

A photograph of three horses running through a field of tall, dry grass. The horses are in motion, with their manes and tails flowing. The background is a soft-focus landscape with some green shrubs and yellow wildflowers.

THE RELENTLESS HORSEPOWER
BEHIND CLARE STAPLES'

SKYDOG RANCH

BY MICHELE STUEVEN

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ART

JURASSIC 5'S CHALI 2NA: LA HIP-HOP FAVORITE PAINTS A NEW PORTRAIT

BY NICHOLAS WHITE



COURTESY OF CHALI 2NA



Chali 2na

COURTESY ERIKA GOLDRING - GETTY

Los Angeles has a soft spot for DIY hip-hop multi-tool artist **Chali 2na**, who has been entrenched in representing Southland culture since breaking into the national music scene in the 1990s as an MC for Jurassic 5 and Grammy-winning Ozomatli, both of which he co-founded. He's also had significant success in visual arts, painting, aerosol spray paint, oils, prints, and even colored pencils. As a painter, 2na has a contemporary fine-art style that builds on the foundation of graffiti art, in the form of pieces of his namesake fish swimming down a subway car, or a skeleton-faced Uncle Sam.

The deep-voiced rapper that many know as the "verbal Herman Munster" is leaning to his detailed hand as an artist, creating paintings on commission and for the love of the art. The artworks, signed with "2NA," are compliments to his rapping abilities that broadcast Jurassic 5's Southern California vibes — formed in the fertile hip-hop soil of Leimert Park's Good Life Cafe — to the world. Chali (real name Charles Stewart) has often said he's an artist first and rapper second,

instead of the other way around.

"The small things like attention to detail, patience, my love of putting things together in an interesting way — it all came from painting," Chali 2na tells *LA Weekly*. "It's just expression for me, man. It wasn't anything else to that. That was my initial introduction to hip-hop, aside from music, was graffiti. I feel like even when people don't see the things that I paint or don't know about the time that I spend practicing that craft, it has always been there and will always be. It depends on how my life turns out. But [painting] is a permanent fixture in my life. It stays there only as it becomes a career in the last seven, eight, 10 years, lately. Being able to sell paintings, that's been a cool thing to be able to do after so many years of pouring myself into this picture that is a canvas."

2na says, "Now that it's turned into something lucrative, it's a beautiful thing at this stage of my life."

One of his recent paintings, an eight-by-four-foot canvas with a scary, colorful T. rex, is sitting and waiting for a



COURTESY OF CHALI 2NA



protective covering. Other new paintings include Graciela, a nonagenarian “cigar lady” from Havana, Cuba, who passed away during the COVID pandemic, and a portrait of British reggae singer, Tippa Irie, which graced the cover of Irie’s 2023 memoir *Stick to My Roots*. A gallery of Chali’s work can be found at chali2na.com.

2na can be commissioned to paint a mural anywhere in the world for \$10,000, as listed on the [Jurassic 5 website](http://Jurassic5.com). Who knew?

The LA graffiti artist Mosh, a member

of the OTR and LOD graffiti crews, went to Bancroft Junior High and Marshall High with 2na in the 1980s and remembers him as a creative force. 2na hadn’t yet evolved into becoming a rapper — that would be a surprise for later. He was just an artist who impressed the younger kids with his graffiti black books.

“[2na] was a little older than me, maybe about a year or two older. ... One or two years of experience and being ahead of the game made a big difference. He was definitely an influence on the guys who were in 7th and 8th grade,” Mosh tells *LA*

Weekly. “I didn’t know him as a tagger and being out there in the streets, tagging buses like us. He always had that fine art style of colors and blending stuff really nice. That caught our eyes and influenced some of the younger crowd of writers trying to learn what we call ‘the craft.’ We were trying to learn from older guys like [graffiti artist Mike] Pyro and Charlie to give us some tips of what we could do. Seeing their graffiti, you could call it influence, but we were little kids biting styles and trying to slip in a bit, you know.”

2na’s color scheme, as showcased in the works at his 2018 music-art tour “Against the Current,” has brooding shades that distinguish graffiti art — the dark greens of a mysterious tree frog or the black surrounding his face as a half-fish with scales, the latter of which was the cover of his 2009 album *Fish Outta Water*. He’s humbly painted killer pieces from Sydney to Sao Paulo. But he often enjoys staying within the parameters of portraits.

“I love portraits, man, shoulder up. You know how people who are sculptors do busts?” he asks. “I like to do portraits in



COURTESY SCREENSHOT FROM YOUTUBE 2NATV

the same [style] – I like to do from shoulder up, the detail in the face. Whether it be an animal or us humans as animals. It's something about the faces that I love. You can do little things with the background that can enhance what you're looking at. You can say so much by saying so little."

Chali's highly practiced visual arts ability started fortuitously in LA's graffiti art scene, a free-for-all of artistic energy and personalities that could rival any

American city. The future rapper created high-profile pieces at the streets-approved Belmont Tunnel and Pan Pacific Park, both varsity-level competing grounds for the city's beastliest graffiti artists, with whom he could network. Well-received was his Belmont Tunnel piece, a unicorn-slash-man, co-created by fellow artist Jack Frost, illuminated with whites, purples, and pinks.

Mosh said of the unicorn piece: "It blew a lot of people's minds away. I recall that exactly. Like, 'Whoa, whoa, who is this guy?'"

Chali explains, "In one fell swoop, I was able to meet the whole Los Angeles underground graffiti scene. When I met everyone at Pan Pacific Park, I started to see who was who, what was what, which cliques were affiliated with gangs, which cliques were pure artists. I was able to exist within it, without upsetting the balance of anything."

Fellow LA graffiti artist and hip-hop

musician Stroe, a member of several graffiti crews including UTI, and who performs under the name Monstroe, has been writing graffiti in South LA since 1987. Stroe shared the stage a few times years ago with Jurassic 5 as part of his group The Bzerkos, and Chali brings a lot of talent and energy to the scene, Stroe says.

"I'll say this about Chali 2na — I have great respect for him, what he's brought to the culture," Stroe, whose recent music includes collabs with LA vets Ras Kass, Myka 9 and Rakaa Iriscience, tells *LA Weekly*. "That fool can write and rap dose as fuck."

When Chali arrived in LA in the 1980s as a teenager from Chicago, he took to occasionally tagging his street name as a nod to his old home: sometimes as "Shicago," and sometimes with the number "1000" at the end. His tag was "2na" when he lived in Chicago.

Although he said he tagged a little in LA, he left the prolific tagging to Triax, Chaka, and Wisk. The detailed art was a more natural fit for the budding artist, who created colored-pencil portraits of Ed Bradley, the "60 Minutes" journalist who won 19 Emmys, and Harold Washington, the first Black mayor of Chicago, the latter with the Chicago skyline in the background.

"It was something I was really, really, really proud of," Chali said, noting that his gift was encouraged by a teacher with gentle ribbing about his level of detail.

"Those two [pieces] came out amazing."

"There were about three major artists in my family, two of my uncles and one of my aunts," Chali says. "Two of my uncles were like serious artists, wanting to constantly paint. My dad could draw. He wasn't really serious about it. He turned his precision into, when it comes to stuff like that, measurements. He became a carpenter-slash-painter. He could build a house with his hands. My uncles were actual pick-up-the-brush, the oils and acrylics. Me sitting there, watching them paint or me painting with them, almost like they were my teachers. [These were] people I looked up to."

With streaming pushing artist compensation down and a collapsed physical distribution system in the music industry — a much different scenario than when J5 hit the scene with 1997's *EP* — the artist's revenue structure has morphed into using music as advertisements for live concerts, he says. 2na has had a touring system in place for years, traveling the world many times over to do gigs and meet the fans. He's toured through Europe twice since August, joined by a live band at stops including Zurich, Vienna, Paris and Geneva.

"My career, I've increased my touring something crazy because I love to travel and I love to perform," he says. "I think the love of traveling and performing and the experience of doing it for so many years has taught me how to maximize my output while I'm out there." ■



COURTESY OF CHALI 2NA

CULTURE

THE RELENTLESS HORSEPOWER BEHIND CLARE STAPLES' SKYDOG RANCH IN MALIBU

BY MICHELE STUEVEN



Clare Staples at Skydog Ranch with rescued zebra

COURTESY MICHELE STUEVEN

When Clare Staples came to Los Angeles, she was a big shot producer, and her house in West Hollywood was party central. The best of the Brits in the business who came to film in LA would just hang out at the house. It was a constant flow of Simon Cowells and Ryan Seacrests.

At the height of her career, she hit a certain age, got sober, and wanted more out of life.

"It was a hedonistic life in a way, very materialistic and very glamorous from the outside," Staples tells *LA Weekly* at her [Skydog Ranch](#) high up in Malibu's

Decker Canyon. "I hit 50 and really felt burnt out from the high energy and the values. I sat and took a really hard look at what truly made me happy, what my own values were, and what my purpose should be for the next half of my life. It was a deep dive. I didn't want to be in this world anymore. I wanted to do something more meaningful."

Horses had always been her happy place throughout her life. When she got in trouble at home as a child, she'd run away to the stables where her mother would drop her off to school. Breathing in the smell of the horses was therapeutic and would give her peace.

She started taking nature walks in Beechwood Canyon and, with her good friend, Welsh actor Matthew Rhys, discovered the nearly 100-year-old [Sunset Ranch](#) in the Hollywood Hills. With that came a whole new community where Staples would sit, ride, turn out horses, and talk about life.

"It was there I learned all about mustangs," she says. "I found out they were wild horses on western public lands. I realized the horrible places they were landing after being rounded up by the Bureau of Land Management. I would see these horses on Facebook that were in trouble in kill pens. Little by little, all signs were

pointing to me doing more of that and rescuing more. I completely fell in love with these horses and the idea that they were born wild, grew up wild, and had instincts that had been honed for decades and sometimes hundreds of years, like survival of the fittest. They captured my imagination, and I fell in love with them."

She and Rhys both flew up to Reno, where auctions take place, and several mustangs the government has rounded up go through prison programs where prisoners gentle them, ride and train them for three months, and auction them off after that. They went inside the Carson City Correctional facility and found two



Rescues at Skydog Ranch

mustangs, Jimmy and Buddy. The prisoner who had trained them said they were closely bonded and couldn't be separated.

As they rode Jimmy and Buddy through the hills and looked up at the Hollywood sign, Rhys and Staples talked about what they could do for the plight of the American Mustang.

The answer was Skydog Ranch and Sanctuary.

She still has Buddy and Elvis. They now live on the 9,000-acre sanctuary in Oregon, where they can run wild with another 350 horses and donkeys that were born wild, rounded up, found themselves in dire living conditions, and were rescued by Staples. There are 11 at the Malibu ranch, which is more for aged horses with special needs.

"We just bought another ranch in Santa

Ynez, which we're in the process of ramping up, building paddocks, fixing the barns," says Staples, who had to evacuate the entire Malibu facility during the Woolsey Fire. "We've got six horses there already. We're doing the same there, taking the older horses that don't do well in winter, have arthritis, or need special medication, and seniors who need extra care. Oregon is more for the wild horses that can just run free.

"There used to be two million wild horses across America roaming with buffalo," she says. "Over the years, when railroads and barbed wire fencing came in, there were mustangers, who would go out and just slaughter mustangs and bring them back to rendering plants. They were used for dog food and chicken feed. They were so overhunted and overkilled that it got down to about 20 or 25,000, almost near extinction."

She started following advocacy groups that would photograph the roundups and track down the location of each animal, many of which were separated from their families. Through exhaustive research and relentlessly hounding the BLM on the whereabouts of the animals, Staples was able to reunite the wild horses with their families. She shot video of the tearful reunions, which ended up going viral on [The Dodo](#).

The most moving reunion has been chronicled in the Gerard Butler-narrated documentary *Blue Zeus*, which recently had its West Coast premiere at the Newport Beach Film Festival.

"After *Blue Zeus* got rounded up, I'd check on him every day in this advocacy group that went to the roundups and took photos and video to make sure that



Clare Staples

COURTESY MICHELE STUEVEN



COURTESY OF BLUE ZEUS



Skydog Ranch Sanctuary



COURTESY OF BLUE ZEUS

the horses were not being cruelly treated by the handlers,” says Staples from the living room of her Spanish-style ranch house decorated with wild mustang portraits throughout.

“There was a picture of Blue Zeus and a video of him and his family being chased by a helicopter into a trap,” she says. “I thought there must be a way to find him and bring him and his mares and offspring to the sanctuary. They ended up being taken to a men’s high-security prison in Colorado. It shut down for COVID, so you couldn’t get in there to see the horses. I kept pestering them to allow me to adopt Blue Zeus. Eventually,

there came a break in the shutdowns, where you could fly again. They took 64 of these older stallions, which were now geldings, to a park in Colorado. I flew up and was looking around everywhere. Lo and behold, there he was. So I bid on him and won him for \$25. Sometimes they’ll go for just \$1. I took a few more that were in such bad shape I didn’t think they’d survive much longer, about 22 overall.

“We loaded him up in the trailer and hauled him away,” says the qualified EAGALA Equine Therapist. “I raced to Denver airport, got on my plane home, and the hauler who was driving them

from Colorado to Oregon. The next morning, he arrived with the other horses. He was so thin. He would always stand away from the other horses and look out at the horizon. He was looking for his family. Out on the range, the most important thing to a stallion is his family; they’ll die to protect them and fight other stallions for them.”

“So I started calling them again,” says the Skydog Ranch founder. “They have one adoption event at the prison just for the annoying nine people like me who have bugged them the most to adopt horses that they know. So I went back up to the men’s high security prison, where

you can only take a pencil. They gave us four hours. They all have tags around their necks with a number. I’m going through pen after pen looking for his family. I had pictures of them all. In the end, unbelievably. There’s this little group of horses that breaks away, and it was his three mares, the two juveniles, and two-month-old babies that had been rounded up while the mares were pregnant. It was a family of eight horses. Black Zeus and his family now run wild on 1200 acres near Bend, Oregon. I went from watching him on social media to looking at him outside my window.”

Donate at skydogranch.org/donate 📄

FOOD

WHAT'S UP POPPING UP

Season's Greetings From Death & Co LA

BY MICHELE STUEVEN



The Coquito Holiday Highball at Death & Co LA



Seasons Greetings from Death & Co. LA

COURTESY SHELBY MOORE

Death & Co LA will be bringing back its fan-favorite pop-up in December, transforming the Standing Room bar into a retro holiday party called *Season's Greetings*.

The festivities began on Wednesday, Dec. 3, and will run from Wednesday through Sunday from 6 p.m. til midnight through the end of the year (except for NYE). The sublevel space will be outfitted with all the trappings of a nostalgic yuletide gathering, including festive lighting, vintage décor, and a cocktail and food menu that includes seasonally-appropriate serves like Vintage Egnog, Polar Espresso, Gingerbread Toddy, and Peppermint Puppy Chow.

Limited reservations are available now via [Tock](#), but walk-ins are welcome.

When life gives you lemons, you get Ed Ruscha. The legendary artist and chef/restaurateur Ruthie Rogers will launch their new Rizzoli book, *Squeeze Me: Lemon Recipes & Art*, at the Gloria Kaufman Performing Arts Center at [Vista Del Mar](#) on Sunday, Dec. 7. They'll be talking about the book with Laurene Powell Jobs as part of Live Talks LA. Packed with fifty recipes from appetizers to main courses, the book casts the lemon as the star of sweet and savory dishes like creamy risotto al limone and a sweet lemon tart accompanied by art created by Ruscha. Get tickets at <https://livetalksla.org/events/ruthie-rogers-ed-ruscha-with-laurene-powell-jobs>.

The Santa Monica Pub Crawl is back, with more than

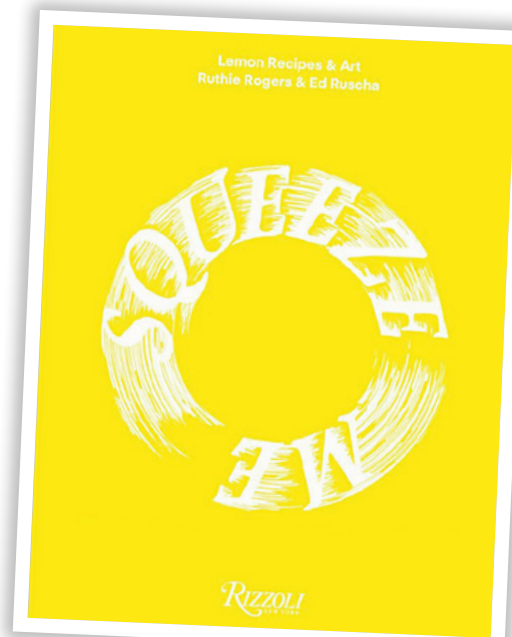
20 of the city's popular bars and restaurants in Santa Monica participating, including Edgemar, Jameson's, Barney's Beanery, LuLa's Cocina Mexicana, Santa Monica Whaler, 1212, Tavern on Main, Ashland Hill, Library Alehouse, JuneShine, Britannia, Cabo Cantina, Lanea, Ye Olde King's Head, Social Vibes, Holey Moley and Vamos Vamos.

Tickets include free entry to the venues, exclusive \$6 to \$9 drink deals, and discounted food all night long, one free drink for the first 500 crawlers at each route, priority entry to Santa's official after-party, prizes for best holiday costume and best holiday spirit. Pulse there's a scavenger hunt with prizes and beer gardens.

In celebration of Santa Monica's 150th Anniversary, there will be a block party on the 3rd Street Promenade in the new Entertainment Zone with outdoor stages, DJs, and pop-up holiday bars.

Unique Green, a next-generation Taiwanese milk tea brand, is making its North American debut with its first flagship store opening in San Gabriel on Saturday, Dec. 6. Known as the "gentle monster of milk tea," UG Tea blends floral-forward recipes and futuristic design, with eco-consciousness.

With no additives, low sugar, and plant-based options, signature drinks include Camellia oolong milk tea, strawberry hibiscus fruit tea with tangy black currant, a strong next-level matcha latte, and a matcha smoothie blended with crushed cookies. [E]



Squeeze Me Lemon Recipes & Art by Ruthie Rogers and Ed Ruscha, with Heather Ive; Rizzoli New York, 2025