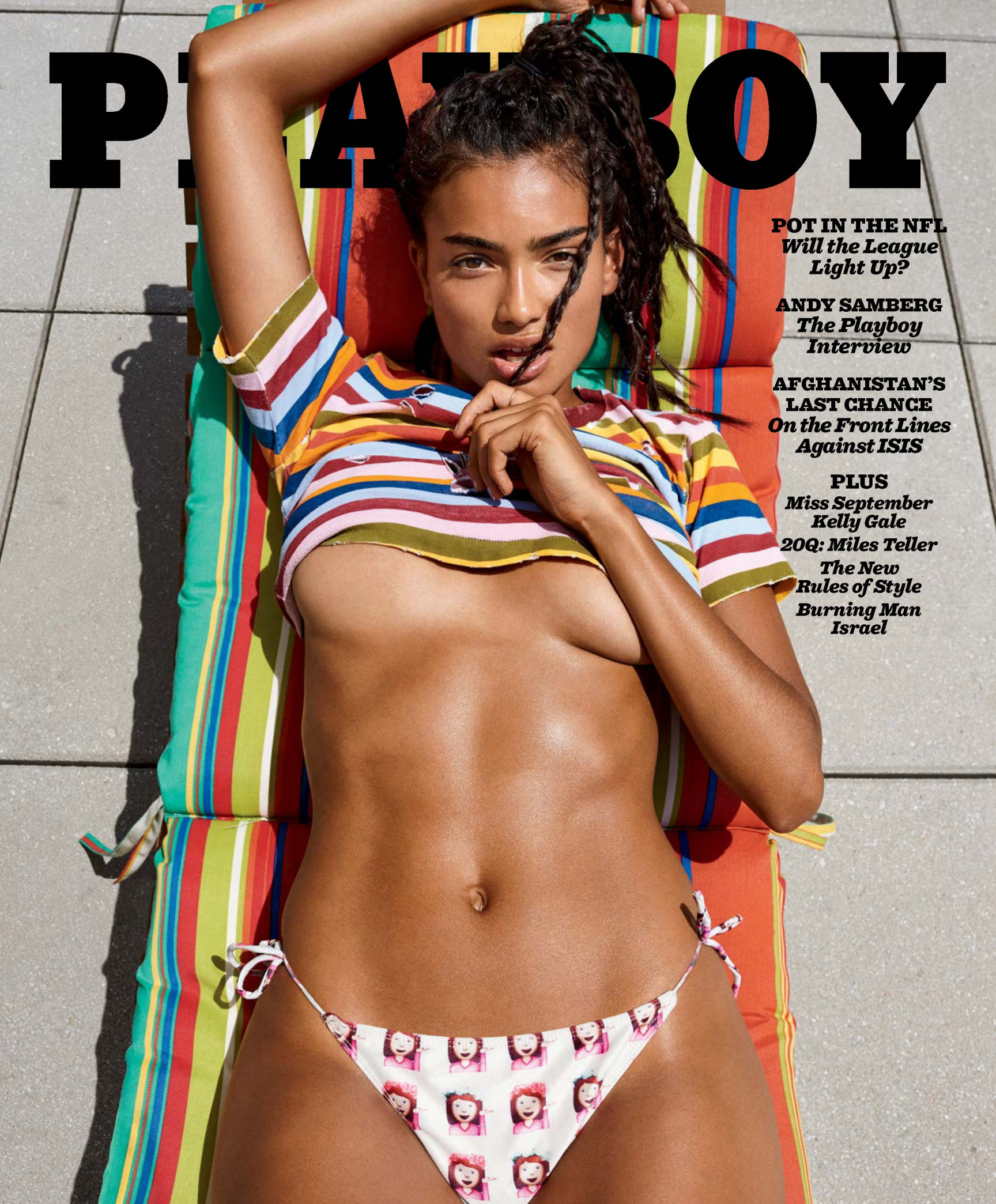


PLAYBOY

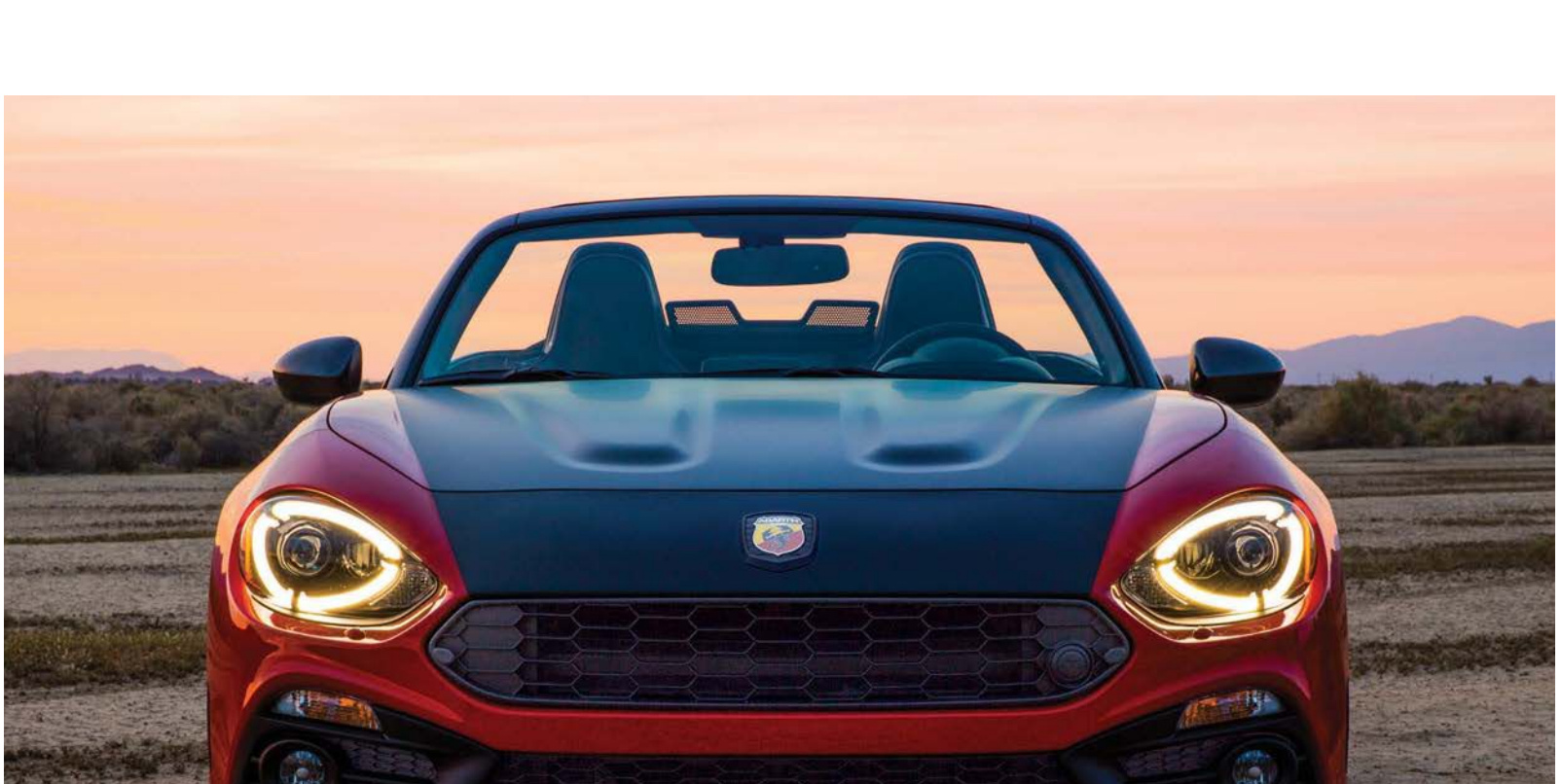
POT IN THE NFL
Will the League Light Up?

ANDY SAMBERG
The Playboy Interview

AFGHANISTAN'S LAST CHANCE
On the Front Lines Against ISIS

PLUS
Miss September Kelly Gale
20Q: Miles Teller
The New Rules of Style
Burning Man Israel

What type of man are you?



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Chris Heads

The whimsical work of Heads, who has photographed campaigns for Levi's and Betsey Johnson, never fails to evoke the halcyon days of youth. Marrying vibrant color with an earthy ambiance, Heads creates a perfect backdrop for Miss September Kelly Gale, whose radiance pops on every page.

Colin Winnette

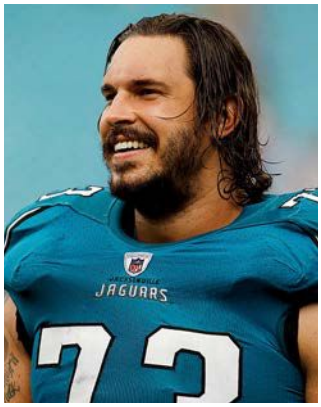
For his short story *Whereabouts,* penned exclusively for PLAYBOY, novelist Winnette drew inspiration from his carless existence in San Francisco—the birthplace of Uber and Lyft. His meandering tale, about a man who tries to save a buck while searching for his missing wife, is a darkly comic satire of the sharing economy.

Kristina Shevory

U.S. Army veteran and war journalist Shevory spent two years reporting *Afghanistan's Last Chance,* an on-the-front-lines account of the Afghan special forces, the nation's last-ditch defense against ISIS. "The commandos are viewed as the best warriors in the country," she says. "Gaining access involved a tremendous amount of wrangling."

Eben Britton

In 2010, former NFL offensive lineman Britton dislocated his shoulder twice during a regular-season game. Sports doctors treated him with opiates, the side effects of which further sidelined him. In *Marijuana Is a Team Sport,* Britton, now a medical-marijuana advocate, argues that the NFL needs to embrace pot as a superior therapy.



Langley Fox

Her work has been commissioned by Louis Vuitton, Marc Jacobs and TL-180; now, as a freelance artist, Fox (center) brings her pen to the pages of PLAYBOY. In *Drawn Together,* she teams with photographer Kava Gorna and fashion savant Djuna Bel for an illustrated pictorial that reminds us how joyful life can be when you stay outside the lines.

Erin Trieb

A Texas-reared photojournalist living in Istanbul, Trieb has dedicated her career to documenting the raw emotional wreckage of raging wars and post-battle trauma. In *Afghanistan's Last Chance,* she captures the stoic faces of the ill-fed Afghan nationals who are expected to stave off ISIS insurgents with too few bullets.

Jeff Weiss

A day before he was dropped off in Israel's Negev Desert for *Burning Man in the Holy Land,* his account of the country's psychedelics-fueled festival, Weiss narrowly escaped a Tel Aviv terrorist attack that killed four. "Battalions of soldiers canvassed the block," he writes. "For 15 minutes, the hissing fear that we were next hung in the air."

Corinne Iozzio

Everything old is new again, and it was only a matter of time before vinyl made its sonically superior comeback. As our resident *Tech* writer, Iozzio reports in *So You Want to Get Into Vinyl* that the LP is cool again thanks to advancements that combine the old with the new. Her best find? A turntable that streams directly to your Bluetooth speakers.

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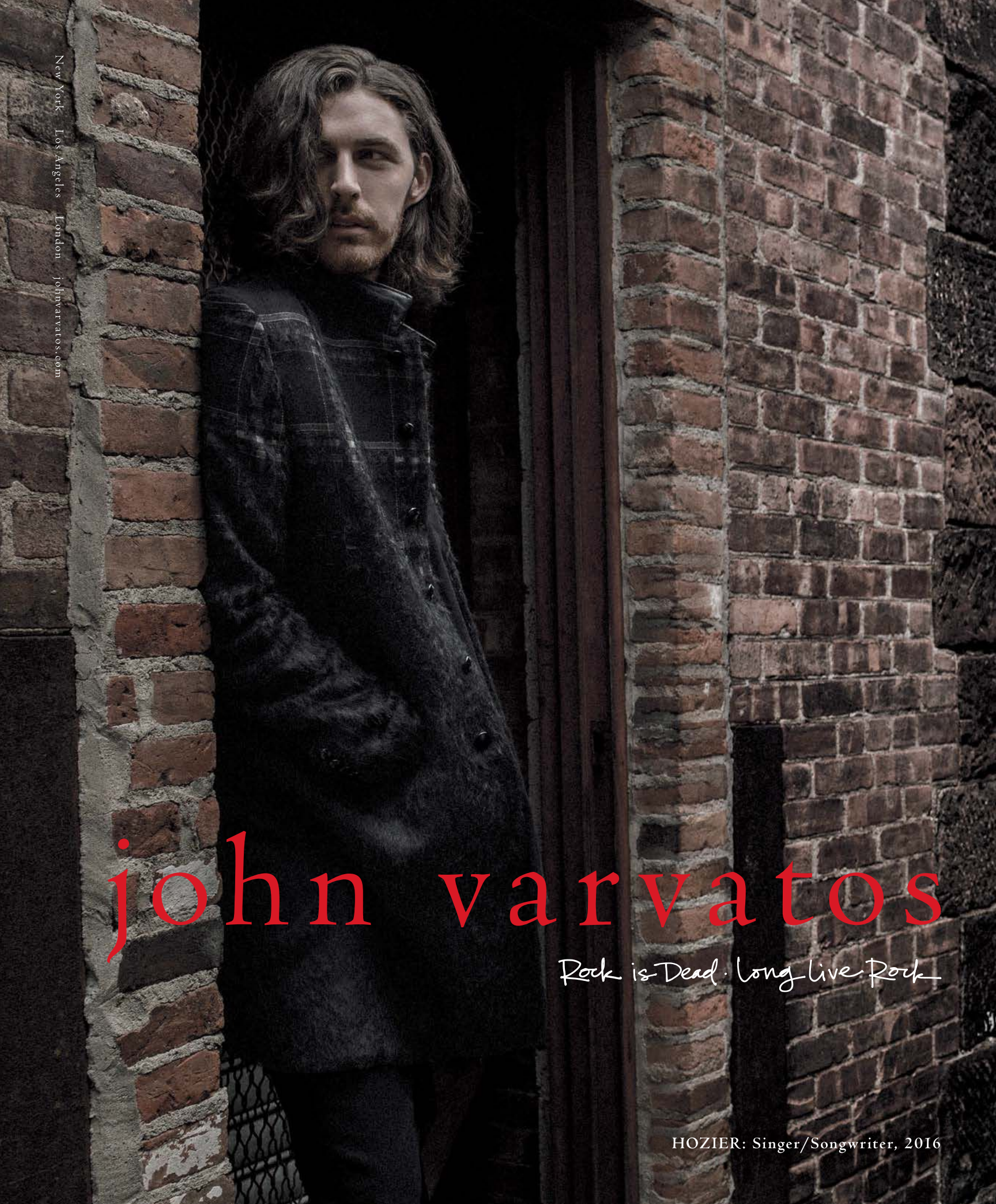
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ON THE COVER (AND OPPOSITE PAGE) Miss September Kelly Gale, photographed by Chris Heads. Our Playmate looks superb in stripes—as does our Rabbit.

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PLAYBOY

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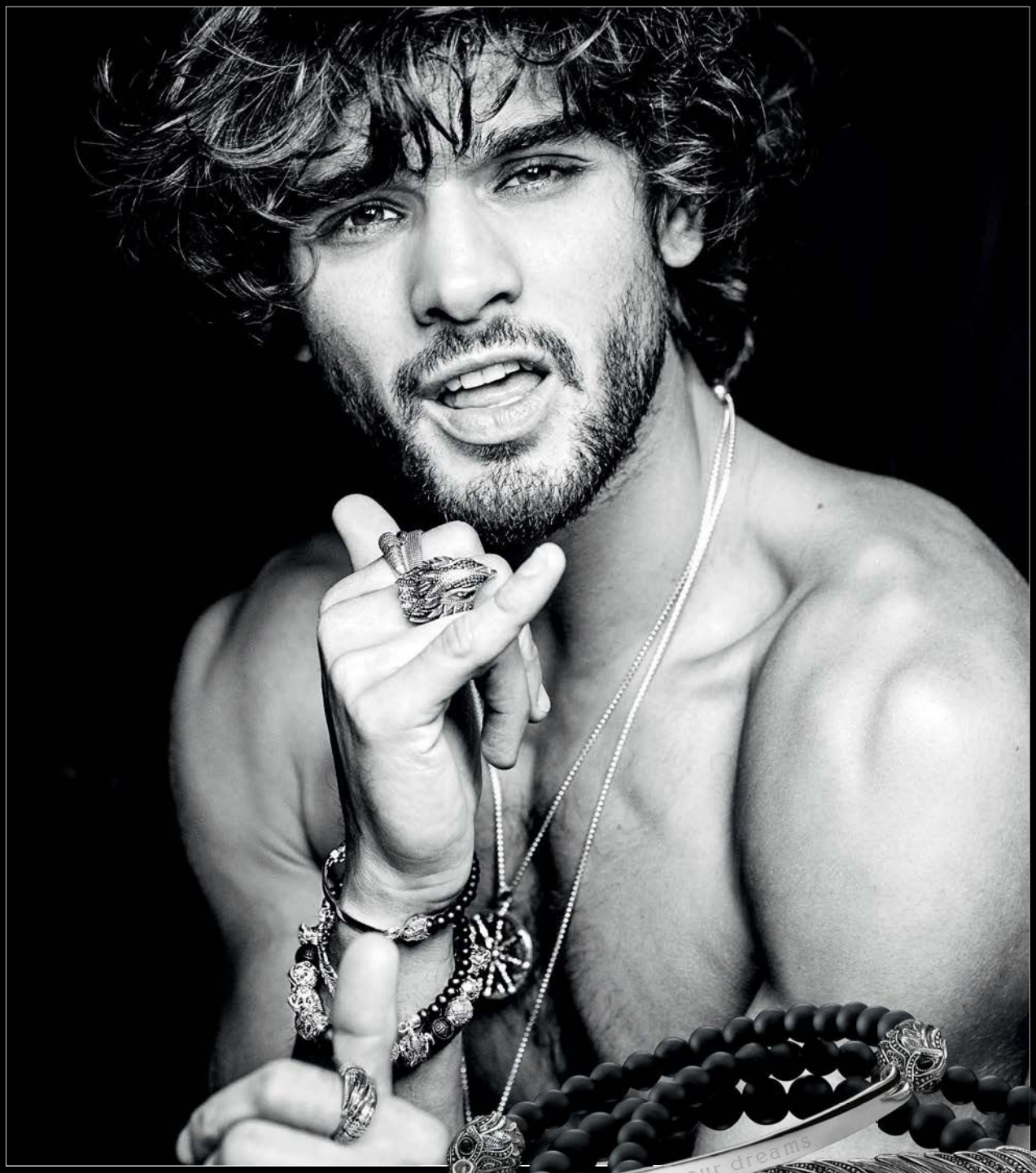

Thomas Sabo

REBEL AT HEART

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All hail Eugena Washington, Playmate of the Year 2016.

THIS IS A SHTICK-UP

No list of brave comic routines can be considered complete without including Stephen Colbert's performance at the 2006 White House Correspondents' Dinner (*The Wildest, Craziest, Most Offensive and Fucked-Up Jokes Ever Told,* July/August). Colbert walked into the monster's lair, looked George W. Bush in the eyes and mercilessly attacked him to his face. By doing so he let the entire world know what many of us believed: that the uncomfortable-looking man with the spurious smile on his face was destined to be remembered as the worst president in our lifetime. What Colbert did that night was not simply brave, it was historic.

Leonard Stegmann
Half Moon Bay, California

FULL STEAM AHEAD

PLAYBOY's new direction is impressive. So far every month has improved on the last, with the July/August Freedom Issue the very best so far. Continue like this and the brand will thrive.

Pierre B. Gauthier
Quebec City, Quebec

KICKING ASS AND GIVING NAMES

Suicide Squad actress Karen Fukuhara says, "It's rare to see an Asian female take on the role of a badass" (*No Filter,* July/August). I guess she's never heard of Michelle Yeoh and Zhang Ziyi (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*), Maggie Q (*Nikita*), Grace Park (*Battlestar Galactica*), Lucy Liu (*Kill Bill, Charlie's Angels*), Devon Aoki (*Sin City*) or Jamie Chung (*Sucker Punch*). It's not so rare.

M.J. Randle
Dallas, Texas

ROUNDING THE BASES

Thank you for the photos of Miss June Josie Canseco. Her beauty illustrates the superiority of the female sex. No tattoos, no piercings, just delicious woman. The photos are so much more exciting when they leave you begging for more.

B. Wills
Las Vegas, Nevada

Josie does in fact have a couple of tiny tattoos. Here's a fun project: Look again.

Someone tell Jose Canseco that his daughter one-upped him: She hit a grand slam without ever stepping up to bat.

Brendan O'Neal
New Orleans, Louisiana

QUEEN EUGENA

I'm thrilled with Eugena Washington, Hef's choice for Playmate of the Year 2016 (June). Eugena is intelligent, ambitious, confident and gorgeous inside and out—essentially the embodiment of what Playmates have come to represent. She's an impressive woman with so much to offer.

Eugena's win feels socially and culturally significant; the impact on those PLAYBOY has empowered with this choice will endure. Validation is important. The struggles to overcome racism and homophobia are similar; I understand the courage it takes to face a world that can be needlessly hateful. I see strength in Eugena's eyes, and it reminds me to keep fighting for myself. She's a symbol of possibility, living her life on her own terms with no apologies, doing what she loves. It's beautiful to see.

Josh Fehrens
Toronto, Ontario

NEW SCHOOL OF ROCK

Writer Sean Manning (*Radio on the TV,* June) is spot-on: Shows about the music industry are a key way to expose viewers to artists they wouldn't hear otherwise, such as Lucius or Halsey. I work in the music department for Cameron Crowe's *Roadies,* and "introducing audiences to new artists," to use Manning's wording, is a favorite part of my job. Everyone involved in the show truly loves music, and I think that comes across.

Jessica Curtis
Seattle, Washington

PREPARE TO BE ASSIMILATED

Ray Kurzweil envisions everyone's consciousness linked through technology (*Playboy Interview,* May). If I had a direct connection between my brain and a massive network, I would want a massive firewall—and other security measures.

Steven Rovnyak
Indianapolis, Indiana

WE FEIGGED UP

Photographer Dan Monick took Paul Feig's portrait for our July/August feature on the director (*The Gospel According to Paul*), as well as the image at right.

TOP PHOTO BY JASON LEE PARRY

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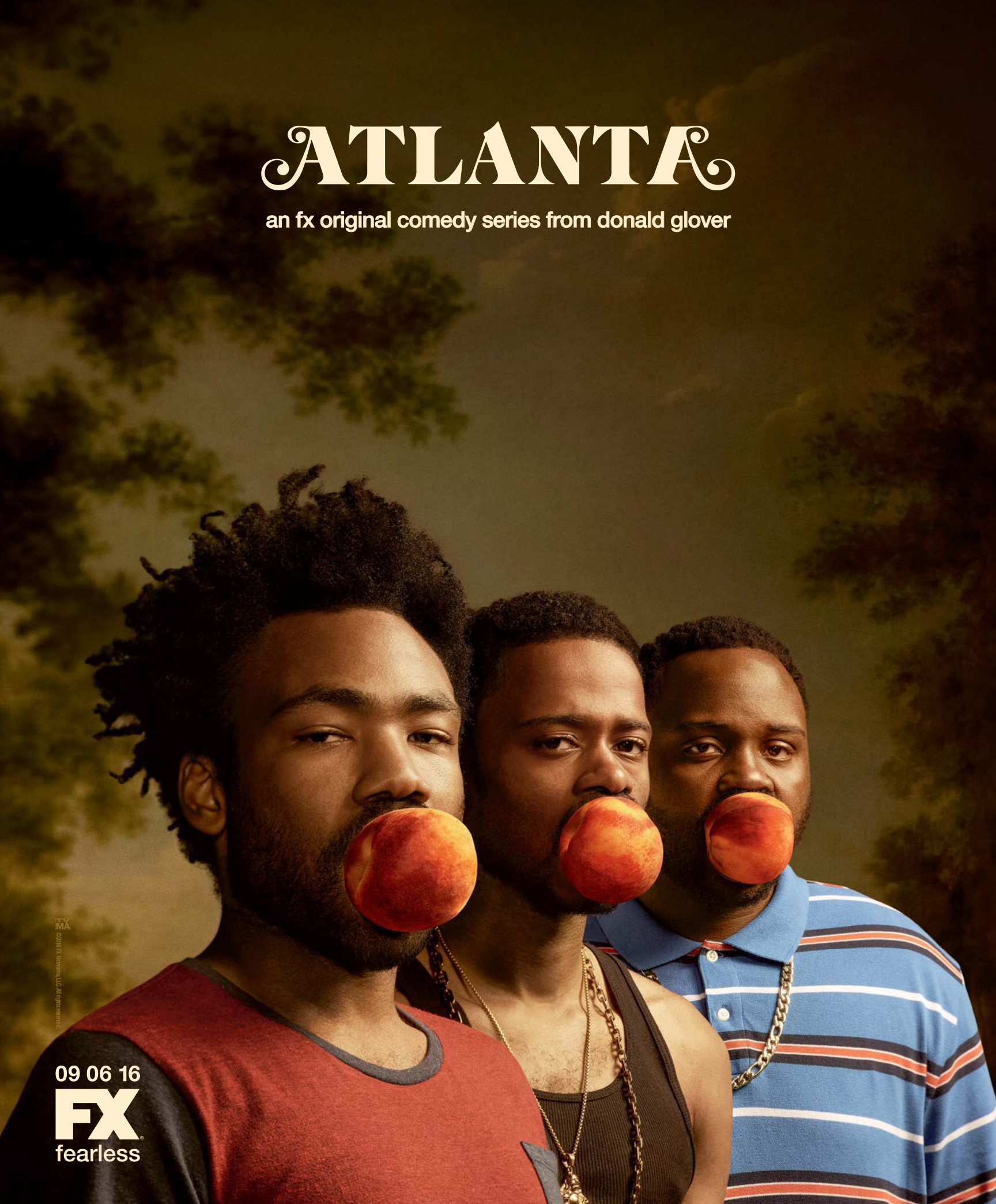
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“Just because I’m a girl doesn’t mean I want something darling and pink.”

“I grew up a tomboy in New York. I also grew up pretty poor. I couldn’t afford name brands, so I’d go to the Salvation Army, buy something vintage and design my own clothes. For me, being an artist wasn’t just about self-expression; it was a way to survive. When I started my own clothing line, Violette, in 2008, it came out as a unisex brand. As much as we’re individuals, girls like a lot of the stuff guys like. I’ve never understood why brands don’t make the same clothes they make for guys in girls’ sizes. Even in the sneaker world, the idea for too long was to take the cool guy sneaker and ‘shrink it and pink it’ for women. In recent years, unisex clothing has become more of a conversation. The stigma is dissipating.”

Vashtie Kola *is a filmmaker, DJ and designer who has worked with Nike, Puma and Ray-Ban.*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ATISHA PAULSON

The Redemption of JÄGERMEISTER

How the notorious drink jumped from the party circuit to the craft-cocktail scene

Jägerbombs certainly have their time and place—namely college. But the bittersweet German spirit the drink incorporates is actually mixology friendly, and the artisanal-cocktail community is starting to embrace the complex ingredient. In a funny way, Jägermeister's low-rent reputation in America is the source of its success. In the 1970s, legendary liquor marketer Sidney Frank (who would go on to create Grey Goose vodka) began importing the spirit into the U.S. Ignoring its reputation in its native land as a digestif enjoyed by grandmothers, he hired an army of attractive young women to sell shots to 20- and 30-something guys, and an empire was born.

If your snooty cocktail-loving friends give you grief for ordering a drink mixed with Jägermeister, point out that the spirit is flavored with 56 different herbs and botanicals and as such is essentially an *amaro,* just like Campari, Fernet-Branca and similar mixologist favorites.

"I've always liked Jägermeister, so when bartenders started to use bitter herbal liqueurs in cocktails, I naturally reached for it," says Mary Bartlett, bartender and assistant general manager at Honeycut in Los Angeles. "I find it to be a lot drier than some of the others I've worked with, so it's easy to balance." In fact, she uses it as the base for a full-on tiki cocktail: Her feisty meister (see recipe below) combines Jäger with rum, fruit juices and, of course, a flaming garnish. Both Bartlett and Willy Shine, official "brand meister" for Jägermeister, cite the spirit's relatively high alcohol content (35 percent ABV) as the chief reason it makes a good cocktail ingredient, and its complexity renders it mixable with all sorts of flavors. Among its many botanical ingredients that complement popular cocktail components, juniper plays perfectly with gin, and citrus matches well with fresh juices. If you want to get fancy with food pairings, Bartlett's favorite flavors to combine with Jäger include chocolate and pineapple, while Shine recommends cucumber, ginger, coconut and grapefruit. But if you just want a drink, try one of the recipes below: an absinthe-rinsed tequila old fashioned, Bartlett's tiki creation and a sophisticated twist on the old Jäger shot.—*Jason Horn*

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX CITRIN

MEXIKANER OLD FASHIONED
(Pictured opposite)
Created by Willy Shine, Jägermeister brand meister

Absinthe
1 oz. Jägermeister
1 oz. añejo tequila
¼ oz. agave nectar
Orange peel
Star anise

Rinse an old fashioned glass with absinthe. Add a large ice cube and pour remaining liquid ingredients into the glass. Stir. Garnish with strip of orange peel and star-anise pod.

FEISTY MEISTER
Created by Mary Bartlett, Honeycut, Los Angeles

1 oz. Jägermeister
½ oz. blended Jamaican rum
½ oz. five-year-old Barbados rum
½ oz. orange juice
½ oz. lime juice
½ oz. passion-fruit syrup
½ oz. orgeat (almond syrup)
For garnish: juiced lime half, 151-proof rum, ground cinnamon

Add all main ingredients to a shaker and shake vigorously. Pour into a collins glass filled with crushed ice; mound more crushed ice on top. Place juiced lime half atop the ice, rind down, and into it pour half an ounce of 151-proof rum. Carefully set rum alight and sprinkle grated cinnamon over flame.

JAGUAR
Created by Jane Danger, Mother of Pearl, New York

¼ oz. *poire* Williams (pear eau-de-vie)
¾ oz. Jägermeister

Pour *poire* Williams into a shot glass and top with Jägermeister. To serve chilled, add ingredients to a mixing glass filled with ice. Stir and strain into a shot glass.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRANT CORNETT

Sushi for Idiots

Poke went from obscure Hawaiian specialty to mainland mainstream success, and it's shockingly easy to make

Poke (poh-*kay*) has arrived on the mainland. The raw fish snack, which hails from Hawaii, exploded on the West Coast over the past year—Los Angeles alone has more than a dozen poke shops—and now it's gone as far as Chicago and New York. "I took a family trip to Hawaii in 2012 and fell in love with the stuff," says Drew Crane, who opened one of Manhattan's first poke-dedicated restaurants, Wisefish, in January. "It's a real comfort food in Hawaii. People get it from liquor stores, delis and even Costco in round plastic containers to go." At Wisefish, Crane dresses fish with shoyu and sesame oil to order, and serves it atop a foundation of rice or zucchini noodles. Customers can amp up the mixture with a variety of nontraditional mix-ins such as watermelon radish and sea beans. In sum, the great argument for why poke is here to stay: It satisfies those sushi cravings without denting the wallet, and you can make it at home (perhaps impressing a date in the process) with even the most rudimentary of knife skills. Pro tip: Poke goes great with corn chips.—*Julia Bainbridge*

Wisefish Ahi Poke
Serves 4

3 tbsp. tamari shoyu
1 tbsp. sesame oil
1 tsp. gluten-free oyster sauce
½ tsp. freshly grated ginger
1 lb. fresh ahi (sashimi-grade yellowfin or bigeye tuna), cut into half-inch cubes
⅓ cup sweet onion, thinly sliced lengthwise
4 cups cooked white rice
1 avocado, cut into half-inch cubes
1 scallion, thinly sliced crosswise
Toasted sesame seeds

In a small bowl, whisk together shoyu, sesame oil, oyster sauce and ginger. Set aside. In a larger bowl, combine tuna and onion. Add the shoyu-sesame mixture and gently toss to coat. Cover and marinate in the refrigerator for at least 30 minutes and up to an hour. To serve, divide rice among four bowls and top each with a mound of poke. Garnish with avocado, scallion and a sprinkling of sesame seeds.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRANT CORNETT

Blades Bounce Back

Take it all off—your beard, that is—as the effortlessly functional double-edged razor makes a comeback

You don't need 27 blades and a subscription service to get a close shave. New versions of the redoubtably sleek safety razor give a design-worthy spin to the classic shaving implement. Unlike plastic razors, which can require excessive pressure, weightier metal razors do most of the work for you. And after the somewhat pricier start-up cost, double-edged blades are mere pocket change in comparison with expensive and elaborate cartridges. Plus, any one of these razors will look good on the bathroom counter when you inevitably leave it out.—*Vincent Boucher*

TILT BLACK
The limited-edition R106 safety razor by Mühle of Germany features a minimalist black handle and chrome-plated trim to suit the modernist at heart. ($70, theartofshaving.com)

TAKE A SHINE
With polished chrome plating to update its old-school origins, this safety razor by Baxter of California will be a bright spot in your morning routine. ($65, mrporter.com)

GILTY PLEASURE
A little bling brings baller style to this gold-finished 34G heavy-duty classic safety razor from Merkur of Germany; it boasts a thick, nonslip grip to boot. ($51, westcoastshaving.com)

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID PRINCE


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So You Want to Get Into Vinyl

A brief guide for the analog curious

BY **CORINNE IOZZIO**

Downloadable songs and streaming music may have doomed the compact disc, but their popularity has helped breathe life into something much older: the vinyl record. After a nosedive in the 1980s, every facet of the vinyl ecosystem is rebounding. Vinyl sales have been climbing steadily since 2007, reaching an all-time recorded high in 2015; major retailers including Whole Foods and Urban Outfitters carry vinyl, and new independent record stores open all the time. What's more, German start-up Newbilt Machinery is selling the first new vinyl-pressing machines in 30 years; Jack White's label, Third Man Records, just bought eight. So what gives?

Obvious assertions about hipster lust for authenticity aside, experts attribute the renaissance chiefly to collecting and ownership.

"It has a lot to do with getting fatigued with everything in your life being connected to a screen or the cloud," says Carrie Colliton of Department of Record Stores, a nationwide coalition of shop owners. "Deep down, humans still want some sort of physical element in their life." Translation: A Spotify subscription gives you access to music, so if Spotify disappears, so do your tunes. But the two worlds aren't necessarily in competition with one another.

"Listening to Spotify, you're vetting your music," says Dustin Hansen, general manager of the Graywhale string of record stores in Utah. "If you decide to take the next step, it makes sense to buy vinyl." Records, he says, satisfy a host of needs. They're collectible pieces of art that double as surfaces to roll joints on—and they offer a unique sound. Yes, it's true: Vinyl can sound better. The soft hiss of the needle as it reads the grooves creates the fabled warm sound. And a true analog recording (i.e., one pulled directly from the original studio master tapes) has more detail than certain compressed digital versions. There's simply more room in the grooves of a record to store nuances. Hansen adds, "You hear things in songs you've never heard before."

FIVE TIPS FOR TURNTABLE VIRGINS

START WITH THE BASICS

A bare-bones vinyl system requires three things: a turntable, an amplifier and speakers. Some systems bundle two of the three; the Audio-Technica LP60BK-BT (pictured; audio-technica.com, $179) has a built-in amp and can stream straight to your Bluetooth speakers, making the leap to LPs preposterously easy.

UPGRADE YOUR NEEDLE

The simplest way to get awesome sound out of an entry- or mid-level turntable is to spring for a brand-new needle. Your local music-shop guy or girl can help—Colliton promises most aren't snooty assholes. Also try TurntableNeedles.com or NeedleDoctor.com.

KEEP THINGS CLEAN

Flecks of dust and oil caught in the vinyl grooves can damage a record's surface—and your precious needle. Invest $10 to $20 in a simple cleaning kit that includes cleaning fluid and a brush or cloth, and squeegee your records after every use.

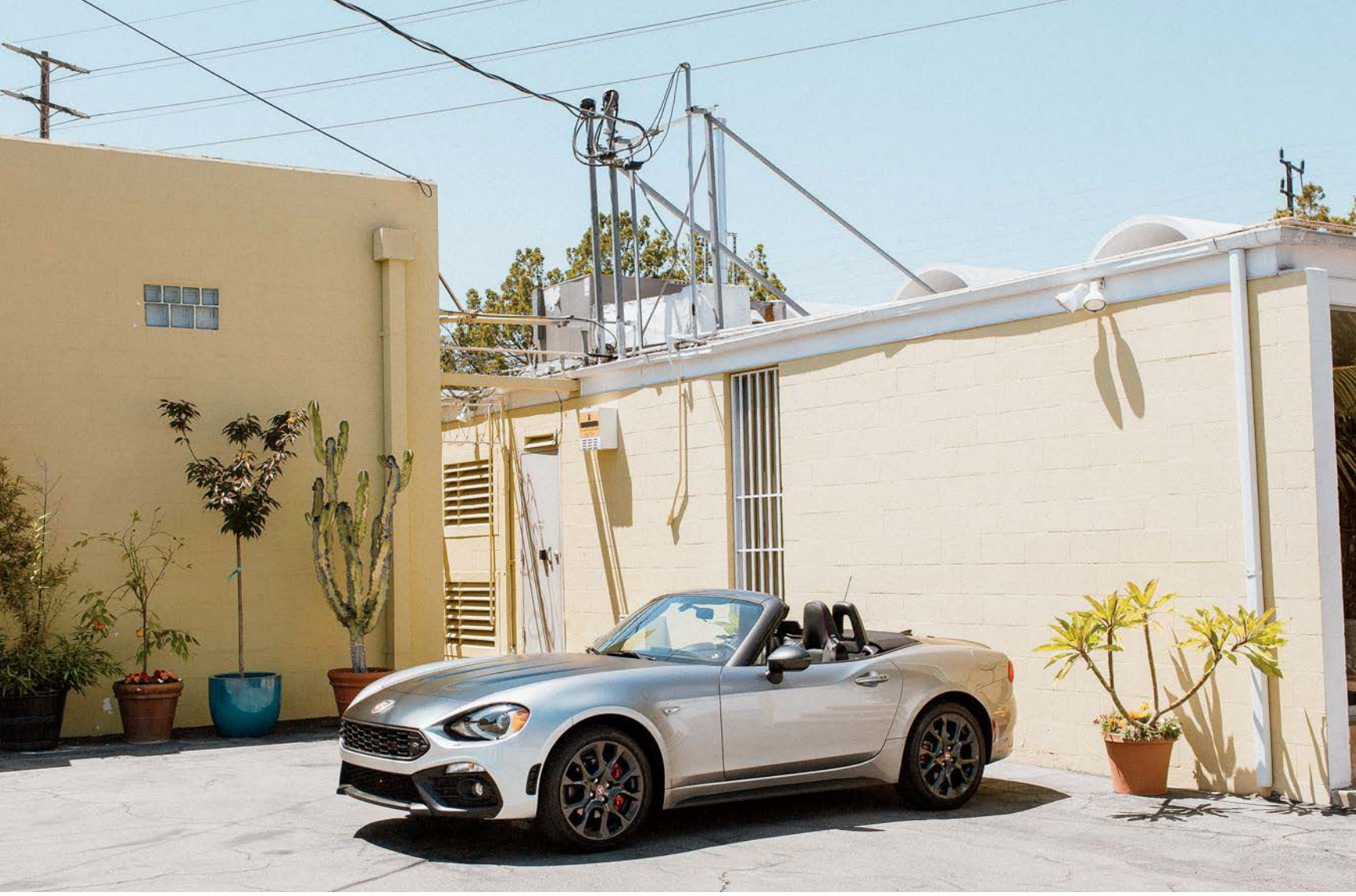
EMBRACE THE DIGITAL

Record labels don't expect you to sit in silence on the train, so the lion's share of new vinyl comes with a digital copy. Amazon's AutoRip feature imports tracks to your Amazon Music account, and indie musician favorite Bandcamp.com lets you download MP3s and stream purchases through its mobile app.

DIG AND DISCOVER

Nothing beats rummaging through the used bins at local shops to build a collection—search for stores at RecordStoreDay.com. And if you're pining for a particular Zeppelin album, it's sure to be in the 8 million–strong catalog at Discogs.com.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
KEIRNAN MONAGHAN AND
THEO VAMVOUNAKIS



AUTO

THE RETURN OF THE SPIDER

The Fiat 124 Spider Abarth gives the classic Italian roadster a new edge

Pulling off an appealing new take on a classic without seeming lame is easier said than done. Regardless of how much you may admire your old man's 1970s sense of fashion after bingeing on the dearly departed HBO show *Vinyl,* you wouldn't dare pair one of those psychedelic shirts with a Tom Ford suit in 2016.

Well, at least you shouldn't.

Fiat seems to get it, which makes the return of its iconic roadster to the U.S., in the form of the 2017 Fiat 124 Spider, so special.

The new spin on the classic Italian convertible not only recaptures the spirit that has made the car a hot collectible 50 years after its introduction, but it also sells you on the idea even if you aren't a fan of the previous models. Some may want to write the new Spider off as simply a rebadged fourth-generation Mazda Miata, but rest assured: This Italian roadster is a completely different animal from its Japanese counterpart, despite the two cars' shared platform.

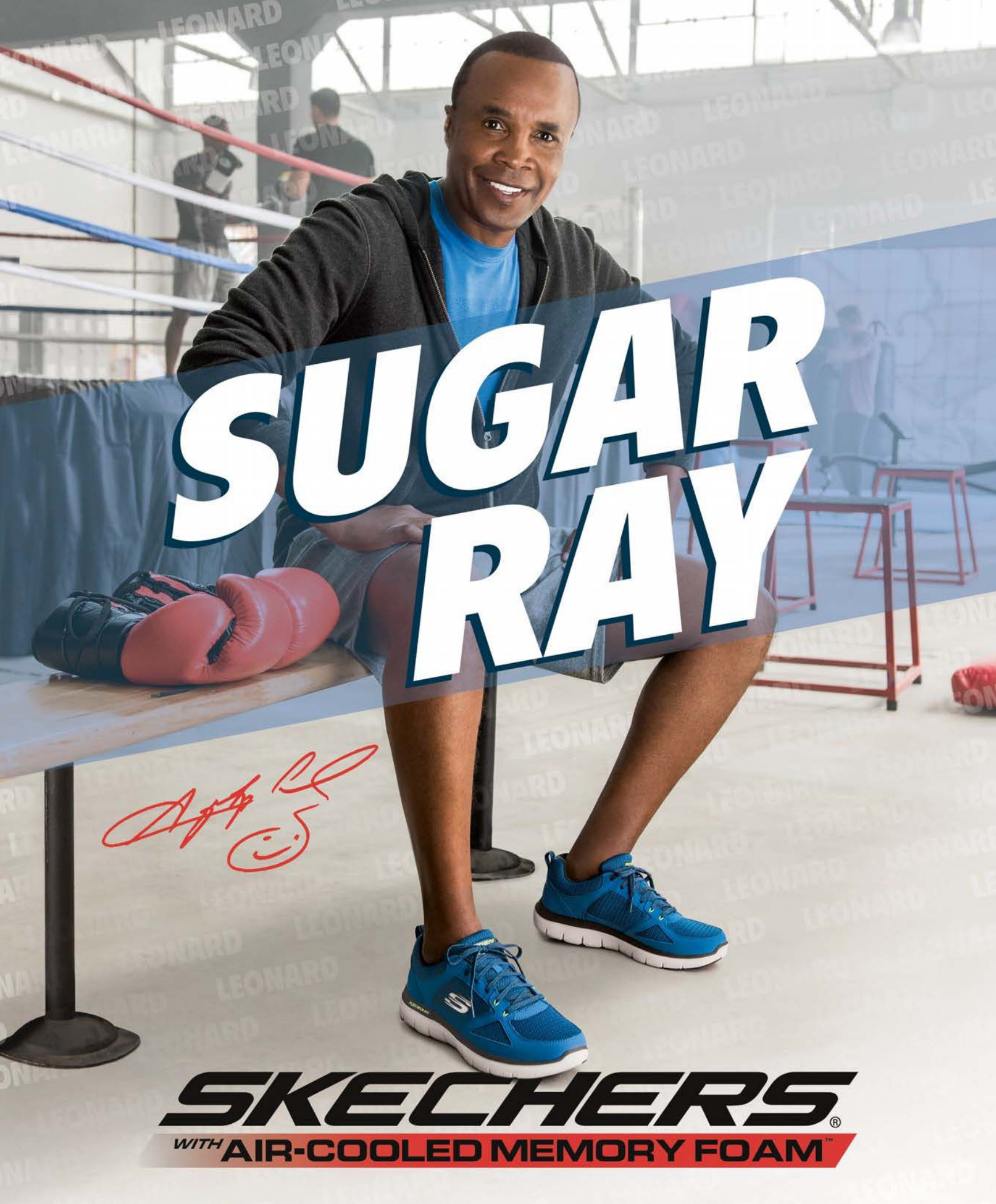
Nowhere does this become more apparent than behind the wheel of the 124 Spider Abarth (pictured). Of the three new Spider variants (not counting the Prima Edizione, a limited offering of 124 vehicles), the Abarth is by far the more sinister interpretation of the convertible. The other two models are the Classica, a purer, entry-level version, and the more premium Lusso, which means "luxury" in Italian.

All three come with a turbocharged four-cylinder engine with basically the same amount of power: 164 horsepower and 184 pound-feet of torque in the Abarth, compared with 160 horsepower and 184 pound-feet of torque in the Classica and the Lusso. But the 124 Spider Abarth, which starts at a little over $28,000, is a far better fit for those drivers who prefer their classics with a little more edge.

In addition to unique design cues such as gunmetal accents and matte-black lids, the Abarth features a number of performance enhancements, including a sportier Bilstein suspension system and a low-growling, quad-tip exhaust—both of which make it a lot more fun to drive.

Fortunately this update also includes all the modern tech features we've come to expect: USB ports, Bluetooth, rear camera. About the only thing lacking is Apple CarPlay, but for a true sports car there are worse sins. Opt for the engaging short-throw standard six-speed manual transmission and you won't even miss it.—*Marcus Amick*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHANTAL ANDERSON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HOW CAN A COUPLE BECOME A THROUPLE?

Q: *We're a heterosexual couple in search of a "unicorn" (an attractive bisexual woman) to join us for a few date nights a week. We've had some one-off threesomes but can't find a partner to join us more long-term. Apps, dating sites, friends, acquaintances—nothing has worked. What are we doing wrong?*

BY **RACHEL RABBIT WHITE**

A: Unicorn hunters have a bad reputation. Perhaps it's the polyamorous community's endless lingo: *ambigusweetie, new relationship energy* (NRE), *friends-first swinging* (FFS) and other terms that reek of corporate buzzwords. One has to wonder if all polyamorous people are middle managers. Of the threesome-seeking couples on Tinder, inevitably she is bi but without much experience, and of course he loves to watch. Tina, a former unicorn, has been on her share of "throuple" dates. "These couples are called unicorn hunters because they're often predatory," she says. Couples end up treating her like a fantasy rather than a partner; these pairs are simply looking for someone to fill a preimagined role. Yet the high of an ongoing threesome is real. Tina recounts the slumber-party vibe of enjoying two lovers, kissing in public, having sex in a myriad of positions, running out in the middle of the night for bad Chinese food, drawing attention as a triple date at a wedding. But fights are intensified when they involve three people. Tina tells of feeling uncomfortable during a couple's spats, pressured to take a side. "You won't solve existing relationship problems by bringing in a third person," she says.

Laurel Steinberg agrees. A New York–based psychotherapist and adjunct professor at Columbia University's Teachers College, she has counseled many couples as they navigate polyamory. Instead of asking what you're doing wrong, Steinberg suggests you ask what you're trying to achieve, what your goals are. "Couples need to ask themselves: Are we going into and coming out of this as a team? Will we be able to put this endeavor behind us if we choose not to do it again? And will we both feel comfortable speaking transparently about our experiences and feelings afterward?" One common pitfall for couples, says Steinberg, is the hope that bringing in a second woman will cure their boredom. However, this can cause new problems if the woman in the couple feels in any way inferior when compared with the new female partner. "It's also important to discuss veto power—whether one member of the couple will control whom the other engages with sexually in the future," she says.

To answer your question: You may not be doing anything wrong. Dating itself consists of endless trial and error, as well as numerous bar tabs that never pay off. In ancient Greece the unicorn was believed to be a real beast. In medieval times the lack of proof of the animal's existence helped move it into the realm of myth. And as you're discovering, the fantasy of a third person, one who enters and exits a relationship with ghostly ease, is just as unattainable.

Questions? E-mail advisor@playboy.com.

ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE PERRY

DANIEL STEIGER

THE PHANTOM ROSE GOLD

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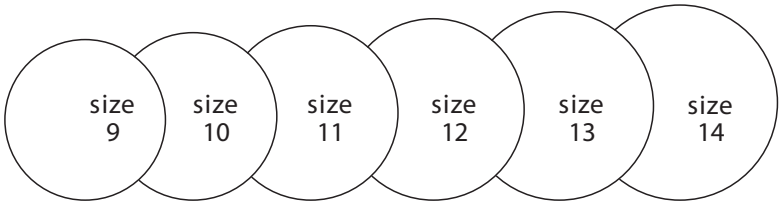

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GREG LONG

The big-wave surfing champion tells how going under put him back on top

AS TOLD TO
ADAM SKOLNICK

Some things you can't explain, such as the fact that an activity like big-wave surfing is what brings happiness or meaning to your life.

When I was 15 years old, my sister was dating a guy from San Clemente by the name of Jon Walla, the best underground big-wave charger in southern California. I convinced him to take me down to Todos Santos—a legendary break off Ensenada—for the first time. There I encountered the biggest wave I'd ever seen, and it changed everything for me.

What it demands of you to actually ride one of those waves—the thrill and sense of accomplishment—was far beyond anything I'd experienced before. It's the greatest physical and mental challenge in the sport of surfing.

After winning the high school national championship, I became a big-wave free surfer. Ocean Pacific gave me a travel budget to chase swells to different corners of the globe. When I was 19 I won Dungeons, a big-wave competition in South Africa. That got me an invitation to the Mavericks surf contest. In between competitions I tried to find the biggest and best waves possible—North Shore, north Pacific or down in the southern hemisphere—and create a story around them that my sponsors could use to help build their brand.

For 10 years, surfing big waves was all I thought about, and I was prepared to accept the consequences. Then the worst-case scenario happened.

It was at Cortes Banks in 2012, on a very large day. I was trying to paddle it instead of getting towed in, and I had a wipeout that was too much to handle. The wind was knocked out of me before I was able to get a breath, and I was held down a really long time. Two more waves passed over my head, and then I lost consciousness. I was floating facedown in the water when my safety team located me.

In the aftermath, I realized I wasn't taking time to appreciate the beauty of where I was in the world. My friendships and relationships at home weren't what I wanted them to be either, and it was because I put all my time toward training or preparing for the next big swell.

When you break it down, the ocean is a beautiful and simple metaphor for life. It's constantly in flux. The tide goes in, the tide goes out. The seas get stormy. Some days the waves are perfect. Other days the water is flat. In the end, no matter what the conditions, you have to be able to relax and move with the current. If you fight and struggle, you're only doing yourself harm. That's exactly what life is like on land. It's a never-ending sequence of radical events. Sometimes things go in your favor, and other times you get knocked on your ass. People can ruffle your feathers or make life easy and bring you joy. You're going to experience all of the above. If you learn to take everything in stride and look for the lessons in each event in order to become a better person and carry yourself with grace and love, that's what it's all about.

Now I have more fun. I travel less and put a lot less pressure on myself when I surf, and consequently I'm getting some of the best waves of my life. I surfed only two of the three big-wave competitions this past year but still managed to win the world title. It was a matter of finding that balance, and I look at it as probably the best year of my life—both in and especially out of the water. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANE PETERSON

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ON *MONDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL*

BY **BEN SCHOTT**

SLOW-MO & ROBOTICS

Monday Night Football owes much of its immediate success to the filmic style and technical innovations of its first director, Chet Forte. Using about 10 strategically positioned cameras (twice the norm)—some mounted on golf carts, some handheld—as well as "shotgun" mikes to capture every call and tackle, Forte coaxed a stop-start sport into telegenic narratives. He also popularized several techniques including instant replay, slow motion, split screen, reaction shots, crowd shots and on-screen graphics. *MNF* has continued to innovate with high-definition technology, robotic goal-line cameras, and "next-gen stats" that track players via chips embedded in their uniforms.

MONDAY, MONDAY

MNF quickly changed Monday nights in America. In 1970 *The New York Times* reported that increasingly empty restaurants were installing TVs and bowling leagues were switching game days. Overlake Hospital near Seattle joked that "no babies are to be born between seven and 10 on Monday nights." PTA meetings were rescheduled, and according to *Variety,* sales of movie tickets "nose-dived."

"ABC-TV's prime-time poem of beef and blood."

—JOHN LEONARD, *LIFE,* 1970

FOOT(BALL)NOTES

Monday Night Football first aired at nine P.M. Eastern on September 21, 1970, when "Broadway" Joe Namath (pictured) led the New York Jets into Cleveland's Municipal Stadium (to be beaten by the Browns, 31–21). ¥ At the time, broadcasting football in prime time was a risk—one that CBS and NBC both fumbled. But ABC's $8.5 million bet paid off, and *MNF* redefined both television and sports. ¥ The inaugural sponsors were a trio of American icons: Marlboro, Ford and Goodyear. ¥ On December 8, 1980, Howard Cosell broke the news of John Lennon's murder during a Patriots–Dolphins matchup at the Orange Bowl: "Hard to go back to the game after that news flash." ¥ In 1985, *MNF* televised one of football's most gruesome injuries, the fracturing of Joe Theismann's leg during a flea-flicker play. ¥ ABC's run ended in 2005, after 555 games. The show migrated to ESPN, which signed an eight-year deal worth $1.1 billion annually. In 2011 ESPN re-upped its contract with the NFL for $1.9 billion a year—a 73 percent rise from 2005 and an astonishing 22,254 percent rise from 1970.

THEME TUNES

MNF's first theme was a groovy slice of 1970s funk titled "Score," composed by Charles Fox, the genius behind the *Happy Days* theme. This was followed by a porno-style ditty imaginatively called "Monday Night Football Theme" and then in 1989 by Johnny Pearson's "Heavy Action," with a driving beat and soaring strings. That same year Hank Williams Jr. adapted his hit "All My Rowdy Friends Are Coming Over Tonight," which introduced *MNF* from 1991 until 2011, when Williams appeared to have compared President Obama to Adolf Hitler. This allowed *MNF* to return to "Heavy Action," from which, let's face it, the show should never have strayed.

TUNE IN

Below are the seven most-watched *MNF* games:

Date	*Game*	*% of viewers*
12/02/85	CHI @ MIA	46
10/02/78	DAL @ WAS	43
12/03/90	NYG @ SFO	42
12/22/80	PIT @ SD	40
11/30/81	PHI @ MIA	40
12/10/79	PIT @ HOU	40
12/17/84	DAL @ MIA	40

Source: Nielsen/NFL

MONDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL · CAREER RECORDS

Scoring touchdowns	36	Jerry Rice
Field goals	51	Gary Anderson
Rushing yards gained	2,434	Emmitt Smith
Rushing touchdowns	23	Emmitt Smith
Passing yards gained	9,654	Dan Marino
Touchdown passes	74	Dan Marino
Pass receptions	254	Jerry Rice
Yards gained	4,029	Jerry Rice
Receiving touchdowns	34	Jerry Rice
Scrimmage yards	4,116	Jerry Rice
Interceptions	11	Everson Walls
Sacks	24.5	Bruce Smith
Highest punt avg. (in yards)	48.24	Shane Lechler

Source: *2015 NFL Record and Fact Book*/Elias Sports Bureau

A CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF ABC AND ESPN PLAY-BY-PLAY ANNOUNCERS AND COLOR COMMENTATORS: Keith Jackson · Howard Cosell · "Dandy" Don Meredith · Frank Gifford · Fred "the Hammer" Williamson · Alex Karras · "Frantic" Fran Tarkenton · O.J. Simpson · Joe Namath · Al Michaels · Dan Dierdorf · Lynn Swann · Lesley Visser · Boomer Esiason · Dan Fouts · Dennis Miller · Melissa Stark · Eric Dickerson · John Madden · Lisa Guerrero · Michele Tafoya · Sam Ryan · Mike Tirico · Tony Kornheiser · Joe Theismann · Suzy Kolber · Ron Jaworski · Jon Gruden · Lisa Salters · Sean McDonough

MILES TELLER

After facing off against J.K. Simmons in Whiplash, starring in the cursed Fantastic Four and weathering a snarky cover story, Miles Teller is back with War Dogs and no apologies

BY **ALEX SCORDELIS** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JOYCE KIM**

Q1: *War Dogs is based on a true story about two Miami potheads who become arms dealers for the U.S. military. You grew up in Florida——*

TELLER: Not in Miami. Miami's its own thing. I grew up on the Gulf of Mexico. Floating down rivers on air mattresses, bonfires in the woods, that sort of thing.

Q2: *In the movie, David and Efraim have a giant Scarface photo in their office. Playing a 20-something gunrunner who makes a fortune in Miami, did you worry you might be glorifying your character, creating another Tony Montana?*

TELLER: I don't idolize Tony Montana. I can relate to the hustle but not to the craving for power and money. But you root for the bad guy. In *War Dogs,* I think Efraim is a guy who is making terrible choices. So is my character, David, but Efraim is more brazen about everything. They're fun characters to watch.

Q3: *Your family moved around a lot before settling in Florida. How did you take to the Sunshine State?*

TELLER: I was born in Downingtown, Pennsylvania. We moved to Georgia when I was two and then to Delaware for a little bit. I lived in south Jersey from the ages of seven to 11—Cape May. I think Oprah is rumored to have a house there. Then we moved to Citrus County in Florida—the manatee capital of the world. When we first moved there I got a tour of the middle school, and this kid walked in with cowboy boots, Wranglers, a rebel-flag shirt and a cowboy hat. I was like, "Oh shit, they must be doing some kind of play." Then I saw another kid wearing the same thing, and it hit me: That's where I'm at right now. I took an agriculture class in the seventh grade where we had to clean pigs and pick up cow shit. It was a massive culture shock for me. But to this day, my best friends are from Citrus County.

Q4: *You were involved in theater in high school. Was your motivation to meet girls?*

TELLER: It wasn't really to meet girls. I was the class clown, and I played baseball year-round. When I was a sophomore, my buddy who was a senior used to drive me home, and he said he was auditioning for a play. The drama teacher was pretty hot. She was 28 years old. So that got me to audition, but entertaining wasn't foreign to me. I knew I was good at telling jokes. I was a big smartass. When I was in school and the teacher said something and I had something funny to say, I couldn't *not* say it. And my house was always controlled chaos. Everyone would be playing a musical instrument, and my oldest sister sang opera. My mom enjoyed the cacophony of creation. So I did that play. I remember doing something the first night and getting huge applause and laughs, and that was it.

Q5: *What was the play?*

TELLER: *Footloose.* I played the same role in the movie, which was pretty cool.

Q6: *You also played Mr. Fantastic in last year's Fantastic Four. What was your take on superhero movies going into it?*

TELLER: I wasn't starving to be a superhero. Although at the time—it was a couple of years ago—if you're a young man in this business, a part of you is saying, "I need to get a Marvel project; I need to be a superhero," because you see all these actors you respect being put in that world. I would not have wanted to be Spider-Man because I wouldn't want the whole thing riding on my shoulders. I enjoyed the ensemble element of *Fantastic Four.* I wouldn't wish what happened to us on another movie. It's tough, because there are such high expectations. Comic books mean so much to a lot of people.

Q7: *Would you be interested in doing a sequel?*

TELLER: If we do, I hope it comes together

in a way that satisfies people. You want to make the fans happy, but you can't please everyone. In our case, we pleased very few.

Q8: *You're wearing a Philadelphia Eagles hat. From what I gather, you're a Lakers, Eagles and Phillies fan. If you could switch careers with any current athlete, who would it be?*

TELLER: Mike Trout. He's a Jersey guy. I would switch places with Mike Trout, then I would demand a trade to the Phillies. Come back home, Mike.

Q9: *With War Dogs and the upcoming PTSD drama Thank You for Your Service, you've got two war movies under your belt. If you were curating a film festival of war movies, what would you show?*

TELLER: I'd make *Thank You for Your Service* the headliner. That movie focuses on the transition: We know how to send guys to war, but we don't know how to bring them home yet. Abraham Lincoln used the term *soldier's heart;* he could tell that soldiers were coming back deeply affected by combat. I'd also show *Saving Private Ryan, Black Hawk Down* and *Apocalypse Now.*

Q10: *You're pretty well trained as an actor——*

TELLER: That's exactly right: pretty well. Because I am a trained actor, but every time I start a movie I ask myself, Do I know how to do this?

Q11: *So what aspects of your training do you fall back on when that happens?*

TELLER: I'll tell myself, Okay, after lunch I have to do a scene where I'm pissed off or whatever. Now, no one's going to tell you how to be pissed. "Hey, Miles, you gotta be pissed in 10 minutes!" You've got to force yourself to think of things that are going to piss you off, physicalizing it. Sometimes on set there are instances when you need to tap into an emotion but you can't bring it up. So you end up doing something different, and that creates another moment that you didn't plan.

Q12: *In your college days at New York University, what was a typical Saturday night out like in the Village?*

TELLER: I couldn't tell you, because we didn't go out. It would be me and my buddies smoking a lot of pot, playing video games, listening to music. I came from a small town, lived in the dorms. My closest friend was from Kolkata, just an awesome dude. A lot of NYU kids had trust funds or a lot of money. That wasn't the case for me. My parents gave me money so I could eat, but I wasn't loaded. We had two TVs in the dorm room. We just got high, played video games and listened to dope music. And we talked a lot.

Q13: *What kind of music and what video games?*

TELLER: My buddy Bird played a lot of Manu Chao, especially that song "Bongo Bong." The first time I heard that, I said, "What is that immaculate sound?" And video games? A lot of *Pro Evolution: Winning Eleven.* But now, for transparency's sake, I'm a *FIFA* guy.

Q14: *Do you keep a lot of musical instruments around the house?*

TELLER: I just scooped up a new drum set. I always have a drum set at my house. I started playing in bands when I was 15. I just like playing with other people. I'm not like my *Whiplash* character, Andrew, where I'm trying to be the best at drumming. For me it's not about the isolated journey of music; it's collaborative. But I like to have options for people to play. I have a piano, a couple of guitars, amps. I just got a lap steel guitar. I figure if I keep it around the house, I'll eventually learn how to play it.

Q15: *I thought you had a reputation as a guy who likes to party, but on Twitter you post photos of you and your girlfriend in which you seem pretty domesticated. Does the public have a warped perception of who you are?*

TELLER: It's tough. You can't get ahead of it. It started back in high school—I tried to do a serious scene in class, and I remember everybody laughing. They thought it was so funny, and it pissed me off that I'd lost my audience, that I was no longer steering them. It still frustrates me a little bit. You can read whatever or say whatever about me, but I care about doing interesting work. I'm not in this for fame. I don't play the social media game. All I want to do is walk into a room with actors and collaborate. It also comes with the movies you're making. I made *21 & Over* and *Project X* in close proximity. Then when people see me at a party it's like, "Miles is this bro." It's not that I'm not. People are complex human beings. I enjoy intelligent conversation. Most of the time, I'm just listening to the Dead, working on a role. But I also drink. I enjoy a bit of chaos too.

Q16: *When you're enjoying a bit of chaos, what are you doing?*

TELLER: It's all about the group. I like hosting. If you have the right people and the right music, it's all good. In New York, it's a lot easier to go out to the bars. In Los Angeles, it's more club-driven and VIP-driven. I don't care about that. I'd much rather be sitting around a fire, just talking.

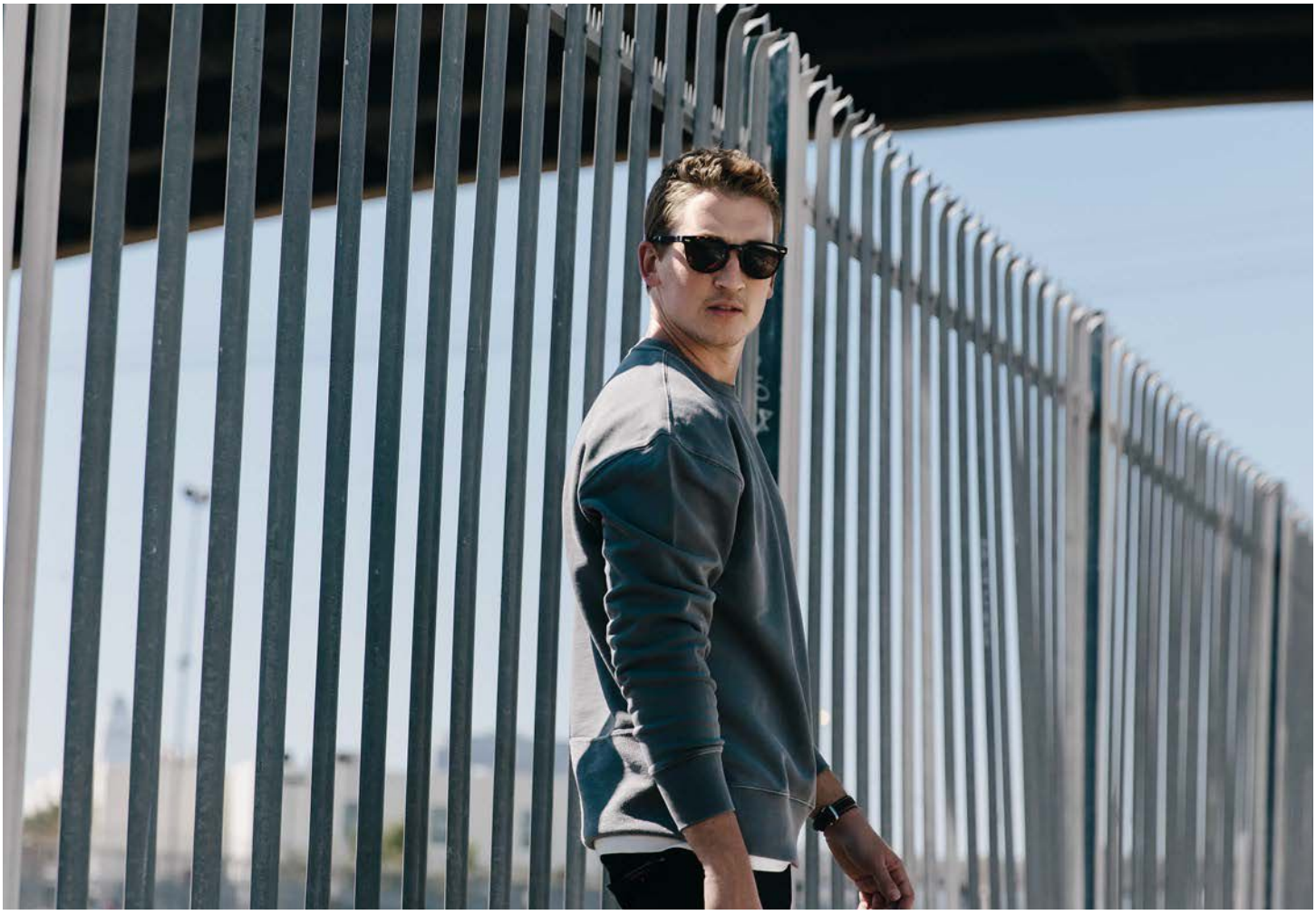
Q17: *Last year, you were the subject of an Esquire cover story that you have said misrepresents you. Since that experience, are you more guarded with the media?*

TELLER: In a way, yes. There are not that many checks and balances with print. In that case, or in any case, they can paint you however they want to paint you. For an actor, if they're looking at your work, they're seeing it two years after you did it. But I've got these movies coming out that totally contradict your image of me. You don't even know what I'm working on now.

Q18: *Like, I don't know why you have blond hair right now.*

TELLER: I'm sitting here with blond hair now, readers! If somebody wants to do a hit piece, they'll do a hit piece. In that case, the *Esquire* reporter had her mind made up long before I showed

AN ANONYMOUS PERSON CAN SAY MY FACE LOOKS LIKE A FOOT OR I'M TED CRUZ'S DOPPELGÄNGER. THAT DOESN'T AFFECT ME.



up. What's frustrating is that she calls me an asshole, and then because it's in a magazine, people say, "Oh, he must be." But I've had however many years of being myself, and I know the kind of person I am. I will defend the person I am through my actions. People can make of it what they want. But I think about so many actors I look up to and wonder what people were saying about them at the age of 27 or 28. I'm sure it's not all flattering stuff. Who knows? You could be writing a hit piece. She was being just as nice as you are.

Q19: *You said you're not a social media guy, but you are on Twitter and you occasionally "favorite" tweets by fans. Isn't it dangerous to read what anonymous people post about you?*

TELLER: An anonymous person, which is 99 percent of the people on Twitter, can say my face looks like a foot or I'm Ted Cruz's doppelgänger. That doesn't affect me. There have been times, absolutely, when I'll read negative stuff. Sometimes it's by a critic or a journalist, and you can use that as fuel. With Twitter, I like it because I can put things in my own words. I can write something, and *boom,* it goes out to however many people. It's important to have your own voice. But I don't do Instagram. People are on their phones too much. I've been told that having an Instagram account will help me book more roles, get more endorsement deals. It makes you more of a brand. But I'm not interested. I want to build my fan base through movies and movies alone.

Q20: *What are the best words of advice you've received from a fellow actor?*

TELLER: I've never sought out a mentor, but I've learned a lot by working with great actors like Bryan Cranston, Nicole Kidman, J.K. Simmons, Aaron Eckhart. You see how they carry themselves. I've been doing this for almost seven years. It makes me marvel at where they're at. To reach their level, I've got to do this for 20 more years and always do something different. That's hard to do. Longevity is the goal. But for advice, one time an actor told me, "When you're on your own, live your life. But don't mess up in front of your peers." This guy did not grow up surrounded by camera phones, obviously. But your reputation is everything. Don't mess that up. ■

Why We Still Need Westerns

Director Antoine Fuqua's take on ***The Magnificent Seven*** *is both classic and urgent*

Who says the Western is dead? Granted, recent sagebrush epics *Diablo, Jane Got a Gun* and *Forsaken* bit the dust, but *The Revenant* made wagonloads of money and won three Oscars. So don't mourn the noble American genre just yet—especially when director Antoine Fuqua, known for the edgy cop dramas *Training Day* and *Brooklyn's Finest,* delivers a lean, mean and timely take on the 1960 classic *The Magnificent Seven.*

Like the original—and Akira Kurosawa's 1954 film *Seven Samurai,* on which it's based—the new *Magnificent Seven* revolves around a frontier town whose citizens, brutalized by a psychotic robber baron (Peter Sarsgaard), buy the protection of a ragtag band of gunslingers, played in this outing by heavy hitters including Denzel Washington, Ethan Hawke and Lee Byung-hun. "The best Westerns evolve from wherever we are as a country," Fuqua says. "Right now, whether it's terrorists, internet bullying or Wall Street bankers, we're at a place where people take away the freedoms of others. Something terrible happens in London, Paris or Orlando, and we all wish we could help each other and do something. The movie's diverse cast makes a statement: It takes all races coming together to fight tyranny."

Fuqua's love of the genre goes way back. Hawke, who also starred in *Training Day,* observes that "remaking this movie with Antoine was a perfect fit because of his great eye and his childhood of obsessively watching Westerns and Japanese cinema." But the connection runs a lot deeper than swords and six-shooters.

"As a poor kid growing up in Pittsburgh, when a Western came on TV, my grandmother would make me something to eat so I could watch sitting right next to her," Fuqua says. "That was her way of keeping me off the street. Seeing the 1960 *Magnificent Seven* was a profound experience because of moments like when Yul Brynner and Steve McQueen's characters defy the others, who refuse to bury a dead Indian in the cemetery. They were like giants to me. In my experience, I've seen the guys who run the neighborhoods and take what they want. I've gone to the funerals, seen the moms cry. When anyone got bullied in school, I was quick to jump in. Part of that came from loving the guys I saw, watching TV with my grandmother."

With *The Magnificent Seven,* Fuqua has given that love a massive, mud-spattered canvas and peopled it with an unstoppable cast. "My first instinct was that Denzel would be amazing as a cowboy," Fuqua says, adding, "because he's a great actor, not because of color. But Denzel as a black man *and* a cowboy—that's an event. The movie stands on its own, and the theme resonates: people uniting to fight against tyranny. That's what Westerns can do."—*Stephen Rebello*

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Good Books for Bad Times

Five new dystopian novels open the door to terrifying worlds before rocketing us back into our own

BY **LYDIA KIESLING**

September of an election year is the cruelest month. In addition to experiencing the standard winter-is-coming heebie-jeebies, most anyone who cares about politics is worried that the end is nigh. Family dinners become battlegrounds; e-mail forwards provoke fistfights in office parking lots. The turmoil has a way of showing up on our pages and screens too, and sometimes the worlds we escape to are even worse than our own. Obviously there's a certain amount of morbid titillation at work when we spend our free time reading about pandemics and watching zombies overtake civilization, but dystopian fiction can scratch a deeper itch—not only satisfying our escapist, world-building urges but reminding us of the beautiful things we're capable of creating. Literary-fiction blockbusters of the past decade have looked at the worst-case scenario in ways that celebrate art while lamenting our baser impulses; see *Station Eleven, The Road* and *California,* to name a few.

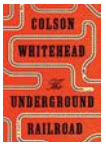
This fall, a new florescence of titles will take on the dystopian and the apocalyptic with varying dashes of gothic horror and fantasy. Here are five to steel you for the dark days ahead.

Fans of Alan Moore can rejoice at the arrival of ***Jerusalem,*** a behemoth from the *Watchmen* author at least eight years in the making. The novel reinvents Northampton, England in a dizzying range of prose styles, mapping a fantastical history of Moore's hometown from ancient times to "the heat death of the universe." This apocalyptic travelogue of central England is more than 1,000 pages long.

A mind-melting literary mystery cum techno-thriller, Michael Helm's ***After James*** shows us a world that is recognizably our own. But the weather is strange and the events are stranger, as characters find themselves tangling with sinister pharmaceutical companies, prophetic internet poets and malevolent artists—all of it laid out in three sections that mirror detective, gothic horror and apocalyptic genre conventions.

The genre-bending badass Michelle Tea returns to fiction with ***Black Wave***. Set in an alternate-universe 1999 Los Angeles awaiting a promised apocalypse, and replete with Matt Dillon cameos, *Black Wave,* like Helm's book, investigates what it means to make art in fraught times. The Pacific Ocean is giving off poison mist, the environment is ravaged and a memoirist named Michelle tries to write her way through a breakup before the world ends.

Joining the ranks of recent hotly anticipated crime novels such as *The Girls,* Kea Wilson's ***We Eat Our Own*** steps back to the 1970s with a blood-curdling horror story about making a movie in the Amazon. Loosely based on the infamous was-it-or-wasn't-it-a-snuff-film *Cannibal Holocaust,* this debut novel imagines what people are capable of when society is just out of reach.



Arguably the most anticipated book of the year, Colson Whitehead's ***The Underground Railroad*** recounts the odyssey of a young slave named Cora who escapes bondage via what Whitehead has, in a surrealist twist, imagined as a literal railway system moving under a set of states that aren't quite the states we recognize. Whitehead's last novel, *Zone One,* is a highbrow zombie tale that delineates the horrors of "post-apocalyptic stress disorder." Now the author looks backward, showing us that for true dystopia, you can't beat our own past. At least we hope that's the case.

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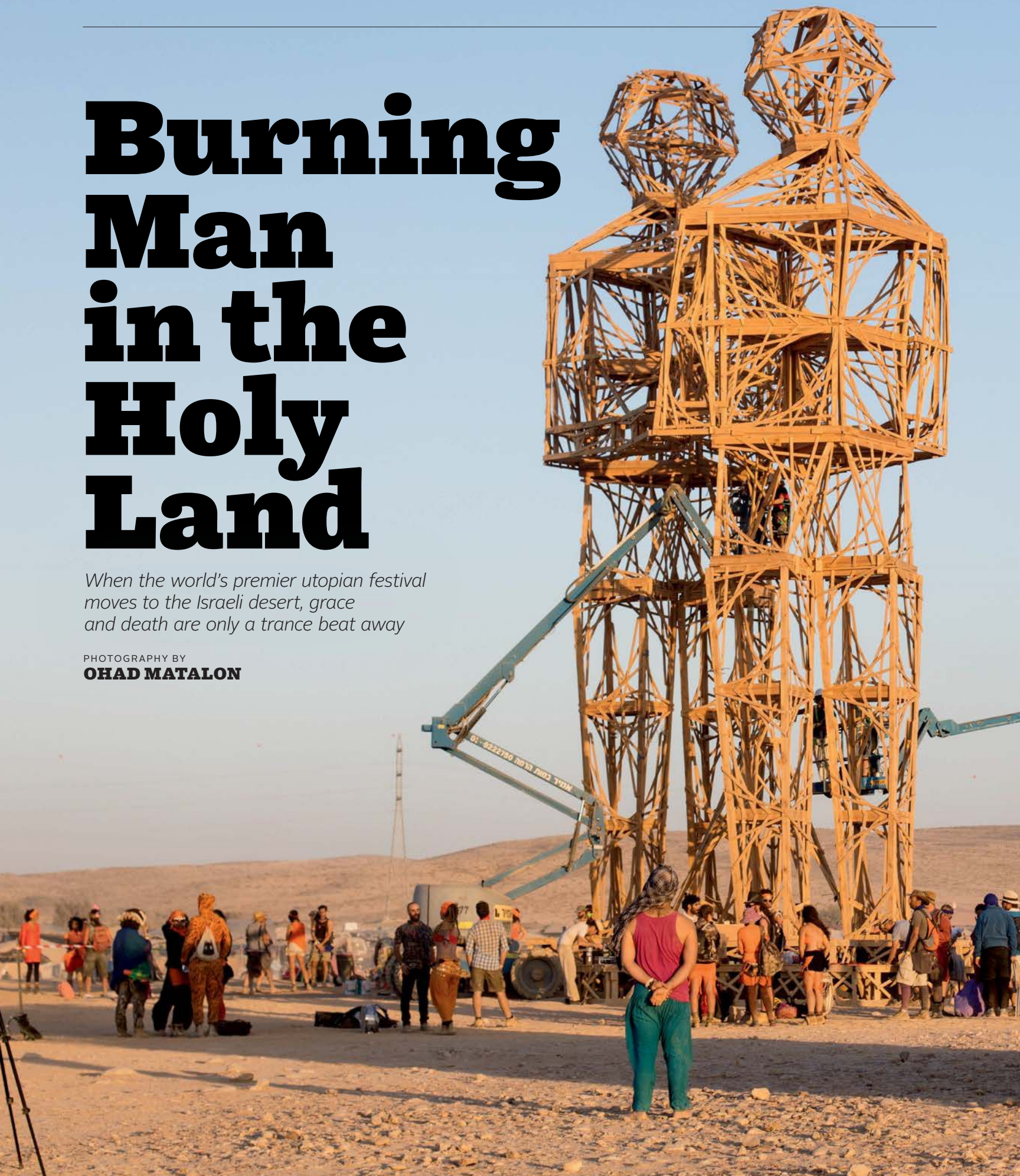
Burning Man in the Holy Land

When the world's premier utopian festival moves to the Israeli desert, grace and death are only a trance beat away

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
OHAD MATALON



I am dropped off at the Israeli Burning Man by Amir (not his real name), a professional tour guide born 60 summers ago in a cave somewhere nearby in the desolate expanse of the Negev Desert. He was with me the night before, when I came as close as I ever have to being murdered.

"They're running a marathon," Amir half joked that night as several people, either plainclothes police or strapped civilians, bolted down Ha'Arba'a Street in Tel Aviv toting semiautomatic assault weapons.

Reflexively trusting him, I took another bite of sea bream, only to watch a second round of cargo-shorted Rambos dash past the window. Had the speakers in this faux American-Irish gastropub not been bumping "Sweet Home Alabama," I would have heard the spray of bullets.

The restaurant staff swiftly locked the doors, and our waiter calmly asked us to move away from the window. For the inconvenience, we received free tiramisu. Battalions of soldiers, police and German shepherds canvassed the block, epileptic blue lights bled through the glass windows, and a Twitter scroll revealed that two heavily armed gunmen had just attempted to slaughter everyone in a Sarona Market restaurant across the street.

For 15 minutes, the hissing fear that we were next hung in the air. So this is how my story ends, I thought, in a knockoff pub, en route to this country's version of the Burning Man festival, called Midburn, where my mission is to reconcile this Hanukkah of hedonism with the internecine warfare that has plagued the region since Israel's founding in 1948. How many gallons of Maccabee beer does it take to ignore the odds that at any point you might be shot, bombed or sliced into gefilte fish?

BY **JEFF WEISS**

Calm prevailed on the humid June night as the music switched to Simon and Garfunkel and the Israel Defense Forces swarmed the streets. "It's Israel," the waiter said. "It happens all the time, but never close to you." He scurried off, humming to himself.

They unlocked the doors, and a trail of unflappable customers strolled out. By then, news reports had circulated about a pair of West Bank cousins influenced by Hamas, dressed in black suits and blasting Carl Gustav–style rifles, killing four and leaving others wounded. Our path back to the car led past a welter of orange emergency tape, police lights, ambulance sirens and grave soldiers in olive uniforms. The silent drone of news cameras captured those crying and those offering consolation. A signpost read 24-MINUTE WALK TO THE OCEAN.

"I can't believe it," Amir muttered, rubbing his bald skull. "The good people pay a price for a bad few who have broken the name of Islam."

A Muslim Bedouin, Amir is in the demographic often considered one of the nation's few neutral players. His Mercedes, Diesel jeans, Polo shirt and resemblance to an Arab Telly Savalas clearly align him with the forces of modernity, but his lineage traces to those nomadic tribes who owe their principal allegiance to the land.

"I try to show you the right things, but then this happens," Amir said wearily—exhausted from the burden of always having to explain.

• • •

Written in English, Arabic and Hebrew, an incantation scrawled on picket signs—"We


Israeli Burner attire ranges from standard-issue Coachella zealot to French Montana at a San Bernardino Renaissance Faire.

dreamed / We thought / We spoke / We made / We created / We conceived / Abracadabra!"—leads to the Burning Man entrance. Noble aspirations, sure, but the concepts hold limited cachet when you've spent the previous night picturing masked assassins bursting into your hotel room.

"It looks like Disneyland," Amir says of the ramshackle rainbow tent city sprouting from the skeletal desert.

The Midburn fest boasts the blessing of the original Burning Man, which celebrates its 30th anniversary this Labor Day weekend in Nevada's Black Rock Desert. Over the past decade, the most chic temporary utopia in the U.S. has spread to a global network of "Burns," the most popular being South Africa's AfrikaBurn, followed by Midburn in Israel, with cozier love-ins in Australia, New Zealand and Western Europe. This year, Midburn's third, organizers sold more than 8,000 tickets at about $170 a pop—a tremendous increase from the 3,000 pioneers of 2014.

I've never made the pilgrimage to the U.S. Burn, but I've perused enough celebrity photo galleries to assume it's no longer the untainted sacral rite it once was. Transcendence is still accessible, but there's a limit to how low-key you can be after Puff Daddy has told the world, "Burning Man, I'll never be the same." Maybe Midburn harkens back to the Edenic spirit that existed before a billionaires' row cropped up in the campsites and tech CEOs ate sushi dinners off nude models at dawn.

Under the blistering late-morning sun a welcoming committee approaches: an ebullient cowboy in a lime green hat; a *ballerino* in a pink tutu, butterfly wings and a cotton-candy wig; and a girl in a sequined black unitard that looks like it could be straight from an American Apparel Purim collection. Amir's eyes bulge.

"It is very interesting and new," he says, cautiously warming up. "But this sand and wind will kill you. Are you sure you don't want to come back with me?"

Art installations range from impressive (a life-size wooden Noah's ark called *No One's Ark;* a towering burning man and woman) to on-brand (a glow-in-the-dark raver rabbit stage playing psy-trance and deep house) to what would have been blasphemous in ancient Canaan (a golden statue of Baal). All we're missing is a Red Sea wave pool that parts when you raise your staff.

We watch 500 people fist-pump to the Goa trance pounding from a fake pirate ship beached in what was a barren wasteland until last week. Amir offers his card and tells me to call him at any hour if things get too bizarre. Before he leaves he says, "I get why you want to stay here, but I'd still prefer Disneyland."

A musician friend helps me procure a tent and a place in the Lev ("heart") Camp—a compound of generous Tel Aviv artists and professionals, veterans of the American Burn, who have constructed a white geodesic dome to host meditation and yoga and, more vitally, provide a shade structure and a kitchen.

And so begins my Holy Land Burn. My ancestors withstood Assyrians, Romans, Germans and both regular and lactose intolerance. I can survive a few days in a dust-choked tent if it means learning why an American communal arts bacchanal has gripped the Israeli psyche—and maybe feel closer to a people who seem half alien despite our shared heritage.

• • •

"The playa provides." In the Burner lexicon, that's the equivalent of "Everything happens for a reason," or the major-key mantra of sage Palestinian American DJ Khaled: "They will try to close the door on you...just open it."

After all, there are no locks here. Approximately 100 whimsically themed camps ring acres of dirt flats, and each has its own mantra, according to Midburn's website. There's Where's Waldo, Tits Heaven, the Ethnic Demon ("You will kiss the mezuzah and fall on righteous graves!"), LED Colored Shrooms and Chai, Camp Lebowski (with giant bowling pins), Elders in Bikinis and AssCream ("We will treat every visitor with cold and amazing American

chocolate ice cream poured out of a huge ass!").

Even here, though, the specter of death is inescapable. It's more than infamous neuroses, minor threats to daily existence or compulsory military service for male and female Jews and Druze (though only about half actually enlist). It's the "never forget" evocation of the Holocaust, a permanent rupture in the national psyche, the irreconcilable statistic that just two generations ago 6 million of our ancestors were murdered. In my own bloodline, there's the macabre oral tradition of my great-grandfather who returned home to Poland after the war to inquire about his family, only for impassive bureaucrats to tell him, "No one by that name ever lived here."

Maybe Midburn is the ultimate revenge on Hitler. What could needle the mustached fascist more than knowing his plans failed and the descendants of the survivors are throwing a massive countercultural freak fest in the same desert that Abraham wandered?

• • •

Around 10 P.M. on Friday, the air now thin and cold, a wooden Goliath and his Amazonian effigy partner burn. It's like a high school bonfire in a Hebrew *Hunger Games.* All week, a temple in the middle of the playa serves as a makeshift shrine. Penitents post photos of dead friends and tributes to David Bowie; some scrawl missives onto wooden beams: "Confusion will be my epitaph," "Chaos of the soul be gone," "Free your balls and the rest will follow."

In memory of those slain in the Sarona Market shooting, I offer a silent prayer to a god I don't believe in. When I tell others about what I saw, they apologize profusely as though bearing personal responsibility. One camp mate offers a hug and two words: "That's reality."

On Saturday, my second and final night, the playa provides me with psychedelic dates. It seems only sensible to devour them on my way to watch Noah's ark burn, staggering past the golden statue of Baal, where a man wearing only a thong is passed out.

It soon becomes clear that tripping in a foreign country while cold and filthy, among a rowdy mob of people chanting to torch a mythical floating zoo, may not be my wisest decision. When the ark burns, it's the biggest inferno I've ever seen. Huge demonic gusts of orange glowing embers obscure the stars. It looks like Pompeii, except the people frozen in ash are attempting to instagram.

As the ark smolders, psy-trance menace swallows the air. The dates leave me nauseated. The vibrations are sinister. My only options are returning to a rickety dust-strangled tent strewn with dirty clothes or wandering this neon Mount Sinai, searching for an improvised promised land.

Inside my six-by-four-foot tent, I hallucinate Hieronymus Bosch hellscapes and Francisco Goya horror scenes: bodies disemboweled, knives twisted, entrails splattered, skeletons in caskets. Somehow I become convinced that the "Pussinema" camp next door—modeled on a 1920s bordello and offering poetry readings, witch apprenticeships and tonight's "Chastity Belts: Lockup Party"—is being run by satanic Jewish Nazis and that allowing this torture constitutes a form of unconditional surrender. Never again!

I catapult off the floor, miserable, aching, crazed and wearing my final item of semi-clean clothing: baggy late-1990s breakaway pants. Half the camp is still awake, but they're all speaking Hebrew and have no interest in the American acid casualty. I spot the guy who gave me the psychedelic dates; he's wearing a velvet military commander's suit. He invites me to watch the sunrise set of Hadas Kleinman and Aviv Bahar, a vaunted Israeli cello-and-guitar duo. But first I have to help.

We trudge off again into the pitch-black, ditch-studded playa. Suddenly a magical stained-glass village house looms before us. I'm as high as I've ever been in my life, hauling 50-pound speakers from a rusted pickup to the top of a sound rig. As an ancient lemon sun rises, a ragtag caravan of people materializes, spreading blankets and rolling cigarettes, sleepless and silted with dust. The performance begins, and I understand none of the lyrics, merely the spiderweb beauty of the instrumentation and the universality of the emotions. These are songs about life and death, love and regret, the permanent sense of loss that expands with age.

Toward the show's end, an aging *bubbe* in polka-dot pajama pants and Birkenstocks shuffles over and holds out her hand to offer raisins. I look into her Eastern Europe shtetl face and thinning red hair, and suddenly I can't see anything but my own grandmother, long gone—the daughter of the man who returned to Poland to discover he no longer had a family. I start to cry. Tattered and broken down, wild-eyed and overly sentimental, weeping for those I never knew and those I've loved who aren't coming back, for everyone murdered at Sarona and for the killers themselves, for all those trapped in unbreakable cycles and entranced by the false promise that murder can make peace. In this nullifying desert, on these tilting drugs, you can't avoid yourself or your origins. Our only reprisal is to create a fleeting oasis out of the ashes as we collectively wander with fear and hope until we eventually fall.

On the solitary trek back to the campsite I feel oddly euphoric, as though I've endured a purification ritual or one of those offhand illuminations when for a split second you feel aligned with an energy much larger than yourself. For a nation of scarred people, maybe this is a way to be healed.

I breathe in the dry air, satisfied that I may actually understand. Then, out of the seven A.M. calm, I hear the jackhammer throb of psy-trance.

• • •

About 45 minutes later, I wake up looking like Jon Snow after the Battle of the Bastards. My face caked in filth, hair knotted, eyes crusted, breath foul and body hobbled. I beg a few others in my camp for a ride back to Tel Aviv, but no one has room. This is rock bottom. I'm told to go to the Midburn center station for help, which means another trip across the playa in the pitiless sun, my brain like a battered eggplant, and no one able to understand my mumbled English. By some miracle, I meet Nimrod, a chill half-Hungarian, half-Persian surfer bro and survival-skills teacher from northeastern Israel.

IT LOOKS LIKE POMPEII, EXCEPT THE PEOPLE FROZEN IN ASH ARE ATTEMPTING TO INSTAGRAM.

"We can work something out," he says, smiling. "The playa provides."

He tells me to meet him in an hour in the parking lot, and when I arrive I can barely believe my eyes. He's driving a late-model eight-seat Land Rover action-hero jeep complete with water jugs and AC. Just before I hop in the car, I step in human shit.

Somehow Nimrod doesn't toss me out. Instead he laughs, turns the key in the ignition and points us out of the dust bowl and back toward civilization. He turns on the radio and looks at me—the American—and it plays, I swear to God, "Sweet Home Alabama." ■

Saving *Final Fantasy*

The battle-scarred and beloved game finally delivers a lush, action-packed return to form

Arguably, the pop-culture divide between East and West is nowhere more apparent than in the realm of role-playing games. In Asia, the fashion is for depth and rigor, as you see in 100-hour epics such as *Star Ocean* and *Persona.* American gamers prefer the slick and streamlined punch of *Mass Effect* and *The Witcher.* The East wants depth. We want to be dazzled.

If anything can bridge the gap, it's *Final Fantasy,* the nearly 29-year-old RPG franchise from Japanese developer Square Enix. The game has enjoyed massive popularity since its debut on the original Nintendo Entertainment System in 1987, but its past decade has been ill-starred. *Final Fantasy XIV,* a *Warcraft*-style online multiplayer game, failed to galvanize nongamers, and *XIII* never quite hit the mainstream. Fans and Square Enix alike have pinned their hopes on the wildly ambitious new installment, *Final Fantasy XV* (PS4, Xbox One)—and darkly wondered whether another disappointment could snuff out the vast and minutely wrought world for good.

In *FFXV* you play as the Crown Prince Noctis, son of Regis, king of a land called Lucius. When the game begins, you're on a breezy road trip with your buddies—until an army of killer robots (what else?) descends on your homeland and you find yourself in the middle of an all-out war. It's *Star Wars* meets *Game of Thrones.* Already you're hard-pressed to imagine a better blend for the current American palate.

But as it's wooing Westerners, the game also makes sure to honor its traditions. Many key elements are here—including everyone's favorite mountable yellow bird, the chocobo—and overall the game sticks with what *Final Fantasy* has always done best: deep combat, complex lore and rich, sweeping adventure stories, all of it realized with bleeding-edge tech. You can still get as involved in the back end as you'd like; it's just that *FFXV* balances pure entertainment with dense design. It's equal parts highbrow opus and popcorn fodder.

The deeper you get into the game, the clearer it becomes that this is not the *Final Fantasy* that recently appeared to be hurtling toward extinction. *FFXV* has the scope and scale of a modern triple-A game, with every battle, set piece and story beat amplified to supersize dimensions. There are sports car rides and airship excursions, robot fights and magic spells. And once you defeat a glowering, skyscraper-size giant named Titan, he joins your side. *Final Fantasy* has always had fun with the superpowered creatures in your battling menagerie—and rest assured that many favorites from installments past will return—but none is quite as staggering as this.

Fifteen installments in, *Final Fantasy* has proven it can bring the fireworks. This may just be the turnaround needed to bring this teeming, endangered world back to life.—*Calum Marsh*

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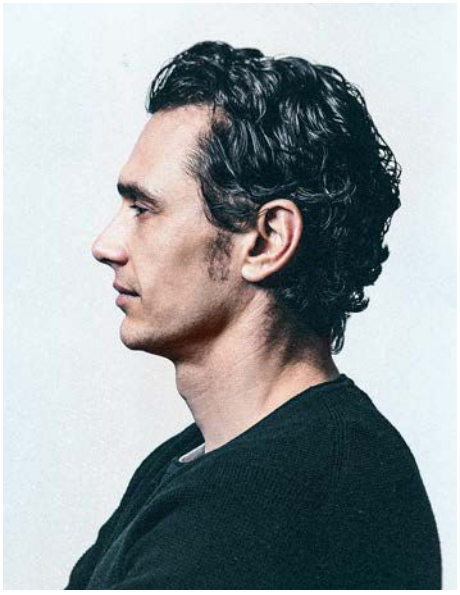
*Author **Richard Price** on Clockers, The Color of Money, the crack epidemic and why he doesn't want to visit your movie set*



BY
JAMES FRANCO

FRANCO: You've written for my new show *The Deuce,* but I hear it's hard to get you to come to the set.

PRICE: I find the most boring thing about a movie is the making of the movie. I was the creator of this show for CBS called *NYC 22.* It was about Harlem rookies. You write the script, you go on set and you tell the director, "Look, this is not the way it should be." And he goes, "Okay, got it." Or you tell the actors, "Listen, man, you cannot play this like you're a Harlem Globetrotter, where you play like you're a circus clown." They go, "Got it." And you get a big, complicated soul handshake, and then they do whatever the fuck they want anyhow. It's like, why am I standing around in January, outdoors, at seven in the morning with the wind coming off the river? Fuck this.

FRANCO: You were in your 20s when you published your first two novels, *The Wanderers* and *Bloodbrothers.* Both are set in the Bronx, where you were born. Did you believe that as a novelist you should use your own experiences?

PRICE: I went to Columbia for the writing program, and I realized that the Bronx was kind of over and I'd never go back there. So I started writing stories as if I were entertaining people about what it was like to grow up in the Bronx. Then I went to Stanford. I'd never been out of New York state before, and it really made me feel like all I have of the Bronx is my memory of it, and if I forget, it's gone. It was a combination of homesickness and realizing it was over that made me want to put it all down on paper. After that I thought, How about we don't write three novels about the Bronx or some semi-autobiographical subject? I didn't live in the Bronx anymore. It was around 1976, and I'd been living in Manhattan for five years. I wasn't a kid anymore. So I wrote *Ladies' Man* to try to write about sexuality in 1970s Manhattan, among other things. And then it took me forever to figure out what I wanted to write, and I fell into a hole. I wrote two novels after that, but I was writing purely because I was in a panic about not having a book.

FRANCO: So you have two finished novels that never came out?

PRICE: I still have them. They're in my drawer. Those books need not be exhumed. But by the time I got to *The Breaks,* I knew I was desperate. Finally I had a story that was saying something, but it was a nightmare. On top of everything, hey, you having trouble writing? Let's become a coke addict! It's like, let's wear a gasoline jacket to a bonfire.

FRANCO: Oh my gosh. [*laughs*]

PRICE: So I was really fucked-up and fucking up. I'd always had offers to write scripts for Hollywood, so I thought, Well, I'm already a coke addict, so I might as well be a screenwriter. Stopping coke was relatively easy once I made up my mind, but stopping screenwriting was really hard. Once you start sucking on that glass, that's celebrity, and it's social.

FRANCO: You wrote scripts for *The Color of Money, Mad Dog and Glory* and other films. Then you wrote *Clockers,* one of my favorite books. David Simon calls it the *Grapes of Wrath* of the crack epidemic.

PRICE: The one gift that screenwriting gave me was that old adage "Write what you know." One of the reasons I stopped writing novels was because everything I knew was written. But in screenwriting you say, Well, the guy's a pool hustler. I don't know anything about pool hustlers. I was forced to go down to Kentucky and Virginia and hang out at these nine-ball tournaments and meet all these guys. I realized that you can learn something, you can absorb something and you can write about something without going underground for three years to make it plausible.

FRANCO: David told me there was a particular New Jersey detective you rode around with for *Clockers.*

PRICE: Being with cops, you see things you would not otherwise be permitted to see as a civilian. I remember going to this devastated housing project in Jersey City. It was like a tiger cage. This was during the height of the crack epidemic. And it freaked me out so badly because it was like the housing project I'd grown up in, and now it was like the ninth circle of hell. I became obsessed. Sometimes you are drawn to the thing that scares you the most, and that's what happened with me. All of a sudden I wanted to get into this world, as opposed to run from it. I didn't want to write it as a screenplay, because I didn't want people fucking with it, so I decided to write it as a novel.

FRANCO: You've worked out a way to switch off between writing novels and writing for movies and TV. How does that work?

PRICE: I'm 66 years old. It takes me forever to write a novel. But novels don't pay the bills, so I'm just fighting—all I want to buy is time to write a novel. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVE MA

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SPORTS

Marijuana Is a Team Sport

*Former NFL player **Eben Britton** on why it's time for the league to embrace medicinal marijuana*

It was week seven of the 2010 NFL season and we were in Kansas City in front of a riotous crowd. I knew we were in for a bloodbath from the national anthem. I stood on the sideline, hand over my heart, feeling the vibrations of the stadium. Adrenaline and cortisol pumped through my veins, along with Adderall, hydrocodone and Toradol. My body felt tight. My shoulders ached. My mind raced.

In the middle of the second quarter our offense put together a solid drive. The play call was a zone to the right, and we broke the huddle at the Chiefs' 15-yard line. The ball was hiked, and I smashed through the outside shoulder of the defensive end in front of me. Derrick Johnson, the Chiefs' Pro Bowl linebacker, came screaming over the top and buried his helmet between my collarbone and right shoulder. With my legs tangled up in the wave of crashing bodies, I went to the ground, landing on my right elbow at a 90-degree angle. I felt something shift. When I picked myself up off the ground, I realized my shoulder was dislocated. We were five yards from the goal line and a play away from a touchdown. I couldn't tap out. Gripping my right triceps, I jerked my torso back and pulled the arm forward, sliding the head of my humerus back into my shoulder socket. We scored on the next play, and I jogged to the sideline, yelling for a trainer to find me a harness.

The doctor questioned me, but I was breathing fire. In a flurry, my pads were off and a harness secured, locking my shoulder back into place. The pads came on and I ran back onto the field. We were in our two-minute drill. No huddle. On the second play, a pass out of the shotgun, I baited Chiefs linebacker Mike Vrabel with my right arm. He clubbed it across my body and back out of position. The harness was now holding my upper arm out of the socket. I sprinted to the sideline. It took three team doctors to get my shoulder back in place.

I walked off the field and into the tunnel in a haze of heroism. Someone helped me out of my gear. My right arm now hung on the verge of falling out of the socket again. I showered, got dressed and put my arm in the sling. I watched the second half of the game in sweats from the sideline. Afterward I was told that my injury would require surgery and that I was done for the season.

I had never been so badly injured that I couldn't continue to play. The doctors gave me pills for the pain, but the pills had a way of making me angry, fueling the frustration of not being able to use my arm. They turned me into a victim. My body didn't like the pills either. Once, after taking one, I felt a pang behind my eyes, causing them to flutter and blink uncontrollably; then things went fuzzy. The pang turned to a bang and I had to lie down. When I woke up the next morning I was overwhelmed by a debilitating migraine. I could barely open my eyes, much less think. It became clear the migraines were my body's way of telling me it didn't care for the pills.

I had used cannabis before, but it wasn't until my shoulder injury that I began to understand its medicinal power. For the first time in my football career I unwittingly conducted my own experiment on the efficacy of various pain-relieving methods. The contrast between the effects of marijuana and hydrocodone, as well as between marijuana and the anti-inflammatories I was taking, was remarkable. With pills, I experienced little relief from pain and a slew of side effects including severe migraines, insomnia, massive mood swings, irritability and trouble controlling my anger. With cannabis I felt calm and relaxed, which placed me in a state of healing. The aching pain in my shoulder, my bones and the rest of my body hushed to a quiet hum with no negative side effects.

The problem was that my employer didn't approve. The NFL's current stance is that cannabis is an illegal "street drug," and players are tested for THC annually. The test is done anytime during mandatory team activities, usually before the start of the regular season, according to the current collective-bargaining agreement between the NFL and the National Football League Players Association. Since the new agreement was signed in 2011, the terms have been reinterpreted—and misinterpreted—to the point that players barely understand them. Of course, part of being a pro is being competent enough to pass a drug test.

"Do they test us during OTAs?" someone asks in a dimly lit locker room.

"Nah, man, they won't test us until minicamp," another answers.

"No way, brother. Bullshit. They started testing people yesterday."

A slow silence settles across the room.

Better stop smoking pretty soon, most of us say to ourselves.

We've all heard tales of what it's like to be busted for pot by the league. The first time a player tests positive for marijuana he gets put "in the program." Details about the substance-abuse program are dark and vague. The individual's energy completely changes, and you know that "the program" is something to be avoided. A second failed test results in a two-week fine. After that, the punishments include a four-week fine, a four-game suspension and then a 10-game suspension.

The NFL doles out these punishments even though 20 of its teams are in places where medical marijuana is legal. And legalization will spread. There is mounting research that shows the medicinal properties of cannabis include healing broken bones, reducing pain and aiding in recovery following traumatic brain injury. A key focus in this research has been the endocannabinoid system, a group of naturally occurring cannabinoid receptors in the brain, heart, lungs and bones, as well as throughout the nervous system. This part of our bodies is responsible for a variety of physiological processes, including appetite, pain sensation, mood and memory. When bodily damage occurs, whether it's a broken bone or a concussion, endocannabinoids flood the receptor sites, initiating the healing process. With medical marijuana, the THC and cannabidiol in the cannabis aid the body in reducing inflammation and bolstering the effects of our own cannabinoid system. Plus, it's safer than the addictive opioids league doctors hand out.

For anyone whose job involves beating their body up every week, medicinal marijuana is a blessing. It's time the NFL treated it that way. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY KALEN HOLLOMON


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The *Real* Mad Men

How advertising executives use hope, dreams and even fear to sell American voters a candidate

BY **JOHN MERONEY**

A top Republican ad maker sits in the living room of his house under the Hollywood sign, explaining how he uses a three-act structure to sell a candidate.

"My spots introduce the candidate in a broad, glorious, positive way," says Fred Davis, founder of Strategic Perception, a firm that has produced GOP commercials since 1994. "In act two, we bring in conflict—maybe a jousting match between candidates over the issues," he says, looking out past the movie studios. "In act three, my guy prevails, and we deliver an uplifting end."

On the wall hang 22 large frames with color head shots of the politicians he's helped, including John McCain and George W. Bush.

When Davis was running media earlier this year for John Kasich's super PAC, New Day for America, his world was upended by Donald Trump's insurgency. That hasn't stopped him from daydreaming about how he'd advise Trump. "Maybe he's not even in the ads," says Davis. "It's just people talking about their hopes and dreams and how Trump can help fulfill them."

By this time, presidential nominees and their admen are supposed to be running at full tilt, spending hundreds of millions of dollars on TV time. But in this irregular election, even the ad wars are surreal. Trump regards traditional political ads as outdated, as his billionaire friend Tom Barrack explained to CNN in June: "The raising of money is an antique. Super PACs are antiques. We're testing a system just like every disruptive technology that's in the market today, which is almost antipolitical and anti-rules."

Thus a mysterious entity called Draper Sterling—created by an unknown *Mad Men* addict and linked to a house in Londonderry, New Hampshire—received $35,000 from Trump's campaign for "web advertising" in late April, according to Federal Election Commission disclosures. That's not exactly Ogilvy.

Meanwhile, Democrats are torn on how to sell Hillary Clinton, even though she's been in public life for almost 40 years. There's the voice-of-God Morgan Freeman approach, pushing "Together—a stronger country" in black-and-white spots, or the ones attacking Trump, with a concerned voice announcing, "In a volatile world, the last thing we need is a volatile president."

"The real Hillary, which people don't really believe, is different from the public image of Hillary," says Jimmy Siegel, former senior executive creative director at BBDO, whose clients included Visa and Pepsi. In 2008, Clinton's campaign hired him to produce ads, which proved challenging. "She's a warm, empathetic person," he says. "And that has been hard to communicate in advertising in both of her campaigns. But I think it's still important to try."

That problem is also complicated because Clinton relies on the same old, same old. Rather than putting her image in the hands of creatives outside politics (as Bill did when he enlisted the creator of the *Designing Women* TV series to make his 1992 convention film), Clinton entrusts herself to Mandy Grunwald, a senior communications advisor who has been with the Clintons since 1992. Even if some candidates understand that the best ads in politics have sprung from the heads of non-politicos in ad agencies, chances are they won't make the change.

"The agency people think the politicos are a bunch of hacks, and the political people think the agency people are a bunch of candy-asses interested more in lighting and camera angles than in message," explains Martin Puris, who crafted BMW's "The ultimate driving machine" slogan and later worked for President George H.W. Bush's reelection.

Sometimes campaigns get it right. For his 1968 presidential campaign, Richard Nixon brought in an ad exec who'd made commercials for Ford and Pan Am. He won in an electoral landslide. When President Ronald Reagan ran for reelection in 1984, his campaign turned to a San Francisco adman known for romantic commercials for Gallo wines. The result was "It's morning again in America," the opening line to what's acknowledged as one of the best campaign ads ever. And the most powerful advertising for then senator Barack Obama—the iconic 2008 HOPE poster—was created by street artist Shepard Fairey, who had no ties to the political establishment.

"The problem is that political ads tend to look and sound the same," says Siegel. "It's the cast of characters who change. So getting people from outside the political arena who are more trained to say, 'How do we break through the clutter?' can be very effective."

Whit Hiler, a master of viral campaigns and one of the nation's leading creatives, admits he's "not really into politics" but offers what could be a masterstroke for a campaign: "Use the *Top Gun* anthem. That theme is amazing. I think it would make people stop what they're doing and pay attention." ■

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ANDY SAMBERG

If he wanted to, Andy Samberg could still be ruling viral video with shorts like Dick in a Box, that indelible ode to the joys of gift wrapping your junk and presenting it to your lover. After Saturday Night Live lobbed that comedy grenade, co-written by Samberg and recorded with Justin Timberlake, it hit 28 million views in less than a year. Later cited by Billboard as one of "the most iconic musical moments in the show's history," it copped an Emmy and inspired two sequels, to say nothing of the countless fan reworkings. Samberg chased that one with other huge SNL digital shorts, including Jizz in My Pants, a New Wave banger about premature ejaculation that to date has more than 153 million views; I'm on a Boat, the Grammy-nominated nautical rap featuring T-Pain; and I Just Had Sex, featuring Akon.

All these Samberg created with SNL writers Jorma Taccone and Akiva Schaffer, Samberg's buds since junior high and inseparable creative partners.

Instead of settling into a career as a younger hybrid of "Weird Al" Yankovic and Adam Sandler, Samberg has pivoted toward a sunnier, more middle-of-the-road and—dare we admit it?—more family-friendly audience. He left his seven-season *SNL* stint in 2012 and played Sandler's long-lost son in the movie *That's My Boy,* letting the star handle most of the cruder, more desperate jokes. He spent nearly two years playing a New Age slacker on the BBC Three sitcom *Cuckoo.* He even went G-rated, voicing characters in the *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs* movies, a pair of *Hotel Transylvania* entries—forerunners to the upcoming *Hotel Transylvania 3*—and *Storks,* out this month. He won a 2014 Golden Globe for his performance as a man-child detective on *Brooklyn Nine-Nine,* the fourth season of which kicks off this month. He performed at last year's Oscars and hosted the 2015 Emmy Awards. He also co-wrote, coproduced and starred (as a drop-crotched and distinctly Bieberesque entertainer) in this summer's warmhearted satire *Popstar: Never Stop Never Stopping.* Oh, and in 2013 he married his longtime girlfriend, singer-songwriter-harpist-actress Joanna Newsom, with whom he handpicked and restored the furnishings for their 1920s mansion. Smart moves, all of them, for a baby-faced comedian bearing down on 40.

David A.J. Samberg was born in Berkeley, California on August 18, 1978. His mother recently retired from teaching special-needs elementary school students; his father is a photographer. Far from the most attentive student at Willard Junior High, where he met Taccone and Schaffer, Samberg dedicated himself to cracking up his classmates, soaking up the comedy chops of various *Saturday Night Live* casts and watching classic comedies on TV. After high school, he spent two years at the University of California, Santa Cruz before switching to New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, from which he graduated in 2000. He reunited in Berkeley with Schaffer and Taccone, and the trio moved to Los Angeles—into an apartment they dubbed the Lonely Island, which became the namesake of their collective comedy endeavors. Their early video work led to Samberg landing an agent, auditioning for *SNL* and joining the cast in 2005, with Schaffer and Taccone signing on as writers. That first year, their *Lazy Sunday* digital short marked the first time millions of people uttered the term *viral video.* Since then, they've released four albums, partnered on a few movies and generally made friends with every celebrity you can name. Without sacrificing his relatable dorkiness, Samberg has set out for full-spectrum comedy penetration on a worldwide scale.

Contributing Editor **Stephen Rebello,** who spoke with Don Cheadle for the April *Playboy*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **TODD COLE**

Interview, spent a recent afternoon with Samberg in West Hollywood. "Don't let Andy Samberg's smug, sometimes punchable screen vibe fool you," says Rebello, "because here's a guy who's surprisingly thoughtful and canny. Whether he's talking about his past, his career, his tastes or his goals, he isn't afraid to sound smart or sincere. He knows exactly what's up and where he's headed. Frankly, I didn't see it coming. But what a relief."

PLAYBOY: You're best known for being an *SNL* cast member, making viral videos and hosting awards shows. What made you want to saddle up for a workplace sitcom like *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*?

SAMBERG: People who know my actual personality know I'm not walking around rapping about dicks all the time. That's just one part of who I am, and it happens to be the most popular part. Doing *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* changed a lot of people's opinion of me. They were able to see the humanized me, for which I'm grateful. Michael Schur created both *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and *Parks and Recreation,* and there's such sweetness to both shows. By the nature of the characters' profession and the locale, *Brooklyn* is a slightly tougher, more cynical universe than *Parks,* but it's an equally heartfelt universe.

PLAYBOY: Was the role of Detective Jake Peralta—wisecracking, highly competent, immature, emotionally stunted, upbeat—written for you?

SAMBERG: There was no script when they pitched me the kernel of the idea and asked me if I wanted to do it. From the point I said yes, they wrote toward me. I knew Amy Poehler, of course, from working with her on *SNL,* so I talked with her about her experience with *Parks.* I had also done a guest acting role on *Parks,* and it was so fun, so comfortable. It just felt like a good life.

PLAYBOY: What's up with your character this season?

SAMBERG: Jake and Captain Ray Holt [Andre Braugher] are in Florida in witness protection. So we have new stuff to play with and I'm really excited. It's one of those rare work experiences where I work on a show I adore, everybody gets along, and I love everyone I work with. I've been lucky so far with this one and the fact that, by all accounts, I was on *SNL* during one of its least dysfunctional times ever.

PLAYBOY: You grew up in Berkeley in the 1990s. If you made a music video of your experiences in northern California back then, what would be the vibe, the sound and the look of it?

SAMBERG: The sound would be a lot of early-1990s hip-hop, R&B, reggae, dancehall and a heavy Latino influence. The look would be Cross Colours and Girbaud jeans, and the smell would be Drakkar Noir—or Preferred Stock if you couldn't afford Drakkar. All that mixed with a vibe of the civil rights movement and original 1960s-era hippies. It was a fascinating and wonderful place to grow up, definitely the melting pot people say it is.

PLAYBOY: How is Berkeley *not* like what people say it is?

SAMBERG: Berkeley is less hippie and touchy-feely than people think it is. That was the 1960s. The version I grew up in was much more "city," although when I was a kid there were still lots of walkouts and protests. You were living in a world that was more politically charged just by the nature of the city's history. It's almost expected.

PLAYBOY: As a kid, how did you navigate those social, political and pop-culture currents?

SAMBERG: By being into a lot of different stuff. I would describe myself as not cool but not unpopular. I played soccer, so I knew a lot of people who were athletic. I listened to reggae and smoked weed sometimes, so I would hang out in the park, play Hacky Sack and go with friends to Reggae on the River. I was into classic rock like Floyd and Zeppelin, so I'd hang with those dudes. I was really deep into hip-hop, so I would hang out with those dudes and with the graffiti dudes and the skater dudes.

PLAYBOY: Did those dude groups intersect?

SAMBERG: The Venn diagram had a big intersection, and that is the beauty of growing up in Berkeley. Kids there were the way I see a lot of young people now—I say "young people" like I'm super old, but they're young to me. It was one of those places that was slightly ahead of the curve of the internet. Now, with the internet, a lot of kids are into a ton of different stuff. But culturally, socially, musically, my friends and I were already that way in the 1990s, when kids in other parts of the country may have been a little more factionalized in their interests.

PLAYBOY: What were the advantages and disadvantages of being the youngest kid in your family, and the only boy, with two older sisters?

SAMBERG: I was a textbook youngest child. I got a lot of positive attention. I had an easy ride. I don't try to paint it any other way. I saw my sisters go through their trials and learned by watching their experiences. By the time I was going through my teen years, my parents were more mellow. I never got into trouble that much.

PLAYBOY: Define "that much."

SAMBERG: Like drinking with buddies, passing out at a friend's house, getting home and my parents being like, "Where the fuck were you? We were worried." But I never got caught stealing or cheating. I kind of cruised. I had a very enjoyable time growing up. I was always sort of the tension-breaker. Not that there was a ton of tension in my family, but I was the goofy one who was always being sarcastic, joking around and trying to lighten the mood.

PLAYBOY: Your mother and father had nothing to do with show business.

SAMBERG: My mom just retired from teaching elementary school, primarily in the special-needs program because she's fluent in sign language and is partly hard of hearing herself. She uses hearing aids.

Our generation wasn't doing anything but wearing super-baggy clothes and condoms all over.

PLAYBOY: Was she born with a hearing problem?

SAMBERG: It didn't begin until, I believe, she was in her 40s. But long before that she had learned sign language. She just was drawn to it and followed that instinct. She feels she subconsciously somehow just *knew,* which is so strange and interesting. If it were anyone else saying that, I'd be like, "Yeah, right." But I'm inclined to believe her. She has strong, clear instincts. That's kind of her deal. She's the best.

PLAYBOY: Your father, who is a professional photographer, is also very talented. His photos—of kids smoking weed, guys with painted faces tripping out and hippies and their "mamas" leaning against their motorcycles—look found rather than staged. It's the kind of thing that period movies almost never get right.

SAMBERG: When people nail a period in film and television, it's immensely satisfying. I think the TV series *The Americans* gets the 1980s right. I thought David Fincher did a really nice job with the 1960s and 1970s in *Zodiac.* For that same reason the first *Alien* somehow feels honest about the future: It's not saying, "Hey, look at all of this futuristic stuff." The stuff is all just there, and it's *used* stuff. For me, the silent minutes at the beginning of *Alien* is one of the best sequences in film history. I loved *Prometheus* too, and it looked fucking amazing. So few people go as far as the level of detail that Ridley Scott and everyone else put into it. I'm big into sci-fi movies and novels, always have been.

PLAYBOY: Your dad has shot incredibly striking nudes. As a kid, did you secretly rifle though his files?

SAMBERG: When he started doing that kind of work, I was in high school, so I was more mature about it. It was definitely a slightly strange moment to understand that my dad, who's married to my mom, goes to work and takes photographs of naked women. But then you see the photos and you think, Oh, it's very much about art and doesn't feel voyeuristic. And my mom didn't seem to care. They had a good thing going.

PLAYBOY: How much were girls a part of your life growing up?

SAMBERG: I was always a relationship guy. In college and right after college, I was in a couple of long-term relationships. I didn't play around. That's the influence of having two older sisters.

PLAYBOY: You didn't wait until college to lose your virginity, though, did you?

SAMBERG: I was, I believe, 16 or 17. It was at summer camp. I was on the junior staff and she was girls' head counselor. She was 24. She could tell I probably was a virgin. I was flirty; there was a friendship and a playful thing between us, but I didn't really think it would ever be real because of the age difference. I think she just decided for me. It was only once. I wouldn't say I was good, but it was great for me.

PLAYBOY: Were your parents cool about sex?

SAMBERG: My folks, my mom especially, were hippies from New York who moved to the Bay Area in the summer of 1970 or 1971. We had this cartoony book that we'd flip through, with illustrations of a sort of doughy-looking couple having sex and text explaining where babies come from and all that. There was not a ton of talk about it. But my teen years were in the 1990s, and there was so much talk about safe sex because of AIDS. My friends and I joke a lot about how the generation before us was all coked-up and fucking, the generation after us was all on ecstasy and fucking, and our generation wasn't doing anything but wearing super-baggy clothes and condoms all over. We were the D.A.R.E. generation, the scared generation.

PLAYBOY: Growing up, did you have sexual fantasies about any celebrities?

SAMBERG: I was enamored of Cyndi Lauper, just obsessed, when I was a kid. I've never met her, but I'm friendly with Paul Reubens, who's friendly with her. I've gushed to him about how much I love her. She's incredible. I still listen to her first record, *She's So Unusual,* all the time. It's a perfect album, and not just the cuts that were hits.

PLAYBOY: You said that you had a lot of friends in different groups. Is it an unwarranted cliché that all comedians were loners as kids?

SAMBERG: I can be on my own for hours, but I much prefer to be around people. When Akiva, Jorma and I were working at *SNL,* the walk to the restroom was long. I would always ask people if they wanted to come with me because I didn't want to be lonely on the walk.

PLAYBOY: Would they humor you?

SAMBERG: Sometimes. And if they weren't ready, I'd wait them out.

PLAYBOY: Do you remember the first time you got a laugh? There's a 1986 video floating around of you as a third-grader, when you played Daddy Warbucks in *Annie.* Backstage you were already bouncing up and down and pretty much going, "Look at me!"

SAMBERG: I don't remember my first laugh, but I know that making people laugh was my way in. It was just what I was good at early on, and I went with it. Like a lot of people say, "Oh, I developed a sense of humor to traverse the world socially"—which is a word I definitely use, *traverse.*

PLAYBOY: It doesn't sound as though you needed it the way others do.

SAMBERG: I just loved it. I loved it immediately. Even when I was really little, I found *Garfield* books in the library, and I was like, "There are jokes in this and I'm going to consume and interpret this." I was six or seven and wanted to get *The Far Side* calendars or the

comedy catalogs where you can order whoopee cushions and the most base comedy stuff. And very early I started watching *SNL,* Mel Brooks movies and Monty Python. I was drawn to it. I knew that's what I loved. *SNL* was my dream from the time I was eight.

PLAYBOY: Video shorts were what put you on the map and helped you realize your dream of getting on *SNL.* When did you first pick up a camera and start making stuff?

SAMBERG: Willard Junior High and Berkeley High School were the first times I recall shooting things where I was hoping to be funny. My family got a home video camera around 1988, and a friend and I started shooting "sketches." Even before that, in elementary school, my friends and I took a boom box with a cassette, a mike and a "record" option and we would do crappy little-kid versions of radio plays and stuff like that. I met Akiva and Jorma at Willard, and much later I went to the University of California, Santa Cruz, where Akiva was majoring in film. But I transferred my junior year of college to study film in New York at the Tisch School of the Arts. Since 1988 until probably today, all I've really done is try to put comedy on film or video.

PLAYBOY: After college, when and how did you, Akiva and Jorma reconnect?

SAMBERG: That first summer after we all graduated, we showed each other all the stuff we'd been making. We clearly wanted to do the same thing and we were already friends, so why not band together? Strength in numbers, as the Golden State Warriors would say—until they got beat. Heartbreaking. Yeah, I'm a huge fan. Anyway, we debated staying in our parents' basements, trying to shoot stuff in Berkeley and maybe putting together a website.

PLAYBOY: In the end, you opted to share an apartment in Los Angeles.

SAMBERG: That apartment was the original Lonely Island. That's what we named it. Having just lived in a one-bedroom apartment in New York with my buddy [writer-director] Chester Tam and a lot of mice, this place on Olympic Boulevard felt big. We turned the dining room into a fourth bedroom, put up a partition and crammed four dudes into that apartment. Even so, it was pretty big. I mean, we set up our original Nintendo and I remember thinking, Wow, L.A. is very comfortable. We hung out, shot stuff, started writing and worked odd jobs.

PLAYBOY: How odd?

SAMBERG: I worked a couple of temp jobs and got fired from one because I was late, which is still a problem for me. My first actual job was working the graveyard shift in the vault of a color-correction company. They'd plop down 50 reels of film in boxes and I'd enter them 100 percent accurately into this antiquated and complicated system. It was mind-numbing, but the people I worked with were very nice. That same year, my dad suggested that if I went to grad school, maybe I could become a film professor. I remember using it as motivation. He was just being sweet, but I was like, "How could you give up on me?" I also continued to do stand-up, which I'd started doing my junior year of college in New York. I did that for the next five years in L.A., before we got hired on *SNL.*

I took off my pants to reveal these crazy-tight shorts. Lorne says that was the moment he decided to hire me.

PLAYBOY: What did you learn from doing stand-up?

SAMBERG: A lot of comedians do open-mike nights as a badge of honor. I didn't get much out of that. It was more useful to do "bringer shows," where you harangue three to five people to pay too much money to come see you. In that setting, I was able to much better gauge whether my stuff was working with real people and not just comics. I read Harpo Marx's autobiography, and it was so eye-opening to learn how the Marx brothers would tour their shows across the country, then wind up in L.A. and shoot the movie version in, like, three takes. Incredible. They'd rewrite on the fly and do their live shows over and over, knowing for a fact which jokes worked everywhere. Now you do it in reverse order: have a test screening, see what works and then go shoot more.

PLAYBOY: And you and your two buds continued to make shorts?

SAMBERG: There is a monthly event-network-website thing called Channel 101, started by Dan Harmon, who went on to create *Community,* and Rob Schrab, who later co-created *The Sarah Silverman Program.* They screen a bunch of fake TV shows of five minutes or less. A live audience votes and the top "shows" get "renewed," meaning you make another episode and just keep going until you're eliminated. It started as an exercise for them and their friends, then it got more traction and they started to get submissions from all over. We created a few shows for it, the most successful of which was *The 'Bu,* a deadpan spoof of *The O.C.* I love that Zucker brothers style of dry comedy. That's where we met Jack Black and Steve Agee and lots of really cool people in comedy.

PLAYBOY: You were asked to write your first MTV Movie Awards, with Akiva and Jorma, in 2004. Was that an offshoot of Channel 101?

SAMBERG: Murray Miller is a writer on *Girls,* and he and I created the HBO tennis comedy *7 Days in Hell.* He's an old friend from summer camp who convinced me to apply to NYU because he went there before me and then convinced me it was a good idea to move to L.A. He and I even did stand-up together for the first time. His brother helped me get a job as a runner for National Geographic Channel, and then Murray helped me get my next job, as a writer's personal assistant on *Spin City.* He helped us get hired as writers on the MTV Movie Awards. We made $300 or $400 a week split three ways after taxes, but you meet

people. There are folks we're still in touch with because of that job. And it led to *SNL*.

PLAYBOY: How does Jimmy Fallon come into your story?

SAMBERG: Jimmy was the host for the second year we wrote for the MTV Movie Awards, and he brought a ton of the *SNL* folks with him, including Liz Cackowski, who came to help write for the awards show. We hit it off with Jimmy and his buddies—in fact, Akiva is married to Liz. Like with Harmon and Schrab with Channel 101, we were in the company of like-minded people. There was a crackle to it. You could tell you were at the center of what was happening.

PLAYBOY: When you auditioned for *Saturday Night Live,* did you plan to drop trou?

SAMBERG: Two or three days after my first audition, I was told they wanted to see me again and that I didn't have to do a totally new audition. Then, a couple of days before the second audition, I got tipped off *not* to do the same audition. I don't know whether it was a mix-up or a head game, but I went to the flea market and bought this ridiculous pair of supershort Adidas 1980s jogging shorts. I was hanging out with Liz, who already worked at *SNL,* so I showed her the shorts and we came up with this bit about an out-of-breath jogger making random references to events from 1982. It made us laugh, so for the audition I put the shorts on underneath my pants, and in the last part of my audition, I took off my pants to reveal these crazy-tight shorts. Lorne Michaels says that was the moment he decided to hire me.

PLAYBOY: Ken Jeong, Jason Segel and Sacha Baron Cohen have gone full monty in movie comedies. Will you up the ante?

SAMBERG: I don't think I'd ever do it, because of the internet. Once you show your dick, that's the first image that comes up on Google for the rest of your life. I don't want my dick on the internet.

PLAYBOY: Apparently Lorne Michaels isn't a fan of *SNL* cast members cracking up during sketches for the sake of breaking or trying to make a sketch work. Will you cop to ever doing that?

SAMBERG: To get laughs? No. But I genuinely lost it twice. One time was during the Kenan Thompson "Scared Straight" sketch, where he's an ex-con trying to scare a bunch of teens who got into trouble for underage drinking. Kenan got in our faces and acted insane. Bill Hader broke first. We're good friends, and it's really hard not to laugh when your friend's laughing. Besides, it was funny. The other time was when Will Forte was doing a stupid halftime dance with Peyton Manning to the theme from the 1960s *Casino Royale* movie. I think there were seven of us in the scene. Again, I believe Bill was the first to go, but in my defense, everyone lost it. Fred Armisen lost it and so did Kenan, which rarely happens. We all went down at Will doing that stupid dance.

PLAYBOY: You got hired as an *SNL* cast member, and your Lonely Island partners were hired as writers. Did the pressure of doing the show put a strain on your relationship?

SAMBERG: I had done a lot of stand-up and we led with me for that first audition. Akiva didn't want to be on camera. He took a writer's meeting. Jorma auditioned, but he was a theater major. He is super funny and would have been great on the show, but he never did the Groundlings or tried improv or anything like that. We all wrote and submitted a writers' packet together, and Jorma and Akiva helped me write my audition. The fact that we all got hired was incredible and a victory for the three of us. Once we were hired, we started to make those videos together, and it was always about the three of us. The nature of the show sometimes threatened to drive a stake between us, but we rarely let it happen.

PLAYBOY: Did you accomplish all you set out to do on *SNL*?

SAMBERG: We far exceeded my expectations. The 40th-anniversary special last year was a mind-blowing and eye-opening experience for us. There was a long section where a majority of the clips were things we had worked on. We looked at each other like, "Holy shit, we're being treated like we're really a part of this show." We're obviously very close with the cast that was there at the time—Bill Hader, Fred Armisen, Amy Poehler, Maya Rudolph, Kristen Wiig—and we all talk about how when you see yourself in clips sandwiched between Chris Farley, Gilda Radner, Bill Murray, that whole long list, you don't allow yourself to believe you belong among them. But it's nice to think that anyone watching the show thinks that.

PLAYBOY: When did you first feel "I'm famous"?

SAMBERG: You get hired on *SNL,* but except for the show's die-hard fans, nobody knows who you are until you do something that everyone's talking about. After we did *Lazy Sunday* with Chris Parnell in 2005, I would be out in public and people would go, "Hey, *Lazy Sunday!*" That first wave feels the biggest because you're going from not at all famous to thinking, Holy shit, somebody just spotted me on the street. It's both exhilarating and terrifying, but the truth is, you've just scraped the surface to the point that, if there's a Google search for you, now at least there's something there. The second big one was *Dick in a Box,* and to this day that's still probably the biggest. Lorne likes to joke about the thing you'll be most remembered for on your tombstone. He's like, "I'll be Lorne '*SNL*' Michaels, and you'll be Andy '*Dick in a Box*' Samberg." I'm very comfortable with that. I love that video. I still find it really funny,

and it was huge for our careers. It was a moment. There was a Justin Timberlake explosion happening and the video got picked up everywhere. That was the first time I really felt the power of the media and the first time I was getting more attention than I was comfortable with.

PLAYBOY: Did it ever get creepy?

SAMBERG: Knock on wood, but I've been pretty lucky in that what we make generally appeals to the types of folks we'd like to be interacting with. It's people who are really into comedy and have been since their childhoods and teen years, and it's sort of the fabric of their social lives. That's incredibly gratifying. Like when a group of teenagers comes up and goes, "We quote your stuff all the time," that's the ultimate compliment because that was basically our religion coming up.

PLAYBOY: There is, of course, that other comedy cliché—that all comedians are depressed. Have you ever had to dip into the Xanax or talk to a therapist?

SAMBERG: Yeah, I have. Not a ton. I'm generally a pretty happy person. For a lot of people, the honesty and realness that produce the best comedy means you're facing the world as it is. You're trying to uncover some truth, and that can be painful and scary. There's a lot of things about being a human on earth that there are no answers to, and that's the scariest part of it, depending on your faith and what you believe. I think most comedians believe in comedy, which we do with some pretty daunting unanswered questions, and that can lead to depression. That said, when I get down it's generally more about working myself too hard and losing my handle. Or something incredibly sad happens in the world or in my world and I'm affected by that. I definitely feel things deeply. And when you feel great joy and major highs, you are susceptible to major lows.

PLAYBOY: Do you check out what people on the internet say about you?

SAMBERG: In my third or fourth year at *SNL,* I made the mistake of looking. There was some awful shit, things that made me think, You're the only one everyone hates. I read one that basically said, "He should fucking kill himself so he can't procreate." That was so harsh that I actually found it funny. As an experiment, I looked up people who were at the height of their game, people whose achievements I aspired to, like Will Ferrell, Jack Black, Amy Poehler, Tina Fey, Jim Carrey. They all had the most horrendous shit written about them. And I remember reading people say how much they hated Will Ferrell and how he wasn't funny, knowing in my heart that he is likely the funniest human being on planet Earth and can do no wrong. That's when I had this moment of clarity about online comments: None of it matters. All of it is easily ignored. That's helped tremendously.

PLAYBOY: Do you ever miss your anonymity?

SAMBERG: That can be managed too. There are folks who do it, my wife, Joanna, being one of them.

I had this moment of clarity about online comments: None of it matters. All of it is easily ignored.

PLAYBOY: Your wife, Joanna Newsom, creates music that is so uncommon and introspective that she draws comparisons to artists like Joni Mitchell and Kate Bush. Were people surprised when you first got together, let alone when you got hitched in 2013?

SAMBERG: At first a lot of folks who were fans of hers found it confusing that we were together, which I totally understand. When you care about someone's art that much, you have a relationship with it. Her work is so personal, special and emotional. She's one of the greatest songwriters ever. If someone I admire artistically starts dating someone I don't find worthy of their art and gifts, I'll allow it to bum me out.

PLAYBOY: Were you a fan before you met?

SAMBERG: Oh yeah. I listened to her second record, *Ys,* every day for almost a year. That was my second year on *SNL,* so it was around 2006, 2007. I would wake up to it, listen to it on my headphones in the subway and then listen to it in my office.

PLAYBOY: Was it awkward meeting her at one of her concerts?

SAMBERG: I figured it would just be me sort of bowing and saying my pleasantries, but she's into comedy and is really funny. She was a great fan of *Dick in a Box* and *Lazy Sunday,* and she, her brother and sister had watched all our weird early Lonely Island stuff. We became friends very quickly, but it wasn't like either of us was pursuing the other. I think when we met she was in another relationship. We kept in touch for a while, and then eventually the timing was such that we found ourselves saying, "Hey, we've been friends. What's going on?" We've been married three years this month.

PLAYBOY: If the two of you were to have children or adopt children, what aspects of yourself would you hope they wouldn't inherit?

SAMBERG: Impatience. It's something I grapple with. I can get very flustered by deadlines. I get asked a lot why Akiva and Jorma direct and I don't. My answer is that I really don't want to because I'm not good at multitasking. I get overwhelmed very quickly. I like to focus on one thing at a time and give it all my attention. But kids—I hope they laugh a lot.

PLAYBOY: Do you feel that marriage has changed you?

SAMBERG: Just being in that relationship made me happier, calmer, more comfortable with life. Like I said, I don't really love being alone, but the idea that you get to spend a good chunk of time with someone you'd rather be with more than anyone else? Incredible. We love going to nice dinners, but we also like staying home and watching *Game of Thrones, Chef's Table* or the DVD extras for *Alien.*

PLAYBOY: As TV watchers, have you ever bought something because you saw it on a TV commercial?

SAMBERG: I got a Squatty Potty.

PLAYBOY: You did not.

SAMBERG: I did. The commercial sold me. I don't know if it was the prince, the unicorn or

whatever, but I was like, "I'll buy it and try it." It works fine, but it's less comfortable. Also, I'm not trying to speed up that time in my life. On the toilet and in the shower are the two places I get to truly be alone and think.

PLAYBOY: Do you have any fears that other people tell you are irrational?

SAMBERG: Not that people tell me are irrational, just your basic fear of death or fear that I won't be able to work anymore. Also, fear that I'll be in a plane going down. The best death you can hope for is a peaceful passing surrounded by loved ones. The idea of being ripped from a plane in the air just feels so helpless and terrifying. This is getting dark.

PLAYBOY: It depends on your view of the afterlife, right?

SAMBERG: My suspicion is that it's like Jon Snow says: "Nothing, there was nothing at all." I believe in energies and that there's probably some transfer into the universe of whatever it is that makes you alive. But I don't believe in the retaining of your consciousness.

PLAYBOY: How did you react when the Lonely Island's recent music mockumentary, *Popstar: Never Stop Never Stopping,* got more love from critics than from ticket buyers?

SAMBERG: It would have been nice if it had made us all a lot more money. We probably would have been given carte blanche to make another movie. But I also feel that if we wanted to make another movie, we could. There are so many outlets now. I'm not complaining about how much money I have. I'm fine. When we put out *Hot Rod* in 2007, it didn't perform the way we wanted, but during a college tour promoting *Popstar,* kids showed up dressed in *Hot Rod* costumes and with *Hot Rod* posters and DVDs. It found its audience. We wanted to make a movie that people would talk about in the same sentence as *Billy Madison* or *Wet Hot American Summer.* We're really happy with how *Popstar* turned out.

PLAYBOY: When you were coming up, you were often compared with and said to resemble Adam Sandler, with whom you made the raunchy *That's My Boy.* Do you envision yourself emulating his career moves?

SAMBERG: One of my favorite things Sandler ever did was *Punch-Drunk Love.* I know the director, Paul Thomas Anderson, a little, and I know a lot of people were surprised when that casting was announced. It's fucking great, a perfect movie, and Sandler is great in it—vulnerable, believable, funny and heartbreaking. Put your trust in an incredible filmmaker and it can work out great. Everyone who has ever been in front of a camera wants to get a call from Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, David Fincher, Paul Thomas Anderson, Spike Jonze, Wes Anderson—from one of the many incredible directors you can trust.

PLAYBOY: Have you ever been called by one of those directors?

SAMBERG: The last time I really auditioned for anything was while I was at *SNL.* It was a one-line thing for the Coen brothers—incredible—for *Burn After Reading.* I came in, said my line once, and they were like [*in a monotone*], "Okay." I was like, "Oh boy."

PLAYBOY: So what's next on the agenda?

SAMBERG: This is the most relaxed I've been in years, as the half beard would imply. I'm very happy. I've been sleeping a ton. I'm regenerating, going on family trips.

PLAYBOY: Besides the new season of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine,* what's next for you and the Lonely Island?

SAMBERG: I did a few scenes playing Josh Peck's mean older brother in a movie for Netflix called *S.B. Bound,* directed by my old NYU roommate Chester Tam. I'm basically like Bill Paxton's character Chet from *Weird Science.* We're producing a very odd and funny movie, *Brigsby Bear,* starring the brilliant, wonderful Kyle Mooney. The tennis comedy we did last year with Kit Harington for HBO, *7 Days in Hell,* was fucking nuts, and we're now doing one around the Tour de France.

PLAYBOY: What's your comedy philosophy?

SAMBERG: Go after whatever's funny at the moment. When you have a winner, nail it and keep nailing it. I met Mel Brooks at the party after the 2015 Emmys, which I hosted. That was a "holy shit" moment. Mel Brooks said, "You were great because some of the jokes you told were great and some of them were shit, but you told the ones that were shit like they were great." The other people in his circle and I laughed really hard. He and I sat down and I told him how much he meant to me, how I grew up watching his stuff and blah, blah, blah. I saw Nick Kroll and John Mulaney, so I called them over and he introduced himself to them. He goes, "He was great tonight, wasn't he? Some of the jokes he told were great and some of them were shit, but he told the ones that were shit like they were great." It was so old-school and beautiful, where he was like, "Yeah, I told a joke and it got a huge laugh, so I'm sticking with it." His inflections were identical. He knew he had a winner, so he just nailed it.

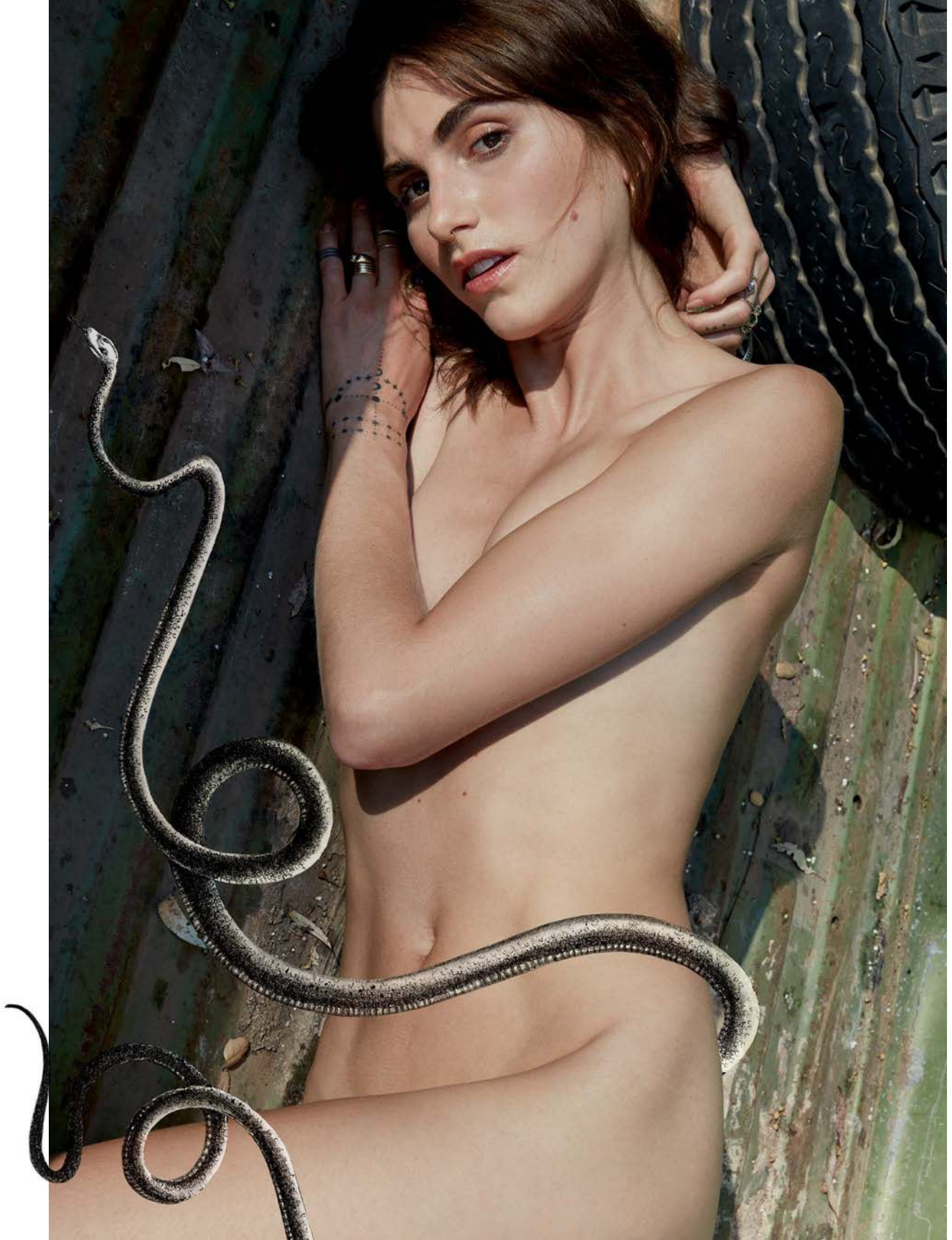
PLAYBOY: Sounds like life is good at the top for Andy Samberg.

SAMBERG: Comedy is such a strange thing in the world. On occasion, it can be treated with a lot of reverence, but it's generally treated a little bit less than reverentially. Still, I'm doing this for a living. People call and ask me to come do comedy. I'm writing comedy, and people are letting me make it. I've already won. Everything from this point on is about what I want my career to look like. When it's over, I want to stand by all the things I've made. ■

Drawn Together

When freelance artist Langley Fox shed her Hemingway last name, it signaled a rebirth—and, as a testament to her abilities, it hasn't hurt her career. Fashion houses and art-pop magazines have commissioned her work, which "emulates the things around me," she says. So it makes sense that when we asked her to run wild with photographer Kava Gorna for an illustrated pictorial, Langley became inspired by their surroundings. "We went out with a loose plan on a hot summer day among flowers, trees, lakes, blue skies and lots of laughs. It was almost obvious that nature would become the thread," says Langley. "Our biggest challenge was dodging cars and climbing over fences to find secret places," adds Kava. "And I can't be too specific about where we shot, because we definitely didn't have permission to be there."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **KAVA GORNA** MODEL & ARTIST **LANGLEY FOX**



AFGHANISTAN'S LAST CHANCE

Outmanned and outgunned—and sometimes without boots or food—can Afghanistan's elite commando force take on ISIS and save the nation?

BY **KRISTINA SHEVORY**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ERIN TRIEB**

A black flag whips in the early-morning breeze. Planted in the middle of a rocky hill a few hundred yards south of the mud-walled compound where the Afghan commandos have taken shelter, the flag's message is clear: ISIS is here, waiting.

The mission of the commandos of Afghanistan's First Platoon, First Special Operations Battalion is straightforward: Find the ISIS fighters and take them out. The soldiers are eager to take on an enemy that has killed many of their own, beheaded and blown up local villagers and driven countless people from their homes.

Pakistan, the source of many of the foreign fighters, lies a few miles away, over the denuded chocolate-colored mountains that stair-step up from the hill to snowy peaks. Mud-brick compounds, abandoned when fighting escalated here in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province last summer, dot the valley floor. There is no movement except for the flag's whip. No farmers tilling their fields. No one walking. The stillness is unnerving.

An order crackles over the radio: time to go. The soldiers move out across the rolling valley floor, searching one compound after another. To the west they can see their comrades from Third Platoon doing the same. The Afghan army and national border police are to follow behind, holding territory the commandos have secured.

The goal is to clear out the extremists so that civilians can return to their homes. Tranquility fled this region over the past year after ISIS fighters slithered in and embarked on a campaign of terror, executing locals they deemed impure and fighting pitched battles with the Taliban and anyone else in their way.

The soldiers are picking their way through a stony field studded with poplar trees and dry grass that crunches underfoot when the first shots ring out from the hill. The commandos scatter, diving behind boulders and trees and firing back. Some sprint to a nearby compound and take shelter.

It's a lousy place to seek safety. The five-foot-high southern mud wall that necklaces the compound is too short to provide good cover. A small dirt knoll in the middle of the compound serves as a lookout of sorts. Inside the adobe house are two tiny rooms: a kitchen with a small cookstove and a bedroom with three string-laced cots. Tight quarters for a platoon of 30 men to wait out a barrage in.

The commandos crouch in a line along the southern wall, popping up to take shots and slipping down to slam fresh magazines into their M-4 rifles. Waves of incoming fire—from machine guns, rifles and the occasional rocket-propelled grenade—continue in booms, cracks, whistles and pops. The shooting dies down for a moment, only to roar back as soon as an Afghan commando stands up to fire.

Firefights usually don't last long, maybe 10 to 15 minutes, though they can feel like years. This one is different. The shooting goes on and on. The insurgents must have a deep-pocketed source funding them to be able to throw this much ammo downrange. This is no pell-mell ragtag group attacking the commandos. This is ISIS.

DESPITE SOME $35 BILLION IN SUPPORT, THE AFGHAN ARMY CAN'T DO MUCH TO STOP ISIS.

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When the regular Afghan National Army can't finish a fight, needs to clear an area or is pinned down, it calls in the commandos, the nation's best and perhaps final line of defense. Calls for the elite special-operations unit have come in faster and faster since late 2014, when the Taliban started to retake territory vacated by withdrawing U.S. troops and coalition partners. Nearly 90 percent of foreign forces have now left Afghanistan. Under Mullah Akhtar Mansour—a leader with a brutal reputation who was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan in late May—the Taliban scored a string of battlefield victories, moving from rural skirmishes to direct assaults on big cities, fueled by thousands of fighters. It now controls more of Afghanistan than at any point since 2001, when the United States invaded. About half the country is currently under Taliban control, and more is on the verge of falling. And now ISIS—or Daesh, as it's known locally—has also moved in.

Despite some $35 billion in training and support from the U.S. and coalition partners, the Afghan army can't seem to do much to stop them. Ravaged by desertions, internal squabbling, poor coordination between units and

Afghan National Army commandos, en route to raid an insurgent compound, read an official memo from ISIS outlining sharia law for the region.

Afghan soldiers strap on their weapons during training and exercise drills at the commando "School of Excellence," also known as Camp Commando, on the outskirts of Kabul. The 10,000-man force is spread thin and is often without proper equipment.

officers so corrupt they've been known to steal soldiers' salaries and sell their equipment, the army races to respond to attacks instead of launching operations to root out the insurgents. Heavy fighting, combined with a lack of close air support and medical evacuations, has taken its toll: Around 5,000 soldiers were killed in 2015—nearly 30 percent more than in 2014.

The Afghan army has yet to hammer out a clear strategy to defeat ISIS and the Taliban; instead it relies on the special-operations troops to put out fires. The commandos wrestled back control of the northern city of Kunduz after the Taliban seized it. They're on the front lines in the south in Helmand province, buttressing a feeble army struggling to fight off waves of insurgents. And now they've been sent northeast to Nangarhar to smoke out ISIS.

But the commandos are spread increasingly thin. Their missions are supposed to last 72 hours or less—hit a target and go home—but can actually stretch on for months. When they're not babysitting an area for the army, the commandos are sometimes used to staff road checkpoints or bigwigs' security details. "The misuse of commandos is endemic," says a U.S. Green Beret master sergeant who trains the elite troops. "One platoon I know is being used as a politician's personal protection force in Kabul."

After years of fighting and training alongside America's legendary Green Berets, the commandos are now largely on their own. They became used to their sugar daddy calling the shots and giving them money, arms, air support and intelligence when things got tight. Not anymore. Now they must run the show and operate better than their U.S. advisors—or risk a Taliban takeover.

But how long can an overworked force of 10,000 men hold together a country of 32 million people?

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On a bracingly cool December morning in the mountains south of Kabul, 1,000 soldiers stand in formation on the hard-packed parade ground at the training base known as Camp Commando. They are the latest graduates of the special-operations program, decked out in woodland-green camouflage uniforms and distinctive maroon berets, gripping M-4 rifles squarely across their chests, eyes locked straight ahead. An improvised red carpet of tribal rugs stretches from the front gate, past a viewing platform wrapped in Afghanistan's national colors of red, black and green, to rows of steel risers crammed with Green Berets, Afghan officials and the foreign contractors who run the camp.

The Afghan national anthem sputters out of loudspeakers; the gate glides open, and in march five top leaders of the Afghan army, their heads turned sharply to the left, holding a firm salute as they pass the soldiers.

Colonel Jabar Wafa, the school's commander, who with his taut, sun-drenched skin and looming build looks like an Afghan stand-in for John Wayne, approaches the microphone. "My hero soldiers," he says, his eyes panning the crowd, "you are the ones with the responsibility to protect this country. Wherever and whenever the ANA has a tough fight, they call on you, the commandos. We will put the insurgents on the run."

"Allahu Akbar!" the troops roar. "God is great!"

The ceremony marks the graduation of the country's biggest class of commandos since the school's founding in 2007. Five times a year, new recruits arrive at this former Russian parachutist base to be trained to join a unit widely considered the best in the country. They are selected during basic training for their aptitude, strength and ethnicity. Overseen by

1. A 26-year-old Afghan commando lies on a makeshift stretcher after being shot during a gunfight with ISIS insurgents. 2. Commandos take cover in a mud-walled compound near the Pakistan border while ISIS pins them down for nearly 16 hours. 3. Overview of Camp Commando near Kabul.

Green Berets, they undergo a rigorous three-month class of advanced infantry skills. The students are chosen to reflect the country: Nearly half are Pashtun, about 25 percent are Tajik, and the rest Uzbek, Hazara or Turkmen.

Until this fall, classes were capped at 650 students. But the uptick in casualties and fighting has pushed the Afghan Ministry of Defense to rapidly expand the commando ranks. The pass rate, once 80 percent, has been bumped to 100 percent. There's talk of a sixth class this year.

The commandos are supposed to be the best-supplied of any unit in the Afghan army, but the strain on the camp's resources is evident. Barracks are crowded, with at least four men per room, and lines for the 16 toilets are long. Recruits are allotted only 800 bullets instead of the 5,000 rounds they're supposed to receive. None of their footwear or uniforms match because there aren't enough to go around. Some wear tan or black boots; many wear sneakers secured with laces or Velcro.

Still, the quality of the recruits has improved since the school's early years, says Donnie Barber, an American contractor who has been training soldiers at the camp for the past nine years. In the early years, he says, most troops couldn't read or write, and he had to teach them to count. Half the current recruits are now illiterate. The new command staff is making an effort to take better care of soldiers and has improved meals, installed a volleyball court and opened a recreation center.

"These Afghans get it," says Barber, wearing a baseball cap and sporting a tattoo on his left arm from his old unit, the 82nd Airborne. "When we leave, they're going to be able to carry on."

In a country where most people identify with their tribes and not as Afghans, the outlook of some of the recruits is surprising. "I joined the army to serve my country," Staff Sergeant Said Jallaludin, 22, a Turkmen from the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, tells me while cleaning his M-4 rifle. "I want peace not only in Mazar but in all of the country. If I go to Helmand, Kunduz, wherever, each place is my country."

There's more than a patriotic incentive to enlist; there's also a financial one. In the wake of the U.S. and coalition troop pullout, Afghanistan's unemployment rate skyrocketed to 25 percent. Jallaludin was a laborer and part-time student with few prospects; he thought the army would give him a career, or at least decent pay. A newly minted commando makes $250 a month—more if he serves in especially dangerous areas—while a regular soldier receives $200.

At the graduation ceremony, Jallaludin goose-steps forward to accept his graduation certificate, salutes the chief of the army and holds out his right hand. He then spins around and barks to the waiting platoons of commandos, "Afghanistan, I am ready to protect you."

• • •

Nangarhar is the latest region of Afghanistan to need the commandos' protection. The province, home to the Tora Bora cave complex where Osama bin Laden hid early in the Iraq war, has long been a roiling stew of Taliban, Al Qaeda, foreign fighters, drug traffickers—and now ISIS. The Pakistani army launched a campaign in 2014 to drive extremists out of its country's lawless northern states. Those who weren't killed fled to Nangarhar, recruited disgruntled Taliban and rebranded themselves as Islamic State-Khorasan, the local affiliate of ISIS. Numbering as many as 3,000, they began a campaign of beheadings and bombings, sending thousands of locals fleeing to the provincial capital of Jalalabad.

The situation has so alarmed Washington that in January, U.S. forces ramped up air strikes in the country threefold. The Obama administration is considering slowing the scheduled drawdown of the remaining 9,800 U.S. troops. Lieutenant General John Nicholson, who took over as commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan early this year, declared that eliminating the Islamic State and Al Qaeda branches in Afghanistan is his "first and foremost" priority.

Early last year, ISIS announced it would use Nangarhar as a launching pad for attacks and

would advance into neighboring provinces. This angered the Taliban, and the two have been battling for supremacy since. For months the army, distracted by other problems, left them alone to kill each other off—until Islamic State fighters started attacking and killing Afghan police officers. The furious provincial police chief demanded that the army intervene.

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Days later, the commandos get the call. They're ordered to leave their base near Jalalabad and speed to Achin, a district in Nangarhar on the border with Pakistan that has long been home to a thriving Taliban-run drug trade and is now the site of near-daily clashes between ISIS and other extremists. Things had gotten so bad there that the deputy speaker of parliament who represents Nangarhar formed his own 200-man militia and led it into battle against ISIS.

The commandos roll out around six P.M. in a convoy of 18 Humvees. A stop in central Achin to coordinate with the army, police and border patrol drags on till midnight. The Afghan National Army has tentative control over a V-shape tract of ground south of town that was under fire from the Islamic State. The army needs the commandos to take enough ground to fill in the V and push south; the army will follow behind and hold that ground. At least that's the idea.

Leading the commandos this night is a young captain who recently transferred from another battalion, or *kandak*. It's his first job in the region. His inexperience worries the commandos, but the rising number of missions has left no seasoned officers available. The rookie captain won't even have a Green Beret advisor accompanying him as a backstop if he gets into trouble. After the U.S. shifted to a training and advisory role in late 2014, the Afghans were put in charge of the fight. U.S. Special Forces now rarely go on missions, unless things go sideways.

The captain sets up his command post and heavy weapons on a small hill two miles north of where the commandos will be operating—usually a commander sets his post 500 yards behind his assault team so he can see what's going on and support them. The commandos complain among themselves about his incompetence and seeming lack of courage, a damning slight in a country where a man is judged by his bravery.

There isn't much to be done except head out. The 60 men of the two platoons slip on their hydration packs, adjust their radios and stride into the night. The darkness is so thick and complete it's difficult to see. Figures that loom threateningly in the murk turn into benign trees on closer inspection. Hours later, the moon is bright enough to illuminate the walking men.

With daybreak only a few hours away, the commandos maintain a brisk pace. The soldiers trek up and slide down stony mountains, sometimes jumping from outcropping to outcropping when the descent is too steep to walk. There are no trails, not even a goat track. Slip-sliding, the soldiers move down into a valley, finding two abandoned compounds the army has cleared. Exhausted, the commandos trudge inside, First Platoon to the far right compound, Third Platoon to the left.

They pull off their M-4s, lean them against the walls and sit down heavily. Some slip off their helmets and rest them in their laps. "What's next?" asks Ahmad (not his real name), an interpreter who works with the commandos and Green Berets. No one seems to know.

THE SHOOTING DIES DOWN, ONLY TO ROAR BACK AS A COMMANDO STANDS UP TO FIRE.

A radio sputters. Ahmad perks up, then sits back and groans after hearing the orders. "Oh shit. Be ready to move. We're heading back the way we came in five minutes," he says. The other commandos look at one another.

There isn't much to do. An order is an order. The soldiers collect their weapons and helmets and get ready to leave.

But the radio buzzes again. Ahmad listens intently. "Okay, we're not doing that anymore," he says to everyone. "We're to wait for instructions."

The next hour and a half passes this way, commands ebbing and flowing like tides. The radio buzzes with an order to move, and a few minutes later another order reverses it. Frustration mounting, the men mutter to one another that something needs to be done.

A few soldiers sip water. No one eats. They have little to no food. The army didn't issue any, and the soldiers don't want to pay for it. With large families to support on a salary of a few hundred dollars a month, it's better to save as much as they can.

By now it's 3:30 in the morning and dinner is a faint memory. My photographer's pack is stuffed with 10 pounds of granola bars, energy drinks and other snacks. She pours them on the dirt floor and gestures to the commandos to eat. They crowd around and snatch up the food. A few men close their eyes for a nap. The radio has gone quiet. Dawn is coming. Why aren't the commandos, who have night-vision goggles and can operate at night when the insurgents can't, moving?

"I bet you anything the captain will tell us to move at daylight," Ahmad says. "And if that happens, we're going to be shot at."

The sun slowly rises, streaking the sky with oranges, purples and pinks. Sure enough, the radio buzzes. Time to move. The instructions are vague, the captain directing the commandos to take over nearby compounds.

Ahmad curses. "This is a bad idea," he mutters. "Hey, German, don't you want to say something?" he asks the squad leader, nicknamed because of his light brown hair and pale skin. German shrugs. "We're soldiers," he says. "We follow orders."

The soldiers snake out across the valley floor, the black ISIS flag fluttering in the distance. That's when the attack starts.

• • •

Bullets chew at the dirt walls of the compound where First Platoon has taken shelter. Third Platoon has found another several hundred yards away. An RPG occasionally sails overhead, its distinctive whine piercing the air. The commandos take turns along the southern perimeter wall, jack-in-the-boxing up to fire their M-4 rifles whenever they feel a lull in the incoming fire. A machine gunner sets up in a protected spot along the wall, his weapon's staccato *thud-thud-thud* puncturing the air.

As the hours slide by, the shooting from the unseen enemy grows thicker, advancing now from the east and west. ISIS fighters are closing in. The commandos' radio has gone quiet again; they cannot raise their captain. The men lean against the walls, cradling their rifles, looking at one another with wide eyes. "I can't believe this," says one. "What is this captain thinking?"

"Mushkele! Mushkele! Problem! Problem!" someone shouts outside. The commandos race to the perimeter wall and see one of their own

Left: An Afghan fighter fires his weapon at ISIS insurgents while on a mission in Achin district, Nangarhar province, Afghanistan. Right: Afghan Platoon Sergeant German, nicknamed thus because of his light hair and skin, receives news that one of his soldiers has died after being shot in the side by an ISIS sniper.

on his back, his buddies working to remove his body armor. A bullet came in through a softball-size hole in the wall, hitting his right side, close to the underarm. The wound is deep.

They bandage the downed commando and haul a cot outside to use as a stretcher. Back to the radio to try to rouse help. "We need a medevac immediately," the operator barks into the radio. The answer that crackles back churns their stomachs: "It's a three-hour wait," the voice says. "There are no helicopters available." It's a common, and lethal, issue for Afghan soldiers: Their tiny, overstretched air force is chronically short of pilots and helicopters for evacuating troops.

The commandos manage to stop their comrade's bleeding, but it's a temporary fix. They know he won't last three hours. They will have to carry him out themselves.

Four commandos lift the wounded man onto one of the string cots and wait for a lull in the shooting. When it comes, they each grab a bed leg and rush across the adjoining field, heading for the relative shelter of a stand of trees.

They make it 100 yards before one of the carriers is hit in the leg. The men drop to the ground while another commando in the compound lays down cover fire with a machine gun. The one who was hit fast-limps back to the house while the other three grab the badly wounded man and run for the trees. A volunteer sprints out to help them. I learn later that they carried their comrade two miles back to the overwatch site where the captain sat, but the man died in an ambulance en route to the hospital in Jalalabad.

Back in the compound, the shooting gets closer and louder and closer and louder. A commando bursts in, shouting that ISIS fighters dressed in camouflage have sneaked into the neighboring compound, about 100 yards away, between this compound and Third Platoon's. The commandos can't shoot at them for fear of hitting Third Platoon.

The captain has artillery, mortars and a .50-caliber anti-aircraft heavy machine gun—all useless because they're too far away to help. Ahmad passes word by radio to one of the Green Berets he works with that the commandos are pinned down and need help. Eventually an Afghan attack helicopter arrives, circles for 10 minutes while randomly shooting and then departs.

Morale plummets; the commandos feel abandoned. No cavalry is coming to their rescue because *they* are the cavalry. Fear coils tightly in their stomachs. No one wants to say what is apparent: ISIS is pounding their compound hard before an impending invasion. Men feel for the reassuring grip of their knives and think of hand-to-hand combat.

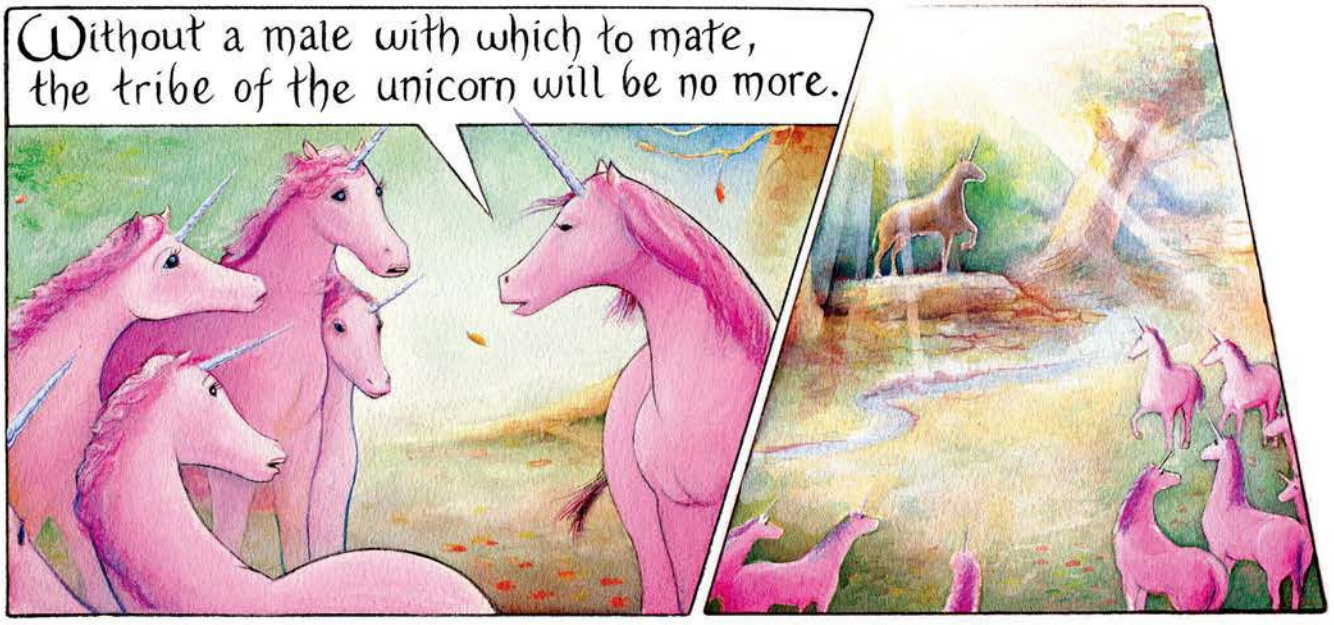
Thak-thak-thak. Machine gun and AK-47 fire seems to be pouring in from all directions. Two RPGs overshoot the compound and sail high overhead. The ISIS snipers looking down from a hill, however, are on target; their rounds slice into the room through windows and a hole in the wall. There is no sign of the Afghan National Army soldiers who are supposed to come to the commandos' aid. Their only chance now is to stick it out until the sun goes down and their night-vision gear gives them the advantage.

As day slips into night, the commandos in both platoons get the call they've been waiting for: Assault the nearby ISIS compound. They creep outside, fan out in all directions and storm the house, killing the handful of insurgents inside with wild bursts of gunfire.

The commandos were eager to move on to assault the main ISIS forces on the hill, take out the snipers who'd been wreaking so much havoc and burn their flag, but their commander ordered them to retreat to the compound. Not wanting to incur casualties, he decided to do nothing and wait to be ordered back to base, Ahmad tells me later.

New commandos arrived on foot a day or two later with supplies of food and water. There were still no helicopters available. The commandos spent 10 days holed up in the compound with the insurgents taking occasional potshots at them, until a general intervened and ordered them to retreat.

The black flag still fluttered high over the valley. ■



NICHOLAS GUREWITCH

The New Rules of Style

In an era when men can wear suits or sweatpants to work, it's essential to know the foundational principles of looking good. Here are 20 timeless best practices from our favorite style experts and designers

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
DAVID PRINCE

1. The work boot works with everything.

A great pair of boots is an investment that will give your look character. And as they get worn in, they'll become a part of your personal signature. You can wear a classic work boot everywhere and with everything from jeans at a concert to a suit on a date at a nice restaurant. Texas-based Helm Boots slims the profile of its made-in-the-USA stompers with the new Ayers model (pictured at right). The slightly dressier silhouette still feels casual with a rubber sole and Helm's trademark white stripe.

2. A suit is more than a suit.

You probably don't wear a suit to work every day, but it's still an important wardrobe player if you pitch it right. The key is to pick a versatile style you can break apart and wear as separates. Look for a slim version with natural, unpadded shoulders and less-formal patch pockets, like Suitsupply's Havana model ($499, us.suitsupply.com). The jacket can serve as a blazer with a pair of jeans, and the slim trousers will work with a casual sweater or even a high-low combination such as a hoodie and boots (see Rule 5). A solid shade is always a good choice, or dial it up with a subtle windowpane plaid in gray and camel Italian wool.

3. Make your new pair of jeans 1990s-style washed black denim.

No sweat if you missed Kurt Cobain, grunge and faded black denim the first time around. Somehow an amalgam of rocker bona fides and soulful nuance, washed and artfully distressed black jeans are the newest denim treatment for those bent on escaping the ever-present blues. Take Nudie Jeans's interpretation from its Replica series based on actual worn pairs, in the skinny Grim Tim fit ($250, nudiejeans.com). To avoid flyover-country overtones, keep the look simple and sharp with just an inky black T-shirt or an urban parka and grounded with black lace-up boots or canvas kicks.

4. Clear is the new black when it comes to eyewear.

Going clear is a reverse-chic move that's trending in both sunglasses and eyeglasses.

Helm Boots Ayers in black, $495, helmboots.com.

Transparent frames signal that you're above the style-wars fray, but their attitude makes an indelible impression nonetheless. Cutler and Gross offers splurge-a-rific see-through sunnies in either round or D-frame models with groovy green lenses, while Moscot's squared-off 1960s Nebb style oozes *The Graduate* cool.

5. It's time to elevate your hoodie game.

No excuses. This fall, all the big designers have a heightened take on the humble hoodie: Rag & Bone's black funnel-neck version under a slim overcoat, Michael Kors's skiwear-inspired hoodie–bomber jacket hybrid or L.A. streetwear ace John Elliott's oversize textured hoodie layered over his signature elongated tees. A spiffed-up hoodie, often in a fabric with a high-tech sheen, raises your style game without sacrificing the comfort of an old standby.

WOMEN NOTICE FOOTWEAR. FOR THAT REASON, THE SHOES ARE WHERE ANY WARDROBE OVERHAUL SHOULD BEGIN.

6. AND YES, THE SHOES WILL MAKE IT OR BREAK IT.

Women notice footwear. For that reason, among several others, the shoes are where any wardrobe overhaul should begin. The good news? Just as that pair of square-toed slip-ons you've had since high school will ruin your nine-to-five look, the right pair of suede loafers or pristine high-tops can raise an otherwise toned-down ensemble to new heights.

7. SPEND MONEY ON BIG ITEMS.

Certain things in your closet have a longer shelf life than others. Jeans, shirts and sweaters will wear out, look dated or get ruined by hot sauce within a few years. Outerwear, suits and leather-soled shoes can last decades. Three things to remember: First, buy in neutral tones such as navy, gray or black—colors that never go out of style. Second, learn how to spot-clean a jacket and use a shoe brush. Third, treat these items like the investments they are; if it doesn't hurt a bit when you buy them, you're not spending enough.

8. BUY QUALITY, NOT BRANDS.

It feels good to own a coveted label, but designer brands don't always carry the same quality throughout their product range. If you're going to splurge on a big name, make it count: Things like Burberry trenches, Gucci loafers and Brunello Cucinelli cashmere sweaters are iconic and worth the money. Yeezy white T-shirts, not so much.

THE TREND TOWARD ACTIVEWEAR IS NOT CARTE BLANCHE TO ROCK YOUR PAJAMAS TO DINNER.

9. You can carry a backpack, but you need to up your game.

There's no reason to give up the hands-free convenience of a backpack out in the real world, but it's time for a smarter-looking version. Emerging brand Haerfest (pronounced "harvest") has just the ticket. Its J1 backpack (pictured below) is a luxury-meets-tech combo of leather and sturdy, line-patterned premium nylon. Neither too large nor too small, the carryall features a fully lined main compartment and a front pouch, both cleanly designed with concealed zippers, as well as smaller interior zip pockets and an inner sleeve—all in a noticeable but still neutral olive.

Haerfest J1 backpack, $375, haerfest.com.

10. Would-be collectors, embrace the starter watch.

The classic Rolex Datejust tops the list for newcomers, according to Jon Goldfarb, owner of Second Time Around Watch Company, a Beverly Hills institution for 40 years. "It's recognizable and holds its value. It's something most people will recognize when a guy is wearing one on his wrist," he says. The iconic watch dates back to 1945 and is still made today. Expect to shell out anywhere from the mid-$2,000s to the low $3,000s for a standard model; variables affecting the price include whether it's all stainless or stainless with white or yellow gold, whether it has a classic silver dial or a more uncommon colored face, and whether it comes with its original presentation box and papers.

11. This is the only skin product you need to face the world.

Hollywood men's grooming expert Cheryl Marks, who tends to Will Arnett among other celebrities, says her guys go nuts over Jack Black Double Duty SPF 20 face moisturizer ($28, getjackblack.com). "It has everything they need, and they don't feel like they have anything on," she says. "It does its job and feels good on the skin." Lightweight and non-oily, the potion hydrates skin for a better appearance and offers broad-spectrum protection against UVA and UVB rays. Fragrance-free and packed with vitamins and antioxidants, it's formulated for all skin types.

12. Athleisure: Just because you can doesn't mean you should.

It's now possible to be both comfortable and stylish (see: tapered sweats, ultralight runners, looser cuts), but there are limits. The trend toward activewear does not give you carte blanche to rock your pajamas to dinner or dress head-to-toe in matching logos like an off-duty gym teacher. The winning play here is moderation, combining one or two informal elements with an otherwise put-together look. Try a pair of monochromatic Nike Roshe Ones ($75, store.nike.com) with dark jeans for a style that's equal parts sporty and polished.

13. BUY TRENDS IN ACCESSORIES.

Botanical prints are big right now. Buy them in shirts, socks, ties, maybe a five-panel hat—but not a suit. Trends are fun to wear, but they work best when combined with the classic standbys already in your wardrobe. Need proof? Google "Justin Timberlake denim suit." You never want to be that guy.

14. SELVEDGE IS GOOD; STRETCH SELVEDGE IS BETTER.

Selvedge jeans in dark indigo are an integral part of any man's wardrobe, but spending six months breaking in a pair is no fun. Recent advances in textile technology, however, have made it possible to have great-looking selvedge jeans that are also exceptionally comfortable from the first wear. Try on a pair of Naked & Famous Denim's Weird Guy stretch selvedge ($166, tateandyoko.com) and you'll never go back.

15. DON'T SETTLE FOR A SHIRT THAT DOESN'T FIT PROPERLY.

All shirts are not created equal, nor are they sized the same—so don't settle for a button-down that doesn't fit just right. Shorter, skinnier guys can turn to Uniqlo (sized for petite Japanese dudes) and Thom Browne, while classic American brands including J. Crew and Ralph Lauren tend to fall on the larger side. Once you find a shirt that suits you (shoulder seams should sit at the edge of your shoulders; the front should be snug without puckering), buy it in quantity.

John Varvatos wool peacoat, $1,298, johnvarvatos.com.

16. You'll need a tailor (a really good one).

Some guys can dress entirely off the rack and look great, but for the rest of us it takes a bit of modification. This is doubly true when it comes to suiting, which succeeds or fails depending on how well it fits your body. A good tailor can mean the difference between your looking like a kid in his dad's suit and looking like the guy who owns the place. Do some research. Ask around. Approach the best-dressed man in your office and find out where he gets his clothes tailored. And then be explicit about what you want. Traditional tailors can be a conservative lot, so if you want that suit skinny, make sure they make it skinny. If you like a high-water look, don't let them talk you out of it. The first time you wear a jacket or trousers that fit you perfectly, you'll understand.

17. A little military goes a long way.

Fashion has gone hard corps for fall, with military looks crowding the runways along with an attendant surfeit of shiny brass buttons, kitschy braid trim and tricked-out fatigue jackets. Serviceman style has been a perennial influence for designers, but you want to look current, not like you're dressed for a costume party. Go for a contemporary interpretation such as the wool peacoat from John Varvatos (pictured above), with its regimental border stripe in a subtly contrasting gray and the unexpected but sleek addition of black leather panels at the pockets. As Mr. Varvatos himself says, "Military-inspired clothes are masculine and classic. They never go out of style, which is why men love wearing them each season."

18. Find a style icon and let him guide you.

Maybe it's your dad, maybe it's Steve McQueen, maybe it's Cornel West. These guys spent decades perfecting the art of dressing, and you could definitely learn a thing or two from them. Take note not just of what they wear, but of how they wear it, the countless details that make a studied outfit look effortless. Finally, make the look your own, adding and subtracting elements to tailor it to your lifestyle and personality.

19. Buy local (and pay a bit more for it).

Guys have more style options than ever before, from international mega-retailers as well as homegrown brands. Both have their strengths, but buying clothes that are made in the United States not only supports our economy, but the garments are often of much higher quality than fast-fashion imports. Check out Alden for shoes, Freeman for outerwear and Tanner Goods for belts and wallets. Spend a bit extra and feel good about wearing something made in your hometown.

20. Accessorize wisely.

Personalize your style by working in a handcrafted accessory. It might be a rough-hammered silver bracelet, a worn and aged vintage belt or a handmade leather portfolio. Keep it simple and take some time to search out the talisman that says something about you.

WHEREABOUTS

The best of intentions may not be enough to help a hopeful but hapless husband find his wayward wife

BY **COLIN WINNETTE**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TREY WRIGHT

"We have some information about your wife," said a voice on the phone, and I was given an address. This was good news. I hadn't heard from her in days. ¶ I ordered a car and because we're pinching pennies, I agreed to share the ride with another rider along the way. She rode in the front with the driver, and they talked about which flowers were in season, because she was a florist and headed to work. When she asked where I was headed,

I told her I was on my way to find my wife, and she offered me a discount at her shop, if I was willing to stop.

"These will show her that you care," she said, stripping the thorns from the marked-down bouquet.

I'd had to let the car go, but it was easy enough to order another, and, in the spirit of our new penny-pinching arrangement, again I shared the ride.

"You're a decent man to share this ride," said the other rider, shaking my hand while passing me a business card. She was a financial advisor, specializing in retirement plans for freelance workers, which both my wife and I are.

When I explained how funny that was, that she was a financial advisor and I'd shared the ride in part because of our recent financial troubles and a half-cocked attempt at recovering from them while working to prevent them in the future, she seemed alarmed.

"Nothing to do with finances should be half-cocked," she said, and she offered to take a look at our books that afternoon, to help determine if our plans would yield positive results, or if we were only designing more trouble for ourselves. When I explained that I was on my way to find my wife at that very moment, she said, "Imagine how your wife will feel if you arrive with that beautiful bouquet and a rock-solid plan for your financial future," and it was hard to argue that she wouldn't feel good. Money had always been a concern for my wife, she'd never felt entirely stable, and the thought of putting that lifelong worry of hers to bed once and for all was exciting enough to get me to let the second car go and follow the financial advisor up to her office, where we pored over the available data and came up with what sounded like a pretty good plan. We invested most of the savings, but the investments were diverse and, she assured me, would yield healthy profits over time, though surely they would dip and plateau as well, that was only natural for something so chaotic and strange, but generally trackable, as financial systems. She provided a folder for the paperwork detailing all we'd done, and I ordered a third car, which met me right outside the building only a minute or two later.

Confident in our financial future, and knowing that I was running a little bit later than I'd intended, I opted not to share the ride but to go straight to the address I'd been provided. The driver asked if we could take the highway, and I deferred to his expertise, believing this would be the fastest and clearest route, as well as the one that would provide grand vistas of the mountains and the bay, allowing me to reflect on the time I'd spent without my wife, my expectations for our reunion, and how difficult it can be to know what you want in life and actually get your hands around it.

"You seem thoughtful," said the driver, who had a calming presence, it was true, and an even more calming voice, so calming in fact that I opened up to him without even really realizing it, explaining how I'd been thinking about how difficult it can be to know what you want in life and actually get your hands around it, showing him the flowers, which were beginning to wilt, and the folder of paperwork, which I presented upside down, spilling a page or two, nothing all that important, while explaining how these little preparatory steps would make things easier, would help get things back on track, and would please my wife, whom I hadn't heard from in a few days, and maybe even offer her a little bit of comfort.

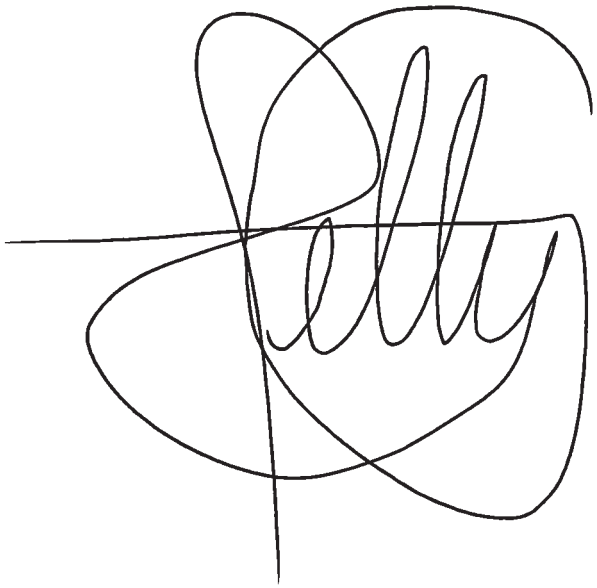
I tried to collect the pages from the floor of the car, but they were stuck, facedown, to something that had been spilled there, for which the driver apologized, explaining that it wasn't technically his car, but his cousin's. The driver worked as a counselor during the days and borrowed the car in the late afternoons from his cousin, who worked evenings at an adhesive factory and sometimes transported buckets of adhesive to and from work in the car before turning it over. I told the driver it was fine, that the pages weren't really all that important anyway, and I apologized for having added to the mess in the backseat, at which point he sighed and shook his head and told me that if I was actually going to get my hands around what I wanted in life I would have to start standing up for myself, as just a moment ago I'd been talking about how important those pages were to me, how they were going to help get things back on track and please my wife, whom I hadn't heard from in several days, and would even provide her comfort, but suddenly I was willing to abandon those pages and even apologize to him, the man whose car the pages had been abandoned to, to boot. He told me that my eagerness to please was undermining the desired results, as he would have actually been much happier to see me grow upset over the loss of the pages, to blame him for the presence of the adhesive and the consequent damage to my presentation, my plan, my wife's comfort level, because it would confirm his belief that I'd been honest with him about caring about those things, thereby bringing us closer, but what I had done instead was present a mask of kindness and acceptance, which required him to affirm my good behavior, to mirror what a capable and understanding man I was, what a decent human, thereby actually distancing us, making him feel that I was withholding my true feelings, not being forthright, opting instead to take what could have been an honest exchange between two strangers on a track toward knowing one another a little better and smother it with my neediness, clouding the exchange with my own compulsive need to see how wonderful I was mirrored in anyone and everyone I encountered, which I masked as an attempt to please him, but was actually an attempt to please myself.

We'd arrived at the address, where I paid him and tipped handsomely, and he left me with his business card, should I need clarification on what we'd gone over, taped to an invoice for the session, totaling $1,000, which was a sizable bite from what was left of our checking account and would have to be gone over with the new financial advisor.

The address was for a vacant lot with a telephone at its center, surrounded by a few men and women in suits, all of whose attention was on me.

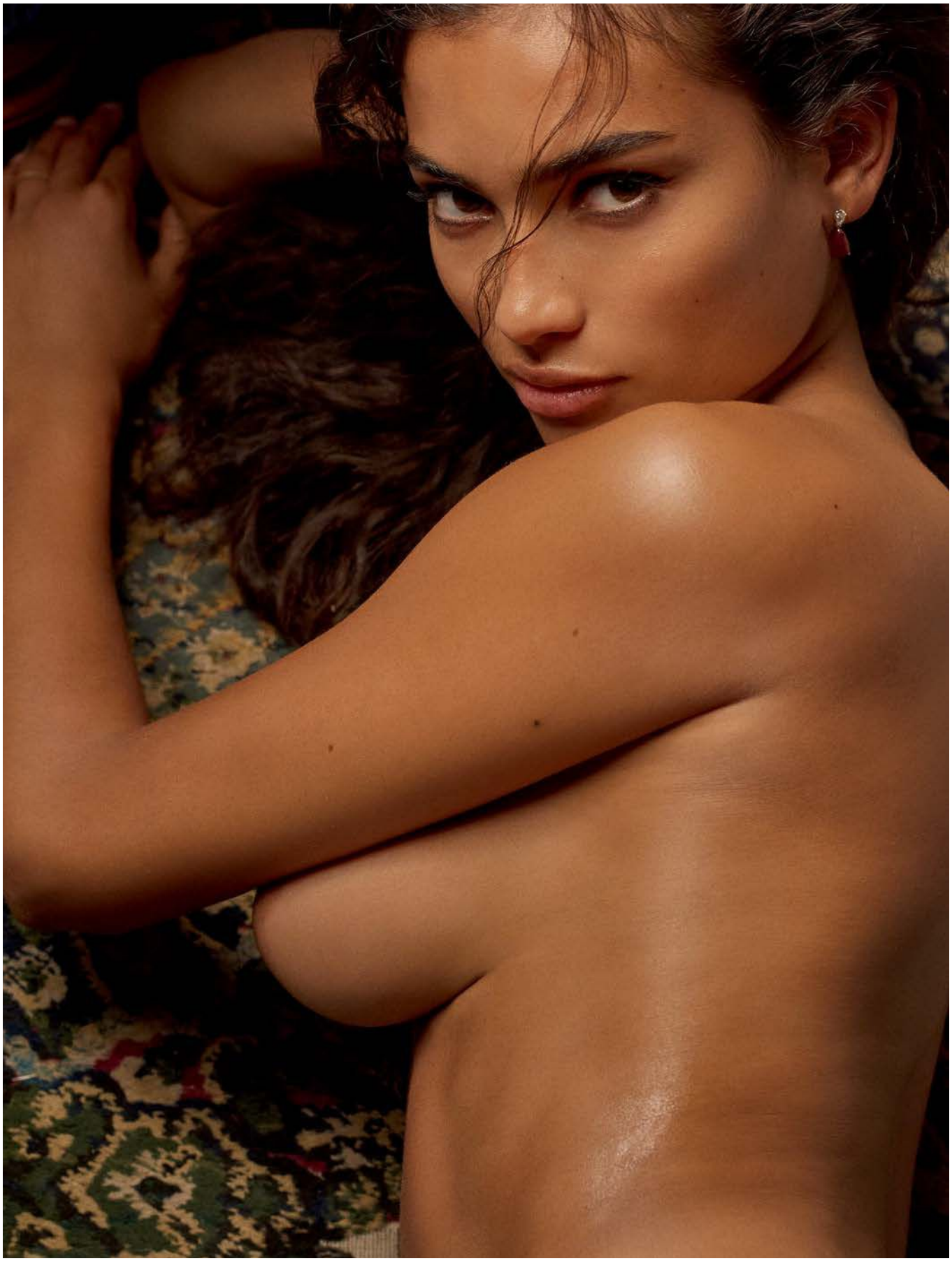
I approached them, greeted them, explained that I was sorry to bother them, but I'd received a call. "You have some information about my wife?" I said.

"Yes," they said. "She was just here." ■

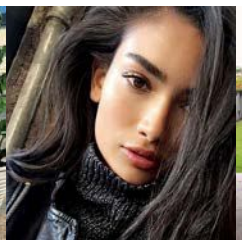
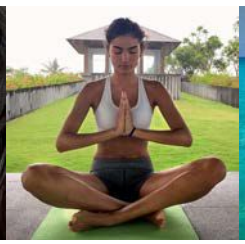


PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS HEADS

"Women have gained more freedom in both business and everyday life than ever before," says Miss September **Kelly Gale.** "Of course, I say that as someone influenced by Swedish culture." Yes, Kelly is a Swede—born in Göteborg, the country's second-largest city—but she's also ethnically Australian, via her father, and Indian, via her mother. Altogether, she's the epitome of a cosmopolitan woman. She holds two passports, is fluent in two languages and is an advocate for equal rights, a position informed by the progressive attitude embraced by her homeland, which offers 480 days of parental leave and has a female archbishop heading the Church of Sweden. "Women in Sweden are treated with a revolutionary level of respect that is unsurpassed in history," she says. "Still, the biggest obstacle is appreciating—and incorporating—each gender's uniqueness into society. We shouldn't shy away from the fact that women develop differently from men. We shouldn't listen to a female leader only when she has masculine characteristics. Instead of moving toward one 'omni-sex,' which sometimes seems like what we're trying to do, we need to learn to benefit from men's, women's and transgender people's individual voices."



KELLY GALE


AGE: 21 **BIRTHPLACE:** Göteborg, Sweden **CURRENT CITY:** New York

MY DREAM JOB

I am a passionate cook and have always dreamed of working with food. (According to my friends and family, I'm great at it.) I make my own breakfast every morning, and I'm most likely cooking a three-course dinner on a Friday night. Food—dark chocolate especially—is something that will always make me happy. In the future I'd love to go to culinary school, write cookbooks and perhaps even open my own health-food café.

WALK IT OFF, SHE SAYS

I'm dedicated to having a happy and healthy lifestyle, and part of that means I walk a lot. And I'm a superfast walker. Most people don't love that about me because I refuse to take a cab or public transportation unless I'm running late or it's freezing outside.

QUIT DRONING ON

Small talk bores me. I won't start a conversation I have no interest in having—and I never pretend to be interested when I'm not. I'm honest and real. In other words, I won't say "I love your shoes" unless I actually love the shoes. Also, don't ask me how much I get paid or anything about makeup or clothing trends. I don't care about trends.

THE DOWNSIDE TO HAVING A "SOCIAL" LIFE

It's easy to paint a nice picture of your life in the Instagram era, but we're now witnessing how that behavior negatively affects young women. What you see and read isn't always the truth, and there's a huge problem today with young girls' egos and how they relate to what they see on social media. Unfortunately, this probably won't change until social media becomes outdated.

DON'T FORGET THE WHITE WINE

Growing up on Sweden's west coast, I learned how to fish and prepare my catch, which I still do when I go back home. Right now I'm obsessed with grilling a whole fish, like a branzino, stuffed with lemon, capers, garlic, chili and parsley and serving it with grilled vegetables. Sushi is also a guilty pleasure of mine.

@KellyBellyBoom @KellyBellyBoom

The Rise and Fall of LOON

Chauncey "Loon" Hawkins was Harlem hustler royalty, a hit-writer for Puff Daddy and a crucial part of the Bad Boy Records family. He looks back at the wave that took him and the wreckage it left behind

BY **THOMAS GOLIANOPOULOS**

The music video for "I Need a Girl (Part Two)" is peak Puff Daddy absurdity, a guys' night out of epic proportions that begins with a helicopter landing and ends at a mansion party featuring a girl-to-guy ratio of about 10 to one. For Chauncey Hawkins, then known as the rapper Loon, it was the first time he felt like a hip-hop star.

Loon arrived on the Miami set that February 2002 afternoon with a plan. First, he selected his motorcycle for the video, settling on a Harley-Davidson chopper with ape-hanger handlebars that not only looked cool but provided a stable ride. He also decided to play to the camera. In his previous video with Puffy, "I Need a Girl (Part One)," Loon at times faded into the background. This time around he was more confident, brazenly elbowing his way into shots—dancing, champagne flute in hand, surrounded by women; leaning on a Ferrari 360 Spider as if he owned it; weaving through the streets of Miami on his bike alongside Puff and the R&B singer Ginuwine, appearing to be every bit as much a celebrity as his more famous collaborators.

But something else had changed since "Part One": The fans on the set—the women in particular—weren't there merely for Puff. "It was amazing to hear people actually screaming for me," Loon recalls. "It was everything I had worked for, everything I had strived for."

Then it all changed. Just as Hawkins had become Loon, Loon became Amir Junaid Muhadith, and then, in July 2013, he became a federal inmate in North Carolina. Far from the private helicopters and champagne flutes, Muhadith is loath to discuss the journey—his debauched life as Sean Combs's wingman; the horrors of crack-era Harlem that he barely escaped; the sex, drugs and violence.

"How can I explain this without glorifying it?" he says.

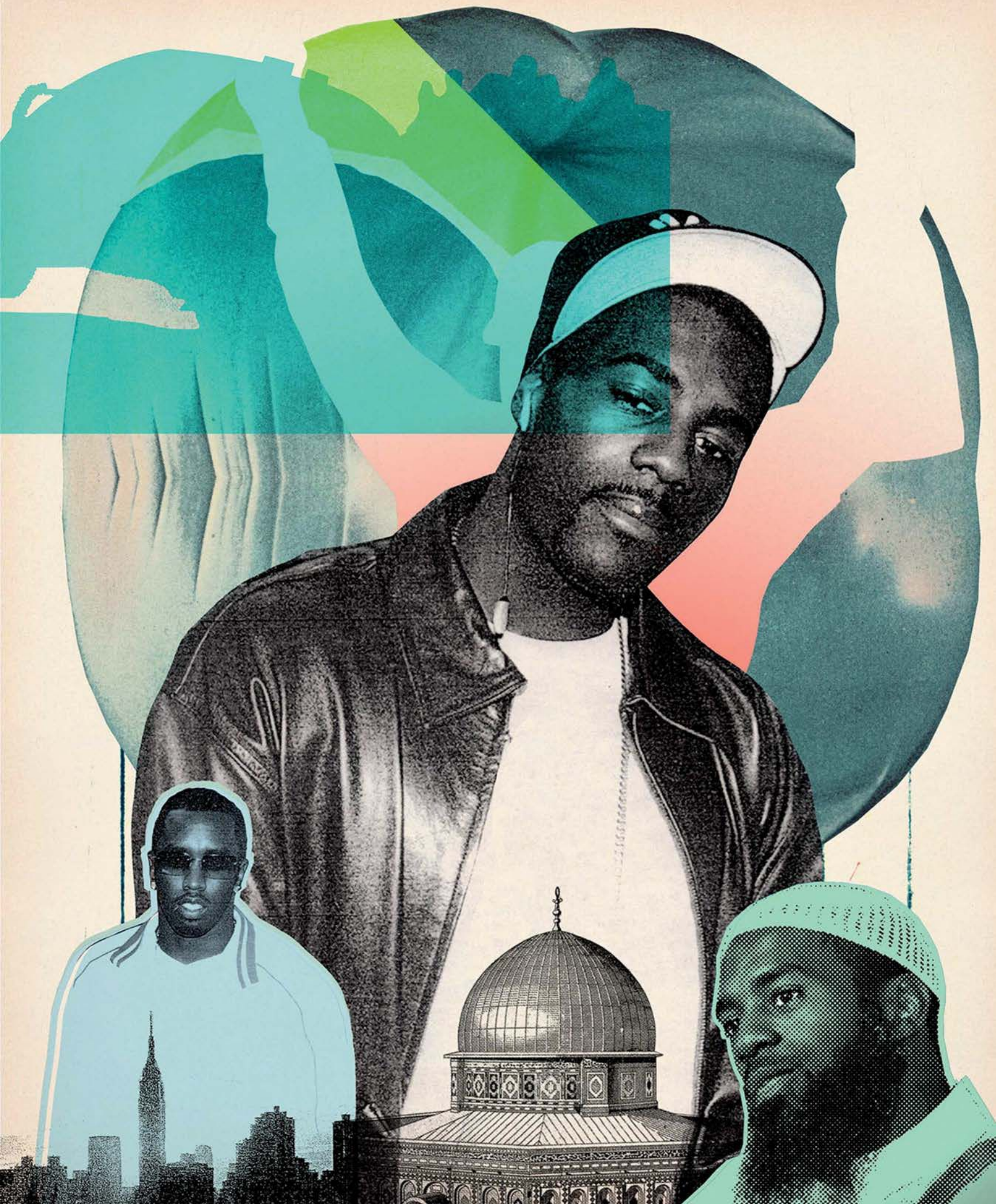
• • •

Situated about 20 minutes north of Durham, North Carolina, the Butner Federal Correctional Complex emerges like a squat concrete box from the verdant undergrowth. It's a sunny spring morning, and the visiting room is awash with friends and family of inmates. A little girl plays Connect Four against a man with tattooed knuckles. A woman wearing a Tom Brady jersey hugs an inmate. The world's two friendliest prison guards man the front desk.

A bit past nine A.M., Muhadith, the man who revived Puff Daddy's music career after writing the "I Need a Girl" series, enters the room. His standard-issue uniform consists of drab olive-green khakis, a matching button-down shirt and black Nike sneakers. For a man of 41, Muhadith sports a privileged, tight hairline. And though he's gained 17 pounds since being incarcerated, he's still in excellent shape thanks to daily calisthenics, cardio and the requisite lifting routine, though only to stay toned. "I can't get prison swole," he jokes. But what's most striking is his majestic beard, an unruly gray-speckled mass that extends halfway down his chest.

Since this is a minimum-security building, little trouble brews here. Sure, tempers occasionally flare, as is natural when some 300 men share any institutional facility, but nobody would risk being sent up the road to a higher-security building. Muhadith scans the room. "I know all these guys," he says. "You can tell who's in here for drugs and who's in here for white-collar crimes." Jesse Jackson Jr. served time here. Bernie Madoff is in

ILLUSTRATION BY JIMMY TURRELL



a medium-security building. "A spy, Spanish guy, Dominguez, was here," Muhadith says. "He told me stories about [former Panamanian dictator Manuel] Noriega."

Muhadith's trip here began in December 2008 when he quit the music industry, converted to Islam and renamed himself Amir Junaid Muhadith. In 2010 he moved to Egypt, where he subsisted as a television host and nascent voice on the religious-lecture circuit. Then, in November 2011, he was arrested in Brussels Airport on felony drug charges. The indictment stated that Muhadith "knowingly and intentionally conspired...with others, known and unknown, to possess with intent to distribute" heroin in North Carolina between 2006 and 2008. He pleaded guilty upon his extradition to the United States. According to Muhadith, he had two felonies already under his belt and risked getting 25 years to life if he went to trial. He couldn't take that chance. He was sentenced to 14 years in prison.

Muhadith calls it "guilt by association. Everything was hearsay. There was no tangible evidence." To hear him tell it: One night at Hot Beats Recording Studio in Atlanta, a rapper he was advising asked Muhadith to introduce him to a heroin supplier. Muhadith complied, which he says was the end of his involvement but enough to place him under the umbrella of conspiracy once federal charges were brought against the other artist.

Muhadith says there are discrepancies in the case, including one that should have gotten it thrown out: The indictment states that he was involved in this conspiracy from 2006 to 2008. But, he says, he didn't meet the individual until 2008. Why did he even make the introduction? "That, um, was just me being stupid, really," he says wistfully. "It was just a brief introduction. It cost me 168 months."

Muhadith, who sprinkles his speech with Arabic and verses from the Koran, remains upbeat despite his long sentence. "The thing that makes this easy for me is my religion," he says. "As long as I accord to what Islam teaches, it doesn't matter where I'm at."

He is, in other words, firmly in the present—though at times he's like an old guy at a bar, reminiscing about his heyday. "I'm actually grateful that those things happened," he says, "because all those events led me to where I am now."

• • •

The Harlem of Amir Muhadith's formative years didn't resemble the glories of the Harlem Renaissance or the gentrified neighborhood it is today; some of the brownstones featured on *Million Dollar Listing New York* were crack houses when Loon walked these streets. In his Harlem, kids grew up fast; Muhadith spent his boyhood fighting, selling crack, smoking weed, snorting coke, shooting dice and having sex with older women. "I grew up exposed to a lot of criminal behavior," he says.

His parents, William "Hamburger" Hughley and Carol Hawkins, were dubbed the Bonnie and Clyde of 116th Street, hustlers who profited from Harlem's heroin epidemic in the 1970s. Burger was sporty, stylish. He also may not be Muhadith's biological father. Carol worked for the drug lord Nicky Barnes, dubbed "Mr. Untouchable" by *The New York Times Magazine*. When she became pregnant, Carol says, Barnes threw her a million-dollar baby shower.

LOON WAS A PERFECT FIT FOR BAD BOY. COOL, COCKY AND HANDSOME, HE PERSONIFIED TURN-OF-THE-MILLENNIUM HARLEM SWAG.

Born in 1975, Muhadith had everything growing up but supervision. "I was a great provider, because I hustled," Carol says. "It didn't change until he was about five, which was when a lot of the crackdown started. Then that crack demon came along." Barnes was sent away in 1978, a few years before crack replaced heroin as the neighborhood scourge. By the time that transition was complete, in the mid-1980s, Carol, once a budding queenpin, was a junkie.

While Carol battled addiction, her mother, Evelyn Hawkins, a pious beautician, and her father, John, a World War II vet, raised Muhadith in Esplanade Gardens. The 1,872-unit complex situated on the Harlem River was originally sold as a middle-class oasis with an Olympic-size swimming pool and the subway at its doorstep. But when Muhadith was 14, one of his friends was shot outside building number four.

Fearing for her grandson's safety, Evelyn sent him to live with his godfather, the movie producer George Jackson (*Krush Groove, New Jack City*), in Beverly Hills. Suddenly Muhadith was the original Fresh Prince. He was still angry, though, and still hobnobbed with the wrong crowd. He was classmates with Angelina Jolie and other rich kids at Beverly Hills High but gravitated toward the Mansfield Crips on the West Side. He was nicknamed Loon, as in "loony Loon," for doing crazy shit, mostly fighting, and he lived up to the moniker. "I beat the wheels off this white boy on my track team for putting his feet on me at practice," Muhadith recalls. Embarrassed, Jackson threw him out after a little more than a year.

Back with his grandparents in Harlem, Muhadith slung crack. "I started hustling to be in the streets with my mother. In some sick, sadistic way that was my way of being with her," he says. "Me and my mom are like brother and sister—that's common where I come from. But she put me through so much."

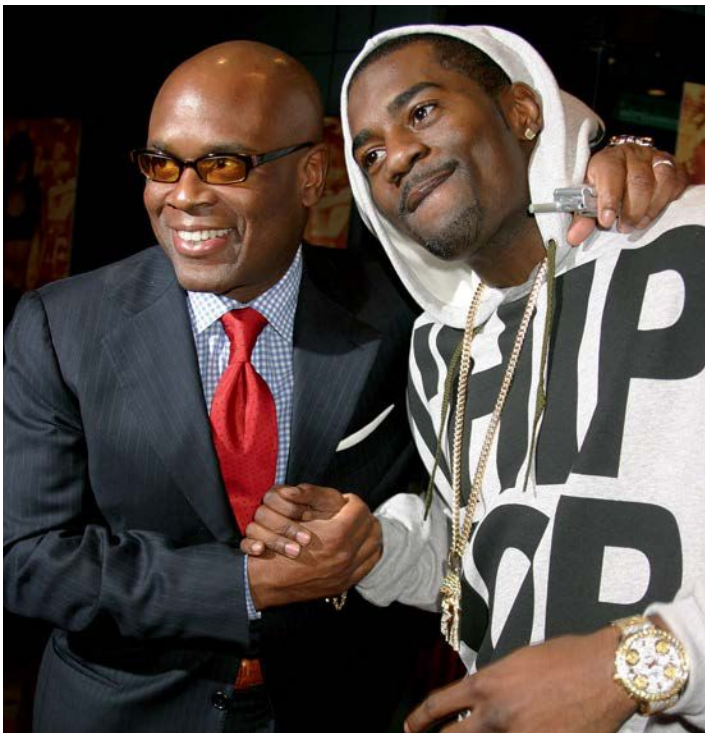
Carol Hawkins gambled, stole crack from dealers and even helped herself to her son's stash, which was hidden in a hollowed-out stuffed animal. "My mom stole so much money from me that it put me in debt to some malicious guys," Muhadith says. Once he'd paid back his suppliers, he made a deal with his mother: "I told her, 'If you stop using drugs, I'll stop selling drugs, because you are about to get me killed.' From that day on, my mother was drug-free, and I left the streets. I never sold drugs again."

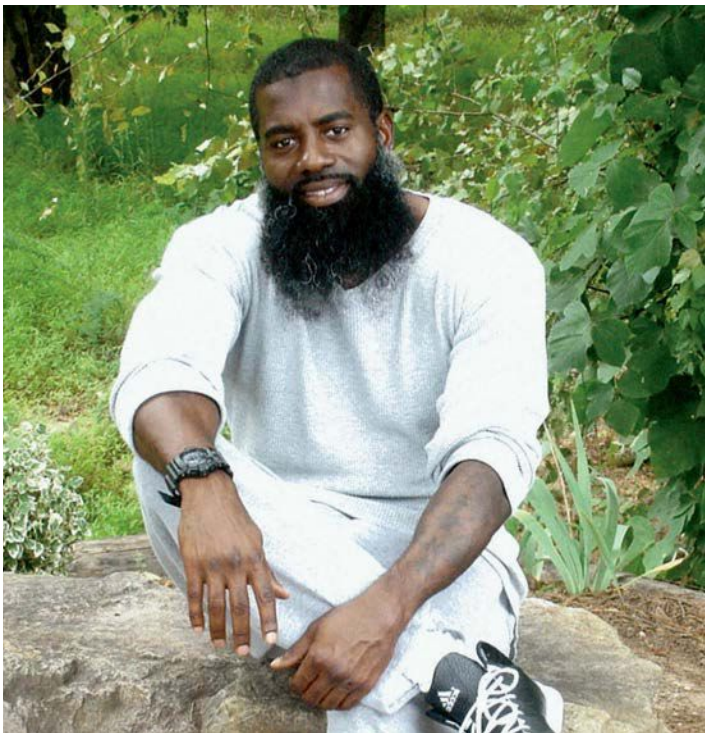
• • •

Although hip-hop was born nearby, in the Bronx, Harlem wasn't fertile ground for rappers. Rap was considered a reach, while crack, on the other hand, was making a lot of people a lot of money. That route closed for Muhadith with his mother's sobriety.

He started by writing rhymes in a diary. Eventually, after filling "notebook after notebook," he found the courage to spit for hip-hop pioneer Fab 5 Freddy, a friend of George Jackson's and the host of *Yo! MTV Raps*. Freddy wasn't impressed. "That's a freestyle," he said dismissively after each rhyme. However, he did offer some constructive criticism: Write complete concepts and complete stories. With that advice in hand, the newly named Loon set out to pursue a career in rap.

In 1997, Harlem finally produced a bona





Left: Loon (right) in 2003 with music industry legend L.A. Reid. Right: Now known as Amir Junaid Muhadith, Loon resides in the Butner Federal Correctional Complex in North Carolina.

fide rap star, Mase—a former high school basketball player who shelved his hoop dreams to hit it big with Puff Daddy's Bad Boy Records. After his 1997 debut album, *Harlem World,* went quadruple platinum, he asked Loon to anchor a rap group also named Harlem World. There was a problem: Loon and Mase were engaged in a cold war of sorts. The two rappers shared a similar voice and flow, which in the provincial world of Harlem—and hip-hop in general—was a violation. Still, Loon joined forces with his longtime frenemy. The group's album tanked, and Mase left the music industry for the church shortly thereafter.

Following a string of failed deals at Sony and Arista, Loon turned to ghostwriting for artists including Shaquille O'Neal and Puff Daddy. Then, in the summer of 2000, he found himself in Miami, writing for Puff Daddy's upcoming album *The Saga Continues….* It was an important comeback attempt for Bad Boy following the Notorious B.I.G.'s death, Mase's retirement and the disappointing sales of Puff's previous album, *Forever.* Nothing was left to chance. At Circle House Studios, a blackboard loomed on the wall, marked with song titles and progress reports denoting which songs were complete and which needed verses or hooks. "I saw an opportunity in that blackboard," Muhadith says. What was meant to be a four-day gig stretched into a two-week-long residency that produced 11 songs and a relationship that would alter both of their careers. Loon even postponed his wedding, scheduled for the week after he first arrived in Miami, to write for Puff.

"Every day he said he was coming home. Finally I was like, 'All right, what is going on?' He was like, 'I can't leave. I have to finish this album.' This was days before the wedding," says his wife, Nona Crowd. "He convinced me we weren't canceling the wedding, just postponing it, because this was his big chance." The wedding was postponed for nearly nine years.

Puff was impressed with Loon's drive. "Puff loved the work ethic—well, Puff likes whoever can make him money," says Loon's former Harlem World group mate Michael "Blinky Blink" Foster. "He also likes people who don't complain. If Puff didn't like what he wrote, Loon would just write another verse."

The two Harlemites shared more than ambition: Their fathers, it turned out, had been friends—and largely absent from both of their lives. Puff was three years old when his father, a hustler named Melvin Combs, was murdered; Burger died of cancer when Loon was a teen. Puff and Loon bonded, and one night in the studio Puff spilled his guts about his recent breakup with Jennifer Lopez. "This was a broken guy," Muhadith says. "He's telling me the story of him and J. Lo. 'I lost my girl. I got it all and no one to share it with.' Then it hits me." Loon took Puff's tragedy—the personal anecdotes, the feelings, the emotions—and crafted "I Need a Girl (Part One)," a post-breakup love letter from Puff to J. Lo for the entire world to hear.

First we were friends then became lovers
You was more than my girl, we was like brothers
All night we would play fight under covers
Now you gone, can't love you like I really wanna
But every time I think about your pretty smile
And how we used to drive the whole city wild
Damn I wish you would've had my child….

"I Need a Girl (Part One)" and its sequel, "I Need a Girl (Part Two)," both featuring Loon, were Puff's biggest hits in years, peaking at number two and number four respectively on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. Bad Boy Records

Loon (left) with Puff Daddy at the premiere of *Bad Boys II* in New York City in 2003.

was back, armed with a new star. "Loon gave Bad Boy a boost," says former Hot 97 DJ Mister Cee. " 'I Need a Girl' dominated radio. It got the Bad Boy train rolling again."

• • •

At first glance, Loon seemed to be a perfect fit for Bad Boy. Cool, cocky and handsome, he personified turn-of-the-millennium Harlem swag. His music also slotted nicely into the space left vacant following Mase's departure: sly wordplay and a lethargic flow—which, yes, was similar to Mase's—over bubbly production built for the clubs.

Loon's ascent continued with cameos on hit records from Mario Winans, Toni Braxton and 3LW, but the business of music interfered when Bad Boy's transition from Arista to Universal delayed his solo album. There were also artistic differences. Loon was uncomfortable being the label's token dreamboat rapper—"the wedding singer," as he calls it—and yearned to make grittier records similar to his 1995 single, "Scotch on the Rocks," or "You Made Me" from the Harlem World album. But, he says, Puff frowned whenever Loon strayed from his lane.

Released in October 2003, Loon's self-titled debut was a modest success, peaking at number six on the Billboard 200 before plummeting. He believes the album wasn't promoted or marketed properly because, he says, he was receiving a higher percentage of royalties than most Bad Boy artists. "I had a few heated moments with Puff. I wanted to fight him," Muhadith says. "But I liked Sean John Combs; I wasn't really a Diddy fan." In December 2004, he left Bad Boy "on a good note." (Combs and Bad Boy president Harve Pierre declined requests to comment.)

Loon grew frustrated as he attempted to reignite his career out from under the shadow of Bad Boy. Performances and royalties paid the bills, but he lived check to check. He was drinking more, smoking more weed, playing video games all night. In interviews he lashed out at Mase and others. He hit the rapper 40 Cal with a shovel during an altercation at a Harlem barbershop. He felt overwhelmed: A hit record meant he'd have to write another hit record and another after that. There was no end in sight.

"I was empty," Muhadith says. "I hadn't cried in a long time. I hadn't felt anything in a long time." He was searching for something, and he found it early one morning while on tour in Abu Dhabi.

The story of how Loon converted to Islam is neat and convenient, almost like a superhero origin story. From his balcony at the Emirates Palace hotel, he saw three seagulls flying in the distance. When he went inside to unpack, the three seagulls landed on his balcony. "Something really special was happening in my heart," Muhadith says. His mind swam with the recent positive exchanges he'd had with Muslims in Senegal, Kazakhstan and Dubai. The solution to his problems became clear. He ran to the lobby, asking, "How do I become a Muslim?" A man led him in reciting the *shahada,* the Muslim profession of faith.

From then on he decided to abstain from past sins—drugs, alcohol, adultery and music. Crowd saw an immediate difference. "He was more caring, honest. He paid more attention," she says. "Seeing the changes he was making was an inspiration."

Being a Muslim in Butner isn't that bad, Muhadith says. Inmates can prepare their own food and are provided with a meal before dawn during Ramadan. As the prison imam, Muhadith continues to study Islam and teaches Arabic.

"You see this guy behind us? Military guy," he tells me without lowering his voice. "He said some derogatory remarks about Muslims that got back to me. I didn't get mad. I approached him and said, 'Seventy-two percent of Americans have never met a Muslim. Is it safe to say that you're one of them?' "

Muhadith places his hand on my shoulder. "Look, I don't want people to think I'm a square," he says. "I'm not a holy roller. I still have a personality. I still have a sense of humor." His high-pitched giggle and deadpan wit—"It's my cheat day," he says when selecting an Almond Joy from the vending machine—are apparent. "I just have boundaries. Before, I had no boundaries."

• • •

Soon after his spiritual awakening, Muhadith's life took another significant turn. For years he'd heard whispers that Joseph "Jazz" Hayden, a former associate of Nicky Barnes's who'd served 13 years for manslaughter, was his biological father. After hanging out with Hayden, Muhadith noticed similarities. "Something about his style," he says, "the way he walked, the way he talked." Muhadith hopes to take a DNA test soon.

Who does he think is his father, Burger Hughley or Jazz Hayden? "I don't know. I'm 41 years old and I'm not sure who my father is," he says. "It doesn't matter. Both are hood royalty." He then smiles. "Ask my mom. I'm curious what she'd say."

Two weeks later, I meet Carol Hawkins on the corner of 116th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, outside the First Corinthian Baptist Church, where she worships.

She wears furry Steve Madden boots, khakis and a plaid shirt with a cream wool sweater coat over it. Her hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail. We drive uptown in her black Nissan Pathfinder before parking on 148th Street in front of Esplanade Gardens. Then she tells the story of how she met Nicky Barnes.

One day on her way home from tennis, she spotted a handful of police officers with binoculars at a gas station on 150th Street. As she walked toward her building, she recognized Barnes, by that point a notorious neighborhood figure, at the bus stop. She warned him about the surveillance and offered to hide his stash in her parents' apartment. "Ever since then, I was holding drugs," she tells me. "After I started making all that money, I didn't want to go to school no more."

She met Burger Hughley soon after. He was older, at least 15 years her senior, and he showered her with money, clothes and attention. The fact that he was married didn't affect the relationship. "I wouldn't have cared if he had five wives," Hawkins says. "He was making me happy."

The drug game was lucrative, and Hawkins soon owned fur coats, a Cadillac, a Mercedes. Sometimes they'd drive to the airport and, on a whim, pick somewhere warm to fly. San Juan, Vegas and Acapulco were among their favorite destinations. When I ask her what specifically the money was like, all she can do is look up and mutter, "Oh God, oh man." A beat passes before she turns and says, "I used to make more than $20,000 a day."

It didn't last, of course. "I got up with that crack," she explains. After her son's proposition—he'd stop selling drugs if she'd stop using them—Hawkins went to rehab in Rochester, New York, where she found God. She is now sober and works for a community health organization. A devout Christian, she tells me she's nothing but supportive of Muhadith's conversion to Islam. "He has found peace in his life," she says. "He found a god he loves and serves. Even though he calls him Allah, he's the same God I love and serve."

I ask if she knows definitively who fathered Muhadith. "No, I don't, to be honest," she says, speaking deliberately. "I do know for sure that I was in Vegas with Jazz and the math added up to Jazz, but I didn't want to hurt Burger's feelings because he was walking around being such a proud dad. I don't know. I was young. I made an executive decision to just say that it was Burger. It kept away a lot of hurt and explaining." Hayden, now a community activist, did not respond to e-mails.

We sit quietly in the Pathfinder. Then she calls her parents. "You wanna go up and meet them?" she asks me.

Hawkins exits her car gingerly. She's 61, and her knees are shot. As we make our way to the entrance, she gives an improvised tour of Esplanade Gardens. "This is the smoking corner," she says. "It was my smoke corner, then my kid's, then my kid's kids."

On the 27th floor sits the Hawkinses' three-bedroom apartment; a balcony offers stunning views of Harlem to the west and Yankee Stadium to the north. "My mother loves them damn Yankees," Hawkins says. And here she is, Miss Hawkins, 86 years old but still going strong. She wears a shirt that reads WHEN GOD CLOSES A DOOR, HE OPENS A WINDOW. She makes sure I see the ASCAP award her grandson won for "I Need a Girl."

"I TOLD HER, 'IF YOU STOP USING DRUGS, I'LL STOP SELLING DRUGS, BECAUSE YOU ARE ABOUT TO GET ME KILLED.' I LEFT THE STREETS."

Miss Hawkins plans to write a character letter for Muhadith later in the week. "Oh God, I miss him," she says. "He calls me, sometimes twice a week. I said, 'You see this situation you in now? That's what I tried to get you to bypass. That's why I worked so hard with you. That's why I brought you up in the church.' I was very disappointed with his situation."

Later, on our way out, Carol Hawkins greets nearly every person she passes.

"You know everyone," I joke.

"Yeah," she says. "I been round here a long time."

• • •

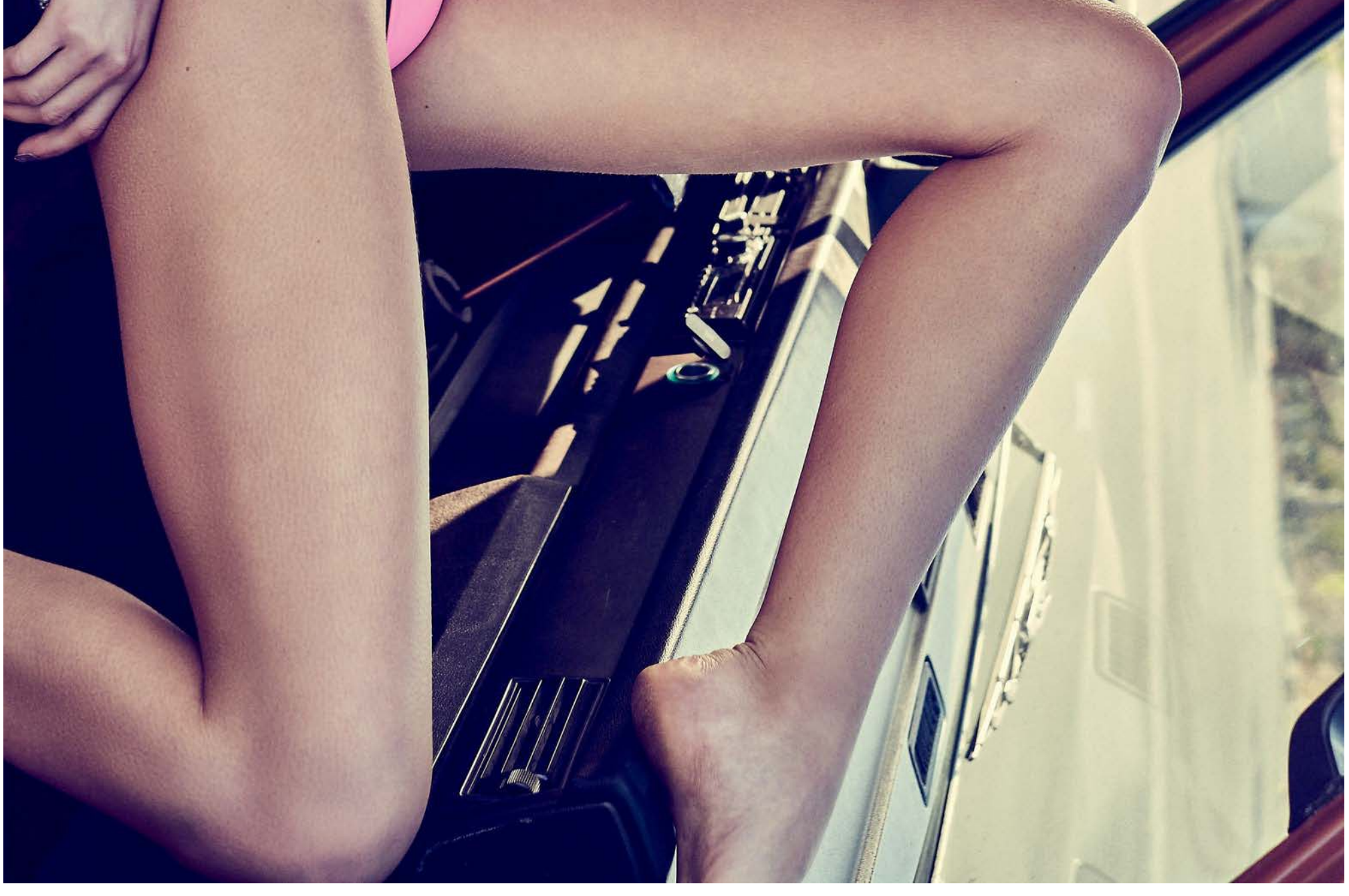
Although he's not scheduled for release until August 2021, Muhadith is doing everything he can to expedite things. He has applied for executive clemency, a pardon that would arrive during President Obama's final days in office. It has happened before—George W. Bush pardoned John Forté, the ex–Fugees associate who was serving 14 years in prison for smuggling cocaine.

Muhadith already has plans for when he's a free man. He'll reestablish his relationship with his wife, who works as a chef in North Carolina and visits him regularly, and his seven children, and he hopes to return to the lecture circuit to share his story with Muslim youth. A move overseas, once it's possible, is more than likely. He won't write or record new music, though he does admit to sometimes thinking about rap, comparing the sensation to what a recovered alcoholic must feel when walking past a liquor store. And sometimes it's unavoidable. At one point during the afternoon, the visitation-room radio blasts "Mo Money Mo Problems" by the Notorious B.I.G., Mase and Puff Daddy.

Muhadith was disappointed to learn about the current Bad Boy reunion tour. "What kind of reunion will it be?" he asks. A fair question considering Biggie is gone, Craig Mack has reportedly joined a religious cult, and Loon and G. Dep are incarcerated. When asked why so many former Bad Boy artists either find religion or become incarcerated (or, in Muhadith's case, both), he says, "I don't attribute it to Puff. Being on Bad Boy you're riding this tidal wave that you can't prepare for. Like most people who ride waves of that magnitude, they often wipe out."

The wave no longer appeals to Muhadith, but the fame is residual. Just before visiting hours end, a young inmate and his girlfriend—long black wavy hair, green eyes, ballet flats, skinny jeans, stunning curves—approach Muhadith. "Hey, man, she saw you and wanted to meet you," the other inmate says. Muhadith appears embarrassed. The woman is starstruck, standing on her toes, head tilted, big smile, giggling nonstop. "Uh-oh, I better watch her around you," her boyfriend cracks.

Muhadith laughs afterward. The encounter reminds him of a past that shaped him but no longer defines him. "This whole situation has been a purification for me," he says. "My life from the streets to the music industry was always ripping and running. It was nonstop. This has become a vacation. Am I over this vacation? Yeah, I am." ■



Road-Trippin'

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **GREG MANIS** MODEL **HANNAH GLASBY**

BEN VENOM

Black metal, satanic imagery and biker-gang iconography are all subjects that San Francisco–based artist Ben Venom (a.k.a. Ben Baumgartner) lovingly transforms into quilts. Yes, quilts. How exactly did a metalhead with an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute gravitate toward the methods of your great-grandma's sewing circle? As a graduate student in 2006, Venom saw an exhibit of works by the legendary African American quilters of Gee's Bend, Alabama in which scraps of clothing were sewn into bold geometric patterns. He says he was inspired by the craftsmanship and by the idea of up-cycling. Applying his own interests to the medium, he arrived at a body of work he describes as a "collision." Venom says, "I combine various macho, loud and disparate elements of culture with the relatively soft and functional medium of textiles. I turn it up to 11 and push it past the red." Instead of using folksy ornamentation and calico quilting patterns, Venom mostly works with recycled scrap fabric and concert T-shirts purchased online. In his I Am the Night Rider, a skeleton holding a flaming torch in one hand and in the other a frayed American flag, its stars replaced by a pair of rolling dice, rides on the back of a racing wolf. Sewn-together bits of Harley-Davidson T-shirts and tie-dyed material flesh out the body of the wolf, while the entire piece maintains the symmetry and composition of classic patchwork quilting. Into other pieces, Venom stitches rallying cries and outsider credos such as "Live fast," "Don't tread on me" and "Fly by night" and makes playful use of iconic figures including Hello Kitty and the Playboy Rabbit Head. His work has been shown nationally and internationally, yet Venom constructs each of his pieces to be practical and durable. He contends that his quilts, while decorative as well as thought-provoking, are still functional. "When hell freezes over," Venom says, "the beasts of metal will have a warm blanket to sleep with."—Eric Steinman

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RANDY DODSON

Opposite page: Artist Ben Venom with *Don't Tread on Me!* (handmade quilt with recycled fabric, 87 x 155 inches, 2015) and a collection of customized clothing.


DON'T TREAD ON ME!

Top: *Member's Only.* Handmade quilt with recycled fabric, 17 x 17 inches, 2015. **Bottom:** *Use Your Illusion.* Handmade quilt with recycled fabric, 25 x 25 inches, 2016. **Right:** *I Am the Night Rider.* Handmade quilt with recycled fabric, 47 x 58 inches, 2015.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Igniting a Dark and Powerful Beauty

Back View

Fear Not the Reaper

A door to fantasy and legend opens with the dramatic, hand-painted character display with crypt-inspired base

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Creator of captivating fantasy characters and richly stylized Gothic designs, Anne Stokes is one of the most sought-after fantasy artists of her time. Now her vivid imagination sparks an intriguing collection that will soon have you under its spell: the *Anne Stokes Summon the Reaper* Zippo® Lighter Collection.

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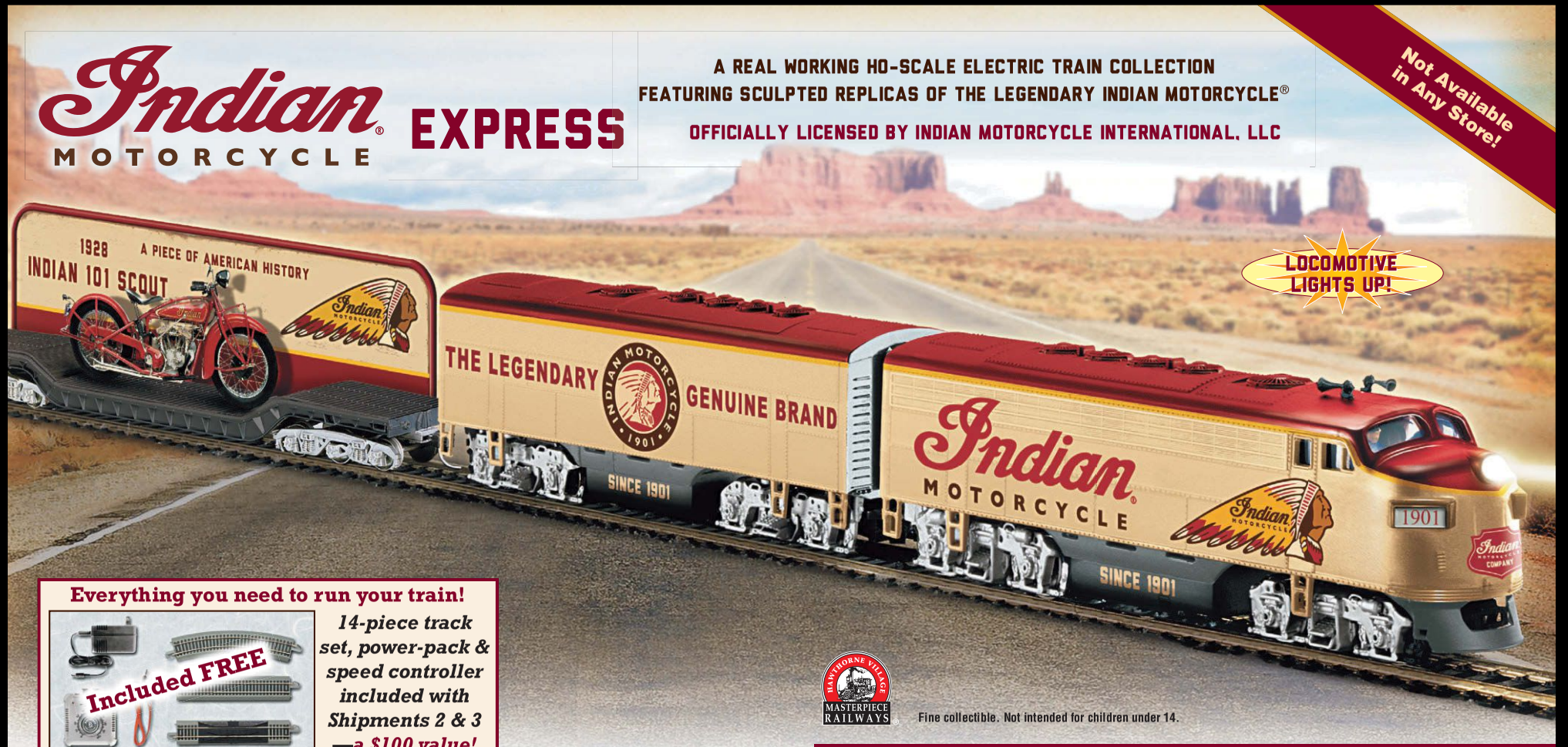

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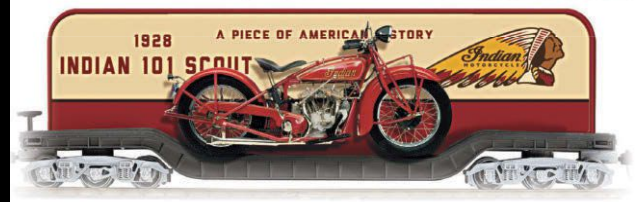

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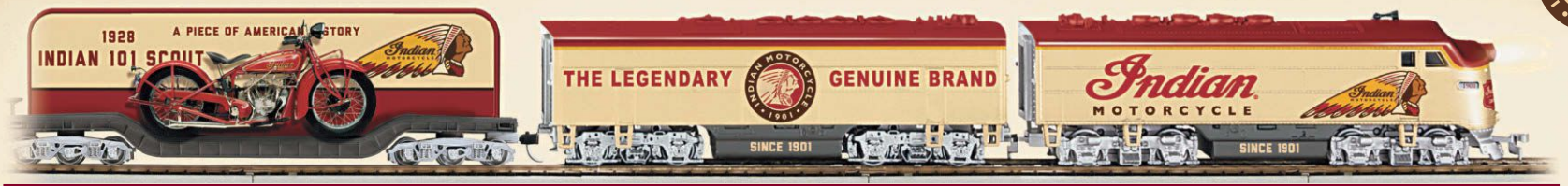

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