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CONTENTS

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THE KISSING BOOTH
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22

NEWS...4

Amazon Fresh launching new grocery store concept in Irvine.
BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

O.C. Reopening: Moving up to the state's Red Tier.
BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

State to Study Site for Veterans Cemetery in Irvine.
BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

FOOD...10

Walk-up shopping is back at the Great Park farmers market.
BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

"Takeout Twins" teach us how to make our favorite takeout at home.
BY TARA FINLEY

MUSIC...14

Live jazz returns to Bayside Restaurant.
BY LIZ GOLDNER

CULTURE...17

O.C. Nonprofit Spotlight: Blind Children's Learning Center.
BY TARA FINLEY

ENTERTAINMENT...22

Irvine Weekly streaming guide: Host, The Umbrella Academy 2, etc.
BY ERIN MAXWELL

Reviews: Mulan + Bill & Ted Face the Music.
BY LINA LECARO

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NEWS



AMAZON FRESH LAUNCHES NEW GROCERY STORE CONCEPT

**IRVINE LOCATION OF INNOVATIVE
SHOPPING EXPERIENCE ON THE HORIZON.**

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

Amazon just opened its new grocery store concept, Amazon Fresh, in Woodland Hills and now the company has confirmed there will be an Amazon Fresh in Irvine.

A few years ago, Amazon Inc. introduced the company's first grocery store concept, which uniquely offered shoppers the opportunity to walk into a store, browse, grab and go – all without paying. They utilized innovative technology, like the Amazon Dash Cart, which tracks and calculates the shopper's final haul, and sends the bill to the shopper's Amazon account.

In terms of the future of Amazon Fresh in Irvine, the company has filed for multiple alcoholic beverage licenses in Orange County. One license was for a building inside the Irvine Market Place, located at 13672 Jamboree Road. The building was previously a Babies R Us.

An Amazon spokesperson did confirm the company is operating an Amazon Fresh in Irvine, but the store is currently not open to the public.

"We've opened our Irvine Amazon Fresh grocery store as a temporary, online-only store, focused exclusively on fulfilling grocery delivery orders. We do not yet have

an opening date to share," an Amazon spokesperson wrote in an email to *Irvine Weekly*.

The Woodland Hills location opened on Sept. 17. Prior to its opening, Amazon invited select shoppers to come preview the new concept.

Jeff Helbling, vice president of Amazon Fresh Stores said he was excited to present Amazon's future vision of grocery shopping to California in the weeks to come.

"I'm excited to announce that starting this week, we're opening our doors to a select group of invited customers in Woodland Hills, California, to shop the store before it opens widely to the public in the coming weeks," he said.

According to documents found on the Alcoholic Beverage Control Website (ABC), Amazon Retail LLC applied for two different types of alcohol licenses for an address on Jamboree Road, under the business name Amazon Fresh.

According to an ABC report dated Thursday, Sept. 10, a 12-month Off-Scale General Liquor License was issued to Amazon Fresh on Feb. 21, 2020, with an expiration date of Jan. 31, 2021.

More recently, an Instructional Tasting License was activated on Aug. 18, 2020, and will expire in 1 year.

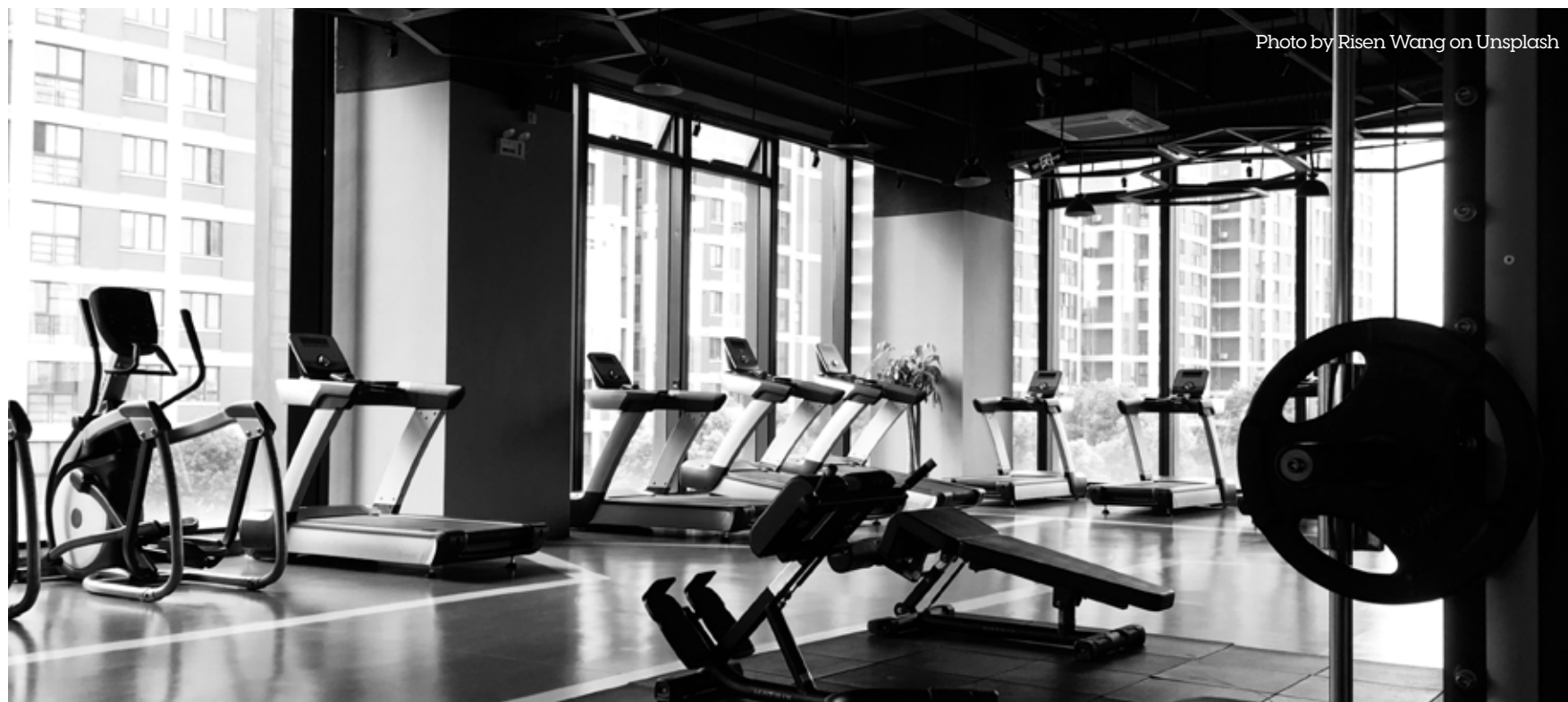


Photo by Risen Wang on Unsplash

COVID-19 REOPENING: ENTERING THE RED TIER

WHAT MOVING UP A LEVEL MEANS FOR LOCAL GYMS, HOTELS AND CHURCHES.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

As positive COVID-19 cases and coronavirus-related hospitalizations steadily decline in Orange County, the month of September has brought positive news and relief to Irvine residents eager to return to normalcy.

As of Sept. 8, Orange County met positivity and case rate requirements to move into the state's less restrictive Red Tier. Within the Red Tier, categorized as the "Substantial" Risk Tier, Orange County was able to reopen many services closed due to the pandemic.

In the Red Tier, gyms, movie theaters and places of worship were given permission to return to indoor activities at a limited capacity. While gyms were only allowed to operate at 10 percent of full capacity, movie theaters were able to allow 25 percent of maximum patrons under California's first tiered reopening. Additionally, all indoor retail locations

in the county were able to reopen at a 50 percent capacity. All indoor activities require the use of face masks and social distancing.

Barbershops and hair salons were also allowed to return to indoor operations on August 31.

In order to move between the state's new tiers for COVID-19 monitoring, which was introduced under the Blueprint For A Safer Economy, the California Department Public Health requires counties remain in each colored-category for three weeks. Counties are assessed each Tuesday.

Orange County will be able to advance into the Orange Tier by October – if COVID-19 statistics remain at the current levels. However, the county will see more reopenings, beginning with public schools on Tuesday Sept. 22.

In July, Irvine Unified School District opted to allow families to make a deci-

sion on attending school in-person, with several models of education presented by the Irvine Unified School District Board of Education.

In a statement from the Orange County Board Of Education, school districts in the county including Irvine Unified School District are on track to begin in-person education.

"Assuming OC's data remains in the red-tier range – or dips lower – local K-12 schools will be eligible to reopen with physical distancing and other safety measures in place on Sept. 22," a statement on the OCED's website read.

While schools may have the green light to begin there may be another viral threat on the horizon, according to Dr. Clayton Chau, Director of the OC Health Care Agency and County Health Officer.

On Sept. 17, Chau issued a statement urging all Orange County residents to

get a flu shot. As the county prepares to reopen schools, residents cannot overlook the risk to any pathogens, especially during a pandemic.

"Cooler weather is coming, and we know that when people spend more time indoors and have closer contact with each other, germs spread much more quickly," Chau said. "It is critical that everyone over 6 months old get a flu shot to decrease the incidence of influenza in the community and to ease the stress on the health care system when both viruses are likely to be circulating."

On Sunday, Sept. 20, Orange County reported 190 positive COVID-19 cases and one death. Of the 190 cases reported, six were reported in Irvine. On Sunday the county surpassed 52,000 cumulative cases of COVID-19. In total, the county has reported 1,128 COVID-19 related deaths.

There were 194 people hospitalized in Orange County on Sunday, Sept. 20 with 65 being treated in the ICU.

While county hospitals continue to treat COVID-19 cases, hospitalization rates within the county are rapidly declining. For example, on Aug. 21 Orange County had a total of 392 COVID-19 cases that required hospitalization with 110 in the ICU.

As long as these trends continue, Orange County's next step will be moving into a less restrictive COVID-19 monitoring tier.

Proposed Golf Course Site for Irvine Veterans Cemetery in the foreground, with the ARDA site in the distance



STATE TO STUDY SITE FOR VETERANS CEMETERY IN IRVINE

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

The California Department of Veterans Affairs is set to review two sites for a potential location for a veterans cemetery in Irvine, the latest in a series of moves to decide where the cemetery will ultimately be built.

CalVets will perform studies – which are required per Assembly Bill 368 – on both sites: The ARDA site, which is located on Irvine Blvd., on the northern edge of the Orange County Great Park and the golf course site, which is located on Great Park Blvd. near Skyhawk Road.

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

Based on the results of the studies, the state will award the most cost effective site \$24.5 million in funding, per a

statement from California Gov. Gavin Newsom.

The Irvine City Council voted 4-1, during the May 12 City Council meeting, to designate the ARDA site for the cemetery in response to a ballot initiative concocted by former mayor Larry Agran.

However, prior to the council's vote, Irvine City Attorney Jeff Melching pointed out that regardless of the council's action on the initiative, 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.

"This study is a colossal waste of time and money at a time when the state doesn't have money to waste," Agran

said during a phone call with *Irvine Weekly*. "This matter has already been decided by the people of the city of Irvine."

Some in the community, however, vehemently disagree with Agran and believe he is using the veterans cemetery – and veterans – as a political tool to help get back on the City Council.

"Keep us out of the politics," said U.S. Marine Corps Vietnam combat veteran Nick Berardino, president of Veterans Alliance Orange County (VALOR). Berardino said he is concerned that voters are being misled by Agran's petition, which had about 17,000 signatures – but is less than 20 percent of Irvine's voters.

"VALOR's position is whichever one is more cost effective to state taxpayers, that's where we want to build it – and the state is only going to build it on a site that they deem appropriate and in the

interest of taxpayers," said Berardino. He added that the state is doing the right thing by studying the issue because previous studies conducted by the state and city on the ARDA and golf course sites concluded that the golf course site would be approximately \$40 million cheaper.

Irvine Mayor Christina Shea, who supports the cemetery being built at the golf course site, says Agran knew about the CalVet reviews all along, but did not wait for the reviews to gather signatures for a political petition. She too believes this move was a political strategy for his campaign.

"Larry should have waited," Shea said. "He should've allowed this process to take place – he understood it. I think he did that from a political standpoint, he wanted to get people stirred up, believing that the ARDA site would be it, but he has failed to be honest with the public."

"I want the public to understand that the ARDA site is not the final site, and that it's still in motion," she said. "It still could be overridden by CalVet – based on the standpoint if the golf course site is superior, [the state] will not be giving the \$25 million to the ARDA site."



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Irvine Certified Farmers Market Pre-Covid

GREAT PARK CERTIFIED FARMERS MARKET IS BACK WITH WALK-UP SHOPPING

EVAN J. LANCASTER

The wait is over and avid farmers market enthusiasts can return to the Great Park's Certified Farmers Market, without needing to stay in the car. Although walk-up shopping returned to the Great Park Certified Farmers Market on Sept. 13, organizers and vendors were pleased with the drive-thru market's success.

While COVID-19 forced many businesses to close during the pandemic, the Great Park Certified Farmers Market was able to provide shoppers with fresh fruits and vegetables, since the state recognizes farmers markets as essential business.

Mary Senske, GPCFM Market Manager, said she is happy the walk-thru market has returned, but said she was pleased with the outcome of the drive-thru concept. Senske added that although the pandemic impacted the turnout of vendors, people still came out to support

"I think the drive-thru was successful, and it was what Irvine needed at the time," Senske said in an interview with *Irvine Weekly*. "We lost a lot of vendors because of that, but going back to a walk thru, it was nice to see people coming back."

Senske has managed the GPCFM for more than 10 years, but said the drive-thru concept helped bring another demographic of shoppers to the market during the pandemic.

"We picked up a group of customers that had probably never been to a farmers market," Senske explained. "We picked up a lot of older folks that were driving, but did not want to get out of the car – and didn't have any interaction with anybody at all."

Another positive echoed by vendors about the drive-thru concept was the lack of window shopping.

Allan Aita owns Millennium Global Inc.,

which distributes a brisket beef jerky from Arizona Jack's and has become one of GPCFM's most popular vendors. Aita says his brisket beef jerky booth can pull in 30-50 customers on an average day at the GPCFM.

Having operated at the GPCFM for about seven years, he explained that not having the normal vending atmosphere took getting used to, but says the situation worked out better than expected.

"It is very challenging when we don't have the normal set-up of a farmers market, but believe it or not, what worked out very well for us was the drive-thru in Great Park," Aita said. "That was the only market that we had as a drive-thru."

Speaking from a sales perspective, Aita said he feels like the drive-thru was very successful for himself and other vendors, thanks to folks shopping with a purpose, rather than just browsing.

"That has been very successful to us – and I believe to most vendors. Because most of the people who came to the market wanted to purchase something. They wouldn't wait in line for nothing. Personally, I prefer the drive-thru market from the way it is right now," he said. "It is just more business for us."

Orange County has made progress against the virus, with positivity rates and hospitalizations continuing to decline. Earlier this month, county barber-shops and salons were allowed to return to work indoors. On Sept. 8, the county moved into the "Substantial" category within the state's new tiers for COVID-19 monitoring.

While face masks and social distancing will be enforced, the city of Irvine also posted a list of new COVID-19 guidelines for those interested in visiting the GPCFM.

FARMERS MARKET GUIDELINES DURING COVID-19

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends social distancing to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Vendors will be placed at least 6 feet apart, the Farmers Market will maintain an aisle space between all tent rows, and attendance will be tracked by staff to monitor crowd levels.

- **Maintain 6 feet of social distance between other groups.**

- **Facial coverings are required for those ages 2 and older.**

- **Follow posted signage indicating where to stand for service and direction of travel.**

- **Do not enter the Farmers Market if you are exhibiting any illness symptoms or have been in contact with someone with COVID-19 in the past 14 days.**

- **No pets are allowed.**

- **Food trucks and craft vendors are unavailable until further notice. Market attendees are asked not to linger once shopping is complete.**

- **Considering the world is still battling a pandemic, there's no doubt shopping will feel and look a bit different. However, Irvine residents will surely find a balance welcoming back this vibrant and engaging community activity.**

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Hosts Adeev and Ezra Potash

THE TAKEOUT TWINS

THE POTASH BROTHERS SAVE US FROM OURSELVES WITH NEW SHOW.

BY TARA FINLEY

Takeout has been a saving grace for many of us these past months. With pressures born out of the COVID-era mounting, it seems like many of us barely have time to eat, let alone make a meal. While constant ordering from apps and restaurants may be great for saving the local economy, it's not so great for household finances. The Potash Twins are here to save us from ourselves.

Acclaimed musicians and TV personalities, Adeev and Ezra Potash are hosting a new cooking show – *Takeout Twins* – that teaches even the most kitchen-phobic how to make at-home versions of fast favorites that will rival any restaurants'. The show's premiere is available to stream on The Food Network Kitchen App as well as all Amazon devices.

Recently, the twins Zoomed into our podcast to chat about their new show with host and publisher Brian Calle alongside *L.A. Weekly* food editor Michele Stueven.

These two are not your typical TV food hosts. There's no formality in their delivery, their approach is accessible to everyone, encouraging all to get into the kitchen and get cooking. The show's ultimate goal? Empowering home cooks to make their favorite takeout dishes at home by showing them how accessible and easy cooking their own delicious meals can be.

"This show – *Takeout Twins*, which

comes out September 2nd on Food Network – is something that is such a passion project for us," explains Ezra. "We made this show for our generation and our peers to be more comfortable in the kitchen. Because delivery is on the rise and takeout is on the rise, it's so easy to get your favorite foods at your door with the click of a button. We just have this fear that our peers and our friends are not going to establish these basic cooking techniques and kitchen techniques that you just need to be a human being. Unfortunately and fortunately technology has sort of taken a lot of us out of the kitchen and made us a little bit uncomfortable and intimidated in the atmosphere of just making your favorite food which is really not something that any of us should be experiencing."

Executive produced by James Beard award-winning TV personality and chef Andrew Zimmern, *Takeout Twins* will showcase the guys' love of music, food and cooking. Each episode will take viewers inside their favorite celebrities' kitchens, while the Potash Twins teach them how to make their favorite takeout dishes.

Adeev and Ezra aren't just known for their great taste, but for their talent as well. Known as the "Twin Horns of Joy," the two have gained world-renowned notoriety as horn players, having toured the world and sharing stages with a variety of heavyweight recording artists such as *John Legend*, *Chance The*

Rapper and Diplo, to jazz legend *Wynton Marsalis* and *Late Show* bandleader *Jon Baptist*, amongst many others. It was actually through touring for music that their crossover into food began.

"This show started for us as a way for us to recreate our favorite dishes when we'd eat when traveling for music," shares Adeev. "The second we'd get home we'd want to order these dishes... there was no way to order them. So the only way to consume these was to make it ourselves. And in that way it educated us in being able to...recognize and recreate flavors. We call in plating by ear because we are musicians...so it's one way for us to get creative."

Calling themselves "jacks of all trades and masters of none," the two have successfully endeavored in making some of the most hard-to-find international dishes from home. Not only for the taste, but for the memories as well.

"[*Takeout Twins*] is a way to share some of our favorite dishes from the trip, and relive our favorite moments," they say in unison.

If you're like Brian, you've been cooking more than ever before. Our host has taken himself by surprise with what he's been whipping up in the kitchen.

"We've been saying that because of COVID, the home kitchen has almost become the food theatre, it's another form of entertainment," laughs Ezra.

Not to be misunderstood, the twins still very much encourage supporting

the restaurant industry. Just not at the expense of your wallet.

"What we have to do right now, because the restaurant industry is facing a massive extinction event, we have to also celebrate our favorite restaurants and our favorite dishes by ordering from our favorite local restaurants. But at the same time, that doesn't mean you don't need to learn how to make them, because you know what, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday order it in, but Friday, Saturday, learn how to make it," advises Ezra.

"The thing about this show, we took the ten most ordered dishes from your favorite apps like UberEats, Postmates, Grubhub, etc... and we made our own recipes based off of those dishes," finishes Adeev.

The recipes are completely user friendly – made for immediate use, no marinating, no waiting, no bullshit.

"It's about making your favorite takeout dishes that you order on a weekly basis, and getting into the kitchen and making them at home," they tell Michele and Brian. "Just to prove how confident we were in these recipes, at the end of each episode we actually order the same dish...we do a side-by-side comparison."

The twins enlist the help of family members and celebrities on their show, to prove how easy it is to make their recipes, no matter how busy or inept you think you are. Describing their method as "raw and stripped down," they make sure to drive the point home that if you make a mistake it's okay, at least you know what's going into your food.

"We've always been really passionate eaters," say the two, as they describe their transition into the food scene. They grew up in Nebraska, a state not known for its culinary delights, but lucky for them, their parents travelled internationally for work and would often bring back new foods to try. This tradition bred their love of international cooking and put them on a lifelong journey of culinary exploration.

"We always love trying new recipes," enthuses Ezra. They're always trying to push themselves – in both palate and career.

Join them in their pursuit by tuning in to *Takeout Twins* – you may just surprise yourself with what you're capable of!

The interview in its entirety can be found: iTunes, Spotify, Cumulus Los Angeles.

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organization sets kids on a course to a positive and healthy future. Every bottle of eDot alkaline water sold allows Olive Crest to continue to make a difference. Community-conscience consumers like you are helping to build strong families and safe kids.

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Sarah Gazarek by Jazley Faith

JAZZ IN THE AFTERNOONS IN NEWPORT BEACH

THE PERFECT CURE FOR THE LOCKDOWN BLUES.

BY LIZ GOLDNER

Listening to world-class jazz in a bucolic Newport Beach setting might seem like a novel idea these days.

Bayside Restaurant in Newport Beach, however, has been presenting live jazz concerts on Saturday afternoons since August 15. These performances will continue through September 26.

Bayside's first three "Summer Jazz Lunch @ Bayside" concerts featured singer Sara Gazarek, saxophone player Eric Marienthal and pianist/composer Josh Nelson.

The concert series is the brainchild of

Jerry Mandel, saxophone player, jazz performer and president of the Irvine Barclay Theater – the nearby venue that hosts live jazz concerts, chamber music, ballet recitals, symphony concerts, solo performances, plays, musicals and lectures, in its theater on the UC Irvine campus. The Barclay, along with nearly every entertainment venue nationwide, went dark in early March.

In a phone interview, Mandel – who plays his tenor sax with his jazz band on Thursday evenings at Bayside, and Wednesday evenings at its sister venue, Bistango restaurant in Irvine – talked

about his decision to have the Barclay host the Saturday afternoon gigs in Newport Beach.

"People are waiting for the world to return to normal. But I think the world we knew before will never be the same," he said. "Nobody knows when we will be able to put on shows at the Barclay again. Maybe we can do it in January but we don't know."

Mandel talked about discussions he has been having with his staff with the possible goal of presenting outdoor concerts near the Barclay. "We are desperate to hear live music," he said. "But no

place on campus has the right feeling for performances."

Bayside, however, has the perfect ambiance, he explained, especially with a section of the parking lot converted to a dining and listening area, shaded by a canopy and several umbrellas. The expansive space can accommodate 125 to 130 people, with couples and larger parties seated safely apart.

With this inventive plan, Mandel has booked "some of the greatest jazz musicians in the world," as so many of them live nearby in Los Angeles, and don't want to travel far these days. He adds

MUSIC

Eric Marienthal
Courtesy of the
Artist



Sarah Gazarek by Jazley Faith



John Clayton -
Courtesy of the
Artist

that all of the musicians to perform at Bayside are Grammy award winners or nominees. He rhetorically adds, "These are the cards we've been dealt ... and what do we do with them?"

Mandel, assisted by his devoted Barclay Theater staff, is hiring the musicians, planning the concerts and managing the ticket sales. Bayside Restaurant is providing the venue, its staff and servers and its world-class food and drinks for guests to enjoy while listening to the music.

The first Bayside concert on August 15 featured jazz vocalist Sarah Gazarek and her quartet. The Grammy nominated singer performed renditions of popular songs from the last several decades, some of them suitable for people in quarantine, as she remarked. One of the songs was *Tea for Two* (1924). Lyrics include: "Just tea for two / And two for tea / Just me for you / And you for me alone." She sang *Blackbird* (1968) by the Beatles, with the lyrics: "Take these broken wings and learn to fly / All your life / You were only waiting for this moment to arise." And she sang *Jolene* (1973) by Dolly Parton, which includes: "Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene / I'm begging of



you please don't take my man." During her performance, Gazarek talked about the thrill of singing live for the first time in several months.

For the second concert on August 22, saxophonist Eric Marienthal and his quartet played lively and soulful jazz standards. Braving the 90 degree

heat, he also remarked about the joy of performing live. Marienthal, a Grammy award winner, has played his saxophone with Chick Corea, Elton John, Barbra Streisand, Billy Joel, Stevie Wonder and several other renowned performers.

The third Bayside concert featuring

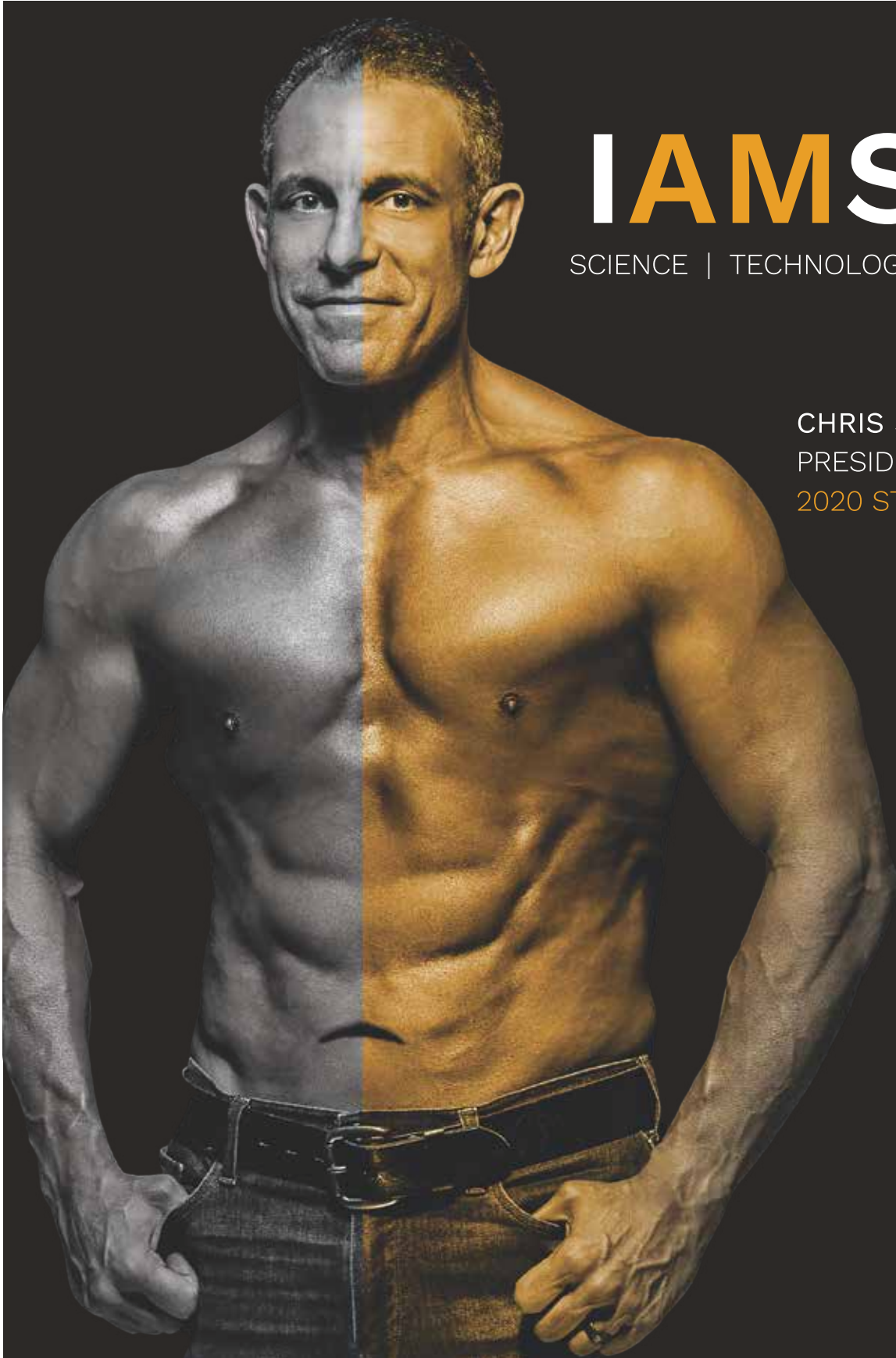
the Josh Nelson Quartet, with Nelson as pianist-composer-bandleader, was presented on August 29. The Southern California native has performed over the years with many renowned jazz artists including Natalie Cole, Jeff Hamilton and Sara Gazarek.

After a Labor Day weekend break, the Barclay Theater and Bayside presented three more concerts on Saturdays at noon.

John Clayton, double bassist, Jeff Hamilton, drummer, and Graham Dechter, guitarist, banded together for a September 12 performance. Guitarist/composer Anthony Wilson performed on September 19. And Hamilton will return to Bayside on September 26, playing with keyboard artist Akiko Tsuruga.

The first concerts at Bayside have proven to be so successful – with the musicians expressing gratitude for the opportunity to perform live – that Mandel is considering continuing them into October, depending on the weather, or perhaps scheduling more concerts next year. Stay tuned.

Bayside Restaurant is at 900 Bayside Drive, Newport Beach.



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Courtesy Blind Children's Learning Center

OC NONPROFIT SPOTLIGHT

BLIND CHILDREN'S LEARNING CENTER FINDS A WAY TO CONTINUE SERVING THOSE IN NEED.

BY TARA FINLEY

As the pandemic wears on, so does our combined economic struggle. Personal and professional finances are suffering, and while the community is rallying around local businesses to help them stay afloat, not everyone who needs help is getting it.

An oft-overlooked sector of pandemic economic casualties are nonprofits, as they struggle to continue to support their clients and pay their staff. While all of us are just trying to make it through the day – given the never-ending stressors of 2020 – Irvine Weekly does think it's vital to shine some much-needed light on those in our community that could use a helping hand if you have one free.

We've been talking to the dedicated leaders of O.C.'s nonprofits to learn what's

next for them, and how we as a community can help.

The Blind Children's Learning Center (BCLC) is a nonprofit organization that prepares children with visual impairments and other disabilities for a life of independence. Located in Santa Ana, the program has had to make some adjustments to ensure that one of Orange County's most vulnerable populations continues receiving the help, services and resources they need.

Undeterred by setbacks following COVID closures, the dedicated staff of BCLC has been able to make sure the needs of their clients remain met.

"Prior to COVID-19, Blind Children's Learning Center provided 100 percent of its services in person," explains President and Executive Director Angie

Rowe. "We served over 250 children and their families through various early intervention, early education, and school aged programs through small classroom or 1:1 individual services on site or in home. Within two weeks of Gov. Newsom's stay-at-home order, we were able to launch all our programs and services virtually. We launched all of our small classrooms as daily Zoom classes and sent weekly packets each Sunday to supplement the online curriculum."

Rowe has played a major role in BCLC's quick transition to meet the requirements of the times, providing families with learning kits that include touch and feel books, Braille letter blocks, as well as personalized learning and activity plans to ensure adaptive learning may continue at home. She

also spearheads other outreach services, including individual therapy sessions, direction/coaching from teachers, and more.

"We also launched a HIPAA-compliant tele-health platform to provide all our 1:1 services (Occupational Therapy, Speech Therapy, Infant Stim, Physical Therapy). This critical pivot allowed us to continue to serve and engage with over 85 percent of our children and their families," Rowe continues. "We have delivered over 3,000 hours of online instruction and tele-health sessions. COVID required BCLC, like the students we serve, to persevere past what we thought were insurmountable obstacles to change how our services are delivered. We have returned to a hybrid model as of May 11th and discuss each family's preference for face to face or virtual services."

While their ability to help despite modern obstacles has been impressive, the disruption to their normal programming has presented challenges.

"For our early intervention programs, it has been more difficult to identify infants and toddlers with needs because assessments are down," shares Rowe. "To overcome this, we are finding creative ways to screen for children with disabilities including visual impairments."

Not one to be deterred by a challenge, Rowe and her dedicated team have found ways to continue to serve all who need them.

For their school-aged student population, learning has been online since mid-March. For some, the online platform can be less than ideal.

"As time goes on we are finding that this modality for children with visual impairments does have limitations," discloses BCLC's director. "With that, we are finding creative ways to engage and serve these students and look forward to announcing some initiatives to work with population 1:1, safely adhering to all public health and safety mandates and recommendations. Stay tuned for announcements about these exciting programs!"

Nonprofits largely depend on fundraising efforts to help make their programming happen. With events off the table for what looks like the remainder of the year, what changes have BCLC made to their fundraising efforts to help meet their goals?

"With special events, we understand that there is no guarantee to hold them. However, we are pursuing creative opportunities to hold both virtual fundrais-

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Courtesy Blind Children's Learning Center



ers and in-person events with significant adjustments to uphold all public health guidelines and recommendations," answers Rowe. "For instance, we are excited to announce our annual Frank Villalobos Golf Tournament at Aliso Viejo Country Club on October 19th. Our guests will tee off in small groups with safety and hygiene protocols in place to maintain a safe environment to raise crucial funds for our families. There will also be opportunities for virtual participation in events as well to meet people in the space where they are most comfortable."

"We are finding that in a pandemic, sharing stories of hope and perseverance that we witness through our work is a meaningful and important engagement opportunity for our donors and community members," she continues. "If you or your business would like to hear inspirational stories and more about what BCLC does, we would be happy to hold a Virtual Town Hall for your business or invite you to participate in one that we host!"

BCLC has been collaborating with other agencies, offering pro bono consultation to other nonprofits that are interested in creating virtual funding activities but need help with social media and community outreach.

"We are taking time to work with other agencies and organizations to assist

with their questions and needs and are offering our campus as well. We hope that this spirit of generosity of collaboration is paid forward," inspires Rowe.

They have also expanded their services to their families who need resources for housing and food.

What does the rest of 2020 have in store for Blind Children's Learning Center?

"As we are hitting our stride in providing services through tele-health and other online modalities, we are building our operational and organizational capacity in order to expand our reach and to holistically meet the needs of children with visual impairments and other disabilities and the families raising them," explains the organization.

Did you know that 80 percent of early learning is typically driven by vision and that most children with visual impairments have other disabilities? This is why BCLC invests so heavily in early intervention. Their adaptive services have been enriching lives since 1962.

Their ability to continue this important work depends on donations from the community. You may help support their families by participating in or sponsoring their golf tournament, or donating online. Donations are accepted and golf tournament information is available at www.blindkids.org.



Ellen Page, David Castañeda, Justin H. Min, Aidan Gallagher, and Emmy Raver-Lampman in *The Umbrella Academy*

Photo by CHRISTOS KALOHORIDIS/NETFLIX/CHRISTOS KALOHORIDIS/NETFLIX - © 2020 Netflix, Inc.

UNBINGED: WHAT TO WATCH ON STREAMING

VIEWING HOST, *THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY 2* AND *THE KISSING BOOTH 2* THROUGH A PANDEMIC LENS

BY ERIN MAXWELL

There's a battle brewing, and it's being fought by streaming services, cable TV and primetime television. If you're too weak to resist, "UnBinged" is here to help, telling you what to hate, what to love and what to love to hate. This week: Shudder's *Host* is new horror for the Zoom generation, while Netflix's hottest sequels *The Umbrella Academy 2* and *The Kissing Booth 2* present the best and worst of sequel-dom.

The Umbrella Academy – Season 2 (Netflix)

In 1989, 43 children were born to mothers who earlier in the day were not pregnant. Soon after this miraculous event, eccentric billionaire Reginald Hargreeves adopted seven of the children in an effort to create his own superhero task force. In time, they grew up to be resentful and profoundly dysfunctional people who accidentally destroy the Earth on numerous occasions.

Based on Gerard Way's comic series, *The Umbrella Academy* is part of a trend of anti-hero superhero series that includes Amazon Prime's *The Boys* and HBO Max's *Doom Patrol*, yet it still manages

to set itself apart. In *The Boys*, heroes are marketing ploys, super-powered jerks who play do-gooders to sell products. In *Doom Patrol*, the rag-tag group includes powered-up fuck-ups trying to find their way in the world, evolving from the selfish or broken beings they were in their former life.

But the members of the Umbrella Academy are different. This is a dysfunctional family adopted by a "man" whose dislike of children didn't deter his agenda. They are treated like a science experiment, given numbers in lieu of names and lessons instead of affection. Twenty years later, and the effects of such an upbringing created a cluster of scarred adults who don't know how to love, how to trust, or where they fit into society.

Season 2 kicks off just seconds after the first season ended: on the cusp of world destruction, which not surprisingly, feels very reflective of the times. To avoid the apocalypse, the Umbrella Academy has been scattered throughout time, dropped off in various years during the '60s in downtown Dallas. Over the next few years, the UA settles into their new situation as they await the arrival of their siblings.

Some get married, some go crazy, while others amass followers and find themselves on the cusp of history.

As an audience, we are rooting for these characters to find their happy place. We want them to experience belonging and

contentment because we have seen them wear their pain overtly, like the school uniforms they once donned. We want Vanya (Ellen Page) to find love, Diego (David Castañeda) to find acceptance, and perhaps we even want to join Klaus's (Robert Sheehan) weird ass cult. We even want Alison (Emmy Raver-Lampman) to end up with Luther (Tom Hopper), despite the implication of possible incest which is super icky. (Honestly, at this point, the audience has already accepted a 60-year-old tween with a mannequin wife, so a little incest is easy to overlook.)

The acting in *The Umbrella Academy* is solid, with Page, Sheehan and Aidan Gallagher as Number Five being the true standouts. Everyone does an admirable job with the complicated material. Sheehan and Gallagher in particular are able to inject humor into every scene they occupy, elevating a story that can get very dark, very quickly. Kate Walsh is also superb as the Handler, a sociopath dressed like a "final four" contestant from *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

The story is compelling and manages to remain focused despite the complicated plot. Even if you felt meh about season

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l, the follow-up might win you over; it's better and it feels more believable right now. The second season doesn't answer all our questions, but it highlights the underlying mystery that propels the show and its characters so we can't help feel more invested. Who is Hargreeves? What was his reason for adopting these beings? And will there ever be a future where the Academy doesn't destroy the world? Luckily, Netflix has promised us scores of new seasons to figure this all out.

Host (Shudder)

Several months into the global crisis, it is safe to say that most folks have become well acquainted with Zoom video chats. As people restrict their movement and are encouraged to stay home, society grows more reliant on technology as a means to connect with others. *Host* is a movie born to those restrictions, a look at what can happen if that desire to connect leads to something evil.

In *Host*, a group of twenty-somethings conduct a video seance, thus opening a door to demonic forces. On the surface, *Host* is yet another found footage film with a premise built on well-used cliches and horror genre tropes. But given the format in which it is presented, this horror film for the COVID-age is able to inject new life into a well-worn concept. And really, for what it is, it ain't half bad.

The familiar cliches and set-ups we have all seen time and time again engage thanks to the skills of the filmmakers and quality of the acting. But the true uniqueness of *Host* comes from its setting which we can all relate to right now. The film operates within the same rules that currently confine its audience. Like the main characters, a lot of us are bored from being at home all day and just need new experiences to liven up the monotony.

Host is not a movie that defines a generation nor does it make huge leaps for the genre, but it is a film intended for right now in this exact moment in history. It makes the most of current events and fears, creating a specific niche for itself that works. In a world where face masks are functional fashion and the sound of a cough is enough to stir panic, *Host* delivers fun scares that are ironically a lovely distraction from the horrors of reality.

The Kissing Booth 2 (Netflix)

Two years ago, *The Kissing Booth* debuted on Netflix, and was met with bad reviews but great ratings. Chasing the legacy of classic yet convoluted teen comedies like *Ten Things I Hate About*

You and She's All That with its own unique brand of vapidness, the pic was a resounding success on the streaming service.

Because of this, star Joey King (Elle) called the film "critic proof," citing its basic themes and ideas, which resound with younger audience members despite older audiences disdain. This also seems to be the case with the sequel as *The Kissing Booth 2* became one of Netflix's most-watched original movies.

But to be clear: *The Kissing Booth 2* might be "critic proof," but that doesn't mean it isn't bad. And it is bad. The movie's intended audience is the teen and tween sect, a younger generation who are still unaware that it is not physically possible to ponder the mysteries of the universe while sitting next to the Hollywood sign at night or apply for credit cards at age 17 (all things Elle does within the first five minutes). *TKB2* lives in its own world with its own rules, dictated by non-stop exposition by lifeless characters who would flounder in the real world.

In the sequel, protagonist Elle finds herself in a pickle as she must decide which university to attend: UC Berkeley with her bestie Lee (Joel Courtney) or Harvard with her boyfriend (Jacob Elordi)? She also suffers from an onslaught of hunky suitors, as well as pressures from school to create a very non-COVID-minded money-making endeavor that encourages teens to swap spit for cash.

But the main issue with *TKB2* isn't the plot. We have all seen over-reaching plots succeed and even charm audiences. The real issue here are the characters who occupy this world. Elle is both entitled and a doormat who uses people to achieve her own ends while bending like a sapling to the will of others. Luckily for her, there are no consequences in this world and no lessons to be learned. There are no story arcs in which a character can grow and become a better person. If a character starts the journey as an awful human being, then an awful human being they shall remain...but with the opportunity to attend Harvard.

The Kissing Booth 2 is a story in which characters are only driven to make others happy with no emotional growth. For rom-com junkies, this isn't the worst film, just aggressively mediocre. But for true film fans looking to relieve boredom, it is best to move along. This is an escapist fantasy written by a madman, where convoluted rules dictate the actions of the characters rather than personal choice. Teens may love it, but they don't know any better yet.



Mulan
Courtesy of Disney

REVIEW: MULAN

THE REMAKE IS MISSING A LOT, BUT THE MAGICAL MOMENTS MAKE UP FOR IT.

BY LINA LECARO

The live action remake of *Mulan* has got a lot of buzz so far, but not the kind Disney probably hoped for. The highly-anticipated remake was slapped with a #BoycottMulan hashtag due to star Yifei Liu's vocal support of the Chinese government against democratic protestors, which made the film trend on Twitter last Friday. But even before this all exploded on the internet, rumblings about the marked changes from the original animated feature left many fans – and critics – skeptical if not disinterested in the latest revamp of the Walt's vault cartoon classic.

Initially slated for theater release in March, *Mulan*, like so many other potential blockbusters, never got its moment on the big screen and finally came to Disney+ this month. Though fans and critics who read anything about it already

knew not to expect musical numbers or the comedic pizzazz of *Mulan*'s dragon sidekick Mushu, the comparatively serious tone and battle-scene packed take here has been surprising; it's clearly not the licensing cash grab we usually see from the company in terms of potential for doll sales and princess dress-up kits. The filmmakers and the company were really trying to do something more sophisticated here, and for the most part they pull it off. Many will be disappointed by its lack of whimsy or humor, but for adults who grew up with the original it's actually a pretty cool and refreshing re-imagining.

Directed by *Whale Rider*'s Niki Caro, *Mulan* is stunning to look at from the very first frame. From the colorful village moments to the gilded backdrops of the emperor's palace to the battle scenes – which bring to mind the dramatically

choreographed fights seen in the *Wonder Woman* movie – every shot has a mood and a purpose.

That purpose is to convey *Mulan*'s coming of age as in the original film, but here things get more metaphysical with a narrative concerning chi – the source of power and life. It is called "qi" here and in this tale, it brings superhuman "man-like" balance and strength to our young heroine. To hammer in the feminist subtext, there's also another strong female character whose abundance of qi is not celebrated but condemned as witchery. Li Gong's Xianniang can shape-shift into birds and she's a brutal fighter too, so when she helps the bad guys against *Mulan* and the Chinese army, you know a showdown and probably an alliance is to come. (With her tribal makeup and dark nail swag, this character might sell to the Disney villain fanbase even if *Mu-*

lan herself doesn't prove marketable).

The 1998 animated original was a vibrant musical buddy flick and also a romance, and this one is none of those things. The basic story is the same: When China comes under attack by Rouran forces from the North, *Mulan* disguises herself as a male and joins the Chinese army in order to spare her injured father from doing so. She ends up being a better warrior than any of the dude soldiers she joins, ultimately saving the empire pretty much single-handedly.

If you watch it with the original in mind, you'll miss the comedic one-liners and you'll probably miss Li Shang (*Mulan*'s love interest) too. He was melded into two characters for the new film because, as producer Jason Reed has said, having *Mulan*'s commanding officer as par-amour was "not appropriate" in the #metoo era. When *Mulan* joins the army here, she encounters Commander Tung (Donnie Yen), who serves as her father figure/mentor and a cute squadmate named Chen Honghui (Yoson An) who connects with *Mulan* as a boy and becomes enamored with her as a girl. She seems only mildly interested, even once the jig is up, making for a nice and notable negation of the princess/prince savior trope.

And yet, it's the love story that made *Mulan* so meaningful to so many, even beyond seeing an Asian character as the hero. Representing queer/pansexual love before many understood what it meant, fans saw Shang's development of feelings for *Mulan*'s male alter ego Ping as not only reassuring but groundbreaking, even if a gay theme was not Disney's intention. In 2020, when the spotlight on gender equality and positive portrayals of LGBTQ+ are on the forefront of culture, Shang's removal has been called out as a misstep or worse, straight-washing, but it really isn't. If you ask us, Honghui seems pretty much beguiled by *Mulan* in boy drag from the start, suggesting sexual fluidity in a more natural way than the cartoon did.

If anything, what makes this storyline a stretch – and honestly makes most of the movie unbelievable – is Liu herself, not the male leads. With full lips and gorgeous bone structure, the waifish actress in a bun is not buyable as a boy even for one minute, so by the time we get her big reveal, it falls super flat. The vivacity the movie tries to conjure from there almost doesn't make up for it, but with a well-spent 200 million budget, the Disney magic-driven beauty of the film does.

Available on Disney+ via "Premier Access" (\$29.99).

Keanu Reeves and Alex Winter in *Bill & Ted Face the Music*



REVIEW: **BILL & TED FACE THE MUSIC**

BY LINA LECARO

Keanu Reeves recently turned 56, and for those of us who grew up crushing on him (and kinda still do), this fact feels—in the words of lovable dude bros Bill and Ted—bogus. Gen-Xers in general tend to have an aversion to adulting and we think it's because of music. Today's middle-agers grew up with so much rad music, didn't we? Arguably, we also had a bigger appreciation for our parents' music than previous or subsequent generations, and all that rocking and rolling had a magical effect: it stopped time! Ok, maybe not on the outside (there's Botox for that) but definitely on the inside. Bill and Ted are perfect examples.

Reeves and his on screen bestie Alex Winter's return in the new threequel *Bill & Ted Face the Music* makes for a simple, rather silly little movie, but the first two were too. This one conveys the wonder and fantasy of the original, bringing about nostalgic feels, even while milking

modern reality as its core premise. Twenty-five years since the adventure of the first film, these two wide-eyed, whimsical buds are now dads (with dad bods to match); they have marital problems and most importantly, unfulfilled destinies that go beyond average father figure failings. Their wives are the medieval princesses they met in the earlier films and their destiny is of course, to save the world.

The time traveling phone booth is back and so is "Death" though his appearance comes far too late in this new journey. As we saw in *B&T*'s second installment, the duo's global concert broadcast with their band, Wyld Stallyns, was a success, but apparently it wasn't enough. The daughter (Kristen Schaal) of their original time ambassador Rufus (now deceased comedy legend George Carlin) takes them to the future where they're informed by her mother (Holland Taylor) that they have about 77 minutes to unite the world with their music and "save reality." They have

yet to write the ditty to do this in the current timeline, so they travel to the future to snag it from their even more aged selves, which sets up a fun cameo scene with Dave Grohl (the ultimate cool rock pops) and a couple of past-changing-the-present meta moments we expect from time travel films.

Meanwhile, the guys' teen daughters (Brigitte Lundy-Paine) and (Samara Weaving), go on their own adventure, gathering the greatest musicians in history to jam and hopefully play their dads' epic tune once it's written. Writers Chris Matheson and Ed Solomon do a nice job of capturing the previous films' charm and stoner/surfer speak while director Dean Parisot—known for a slate of strong TV work—brings a light, slightly satiric vibe to the story set-up. We watched this one with our own teen daughter and she didn't buy the youth's storyline at all however, noting that Gen-Z is generally disinterested in music from the past. Still,

she did know Weaving and Paine from their roles in *The Babysitter* and *Atypical*, respectively, so they were good casting choices for younger audiences at least.

Despite the offspring angle, this film is clearly not made for teens. It's a movie meant to give older audiences and maybe the retro nerd contingent, a fun and fluffy, warm and fuzzy escape. It's also a movie for younger Reeves fans, providing an opportunity to see where he came from. Most know him as the enigmatic Neo from *The Matrix* or the dynamic badass from the *John Wick* movies, not the long-haired sweet simpleton here (or the tousled, denim-vested heshier we fell in love with in *River's Edge*... if you don't know that one, google it now!) However flimsy *Face The Music* may be story-wise, one thing is for sure—watching an iconic star pay homage to his bodacious beginnings with the kind of heart the actor brings here makes for a most excellent flashback.



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“If not for Keith’s compassion and superior defense strategy, we might have lost all of our hard-earned retirement savings to a very opportunistic claimant. The stress prior to retaining Keith was nearly unbearable.”

- Jim and Carol Hoffman



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