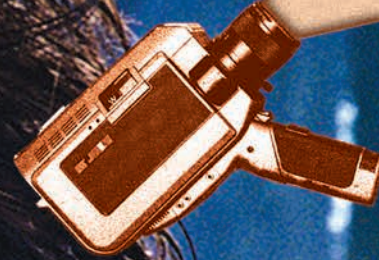


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**ABOUT THE COVER:** For our annual Film in Utah issue, coinciding with the *Sundance Film Festival*, *SLUG* Assistant Editor William Hughes interviewed the Topic Studios production team behind *It's Never Over*, Jeff Buckley, which premieres on January 24. Read more on page 6.

## Bailee Elaine

### Contributor Limelight Senior Staff Writer



Bailee Elaine has blessed *SLUG* with her poetic knack for telling essential community stories — from drag queens to local artisans — for the last two years. She even has her own poetry book out! Read her interview with Mental Healthy Fi.T's Brian Higgins on page 18.

## Ben Trentelman

### Contributor Limelight Senior Staff Writer



Since 2007, Ben Trentelman has contributed countless pieces bolstering *SLUG*'s media and community coverage — from reviewing films, books and concerts to interviewing local activists. Check out his interview with *Slamdance* co-founder and president Peter Baxter on page 10.

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**JEFF** Buckley's 1994 album *Grace* is enigmatic, genreless, genreful and, most notably, continually relevant. It stands shoulder to shoulder with other '90s albums that can't seem to die — think *Nirvana's Nevermind*, *Wu-Tang Clan's Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* and *My Bloody Valentine's Loveless*. These artists (save for *Kurt Cobain* and *Ol' Dirty Bastard*) all had long lives spent in the musical sunshine, world tours and endless chances to commercialize their sound. Buckley, on the other hand, had fewer than three years following *Grace's* release before he tragically passed in 1997 at the age of 30, leaving behind a vast echo of "what-ifs?" Not many had a chance to get to know Buckley as an artist and even fewer had the chance to see him perform live.



Photo: Merri Cyr

# IT'S NEVER OVER, Jeff Buckley

By wphughes • [william@slugmag.com](mailto:william@slugmag.com)

"[Buckley] may be the greatest singer you've never heard of. His story is incredible," says **Ryan Heller**, producer of the upcoming documentary *It's Never Over, Jeff Buckley* directed by **Amy Berg** and premiering at *Sundance 2025*. The project was first conceived in 2007, and it marks the fifth *Sundance* appearance for Berg, a lifelong filmmaker and Academy Award-nominated documentarian. Berg worked closely with Buckley's mother, **Mary Guibert**, who (after much convincing) allowed the director access to the artist's archive containing endless material that the world hasn't yet seen. "[Berg] is disarming. Her ability to sit with people and put them at ease, to not feel as though they're being interrogated, but that they are giving [their story], is really amazing," says fellow producer **Christine Connor**.

Both Heller and Connor work at Topic Studios, an American film production company founded by **Michael Bloom** in 2017. Topic Studios has been incredibly successful at *Sundance*, with many of their

films premiering at the festival over the past few years (including *A Real Pain* and *Theater Camp*, to name a few). On the founding of Topic Studios, Bloom says, "I'm a bit of a romantic and an idealist. I wanted to start a company for artists that would really put [them] and creators at the center and then do whatever is best for the idea, regardless of format." Heller, Connor and the rest of the producers at Topic did just that with *It's Never Over, Jeff Buckley*, supporting Berg for a number of years while she put together this documentary, much longer than many other production companies would have done.

In addition to providing continual support while Berg put the completed film together, the producers at Topic worked very hard to get the film the premiere it deserved: "*Sundance*, in addition to being one of the greatest places to launch a film, [is] such an unbelievable place to launch a documentary.

We really targeted *Sundance* as the platform we wanted ... and we were elated that they invited us," says Heller. "The history of independent film and *Sundance* are so interlinked. It's a really warm and friendly environment ... full of people who love movies who are there to see movies, talk about movies, think about movies — and that makes it a rich, thoughtful and caring environment," says Connor. *Sundance*, while familiar to Heller, Connor, Bloom and Berg, is undeniably the perfect place to debut the videos, voicemails and other unearthed materials from Jeff Buckley's short career. "For people that know Buckley, I think they will appreciate and dig [the film]. For people that are new to [Buckley], they will be equally intrigued and fascinated that they didn't know about this guy that was such a force," says Heller.

At the end of our conversation, I ask each of them to tell me their favorite Buckley song. While everyone name-checks his most famous track "Love, You Should've Come Over" — the lyrics of which inspired the film's title — Heller mentions the artist's lesser-known cover of **Bob Dylan's** "Mama, You Been On My Mind" and Bloom succinctly adds, "Hallelujah, of course." *It's Never Over, Jeff Buckley* will premiere on January 24 at 3:45 p.m. at *The Ray Theatre* in Park City. Find tickets and more showtimes at [festival.sundance.org](http://festival.sundance.org).



Michael Bloom



Christine Connor



Ryan Heller

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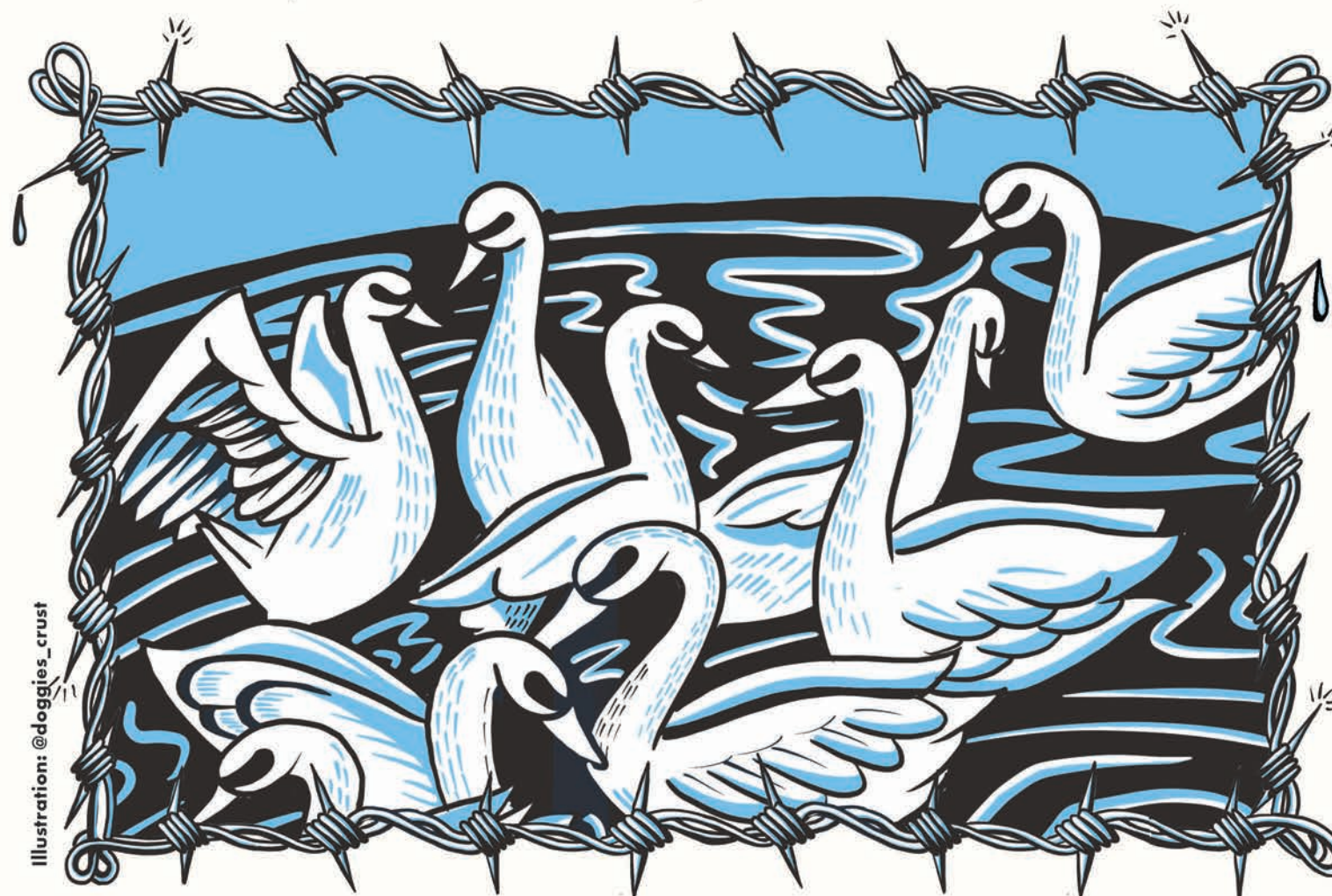


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# Provo To Omaha To Park City: Cole Webley and Paul Meyers' Road To Sundance

By Patrick Gibbs • pinkwombatcinema@gmail.com

There are some feelings so overwhelming they defy description. Filmmaker Cole Webley experienced those feelings when his feature film debut, *Omaha* — which he made with fellow BYU alumnus Paul Meyers as his cinematographer — was accepted into the 2025 *Sundance Film Festival*, where it will premiere on January 23.

“We’ve all had our hearts broken in high school,” Webley says. He recalls reaching a baseline of numbness, only to remember the heartache and start plummeting again. “This is the exact opposite,” Webley explains. “Every time you get to a baseline, and then you remember your film is playing at *Sundance*, your heart rate jumps, you’re excited ... I’m soaking this up.”

An emotionally charged story of hardship and family, the film begins in Utah during the 2008 economic crisis. Reeling from a family tragedy, young siblings Ella (**Molly Belle Wright**, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*) and Charlie (**Wyatt Solis**) are taken on a cross-country journey by their father

(**John Magaro**, *Past Lives*, September 5), who tells them they’re heading to Omaha, Nebraska. What starts as an adventure becomes increasingly surreal as Ella begins to suspect there’s more going on than her father is telling her.

“The script touched me so deeply,” Webley says. “It felt like the right project for my first film, something we could truly accomplish while staying authentic to the material. Paul and I knew this was a story worth telling.” Meyers echoes the sentiment, adding, “Cole and I both have a deep love for visually rich, emotionally resonant stories. *Omaha* gave us the chance to bring that to life in a meaningful way.”

The screenplay was written by BYU professor **Robert Machoian**, the acclaimed writer-director of *The Killing of Two Lovers*, which Webley saw at *Sundance* in 2020. “I was shocked and excited by how good it was,” Webley says. “I was excited, but I was also appalled that I didn’t know Robert who was right here in Utah, coming out of BYU [and] making the kind of cinema I aspired to create, so I sought him out.”

The two were working on developing an original concept when Webley persuaded Machoian to let him read a script written 11 years earlier but never produced. “It was clear from the start that this story

was something special,” Webley says. Once the decision was made to bring *Omaha* to the screen, casting became crucial and Webley knew Magaro was perfect for the father. “John is incredible and I’ll be forever grateful he did this film,” Webley says. “In some ways, he co-directed these kids in the scenes. He knew how to work with them. He was patient. John’s role as a father shone through in the making of the picture.”

The decision to shoot digitally on the ARRI Alexa 35 and Alexa large-format cameras was driven by budget and logistical considerations. “We were both interested in shooting this on film,” Meyers says. “But in the end, we opted for digital, mostly because of the kids in the film.” Solis, who was six years old during filming, could only work four hours each day. Meyers and Webley knew that they needed the flexibility to capture the children’s performances in the moment without stopping to change film magazines. “I stand by the decision,” Meyers says.

As the festival draws near, this heartfelt narrative, as well as the collaborative spirit of two filmmakers who’ve spent their lives honing their craft, make *Omaha* an extraordinary film that’s poised to be one of the standout premieres in the U.S. Dramatic Competition. For Webley and Meyers, it’s not just a film — it’s the culmination of years of passion, partnership and storytelling. Get tickets to see the premiere at [festival.sundance.org](http://festival.sundance.org).

LEFT: Cinematographer Paul Meyers (left) and director Cole Webley (right) are BYU alumni and current Utah residents.

BOTTOM: Much of *Omaha*, Cole Webley’s feature debut about a cross-country road trip, was filmed in and around Salt Lake City.

Photo courtesy of Sanctuary Content

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# Le Salon Des Refusés Vivra

SLAMDANCE WILL LIVE ON

By Ben Trentelman

bdkr0@yahoo.com

SLAMDANCE

"We wear this badge proudly: 'Le Salon des Refusés,'" says Peter Baxter, co-founder and president of the *Slamdance Film Festival*, referencing the French term for an exhibition of rejects to describe the community he and the festival's founders have cultivated. Dubbed a "guerrilla upstart" on their website, *Slamdance* began in Park City in 1995 as a haven for filmmakers who didn't make the cut for the *Sundance Film Festival*. It provided a space for these artists to showcase their work, connect with peers and exchange ideas. What started as a one-time event has grown — over 30 years — into a thriving platform for independent filmmakers. "We wanted more than just a film festival," says Baxter. "We wanted a gathering place for artists — a space that embraced divergent voices and allowed their work to be seen and heard within a system that was otherwise bleak."

*Slamdance* has evolved from its humble beginnings into a year-round enterprise, offering a screenplay competition, the DIG (Digital, Interactive, Gaming) program and the *Slamdance Channel* virtual film platform. Most recently, *Slamdance* announced that its 2024 festival would be its last in Park City as it relocates to Los Angeles, where its other operations are based.

The decision to leave Park City stems from *Slamdance's* commitment to supporting underrepresented voices. The high costs of traveling to and staying in a resort town like Park City are often prohibitive for filmmakers who have poured everything into their projects. "It goes against the goal of giving

emerging voices a chance," Baxter explains. Accessibility was another factor. For participants in the Unstoppable program, which highlights work by filmmakers with visible and non-visible disabilities, Park City's mountainous terrain posed challenges. A recent partnership with the University of Utah allowed for the Unstoppable showcase to take place in Salt Lake City, but Baxter notes that *Slamdance's* ultimate goal is fostering a filmmaking community that connects artists with audiences and distribution opportunities.

*Slamdance's* community-focused ethos has always set it apart. "*Slamdance* is a festival for filmmakers, by filmmakers," Baxter says. "Once you're in, you can never really leave — you contribute in some way, like helping with the next year's program." This model keeps many of the founding filmmakers involved to this day. "We're one of the only festivals where filmmakers return to run it. That's unusual."

Reflecting on *Slamdance's* first year, Baxter shares, "We soon realized we should continue this for other artists. It wasn't the first time some of us had shown our films, but it was the first time many of us felt part of a festival that was truly ours. We've been doing that ever since, and we have a strong track record of discovering filmmakers who went on to change the industry."

Notable alumni whose debut films

premiered at the festival include Christopher Nolan (*Following*), the Russo brothers (*Pieces*) and Oren Peli (*Paranormal Activity*), the last of which went on to become one of Paramount's most profitable films. "This shows the power of independent and micro-budget filmmaking to push the industry forward," Baxter says.

*Slamdance* has also led industry innovation, being the first festival to screen a film via video projection, the first to have filmmakers program the festival and the first to showcase films on the Xbox platform. Baxter sees the move to Los Angeles as an opportunity to expand this pioneering spirit.

"We believe there are opportunities to elevate independent film by bringing fresh ideas to the industry at a time when it's struggling," Baxter explains. *Slamdance* has already partnered with production companies, schools and colleges, focusing on younger filmmakers. "These collaborations are building a vibrant film community, especially from a younger perspective." As *Slamdance* continues to grow, its focus remains on discovering new talent, prioritizing creativity over celebrity and commercialism. "We're not showcasing celebrities — we're showcasing artists because this is where it all starts," Baxter says. "How beautiful is it to showcase pure work from the source? That inspires me and our programs deeply."

Learn more about *Slamdance's* journey at [slamdance.com](http://slamdance.com).

Slamdance co-founder Peter Baxter (right) chats with festival alumnus Steven Soderbergh (left) at Slamdance 2019.



Photo courtesy of Slamdance



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# BLACK BOLD AND BRILLIANT

## A Space for Black Filmmakers

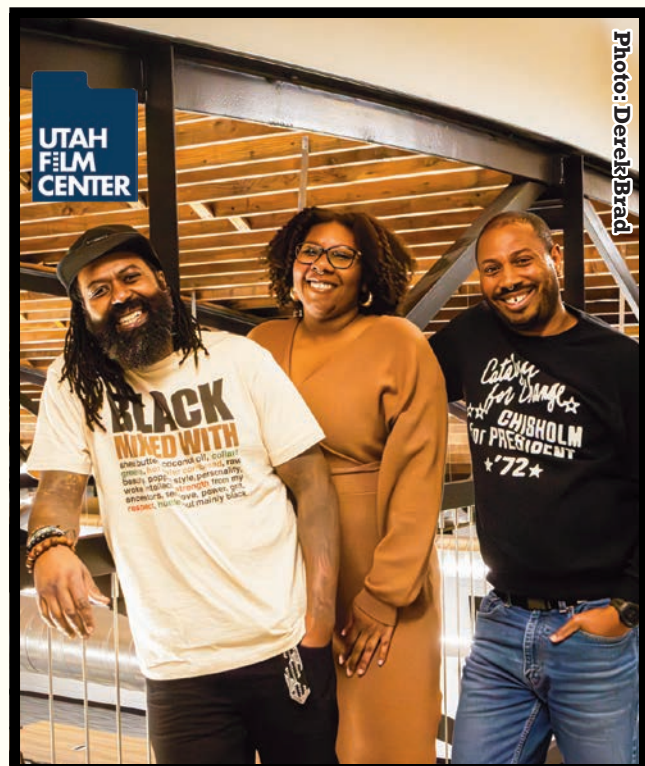
By Olivia Watts \* [oj.watts5@gmail.com](mailto:oj.watts5@gmail.com)

Though some may not consider Utah a hot spot for Black creators working within the realm of film, there exists a whole program to support, uplift and recognize local Black filmmakers.

"I hope through our program we are changing the minds and the understanding of what Black culture really is and what it can be," says Associate Programmer **Risshan Leak** of the Black, Bold and Brilliant (BBB) program, supported by the *Utah Film Center*. Leak is accompanied by Lead Programmer **Aja Washington** and Program Manager **Russell Roots**.

BBB uses cinema to talk about issues within the Black community. Beginning in 2020, shortly after the summer marked by the murder of **George Floyd** and subsequent protests, this program was developed to create different kinds of conversations surrounding Black communities, intersectionality and other marginalized communities in Utah. "A program like this is so necessary. People don't have privy into the Black experience because our population is so small within the state," says Leak. Through BBB, there is an avenue through which stories can be told, shared and discussed. In doing so, a safe space has been created.

The program first started off as an online experiment, recognizing a need for Black voices in film. It has now grown into multiple live events each year, all focused around storytelling within the community. "It started out as taking clips of pop culture or films and highlighting issues that those films talked about," says Washington. The program was



(From L-R): **Risshan Leak, Aja Washington and Russell Roots** believe in the unique power of film to highlight Black experiences.

then simplified into film screenings, Q&As, community tablings and more in order to bring people together and form discussions.

As the program has continued to grow over the years, attendance has increased from less than 100 people to now over 300 attendees at the most recent event. The *Utah Film Center* has helped in moving things along, bringing up viewership and awareness. Some hear about BBB and might think the program is only for people within the Black community, but all are welcome! "Yes, we are talking about Black issues, but it's okay that you are a part of it, too," says Washington, as she discusses the importance of having a diverse audience at their events.

"Film is a voice. It is a way to express yourself and to make a point," says Washington. It is important to have Black voices in filmmaking and for them to be paid and recognized for their work. With the film industry being largely

dominated by white men, BBB is aiming to highlight Black experiences while supporting Black filmmakers. Supporting these people, paying them and showing recognition will allow for continuation in production. BBB has created a community for Black filmmakers and hopes to put Salt Lake City on the map as a place for others alike in the film industry.

"I love the challenge and responsibility of sharing our story," says Leak, discussing why he is involved. *Utah Film Center* is a great partner for BBB because it opens many doors for the program. Much of the programming done by the film center and BBB is free, allowing for anyone to come and experience filmmaking, community involvement and educational discussions. With the goal in mind of breaking stereotypes and stigmas around people of color, this program creates an amazing opportunity for people in the community.

Roots, Washington and Leak are looking forward to the continuing growth of BBB and believe it can be a place for people to open their minds to the possibility that there are stories outside of what they might already be aware of. "There really hasn't been a program like this [before], and my personal ultimate goal is to keep it going as authentically and productively as possible," says Roots.

For more on Black, Bold and Brilliant, check out [utahfilmcenter.org/black-bold-brilliant](http://utahfilmcenter.org/black-bold-brilliant), where you can read more about the programming team, upcoming events and past events.

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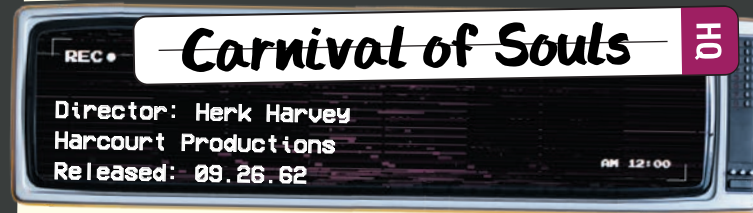
If you have a surface-level knowledge of films made in Utah, your Beehive State picks may fall somewhere on the spectrum between glorified, red clay-dusted Westerns and Disney Channel Originals. Drill deeper and you'll find "only posers die" punks, **Babe Ruth**-signed baseballs, **James Franco**'s severed arm and unopened packages from a **T. Kaczynski** (yes, it happened here). There have to be more features with Utah cultural significance that fly under the radar. Well, if there's anything I've learned when uncovering forgotten cinema: When in doubt, book a trip to *Deseret Industries*. Read about two more salty secondhand picks on *SLUGMag.com!*



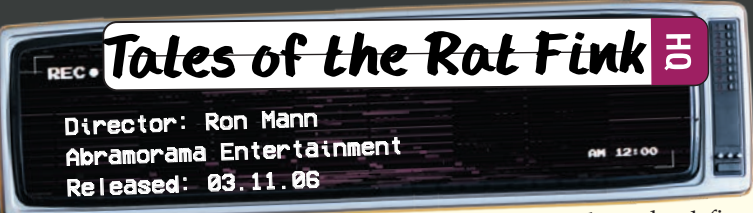
In the copy-and-paste *Mad Max* future of 2050, a dragged-through-shit bounty hunter (**Michael Ironside**, *Scanners*) must transfer a seductive runaway (**Vanity**, *The Last Dragon*) to the cyberpunk metropolis of "Neon City." However, hitching a ride on a sheet metal caravan of ragtag survivors turns deadly, as the biohazard waste holds mutated marauders ready to ambush. I love an apocalyptic road trip! The only problem is this Canadian cut of cinema doesn't quite know what it wants to be: "Maybe we're *Road Warrior*, but we're kind of liking the *Bladerunner* undertones." It's like when 2008's *Doomsday* came out and combined Scottish knights with punk rockers. I do like seeing the old *Saltair* as a rat den settlement, though.



Nerdy vagabond Voss (**Devin McGinn**, *Skinwalker Ranch*) needs to land a big break with a Seattle gaming company. How can he prove his determination, though? By creating a mythical LARPing paradise with his brother Clancy (**Matt Mattson**), friendzoned Marsha (**Jaclyn Hales**) and a guild of clueless gamers. However, the maniacal Shadowhawk (**Jon Gries**, *Napoleon Dynamite*) comes to claim the PVC piping throne. There's a charm to this movie that holds tons of heart. Its DIY duality and make-believe nature makes it an awesome watch. Keep a keen eye out while watching, because you might find a fellow *SLUG* writer decked out in a gorilla suit... psst, it's me!



Halfway through watching the pre-Code Western *The Man from Utah*, I started to realize that misleading title was actually filmed in Lone Peak, California. Damn you, **John Wayne**... *Carnival of Souls*, however, was filmed at the old *Saltair*. While restarting her life after a horrific car accident, a bewildered organist (**Candace Hilligoss**, *The Greenstones*) is tormented by a kindred spirit beckoning her to an abandoned carnival. For an early psychological horror flick, it's not too bad. It's a tad cheese corn with a lot of the sets looking like the film takes place at *Lagoon's* Pioneer Village. Plus, it's weird that more than two actors have lazy eyes, but it makes for a fun game of "I know where that place is!"



Okay, maybe a documentary about **Ed Roth** is stretching the definition of movies FILMED in Utah. However, when the Kustom Kulture's Kronos stick shifts life in reverse to become a born-again Mormon, he's a Utahn in my book! *Tales of the Rat Fink* is a wacky sort-of documentary. Told through custom-made buggies and hot rods, which gets weirdly *Autopia*-like at parts, the film follows the candy-colored career of the "Big Daddy" himself. There are moments where Roth's disembodied head (voiced by **John Goodman**) tries to explain his own car club philosophy on life, only to be derailed by the snorting, grotesque green rodent of his imagination. It's like a pinstriped repeat of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

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# ROLL THE CREDITS:

## Salt Lake's Brightest Film Specialists

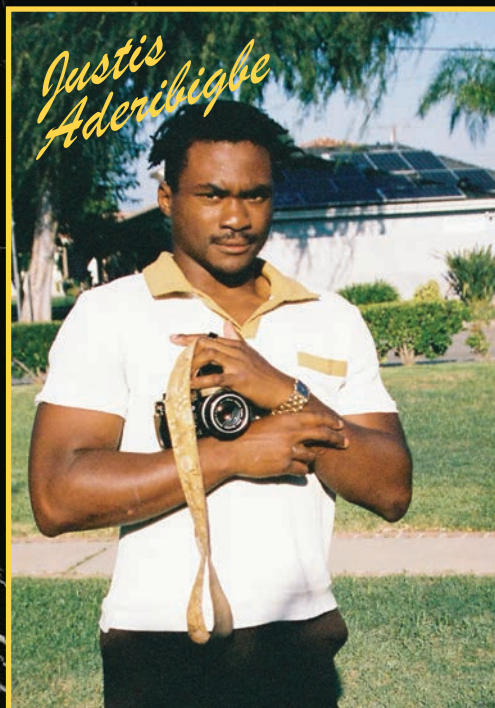


By Marzia Thomas  
marziamercurythomas@gmail.com

The time has come for the sun to dance. Wait, what's the event about again? It's the largest independent film festival in the United States, hosted in Utah every January? Oh shit, I might need another day to write this. I thought these guys just *really* loved movies when I interviewed them. Huh. Well, I hope you enjoy what they have to say about the local filmmaking scene (beyond the big screens at *Sundance*) and the individual part that they play in it.

As precise and systematic as music itself, Calvin Jackson writes emails with a no-nonsense style that I appreciate. Jackson's experience with sound production began when he started making music when he was much younger. He then began to produce videos to accompany the songs he wrote, leading him to become a music video director. Dabbling in multiple disciplines — including foley, sound design and even scoring short films — Jackson is well-acquainted with the processes and procedures of sound production. With further experience working as a boom operator, dialogue editor and post sound-mixer, he found joy in post-production audio. Due to his skill and affinity for the craft of creating sound for multimedia content, he

has a clear comprehension of how critical quality sound is to a video or film. As he puts it, "The audio quality is a signifier of the quality, time and effort put into a film since — no matter how fancy the visuals are and what camera and lens and cool lighting setup you have. If the audio sounds bad, the film automatically comes off as unprofessional." The clear passion Jackson has for the artistry of post-production sound is admirable. He understands how much detail and care goes into a piece of audio; how much clarity and exactitude in sound is necessary to not distract from the overall project. Check out Jackson's surreal comedy short *The Vents* (about the video game *Among Us*) on YouTube at @calvinjacksonsound and follow him at @sound\_guy\_calvin on Instagram.



Justis Aderibigbe is filmmaking until he gets to make a **Radiohead** film. Based on his impressive portfolio, he has more than the potential to get there. Aderibigbe discovered photography as a child as a way to journal his life, an interest that later developed into working as a lighting technician on film sets. As a gaffer, he collaborates with the director of photography to generate the perfect brightness and shadowing for a given shot. With a brilliant knowledge of lighting on film and photography sets, Aderibigbe is able to create what is needed for the vividness of a visual project at the time of shooting. This is plain to see in his work — there is an unclouded luminescence to the way he places light sources in frame, result-

ing in a glassy, glowy feel to the way he captures moments. Citing music and art as his inspirations, Aderibigbe is an admirer of **Francisco Goya's** work and, of course, the discography of Radiohead. These muses are transparent in his stylistic choices for photography, which he calls "naturalistic and surreal." When asked what visuals he loves, he says, "So much of the art that I enjoy creates a feeling where the world is so real to you, but there's these dissociating factors in the work that help you understand your connection to other things outside yourself." Learn more about Aderibigbe's recent short film *Void Formula* and follow his journey to make a musical biopic on his Instagram @junglebooge.

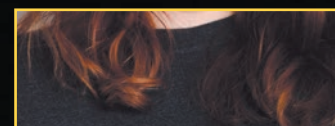
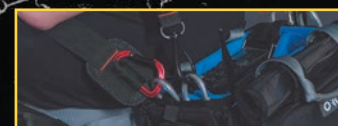


A born storyteller, Savannah Rose Coles has always loved the practice — starting out with making comic books as a child. During college courses, Coles found her admiration for the act of screenwriting and the collaborative effort of filmmaking. She explains, "Screenwriting, for me, is a way to deeply explore empathy, allowing me to step into the shoes of others and experience things I've never known." For Coles, the process of bringing together a plot has its own impromptu path. By collecting notes of thoughts and ideas over time, she is able to make connections and bring form to a story in a serendipitous style. She calls this the "chaos of inspiration." Through this process, the pieces of the plot fall naturally into place and the result is well-written

characters, dialogue and storylines. When asked about her favorite elements of screenwriting, she says, "Dialogue has always felt like music to me. When it's done right, it lingers in your mind long after the credits roll, much like a song you can't get out of your head." Although screenwriting is what she does best, it's not the only skill she has tried her hand at. Having tried editing, animating, script supervising, assistant directing, directing and voice acting, Coles has a thorough understanding of the detailed work that goes into a film. Follow Savannah Rose Coles on Instagram at @rose\_memento and watch her latest short film *Little Thieves* on YouTube at @mysticswanstudios.

Propmaster Patrick Charles became obsessed with monsters after watching *Alien* and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* as a kid. Discussing his curiosity about the medium, he says, "I remember dressing up a piece of work out equipment with a latex mask and stretching a green sweater over it, thinking, "This can't be right... How the hell do they make monsters?" His desire to bring creatures to life did not stop there — Charles began to make masks and sculptures in art school which fostered his love for making props. Some of his favorite creations include an alien fetus for a short called *It Came from Inside!*, directed by **Aura Martinez Sandoval** and **Jackson Rees**, as well as tiny dragon-like stop motion puppets

for a short called *The Atomic Spawn*. He believes that realistic and eye-catching props are paramount to perfecting a film's visuals. Props are also essential for an actor's performance: "There is a big difference between being able to hold a little monster fetus versus being told, 'Okay, hold this green thing and act scared — we'll add it in later,'" he says. Charles is not only a collector of Godzilla figurines and VHS tapes, but he is also the theater operations manager at *Salt Lake Film Society* and is currently working on pieces for an upcoming project called *To Zion* directed by **Landon Adams**. To see more of his outstanding work, follow Patrick Charles on Instagram at @punkpat88.



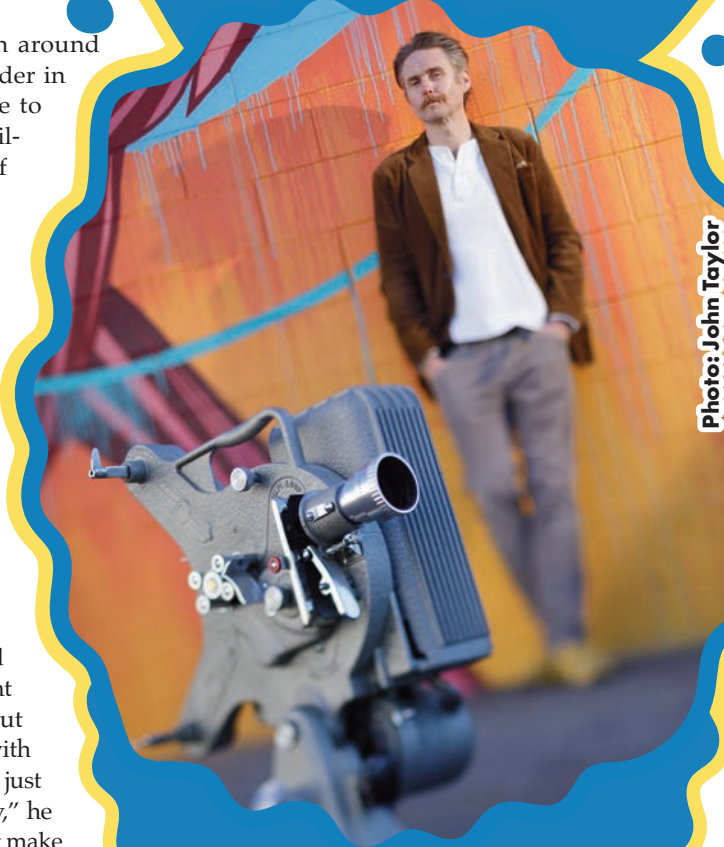
# Mental Healthy F.i.T Community Through Creative Communication

By Bailee Elaine · [jessopbailee@gmail.com](mailto:jessopbailee@gmail.com)

The door to the conversation around mental health has opened wider in recent years, allowing people to find comfort in their vulnerability. **Brian Higgins**, founder of Mental Healthy F.i.T. (Films-ideas-Tips) has a unique approach to the subject.

“Mental Healthy F.i.T. arose out of my own recovery and my own journey through homelessness,” Higgins says. While navigating early life in Northern Ireland, Higgins was faced with traumatic events that led him to addiction and PTSD, among other elements that are often a result of trauma. He ended up homeless while trying to find help through therapy, treatment centers and other resources but found that nothing resonated with him. “In all my Celtic wisdom, I just drank more to make it go away,” he says. “And of course, that didn’t make it go away; it just made everything else in my life go away.” Higgins was able to transition out of this state through creativity. “It was how I was able to reconstruct my triggers through creative form. I was able to reconstruct my negative reaction to guns — my main form of PTSD,” he says. He used his imagination to change the situation, to turn a gun into a banana. And that’s where Mental Healthy F.i.T. began.

The nonprofit organization, started in 2016, has since become a traveling film festival focusing on all aspects of mental health. Through their Focus on Fests events, the organization travels to locations where they are needed (for example: a school that wants to host an assembly on bullying). The idea is to generate emotional filmmaking to create visceral responses that enhance conversations around mental health.



Photos: John Taylor

**Brian Higgins’ Mental Healthy F.i.T. grew out of how creativity and imagination aided his own recovery.**

Higgins shares one example of a film with a monster under the bed; the monster can represent addiction, PTSD, depression, etc. “It is real and if it comes out from under the bed, it will kill us. We have to do everything in our power to ask for help, and it’s all fair and good — us having the vulnerability to ask for help. But the community as a whole has to know how to answer that,” he says.

Mental Healthy F.i.T. has found film to be a good medium for people to talk about their experiences. Whether the film itself is correlated to someone’s personal experience or not, as two people with the exact same

diagnosis can have entirely different stories, it allows them to relate to the emotion, which then opens up the space for conversation about their personal trauma and mental health.

Not only do the people watching the films benefit from this, but those who are a part of making the films benefit, too. Higgins explains the process of giving each person a new job each day and how there’s a job for everyone to do. He shares the analogy that someone could be a director for a day and ask for something as simple as a chair to be moved, and it gets moved. “That could be the first time that anybody has ever responded to you in a positive way and has given you the self esteem to realize, ‘I asked for what I wanted and it happened. Maybe I could ask for boundaries, too,’” he says. Local filmmakers often give back by providing mentorship.

“Finding ways to make things better to help people” is the motto behind Mental Healthy F.i.T., and one that Higgins strongly relates to. “I look back at all my professional and personal endeavors, whether it was graphic design, architecture or making false teeth. Really, the through line was always to find ways to make things better,” he says.

Mental Healthy F.i.T. also travels to Utah’s neighboring states. They host workshops and other events, like Focus on Fridays, which are held online on the first Friday of every month. They are hosting a three-day *Focus on Fests Festival* in May 2025. Follow Mental Healthy F.i.T. on Instagram at [@mentalhealthyfit](https://www.instagram.com/mentalhealthyfit) for more information.

Some stars are massive while others are so tiny they’re almost insignificant. The characteristics of a star will determine what type of life it will lead, how long it might live and even the type of death it will die. Witness the amazing variety of stars and peer into their secret lives.

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# BEHIND THE SEAMS

THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL WORLD OF MCGREW STUDIOS

By Aspen English • [aspentree56@gmail.com](mailto:aspentree56@gmail.com) || Photos by India Mendoza

Jennifer McGrew is no ordinary professional. On the day we meet for coffee to discuss her business, McGrew Studios, she also has plans to track down a specific piece of band equipment and talk fabric with a fellow artisan. When I ask about her job title, she slides me a glittery business card that reads "Director of Disguises."

It's a fitting moniker — McGrew does it all, including costume fabrication, multimedia design and mascot creation. She's contributed to local films like *Punk's Dead: SLC Punk 2*, *We Love You, Sally Carmichael!* and *Alien Country*. But what truly sets her apart is her passion for the peculiar.

McGrew later rediscovered her passion for costume design at Weber State University while wrapping up her English undergraduate degree, leading to several more years and universities as she continued her artistic training. Eventually, McGrew Studios was born, and soon, her creativity had its own reputation in the entertainment industry, especially film and TV.

Of course, that came with its own set of challenges.

"Most films are a shitshow," McGrew says bluntly. "A lot of decisions that get made from the top down have a ripple effect and screw up everybody else's scheduling and plans."

She describes the meticulous schedules that guide each film: where and when scenes are shot, what costumes, props and equipment are needed. But the reality is often far messier. Last-minute changes from higher-ups can throw entire departments into disarray, forcing costume designers to scramble — and the details are the first things to go.

"If something's missing, as a viewer, you'll know," McGrew says. "You might not know exactly what it is, but if all the little details aren't looked to, it's not going to look like a complete world."

Attention to detail, she explains, is where the magic lies. She recounts her work on a short film called *Flight From Shadow* in 2013. In McGrew's research for the costuming, she discovered a kind of complicated Celtic knot and decided to integrate the idea into the back of a main character's cloak as

imagery to emphasize her key traits. Her team spent hours creating it, but in the final product, it didn't appear on screen once. Still, McGrew doesn't regret her creative choice.

"The point is that you never know," says McGrew. "Because producers and directors are capricious and arbitrary creatures, just like the rest of us. They might be on set and go, 'Oh, wow, we never thought of shooting it from this angle,' and then you're going, 'Oh, fuck, we should have, we could have.'"

Despite the fun and wacky projects, the thrill of being on set and the feeling of successfully finishing a costume, none of those things are McGrew's favorite part of the process. It's the way a carefully chosen texture hints at a backstory, or how a unique accessory adds a layer of personality. For her, it's about the subtle magic of costume design and the impact it has on viewers — even if they don't consciously notice it.

"It's telling stories through costume," McGrew says simply. "Who is this person? Why did they pick that out of their closet on this particular day?"

To learn more about McGrew, or commission a wonderfully weird costume from her, check out her website at [mcgrewstudios.com](http://mcgrewstudios.com).



Jennifer McGrew's attention to detail is what makes her costumes tell a story on screen.



Jennifer McGrew's love of the peculiar and unconventional informs her ornate costume designs for films and TV shows.

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Photo: Emily Sorensen

(From L-R) Amber Pearson (electric cello, vocals), Steph Darland (guitar, vocals), Ryan Houts (bass) and Ben Thornton (drums, percussion) make up the counter-country quartet Fur Foxen.

## LOCALIZED

By Jamie Christensen  
jamiec1331@gmail.com

Ditch your upcoming New Year's resolutions for the only one that matters this season — supporting Salt Lake City's local music scene. Come check out the *Kilby Court* stage on Wednesday, January 15 for a night of genre-melding performances featuring guitars, cellos and harmonicas from co-headliners **John Elwood Morgan** and **Fur Foxen**, along with opener **The Snarlin' Yarns**. *SLUG Magazine's Localized* showcase is sponsored by *Riso-Geist*. Doors open at 7:00 p.m. and music starts at 8:00.

# FUR FOXEN

# JOHN ELWOOD MORGAN



Photo: Emily Sorensen

John Elwood Morgan emphasizes folk music's strong storytelling aspect on his just-released EP, *New Skies*.

## LOCALIZED

By Jamie Christensen  
jamiec1331@gmail.com

While Utah may outwardly express itself as a hyper-religious, sleepy state full of do-gooders and rock climbers, Salt Lake City maintains its local reputation as a counterculture refuge. Similarly, Fur Foxen is a band composed of four individuals who seek to redefine genre and place themselves in a label of their own creation: counter-country. The quartet has managed to conceive an anti-genre that uniquely describes their blended sound of country with alternative elements.

Beginning as an acoustic duo in 2017, Fur Foxen was founded by original members **Steph Darland** and **Amber Pearson**. Darland and Pearson originally met in 2015 at a show where Pearson was performing, as Darland was looking to add a string musician to his project at the time, **Harold Henry**. After Harold Henry split, Darland and Pearson stuck around as a duo before introducing new members **Ben Thornton** and **Ryan Houts** to Fur Foxen in 2022 and 2023, respectively.

After speaking to each member about how they were introduced to Fur Foxen, it seems almost kismet that these musicians found one another when they did. From Houts moving from Boston to SLC and seeking the right project to join as a bassist, to Thornton's band **First Days** going on hiatus at an ideal moment, everything aligned and allowed Fur Foxen to evolve

into what it is today. Pearson says, "It seems like the timing for everyone was perfect, which is kind of crazy that it worked out that way." Darland adds, "Like dominoes falling into a puddle of gold."

Before Houts and Thornton joined, Fur Foxen sought a description that laid beyond the categories they were often lumped into, such as folk. Darland says, "We had the instruments and maybe the look of that kind of band, so I understand why we would get placed in that category from a visual standpoint." With the addition of Thornton's percussion and Houts' bass, the duo's sounds melded together into what they now define as counter-country. The term derived from the band's love of SLC and its resistance culture. "That's where our sound lives — sort of on this fringe area between country and rock but not quite fitting into either of those categories. It's this resistance to these sounds that we're inherent to because we want it so badly to be our own, you know?" Darland says.

With the latest releases of Fur Foxen's single "Burn" and their EP *Fox, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes* — which Pearson credits as the most accurate representation of their sound — Fur Foxen's counter-country label continues to sharpen. The band performed at *The DLC* this past July and highlighted a moment in the show where

they felt more confident than ever. Darland says, "We were just thinking about having fun and being comfortable in the moment. And we had collectively not experienced that before, but it was noticeable." Houts adds, "It's probably one of the first shows where we all knew the songs front and back and we could have that confidence of just putting our hearts out there."

Darland notes that SLC itself is thick with myriad genres and scenes that are incredibly talented and welcoming (they mention a love for local artists **Ambedo**, **Vincent Draper and the Culls**, **Lord Vox** and **Sean Baker's Recycled Stardust**), and their eclectic rehearsal space *The Foxhole* often moonlights as a small venue in the backyard of Darland's garage-turned-studio. The group notes, however, that one of the greatest challenges of being a local act is just getting people to come out to shows. Darland says, "In my heart of hearts, this is good music. This is music I would listen to. And we think if you like good music, you should listen to Fur Foxen. It's nostalgic. It's different."

Check out Fur Foxen at an upcoming performance, whether that be at *Localized*, other local venues or their upcoming tour in Germany and the Netherlands. Keep an eye out for their new single "Murders and Metaphors" this January, and follow their Instagram [@furfoxenmusic](#).

At first glance, John Elwood Morgan appears particularly familiar with the undercurrents of folk. With his denim-clad poise, harmonica holder attached to his button-up, large acoustic guitar case and appreciation of the American Southwest and Utah's landscapes, Morgan is an homage to the greater blend of the Americana, blues and country genres.

Raised on the sounds of **Rush** and musical theater, Morgan cites music as a cornerstone of his family's heritage. Having been taught the harmonica by his granddad and picking up the guitar at age 12, Morgan soon moved into writing moody, teenage sap songs by 14. Morgan wasn't introduced to folk sounds until he received his first CD — a live **John Denver** concert. Morgan also credits older artists such as **Cat Stevens** and **James Taylor** as inspiration. However, he says, "I find more recently that what inspires me most are the smaller artists who are doing things similar to what I'm trying to do."

One specific artist, **Caleb Christopher Edwards**, helped Morgan create his EP *New Skies* — released at the end of November. Morgan connected with Edwards through social media, and Edwards eventually contributed to the EP as a producer, singer and mandolin player. "I just said, 'Hey, how would you feel about recording some mandolin for me on a song?' Which ended

up being the single that I just put out called 'Linger,'" says Morgan.

Morgan flew to Nashville in June where he met Edwards and other musicians to record *New Skies* in a single day. "The bones of the songs we recorded were totally live. I owe a lot of that EP to the folks that played on it," he says. Morgan notes that preserving the authentic sound is essential. He recalls hearing specific lyrics or unintentional pauses that call back to memories of recording. "I really love that organic feel of just sitting right here and playing a song together, you know? That's kind of the sound I feel like represents myself most ... a really organic live sound," he says.

Morgan considers moving with his family from Utah to South Carolina (then later back to Logan, UT) as a central experience that helped cement his sound. He says, "A lot of the songs on the EP, they kind of explore different aspects of what makes the word 'home' meaningful to people. Everywhere you move, there's a new story to tell, right?"

Specifically, he recalls beginning to write the chords for the song "New Sky" during his last night in Logan and continuing the track on the road, ending with a final product in South Carolina. "It's one of the more meaningful songs for me because it's about change and how it's not always

comfortable and not always very fun, but it's almost always what's best for us," he says. Morgan explores other themes of planting roots, not feeling like you belong and being present for fleeting moments in the other tracks.

Morgan credits the experience of creating *New Skies* as his biggest musical success to date. From making a friend in Edwards to supporting other musicians to releasing his music on streaming, he says, "Being able to hear my songs in a way that's like, it's still me, it's still what you would hear if I were to play the songs for you right now, but the collaboration with other people really brought out a different character in the songs."

Though *New Skies* is brief, each of the four songs are a testament to storytelling. Listening to Morgan ardently explain the specific locations, memories and sentiments tied to the sounds punctuates the central intent of folk. He says, "If you had to define what folk music is, it's telling stories in musical form. They're kind of small stories, right? But the hope is that they'll resonate with people; that people will be able to hear my stories and hear their own story echoed in it as well." Check out Morgan's Instagram [@johnelwoodmorgan](#) for new releases and updates.

# SIURP

## LAKE CITY

RAMEN ICHIZU DELIVERS AUTHENTIC JAPANESE FLAVORS

By Christian Ledek • sea.ledek@gmail.com || Photos by Nicole Marriner

As someone who went to Japan (brag) for a little over two weeks this summer, spending time in Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo, I have been... hesitant? Trepidatious? Somewhat scared to try new Japanese cuisine in the states? No, I've been LOYAL to my culinary experience in Japan. As pretentious as that may sound, please allow the indulgence of remembering those flavors fondly, and allow the exceptional quality of *Ramen Ichizu* to bless your life.

I walked into the restaurant with an open mind, though, and seeing the layout of *Ramen Ichizu* helped with some of my consternation because it felt like a Tokyo ramen house. Now, hindsight is always clearer, as I found out after my visit that the owner of *Ichizu* trained in Tokyo. With that information, it's hard to imagine that said layout isn't done on purpose, you know? You know.

While the mains of the menu — the types of ramen you can order — are in rotation throughout the year, it appears that the sides remain fairly consistent.

The Tan Tan Noodles and Shoyu Cucumbers are menu highlights.

However, it wouldn't be a surprise if some of those rotate in and out of the menu as well. From there I ordered the Edamame (\$5), Shoyu Cucumbers (\$6), Karaage (\$9) and Pork Gyoza (\$9). The only reason I didn't try the Shishito Peppers (\$8) and the Potato Salad (\$5) was because they were crossed off from the menu — out of order, if you will. Whatever sides are available to you when you go to *Ichizu*, order them. Do it. Do it. All of them. Full stop.

There was a freshness to all of the sides that made me realize that when *Ichizu* claims to make their food from scratch, they are 100% telling the truth. Lightly salted edamame, the soy-vinegar marinade of the Shoyu Cucumbers and the fresh batter on the Karaage are my personal holy trinity of Japanese side dishes. SO DELECTABLE. And yes, the Pork Gyoza are fresh and tasty too, though it was the side that I enjoyed the least. But again, I cannot stress enough that I still enjoyed it immensely. Crazy, right? Pork Gyoza would be on the bench of the Japanese side dishes' starting lineup, but I stand by my call as the coach of my *Ramen Ichizu* meal.

I love me some spicy food, ok? When I saw the Tan Tan Noodles (\$17) option on the menu at first glance, I knew I was cooked. It was a done deal. Game over.

Did I read the rest of the menu to kill another minute or two of time to pretend like the Tan Tan Noodles didn't have my heart already immersed in its spicy broth? Yes, yes I did. I tried to play it cool, like pretending to accidentally bump into your crush at a party, even though you've known the

What sets apart *Ramen Ichizu* is their dedication to traditional ramen noodle making, something many other ramen shops don't do.

ENTIRE TIME that said crush is also there, and being like, "Oh my God, you're here? That's SO crazy!" So yeah, I ordered the Tan Tan Noodles.

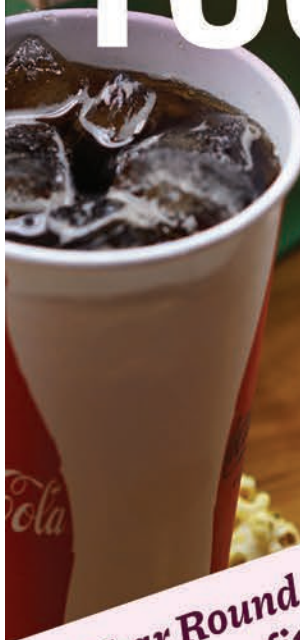
The base of the bouncy noodles — fresh green onion and spinach leaf and flavorful ground pork, immersed in that homemade spicy broth that had hints of ginger and garlic — was enough to open a portal in my mind. It's as if I were back in Shibuya, pointing to the menu and trying to use broken Japanese to order ramen, with the kind server smiling at me while taking the menu from my hands and saying "hai." Again, the FRESHNESS at *Ichizu* is evident and abundant. To me, it's completely worth your while, worth your time and worth your dollars to put this establishment into your ramen rotation.

I'd like to give a quick shout out to the couple I watched walk into the restaurant, ask to see a menu and then, after a brief moment or two, walk out. I have to believe they're not familiar with a ramen place? Because what you get is in the name of the restaurant: *RAMEN Ichizu*. Like, you should know you're in the mood for ramen, right? And with winter in full force, a bowl of ramen from *Ichizu* will hit the spot just right.

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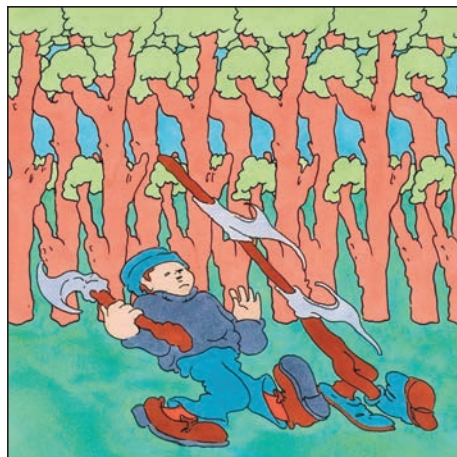
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# LOCAL MUSIC SINGLES ROUNDUP

No cultural references in this intro, just the music. January's picks are notably mellow and built for those who love contemporary big band music, low-key hip-hop production and winding electronic tracks. If I had the space, I would pair each track with an elegant wine or a cold Four Loko. Read reviews of three more songs by **Sasha Haydn**, **Spencer Kilpatrick & The Sand Gators** and **The Wildfires** on *SLUGMag.com*.



**Blushy Buttercup  
and Starmoon**



**Henny**



**Melvin the  
Woodland Stray**

## "Saudade"

Tree Critters  
Street: 11.23

Blushy Buttercup and Starmoon = death's dynamic shroud x El Ten Eleven

A collaboration between Blushy Buttercup and Starmoon, "Saudade" is a sprawling, vibey cut. At over ten minutes long, it doesn't crescendo or even build up, but instead vibes thoughtfully on the primary components. In this case the components are a sampled and deepened vocal melody, mathy and textural guitars and snappy drumming (gird yourself for a whole lot of rimshots). There are phases surely, but they gradate into one another in muted, unsaturated and cool shades of blue. Each phase has a uniqueness, but taken as a whole, "Saudade" has an early-2000s chillwave and downtempo feel to it — drenched in intimate rainy day melancholia. Fair warning: As this track is on the lengthier side, if you're not enjoying the first minute of it, you don't owe it to yourself to stay through the end credits. —*tín Rodriguez*

## "Joshua (Ft. JUST JAY)"

Self-Released  
Street: 11.28

Henny = The Alchemist + J Dilla's room of records

The nuclear powerhouse that *Voir Dire* (The Alchemist + **Earl Sweatshirt**) has shaped up to be is undeniable, and it's heard all throughout this single (and subsequent tracks on *IN CASE OF FEAR*). I'm not accusing Henny of being derivative nor JUST JAY of latching onto Sweatshirt's signature casual baritone lyricism — there's a ton on this single that breathes new life into its inspirations. Henny notably takes an even lower-key approach to his production, making it feel as if the listener is laid so low in their chair that their ass is in the air. JUST JAY is very intentional in his approach; he starts, stops and takes long breaths to let the track ease itself in and out of his lyrics. This track, and album, are for those who love when the the music gives you just enough — simple yet elegant. —*wphughes*

## "Moon Light Lover"

Mapapache  
Street: 12.01

Melvin the Woodland Stray = Dirty Three + Chuck E. Weiss + Danny Elfman

I often think about how we interact with the music we listen to. How does having so much music at our fingertips affect us? That is why we have arrived at a natural point where Melvin the Woodland Stray can be simultaneously influenced by traditional folk music and new wave-y alternative rock. Beginning with some lone, ominous guitar noodling, "Moon Light Lover" is then joined by melismatic vocals matching the attitude of the preceding guitar part, creating an atmosphere of anticipation. Then the whole thing explodes with a full band, including some rollicking saxophone that brings it to electrified life. The song settles into this driving groove that sustains 'til the end. It's almost elemental in the way it comes at you and is nearly over before you even get your head around it. Strangely visceral, this song is an eruption of emotion and expression, done with sophistication. —*James Orme*

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# AURA MARTINEZ SANDOVAL SLUG STYLE

Photos by Jovvany Villalobos • [countercultureconscious.com](http://countercultureconscious.com)

Local production and costume designer Aura Martinez Sandoval is just as well-versed in putting together stunning, eclectic looks as she is working behind the scenes on a film set. Her affinity for unique film and television inspires her one-of-a-kind style (and vice versa). Follow @aur0rra and @itcamefrominsidemovie on Instagram to keep up with her creativity and watch out for the release of her upcoming horror short. Read the full interview on *SLUGMag.com!*



"I love clothing that skews towards the historical or the fantastical (puffy sleeves!) and romantic silhouettes."

"I love the way characters in '90s TV shows are dressed, specifically Fran Fine, Sabrina Spellman, Buffy Summers and Moesha Mitchell!"

"I don't participate in trends as much anymore and I feel like that has helped me pinpoint what silhouettes and colors I actually like on myself."

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# JANUARY 2025

**Houndmouth** - 1.19 The Depot | **Tophouse** - 1.19 Soundwell | **Glaive** - 1.21 Soundwell  
**Jamie Miller** - 1.26 The Complex | **Lauren Mayberry** (of CHVRCHES) - 1.31 Soundwell  
**Travis** - 2.4 The Depot | **Wallice** - 2.14 Soundwell | **Hazlett** - 2.15 The Depot  
**Phantogram** - 2.19 The Union | **Good Kid** - 2.22 The Complex | **MISSIO** - 2.22 Soundwell  
**Mount Eerie** - 2.23 Soundwell | **Hippo Campus** - 2.24 The Union  
**MJ Lenderman** - 2.24 Soundwell | **This Wild Life** - 2.28 Soundwell

## KILBY COURT

Bleacher Babe + Cutie + If And When 1.2  
 BRYSN + EJ Michels + Forest Slater 1.3  
 The 4411 1.6  
 Ideal Horizon + Clementine + The Schwacksters 1.7  
 FlowerHouse + Black Cat Parade + Internet Lover Boys 1.8  
 Bad Charm + Body Of Leaves + Nadezhda 1.9  
 Tomper EP Release w/ Marshall Van Leuven + Kid Kawaii 1.10  
 Nothin' Good + Jacon Rountree + Raccoon Rodeo 1.11  
 Buddha Trixie 1.13  
 Anni Pasto + Floral Hell + Camilla Wickman 1.14  
 SLUG LOCALIZED: Fur Foxen + John Elwood Morgan + The Snarlin' Yarns 1.15  
 Side Montero 1.16  
 The Painted Roses + Sad Cowboy + Garden Drive 1.17  
 Swerved By Blondes + Lonely Heights + Bombshell Flowers 1.18  
 Bad Bad Hats 1.19  
 KJI + Heber Matute + DJ Skratchmo 1.20  
 SLCSE Showcase: Fish Don't Blink + Some Derpy Kid + Grey Bakken + Alexander Metz + Elise & Amalie + Alex Weyerstall 1.21  
 Roo Nostalgia + Elani + Toto Peña 1.22  
 Kill Dyll 1.23  
 Steinza 1.24  
 Drusky + Love, Audrey + Jonas Swanson 1.25  
 Ethan Regan 1.27-28  
 Guava Tree + Bonneville + Bad Luck Brigade! 1.31

## METRO MUSIC HALL

Louder Than Hell: 80s Rock Night 1.2  
 Mother Bus + Seeking The Sun + The Magpipes 1.4  
 HARBINGER 1.9  
 Emo Night Tour: 10th Anniversary 1.10  
 Love Lunatics: Mathew Fitt Gizmoe + James Dee Tab + Manu Gabo 1.11  
 MOD + 3ROSES + JAXX + SIMIGISHI 1.16  
 Après: Winter Ski Party Hosted by Sarah Lies 1.17  
 OFFICE HOURS: POTEET + ZBRA + Dahvee + Durukes + Duggie Maston 1.18  
 SoulFang + Hot LaCroix + Adam & The Cracker Jacks 1.23  
 The Dark Carnival: Doomcupcake + Alec Bang & The Cult Classics + Isa 1.24  
 Samba Queen and King Contest 1.25  
 Zombie Carpenter 1.30  
 BERLIN: Vi:BRA + DJ Nite Raid + Gato 1.31  
 Then Comes Silence 2.05  
 Terrestrial Soulz 2.06  
 Hot in Herre: 2000s Dance Party 2.07  
 Eivor 2.11  
 Decapitated 2.19

## URBAN LOUNGE

Jack Wakley + Slow Potion + BC Bustamante 1.2  
 Eagle Twin Album Release w/ Dragstergas + GRGL 1.3  
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 Mopsy + Cannibal Queen + Mopsy 1.9  
 Lapdog + The Lip + The Magpipes 1.10  
 Week 1 FINALS - TBD 1.11  
 Herring + Love, Audrey + Guided Lillies 1.15  
 The Last Wild Buffalo + Fur Foxen + The Alpines 1.16  
 Drunk in June + The Narcs + No Such Animal 1.17  
 Week 2 FINALS - TBD 1.18  
**BATTLE OF THE BANDS FINALE - TBD VS TBD** 1.25  
 Masta Killa (of Wu Tang Clan) 1.21  
 You Can Call Me Billy + Lazy Loners + Anna Beck 1.22  
 Seaslak + Local Kin 1.23  
 Alan Sparhawk (of Low) 1.24  
 Lo Moon 1.28  
 Cal jo 1.29  
 VAL/IN/TIME + The/They + DOLĪ 1.30  
 4PLAY 1.31



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