RON FINLEY: CULTIVATING FREEDOM
L.A.'S MOST BADASS GARDENER SHARES LESSONS FROM NATURE
BY SHANA NYS DAMBROT
Ten years ago, artist and designer Ron Finley planted a modest vegetable garden in the little strip of soil between the sidewalk and the street outside his own front door in South Central Los Angeles. And with that small action he sowed the seeds of what he envisions as both a forest and a revolution.

A decade on, Finley’s HQ has grown into a lush garden of flowers, fruits, vegetables, grains and ad hoc sculptures. He’s lectured and worked all over the world and shot to fame with a stratospherically popular TED talk. And according to the Sunset Plaza Drive billboards asking whether “Y’all want to plant some motherfucking kale?” Finley has now taken his rightful, genre-bending place on the Masterclass online academy faculty.

When the Weekly caught up with him by video conference from the sunniest bench in his garden, we asked whether he thought that pandemic conditions had boosted interest in the Masterclass, since it’s centered around the why and how of growing one’s own food at home. He is certain that it has. “Yeah, definitely,” he says. “Motherfuckers are realizing they can’t eat diamonds. They are figuring out the true value of shit, that there are certain things you can’t buy.”

Finley’s motivation in 2010 had to do with the availability, or actually the total lack, of fresh produce at stores in his urban neighborhood — a common condition in many inner city regions around the country.
And through that process he has become immersed in everything from civic policy regarding growing food on “public” lands to the ways in which communities are created, sustained and protected, to the effects of empowerment on the individual.

“This experience has also made me an urban sociologist, and anthropologist, and a psychologist,” he says. With his clear-eyed understanding of how food insecurity and food justice directly impact the health and well-being of a given zip code, he has placed the act of gardening within the spheres of not only agriculture, but economics, public art, political activism and self-determination.

Now with the intensifying, overlapping contexts of disrupted food supply chains, a global health threat and resource inequity, Finley isn’t surprised more people are becoming agriculture-curious. “What if,” he offers, instead of being dependent on faceless corporate forces to shape your life, what if instead of that, “you could be your own food supply chain?”

And for Finley, the idea of growing food at home and the freedoms it affords doesn’t stop at the property line. He is an advocate for forming collectives with the neighbors on your block, sharing your crops, so that everyone ends up with some of everything they need.

“Resources means more than just money,” Finley says. “It means food and neighbors, it means dirt and air. There’s so much I hope will be different in the new world that’s coming. You can design the life you want to live, and this is a wakeup call. I hope.”

The garden has always been a powerful cultural, mythological, poetic and religious symbol even across history and societies. But for Finley what a garden represents is much more than a metaphor. “The garden teaches patience and persistence, math and science,” he says, and above all, “it teaches freedom.”

So what’s growing in his garden right now? “Well,” he laughs. “What’s not growing in my garden right now? Pomegranates, nectarines, stargazers, cape gooseberries, apples, collard greens, peppers, bananas, beets, corn, sugar cane, succulents, milkweed, butterfly bush, lemons, figs…You just missed the amaryllis!”

So what exactly does his 10-lesson Masterclass “Ron Finley Teaches Gardening” course actually teach subscribers, many of whom are presumably new to the idea? As its promo says, he’s talking to people where they are, about how to make use of any and every spot of available land or wherever they can put a pot.

For example his ingenious and completely charming dresser-drawer planters, which have been especially popular on social media. It’s a good thing Finley enjoys engaging with people online, because he’s been inundated with proof from all over the world that his lessons are being learned.

“I love to be able to see that I’m changing people’s lives,” Finley says. “They send me pictures and videos, especially their dresser-drawer gardens! Now I get to see who is taking the class, or who has seen the TED talk and been inspired. And there are people from Africa, the Philippines, India, Jordan, Brazil...It’s crazy. But I love it.” And everyday it keeps growing taller.

See more about how the garden grows at ronfinley.com.
WHAT TO WATCH THIS WEEK
Al Capone, former first lady Michelle Obama and more

BY LINA LECARO & CHUCK WILSON

Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. the Reverend | Netflix
Quirky Kimmy is back and in this all new feature-length film, and we get to decide her fate. If you’ve missed the hilarious cast of Unbreakable, you’re not alone. This novel, choose-as-you-go story is fun, but it also makes for some pressure, especially for hardcore fans who know that Kimmy (Ellie Kemper) doesn’t always make the best choices on her own.

Like Netflix’s groundbreaking Black Mirror: Bandersnatch episode, Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. the Reverend is a twisted tale providing multiple outcomes and viewer choices along the way. Most are likely to get everyone to the happy(?) ending eventually, in which our wonderfully wacky Miss Schmidt walks down the aisle with Harry Potter himself, Daniel Radcliffe, playing an equally naive English prince here. But before that can happen Kimmy must call on her fellow “mole women” (Tip: Avoid “the Taco Snake” phone option at all costs!) to solve a mystery concerning her puppet-like purple backpack and a mysterious book she finds hidden inside of it belonging to the “reverend.” Jon Hamm’s cult leader/ Kimmy’s captor from the last few seasons. It seems the evil Rev might have abducted a new group of gals, so it’s up to Kimmy and her bodacious bestie Titus Andromedon to save the women, trekking by foot and pimped-out bike and hitting up a hicksville bar (Another tip: Choose the option where Titus actually knows the words to “Freebird” and you won’t be disappointed.).

Final tip: Watch this movie more than once for an array of storylines and Easter eggs from the warped minds of producers Tina Fey and Robert Carlock. Unbreakable the series is over, so this movie and its multiple versions are all we got. —LINA LECARO

The Wrong Missy | Netflix
In the past decade or so, Adam Sandler movies have been very hit or miss, especially The Wrong Missy, starring still-effective straightman David Spade and the spastic Lauren Lapkus, is a laugh-out-loud hit. Sandler’s usual suspects are all here (Rob Schneider, Nick Swardson) but he is nowhere in sight and that seems like it was a good choice. Instead, Spade plays the unlikely romantic lead Sandler might have, and the casting really works.

Recalling the chemistry the actor had with Chris Farley back in the SNL days, this silly slapstick-driven comedy works its wacky magic from scene one, when the two leads go on a blind date from hell. It’s all pretty predictable about 15 minutes in, but thanks to some gorgeous Hawaiian locales (Sandler loves his vacay/island flicks) this one fits in nicely with alongside classics like Just Go With It and 50 First Dates. But none of it would be such a scream without an utterly electric performance by Lapkus, who steals the show here as a woman whose lack of boundaries, filters and self-restraint make for a full and shockingly funny take on life that’s so “wrong,” it’s right. —L.L.

Capone | VOD
Al Capone, the 20th century gangster responsible for dozens of brutal murders, died in 1947 after spending years fading away in his Florida mansion, lost to dementia brought on by syphilis. In his daring new film, writer-director Josh Trank (Chronicle) sends Tom Hardy on a journey into the famed thug’s fractured mind, as violent memories from his glory days jumble up to create fantasies of what’s happening in the present.

To their credit, Hardy and Trank don’t soften Capone’s bullying edges though he’s clearly puzzled by the extremes of what his memory bank has to offer, as when Capone relives the death by torture of an enemy that he himself ordered. All grunts and chomping cigar, Hardy gives a performance that’s all in the eyes — fine work from a fearless actor.

The film itself may disappoint those hoping for an action epic on par with The Untouchables. Capone doesn’t have much plot, despite the awkward inclusion of a long-lost son seeking reconciliation and FBI agents on the trail of missing money. Individual scenes, particularly two music-tinged sequences early on, impress but don’t quite land. Trank is always dashing on to the next fantasy, and after a while, seems to be moving in circles, which may be the point. Inside the horror of dementia, life is on repeat and nothing lands.

Hope Gap | VOD
One week from their 29th wedding anniversary, and Edward (Bill Nighy) leaves his wife, Grace (Annette Bening). He’s in love with someone else. Grace is enraged and sinks into eternal bitterness, calling the divorce a “murder.” Inspired by his own family’s story, writer-director William Nicholson (Shadowlands) gives his ace cast, including Josh O’Connor as the son, dialogue that’s self-consciously literate and a post-divorce arc for Grace that feels underdeveloped, as if he couldn’t imagine the mother breaking free of self-imposed traps. Still, we see these things for the acting, don’t we? This trio — aces all. —C.W.

Becoming | Netflix
Like her memoir of the same name, Becoming tells the story of Michelle Obama in a personal way that’s fascinating because of the subject, not because of any revelatory information or even any particularly new perspectives.

Made by Higher Ground Productions — the former first lady and her husband President Barack Obama’s production company — it is a detailed chronicle of an extraordinary life, a powerful love story and a journey filled with challenges and disappointments, all of which are meant to show the kind of character and strength we might all achieve by example. And although Mrs. Obama is never really put in the hot seat the way Hillary Clinton is in her Hulu doc series Hillary, she doesn’t hold back either, especially when sharing her experiences as a black woman and her disappointment in her fellow black women for not voting, allowing Donald Trump to snag the presidency. “After all that work, they just couldn’t be bothered to vote at all — that’s my trauma,” she says earnestly yet matter of factly.

Though Michelle doesn’t dig too deep into the Trump stuff (Lord knows there’s a lot of him out for; the man has proven he is obsessed with her husband, after all.), the entire documentary is somewhat of a wistful watch if you miss the class, the humor, the empathy and the lack of pretense of the former first family. —L.L.

Thousand Pieces of Gold | VOD
A little-seen gem from 1990, newly restored, and screening online to benefit the American Cinematheque, Thousand Pieces of Gold stars a superb Rosalind Chao as LuLoo, a young Chinese woman who is sold into slavery in the 1880s by her father and sent to America. A fact-based historical drama that also happens to tell a marvelous love story (featuring a dashing young Chris Cooper), this top-tier debut feature from director Nancy Kelly is like curling up with a good thick novel. —CHUCK WILSON
THE END OF AN ERA

Longtime Dan Tana’s bartender Mike Gotovac loses battle with coronavirus

By Kayvan Gabbay

Veteran bartender Mike Gotovac has been a perennial presence for over five decades behind the bar of West Hollywood hotspot Dan Tana’s. (He celebrated his 50th anniversary at the iconic restaurant in August 2018 with his colorful visage emblazoned on the rectangular, layer cake.) Sadly, he lost his battle with coronavirus and died on Thursday after an insurmountable battle. He was 76 years old.

It’s the end of an era where the vibrant Hollywood night life scene and the lives of countless friends he made over the decades will never be the same. His longtime fans witnessed his transformation from a novice, budding young bartender to the grizzled, distinctively mustachioed septuagenarian with an acerbic wit for the ages and the warmest of hearts despite his gruff, no-nonsense exterior. In a proverbial entertainment town full of celebrities, he was the star. He was truly the last in a long line of old-school bartenders that could whip up a half dozen drinks in a matter of seconds while zinging gut-busting wisecracks with equal dexterity.

He was born and grew up in bucolic Split, a seaside village in Croatia where he developed an unwavering, lifetime passion for soccer (for years he would coach local children’s soccer teams on the side). He ultimately immigrated to Los Angeles in 1967 without much but the crucial desire to succeed. A friend residing in the tight-knit Croatian community in San Pedro set up with a job at Dan Tana’s, where the manager was also of Croatian descent. He landed the job in 1968 and the head bartender who was nearing retirement took him on under his wing. Months later, he would become the bartender despite his limited English and minimal cocktail knowledge (his customers would assist him in the makings of a great cocktail). Some regulars would even visit the bar six times a week — the true sign of a regular — and Mike was the reason why. He could serve a stiff, bone-dry martini like nobody else coupled with the admonition (obviously good-naturedly) to “Shut up and drink.”

Over the years, he would serve drinks and chit chat with up and coming bands playing the Troubadour next door (The Eagles wrote their hit song “Liyin’ Eyes in a corner booth). And in his younger years he would hop over the bar, drop by the Troubadour for couple shots, and then race back to Tana’s and a visit to see Mike after shot with customers while not skipping a beat. And he never had a bar back nor the use of an assistant. If he hadn’t seen you in years, he’d holler vociferously, “How’s your sex life?”

He was quite the fount of kinetic energy, whether doling out heaps of saucy veal parmigiana molten with gooey mozzarella, slipping you an extra drink here, or plying you with an extra slab of creamy cheesecake there. Mike was the reason why a plethora of his ardent fans described the restaurant as a real-life Cheers.

MIKE HAD A TREMENDOUS IMPACT ON THE BAR SCENE IN LOS ANGELES (AND PERHAPS EVEN WORLDWIDE) IN MAKING A CAREER OUT OF SIMPLY SERVING PEOPLE DELICIOUS, STICK-TO-THE-RIBS ITALIAN-AMERICAN FOOD AND THOSE SUPERB DRINKS.

It goes without saying it was that kind of quintessential joint that made Hollywood much more manageable, homey and friendly, where customers would come for the off-color jokes (“You’re homeless and hopeless”), hearty helpings of rich food, copious drinks and the unabashed camaraderie of Mike the Bartender, who would orchestrate a lively bar scene seamlessly. Free-flowing conversation was always the order of the day.

He was larger than life. Yet, those who met him were the better for it. Every year, he would host a lavish Thanksgiving dinner: opening his home to regulars without a home to go to, who would drop by for a wonderful meal, drinks and laughter with Mike and his family. “Many close customers didn’t have family in L.A., so I invited them to my home every year,” he said. And he was a true family man spending as much time in his off hours with his grandchildren as possible. When I once inquired what he liked to do for fun, he said, “I used to go to Rams game when they played at the Coliseum in the ’70s and ’80s, drinking huge beers, and enjoying the game with friends.”

Mike had a tremendous impact on the bar scene in Los Angeles (and perhaps even worldwide) in making a career out of simply serving people delicious, stick-to-the-ribs Italian-American food and those superb drinks. But what we might ultimately remember him by is his unwavering friendship with people who visited his bar whether you were rich, poor or somewhere in between, which is quite hard to come by in the City of Angeles and is surely a testament to his loyal customers who became his close friends.
THE LICKERISH QUARTET AREN'T CRYING OVER SPLITT MILK

The trio of Jellyfish veterans release a new EP

BY BRETT CALLWOOD

Five years. That's the length of time that Bay Area psychedelic power-pop band Jellyfish were together, putting out two beloved albums in 1990 and '93, before splitting in '94. Five short years. And yet few bands of their type and commercial stature command the same level of reverence a quarter of a century down the line. Big Star would probably be the closest comparison.

The members didn't quietly retire when Jellyfish broke up; Roger Manning and Eric Dover initially regrouped as the criminally underrated psych-glam outfit Imperial Drag, and then everyone went off and did their own thing. But 27 years after the release of the second Jellyfish album Spilt Milk, 23 years after Imperial Drag split, Manning and Dover plus Jellyfish bassist Tim Smith are together again as The Lickerish Quartet. (Yeah, The Lickerish Quartet is a trio — what are ya gonna do?)

"It was clear to me that Tim and Eric were good singer/songwriters in their own right and I was pretty interested in collaborating with them in the Jellyfish scenario but the band broke up so we never got a chance to do that," Manning says. "So in 2017 I just had a rude awakening about how fast time was flying by, and wanted to try to do something about it. That turned into a lot of writing and recording sessions, and piecemealing the whole thing together. We realized we had 12 songs we were all proud of, and wouldn't it be great to share that with our audience that we knew was out there of creating Jellyfish mark II."

There was little chance of that happening. The artists that the three of them have worked with over the past two decades or so are startlingly diverse — Slash's Snakespit, The Finn Brothers, Sheryl Crow, Cheap Trick, Noel Gallagher, Alice Cooper. It's inevitable that they learned a heap before reconvening.

"Certainly for me, having worked behind the scenes with so many different artists of so many different styles," Manning agrees. "I've learned that there's no right way to get to the finish line, but when you do get there you better make sure you have all these key stellar ingredients that aren't average. You're always doing your best to make people take notice, and also something special and unique among the sea of everybody and their brothers who are so-called recording artists with a basement studio. If they've got enough clicks on their social media, suddenly they're Leonard Cohen. Maybe."

The songwriting process, Manning says, was completely collaborative. They would each bring ideas to the table, and then they'd all enhance them. Some of those ideas dated back to the late '80s.

"We all had scraps and bits 'n' pieces of songs lying around that, if we believed enough in them, we'd share them with each other," he says. "If they inspired our partners we'd pursue it and see where it'd take us. In some ways, that was some of the most fun on this journey because getting that fresh opinion would suddenly resurrect an idea which you didn't feel was as special as you originally thought. I mean, I was presenting ideas to the group that literally went back to my college days. The song 'Bluebird's Blues' is from 1988/89, right as I was starting Jellyfish. I still believed in the idea, brought it to the guys and they jumped at it."

"Threesome Vol. I" was recorded with longtime friend Jeremy Stacey on drums and engineered by Ken Sluiter.

"These are all guys that I've known from making records over the years," says Manning. "We knew that we could throw all kinds of ideas and experiments at them and they would love an opportunity to explore outside of generic convention."

Manning says that there are a total of 12 tracks recorded, and so there will be two more EPs and possibly an album forthcoming. When that all happens is anyone's guess — the band's work has obviously been affected by the pandemic and subsequent lockdown, although perhaps not as much as for some.

"Fortunately, before the lockdown, I mostly work from home in my home cave here with all my vintage synthesizers and keyboards," he says. "But we're really trying to do our best to make use of social media the best way possible. Generationally speaking, the whole thing still feels frivolous and non-musical. But it is very much a way that people can not only thank the fans but stay in touch with them and hopefully get that fishing net cast even wider. I continue to do sessions from home. People send me files — tracks to play on their records. In between that I'm editing and doing what needs to be done to get those two EPs out. Plus I'm probably going to put another solo EP out there in between as well. So I have a full plate thankfully."

Manning also says that, even when the lockdown is lifted, touring is unlikely as he sees The Lickerish Quartet as a studio project. But he tantalizingly adds a "never say never" disclaimer. We'll just have to wait and see.

The Lickerish Quartet’s Threesome Vol. I is out now via The Lickerish Quartet/Label Logic. The first single, “Lighthouse Spaceship,” is also available now. Also, check out the new L.A. Weekly Spotify and Soundcloud playlists.
DTLA EXPLOSION WAS A SMOKESHOP WHOLESALER

E. Boyd Street conflagration wasn’t pot lab

BY JIMI DEVINE

P eople were too quick to blame the cannabis industry for the E. Boyd Street explosion that sent 11 firefighters to the hospital.

Four of the 11 remained in the hospital as of Monday night, with the other seven being discharged.

The horror story started Saturday at 6:26 p.m., when the Los Angeles Fire Department responded to a reported structure fire at 327 E. Boyd Street. After arriving within four minutes, the first wave of the eventual 230 firefighters that helped battle the blaze saw smoke coming from a one-story commercial structure.

After sending firefighters to the roof to vent the building, which helps clear the smoke and improve visibility for the firefighters working inside, things quickly took a turn for the worst.

“As firefighting operations continued, the firefighters encountered increased pressurized smoke and heard a rumbling high-pitched sound. Firefighters identified the changing conditions and immediately started exiting the building and the roof as the situation rapidly deteriorated,” the LAFD said in a Sunday statement.

During the explosion, all of the firefighters escaping the roof were exposed to extreme temperatures compromising their equipment as jackets burn and helmets melted. A massive supporting cast of firefighters was called in as jackets burn and helmets melted. A massive

The DCR also noted it has no commercial cannabis application or license records associated with the location where Saturday’s explosion occurred. DCR told L.A. Weekly any business manufacturing hash legally in the city would have had to have been licensed by both the DCR and the state.

California NORML struck back against the hash oil lab claims in a Monday statement, noting the explosion and fire at the “Smoke Tokes” facility in downtown Los Angeles “did not happen at a facility that contained cannabis, nor did it have any license for manufacturing or distributing cannabis products, according to a search at the CA Bureau of Cannabis Control and Department of Public Health.”

The marijuana advocacy organization went on to point out a September 2018 law made the sale of bulk quantities of butane unlawful except to licensed manufacturers. The process to get that manufacturing permit is at least $75,000 in licensing fees. But people can still purchase the individual cans of butane, which in a bulk storage commercial setting may have contributed to Saturday’s blast.

“The city is conducting a major investigation of what happened with federal support from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.