

DOWNTOWN NEWS

September 4 – October 1, 2026

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City leaders urge residents to prep for strong El Niño

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High design, haute cuisine define new era for Guild Hotel

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Explore city's iconic design



During a walking tour, attendees check out 'The Riparium,' a sculptural eucalyptus-branch gateway by local artist Roman de Salvo at Ruocco Park. San Diego Design Week returns this month with about 75 tours, talks, and showcases. Read more about it on page 10.

(Photo courtesy of San Diego Design Week)

COVER STORY

SDPD ramps up officer presence in Gaslamp areas to address violence, 'lawlessness' at night

San Diego Police Chief Wahl announced the effort, Operation Last Call, last week, with a special focus on crowded intersections like 5th Avenue and F Street. His announcement follows a huge brawl last weekend outside a taco shop. The police dragged assailants away and deployed pepper spray on the crowd, with five arrested. Franked by a wall of uniforms, Wahl announced up to 25 officers would be assigned to manage crowds, brawls and public intoxication in the Gaslamp from 8 p.m. to 4 a.m. on Fridays and Saturdays. The effort will be highly visible, and officers will have zero tolerance for unlawful behavior. PAGE 2

SPORTS

Punches in the Piazza fundraiser returns to Little Italy on Sept. 11

This year's gathering will also have a tribute to first responders and survivors of 9/11, because this year's event takes place on Sept. 11, which is both the day of the terrorist attacks, and the day that Bobby DePhilippis died in 2022 at age 72. PAGE 13



ENTERTAINMENT

Concert giant Live Nation has set its sights downtown

Live Nation announced on Aug. 17 that it will be converting the old Wonder Bread building, located on the outskirts of East Village, into a concert venue. A new music spot in downtown could hold about 4,000 seats; and presents an opportunity for certain artists. PAGE 7



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SDPD ramps up officer presence in Gaslamp to address violence

By Drew Sitton and Dorian Hargrove
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

GASLAMP QUARTER — In an effort to address nightly disorder and lawlessness in the Gaslamp Quarter, San Diego Police Department dispatched more officers to the popular entertainment district over the weekend.

San Diego Police Chief Wahl announced the effort, Operation Last Call, last week, with a special focus on crowded intersections like 5th Avenue and F Street. His announcement follows a huge brawl last weekend outside Tacos El Gordo. The police dragged assailants away and deployed pepper spray on the crowd, with five arrested.

This weekend, the scene at bar break was calmer.

“There was definitely a ramp-up of officers, approximately two on every block. So they definitely helped (by) having additional boots on the ground,” said Gaslamp Quarter Association Executive Director Michael Trimble. “They’re looking to continue to do that until they get the Gaslamp back to a state where it’s as safe as it should be, like it always should be.”

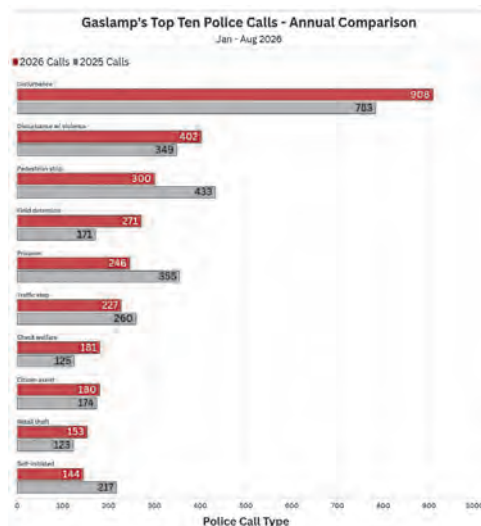
Days after the Tacos el Gordo fight, flanked by a wall of uniforms, Wahl announced up to 25 officers would be assigned to manage crowds, brawls and public intoxication in the Gaslamp from 8 p.m. to 4 a.m. on Fridays and Saturdays.

He pledged the Gaslamp will become safe once again thanks to dedicated foot patrols, undercover VICE teams making sure bars aren’t serving underage patrons, plus enforcement of public consumption and disorderly conduct.

The effort will be “highly visible,” and officers will have zero tolerance for unlawful behavior, Chief Wahl said.

Violence in the nightlife hub has increased in recent years.

Times of San Diego analyzed police calls for service from January 1, 2026 through August 29, 2026 and compared them with the previous year’s calls for service in the Gaslamp. The data shows that San Diego Police fielded 125 more disturbance calls this year than in 2025. Police officers have responded to 53 more disturbances with violence calls this year as well.



Officers reported 196 assaults against them in 2025. Assaults on SDPD officers operating in the Gaslamp have also increased by 172% over the past two years, according to the city.

While disturbance calls went up, police officers working the Gaslamp detained 100 more people this year compared to 2025.

Wahl said Operation Last Call aims to address problems before they escalate to violence.

“We want everyone coming to the Gaslamp to have a great time and enjoy the best of what San Diego has to offer,” Chief Wahl said. “Unfortunately, we have seen an increase in violence and lawlessness that threatens our residents and our officers. Enough is enough.”

As a response to the uptick in violence, police officers working the Gaslamp beat have responded with more force of their own. Times of San Diego previously reported on the increasing use of pepper spray in the Gaslamp, from 68 uses in 2017 to 361 times in 2025. No other neighborhood had as frequent usage, with East Village coming in second with 18 uses in 2025.

At the time of the report, SDPD spokesperson Ashley Nicholes said Gaslamp’s circumstances are unique, with thousands of people packed in a tight area. In that area, police respond to three times more disorderly calls than anywhere else in the city, the second-highest number of crimes, and experience the most assaults on officers.

“Ever since COVID, I think there’s been a feeling that there are no consequences, so I can do whatever I want,” Trimble said. “That basically breeds a



SDPD bike patrol in the Gaslamp Quarter in May. Operation Last Call will focus on crowded intersections like 5th Avenue and F Street. (Photo by Adrian Childress/Times of San Diego)

lot of poor behavior and contempt for law enforcement.”

San Diego Fire-Rescue Chief Robert Logan noted the chaos in the Gaslamp affects his crews’ ability to respond to emergencies.

“Crowding around an emergency scene, blocked access and violent behavior can delay emergency care and place both the person needing help and first responders at greater risk,” he said.

In addition to SDPD’s increased presence, the city claimed it is taking a coordinated approach to improving conditions in the Gaslamp Quarter, with work underway focused on infrastructure, cleanliness, the public right-of-way and the overall visitor experience.

In 2023, the city ended funding for the Fifth Avenue Promenade after contract overruns with the Gaslamp Quarter Association (GQA). The promenade closed the busiest road in the Gaslamp to vehicles at night, so pedestrians had more room to bar hop. Since the program ended, lines to bars, illegal street vendors, and passing pedestrians all crowded onto narrow sidewalks.

“We’ve gone backwards when it comes to making the Gaslamp Quarter more walkable and safer,” Trimble said. “You can only have so many people on that sidewalk before people bump into each other, and you add alcohol, and then you have problems.”

With the chaos on the sidewalks,

Trimble said it felt like the Gaslamp is regressing to how it was in 2017. But raucous behavior in the Gaslamp predates that, going back to its roots as a red-light district — and police crackdowns.

Once known as the Stingaree, one section of the Gaslamp had brothels, opium dens, gambling halls and saloons. In 1912, police arrested 138 prostitutes in a raid, giving all but two train tickets to leave the city. Then, the city tore down many of those anti-social establishments ahead of the 1915 Panama-California Exposition.

By the 1970s, the area was blighted once again and only became a thriving business district after two decades of revitalization efforts.

While the historic Gaslamp district of today is much different than the red-light district of the 1880s, businesses and residents in the 21st century still complain about drug use and excessive drinking.

This year, the Gaslamp Quarter Association called on the city to let police enforce a no-vending zone that would have alleviated congestion. However, the city declined amid a court battle with a licensed street vendor.

Months later, the Gaslamp Quarter Association is getting its desire for additional police enforcement, although illegal street vendors will not be kicked out.

The operation will continue until there’s a notable decrease in “lawlessness,” Wahl said.

City launches crackdown to clean Central Library encampments

By Dorian Hargrove
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — San Diego leaders are cranking up efforts to combat the rampant drug activity, violence, encampments and loitering that have plagued the Central Library for years.

San Diego Police Officers and the nearby business district are initiating a four-week, early-morning enforcement push to clear encampments outside the library, according to public records obtained by Times of San Diego.

Librarians, meanwhile, are now more than a year into a dramatic increase in the number of suspensions they hand out to patrons who break the law or violate rules in the city’s architectural landmark.

They handed out nearly 70% more suspensions in 2025 than a year earlier. But they’re on pace to slide back from that total in 2026, amid budget cuts that reduced security at the building.

The police department’s Neighborhood Policing Division launched the four-week operation to clear encampments and then clean the sidewalks surrounding the Central Library on Aug. 24.

“We have been experiencing significant issues in this area involving drug paraphernalia, human waste, and other similar conditions, so the goal is to pair the early morning enforcement with immediate cleaning of the surrounding sidewalks,” Franklin Coopersmith, the director of the city’s environmental services department, wrote in an Aug. 18 email. “We will continue this daily for four weeks and reevaluate on Sept. 18 to determine whether the combination of consistent early morning enforcement and cleaning is having an impact.”

The new push on encampment sweeps comes as librarians and library security say they are overwhelmed with the loitering around the library and illegal activity inside it.

“With the budget reductions, we had to reduce security by three guards at Central and went from two guards to one guard during closed hours,” wrote Library Director Misty Jones in an email to Mayor Todd Gloria’s East Village

community representative.

“During open hours, we have been informing people that they can’t loiter because we have a school in the building, but once we close they come out in droves and it is impossible (and not safe) for one guard to try to get them to move on. If they do move off the property, they just go around to the sidewalk on the outside of the courtyard.”

Jones and city staff aren’t the only people urging the mayor’s office and police to do more. Residents, businesses and school administrators at E3 Civic High, a charter school inside the Central Library, write to Gloria’s office frequently about the state of the city’s flagship library, as do many nearby residents.

“Living near the Central Library was something to be excited about,” wrote an unnamed resident to city officials on Aug. 22. “It should be one of the greatest public resources in our neighborhood. Instead, after being nearby while two murders occurred, witnessing open violence, multiple overdoses, constant drug activity and increasingly disturbing behavior, many neighbors are now afraid to use the library or even walk around it. That should alarm every leader receiving this email.”

Another resident echoed those complaints in an email to City Councilmember Stephen Whitburn.

“Open drug use, public urination and defecation, and camping in the plaza and on the surrounding sidewalks are recurring conditions that residents and library patrons are expected to navigate day after day,” wrote a resident in a redacted email obtained by Times of San Diego. “I understand that homelessness and addiction are complex issues and require more than enforcement alone. But that cannot mean allowing this important public facility to become routinely unsafe and unsanitary.”

Amid the complaints and budget cuts, city librarians are indeed stepping up enforcement inside the library.

Suspensions handed out to library patrons increased dramatically in 2025, increasing from 262 suspensions the prior year to 445 suspensions in 2025, according to city data.



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City leaders urge residents to prep for flooding due to El Niño

By Drew Sitton
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — It's here, and it's big: 2026 is the year of the potentially record-breaking Super El Niño.

Nearly every city department was on hand at Balboa Park recently to explain the city's preparations for heavier-than-normal storms and flooding — while urging residents to do their own readiness work, too.

"The city is doing everything we can to be prepared, and we're asking for your partnership in doing the same," Mayor Todd Gloria said. "You do your part. We do ours."

The Office of Emergency Services, Police, Fire-Rescue, Transportation, Stormwater, Homelessness Strategies and Solutions, Environmental Services, Performance & Analytics, and Communications, among others, were in attendance alongside elected officials.

In other words, the entire city is preparing in case of a potential natural disaster.

"The leaders and subject matter experts behind me represent our city's unified approach to preparedness," said Fire Chief Robert Logan. "But preparedness doesn't start and stop with city departments. We're asking San Diegans to prepare with us."

The cross-section of department officials reflected the city-wide action being taken ahead of expected extreme weather conditions this fall and winter, with the warm water in the Pacific from El Niño expected to drive heavy rains and fast flooding.

"If you've seen flooding in the past in your neighborhood, expect the same, or perhaps even worse during El Niño," said Council President Joe LaCava. "We need residents and businesses to take steps now."

EMERGENCY SERVICES

Partners from other jurisdictions were in attendance too, including the county's emergency response team.

In addition, Assistant Fire Chief Robert Rezende announced that a meteorologist from the National Weather Service, Felix Castro, will also be embedded in the Office of Emergency Services.

"(Emergency planners) have worked tirelessly alongside staff from nearly every city department to get us ready for El Niño, to ensure a citywide preparedness to handle whatever comes our



Fire chief Rob Logan addresses the media during a press conference on preparing for El Niño weather. (Photo by Drew Sitton/Times of San Diego)

way. We're not taking this weather event lightly," Rezende said. "Residents need to take steps to stay ready too."

He urged residents to research whether they are in a FEMA flood zone, build a to-go kit with three days of supplies, create an evacuation plan and stay informed by signing up for Alert San Diego emergency notices. Then, when the storms hit, never drive or walk through flooded areas and move to higher ground if flooding is a threat.

"If an evacuation order is issued, that is not the time to make a plan. It is the time to execute your existing plan," Rezende said.

The city launched an El Niño webpage to detail how to prepare for the expected extreme weather and connect residents with resources.

"Preparedness is a shared responsibility because when we prepare together, San Diego is stronger and safer," Logan said.

The fire chief said he was proud that OES reorganized to fall under the Fire-Rescue department because it "strengthens the connection between citywide emergency planning and operational response."

During storms, transportation and stormwater staff will patrol neighborhoods, ready to address clogged drains or other issues that arise.

First responders also have heavy-duty equipment on hand for rescues.

INFRASTRUCTURE MAINTENANCE

One aspect of getting ready for heavy rains is clearing drains and maintaining stormwater channels, pipes and pump stations.

"We've really accelerated maintenance on all of those," said Todd Snyder, director of the city's Stormwater Department.

Before 2024, he said the city typically cleared four stormwater channel segments per year. In the budget for fiscal year 2027, the department plans to clear 67 segments, accounting for 20 miles. To do that, crews are out six days a week for 12 hours per day.

"That's historically far and above anything that we've ever done before," Snyder said.

After the January 2024 floods, San Diego increased its investment in the stormwater system. Multiple capital improvement projects are underway to replace aging infrastructure.

Long-term, the city is upgrading an aging system.

The city took out a \$733 million low-interest federal loan from the Environmental Protection Agency to pay for upgrades to the system, but those dollars are expected to run out long before the system is fully upgraded. Those take years though, with current stormwater systems not up to the task.

"Our stormwater system faces a \$5 billion funding gap over the past five years," LaCava said. "But I have never seen a city hall under this leadership move more quickly to understand the nature of stormwater, our infrastructure and the potential impact to residents and our businesses."

However, even with the boost in maintenance, as well as several ongoing capital improvement projects in the stormwater system, it won't be enough amid the scale of predicted rains and how old the system is.

"If we get a storm of the magnitude that we saw in 2024, we are going to have as flood, regardless of how much maintenance is happening," Snyder said. "I

went and inspected those channels yesterday. They are as clear as a whistle, but they will flood if we get enough rain."

Snyder urged residents to pay attention to whether they're in the flood zone, which covers 15,000 acres in the city.

LESSONS FROM 2024

The fumbled response to the January 2024 flooding that drove people out of their homes for months at a time was top of mind for city leaders looking to improve preparedness this time around.

"The actions being taken now really are a reflection of the way that that sat with all of us," San Diego City Councilmember Sean Elo-Rivera said. He echoed others that the city had never prepared so thoroughly for a flood event before now.

And while the city was not prepared in 2024 for long-term recovery, Elo-Rivera praised community members for helping each other in the wake of the floods. He emphasized that the community needed to prepare again, and be treated as a stakeholder in the city's response.

"When the system fell short, our community stepped up," Elo-Rivera said, describing the response to the floods as the most moving experience he's had while in office. "The people who live along these channels can see the problems first and can be part of the solution."

Elo-Rivera announced the creation of a community task force made up of many of the people and organizations that responded to the 2024 floods, now with designated roles for the next round of extreme weather.

"We're reactivating that 2024 network, reaching out now to those who were there in the moments immediately after, and the months that follow that flood, so we have a plan in place before the rain to prevent, mitigate response, or recover from any flooding," he said.

CHANGING FUTURE

Current weather predictions anticipate that this year's El Niño will break all-time records for intensity, although that is not guaranteed. It is expected to spur chaotic extremes in weather that could include heat waves, drought and heavy rainfall globally during the year-long cycle, but its impact on San Diego could vary.

Read more at timesofsandiego.com.

City’s aging stormwater system requires repairs before El Niño

By Drew Sitton
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — As warnings of a potentially historic El Niño mount, city crews are fast at work preparing for the unknown. Workers in the city’s Stormwater Department are tasked with clearing a record number of stormwater channels to prepare for potential flooding, along with replacing flood control gates in Mission Beach and conducting emergency repairs on stormwater pumps and generators.

On Aug. 20, city directors for the Office of Emergency Services, Stormwater and Infrastructure updated councilmembers on the Environment Committee about their departments’ work to try to prepare the city for what could be a historic El Niño weather pattern.

Assistant Chief Robert Rezende from the Office of Emergency Services noted that sharing the plan with the council was the first step in the city’s preparation for what would be the strongest El Niño since before 1950.

“This is not the culmination or the end point of the preparedness that we’re doing,” Rezende told committee members. “It’s not that it’s done. It’s really just getting started.”

Preliminary preparations began in June, when the city formed a large working group with employees from 24 departments. The group was tasked with identifying gaps in past flood responses and preparing the city as much as possible for potential floods. The working group, said Rezende, also used an audit of the city’s response to floods in January 2024 that destroyed dozens of homes in South San Diego.

During the Aug. 20 Environment Committee meeting, department leaders said the working group has identified 50 projects and is working towards improving communication and coordination between departments, agencies and the public.

At least one councilmember on the committee expressed concern that the city needs to focus on infrastructure needs.

“The city has launched a website. A website is not gonna solve the city’s



Flooded and road closed signs in Mission Valley. (File photo by Adrian Chidress/Times of San Diego)

inadequate storm drain system,” said council president Joe LaCava.

One of the most concerning obstacles the city faces, however, is finding the funds needed to pay for the preparations and improvements.

Those budget constraints can be seen clearly in the case of the “sandbag working group.” While the group has prepared a plan, found a vendor and secured a storage area to fill 100,000 sandbags to hand out to residents, it has yet to find \$300,000 to execute the plan, which will take two months to complete.

That is only one of many El Niño-related projects that face budget uncertainties.

Despite using low-interest federal loans, known as WIFIA, to design a replacement for the city’s largest stormwater pump in Old Town, the city does not have funds to actually replace it. In addition, the Jamacha Waterway Revitalization Project is in the design phase too, but the city needs \$100 million to complete the project.

The stormwater department, meanwhile, began inspecting and clearing important stormwater drains when the fiscal year began.

Much of the maintenance focus has been on areas fixed around Chollas Creek that were reconstructed after the January 2024 flood.

Despite this, stormwater director Todd Snyder had a grim outlook on the upcoming winter weather. Snyder noted that very few of the city’s channels and drains have the capacity to handle a 100-year storm, which is a measure of a large amount of rainfall within a short period of time, such as two inches within three hours in San Diego.



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UPTOWN NEWS



DOWNTOWN NEWS

Taking a ride as Waymo prepares for full San Diego launch

By Jennifer Vigil
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — It feels a little naïve at this point to be aghast and agog over Waymo.

The driverless taxi service, which began autonomous operations in Phoenix six years ago, is coming to San Diego as you may have heard.

Or seen, actually. The sleek misty blue Ojai edition — manufactured not by a carmaker you'd readily recognize, but by Zeekr, a Chinese brand — has been visible, meandering over parts of town for months, and even more so in recent weeks.

That's because the service will launch soon in a distinct zone, about 40 square miles, that stretches from Pacific Beach to most of Point Loma along the coast and through Mission Valley, Uptown and downtown, extending south to Barrio Logan. The map is not yet for public consumption, but if an image somewhat reminiscent of Iowa was superimposed along I-8 stretching between those boundaries, you wouldn't be too far off.

There won't be airport or freeway access in the early going, but Waymo has been working that prescribed service area, fine tuning its calibrations and preparing for riders.

One of whom, recently, was me.

And honestly, I wanted to feel a little aghast and agog. I haven't traveled recently to any of the big cities where the service is already available, such as San Francisco, Phoenix, Miami or Houston, and if I'm in L.A., I have my car.

The ride, from Balboa Park — we traveled along the boundary between University Heights and North Park, then headed to Normal Heights before turning back — was smooth, easy and uneventful, just as I'm sure Waymo would want me to say.

The only hiccup, if you could call it that, was the Waymo Driver's — oddly, that's what Waymo calls its driverless system — quick stop in the park when a man abruptly entered a crosswalk in front of us. Which would have happened to any human driver, and does regularly in the park.

Glass half full people: Yay, the Ojai did



Waymo's latest vehicle, the Ojai waits by the curb in Balboa Park on Aug. 20. (Photo by Jennifer Vigil/Times of San Diego)

just what it was supposed to! Glass half empty: Oh, no, near miss, Waymo!

The Ojai didn't jolt or jostle me, and in fact, when I fumbled with the seat belt, the car came to a stop until it sensed I was properly belted in. In addition, when I gabbed with my Waymo host, Sandy Karp, for a few minutes after our ride ended, a human voice chimed in over the car's comms to check if everything was OK. Turns out Waymo's system questions why anyone would linger and builds a checkup into the works to see if the rider is safe.

If you're on the fence about driverless taxis, particularly as a woman, this, along with riding without a male driver, is a first-rate feature.

Yet our current onward rush into the future — AI, data centers, and yes, Waymo, part of Alphabet, Google's parent company — leaves many people uncertain at best and anxiety-riddled at worst. Their view of the future may be more "Terminator: Rise of the Machines" doom than, say, "Star Trek" utopia.

Aside from those concerns, there's the questions over local control, the fate of those who make their livings as taxi and ride-share drivers and just what happens if Waymo Driver does stall out or go haywire.

We'll let Karp break down the tech behind a Waymo ride to try and ease those fears.

"The way Waymo Driver works is it uses a combination of sensors and AI to make real-time driving decisions. So the sensors provide the Waymo Driver (a) 360 view of the world around it up to 500 meters away with overlapping fields of view," she said.

Those sensors, she explained, have "different superpowers," some focused on weather and lighting conditions, others on street signs and colors. AI factors in when it comes to those real-time driving decisions.

And as you or I become better at something, so, the company contends, does Waymo, but at far greater scale than say, Gladwell's 10,000 hours.

"What you and I learn from each other and from the handbook, Waymo Driver learns from over 200 million miles of fully autonomous experience," Karp said.

Waymo also touts their safety performance, though experts, while hopeful, are more cautious. The president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety noted earlier this year that "on a limited scale, these driverless cars are safer than human drivers." But he added that "the present data collection system isn't good enough to allow continuous monitoring of a large-scale expansion."

So San Diego will have to decide whether to jump on the Waymo bandwagon. If locals do, they will be far from alone. The company announced in March that weekly paid rides had doubled in less than a year, to 500,000.

And FOMO is a thing. Seeing all those Ojais around town surely has planted a seed. Waymo is tight-lipped about the formal launch of San Diego's services — Karp would say only that invites would be sent to potential riders "likely by the end of the summer." Download Waymo's app and sign up for San Diego notifications and perhaps the chances are better to snag one.

As for being aghast and agog, as Karp approached the Ojai to depart Balboa Park after dropping me off — I hoofed it back to my humble non-robot vehicle and drove myself home — a man and a woman stood on the sidewalk outside Casa del Prado, one with camera in hand, each with their gaze trained upon the Waymo.

Maybe they just can't wait for their chance at a ride? Soon, San Diego.

Concert giant Live Nation has set its sights on downtown

By Tessa Balc
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — Live Nation's new venue could give your favorite band more options when it comes to playing in San Diego. But it probably won't help you much as a consumer.

The entertainment giant announced on Aug. 17 that it'll be converting San Diego's old Wonder Bread factory, located on the outskirts of East Village, into a concert venue. Just days before the announcement, an independent venue, Brick by Brick, closed its doors, and the Bancroft in East County announced it would do the same.

But on the whole, those in the industry say San Diego has a relatively healthy music venue ecosystem, though cost-wise, like everywhere else, it has become more challenging for fans. The proposed Live Nation site, though, fills one particular gap.

In downtown alone, there are six live music venues, not counting symphony halls and bars that invite artists to play. Four of these — The Quartyard, the Casbah, Music Box, and the Rady Shell — are independent. Gallagher Square and the House of Blues are the other two corporate venues.

Justin Navalle is a managing partner at the Quartyard, Tim Mays is behind the Casbah and Joe Rinaldi helps run the Music Box. They all said they're not fazed by Live Nation's announcement, in terms of what it means for their businesses. But they do question what it means for the consumer.

Another player in town

A new music venue in San Diego means more live music in San Diego. With this particular venue coming in at 4,000 seats, it presents an opportunity for certain artists — those who might not be able to sell out the Rady Shell, but are too big for the House of Blues.

This new mid-sized capacity, Rinaldi said, could be a good thing for everyone else in town. As he sees it, it creates more opportunities for artists to grow their audiences.

"Maybe more people will play Music Box because they want to be in the game in this market," he said.

"Before you'd have to jump from basically 1,500 [seats] all the way up to 6,000 in this market until you're at Open Air or Rady, and that doesn't happen organically.

That generally happens through being carried on other people's tours."

The prospect of growth for independent venues in San Diego is a bright spot. Operating an independent venue, all three say has never been easy, but it was particularly challenging in the wake of COVID.

Consumer behavior has shifted in notable ways. For one, Mays said, people don't really purchase walk-up tickets anymore. Most tickets sold are in advance. His best guess as to why: People are tightening their belts as virtually everything gets more expensive.

All three operators said that over the past couple of years, the percentage of people not showing up for a show after buying a ticket has noticeably gone up, too. Navalle and Rinaldi attribute the issue to online ticket scalpers and how they have used search engine optimization tools to appear before concert venues in search results when someone looks up a show. Regardless, it hurts their bottom line with fewer people to spend money at concessions and merchandise tables.

The cost of opportunity

Navalle believes, particularly when it comes to venue sizes introduced into town, growth shouldn't be stopped. But by nature of Live Nation's business model, he fears that despite the new opportunities the venue will create, others will shrink.

"It's the rules that [Live Nation] plays by that concern me the most," he said.

"It's not an equal playing field when an independent venue can't even bid on the same artist because there's a blackout rule and when agencies won't really work with you because they have a relationship with these larger companies," Navalle said.

In April, a federal jury in New York found Live Nation, along with its parent company Ticketmaster, to be a monopoly due to inflating ticket prices for consumers and snuffing out competition. One practice cited in particular — like requiring artists to sign exclusive contracts, not allowing them to work with other venues, in order to play at Live Nation's venues. At this time, the verdict hasn't led to any material changes in how the company conducts its business.

Regardless, people want to see their favorite bands.

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Jimmy Carter's Mexican Cafe perseveres after owner's passing

By Frank Sabatini Jr.
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

HILLCREST — Its fate hangs a little in the air. Yet for now, the long-revered Jimmy Carter's Mexican Cafe at 3172 Fifth Ave. in Hillcrest remains on steady ground a year after the restaurant's namesake founder passed away at age 82.

Jimmy Carter was the glue to a staff of devoted employees, none of whom have left their jobs since Carter died in August of 2025. He supported them through the pandemic years and often mingled affably with customers as they savored homey dishes ranging from breakfast enchiladas and egg scrambles to scratch-made chile rellenos, taco salads, and slow-roasted meats used in various presentations.

The menu hasn't changed a speck. And the operation today resides in the hands of four esteemed managers who Carter entrusted to carry the torch.

Baltazar Mojica is one of them. He started working for Carter a few years after the restaurant's launch in 1991. He began as a busboy before eventually ascending to manager.

"It was Jimmy's wish to delegate me

and the three others to run the restaurant. He worked with a lawyer to make that happen, and he completed the process of turning the business into an LLC right before he died," said Mojica.

His concern when looking ahead, however, is whether the restaurant might have to someday change locations, should the landlord decide to sell out to encroaching developers.

"We don't own the building. So, my big wish is to see things keep going nice and smoothly," he added.

Having visited three times in the past 10 months with various dining cohorts, our only complaints were directed at the house margaritas. They seemingly contained subdued measures of tequila.

Perhaps the loose pours of yesteryear at Jimmy Carter's ended because of tariffs, which has hit the tequila industry with a 25 percent clobber. Or maybe these were flukes. Otherwise, the restaurant maintains genuine consistency in both its food and service, which is becoming increasingly rare in our inflated economy.

Carnitas and carne asada among the top sellers. I often preface either with house-made jalapeno poppers, which



Jimmy Carter's operator-manager Baltazar Mojica. (Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr./Special for Times of San Diego)

are stuffed with the same creamy Oaxaca cheese used in the chile rellenos. Served four to an order, these breaded beauties can be upgraded with the pork on the inside or swathed in bacon on the outside.

Traditional pork shoulder is used for carnitas. It is slowly roasted onsite with garlic and seasonings. The shredded meat is reliably juicy and tender, and it is always generously portioned no matter how you order it — in tacos, burritos, salads, or in plate-form with rice and beans.

For the carne asada, the kitchen still

sources the beef from Central Meat & Provision in Barrio Logan. The whole-sale butchery dates to 1912, and Carter maintained a close friendship with one of the owners since childhood. The meat is marinated at the restaurant in citrus juices and is generally tastier and suppler than what you'll chomp into elsewhere.

I recently learned that Jimmy Carter's re-fried pinto beans are lard-free, which came as a surprise given their unctuous, savory quality. Ditto for the nicely seasoned black beans.

Other standouts include the menu's longstanding chili Colorado, which uses a novel trick for adding texture to the robust pepper-rich sauce. Mojica said it comes from one of the restaurant's established cooks, who soaks tortillas in water before blending them into the chilis.

The recipe offers a decent level of flavor complexity, much like dishes involving mole sauce, which Mojica said is made in-house "with at least 16 ingredients" including dark chocolate.

Lunch and dinner also give way to comforting tamales, hearty seafood enchiladas, and lamb simmered in chile de arbol sauce.

From Little Italy to Hillcrest: Pali Wine Company's next chapter

By Robin Dohn-Simpson
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

HILLCREST — Pali Wine Company San Diego has moved from its Little Italy location to its new Hillcrest digs.

The winery will still offer its hand-crafted wines and additionally be able to expand its hospitality programs and culinary offerings.

The urban winery is known for crafting wines in Lompoc, on the Central Coast, and features grapes from the Santa Rita Hills area adjacent to Santa Barbara and Solvang.

Tim and Judy Perr started their winery in their Lompoc garage in 2005, eventually opened a tasting room, and in 2012 planted their estate vineyard in the Santa Rita Hills. They expanded to San Diego in 2016 with their Little Italy tasting room.

The new Hillcrest location features a full kitchen, an outdoor patio, and updated interior design.

The team plans on adding guided

communal tastings, wine club events, music and trivia, pick-up parties, and more. Join them every weekend and enjoy live music while you sip a Chardonnay or Pinot Noir. Also in the works is a weekday Happy Hour featuring deals on wines on tap, spritzes, and bites.

Wines are offered in flights or by the glass. Two different flights are: the "Vin de Soif," featuring pét nats, acid-driven whites, rosés, orange wines (white wines made in the red wine style), and chilled red wines.

The "Vin de Garde" features five of the winery's most refined wines straight from the Pali Vineyard estate in the Santa Rita Hills or other vineyard-designated sites. On the horizon are housemade frozé, spritzes, and its first-ever zero-proof flight featuring housemade juices and botanicals.

Winemaker Aaron Walker hails from San Diego and shares a commitment to wines that reflect people, place, and purpose. He makes Pali wines, originally starting with Pinot Noir and Chardonnay,



The Pali Wine Company has moved to 1440 University Ave. (Photo by Robin Dohn-Simpson/Special for Times of San Diego)

now also adding Gamay, Syrah, Chenin Blanc, and Dornfelder.

The Perr family has created a second label called Neighborhood, which focuses on experimenting with natural wine-making and wild-fermented, unfiltered and unfiltered wines.

PALI WINE COMPANY

Where: 1440 University Ave.

Hours: Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 2 to 10 p.m.; Saturdays, noon to 10 p.m.; and Sundays, noon to 9 p.m.

Info: paliwineco.com.

If you've been lucky enough to travel and enjoy a European sidewalk café with outdoor dining tables and a leisurely pace, you'll find that same feel on the open-air patio. Executive chef Sable Wentwoord plans to offer light bites as well as a full dinner. Not to worry, you can still nosh on their signature charcuterie and cheese boards.

Wentwoord has a strong commitment to local sourcing whenever possible, championing San Diego growers and producers.

SAN DIEGO
Reader

A
YARD SALE
FOR
BACKYARD RENAISSANCE

Theater company funds the future by selling the past PAGE 2

The happy-making
jacket from "Misery".
(Photo by: Matthew Lickona)

Nine concerts to see this September (that aren't already sold out) PAGE 4

A YARD SALE FOR BACKYARD RENAISSANCE

Theater company funds the future by selling the past

By Matthew Lickona
SAN DIEGO READER

Six-fifteen on a Saturday morning is a ridiculous hour for theater people. But you know what they say: the show must go on. Or in this case, the sale. And so a crowd has gathered here in San Carlos for the Much Ado About Knick-Knacks Yard Sale, a combination storage purge/fundraiser for Backyard Renaissance Theatre Company, which uses Downtown's Tenth Avenue Arts Center to stage its "art to the gut." (Of late, they've been taking some big swings at marriages gone soft in the middle.) Because as every good yard saler knows, if you want the good stuff, you have to get there early.

And there is good stuff here. The books piled under the end table of an associate professor of history in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" The handbag and luggage of a woman who's always depended upon the kindness of strangers in "A Streetcar Named Desire." A collection of antique cameras that were supposed to serve as a lobby display for a production of "I Am a Camera," the play behind the musical "Cabaret." All up for grabs — orphaned objects that Backyard Renaissance hopes will find a home.

And of course, the sort of clothes you require to transport the audience to a different time and place every time. Shopper Tuscany has no trouble outfitting herself for next year's Renn Faire in Riverside: flouncy skirts, frilly tops, a faux fur jacket that might serve as a duchess' capelet. A costumer from Palomar College finds a fluffy, curly squirrel tail and a fitted red silk dress. "We're doing 'The Spongebob

Musical' soon," she explains. "My costume designer isn't keen on the big tail for Sandy Cheeks, just because there's multiple scenes where she's standing close to other people or climbing things. But I'm going to push for the big tail." As for the dress, "right now, I'm costuming 'Clue.' It would be dynamite on Miss Scarlet. 'But it doesn't seem terribly forgiving.' She measures the bust, tugs at the cups, consults a card containing her cast's measurements, and examines the back of the dress, searching for ways to make room.

"We're always looking for a way to engage with the people who come to our shows and support our company," says Francis Gercke, co-founder and artistic director of Backyard Renaissance — a position that requires him to think about the "business" part of "show business." "We like to do things that are a little more personal than what's normally done." Hence the promo flyer's invitation: "Come rummage through 11 years of theatrical history and take home a piece of the show." And maybe pick up a story to take home along with it. Gercke's got a million of 'em.

"Moving sucks," says Gercke. "I am a hoarder. Everything has this deeply personal story for me. But this was still fun for Jess and me." That would be Jessica John Gercke, co-founder and executive director of the company. For example: "There's this great pair of shorts that Mike Sears wore for our first-ever show, Parlour Song." His character, Ned, is written as being rotund. Sears was...not. To drive the mismatch home, "Jessica specifically got him shorts that didn't fit particularly well and weren't particularly stylish. As weird and creepy as it sounds, I hope nobody takes those



A lucky lady made off with Blanche's baggage — the physical kind, anyway.

(Photo by Michael Mackie, courtesy of Backyard Renaissance)

shorts, because they are the ultimate red badge of courage for me — that an actor put them on and performed a full run of shows in them." (For his bravery, Sears was awarded the Craig Noel Award for Outstanding Featured Performance in a Play.)

A gold futon brought back memories of "Mr. and Mrs. Fitch" staged at Moxie Theatre on El Cajon Boulevard. "We had to get out old production photos to figure out what production it was from, and it ended up occupying two hours of a Friday morning. Eventually, we said, 'We can't be doing this. We have to let the kids grow up and move out.'"

"I hope this isn't a retirement-type thing," says one shopper.

"Oh no, it's because they're expanding," comes the quick response from another. "They have to get rid of the old to make room for the new."

"By nature, theater is an inefficient model," affirms Gercke. "It's just not conducive to streamlining. We have this bedding we used for 'Misery' — a full set, with quilts and pillowcases. But not every play calls for a bed" — and even if it did, "you don't want people staring at the same furniture for three years in a row. Companies have to reinvent the wheel every time out. We had a period refrigerator for 'Smokefall,' and we were thinking about using it for 'A Streetcar Named Desire.' But we stumbled; we started worrying, 'Is it going to look like the same refrigerator? We've got to get a different fridge.' And that's how you start to acquire stuff."

Right now, the company is renting three storage spaces, "and costs have really gone

up in the last year. We realized that if we could get rid of those three storage spaces, we could actually come close to affording a monthly lease on a property, so that we would have a commercial residency. It's not like we could afford a theater, but we could combine storage space, rehearsal space, and have the potential for a small cabaret space. It would be a better use of the contributions people provide." A framed flyer lays out the average production costs for a Backyard Renaissance show — \$46,720 — and breaks it down: \$9500 for actors, \$12,500 for required crew, \$4500 for additional crew, \$7700 for theater space (including storage), \$7900 for production and \$4620 for marketing.

The sale will eventually make about \$2000. In addition, says Jessica in the aftermath, "It helped us clear out a \$400 a month storage space, which is a savings of \$4800 over the next year. So it gives us close to \$7000 to put towards rent on a new rehearsal/storage space. Also, it was really fun to see a number of friends from other theater groups come out, and also to meet some longtime audience members!" Friends like Witchland writer Tim Mulligan, or Teri Brown, who spent 15 years as artistic director down at Chula Vista's OnStage Playhouse (where she staged the first San Diego production of "Heathers: The Musical").

Brown has a particular reason for being here: she's curious about a costume. "One of Jess's big loves is wardrobe," says Gercke. "Finding pieces that not only look good, but feel like the character has lived in them. That they purchased it themselves, and it shows them off in a good light even as it tells the story."



For sale: used jacket, slightly stained, some wear and tear in back.
(Photo by Michael Mackie, courtesy of Backyard Renaissance)

But not every actor is supposed to look good. Sometimes, they need to look terrible. “We have the jacket that the sheriff wears in ‘Misery,’” says Gercke. “He was played by Alex Guzman, and he gets shot with a shotgun by Maggie Carney’s character. Our special effects coordinator Jeffery Neitzel blew out the back of the jacket and had blood and guts hanging from it. The spine was even showing. I couldn’t believe he was going to rip it up, and then once he completed it, it was like this work of art. But I said to him, ‘You’ve really screwed Jess and me, because we’re never going to get rid of this jacket. Who walks around with their spine out?’”

How about another sheriff from another production of “Misery” — like the one Lamplighters in La Mesa will be doing in October, with Brown in the role of Annie Wilkes? Incidentally, Lamplighters is facing its own real-estate issues: “It’s the oldest community theater in San Diego,” notes Brown. “They were down by the library in La Mesa, and then when the police station decided to expand, they didn’t have a home for three years. They found a place in a shopping center, but the guy who owned it passed away, and the school that’s there now wants the whole thing.”

Despite the ground shifting beneath Lamplighters’ feet, it’s something of a return-and-restart for Brown. “It’s the first place where I came in as an actor, right out of high school. I haven’t been on stage for

many years, but this year, my goal was, ‘I’m gonna start auditioning again,’” after years of grieving for her lost partner. “On a whim, I auditioned for ‘The Rise and Fall of Little Voice’ at Backyard this year. And I was cast. And then ‘Misery’ came up” — the kind of lead she hasn’t tackled in ages. “It’s big. But I was like, ‘Okay, yes, I can do that.’”

Brown was already a fan of Stephen King, and also of tackling tough stuff. “I directed ‘Carrie’ down at OnStage. I like to give myself a challenge with every show that I direct. And that one was, ‘How do you deal with all this blood?’ We had a platform that had steps, almost like bleachers. And at the top of the platform was a grate, and under the grate was a rolling sort of bucket thing that you could take out. But that didn’t stop it from splashing. Backstage, we had these big tubs with OxyClean and water in them. When the curtain closed, the blood-soaked women had to run and take everything off, and everything went in the bins. The bathroom had a utility sink, so Carrie could wash her hair, and the stage manager would bring them their street clothes.”

Now, she’s after the jacked-up jacket. “Jeff will be so happy that it’s going to live again,” she says as she buys it — even before getting Lamplighters’ green light. “Even if we don’t use it, it’s fun. Maybe I’ll wear it on the back of my brother’s motorcycle.”

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Nine concerts to see this September (that aren't already sold out)

By Reader Staff
SAN DIEGO READER

Yes, Pierce the Veil and Robert Plant and J. Cole and Jack White are all coming to San Diego in September. But you probably knew that already. What's more, they're sold out. Here are nine other shows that still had tickets available at press time — some local, some touring, all worth noting.

SANDE LOLLIS FAREWELL CONCERT

Local icon Sande Lollis first earned notice with East County Americana band Enter the Blue Sky. In 2017, she won the West Coast Country Music Association competition for Best Female Vocalist of the Year and Best Female Entertainer of the Year, earning a slot the following year at the national competition at Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. Over the past two decades, she has uploaded nearly a hundred performance videos to her Youtube channel, many of them taped locally, but now

she's relocating to the east coast. "Last year, after losing my mom, I inherited her house in Tennessee," she said. "That turn of events set in motion a decision I never imagined making...this city has held so much of my music life, my friends, my collaborators, the rooms where songs were born, the unexpected harmonies, the late-night conversations that turned into melodies. It's where I learned how to stand inside my own voice, and where so many of you first stood with me. Now I'm packing up that life and stepping into something new, carrying both sadness and excitement at the same time." Her farewell-to-San Diego concert includes singer-guitarist Jeff Berkley (Berkley Hart), bassist Jason Littlefield (Archtones), multi-instrumentalist Shawn Rohlf (7th Day Buskers), drummer Danny Campbell (Fish & the Seaweeds), and singer-songwriters Cathryn Beeks (CalAmity) and Bonnie Nicholls.



Sande Lollis at Big Rock Studios. (Photo courtesy of Sande Lollis)

Where:

Normal Heights United Methodist Church,
4650 Mansfield Street, San Diego

When:

Friday, Sept. 4, 6 pm

Ages: All ages

Cost: \$25

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Fenix TX (San Diego Reader file photo)

FENIX TX

Though two of the members currently live in San Diego County, pop-punk band Fenix TX was originally based in Texas and known as Riverfenix. Their debut 1997 album Drive Thru resulted in Mark Hoppus managing the band while he was still playing with Blink-182. Both groups toured together until Fenix TX split in 2002, though a few brief reunions ensued. After Blink-182 announced its reformation in 2009, the classic Fenix TX lineup reunited as well. One of the original members, Adam Lewis, passed away from cancer in 2024, prompting the band to prepare previously unreleased material to release in memory of Lewis and for the benefit of his family. Their Big Fish EP dropped in March, and includes four rare or previously unreleased recordings from 1999: “Damn For Real?,” “Abbazabba You My Only Friend,” “Mountain Dewd” and a demo of “Phoebe Cates.”

Where:
The Casbah, 2501 Kettner Blvd, San Diego

When:
Saturday, Sept. 5, at 8:30 pm

Ages: 21+ **Cost:** \$25–\$30

FOOLS AND FRIENDS

Local songwriter collective Fools and Fables takes over the Casbah for Fools and Friends, an eight-artist showcase featuring Alex Bergan, Sutton James, Justin Rodriguez, Jesse Lamonaca, Shelbi Bennett, The Wellsprings, Aly Rowell and C. Gibbs. It’s something of a comeback show for Lamonaca, who recently released two singles in advance of his first recording in nearly 15 years. (He recorded his last album, The Lament of Tumbleweed Hawk, with his band The Dime Novels and nabbed a Best Americana nomination at the San Diego Music Awards in 2012.) “In the last five years, something shifted where music came back to front and center in my life,” he said, “and I started writing the songs that I’ve been waiting to write.” “The Way,” currently streaming online, is “a song about absence and rediscovery,” he says, “about being lost and finding your way home. It opens on a misty river — a swarm of swallows, a grey morning, a soul that gets a little straighter at the bend — and ends with a confession.”



Jesse Lamonaca
(San Diego Reader file photo)

Where: The Casbah, 2501 Kettner Blvd, San Diego

When: Friday, Sept. 4 at 8 pm

Ages: 21+ **Cost:** \$20





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MY TOWN FEST

Taking place over two days, the My Town festival is back to celebrate decades of San Diego music with a number of noteworthy appearances and reunions. The bill for Saturday, Sept. 12 includes punk icons The Zeros celebrating their 50th anniversary, Everready's first show in over ten years, 1980s punk band Dum Dum Boys, 90s punk rockers The Mice (marking their first performance in around six years), Sex Pistols-Spice Girls mashup Spice Pistols, hardcore punk chick rockers Revolt Chix, Gizzards, Hour of Pearl, Substitute Gym Teacher, Holding Grudges and Rat Tricks. Sunday, Sept. 13 features The Neighbors celebrating 34 years of hyperfast hardcore, politically aware all-vegetarian anti-war punkers Diatribe (known as the first American D-Beat, circa early 1980s), Santa Claus (1985 thrash) War Fever, Doc Hammer (named after one of the talents

behind the TV cartoon show The Venture Brothers), Subversive Intent (members of The Eulogy, In Control, Meth Breath, Stay Away), Philistine (members of Waco Fuck/DEA), Moral Genocide (members from Battalion of Saints and Systematic Abuse), Aggravate (ex-Impulse), Lummux Delux (ex-Crossed Out) and Infernal Tide Riders.

Where:

The Holding Company, 5046
Newport Avenue, San Diego

When:

Saturday and Sunday, Sept.
12 and 13 starting at 1 pm

Ages: 21+ **Cost:** \$32.50



My Town event poster. (Used with permission)



"Not quite my tempo." "Weird Al" performs in Whiplash as part of his Bigger and Weirder tour. (YouTube screenshot)

"WEIRD AL" YANKOVIC

You will meet people who will tell you that the triumph of nerd culture began with the rise of comic book movies — Peter Parkers of the world, unite! Eventually, Robert Downey Jr. will come along and make science cool! These people are mistaken. It began in 1985, when "Weird Al" Yankovic released "Eat It" just a year after Michael Jackson's "Beat It." Michael Jackson was the King of Pop. Thriller was (and is) the best-selling album of all time. And here was this guy singing "Have a banana, have a whole bunch/ It doesn't matter what you had for lunch/ Just eat it." Five months later, Revenge of the Nerds hit theaters. Of course, the great thing about Yankovic is that he wasn't a one-off novelty act. He's stayed sharp for decades, outlasting nearly all of the stars he started out parodying.

Where:

The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park, 222 Marina Park Way, San Diego

When:

Wednesday, Sept. 16 at 7 pm

Ages: All ages **Cost:** \$71–\$225

ADAMS AVENUE STREET FAIR

Hey Magic 8 Ball: will Normal Heights ever be properly gentrified? Signs point to no. It’s just too stubbornly itself. Your humble correspondent once looked at a house within sight of the Kensington sign. “Don’t kid yourself,” warned the realtor. “You will never be Kensington.” Thank goodness? The 44th annual Adams Avenue Street Fair fills 10 blocks of Normal Heights with 75 musical acts on six stages, making it Southern California’s largest free two-day music festival. This year’s bill mixes nationally known performers such as veteran rapper Masta Ace and blues guitarist Chris Duarte, plus a particularly deep roster of San Diego acts, including Bardo, Boostive, Creepxotica, Wild Wild Wets and Euphoria Brass Band. Scheduled artists include: Los Fabulocos, Sue Palmer & Her Motel Swing Orchestra, The Midnight Rivals, Kimmi Bitter, Jahtiva, Gayle Skidmore, Please Ask for Paul, The Wellsprings, Stucky Leigh, Rookie Card and Poor Thing.



You know it’s a good street fair when you can’t even see the street.
(San Diego Reader file photo)

Where:
Adams Avenue, Normal Heights

When:
Saturday, Sept. 19, 10 am–10 pm; Sunday, Sept. 20, 10 am–6 pm

Ages: All ages **Cost:** FREE



A.J. Croce (San Diego Reader file photo)

A.J. CROCE

“I’m pretty eclectic,” said singer-songwriter A.J. Croce. “I’ve been filed in five or six different genres in stores and on the radio, so it may be easiest to describe my music as Ray Charles meets Ray Davies, or Elvis Presley meets Elvis Costello, or John Hurt meets John Lennon, or maybe Randy Newman meets Jim Croce, which was my first concert.” Now, he celebrates both his own 35-year career and the music of his father, Jim Croce, with Croce Plays Croce, mixing songs such as “Operator,” “Time in a Bottle,” and “Bad, Bad Leroy Brown” with his own roots, blues, soul and rock material. Croce deliberately avoided performing his father’s catalog for decades while establishing himself as an artist in his own right. That changed in 2017, and in 2022, the 50th Anniversary celebration of his father’s breakthrough album You Don’t Mess Around With Jim saw the beginning of the Croce Plays Croce tour that he’s bringing to his adopted hometown.

Where:
Humphrey's Concerts by the Bay, 2241 Shelter Island Drive, San Diego

When:
Saturday, Sept. 19, 2026 at 7:30 pm

Ages: All ages **Cost:** \$82.90

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CRSSD FESTIVAL

Who knew that EDM fans would enjoy blissing out while watching the sunset over the water instead of baking in the desert outside of Vegas? For that matter, who knew San Diego was secretly cool? San Diego’s homegrown CRSSD Festival has grown since its 2015 debut into one of the West Coast’s major electronic-music festivals, drawing roughly 34,000 attendees over two days and emphasizing house, techno and crossover electronic acts rather than EDM spectacle. Fall 2026 is topped by a Chris Lake b2b Disclosure DJ set, with Mochakk, Boys Noize, Groove Armada, Skepta’s Más Tiempo project, I Hate Models, Marlon Hoffstadt and many, many others spread across the Ocean View, Palms and City Steps stages.

Where:
Waterfront Park, 1600 Pacific Highway

When:
Saturday and Sunday, Sept. 26–27, noon–10 pm

Ages: 21+ **Cost:** \$214–\$440



CRSSD lights up the night in 2025. (YouTube screenshot)



Collective Soul (YouTube screenshot)

COLLECTIVE SOUL

Trent Reznor famously said that hearing Johnny Cash’s cover of Nine Inch Nails’ “Hurt” felt “like someone kissing your girlfriend.” And after he saw the video, he even more famously said, “Wow, I just lost my girlfriend, because that song isn’t mine any more.” That line came to mind during Twitter’s collective swoon over Dolly Parton’s cover of Collective Soul’s “Shine” after the music legend died last week at the age of 80. Parton’s cover is legit great, and has a more obvious piety about it when it pleads “Heaven, let your light shine down.” But Collective Soul is a band, and Dean Roland’s guitar riff is as much a part of what makes that song work as anything in the lyrics. Verdict: similar, but not the same as the Cash grab.

Where:
Humphrey’s Concerts by the Bay,
2241 Shelter Island Dr., San Diego

When:
Friday, Sept. 25, 2026,
at 7:30 pm

Ages: All Ages
Cost: \$128–\$304

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High design, haute cuisine define new era for historic Guild Hotel

By Frank Sabatini Jr.
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — Much is happening behind the ornate facade of 500 W. Broadway.

The eight-level structure, built in 1924, operated for nine decades as the Armed Services YMCA before falling into the hands of developers. Today the historic downtown property, known as The Guild Hotel, has evolved into a stylish community hub showing off fresh interior renovations, a newly installed backyard swimming pool and a curated art collection.

In addition, the 149-room hotel recently welcomed the arrival of Zuma, a high-end Japanese restaurant chain that originated in London in 2002. It has since branched into cities across the globe, including New York, Rome, Madrid, Dubai and Hong Kong.

Zuma's indoor-outdoor presence at The Guild is noteworthy because it marks the brand's California debut, leaving Los Angeles and San Francisco on the back burner for now.

Known for its contemporary approach to izakaya-style dining—not to mention

its elaborate sushi rolls and char-grilled meats—the restaurant can be reached through the The Guild's main entrance or from a dramatic "tunnel" clad in teak beams that visitors access from Columbia Street.

San Diego-based Oram Hotels rescued the building for \$14 million from bankruptcy in 2014. The property at the time was called 500 West Hotel. Several years later the family-run company re-branded it as The Guild Hotel, after having also taken ownership, around the same time, of the historic Granger Hotel in the Gaslamp Quarter.

Oram Hotels founder and managing director, Kevin Mansour, said that compared to past redevelopments he oversaw at The Guild, the latest renovations "better reflect the history and architecture of the building."

The remodeled lobby, for example, greets guests with a large, black-painted wooden panel with tattered basketballs attached to its surface. The eye-catching piece, titled "Glory in the Grotesque" by Detroit-based artist Tyrrell Winston, is an ode to when the building's basement and first floor served as an athletic center for military

service members. It also represents the "blood, sweat and tears" endured within all branches of our armed forces.

Throughout the hotel's common areas are other works from local, national and international artists. Some beckon to San Diego's maritime culture. Others present sleek, modern vibes amidst the vestiges of a 100-plus-year building that Mansour says "has very good bones."

New York-based INC Architecture and Design helped Mansour select textures, colors and furniture for several common areas. They include the front lobby, which is flanked by a boutique retail space and registration alcove for overnight guests, plus a spacious lobby bar and a parlor-like lounge behind it.

Some of the areas are separated by partially see-through draperies, allowing each space to retain their own identities while showing off an array of rich colors and symmetrical archways.

The redo has preserved the property's cherished courtyard, which brims with lush greenery and comfy outdoor furniture. In both the courtyard and lobby bar,



The Guild Hotel is an architectural relic on West Broadway. (Photo courtesy of Oram Hotels)

the public and hotel guests can indulge in a full range of classic and signature cocktails along with salads, ceviche, Wagyu burgers and more.

In addition, Mansour said the guest rooms are receiving "enhancements that point to warmth."

He noted that the original columns are exposed in some of them. "We did that intentionally so you can feel the history," he said.

The same applies to the Italian Renaissance Revival masonry framing the outside entrance and the old double-sided YMCA sign on the roof.



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What makes San Diego cool? Design Week has an answer

By Elizabeth Ireland
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — Walk into a swanky hotel lobby and you feel it before you can explain it. Put on an outfit that makes you stand taller. Step into a space that helps you breathe easier.

Eric Weiss, president of the nonprofit Design Forward Alliance, has been asked to define design more times than he can count. He always lands on the same answer. “Design is what makes everything cool,” Weiss said.

The cool factor will be on display across San Diego County from Sept. 15–20 as San Diego Design Week returns for its sixth year with about 75 tours, talks, workshops and showcases organized by the DFA.

Each day will focus on a different design theme — multimedia, digital, spaces, fashion or health and well-being — with programming at an anchor location. The broader design community also will host events throughout the county.

Weiss said typical attendance is usually 7,000 over the course of the week, drawn from design students, tech workers, fashion enthusiasts and what organizers call the “design curious.”

This year marks the first time fashion and costume design will have its own dedicated track at Design Week, organized by board member Olga Cecilia Sanchez, a retail buyer, business developer and the designer behind the label “Eclectique Mode.”

The main fashion track is Sept. 17, at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in La Jolla, with an exhibit featuring work by local designers and students from Palomar College and Mesa College, the last two schools in San Diego County with fashion design and merchandising programs.

Rather than a traditional runway show, Sanchez built the day around exhibits where designers can explain their process.

“We want to be able to showcase the designer or the students, and they can talk about their work and inspiration behind it,” she said.

The day also includes discussions on Isaac Mizrahi, a preview of the unreleased documentary about English fashion designer Zandra Rhodes and a Dazzle Lab, where attendees can bring blank items to zhuzh with rhinestones and stencils.

Leading up to the MCASD event, Sanchez arranged a rare, ticketed tour of the San Diego History Center’s clothing archive in Balboa Park, which holds more

than 77,000 items, including pieces from Rhodes and Bob Mackie. It is not normally open to the public.

“This tour is an exciting way to build a bridge between San Diego’s fashion history and what is happening in the present,” Sanchez said.

Other fashion track activities include free tours of the La Jolla Playhouse costume department and an Uptown sewing collective.

Sanchez said the goal is to create experiences that connect students, designers and the larger community.

“I want to create memories like I have from when I was in fashion school,” she said. “I want to give back to the amazing community that supported me.”

Design Week’s reach extends into San Diego’s hospitality scene through Jennifer Findley, an art consultant for Oram Hotels, which owns One Ameria Plaza and The Guild and Granger hotels downtown. Findley is a San Diego native and founder of JFiN Collective.

“One of my goals is to see what I can do to showcase and really toot my little horn, as much as I can, about what San Diego has to offer,” Findley said.

Findley has spent the past several years helping build an art and design identity for the hotels that pays homage to San Diego culture, including an artist-in-residence collaboration with UC San Diego and two exhibitions featuring regional artists.

“Our goal is that the design, art and hospitality work together to create an environment that feels very uplifting, but also authentic to the community,” Findley said.

On Sept. 19, The Guild and JFiN Collective will host “The Art of Design,” an evening reception and exhibition in a building whose history is itself part of the design story. The former Army-Navy YMCA’s recently reimagined interiors preserve the building’s historic architecture while incorporating what’s relevant today.

“It’s not just a party,” she said. “It’s thinking about how every element, from the chair to the cocktail glass, to the food, to the plate, to the fashion that’s worn that night, comes together to create a perfect work of art. Everything connects so everything is intentional.”

Findley sees Design Week as a way for San Diegans to recognize the creativity already happening around them.

“San Diego is not a second city. It’s a place that has its own narrative, its own



Church by The Lost Abbey at 1313 J St., once a house of worship, is now a cathedral for craft beer. (Photo courtesy of San Diego Design Week)



Guests enjoy happy hour at Charade Speakeasy at last year’s Industry Day with a live interactive performance by Queer Clown Collective. (Photo courtesy of San Diego Design Week)

story to tell, its own future and that future is pretty bright,” Findley said.

Weiss said the payoff comes when the doors finally open after a year of planning. “It’s pretty amazing,” he said. “It’s six days, it’s all over the city, it’s all over the county.”

But the most rewarding part, Weiss said, is what happens when people from

different corners of the creative community come together.

“We’re all in the same space, same principles, but to see them applied in totally different domains. It gives me the chills,” he said.

A schedule of Design Week events, most of which are free, is available at sddesignweek.org.

Staycation September: Enjoy the best of Little Italy



LITTLE ITALY NEWS

Christopher Gomez

Local summer is in full swing in Little Italy! As the late-summer weather cools down, it's the perfect time to book a local staycation and explore what the neighborhood has to offer this month. With top-tier stays just walking distance from all the action, locals are invited to settle in and experience the charm of Little Italy for themselves.

Where to stay for your local summer staycation

There is no shortage of locally loved accommodations in Little Italy. For a sleek and modern stay, Carté Hotel offers an experience for those who love the finer things in life. Just down the road, Porto Vista is a retro-chic hideaway for artistic souls. Or, for a classic waterfront stay, the Hilton Bayside has ocean-view rooms

that you'll never want to leave, while the Courtyard by Marriott and Urban Boutique Hotel provide comfortable stays for the family. No matter what your staycation vibe is, Little Italy has a place for you.

The best part about the hospitality of Little Italy? There is a never-ending list of things to do. If you are new to the area, hop on one of the Little Italy tours. For a picturesque Saturday stroll, explore the Little Italy Mercato, where dozens of vendors come together for one of San Diego's favorite traditions. Take in the smell of locally baked bread while browsing handmade artisan crafts or take a seat at one of the family-owned Italian restaurants that line India Street.

Little Italy Labor Day Stickball Classic

Step into a Little Italy tradition this Labor Day weekend at the Little Italy Labor Day Stickball Classic, happening Saturday, Sept. 5 through Monday, Sept. 7 from 8:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. A Little Italy staple for more than three decades, the tournament keeps the old-school game of stickball alive while celebrating the community and

generations who have made it a neighborhood favorite. For more information, visit littleitalysd.com/events/labor-day-stickball-classic.

Punches in the Piazza

Punches in the Piazza is one of those Little Italy traditions you can't find anywhere else. Hosted by the Bobby D. Foundation on Sept. 11 at 6 p.m., this event combines amateur boxing, philanthropy, and a powerful tribute to the 25th anniversary of 9/11.

"There's an unmistakable energy that comes from bringing people together for a cause bigger than themselves. Hosting Punches in the Piazza at the Piazza della Famiglia allows us to create an exciting night for the community while making a meaningful impact for those who need it most," said Michelle DePhillipis, founder of the Bobby D. Foundation. On top of USA Boxing-sanctioned amateur bouts, guests will enjoy silent auction opportunities, raffle prizes, and more for



Punches in the Piazza is one of those Little Italy traditions. (Photo courtesy of Goappr Studios)

a truly memorable night.

State of the Neighborhood

On Thursday, Sept. 24 from 5:30- 9 p.m., the State of the Neighborhood will be hosted on the rooftop lanai of Kilroy's premier office building. Come together for a night of community togetherness where neighbors, business owners, residents, and visitors can wine and dine in the heart of Little Italy. Learn about current happenings and future projects to come. Plus, show up early for happy hour to mix, mingle, and meet new people!

For the latest updates, visit littleitalysd.com or follow on Instagram @littleitalysd.

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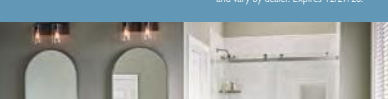
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1	9	5	8	3	6	2	4	7
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A knockout event — Punches in the Piazza returns to Little Italy

By Mark Nero
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LITTLE ITALY — When Hall of Fame boxing promoter Robert “Bobby” DePhilippis died four years ago, his daughter, Michelle DePhilippis, decided to honor his life and work by creating Punches in the Piazza, an annual amateur boxing event in Little Italy.

But this year’s gathering will also have a new and special component — a tribute to first responders and survivors of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. That’s because this year’s event takes place on Sept. 11, which is both the day the World Trade Center in New York City fell and the day that Bobby DePhilippis died in 2022 at age 72.

And with this year’s event taking place on the actual Sept. 11, Michelle DePhilippis decided to treat it as a tribute and fundraiser for two separate causes.

“This year is especially special because it’s the fourth anniversary of my father’s passing and it is also the 25th anniversary of 9/11,” she said. “And so, we’re going to continue with our boxing showcase, but I thought it was a great opportunity to honor first responders and the families that make the sacrifice.”

“This is the first year we’re doing the 9/11 tribute. It’s going to be exciting,” she said. “We’re going to have some first responders actually boxing, as well as amateur fighters. And we’re going to do a tribute to 9/11. It should be a wonderful time.”

Michelle DePhilippis, who had no experience in event promotion before her father’s death, said she came up with the idea of raising money for a 9/11-related cause once the event’s date was settled.

“We typically give money to Washington Elementary School Foundation, which is right in Little Italy. They’re one of the oldest schools in San Diego, and about 80% of their students live below the poverty line,” she said. “So that’s what we’ve been giving our donations to for the last three years.”

But with this year’s event falling on 9/11, Michelle said she did some research on Sept. 11-related causes to donate to and settled on one whose mission is compatible with what her event has done.

So, this year, in addition to Washington Elementary, proceeds will also be donated to the Tunnel to Towers Foundation, which, since 9/11, has helped provide mortgage-free homes to families of fallen first responders and families of

fallen members of the U.S. military that have young children.

The organization also builds specially adapted smart homes for severely injured veterans and first responders, plus offers children within the immediate families full scholarships for undergraduate degrees and accredited trade school programs.

Half the proceeds from the event will go to the Washington Elementary Foundation and the other 50% to Tunnel to Towers, she said.

As far as the event itself, the event’s expected to feature USA Boxing-sanctioned three-round amateur bouts, special tributes, a silent auction, raffle and more. Michelle said that if her father could see the events that she’s put together in his honor annually over the past four years, he’d likely be proud.

“I think he’d be surprised that I that I’m doing this. I’m surprised I’m doing this. But I think he would love it; you



The event is expected to feature USA Boxing-sanctioned three-round amateur bouts and more. (Photo courtesy of Punches in the Piazza)

know, in Little Italy, it’s just such a great venue. It’s really unique, and it has a vibe when you’re there,” she said.

“And I think he’d be smiling and (would) be happy, and (would) like the attention he’s getting, a little bit,” she added.

“I’ve never had any experience with promotions; I just threw myself in there, and because he’s such a great person and made so many great connections, there were so many people that respect him that wanted to be a part of it and help out,” she remarked. “So, it’s really come together quite nicely.”

A guide to the Adams Avenue Street Fair, for the adventurous

By Mark Nero
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — Over the more than four decades that it’s been in existence, the Adams Avenue Street Fair has grown into of the biggest free music events in all of Southern California, and this year’s event is a perfect example of why.

Over the course of 20 hours stretched across two days, 75 music acts are expected to play on six different stages, with artists in almost every genre there is represented including, but not limited to, country, Americana, rock, jazz, pop, hip-hop, dance, punk, R&B and even gospel.

But it’s not just all about music. The event also features carnival rides, beer gardens, circus performances and 300 exhibitors offering food and drink for purchase, as well as other items, like jewelry and clothing.

With dozens of acts performing, it can be tough for music lovers to choose who to

listen to, especially since so many acts aren’t yet well known, nationally or regionally.

If you’re an adventurous listener whose ears and mind are open to good, diverse sounds, here are eight acts — four performing on Saturday and four on Sunday — to consider checking out.

Saturday, Sept. 19

- **CreepXotica.** CreepXotica, which is an alternate identity of punk rock outfit the Creepy Creeps, is one of the more unique bands in San Diego, both sonically and visually. They combine surf music with lounge sounds and exotica. And oh — they perform while wearing luchador-style masks and matching suits. They play from 5:30–6:30 p.m. on the Casbah/91X Rock Stage at 33rd Street and Adams.

- **Los FabuLocos.** This band from East L.A. plays Cali-Mex music, which is a combination of blues, rock, R&B and Chicano sounds, similar to another band from East L.A., Los Lobos. Performing from 5:45–7 p.m. on the

Roots Rock Stage at 34th Street and Adams.

- **Bishop John W. Haynes & Change.** One of the few contemporary spiritual acts performing at the event, Bishop Haynes and Change are a family gospel group from the Escondido area whose music is upbeat, uplifting and danceable. Playing 7:15–8:15 p.m. on the Blues Stage at Hawley Boulevard and Adams.

- **Boostive.** Ocean Beach-based reggae/world music band Boostive is known for high energy live shows, and has won multiple trophies at the annual San Diego Music Awards. They perform from 8:45–10 p.m. on the Groove Stage, in the Starbucks parking lot at Felton Street and Adams.

Sunday, Sept. 20

- **Westwinders.** The Westwinders are a three-man country, Americana and honky-tonk band based in the San Diego area. Their sound is both familiar, but at the same time, completely unique. They play from 1:45–2:45 p.m. on the

Roots Rock Stage.

- **Bardo.** Bardo, whose full name is Bardo Martinez, is best known as the lead vocalist for the LA-based psychedelic rock band Chicano Batman. The band went on an indefinite hiatus at the end of 2024; since then, Bardo’s been a mostly solo act. He plays from 3–4:15 p.m. on the Groove Stage.

- **Sue Palmer & Her Motel Swing Orchestra.** Palmer has been a presence on the San Diego music scene for more than 30 years. Her band, which plays a combination of swing, blues, New Orleans and boogie-woogie, is set to perform from 4:45–6 p.m. on the Blues Stage.

- **Various DJs.** The Soul Side Vinyl DJ Stage is where a number of San Diego party and club DJs will spin records from noon to 6 p.m. on Sunday. Stop by the Soul Side Vinyl stage, located at Wilson Avenue and Adams, if you’re in the mood for a house music-oriented dance party.

PiL frontman John Lydon hasn't mellowed after decades of performing

By Donovan Roche
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — Contrary to most bands that have been around for nearly five decades, Public Image Ltd (PiL) isn't trying to sell seats on its current North American tour by calling it a farewell. In fact, it's doing the opposite: branding the current run "This Is Not... The Last PiL Tour" — a wink to the post-punk group's 1984 hit "This Is Not a Love Song."

Following last year's string of shows in the UK and Europe, this is PiL's first North American tour in eight years. With just 24 dates over the next two months, local fans are fortunate that it includes a San Diego stop at House of Blues on Sept. 11.

Despite the promise that this isn't the end of the road for PiL, the tour almost didn't happen.

In 2023, frontman John Lydon lost his wife of 44 years to Alzheimer's disease and his lifelong friend and manager, John "Rambo" Stevens, suddenly died.

The same year, longtime drummer Bruce Smith departed, prompting Lydon to contemplate retirement and never stepping onstage again.

"After everything that's happened over the past few years, I thought for a moment that might be it for me," the 70-year-old singer said. "After losing Nora, and then losing Rambo, I couldn't see a clear way through."

But the love and support of fans and memory of his wife's appreciation for the band kept Lydon going.

"She wouldn't have wanted us to crawl into a hole," he said. "I had my moments of falling into self-indulgent pity, but I knew that if I ceased working she'd be furious at me!"

Earlier this year, the ever-irreverent Lydon, known for his venomous vibrato, appeared on the British version of "The Masked Singer" dressed as a yak. He later said he did it largely to help bankroll PiL's new self-produced album, "Alive," recorded during the band's 2025 tour.



Public Image Ltd, with John Lydon, second from left. (Photo by Pauln Heartfield)

The foursome — which includes guitarist Lu Edmonds, bassist Scott Firth and drummer Mark Roberts, who replaced Smith — explicitly decided not to release the live album on streaming platforms or at retail. The only way fans can get a CD or vinyl copy is through A Way With Media.

Lydon (previously known as Johnny Rotten) formed PiL after leaving the Sex Pistols in 1978 because he wanted to do something radically different. Venturing

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When: 7 p.m. Friday, Sept. 11.

Info:
sandiego.houseofblues.com.

beyond conventional punk, the group explored a mix of dub, noise, reggae, pop and experimental "anti-rock" across 11 studio albums.

The band's first three albums, "Public Image: First Issue," "Metal Box" and "The Flowers of Romance," are widely regarded as influential works of the post-punk movement. But PiL's biggest commercial success came in the 1980s, with a trio of new wave/modern rock albums yielding popular singles such as "This Is Not a Love Song," "Rise," "The Body" and "Disappointed."

Musician and composer Preston Swirnoff has roots in San Diego's scene

By Paul Georgeades
SPECIAL TO TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — Preston Swirnoff is a musician, composer and sound artist who's released over 30 albums with numerous bands, collaborators and as solo projects.

He's recently been commissioned to compose work for the Plein Soleil festival in Corsica, the Singapore Biennale and the Scent Art Festival in Riga, Latvia. His sound art and compositions have been exhibited at Tate Modern, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, MACBA in Barcelona, MOMA PS1 in New York City, Niterói Contemporary Art Museum in Rio de Janeiro, and elsewhere throughout the globe.

Though he's toured and performed extensively throughout Europe, Asia and South America, for the past 35 years he's made San Diego his home. During the 1990s, he was a fixture of San Diego's vibrant punk scene, and since, his music has spanned contemporary classical, art rock, experimental, Brazilian folk, jazz and sound art.

I sat down with Swirnoff in his Mission

Hills home to discuss his music.

Times of San Diego: You have a new piano record coming out in 2027. What does it sound like?

Swirnoff: I'm working in the tradition of repetition, minimalism and rhythmic playing, but also weaving in some minor chord romantic/classical melody within it. So instead of this upbeat major key Terry Riley thing, who I love, don't get me wrong, I injected something that was a little darker and closer to my roots — Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Scriabin and the Russian pianists. But then appropriating that for a more avant-garde style of piano.

ToSD: You play and write music in such a wide variety of genres, but I've noticed that all your music has a droning, hypnotic, and hunting quality. Would you say that's accurate?

Swirnoff: Yeah, that's a good observation.

ToSD: What draws you to it?

Swirnoff: I'm drawn to a lot of music that uses drone, like Indian, Maqam, music from Indonesia. So instead of writing linear melody, I write music that either has a structure over a drone or has a circular

structure where there's not really a beginning or an end—it's like an atmosphere. The choir piece I just did in Latvia has that quality to it ... And also, a lot of my favorite composers, like Giacinto Scelsi, La Monte Young, Kaija Saariaho (the Finnish composer, I love her), Valentina Goncharova — there's something in there that I feel kinship to musically.

ToSD: You've composed works for some very unique natural spaces. What's the interaction between place and your music?

Swirnoff: Something really called to me about prioritizing place as a main feature of the music. It's actually part of the composition ... I was commissioned to compose and conduct a piece on the Smith River at the very Northern tip of California. It's this beautiful river. So, I wrote the piece to be like a mist or fog hanging over the water, because the actual audience was in boats. I wrote it as a physical weather system. And it has a series of slowly passing chords, and each of them was like a new mist rolling in, like you would see in a morning on the river.

ToSD: How has San Diego as a place shaped your sound?



Preston Swirnoff in Balboa Park. (Photo by Paul Georgeades)

Swirnoff: It's been totally formative because the first bands I was in were in Mission Beach, where I played in punk bands as a teenager and in my early 20s. The wild freedom of skateboarding, surfing, punk and youth culture in California was a huge influence on me. It was that DIY culture where everyone had their own label and zine. That's the ethos and undercurrent still in everything I do.

I learned about music from watching all these incredible San Diego bands in the '90s like Drive Like Jehu, Tanner, Fishwife, No Knife and Boilermaker.

Homegrown musical ‘the wulfeater’ finds success by bucking trends

By Drew Sitton
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — Most of the time, San Diego theater audiences are served up palatable offerings focused on escapism, joy and nostalgia. If there are tough messages, they’re cloaked in comedy.

If these light-hearted musicals are cotton candy, what local creatives Brian and Danisha Jenkins offer in the second run of their musical “the wulfeater,” opening Friday, is meat. Characters explore themes of imperialism, capitalist exploitation and gender violence through its punk rock soundtrack, dramatic script and dystopian setting.

“Musical theater is a little bit safe in that regard. Typically, there’s a lot of happy endings,” said lighting director Sara Hayes. “I like that we don’t give that to people here ... There’s not really a hero. It’s just people making bad choices.”

“The wulfeater” is the opposite of safe. It is set inside a bar, which serves milk called “suckle,” where infertile women serve hyper-masculine married men. The bar is inside a fictional Cleveland, a nation-state in a post-apocalyptic world at war. Aspects of the setting are influenced by “The Handmaid’s Tale,” “Clockwork Orange,” and “Mad Max” although the Jenkins, a married couple, wrote it as an homage to “Cabaret.” In addition, Brian Jenkins directs the play and Danisha stars in it.

One of the big twists is that the wulfeater is not a brothel — there is no sex — but in a capitalist world worse than this, basic acts of intimacy have been commodified. These disempowered women are paid to care for the male customers,



Danisha Jenkins co-wrote ‘the wulfeater’ and plays Diana, the manager of the wulfeater bar who looms large over the women employees. (Photo courtesy of the wulfeater)

who go home to their wives and reproduce to make more soldiers.

People will draw comparisons with the Trump administration, but the co-writers intended it as a broader critique of systems that inflict unnecessary pain and suffering on people.

“It’s my belief that you can’t rid the world of that pain and suffering until you acknowledge its existence, and I think that’s what ‘the wulfeater’ is doing,” Brian Jenkins said.

Instead of melt-in-your-mouth sweetness, “the wulfeater” is ambitious art you need to work to digest. Some people are likely to be left with indigestion. For those who are hungry though, this satisfies far more than saccharine productions.

Despite having a more cynical outlook than the typical musical, the self-funded project found an audience hungry for more. It nearly broke even, unlike many of the nation’s top musicals struggling to make it on Broadway.

“Bucking trends can lead to some really



The women who work at the fictional wulfeater bar, where men drink “suckle” and pay women to receive basic care. (Photo courtesy “the wulfeater”)

cool stuff,” said Hayes, who won Best Lighting Design at the BroadwayWorld San Diego Awards. In her first time as a lighting designer, she threw off lighting norms where the dark is seen as an unknown, frightening place. Here, light illuminates the violence of the system. Yet many characters cling to known terrors over the unknown darkness where they might find a better world.

Despite much of the design team learning on the job, “the wulfeater” connected with audiences during its first 10-week run at Tenth Avenue Arts Center in 2025. Close to 40% of attendees came to the musical a second time, according to Brian Jenkins.

“So many (plays) just kind of felt hollow and empty,” he said. “I think our entire crew of actors and cast just poured their heart into it, and I think that resonated with people to go and see something that also made them uncomfortable.”

About half of the original cast of 25 are reprising their roles in the new production, which is sharper and edgier.

THE WULFEATER

Where: Tenth Avenue Arts Center at 930 10th Ave.

When: Through Sept. 18.

Info: thewulfeater.com.

Rather than giving Western saloon vibes, the wulfeater, the bar in which the musical is set, now reeks of Victorian posh decay. Some dances and lighting elements were redesigned from the ground up. The Jenkins also gave new notes to the performers. The gist: be more feral.

“The characters are making it less pretty and almost less palatable in really powerful ways,” Danisha Jenkins said. She plays Diana, the manager of the wulfeater and the embodiment of toxic girlboss energy.

Four of her instructors at Culture Shock dance studio auditioned to join the cast this year. In fact, the audition slots completely filled up, with 100 people interested in joining the show.

Some saw it last year and connected with the material. Others wanted to be part of the tight-knit community.

“In a world where so much is so hard and so much is being destroyed, I feel really passionately that making things now is just absolutely essential to maintain humanity and beauty in our community,” Danish Jenkins said.

These new cast members bring expertise in singing, dancing, acting and design. To Danisha Jenkins, that is the power of musical theater: It says more than music or dance or any other medium could alone.

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Agent 51 brings ‘old man punk angst’ to Capital of Craft’s return

By Donovan Roche
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — The San Diego Brewers Guild’s flagship beer festival is returning to downtown’s Broadway Pier, where it was last held in 2017.

Now known as the Capital of Craft Beer Festival, the Sept. 19 event will feature unlimited sampling of more than 65 local craft beers, food vendors, an arts and crafts marketplace and live music from Poway punkers Agent 51 and 80s Resurrection, a new wave cover band presented by Dead Man’s Party.

Participating breweries include local favorites Pizza Port, Belching Beaver and Coronado Brewing Co., as well as lesser-known labels like Burgeon, Kilowatt and Hopnonymous Brewing Co. Festivalgoers can vote for their favorite beer, with the winner receiving the People’s Choice Hoppy Beer Award.

The Capital of Craft VIP session opens at noon, followed by the general session from 1 to 4 p.m. Tickets are available online (use promo code sdbeer for \$5 off).

Ahead of Agent 51’s performance, Times of San Diego spoke with lead vocalist/guitarist Chris Armes, who opened up about the band’s alien origin story, 18-year hiatus, recently released Beastie Boys cover and their newest creation: “Red Alert” IPA, named after Agent 51’s 1997 song, which 3 Punk Ales will serve at the festival.

Poway has spawned several great punk bands — blink-182, Unwritten Law, Agent 51. What do you think has contributed to that distinction, and how did you get started?

Back in the ‘90s, the pre-internet era, if you didn’t live by the coast, there really wasn’t much to do. And if you didn’t have a car, your best bet was to pick up a guitar or a skateboard. I remember being in high school and seeing Unwritten Law play a keg party. I’m like, ‘Man, I really want to do this.’ Alternative music was really big, but I couldn’t play a C chord, I could just play bar chords. Punk rock is the doorway to entry; it’s very simple and very immediate. All you need to have is teen angst and know three chords, and you’re in. I had plenty of [teen angst] at 17, so I just started there in 1993. I was washing dishes at Hamburger Factory for

\$4.25 an hour and got invited to sing in this band called Openfast.

Agent 51 formed in 1995, originally as Area 51. What inspired you to adopt the persona of rogue secret agents with insider knowledge of extraterrestrial life?

I was into the alien thing since I can remember. I found an old preschool photo of me at like four years old and I have the “Mork & Mindy” Shazbot Nanu Nanu shirt on. I’ve always been really intrigued by these lights in the sky. I wanted to incorporate that into our music because I hadn’t really seen any other band do that. And Area 51 at that time wasn’t really part of the cultural landscape, so I just went for it. The idea for the suits was brought in by our bass player, Greg Schneider. He said, ‘Why don’t we incorporate some visual stuff into this?’ I thought that was a great idea. That way, when people come see us, they’re not only getting the music, but they’re getting this visual aspect as well.

How did Green Day’s Billie Joe Armstrong come to sign you to his Adeline label and re-release your sophomore album, “Just Keep Runnin’”?

We incorporated a comic book storyline in our second album about all our characters. If you buy the CD, it’s got a six-panel layout of each character in the band, what their superpowers are and how we all escaped this government entity called The Syndicate. It really helped our CD stand out because it brought this visual, comic-book element. So, when a record label receives it, they’re like, ‘Oh, wow, these guys are doing something really different.’

I got an email from some guy at Atlantic Records who said, ‘We liked your record. Give us a call.’ I called the number and it was some sweatshop in LA. It turned out it was my friend pranking me. Then, a week later, I got a message on my machine: ‘Hey Chris, this is Billie Joe from Adeline Records,’ and I’m thinking this guy is pranking me again. So, I called back and, sure enough, it’s Billie Joe. He put out our record with two new songs, and it really gave us a boost. We were able to tour, and people knew who we were.

On Aug. 20, Agent 51 released a cover of the Beastie Boys B-side “Mullet Head.” What prompted you to put your spin on



Agent 51, which will perform at the Sept. 19 Capital of Craft fest. (Photo by Alex Middleton)

the song, and how did that come about?

We did an Indiegogo, like a GoFundMe, for our last record. If you were a backer and pledged a couple hundred bucks, we would cover any song you wanted, and one of the backers chose ‘Mullet Head.’ We love the Beastie Boys anyway, and we covered ‘Fight for Your Right to Party’ back in the ‘90s, so we covered ‘Mullet Head’ and just injected our brand of old man punk angst into it. But we wanted to go dirty instead of making it sound polished. We wanted to go as nasty and raw as possible.

Tell me more about the creation of last year’s “Age of Validation” and what you had to do to get the album out.

It started with the idea of doing a reunion show, and I thought why don’t we just write one new song, so we have something to promote this reunion show? One song turned into two, two turned into three, three turned into an EP and then it turned into an album. I hopped on this wave, and I just couldn’t stop writing.

But we didn’t have the money to record it, and that’s where the crowdfunding thing came in. Greg and I got together, and we’re like, ‘How can we make this a visual thing and create a video where Tom Cruise is narrating and talking about Agent 51?’ Thankfully, there was still enough interest there for us to fund a 15-song record. I’m just blown away that we’re still able to do this at our age.

Agent 51 took a hiatus from 2005 to 2023, apart from some one-off reunion shows. What led to such a lengthy break?

When you’re starting out and it’s just a few guys in a garage and it’s fun, you’re

CAPITAL OF CRAFT BEER FESTIVAL

Where: Broadway Pier.

When: Noon to 4 p.m.
Saturday, Sept. 19.

Info:
capitalofcraftbeerfest.com.

like, this is the best ever. Then, by the time you manifest the record deal, it’s now business. I didn’t understand the business side. So, we’d get off a three-month tour, and I’d have \$300 in my pocket because the RV broke down. I was 20 years old, and I’m like, it’s probably time for me to at least get a job so I can fund this hobby.

So, we stopped touring. I put all my focus on myself instead of the band. I just decided it was time to do something else. I didn’t really like who I was becoming because I was so focused on the outcome of success rather than just focusing on the creativity and writing the best songs I could.

What can fans look forward to at Capital of Craft, and what’s ahead for Agent 51?

We’ve got a new beer out called Red Alert from 3 Punk Ales. It’s kind of like a red IPA that they’ll be serving at Beer Fest. We’re releasing a re-recorded version of ‘Red Alert’ in September, mostly for the beer. And on Oct. 3, we’re gonna play the Hop Stop in Poway. Our beer will be on tap there and at 3 Punk Ales in Chula Vista and Little Italy.

We have a string of singles coming out, too. I think we’re gonna go in a direction where it’s really garage-y sounding, moving away from the polished sound and more like we just hung a mic in a room, like early Misfits stuff. We’re also working with the San Diego Gulls right now to come up with either a theme song or something that’s gonna play every time they score a goal. I’m crossing my fingers that we actually get to do this.

Donovan Roche is a longtime music writer and regular contributor to Times of San Diego.