



JAKE OWENS - COURTESY VENOM PRISON



Ben Thomas
(right), one of
the guitarists of
Venom Prison,
appears in the
documentary
"Metal Health:
Out of the Pit."

The new film "Metal Health: Out of the Pit"
documents the pain of headbangers.

INTO THE VOID

BY DON HARRISON

ily Rivera grew up in an unsteady home. Times were tight, and his dad's government job kept shuffling the family around. "We never stayed in one place," says Rivera, a burly, tattooed man with a Rasputin beard. "We'd move every two or three years. So I had a hard time putting down roots."

Rivera, guitarist for the Fredericksburg heavy metal band *Spiral Grave*, always felt like an outsider, "a transient." This fueled a deep depression that he struggles with today. "Music became my solace," he says. "That was a safe place I could hide. A sanctuary."

As shown in the 2019 documentary "Metal Health: Out of the Pit" Rivera's battles with depression fit a pattern for many in the music business, especially those who operate in the harder-edged world of heavy metal. He's one of many hard rockers to share their stories in this raw, revealing film.

Director Bruce Moore, 52, a music engineer who has become something of a heavy metal lifestyle chronicler, produced "Metal Health: Out of the Pit" at his home studio in Mechanicsville. He says that he first started thinking about depression and its effects on musicians after the 2017 suicide deaths of Linkin Park's Chester Bennington and Soundgarden's Chris Cornell. A year later, a friend of Moore's, Jill Janus, singer for the band *Huntress*, took her life. "I realized that metal artists are suffering too."

Taking part of its name from the famous Quiet Riot tune "Metal Health: Out of the Pit" features 17

singers, musicians, journalists and fans talking about their battles with depression, and how they've learned to cope with tragedy. Adorned in piercings and leather, affiliated with outfits that have names like *White Heaven Wept*, *Fall and Resist*, *Exmortus*, and *Exhumed*, they confess their personal — as opposed to theatrical — dark thoughts.

"Some of them were abused, others were separated from loved ones or lost somebody," Moore says. A few have witnessed the effects of mental illness firsthand, like Patrick Donovan, guitarist for California's *Toy Called God*, who talks about how the death of his father caused the suicide of his brother. He also recounts the difficulties experienced by two ex-bandmates suffering from bipolar disorder. Donovan stresses that mental illness "affects all of us ... and people can have the same diagnosis and express themselves in very different ways."

"Even Katy Perry fans, teenage girls, will cut themselves," says David Lawrence, a metal fan from Mechanicsville who's featured in the doc. "Depression and mental illness can happen to anyone."

The documentary isn't flashy. Single-shot camera angles capture the subjects. There is no head banging or shredding. Instead, viewers hear a minimal, mournful soundtrack by *Klank*, an industrial metal group from California. A voiceover reminds us of Plato's observation that creativity is a divine madness, and we are informed that artists throughout the ages, from painter Vincent Van Gogh to writer Ernest Hemingway to rocker Kurt Cobain, have committed suicide.

"Studies show that creative artists are the fifth in the top 10 of professions with the highest rate of depressive illnesses," says Jennifer Gilante, a licensed psychologist who appears in the film. (She's also Moore's sister and the film's consultant.) She says that artists in general are more apt to suffer from manic depression, but musicians are three times as likely. That's according to a 2017 study, conducted by London's University of Westminster, of 2,211 industry professionals.

The journal *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* looked specifically at heavy metal listeners. Psychologists Gavin Ryan Shafron of Columbia University and Mitchell Karno of the University of California-Los Angeles found, in an analysis of 551 college students, higher levels of anxiety and depression among listen-

Bruce Moore,
director of
"Metal Health:
Out of the Pit"





Dee Calhoun, frontman of Spiral Grave, is featured in the documentary.

ers of heavy-metal music as compared to non-metal listeners. Even with that, there were no more

underlying levels of anger in metal listeners than in, say, fans of light jazz.

If mental illness is acute in heavy metal musicians and fans, the big question, according to Gilante, is: Does depression attract them to the music, or does it cause their depression?

OUTSIDERS LOOKING INWARD

When Bruce Moore first contacted publicists and media outlets about his potential film exploring depression in heavy metal, he was unsure of the response to expect. "I asked for stories, and boy, did I get them," he says.

He collected them on tour buses, in backstage areas, alleyways, even in his living room. Some participants, like Ben Thomas from Venom Prison, a band from South Wales, sent Moore video confessionals shot in their homes.

The breakthrough interview was conducted outside of Richmond's Canal Club, with Matt Harvey, front-

"DIVING INTO THE DARKNESS HELPS KEEP US SANE."

DAVID LAWRENCE, METAL FAN FROM MECHANICSVILLE

man for the California-based Exhumed. "He just started opening up and telling me his story," Moore recalls. "And afterward, I said, 'There's something here.'" The director soon connected with Tuomas Saukkonen of Wolfheart, a visceral black-metal band from Finland. "He's a real tough guy, but he ended up talking with me in an open and honest way about mental illness, and his suicidal thoughts. He's just like you or me, and he suffers like you or me."

Along with his crew — son Colin, a senior at Lee-Davis High School — he casts larger-than-life metal performers in a different light. "We try to get them to talk about things other than their new album or tour, all of the things you can find anywhere on Google. We show them to be real people." >



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BY DOMINION ENERGY

< INTO THE VOID |



Venom Prison's Ben Thomas says that the life of a working musician can, in itself, cause depression. "You're stuck in a miserable van most of the time," he says, citing poor food, lack of sleep and relationships left behind. "And unlike most people, you can't run to H.R. if you have a problem."

Subjects featured in the documentary say that the bleakness and darkness of the music doesn't fuel the madness, it helps to elevate it.

"Diving into the darkness helps keep us sane," metal fan David Lawrence says. "What draws us to the music is the sense of isolation. We don't fit in. But, with metal, it's OK to be an outsider."

Lawrence, a longtime journalist who works as an editor and writer at the Mechanicsville Local newspaper, says that loud music helps him cope with a childhood of abuse and suicidal thoughts. "And alcoholism," he adds. "Alcohol made me feel OK for the moment. Like poison ivy. Even when you shouldn't scratch, it feels good to scratch."

At 58, this lifelong Kiss fan, and the author of two books, is sober and taking medication, and he's learned to

Patrick Donovan
of the band Toy
Called God

listen to all kinds of music — the Band is a particular favorite. But metal is the music he reaches for when things get bad. "When I've had the gun barrel in my mouth, it's always metal that gets me through."

"Metal Health: Out of the Pit" is being released at a time when the topic of depression is top of mind in the industry.

The Moores recently made a discovery while in New York when they attended a concert by a band traveling with their own counselors. "They were offering free consultations to people and encouraging them to talk about their anxieties and depressions ... I said to my son, 'Holy cow. Look at that. That's perfect.'"

Colin Moore, working with his dad on the documentary, came away with the feeling that heavy metal is cathartic. "it's almost like a therapy of sorts to these guys, getting the anger and aggression out. It hits deep in some of them, and the music that comes out of them communicates to the audience. You can feel it." ■

The documentary may be seen at no charge at youtu.be/ydZp3lV068Y.

COURTESY BRUCE MOORE

VIKINS STEW, ANYONE?

SHOWCASING OTHER ASPECTS OF METAL

Bruce Moore, the director of "Metal Health: Out of the Pit," is also known for capturing a different side of heavy metal music.

"Brutally Delicious," his web series and its accompanying podcast, serves up a cooking show that's not really about music: It's more about interesting people making edible things. The online cooking show is a place where metal and hard rock musicians serve up their favorite home-cooked meals. You'll find David Ellefson from Megadeth talking about his coffee company and how to make cold press, Australia's Psycroptic concocting a delicate grilled brie sandwich with raspberries and chocolate chips, and Iron Maiden's Blaze Bailey preparing English fish sticks, among many others.

"It's sort of like 'Headbangers Ball' mixed with 'Rachael Ray,'" Moore says.

His other projects include more documentaries on heavy metal — "Metal Missionaries," about the intersection of Christian rock and Satanic black metal, and "Women of Metal." Both are available on Moore's YouTube channel for Brutally Delicious Productions, where you'll also find regular installments of "Brutally Delicious."

Once, in his younger days, Moore was knee-deep in another kind of music, hip-hop. He worked as an engineer in New York City studios like the Hit Factory, manning the controls for, among others, Arrested

Development, Keith Sweat, Heavy D and Public Enemy. "I worked with Chuck D for a long, long time," he remembers.

But it wasn't Moore's kind of music. "Heavy metal is what I grew up on. I guess you could describe me as a 50-year-old headbanger. I grew up to listening to [Iron] Maiden and [Judas] Priest."

After getting married, he and his wife, Denise, settled in Florida, where he worked for 18 years in a Clearwater mastering house. Then Denise got a job in Virginia. "So we moved here, and I found work as a police dispatcher. I was with Hanover for 12 years, and now I'm [in emerging communications] at VCU. The schedule affords me the opportunity to do other stuff."

"Metal Health: Out of the Pit" covers more serious territory than his other music works, but it reinforces Moore's belief that, underneath the tough exteriors, demon imagery and blasts of Marshall stacks, heavy metal musicians are just like everyone else. "And they hurt like everybody else," he says. —**Don Harrison**



Top: April Rose of Auditory Armor in "Women of Metal"; bottom: still from "Brutally Delicious"



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THE INSTITUTE FOR
CONTEMPORARY ART
AT VCU HAS RECEIVED
NATIONAL ACCOLADES
FOR ITS ARCHITECTURE
AND EXHIBITIONS, YET
SOME RICHMONDERS
JUST DON'T GET IT

BY DON HARRISON

Abstract Mission

DEPENDING ON YOUR VIEW, Virginia Commonwealth University's Institute for Contemporary Art can look like the ornate lair of a Marvel Comics villain, a short stack of pyramids kicked over or (if you're a modern art connoisseur) the gnarly deconstructions of Irish sculptor Matt Calderwood. But today, from all perspectives, this 41,000-square-foot congregation of slabs and cubes looks dark and lonely.

In mid-March, like other area cultural institutions, the 2-year-old museum shut its doors and canceled all remaining programs and exhibitions for the spring semester due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"These are unprecedented times," says Dominic Willsdon, executive director of the ICA. "We feel fortunate to have the

support and community that a large, public institution such as VCU can provide during the crisis." The soft-spoken, U.K.-born administrator maintains that when things do eventually reopen, the public will need the modern art it showcases more than ever. "The ICA is one of those institutions that is meant to be sensitive to what is changing in the world," he says.

It should be a time of celebration for the ICA, which was named as one of America's "Ten Best New Museums" by USA Today earlier this year, the only contemporary art museum on the list. It also earned a rave from The New York Times, calling last year's group exhibit "Great Force," which examined white privilege and African American resistance, one of the art world's unmissable events.

Willsdon, who came to the ICA from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Tate Modern in London, was hired in September 2018 to oversee a fledgling institution that had, as art market website ArtNet described it, a "troubled history," mainly because its first executive director, Lisa Freiman, stepped down three months before it was to open.

"I think Dominic was a really smart choice," says Ashley Kistler, the former director of VCU's long-running Anderson Gallery, and current chair of Richmond's Public Art Commission. "People have to remember that he's only been in place for a year and [four] months and he inherited a pretty chaotic situation, and that doesn't change overnight. It's so ironic that [the ICA] was really getting on their feet in a >

vital way and then this calamity [of COVID-19 came along].”

One of the ICA exhibits currently on hold is “Xenogenesis,” created by a two-man art collective called The Otolith Group. Originally slated to run through July, this expansive show was the group’s first major exhibit in the United States. Its impressionistic assembly addresses, to quote the program notes, “contemporary global issues: how humans have shaped the natural world; what ‘we’ have inherited from colonialism; the unresolved histories of global Asian and African diasporas; and how ‘we’ are changing in response to new technologies.”

The ICA staff didn’t curate it — as it has with the other exhibits it has presented since opening — but “Xenogenesis” is in

to the city,” says Kistler, who served as a liaison between the university and architect Stephen Holl during the ICA’s planning. “I would say that the building is difficult in some ways ... some exhibits just won’t work there.” That’s not unusual for a modern art showplace, she says. “It shouldn’t be like the Virginia Museum [of Fine Arts] or any other museum. It should be a totally different animal.”

“The building itself is such a departure from what we’re used to here in Richmond,” says Enjoli Moon, founder of the Afrikana Film Festival and assistant curator of film at the ICA. “Looking at it, a person might perceive a level of pretense ... but there’s been such a conscious effort here at the ICA to totally dismantle those traditional ideas that would circulate in

determined, the idea was to erect a structure that was different from anything else in Richmond. “The planning for a state-of-the-art exhibition facility connected to the university and to the School of the Arts had been talked about for 20, 25 years,” says Kistler. “When Joe Seipel became dean of the School of the Arts, he took up the charge and helped make it happen ... he deserves enormous credit.”

Now back to being a full-time sculptor, Seipel, the ICA’s retired “father,” shifts credit to the late Beverly Reynolds, owner of the Reynolds Gallery, who had successfully represented several VCU faculty artists to the greater art world. More than a thousand private donors — including Pam and Bill Royall, Kathi and Steve Markel, Patsy Pettus, and True Luck —

“I think people are still trying to figure out what’s up with that big building on the corner.”

—ENJOLI MOON, ASSISTANT CURATOR OF FILM

line with the challenging, enigmatic, political offerings that patrons have witnessed at the institute in its first two years. While programming is paused and as VCU unveils a new strategic plan for the ICA — and while we ponder a changed, post-COVID-19 environment, the questions are worth asking: Is this what Richmond expected when the ICA made its splashy debut two years ago? Is this what Richmond wants in a contemporary art museum?

‘A TOTALLY DIFFERENT ANIMAL’

First, there’s that audacious building, meant to be a signpost as well as a monument to Richmond’s rise as an arts destination. “It was designed to be a gateway

an art space. We aren’t here for that. We want to offer people a fresh way of experiencing an arts institution.”

The outward shell looks imposing and cool — even icy — but it feels friendly when you step inside. With its welcoming lobby/meeting space, ornate staircase and four adaptable gallery spaces, Holl’s hulk was built to capture light and to feel inviting. Stephanie Smith, the ICA’s chief curator, says the museum’s central space was purposefully designed to feature two entrances, one from the campus side near Monroe Park, the other from Broad Street. “This shows that the ICA is open to a wide swath of the city,” she says.

Long before its current location was



P. 80-82: JUSTIN CHESNEY

raised \$37 million toward the \$41 million total building cost, but Reynolds led the way and had the vision. "When she had something in her head, she was doggedly determined to make it happen," Seipel says.

VCU's on-campus Anderson Gallery had shown noteworthy work over the years, he says, but the building wasn't handicapped-accessible. (The Anderson recently reopened to showcase student work.) "It's an old stable turned into an art gallery. The ICA was designed to be something else. It was meant to show new work being done by artists on the cutting or bleeding edge of contemporary art, both local artists and international."

The museum is a separate entity within the VCU system, with its own \$4.1 million annual budget, disconnected from the

School of the Arts. That has puzzled some. "The School of the Arts, as the teaching arm of the institution, should be involved in what kind of art they are showing," says Lorna Wyckoff, founder of Style Weekly and an ICA donor, echoing the sentiments of others interviewed for this story.

"There aren't a lot of models to look at for this kind of museum," Seipel maintains. He had originally wanted the ICA to operate under the art school's umbrella for its first few years as it established itself. "Rhode Island School of Design has a contemporary museum that operates one way, and the University of Pennsylvania has an [ICA] that operates another way ... they're all different. It's not a one-size-fits-all for this kind of institution." This is a complex beast, he stresses. "It has some-

thing in the neighborhood of 25 employees and a multi-million-dollar budget. It really is more than the School of the Arts could handle. So it makes sense that it would be connected [directly] to the university."

The ICA does have close ties to the School of the Arts, Kistler argues. "It's involved in a substantive way through the involvement of faculty and students." She points to Corin Hewett's exhibition last summer, "Shadows Are to Shade," as one of its triumphs. "He's an instructor in the sculpture department. And then you have sculpture instructor Guadalupe Maravilla's exhibition. He's on VCU faculty, and that show is the first opportunity for his work to be highlighted here, as it should be."

Maravilla's "Disease Thrower" installation currently sits dark in the ICA's loft-like, top-floor True Farr Luck Gallery, the second in an ongoing series of special ICA-commissioned works called "Provocations." Incorporating drawing, sculpture and music, former Salvadoran refugee Maravilla's display draws on his own experiences with, as he says, "illness, migration and the anxieties experienced by undocumented peoples."

"We try to pay attention to the world around us," Willsdon says. "A lot of projects are commissioned by us, they begin with a conversation with an artist about what can be meaningful to do here and now. We're aware that the Richmond region has a long and traumatic history. In our programming, we want to be conscious of that history even as we create new things and focus on the future."

Moon reminds us that all of this is new stuff, for VCU and for Richmond. "I think people are still trying to figure out what's up with that big building on the corner. So, how do we educate the public as to what this place is and how it correlates to an experience that they'll want to have? We're learning now how to do that, still figuring that part out."

'NO LONGER PRETTY PICTURES ON A WALL'

The ICA's 2018 opening exhibition, "Declaration," was aptly named. The kaleidoscop- >





ICA Executive Director Dominic Willson

ic multi-artist collection received national attention, most notably for Baltimore artist Paul Rucker's "Storm in the Time of Shelter," a collection of deconstructed Ku Klux Klan iconography that included 52 multicolored KKK robes. The provocative piece was acquired by the VMFA for its permanent collection in late 2018.

Rucker's installation is an important work, says Valerie Cassel Oliver, the VMFA's Sydney and Frances Lewis family curator of modern and contemporary art. "It allowed for the viewer to understand the persistence of racism in this country."

The VMFA is in the process of securing a piece featured in the ICA's recent "Great Force" exhibition, as well. "As the ICA is a noncollecting museum, the VMFA could serve as a repository for its efforts through the collection of works from its exhibition program," Oliver says. "Certainly, given the focus on contemporary art, many artists featured at the ICA are also artists of interest to my department."

There's a good reason the ICA does not collect art, Siepel says. "You'd need triple the space, and you'd need people — preparators, conservators — and a budget to purchase these things. And we already have a great collecting museum here. ... The VMFA does a wonderful job."

"Declaration," curated by the ICA's original founding director, Freiman, was a provocative success, Siepel maintains, but when Freiman stepped down before the opening after three years at the helm, announcing in a statement that she

wanted to get back to academic work as a tenured VCU faculty member, Siepel was reluctantly called out of retirement to become interim director. He says that, from the beginning, the ICA's fare has properly reflected the state of contemporary art.

"This is all new and the kind of work that young artists are doing, focused on content based on current issues of society. It's not always easy to look at. Like with any contemporary art, you are going to find people who are really passionate about what they're seeing and people who are confused by what they're seeing, and they can be looking at the same exhibition."

That observation is backed up by a sampling of 15 local arts professionals, ICA donors, artists and patrons, many of whom, for various reasons, declined to speak on the record. This pulse-read indicates that the ICA has stirred a range of opinions within the established local arts community, as people use descriptive terms ranging from "remarkable" and "thought-provoking" to "cliqish" and "pretentious."

One arts patron doesn't like the fact that "you have to read all of this text to find out what the art is about," while one artist complains that there hasn't been enough attention paid to Virginia artists. Several think that the exhibition spaces are too small and that the offerings are too political. "There is avant-garde art out there that is accessible," says one ICA donor, "but they aren't hitting the mark on consistently bringing anything in that connects [with me]."

Suzanne Hall, the retired former chief communications officer at the VMFA, says, "Art is not easy. And this kind of art, contemporary art, is complicated, challenging, multilayered. It's no longer pretty pictures on a wall." She has viewed most of the ICA's exhibitions and has been enthralled. "It's so much more challenging and rich than I thought it would be," she says. "I was thinking... it would be a little bit more standard issue in modern contemporary art. But it's not."

Kistler agrees. "The offerings that the ICA has presented have been interesting and provocative, she says. "It's material that

is not addressed elsewhere in the region."

Heather Waters, founding director of the Richmond International Film and Music Festival, helped to curate an institute screening of the Kenyan film "Rifiki" last year. "I think Richmond is fortunate to have an institution like the ICA," she says. "It has the capability of being a unique forum that serves our greater community in thought-provoking, artistic ways."

Along with his husband, Mark Reed, Jerry Williams longtime film and theater critic and a past Richmond magazine contributor, was a donor to the ICA building campaign. "We love the space and its unique position right at the 'gateway' of the city, and [Declaration] had some interesting work, but all of the shows since then have been less than exciting," he says. "The art they've shown would completely confuse or even turn off people who might wander in off the street and aren't familiar with the art world."

"Not all of the work that's been in there has been spectacular," Siepel admits. "Some of it has been better than others. But that's OK. That's the whole nature of contemporary art. It should be inventive, it should be expressive, and it should keep us on our toes."

While the national press raves and the hometown crowd debates, Willson takes it all with calm acceptance. "Part of the excitement of very, very new art is that we're all figuring it out together," he says. "And one thing that's true of art today maybe more than in the past is that it doesn't only refer to art history, but is referring to things that are happening in the world right now, in the media, public life, family life."

One longtime arts administrator with fundraising experience expresses worry about the long-term sustainability of the ICA. "It's hard to raise money for modern contemporary art, and there isn't a deep, deep well of donors to draw on. The rich people's children don't act like their parents, so everything is going to change ... probably in three months. It's possible that, in the future, the ICA may have to charge admission."

CHARGING AHEAD

Keeping admission to the ICA free is integral to its mission, Willsdon says. Most of the ICA's \$4.1 million annual budget comes from VCU, but he says that the eventual goal is independence. The ICA's new strategic plan sketches out a long-range, multi-year financial course that presents, as Willsdon says, "a kind of path for us to become, through the generosity of many people, hopefully, increasingly independent of the university budget. But that's going to take a little while."

Short on financial projections, the ICA's 16-page strategic plan is an aspirational mission statement that stresses listening to the larger Richmond community, placing a greater emphasis on disseminating material online, and bringing in contemporary work that inspires debate and promotes study. The plan was informed by a visioning process overseen by Brightspot Strategy, a management consulting firm based in New York, and included the ICA's advisory board, staff, VCU officials and members of the arts community.

There was upheaval last year when Ellwood Thompson's closed its cafe inside the ICA. "This was a difficult decision to make," market owner Rick Hood wrote in a press statement. "The cafe was not financially sustainable." Its replacement is the locally owned Soul 'n' Vinegar Cafe. "We are excited for them to continue as our cafe vendor," Willsdon says. "They are focused on sustainability in the food they serve, and on the community."

The ICA also let six employees go last year, a move some interpreted as a downsizing. Willsdon says no. "It was part of a restructuring to better meet our operational needs, informed by the strategic plan," he says. "We are hiring now. The ICA staff will be the same size as before."

As far as connecting to Richmond, Willsdon and VCU point to data showing that the ICA's total attendance for 2018 and 2019 is 152,227 and that it reached a demographic not normally seen in area museums. (In comparison, the VMFA

reported 507,745 visitors in 2019.)

VCU reports that more than 70% of first-year attendees were under 35 years old, with 50% under 25. Half of the ICA's 2018 visitors were affiliated with the university, and 80% were Virginia residents. "The crowds look like the city looks," Siepel says, "and that's new for Richmond."

"We've really committed to creating visibility and opportunity for artists who have been historically unrepresented — women, LGBTQ [people] and artists of color," says ICA Chief Curator Smith. In 2021, the ICA will highlight women artists in a multi-part exhibition.

For now, everything is on hold as the museum struggles with when and how it will return from hiatus. But Willsdon is sure that COVID-19's aftershocks will be felt, seen and heard in contemporary art, and that the ICA will be here to chart the reverberations.

"If you're an institution that's meant to be sensitive to the present and to the immediate future, it kind of comes with the territory," he says. "The question is already on our minds: What kind of programming do we present at the ICA that will be most pertinent to the world we're going to come back into?" **19**

"We've really committed to creating visibility and opportunity for artists who have been historically unrepresented."

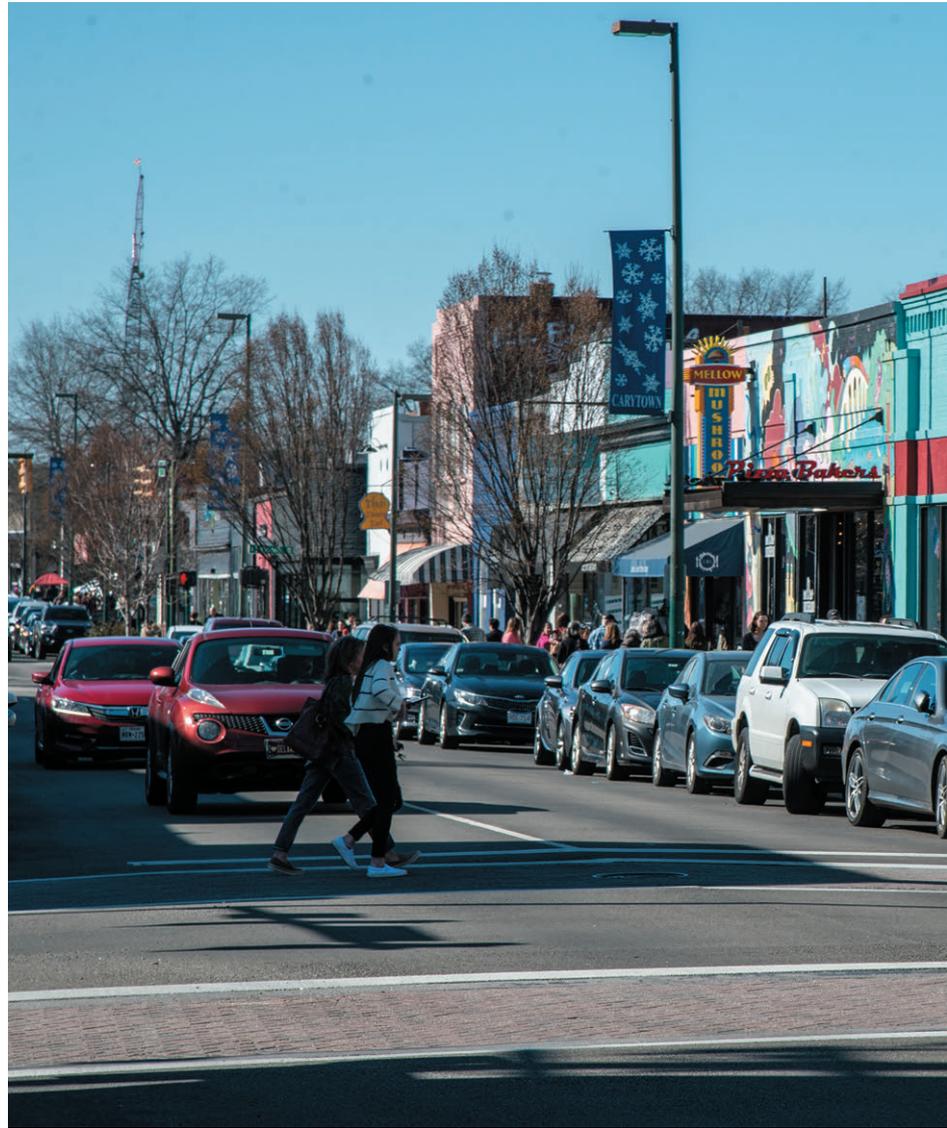
—STEPHANIE SMITH, ICA CHIEF CURATOR



A view of the installation "Provocations: Guadalupe Maravilla, 'Disease Thrower'" in the ICA's True Farr Luck Gallery

ONWARD ALONG

EVERYONE
AGREES THAT
CARYTOWN IS
CHANGING,
BUT WHO
BENEFITS
DOWN THE
ROAD?



THE MILE OF

**BY DON
HARRISON**

**PHOTOS BY
JAY PAUL**



STYLE

Don't mess with the merchants of Carytown. Just ask the owners of the porn palace who tried, in the mid-'70s, to disguise their shop as a candle store and were promptly run out of town.

And then there was the fast food franchise that wanted to open a drive-thru on the easternmost, most countercultural edge of Richmond's popular nine-block shopping district. "Everyone got up in arms over the thought we'd have a drive-thru across from the historic Byrd Theatre," says May Cayton, owner of Bygones vintage clothing boutique, a Carytown staple since 1985.

"It made us all sick. But it was just a matter of talking the landlords into being good stewards of what Carytown is."

Carytown is where you'll find some of Richmond's longest-running — and iconic — local businesses, starting with the historic Byrd Theatre, a restored grand movie palace built in 1928. The centerpiece of the district is Cary Court Shopping Center, the first strip mall in Richmond, which officially opened in 1938 as Cary Street Park and Shop Center. (Construction slowed due to the wartime economy, but many stores were open by 1933.) Bordered by Thompson Street to the west and Arthur Ashe Boulevard to the east, Carytown is, on most days, buzzing with activity and populated with shoppers, diners, buskers and people watchers.

Ten years ago, a Ben & Jerry's franchise moved in near long-time local ice cream shop Bev's — and promptly closed. "It's the way people think in Carytown," says Tom Roukous, owner of Coppola's Deli since 1990. "Many of my customers said they were going to go to Bev's twice as much to make sure they survived. I think that mentality is awesome. It's just different here."

"Keep Carytown weird," laughs Richmond City Council member Stephanie Lynch, who represents the historic shopping area in Richmond's 5th District. "I relate to the desire to preserve the character of Carytown and the types of businesses that thrive there. It's the prime example of an inclusive business community that has all cultures, creeds and backgrounds ... a community space for small business."

"We used to call it 'a mile of style,'" says L.A. Phipps, manager of Cary Court's Crème de la Crème gift shop, and the public liaison for the Carytown Merchants Association, a group of affiliated local businesses that advocate, coordinate cleanup efforts and throw special events like the annual Watermelon Festival. Approximately one-third of the businesses here are dues-paying members. "Carytown is very important to the >

economy of Richmond,” she says. “People know it. People love it. People complain about parking, but they still come.”

New and longtime merchants agree that Richmond’s most prominent shopping destination is changing — in all kinds of ways. Whether these changes are all positive is a question up for debate. For right now, business is brisk.

“I think Carytown is booming,” says Bygones’ owner Cayton. “That’s because there’s a movement, nationally, where people want to live where they can walk. Where there are things to do. People are really tired of being cut off in the suburbs and being dependent on internal combustion engines and polluting and not getting exercise.” This walkable district, with all of its many experiences, finds itself in a “sweet spot,” she says. The world is finally catching up to Carytown.

What’s the Exchange?

It probably won’t offer adult magazines, and there are no plans for a drive-thru, but the \$40 million Carytown Exchange development on Carytown’s western edge has caused more than a few pearls to be clutched. Anchored by a Publix grocery store, with the neighboring Virginia ABC outlet planning a relocation to the development, when completed it will provide 120,000 square feet of retail space — an entire block of Carytown.

“My biggest issue is that they are pushing away small businesses and only making room for the national franchises,” says Lisa McSherry, owner of the dress shop Lex’s of Carytown, an area mainstay for 24 years (McSherry also owns Mamie’s Apothecary next door). “That worries me for Carytown because not everyone can pay what they’re trying to charge. Unless you’re a national franchise, you’re not going to be able to afford it.”

Before she opened her apothecary, McSherry says she contacted Exchange brokers to inquire about renting there. “They wouldn’t entertain talking to me,” she says. “When they told me what they were charging for square footage, I kind of laughed. They didn’t care that I’d been a local retailer for so long, they didn’t even want me in that area.”

On the other hand, James Ashby, senior vice president of Cushman & Wakefield/Thalhimer, the brokers for the Carytown Exchange, says, “We are marketing to, and speaking with, not only national tenants but regional and local tenants as well.”

Some of those include existing Carytown retailers, Ashby says, “and there are some who have been looking for space in Carytown for years. If you look at the Carytown market, there’s very little vacancy. And a lot of the buildings are old row houses, with layouts that don’t work well for some.”

He says that he and his fellow brokers have been talking to restaurant, fitness, boutique, and apparel interests — “all across the board.” Of the asking price, he says that “our rental rate is in line with new construction for major retail development projects for the Richmond market.” The only big-box retailer involved in the project is Publix, he stresses, and that chain is replacing Ukrop’s and Martin’s, also large grocery chains.

Still, this project — as well as a five-story Residence Inn by Marriott hotel planned near the district — is something long expected, and widely feared. “It’s been a concern of some of us here for years now,” says Jim Bland, owner of Plan 9 Records, in Carytown since 1981, “that we’d end up like places in other towns where the cool spot has corporate entities come in and change the nature of it.”

Andreas Waltenburg can speak to that. He owns a bar and gastropub in New York City’s West Village, The Folly, and says that funky local retailers have largely been priced out of the Big Apple. “The diversity of New York has pretty much disappeared. You don’t get as much variety now.”

Four years ago, Waltenburg and his wife, Mary Dail, moved to Richmond with their son, Loki, while he continued to maintain The Folly. The couple opened Fuel Pump last year, a Carytown coffee shop.

It’s a changing neighborhood, he says. “In the way Richmond itself is changing. It’s moving very quickly and upward, so to speak. But even though the selection of stores might change ... people here are very loyal to their mom-and-pop organizations.”

Though she is not happy with the project, Cayton credits the Exchange developers for at least emulating the look and feel of the district. “I like the fact that there will be stores lining Cary Street so it echoes the older section,” she says. “When the property was

Ukrop’s or Martin’s, there was just a parking lot facing Carytown. From the drawings I’ve seen, they’re at least trying to make the Cary Street side reminiscent of the older part of Carytown.”

The ship of purity sailed long ago, some would argue. With West Elm, Kroger, two 7-Elevens, Wells Fargo Bank, Walgreens, Fresh Market, Chipotle, Panera and McDonald’s — with drive-thru — Carytown’s locals-only vibe has long been compromised.

“This is what happens when our city grows,” Chop Suey Books owner Ward Tefft says. “It’s always the small businesses that build it up and clean it up, and then the big businesses come in and raise the rent. That’s just the nature of things.”

Tefft’s independent bookstore has been in Carytown for 14 years. He’s not stoked at the prospect of chains potentially moving into the neighborhood, “but it will bring people into

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People know it. People love it. People complain about parking, but they still come.”

—May Cayton,
owner of Bygones



[Clockwise from top left] Tom Roukous, owner of Coppola's Deli; street performers are common in Carytown, including this drummer who set up next to candy shop Rocket Fizz's pirate statue; May Cayton, owner of Bygones; James Ashby, a broker with the Carytown Exchange, maintains that the development will fit in well with the character and makeup of the neighborhood

the city, and that's good for the tax revenue," he says. "There's not much you can do when someone buys a piece of property and wants to do something like that. I guess we'll wait and see what it's going to be. I assume it will be chains."

"There's going to be pros and cons to the Exchange, and, no, people aren't happy about it," Phipps admits. One positive is a new 525-space parking deck. "We've been to all the meetings," she says of the merchant association's dealings with the Florida-based Regency Centers, which is spearheading the Exchange. "They're consulting

us. They've given us plans, mockups, that show us that the new buildings will look like the little row homes of Cary Street. ... I think they respect what Carytown is."

The first part of Carytown Exchange's construction will be finished in August, Ashby says, the rest in early 2021. "We have four individual buildings, one on Ellwood and three on Cary, and the largest space we can do is 4,500 square feet. The rest will range in size from 1,200 to 3,600 square feet. So, let me be clear: There's not going to be any big-boxing of Carytown."

Sometimes corporate encroachment

isn't so bad. Tefft says, "When Capital One came in and displaced a bunch of local businesses and signed a 20-year lease for their Capital One Café, and then did \$1 million in improvements, what can you say? They are definitely involved in Carytown cleanup and are friendly neighbors. I don't like that they opened up across the street from Sugar & Twine [an established, independent coffee shop], but I think the two offer different experiences."

"Capital One is a big company, but they understand marketing," Roukous adds. "That group came in and hit the streets, >



and they pulled weeds and put down mulch and scrubbed graffiti, and they did it three or four times." That, he says, is how you win over longtime Carytown merchants and clientele.

The View From Here

Cayton has seen big changes since she moved Bygones to Carytown from Grace Street, near Virginia Commonwealth University, in the mid-'80s.

Back then, there were only three restaurants in Carytown, she recalls. "And the sidewalks basically rolled up at 8:30. Except for going to the movies, there wasn't much to do. There was a gay bar for a while [preceding Babe's of Carytown], and a few evening places, but the biggest change I've seen is in the number of restaurants, good restaurants. It's a much more happening place for a much longer day."

Roukous says, "It used to be a more functional street, with a hardware store, vacuum repair shop and so on." Carytown still houses a shoe repair shop and a dry cleaner.

Carytown needs a variety of businesses, he says. "You can't have too much of anything. You need clothing, restaurants, outdoors store, bookstores, record stores. You need diversity. I would say, yes, it's become a dining area. And, yes, it's probably a little much because you now see them closing."

Xtra's Cafe, a 10-year Carytown veteran, and Zzaam Fresh Korean Grill, which opened in 2015, have both shut down in recent months. But turnover like that is not unusual, Lehrer says. "Restaurants are difficult anywhere."

Cayton adds that the district has also found its niche as a secondary market. "We have not just vintage clothing stores, but we have consignment stores, we have Chop Suey Used Books, we have [Bits and Pixels], and Buffalo Exchange opened [in 2018]. Block by block, you can see that in order to remain unique, which Carytown has always been, it's differentiated itself from Stony Point or Short Pump. It has now really embraced nightlife and the secondary market."

McSherry acknowledges the trend toward buying second-hand. "The wave of consignment and thrift stores [has] really taken over, in my opinion," she says. "If I didn't have such a niche with the formal market, I would've closed down completely." She isn't bitter about it, though. "People are into recycled and refurbished clothing now because they are more environmentally conscious. I totally respect that."

It's more about experi-

ences these days, not product, she adds. "As you saw clothing stores going out, you saw more restaurants coming in. If I was in the restaurant industry, I'd say it's for the better. But I can't say it's good for retailers. When there's a good mix of restaurants and retailers, we all benefit one another, but as the restaurants take over and retailers move out, it's harmful because now you just have an area of people coming to eat and not shopping."

"There are more restaurants here, sure," Tefft says. "But that's just kind of Richmond. We've got more restaurants everywhere."

Entering the '20s

To keep up with everything from shoplifter alerts to cleanup efforts, Carytown merchants interact through a private Facebook page set up by the association. "The biggest debate lately has been about parking, or specifically the new \$1 charge on the parking deck," Cayton says. Historically free to use, the city-owned parking decks on Colonial and Crenshaw avenues implemented a new \$1 to \$2 fee to park in August 2019.

But a long-burning complaint is about city government. "They don't do much for Carytown. You could sometimes say that's a plus," Roukous says with a laugh. "Considering that Carytown's always been where the money came from, I don't think the city really helps."

"For years, when I was on the board of the association, we were promised money toward beautification and a new entrance sign," McSherry says. "That's not too much to ask considering that we pay a huge chunk of taxes to the city. But they don't put money back into Carytown at all. They'll plant a few trees here and there. But in the years I've been [here], they have continually promised us funding, and it never comes."

McSherry and a handful of other business owners paid for the last entrance sign more than 20 years ago. It has since deteriorated, and there has been no replacement.

"It's not fair," Lynch says. "We shouldn't penalize our small-business community and make them pay for the things that the city services should be responsible for delivering." She's looking for funding options to help with beautification and signage.

"I don't try to think about the negatives," Roukous says, sitting in his deli. "I love Carytown. I'm so glad that I'm here. I couldn't have picked a better spot."

"I truly love the old-school, little-bit-kooky feel of Carytown," echoes Waltenburg. "It's a really open-minded, culturally and politically diverse small town. As long as it remains a place where everyone feels welcome, I don't think it's going to go wrong." ■

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—James Ashby,
a broker for the
Carytown Exchange

(Clockwise from top left) The Byrd Theatre, Richmond's grand movie palace, has been in operation for 90 years; Lisa McSherry, owner of Lex's of Carytown and Mamie's Apothecary; Chop Suey Books on the eastern edge of Carytown has been a neighborhood fixture for 14 years.