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039

Ralph

TAKESHI
KITANO

Has a job
interview?

SAY NOW

Chats with UK's
hottest pop group

TATTY
MACLEOD

European
comedy queen

ANIME IN
INDIA

Indian creators
shaping anime

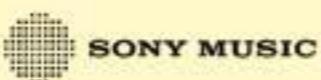
TANK GIRL

How to write
a cult comic

BLINDBOY boATCLUB

QUESTIONS REALITY ITSELF

POP CULTURE FOR THE FUN OF IT



HOW
TO...
DATE

WITH
ELIZABETH
DAY AND
MEL
SCHILLING

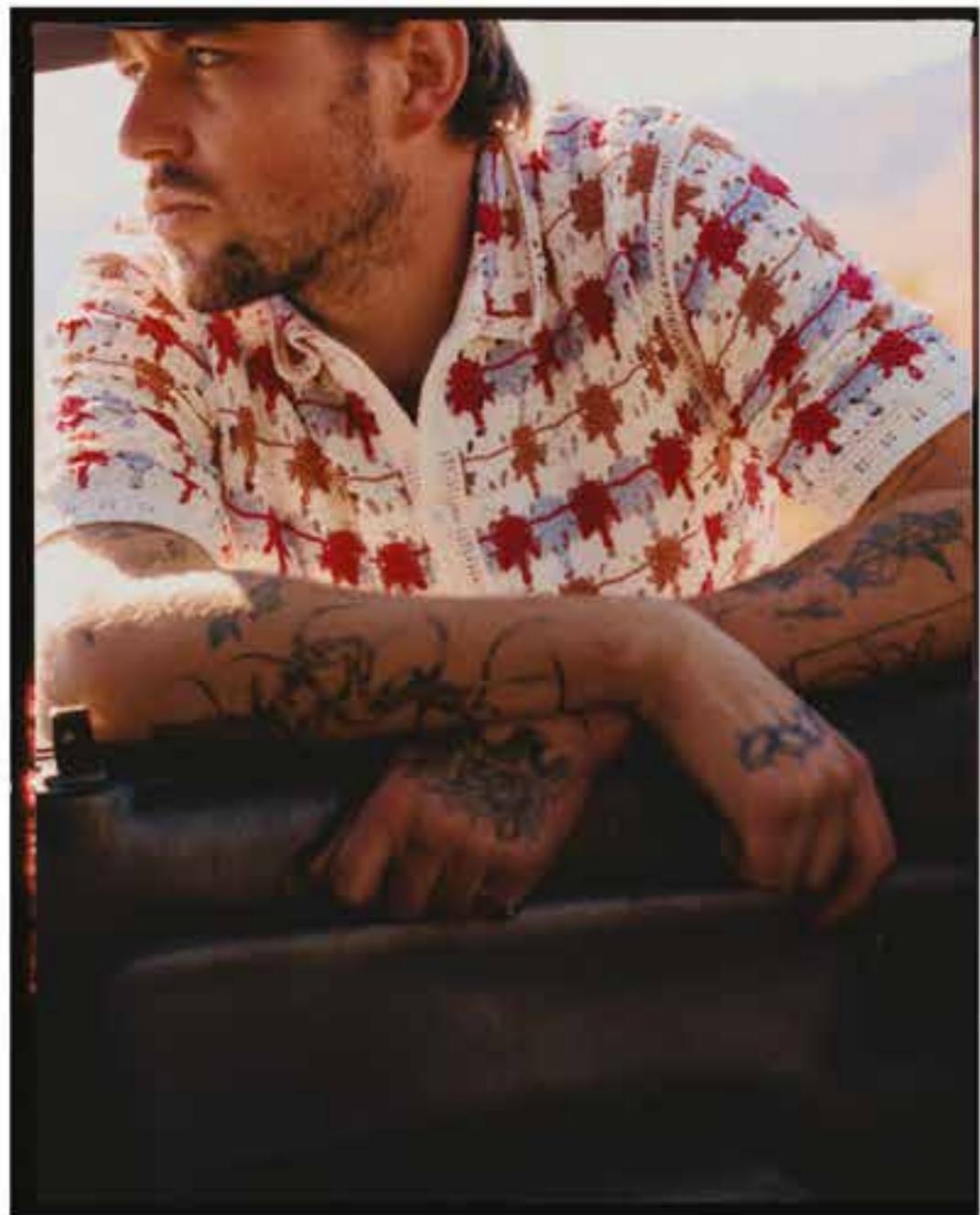
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Editor's Letter

Dmmm dmm dmm, dmm dmmm, dmm dmm...

Three, that's the magic number.

De La Soul have always been right about this.

SEGUE! I'm very proud to bring you issue three of *Ralph* – we're really getting into our stride with the magazi– OH WOW! This is weird, but look to your left... the facing page is an advert for our Comedy Editor's stand-up tour called THIRD PARTY! Three really is a magic number.

This issue of *Ralph* is bananas – exactly how we wanted it to be. We learn a valuable lesson to not ask existential questions to the brilliant podcaster-author-multi-hyphenate, Blindboy Boatclub; imagine iconic Japanese auteur, Takashi Kitano, preparing for job a interview with an HR rep; chat with the newest queen of comedy, Tatty Macleod; speak with Say Now, one of the UK's hottest pop acts; wonder why the restrooms in NYC bars are so big; do a deep dive on the early 21st century emo scene of South Wales; and continue our quest to find fun, interesting people doing fun, interesting things. People like Nick Prueher who collects cast and crew jackets from iconic TV shows and does a live show of found VHS footage. That's what this issue's got in it. That and much more.

Good things really do come in threes (until issue four).

Have fun.

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Say it LOUD

Britain's hottest new girl group, Say Now, dish out hot gossip and wax lyrical about fame and friendship



Words by Tracy Kawalik
Photos by Rebecca Zephyr Thomas

Rain lashes relentlessly on the streets of North London. Yet tucked away by a fireplace in the rooftop garden of their apartment, pop starlets Say Now greet me with megawatt smiles, hugs, glowing compliments about my nails and a teapot of gossip about their rise to fame, friendship, toxic breakups, makeup sex, and what the future holds.

The trio has plenty to celebrate and every reason to be riding high. In two feverish years, Yssy, Amelia, and Maddie have racked up 11 million likes on TikTok, signed a label deal with Atlantic Records (home to Charli XCX and Cardi B), joined Modest! Management (known for One Direction and Little Mix) won a Rising Star award from Glamour and supported Kylie Minogue - most of this before they even had a name.

Hi Say Now! Give me the hot gossip. What's the story behind your song 'Makeup Sex'?

YSSY: Well, I was severely ill on the day we were writing and recording. I was talking to my ex, and he wound up ordering me an Uber to go see him.

MADDIE: That's why in the demo, it's only me and Amelia. We'd all written the song, but Yssy left at the end. So the reason she's not on the demo for 'Makeup Sex' is because she was literally having makeup sex.

YSSY: He is actually now my boyfriend, which is quite funny.

If you were stranded on an island, what's the one makeup item you couldn't do without?

MADDIE: Low key, lash extensions; I'm so addicted. Or lip liner.

YSSY: Concealer, but I also need a powder.

MADDIE: You'll have a tan, so you should just take lip liner.

What's currently in your fridge?

AMELIA: Ketchup and condiments.

YSSY: We do always have fruit and veg.

MADDIE: I don't cook. I order takeaway. So my fridge essential is hummus.

What would your superpower be?

MADDIE: Invisibility, so I can spy on people.

YSSY: I'd want to be the Scarlet Witch from Marvel Comics. Whatever powers she has, I want those.

MADDIE: Wait! I want to change mine to shape-shifting because I could have long hair one day and short hair the next.

AMELIA: That's a good idea! If you wanted anything in life, you could shapeshift and get it. That would be so easy! You could shapeshift into the richest tech billionaire in the world.

MADDIE: Oh my God! We could be men!

YSSY: Imagine?! If I lost my voice and was like, "Girls, I can't do the ad-lib today", I wouldn't have to worry. Maddie could just shapeshift into me and sing my part.

If you had to walk out of this apartment building and directly onto stage, which Broadway musical could you perform without being found out as a fake?

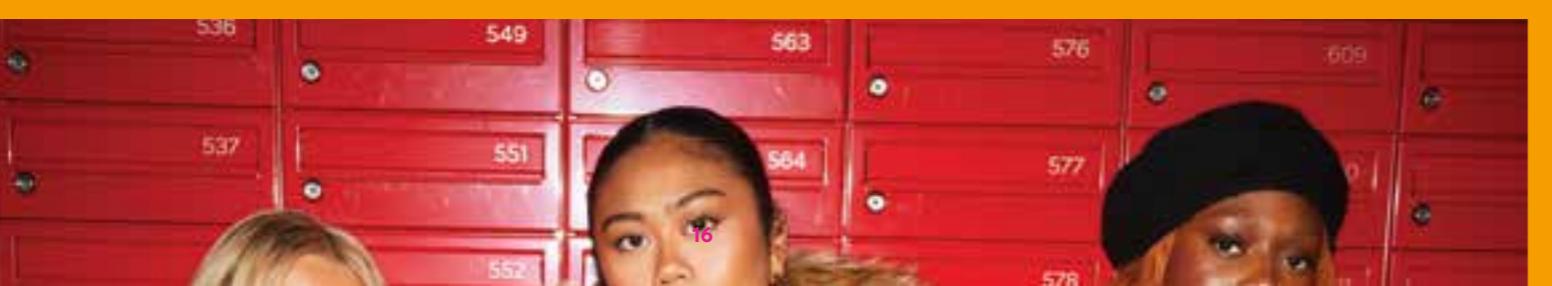
YSSY: Hamilton, only because Amelia taught me it.

AMELIA: I could probably do Waitress. I

"So far, our favourite moment on stage was opening for Kylie Minogue"



"1,2,3,4! Coochie, Coochie, Coochie, needanamebro!"



know enough of the songs to improvise the acting in between.

MADDIE: *Les Mis*, and I could do any part. I would even know what side of the stage each part comes on... because I was in it.

YSSY: I feel like I could be Cosette... [starts singing 'On My Own']

MADDIE: I actually have a recurring dream where I get thrown on stage to do *Annie*, and I have to do everything. Over and over, I'm singing 'It's A Hard Knock Life' in the dream, and everyone's watching me and confused, like, "Why is there an adult Annie?"

AMELIA: You should at least be promoted to Miss Hannigan by now!

Beyoncé, Kelly, or Michelle?

ALL: Ooooooooooh!!!

MADDIE: Beyoncé.

AMELIA: Michelle. Recently, I've gained a new-found love for her. Every time I watch Destiny's Child videos, she's always trying so hard and always performing 10/10! She didn't get enough appreciation back in the day!

YSSY: Speaking of musicals, Michelle's performing *Death Becomes Her* on Broadway at the minute and she's so good.

Disney princess or villain?

ALL: Princess.

Naughty or Nice?

AMELIA: Nice. I feel like we've been really good lately, we've not been partying too much, haven't done anything crazy. I feel like we've been way worse!

Who is your single 'Bitch Get Out Of My Car' about?

AMELIA: Technically, we have a range of people it could be about! But in the end we wanted to keep it neutral.

MADDIE: I have pulled over once and told an ex to literally, just get out of my car! I think I was in Willesden Green.

You started off successfully releasing music without an official name apart from the moniker 'needanamebro'. How did you come up with your band name – what other options were flying around?

YSSY: I came up with 'needanamebro' when Amelia and I first started making music together and releasing it. When Amelia joined and we signed to Atlantic we set up a website for all of our followers and supporters to suggest/throw ideas in for our name. We got, like, over 500 submissions, and they were just so bad!

AMELIA: I think the worst was Green Tigers!

MADDIE: They were so bad that we wound up doing a YouTube video reacting to all of the names. So if people want to hear some really, really bad names or need a laugh over dinner then they need to go and watch that YouTube video!

AMELIA: We were in a coffee shop and Maddie suggested Say Now, and we all agreed. But there were a few other names we always wanted like 'Truth Say', 'Love Always' and 'M.A.Y' because it's an acronym of our names and we all felt it would've been fun.

Do you feel like Say Now was the right choice?

MADDIE: For sure! Say Now totally represents the message we want to send with our music: 'we're saying it now. We're saying how we feel. We're being truthful, saying what's on our mind - and we want you to do the same!'

AMELIA: Between the three of us, there are always experiences/interesting topics to sing about. We start with a melody and then take what's happening in the moment and put it into our lyrics.

Stadium show or festival stage?

AMELIA: So far, our favourite moment on stage was opening for Kylie Minogue at the *BST Hyde Park Festival* in 2024. Our stage was really hidden, so we went on thinking that we wouldn't have anyone there.

YSSY: We just said to each other, "let's just go on. Have fun and do it for ourselves."

AMELIA: But the audience got bigger and bigger! Every time I blinked, I'd look up and there would be people all the way to the back of the walkway. We ended up performing so close and surrounded by this massive crowd. It was so fun!

Do you have a pre-show ritual?

[Say Now burst into song and choreography]

SAY NOW: "1,2,3,4! Coochie, Coochie, Coochie, needanamebro!"

MADDIE: I made it up and we stuck with it!!!

YSSY: Me and Amelia didn't like it at first. But the first time we did it, the show went so well. So now we feel like it's bad luck if we don't do it.

Pizza or sushi?

ALL: Sushi!

Who's your dream dance partner?

MADDIE: If I could pick anyone, definitely Tate McRae or Britney Spears.

AMELIA & YSSY: Beyoncé at Coachella.

Which of your songs makes you cry?

ALL: 'Five Years!'

AMELIA: Definitely 'Five Years' or this unreleased song called 'Ex in Different Clothes' which isn't out yet.

What's the secret to making a good girl group?

MADDIE: Besties make the best girl groups!

YSSY: It's actually true though. If you're friends then you can be so unfiltered with each other. You don't really care about how you're perceived by each other if you're besties.

AMELIA: You have to be comfortable. Never make a girl group with people you're not friends with. That's probably the worst thing you could do.

If you had to go back in time and join a girl group which one would you pick?

ALL: Spice Girls!!!

Which Spice Girl you would be?

MADDIE: I'd be Baby Spice.

YSSY: I'd probably be Posh Spice just because she's laid back and chilled.

AMELIA: Personality-wise I'm closest to Ginger Spice, she was always quite a bit outspoken! Plus I'm ginger now!!

OK! Last question: what does the future hold? What are you most excited about?

SAY NOW: New music!!!

AMELIA: Our new single 'Don't Text, Don't Call' is one of our favourite songs that we've ever written, and it's out now! ralph



"Never make a girl group with people you're not friends with"

Say Now's new single 'Don't Text, Don't Call' is out now via Atlantic Records



SIZE MATTERS

A quest to find out why the restrooms in New York bars are so massive

Words and photos by Tom Medwell

My friends tell me it's the fanciest cocktail bar in Brooklyn. Maybe the world. At the door the maître d' mishears me, thinking I want to take photos of the restaurant. I tell him it's for a magazine, and he shrugs; it's just gone midday and the place is not yet busy. He walks to a backroom, and I follow. When he gets there, he glances up at me and waves me off – I'd misunderstood about following – and he points me at the tables, and says to take some photos. I say "no, restroom, not restaurant," and there are awkward smiles – "oh yes, they're the old style." Perhaps old style means "before they made them huge", because the fanciest cocktail bar in Brooklyn (or the world) turns out to have tiny, spartan water closets, and old-style means they have a chain pull.

New York has always seemed to me to be a place that wears its civilisation thinly. It is a city of ground-level stink and filth, eyes looking to the lights in the sky, hawking Stockholm Syndrome via "I \heartsuit NY" merchandise, while the anthem of car-horns and sirens drifts through venting steam. An ecosystem of grime has evolved in the gaps left by lives lived fast, growing and changing as municipal trends ebb and flow. It is, at its heart, a city of functionality, a place to do things and get stuff done, and all its gloss just a veneer built on top of toil, steel, and a demand for the next opportunity. In many places the crumbling supports and structures of the city poke through, and nowhere is that more apparent than on a tour of the restrooms of New York's bars.

It's a few below freezing, and the architect I'd planned to meet has cancelled on me, so I get to marching around the West Village, looking for a pub a NYC native has recommended. I end up in Blind Tiger, which, as much as any bar I've been to in America, reminds me of home. The EPL is showing on a screen, the wooden bar and tables are worn but clean, and for New York, it's relatively quiet – only at about third capacity. I begin my thawing

process with a beer and a decent empanada. I get chatting to the lady behind the bar, and ask her about what I'm trying to discover: "why are restrooms in New York bars so big?" She says something about before Covid, they had to make them all gender neutral. "It's definitely a gender thing," she says. She looks like she wants to make a bold statement. Mindful of the current political climate, I order another beer and retreat back to my table, to plot my next steps.

For a city that prides itself on never sleeping, it can be really hard to find a decent New York bar open in the afternoon. Many of the better bars don't open until offices start emptying out, and when I get into Vol de Nuit, a block west of Washington Square Park, I'm the first person through the door. It's a Belgian bar, with a French barman; we get to chatting – he's a writer, too – but he has no idea about NYC restrooms. Eventually two more customers appear, younger guys who set their sights downing glasses of Delirium as only the young know how.

Fortified by Belgium's finest, I walk the four minute journey to The Up & Up, a fancier cocktail bar. The drinks are delicious, the restrooms plain but large, like a half-built dressing room, the waiter un-conversational when I ask him about them. NYC cocktail bars always have a particular atmosphere, like talking to a stranger in a sharp suit who turns out to have been in court all week. There's a rush and a threat to them – the drinks always seem stronger than they are in other places, as if they've been watered down with vodka, and another appears as soon as your glass is empty. I begin to worry for my head and liver, but not enough to stop me heading to another cocktail bar afterwards.

The thing with many modern cocktail bars is, they all try not to look too modern. There's a sort of '70s airport first class lounge feel to many of them. You know what they're going for – a catalogue idea of classy, with



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art on the walls that's not supposed to be looked at, and a carefully controlled hint of decay to give them an air of timelessness. It's fine – what matters is the drinks, ultimately – but they tend to all blend into an endless carousel of patina and waistcoats, speciality snacks and painful cheques. Their restrooms are similarly nondescript: basically clean, functional, large, but stark, with no sense that they've seen any more adventure than perhaps some illicit vaping.

The next day I head to Brooklyn, land of the hip, to meet a bar manager friend who'd promised to show me the sights. First stop is Iona, a 'Scottish bar' in Williamsburg. It's small, cosy with a hint of nooks, and the barman's struggling with the till. He calls out "cash only!" after the card machine failed on me, so I'm obliged to stay for another while I wait for my friend, which is a good start to the afternoon. The restroom is, again, pub-ish; I ask the barman about the large size of NYC restrooms and he says, "I dunno, are they?" He seems a bit belligerent, in the manner of all bartenders being asked stupid questions by customers, and so my search for the truth must continue.

Next we stop by a burrito shop, which turns out to have a bar in the backroom. That might be the most Brooklyn thing I've seen in my 15 years of visiting. The bar isn't open yet, but the nice lady behind the burrito counter knows my friend and waves us through. The hidden bar is cosy, a different take on the '70s theme, with neon lights. I have no doubt that most drinks they sell have little umbrellas in. The restrooms are large enough to serve as breakout dance floors, with mirrors that go right around so you can watch yourself on the pan from any angle, which is probably a major selling point in Brooklyn.

Fuelled up and marching with purpose, we go to Horses and Divorces on Bedford Ave., which has perhaps the most spectacular restroom of the trip. It is huge – a fully

decorated throne room, with every single surface covered with graffiti. The light angling in through the half-covered windows makes it feel like an art installation or film set. Why's it so large? Perhaps to give people more surface area to scrawl on. After a cold lager, because I am a sensible adult and learn from my mistakes, we carry on to the Comodore, which has the smallest restroom of any I've seen – a model of a bathroom in a model of the actual bar, next to the actual bar. We do a quick tour of the proper restroom, and my friend points to the mirror on a chain. "It's so people can have some private fun more easily," he says, "and that's why the restrooms are so big in New York." It makes some kind of sense as we sit down to drink a delicious frozen piña colada; some lessons don't stick.

The last stop is a taproom for a new-looking microbrewery, where a running club seems to be settling in for post-job socialising, and the LP that's playing has its cover displayed behind the bar. Like a lot of modern taprooms, it feels like the designer walked out of an Apple Store and thought, "let's do that but for beer!" It is a strange juxtaposition, being the most spacious, clean, well-lit, family-friendly sort of place, selling craft beers so strong they could probably make you go blind after a few pints. The restroom is huge, bland, with neatly stacked rolls of paper and spotless walls. I ask the lady behind the bar about why they're so big. "It's for disabled access, you need to be able to turn a wheelchair around in it," she says, matter of factly. "It's the law."

It's a functional, rather than mystical answer, but probably as close to the truth as I'll get. Something about the sterility of the place seemed to suck the joy from me, like leaving the cinema after a midday movie; the snow was starting to fall, so I made my escape. *ralph*



What better way to celebrate Japanese auteur, artist and icon, Takashi Kitano's career than imagining him having a "get back to work" meeting with an HR rep?

Transcript by David Jenkins
Primary illustration by Eri Aikawa

[tape begins]

Kitano: This...

HR person: Yes this way. Take a seat.

Kitano: Can I [inaudible]? Yes?

HR person: Yes, yes, just pop that down. Okay, so, Mr Kiii-

Kitano: Kitano.

HR person: Kiiiiitano, thanks so much for coming in. My name is Janice; we spoke on the phone. So today, we're going to have a little comb through your CV to see if we can whip it into shape for the current jobs market.

Kitano: Okay, yes, that would be very helpful.

Middleton: I've taken a look at what you sent over - the first red flag I have is riiight... here [points with red biro].

Kitano: My names?

Middleton: Yes, you've written down Takeshi Kitano aka "Beat" Takeshi. That's two names.

Kitano: Well yes, I go by both of those names depending on what area of work I'm in. Their function is to reflect the opposing facets of my persona.

Middleton: That might be something prospective employees might look... dimly upon. Can you give me more context?

Kitano: Sure, let me think. I started out in showbiz, doing stand-up

comedy in Japan. I flunked out of University. Engineering wasn't for me. I did odd jobs in a strip club, the Asakusa France-za, which is still going today, and did the classic thing where I started off operating the lift and ended up as their in-house MC.

Middleton: And what name did you go by then?

Kitano: Oh that was still my normal name. A bit later I fell into a double act with my pal Nirō Kaneko and we became the Two Beats. And I was Beat Takashi.

Middleton: So when you perform you call yourself Beat?

Kitano: Exactly. It's like a physical projection of my inner clown. You know what I mean?

Middleton: How lovely. When would someone call you just Takeshi...

Kitano: Kitano.

Middleton: ...Kitano, then?

Kitano: That's my artist's nomenclature, for when I'm making original work but not directly in the public eye.

Middleton: Okay, I think I understand... so which one are you right now?

Kitano: I'll never tell!

Middleton: [pause] Well, rather than go through your CV line by line, maybe I could ask you some questions that might be posed in your average job

interview, to get you thinking about your skillset, and your suitability for certain professional roles.

Kitano: Okay missus, let's do it.

Middleton: Tell me about a time when you did something that many people enjoyed.

Kitano: Hmm... well, I was involved in a very popular gameshow in the mid-1980s called Takeshi's Castle. The "Takeshi" of the title actually refers to me, if I may be so modest to say so.

Middleton: Referring to your own castle?

Kitano: No, no, more of the figurative notion of a castle as a kind of social fortress that's inaccessible to common folk. Basic class-warfare stuff.

Middleton: And what was it about this "Takeshi's Castle" that people loved?

Kitano: The violence mainly. The humiliation. The mockery. The scorn. Seeing people think they can get one over on the system, but ending up making an ass of themselves. Basically, I'd sit there in ceremonial robes with flunkies around me, and the aim of the game was that members of the public had to overcome fiendish obstacles in order to get to me. I actually can't believe how we got away with it from an insurance perspective.

Middleton: In what sense?

Kitano: In the sense that the safety requirements were rudimentary,

and we were just laughing along. Great days... people loved the show. It was a major hit in Japan, and then spawned many spin-offs around the globe. Much imitated, never bettered is what I think.

Middleton: Okaaaay, what about an occasion where you felt you confused or annoyed someone, and how did you rectify the situation? I'm trying to see how you excel as a problem solver.

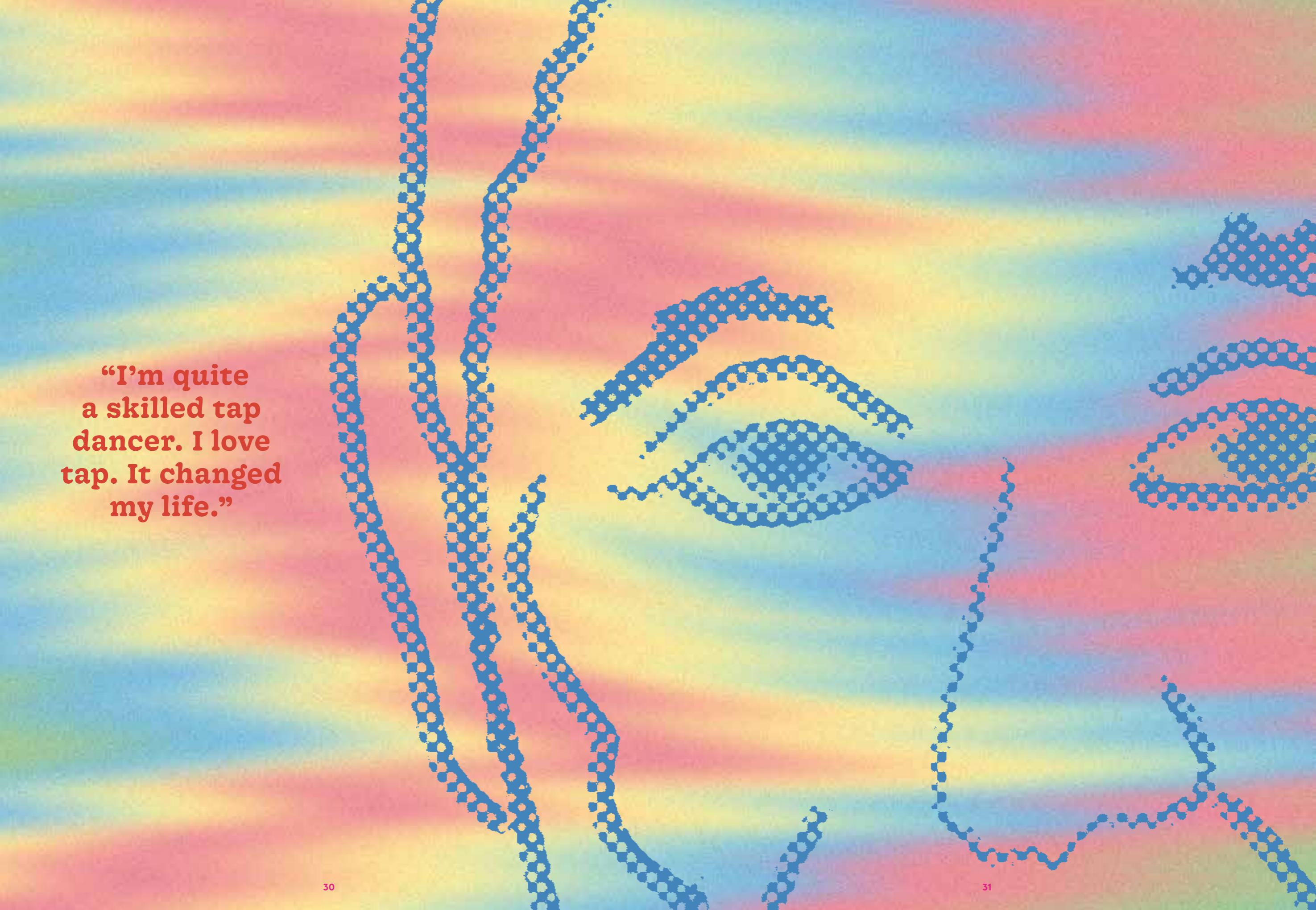
Kitano: Just as Takeshi's Castle was becoming famous and my profile as a celebrity was on the rise, I got a call from an electronics company who wanted me to put my name to one of their new computer games. I said I'd love to be involved, on the proviso that I'd actually help design the game, and be involved with its creation on a granular level. Essentially, I would devise the whole thing, and they would just make it.

Middleton: Aha! This feels like an instance when you demonstrated great teamwork, and a willingness to go above and beyond the call of duty.

Kitano: I haven't got to the good bit yet. I decided to make the game - called Takeshi's Challenge - the hardest game ever made. It would be near-impossible to get to the end, as I insisted upon a mechanic whereby whenever your character died, you'd start again from the beginning.

Middleton: That sounds less annoying and more cruel - as if you had contempt for the people purchasing the game.

Kitano: Exactly! In the game you

A person is dancing tap on a vibrant, multi-colored background that transitions through shades of yellow, orange, red, blue, and green. The dancer's body is composed of a grid of small blue dots, giving it a pixelated or digital appearance. They are wearing a dark blue shirt and dark pants. Their arms are raised, and their legs are in a dynamic tap dancing pose. The overall style is artistic and modern.

**“I’m quite
a skilled tap
dancer. I love
tap. It changed
my life.”**

play as a salary man going through a mid-life crisis. He beats up his boss. Murders his wife and children. Then travels to an exotic island in search for g-

[*Sudden knock at door, man enters*]

Man: Excuse me, is this room booked?

Middleton: Yes. Until 2pm.

Man: Ahh, sorry. [*Exits*]

Kitano: ...for gold having found a treasure map in a karaoke bar.

Middleton: And how does he acquire that?

Kitano: By beating up an old man.

Middleton: [*laughs nervously*] So what did you do to help people to overcome this challenge?

Kitano: I made some very cryptic TV ads that contained hidden clues to beat the game. Because they were completely out of context, no-one really understood what I was doing. But screw all them anyway... Those [*inaudible*]. I think the game is pretty good. Games back then were too easy, so this was something new and exciting.

Middleton: Absolutely... Okay, well tell me about a moment of raw emotional openness, where you felt you revealed something about yourself to someone.

Kitano: This is probably a good time to talk about my film work, which also applies to the previous question a

little bit as a lot of my followers from my days as "Beat" Takeshi didn't really care for them. They would come along to see them and say to each other, "what's this maudlin shit?" I was brought on to act in a film called Violent Cop in the late '80s, which is a bit like Dirty Harry but set in the world of the Yakuza. It was originally going to be directed by a famous Japanese filmmaker called Kinji Fukasaku who has made many wonderful films on this subject, but he had to drop out as he couldn't work around my schedule. So I ended up stepping in and directing. I think I did a really decent job all told.

Middleton: That's extremely impressive, and an amazing example of how adaptable you are in the workplace. But you're not really answering the question I asked.

Kitano: I'm coming to that. I enjoyed movie directing, so alongside all the TV presenting gigs, that became the thing that gave me a more international profile. I think in those films you get to see a more fragile side of me. Especially in something like 1993's Sonatine, in which I play an existentially tortured Yakuza who the boss attempts to bump off, but my character gets one over him after experiencing the idle pleasures of life outside the criminal rat race. But maybe the most emotional moment was in my 1997 film Hana Bi, which won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival.

Middleton: I'm really sorry Mr Kitano, but I don't think that the prospective employers we're looking at will be that interested in an

international film festival prize.

Kitano: Understood, understood. Well, it's more that it's a very emotional film. I play a cop who witnesses the shooting of his colleague after discovering his wife has terminal cancer, so he decides to rob a bank and take her on a final journey while being chased down by the Yakuza for loan repayments. My old pal Joe Hisaishi made an amazing score. I don't want to spoil it for you, but the final scene is a real old school tearjerker.

Middleton: I'm more of a Wicked person myself, but I'll definitely look out for that one. I'm aware that time's rattling on a bit, so maybe I could ask you as a climactic question about any other relevant skills you might have?

Kitano: I'm a keen painter. I even made a film about the impossible search for originality called Achilles and the Tortoise, where I play a painter who's great at adapting other famous styles, but unable to develop his own. I'm influenced mainly by the impressionists, but my main influence is probably my father, who was a house painter. I've had multiple large-scale shows dedicated to my work. In 2010, the Cartier Foundation in Paris did a major retrospective of my fine art work. The show was called Painter's Kid.

Middleton: Not much of this is screaming "current job market". Anything else we can add to your personal skills database?

Kitano: I'm also a novelist and short story writer. My volume titled Boy

*was translated across the globe, and it's made of nostalgic tales ripped from my youth. They're quite sweet; very different from my movies. No-one gets a chopstick rammed up their nose [*laughs*]. Or [*inaudible*].*

Middleton: [*laughs nervously*] Ha ha, yes... anything else?

Kitano: I'm quite a skilled tap-dancer. I love tap. It changed my life.

Middleton: Do you have word processing skills? Are you "social media savvy"?

Kitano: I can write poetry! I had a long-running literary salon show on the radio and still regularly host clip shows on mainstream television. I've just made another big movie, a historical epic called Kubi, which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival.

Middleton: Can you use Photoshop?

Kitano: I probably could if I tried.

Middleton: Well, despite some impressive achievements, there are still major gaps in your CV. Let's get some more training under your belt, and speak in six months. Maybe have a think about finishing that engineering degree?

Kitano:... uh, sure. I guess, okay.

Middleton: Fab. I'm just going to switch off the tape now.

Kitano: Oh, were we recor-

[*tape ends*] *ralph*

THE COUNCIL OF BENS

What started as a joke to see how many people called Ben could meet up at a UK music festival, has gone on to create genuine positive change across the UK and beyond.

Words by Ben Smoke



This story starts, as many good things do, in a sweaty tent in a field in Hampshire, UK – at the legendary Boomtown music festival in 2023. I sat down with Ben's Bradley and Grant-Wilcoxson to find out more.

"I don't know if you're familiar with Boomtown but they had an app called Woov specifically for the festival where you could create your own groups," Ben Grant-Wilcoxson tells me over video call. We're talking on a freezing cold Friday evening in early 2025, so sun-drenched festival frivolity feels one hundred million miles away – until Grant-Wilcoxson recounts with real joy and affection the heady summer two years ago, when they founded the amazing project known as the Council of Bens.

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"There was one group that was created saying, 'if your name is Ben, join!' " Grant-Wilcoxon recounts. Much to his delight, they managed to get about 200 people in there. "There wasn't any formal i-ben-tification process, so we can't vouch for the validity of all the Bens in the original chat," he laughs. "But we decided we would all try and meet up. We noticed there was a DJ on the line-up called Baseline Ben and it just felt like everything fell into place to meet there."

Of the 100 or so Bens (real and/or fake) that said they'd go along, around 20 actually made it to the Baseline Ben set – as it took place on the third day of the festival, the dropoff was somewhat understandable. It was "the sweatiest tent" Grant-Wilcoxon had ever been in but what was birthed in that tent quickly morphed into a growing and dynamic community of people called Ben.

Initially called Boomtown Bens, it quickly evolved into the Council of Bens. The heart of the group is now an ever-growing WhatsApp community, and staying true to their roots it can only be accessed with the aforementioned i-ben-tification: where potential users are asked to show providence to the name Ben through means other than formal identification. "We've had texts from Mums, railcards, all sorts," says Ben Grant-Wilcoxon – the chats are still the driving force of the Council.

"The growth of the WhatsApp group has all been quite organic," Grant-Wilcoxon clarifies. After Boomtown had ended and the original Woov chat was going to be taken offline, they decided to all stay in contact and move things across to WhatsApp. "For the first couple of months we had around 50 Bens in there and we were slowly growing," he says.

As the group transitioned from the heady, hazy festival fields to reality of normal life, the community grew into a support network as much as anything. Bens would ask each

other for help or advice, and reach out to one another in times of need or mental anguish. It quickly became clear that for so many of those within it, the Council represented something bigger. A community with heavy ties to dance music – and all of the soaring highs and crushing lows that can often come hand in hand with some of the more recreational aspects of it – the theme of 'Bental health' kept coming up.

"Through it all though, Bental health remains the most popular subgroup by far"

"When we decided to push Bental health specifically, we turned it into a WhatsApp community, which allows you to have loads of sub-threads, and now it's become almost autonomous," Grant-Wilcoxon explains. "Say there are 10 Ben BMXers in the community, they can put forward that they'd like a specific group and then they'll get their own space. It's growing really organically." The community now includes over 1,000 Bens, with over 60 different subgroups. From Builder Bens, catering for Bens who work in the construction industry, to 'Benchers' (Bens who like the gym), an LGBTQ+ group, and DJ/Producer Bens, the now sprawling community caters for Bens from all walks of life. Through it all though, Bental health remains the most popular subgroup by far.

"The amount of support and love that gets shown to people that are going through dark times is beautiful," Grant-Wilcoxon says. Ben Bradley, the Council's manager agrees, "I think that's genuinely one of the things that

stands out the most when it comes to actual genuine achievements that you can look back on and go – that's made an impact," he says. "It doesn't matter how old you are, at some point you are going to need some advice. We've got younger Bens in there that are asking for help; older Bens who do the same, a whole group of people who have all been through different life experiences all coming together to genuinely help each other. To have been there from the creation of it is something I will forever be proud of."

The Council have previously spoken publicly about the story of a Ben in Devon who tried and failed to take his own life. He posted in the WhatsApp group about it and, within 10 minutes, another Ben who he'd never met before was at his house. They speak of people reaching out for help with every aspect of their lives – from building work to relationship advice and more. The beating heart of the Council is the generosity of Bens to one another.

This generosity, however, does not just live on a (loosely) gate-kept WhatsApp community. From the Council's conception, the Bens have sought to raise awareness and funds for different charities and causes, always with characteristic, erm, benergetic flair (sorry).

Last year the Council of Bens threw the first ever rave on top of Ben Nevis – Britain's tallest mountain – in aid of mental health charity Mind and the Sheffield-based Ben's Centre, which supports those affected by substance misuse.

As the Council was created at the Boomtown festival, music is an important part of everything they do. "All our events have a charity and a music side to them," Grant-Wilcoxon explains. "We weren't satisfied by just climbing Ben Nevis and conquering it, we had to throw a bloody rave up there didn't we?!" Which begs the question, how exactly does one get the kit for a rave up a

"We weren't satisfied just climbing Ben Nevis and conquering it, we had to throw a bloody rave up there didn't we!"

mountain, I ask? "Well," Grant-Wilcoxon tells me, "admittedly, as the most unhealthy Ben, I was probably slowing us down a little bit. It took us four hours to get to the top, we had about an hour of partying and then a treacherous three-hour journey back down. The fact that half of us were in fancy dress and we were carrying heavy bags, big laptops etc. probably didn't help!"

The event raised thousands of pounds for the chosen charities but is just the tip of the iceberg (or mountain!) where their endeavours are concerned. As well as local events and small fundraisers, the Council have also mobilised en masse around the issue of stem cells, working closely with blood cancer charity DKMS.

"The aunt of a man called Ben Collins reached out to us," Ben Bradley explains. "He was unfortunately diagnosed with a form of leukaemia in Christmas 2023, which led to him needing a stem cell transplant in order to stay alive. At the time, when she first reached out to us, he hadn't found a donor, so we sat down together to figure out how we could help and how we could get more people signed up to the stem cell register."

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The resulting event – in the shadow of London's Big Ben “the biggest Ben of them all”, the Council threw a rave outside of Parliament, whilst staff from DKMS came down to talk more about the stem cell register and sign people up. “I believe we signed about 30 people up that day,” Bradley tells me, “and then after the event we signed about a further 20 to 30 online. We've signed up about 60 people so far and that's an ongoing thing as well. We continually push it within the community, so hopefully it should have an impact.” The Council are still in contact with Ben Collins' family who frequently drop them messages to let them know how he is doing, and to brainstorm other ideas they can do together.

“In broad strokes, what we've achieved in the charity aspect is bringing the community together alongside a good cause,” Bradley explains. “Generally in life, it's quite hard to get out and meet people. So if you can highlight a good cause for something, raising money, raising awareness, whatever that may be, alongside an activity that someone can participate in, then that's amazing. And if it's fun, even better – and if it's absolutely out there, that's us on brand.”

It strikes me, as we talk, that the Council offers an antidote to an increasingly hostile world. A world where young men particularly are told they must behave in a certain way to be taken seriously. Where masculinity means being an ‘alpha’. I put to the Bens that the Council runs antithetical to so much of the toxicity that seems to be increasingly permeating and infecting the minds of so many young men.

“I think using our influence to help the younger generations is a beautiful idea,” Grant-Wilcoxson replies. “One of the questions we used to ask people when they would join the chat was ‘what is one piece of advice you would give your former self?’ and some of the snippets and insights that get put in there are so beautiful.” There's

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been so much input from the community there are plans to collect them all into a book called Words of Advice for a Young Man. The Council are hugely focused on working out how they can use their influence in the wider community to have a positive effect on the younger generation – that's their dream.

“It's a difficult world for anyone to navigate nowadays, no matter what age you are,” Bradley says. “However, we all know it's literally science that young minds are very malleable and will take on board what they see. If we can push the community aspect of life, that you don't have to be alone, that there's people out there that you don't know, but will help you, then that's amazing. If the Council can be the driving force behind that and show people there is a different path to go down then that's brilliant.”

This year, the Council of Bens plan to become bigger and stronger. While currently lobbying different airlines to fly a group of them out to Benidorm (get it?!) for a charity fundraiser, they're doubling down their efforts around their Bental health initiative, with a particular focus on the rave scene. All of this, helped along by a healthy dose of puns and Benergy. What is Benergy? Grant-Wilcoxson has you covered: “It's the first sip of cider on a festival morning,” he says. “Benergy is leaving no trace at your campsite, even though you party the hardest. It's the embracing hug that you have from a stranger when the beat drops. Benergy is the inherent positivity found within the raving community. It's not being a bystander and calling out your mate's behaviour. Benergy is accepting others into your tribe. It's no longer about the prefix, it's all about the Benergy.”

At its heart, the Council of Bens is more than just a collection of people who share the same name. The driving force is the connections humans forge with one another – the help, support, and love that people inherently want to create, experience and put out into the world. *(ralph)*

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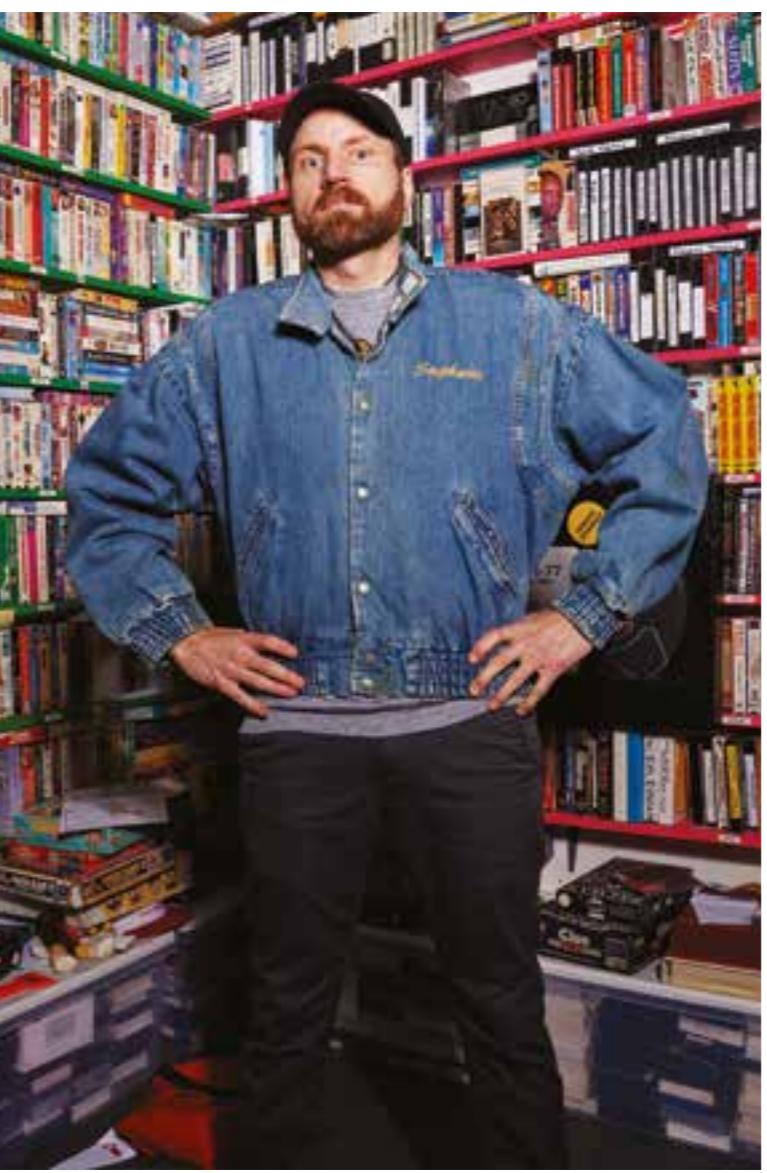
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Nick Prueher's a king of making fun things, just because... why not?

Words by Josh Jones
Portrait by Matthew Salacuse

Growing up gripped by boredom in Wisconsin, USA, Nick Prueher has been “just doing fun things” for his own entertainment since he was a child. And he hasn’t ever stopped. From making his own magazines to leave in doctors’ waiting rooms (keep your eyes out for titles like Mediocre White Guy Digest or The Grizzled Prospector), he collects and exhibits cast and crew jackets from iconic TV and films (more on that later), has pranked morning TV shows across America until he got sued, and written for the likes of The Onion, The Late Show with Letterman, The Colbert Report and The Daily Show.

Prueher, along with school buddy/partner in crime, Joe Pickett, are also founders of Found Footage Festival – a touring show and YouTube series that celebrates the mad things they’ve found on the VHS tapes they’ve been collecting since high school. Their Sisyphean task of watching every minute of every VHS tape they find has resulted in an incredible show that is continually evolving. It also makes us think, what on earth were people thinking in the ’80s and ’90s?

Have you always wanted to just do fun stuff that entertains you?

I think so. I grew up in a pretty small town in the Midwest, and there wasn’t a lot to do. So my friends and I would just find things to entertain ourselves. One thing we used to do was find old answering machines with the tapes still in at the local thrift store. We’d take the tapes out, and play them on road trips. That’s the levels of boredom we’re talking about. We also started a break dancing group in our high school, even though we were all terrible break dancers. We would have some storyline about how a greedy developer was

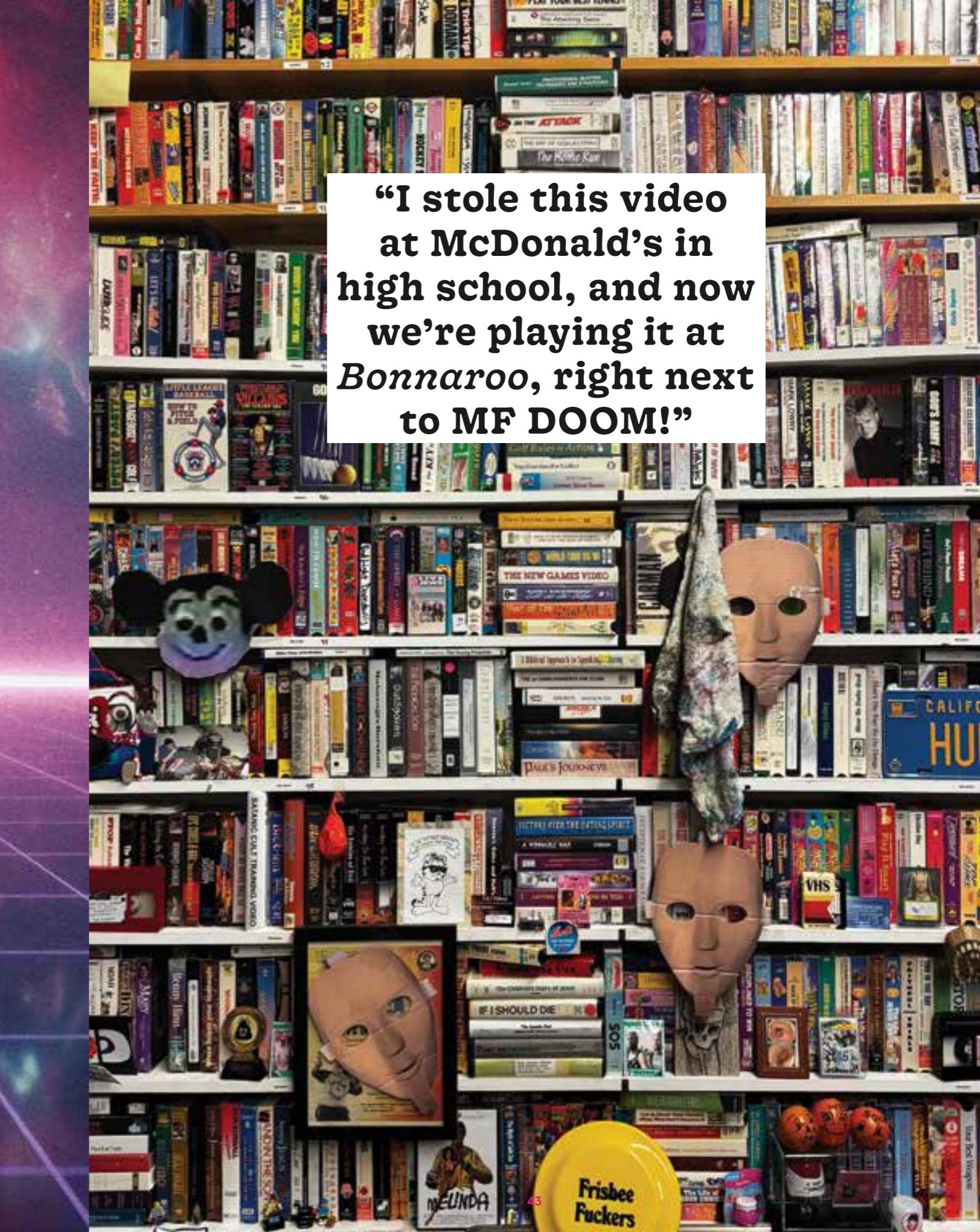
going to bulldoze the high school unless we raised \$10,000... I think it was bred from being a frustrated, creative person in a small town. I’m almost thankful that there weren’t a lot of outlets. If I’d grown up in New York, where I’ve lived for 30 years I’d just be one of nine million other people who are trying to do experimental, weird stuff to entertain themselves.

Would it be fair to compare *Found Footage Fest* to Taylor Swift? Because your fans have also given themselves a nickname...

Yes, absolutely. There’s no difference. Also it’s *Found Footage*’s 20th anniversary, which is kind of our *Eras* tour. I think theme parks is next, and tailgating out in the lobby of a nightclub. Although our groupies are more like people who look like Peter Jackson, you know, before the weight loss. Those are the hangers on who are star struck by us.

Your fans call themselves ‘The Melindas’ after a video you show of actor Nick Nolte greeting a doctor’s receptionist with “hello Melinda” before putting himself through a physical exam so hard, he passes out.

That video was from 1999 or 2000 when I don’t know if it was common knowledge that he was a goofball. Our comedian pal had it on VHS, on a compilation of other things. It’s emblematic of what I think is remarkable about *Found Footage Festival* and maybe all the projects that I do. It’s something that feels like an inside joke to entertain yourself or your friends – which is what that was. Like you’re sharing an inside joke with people. And that’s one thing we’re conscious about too, because I know a lot of comedy communities, or VHS collecting communities are very insular and can be kind of gatekeepers, but we’re like, “no, come on, be part of the fold!” It’s a goofy, esoteric thing that we can all be part of.



“I stole this video at McDonald’s in high school, and now we’re playing it at Bonnaroo, right next to MF DOOM!”

In the 20 years that you've been doing *Found Footage Fest*, have you seen a difference in the way people regard VHS?

I think so. We started in 2004, when YouTube wasn't even a thing. So when we invited people to come and see a show of questionable exercise videos and safety videos, they would be like, "Why would I pay money to see things that aren't good?" We had to rely on editorial coverage like *The Village Voice* or the *New York Times* writing about it, so that people kind of got it. But today, everyone has been forwarded a YouTube clip or something. Then shows like *Tim and Eric* used that VHS aesthetic, so even if people hadn't seen the originals, they knew the aesthetic. I feel like when we started the show in 2004, people were ready to look back at the VHS era and laugh. And now there's a whole culture around it. In the same way people appreciate all the hisses and pops and perfections of a vinyl record, I think people appreciate the washout colours and the tracking on a VHS tape.

After about six years of doing it, you started tracking down the people in the *Found Footage* videos. How else have you kept things fresh?

Well we started our web show, which is more immediate and very loose compared to our more honed live shows, where we've figured out where all the best parts and jokes are. It's a big time show business show – as much as a VHS-based comedy show can be. The web show allows people to get to know us more and our sensibilities. I think that's kept things a little fresh for us. In terms of the live show, we've hired private investigators to help us find people who were in the videos. We'd been obsessed with the videos of this crafting lady named Diane Thomas. Her crafts are, as we describe it, "as if Martha Stewart got conked in the head". One of them is her idea of how to spruce up your bath towels – she has a dead fish on a table, and she's painting

it, then puts a towel on it to make a print. So you have kind of a crappy looking fish print, and a towel you can't use. She makes a giant cardboard cow, puts a rubber glove full of milk on it, and then says you can have kids pretend to milk it. So we flew to Salt Lake City and spent two days with her. She taught us how to do crafts, and she's going to help spruce up our merch table, selling T-shirts that are Diane Thomas originals. We also realised that people at the show are kind of along for the ride, so we can take them to weird places. So those answering machine tapes I mentioned – we've never known what to do with them. Sometimes when you would call an answering machine, even if you picked up it would record your conversation. So we found a couple of those, which are funny to us, but how do you present them in a live show? One recording was a woman telling her friend about a harrowing diarrhoea experience she had. So at the live show we tell the story of this woman's diarrhoea experience using stock photos. We found another recording of a guy asking for advice about going to a brothel in Reno. So we can tell that story through clips from our collection alongside stock images. By the time we're midway through the show, people are willing to go with us on that, whereas in the early days, it was strictly VHS content and we wouldn't insert ourselves into it. Now we're much more willing to do bits and take people on long walks like that.

“One woman’s telling her friend about a harrowing diarrhoea experience she had”



Thriftin in the US is so much more fun than in the UK. There's so much stuff. Do you find gold every time you go to a store?

It's getting harder. Charity shops in the UK are, like, clean and there's actually nice things, and it's well organised. Most of the thrift stores in the US are like they've put a pile of garbage out, and you have to sort through it yourself. I think it's getting rarer to find tapes, because when we talk to people at the big chains like Goodwill, Salvation Army, Saint Vincent de Paul, they tell us if they get VHS donations, they just go in the dumpster, because no one buys them anymore. I mean that's heartbreaking because there's so much footage you're just not going to see. But we were in Wyoming doing a college show in the middle of nowhere, and we stopped at a thrift store where they didn't have any VHS. Then we went to another one, which was a Goodwill and we didn't have high hopes. But they had an entire wall. We shipped home 200 tapes because we were like kids in a candy store. So, I think you're having to go to more remote areas, like Alaska. We just had to ship a box home from there, because it's just the last frontier of VHS too. I think you have to either go to a smaller town somewhere, or you have to go to a non-chain one. I always say, if you find a thrift store that's called, something like, Christ's Precious Blood Thrift, or The Hospice Benefit – the more depressing or religious the thrift store is benefiting, the better chance you have at finding good tapes there because they're not doing a lot of sorting.

Yours and Joe's minds must be CIA-level steel cages, because you watch everything. You don't fast-forward anything. That's hundreds of hours of concentrating.

We're almost 50 and I'm like, "I just watched a two-hour cash register instructional video. I'm not getting that back." My parents were getting close to retirement, and had two kids

who were graduating high school at my age. And I just watched a two-hour cash register instructional video, and found nothing redeeming in it. But you know what? When you get so mired in watching these tapes that you feel like there's no way out, and for weeks you've been looking for stuff and finding nothing good, when you do find that special tape that's when we see that silver lining. I cannot wait to show it to people – whether on our web show or live on stage, which I still think is the best way to share this kind of material. I miss that communal experience I had at high school and college, where we had friends over to show them this new tape called *Little Marky* – a guy who plays a little religious character, and sings songs about not being aborted – then getting their live reactions and being able to joke about it together. If nothing else, our show recreates that experience for one night. I don't think that our show has changed, but the culture has, and that's what makes our show even more refreshing for people.

It must be a great feeling when you get that feedback from something you have found.

Exactly! We were doing shows in Paris and it's like, "wow, I literally found that video in a dumpster in high school, and here we are playing a film festival in Paris, or Norway, or Sweden." We played Bonnaroo Festival, and it's just like, "what are we doing? I stole this video in the break room at a McDonald's I worked at in high school, and now we're playing it at Bonnaroo, right next to MF DOOM!" It's not lost on me that this is a very bizarre career.

One of your standout video finds is called *How To Have Cyber Sex On The Internet*. Are there any other favourites?

That one is great because it's redundant. Where else would you have cyber sex but the internet? But it also can't decide whether



“Bill Hader emailed saying, ‘I’m watching this right now. Keep up the good work!’”

it wants to be sexy or informational, so it's neither. There's a topless woman, but she's explaining a modem problem, so you're not really turned on and you're not getting information. So what is it trying to do? Then there are other ones I have a soft spot for, like the training tape that I found. It was 1993, I was working at McDonald's, extremely unhappy. And I'm in a break room, which at the time you could smoke in. So there's an overflowing ashtray, and I'm getting a headache while trying to eat lunch. Then I popped in a training tape for McDonald's janitors. And I was like, “oh my god!” It tried to have a cute plot to it with a trainee on his first day on the job where if he cleaned really well, he could hope to see McSee – they never explained what that was. I immediately thought that Joe needed to see it. So I put in my backpack, and I still have it in my office. That was the beginning of everything. Years later, my McDonald's manager came to a show in Wisconsin, and she officially forgave me for stealing it. During the pandemic, we tracked down the guy who plays the janitor, and it turns out he owns a candy factory in Brooklyn, about a mile from our office. So for our 20th anniversary, he's going to come on some of the shows and talk about it with us, live. So that one is special. There are other ones, like these training videos by a company called Federated Mutual, which were safety videos for people working in industrial jobs. And there are a series of on-the-job accident re-enactments, where each one is more violent than the one before it. We didn't have to touch it at all with our editing. It's Three Stooges-level violence that keeps getting funnier and ends with an explosion. It's perfect.

You and Joe created the character K-Strass (played by Mark Proksch) who was a yo-yo champion who'd go on morning news and just fail at it so awkwardly.

It's so crazy. Mark had just gotten laid off at his job when we developed the idea to do

these fake news appearances and we knew he had the talent to do it. We'd done about five appearances with the yo-yo expert, and one of the news stations posted it. I think *Deadspin* reposted that and, all of a sudden, it had millions of views. We were on the way to another morning show and they cancelled. We were so pissed as we had a whole story arc for K-Strass, with little details he would reveal, telling this whole story. We'd made a fake website for the yo-yo company 'sponsoring' his tour and Bill Hader emailed saying “I'm watching this right now. Keep up the good work!” Then Tim and Eric emailed, and we pitched a show at them for about six months. We knew some of the writers on *The Office* from our time at *The Onion* – Amelie Gillette was one of them. She emailed us saying, they were all in the writer's room watching K-Strass, and wanted to fly us out there. They ended up writing a part for Mark as Nate, Dwight's assistant, which was basically based on K-Strass. It was wild – Mark ended up marrying Amelie, and they live together in Palm Springs now. So, yeah, it was a crazy, pivotal moment for Mark. I mean, we're still sleeping in Motel Sixes and trying to sell enough frisbees to get gas money, but not bitter at all. Couldn't be happier for him!

You and Joe also pranked morning TV, playing Chop & Steele – a pair of absurd ‘strongmen’, which eventually resulted in a lawsuit being filed by the owner of one channel for “fraud and copyright infringement” among other things. It’s amazing how little checks are done on these morning shows.

The vetting is just not there. There are so many of these stations, I guess it's hard to come up with an equivalent in the UK, but there's one in every municipality in the States: *Wake Up Sacramento*, *Good Morning Des Moines*... they're just looking to fill time. When we'd gone on as ourselves to promote *Found Footage Festival*, we realised the stations were not paying attention. They'd



get the name of our show wrong and they'd forget we were even coming, which made the whole getting up at 5.30am worth it! So it was like an experiment for us – let's see how much they're paying attention. We thought maybe they'll do some vetting and gradually, over time, we did less and less to try to convince them we're real. We'd put in deliberate red herrings, like we said Chop & Steele won *America's Got Talent* in 2017. It would have taken them two seconds to search it. Nobody did. Then, the irony, of course, is that after the lawsuit was settled, *America's Got Talent* said, “Hey, will you come on as Chop & Steele?” So it almost came through, we manifested it.

Finally, let's talk about your elite collection of cast and crew jackets that we've done a fashion shoot with in this issue of *Ralph*.

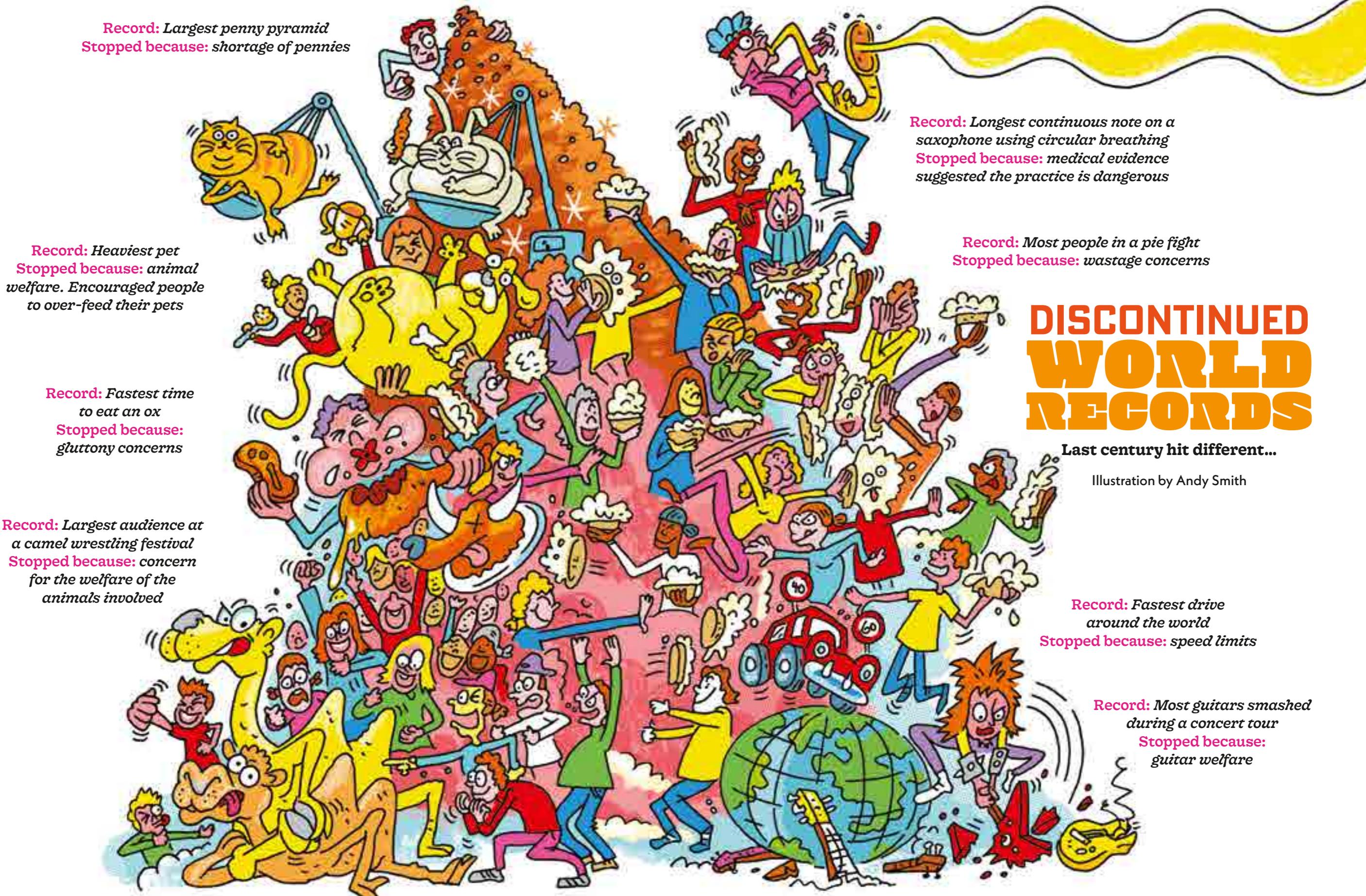
I was trying to think where my obsession with this started. I've always loved television and grew up with it. One show that Joe and I bonded over when we met at high school was called *Small Wonder* about a little robot girl. There's no merch for it, but there is a cast and crew jacket, which they made as a thank you for all the hundreds of people who worked on it (and I now have in my collection). I worked at the *Letterman Show* for five years, and then worked at *The Colbert Report*, and every year you would get a crew jacket or sneakers that said *Late Show* on them. I think I left mine at a thrift store eventually. After I'd not worked there for 10 years, it's like, “what am I going to do with five jackets?” But about 10 years ago, I was at a thrift store in Queens, New York, and I found a *One Life to Live* jacket, which is a soap opera. It had Diane stitched on the front. I was like, “who is Diane? Why is her jacket here?” I was fascinated by it, but they were charging \$50 at a thrift store. Which was a little rich for my blood. I'm used to paying \$1 for things there. I immediately regretted not getting it, so I went back, and the woman there goes, “you didn't buy it. Somebody else scooped it up”,

and she mocked me! Since then, I've kept an eye out at thrift stores and online. I'm not going to go nuts, but I have about 60 cast and crew jackets now from TV and movies. A lot of them are from beloved sitcoms like *Family Ties*, *Growing Pains*, *Night Court*, *The Twilight Zone* and *The Wonder Years* – things that I grew up loving.

I saw that fans of *Found Footage* gave you jackets from *The Thing* and *Cheers*!

Yes! There are friends of *Found Footage Festival* who will actually come and bring cast and crew jackets. I got one from the movie *Backdraft* recently because they know I'm a Kurt Russell fan. I realised that I can't just have them in my storage locker in Queens. I should give people an opportunity to try them on, and hopefully they'll be as amused as I am about it. So I contacted some of my favourite vintage stores around the country and, while I'm on tour with *Found Footage Festival*, I'll be staging a pop-up museum at these vintage stores. I'm calling it *The Museum of Cast & Crew Jackets* and am doing an audio guide that will have all the theme songs and my thoughts about each one – just like a museum would. I've got these little museum pins and stickers and things like that. There's no money involved, it's just a fun way to show off a collection. So, yeah, that's my latest project I'm doing for no one in particular. *ralph*

Record: Largest penny pyramid
Stopped because: shortage of pennies



Record: Longest continuous note on a saxophone using circular breathing
Stopped because: medical evidence suggested the practice is dangerous

Record: Heaviest pet
Stopped because: animal welfare. Encouraged people to over-feed their pets

Record: Fastest time to eat an ox
Stopped because: gluttony concerns

Record: Largest audience at a camel wrestling festival
Stopped because: concern for the welfare of the animals involved

Record: Most people in a pie fight
Stopped because: wastage concerns

DISCONTINUED WORLD RECORDS

Last century hit different...

Illustration by Andy Smith

Record: Fastest drive around the world
Stopped because: speed limits

Record: Most guitars smashed during a concert tour
Stopped because: guitar welfare

MACLEOD

9

Tatty Macleod is the pink-haired comedian taking Europe by storm

Words by Alexandra Haddow
Photos by Stephanie Sian Smith





Like most people I interview for this brilliant magazine (it's only issue three Alex, why are you acting like you've been doing it for years? It makes me feel part of something OK?) I've known Tatty Macleod for a while. We first met on the open mic circuit, and on both sides of the bar at one of London's best comedy clubs, The Bill Murray in Angel. In lockdown, she made me howl with her videos about French vs. English women, a topic she's an expert in, having been initially raised in the UK by her mum, then moving to France aged four, and back to the UK at eighteen. As of very recently, she's splitting her time between London and Paris. Très chic non? Her online success has so far resulted in what feels like global fame, a sold out Edinburgh Fringe run, a UK and now European tour, a book deal (more on this later), legions of loyal fans, and the cover of Time Out (other magazines, regrettably, are available, but buy us first). I met up with Tatty at comedy/performance venue Underbelly Boulevard in central London, which felt a bit like a French hotel - just to make her feel at home - as we spoke about the story so far...

Alex: I distinctly remember you saying something once that's stuck with me. You said "I don't want to go and gig in Chichester for £100 on a Friday. I want to do something different."

Tatty: Chichester sounds like it might be quite posh. Chichester sounds like it might work, actually.

Alex: I'm sure they'd have you. You've carved out this niche for yourself, where you can gig if you want to at a club... but you have your own thing, where it's not even just touring. You've created your own community,

not to sound too cheesy. Was that a conscious thing, or did it evolve that way?

Tatty: I didn't consciously think to myself, "I'm going to create a hybrid income that's going to be made up of lots of different aspects". But I did realise quite early doors that I have this relationship to the audience, via social media. This feels really valuable. Not just in a financial way, but it feels really powerful and important. And actually, when you think about it, this is the first time that comedians have had a business-to-consumer option, if you say it in business terms. There's no middleman. There's no comedy club booking. There's no getting five minutes, then 10, then 15, then being booked on the main show. There's no getting a commissioner to like you to invite you on a TV show. You can access a hundred million people if you want to. This gives you total independence. And I think creativity really is about having that freedom. It's about being free from having to do a day job and worrying about how much money you're making. You're free of having to worry about other people's creative influences or having to fit on a certain bill. Some people would feel there's no creative freedom in social media because there's the famous algorithm. But to me, I looked at it, unlike – I think, a lot of other comedians, and I was like, "oh my God, but this is great. No one can stop me."

Alex: You're on the European leg of your tour *Fugue* at the moment, do audiences respond to you differently in each country?

Tatty: Well, it's been really funny when I do it in Paris. I have this bit that I do about hen dos. It goes down really well... it kills in any English room. In Paris, I'm building up to it, I'm like, "you're gonna love this bit. You're gonna love the image of English hen dos." And then... total silence. That's the problem. It doesn't matter that they're English speaking. They have no fucking clue what a hen do is. That is too much of an English-ism. So I had to change it to bachelorette.

The next time I kind of even had to explain that. I had to add in some French words. So you're learning all the time. Then, some of the things that I'm talking about they sometimes find hilarious and I'm like, "that wasn't the punchline! Why are they finding that funny?!"

Alex: One of the main themes of your show is being caught between two cultures. When you go to France now, does it feel like you're returning home or does it almost feel like because you lived there in your childhood you're starting again?

Tatty: There are pockets of familiarity and pockets of melancholy, like there's a TV show that's on at the moment called *Star Academy*, which is the show that I watched when I was younger. There are lots of little things, and it's funny, having conversations with English people where, nobody knows where I came from, no one knows Brittany, no one in the UK knows anything about it. No one here knows where Camors is, where I grew up, but when I'm in Paris and I meet people who are from my region, I can have those conversations and be like, "where did you go to school?" Which I've never ever had in the whole time I've lived in London, or even when I went to university.

Alex: It's almost like you don't have nostalgia when you're in Britain, but that's what France provides you with, it's like what we have when we talk about a certain TV programme, or food, or a celebrity, or whatever else.

Tatty: Totally! There's stuff that I remember – even singers from when I was a child – which I don't have the references for in England, but in France I do. So that's quite nice, and people understand the nuance of what it is to be from Brittany, whereas here in London if people hear about my life they're like, "Oh France!", but France is obviously a pretty big country!

Alex: It must feel quite grounding in a way.

Tatty: Yeah, but it's funny as well because Brittany for Parisians is not seen as very chic. I'm not chic in Paris. Obviously when I'm in England there's no nuance around what France is like. When I'm in Paris I'm considered – because I'm from the countryside – a "provinciale". I'm from the provinces, that's what they call me "les provinces". I'm a country bumpkin.

Alex: That's so French.

Tatty: Yeah exactly, anyone who's not from inner city Paris is a "provinciale", that's what they're called.

Alex: "I'm a provinciale." That's the headline.

Tatty: Yes, exactly. Obviously I come to London being from France and everyone's like, oh she's so chic. But you know, I go to Paris and they're like, not only is she English, but on top of that... she's from Brittany.

Alex: So in France they're like, "We're all going to see that provinciale comedian tonight!"

Tatty: Seriously!

Alex: And in England it's "Oh my god! Tatty's so chic." Is there even a French word for a yob? Or a lout?

Tatty: Yeah. 'Beauf' and 'plouq'. People from outside Paris are thought of as more crass. It's funny. I can't work out if it's because I lived in England for so long or it's because I'm from Brittany. Am I crass? Or just Breton? Because then I talk to my friend, and we're saying this phrase about boys, which translates to, "he wants to dip his spaghetti. He wants to dip his noodle" – which is like, you know, he wants to fuck, basically. Maybe that is crass?! A compliment you get in Paris is "You're very elegant", and you'd never really get that in England. Obviously then I ruin it by saying "dip your noodle in me!"



**"Am I
crass?
Or just
Breton?"**

Alex: Your mum Liz, or DIY Liz to use her full name, is one of the coolest characters on your Instagram. I know she's not French (insider info, Liz is actually half Welsh, half Scottish) but she looks so French! Very aloof.

Tatty: She lives on tea and she watches *Coronation Street* religiously. I went to the *Wicked* premiere recently [writer's note: check out Tatty's video on what it's actually like to go to a premiere, I guarantee you'll never be jealous again]. I wasn't allowed an umbrella because I'm not famous enough – I'm not posh enough to stay dry in their eyes. I realised I was standing behind an actress that was in *Coronation Street*, and I had to get a selfie for my mum. She was more thrilled with that than almost anything else I've done.

Alex: What made you want to spend more time in Paris after being in the UK for quite a while?

Tatty: Lots of different things. I feel like because I was doing so much content about what it is to be French, to be in France and the French, and I haven't lived there since I was 18. I felt like, "oh you actually need to renew your licence; you need to get back out there." I've never lived in Paris and I ended up visiting, gigging a bit and really liking it, plus I wanted something fresh and different. And Paris is more affordable than London – I like that it's much smaller, you can cross Paris in an hour. I think it's an exciting place when it comes to stand-up because it's developing there, it's still fresh, so that's exciting as well.

Alex: That's my penultimate question sorted then, what are you up to next?

Tatty: I'd like to develop a show in French, I'm working on my Substack, and I'm writing a book. I can't say much as it hasn't been officially announced yet, but it's about my life growing up in France and all the trials and tribulations of growing up between two cultures.

Alex: It's a huge task doing stand-up in a different language, isn't it?

Tatty: Oh my god, it's like starting again, it's so humbling. I went to Paris and, because obviously I'm already a professional comedian, they immediately put on like, pro line-ups, doing the premium gigs and whatever. And after a couple of those spots I got the schedule for the next month that they sent me and it was like "you're doing the 8pm, 9pm shows." The next month they said, "should we put you on the.... 2.30pm on Saturday afternoon?"

Alex: Yeah, "it's just in the back of a boulangerie, it's a 12-seater, you'll be fine!"

Tatty: Exactly! And not to sound like an absolute twat but I thought, "I sold out Hackney Empire last night." The next day I went to Paris, I was doing a 4pm show to 10 people. Do you know what? It's such a weird dichotomy.

Alex: Humbling. Do you secretly speak any other languages as well or are you just loyal to French?

Tatty: I'm not going to fucking take on a third country babe.

Alex: I was hoping that my big scoop is that you also speak fluent German.

Tatty: That would be more believable. Imagine if it was like Japanese.

Alex: Your show *Fugue* is, I think, a good level of personal, because sometimes we can give away quite a lot about ourselves and then we think, oh, should I have done that?

Tatty: I've become really aware of that, especially because I do so much on social media. I think that there are different mediums for different things, and on my Substack, I talk a lot more about dating, who I'm seeing, my sex life even, which are

"I sold out Hackney Empire... the next day I went to Paris, doing a show to 10 people"



quite personal things that I don't want to talk about on camera. But I think that when you're in the medium of writing, it feels more controlled. It feels more natural to talk about it there and if I'm going to talk about my relationship to my absent father, or to my mum and to my sisters, that's something which I feel more comfortable doing in the book. The show is very personal, but as you say, it's personal in a different way. One thing I would definitely say is that I feel so grateful for where I'm at. If this is where I plateau for the rest of my life, I'm really happy. I'm not looking to escalate, it's just nice to be able to do things you enjoy. I'm saying to the universe, "if I could stay on the same level, this would be perfect."

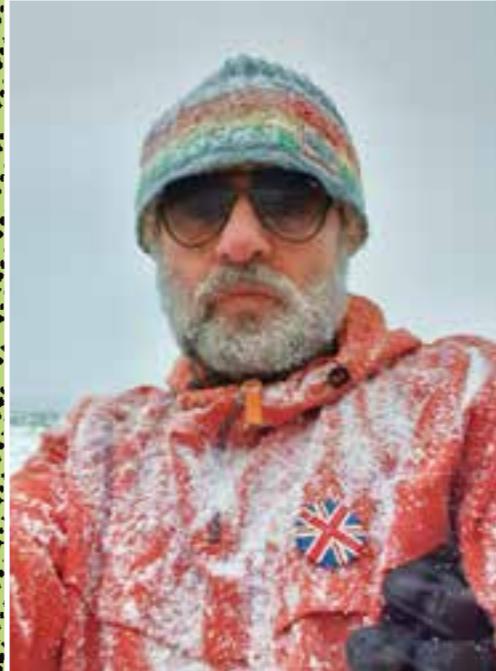
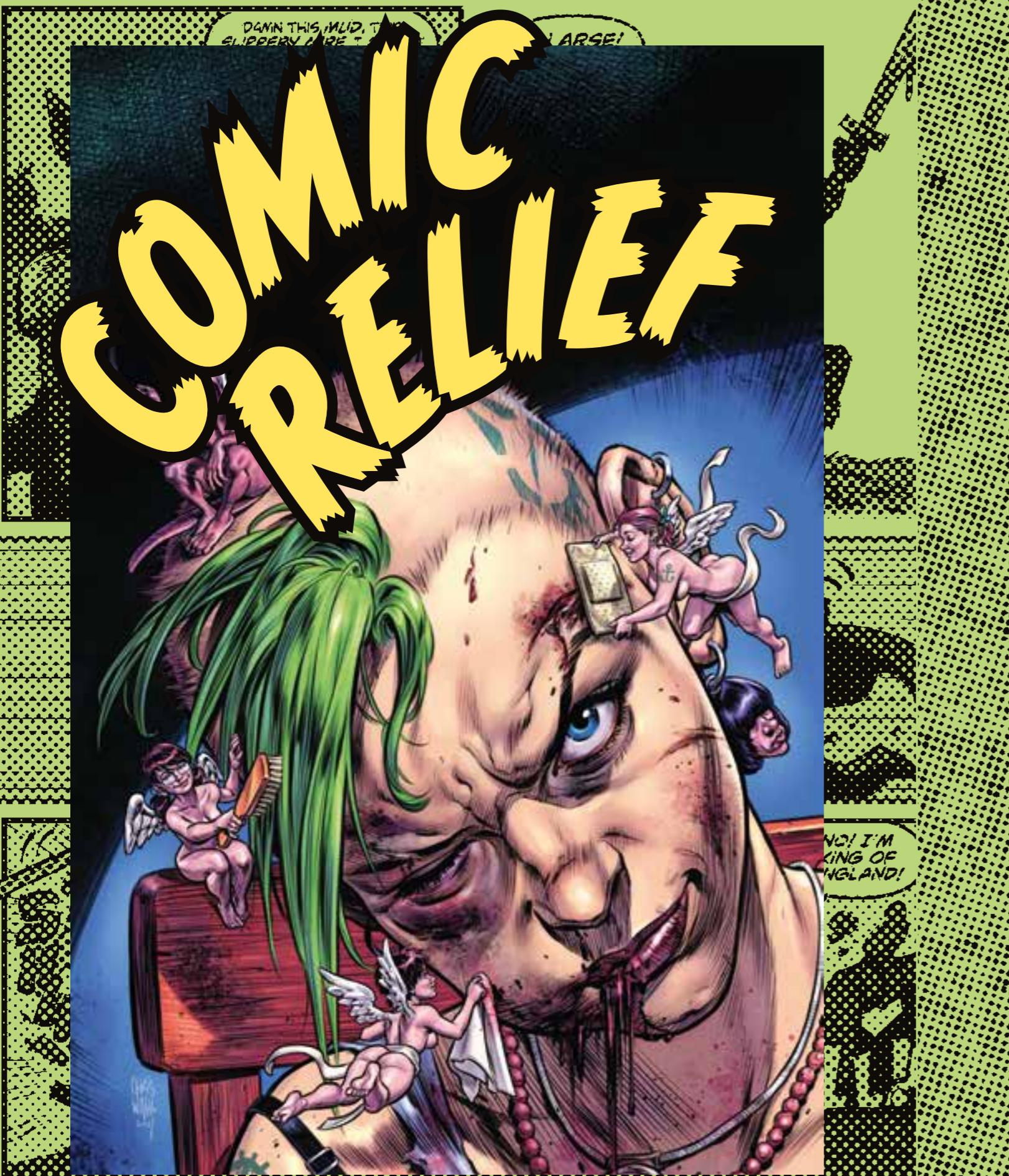
Alex: Okay, my final question. Right now, at this interview, do you feel English, or French?

Tatty: Well, I'm sat here eating a bag of sweet chilli crisps. I've just had a cup of Earl Grey tea. I think that says it all.

Alex: We'll leave it there. *ralph*

"Paris is an exciting place when it comes to stand-up because it's developing there, it's still fresh"





Tank Girl creator Alan Martin tells us how to write an amazing comic

Words by Josh Jones

Facing Tank Girl illustration: Chris Wahl

Photos: Lou Martin/Alan Martin

Background comics: c/o Lou Martin/Alan Martin

Alan Martin started a cult. In 1987, he, along with friend and artist Jamie Hewlett, famously created the iconic comic, *Tank Girl* while at art college in Worthing, England. First appearing in their zine Atomtan and then as a proper serial comic in the magazine Deadline, *Tank Girl* – along with her tank, kangaroo lover Booga, scathing view of the world, and a rotating cast of characters – quickly became a cult read. A symbol of pure rebellion, she has become a feminist icon, had a film made about her (let's not talk about that), filled the pages of many huge hardback books, featured on merchandise and more.

While artists like Brett Parson, Phillip Bond, Chris Wahl and Rufus Dayglo, and writers Alan Grant and Peter Milligan put their spin on it, it's Alan Martin who's been steering the ship (tank?) and continues to do so today.

Now based in the very north of England, Alan took some time out of his busy schedule (he was literally swimming against a deluge of orders for miniature *Tank Girl* tanks when we spoke to him) to answer our questions on how to make a brilliant comic.



Do you dream in comic storyboards, Alan? Do they take over your subconscious?

No, but chess does. If I play too much chess I start to see the world as chess and situations in life as chess moves. It gets right into my dreams. But comics? No.

Do you try to write differently for different artists? Or do they just have to deal with it?

I don't really try to, it happens automatically. I visualise the artwork in the artist's style as I write and I try to play to that artist's strengths. Humour especially; if I know how an artist expresses humour I can play to that because everyone does it differently. For example, with Brett Parson - I find his strengths are expressions and the relationships between characters, and he's good at slapstick action, so I have all of that in the back of my mind when I'm writing for him to some degree.

"If I know how an artist expresses humour I can play to that because everyone does it differently"

You've often mentioned that when you start a story you have no idea where it's going to go. How do you know when it's gonna be good or maybe time to abandon a story?

I never abandon a story! I always think of my

best stories from the past when I'm starting to write, and that's the bar I aim for. Because I've already achieved that level of satisfaction with a story, I trust myself to get there, and I can let go at that point and let the path take me there. The likelihood of a story working is all down to how I'm feeling and whether I'm free enough to let that happen.

The current climate might be ripe for subversive comics but do you think they would actually have an impact, in your opinion?

I think the current climate is in such a state of flux that it's hard to have an impact. I'm a big pop culture fan and chaos theory tells us that something very small can have incredibly large repercussions, and a lot of the time we don't even know where influences start. But now more than ever there are so many voices in the mix, it's all up in the air. But basically my answer is yes!

Do you think digital creation is too clinical? Do you need the chaos of pen and ink to make a great comic?

It depends on the artist and their skill, and on the taste of the reader. Most of my favourite art in comics is from before the digital age - *The Freak Brothers*, *Mad Magazine* etc., all hand rendered. But most of my favourite contemporary stuff is usually a combination of hand and digital.

Are you someone who can write anywhere or are you like Roald Dahl where you have a favourite chair and cardigan?

I find it almost impossible to write anywhere. Favourite chair, pen, cardigan, it doesn't seem to matter. It only works when it works and when words come I grab 'em! What I try to do is find a place where I'm isolated and undisturbed. It's my life's quest to get some damned words out.

When you have an idea, is it like an



explosion that you have to get out? I know you're not a meticulous planner with arc spreadsheets and that.

Ideas gestate over time. I don't suddenly give birth to them. Components come and go and several parts of a story might align and then reconfigure, depending on what the format is. If I'm writing a short, it might be 5-10 pages and I'll usually free-wheel it. But if it's, say, a 4-issue mini-series I'll need an arc, so I'll do a loose format to include movie-style beats and cliffhangers at the end of each episode.

"It's the Booga mentality, basically: the less I know, the stronger I am"



When *Tank Girl* became globally popular, how did you keep the same energy in the comic as when you started her in Worthing? Was it a struggle or have you always been able to tap into that?

When the film came out we were still essentially creating it in Worthing in the same way, but yeah, maybe we became resistant to the pressure on us to perform. "Stoic stupidity" is the phrase which springs to mind on my approach to writing *Tank Girl*. Meaning being wise and calm, but stupid at the same time. It's the Booga mentality, basically: the less I know, the stronger I am. That was true then and it's still true now!

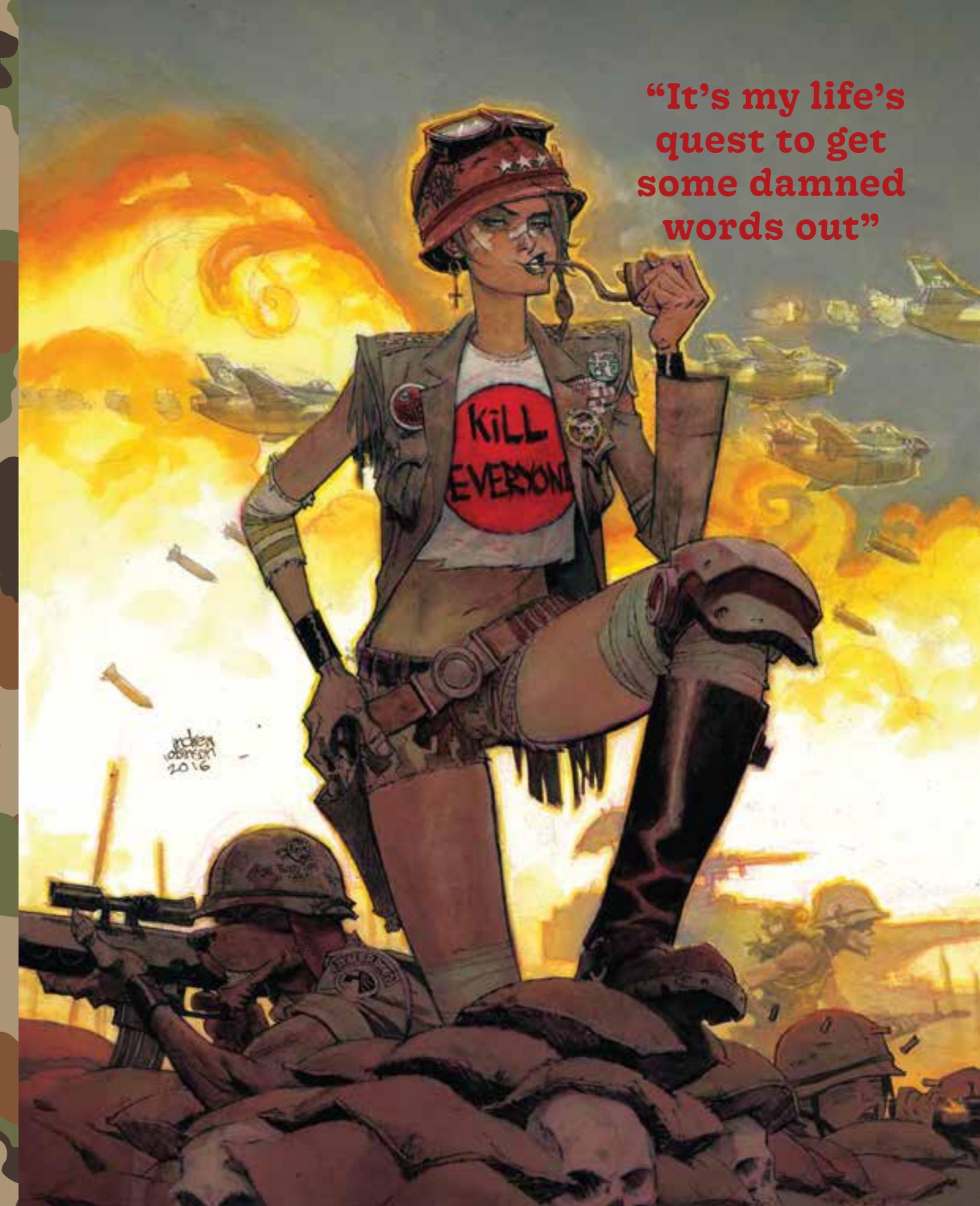
What would Tank Girl make of social media?

She'd completely fuckin' avoid it! *ralph*



ALAN MARTIN'S TOP TIPS FOR WRITING A GREAT COMIC.

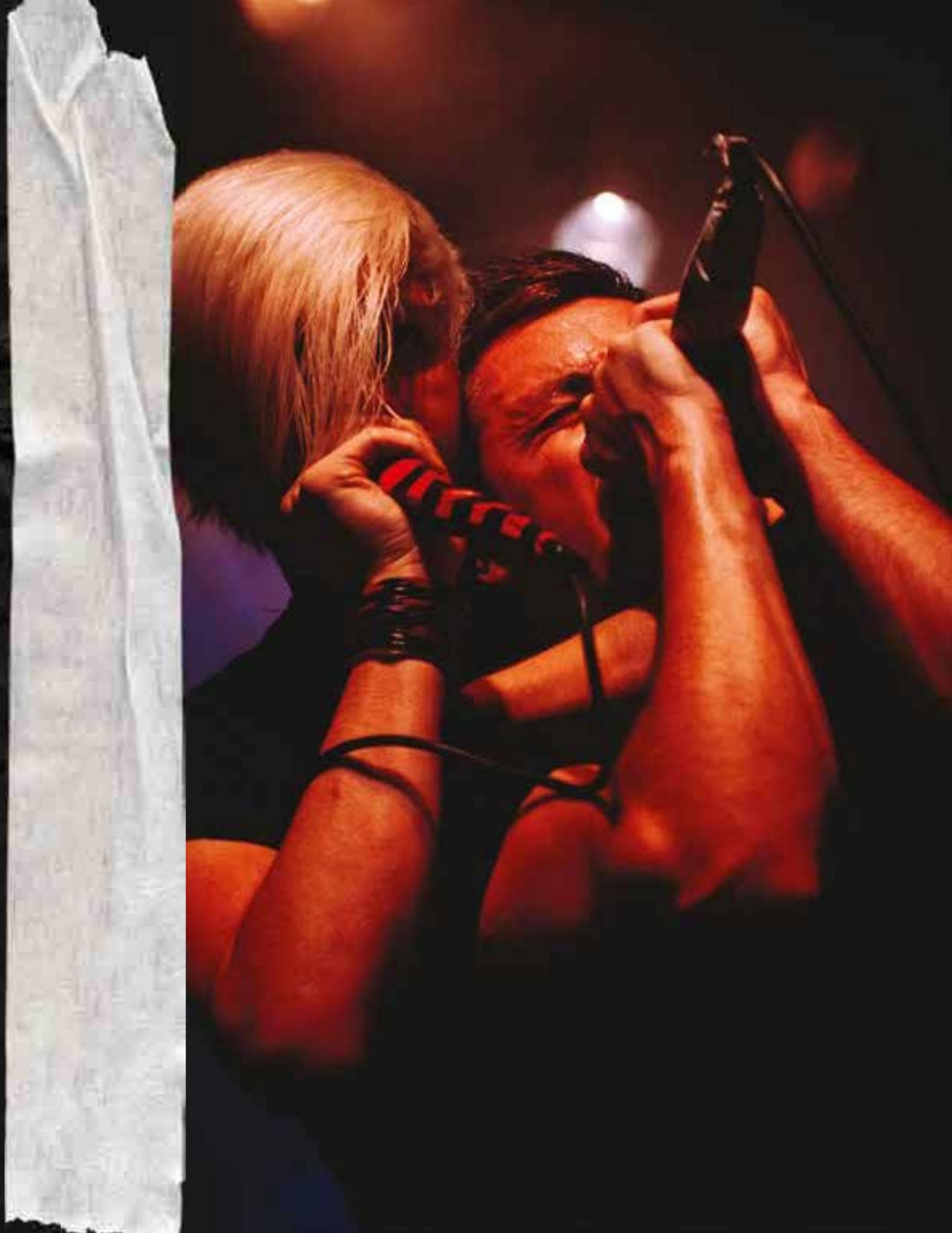
- 1. STEAL SOMEONE ELSE'S STORYLINE**
- 2. INCLUDE YOUR FAVOURITE CHILDHOOD TOY**
- 3. BE UNNECESSARILY MEAN TO THE PROTAGONIST**
- 4. SPLASH THE CLARET AROUND A LOT**
- 5. READ COPIES OF MAD MAGAZINE FROM THE '60s, '70s, & '80s**
- 6. MAKE LOTS OF TEA**
- 7. CREATE GAPS**
- 9. BETWEEN**
- 10. THOUGHTS**



Panic! In the Disgo

Emma Garland takes us on a deep dive
of the 2000s Welsh emo scene

Words by Emma Garland
Photos by Nadine Ballantyne





“Wales is known as the ‘Land Of Song’ for a reason”

Three teenagers sitting cross-legged on the pavement in zip-up hoodies and shapeless jeans throw devil horns up for the camera. A lad wearing a peaked beanie and a backpack sticks his tongue out and does the same. Two girls with pixie cuts, box-dyed black with their fringes slicked to one side, pout in fitted chequered shirts and H&M scarves. A few awkward kids in clothes five sizes too big try to hide their faces, but most of them lean eagerly into the camera, screaming down the lens while thrashing their heads, throwing two fingers up with painted nails and kohl-rimmed eyes. And that's just the boys.

This definitive panorama of youth culture at the height of MySpace kicks off the music video for metalcore outfit Bullet For My Valentine's 2005 single '4 Words (To Choke Upon)'. The footage was shot earlier that year outside their show at Mean Fiddler, the now defunct music venue in Harlesden, London, but it could have been anywhere across the UK. Whether it was Luton or Leeds, an inner-city legacy venue or a rural town pub, the crowd in the early-to-mid 2000s would have been the same: a gaggle of alternative kids in their mid-to-late teens, with studded belts and lip piercings, whose collective image we now associate with the emo scene.

Emo was, is, and always will be a contested term. Springing from Washington D.C.'s hardcore scene in the mid-1980s and evolving over the decades to encapsulate each new wave of yearning guitar bands, it has no fixed reference point as far as sound goes. It's a subculture, in the lineage of hardcore, that will mean something different depending on when you were born and where you grew up. Still, when emo hit the mainstream in the 2000s, the flames of its popularity fanned by file sharing platforms like Limewire and burgeoning social media, it hardened into a stereotype that remains the same today: an introverted depressive who doodles on their Converse and listens to artists that sing about heartbreak and

death in extreme terms. Though its image became fixed, the bands remained as far-flung as ever, from 'literary' post-hardcore band Thursday, to Las Vegas cabaret act Panic! At The Disco, to acoustic troubadours Dashboard Confessional.

In the UK, the bands that got lumped into the "emo" category varied wildly from the '80s-inspired thrash of Bullet For My Valentine, to post-hardcore fusionists Funeral For a Friend, to the squealing riffs and pop punk gang chants of The Blackout. They didn't have much in common, but they were covered by the same magazines, appeared on the same music video TV channels, and played the same circuit of venues and festivals. And, strangely, all of them came from South Wales.

South Wales is an area of conflict. The landscape is made up of rugged mountains and wind-battered coastlines, depleted post-industrial towns and dense green forestry, rural valleys and suburban sprawls. There are three major cities in the form of Cardiff, the nation's capital, its neighbouring cousin Newport, and second-largest Swansea. Then there's the valleys – the sprawling network of towns and villages that connect all three, and are famous for two things: exporting massive quantities of coal, iron and steel during the Industrial Revolution, and producing some of the biggest music artists in the world. In the '60s it was "sex bomb" crooner Tom Jones and The Velvet Underground's John Cale, in the '70s it was pop soloists like Bonnie Tyler and prog bands like Sassafras and Man, in the '80s it was alt-rockers Manic Street Preachers, and in the '90s it was Stereophonics – and that's discounting all the city-based artists like Shirley Bassey, Young Marble Giants, Catatonia, and Skindred. Each came up in line with the emerging sounds of their decade and, in their own ways, made significant contributions to their growth and evolution. The same is true of emo in the 2000s.



Music is an integral part of Welsh identity, whether it's the community roles of male voice choirs, brass bands and social club acts or broader celebrations like the National Eisteddfod (a cultural competition that formally began in the 1800s, with roots reaching as far back as 1176). It's known as the 'Land of Song' for a reason. It's partly because of this tradition that, throughout the 20th and early 21st century, South Wales had a robust network of pubs, clubs, venues and community spaces that prioritised music on a weekly basis. Even in the 2000s, a time most valleys residents would describe as economically "shit" with unemployment rates among the highest in the UK since the '80s, the gig circuit was thriving. Every town had at least one watering hole that acted like a church, where a congregation of greasy teens would flock on weekends to watch their mates' bands and be sick on themselves.

There was the Pop Factory in Porth, which was coronated in 2000 by Tom Jones smashing a bottle of dandelion and burdock against the wall and had its own Top of the Pops-style TV show of the same name on ITV Wales. There was Tom's Bar in Treforest (named, again, after Tom Jones), which hosted gigs across its two floors, often simultaneously, and had so many emo kids pouring through the doors it looked like Hot Topic on clearance day. Blackwood had the Miners' Institute and Pontypridd had the Muni Arts Centre – a gothic-style listed building funded by the council, which often drew bigger bands away from rock Mecca venues in Cardiff. Newport had local DIY venue LePub and the legendary TJs, supposedly where Kurt Cobain proposed to Courtney Love in 1991, when the city was experiencing an alt-rock boom that prompted the media to dub it "the new Seattle." And many, many more venues besides.

It was out of this sprawling grassroots infrastructure that the loosely defined "emo" bands of the 2000s emerged, the broad spectrum of their sound in part reflecting

how integrated the South Wales alternative scene was. There were only so many venues and bands, after all. Whether your poison was punk, metal, ska, or something else, chances are you were hanging out in the same spaces and going to the same shows. While some scenes were regimented, South Wales had more of an open door policy by nature. In the same mix you had Douglas playing a Fat Wreck Chords-style blend of melodic hardcore and skate punk, Ammanford's Jarcrew providing a strange brew of raw hardcore, glitchy electronics and alternative pop that alt/rock bible *Kerrang!* reckoned "would sound at home on Fugazi's Dischord label," and Caerphilly's Dopamine coming down on the more anthemic side of post-hardcore. Heavier metal bands like Shaped By Fate, Anterior, and Through Solace emerged later in the decade, alongside a slew of pop punk/power pop bands like Save Your Breath and The Guns, but the early-to-mid-2000s belonged to "emo."

Though their name has an unimaginably dark stain on it due to the actions of their vocalist Ian Watkins, now serving a 35-year sentence for child sex offences, it has to be said that there was a massive spotlight on the area due to the runaway commercial success of Lostprophets, essentially Pontypridd's own Linkin Park. However, the success of many local bands was also related to broader cultural and technological shifts that helped push bands from the underground into the mainstream. Essentially, these were all kids who grew up on a disaffected diet of American punk and Tony Hawk's *Pro Skater* soundtracks. At the time, though, the most dominant guitar sounds at home in the UK were Britpop and indie. These Welsh bands began to fill the gaps to local as well as international acclaim, spurred on by momentum that was gathering in the US. Douglas signed to American indie label GFY; Jarcrew toured with everyone from Biffy Clyro to Alec Empire, and frontman Kelson Mathias went on to form Future of the Left. However, it was Funeral For A Friend



"Hailing from Bridgend, a town with one of the highest rates of deprivation in the UK, Funeral For A Friend focused on working-class concerns"

that tipped the scales. Hailing from Bridgend, a town with one of the highest rates of deprivation in the UK, Funeral For A Friend focused on working-class concerns. Alongside introspective material about relationships, vocalist Matthew Davies-Kreye tackled subjects like unemployment, the 1984-1985 miners' strike, and teen suicide (Bridgend experienced such a shocking suicide cluster in the 2000s that American journalists descended on the town and wrote about it for *Vanity Fair*). Their debut album *Casually Dressed and Deep In Conversation* was released by Atlantic in 2003, making Funeral For A Friend the first UK "emo" band to sign to a major. It went gold shortly after its release, and the five-piece jumped from playing small local venues to opening from Iron Maiden within a year. Their success cleared the path for other post-hardcore-minded bands like When Reason Sleeps, The Blackout, and Kids In Glass Houses, to charge forward.

Much like emo bands in America, Funeral For A Friend's ascent was accelerated by technology. File sharing, CD burning, social media, digitally organised street teams and proto-viral marketing strategies brought much larger audiences to bands than they would have managed pre-internet, and enabled word of mouth to spread like wildfire on a global scale. Funeral For A Friend were touring North America with Every Time I Die, Cave In, and From Autumn To Ashes a month before *Casually Dressed...* was even released. Bullet For My Valentine, also from Bridgend, had just one self-titled EP to their name when the footage for '4 Words (To Choke Upon)' was shot. The show had to be upgraded to the Mean Fiddler due to demand. That level of exposure also had an impact on their fanbases, which became even harder to categorise than the scene to start with. As one online review of Bullet For My Valentine's Mean Fiddler show pointed out, the crowd ranged from "Green Day fans to Metallica fans to The Used fans to Maroon 5 fans; they have something for everybody."

Like all music, emo was an outlet. The environment of South Wales, especially at the time, was a difficult one for young people. The older generations were still reeling from the socio-economic unrest of the '80s and '90s, the scars of which were patently visible for all to see. Prospects were up in the air and, unless you felt particularly buoyed by New Labour's "education, education, education" escape plan, there was a sense that all roads led to dead ends. On top of that, the shock of 9/11 and subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan created an atmosphere of fear and mistrust. It's not surprising that alternative music exploded at this time, but emo's heart on sleeve lyricism and extreme sonic shifts in particular mirrored the tumult felt by millennials.

The success of so-called emo bands in South Wales dovetailed with the success of so-called emo bands in the United States. Coming predominantly from suburban and rural areas, rather than metropolitan hubs like New York or London, emo bands tapped into and unleashed anxieties unique to their environment. They had a gravitational pull on kids who felt adrift, who were looking for community and identity – a place to call home. While emo bands were by no means limited to South Wales, the high concentration of bands coming out of the area mirrored the high concentration of American bands coming out of New Jersey. There was something about these working-class post-industrial areas that compounded feelings of frustration and alienation. They produced a lot of bands that channelled those feelings, and had a latent fanbase waiting for the right outlet. Indeed, the character of South Wales felt so similar to that of New Jersey that when Thursday went on hiatus, vocalist Geoff Rickly formed a band called No Devotion with the remaining members of Lostprophets, the group bonding over shared sensibilities, humour, and outlook as well as musical influences. In his biography of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, author Roger Lewis writes



that "the Welsh are supreme at being actors and actresses because flamboyance is suppressed; it is the guilty secret, which bursts out now and again in lunatic ways, quick and fierce." The same can be said for its music, which perhaps explains why the area produced so much emo – itself a fierce and flamboyant subculture. By the mid-2000s the valleys had become such a notable hub for emo it spawned a music festival called *The Full Ponty*, which brought everyone from homegrown talent to US major label acts like Silverstein and Paramore to a park just off Pontypridd high street. It only ran for two years in 2006 and 2007, but it's strange to think that Hayley Williams performed within spitting distance of Woolworths.

Most Welsh bands originating in the late '90s and 2000s have had enduring success: Funeral For A Friend became the posterboys of emo in the UK, putting a regional stamp on a scene that had previously felt like a strictly American import. They developed huge fan bases across Europe, Japan, and Brazil. Bullet For My Valentine now counts Margot Robbie among their most ardent supporters. Though they didn't benefit from the major label ecosystem the same way other bands did, Douglas, Dopamine, and Jarcrew have all reunited for sold-out shows in recent years. As a whole, the scene's influence can be seen on contemporary post-hardcore bands like Holding Absence and Casey. But its greatest impact is also its least quantifiable: it gave teenagers growing up in shithole towns with heavy feelings and few outlets, something to do on a Friday. *ralph*

HiTech's Hot Ones

A heady mix of good times, techno and Hennessy, Detroit's HiTech is a collaboration between DJ/producer/rappers King Milo, Milf Melly and 47 Chops. Known for their chaotically fun, high-energy shows, we thought they'd be the perfect people to make a Ralph playlist.

okayyy
username & Pax
It's a Throw
Pretty Liyah
SR2ODET
Blksmiith
Shut Up
Nettspend
Inergee
Rio Da Yung Og & Rmc Mike
Calculator
Drego & Beno
Bop It!
BabyTron, Drego & Beno
Freak Hoe
Speaker Knockers
Outro
Ras G
Viking
SahBabii

HiTech's new mixtape *HONEYPAQQ* will be out in March.
Give them a follow for all the latest HiTech updates @hitechdetroit

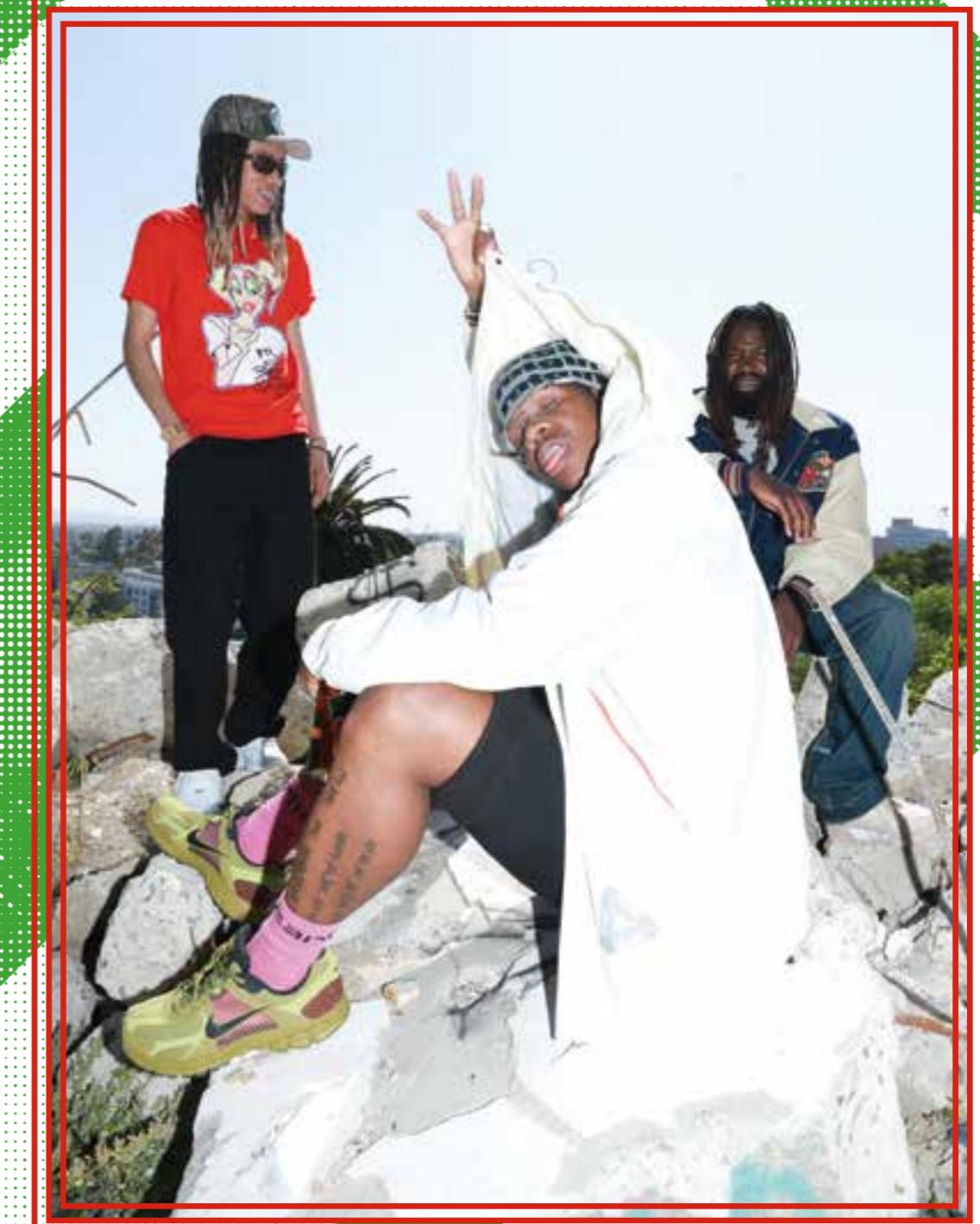


Photo by Alex Free

SCAN TO LISTEN





THAT'S
A WRAP!

THAT'S
A WRAP!

THAT'S
A WRAP!



As well running the *Found Footage Festival*, Nick Prueher has an amazing collection of jackets given as gifts to cast and crew working on iconic films and TV shows. With 60 jackets in his locker, he's taking them on tour, calling it the *Museum of Cast & Crew Jackets*. He's got a logo and everything. And we thought it would make a perfect *Ralph* fashion feature.

THAT'S
A WRAP!

Photos by Matthew Salacuse

THAT'S
A WRAP!



Nick wears Small Wonder



Nick wears The Wonder Years



Nick wears *Miami Vice*



Nick wears *Unsolved Mysteries*

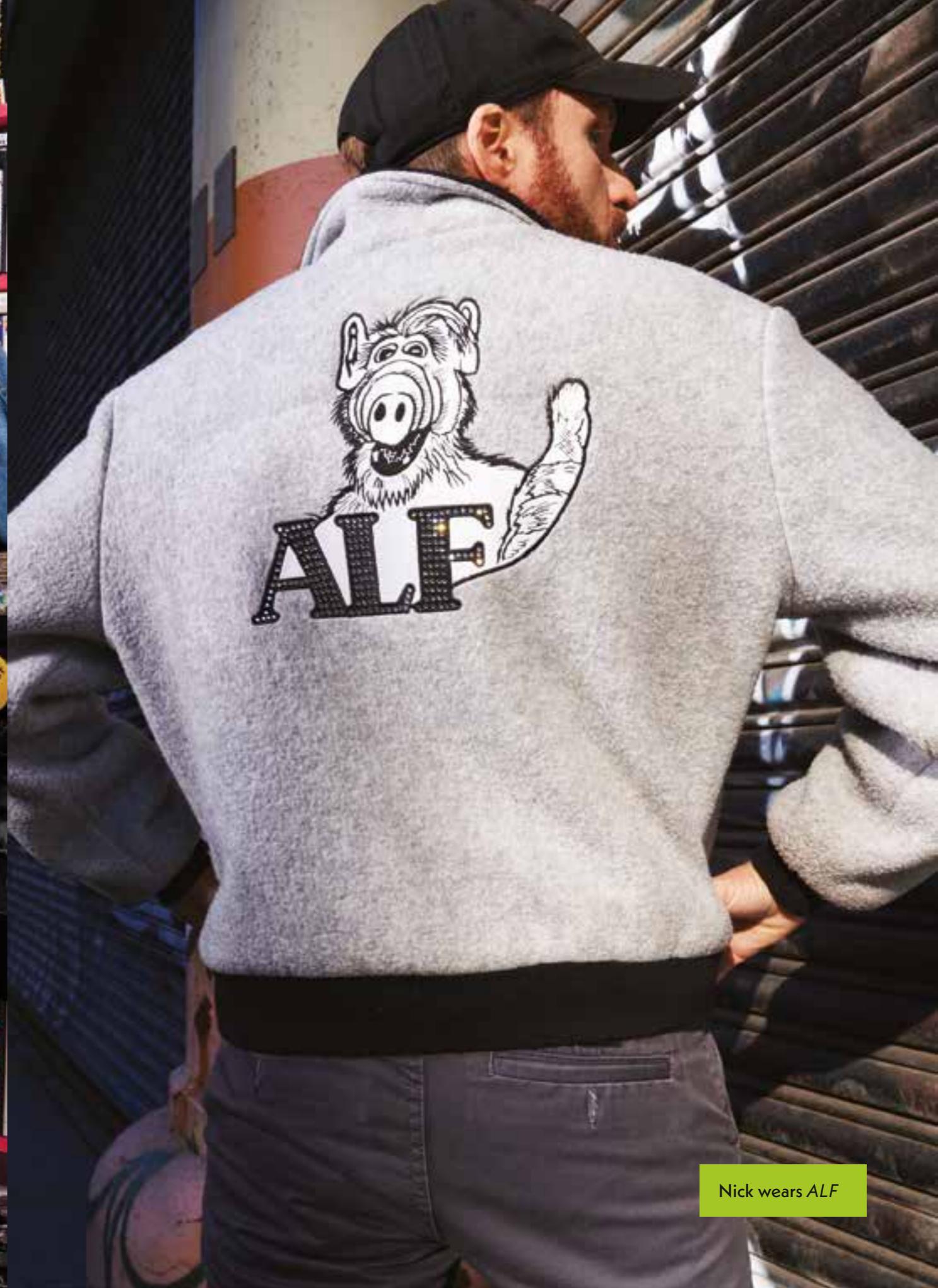


Nick wears *The Thing*





Nick wears *Married With Children*



Nick wears *ALF*

FRIED CHICKEN HA
FREE DELIV



Nick wears Family Ties



Nick wears Howard The Duck

TREVOReY TREVOrT CArNEY

Ralph Editor, Josh Jones, learns that you shouldn't start an interview with award-winning podcaster, best-selling author and mind of a generation, Blindboy Boatclub, with an existential opening question...

Words by Blindboy Boatclub
Photos by Karen Cox



Josh: How do we know what is real?

Blindboy Boatclub: There was a 9th-century Irish monk by the name of John Scotus Eriugena, who concluded that reality was a type of video game that God would rage quit and reboot. Everything we understand to be reality is a type of code, programmed by God into this game called reality. Eriugena wrote that God is the only reality. What we humans experience is the “essence of his divine manifestation,” not reality – more like a video game that God created. We live within the perceptual confines of this illusion, and we have no possible way to understand, comprehend, visualise, or verbalise the actual reality that God inhabits.

I was thinking about Scotus Eriugena last night, particularly his work *De Devisione Naturae*, while playing *Red Dead Redemption 2*. It's a Western game, set in America around 1890 – you know it. *RDR2* is very unique in that it truly feels like a detailed simulation of a reality. Objects don't seem to spawn like in other games; they exist permanently in the world. I was drinking digital pints in the Valentine Saloon when these pixels of peach sunrise crawled across the wall at about eight times the speed of my sunlight. Beautifully sobering. This meant that it was dawn in the game engine. Drinkers began to leave. I heard the jingle of shops opening outside. Hooves clopping. I was overcome with a weird shame feeling – a “what the fuck am I doing with my life?” feeling – the one you get when you leave a house party and it's bright outside. An incredibly drunk fella walked past me and rubbed off my shoulder. He was leaving the pub, so I decided to follow him. He looked to be a labouring man by the cut of his clothes. He stumbled out through the saloon doors, and I listened to the creak of his steps on the pine decking, then a slurpy thud when his feet sank into the hoof-pocked mud, staining the cuffs of his pants. I could smell the fucking mud in my mind—the farty ether you get on a Sunday at a festival. He stopped down a grass

alleyway and leaned against the wooden slats of a building. Before long, the poor fucker started puking on his shoes. Stringy, green puke. I marvelled at the detail of it. I waited from a distance and watched him vomit. When he moved on, I stared at the ground where he'd stood to see if his vomit was still there. It wasn't. The pixels didn't stick in the electronic mud. He proceeded up the back of the Valentine Saloon, stumbling and mumbling a tune to himself. I followed him more. The dawn light was at a higher angle now, with a blue-cheese beige-ness about it. It was 8am. Since we left the pub four minutes ago, two hours had passed in the town of Valentine. The previous day, I'd found a Viking hatchet in an old tomb north of Annesburg. I hadn't used it as a weapon yet. The man kept walking up the stretch of grass at the back of the Valentine shops. This area is a blind – you'll rarely meet another person there. I regretted following him. The drink had him too slow. I should have picked another person to follow, a faster walker – he was frustrating me. The sound of multiple grunting caught my ear. There's a small pig enclosure at the back of the saloon. I decided in that moment that I'd kill the drunk man by splitting his head open with the Viking hatchet, and then I would place his body in the pig pen. The pigs will eat the dead body if you do this. I wanted to watch the pigs eat him until he was bones. Nobody would see it. It wouldn't impact my ‘wanted’ level. Even though the pig pen was at the back of the sheriff's office, I'd get away with this. The man was leaning against an old wooden telephone pole now, as if he were taking a break from the slog of the journey. He was searching through his pockets like he'd lost something important. Very drunk. Clothes caked with mud from all the falls along the way. A stagecoach moved past him – a wheel the height of his shoulders, four big horses with good speed.



I thought about all the times I'd walked home blind drunk over the years. The dangerous situations I'd put myself in. The near-death misses that I don't even remember. When I pulled back the hatchet and focused the red reticle on the crown of his head, I chose not to do it. Why kill him and feed his body to the pigs for the empty spectacle of it when I have the power to protect him instead? I had entered a parasocial relationship with this drunken man. He pushed himself off the wooden post and sauntered up the hill towards a little timber shack on the outskirts of Valentine. The sun was high now. He sat down on the front porch in a stupor, then instantly glitched into sobriety. Upright, alert, the man stared at me and said, "What are you doing here?" I had witnessed something I wasn't supposed to see. In game design, this glitch is called a "level of detail behaviour transition", where the non-playable character (NPC) switches states within their AI behaviour loop, and player immersion is lost. John Scotus Eriugena would call this an "imperfect theophany" in the divine emanation – a flaw that only God could witness. I left the man and whistled for my horse. I then rode back and reached camp at about noon. When I arrived, I was informed that the stew was ready. In *Red Dead Redemption 2*, your character must eat food to keep themselves sated. At base camp, there's a big pot of stew that will replenish your character's reserves. The stew reminded me of chilli con carne. It was dinner time in my living room as I watched my game character eat his stew on the flatscreen television. Memories of red onion bubbling in butter flew into my head – the petrol allure of cumin when it hits hot fat, cinnamon sticks, oregano crisping, and then fold in the raw mince before you burn the paprika. "Fuck this, I'm making myself chilli con carne for dinner," I said out loud to my television. I paused *Red Dead Redemption 2* and sorted myself a chilli in the kitchen with some basmati rice. I returned to the living room about 30 minutes later, brandishing a plate of chilli so that I could eat it while playing *Red Dead* – a perfect evening.

As I moved toward the couch, I bumped my shin off a footstool. My body jarred a little, and a tablespoon-sized lump of chilli con carne fell from my plate and splattered on the wooden floor in front of my TV. Red and irregular like a melanoma – speckles of beef mince and purple kidney beans, sticking to my floor the way digital vomit doesn't. "Fuck sake, I'll clean it later," I said. I pressed play on *Red Dead Redemption 2* and took incremental spoons of delicious chilli into my body, reviving myself just like my on-screen character. I walked toward the edge of a little hill called Horseshoe Overlook, where our camp was situated, and watched sunlight break through fat, grey clouds and stain the valley below with lime-green patches. Nervous deer pranced around the stones of a shallow creek, and I wondered if I could hit them with a bow and arrow from this height. Would it be cruel and irresponsible? I thought about the drunken man in the shack near Valentine. Would he return to the saloon tonight? Is he a permanent fixture? A theophany in this emanation? Or did he just spawn because I was there to see him, and he never really existed in the game? The clouds over the valley below told me to visit the man again tonight. But the splatter of chilli con carne on the floor in front of my television was pulling me away from the mountainside. I thought about how many paper towels I'd need to clean it in one scoop. Will Cillit Bang be involved? I thought about how cleaning chilli from the floor with paper towels is a bit like wiping my floor's arse, and how disgusting that is. And also, if my house had an arse, it would be the chimney, not the floor. The floor is a house's belly, and the wind wipes the chimney's arse. I was procrastinating hard, distracting myself from cleaning the chilli con carne. It's not even that difficult. What am I afraid of? Why am I a bit uncomfortable?

When I was a child in Ireland in the '90s, chilli con carne came from Uncle Ben's jars, and it was ferociously fancy and exotic. My





**“The chilli triggered
memories of my
shirtless father
standing bare-chested
in the kitchen with his
multiple belly buttons,
accusing my dinner
of being a man called
Trevor Carney”**



ma would only buy it if it was on sale, and we ate it once every few months with mashed spuds as a real treat. My da was an old da, in his 60s. His appendix exploded when he was three years of age – severe blood sepsis, requiring emergency surgery from a veterinarian in a coal shed in rural West Cork. He should have died as a toddler. It fucked him up in the head a bit and gave him lifelong issues with digestion.

He couldn't eat any spicy food at all. He refused chilli con carne whenever my ma cooked it. "It will slice the belly off me," he'd say. My da would lift up his jumper and reveal an operation scar from the 1930s that made him look like he had lots of different types of belly buttons. The spectacle of his mutilated stomach would put me off my chilli con carne. My ma would cook him sausage and egg instead. Once, in the summer, he ate it topless with all his belly buttons on show. "Kidney beans, kidney beans, kidney beans. Are these little kidneys?" I'd think to myself at a young age. My da hated chilli con carne so much that he pretended he couldn't pronounce it. "Trevor Carney," he'd call it. Trevor Carney was a man he knew from work. "Are ye all eating that Trevor Carney muck?" he'd say. "Trevor Carney will slice up my insides if I go near him. Look at my scars. I was only three when they did that to me. The bishop had to be called." My father died of a brain tumour when I was 19, and I have trouble remembering him because it was so long ago now.

My character on *Red Dead Redemption 2* stood static, surveying the valley, which was purpled in the dusk. Hours had passed in the game, in the 15 minutes it took me to try and accurately remember my dead father. A frown in my brow informed me that my reluctance to clean the chilli con carne from the floor was an expression of complicated grief. I attempted to respond to the adult problem of a stain with the inertia of childlike helplessness. In transactional analysis psychology, this is called unconsciously role-playing a script from childhood.

The chilli triggered memories of my shirtless father standing bare-chested in the kitchen with his multiple belly buttons, accusing my dinner of being a man called Trevor Carney. Wonderfully eccentric. I'd love to laugh with him about it now. But the last time I spoke to my da, I was 19 – a kid – nearly two decades ago. I have no lived experience of speaking to my father as an adult. It is unknowable because he's gone, and I'm not the same person I was when I was 19. A wave of sadness dragged over me, but with the relief of having untied an inner knot.

I yearned to speak to somebody about this, but there weren't any people in my living room. Just my *RDR2* character, Arthur Morgan, running an idle behaviour loop script in the rain, waiting for me to move his body. How could I possibly explain any of this to him? The sheer complexity of a chilli stain triggering an intergenerational trauma that originates with my father being operated on by a vet in the 1930s? What words or metaphors could I use to describe my three-dimensional living room, where his entire universe hangs flat on my wall? Could he imagine the smell of my chilli con carne when smells don't exist in his reality? I am the unknowable. John Scotus Eriugena wrote: "We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is, because He is not anything. Literally, God is not, because He transcends being." This is apophatic theology. Arthur Morgan could only understand my reality, and my existence, within the limitations of the world of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. He could only describe me by what I am not, in reference to the objects, physics, and time of his reality. I control him, but I must assume that he experiences this as free will. Therefore, it is impossible for him to even begin to imagine my living room or the two-dimensional screen that I use to control his fake three-dimensional world. My smells, my emotions, my memories of my father. Unknowable. I wiped the chilli con carne from the floor and crumpled the tissue in the bin. My horse was slick with rain, and orange lamplight glimmered off his arse.



Darkness fell, and the moon moved so quickly across the sky that I could watch the passage of time. I reached the saloon at Valentine to search for the drunk man. There he was – drinking heavily, mumbling to himself in the same clothes from last night. I noticed a glimmer of relief in my belly. He wasn't gone forever. He existed. He was a permanent non-playable character in the game. I decided to call him Trevor Carney. He drank from a brown beer bottle. The beer inside depleted as he took swigs, but then a new full bottle would spawn into his hand instantly. He didn't pay for the drink. It was a bottomless gift from the gods. He was condemned to drink. Music from a piano filled the air. Trevor Carney didn't do much but lean against the saloon wall and drink beer in a behaviour loop until he was so drunk that he stumbled around the bar. He didn't interact with other NPCs. He was a lonely, annoying drunk. I watched him drink until the peach sunbeams lit up the saloon, then followed him out the door, creaking the wood. He stopped to vomit. He leaned against the post. He returned to his shack. The same as he had done before. I slept in my tent to fast-forward time by 18 hours and returned to the saloon again at nighttime. Trevor Carney was there, drinking himself stupid. In the same spot. I did this three more times and realised that Trevor Carney had no purpose other than to facilitate a feeling of background ambience that would invite me to experience this game as immersive reality. He was doomed to repeat this behaviour loop for as long as I played the game. Waiting on the porch of his shack until sunset. Drinking in the saloon until dawn. Vomiting. Stumbling home. Day in, day out, without fail. This was the painful, miserable, scripted existence of his reality. On the fifth night, I watched Trevor Carney raise the brown beer bottle to his lips, in the same corner of the saloon. I pulled out my revolver, slowed down time, and shot the bottle from his hand. It exploded, glass shattered on the timber floor. Screams filled the air, and I watched every NPC transition to a new behavioural loop. The gunshot triggered a scripted event cascade.

Women and men scrambled for the exits in accordance with their reaction archetypes. Trevor Carney wasn't drunk anymore. He ran from the bar and away from me. Bullets from the police outside whizzed into the bar. I was a wanted man. I escaped on my horse and set up a campfire near a pine forest on the sand of the Dakota River. I'd disrupted Trevor Carney's AI behaviour loop, causing a state de-synchronization within his NPC routine. That night, his spawn point at the shack failed to initialise – his pathfinding script did not return him to his designated home node. I checked myself. I waited by his shack with the silver moon above me and a paraffin torch warming the darkness. He was gone. I walked down to the Valentine Saloon. The barman remembered me as the person who shot the place up. Trevor Carney wasn't there. I wondered if he'd go to an AA meeting and talk about the night that he was almost shot by a crazy man, only for the bottle of beer to stop the bullet. Would he pledge to never drink again because God controlled the bullet that was meant to kill him? Was this a sign from the universe meant only for him? Would people call him crazy for believing this but ultimately wish him well, because this interpretation of reality works for him?

Google just unveiled their Willow quantum computer chip. Willow performed a benchmark computation in under five minutes – a task that would take today's fastest supercomputers 10 septillion years. Google suggested that this could only be explained by the existence of parallel universes. A goal of quantum computing is to create a chip so powerful that it can run a reality simulation. A perfect simulation of our reality where we prepare for uncertainty by testing out plagues, biodiversity collapse, famines, genocides, just to see what happens and how we can respond. We can test out cruelty on the people, animals and ecosystems of our simulated reality, and then we can wonder if our reality is a simulation test for cruelty and pain too.

Josh: ... *ralph*

MAX'S DISPATCHES MAX'S DISPATCHES MAX'S DISPATCHES MAX'S DISPATCHES

DISPATCH #3 - SANDSEND & WHITBY



Royal Fisheries

Fish & Chips
Our specially selected fish and homemade chips made from British produce. Served with lemon wedge and parsley.

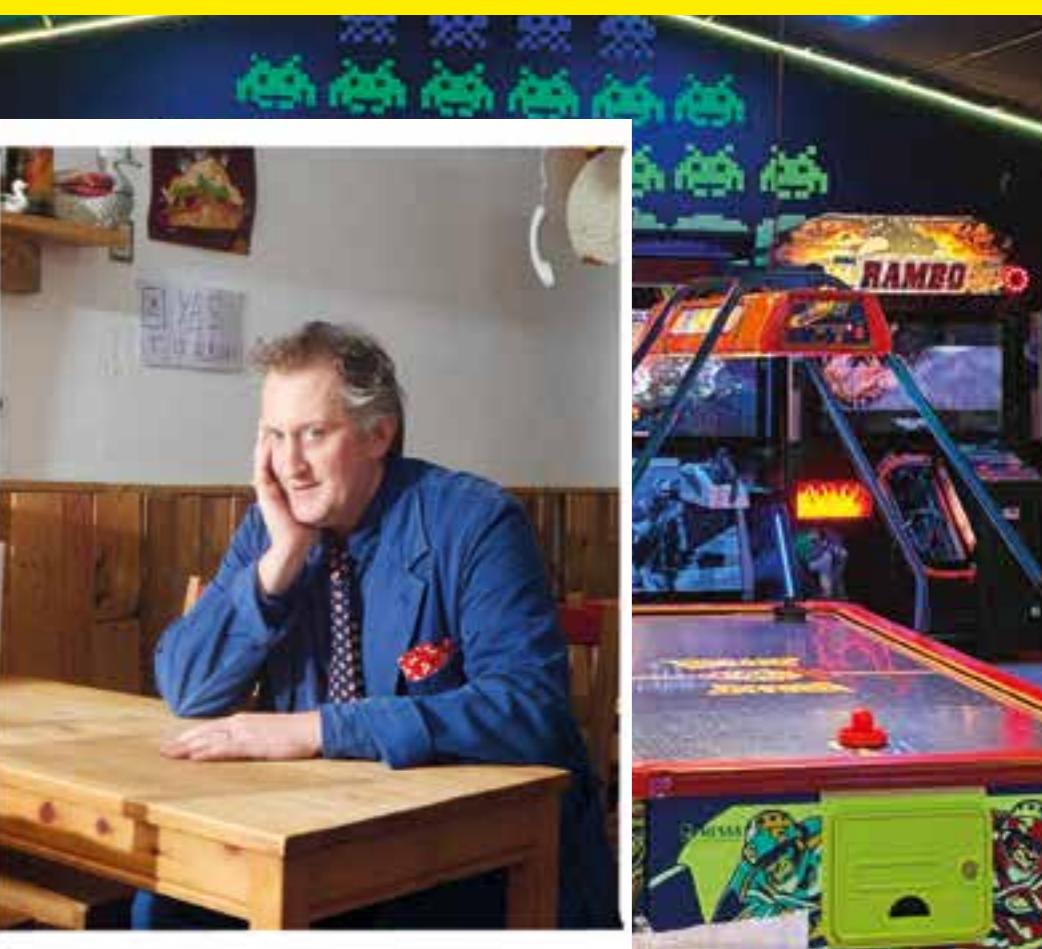
Size	Cod & Chips	Keen's
Small	£13.40	£16.70
Large	£13.90	£17.30
Extra Large	£14.80	£18.00

Homemade Puddings

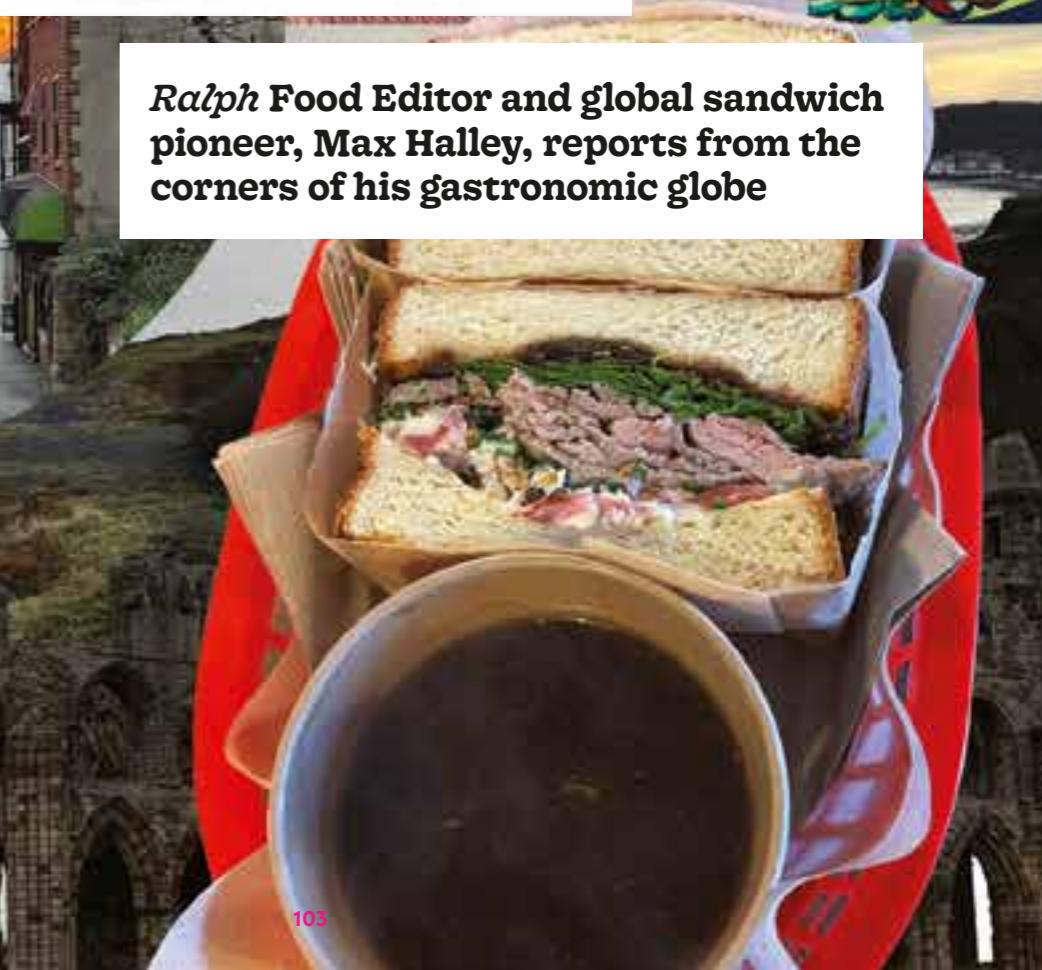
Size	Royal Fisheries Kaiserkuchen	Vanilla sponge sponge with peach, raspberry and lime.
Small	£13.90	£16.70
Large	£17.30	£20.00

ICE fACTORY

Fish from the Sea
Premium fillet of sea bass served with a choice of sides. Top quality fresh salmon served with house salad and new potatoes, and a choice of Mediterranean or Lemon Butter. 102



Ralph Food Editor and global sandwich pioneer, Max Halley, reports from the corners of his gastronomic globe



MAX'S DISPATCHES MAX'S DISPATCHES MAX'S DISPATCHES MAX'S DISPATCHES

"There was a huge moon over the western mountains, and it made the city seem even more mysterious and old, and the great black castle on the ridge stood out in front of the moon. And if there are ghosts anyplace in the world, they must be here..." John Steinbeck, A Russian Journal.

Whitby's ruined abbey – the site of the Synod of Whitby in 664 AD, where the dating system for Easter was agreed – looms over the North Yorkshire town so menacingly that when Bram Stoker saw it, he didn't even bother going to Transylvania, which he had chosen as the location for Dracula's Castle.

Dominant as the abbey is, the sea is even more so. The timing of the tides determine how you get about. Weather offshore makes journeys impossible when the briny menace batters the walls below the road to Sandsend, and seafront houses and restaurants have all manner of things thrown at them by thuggish waves.

Chris, the publisher of this very magazine, and I arrived at our cottage in a small valley in Sandsend, on a jet black night in early December. The place was magic – a few tiny fishermen's homes joined together into what is now quite a swanky affair. We chose our bedrooms, lit a fire and I made dinner (pork chop and polenta) while Chris did a few work meetings.

We got stuck into some wine and talked about the big things in life – like where to go for lunch tomorrow and what pickled item best accompanies fish and chips. His family had come here for holidays when he was a child and I had totally missed how genuinely important this place was to him. "We scattered my Dad's ashes down there," he said, gesticulating at the sea. "I'll show you tomorrow." I told him my mother was ill, and

we talked about our parents and where we'd grown up.

Aged 11 or 12, I asked my mum where she was from, and where she'd grown up. I remember her looking awkward, crestfallen, shuffling a bit and telling me that she'd been born in Copenhagen, but had never lived there, adding "I'm not from anywhere really, I don't know where I grew up."

Her Dad was in the army and they had moved relentlessly. At boarding school in England aged 8 to 18, she traversed the world alone, boarding boats, planes and trains, to get there while her parents lived in England, Belgium, Cyprus, Kenya, Singapore, Germany and other places I've since forgotten.

I knew where I was from (Somerset) and where I'd grown up (Somerset) and telling Chris about it all, I remembered her standing in front of me, not as my mother the adult, but as my mother the child. Little was I to know, that by the end of the week, she'd be dead.

For now though, she wasn't, I even sent her a postcard, and everything was fine. We got up, had some breakfast and went for a look in the church at the bottom of the road. Inside we met a couple from Darlington called Ange and Derek. They were here on holiday and having a lovely time. Standing and talking for a while about the area, my fear of the sea and so on, we looked through the puzzles that were for sale. I asked about smoked fish. There's a lot in Whitby and I wondered if that had anything to do with them coming. Ange wasn't bothered but Derek instantly became animated and explained his kipper cooking method. "Get a frying pan of water to the boil, with some olive oil in it, slip the kippers in, lid on, five gentle minutes and they'll plump right up." We all shook hands, I promised Derek I'd get some kippers in town and try his method the next morning, and we



walked the three miles down the beach to Whitby.

About halfway, we met a man called Martin with a metal detector and stopped to talk to him. He'd found nothing so far that day and said sometimes he didn't find anything at all. I asked if finding things or looking for them was more important. "I found a ring once," he said. "And a crucifix." I said that was wonderful, but he hadn't really answered my question. "I don't care what I find," he replied. "If I get summat, I'm happy, and if I don't, I'm just as happy. I've never been to London. I've got my motorbike and a girlfriend who can cook, what more do you need?"

Dame Joanna Lumley once said about her travels, "Whitby surprised me most. I was captivated by it. There was something about the geography of it, that deep cleft and then this little town..." You come up the slope from the beach and you're in the centre of town. The houses rise steeply, and pleasingly, on both sides of the cleft before you and there's boats and masts and sails all about the place. There are the neon-lit games arcades and crap-filled tat shops you might expect, but you feel like a guest in a real town, not another bloody tourist.

There are many fish and chip institutions calling themselves "Britain's best", so how do you choose? We went for Trenchers, because it looked so nice inside. A sense of permanence is a wonderful thing in a restaurant and this place was built to last – everything's immaculate, and while sat in our booth I was reminded of '50s ice cream parlours and great American diners. There's a lift, which I took of course, to the loo on the first floor and on my return, as Karen (the waitress) promised, my tea had arrived. Out the pot and into the milk, the tea is the colour of He-Man, there's a spare pot of water on the side and a staggering eight sachets of

sugar on the coaster, which might explain the lift. Say what you want, Whitby knows how to enjoy itself.

Fish and chips is not my favourite meal. It always seems more a gift to condimenting than an exercise in deliciousness. Hand made tartare sauce and bread rolls for butties though, and my spirits are lifting. Buoyed further by lashings of vinegar and the success of my fork-jabbing-butter-pat-squeezing-technique, things are really flying. The batter (the bit that often bothers me) on my fish is thin and crisp and dry and much less present than I had feared it might be.

I ask Karen if it's true that the south of England fries fish skinless, and the north (where we are) fries skin on. "Sort of," she said. "You can only fry haddock skin on, not cod, too chewy."

"The tea is the colour of He-Man... and a staggering eight sachets of sugar on the coaster"

Litres of ketchup and handfuls of napkins dispatched, we head to the fishmongers for kippers and get the bus back to Sandsend. We hop off the bus and into our local, The Hart, where barman/local-club-singer-legend Liam tells us we should have gone to Royal Fisheries for our lunch, which we promise we will. It's got dark already so Chris has a mulled wine served with a mince pie they have definitely made themselves, and I have at least one enormous whiskey too many. Before getting back to our cottage we have an odd encounter with a large group of ducks

and stop to look over the sea wall where the beach was before and where the waves are now raging. The power with which the sea hits the wall below us is truly terrifying and I cannot help imagining myself being pulled out to sea by some massive wave and drowned in the darkness of the night.

As a professional sandwicher of sorts, Mary's Sandwich Shop has been on my radar a while. It is on the seafront in Sandsend and has one of the most wonderful views (road and sea) of any sandwich shop anywhere. Gabe, the chef, had a burger van with a cult following during Covid that has morphed (with the help of his brother Cam) into this bricks and mortar joy. Gabe makes the bread, always a good sign, and he has chosen well. It's a pain de mie/pullman type dough with milk in it. Milk makes bread pleasingly soft, but it also makes it caramelise beautifully when toasted. Gabe makes sandwiches during the day and (smash) burgers at night and the menu is strictly bangers. His balancing of hot and cold, sweet and sour, crunchy and soft leads me (vainly) to ask if he has read the book I wrote about sandwiches, which he flatteringly produces. We have such a good time at Mary's that Chris and I pop home in the afternoon and return that evening for amazing beers we've never had before, loads of laughs and those wonderful burgers.

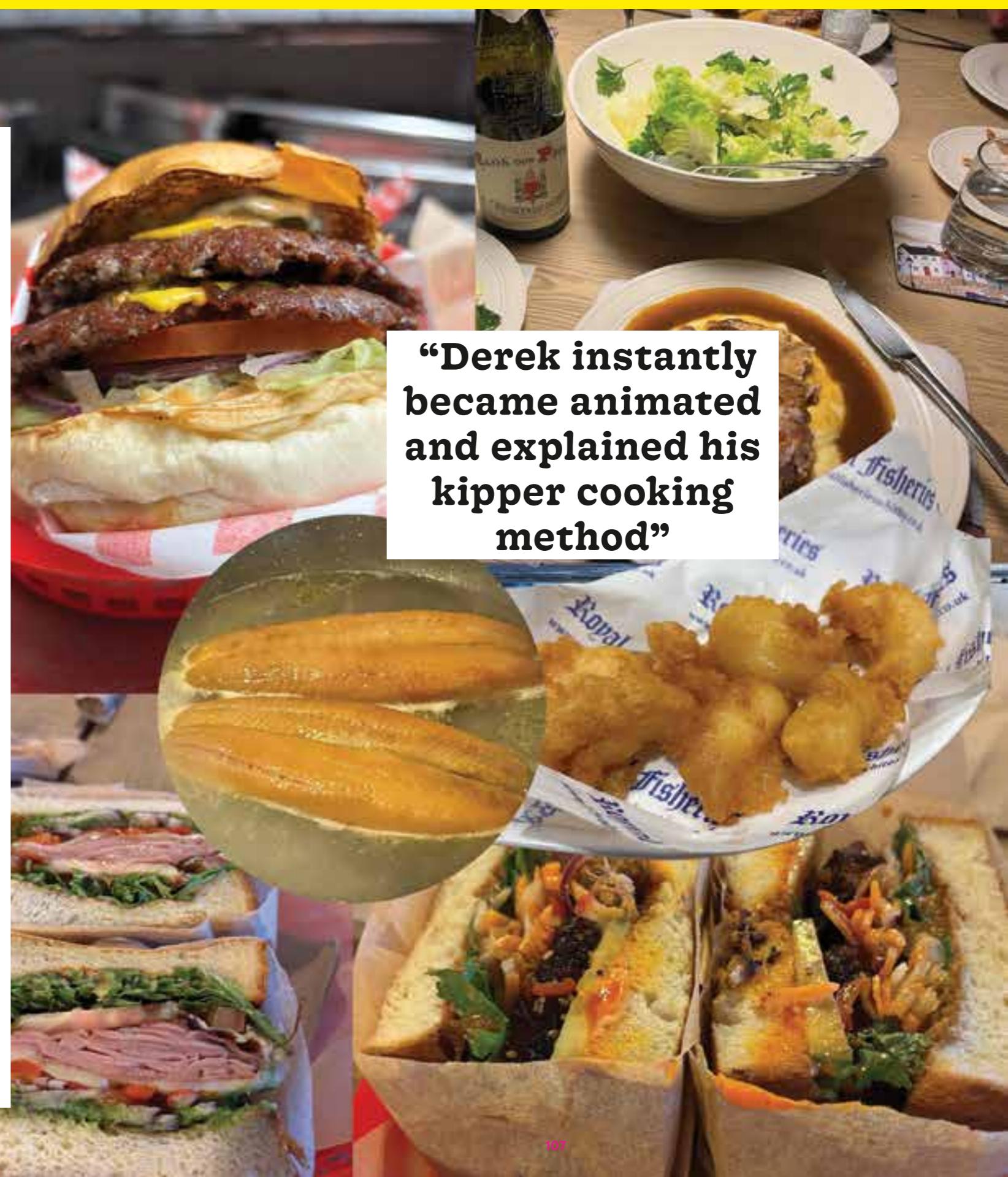
In the morning, I wake up regretting quite how many of those beers I had. I take four ibuprofen and head downstairs to cook the fish. I do exactly what Derek told me to do the day before (but with butter not olive oil) and we have them "plumped right up" on hot buttered toast, and agree it is one our favourite breakfasts ever.

We walk up a path to the cliff tops and find

ourselves in a Martian landscape of grey-brown dunes that I didn't see coming, and Chris tells me this is where they scattered his dad's ashes. I wonder if my mum's alright, give him a hug and we head down to the beach and return to Whitby for our final lunch.

I prefer the dining room at Trenchers, but Liam is right, Royal Fisheries is better. The batter is even more delicate, the fish juicier (less time in the fryer?) and the scampi battered not breadcumbered, which is only allowed when your batter is this good. There are two curry sauces on offer: 'Irish', which is spicier and 'Fruity', which is less hot and includes raisins and sultanas. Both are excellent. The only thing they do here, which I cannot understand, is battered pineapple, as a savoury thing not as dessert. A ring of tinned pineapple battered and fried... who knows?

Coming here has made me think again about holidaying in Britain. It's easy to go somewhere where you speak the language, but that isn't all that binds us together. Here in Sandsend and Whitby, I found places that think of deliciousness like I do, with a beautiful landscape. Growing up in the south west of England, my patronising perceptions of seaside towns are of net curtains, china dogs and poundshop Betty's tea rooms. Here the sea might be brutal and rough, but the people are kind and interesting. As long as you aren't afraid of ghosts and don't really care about beaches, Whitby is as good a holiday destination as anywhere in the Caribbean. Just don't forget your coat, your hiking boots, or your ability to talk to strangers. And make sure you dunk that sandwich of Gabe's, deep down, right to the murky bottom of that pot of hot gravy. *ralph*



"Derek instantly became animated and explained his kipper cooking method"

Queer-coded

We asked Cressie Lawlor, founder and manager of the fantastic Ego Death bar in Manchester, recent recipient of *Bar Magazine's* 'Unsung Hero Award', and host of the *Quest 4 Queer* video series what she would do to put her spin on some iconic queer-coded drinks...





The Samantha

We all love a Cosmo, but it's time to bring it into the 21st century. *Sex and the City* shaped the way we see cocktails, but let's be real – Samantha was always the true icon. While Carrie lost her "girls' girl" status, Samantha remains the ultimate megababe, unapologetically fabulous.

Enter The Samantha: a Champagne Cosmo that's bolder, sexier, and effortlessly chic. This version mixes salted cranberry cordial, triple sec, citron vodka, and is crowned with a crisp brut champagne.

Just like Sam, it's refined yet a little wild – perfect for the modern-day queen in you.

30ml citron vodka

15ml Triple sec

20ml salted cranberry cordial

*Thrown then topped with
champagne*

Served in a cocktail glass

The Pick Me Up

The Espresso Martini is the go-to for a night out, but did you know it was a staple for George Michael? If there was ever a drink that screamed wake me up before you go-go, this is it.

The Pick Me Up takes things to the next level with a Jägermeister twist – bold, unexpected, and undeniably indulgent. It blends Jäger, miso barley syrup, Kahlúa, Chocomel, and cold brew espresso, finished with a dusting of chocolate powder. Easy to drink, deeply rich, and dangerously smooth – just like your obsession with 'Careless Whisper'.

An espresso martini with a WHAM!

30ml Jägermeister

25ml cold brew

20ml Kahlúa

5ml miso barley syrup

50ml Chocomel

Shaken and straight up in any glass

The Kokomo Highball

Absinthe has long been associated with wild nights and artistic hallucinations, thanks to icons like Oscar Wilde, who sipped it religiously in Paris back when it was unregulated. But absinthe doesn't always have to send you spiralling – it can be light, fresh, and effortlessly cool.

Meet The Kokomo Highball, an elegant yet playful take on absinthe. It combines coconut syrup, London Essence roasted pineapple soda, and a touch of absinthe, served over ice in a highball. It's exotic, refreshing, and just the right amount of rebellious – much like Wilde himself.

A lighter side of absinthe.

25ml absinthe

100ml roasted pineapple soda

15ml coconut syrup

Build over ice

Serve in a highball glass

The Mercury Royale

Few knew how to live like Freddie Mercury, and his favourite drinks – champagne, Earl Grey tea, and vodka – deserve a tribute worthy of a rock god.

The Mercury Royale is a champagne cocktail that's as bold and indulgent as Freddie himself. We start by reducing Earl Grey tea with an equal amount of sugar syrup and just a hint of citric acid, then add vodka and top it off with champagne. It's regal, punchy, and unforgettable – just like the man who inspired it.

A champagne cocktail fit for a queen.

20ml vodka

25ml Earl Grey syrup

Build and top with champagne

Serve in a champagne glass

Follow Cressie @egodeathmcr

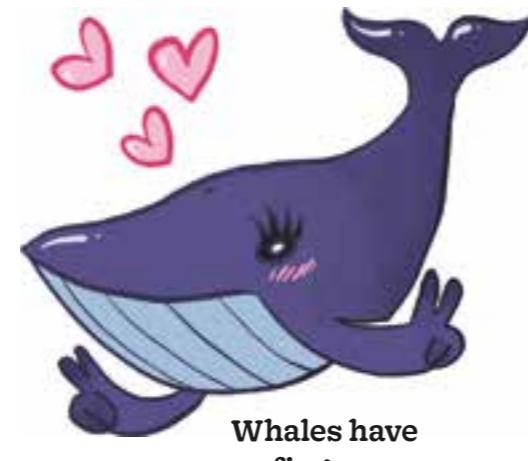
DON'T Google This

Things we heard that might be true

Illustrations by @mttxvr.jpg



1 in 4 doctors have imposter syndrome



Whales have fingers



Some turtles can breathe through their butts



A baby grips fingers to favour itself with the father so the father doesn't eat it



When you are put on hold they can still hear you



You know if a red wine is full-bodied as the bottle will be more curvaceous



There's no proof that smelling burnt toast means you have a medical condition



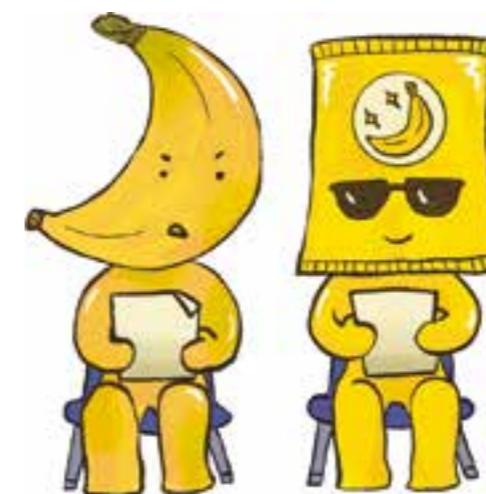
Teeth have a flavour. You're just used to it



Rotten Tomatoes started out as a Jackie Chan fan site



The term "gossip" came from when kings sent errand boys to "go sip" with commoners



Banana flavouring tastes more like bananas than modern bananas



Men are more likely to order cocktails if there are pictures on the menu

INDIA



INDIANIME

The rise and rise of anime in India

What makes something go from niche to mainstream? Cultural moments don't announce themselves – they subtly weave into our routines, infiltrating conversations, and soon, they're everywhere, dominating our social media feeds. Anime, the animation art form from Japan, is at a crossroads in India.

Known for its vibrant visuals and complex storytelling, it appeals to a wide audience, from children to adults, who watch it on both official streamers and pirate services.

Words by Shivam Srivastav



Anime is gaining serious traction in India. Its influences are felt in hip-hop, street fashion, and even in its vibrant film industry. It's no surprise that the most populated country in the world is now the second-biggest market after China for anime, with 180 million fans – and 53 million of them are streaming it.

Sure, it's still battling the "kids' stuff" stereotype and piracy issues, but platforms like Crunchyroll and Sony are all-in, banking on India to fuel 60% of global anime growth. With a \$1.6 billion market and a massive fanbase, India might just become the next anime powerhouse. "India's younger, digitally savvy population is driving a significant portion of anime's growth," says Crunchyroll's Akshat Sahu, Senior Director of Marketing - APAC. "The rapid expansion of high-speed internet, the rise of streaming platforms, and increasing cultural exchange have laid a strong foundation for anime's popularity. Moreover, the ongoing localisation efforts of anime by Crunchyroll in regional languages like Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu are making the medium more accessible, fostering a vibrant and growing fanbase. These factors support Crunchyroll's confidence in India's role as a major growth market."

In the late '90s, India embraced globalisation, opening up cable TV and expanding the entertainment options available to audiences. But, even before that, anime had made its mark, starting with the anime adaptation of *The Jungle Book*, which became a key moment in India's TV pop culture. The launch of Cartoon Network in 1995 saw anime like *Dragon Ball Z*, *Pokémon* and *Doremon* make their way to India, becoming the top cartoons for Indian kids. By the end of the 2000s, anime was a staple, though most viewers didn't recognise these popular shows as anime.

"I was about 8 years old when I first saw *Pokémon*. It used to air on Cartoon Network at 5pm, followed by *Beyblade* half an hour later," Ankit Aggarwal tells me over a call.

Ankit, 26, helps run AnimeTM Talks, one of India's largest anime-focused YouTube channels. "I used to watch the shows while sitting in front of the TV with Rasna (a Tang-like drink) along with hot samosas," he says. Alongside managing social media and brand collaborations, Ankit owns Weeb Central, an animation news page, and also founded the Delhi Anime Club. Remarkably, he juggles all of these passions while holding down his day job as a graphic designer.

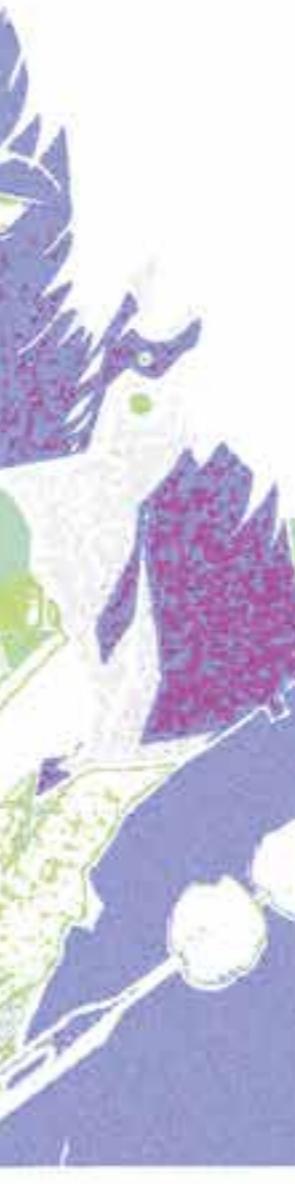
As a teen, Ankit worked for a site hosting free anime streams. A pivotal moment came when a fan group requested to upload their version of horror series *Corpse Party*, which they'd dubbed into Hindi. Impressed, he joined the group and quit the website. In March 2016, AnimeTM Dubbers launched on YouTube, dubbing anime into Hindi. A year later, they created AnimeTM Talks to discuss anime. One of their biggest projects was dubbing fantasy film *Your Name* (*Kimi no Na wa*). "We listed characters and assigned roles, approaching voice-over groups, including VO artists who supported our cause," Ankit explains. "Our editor synced dubs with tracks, often recreating sound effects and music from scratch or isolating them using 5.1 channel files. The entire process took nine months. When we released the dub of the film, the response we got was huge, and our YouTube subscribers soared." Ankit's story is an anecdote as to how anime fandom in India grew organically, driven by passionate fans and the accessibility of the internet, without any targeted marketing or efforts from official channels.

Grouped collectively, 51% of Indian consumers were accessing content from pirated sources, according to Ernst & Young. While theatrical movies dominate, streaming legal or otherwise is rapidly growing. In 2020, after a deluge of copyright strikes, official distributors of anime began to relook at the Indian market.



Many young Indians admit to watching anime on pirated platforms such as Hi Anime, the world's largest anime piracy site, which, as reported by TorrentFreak, has surpassed Disney+ in monthly global visits. These platforms have unified a new wave of anime fans, creating the potential for legitimisation at scale. However they choose to view anime, Indians are hooked.

"My routine was brushing my teeth and watching *Naruto* all day"

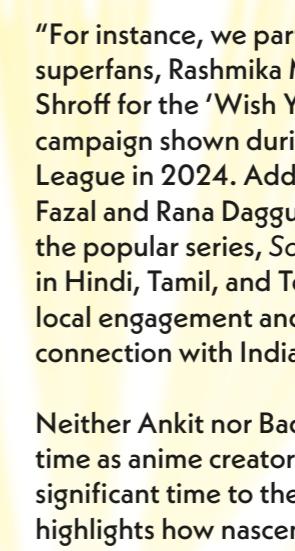


"During the lockdown, my audience kept asking me to watch anime," says Badal Yadav, 27, creator of Bnftv, a YouTube channel with 1.3 million subscribers. Initially focused on comedy skits, the channel pivoted to movie reviews in 2018. In 2019, Badal discovered anime through *Death Note* and *Attack on Titan*. His obsession peaked when he binge-watched the iconic series *Naruto*—420 episodes in just over two weeks. "I was addicted. My routine was brushing my teeth and watching *Naruto* all day," he recalls. This passion inspired him to upload more anime content, eventually launching Anime Cloud, now with over 400,000 subscribers. "I noticed many people consuming anime for the first time through my recommendations," Badal says, highlighting anime's growing reach in India.

As the anime scene continued to evolve, recommendations that once came from TV channels and friends were now coming from social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram, and creators like Badal, who has collaborated with Crunchyroll, are now riding that wave. "We actively collaborate with brands and creators to amplify anime's reach in India," Crunchyroll's Akshat Sahu explains.



"For instance, we partnered with anime superfans, Rashmika Mandanna and Tiger Shroff for the 'Wish Your World Was Anime' campaign shown during the Indian Premier League in 2024. Additionally, actors like Ali Fazal and Rana Daggubati lent their voices to the popular series, *Solo Leveling* characters in Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu, enhancing local engagement and building a stronger connection with Indian fans."



Neither Ankit nor Badal have gone full-time as anime creators, despite dedicating significant time to their channels. This highlights how nascent the anime scene is in India. Yet, the potential is undeniable, with a growing audience and money to be made—particularly in the influential Gen Z and Gen Alpha demographics, combined with a lucrative merchandising segment.

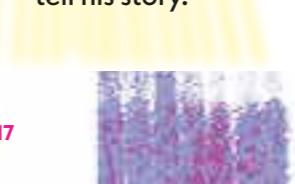
Enter brands.



"Anime is a small, growing space, and brands need to tap into the communities emerging across India," says Abhimanyu Singh, Head of Strategy at Kulfi Collective, who produce branded and original video content. "Gen Alpha and Gen Z often inherit their passions from their parents," he explains. "I'm referring to the urban, metropolitan, English-speaking audience with higher disposable income. They're the type who may cringe at shows like *Chota Bheem* [2D animations] but want their kids to watch quality animation – this is where anime gets passed down."



Meanwhile, anime merchandising is gaining momentum, with brands like Uniqlo, Celio, Virat Kohli-backed WROGN, and popular online stores like The Souled Store offering official anime merchandise.



"By mistake, you have met the right person," Krishna Gupta, 24, tells me standing outside his street-side anime store in Colaba, located in the touristy region of South Mumbai. Something tells me that he's been waiting to tell his story.

"I started watching anime as a kid – *Dragon Ball Z*, *Beyblade* - with my brothers on channels like Jetix and Animax," he says. "But access was tough, and I eventually stopped when I joined the family business selling posters of international bands like The Beatles. Occasionally, we'd receive anime prints by mistake, and they always sold out." That's when Krishna realised anime wasn't just a small craze – it was growing.

Eight years ago, he began selling anime merchandise, starting with A4 prints, badges, and miniatures like *Dragon Ball Z* figures. In South Mumbai, his shop was one of the first to cater to anime fans, keeping prices affordable—posters at ₹100, badges at ₹40. Before the lockdown, he earned ₹60,000-70,000 (£550-£650) monthly, with anime contributing 50-70%. Post-lockdown, that figure rose to ₹100,000, (£950) driven by soaring demand that also lowered prices – miniatures once sold at ₹800-1,000 now go for ₹400-500.

"People call it just a plastic toy, but I'm selling an emotion"

While he's expanded to a bigger store, his street shop remains a hub for loyal customers, including parents introducing their kids to anime. However, he still faces resistance. "People call it just a plastic toy, but I'm selling an emotion," he says. Despite challenges, Krishna remains a pioneer in India's anime merch scene. But as peers embrace online platforms, he feels the FOMO, knowing he must adapt to keep pace.

As I try to process Gupta's countless anecdotes, a brief interaction with a customer at his store offers a glimpse into how anime is quietly seeping into India's popular culture. A college boy arrives to buy a figurine of Gojo, a main character from dark fantasy series *Jujutsu Kaisen*, as a gift for a "special friend" who's a fan of the show. "There's a lot of craze for anime in my college, but I haven't watched it yet," he says, before hurrying off to Gupta's second shop to find the figurine. As he disappears into the crowd, Gupta smirks. "He says he doesn't watch anime but is wearing a jersey from an anime basketball show."

"I used to sell anime T-shirts for ₹400-500 before the lockdown," Gupta explains. "After it became popular, the market caught on, and now T-shirts are mass-produced and sold for ₹200. That's why you see so many people wearing anime clothes—even those who know nothing about anime." If you live in urban India, especially in big cities like Mumbai, Delhi or Bengaluru, you will spot people wearing anime merchandise. It's so prevalent that it has become part of India's "real" street culture. It's also the reason that eventually led to this article. I noticed the rise of anime on the streets but little did I know that it may have come to me in the shape of a fashion trend.

Something changed in the anime audience after the lockdown. It seems to have accelerated the rise of anime in India. "The lockdown period saw a surge in streaming as audiences sought new content," says Akshat Sahu of Crunchyroll. "For many, anime became a source of escapism... this increased exposure introduced anime to a wider audience, accelerating its growth in India." This shift was not only noticed by the platform but also by Gupta and every other street vendor selling clothes.

But all this raises a question: Is anime's future in India limited to consumption, or will it evolve into a culture of creation, capturing a bigger slice of the pie?



Aged seven, Rajorshi Basu was captivated by reruns of classic anime like *Ninja Robots* and *Speed Racer* on Cartoon Network. These shows ignited his lifelong fascination with anime, which deepened as he explored drawing, comics, literature, film-making, and music. With experience in graphic design, digital marketing, and audio projects, Rajorshi founded Studio Durga in 2017 in New Delhi.



Wasting no time, he started developing the studio's first anime feature film, *Karamachakra*, which is India's first fully-fledged anime production. "It took around two years for the movie to be made and, in 2020, we started our promotion campaign. First came the trailer, then the pilot episode broken down into three to four-minute clips, eventually culminating into a full episode," says Rajorshi, who claims Studio Durga is India's first anime production studio.



At some point during this journey, the team had a change of heart. They felt that the 75-minute movie did not adequately capture the scope of the story and left a few unanswered questions. "We are now looking at releasing it in the form of a series. The content of the current movie spans the first three episodes and they have been self-funded. We have chalked out the entire series of 13 episodes and are waiting for something to work out to finish the rest," Rajorshi says.



The experience of talking to possible suitors in the form of streamers has been mixed. Things around anime may have opened up in recent times – the audience has always been there, and creators such as Studio Durga are ready to make content, but the industry is still nascent. "The audience wants it and the creators are ready to make it, but the distribution needs work," Rajorshi explains.



In the meantime, Studio Durga has taken on work from clients, creating hand-drawn 2D animations in the anime style from India, Japan and South Korea.

"We are one of the few players from India when it comes to hand-drawn animation"

"There are a lot of projects that we have worked on for clients, and it's great that we recovered a lot of the money that we spent on the film," Rajorshi says. "We are one of the few players from India when it comes to hand-drawn animation. The current narrative is that India is just a back office incapable of handling the main production. No, we are capable of so much more. And therefore, in our dealings, we will behave in a way that merits that confidence. We want to create a new narrative about India. It's all about changing the brand story."

For streamers, India is a hub for the next generation of anime fans, but the shadows of piracy and the challenge of making anime that truly resonates beyond dubbed dialogues looms large. For brands, it's a bold bet on a future shaped by Gen Z and Gen Alpha – a gamble on an audience craving something different, but not without its risks. For creators, it's a climb up a steep hill, where dreams outpace the opportunities, and bridging that gap requires more than just passion. But here's the undeniable source of optimism: an increasing number of young Indians are falling in love with anime. It's not just entertainment; it's a quiet rebellion against the same old stories they've been fed for years. Anime is subtly weaving its way into the pop culture scene of India. *ralph*

POPCORN PIRATE

We asked our mystery reviewer to cast their eye on the pilot episodes of Rotten Tomatoes' "Top 5 Comedies Of All Time"

Well, well, a brief that makes sense. Well done Mr Editor! I cancelled pilates, got the good socks out and settled in to review these five pilot episodes. I suspect my opinions here will court controversy, but I don't care because A) opinions are not facts, and B) this is in print – you can't find me, and I forgot how to log into the Popcorn Pirate Insta so nothing you say will ever get home.



M*A*S*H Pilot

All I know about this show is that my dad thought it was funny. He's a man of odd tastes, he made us watch *Animal House* when we were like, six years old and "TUCK IN THOSE GODDAMN PYJAMAS" is a childhood catchphrase. But he also talks endlessly about how great *Bad Teacher* with Cameron Diaz is, so he can't be trusted.

I dunno, it's fine I guess. Of its time maybe? Definitely not aimed at me. Sexist while also abstract, sad and a bit bleak. I guess 7.2/10 because that's when it's from and no disrespect but I will say, whichever generation made you, a canned laughter track on a wartime medical drama is weird AF.

CHEERS *Give Me a Ring Sometime*

The greatest Don't Skip intro song of all time. Honestly, I was expecting more innuendo and to be bored, but the Cheers pilot is the pilot against which all pilots must be measured forevermore. It has that nervous shouty quality of a cast freshly minted and doing their best, the excited optimism that maybe this is some bullshit, or maybe it will run for *checks notes*

ELEVEN seasons and become a beacon of its time.
PS Ted Danson's hair is a major carbon sink and should be protected under the EU Nature Restoration Treaty. 9/10

THE SIMPSONS *Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire*

Iconic. No notes.
10 stars.

I LOVE LUCY *The Girls Want To Go To A Nightclub*

I had four negronis last night so this was painfully shrill. It also took darknet-level internet knowledge to find the pilot. There's a story about how the reel got lost and then found and whatever but like I said, four negronis. Give it as many stars as you want. You shouldn't care what I think.

SEINFELD *The Seinfeld Chronicles*

There are some cultural red flags that fly under the radar – liking Seinfeld A LOT is one of mine. The pilot is binary AF and Elaine isn't in it. 2 stars

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&
Rodin

What's wrong Botman?



I AM BAT...
Stop winding me up.



Some bachelor party left my
place in a mess and checked
out late at the weekend



You have 'a place'?



Mmhmm.
It's an 11 bedroom, 7
bathroom place just outside
the city...
It has
a butler.



Why are you renting
my room then?



oh.

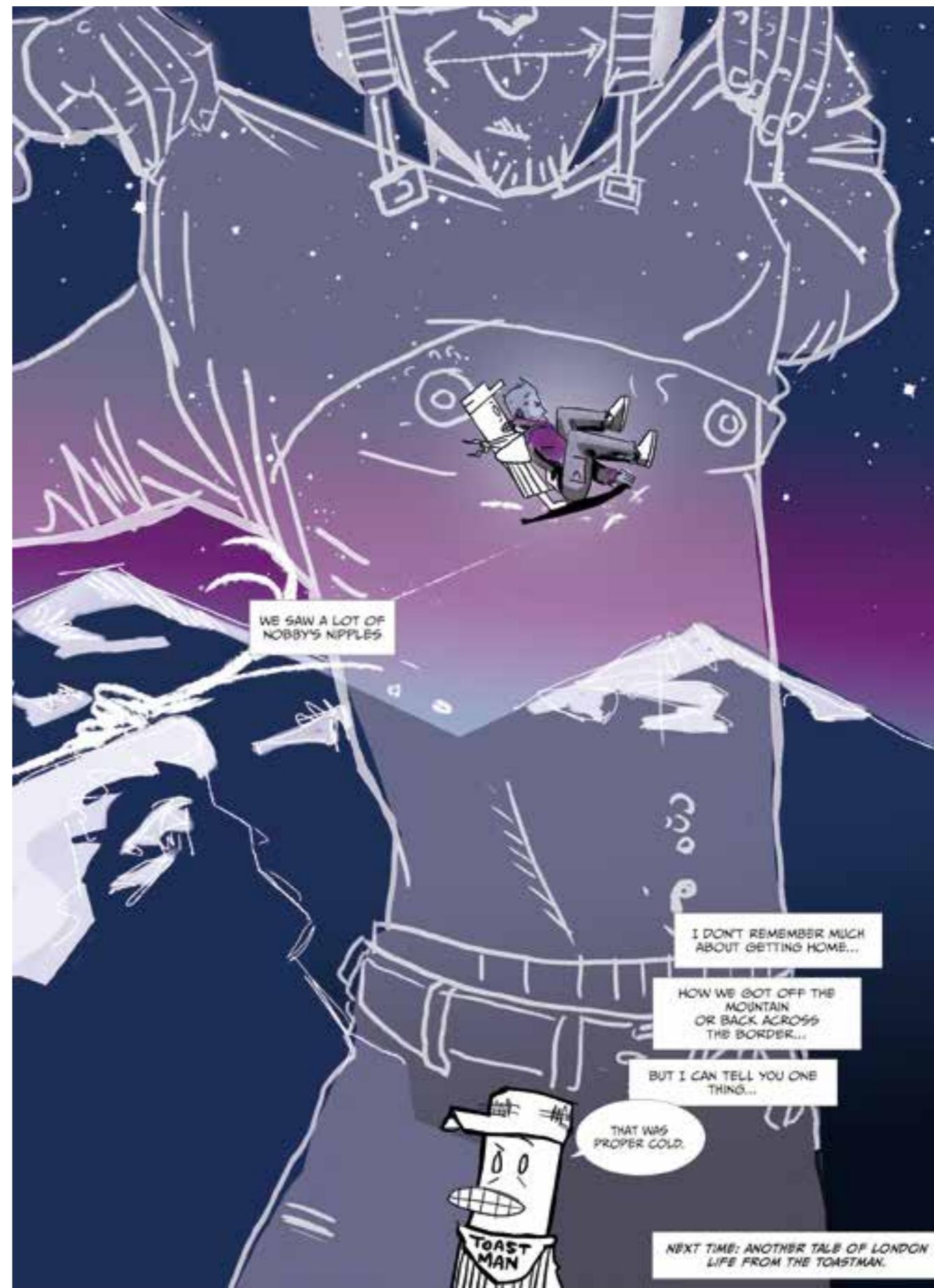
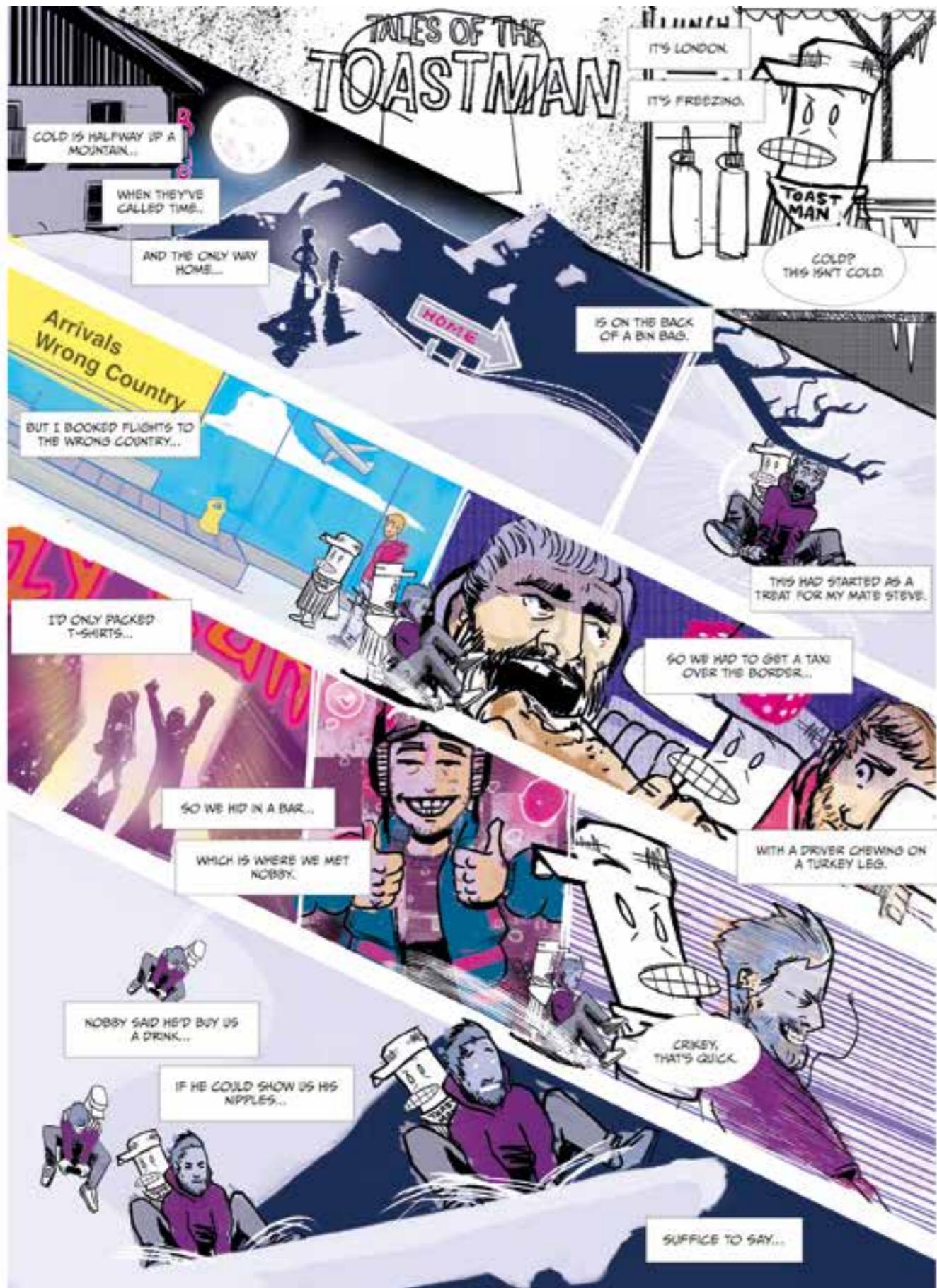


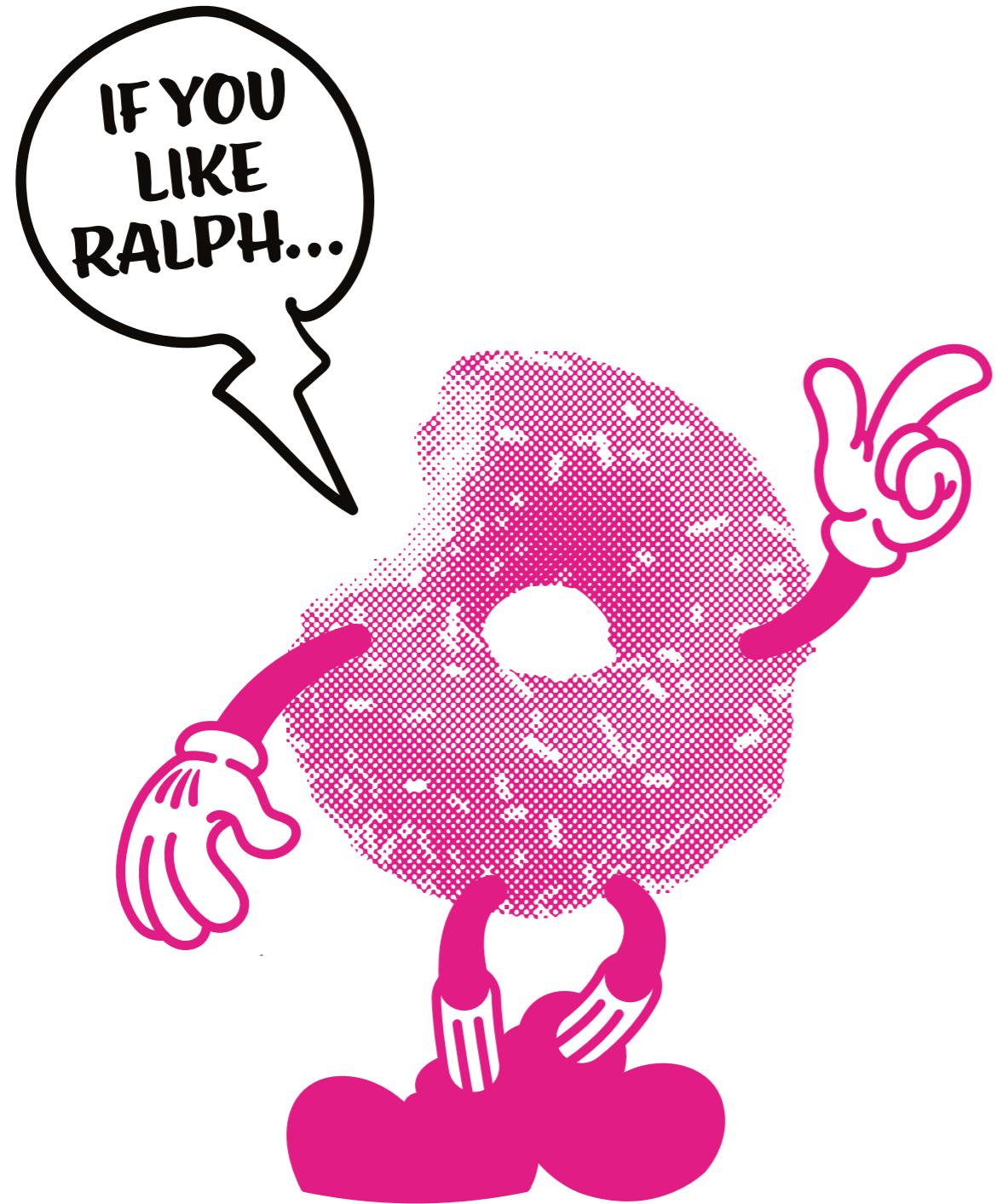
I am vengeance.
I'm in the right.
I am withholding their
deposit.



I am... That Man.





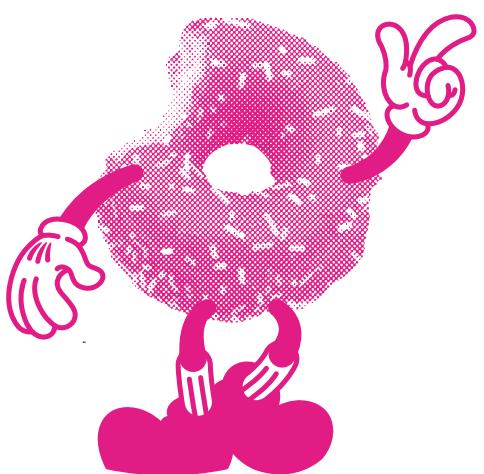


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