

GREAT PARK NAME CHANGE • IRVINE BARCLAY THEATER'S UPCOMING LINEUP • LAS VEGAS DESTINATION GUIDE

# IRVINE WEEKLY

AUGUST 6, 2021 VOL. 3 • NO. 18



## DEMANDING CHANGE

BLIZZARD EMPLOYEES IN IRVINE PROTEST AND STAGE WALKOUT  
IN RESPONSE TO WORKPLACE CULTURE.

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COVER: PHOTO BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

# GREAT PARK NAME CHANGE

**AFTER A 4-1 VOTE, THE CITY OF IRVINE WILL NIX “ORANGE COUNTY” IN GREAT PARK NAME.**

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

Great Park - Reflecting Pool



COURTESY OF THE CITY OF IRVINE

**A** little more than two weeks after the Irvine City Council began publicly exploring changing the name of the Orange County Great Park, the decision to drop the Orange County prefix within the Irvine-based park's official title was finalized by a 4-1 vote, during the Orange County Great Park Board of Directors meeting on Tuesday, July 27.

It should be noted that the members of the Irvine City Council and the Orange County Great Park Board are the same elected officials.

Orange County Great Park Board Member and City Council Member Larry Agran was the lone vote against the name change, arguing that the estimated costs will be far exceeded by the actual costs, once the project gets underway.

With an estimated cost of \$360,000, Agran argued the idea to rename the Great Park was unpopular with the public, as the name change item has been scrutinized heavily by the public during both the Irvine City Council meeting and the Great Park Board of Directors meeting.

“When this was first introduced, I approached it with an open mind – skeptical of the need for a name change – nevertheless I try to listen and reach out to others,” he said. “This is not a popular idea – I’ve been around long enough to know that hard costs of \$360,000 – you’ve got to be kidding. It would be double, triple that, at least.”

Another question posed by Agran, along with members of the public was: Why?

To answer that, in past conversations

with *Irvine Weekly*, Irvine Mayor Farrah Khan has emphasized that from her perspective, the name change helps reinforce Irvine's identity as a major city in Orange County and throughout Southern California.

“This is a pivotal time for our city, and we are getting noticed throughout the nation, and becoming the destination for not only living, but working and playing. One of the goals has always been highlighting our city and have it be recognized, for its residents and businesses,” Khan said during the Great Park Board of Directors meeting. “For me, if there are changes going to be made, they need to be made now. If we wait or go further along, the cost that we are looking at right now – the more costly it will get.”

Several residents spoke out against

the need to rename the Great Park during the meeting, saying that staff had not given enough notice or documentation for residents to review in order to support this change. The item first appeared on the Irvine City Council agenda on Tuesday, July 13.

Irvine resident Susan Sayer spoke in opposition to the Great Park name change during public comment at the Great Park Board Meeting. She added that there was little to no benefit to changing the name, especially when it seems that the majority of residents seem to refer to the park as the Great Park, as it stands.

“Irvine residents stand to benefit nothing from a name change. Everybody calls it the Great Park and knows it's in Irvine,” she said. “Is the name change worth the cost of time and money?”

Steve Torelli, manager of Orange County Great Park, presented an updated analysis of the hard costs associated with this undertaking.

“The physical items – renaming door placards, signs packages – would run about \$360,000 or so,” he said. “The regulatory, administrative and online items would be done under the city staff's current budget, and also the city attorney's time already within the Orange County Great Park – so there wouldn't be any incremental new costs to that.”

Prior to the vote, Irvine City Council Member and Great Park Board Director Mike Carroll explained that in order to help decrease costs the city would refrain from changing out marketing materials, and other lower priority items, and re-printing with the new name and logo – once the current supply is naturally depleted.

“I would like to make a motion that we remove the Orange County prefix from the name of the Great Park,” he said. “And we do that in a phased manner, so we utilize the least amount of funds spread over the longest time possible, with regard to revisions to the signage.”

As Irvine prepares for a phased-in approach to a name change for the Great Park, Irvine City Attorney Jeff Melching reinforced the city's ability to make the decision, if it desired.

“The Great Park is a municipally owned and controlled park. It's not a regional park, it doesn't require the approval from the county of Orange, or frankly anybody else to change its name.”



PHOTO BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

## DEMANDING CHANGE

### **BLIZZARD EMPLOYEES IN IRVINE PROTEST AND STAGE WALKOUT IN RESPONSE TO WORKPLACE CULTURE.**

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

In search of accountability, demanding changes in workplace equality from their employer, numerous Activision Blizzard Entertainment employees participated in an organized walkout on Wednesday, July 28, in response to allegations of sexual assault brought forth in a lawsuit by the California Department of Fair Housing and Employment.

During the walkout, *Irvine Weekly* secured interviews with an Activision and a Blizzard employee in attendance. While both opted to keep their identities anonymous for this story, both echoed statements in support of

the victims that have been made public and those that have remained private.

However, both continued to reiterate that leadership at Blizzard has yet to show true accountability.

Speaking to *Irvine Weekly*, the Blizzard employee explained the purpose of the walkout was to stand with fellow Blizzard employees and to ensure leadership continues to take responsibility for the damage it has caused.

"The purpose of this walkout is, first and foremost, solidarity for the victims of the lawsuit, and also victims not mentioned in the lawsuit. It's also a call to action for the

demands that were publicly posted – and it's also a request for accountability – that we have not received yet."

The Activision employee added they hope this can create a ripple effect throughout the gaming industry.

"I think primarily we want people to know that they aren't alone. It can be very isolating when instances in the lawsuit happen, because most the time people are afraid to speak out in fear of retaliation," they said. "It's a giant industry, but a lot of people know a lot of people. It's similar to film in that way – if you talk to someone, they'll know someone who knows someone."

Blizzard has come under scrutiny as a lawsuit was filed against the World Of Warcraft creator by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing for several accusations including sexual harassment and unequal pay.

After the lawsuit became public, Blizzard and Activision employees have continued to mobilize, with thousands signing an open letter calling for improvement, culminating in a walkout, with fans even participating digitally by not playing Blizzard games, and hosting virtual walkouts.

"We have organized this in a pandemic, and we've

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come together to make this possible – this is the first time that most of us have seen each other, and this is the first time many of us are meeting – the pandemic certainly has not gotten in the way of any kind of solidarity and support,” a Blizzard employee said to during the walkout.

With allegations of cyclical workplace inequality now hovering over the video game giant, some might wonder what working within these conditions would be like.

Not easy, according to the Blizzard employee.

Based on the magnitude of accusations against the company, the Blizzard employee added that the situation has impacted creativity at the workplace, but would not call it a distraction.

“I can’t think of something as a distraction when it is life-ruining for somebody – for me, my creativity is my co-workers – I am inspired by my co-workers. When my coworkers are in pain, I can’t be creative, because all I can think about is my co-workers.”

Still, while a passion for gaming remains a crux for so many developers at Activision Blizzard, many say a thirst for communal creativity is reason enough to work now, in hopes for future change.

“We come to Activision Blizzard because we love to make games, and when things like the allegations in the lawsuit come up, they remind us of the harsh reality of our surroundings.”

Using the hashtag #ActiBlizzWalkout on Twitter, employees at the Irvine-based Activision Blizzard Entertainment announced the walkout on Tuesday, July 27.

Within minutes of the announcement, dozens of Blizzard employees began tweeting out the hashtag #ActiBlizzWalkout, with a blue heart emoji, in response to the recent workplace abuse allegations the company is currently battling in court.

The walkout, confirmed to *Irvine Weekly* through several sources, including a confidential source at Blizzard, came through an internal email, and included a list of demands for workplace equality, focusing on the LGBTQ community:

As current Activision Blizzard employees, we are holding a walkout to call on the executive leadership team to work with us on the following demands, in order to improve conditions for employees at the company, especially women, and in particular women of color and transgender women, nonbinary people, and other marginalized groups.

1. An end to mandatory arbitration clauses in all employee contracts,



PHOTO BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

current and future. Arbitration clauses protect abusers and limit the ability of victims to seek restitution.

2. The adoption of recruiting, interviewing, hiring, and promotion policies designed to improve representation among employees at all levels, agreed upon by employees in a company-wide Diversity, Equity & Inclusion organization. Current practices have led to women, in particular women of color and transgender women, nonbinary people, and other marginalized groups that are vulnerable to gender discrimination not being hired fairly for new roles when compared to men.
3. Publication of data on relative compensation (including equity grants and profit sharing), promotion rates, and salary ranges for employees of all genders and ethnicities at the company. Current practices have led to aforementioned groups not being paid or promoted fairly.
4. Empower a company-wide Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion task force to hire a third party to audit ABK's reporting structure, HR department, and executive staff. It is imperative to identify how current systems have failed to prevent employee harassment, and to propose new solutions to address these issues.

Paul Lawrence Henderson, who lists Contract QA at Blizzard, in his Twitter bio tweeted in support of the walkout, on Tuesday.

“I plan on virtually participating in this walkout tomorrow, in support and solidarity of my friends and coworkers who have suffered abuse during their time at

Blizzard. #ActiBlizzWalkout”

Since then, several current and former Blizzard employees have been quick to vocalize their support.

Some employees, like current Blizzard software engineer Nora Valletta, used Twitter to finally shed light on the internal fear she has been dealing with as a result of the atmosphere created within the video game publisher's workplace:

*“I've been hesitant to comment on what's been happening at Blizzard because I am afraid. I'm afraid I'll be held back from promotions or opportunities. I'm afraid I'll be dismissed as a troublemaker. I'm afraid that stepping forward will cast a permanent shadow on my accomplishments and harm my career. However, this issue – the issue of fair treatment in the workplace – has already cast a shadow on my accomplishments. It has already harmed my career. Staying silent may save me from retaliation, but it won't soothe the ache in my heart for those who have suffered and those who are still suffering. I admire the bravery of my coworkers, and I endeavor to show even a fraction of the courage they've recently shown. I love Blizzard. I know we can do better. I am proud to say that I will be attending the #ActiBlizzWalkout.”*

Some former Blizzard employees, like Twitter user @CherTheDev say little has changed over the years.

“As a former Blizzard software engineer, I endured and witnessed sexual harassment, abuse, and discrimination in a toxic work environment. HR was not safe for victims. That was 5 years ago. It's still

Blizzard culture. I demand for change alongside my peers. #ActiBlizzWalkout”

*Irvine Weekly* was able to confirm that an internal email from a Blizzard Entertainment executive did give the approval for all employees the ability to attend without fear.

The Santa Monica-based video game company, which is known for popular games such as *World of Warcraft* and *Call of Duty*, was investigated by the DFEH for two years where it concluded the Blizzard workplace was a “breeding ground for harassment and discrimination against women,” according to a Bloomberg Law report.

On Wednesday, July 28, Blizzard employees responded to a statement released by Activision Blizzard CEO, Bobby Kotick, on July 27. Kotick's statement, in which he called the response to the company's lawsuit “tone deaf” came after the news of Blizzard employees staging a walkout in Irvine went public on Tuesday.

By Wednesday morning, Blizzard employees released a statement in response to the CEO's statement, adding that Kotick's response fails to address core issues of equality in the workplace, including greater pay transparency.

A document provided to *Irvine Weekly* through a confidential source at Blizzard underscores the previous demands made by employees in an open letter, which was signed by thousands of employees at the video game publisher.

*While we are pleased to see that our collective voices – including an open letter with thousands of signatures from current*

# NEWS

employees – have convinced leadership to change the tone of their communications, this response fails to address critical elements at the heart of employee concerns.

Activision Blizzard's response did not address the following:

- The end of forced arbitration for all employees.
- Worker participation in oversight of hiring and promotion policies.
- The need for greater pay transparency to ensure equality.
- Employee selection of a third party to audit HR and other company processes.

Today's walkout will demonstrate that this is not a one-time event that our leaders can ignore. We will not return to silence; we will not be placated by the same processes that led us to this point.

This is the beginning of an enduring movement in favor of better labor conditions for all employees, especially women, in particular women of color and transgender women, nonbinary people, and other marginalized groups.

We expect a prompt response and a commitment to action from leadership on the points enumerated above, and look forward to maintaining a constructive dialogue on how to build a better Activision Blizzard for all employees.

Today, we stand up for change. Tomorrow and beyond, we will be the change.

On Wednesday, July 28, several dozen Activision Blizzard Entertainment employees participated in a highly publicized, employee-organized walkout, underscoring the World of Warcraft creator's employee's demands for improved workplace equality, especially toward marginalized groups.

Crowds and food trucks took up both sidewalks at the entrance of the Blizzard headquarters off Alton Blvd., in Irvine, with several participants carrying signs in protest of the current conditions.

While many in attendance opted not to speak to *Irvine Weekly* publicly, an

anonymous Blizzard employee opted to go on the record. The source has also provided multiple *Irvine Weekly* with multiple internal Blizzard documents, which further confirm credibility.

While thousands of employees have signed an open letter calling for equality across the board, one question asked to the anonymous Blizzard employee was their choice to remain an employee, and not just leave, considering the current legal hurdles the video game publisher is surrounded by.

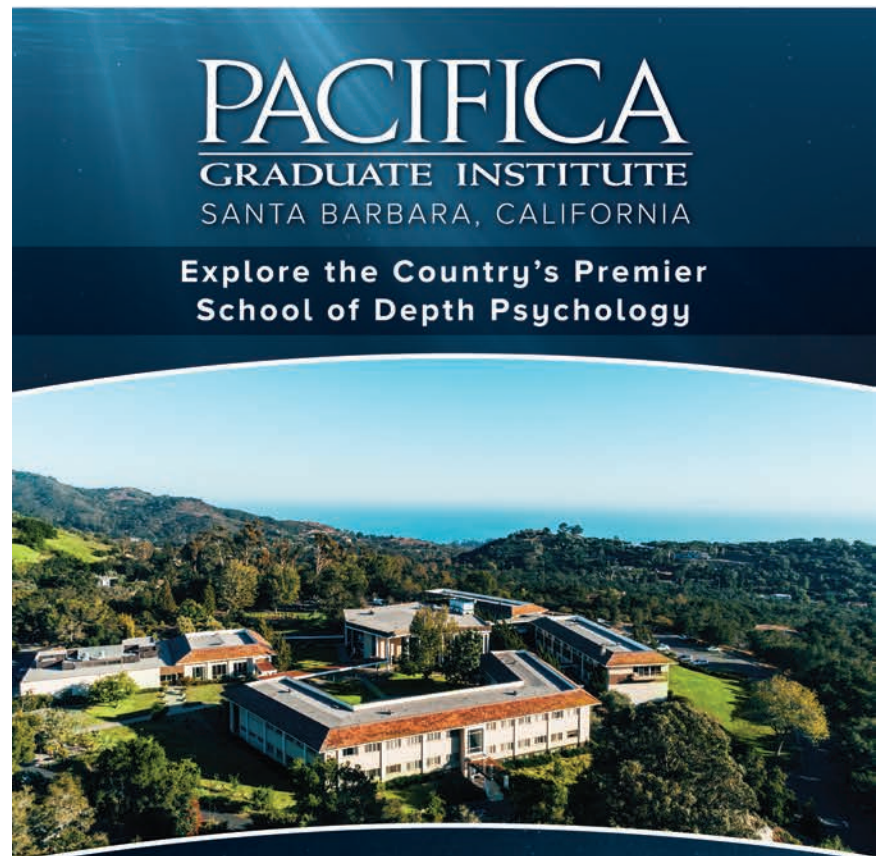
Despite these setbacks, the Blizzard employee detailed that it's from the support of fellow co-workers at Blizzard that the demands for equality from employees do not seem out of reach.

"Because I have seen a lot of incredible people at this company fighting for change, and I believe it's possible – there's a very small number of people who are stopping this from happening. If I couldn't make it work at Blizzard, I couldn't make it work anywhere else. And I want to see the change – and so if I was to leave Blizzard over something like this, I don't feel safe anywhere else in this industry, that I would be able to make a more positive change than I can here."

Earlier Wednesday, a statement from Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick failed to satisfy the previous demands for equality within the company, prompting an additional response from Blizzard employees. While Blizzard employees say Kotick's acknowledgment of the situation is a positive indication, employees reiterated their demands – adding that this issue would not be swept under the rug.

"Today's walkout will demonstrate that this is not a one-time event that our leaders can ignore. We will not return to silence; we will not be placated by the same processes that led us to this point," a portion of the statement read.

Activision Blizzard has not responded to multiple requests for comment from *Irvine Weekly*.



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Robert Maguire - Love with a Perfect Stranger



## DRESSED TO THRILL

### HILBERT MUSEUM EXHIBIT EVOKES A TIME WHEN FASHION WAS ABOUT GLAMOR AND STYLE.

BY LIZ GOLDNER

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE HILBERT COLLECTION

**M**y mother was a fashionista decades before the term was first used. She trolled the aisles of Lord & Taylor department store in New Jersey, looking at the latest styles. She read fashion magazines and newspaper columnists (especially Eugenia Sheppard) who personalized fashion by writing about the people who made the clothes and those who wore them. As fashion and art were important aspects of my mother's *raison d'être*, she would have loved this exhibition as it extols the glamor, attention to detail and aesthetic aspects of 20th century couture.

Indeed, "Dressed to Thrill," on exhibit at the Hilbert Museum through November 12, displays stunning depictions of fashionable women (and a few men), with many of the paintings and illustrations created for fiction and popular magazines, including *Saturday Evening Post*, *Redbook* and *McCalls*.

One dramatic painting, *Beautiful Woman in Large Hat*, for a *Cosmopolitan* magazine cover, features a larger-than-life portrait of a 1940s glamor girl, replete with exotic make-up, deep red lipstick, arched eyebrows and a large red and white hat framing her face. Artist Bradshaw Crandell also created portraits of famous film stars including Bette Davis,

Judy Garland, Veronica Lake, Carol Lombard and Lana Turner.

The elegant painting, *Linda Darnell as Lucretia Borgia* by Henry Clive, from his "Pin-Up Girls of History" covers series for the *American Weekly*, harkens back in its painting style to detailed figurative works of earlier centuries. It also mirrors in style and coloration *The Blue Boy* by Gainsborough, owned by the Huntington Library in San Marino. The Clive painting transforms Darnell into the notorious Lucretia Borgia (1480-1519), the illegitimate and salacious daughter of Pope Alexander VI. It is an exquisite portrait of a noble woman dressed in a deep blue velvet Renaissance-style gown and headdress, adorned with pearls. Other actresses posing as notorious historical women for Clive included Claudette Colbert, Marion Davies, Rita Hayworth, Hedy Lamar, Dorothy Lamour and Maureen O'Hara.

*Just Married* by Gordon Johnson, also for an *American Weekly* cover, contrasts Clive's painting in several ways. The cartoonish Eisenhower era (1956) illustration depicts a just married, fashionably dressed couple, standing alongside a baby blue convertible, engaged in a fierce argument. Curator of the exhibition and Hilbert Museum Director Mary Platt explains, "Hubby seems pretty sure

of himself – and he has the map. But his new wife seems equally certain she knows where they should have turned: somewhere back there. We can only hope they work it all out and get to their destination – and that it has a pool, and umbrella drinks!"

The contrasting *Scarecrow* calendar illustration by Earl Moran is a pin-up style portrait of a curvaceous woman humorously posing as a scarecrow, wearing Halloween colors. Another pin-up is Fritz Willis's *Ice Follies of 1952*, a cover illustration for an ice-skating program. This classic painting of a long-legged woman in a scant, fur-adorned skating costume recalls a time when blue-eyed blondes were among the models and prototypes for fashion-conscious girls.

The newest painting in this show is the 1982 *Love with a Perfect Stranger* by Robert Maguire, created for a romance novel cover. The film noir style work in vibrant colors illustrates a handsome, well-dressed couple kissing goodbye in front of a train, while smoke alongside them coming from the engine takes the form of an apparition. Platt explains, "He [Maguire] was known for his mastery of female characters, especially his *femmes fatales*, who maintain an air of glamorous mystery but still seem realistic."

The most detailed and fanciful painting in the exhibition is *Ruth's Cheeks Flushed; Her Eyes Became Starry* (1934) by Pruett Carter. The work is composed of beautiful young women dressed in ball gowns, being wooed by an assortment of male characters, presumably from the movies. They include a sheik, a pirate, and two aristocratic gentlemen from the late 18th century. This cover illustration created for *Ladies Home Journal* during the Depression must have attracted legions of women to purchase and read through the magazine, and to try to mimic the gorgeous models on the cover in their style of dress and makeup. Carter is quoted in the exhibition didactics: "The illustrator may be likened to the director of a motion picture. He must live the part of each actor. He must do the scenery, design the costumes, and handle the lighting effects."

A fashionable boy also has a place in this exhibition, with *Fitted for a Suit* by Joseph Christian Leyendecker, created



Earl Moran - Scarecrow

Gordon Johnson - Just Married



Joseph Christian Leyendecker - Fitted for a Suit



Henry Clive  
- Portrait of  
Linda Darnell  
(Dressed as  
Lucretia-  
Borgia)



for a 1916 *Saturday Evening Post* cover. The painting by the German-born artist – who inspired and influenced Norman Rockwell – depicts a startled young man being fitted by an old, curmudgeonly tailor. Leyendecker studied art at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Académie Julian in Paris, and created 322 covers for the *Post*, including New Year's Baby, the pudgy, red-garbed Santa Claus, flowers for Mother's Day, and firecrackers on the 4th of July.

The exhibition, featuring several other paintings and illus-

trations of well-dressed and coifed women, brings viewers to a time when glamor and elegant couture helped define a woman's (and a man's) social standing – and when clever marketing in magazines helped propel our country's high-fashion industry to major status on the world stage.

"Dressed to Thrill" is on view through November 12. Hilbert Museum of California Art, 167 N. Atchison Street, Orange, CA. Tue. - Sat, 11 am - 5 pm. 714-516-5880. Free. [hilbertmuseum.com](http://hilbertmuseum.com)



Pruett Carter - Ruth's Cheeks Flushed, Her Eyes Became Stary





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- Jim and Carol Hoffman

# CULTURE

## UNDEFEATED

### IRVINE'S YOUTH FUTSAL TEAM WINS NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP IN KANSAS CITY

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

While American athletes are currently in Tokyo representing the United States in Olympic competition, an Irvine-based youth futsal team, O.C. Premier Academy, recently claimed a national championship of its own during the 2021 U.S. Youth Futsal National Championships in Kansas City.

Jessie Lopez, an assistant coach and owner with O.C. Premier Academy, an Irvine-based youth futsal organization, shared that his team went undefeated in the U-10 Division, which is age 10 and under, adding that his team demonstrated an edge the entire tournament.

"This group of boys is extremely hungry and extremely dedicated," Lopez said in a phone interview with *Irvine Weekly*. "Futsal aside, they play for the best soccer clubs in SoCal and on the futsal court, they play for the best Futsal program. They fought battles, until we got to the finals – then they just cruised 4-0, very dominant."

In addition to the victory, Lopez explained the nuances of futsal, to *Irvine Weekly*, detailing how the sport is growing in popularity both locally and abroad.

"We took the national championship. It's a pretty big deal in our sport – as you know soccer is really crazy out here in SoCal. It's a hotbed for soccer enthusiasts," he said. "Our program launched in Irvine – proudly representing Orange County everywhere we go."

Currently, O.C. Premier Academy Futsal is Orange County's largest futsal organization, which is headquartered in Irvine, at Momentous Sports Center, according to Lopez. Adding that the U.S. National Team just made the World Cup, generating even more attention to the game of futsal locally.

"Things are really happening in the U.S. with the sport," he said. "We cater to players from five years old to 13 years old. We focus on the youth. We're happy to announce that we launched our program in 2019, and in about two years we've become one of the most highly-ranked youth futsal programs in the country."

Played indoors, futsal closely resembles soccer, but is played on a smaller harder surface. Globally recognized, and gov-



erned by the highest governing body in professional soccer, the Federation Internationale de Football Association, also known as FIFA.

With a worldwide presence, futsal is gaining attention locally, with many soccer enthusiasts seeking futsal due to its intense nature and frequent scoring opportunities. Due to its fast-paced nature, Lopez explained that in addition to being recognized as a professional sport, many soccer players seek futsal to sharpen their soccer skills.

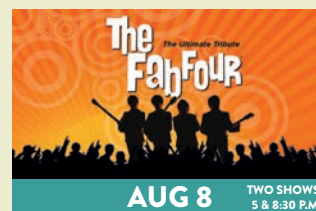
"We use futsal to develop really good soccer players. Futsal is a tool, a type of training with indoor smaller courts, with a smaller heavier ball – and around the world, Spain, Argentina – we're talking about countries in the world that produce the best talent – they actually emphasize their youth players starting playing futsal first," Lopez explained. "The reason is you develop a lot faster with smaller courts – you're going to get a lot more touches, more repetition."

Lopez added that in terms of professional sports, futsal is relatively unknown in the United States. In fact, the U.S. is one of the few countries without a professional futsal team, something Lopez expects to change within the next decade.

"We're one of the last remaining countries in the world that don't have a professional league – yet. But as the sport grows, in the next five, six, seven years here in the United States, we will have our own professional futsal team," he said. "Futsal is becoming so big now that you're seeing professional leagues in Europe and South America, where players can actually choose futsal as their profession, and don't have to switch over."



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As art venues open up, the excitement of art lovers all over Orange County is palpable. Yet few people are as enthusiastic about this new era as Jerry Mandell, president, Irvine Barclay Theater. "We never really closed," the impresario/jazz musician said in an interview. "We're not going to live that way."

Mandell added that the theater has held private concerts throughout the past 15 months, with many live-streamed. Last summer, the Barclay hosted live outdoor jazz, rock and folk concerts at Bayside Restaurant, and continues to hold them this summer. And during the downtime, the theater formed a partnership with the Orange County Philharmonic Society to bring new artists to the venue, installed new seating, and upgraded the air conditioning and filtration systems.

With its detailed preparation, and with no staff members laid off, the Barclay was ready to raise the curtain soon after the lockdown ended. The first performer to grace the theater's stage was renowned opera singer Renée Fleming, on June 24. Singing selections by Handel, Schubert, Strauss, Verdi and pop star Joni Mitchell, accompanied by pianist Inon Barnatan, Fleming was exultant, remarking, "This is my first performance in front of a real audience, a large audience." The audience was equally enthralled, clapping enthusiastically and demanding an encore. Fleming returned to the stage to sing Puccini's "O mio babbino caro."

Susan Fries, a professional flutist living in Irvine, remarked that Fleming – who she has met – is incredibly versatile. "She can fill the Metropolitan Opera hall, never amplified, with her powerful voice, and at another time become an intimate singer, as during her performance at the Barclay Theater. At the beginning of the concert, alone on the stage, with solo voice for 'And the People Stayed Home' by Corigliano, commissioned by Renée, she appropriately and meaningfully touched her audience, especially considering the long, difficult pandemic that so many have been through."

Mandell added, "Hearing Fleming rehearse was a gift from God. She is as nice as you think she is," and her performance "was one of the greatest excitements of my career." He explained that the 755-seat Barclay Theater is ideally suited for recitals and chamber music concerts.

## RAISING THE CURTAIN

### JAZZ, ROCK, POP, BLUES, FOLK, HAWAIIAN, CLASSICAL MUSIC, ALL AT THE IRVINE BARCLAY THEATER

BY LIZ GOLDNER



On June 27, the theater hosted the debut of chamber music group "Trio Barclay," comprised of Pacific Symphony concertmaster Dennis Kim, cellist

Jonah Kim (no relation) and pianist Sean Kennard. They played piano trios by Shostakovich, Dvorák, and performed the world premiere of "Piano Trio" by

their friend from the Curtis Institute of Music, Sheridan Seyfried.

Fries explained, "The piano trio is one of the most written for and exciting types of chamber music. The piano evokes the fullness of an orchestra, while the violin and cello create beautiful melodies and duets on top of the beautiful piano textures. Pianist Sean Kennard played with crystal clarity, as he created beautiful 'carpets' for the soloists to ride on. He also emerged as a soloist with color and energy. The performance of Dvorak's famously difficult 'Dumky' Trio was particularly spellbinding. I noticed that the audience was completely still during the performance of that piece, and I think that everyone was living the adventure from beginning to end."

Audience members look forward to several more concerts over the months by the Barclay Theater's resident ensemble.

Future concerts at the theater will include rock, pop, blues, jazz and Hawaiian music, along with dance programs and performances by UC Irvine's Drama Department. The theater is also a community resource, inviting outside groups to use the Barclay for events and performances.

Here is a selection of the Irvine Barclay Theater's impressive and varied upcoming musical presentations.

**Sept. 9, The Gatlin Brothers**, country music with No. 1 records and country classics



PHOTO BY SHAREN BRADFORD

**Sept. 23, Jake Shimabukuro**, “the Jimi Hendrix of the ukulele”

**Oct. 1, Pat Metheny Side-Eye with James Francies & Joe Dyson**, acclaimed jazz ensemble

**Oct. 7, The Wailin’ Jennys**, international folk act with show-stopping harmonies

**Saturday, Oct. 9, An Evening with Michael Feinstein**, performing songs by Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Johnny Mercer, and Duke Ellington

**Oct. 22, The Black Market Trust**, combining gypsy jazz with the Great American Songbook

**Oct. 23, Croce Plays Croce**, piano player performing pop songs

**Oct. 29, Eric Marienthal**, Grammy-winning contemporary jazz saxophonist and composer

**Jan. 21, 8 pm – Kulāiwi**, featuring Lehua Kalima, Kawika Kahiapo, Shawn Pimental with Pono Fernandez, hula, Hawaiian music

**Jan. 23, Laurie Berkner Greatest Hits Solo Show**, the “queen of kid’s music”

**Jan. 29, The Fabulous Thunderbirds Celebrate 35 Years of Tuff Enuff**, fusion of blues, rock & roll, and R&B

**Feb. 24, Joey DeFrancesco**, organ jazz

**Feb. 25, Linda Eder: By Myself – The Songs of Judy Garland**

**Feb. 26, Storm Large and Le Bonheur**,



Sheléa

PHOTO COURTESY OF RECORDING ACADEMY, CHRISTOPHER POLK, GETTY IMAGES 2019

singing the Great American Songbook

**March 10, 8 pm – Stacey Kent**, Grammy-nominated jazz singer

**March 11, Live from Laurel Canyon: Songs & Stories of American Folk Rock**, music from 1965 to 1975.

**March 25, Bessie, Billie & Nina: Pioneering Women in Jazz**, celebrating the enduring legacies of these music icons

**March 26, Jersey Boys & Girls**, celebrating New Jersey’s musical legends

**April 16, Waipuna**, mixing Hawaiian classics with original songs

**April 21, John Pizzarelli and Catherine Russell: A Tribute to Nat King Cole and the Ladies of Song**

**April 23, Sheléa: Natural Woman – A Night of Soul**, blending traditional pop, jazz, R&B, and soul

**April 29, Complexions Contemporary Ballet: STARDUST: From Bach to Bowie**, showcasing two dance pieces inspired by musical masters

**May 13, Makana: The Gift of Slack Key Guitar**, weaving the roots of Hawaii’s vast musical palette into a universal sound.

**June 9, John Beasley’s MONK’estra**, Grammy-nominated jazz pianist and composer

To order tickets for Irvine Barclay Theater performances, check out its Get Ready It’s Showtime brochure. Or go to: <https://www.thebarclay.org/>. To order by phone or have questions, contact the Box Office, 949-854-4646, Mon-Fri: 10 am-4 pm; Sat-Sun: noon-4 pm. Irvine Barclay Theater, 4242 Campus Dr, Irvine, CA 92612

Waipuna trio



# CULTURE

## VEGAS BABY!

### A GUIDE TO SIN CITY'S BIGGEST AND BEST NEW (AND OLD SCHOOL) DESTINATIONS

BY LINA LECARO

*Disclaimer: We began compiling this guide to visiting Las Vegas a couple of months ago, as COVID-19 vaccinations were fully underway both in O.C. and L.V., and infection numbers were coming down. The lights have slowly been coming back on again, but at press time, the "back to normal" we had all been hoping for seems a little less likely due to the rise of the Delta variant. As of Friday, July 30, Nevada followed California's lead, re-imposing its mask mandate for public indoor settings as local hospitals began to fill up again. Right now, if you plan to visit Vegas, your safest bet for a virus-free good time includes getting vaccinated, wearing masks while indoors, social distancing, and washing your hands/sanitizing frequently.*



The High Roller

What happens in Vegas hasn't always stayed in Vegas. The suggestive slogan, part of one of the most iconic marketing campaigns ever, might feel like a classic pop-culture catchphrase, but in fact, it's relatively new. Debuting in February 2003, it was conjured by R&R Partners

ad agency for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, who sought a rebrand for the city that retained its "sinful" rep but also showed it had more to offer beyond blackjack tables and slot machines. It worked. Vegas has become synonymous not only with gambling, but also with dance clubs, strip shows, bars, restaurants, dazzling stage shows

(from Cirque du Soleil to Celine Dion – who coincidentally started her first residency in 2003), conventions and thematic Disneyland-like hotels.

Welcoming tourism from all walks of life, Vegas has been attracting a mix of young and old, rich and poor, nightlife lovers and sun worshipers, hedonism-seeking adults and families looking for

good clean fun more than ever in the past couple of decades. They've added new demographics to the mix in recent years too, with huge music festivals including Electric Daisy Carnival (EDC), Life Is Beautiful, Psycho Las Vegas, Viva Las Vegas and Punk Rock Bowling, to name a few.

Then 2020 happened. In the wake of the pandemic and stay-at-home orders, the Vegas Strip (and its surrounding areas), much like Times Square in New York and to a lesser extent Hollywood Blvd. in L.A., became a dead, desolate ghost town. And while it's been a struggle coming back for every hotspot, the glitziest place on the globe might have the biggest challenges ahead. Or not. People don't go to Sin City to be responsible, or careful, or safe. Even as coronavirus remains a very real threat, visitors – and particularly those rela-

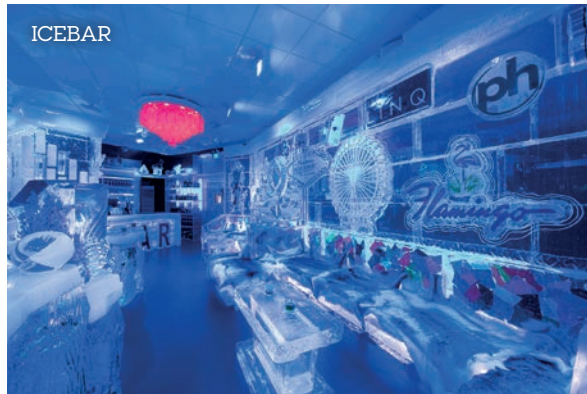


The High Roller



The Underground Speakeasy and Distillery

# CULTURE



ICEBAR



The Omega Mart (inside AREA15)

tively close – look to Vegas for frequent, quick and easy escapes from the stress and drudgery of daily life. Many of us really need that right now, too. Here, we provide a guide list for the best ways to do just that, from the newest stuff you probably haven't seen yet to some old-school standbys you may have forgotten about or never even knew existed. We can't promise what happens there will actually stay there, but the memories will definitely stay with you.

## WAKING UP IN VEGAS

Billing itself as "the world's first purpose-built experiential entertainment district," Area 15 is conceptually a nod to the mythic Area 51, Nevada's mysterious, highly classified air force facility suspected to conduct alien and UFO research, but it's a lot more than that. It's a mind-bending, immersive wonderland of art, sound, lights and activations that could only really come together in Vegas. Think euphoric rave vibes meets unique art gallery visuals meets futuristic amusement park and that only starts to reflect the eye, ear and mind candy here.

A collaborative creation between real estate development firm Fisher Brothers and creative agency Beneville Studios, it offers several different things to do including various VR experiences, cool themed bars such as Oddwood Bar, Emporium Arcade and Lost Spirits Distillery. There's also Wink World, a 3D effect driven light show from Chris Wink, one of the three co-founders of Blue Man Group; Museum Fiasco, an audiovisual installation exploring space, time and perception with sound and light; an ax-throwing experience called Dueling Axes; and the delectable dishes of The Beast by Todd English, which elevates the mall food court concept with stations serving different cuisines via the James Beard award-winning chef's "curated map of flavors." Rotating installations come through (we saw Van Gogh

Experience) here as do big-name DJs and specialty show bookings.

The biggest attraction at Area 15, and the one you should definitely not miss even with its perpetually long line outside, is Meow Wolf's Omega Mart, a huge narrative-based art installation that's designed to absorb and astound. The transportive 52,000 square feet experience meshes sci-fi, psychedelia, social commentary, retail, technology and a lot of seemingly strange but clearly intentional visual elements to create one of the most interactive environments in L.V., or the country. The dystopian, multidimensional storyline – which features 60 unique sections including multiple rooms and portals to other worlds – is set around what looks like a supermarket filled with odd goods (many of which you can actually buy) but we won't even try to explain much beyond that because even after an informative tour,

we're not sure we even understand it all. ([area15.com/](http://area15.com/))

Likened to Star Wars' Death Star due to its imposing black exterior, Allegiant Stadium is hard to miss as you drive into the city from Irvine. The black and silver-clad NFL warriors make sense in Vegas and the new stadium is – visually anyway – a perfect fit. Construction of the \$1.9 billion 10 level building began in late 2017 and was completed last year. It features a 275 foot media mesh video screen facing Interstate 15, retractable curtain-like side windows facing the Strip and an endzone area with an 85 ft torch (touted as the largest 3D printed object in the world) with a flame honoring the late Raiders owner Al Davis. In addition to the Raiders, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) college football team, fittingly called The Rebels, also play here and their first game was held on Halloween of last year.

The seats were mostly empty for both teams when they first took to the field after the decision was made not to have fans attend the 2020-21 season due to COVID. But as of now, games and some mega music acts are scheduled there including Guns N' Roses (Aug. 27) and The Rolling Stones (Nov. 6). ([allegiantstadium.com](http://allegiantstadium.com))

Casinos and hotels will always be the heart and soul of Vegas and it's always fun to see new ones pop up when we visit. The most eye-catching currently has to be Resorts World, the majestic two-tower structure that now lights up the skyline in red, facing Las Vegas Blvd. with some monster 100,000 square foot LED displays promoting its upcoming music slate including Katy Perry and Carrie Underwood. It stands on the land that used to be home to The Stardust, and it's the first brand-new, ground-up, major resort to open on the Strip in over



AREA15 (Laurent Velazquez)

# CULTURE

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a decade. Utilizing the Hilton brand via a franchise agreement with Malaysian developers Genting Berhad (who added the Hilton name and the company's high-end Conrad brand labeling to its 57-story towers) it also touts European casino brand Crockfords on its exterior. The 88-acre site has a massive casino surrounded by a slew of restaurants and bars, plus a 5,000-seat theatre and a two-story retail district featuring clubs and entertainment galore, not to mention a 20-million-pixel digital sphere illuminating mesmerizing content 24/7. Yes, this is the Vegas a lot of us grew up with – over the top, extra-sensory and packed with something for everyone, but it doesn't come cheap. Room rates are some of the highest on the Strip – upwards of \$400 a night on weekends. We recommend visiting, if not staying there. ([rwlasvegas.com](http://rwlasvegas.com))

Though its restaurants have always been looked upon as a homogenized take on rock n' roll culture, the Hard Rock brand managed to capture something edgier beyond its touristy "cafes" with its hotel in Vegas. Because of this, it always attracted a music-minded crowd and it was a go-to for those of us seeking like-minded in Vegas. We made a tradition out of playing the Sex Pistols and KISS-themed slot machines there every visit and more often than

not, we'd check out bands and shows there before venturing to the main strip. But that's all in the past now that Hard Rock is gone and the space has been replaced with the brand new Virgin Hotel & Casino. Owned by the Hilton corp, this new one is all Richard Branson branding, with its red and white color scheme, clean lines and design. Amidst COVID fears it should do well with its focus on outdoor entertainment and environments; it's got a 5-acre pool complex with an event lawn and a 4,500-person capacity theater for live music. Its current hottest show, called 27, celebrates the music of the "27 club" – celebrating rockers who died at 27 years old, including Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain and Amy Winehouse. And before you assume it's another cheesy lounge tribute, note that it's produced by a genuine L.A. rocker Erik Himel, former host and producer of "The Sunset Jam" at The Viper Room. ([virginhotels.com/las-vegas/](http://virginhotels.com/las-vegas/))

Recently named Best Casino in Downtown L.V. (aka the Old Strip), by *Las Vegas Weekly*, Circa opened last year during the pandemic, but has found its footing this year with those who want the feel and amenities of new Vegas with the surroundings of the old. The 1.25 million-square-foot property offers an impressive sportsbook (with

a 78-million-pixel high-def screen that can play up to 19 games at once), a huge sunbathing area with six pools, two swim-up bars and a 143-by-40 foot, 14-million-megapixel LED screen amidst an amphitheater setting. Also, the famous kicking cowgirl neon sign seen in countless TV and film backdrops can be found inside, now overlooking a cool bar called Vegas Vickie's Cocktail Lounge. ([circalasvegas.com](http://circalasvegas.com))

#### Shop Like a Showgirl

If you're the type of traveler who brings an extra-large suitcase on vacays so you have room to fill it with purchases, you might just want to bring another piece of luggage to Vegas. There are countless places to drop your dough (hopefully won in one of the casinos). For mall shopping, we love Fashion Show which has all the mall staples (some, like the Forever 21, are massive!) plus a few out-of-the-box must-sees such as Lip Lab by BITE, where you can create, design and name your own custom lipsticks; and Honey Birdette, the sexy lingerie brand known for personalized service. Both are top spots for Vegas' ubiquitous bachelorette party crews. After shopping, we recommend Galpao Gaucho, an authentic Brazilian steakhouse adjacent to the mall where all-you-can-eat fine meats are cut off a spit right at your table. The 2 million-square-

foot shopping and dining complex recently rebranded with a new logo and focus on "creativity, fearlessness and inclusivity," and this is reflected in its look and inventive use of empty spaces post-COVID – currently artwork by local artist Pretty Done adorns the entirety of a retail space welcoming selfies and walk-thrus. ([fslv.com/en.html](http://fslv.com/en.html))

For a more upscale spending experience, check out The Shops at Crystals, a high-end luxe-o-rama featuring the likes of Christian Louboutin, Jimmy Choo, Versace (or as Nomi Malone calls it "Ver-say's"... sorry we had to!), Dolce & Gabbana and Prada to name a few. It's Rodeo Drive in a mall basically, and really not our bag but it deserves mention for the installation by legendary light artist James Turrell called Akhob. Google it. ([simon.com/mall/the-shops-at-crystals](http://simon.com/mall/the-shops-at-crystals))

Beyond the head-spinning spending options in Vegas, we prefer to give our money to smaller independently owned stores in the area. Our faves include Cash 4 Chaos ([cash4chaos.com](http://cash4chaos.com)), a well-stocked punk rock paradise that puts Hot Topic's mall goth merch selection to shame, and Wax Trax ([waxtraxonline.com](http://waxtraxonline.com)), known as "Elton John's favorite record store" after word got out he purchased over 11,000 pieces of rare vinyl from the shop, which is housed in a converted stucco house on Vegas' west side. (And yes, John sent assistants to buy for him at first, but he did peruse the place himself during his Caesar's Palace residency). We also think L.V.'s Antique Mall of America ([antiquemallofamerica.net/](http://antiquemallofamerica.net/)) is worth a visit, with 23,000 square feet full of vintage furniture, collectibles and oddities.

Switching gears from clothing, music and chotchkie to cannabis, we must make mention of Las Vegas' growing marijuana marketplaces. Many have popped up since weed became legal in the state, but we'll give it to Planet 13 for size, selection and groovy atmosphere. With 15-foot-tall interactive LED lotus flowers on the roof of the building and an 18-foot outdoor water spectacle greeting guests upon entry and an aerial orb show inside, it's got just the kind of trippy vibe tokers can appreciate. Keep in mind that while it's legal to buy and possess up to an ounce, it's only legal to smoke on private property. That means not in your hotel room, car or outside in public. Clearly, if you're a smoker, it pays to know a local or two who are too. ([planet13lasvegas.com](http://planet13lasvegas.com))

# CULTURE

## LIGHT UP THE NIGHT

Carlos "Big Daddy" Adley and wife Ava Berman have made names for themselves in L.A. separately and together, owning and promoting countless nightclubs and restaurants including Vertigo (and later Glam Slam), the Dragonfly and Velvet Margarita. When they moved to Vegas they became leaders in reviving Downtown and specifically the area known as "Fremont East," with their adjacent venues, Backstage Bar and Billiards and Fremont Country Club. We'll disclose here that we've become friends with the pair covering their endeavors. And boy do they have some major endeavors – a \$100 million boutique hotel called Indigo/Central Las Vegas, to be erected on the property behind their clubs, their own streaming network (which will provide music, gambling and original content for a nominal fee) and of course, staying busy with their two clubs which have brought an L.A.-feel and cred to the old strip, booking hot acts that would play venues like The Roxy or the Fonda here. They've also become known for some of the most sought into after-parties during festival season. Coming up: Their all-star Punk Rock Bowling pre-party with Cheetah Chrome (The Dead Boys), Rat Scabies (The Damned), Monique Powell (Save Ferris), El Vez and more on Sept. 23. ([backstagebarlv.com](http://backstagebarlv.com))

Interestingly, it was a visit to the Double Down Saloon with their pal Vince Vaughn that inspired Berman and Adley to turn their attention to old Vegas. And speaking of DD, it's been the divey alternative to Vegas' conspicuous consumption for decades now. Conjuring the grit and spit of L.A. punk rooms of yore like Al's Bar and current ones like The Burgundy Room, the Saloon has been touting itself as the "anti-Vegas" since it opened back in 1992 with house specialties including their signature "Ass Juice" (served in a ceramic toilet bowl mug) and their original Bacon Martini. With smaller indie watering holes closing left



The Mob Museum

and right due to coronavirus-related concerns, we're happy to report that his smokey spot (whose promo tagline is "Shut Up and Drink!") is still making guests see double nightly. ([doubledown-saloon.com](http://doubledown-saloon.com))

Attracting a similarly colorful crowd, L.V.'s got a pair of charming tiki spots to choose from and if you like a kitschy-cool scene and tasty umbrella drinks you should check out both. Frankie's Tiki Room ([frankiestikiroom.com](http://frankiestikiroom.com)) – which, like its sister bar Double Down is open 24 hours a day – is the older, though it wasn't tiki-themed originally. The '50s-era bar underwent a makeover in 2008, meshing a modern primitive decor with inviting tropical touches. Built by famed tiki bar designer Bamboo Ben (grandson of the guy who designed Disneyland's Enchanted Tiki Room and the tiki-themed Aku Aku restaurant at the now-gone Stardust), Frankie's boasts potent potions and cool souvenir mugs you'll definitely want to pay extra to take home with you. Newer on the Polynesian paradise scene, The Golden Tiki ([thegoldentiki.com](http://thegoldentiki.com)) in Vegas' Chinatown region offers live entertainment nightly as well as a festive atmosphere and of course, fanciful cocktails. Don't forget to snap a

selfie in front of its centerpiece photo opp – a giant clam shell-shaped bench!

Speaking of photo ops, there are many at our new favorite food place (and is actually quite old): the Benihana at The Westgate, which was built in the '70s and looks like a technicolor Japanese garden brimming with lanterns, a faux rain waterfall, and red swathed authentic private dining rooms. Westgate also deserves mention for its retro feel. Both Elvis and Liberace played and stayed there, and Barry Manilow calls it home (taking up residency in the hotel's gilded Sky Villa Penthouse atop the hotel) when he performs there, which is so often he has his own themed gift shop. ([westgateresorts.com/hotels/nevada/las-vegas](http://westgateresorts.com/hotels/nevada/las-vegas))

The view from the Sky Villas – which we recently got to tour – is almost as breathtaking as the giant circular "ride" called The High Roller on the Linq Promenade. If you've seen it and wondered what it's all about, your perspective might be a bit off unless you actually go to the Linq Hotel or near it. The 550-foot tall, 520-foot diameter attraction is considered the world's tallest Ferris wheel, but it doesn't feel like a carnival thing when you're on it. It's more like an observation experience. Despite what

you might have heard, there is no bar inside each pod, but there is one just before you get on and drinks and snacks are allowed as you slowly complete a 30-minute rotation in the sky with up to 40 other people. ([caesars.com/content/cet-global/caesars-com/linq/high-roller.html](http://caesars.com/content/cet-global/caesars-com/linq/high-roller.html))

Linq is also home to one of three Minus5 Ice Bars (the other two are at The Venetian and Mandalay Bay). This cool concept features drinking spaces made completely of ice, from the walls to the tables and chairs to glasses you drink from. Admission includes a parka and gloves and faux-fur coats for VIPs. Ice sculptures, flashing lights and lively music (wish we'd heard some Vanilla Ice during our last visit) make this one of Vegas' coolest things to do. ([minus5experience.com](http://minus5experience.com))

We've all seen enough Scorsese films to know that Las Vegas is pretty much the city that the mob built. Organized crime outfits created and ran the casinos, and The Mob Museum lays it all out, in engaging and visually compelling detail that both locals and tourists enjoy. Located in a 1930s restored former federal courthouse and U.S. Post Office, it houses artifacts, photos, weapons and other ephemera on three floors, unraveling the growth of Vegas and the evolution of mafia-backed businesses as well as the law enforcement groups who tried to hold them accountable. Highlights include a simulated courtroom screening and a distillery and speakeasy in the basement serving hooch like it was before it was legal. ([themobmuseum.org](http://themobmuseum.org))

Leaving Las Vegas

Vegas is about excess and this guide is by no means a complete one; even a seasoned visitor is bound to miss something amazing. We hope to continue to add to our Sin City favorites list in the months and years ahead and with the city working on countless new projects, themed restaurants, bars, clubs and other novel amusements, it shouldn't be too difficult.



PHOTO CREDIT  
LAURENT  
VELAZQUEZ

Backstage Bar and Billiards



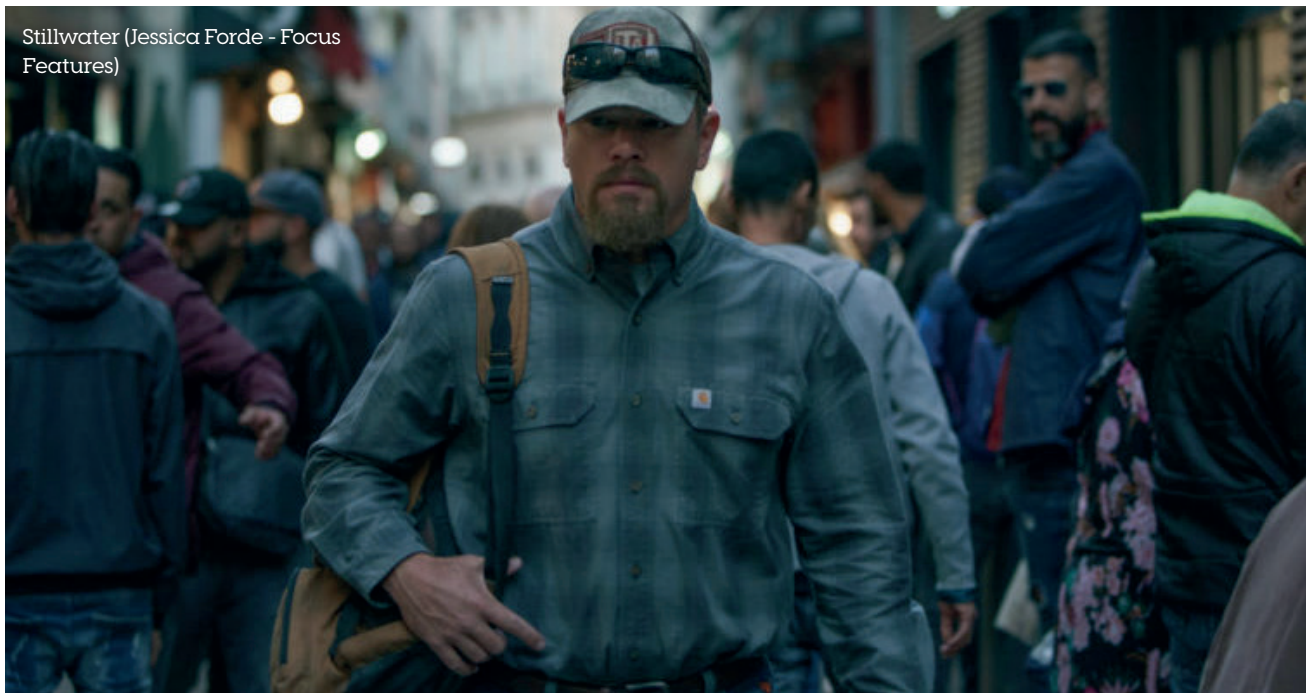
# ENTERTAINMENT

## IRVINE WEEKLY MOVIE REVIEWS

### OUR CRITICS BREAK DOWN STILLWATER, OLD AND GUNPOWDER MILKSHAKE.

BY IRVINE WEEKLY CRITICS

Stillwater (Jessica Forde - Focus Features)



#### STILLWATER: MATT DAMON DELVES BENEATH THE SURFACE

The opening shot of *Stillwater* depicts the remnants of a house after it was destroyed by a tornado. This is how director Tom McCarthy portrays the condition of America in a movie that takes place in France, but is wholly concerned with this country. A hefty man in a hard hat and goatee, Bill (Matt Damon), sifts through the rubble with a look of one who's seen destruction his whole life.

Afterward, he interviews for several jobs before jumping on a flight to Marseille, France to visit his daughter Allison (Abigail Breslin) in prison, who was convicted of murdering her roommate four years prior. Clearly inspired by the Amanda Knox case, Allison is struggling to convince the government to reopen her case, as there's an important lead they're ignoring. A self-professed "fuck-up," Bill was an absentee father and alcoholic for most of her life, so when their lawyer rejects her request, he decides to follow the lead and exonerate his daughter himself. It's an opportunity to make reparation for a lifetime of

neglect.

It might sound like a rudimentary who-done-it thriller, but the filmmakers utilize the investigative storyline to uncover deeper truths about its characters. Then screenwriters McCarthy, Thomas Bidegain and Marcus Hinchey boldly switch gears to focus on Bill's relationship with a French actress, Virginie (Camille Cottin) and her daughter, Maya (Lilou Siauvaud). At first, the pair are there to simply help Bill navigate the rough streets of Marseilles, but they quickly create a rapport with this troubled American. Bill's relationship with them is the best part of the movie – captivating and filled with moments of raw honesty and humor.

McCarthy doesn't approach the "fish out of water" trope with a sledgehammer but instead portrays Bill's confusion in the foreign country with a quaint authenticity. In many ways, Bill is the stereotypical heartland American (you might even call him a traditional blue-collar Republican). He has a tattoo of the American eagle, he prays before every meal, he owns guns and he's unexpressive and unapologetic to the bone. He also lacks the openness we

usually demand from our protagonists, so it's intriguing when he starts to create a new family with these people and his carefully fortified defenses begin to crumble.

As we've seen in McCarthy's other films like *The Station Agent* or *Spotlight*, he's as fascinated by human behavior as he is with plot. He never sacrifices one to serve the other. Unfortunately, he does exactly that when the story veers off into farfetched contrivance in the third act. Thankfully, the movie has enough sincerity, connective tissue to its setting and empathy for its characters to rise above this setback. The performances help as well. Breslin's turn as Allison is gritty and authentic. Cottin's Virginie is naturalistic and graceful. But the real standout here is Damon, who inhabits Bill without an ounce of pretense or caricature. His performance is so natural and intricate, halfway through the film you forget it's the same actor who played Jason Bourne and Will Hunting. It's Academy Award material.

Even with its minor flaws, *Stillwater* is a welcome change from the status quo because it has something to say besides, "I'm going to entertain you."

The studios don't make movies like this very often. It's an American film with a hefty budget and a big star that's more concerned about human behavior and asking tough questions than displaying large set pieces. Now that we have experienced so much destruction and divisiveness at home, who are we? How do we define our identity? And how do we connect with others and ourselves in a meaningful way when we're fraught with so much past and present sorrow? Ultimately, this film poses more questions about the contemporary American predicament than it answers, which is actually an attribute, not a flaw.

— By Chad Byrnes

#### M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN'S OLD IS A JUMBLED, GERIATRIC MESS

M. Night Shyamalan has tricked us again. He's given us all the signs of a great film – a star-studded cast, a high-concept premise, and an award-winning cinematographer (Mike Gioulakis). But *Old* is still a jumbled, incoherent mess.

The filmmaker has already copped to the fact that COVID-19 restrictions were a big part of the problem here, but that doesn't excuse what ended up on screen. *Old* makes little sense while you're watching it, even less after you've seen it. Proper care wasn't taken to make sure the premise worked. It's basically Bunuel's *Exterminating Angel* meets *Fantasy Island*, with an empty beach, a wonky script, a jittery camera, a cast who looks stranded, and of course, a supernatural twist.

Things start out promisingly enough as a lovely-looking family arrives at the Anamika resort, a ritzy getaway in the tropics. Guy and Prisca (Gael Garcia Bernal and Vicky Krieps) are here to relax with their 10-year-old daughter Maddox (Alexa Swinton) and six-year-old son Trent (Nolan River), soaking up all the sights and sounds the island has to offer. They take a trip to a nearby beach, where only certain guests are allowed. "Special guests," says the hotel manager.

Then things get weird, *real weird*. The kids feel their bathing suits tighten. A psychologist (Nikki Amuka-Bird) has a seizure. The elderly mother of a trophy wife (Abbey Lee) drops dead, while her husband (Rufus Sewell) rambles on about Jack Nicholson. A rapper named Mid-Sized Sedan (Aaron Pierre) walks around with a nosebleed, not that any-



OLD (Universal Pictures)

one notices. Everyone's too busy gasping at how Maddox and Trent have conspicuously transformed from kids to teenagers (now played by Thomasin McKenzie and Alex Wolff, also great in last week's *Pig*).

Though everyone tries to leave, they simply can't. Any attempt to cross the perimeter around the beach causes a blackout. Soon, everyone realizes they are aging at an alarming rate, a phenomenon that should have cultivated questions about life, love, loss and time, as it did in Shyamalan's early work (*The Village*, *The Sixth Sense*). Instead, screen time is devoted to the physical and psychological horror of this accelerated, "I've fallen and I can't get up" decline.

It's a faulty idea, and faulty execution, especially because the stakes go from entirely too low (graying hair) to entirely too high (dying of old age). It's never convincing as to why a certain character, who we know nothing about, would suddenly turn into a raving lunatic, or why a model would suddenly have a 90-year-old's back spasms.

The premise is so thin that it grows yes, *old*, in minutes, and all the talent in the world can't save it. The make-up and prosthetics are impressive. Time, as one might imagine, wears on faces like rotting fruit, an interminable diagnosis the makeup artists make abundantly clear. But Shyamalan's script also has wrinkles, and you can't help but notice a glaring number of plot holes: how come some kids age faster than others? Why does one corpse rot while another doesn't? And don't even bother questioning the twist. In Shyamalan's hands, we are all lost at sea.

— By Asher Luberto

## GUNPOWDER MILKSHAKE RELIES ON 'JOHN WICK WITH WOMEN' FORMULA

If you've ever seen *John Wick*, *Le Samourai* or *Leon: The Professional*, then you've essentially seen *Gunpowder Milkshake*, another action flick featuring killers on the run.

The set-up is basic: Karen Gillan is Sam, a hit woman-for-hire in Berlin. She's sent to murder the son of a mobster and then threaten his accountant — only the accountant stole the money to

pay for the ransom of his kidnapped girl, Emily (Chloe Coleman). After things go south, Sam and Emily are on the lam, ducking through parking garages and taking shelter with Sam's mother, another killer-for-hire named Scarlet (Leana Headey).

You can probably guess what happens next. Bad guys are shot, bones are crunched, blood fills the screen, and a corporate overlord (Paul Giamatti) sends dozens of ringers to take out our mother/daughter duo. It's *Hitman Cinema 101*, with all the fedoras, trench coats, vivid colors and silver bullets, laughable one-liners and Park Chan-Wook homages you'd expect from this sort of thing, just without the necessary inventiveness.

*Gunpowder Milkshake* is one of those films where the director (Navot Papushado) thinks casting women in generic action roles makes the action less generic. Take, for instance, a *Wick*-style underworld run by three tough/beautiful icons, Michelle Yeoh, Angela Bassett and Carla Gugino. All the girl power in the world can't save them from feeling like tired sidekicks, as the trio joins Sam and Emily.

Papushado pays tribute to *Wick*'s choreography with a long, insane fight scene, filmed in uber-cool, slow-motion shots lasting over ten seconds.

It goes up and down stairwells, in and out of bookshelves, into hidden passageways and across pools of blood. It's a remarkable feat of action, performance by Gillan, and physical endurance on the part of the camera operator. It's also soundtracked to "Piece of My Heart," with Janis Joplin's earth-shattering voice blaring on the speakers.

Unfortunately, the film (currently in Netflix's Top 10) can't keep that same energy. After a brisk, bare-knuckled first act, all neon lights and mesmerizing slow-mo, the second act drags into feminist sermonizing. The narrative momentum is sucked dry faster than the title's milkshake, and none of the coldly delivered speeches pack a dramatic punch. Aren't we past the point where women ragging on men is considered progress?

Wouldn't it be a whole lot cooler if these women were allowed to forge their own paths, without all the riffing on other movies? Sure would. But directors still think it's novel to cast women in male roles. We got *Ghostbusters: With Women!*, *Oceans II: With Women!*, *Captain America: With Women!* and now *John Wick: With Women!*

It's time we let women kick ass their own way, on their own terms.

— By Asher Luberto



Gunpowder Milkshake (Reiner Bajo Studoocanal)

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