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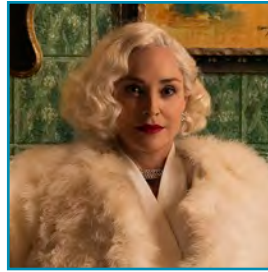
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GRAB SHARON



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You Can Count on Sharon Stone

Screen icon on how *Basic Instinct* influenced her LGBTQ activism, acting with Ellen and what her dad meant to her gay friends

By Chris Azzopardi

That scene. You know the one: the one in *Basic Instinct* where Sharon Stone's legs are open. It's been talked about and talked about, and talked about some more. It's been talked about so much in the years since it shook the world in 1992 that it has diminished the other non-crotch facets of Sharon Stone.

What nobody talks about anymore is her heart, her courage and her activism. As Stone pushed through the male-dominated Hollywood sphere of the 1990s to reach top-tier cinematic heights through her work in 1990's *Total Recall* and then *Basic Instinct*, an Oscar nomination for *Casino* solidifying her influential screen presence, she was giving a voice to the voiceless. She was

speaking up for marginalized women. She was speaking up for the LGBTQ community. She was speaking up for herself.

And to this day, she still does.

Stone's enduring affinity with the LGBTQ community might explain why working for the first time with Ryan Murphy, known for bringing actresses over 50 (Jessica Lange, Kathy Bates, and now Stone) into his lavishly stylized queeriverse of prestige TV, was so special. In Murphy's dark dramedy *Ratched* for Netflix, an origins story of Nurse Ratched of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the 62-year-old actress portrays the deliciously insane Lenore Osgood, a rich, twice-widowed mother who'd rather spend time with her

Capuchin monkey than her queer son (played by openly gay actor Brandon Flynn). The series also stars out actresses Sarah Paulson, as nurse Mildred Ratched, and *Sex and the City* star and political activist Cynthia Nixon, who portrays Gwendolyn Briggs, the press secretary for the Governor of California.

When I spoke with Stone recently by phone, she did talk about the show's queerness. But it was the touching story of her late father, Joe, who took her gay friends under his wing, that you won't forget.

Chris Azzopardi: Where do you think your role as Lenore Osgood will rate on the "Things Queer People Love

The image shows two cups of shaved ice on a metal table. The cup on the left is filled with bright red shaved ice, and the cup on the right is filled with light pink shaved ice. Both cups are topped with a single red cherry and have a black straw inserted. In the background, there is a colorful fence made of vertical wooden slats in various colors like blue, yellow, red, and green. The 'SIDETRACK' logo is overlaid on the top center of the image.

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that I've Done" scale?

Sharon Stone: Right? (Laughs.) I have to say that it's full of beauty and full of style and full of the immense tenderness that happens when we confront abuse. And because of the nature of what it is to live a queer life, I think all of that will be very moving.

CA: While watching *Ratched*, I was reflecting on your LGBTQ roles. There's been some that are blatantly queer, and others that are more nuanced in their queerness.

***Catwoman* with Halle Berry came to mind because I really do think it's part of the queer canon.**

SS: (Laughs.) I think because the character was so intriguing – and so catty, also! And I think because the character was really based in an intense beauty-centric world, maybe. I just feel like my characters are all based in a “for everybody” kind of world, but I really believe there's something when you work for people who are gay-friendly and people who hire gay people on the set, where costumes and sets and things have an opportunity to grow and become even more lavish.

We shot (*Catwoman*) in Tony Duquette's estate house (Duquette was an artist who specialized in fantastical set designs for stage and film); he was a

very good friend of mine and, you know, he said to me when he met me, “I haven't seen any of your pictures, darling.” But truly he was engaged in the (Canadian-American film actress and Duquette's wife) Mary Pickford and (silent film actor) Douglas Fairbanks universe and swashbuckler films and all of these extremely lavish and beautiful filmmaking experiences.

One was not allowed to have a homosexual identity in those periods, so people had partners and the partnerships were agreements, and they were often very artistic agreements. In this case, very beautiful artistic agreements, very accomplished artistic agreements. And this was a way to love, be loved, be safe, be protective and work in the industry.

CA: You've worked with straight directors as well as gay and queer directors. Ryan Murphy now among them. And when I think of him and the gay men I know, I think of the reverence and respect we have for women. Based on your experiences, what is different for you working with straight male directors versus gay or queer male directors and their treatment of the women that you've played?

SS: (Laughs tellingly, as if she has a lot

to say about this.) That's a beautiful question. Well, it doesn't just break down to gay and straight; it breaks down to people who have self-respect and people who do not. And our business was very much dominated by straight men – and a lot of straight men who felt that self-respect for them meant that there wasn't any for women.

Now that we are opening the business to a more sincere and honest appraisal of reality, women, men, gays and straights get to participate in the business with a treatment of white male abuse, which is starting to calm down but not completely. And as we can see from our worldview here and certainly from our national view, the resistance to the end of it, it's so violent; the resistance to the end of white male supremacy is so violent, and the women who have thrived on being victims and being victimized are unsure of what to do too because being a victim is an identity and having that situation where you call your husband or wife “mommy and daddy” is also part of that system. There's a whole mindset that goes with that system that's leaving, and as that leaves we have to start addressing all the other things, the underbelly of that, like child abuse and pedophilia.

CA: When it comes to *Ratched* and



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working with someone like Ryan Murphy, who loves women differently than a straight man might, do you notice a difference in the way the character is being treated? For instance, was your experience different on, say, the set of *Basic Instinct*?

SS: Well, I was protected on *Basic Instinct* because I had a European director (Paul Verhoeven). I had a very intelligent European director, so I was protected. I was not abused at all, or I could never have been able to play that part. We made agreements even prior to shooting that if we had disagreements we would take them off the set and into a private place and talk so that it wouldn't tear down the authority of the character.

CA: When *Basic Instinct* was released, it agitated LGBTQ activists who were taken aback by your character being a bisexual psychopath. Seeing as though you were passionate about LGBTQ issues and you are an activist for the community, how did you process their concerns at the time?

SS: At the time we had all kinds of problems, not just LGBTQ people feeling like they were going to be abused and not knowing what was going to happen and showing great concern. But there were just people acting out all over the place over this movie. People blowing horns, trying to destroy the sets.

So (co-star) Michael Douglas and Sherry Lansing, the head of Paramount

Pictures, and I sat down and we talked about it. I said that I would be very happy to become the person who talked about these LGBTQ issues and to discuss that what we were trying to do was put LGBTQ characters in a major motion picture from Paramount and that we were trying to, for the first time ever, do this. That we were trying to give the LGBTQ community a platform. And that I would take on the position of being the voice of that platform if this community would trust me.

CA: And you did.

SS: And I did. And Micheal and Sherry were like, "You're willing to do this?" And I'm like, "I'm absolutely willing to do this, and there's nothing about me that would cause people to distrust that that's what I'm going to do."

CA: Would you say that was the moment in your life when LGBTQ issues became especially important to you?

SS: I was already working for amfAR (The Foundation for AIDS Research, which Stone began working for in 1995, as Global Campaign Chair) at that time, so no. And I had already begun working for the Pediatric AIDS Foundation because my neighbor had funded it. So I was already heavily working on that with our pediatrician Dr. Peter S. Waldstein and his wife. I was into the pediatric aspect of it, and then I went to the Dominican Republic as a guest of the president because they were beginning

to have extreme AIDS issues. This was a really long time ago. This was even before amfAR. Then amfAR asked me if I would work for them.

CA: Getting back to film, I'm curious about your role in the 2000 HBO film *If These Walls Could Talk 2*. You must still get stopped by lesbians everywhere you go for being a part of that movie.

SS: Well, I just think it was really great that we had this opportunity for Anne Heche to direct Ellen (DeGeneres) and I. Ellen was so brave and so cool to come out and use her platform to get so much good work done. Vermont changed their laws after we did that film (the year the film was released, Vermont became the first U.S. state to pass same-sex civil union legislation). The Vermont senator (James Merrill Jeffords) then changed from being a Republican to a Democrat, and I went to visit him at the Senate in Washington and there was a lot more action.

I know everybody wants to be mad at Ellen right now, but let's not forget *all* of the incredible things she took on her own shoulders and her own back, and the pressure she took. I mean, when we did that, my parents were like, "Why are you doing this? And *what* are you doing?" And when I really explained it to them, my dad was like, "So you mean those two uncles that lived together down the road were queer? And those old ladies were queer?" And I'm like, "Yeah, dad." And he's like, "Well, isn't

that nice. So they weren't lonely and alone." And I'm like, "Yeah, dad; they weren't lonely and alone." And he goes, "Well, that's so good."

CA: That's a beautiful response.

SS: Right? So he started to have this revelation about all these old men or old women that he'd known all his life that lived together that weren't alone and lonely. He started inviting my gay friends up to the hunting cabin, including my friend whose father had kind of dismissed him as not being masculine enough to do anything. My dad would take them out on the boat and teach them how to shoot and fish and drive the boat and walk in the woods. These were my 40 and 50 year old friends who were standing up and saying, "I had a dad but my real dad was Joe Stone because this is what he did for me. He taught me how to shoot a bow and arrow." All of these things that their dads wouldn't spend the time doing with them because they were mad at them for being gay.

CA: I'm getting a mental image of me, a gay man, learning to walk in the woods from your father and what that experience might have been like.

SS: At my dad's memorial, one of my friends stood up and he said, "I don't

suppose you would recognize why I'm such a fashion plate in these flannel shirts, but these were Joe Stone's shirts and he treated me like I was his son."

CA: Did your dad ever see *If These Walls Could Talk 2* then?

SS: Of course. He saw everything. He died 10 years ago, and he really became a very Zen-like dude who actually talked to a lot of my friends about a lot of big things in their lives. He used to do this thing where he'd go, "I'm gonna go out to the hardware store," and he wouldn't come back for seven or eight hours. He'd go to the hardware store and he'd go to the little shops and he'd go sit in the park and he'd literally wait for a person who needed to talk to him and help people with their life traumas. I can't tell you how many people – giant businessmen, rock stars, political figures – that have come to me saying, "I knew your dad and I was having such a terrible time and I sat with your father and he helped me. Your father changed my life." It was just all these walks that he went on, and all these walks to the hardware store.

CA: Do you think you've been influenced by him in regards to the work that you do for the LGBTQ

community but also how vocal you are about other causes that matter to you?

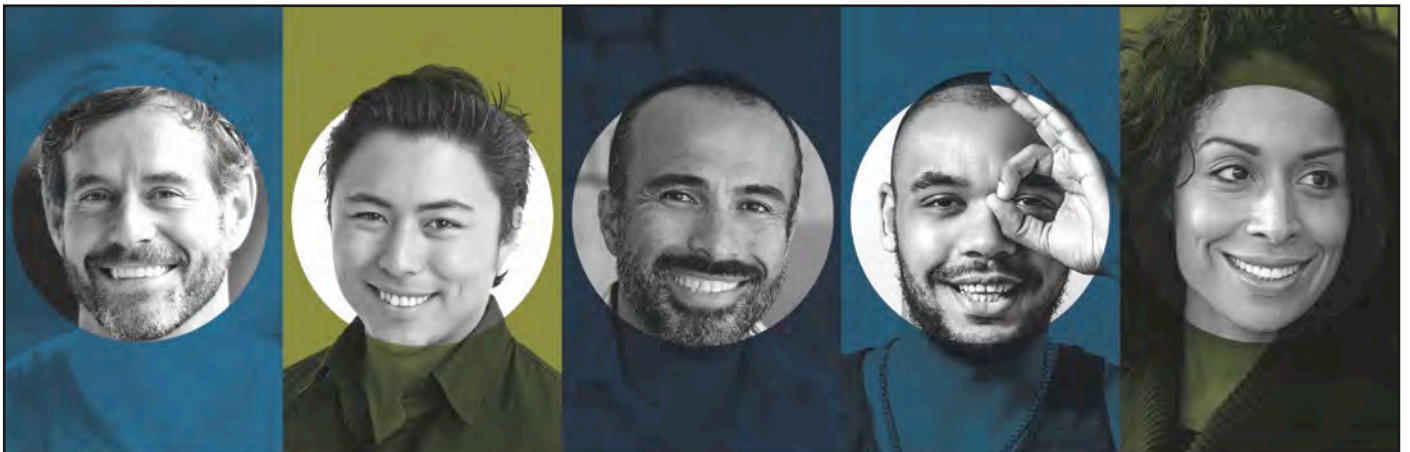
SS: Yes, by both my mother and my father. Because my mother always said, "It doesn't matter who you love, it matters that you love."

CA: I couldn't end this interview without mentioning the fact that you performed with Kylie Minogue in Cannes for AIDS research, and then you gave the gays an iconic moment with Mariah Carey on the red carpet at the 2018 Golden Globes and said you were going to trade diamonds with her. Did you realize the gay magic you were creating in both of those moments with two of our biggest gay icons?

SS: No, but I can tell you that both of those women have been through their own personal major difficulties and giant triumphs. I admire both of them for being able to live in the public life and continue to be so generous.

CA: I admire that about you because you have also been that person. I'm so happy we have your voice and that it's been heard.

SS: Thank you. One-hundred percent, you can count on me.



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GRAB ADDICTED



Where's the Party? All the Steamiest Party Gear is at AddictedUSA.com

By Connor Davenport

Clubs doors may be closed but that isn't stopping Addicted from getting the party started.

"This fall's clubwear collection is all about fun," says *Chris Lynch* of Addicted USA. The brand's new "Party" collection features crop tops, fetish shorts, mesh tanks and feathers (yes, feathers!) in bold black, white, silver and gold colors. There is also metal and fur and more.

"We played with new technologies and fabrics to create the best standing out party outfits for all those of you who are not afraid to be in the spotlight!," Lynch continues. "It's a collection to go

out for a night to be remembered, shining like a star in the night sky!"

Addicted has always been intended for guys who are comfortable with their bodies and are daring enough to be overtly racy.

All garments in the Party collection are finely and meticulously crafted by Addicted's artisan team in Barcelona. "As a men's fashion label, materials and craftsmanship are top priority," designer *Carmen Monforte* confirms. "More time is put into the sewing of each garment so that they are built to last through the roughest play. They are tailored to fit every body type

perfectly."

Addicted is the sister line from ES Collection, the popular men's athletic wear company. Since 2009, the brand has been dedicated to the design, manufacturing and sale of men's underwear, swimwear, and sportswear. It was founded by *Eduardo Suner*, also the founder of ES Collection, and has distinguished itself by setting trends and pushing the envelope in stylish, sexy and very wearable men's fashion.

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GRAB BRANDEN

Life story: An interview with Branden James

By Gregg Shapiro

In 2013, right before I moved from Chicago to Fort Lauderdale, I was fortunate enough to interview singer Branden James, not once, but twice. A gay classical crossover artist, Branden, who also lived in Chicago at the time, was riding high following his success on America's Got Talent (where he was a finalist on season eight), as well as his performances with various national opera companies, including Chicago's Lyric Opera. But Branden's triumphs were not without trauma, something he goes into detail about in his new memoir *Lyrics of My Life* (Cleis Press, 2020). Raised in a conservative Christian home in Orange County, California, Branden risked being shunned by his family not only for being gay, but also for being HIV-positive. A survivor with talent to burn, James is now happily married to fellow musician James Clark, a cellist, with whom he performs as the musical duo Branden & James. I had the pleasure of speaking with James in the fall of 2020 about his book.

Gregg Shapiro: Why was now the right time to write your memoir *Lyrics of My Life*?

Branden James: I wrote it over the course of spring 2018/summer 2019. The release was delayed once because it (Cleis Press) was taken over by Simon & Schuster, and then a second time because of the current pandemic. After the second delay, I was a bit disheartened, wondering if the project would be shelved. I'm grateful to have released it in this tricky time. Writing a memoir is a labor of love for sure. I honestly never had it in mind that I'd write a book of any kind, but when the opportunity presented itself, I thought, why not? I believe we should always grab new life challenges and experiences that are handed to us.

GS: Did you have a target audience in mind while writing the book?

BJ: I didn't really have a target audience (in mind) while writing the book. I knew my story would probably resonate with LGBTQ+ people. I wanted to share this

story to help younger people in their own coming out journeys, and those who are closeted and fearful of what might happen to them if they reveal their sexuality or HIV status. From having been on America's Got Talent, a great deal of my fan base is made up of rural and suburban Christians. I've been blown away at the amount of support I've received from them over the years. Just like music speaks to all of us

universally, the stories we share with one another connect us on a deeper level; I truly believe we are much more alike than we are different or divided. I hope that telling this story will help those outside of the LGBTQ+ community understand a little bit more about who we are, and where our hearts are. Reducing stigma around HIV/AIDS is a huge part of what I set out to accomplish when writing the book.

GS: Being that *Lyrics of My Life* is a memoir and your childhood is a significant part of the book, I was wondering if your parents and siblings have read the book.

BJ: My parents and my sister have read the book. Every person mentioned in it has read the excerpts they are included in. I had to have written permission from them in order to include them in my memoir. Everyone was generous in spirit and allowed me to include several personal stories about them. It was

difficult for my Mom to read especially; the details in the book aren't the kinds of things we generally discuss with our parents. She was saddened to know that I'd withheld many truths from her for so many years. It was cathartic to have her read it and understand me better. Now, I feel like the barrier that was holding back our relationship has been broken. It's beautiful and liberating.

GS: Speaking of family, not everyone is lucky enough to have an accepting and understanding Uncle Ted in their life as you did. What does that relationship mean to you?

BJ: My Uncle Ted is my biggest fan, and has guided me from a young age – encouraging me to pursue my dreams, and get a college education. He has never passed judgment on me. He has always said that what I do is up to me, and God, and that's it. I wouldn't be here today, as an emotionally stable person, without his unconditional love



and acceptance.

GS: As is often the case in a memoir, the book is filled with intimate and personal details. Was there one thing more than any others that was most difficult for you to write about?

BJ: It was difficult to write about things I regret, such as passing HIV onto someone else, or driving recklessly while under the influence of marijuana and prescription pills. These are things I'll probably never forgive myself for, knowing I put other people in harm's way. I decided before writing the book that being honest about who I am was the best way forward. I'm glad I wrote the book in this way – it has been so freeing to put pen to paper and tell this story that I was afraid to share for so many years.

GS: Thank you for using the word "meatus". I had to look it up even before I got to the part where you suggested the reader look it up. Writers make a variety of choices when writing, why did you choose to use the word "meatus"?

BJ: [Laughs] sometimes I found it less awkward to use scientific terms rather than more common descriptions when writing about personal details, or in this case, an opening leading to the interior of the body.

GS: A large section of the book centers on your college experience. There have been a few good college-

set movies released this year, including *I Used to Go Here* and *Sh*tthouse*. If there was a movie version of *Lyrics of My Life*, who would you want to play you?

BJ: Good question [laughs]!! I would hope that someone in the LGBTQ+ community who can sing could play me in the movie version of *Lyrics of My Life*. I'll just throw a few names out there:



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Cheyenne Jackson, Adam Lambert and Neil Patrick Harris come to mind. I think it'd be cool if a trans person played me, too.

GS: With your extensive background in opera, pop music and Disney tunes, is there a style of music, say K-Pop, or artist, perhaps Cardi B or Angel Olsen, that you listen to that might surprise your fans?

BJ: I appreciate all kinds of music. I listen to, and am inspired by lyrics, mostly. I'm not a huge hip-hop fan, but I do love female singer-songwriters of all types: Sara Bareilles, Ingrid Michaelson, Sarah McLachlan, Dolly Parton, Carole King, Dua Lipa, Adele. Give me a sad song with soul-stirring lyrics, and I'm all about it!

GS: Sam Harris, who like you is a gay singer who competed on a talent show (he won Star Search in 1983), wrote a memoir *Ham: Slices of a Life* in 2014, and followed it up with a novel in 2020. Now that you've written your memoir, do you think you might have a novel in you?

BJ: I'm currently reading and writing my way through (Julia Cameron's) *The Artist's Way*. It is a book that helps creative people let go of fear and find a clearer pathway to a higher level of creativity. I hope to let go of some of my creative hang-ups and write a book and

some great songs. I'd be very happy with that!

GS: This interview is taking place in September 2020, during the year of the COVID-19 pandemic. By what means, as a performer, and now an

author, have you been able to reach your audience?

BJ: We've all had to reinvent ourselves to some extent in this COVID-19 pandemic year of 2020. My husband and I were fairly well-versed on social media before the pandemic hit. The transition to playing virtual concerts wasn't too difficult for us, luckily. Our audiences have been incredibly supportive of our music, and my writing. It requires a little more thought and work to present high-quality content without the presence of a live audience, but it still has been rewarding. People are hungry for entertainment, and for human connection as we all remain in quasi-isolation. In some ways, we have more of a captive audience now than we did pre-COVID. I think we'll continue to use virtual performances to our advantage even when we have the ability to travel and play again for large crowds. It's like someone who works remotely for a big company. You can't beat the commute [laughs]!





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GRAB HOLLY

We All Scream for Ice Cream

By Holly Maholm

I was disoriented. I had been silently congratulating myself on my latest philanthropic effort: The purchase (and plan for future remodeling) of this ramshackle Victorian eyesore – No. 9, Wellington Square – as both a suite of elegant apartments for my friends at Donut Time and a bit of much-needed gentrification of our little town. But now, Recon had announced that he, Fender, Tuco and – evidently – Aly, had “other plans.”

Seeing my anxiety, Recon hurried to explain himself (and, I hoped, relieve me of my distress). “We have been driving the Donut Time delivery chariots for...what is it? Three weeks? Doesn't matter... that's fine. We want to support you and the other LGBT folks at Donut Time, and we like spending time in the out-of-doors and being around the horses. We're happy to do that now, and for the indefinite future.”

“However, you sometimes seem to forget, Holly, why it is that we chose to begin living in tents in the first place. We let ourselves get caught up in...what you might call this country's ‘power structure.’ We became pawns in a great

game that we soon realized we could never win, nor could we find a way to gracefully exit from that game when the price of continuing to play became unbearable. Accordingly, we decided to isolate ourselves from that ‘unaccountable power.’ We took steps to absent ourselves from those oppressive laws – and those agents of law enforcement – who had tried to tell us how we must live.

“So, now, maybe you're afraid we're going to tell you that moving into a bedroom here – plus becoming a ‘cog’ in that great Donut Distribution Network you and Xandra and Cindy are running – is too ‘oppressive’ for us to endure. But, that's not it.”

Recon glanced back at the others, then went on. “Fender and Tuco and I have learned a lot watching you transgender women at Donut Time. Xandra and Cindy came from nothing – working on a street corner – but now they've got a successful business which supports them and their employees. They did that by hard work, long hours, and making as many friends as they could along the way. Now they've got security, independence, and they're not caught up in anybody's web of dependency and debt.

“Anyway,” he continued, “we're happy to move into this house – to the bedrooms upstairs – but there's more. We want to build our own security...our own independence; something that is more than just a tent in the woods. We want to create something that's more permanent than just driving a chariot year after year. Can you understand that?”

“Yes, certainly,” I agreed. “What are your plans?”

Recon responded, “Well, for me, it's easy and quick to explain. I worked construction for a couple of years before I went into the armed forces, so what I want to do is get into ‘home remodeling and general contracting.’ So, if it's okay with you, Holly, I'd like to partner up with you on the remodeling of this house, so I can get experience and learn everything I can.”

Fender spoke up.



“What I want is to get back into music. I need to find a guitar and amp and start practicing again. In time, I plan on giving lessons and maybe join a band that performs professionally. I can't do any of that in a tent!” We all laughed.

Finally, I looked at Tuco, but he turned his head to Aly, to let her speak for the two of them. “I was never in the military, and I've never lived in a tent, but I did spend many long days sitting in front of a cam trying to please my audience. And I learned three things. First: Smile. Second: Give Your Customer What He Wants. And Third: Keep looking for a way to Build on Your Success. We know that Xandra and Cindy have got the audience for ‘donuts’ sewn up in this town, but I see an opening for Tuco and me.

“Look around,” she enthused, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Look at this space! Here's this big, bright foyer in the middle of the floor. Then there's a cozy parlor over on the far side, and a dining room with lots of windows on the other. There's charming, hand-carved woodwork in every room, plus a gorgeous spiral staircase – in good condition (!) – in the back. We think... if this place were fixed up with tables and chairs, antique-style lighting, and brass fixtures shined up bright, it would make a perfect location for an old-fashioned Ice Cream Parlor!”

“That's what I...” she glanced at Tuco, seeking his encouragement, “that's what Tuco and I want to create. It would be our joint project. We would do all the work, and I promise we'd never, ever sell any donuts, ever!”

(To be continued)

Holly Maholm is a transgender woman living in Cleveland, Ohio. Look for Volume 2 of *What Would a Unicorn Do?* (now available on Amazon) which contains additional episodes of Holly's on-going story of her life among the unicorns, plus additional articles and a short story of a transgender woman confronted by Satan! Send a message to Holly www.hollymaholm.com.

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GRAB A PLANE



PRIDE JOURNEY: NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

By Joey Amato

The past few months have been nothing short of disastrous for the travel and tourism industry. Thousands of people have lost their jobs and many more layoffs are planned in the upcoming months. As a travel journalist, I wanted to try to find a balance between safety and promoting destinations to help increase tourism. LGBTQ-friendly destinations need our business now more than ever. As someone who has personally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, I am still very cautious when it comes to participating in certain activities, although I have to admit, I have become less fearful than I was earlier this year.

For my first pandemic pilgrimage, I decided to head to Nashville, Tennessee. Nashville was my home for eight years prior to relocating to Indianapolis, and although I knew Nashville was at one time a hotspot for COVID-19, I know the city well enough to feel comfortable exploring while maintaining the upmost safety

precautions. For starters, I visited in the early part of the week, when the number of tourists (or bachelorette parties) would be as minimal as possible. In fact, I did not see many tourists at all during this trip.

WHERE TO STAY

I decided to stay at the new *Margaritaville Hotel* located downtown, within walking distance to many of the area attractions. My reason for staying downtown was to limit the amount of rideshare trips to and from points of interest. As you enter Margaritaville Hotel you almost feel as if you are instantly transported to a tropical paradise. I have stayed at many hotels over the years, many of which have been quite fabulous, however none provided the feeling and vibe quite like Margaritaville.

After checking in to my room, I decided to explore the property. My first stop was of course the fourth floor pool bar and restaurant called Fins. During my stay, the main restaurant JWB Grille

was not open (the hours of operation are Thursday-Saturday at the time of publication). I was greeted by a wonderful bartender who was eager to make me a cocktail. Since I was on vacation, I decided to splurge a bit and opted for a frozen beverage as opposed to a more traditional whiskey drink which Nashville is known for.

Later in the evening, a friend met me back at Fins Bar for some margaritas. A trip to Margaritaville would not be complete without one. The only thing that could have made the experience better is if Jimmy Buffett would have been serenading me by the pool.

WHAT TO DO

Just walking around downtown Nashville could prove to be an experience. Music City is known for its famous honky tonks along Broadway as well as attractions such as the Country Music Hall of Fame, *Ryman Auditorium*, *Schermerhorn Symphony Center* and *Musicians Hall of Fame*. If

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you want to limit your activities to outdoors, talk a walk over the pedestrian bridge for one of the best views of the Nashville skyline, or head to Centennial Park, home to a life-size replica of *The Parthenon*.

WHERE TO DINE

Nashville has emerged as a culinary capital of the United States. Although the city has been known for its BBQ and famous Hot Chicken (yes, KFC stole the idea from Nashville), dozens of new restaurants have been popping up all over the city.

I am a pretty earlier riser, so for a wonderful and delectable breakfast, head to gay-owned *D'Andrews Bakery & Cafe*. As you enter, the smell of freshly baked goods overwhelms you with delight and you have no choice but to give in to the temptation. From Brioche Fruit Tarts to Pecan Cinnamon Bunz, *D'Andrews* is the perfect place to satisfy your sweet tooth and get your day started.

For lunch, head over to *Anzie Blue*, a unique café/bar/boutique located in the Belle Meade neighborhood which offers

guests the chance to add CBD to any one of their delicious coffee or tea drinks. I decided for a turmeric beverage made with almond milk and of course a shot of CBD. For my meal, I ordered a Cheese & Charcuterie board, which was beautiful. I spent a few minutes observing it before diving in. The board is made for two people to share so definitely bring a guest and come hungry.

If you are in the mood for an afternoon snack, head to *Tempered Fine Chocolate* in Germantown, about a five-minute ride from the hotel. All the chocolate is made on site and the flavor combinations are some of the most unique I have seen... and tasted. Their selection of truffles is truly to die for. Since I couldn't decide on one flavor, I chose a 12-pack sampler.

Finally, there is no better way to cap off your culinary adventure of Nashville than with a visit to *The Chef & I*. Not only is *The Chef & I* one of my favorite restaurants in Nashville, but it's one of my favorite restaurants in the entire country. And I am not just saying that because my friends Erica and Chris Rains are the owners. Every time I visit, the restaurant is an experience different from the last. If you can, request a seat to dine at the show kitchen bar. My guest Blake were joined for dinner by both Chef Chris and Erica who treated us to a fabulous five-course feast. We began with their famous Caramelized Brussels Sprouts sautéed crispy with caramelized onions, house cured bacon lardons and finished with lemon, Parmesan, apple cider glaze and whipped goat cheese. For my main entrée, I ordered the Vegan Bento Box, a carefully curated selection of four unique vegan creations, my favorite being a Thai style red lentil cake with zucchini and coconut lemongrass sauce.

The rock and roll-themed cocktails are also incredible. Blake ordered the Dave Grohl which is made with of Tito's Handmade Vodka, citrus, St. Germain, and black walnut; however, my favorite is Me & Bobby McGhee, a smooth blend of Old Hickory Bourbon, Amarena cherries, absinthe, and bitters. The Chef & I are frequent supporters of Nashville's LGBTQ community and have been the recipients of numerous awards presented by the *Nashville LGBT Chamber of Commerce*.

WHERE TO PLAY

Although I did not visit any of the following establishments on this trip, I have been to all these bars/clubs on



many occasions when I lived in Nashville. Please check each of their websites/social media pages prior to visiting so you are familiar with current hours of operation as well as safety procedures. Nashville has a wonderful selection of LGBTQ nightlife establishments each with a different vibe and clientele. I would recommend stopping by a few on your visit to get a flavor of Nashville's LGBTQ community. *Tribe*, *Canvas*, and *Play Dance Bar* are all located within walking distance of each other on Church Street, however, *Play* is currently closed due to COVID-19. *Pecker's Bar & Grill* and *Trax* are a quick five-minute drive south of downtown, while *The Lipstick Lounge* is located in hip East Nashville, along with many other LGBTQ-friendly establishments.

Traveling during a pandemic can be a bit more challenging, but I think if people take proper precautions, it is perfectly acceptable. We need to support LGBTQ-owned businesses during these challenging times, so even if you are not quite ready to hit the road, now may be a good time to start planning a 2021 getaway.

Joey Amato is the founder and publisher of Pride Journeys, an LGBTQ travel website and syndicated column. For more LGBTQ travel ideas, please visit <http://www.pridejourneys.com>.

GRAB ROD

A Bright Light in the Dark

Out musician Rod Thomas centers LGBTQ culture with his disco-laden third album

By Chris Azzopardi

The name Rod Thomas might not be instantly recognizable, but it's likely you've come across the one he uses on stage. As *Bright Light Bright Light*, Thomas has been a staple of the international LGBTQ music scene for the last 10 years, performing for Cher on the European leg of her 2019 tour and collaborating on a song with Elton John.

The independent Welsh singer-songwriter's latest album, *Fun City*, is awash in the queer make-up of disco culture, fittingly corralling a roster of LGBTQ notables including Andy Bell of Erasure, Jake Shears, Justin Vivian Bond and Sam Sparro.

Chris Azzopardi: Leading up to its release, what's been the day-to-day of getting this album out?

Rod Thomas: It's been trying to rethink the whole presentation of it because it's very LGBTQ+ focused. What I've been working on with my agent this last year-and-a-half is touring with other queer artists and going to smaller spaces in different cities and working with LGBTQ + local artists and drag performers. We wanted to make it like "Soul Train circus comes to town" and also highlight local LGBTQ+ businesses, organizations and charities and really use it to expand on the story of the record, which is respect for queer culture.

Not being able to do that this year has been kind of depressing because it really was meant to be much more than this album, like before it was hip to be fucking amplifying people's voices the whole point of this record was to shine a light on artists that people overlook or local talent that people don't really get a chance to hear about. Not really being able to do that properly felt just a bit sad. Hopefully next year I can take that on the road and do it then, if any of these venues are still open.

CA: Have you thought about a way to

reconfigure your plan for a virtual audience?

RT: I don't think it's very effective. I really don't think it is. I think people are so exhausted by online presence and online events that I just don't think it's going to have any impact, so I really do think it needs to happen when there's people in a room. Online there's just so much white noise that you can't really cut through, especially if you don't have the budget of a Dua Lipa or Miley Cyrus – who I love. But the minute they put out a song then that kind of dominates the gay male focus.

CA: Your song with Justin Vivian Bond, "Saying Goodbye Is Exhausting," is really touching. What can you say about that song?

RT: I feel like a big part of gay life is losing people too young, and that's about a friend. I don't often write that kind of lyric about personal loss, but that is about a friend who died two years ago and was 33, 34 years old. Throughout time people have been murdered by homophobes, but also with the AIDS crisis and everything that LGBTQ+ people have gone through, it has been watching their contemporaries or their friends or their family die too young.

Even during the last three weeks we've seen Black person after Black person murdered, trans woman after trans woman murdered. Saying goodbye and watching these people disappear is absolutely exhausting when people have the power to stop it



and literally nobody that it doesn't affect gives a fuck and it's just unforgivable. I don't understand where the compassion in society has gone. Even if you were the shittiest white person living, how do you not understand that watching person after person die is exhausting?

CA: I remember reading that you're a mood board person. What did your mood boards look like for this album?

RT: Oh, fucking mental. (Laughs.) It was really mental. Let me see if I can find it. I think I have it. I still keep printouts of everything.

CA: You should.

RT: Yeah, I do. My apartment is a lunatic asylum.

CA: Well, you're an artist.




RT: Let's go with that, yeah. (Laughs.) One of the boards is: *Eyes of Laura Mars*. *Body Double*. *The Stepford Wives*. *Escape from New York*. *Party Girl*. *Silence=Death* and the pink triangle. *Showgirls*. And Sylvester's live album cover. I wanted it to feel like it sort of spoke to or about different parts

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of queer culture that I've really learned a lot from or was really inspired by through the years, so I kind of hope it does that in some loose way. Also, on a lighter note: *Big Trouble in Little China*. *After Hours*. *Cat People*. *Blade Runner*. *Sweet Charity*, with Shirley MacLaine.

CA: How does *Showgirls* fit into the vibe of the album?

RT: Delusion. (Laughs.)

CA: Do you usually reference a lot of films when you're making music?

RT: Yes, it's mostly film that I reference, honestly. Looking at references makes me want to make a song that sounds like those images, and I find that much more inspiring than a playlist of songs because film speaks to me a little bit more and teases images out in my brain.

CA: While we're on the topic of film, what made *Gremlins* so special to you that you named yourself after the Gizmo line "bright light, bright light"?

RT: (Laughs.) I honestly don't know. I don't think I named myself after that because it was a particularly special film. When I was thinking about what to call myself with my manager at the time, that is the first thing that came into my head. I thought, "God, that's pretty shit," but then I couldn't think of anything better, and it kind of stuck. I liked that it alluded to dance floors and nightlife and electricity and electronic music. It just seemed to work. And I'm a huge fan of the *Gremlins* franchise, so that definitely works for me too.

CA: And I read that the title was inspired by a comment made by former NYC mayor John V. Lindsay on his first day in office in 1966,

amidst a crippling transit strike. Is that right?

RT: Yeah, it was. Basically when he took over on his first day of office the whole city fell to shit and it was a disaster. There was a transit strike and the lights went out and everyone just lost their minds and one of his adversaries was like, "Oh, so you're still happy to be the mayor?" And he was like, "I still think it's a fun city." So I kind of took the idea of this very flawed paradise and applied that to how queer people have had to live the whole time. It's like, you move to LA, New York, Atlanta, whatever is your city, to escape the suburbia you're not safe in. But then you get to the city, which has things like other gay people, nightlife, sex, glamour, jobs. It has everything. But you also have the prejudice and the danger and the need to keep both eyes open all the time

whilst remembering to celebrate yourself and have fun. *So Fun City*, for me, is like this place that you aspire to live in. But it's also a double-edged sword because it could be your downfall.

CA: Did you personally experience this?

RT: Yeah. Where I grew up is absolutely not tolerant of gay people. When I was young I grew up in the middle of nowhere, in like an old coal mining valley in South Wales, which was homophobic. So, for me, it was going to London and then moving from London to New York; it's like chasing the best version of yourself and finding a place that allows you to be the best version of yourself with the people you want to be surrounded by.

CA: Has disco and dance music been a catharsis for you?

RT: Dance, yeah. The whole ethos of disco from my understanding is: dancing through pain, or singing through turmoil, or celebrating through adversity. So referencing that in relation to what I wanted to talk about with the record felt kind of right to me. A lot of gay culture was born and bred from the love of disco music, and the joy and

togetherness it inspired is still very much at the heart of LGBTQ+ culture.

As editor of Q Syndicate, the LGBTQ wire service, Chris Azzopardi has interviewed a multitude of

superstars, including Cher, Meryl Streep, Mariah Carey and Beyoncé. His work has also appeared in The New York Times, Vanity Fair, GQ and Billboard. Reach him via Twitter @chrisazzopardi.



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Victory Fund Endorses 77 More LGBTQ Candidates for 2020; Historic Number of LGBTQ Candidates Running

Washington, DC – LGBTQ Victory Fund, the only national organization dedicated to electing LGBTQ leaders to public office, endorsed 77 more openly LGBTQ candidates in an unprecedented year for LGBTQ political power. More than 1000 openly LGBTQ people ran or are running for office in 2020 and at least 574 LGBTQ candidates will appear on the ballot in November. Victory Fund has endorsed 387 LGBTQ candidates this election cycle – more than at any time in its 29-year history. This is Victory Fund's last state of endorsements for the 2020 cycle.

Among the slate are three newly endorsed candidates who received Spotlight Candidate endorsements: **Jared Nieuwenhuis**, running for the South Dakota state House, would become the first out gay man elected to the state legislature; **David Ortiz**, running for Colorado state House, would become the first person to use a wheelchair elected to the state legislature; and **Louise Snodgrass**, running for the South Dakota state House, would become one of the first out genderqueer members of a state legislature anywhere in the country. Additionally, eight previously endorsed candidates were elevated to Spotlight Candidate status: **Lyn Franks**, running for the Alaska state House, would become the first openly LGBTQ person elected to the state legislature; **Torrey Harris**, running for the Tennessee state House, would join

Brandon Thomas to become the first two openly LGBTQ people elected to the state legislature;

Ashley Klein, running for the Indiana state House, would become the first openly LGBTQ woman elected to the state legislature;

Jody LaMacchia, running for Michigan state House, would become the first openly LGBTQ woman elected to the state legislature;

Marcia Morgan, running for the North Carolina state House, would become a key LGBTQ voice in the state legislature;

Lorenzo Sanchez, running for the Texas state House, would become just the second openly gay man ever elected to the state legislature;

Brandon Thomas, running for the Tennessee state House, would join Torrey Harris to become the first two openly LGBTQ people elected to the state legislature; and

Brianna Titone, running for reelection to the Colorado state House, would continue to be one of the few out trans state legislators in the nation.

"A historic number of openly LGBTQ people are running for office this year and we have the opportunity to elect an unprecedented number on Election Day," said Mayor **Annise Parker**, President & CEO of LGBTQ Victory Fund. "We can double the LGBTQ members of Congress, elect out LGBTQ state legislators in key states for the first time and elect the first out trans state senator in U.S. history. But this is not about breaking records or making history. When LGBTQ people are in the halls of power, it changes the hearts and minds of colleagues, transforms the legislative debates and leads to more inclusive legislation. LGBTQ elected officials

advance equality and that is why we must secure a Rainbow Wave of LGBTQ victories in November."

Victory Fund endorsed state legislative candidates in four of the five states that have never elected an out LGBTQ person to their state legislature: Alaska, Delaware, Mississippi and Tennessee. The fifth state, Louisiana, does not have state legislative elections this year. Sarah McBride, running for the Delaware state Senate, would become the first out trans state senator in the U.S. if elected.

Victory Fund also endorsed **Elisa Crespo** in her 2021 race for New York City Council.

Spotlight Candidate Endorsements (Previously Unendorsed)

Jared Nieuwenhuis South Dakota House of Representatives, District 25
David Ortiz Colorado State House, District 38

Spotlight Candidate Endorsements (Previously Endorsed)

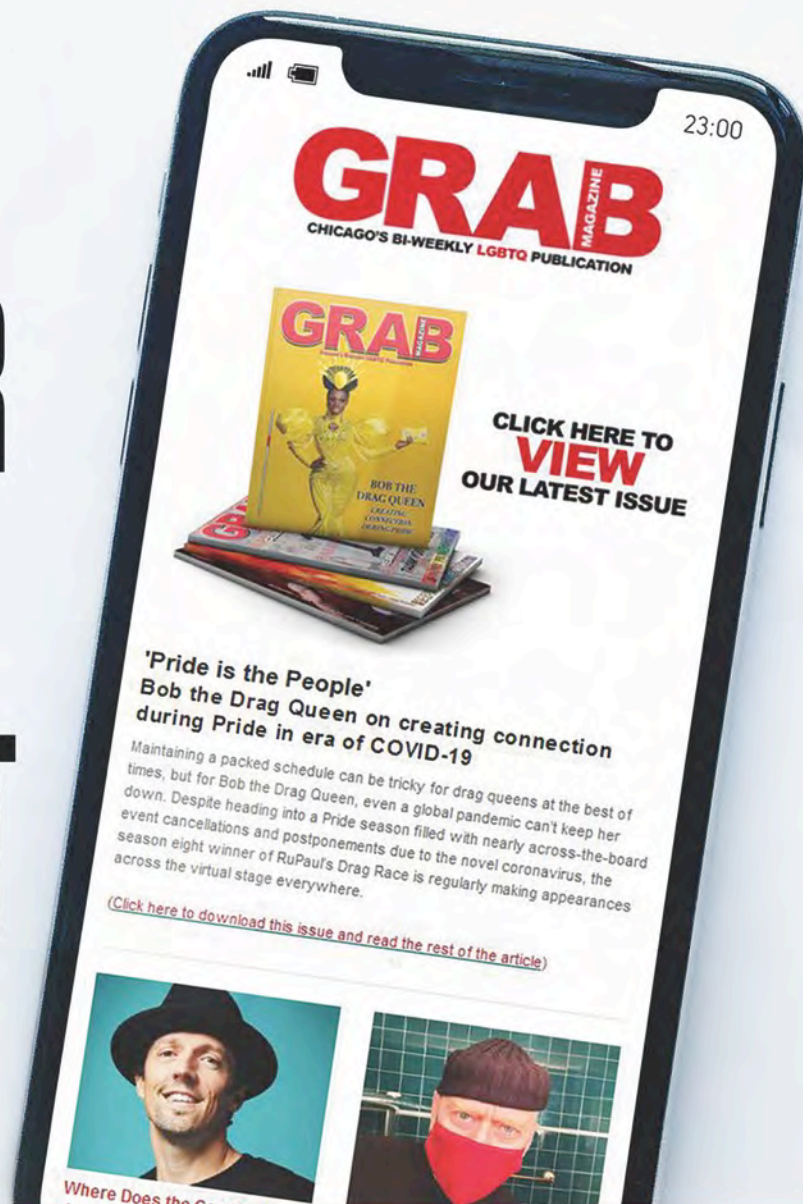
Lyn Franks Alaska State House of Representatives, District 15
Torrey Harris Tennessee House of Representatives, District 90
Ashley Klein Indiana House of Representatives, District 39
Jody LaMacchia Michigan State House of Representatives, District 46
Marcia Morgan North Carolina House of Representatives, District 19
Lorenzo Sanchez Texas State House of Representatives, District 67
Rep. Brianna Titone Colorado State House of Representatives, District 27
Brandon Thomas Tennessee House of Representatives, District 49.

To see the complete list and for more information visit <http://www.victoryfund.org/ourcandidates>.



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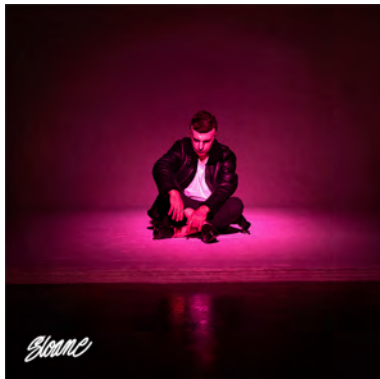


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SLOANE PREMIERES NEW SINGLE FOR "PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS"



Jazz prodigy-turned-soundtrack guru, **Nick Rosen**, also known as **SLOANE**, has premiered his new single + lyric video for "Put Down Your Weapons" via PopWrapped.

"Put Down Your Weapons" comes off of SLOANE's debut EP, *Too Young To Be Lonely*, due out October 30 via Atoned Music, and follows the release of the title track, "In My Head," "Down From Here," and "Good At Pretending" and which debuted in May, June, July and August respectively. Each of these singles will be a part of the six-track EP.

On his fifth single, Rosen shares, "This song is me talking to my inner

demon or darkness. The first verse is me and the second verse my demon. I'm basically telling my demon to put down its weapons because we can both exist at once. Everyone has light and dark inside them at the same time and it's about finding peace with the dark and then in turn being able to live more comfortably in the light."

A self-described L.A. gutter punk in his youth, Rosen discovered jazz as a teenager and began devoting his every waking moment to the bass. Before even graduating high school, he was making national headlines for helping resurrect the career of jazz legend **Henry Grimes**, who'd been thought dead for decades, and generating serious waves around Los Angeles for his performances with luminaries like **Bennie Maupin**, **Arthur Blythe**, and **Nels Cline**.

After college, Rosen dove into the world of film and television, recording with Oscar-winning composer **Michael Giacchino** on scores for *Super 8*, *Star Trek*, *LOST* and more, in addition to serving as music director for massive live broadcasts like NBC's Fourth of July and Christmas in Rockefeller Center specials. On top of that, Rosen served as music director at L.A. hotspots *Bardot* and *The Sayers Club*, where he found himself performing live with *Prince*, *will.i.am*, *Jamie Foxx*, *Perry Farrell*, *Bruno Mars*, *Macy Gray*, *Common*, and countless other

celebrities. Adding a slew of other instruments to his repertoire along the way, Rosen also managed to become a prolific session musician and producer/engineer, boasting a resume that includes the likes of Phantogram and Tinashe among others.

Last year, Rosen released his debut EP under the Sloane moniker, and is gearing up to release a six-track EP later this year, *Too Young To Be Lonely* - an addictive collection of experimental electro-pop gems, grappling with depression, loneliness, and the hollow nature of our social media-obsessed society. Rosen plays every instrument on the collection himself, layering up infectious beats and dreamy synthesizers into a potent mix of slick pop appeal and raw emotional intensity. That mix of dark and light is at the heart of Rosen's mission with Sloane. Sure, he's here to exorcise some personal demons, but more than that, he's here to help you do the same, and to make sure you know you're not alone in the process.

"I'm not afraid to talk about depression or anxiety or getting caught up in the materialistic trappings of the world," says Rosen, a devout Buddhist. "Enlightenment isn't about the absence of darkness, it's about learning to be okay with the mixture of light and dark that's inside all of us."

For more information visit <http://www.sloanesongs.com>

BOY BECOMES HERO SHARES NEW ALBUM ESCAPE ARTIST



Post-hardcore outfit **Boy Becomes Hero** share their new sophomore album *Escape Artist*. The album is autobiographical in nature, and touches on themes of depression, self-harm, and mental health, all of which Boy Becomes Hero creator, multi-instrumentalist and vocalist **Andrew Brittingham** has dealt with personally. With features from vocalists **Garret Rapp**, **Jonny Craig**, and **Ranadi**, the album ebbs and flows through more hard hitting tracks like "Flexibility" and "Craftsmanship" into more lo-fi transitional tracks "Abscond" and "Confluence" to tell the story of protagonist Amatera.

On creating *Escape Artist*, Boy Becomes Hero shares, "All of us that

put our hearts and souls into this album are incredibly excited for listeners to hear 'Escape Artist'! Our biggest goal for this record is for everyone listening, who is struggling to any capacity, is able to grasp HOPE again. Life is a lot like 'Escape Artist', and the world inside that the characters of this concept album are experiencing. There are highs and there are lows. Sometimes we can control them and others we can't - and that's alright. Finding what brings you stability and happiness can take time, but it's well worth the effort and time; because once you do - it's a beautiful thing. Struggling with mental health issues ourselves has helped us find a position in which helping others enrich their lives and pushing to be a positive impact in our communities and world is what brings joy. We want to encourage everyone to be open to change and finding what they're passionate about; to allow themselves to find happiness in hope. If you're hurting - know that you're not alone. This album has been deeply emotional and personal for us to write and cannot wait to share this with you all!"

Michigan-based Boy Becomes Hero is a project created by **Andrew Brittingham** that delivers thrashing anthems and melodic breakdowns. Boy Becomes Hero, with a partnership with To Write Love On Her Arms, is dedicated to creating a musical experience across the post-hardcore scene while raising awareness for

depression, self-harm, addiction and suicide.

The band's upcoming sophomore album, *Escape Artist*, is a horror album serving as a prelude to Boy Becomes Hero's 2019 debut album, *Reverie* which was heralded by Billboard and Substream Magazine as well as Johnny Minardi (Roadrunner Records & Fueled by Ramen) who shared that it had "a solid groove that hits hard right off the bat."

Mixed and Mastered by **Andreas Magnusson** (Oh, Sleeper, Haste the Day, The Black Dahlia Murder) the album takes a much darker side compared to its freshman counterpart with **Jonathan Gearing** (The Devil Wears Prada) presenting a much deeper emotional space with programming and keys.

The story follows Amatera (Andrew Brittingham) as he struggles with toxic relationships, mistakes he will make and has made, and searches for Restitution, by creating a life of atonement. Ninjen (Garret Rapp) and Ajna (Jonny Craig) help our anti-hero, while captive upon a siren's ship, find positivity and a healthy mental state in order to let go of the past and focus on the present and the future. *Escape Artist's* themes of depression, self-harm, and mental health provide a deep dive for listeners as the heroes in the story make their way from darkness back to light.

For more information visit <http://www.boybecomeshero.com>



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