Hitmaker Nija is Doing her Own Thing

Equity and Inclusion at the Department of Arts and Culture

Our critics review this Valentine Week's films

From Punks to Plates

BY MICHELE STUEVEN
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FROM PUNKS TO PLATES

How This Trio Plays On
BY MICHELE STUEVEN

When Chris Reece opened the Pike Restaurant and Bar 20 years ago in the fourth street corridor, it was a gang-infested rough Long Beach neighborhood. Being the drummer of the punk band Social Distortion, that didn’t phase Reece who was forever fighting the machine and never felt like he fit in anywhere. It became home.

What was once a Googie-style diner called Chipper’s Corner, Reece converted it into a funky seafood restaurant and bar, on a strip that is now referred to as Retro Row. Back then, a punk rock drummer could afford to buy a house in Long Beach, which is why he ended up staying.

In addition to live entertainment, the menu is a road map of his days on the road - the fish and chips he enjoyed in Bayswater, London, to fish tacos in San Felipe, Mexico. There are beachy weekend specials like breakfast burritos and avocado toast, along with a beefy selection of burgers, sandwiches and beer.

“In all my touring days, I realized that the money was in the booze, not playing the drums,” Reece tells L.A. Weekly from behind the eclectic bar with mementos that intertwine his Social Distortion days with Long Beach Pike history. “I played gigs where the waitresses were making more money than me. I was always familiar with the business because I had worked in restaurants and bars to support my music career in the beginning, and I always wanted to open one of my own. I opened in 2002 and it was a real struggle back then. It was a different city and neighborhood at the time. It was a pretty rough side of town. There was a lot of gang violence and crime, but we persevered, and we’re still at it.”

Reece attributes that punk resistance to his longevity and the success of the bar, which has a strong musical draw. It’s a neighborhood watering hole and restaurant, which turns into a nightclub at night until 2 a.m. Experience has taught Reece that a good band will always bring people around and draw a crowd.

“I grew up in punk rock and we had our backs against the wall all the time,” says the San Francisco native. “We weren’t really loved by the police or the establishment, and just did things our way. Somehow, you find a way to survive. We were rebelling against the music at the time, like Journey, Pink...
Floyd and bands like that, that were on the radio. We didn’t really like that kind of music, it was just too commercial, so we set out to play music our way and stuck to it and didn’t change the recipe over the years to satisfy a record label or radio programmers. I’m still just trying to make a buck.”

On any given night, you’ll find performers like Drugstore Dharma, The Rails with King Flamingo & Acolyte, Sink Drinkers, Long Beach Jazz Jam, Plastic Horseshoes on stage attracting an audience of all ages. In fact, it’s not uncommon to catch Reece himself jamming with longtime friend and founding member of The Crowd, Jim Kaa.

Kaa sprung out of the Huntington Beach surf and skate punk scene in the late ’70s and is currently the president and CEO of Polly’s Pies, founded in Fullerton in 1968 and owns 10 KFCs. Kaa has worked with several other restaurant brands, including Veggie Grill and Bubba Gump. On weekends, he plays at places like Alex’s Bar in Long Beach with his band 16 Again and is still producing records on vinyl.

“I was getting a degree in accounting at Long Beach state university and took a different tact than Chris,” Kaa tells L.A. Weekly, from behind the counter at Polly’s Pies in Long Beach. “We were one of those bands in ’78 playing parties, opening for the Cramps at the Whiskey. I was scared to death. Look, I wanted to play parties so I could meet girls. When I started playing in 1978, I didn’t have a grand idea that I was going to be a rock star with records and merchandise. Back then we didn’t think about merchandising and records. You’d play a show, meet people from other bands. We were friends with the Flyboys from Arcadia and met Robbie Fields of Posh Boy, who we were originally going to do a single with and ended up recording the Beach Boulevard album with him. That helped blow open the doors for Orange County punk rock at the time.”

The father of two, who has been working in the restaurant business his entire adult career, correlates the hospitality industry with the music industry in that desire to entertain and be the host of the party.

“I’m a passionate and intense person, and still playing music keeps me sane,” Kaa says. “I’m lucky enough to be the president of a large restaurant company, which is a hard and stressful job - even in the best of times it can be brutal. I played at the Pike on Friday night, and
when people are happy and having a drink and some fish and chips, we're playing songs they like, it's such a great vibe for everybody."

He acknowledges punk era contemporaries that have been lost and credits his longevity with the ability to grow up. "I can't write songs like I was 19 because it would sound stupid and hollow. I have to write about people going through divorces and losing friends. It's sad to see that happen. You see the big split happen over the years - tons of people get sober and so many of the successful rock guys we know are sobriety people because they've seen the dark side when they were young. They came out of that realizing that's never the answer. We've lost so many people to alcohol and drug abuse. You don't think about what it's doing to you when you're 30, or realize what it's going to do to you when you're 50. Everybody has the opportunity to be young and dumb, but when you get to a certain age, it doesn't fly anymore. When you're 45 saying sorry dude, I just got too hammered, it rings pretty hollow for everyone."

Further up the 405, in the heart of one of L.A.'s oldest tourist attractions, you can stumble across some of the greatest names in punk rock performing at The Market Tavern in the Original Farmers Market. The brainchild of International Swinger's guitarist Gary Twinn, who already managed two bars at the market, opened the proper contemporary British pub in the former Johnny Rockets space in the midst of the pandemic. In a coincidental twist of fate, a band Kaa was playing bass in at the time, Piccolo Pete, opened for the International Swingers about 12 years ago at a club called Fitzgerald's in Huntington Beach. It's not your cliche-themed pub with pictures of the queen. The walls are filled
with original photographs on loan from friends of his that you won’t see anywhere else. There are black-and-white pictures of the Sex Pistols, taken by Bob Marley photographer Dennis Morris, as well as L.A. Weekly contributor Dawn Laureen’s images of David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Debbie Harry and Billy Idol. Then there’s the mural at the DJ station. Twinn gathered together a bunch of album covers and posters he’s had since he was a teenager of movies his dad took him to see and other mementos, and made it all into one piece of instgrammable art.

“From a young age when you first start playing - where are you playing? You’re playing in bars and pubs,” says Twinn. “When I first started, I wasn’t old enough to drink. When you’re too young to be in the storeroom and that’s when you really see how things work.”

And it’s still working. The original Gilmore family that still runs the farmers market trusted Twinn and eventually came around and helped finance the pub, which might have been considered a risk. He brought on British chef Brendan Collins, who has now moved on to FIA in Santa Monica.

“I’d been booking bands for EBs for quite a few years and we’ve had some pretty rowdy stuff go on in there,” says Twinn. “I was playing in the International Swingers, which is me, Clem Burke from Blondie, Glen Matlock from the Sex Pistols, James Stevenson from Generation X, so we certainly brought in a crowd of rowdies.”

Every Friday, The Longshadows - composed of Twinn, Burke, Mick Cripps (L.A. Guns,) Gaz Ivin and Luke Bossendorfer of The Quireboys perform live at the Market Tavern with surprise acts like Kathy Valentine of the Go-Go’s randomly taking the stage, if they happen to be in town. DJ Dandy Randy spins vinyl during Friday night happy hour from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. All free, no cover charge. Twinn continues to perform around town, like at the Sugar Mill Saloon in Tarzana.

“When I look in the mirror in the mornings, I still think I’m 25,” says the youthful guitarist. “I try to eat right and am aware of my diet. A little bit of yoga and running. Living in L.A., it’s not that difficult to find good healthy food. When I was touring with the Swingers, it was pretty tough trying to find my carrot juice. A salad could be jello with mayonaise on it.”

That said, the Market Tavern is probably the only place you can find a British Breakfast Burrito smothered in Heinz baked beans. Sunday roast suppers are a tradition at the Tavern, with roast beef, lamb or chicken, and potatoes, peas, brussel sprouts, Yorkshire pudding and gravy. It’s Twinn’s homage to the kind of thing your mum makes for you on Sunday.

“If I had a choice, I would just play my guitar and sing every night of the week,” says Twinn. “If that’s how I could make my living, that’s what I would do. Once you’re a rock and roller or musician, it just never leaves you, you can’t just drop it. My guitar is in my hand all day long. But, eventually, I had to grow up and step aside to let the next group of musicians come along. I love running this place and seeing people happy, and I’m still able to carry on playing for fun.”

Gary Twinn at Market Tavern

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Hitmaker Nija is Doing her Own Thing

BY BRETT CALLWOOD

L.A.-based, New Jersey-born singer and songwriter Nija was just 13 years old when she started life as a producer, making beats in her bedroom.

“It was my hobby, and it was something I would do on the side, after school,” she says. “But I really started taking it seriously when I was 16, because that’s when I started looking at colleges and schools, and really trying to figure out what I wanted to do and go to school for. The next level of me really taking it seriously was when I was 18 or 19, and I had to figure out if I was going to stay in school or not. Everything started moving with the songwriting stuff - it actually happened not. Everything started moving with the

She had another credit on Cardi’s smash Invasion of Privacy album, with “I Do,” too. Nija was up and running.

“Invasion of Privacy was such a big album at that time, and that was her debut album, so for me to have two really big songs on there, especially when ‘Ring’ ended up becoming the single, it really going crazy - that was really my big break.”

Nija cites Usher, Chris Brown, Beyoncé, Drake and Kanye as her favorite producers and rappers growing up. As for her sound today...

“I would say it’s R&B foundation with rhythmic and hip-hop, rap melodies,” she says. “A more rhythmic sound where I’m bringing all these genres together.”

Nija’s latest release is the Don’t Say I Didn’t Warn You EP.

“I recorded that in about a year, because I was in the midst of writing my stuff and then also writing for other people,” she says. “A few of the songs I recorded myself at home, and the rest of the songs I recorded with my engineer in the studio. So it was either my bed, or in a studio in NoHo.”

It’s a wonderful piece of work - honest and heartfelt, and a seamless blend of genres - and she deserves the plaudits after writing hits for SZA and Ariana Grande, as well as Cardi B. Of course, the pandemic came along and threatened to derail everything.

“It actually had a big impact,” she says. “It definitely benefited me for recording because I was able to get back to how I used to record, which was in my room, not having a lot of people in the studio, like it was just me, the engineer and the producer. But when it came to the rollout, we had to do a lot over Zoom, meeting with partners, so that definitely impacted and made it a little harder, but we made it through.”

Nija made the move from New Jersey to Los Angeles literally on New Year’s of 2018, in order to further her career.

“I had to move to L.A. because my songwriting career took off, and in order to really succeed, I have to be in a room with artists to get placements,” she says. “A lot of my success came from being available and on-call. Artists would hit me up and be like, ‘Hey are you around right now? I have this song that I need done’. So just to really make myself available. I did my deal with UMPG [Universal Music Publishing Group] and dropped out of school, and moved out to L.A.”

She doesn’t regret it for a second, as she’s seen her career go from strength to strength. All the creatives, she says, are on the West Coast. That said, there are things she misses about New York/New Jersey.

“I miss the authenticity of it,” she says. “All my friends and family are out there. I miss the food for sure. The inspiration. There’s never a dull moment. You won’t see the same people every day. It’s unpredictable. That’s something I love, which definitely makes for a lot of inspiration, compared to L.A. I remember I was telling my manager when I first got out here, it was a culture shock because it’s not fake, but it’s not real life. Sunny weather and palm trees every day. We don’t even really get to experience autumn. I don’t get to see the leaves change colors out here. You don’t get a real winter. Christmas feels weird. I make sure I go back home because it’s literally the same thing every day. La-La Land. Pleasantville.”

There’s plenty of authenticity in Los Angeles, and there’s nothing Pleasantville about, for example, Downtown. But we get what she means. She also thinks this is a healthy time for R&B in the States.

“I think right now is a time when R&B is having a resurgence,” she says. “I feel like a lot of people are experimenting, especially how we’re seeing more influences from international music as well. So I feel like everyone is inspired and pulling from different places to help innovate the culture and the genre.”

Don’t Say I Didn’t Warn You is out via Capitol Records, and the artist says that the label is a good home for her.

“I’m pretty seasoned in the industry already so it was always about having the right deal, the right support system, and making sure I have the right relationships in the building and not just with one person,” she says. “So I’ve definitely felt the love and the backing and the support from Capitol, and that was really my main thing going into a partnership with whoever I was going to do it with, for my artist side.”

Looking deeper into 2022, Nija wants to get out on tour, and release more music.

“I want to start doing features, a bunch more videos – I love doing visuals,” she says. “Putting my face out there and showing them my creative side. I’m going to put another project out and I’m working on the album right now. So just more music, I want to stay consistent and flood people.”

Nija’s Don’t Say I Didn’t Warn You is out now.
ENTERTAINMENT

LOVE IS IN THE AIR

From light rom-coms to meditative character studies, our critics review Valentine Week's hot trio of new relationship films.

BY LINA LECARO

Marry Me

Jennifer Lopez's Marry Me, seems to take us behind the scenes of her well-documented love life and the result is a surprisingly revelatory rom-com. It's a candid, smart and sexy dissection of celebrity life set against the backdrop of New York City.

Lopez plays Kat, a musician too impulsive for her own good. She talks too much about fashion and has been married three times. She’s a Lopez caricature. After she finds out her fiance, Bastian (Maluma), has been cheating on her, just as they are about to go on stage for a concert, she does something bizarre. She stares into the crowd, zeroes in on Charlie (Owen Wilson), who is holding up a sign saying “marry me,” and says “yes.” Charlie is hauled up on stage, a ceremony is performed and the crowd goes nuts.

The marriage is publicized similarly to Lopez’s own relationships with Alex Rodriguez and Ben Affleck, which has metatextual moments throughout (POV shots from paparazzi cameras, gossip columns about Kat+Charlie a la “Beniffer”) giving his story a very personal feel. None of it would work without the love story at the center, and Lopez and Wilson share a natural chemistry that feels authentic. You root for them to make it despite the many, many obstacles in their way.

Marry Me - streaming on Peacock Premium now – is about so much more than just Kat and Charlie’s love story. It’s about the nature of fame, and dealing with that fame in different scenarios, settings and relationships. It’s not hard to draw parallels between Kat and Charlie and Lopez and Affleck: everything (and everyone) Lopez does is publicized, scrutinized, written about and fetishized. It’s heartening to watch her skewer the headlines with a wink and a smile, and you may even find yourself moved by her honesty. She makes saying “yes” to Marry Me a no-brainer.

– Asher Luberto

I Want You Back

For a movie with such a farfetched premise, I Want You Back is authentically charming and strangely relatable. Unlike most romantic comedies, which feature two ludicrously gorgeous, fiercely independent leads who hate each other for most of the movie before falling in love in the last act, Jason Orley’s second feature focuses on the devastating heartache after a breakup and how it can make us act, shall we say, out of character.

In the first five minutes of this movie, we’re plunged into the dire bleakness of heartbreak. It’s just another lovely day for Emma (Jenny Slate) and Peter (Charlie Day), who think everything is going well with their respective partners, Noah (Scott Eastwood) and Anne (Gina Rodriguez), when they’re both unexpectedly dumped by them. They attempt to move on with their barren lives, Emma as a receptionist in an orthodontist’s office and Peter as a corporate lackey for a retirement firm.

Each night they drink, eat, and cry themselves to sleep while obsessively looking at their ex’s Instagram accounts, which is a horrible idea. Apparently, their exes have found new lovers and are doing just fine without them. One day Emma and Peter meet in their shared building’s stairwell where they commiserate over their recent decrepitude.

Soon, these two miserable clowns concoct a plan to sabotage Noah and Anne’s blossoming affairs with their new paramours, bakery owner Ginny (Gina Backo) and high school drama teacher Logan (Manny Jacinto). By destroying their ex’s new relationships, they hope they’ll run back into their arms for consolation.

As we saw in his debut, Big Time Adolescence, Orley is fascinated by adults who really have no concept of adulthood at all. At one point, Emma tells a high school kid, “We’re all just pretending that we know what we’re doing.”

“I Want You Back (streaming on Amazon Prime Video now) is far from original and you can see the end coming miles away. But it also never veers off course into over-sentimentality, which Judd Apatow’s films intermittently fall prey to. What’s really original and refreshing is the movie’s lack of villainy; everyone in the story is simply trying to follow their given paths and do their best. Breakups are hard, but this charming comedy reminds us that there will always be a little light even in the darkest of times, making it a Valentine’s Day flick that achieves its goals.” – Chad Byrnes

The Worst Person in the World

Joachim Trier’s The Worst Person in the World (just nominated for the ‘Best Foreign Film’ Oscar) might be wholly concerned with Julie, an ostensibly carefree soul living in Oslo, Norway, but this disarming coming-of-age tale could be about any millennial, anywhere. Played with natural elegance and quiet intensity by Renate Reinsve, Julie is beautiful, intelligent and determined, but at 29 going on 30, she’s also adrift in the sea of life, dolefully treading her way into adulthood. The title implies a melodramatic self-loathing everyone at that age has probably felt at one point or another, and the film leans into it. As Julie leaves her 20s in the dust and attempts to take on the mantle of maturity, the world feels like an open book, but it’s stuck in a muddled place where personal decisions sometimes clash with social norms.

Trier’s third film in his loosely bound Oslo Trilogy might be structured like a romance, in which a heroine must choose between two suitors, but he only exploits the genre to subvert its archetypes. Instead of celebrating the dizzying effects of love and how that could somehow be a savior, Trier and writing partner Eskil Vogt explore the existential chaos that comes with going into one’s 30s and how the decisions we make during these years – both trivial and colossal – mold our lives. It’s also a stark portrait of an unsettled generation struggling to mark its place in history.

This movie (currently in theaters) has intense tonal shifts, but you hardly notice them, thanks to the fluidity of the storytelling. The narrative veers from rom-com to erotically charged drama to a meditative conclusion where everyone is forced to erotically charged drama to a meditative conclusion where everyone is forced to confront their own mortality. Some people might have issues with the devastating third act, and perhaps find it to be a bit manipulative, but in the hands of Trier, it simply feels like the natural progression of life. This is a romantic comedy for those who have a darker and more realistic perspective on life. But it’s not all gloom and doom. By showing us how hard-learned lessons and bitter pills can give us strength, the film offers some real affirmations about personal journeys. Who knew that a burgeoning romance with oneself can be just as heartbreaking, devastating and fulfilling as those we share with others?

– Chad Byrnes

(Above reviews have been condensed for print. Read the full reviews in the Film Section on LAWeekly.com)
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Equity and Inclusion at the Mission-Driven Department of Arts and Culture

BY SHANA NYS DAMBROT

If there’s one word that encapsulates what the L.A. County Department of Arts and Culture is about, it’s access. From organizational grants and public art commissions, to internships, education programs, career guidance, events and some intriguing interdepartmental placements, expanding the presence of the arts in the lives of as many county residents as possible is the guiding principle. In the aftermath of the pandemic and in light of the landmark Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative, its role in the recovery and revitalization of the county’s cultural landscape is more vital than ever. We checked in with its director, Kristin Sakoda, about how it’s all going.

Formerly known as the L.A. County Arts Commission, in 2019 they became the Department of Arts & Culture. (The arts advisory body to the Board of Supervisors is still called the L.A. County Arts Commission.) Sakoda, as executive director of the commission, oversaw its transition to a county franchise, and continues to serve as the department’s director. Before that, she was at the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, and before that she studied Race and Ethnicity and Feminist Studies at Stanford and Law at NYU. Before all that, she was an accomplished performing artist — like, on actual Broadway stages.

After she went to law school and became the dedicated policy nerd we know today, Sakoda saw the intersection quite clearly between arts, philanthropy, government, real democracy and healthy civic engagement. And as she tells the L.A. Weekly, even before any of that, she was, crucially, raised in a home and a school environment that valued the arts and encouraged her creativity. And that’s what she wants for every child — for each and every one of us, actually.

“All of this comes from my own lived experience,” she says. “I know firsthand why all of this matters, and what the personal impact of the arts can be. The arts offer not only skills to collaborate and build, but the inspiration to change our paths no matter who we are, where we come from, whether we have money or anything else. Everyone deserves to have those opportunities.”

Across data-informed policy advice, funding distribution, programming development, education initiatives, community building, and exciting direct commissions with artists like Alison Saar and Patrick Martinez, Sakoda says, “All of the work is about real world impact that advances the great civic narrative — who the arts are for, and who we are as humans. Art creates space for empathy and that makes a difference.”

Among the action items manifesting from this worldview — and especially in the COVID-19 recovery phase and at a moment when the social fabric can use all the repairs and reinforcements it can get — is the Department’s Countywide Cultural Policy. A kind of road map, more of a world atlas really, to bolster resources and equitable access to the arts in civic life, its release and implementation comes at a complex time of pandemic-survival needs and heightened awareness of society’s responsibilities toward under-represented, under-funded communities who desperately need healing-centered arts, and creatives who need employment.

One of the more innovative programs is the extensive interdepartmental residencies for “creative strategists” throughout civic and government agencies — Mental Health, Violence Prevention, Immigrant...
or, saliently in the pandemic-induced
as free downloads for use as wallpapers
made dozens of these works available.
During the pandemic, the county
the Los Angeles County Arts Commis-
creation compiles the over 150 artworks
community, but enrich the lives of the agency
leadership in the education
sector, 450 small to midsize cultural
convene leadership from L.A., Pasadena,
Calif., Culver City, Santa Monica, Santa Clarita,
Lancaster," she says, plus something like
100 philanthropies, leadership in the edu-
care, 88 cities and 125 unincorporated

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LEGAL NOTICES

ORDER TO SHOW CAUSE FOR CHANGE OF NAME
Case No.: 21CV82383 Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles
located at: Long Beach Courthouse 275 Magnolia Ave., 1st Floor Long Beach, CA 90802.

PETITION OF JACOB TAYLOR HODS FOR CHANGE OF NAME.
TO ALL INTERESTED PERSONS.
JACOB TAYLOR HODS filed a petition with this court for a change of name. JACOB TAYLOR HODS hereby ordered that all persons interested in the matter of change of name appear as indicated herein above and there to show cause why the petition for change of name should not be granted. If no written objection is timely filed, the court may grant the petition without a hearing.

ORDER TO SHOW CAUSE FOR CHANGE OF NAME
Case No.: 21CV82383 Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles
located at: Long Beach Courthouse 275 Magnolia Ave., 1st Floor Long Beach, CA 90802.

PETITION TO TERMINATE FATHERSHIP and PARENTAL RIGHTS.
Respondent, MARCUS MURILLO, 115 E. High Street, Suite 102, Lebanon, TN 37087.  Entered in the Juvenile Court Clerk's Office located at 115 E. High Street, Suite 108, Lebanon, TN 37087.  Entered on 02/20/2006, that ordinary process of law cannot be served upon you because your whereabouts are unknown. You are hereby ORDERED to appear in the Juvenile Court of Wilson County, Tennessee located at 115 E. High Street, Suite 102, Lebanon, TN 37087 on April 1, 2022 at 9:00 a.m. to personally answer the Petition for termination of Parental Rights.

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