

OC'S COVID RED TIER REOPENINGS • WANDAVISION AND THE MARVEL REVOLUTION • NONPROFIT SPOTLIGHT: SOUTH COUNTY OUTREACH

IRVINE WEEKLY

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SUBURBAN ECOLOGIES

SEEN THROUGH A TRANSCENDENT LENS



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The Orange Coast: Laguna Beach

As a recent Irvine resident (who moved here from Laguna Beach), I often feel as though I am driving through an imaginary village. I marvel at the flawlessness of the city with the trees and bushes trimmed to near perfection, and the cohesiveness of the housing.

This suburban environment is also recognized by Jesse Colin Jackson, an artist, designer and UC Irvine art professor, who photographed many of the modern and contemporary homes here for his innovative series, "The Villages of Irvine."

(This series, part of Jackson's exhibition, "Suburban Ecologies," recently installed at Irvine's Great Park Gallery, was curated by Adam Sabolick, Community Services Specialist for the city. As the lockdown prevented visitors from viewing the show and it is now closed, personal tours are available. See information below.)

The "Villages" series was inspired by five Irvine villages – Northwood, Stonegate, Turtle Rock, University Park and Woodbridge – which Jackson visited many times over several months. His

THE CITY OF IRVINE AND THE LARGER SOCIAL AS SEEN THROUGH A TRANSCENDENT LENS

BY LIZ GOLDNER

goal was to locate structures in each area that have similar design features, but are slightly different from each other. Or as he explains, "Less distinct are the individual buildings, which are subtly mirrored, shifted and finished in ways that maintain predictability while making it difficult to pinpoint exact copies."

He ultimately created seven composite photos – six of homes and one of large planters in Turtle Rock – with each photo comprised of eight digitally

overlayed images. Each resulting 36" high by 54" wide inkjet print brings to light the similarities of the structures; while their slight variations, enhanced by the digital manipulation, result in glistening artworks evoking the work of the French Impressionists, particularly their brushstrokes and depiction of light. They also suggest the paintings of Claude Monet, whose landscapes often illuminate the early morning mist.

As "Villages" further demonstrates,

Jackson employs his skills in photoshop, photography and film. "I am part of the late Generation X, born in 1978. We were the first group who learned how to use computers as an integral part of everyday life, but we still had to build them from scratch and fix them from basic principles." He adds, "I learned photography the old way, in the darkroom, but came of age artistically using digital technology."

By merging his lifelong technical skills with artistry, Jackson transforms Irvine's classic architecture into images of astonishing artistic splendor.

Jackson's "The Orange Coast," an organically inspired series in this exhibition, is composed of digitally overlayed panoramic shots of the shorelines and nearby environs in San Clemente, Dana Point, Laguna Beach, Newport Beach, Huntington Beach and Seal Beach. The resulting six 30" high by 90" wide inkjet prints, centered on the water's horizon, illuminate the ocean, sand, surfers and birdwatchers, along with regional sights including the Huntington Beach and Seal Beach piers.

The ocean – when viewed through



A Village of Irvine



Marching Cubes Watershed: Santa Ana



Marching Cubes Watershed: Santa Ana

The Villages of Irvine: Turtle Rock



The Villages of Irvine: Turtle Rock



The Orange Coast: Newport Beach



Suburban Ecologies: Great Park Galleries



The Villages of Irvine: University Park



room. Available for online viewing, these videos record a hiking/biking journey that Jackson and a friend pursued from the mouth of the Santa Ana River to the top of San Geronio Mountain, a trip of about 100 miles each way.

To create the films, Jackson and his friend, Nicholas Bradley, first shot 20,000 still images each of the terrain, foliage and people during the journey – one photo each minute – wearing body-mounted cameras. Jackson culled these to 10,433 frames per channel by deleting breaks and most of the night shots.

The first resulting film, with dissolving figuration, is redolent of the play of sunlight on flowing water, or of the appearance of movement in impressionist paintings, while echoing “The Orange Coast” series installed on the room’s side wall. The second more abstract film, comprised of large moving multi-colored squares, complements the “Marching Cubes” sculpture on the floor nearby.

“Suburban Ecologies” exhibits aspects of postmodernism as it contains borrowed elements, repeated design motifs and complex juxtapositions, while combining high art with images from daily life. It is a transcendent installation, created by an artist who intuitively uses the latest digital tools and methods in his work.

Jesse Colin Jackson creates artwork in his “Speculative Prototyping Lab” on campus at UC Irvine’s Claire Trevor School of the Arts. As visiting his lab is currently inaccessible, he has relocated his art-making to his home studio. He is pleased to receive visitors there to show his work from “Suburban Ecologies” and other projects. Art lovers can email him at jesse@jessecolinjackson.com or call/text him at (949) 546-6515.

the lens of multiple layers – appears to be churning as it would during a fierce storm, while the series portrays a mystical sweep of the ocean meeting sky and sand, evoking the romance and passion of our shorelines.

Jackson expresses his architectural training and skill in the creation of “Marching Cubes Watershed #2: Santa Ana” (58” high by 242” wide by 160” long), composed of 5,000 3D-printed PLA plastic components, with magnets affixed to them. The installation depicts the topography of Orange County and regions beyond as it progresses inland from the Santa Ana Watershed.

He explains, “Orange County’s historic orange groves, such as those found at the Irvine Ranch, were irrigated by the

Santa Ana River, which brings water from Southern California’s highest points to its current artificial outlet at the border of Huntington Beach and Newport Beach.” The art piece also includes Saddleback Mountain, Big Bear Lake, Mount Baldy, and the San Jacinto and San Geronio Mountains.

As a low-slung sculpture with light filtering through it, “Marching Cubes” evokes the Southern California Light and Space movement of the 1960s and ‘70s: an immersive style in which various materials were used to create sculptures and installations reflecting the magnificent southland light.

Another series in this show, “Santa Ana Fall Line,” consists of two pixelated films on opposing walls in the gallery’s main

Suburban Ecologies: Great Park Gallery



COVID-19: VACCINE UPDATE AND RED TIER REOPENING

NEW SECTORS OF THE ECONOMY REOPEN, INCLUDING INDOOR DINING, MOVIE THEATERS AND GYMS.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER



PHOTO BY LOUIS REED ON UNSPLASH

As Orange County works to prioritize reopening aspects of the economy shuttered by the pandemic as safely as possible, it does so with the availability of multiple COVID-19 vaccines. While not a cure, public health officials say the vaccine is the nation's quickest path back to normalcy.

Despite a lack of cure for COVID-19, Andrew Noymer, Associate Professor of Population Health and Disease Prevention Public Health at UC Irvine, says history indicates that vaccines have the potential to be more effective than a cure. Adding that COVID-19 is not going away anytime soon.

"In many ways, vaccines are better than cures – there's no cure for measles, but very few of our friends and cohorts have had measles because they were born for the most part after 1965," Noymer said in an interview with *Irvine Weekly*. "We're going to have another wave of COVID-19, in Orange County and everywhere, I guarantee it, but I don't know when, I don't know how bad it will be – infections diseases come in waves, that's just the way the universe works."

Orange County's move into the Red Tier on Sunday, March 14, came three days before the one-year anniversary of the county's first coronavirus-related stay-at-home order. The order, issued by former OC Health Officer Dr. Nichole Quick on March 17, 2020, marked the beginning of the pandemic in Orange County in many ways.

Prior to Quick's order, Orange County only had 166 total COVID-19 cases, and zero reported deaths. However, COVID-19 would soon make its presence felt in Orange County and beyond.

Twelve months later, as of March 15, Orange County reached an accumulative total of 248,881 COVID-19 cases, including 4,486 deaths.

The Red Tier now allows portions of the economy – like indoor dining, movie theaters and gyms – to reopen, while establishments like theme parks and stadiums have also been given the go-ahead to reopen with modifications on April 1.

Noymer said there are plenty of unknowns associated with COVID-19, even with the introduction of new vaccines. Still, Noymer said he is comfortable allow-

ing the reopening of theme parks and larger outdoor gatherings inside stadiums at a limited capacity.

"These theme parks, for the most part, are outdoors," he said. "But the theme parks are not what keep me up at night."

For Noymer, the "nightmare scenario" from his perspective is COVID-19 variants that could potentially evade the effectiveness of the current vaccines available. Noymer used the example of how AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine was discontinued in South Africa due to a degree of ineffectiveness against the South African COVID-19 variant.

"What does keep me up at night are variants that render the vaccine less potent. We have seen examples of this. It's a tangible threat," he said. "It's more trying to anticipate the virus's next move."

In terms of reopening precautions, Noymer said, "We should not emulate Texas," but rather implement a phased-in approach, referencing the unknowns.

"We need to go step-wise, we need to be humble in the face of mother nature and recognize that we don't understand all of the factors that are driving this," he said.

In Orange County, July 4 is the target date for Operation Independence, the county's partnership with the Orange County Fire Authority and the Orange County Health Agency that is working to vaccinate all residents by that date.

Irvine Mayor Farrah Khan, who founded Orange County's first city-based COVID-19 Recovery Task Force, said while all cities are dealing with a limited vaccine supply, the county seems on track to meet the July milestone.

"I think July 4 is going to be realistic. It can be realistic as long as we get the vaccine numbers that we hoped we would get," she said. "Johnson & Johnson was just approved – that should bump up the number of vaccines we get – the more supply we get, the faster we're able to vaccinate people."

As of March 15, the county has administered 1,005,143 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine to nearly 480,000 people, although the OC Health Agency Database is behind about 300,000 doses due to a reporting lag.

Despite the nationwide push for vaccination, Noymer added that COVID-19 testing will still become a useful tool for those who are not vaccinated and become symptomatic.

"Testing is going to be important in order to stay up to speed on potential variants, and for people who have any sort of symptoms," Noymer said. "Find out if it's just a cold or is it COVID-19 – are you vaccinated? – if you are, let's get this figured out – because it could be a sign of a new strain emerging. And that goes back to my nightmare scenario of a virus that evades the vaccine."

As reopening efforts and vaccine distribution increases, Noymer was asked if he could define a perspective of COVID-19, nationally speaking. Given the option of, "COVID-19, one year later," or "Pandemic Year Two," Noymer said he would go with the latter.

"I would call it Pandemic Year Two, because I still think we're in a pandemic phase," he said. "Just because Orange County's doing okay on any given afternoon, doesn't mean it's not still a pandemic."

IRVINE MAYOR SAYS CALVET STUDY FOR VETERANS CEMETERY MUST CONTINUE

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

While the veterans cemetery project has yet to break ground in Irvine, Mayor Farrah Khan has addressed the notion that the proposed project is currently being delayed by members of the City Council.

In an interview with *Irvine Weekly*, Khan explained that the project is not being delayed in any way, adding that once the California Department of Veterans Affairs completes site assessment studies on both the ARDA and Golf Course sites – which will be completed in May – the city will move forward.

“The cemetery issue has just been politicized so much. When my colleagues and I adopted the initiative, we didn’t want the community fighting anymore on this issue,” Khan said in a phone interview with *Irvine Weekly*. “I was just on the phone with CalVet yesterday, and it’s a straightforward matter – there’s a bill that’s signed by the governor, the bill requires CalVets to do its study. We can’t build a cemetery without knowing its cost and preliminary design – and that’s what the CalVet study is going to bring to us in May.”

The CalVets studies – which are re-

quired per Assembly Bill 368 – will review both potential sites: The ARDA site, which is located south of Cadence between the Bosque and Agua Chionon, and to the east of Pusan north of Cadence to Agua Chionon. And the Golf Course site, in the area north of there to be extended to Great Park Blvd, from just west of Skyhawk Blvd to about midway to Agua Chionon.

The studies will be funded by \$700,000 set aside for CalVets in the state budget, and will determine which site will be the most cost-effective to build a veterans cemetery.

Last May, Irvine City Attorney Jeff Melching pointed out that the decision of the cemetery’s location would ultimately be made at the state level – after the studies on both sites have completed.

“Whether it’s adopted tonight or voted in by the electors in November, the initiative doesn’t bind the property as long as it’s in the hands of the city,” Melching said in May.

In the past weeks, Irvine City Councilmember Larry Agran has issued resolutions proposing the city forgo the CalVet study. However, none of Agran’s submitted resolutions have been supported by Khan

or other council members, and have failed to appear on the council agenda for a vote, as agenda items now need the support of two members of the City Council, or mayoral support to appear as an agenda item.

Khan said she has not accepted any of Agran’s resolutions regarding the cemetery, and does not understand why a new resolution is needed.

“I cannot support any of them because they ask the city to neglect due diligence by taking a step ahead of the CalVet Study. My question, still unanswered, is why would we do this?” Khan wrote in a text to *Irvine Weekly*. “I don’t understand the narrative that ‘we got to build it now,’ I don’t know what to build right now, because there’s nothing there to build.”

Irvine Weekly reached out to CalVet for more clarity.

“Irvine determines the site that will be offered to the state for construction of a veterans cemetery. A prerequisite for a cemetery moving forward is the site determination,” CalVet wrote in an email to *Irvine Weekly*, responding to questions specifically asking if the Irvine City Council was delaying the project.

Khan said that she was willing to make a compromise with Agran’s resolution, under the impression that the city would not get additional state funding for the cemetery, but later discovered that Agran could potentially be delaying the CalVet study altogether.

“I started finding out, they’re actually trying to stall the CalVet study from coming out, and that cannot happen,” she said.

“I think it’s because the CalVet study is going to bring us back to the cost analysis for both the ARDA site and the Golf Course Site, and I have a feeling there’s going to be a substantial difference in the two sites – and I don’t think certain people want that number coming out.”

Referencing new support from state Senators Dave Min and Tom Umberg, who have joined Agran’s push for the ARDA site, Khan said her main priority is to make sure she represents all residents in Irvine.

“I’ve told this to Senator Min and Senator Umberg – we have residents living across the street from ARDA – and my job is to represent everyone in this city. If they’re uncomfortable with this cemetery, then I need to make sure that the way the cemetery is built protects them as well.”

IRVINE RESIDENTS SAY LATEST AQMD TOXIC AIR STUDY LACKS SUFFICIENT DATA

WHILE SOME AIR SAMPLING RESULTS SHOW REASONABLE LEVELS, RESIDENTS CONTINUE TO VOICE FRUSTRATION OVER FOUL ODORS IN IRVINE.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER



Irvine residents are voicing concerns over the potential exposure to carcinogens and other volatile organic compounds, as foul odors being produced by the All American Asphalt facility continue to sweep through the neighborhoods of Irvine.

Eastwood resident Lesley Tan, who has lived in Irvine for more than a decade, said she can still recall the first time she smelled that powerful asphalt smell one evening, after learning about it from a WeChat group.

"I remember that night, it was around 10:00 p.m. I went to open my window upstairs, and I tried to smell it," Tan explained during a phone call with *Irvine Weekly*. "Oh, the moment I opened the window I could smell that strong asphalt – and that was the first time I

launched a report [with AQMD]."

The AAA facility, located on Jeffrey Road, manufactures hot mix asphalt. Since 2019, the facility has become the subject of more than 800 complaints filed with AQMD regarding a foul odor wafting into the surrounding residential areas.

Now, residents claim that the recent AQMD study, which took place between December 2020 and March 2021, specifically to monitor air toxics in the area, lacked enough data to be conclusive.

On Wednesday, March 3, the South County Air Quality Management District held a community meeting via Zoom to discuss the results of the air samples taken near the All American Asphalt facility in Irvine.

In reference to the findings, Irvine Mayor Farrah Khan, who attended

the meeting via Zoom, said she was surprised AQMD did not offer her an opportunity to speak during the five-hour meeting. But she added that it was clear that the data presented did not satisfy residents, and can understand the frustration.

Khan added that she is also looking forward to more sufficient data.

"The data is there. The UCI consultants are talking about there being some spikes, but also they cannot conclude whether it is toxic or not. The data collected by the city and AQMD show that it's within reasonable levels, and I think the frustration from the public is wanted to be told for sure, that what we're breathing is not toxic," Khan explained in an interview with *Irvine Weekly*. "I think that's the answer they're looking for and that didn't come out at the

meeting."

In a Facebook post on Monday, March 15, Khan said, "it was clear" that AQMD needed to collaborate with UC Irvine and that with the support of Councilmember Anthony Kuo would be requesting a meeting with the AQMD board to see if more specific testing can be provided.

"I, along with Councilmember Kuo, am requesting to meet with OC Supervisor/AQMD Board member Lisa Bartlett and AQMD Board member Carlos Rodriguez to develop a testing program with input from UCI experts to test and collect enough data to clearly show what is in the air and where it may be coming from," the Facebook post read.

In terms of the specific testing, Dr. Barbara Barletta, Donald Blake Research Group, Chemistry Department at UC Irvine, explained that her group detected nearly 100 different species of volatile organic compounds within their air sampling efforts.

However, even with state-of-the-art equipment, Barletta's team discovered that the VOCs being produced by the All American Asphalt facility might be too large for her team's detection.

"Our system is quite sophisticated and quite complex. We can measure hydrocarbon three parts per trillion," Barletta explained. "We can measure a wide variety of VOCs – we measure mostly light volatile organic compounds – we realized that many of the compounds that could be associated with emissions from an asphalt facility, we cannot measure them because they are too heavy for our system."

In addition to the immeasurable size of the VOCs being produced by the AAA facility, Barletta also added that in terms of collection devices, her research group distributed just over a half-dozen, which she called very low.

"Eight canisters is a very very low number to actually have a detailed picture of what the atmosphere and what the troposphere looks like," Barletta explained.

During the public comment section of the March 3 meeting, many residents expressed concerns and demanded more answers.

For Tan, the search for clarity continues. As a mother of five, she said she has come too far to give up the fight for answers.

"I didn't want to give up – we only have two choices: We fight, or we move out," Tan said.

IRVINE-BASED SOUTH COUNTY OUTREACH DEMONSTRATES THE FUTURE OF NONPROFITS

FROM RENTAL AND UTILITY ASSISTANCE TO A STREAMLINED GROCERY EXPERIENCE IN IRVINE, SOUTH COUNTY OUTREACH PRIDES ITSELF ON INNOVATION THROUGH COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER



COURTESY OF SOUTH COUNTY OUTREACH

South County Outreach (SOC) is an Irvine-based non-profit organization, helping provide families and individuals with financial rental and utility assistance, along with food support through different programs including a 2,000 square foot walk-through style market in Irvine.

In an interview with *Irvine Weekly*, SOC's newest Executive Director, LaVal Brewer, discussed the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of SOC's

normal operations – and challenges for the community the organization serves.

Over the last year, Brewer said the community in which SOC provides service has expanded by 15 percent, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, South County Outreach serves more than 5,000 individuals.

While services have increased, Brewer was proud to report that donations have enabled SOC to distribute more than 730,000 pounds of fresh food.

"It is my absolute honor to serve South Orange County as president and chief executive officer," Brewer said. "I look forward to changing more and more lives each year and am lucky to have a dedicated team by my side. Last year we served 5,500 people. In 2021, we aim to relieve 6,500 individuals from food and housing insecurity."

Brewer, who has more than 30 years of non-profit experience, explained that the main objective of South County Outreach is not only to assist people to find their way out of hunger and homelessness, but also be able to do so through dignified, respectable avenues.

"We don't just hand you a box of food," Brewer said. "We say, 'Go with a shopping cart, and shop for your family' – and they walk down the aisle and they actually choose the brands of food that they desire best for their family. We give them food, but we give them the ability to have their own choice."

Brewer, who joined South County Outreach in February, said he's implemented several nuances to the market that provide key necessities to families that were not always available to people in need.

One issue Brewer worked to address was the lack of dairy products. Brewer saw this as a significant problem considering two of the most selected items

were cereal and macaroni and cheese. However, families were constantly unable to find milk or butter.

"In the last year, we made a commitment that over the next two years, every client that comes through our doors will have the ability to get eggs, milk and butter when they shop in our market," he said. "If you don't have milk and butter – you can't make macaroni and cheese."

The food market at South County Outreach's Irvine headquarters is just one of the SOC's two core programs. The other, Brewer explained, provides rental assistance of up to \$10,000 to help people stay in their homes.

Cheryl Flohr, chair of the South County Outreach Board Of Directors, said she is looking forward to Brewer's innovative leadership.

"South County Outreach is fortunate to have LaVal at its helm," Flohr said. "He brings broad experience and expertise in the nonprofit arena and has already provided strong leadership for the organization, particularly during these challenging times. We look forward to the continued growth and development of the agency under his direction."

Brewer explained that in order to service the dietary needs of more than 5,000 people, South County Outreach's food collection efforts are threefold.



LaVal Brewer

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COMMUNITY

"We're assigned our grocery rescue stores through Second Harvest Food Bank. We go to our assigned stores, and we pick up either shelf-stable items, bread, dairy and even frozen protein. We get guacamole, we get pico de gallo – a wide array," he said. "So that is really diverting food that can be consumed from going to the landfill, and we bring that and we stock it and we try to move it out as fast as possible."

Local food banks and local groups also help supply South County Outreach's Irvine Market through food donations. Brewer explained that local groups will organize food drives, which is a critical part of community-driven food collection.

"This local Irvine Brownie troop had done a food drive within their families, and each had collected bags of food and the troop got a chance to see how the food came in and out of the market," he explained. "They were part of the system to donate food to people in need, and this one Brownie says, 'This is a cool store!'"

Brewer also discussed what South County Outreach calls "buying the gap." The gap is the shortage of food that does not come by way of donation, but rather is purchased directly by SOC.

"The final way, between what we get donated from grocery rescue, and what we get donated from our food drives – there's a gap, and that gap is the dairy (the milk and the eggs) as well as produce and protein," he said. "We believe so heavily in the dignity and respect factor, that when someone walks in we never want them to go, 'Oh, you don't



COURTESY OF SOUTH COUNTY OUTREACH

have any milk?"

Looking ahead, Brewer said he wants to reopen the market's doors to the public, which have been closed due to COVID-19.

"I'm starting to rethink the market. I want the shopping experience in the market to be such where no one feels like less than when they walk in," he said. "We're starting to look at

technology improvements, as well as logistics – and finally the layout and the feel – so when people walk in, they feel like they're in an actual market."

Lastly, Brewer reminds us that this community effort is volunteer-driven. Even with more than 250 regularly scheduled volunteers, and 1,500 occasional volunteers, South County Out-

reach is always looking for individuals to help with various tasks, from stocking shelves in the food pantry, driving trucks and picking up donations, handling retail responsibilities, to teaching classes at the Computer Learning Lab.

For those interested in volunteering please www.sco-oc.org/volunteer/ or call (949) 380-8144 ext. 217 for more information.



COURTESY OF SOUTH COUNTY OUTREACH

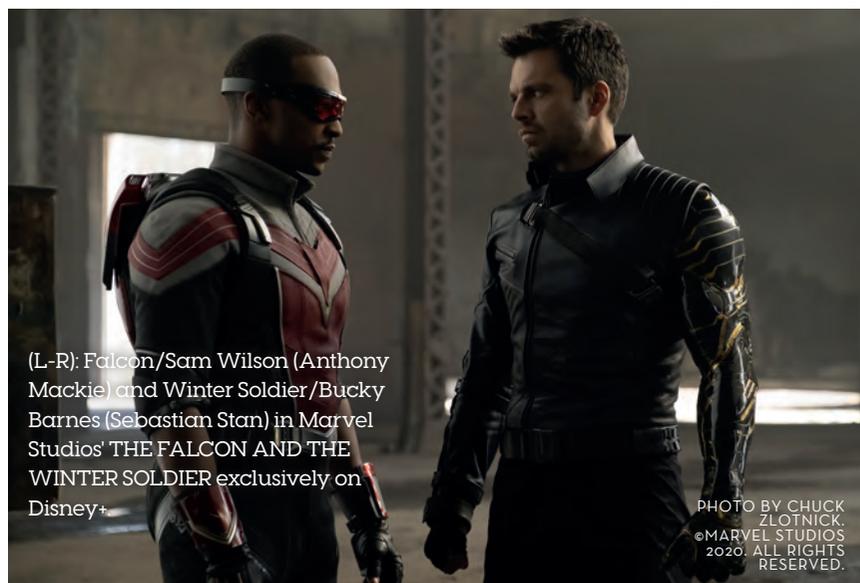


COURTESY OF SOUTH COUNTY OUTREACH

THE MARVEL REVOLUTION WILL BE TELEVISED

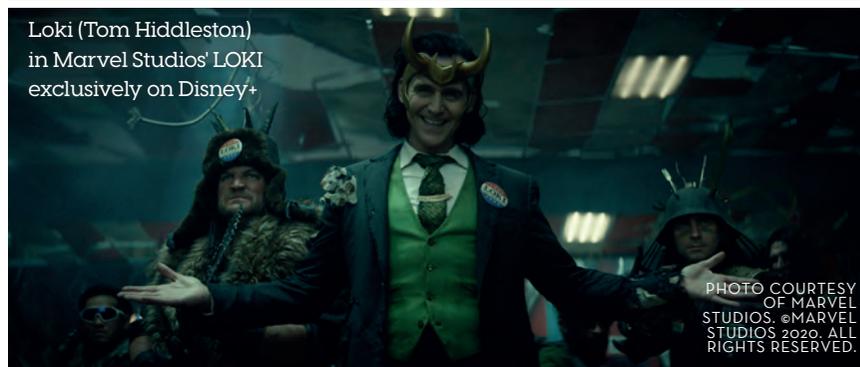
DISNEY'S WANDA VISION BRINGS THE SUPERHERO MULTIVERSE TO THE MASSES.

BY ERIN MAXWELL



(L-R): Falcon/Sam Wilson (Anthony Mackie) and Winter Soldier/Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan) in Marvel Studios' *THE FALCON AND THE WINTER SOLDIER* exclusively on Disney+.

PHOTO BY CHUCK ZLOTNICK. ©MARVEL STUDIOS 2020. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



Loki (Tom Hiddleston) in Marvel Studios' *LOKI* exclusively on Disney+.

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Already brimming with magic and mayhem, supercharged superheroes, and enough drama to fill a world or two, the Marvel universe is about to get much, much bigger. And it's all thanks to a little witchcraft.

While the Marvel Cinematic Universe's production schedule is currently on pause due to the pandemic, the Mouse House did take the opportunity in January to roll out *WandaVision* on Disney+ and the series has not only acted as an in-depth examination into the life of a lesser-explored Avenger, it also forms the connective tissue that will help introduce major themes and concepts for Phase Four of the MCU.

But before exploring the future of Phase Four, an examination of Marvel's history and its ability to break down comic book lore is needed. Beginning with *Iron Man* in 2008, Marvel's film release was divided into distinct sections, each with themes and storylines that would encompass a massive overarching world in which heroes from each movie converge, blending elements from each narrative.

Phase One introduced the core characters – Thor, Iron Man, Captain America and the Hulk – and ended in the crossover, *The Avengers*. Phase Two dug deep into the Marvel backpages for additional heroes such as Guardians of the Galaxy and Ant-Man, while establishing more complex themes and exploring conflict between the icons. Phase Three would see disputes between the heroes come to a head, initially splitting the super group, but later resolving their issues to fight a larger foe, Thanos. The phases allowed the audience to understand the heroes and their private battles, while inserting the drama necessary to allow the audience to become personally invested in each hero.

WandaVision is a culmination of the first three phases of the Marvel rollout, taking place after the events of *Avengers: Endgame*, which saw every hero from the MCU take the field to save the universe, ending with the loss of both Iron Man and Steve Rogers' Captain America. In the end, the heroes who survived were left to pick up the threads of new storylines and kick off Phase Four.

When we last saw Wanda Maximoff (Elizabeth Olsen), aka the Scarlet Witch, she was one of the MCU's most tragic figures. Orphaned at a young age and brainwashed to become a weapon by Hydra, Wanda has had more than her

fair share of devastating sadness. First with the death of her parents, then her brother, followed by the loss of her lover Vision (Paul Bettany) at the hands of Thanos. But what of her whereabouts after the Avengers assembled to defeat the Mad Titan?

During this time, Wanda herself became darker and more dangerous as she was consumed by her grief. All alone after the battle with Thanos, Wanda has been left to fester, choosing to create her own reality instead of facing her demons.

Disney+'s *WandaVision* is a truly unique entry by the studio. Set within different decades and using TV tropes that caricature family-friendly programming of the past, the show also hides a sinister secret behind its catchy theme songs and canned laugh tracks. The series cloaks deeper themes and offers an enticing mystery that invites fans to play Encyclopedia Brown in the MCU as they wade through the dozens of Marvel-related references hidden in its parody commercials and set design.

Though never stated, Wanda Maxi-

moff is one of the most important players in the Marvel universe. With powers that include telekinesis, energy manipulation and the ability to change the perception of reality, Disney's Wanda is more powerful than originally conceived by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee's comics back in 1964. Wanda not only manipulates reality, she holds the future of the MCU in her hands.

"I think *WandaVision* is setting out to do what every entry in the MCU attempts to do: first, to tell a good, interesting story, and second, to further develop the larger world and push the story of the Marvel shared universe forward," states TV host/Marvel guru Hector Navarro. "But *WandaVision* also has another agenda: to finally and fully showcase the potential of the Scarlet Witch and the Vision."

"It seems like their goal is to blow the doors off the Multiverse, bring more of the magical and the mystical into the MCU, and finally establish Wanda's true power as one of MCU's most-formidable beings," adds John Humphrey, co-host of entertainment-driven YouTube channel, *The Reel Rejects*. "Based on the show, so far (and if the internet is to be believed), *WandaVision* appears to be a springboard for opening up the multiverse within the MCU as well as further expansion on the magical and mystical elements introduced in films like *Doctor Strange*."

In addition to continuing the ongoing superhero saga, *WandaVision* also feeds fans bite-size nuggets of necessary information in a colorful way that is easy to digest. Taking a tip from the storytelling structure of comic books, the MCU uses information gathered from previous films to set up future endeavors.

With *WandaVision*, as well as its upcoming slate of new television shows, Marvel is leaning into Disney+ to help set up the future phases of the MCU by introducing audiences, slowly, to new concepts and ideas that will propel upcoming storylines.

"Classic comic book storylines like 'Avengers: Disassembled' or 'House of M' couldn't really play out in the film franchise the way it was set up before," states Navarro. "But with the addition of Disney+ series' they can take their time exploring more character dynamics and relationships. Wanda losing her grip on reality (and eventually coming back from those extremes) is now a story that can be properly told in the Marvel Cinematic Universe."

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Elizabeth Olsen as Wanda Maximoff and Paul Bettany as Vision in Marvel Studios' WANDAVISION exclusively on Disney+.



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By using its television efforts to support its theatrical endeavors, Marvel is creating an active entertainment experience that both engages viewers while steadily teaching them everything they need to know for the next film. It's homework, but without the work.

The slow introduction of information and world-building is what sets the MCU – and its visionary guru Kevin Feige – apart from other franchises. Feige – who has been president of Marvel Studios and the primary mind behind the MCU since 2007, earning a combined worldwide box office gross of over \$26.8 billion for the franchise – has assembled a team of writers and directors who understand that fans need to be entertained as they learn, otherwise the story can become muddled as they struggle to retain all of the new details thrown at them. Because of this method, fans who follow it all walk into every Marvel film completely prepared, armed with the knowledge of Pym Particles and how time transpires in the Quantum Realm. These days, more MCU-versed moviegoers understand the importance of returning the Infinity Stones to the point of origin rather than the Pythagorean theorem.

"It's been fascinating to watch them build this apparatus over time, because its origins with Phase One are simple enough; but as the phases pick up momentum, you can see that, rather than simply adapting a certain story or character, they've managed to adapt an entire mode of storytelling," explains Humphrey.

On *WandaVision*, the inclusion of Evan Peters as Wanda's brother Quicksilver in lieu of the MCU's Aaron Taylor-Johnson paves the way for Phase Four as it introduces the multiverse concept, while making the most out of the Fox and Disney merger. Not only does the cameo open the door to previous out-of-touch elements of the MCU, but it foreshadows the future of Marvel.

The Marvel Multiverse is the perfect opportunity to flex Disney's muscle and to show off its brand new shiny acquisition: Fox. It also gives the MCU the ability to mix and match characters from different franchises that previously were out of bounds. "It seems fairly clear the multiverse is now in play in the MCU," notes Mike Avila, author and host of the comic book video series *Behind The Panel*. "The multiverse provides rather easy yet fascinating options for introducing the X-Men and the Fantastic Four into the MCU."

"I think *WandaVision*'s success, combined with *The Mandalorian*, has proven the viability of the weekly release," adds Avila. "The global popularity of Marvel almost guarantees each new episode of a series will dominate social media conversations. In this age of instant gratification where viewers can watch what they want when they want, Disney+ has figured out a way to revive appointment TV viewing."

WandaVision's inclusion of Fox's X-Men characters, as well as magic-user/wicked witch Agatha Harkness (played by Kathryn Hahn), lays the multiverse groundwork for the upcoming *Doctor*

Strange in the Multiverse of Madness and possibly *Spider-Man 3: No Way Home*, which is set for a December release. Feige has implied that *WandaVision* would most likely be a lead-in for the upcoming *Doctor Strange* movie.

"Some of the shows that I mentioned that we are about to start filming, we are keeping in mind a structure that would lead into a season two or a season three in a more direct way compared to a show like *WandaVision* that goes into a feature," he explained at the Television Critics Association's 2021 presentation.

But as Marvel likes to keep its plot points close to the vest, all fans can do is theorize, hypothesize and speculate while they tune in week after week, thus creating a more loyal audience for Disney+. Co-executive producer Mary Livanos believes that the show's current momentum is not just due to this kind of loyalty to the MCU, but also thanks to

the compelling story at the heart of the show.

"One of the beautiful things about *WandaVision* is that it was really designed as its own, standalone complete story," Livanos shares. "As far as how this story relates to future installments, we always knew that Wanda would segway into *Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness*. The inclusion of Monica Rambeau and ties to *Captain Marvel 2* was an early discovery that has been so cool to help build to. Each case of connectivity is an ever-evolving creative conversation that is designed to enhance how this installment of the story resolves, rather than fundamentally change it. As for lasting ramifications on future phases, the hope is that there are kernels of inspiration and story threads introduced here that help weave the larger tapestry in later installments, if and when the narrative alchemy is right."

It should be noted that the success of *WandaVision* not only comes from the strength of the franchise, but from the pandemic as well. Due to the sheer numbers of at-home people consuming content, it had a literal captive audience in which to show off its wonders. Disney CEO Bob Chapek is using the opportunity to create a new focus that will lean into streaming, much like he did two decades prior when he created Disney's home video empire. But instead of *Air Bud*, Chapek has an entire MCU to play with. This new strategy will strengthen the symbiotic relationship between Disney+ and theatrical, feeding each other with each new release.

Marvel is moving full steam ahead with its small screen slate too. Up next is *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* on March 19, with Anthony Mackie and Sebastian Stan reprising their *Avengers* roles. Much like *WandaVision*, the limited series will give the Avengers B-team

(L-R): Teyonah Parris as Monica Rambeau and Randall Park as Jimmy Woo in Marvel Studios' WANDAVISION exclusively on Disney+.



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ENTERTAINMENT

a chance to shine as the duo try to find their place in a Captain America-less world. Like *WandaVision*, the series will take full advantage of its small-screen format to both tell a story while developing characters for their new roles in the MCU.

"The value of these series is that we get to spend a lot more time with these characters – we get to go deeper into their relationships, their fears, their wants, and have some fun putting them in unexpected environments," reveals *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* co-executive producer Zoie Nagelhout. "It also means we have the time to invite supporting characters into their narratives, which not only makes the world of the show feel bigger, but also it adds layers to both Sam and Bucky as people. We get to understand them and the events of the show through multiple lenses."

Following *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* is *Loki*, which will debut in May. In his own outing, the God of Mischief (Tom Hiddleston) will likely use the serial format to establish his place within the new Marvel Universe. The series will also introduce the Time Variance Authority, a policing body from the comics that monitors the multiverse.

Following *Loki*, *Hawkeye* eyes a late 2021 release, while *Ms. Marvel* also targets late 2021 for a debut. In addition to these character-driven series, the animated anthology series *What If...?* is set for a Summer 2021 release, unless unforeseen circumstances push it back. The series will tease endless possibilities of each hero and storyline by placing characters in oddball situations. Other Marvel series that are set for production (but are a bit far off) include *She-Hulk* in 2022 plus *Moon Knight*, *Ironheart* and *Secret Invasion*, the latter three still TBA in terms of production release schedule.

In addition to Disney's own slate, Marvel recently retained the rights to *Punisher* and *Jessica Jones* back from Netflix, officially ending the multi-year deal Disney held with the powerhouse streaming service. As Daredevil reverted back to Marvel in 2020, this gives Disney the possible chance to flex a little *Defenders* muscle.

"The production quality of the Marvel shows should be an indicator to broadcast networks that they shouldn't bother to try to do a mainstream superhero show unless they plan to commit massive dollars to the effort," states Avila. "ABC, NBC, CBS and certainly not the CW can compete with the types of

production budgets Disney+ is giving to these Marvel shows."

With each new series, the strength of the Marvel franchise grows. Each series will connect in a larger way to the theatrical efforts, either through characters or plotlines, and each will help the other grow, creating a constant flow of entertaining content that also schools audiences on Marvel 101.

"The MCU coming to Disney+ continues to change the game with the expansion of an already vast and unprecedented narrative odyssey," Livanos says. "To have Disney's unwavering support in this space now allows the MCU to showcase and celebrate what we love best about television and the episodic format. It's exciting to be at the precipice of all of the opportunities this unlocks."

The small-screen series will pave the way for the ambitious theatrical slate that is just on the horizon, a slate that includes the much-delayed *Black Widow* (currently set for this May) and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, set for June. This will clear the way for the highly-anticipated A-list extravaganza *Eternals* on November 5, 2021, which stars Angelia Jolie, Salma Hayek and former members of House Stark: Richard Madden and Kit Harington.

If all goes according to plan, the series slate will complement the nonstop theatrical releases set for 2022, including *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* in March 2022 and *Thor: Love and Thunder* in 2022.

There's not a lot known about Phase Five yet, but we do know that it will be marked by the release of *Black Panther II* in July of 2022, followed by *Captain Marvel 2* in November of 2022. Other pics on the release schedule include *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol. 3* and *Ant-Man 3*, and the revamp of *Blade*. Then there is the possibility of new *X-Men* and *Fantastic Four* flicks.

In essence, Marvel is building a franchise more ambitious than anything ever attempted in pop culture. An entire universe spanning decades that includes television and theatrical releases, using every resource Disney has in its deep, deep pockets. The end result is a fully-formed world filled with compelling stories and favorite characters that will last the ages. Mainstream audiences can easily understand and appreciate it and hardcore fans can delve into it all in a deeper, nerdier way. In exchange, Disney gets a solid revenue

stream and an unshakeable franchise that can result in more content, more fans, more theme parks, and a solid film and television slate for the next decade.

What Marvel is creating is not brand new, but it is revolutionary. A feat that has only been attempted on the pages of comics brought to screens of all sizes everywhere. And while the first step in this revolution might have started with an iron suit, credit to Marvel's next phase must be given to a witch ... and a little vision.

"Hold on to your hats, because *WandaVision* is just the beginning. The upcoming MCU Disney+ and theatrical slate is absolutely unlike anything audiences have seen before," touts Livanos. "Knowing what's cooking, there really does seem to be something for every kind of audience member to relate to and enjoy. Prepare for delight."

WandaVision can be viewed in its entirety on Disney+.



PODCAST

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TUNING INTO THE HEART OF THE HUSTLE WITH RAY J

THE ENTREPRENEUR AND ENTERTAINMENT STAR SHARES DETAILS OF HIS COME-UP STORY.

BY TARA FINLEY



PHOTO COURTESY OF RAYCON

If anyone knows a thing or two about hustle it is Ray J. Growing up in the entertainment industry, having to establish his own name as an artist, overcoming obstacles and pivoting as an entrepreneur, he has quite the come-up story.

"Some people say 'hustle' and they

don't know what hustle means," Ray J said on a recent edition of the *More Hustle* Podcast. "Hustle is just an everyday hardworking person that can turn a creative idea into something. Just think about and then create it with a team. I think that's the heart of the hustle for sure."

The heart of the hustle is what the *More Hustle* podcast is all about, as co-hosts Brian Calle and Nefeteri Plessy use their own backgrounds to find and share come-up stories and the sometimes painful journeys it takes to achieve success.

Born William Ray Norwood Jr., Ray J

is now a household name. An entrepreneur, singer, songwriter, actor, reality star, the man has had more job titles than most and he's put his heart and soul into all of them.

Breaking into the scene at a young age, he and sister Brandy have been hustling from what feels like day one.

PODCAST

What was his upbringing like? From the church choir to constant auditions, Ray J and his sister were flexing their talents early.

"If you have a sibling that's really at the top of the top of the music game at the time, and there's just so much happening at once, sometimes it's hard to identify who you are because so many people are trying to create another Brandy just in a male form," the *More Hustle* guest confides. "And so I struggled with that, and struggled with just trying to make sure they knew I was my own person."

The only way to make your own path is to just keep grinding, so that's what Ray J did. Working to perfect himself with whatever opportunity or avenue he was given, he was able to carve out his own fame and name. But no matter how successful he's become in his own right, he always credits his family.

"Brandy is one of the people who gave me support throughout everything," he says. "I owe a lot of where I am today to her and my family, and for just allowing me to do what I wanted to do creatively. Without them I don't think I would be around you know?"

"My mom's my third eye," Ray J tells the podcast when asked if his family is still involved in his career. "My mom is still involved every day ... she's always going to be there for me from the most honest place in the world."

While many know Ray J from his art, so much of his talent lies within his business acumen. But before every success, there is a learning moment. What was a point in time in this guest's journey where he felt like it was all too much?

"There was a time when I had my scooter company, before we sold it, and I was just down to my last dollars," he confides. "Like I was just spending so much money on buying inventory and trying to figure it out, and there was so much stuff happening that I just couldn't handle it. I almost went broke trying to just maintain the inventory and trying to maintain the demand, and it taught me a lot."

"When Ray [Lee] and I met, it really changed the scope on how I thought about business and how to listen – how to build the infrastructure in a whole different way," Ray J continues. "It led me to where we are today with Raycon, so some of the mistakes that you make or some of the real hard lows that you're going through, you need those because you can really appreciate the other side and then humble yourself when posi-

tive things start to happen. You definitely need that reality check sometimes."

Raycon is a premium wireless audio company in which both Rays are co-founders – Ray J and Ray Lee.

"We're for the people, we want to make sure the price points make sense. We want to make sure that you can go out and get some quality high-end products that people are out wanting but not paying these crazy prices for, then having multiple different choices as well," explains Ray J of Raycon. "We stand out because we focus on the customer."

Why wireless audio (earbuds)?

"There's definitely a lot of competition, right?" agrees Lee. "but we've always been humble when we approached it. We know there are huge industry giants – Apple, Samsung – I think we always say 'oh we appreciate those guys, they do great stuff, great products.' But at the same time, I think there's space in the market right now where brands aren't really creating electronics around the person, and really thinking about how they use it."

They try to simplify it, to make sure it's something their consumers will really enjoy and need.

"I just feel like we are on the other side of the spectrum of it," agrees Ray J. "I think our price points and our mission is different. Our company and our grind, the independence behind who we are, the story is different, the passion is different because it's more heartfelt because we are really building this from the ground up and day to day we get better and better."

A father of two, staying grounded is a key to his success.

"I want the kids to be set, so if they want to be able to do tech or they want to be able to do entertainment, they can," says Ray J. "I'm trying to put in all the work. I'm trying to put in the work of 15, 25 generations so I'm up 24 hours making sure they don't have to really want for nothing but just living life. Now in life, you still have to turn into who you are and build your own business and build your own empire, so I'm just trying to provide for them everything they need, all the tools. From there, they can be who they want to be and just be great."

His no-sleep, heart-of-the-hustle mantra is what enables him to do so much. What advice or words of wisdom would he give to others looking to achieve success?

"You've got to make sure you take your time to appreciate everything around you, because when things are happening for you in a positive way that's when

you got to turn into the most humble you and I think that's a challenge for everyone in the world. You just have to zone back and say 'thank you God' every day, or 'thank you' to whatever the higher love you give, the appreciation of life and success and things around you first. That was a challenge just trying to stay away from the turn-up and the over-good time and the overdoing it. A lot of people self-sabotage, right? So you get right to the two-yard line and always end up fumbling the ball. If you really take a look at that and make adjustments to who you are and how you treat people and how you talk to people – because it's either we are all special or nobody's special. That's how I look at it: nobody's better than the next person. We are all just special creative people. So I think that's really the biggest adjustment I made growing up and maturing into who I am now is to appreciate and love and uplift and encourage and help people every day, and serve. And that's what we all should do. And I think that I'm just at that level mentally every day, so if there's a problem that comes my way we can figure it out. I'm 99.9% solu-

tion, you know? Straight up," says Ray J. "Sometimes you have to enjoy the problem – enjoy the challenge," he explains. That's where the energy starts, and sometimes where the best stories begin.

"You really have to get an alignment with your greatness," agrees Neferteri. "What are you here to do on this earth, right now? And then create your life from the end: what do you want people to know you as? And how do you need to show up on a daily basis to command the space to create that into reality?"

"Say yes when you can say yes, and learn to say no when it's necessary (but firmly)," wisens Brian. "My other one is to bite off more than you can chew, then chew it. And then always remember the people who were loyal to you, and always be loyal to them no matter what. Those are the things that have always made me successful."

To learn more about Ray J's journey, Raycon, and the heart of his hustle, listen to *The More Hustle* podcast on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, iHeart Radio or wherever you consume your podcasts.

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IRVINE'S OLIVE OIL GRILL IS PUTTING MEDITERRANEAN CUISINE ON THE MAP

SPECIALIZING IN TWO DIFFERENT STYLES OF MEDITERRANEAN CUISINE, THIS OLIVE OIL GRILL IS SHOWCASING THE IMPORTANCE OF MOM AND POPS IN IRVINE.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

Located in the Cypress Village Shopping Center, Olive Oil is a casual Mediterranean joint, featuring a Chicken Shawarma Calzone and Olive Oil Calzone that you can only find in Irvine. They also offer a "mini menu," which contains mini versions of their regular menu items, which is ideal for catering.

Opened in 2015, Olive Oil is owned and operated by a husband and wife, Khaldoun Sahmani and Basma Kaoud, who have merged two different styles

of Mediterranean cuisine into one robust menu in Irvine.

Sahmani is Syrian and Kaoud is Palestinian, so it was a natural transition to bring aspects of their culture into one singular menu. For years, the couple had aspirations to open a Mediterranean restaurant.

In August 2015, when they decided to start their own business, it was for many reasons. Mainly, being in Irvine, they noticed that there are not many mom and pop businesses in the area, and the couple wanted to create an atmosphere



PHOTOS COURTESY OF OLIVE OIL GRILL

that felt authentic to their backgrounds.

The couple created Olive Oil Mediterranean Restaurant as an escape from fried and processed foods. They wanted to introduce salads, grilled proteins and baked goods to their kids and the younger community.

With an array of flatbreads and chicken shawarma dishes, Olive Oil Medaterranean Grill is the only Medi-

terranean restaurant in Orange County that offers delicious flatbreads and a grilled kabobs menu. Also on the menu is lahmajoon, which is known as an Armenian Pizza.

The owners have said that people from Los Angeles to Texas have come to Olive Oil Grill for the taste of their house-prepped chicken shawarma because it is an authentic family recipe.



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