900-1969*. Nadel teaches a class on Graphic Novels in conjunction with the New School and the Parsons School of Design that centers around the genre's collaborative method of drawing and construction. "We wanted to... try to bring together writing students and art students since comics are a mix of picture and prose. We wanted to try to bring together students who specialize in each." It also varies from Spiegelman's course by teaching students methods rather than history.

Nadel wanted to conceive a "counter history" to the Masters exhibit that he considered a "conservative canon." Nadel explained that comics were too broad an art form to be focused on so few masters, a sentiment shared by both Spiegelman and Rodriguez. "It's not just a medium done by 15 white guys, and I think it was a bit of a failure of imagination in a way," Nadel says. "It's the problem of trying to present a conservative canon and it's a problem of viewing comics with such limited sort of spectacles on." He also wanted to emphasize that comics, like film and other media, have different inherent canons. "There's a canon for literary fiction, there's a canon for science fiction, there's a canon for detective novels. There's a canon for French literature ... you know I think it's a huge mistake to make a single linear canon for comics. I think it's backwards thinking and sort of retarded."

Certainly other sections of Columbia academia have followed this model, with the film department having separate seminars on anything from Film Noir to Clint Eastwood as an auteur.

However, Art Spiegelman does defend the "masters" of the exhibit, who are the cornerstones that frame and ground each meeting of his course at Columbia. "I think it's all good because it creates a structure that one can rebel against ... the process of canonization being beckoned into the hallowed halls of bookstores, museums, universities allows the medium to stay alive, past its life as mass media, and once that happens, then there's room for an artist to come say 'I like working with this stuff, but comics should really be graffiti and shit.'"



he points out that both sides were featured in his magazine *Raw*. "It's not like the notion of a canon is really meant to be really exclusionary, but it's meant to set up a navigational system." Spiegelman also sees it as a way for cartoonists to know about their past and be able to draw upon the influence of lesser known—but equally important—artists like Rodolphe Töpffer, who is now credited with inventing the form in the beginning of the 19th century.

For Brown University professor and comic enthusiast Paul Buhle, the medium exists for

more reasons than just academic. Buhle, who is currently working on several different books—including a comic adaptation of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*—and has helped create much of the buzz about comics on his local campus, says that comics can be used for more than just critical analysis. "I showed some PowerPoint pages from the ongoing Zinn adaptation in class last week and it's a teaching tool in several different ways. It's a teaching tool because it's a way of explaining how history is understood," Buhle says.

Other professors are completely indifferent to the debate of comics entering academia. Ben Marcus, the chair of Columbia's writing division, comes from Brown and has worked on many visual collaborations. For him and his group of friends, distinctions of comics and the incorporation of visual media into writing are meaningless. While comics professors had been careful to look at the debate, Marcus was hardly aware of it, and quickly brushed it off. "I have a lot of friends, Jonathan Lethem and Michael Chabon, and a lot of my writer friends are very, very indifferent to these distinctions between high and low art, so I'm very steeped in a sense to the vitality of all this and need no convincing." He saw this indifference and acceptance by academics and writers as generational. "You've got ... people like Spiegelman kind of giving credibility to stuff that wasn't happening 20 years ago and I think it's really healthy, and I think if academics want to fight it, maybe it's a healthy battle. Maybe these are good arguments. I don't care that much... I don't think it's my job to protect the canon."

Marcus thinks that the changes to the writing division may quickly allow for seminars on graphic and alternative media fiction, from comics to hypertext or electronic novels. As to why it hasn't happened thus far, "It's certainly not a polemical resistance to it," Marcus says. "Why haven't there been classes in a lot of things?" Marcus says a mixture of student interest and capable teachers will determine whether a comic writing class will happen in the future.

Graphic fiction has appealed to high school writing students, who can take an elective in that as well as sci-fi and fantasy as part of the Columbia High School Writing Program directed by Leslie Woodard, who is also the director the undergraduate creative writing program.

On the undergraduate level, Woodard agrees with Marcus. "We haven't had somebody who can do that. Our thing is writing, that's what we focus on. That's what we try to do well," says Woodard, who wonders whether the course would belong in visual arts, writing, or a marriage between the two, a viewpoint that matches the New School class as well as the views of Ben Marcus.

Ultimately, Woodard approved of the study of the genre. "The comics I grew up with have been incredible satirists and really extraordinary commentary on the human condition. That's why *Peanuts* did so well," she says. "It's not a less valid art form. It's just not mine."



Woodard's view seems to reflect that of the general populous of the school. Stu-

dents may be indifferent to the world of comics, but support the idea of it being studied. "I don't really read comics personally, don't know much about them, but it sounds like a cool class," says Sain, who points out that jazz classes discuss such diverse topics as album insert artwork. Other students may find the idea of studying the comics genre unappealing or even silly, child's play, as *Wired* suggested, but no major opposition could be found for the class teaching, with students more surprised that Columbia is offering a comics class rather than chagrined.

And comics seem to have pervaded even the highest echelons of the literature world. English professor Bruce Robbins, who teaches the seminar *The Contemporary American Novel*, is "interested when rereading *Gravity's Rainbow*, which is I think Pynchon's masterpiece, which came out in 1973, to see how often he reached back to the childhood experience of comic book superheroes in the course of writing the most ambitious novel that we've had in the last 30 years or so." Robbins points to Pynchon and Salmon Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as books that draw upon the world

Canonization being beckoned into the hallowed halls of bookstores, museums, universities allows the medium to stay alive past its life as Mass media.



of the superhero and superpowers. Robbins adds, "I think it's great that people who have educated eyes are doing it. That is, I think it is a genuinely serious art form and it should be talked about, absolutely as one of the really interesting art forms of our time and one of the more serious ones."

Art Spiegelman, who admits in class that he was drawn to comics because of their humor, is quick to point out that pop culture and academia's contentious relationship is part of what makes these forms worth studying. When asked what would be the next media to march into the canon, he immediately quips, "Video games."

Full disclosure: The author is a student in Spiegelman's class. ■



Sleeper
Directed by Mark Wallinger
Starring a man in a bear suit
NY premiere on Saturday at
Anthology Film Archives



Reno 911!: Miami
Directed by Ben Garant
Starring Thomas Lennon, Ben Garant, Kerri Kenney
Opens everywhere Friday

The Oscars According to Alma

Alma Mater breaks her silence and offers her Oscar picks

BEST PICTURE



It's definitely a tough race, though there aren't as many Columbia connections as there have been in years past. First, there's *The Departed* — a solid, entertaining, and sharply-written story that brings us back to the mean streets of Martin Scorsese. And, of course, I hold a soft spot for the best film of the summer, *Little Miss Sunshine* and its adorable, Oscar-nominated star, Abigail Breslin—I'm still holding out hope to add her to my list of former child-star students in 2014. However, after much consideration, I have to go with *Babel*, though its large cast certainly gave it an advantage. In fact, there are

two roundabout cases to make for this pick: Brad Pitt, one of the film's many co-stars, was also in *Fight Club* with Edward Norton, who appeared in *Everyone Says I Love You*, which was filmed on the Columbia campus. Not enough for you? There's more: the director, Alejandro González Iñárritu, received a special thanks from *Brokeback Mountain*, produced by Focus Features (Columbia professor James Schamus is its co-president). All right, so it's a bit of a stretch, but the movie is so excellent that it hardly matters.

—Michelle Rejwan

The choice is simple: this year, it's Marty, Marty, Marty. Along with the indomitable Woody Allen, Scorsese is the greatest director ever to call New York home. While I could allow myself to become angry that these two Big Apple auteurs have recently found inspiration far away from home, I'm just glad they're both doing brilliant work again after making several films that did not reach the stratospheric heights of their average fare. Rather than fixate on *The Departed*'s Boston setting, I choose instead to remember the New York films that should

have earned Scorsese multiple Oscars. *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, and *Goodfellas*, three classic New York pieces that were all unfairly snubbed by the Academy Awards. I'd like to throw into that mix Scorsese's highly underrated mid-1980s flick, *The King of Comedy*, a New-York-based movie that looks incredibly prescient in today's age of Anna Nicole and *American Idol*. Here's hoping that the master of New York cinema doesn't lose to an apprentice again.

—Jesse Horwitz

BEST DIRECTOR



BEST ACTRESS



At the Golden Globes, Meryl Streep, who portrayed Miranda Presley in *The Devil Wears Prada*, finished her acceptance speech with her character's biting line, "That's all." Well, "that's all" also refers to the fact that it's extremely obvious that Streep deserves the Oscar for Best Actress. Though this category is loaded with talent, she was absolutely fabulous as the editor of the fictitious *Runway* magazine. Through her poise and grace, she transformed the ultimate vil-

lain into one of the most appealing and interesting characters of 2006. And besides, with the real *Vogue*'s headquarters in Times Square, I can't help but thinking of all my Columbians who work as unpaid Condé Nast interns. Think of how satisfying it will feel for them to know that the sacrifices they make to work at the real-life *Runway* magazine are appreciated by the Academy.

—Susan Cohen

BEST ACTOR



It's a good year for college-aged straight girls and gay guys, with two nominees harking back to past loves that many of them undoubtedly shared. I'd be hard-pressed to find a floor on any campus dorm that doesn't own a copy of *The Notebook* and much of that is due to Ryan Gosling—nominated this year for his work in *Half Nelson*. He plays a drug-addicted junior high school teacher, but that doesn't mean he couldn't still build you a house with his bare hands. He faces stiff competition though, with Leonardo diCaprio offering

an impressive, gritty performance in *The Departed*. It's a far cry from his days charming Kate Winslet in *Titanic*, but his days as a heart-throb aren't totally eclipsed by his serious acting. Even though they could both be flattened by Forest Whitaker's steamrolling path to the Oscars, it's not that important—because no matter who wins, both of these boys seem to have proven that they're all grown up.

—Emily Rauber

BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS



My support goes to Cate Blanchett for her role as Sheba Hart in *Notes On A Scandal*, which is based on a book written by Zoë Heller, a novelist who studied here at Columbia. It's as simple as that, really. Though, I secretly hope the Academy recognizes Adriana Barraza for her heart-wrenching and fabulous performance in *Babel*. Let's face it, though—the real shoe-in is Jennifer Hudson for her part in the Broadway-based musical

Dreamgirls. Yes, she has a mind-blowing, phenomenal voice that deserves a standing ovation, but it's difficult to compare a stellar vocal performance to acting-heavyweight Blanchett or the courageous parts in *Babel* acted by Barraza and Rinko Kikuchi. But, I have to stay true to my connections on the Hudson shore, and cross my fingers for an envelope with Blanchett's name inside.

—M.R.

BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR



I'm torn between three former New York residents: namely Eddie Murphy, Alan Arkin, and Mark Wahlberg. I know, I know, Wahlberg was born in Boston, Massachusetts—but for several months in the early 1990s, he towered over Times Square in his Calvin Klein's, making his residence in New York more memorable than either Murphy's or Arkin's. Although Murphy was born and raised in Brooklyn, I'll always think of him as a *Beverly Hills Cop* and am still

trying to forget about his *Harlem Nights*. And as for Arkin, although he's an appealing sentimental nominee, he's not my *Little Miss Sunshine*—I thought he was outshone by Abigail Breslin. Still, I wish that Long Island native and frequent *Saturday Night Live* host Alec Baldwin had been nominated for his work in *The Departed*. Like any good New Yorker, the man knows his way around an expletive.

—J.H.

WCOURTESY OF PARAMOUNT VANTAGE, WARNER BROS. PICTURES, 20TH CENTURY FOX, THINKFILM, AND FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES



CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH? IOAN GRUFFUDD STARS AS AN 18TH CENTURY ANTI-SLAVE-TRADE ACTIVIST IN THIS MOST RECENT BIOPIC OFFERING

COURTESY OF ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

Reality Bites on Big Screen

Biopics multiply, but subjects dwindle

BY CHLOE SMITH

What do Ray Charles, Truman Capote, June Carter Cash, and Virginia Woolf have in common? How about Queen Elizabeth II and Idi Amin? And no, this is not the start of some tasteless joke—unless, that is, one considers the Academy Awards a joke.

These people, while famous in their own rights, have the added distinction of being among the subjects of the plethora of biopics—or “biographical dramas”—that the film industry has started to churn out exponentially in the past decade. Furthermore, the actors who portrayed these people have all won Academy Awards for their performances—or are currently nominated.

Clearly, the portrayal of well-known figures is a big business in Hollywood these days. In the span of three years, audiences have been invited to examine the lives of people ranging from an ancient general (*Alexander*, 2004) to a 1950s pinup girl (*The Notorious Bettie Page*, 2005), and nearly every notable person in between. Although biographies have long been a staple of movies—Cyrano de Bergerac was the subject of an early film in 1900—their recent growth is unprecedented. Since 2000, about 60 films dealing with real-life celebrities or historical figures have been released. That's more than twice the amount produced in the 1990s—and this decade isn't even over. The most recent offering is *Amazing Grace*, which is based on the story of the 18th century anti-slavery campaigner, William Wilberforce. The film is set to open tomorrow.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has surely been at least partly responsible for this spawn. In the last five years, the Academy has given two Best Actor awards, four Best Actress awards, and 11 nominations to actors for re-creations of people whose names were already well-known before their respective films. However, at what point does impersonating famous figures cease to be acting and become simply imitation?

Philip Seymour Hoffman was hailed for his performance in *Capote*, in which, admittedly, he did an excellent job aping the idiosyncrasies and persona of Truman Capote. *Capote* was powerful, but its quality lay more in the vision of the film as a whole rather than specifically in Hoffman's acting. His role did not give much insight into the motives or demons that drove the man, nor did it help the viewer understand the reasons for Capote's rapacious pursuit of success. But mimicry ultimately proved to be more important, and Hoffman earned an Oscar for his portrayal.

An actor's appearance is more crucial in biopics than in fictional narratives. Hoffman, for example, successfully met the viewers' expectations of how Capote should look and sound. While he should be

praised for his impression of Capote's identifiable, nasal voice, his depiction was also aided enormously by skilled teams of makeup and hair artists and costume designers. It's no surprise that the majority of non-fantasy Best Makeup award winners have been those associated with bringing a real person onto the screen—they have a clear goal to reach, a template to copy, and their triumph is immediately recognizable to anyone in the audience.

Because, by nature, biopics are inextricably entangled with already known subjects, the films also benefit from sentiments attached to their real-life protagonists. Jamie Foxx, who won a number of awards for his performance in *Ray*, almost certainly benefited from voters' nostalgia for the recently-deceased Ray Charles. A vote against Foxx would have been a vote against Charles, and surely that would have been a disgrace, given the public's grief over the loss of the musician.

Most importantly, these films are dramas—not documentaries. Although they sometimes run the span of the subject's life, they rarely go from cradle to grave. As *Hollywoodland* demonstrated, they often focus on no more than a section of the subject's experience or a famous incident. Other times, they bind the figure's life off neatly before they end, fitting the story into the narrative drama and leaving audiences with a satisfying “happily ever after” ending, as in *Walk the Line*. Although they do not strive for slavish accuracy, they do attempt to expose a new perspective on the subject's private life.

This Sunday at the 79th Annual Academy Awards, the trend may continue. Helen Mirren and Forest Whitaker have both been nominated for their respective portrayals of the queen of England and the dictator of Uganda. There is no indication of whether the wave of biopics will slow anytime soon, especially if Mirren and Whitaker are victorious. And just because Hollywood has exhausted many compelling subjects, it doesn't mean there has to be an end. They're now turning to nobodies—last year's *Running with Scissors* is based on Augusten Burroughs's semi-autobiography, and he wasn't even famous until his memoirs were published.

When *Amazing Grace* opens tomorrow, viewers will have the chance to decide for themselves whether this latest addition to the pantheon of celebrity biopics adds to the understanding of a historical figure. Though veracity is certainly an important element in creating a compelling character, the cinema doesn't necessarily need to be a haven for truth-telling. But maybe it's just enough to illuminate a past individual's contributions, significant or superficial, and entertain some audiences along the way. ■

Front of the Queue

As president of the Hillel Filmmakers Club, Jason Schulman, CC '07, offers an opportunity for students to analyze films and express themselves cinematically.

- 1 *Catch and Release*—“The only Jennifer Garner movie I haven't seen.”
- 2 *Breach*—“After a disappointing recent CIA movie, this FBI thriller could reinvigorate the spy genre.”
- 3 *Click*—“The message of this oddly insightful movie is perfect for midterm season: don't get bogged down with work or you'll miss those tiny, extraordinary moments that life is all about.”
- 4 *Stay*—“A solid thriller with a bold twist at the end. And Lerner Hall has never looked cooler.”
- 5 *The Last King of Scotland*—“I want to see if Forest Whitaker deserves the Oscar, because he may be the one to beat come Feb. 25.”

—Compiled by Emily Rauber

DOUBLE DVD FEATURE



✓ *Babel* (2006)

✓ *L'Auberge Espagnole* (2002)

Counting down the odd number of days in February? Get through the last week of the shortest (and coldest) month with two lengthy movies about the obstacles of language. In *Babel*, new on DVD this week, an American tourist is mistakenly shot by a child in Africa, leading to a succession of cultural misunderstandings around the world. In *L'Auberge Espagnole*, misunderstandings arise when French college grad Xavier spends a year abroad in Spain, where he shares a small apartment with young people from different countries. Both films feature international casts exploring the consequences of clashing cultures as they play out on a global scale in one and come to a head in a tiny student apartment in the other. The ensuing despair in *Babel* is enough to make college students moan about the state of the world they're about to inherit, while the conflicts of communication in *L'Auberge* lead to fairly breezy outcomes for its characters—like self-discovery and fun parties. Take some time to watch these movies and reacquaint yourself with the outside world—the one that exists way off campus.

— Ariel Karlin



Awesome Color,
Dragons of Zynth,
Kyp Malone
Thurs., Feb. 22,
10 p.m.
Tonic



The Lemonheads,
Vietnam
Fri., Feb. 23,
8 p.m.
Southpaw

God or Monster?

Virtuoso guitarist Gary Lucas compartmentalizes pop

BY PARKER FISHEL



COURTESY OF LARS KLOVE

There's a man in the back, bedecked in all black, smiling like a maniac. A surf green Stratocaster upon his lap, his fingers dance across the fret board urging out blissful tones, his trademark "avant-pop," with effortless ease. Unable to keep up with the feverish pace or add anything new to the sonic mix, the other players fall out one by one, save a brave guitarist and drummer. All the players look at each other with the same big grin that says, "Damn, this guy can play!" The man in back—still with that knowing smile—is conjuring such a maelstrom that it's impossible to tell how he's playing so many parts at once. The jam winds to a close with all eyes still on the man in the back. As the final notes give way to dead silence, everyone in WKCR studios stands transfixed, enraptured, while the man in back just smiles. Eventually, they all shuffle in procession to pay their respects. This is Gary Lucas as the Monster. Seeing that devilish smile and his musical virtuosity, it's hard not think that he's followed the path of Robert Johnson and sold his soul to the devil.

Yet, within moments of meeting Gary Lucas the God for a lunch of Chinese noodles, it becomes apparent that this cannot be the case. Lucas the God is the affable, well-spoken Yale grad, Shakespeare and Chaucer devotee, self-proclaimed pacifist, and leader of psych-rock band Gods and Monsters. For an hour and a half, we talk about everything ranging from the pride he derives from his Jewish origins to air traffic controllers to Václav Havel, but whatever the tangent, he always comes back to the music.

"It gives me more joy than any other art form and it just moves me emotionally," Lucas says. "It's better to follow your heart, plus I don't really know how to do anything else." From his easy-going, self-effacing demeanor, one would never be able to tell that he is a darling of the avant-garde scene in New York and has been for almost two decades since his appearance at the old Knitting Factory in June of 1988, a self-described "turning point" that jump-started the second part of his musical career. Since then, Lucas has played alongside such music legends as Lou Reed, Roswell Rudd, Jeff Buckley, and John Zorn. He has not only held his own, but left such an impression that he has been lauded with accolades such as "the thinking man's guitar hero" and "a true axe God," by *The New Yorker* and *Melody Maker*, respectively.

"Since I was a little boy, I've loved monsters and horror films," Lucas, the consummate storyteller, says as he reminisces about his childhood. On a fourth-grade musical aptitude test, Lucas received a perfect score, and the band director immediately insisted that he begin playing the most difficult instrument in the orchestra, the French horn, and so Lucas' proper musical career began. Throughout middle and high school, he played guitar in various combos, often with friend Walter Horn, with whom he would later compose a live film score to the 1920 film *The Golem*—which Lucas continues to play live around the world to this day. Following high school, Lucas says he spent a lot of time at WYBC, the Yale radio station, but he was also a letterman on the rifle team and a guitar player in the Yale Symphony Orchestra, through which he was able to meet and play with Leonard Bernstein.

A post-college stint in Taipei exposed Lucas to the Chinese pop of the 1930s-'50s, which Lucas would later rearrange for the album *The Edge of Heaven*. Upon returning to the States, Lucas wrote ad copy for CBS Records, which Lucas describes as "a total prostitution of my writing skills." Yet, he did come up with some memorable lines. Writing about The Clash, Lucas came up with the tagline, "The Only Band That Matters."

"And I really believed it for a minute," he says. "I

really liked them."

"But then I got into Beefheart's band, and thought hey, we're the only band that matters," he says, cracking that smile again. As a member of Captain Beefheart & the Magic Band, Lucas played on *Doc at the Radar Station* and *Ice Cream For Crow* and immediately began to distinguish himself as a guitar virtuoso. The solo guitar piece "Flavor Bud Living" even managed to fool the great rock critic Lester Bangs, who asked Lucas if he was playing the higher or the lower part (Lucas was actually playing both parts simultaneously, without overdubs).

After Beefheart, Lucas laid low for a while. "For a while, I totally psyched myself out of even attempting to write songs," Lucas says. "Then one day, I was just doing it and it met with pretty good reception." Lucas then formed Gods and Monsters and used it as a vehicle for his musical theories; the only problem was finding a lead singer. Who could possibly be able to keep up with Lucas the Monster?

"My experience was it never really worked out on the long term and I had some good ones. The best probably being Jeff Buckley," Lucas says. "I'm very proud of writing 'Grace' and 'Mojo Pin'—songs that would appear on Buckley's platinum album *Grace*. Those songs put into practice my little ideas about avant-pop whereby, the game was to aspire to make stuff that wasn't an automatic Top 40 hit, but could function as a popular song and still had art elements with it. And that's what I continue to try and do."

Along the way, there has been some criticism. The sheer versatility of Lucas' playing is astounding and his musical palette is so large he can literally create whatever he wants. However, as he traverses and bridges various musical territories, he alienates fans, critics, and purists who believe he is just wasting his time and talent. Though his work may be "compartmentalized," a term Lucas himself uses, "it's the very diversity of what I do that keeps me in business," he says. Lucas has literally done everything—he's dabbled in Chinese pop, country, music with Jewish themes, blues, pop, rock, ambient, jazz, film and television scores, but he says, "If you examine all my records ... the one common thread, besides that I'm playing guitar, is that there's a blues element, there's a twang ... This is the music I relate to the best. Why? I try to figure that out. I think there's a spiritual aspect to blues that encompasses all of the dynamic, the sound of a human struggling through the instrument. That I like. I like to hear a wailing, kind of a human cry, and I put it in my guitar playing. It just comes out. That's what

moves me the most of any music."

The current lineup of Gods and Monsters may be the best evocation of this dynamic yet. The "New Wave super group," as he refers to the band, includes his friends Ernie Brooks (The Modern Lovers), Billy Ficca (Television), Jason Candler (Hungry March Band), and oftentimes Jerry Harrison (Talking Heads). Their last record, *Coming Clean*, is an impressive and forward-thinking effort in the avant-pop vein, showing that despite an illustrious past, Lucas is not one to rest on his laurels. This is something that Lucas feels differentiates the generations of musicians.

"People just think, 'I can make a perfect record that sounds very polished and could even be avant-garde and then just boot it up on the net and I'm in the music business and I'm an artist,' without paying any dues, without really going and being rejected or feeling what that's like," he says. "Cause that informs your evolution and your craftwork. ... Nothing is easy and you can't really have any struggle if it's all given to you." Lucas is fast to point out that he does like a lot of new music, citing Joanna Newsom and Super700.

This year will see the release of a live DVD and a studio album from Gods and Monsters, as well as the new solo Chris Cornell—of Soundgarden and Audioslave fame—album, which has Lucas' signature guitar work all over it. Cornell, on the strength of Lucas' work with Buckley, requested that the guitarist play on his album. Beyond recording, Lucas continues to tour the world both as a solo artist, with Gods and Monsters, and with The Duetels, a country-folk duo that features Lucas showcasing another dimension to his prodigious talent along with Peter Stampfel (The Fugs/Holy Modal Rounders).

"It's that youthful energy and spirit and attitude that's kept me wanting to do this and it's why I still enjoy it playing live," he says. "Really when you're on stage and in the moment and it's all working, like the audience is digging it, there's no better feeling in the world. ... It's one of life's best things and if you can make it pay as a living, that's been my goal. And actually I'm proud to say it's worked out."

At the end of the meal, fortune cookies were brought out and Lucas' read, "Doing what you love is freedom, and loving what you do is happiness." It really doesn't matter whether Lucas is more God or Monster. As long as he plays his guitar and follows his muse, he's got everything one needs: music, freedom, and happiness. ■



NOT IN THE BAND ANYMORE DECADES AFTER THE DISSOLUTION OF THE BAND, GARTH HUDSON IS STILL PLAYING ON. COURTESY OF JOHN SCHEELE

Speaking the Same Language

Garth Hudson on pedagogy and “old” music

BY JUSTIN A. GONÇALVES

As I sat outside Landau Grill, waiting for a 2004 Saab sedan to pull up into the restaurant's outdoor sound system. The song choice was hardly immediately noteworthy, considering this particular establishment in Woodstock, NY, had played a steady stream of classic rock the past hour. But it wasn't until this moment that I realized what I was about to do, and with whom I was about to spend the entire afternoon. Part of me hoped his car would pull into the driveway right then, with his band's—The Band's—most recognizable song an overture for what would soon transpire. Much to my chagrin, five minutes passed and the song ended, but there was no black Saab in sight.

The car finally pulled up to the restaurant and there sat Garth Hudson—the former organist, pianist, saxophonist, and part-time musical instructor for The Band—in the driver's seat. This man had shared the stage with Robbie Robertson, Richard Manuel, Rick Danko, and Levon Helm for two decades, and recorded with the likes of Bob Dylan, Emmylou Harris, and The Staple Singers. Here he was, wearing all black, fumbling change and keys in his pocket, finally extending his arm for a handshake.

Throughout the late '60s and early '70s, Hudson garnered both popular and critical claim for his innovative organ techniques, forcing the instrument into a musical realm that no one could have anticipated. Emotivity and inventiveness would become Hudson's

signature, and it wasn't an accident. “On all Band recordings I would try and play something a little different, particularly soundwise, in terms of the texture,” Hudson says. “It's clear and emotional, but the Lowrey [organ] did speak in a certain way. It has something like 110 tubes that all created a great tube distortion.” As unprecedented as his sound would become, Hudson's musical upbringing is hardly atypical.

Born in Windsor, Ontario, and raised in the small town of London, Ontario—halfway between Toronto and Windsor—he thoroughly immersed himself in the few musical opportunities the town had to offer. “They had a concert band, a symphony, various dance orchestras, and musicians that played what we called casual,” Hudson says. “There were only two rock ‘n’ roll bands in London, the Mel-O-Denes and the Capers. I joined Bob Liley's group, The Capers, playing tenor saxophone and piano. I played the C-melody saxophone in the Medway High School Cadet Band for Parade Day. I wish I had a recording of that. That's maybe where I began to listen and archive.”

Archiving has since become an important pastime for Hudson, a subject he certainly overemphasizes in lieu of answering questions regarding The Band. Hudson is currently working on amassing a comprehensive history of “old music” with hopes of educating musicians by exposing them to the undiscovered gems of the past. As we sat down to dinner, he asks, “How do I get young people to listen to old music? I want to avoid the words di-

nosaurus, old, antiquated, archaic.” While the question itself has no simple answer, Hudson himself is certainly working on it, culling mounds of encyclopedic information to create a comprehensive collection of some of the most influential and important artists of the first part of the twentieth century. Hudson hopes that this research, once combined with his recent fascination with pedagogy—or, as he puts it, “Teaching teachers to learn to teach those who learn to teach”—will culminate in a musical education program he has in the works.

Hudson has always been a teacher of sorts, back to the days that he and The Band were playing as backup musicians Ronnie Hawkins and The Hawks. “Ronnie [Hawkins] wanted me to teach the guys something,” Hudson says. “He wanted me to give them lessons in music. I didn't really teach them much in sit down in one-on-one lessons. Where we began to expand was putting together modern chords, more sensible, in a way, to some of the numbers that Richard [Manuel] was doing.” This notion of modernity is one that has stuck with Hudson, who is embracing contemporary technological and musical developments that become evident on our excursion to Allaire Studios.

In the studio, Hudson was finally in his element. As he made his way toward the piano, set in the corner of the enormous studio, Hudson sat himself down and began playing some of his most recent compositions. As soon as he laid his fingers on the ivory keys of the 1930s Steinway grand piano, his sooty hands were rejuvenated with youthful vibrancy. Hudson began explaining the manner in which he approaches the instrument. “I play the piano and what I play is recorded as MIDI information and goes into a music notation program like Concord, Finale, Logic, Sibelius. ... This is a lot more fun than other work ... you have to do in your home studio office enterprise, sometimes called in upper-Canada a cottage industry.”

Hudson's current operation is hardly a cottage industry, at least in terms of its magnitude; he's recorded albums with artists the likes of Daniel Lanois, Neko Case, The Sadies, Martha Wainwright, Los Lobos, The Gypsy Kings, Evan Dando and the Lemonheads, Norah Jones, and, most recently, Nicolai Dunger of Sweden. Other lesser-known artists constantly solicit his piano, organ, and accordion expertise, hoping that he'll help bring that special line that will transform a good melody into a great song.

Oftentimes, however, these solicitors are not the best acts around. “I try to do what I can,” Hudson says, “but some of them just don't sound good.” It's these bands, those that just don't sound good, that take least advantage of Hudson's virtuosity, failing to translate any musical vision they might have—if it even exists—into organists' terms. “I did a few demos in L.A.,” Hudson says, “and, in general, they didn't know much about what I did. They never listened or had maybe heard one thing. If it was organ, maybe all they wanted was a pad, which is fine. Very often, people don't explain what they want very well. But I find most artists who I collaborate with are informative and inventive.”

Ultimately, the goal of Hudson's archiving project is to help musicians better explain what they want. By creating a universal musical foundation in the canonical works of yesteryear, he hopes to eliminate any loss of translation between the song and the words used to describe it. It will only a matter of time until Hudson's own musical contribution—especially those of The Band—will be added to this canon, if he hasn't been already. ■



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Nailing the Perfect Treatment

Priti manicures, clean conscience

BY NUSHIEN FATEH

The craze for organic products shows no signs of slowing down. It started with our food, popping up in everything from cranberry juice to potato chips. Then it moved to clothing, as companies scrambled to churn out organic cotton tees and cashmere sweaters. Now the trend has come full circle. About a year ago, Priti, an organic, non-toxic spa, opened its doors in the East Village to nature-loving pilgrims all over Manhattan.

When I opened the door, I was greeted by a whiff of geranium. The strength of the scent and the classical sound of Nina Simone were immediately soothing. Michael, my manicurist for the day, gave me a warm welcome and ushered me in. Within five minutes of walking into Priti spa, I was drinking a delicious, warm chamomile tea and picking out my manicure for the afternoon. The menu sounded delicious.

Each manicure had a signature blend of fresh flowers, fruits, herbs, and organic essential oils. Michael explained that the "Priti Simple," a geranium blend, is a popular choice, but then again, Priti Princesses also enjoy the "Priti Delicious," a mix of freshly sliced oranges and ginger. But being the stressed Priti Princess that I was, I chose the "Priti Deep," which blends together fresh rosemary and mint.

As Michael began removing my old nail polish, he explained that all the products they used in the spa were natural and non-toxic. I couldn't help but joke that my old toxic nail polish was beating out his soy-based nail polish remover, which took a full 15 minutes to remove all remnants of old polish on my nails. This manicure is certainly not for those in a rush. However, the warm bowl of water that my hands rested in, infused with oils and enriched with smooth massage pebbles, made up for the wait.

My nails ready, Michael liberally lathered on Priti's homemade brown sugar scrub. Next came probably my favorite part of any manicure, the steaming hot towel rub. The heat and sugar grains literally melted onto my arms, in a brine both delicious and invigorating. After most of the melted sugar had been wiped off, Michael slathered on Priti's rich-yet-non-greasy homemade lotion.

Priti's selection of nail colors would seem to flaunt the limitations of mother nature. The salon hosts its own line of nail color, but also carries other non-toxic labels. I picked Zoya's Raven, a simple black, which Michael applied with more care than any manicurist I've ever had.

After a two hour manicure, I walked out of Priti feeling relaxed and rejuvenated. I was even inspired to pop into Whole Foods on my way back to pick up some organic treats to go with my new, non-toxic manicure. ■

What a Tease

The LES salon proves anything but

BY XIYIN TANG

Troye Evers owned a salon on the corner of Canal and Orchard before closing up shop to work at Kropps and Bobbers, where he met stylists Jackie D and Margie. But Troye was fated to be master of his own domain. That's where Tease comes in. Troye, Jackie, and Margie left Kropps and Bobbers and moved into an intimate space in the burgeoning scene of the Lower East Side. And what a sweet move it was.

As Troye recounts his history, his scissors fly through my long hair in seemingly haphazard strokes. I'm a little nervous, and I can't remember the last time I sat down in a chair and told the stylist to do whatever he pleased with my chest-length locks. The first thing Troye suggests is to pump up the volume at the crown of my head. He says that it looks flat, a detail that had earlier escaped my attention. But I had faithfully placed myself in his hands. After all, Troye has clients up and down the East Coast and even overseas. Clients from locales as far away as Australia depend on Troye to maintain their well-kept manes.

The Tease aesthetic is a slice of rock 'n roll heaven that happens to churn out some of the best haircuts around. The iPod, on constant rotation, plays The Raconteurs the day I'm there, and Troye himself is covered in tattoos. Co-owner Margie

has stunning platinum hair that almost compels me to get highlights—but I'll save the indulgences for next time. Aside from cuts, clients (who range from East Village hipsters to Westchester yuppies) will often step in to get extensions and blow-outs, and with Tease's free-wine-after-5-policy and the neighborhood's healthy nightlife, it's easy to imagine stopping in for a little teaser before a big night out. With prices starting at \$45 for an updo, you'll be paying less for a style you can keep for days than for the drink tab you'll run up at the nearby Annex. Not to mention that Tease's bathroom trumps all the rock clubs' by a million. The walls are covered in old black-and-white pictures of everyone from the Talking Heads to wide-eyed Nico. Troye explains that they hand-selected every single clipping before handing it over to a friend, who proceeded to turn it into wallpaper.

And really, that's exactly the kind of place Tease is—a collection of friends (The World Famous Bob, a close friend of the salon and a voluptuous burlesque star, used to work as the receptionist), seasoned veterans, effortless decor, and friendly accommodations in a hipper-than-thou locale.

As for my hair? Sideswept, blown out, and re-layered, I felt like a different person—reborn, glamorous and yeah, I'll say it ... a bit of a tease. No liquid courage required. ■



PHOTOS BY ANGEL LAM



Police cite dramatic rise in number of mysteries.

CRIME, 15

Seriously, 8 Joints

BY TYRONE RAKETEMENSCH

Listen, okay, if we go next door, they will totally have eight joints lined up for us on the table and they'll be all "go on, we don't want to smoke this, we want you to do it." I know this to be a million percent true.

Seriously. We have to go. Now.

Stop laughing at me. I know you're doing that, so stop.

Think about it this way: if we don't go, we'll never have the eight joints. Now think about it this way, too: we go over there, they give us

their eight joints for free, and then we have them.

You don't understand. My body is like a high-powered rocket ship. It needs a precise amount of fuel in it at all times to function. My fuel is a joint.

But sometimes my body is like eight rocket ships, which is why we have to go next door right now. Kablamo!

I meant to fall down when I said "Kablamo!" just now. It's called commitment to a bit.

No, smoking the fern my mom gave me for Arbor Day isn't going to make things better, jerk face. I'm not stupid, you know. You're the stupid.

I don't care which next door we go to as long as we go to one of them. And listen, I don't want to hear any of this "please don't start smoking up while my parents are in the room visiting me" business. That man was obviously too striking to be your father. Everybody knows it.

In fact, now that I think about it, you probably don't even have parents. So you're a charlatan and a mountebank. And adopted. We

should listen to me, because I'm not any of the things I just said you were.

Seriously, let's go.

Please. ■

#1 WORST ALUMNUS EVER

PLEASE CUT OUT AND HOLD PAGE UP TO MIRROR

BY J.D. PORTER

History may be written in the lives of a few great men, as philosopher Thomas Carlyle suggested, but apparently Columbia students know next to nothing about history.

To be sure, the University has a storied legacy of sordid individuals. Hypocritical, fear-mongering lawyers. Icons of corporate malfeasance. A guy who poured napalm on people.

But look at Columbia in a different way and you'll see a different thing. It's a legacy of countless anonymous students who didn't vote in our "Name the Number One Worst Alumnus" poll.

The mechanism that made this catastrophic apathy possible is the Internet. Not that thing people sometimes use in useful ways. Rather, it's that thing students use to read articles and then not participate in the easily accessible voting drive that accompanies them.

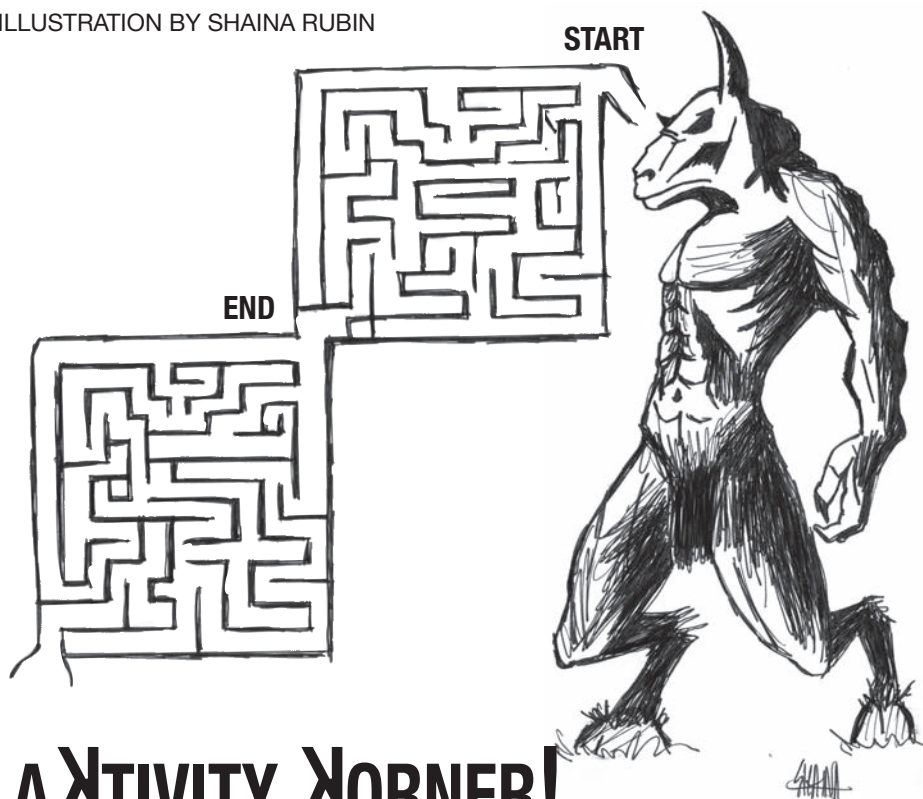
And we really did not participate

in it. We as a school submitted only 26 votes. Pat Buchanan and Barack Obama received six apiece to lead the pack, which just goes to show that even the people who did vote were idiots. Clearly Hafizullah Amin is the worst. He killed thousands of people. And clearly Barack Obama shouldn't even have been on the list, because he is a beacon of hope for America.

Who did this? Who would read an obviously thoroughly researched story that practically begs for votes, and then refuse to click the right bubble in a poll? Who thinks sending a one-line e-mail just isn't worth the trouble? Who refuses to take seriously an obscure, little-read page filled with confusing half-hearted jokes that should have ended before this paragraph?

The answer is, you do. And for not doing a thing that I vaguely envisioned you doing last week, Columbia's worst alumnus of all time is you. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY SHAINA RUBIN



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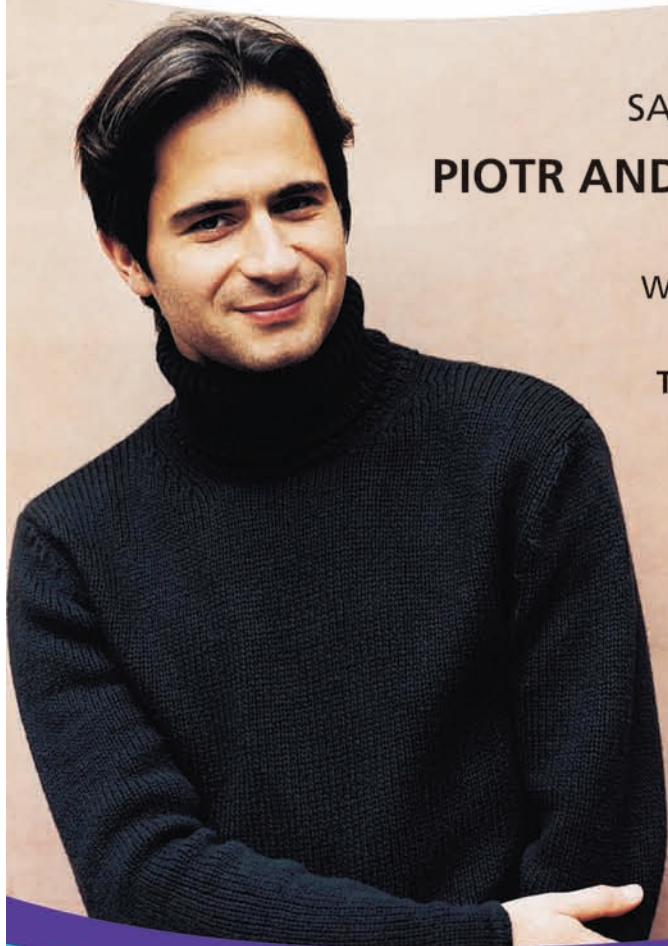
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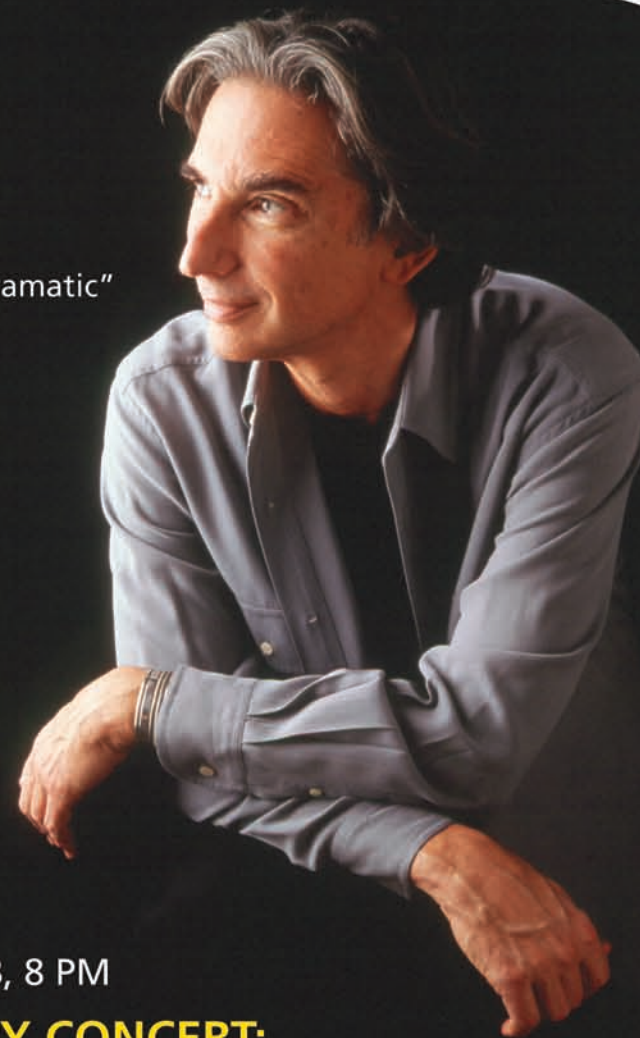
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