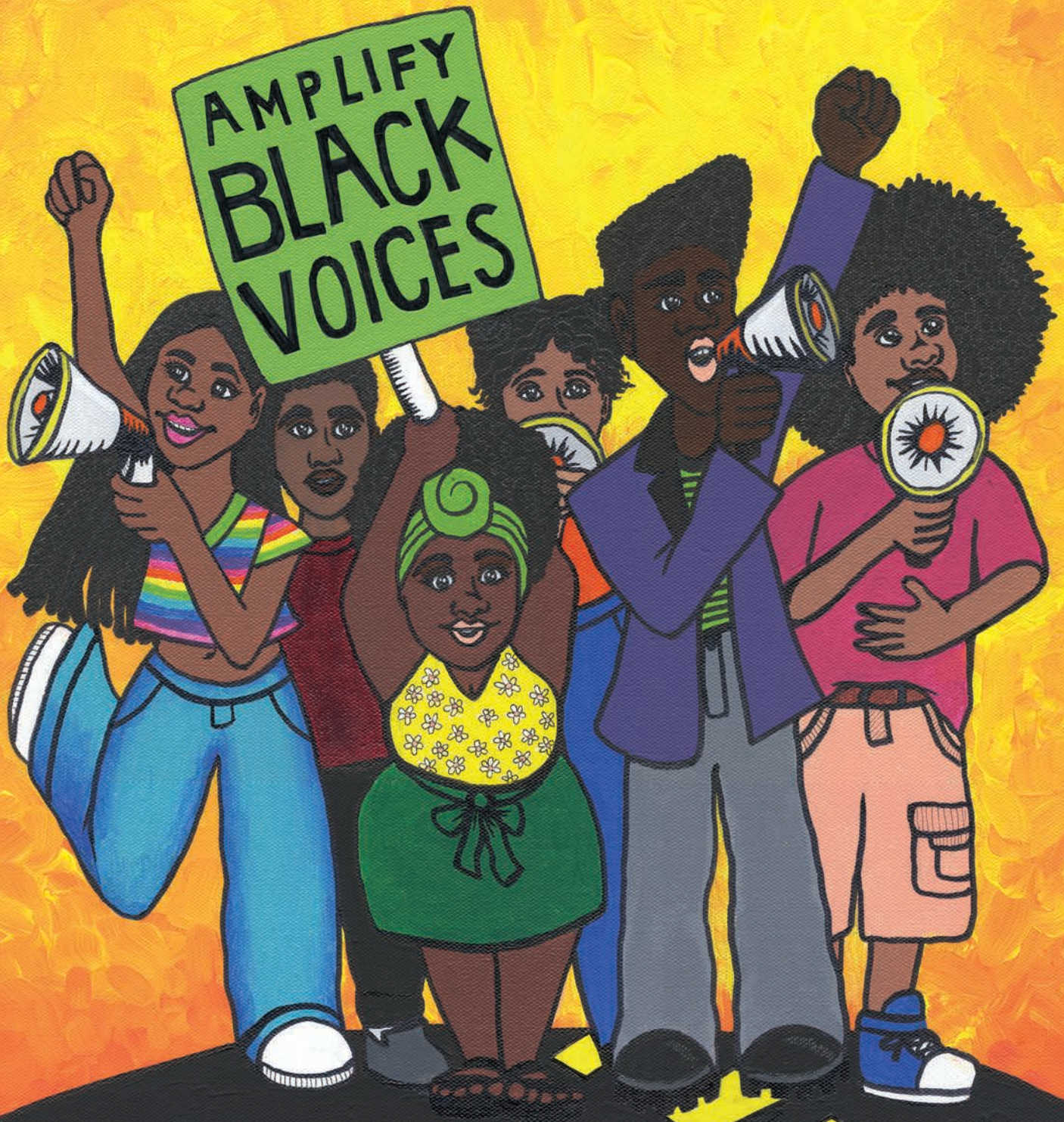


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ABOUT THE COVER: Liz Lambson caught our eye with her stunning murals on the Utah Black History Museum's Mobile Museum bus (p. 6), and we knew that her expressive figures were perfect for this *Amplify Black Voices* issue. You can find more of Lambson's work on Instagram @lizzylambson.

T.J. Taylor

Contributor Limelight
Guest Writer



T.J. Taylor takes part in this year's *Amplify Black Voices* issue as a guest writer to discuss the importance of Black comedy and creative expression in the state of Utah. A local comedian and podcaster, Taylor has excercised these roles in organizing Black-centric events like the *Black Hilarity Show* at *Wiseguys* and works to continue cultivating a sense of community within these scenes. Listen to his podcast *The Downstairs* on Spotify where Taylor and co-hosts **Anti** and **Sheep** discuss everyday things like Gamestop Stonks and Norwegian Car Films. Check out his article on Pg. 20 and keep up with him on instagram @tjjsfunny.

Liz Lambson

Contributor Limelight
Cover Artist



Liz Lambson is an artist, musician, writer and mother to five boys. In addition to her collection of talents, Lambson performs as a string bassist with the **Ballet West Orchestra** and is the creator of *Yoga Storytime & Songs* where she performs as children's singer-songwriter **Lizzy Luna**. In painting the cover for this issue Lambson says, "From varying skin tones on the subjects' faces to the hues of their clothing to the brightness of the background, I love painting with vibrant, rich colors." As a member of the **Utah Black Artists Collective** and board member of the *Utah Black History Museum* Lambson actively plays many critical roles in Utah's art and culture community.

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-THE- UTAH BLACK HISTORY MUSEUM

CORRECTING HISTORY

By Ben Trentleman | bdkt0@yahoo.com



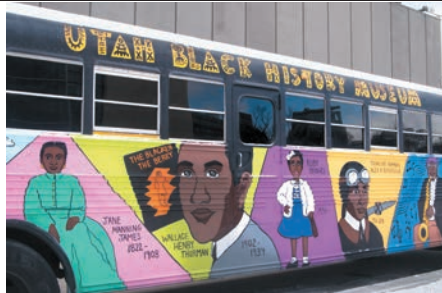
Photos by Rowe Photo Co.

In its first form as a traveling bus exhibit, the *Utah Black History Museum* is a mobile pop-up museum that travels throughout Utah to educate youth and adults about Black figures who've shaped our state's history.

As part of Utah's core educational standards, all seventh-grade students in the state take a Utah History Class described as "an opportunity for students to learn about their own families and cultures as well as those of others." While these lessons may make many Utahns feel a meaningful connection to their home state, Black people are often omitted from that history, despite a longtime presence predating formal statehood. Key individuals anchored to Utah's past are largely absent, such as **Joe McQueen**—who played with the likes of **Charlie Parker** and **Duke Ellington**, and led his own musical boom in Ogden—or **James Beckwourth**, a fur trader and explorer credited with naming Cache Valley, which he frequented in the early 1800s. Responding to this need, the *Utah Black History Museum* is a colorful, mural-wrapped school bus that is set to travel the state and help Black youth discover and connect to their own place in Utah history.

Liz Lambson is the museum-bus artist and a member of the museum board of directors, and **Tarienne Mitchell** is the museum's curator. The two are working with other artists, historians and activists to launch the mobile *Utah Black History Museum*. **Lex Scott**—Founder of the **Black Lives Matter Utah Chapter** and Founder and President of the *Utah Black History Museum*—contacted Lambson, Mitchell and others with the idea for a Black history museum after hearing from young, Black students about issues they were dealing with at school.

Mitchell says, "We thought that if [Black students] knew the history and contributions that the Black community has made in the state of Utah, it might help with some of the situations they were dealing with. We can also provide students with more validation that their history is important, that their identities are important and that we all have something to offer to this great state."



There are plans in the future for a brick-and-mortar location, but for now, the fact that the *Utah Black History Museum* is mobile and can move through different neighborhoods and cities ensures that everyone throughout the state will be able to access this history. "We can set up anywhere," Lambson says. "We can set up in parking lots, we can set up in community centers and we can set up in school gyms." While aiming to reach Utah's Black communities, they'll be well-equipped to bring the museum to rural areas, which typically have less access to resources of this type.

While primarily aiming to reach youth, the museum will also provide opportunities for all of us to learn together. It's a continually evolving exhibit that will continue to grow as the curators hear stories, further their research and acquire additional items of historical significance. Currently, the focus has been on building a foundational body of knowledge around Utah's Black history, but other national figures are also included. "We mostly focused on things that we thought students needed to know to better understand where the Black community is coming from," Mitchell says, "stories that help share what it was like to be a Black or African American person in Utah over a period of time from before Utah was even a state. This is what was it like for them to live in the Utah Territory."

The majority of the state's history is depicted as white and Mormon, and there has been a failure to adequately tell the story of the diversity that has always existed in the state. "Students and families learn so much about the establishment of communities by Mormon pioneers, and often, the Black figures and the Black people who also came to the state are not mentioned," Lambson says. "So we feel it's important to note and share the stories of the Black pioneers who settled here and also contributed to the growth of the state, but they've just never been mentioned before."

The bus itself isn't necessarily the actual museum, but instead houses the pop-up experience that can be shared in any range of locations—both indoors and outside. It is wrapped in murals painted by Lambson and **Gretel Tam**, which depict a mixture of Utah landmarks and imagery and portraits of some well-known local and national Black icons. Those depicted include **Ruby Bridges**, the first African American student to integrate an elementary school in the South, and some lesser known historical figures, such as the "Buffalo Soldier," who draws attention to the prevalence of Black cowboys in the West. The back of the bus also lists the names of victims of police brutality, both locally and nationwide. "We really want to recognize and memorialize those individuals," Lambson says.

Currently, the *Utah Black History Museum* is available by request via email at utahblackhistorymuseum@gmail.com, or you can find a form to make a request on their Instagram account, [@utahblackhistorymuseum](https://www.instagram.com/utahblackhistorymuseum). As a patron of the museum, you're learning what should be our complete history as a state and nation. "We're trying to update history to include overlooked Black figures," Lambson says. "The omission of Black people in American history is an error that we hope to help correct."

PROJECT SUCCESS COALITION KEEPS HOPE ALIVE

Through Education, Adovacy and Celebration

By Mekenna Malan
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Photo: John Barkiple

It isn't easy for a grassroots organization to do it all, but Project Success Coalition sure does try. "We offer a little bit of this, a little bit of that," says **Betty Sawyer**, the Director of Project Success, about the list of programs the Ogden-based organization offers. That's an understatement. Since 1989, Project Success has committed to improving culture, education and health among the local Black and Brown community through tobacco prevention programs, health access and awareness initiatives, annual Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners for homeless and low-income communities, career development, the *Juneteenth Heritage Festival* and even COVID-19-related education and financial support, to name a few. "We were just funded by the Office of Health Disparities to participate in **The Embrace Project**, supporting women of color during their childbearing years to improve wellbeing and health outcomes," Sawyer texted me the day after our interview, just when I thought Project Success's portfolio of outreach couldn't get any longer.

According to Sawyer, the Project Success Coalition was founded in response to a series of drug busts and arrests in Ogden's inner city in 1988. "I sat down with one of our local pastors, the late **Reverend Leander Coates**, and said, 'It's one thing to talk about it, but what are we gonna do about it?'" says Sawyer. The two of them decided to hold a town hall meeting. Close to 200 residents showed up, including representatives from the **Ogden NAACP**, **Hill Air Force Base**, local congregations, sororities and other civic groups. "The young people in our town needed help. We wanted to establish an organization for them," Sawyer says. And so Project Success Coalition was formed, the name an expansion on the letters "PS," as in postscript. "It means this isn't the end of our story," Sawyer says. "We know that we are persistent folk. We

know we are resilient. We're working together to make the changes that we want to see."

There were no other after-school programs in Ogden at the time Project Success was founded, Sawyer says, so they began offering substance abuse prevention activities, recreation and sports. When Sawyer realized the city's youth were struggling in school, they added an academic program as well as cultural arts. "In a small place like Utah, you're not getting connected to your culture—the richness and greatness of it—in school," Sawyer says. The largest of these cultural programs is the annual *Juneteenth Heritage Festival*, a commemoration of the day all enslaved people in the United States were formally emancipated. "It's a huge party, a family reunion," Sawyer says of the festival. "It offers a time and place for people of different backgrounds to come together."

The *Juneteenth* planning committee meets via Zoom every first and third Saturday and is open to everyone. No idea is thrown out, Sawyer says. While it differs from year to year, festivities include everything from a reptile show to card games, a gospel mass choir, the *Mr. and Miss Juneteenth Scholarship Pageant* and even the *Willie Moore and Billy Mason Golden Clipper Barber Battle*, in which local barbers compete on the *Ogden Amphitheater* stage. "This year, we're going to add braiding to it because we'd like to expand and be more inclusive to all the different expressions of Black hair," Sawyer says. Inclusivity is a main theme of the festival, uniting a community in strength and joy. "I think that sense of community is so important," Sawyer says. "Again, we're in Utah. You get to come be a majority for a change, instead of the minority. And you don't have to think about anything except enjoying yourself while you're there."

While the event is largely for fun and celebration, Project Success also views the gathering as a massive opportunity for genealogy and race education. The festival has had lasting, unifying consequences, such as kickstarting the formation of the **Utah Black Roundtable** and influencing the passage of Juneteenth as an official Utah state holiday in 2018.

Over the last 33 years, the accomplishments of Project Success have only expanded. "To me, that's success in and of itself," Sawyer says. "To be a small grassroots organization that's been able to maintain its commitment and connection to the community is extremely important. When people lose hope, they give up. They stop dreaming of a better place and better opportunities." When I ask Sawyer what other changes she dreams of seeing in the community, she lets out a sigh. "That's a big list," she says. "The changes that need to take place across the state of Utah are immersed in our willingness to recognize institutional inequality. We can't try to pretend that what's happening in this country wasn't by design ... I believe we have to get off this denial trip of, 'I'm not a racist.' It doesn't matter what you are. The policy is what matters, and are you willing to change it or not? That's the conversation. What are you willing to do? How much time are you willing to put on the table? How much money are you willing to put on the table? How much are you willing to fight back against what you know is wrong? Come to the table with what you're willing to do and let's take it from there."

If you'd like to "come to the table," Project Success Coalition is always seeking support through financial investment, volunteer work and skill sharing. These and other opportunities to support the organization can be found at projectsuccessinc.org.



Photo courtesy of Curly Me!

Curly Me!

A Resource to Educate, Empower and Encourage Young Black Girls of Power

By Theadora Soter • theadoraisabella@gmail.com

Curly Me! was established in SLC in 2015 after founder **Alyssa Dairsow** realized there was a demand for a supportive community both consisting of and curated for Black girls in the Salt Lake area. Reflecting on her youth, Dairsow knew the importance of having a community of peers. The Curly Me! team says of Dairsow's experience, "In childhood, Alyssa came to understand the power of having available resources in the form of people who looked like her. Inspired by this, and by her mother who herself founded and runs a successful non-profit back home, Alyssa finally realized her true purpose for being in Utah." Dairsow acted upon this realization in one of the most unlikely of places: Dairsow says, "I approached a random woman and asked, 'If there was an event to learn about your daughter's hair, would you attend?' The woman said 'yes,' and the event planning started from there." At that moment, the idea for Curly Me! was born. In 2018, Curly Me! was officially deemed a 501 (C3) Non-Profit. Today, Curly Me! is the community Dairsow envisioned, and in 2020 alone supported over 300 families.

The program offers resources to girls ages 5–14 through quarterly events that aim to bring young girls of color together and to show them that they are not alone. One of the organization's favorite events is called "Change The World With Her," which introduces the girls to successful women of color in occupational sectors such as the arts, education, health or science. The event is praised by girls and parents alike.

One mother recently thanked the organization for the event saying, "It is not every day they get to hear first-hand experiences from women at the top of their field who look similar to them. Thanks for making this happen for our girls!" Curly Me! also offers group "mentoring hangouts" where girls have sleepovers and tea parties. Dairsow says, "Our programming, at this point, is structured for groups of girls to continue learning interpersonal skills and feel supported from their community." The hope is that the skills they learn will give them confidence in any environment they're a part of. But, whatever the event may be, all Curly Me! gatherings are centered around the organization's mission statement to be "a resource to educate, empower and encourage young girls of color to be their best selves."

Beyond the programs for the girls, parents learn how to better support their daughters in navigating the world and their important place within it. Of the parent programs, Dairsow says, "We stand alongside families to help promote positive self-esteem/confidence. We also provide resources for parents to help be advocates on how to address certain situations in places like schools and during 'hair time'."

Of course, achieving their ambitious mission wouldn't be possible without their hard-working and dedicated team. Curly Me! is run and operated by five individuals: Executive Director Alyssa Dairsow, **Meligha Garfield** handles marketing, **Latonya Howell** is the Volunteer Coordinator, **Ashley Cleveland** heads infrastructure and **Amber Mitchell** oversees all fundraisers and donations. "We work together by way of acknowledging everyone's skills they bring to the table and listening to them. Listening is the secret sauce," Dairsow says. And she would know.

Dairsow saw underrepresentation as a problem that it is especially prevalent in traditionally conservative areas like Utah. She sought out to right the wrong in hopes that future generations of women will be confident in their bodies, their minds, and their power, independent of the color of their skin. Through Dairsow's organization, her vision for a more just world is turning into a reality.

While Curly Me! has an incredible team that works together to make magic happen, they are always looking for new and ambitious volunteers. Curly Me! says they are on the lookout for volunteers who have experience with non-profits who are interested in joining the Curly Me! Board or various committees, as well as day-of-event volunteers. But most importantly, Curly Me! is eager to find people, who as they put it, "have a passion for Black girls and want them to thrive in all areas." Curly Me! encourages potential volunteers to reach out to them for position descriptions or other questions by emailing hello@curlyme.org.

If you're interested in learning more about the organization or know someone who might want to become a member, be sure to visit the Curly Me! website, curlyme.org, or visit their Instagram page [@CurlyMeSLC](https://www.instagram.com/curlymeSLC) to learn more about the valuable work Curly Me! does for our community.

Essence of Ebony

BLACK EXCELLENCE THROUGH NATURAL HAIR STYLING

By Jamie Christensen
Jamiec1331@gmail.com

As a natural hairstylist, **Imani Powell** understands the necessity of creating a nourishing environment for Black culture to grow and prosper. In this vein, learning how to love and care for one's hair in its natural state fosters empowerment. *Essence of Ebony*, Powell's hairstyling and salon experience for Black individuals looking to embrace the natural power and beauty of their hair, offers a community for those who may have never been comfortable wearing their hair in its authenticity. Where customized options catered to Black hair were limited, Powell saw an opportunity for societal and personal growth; *Essence of Ebony* provides a nurturing environment where curly hair is appreciated, acknowledged and admired for what it is. Powell says, "the name 'Essence of Ebony' epitomizes Black Excellence."

Essence of Ebony as a hairstyling-teaching experience was almost never created. Powell, though enthralled with the arts, originally came to Salt Lake City with a different career path in forensic serology. "Officially, *Essence of Ebony* was born in June of 2020. I had no intention in launching my business that soon, and it wasn't going to be focused on hair," she says. "Day to day, I continued my work as a scientist and kept my artistry silent. A close friend found my old Instagram page, showcasing some of my hairstyling talent, and then word quickly spread across the state."

Powell has built her craft throughout her lifetime, learning tricks of the trade from her mother who was a licensed cosmetologist and owned a salon for over three decades. Shadowing both her mother's and other stylists' techniques, Powell has grown extensively in the art of styling natural hair.

"I have over 10 years of direct experience styling in the natural hair industry," says Powell. "As a stylist, I have learned that you are both a coach and a stylist. It is my responsibility to educate myself so I can better serve and empower my clients."

To better serve her clientele's individualized hair needs, Powell released **The Crown**, a personalized coaching experience that allows Black hair the space to accomplish healthy hair goals. Here, Powell has customized an educational, virtual experience—which can be conducted over the course of one day to six months—in which she sits with



While Imani Powell teaches and consults clients virtually with *Essence of Ebony*, she also offers in-person, salon services to her clients.

For Black individuals or for parents who are interested in trying to better understand how their child's curly hair can maintain its health and balance, *The Crown* is a premium resource. As *Essence of Ebony's* website mentions, "Imani is adamant about helping you enjoy and appreciate this journey of learning about your CROWN."

While Powell teaches and consults clients virtually, she also offers in-person, salon services including individual braids, cornrows, two-strand twists, locs and coils. Powell can also style some services with extensions, though clients are required to bring their own pre-prepped extensions.

Powell does all of this as a team of one. Through her concentrated passion for styling hair in its natural, curly state, she provides a unique, empowering environment for Black individuals to feel comfortable and celebrated throughout their hair journey. "Essence of Ebony offers a deeply-rooted Black experience," she says. To ensure the best products are offered to clients while also supporting the Black community, Powell purchases all of her wares from Black-owned businesses.

To expand on this environment of comfortability, Powell reassures that clients know she accepts their hair in its most natural state. "Blow drying, flat ironing, relaxing and any additional heat or chemical treatments are not required or suggested to book an appointment," she says. "It can be cumbersome for Black individuals in Salt Lake City and surrounding areas to locate a stylist educated in the science and styling of Black hair, let alone [find] a Black stylist. My goal was to create an environment where people could relate to their stylist and receive hair care with their best interest in mind."

Black hair—as well as all of the nuances of Black culture and the arts—are welcomed with open arms in Powell's company. She says, "*Essence of Ebony* was created for us to feel seen and loved in the purest and highest form. Black culture plays such an imperative role in this world, and I want to represent us, naturally and powerfully."

To book an appointment with Powell or find more information, you can check out her Instagram [@the.essence.of.ebony](https://www.instagram.com/the.essence.of.ebony) or her website, www.eofebony.com.

the individual one-on-one and provides hair coaching for clients to better understand their natural density, formation, style and texture.

She says, "I, as the head coach, will review the client's goals and needs and design a plan for their hair journey." Depending on the selected Crown service and the individual's needs, Powell will provide a bundle of appropriate products, accessories, tools and materials. "I remove myself from the equation to give my client autonomy of their desired style," she says. "Hair styling is more than just copying a style from Instagram—it's about the person and what they want to feel like after they get their hair done. The intricacies can be added along the way, but I always take care of the person first, and I use my expertise and skills to accomplish their goals."

For those just beginning their journey to healthy hair or who may be unsure of where to begin, Powell recommends focusing on the "why." She says, "Our hair is a reflection of what's happening not only on the outside of our bodies but on the inside as well. Reflect on your eating habits, water intake, physical activity, styling flaws, product ingredients and stressors. We can work on the outside if we start with the inside first!"

From Radio to Mentoring, Keith McDonald Always Works to Make

"Good Change"

Whether he's hosting 90.9FM KRCL's "Friday Night Fallout" or mentoring youth in our community, Keith McDonald is always working to make the world better. McDonald is a service-oriented individual and incorporates that into everything he does. He works to amplify hip-hop culture at KRCL, does what he can to support his students at Salt Lake Community College and works to create safe spaces for young people to learn and grow at his nonprofit, the **Carlos Antonio Fisher Foundation**. For McDonald, it's important to see others doing good because, hopefully, it will inspire others to do the same.

McDonald, along with co-host **Nate Chacon**, are the most recent in a long line of hosts of "Friday Night Fallout," Utah's longest-running hip-hop radio show. At a local station, McDonald feels responsible for amplifying underrepresented voices. They play local musicians and uplift artists who normally wouldn't have the opportunity to get much airtime. "If an artist gives us a song that sounds good ... then we pretty much run with it," McDonald says. "We wouldn't do that with national artists, but we definitely do that with Salt Lake City artists. I think that's the main driving point behind the show because we get our funds from the community, so I think it's our obligation, then, to support the community."

McDonald says that while hip-hop, as a Black art form, can create change in communities, institutional obstacles in the music industry prevent people from under-resourced communities from having an impact. Through "Friday Night Fallout," McDonald says they're able to give local artists promotion for music that may not market well at large labels and practice building artists' interview skills. Hip-hop often becomes a "patsy" for negative press, creating a perception that the community is violent. This is a misconception, however, based on how hip-hop is commercialized. McDonald also hopes his community work will help alleviate those harsh circumstances in the first place. "It's our obligation to make things better for young people so they have better things to make their art about," McDonald says. "Because their art is going to reflect what they see [and] experience."



Illustration: Kilo

Keith McDonald is a tour de force in our community who uplifts artists and the youth through via his KRCL show, "Friday Night Fallout," and his own nonprofit, the Carlos Antonio Fisher Foundation, among other forums.

McDonald also collaborates with *Uprok* and *The HERC* to create youth programming like park clean-ups and seminars. McDonald connected with the *Uprok* when he was learning to DJ and they'd let him practice on their turntables. After a while, McDonald decided to start holding events at *Uprok*, and they supported him all the way. It started as one back-to-school drive and became an annual event.

This work evolved into the Carlos Antonio Fisher Foundation, which McDonald founded and has been running for seven years. The foundation works to provide youth programming for local businesses and organizations. "I've found that places like *Uprok* ... wanted ways to help young people, but they didn't have the way to get it to them conveniently," McDonald says. "If you had a business and you wanted to teach kids about financial literacy, I would take a group of kids to your business. Or [if] you, like *Uprok*, had a paint shop and you wanted to get the word out to young people about a safe and fun place where you can come in and paint walls, I would take you to that place."

The foundation—also called the **Community Action and Fellowship Foundation**—is named after McDonald's younger brother, who passed away at 19. McDonald credits his brother with much of his motivation to do this community work, which is why the foundation is in his name. "When he passed, it really changed me as a person," McDonald says. "I really had to think a lot about the things I was doing. ... If I would've been focused on the right things ... maybe he would have been focused on the right things. If my brother had the opportunity to see me, [I'd] want him to be proud of me."

The pandemic has prevented McDonald from programming his regular events, but he hopes to get things back up and running soon. Meanwhile, McDonald took his foundation to a more personal

level, mentoring young men one-on-one. On top of everything, McDonald tutors English students at SLCC and is going back to school himself to get his Master's Degree in writing and rhetoric from the *University of Utah*.

With all McDonald puts in, his primary hope is to make a positive impact. "I don't expect a medal," McDonald says. "My goal is to have somebody tell my daughter what I did ... I want it, somewhere, down the line, to be something that boosts my daughter's self-esteem and makes her prouder of who she is."

The work McDonald puts in is taxing, he says, but it's necessary to create change. As far as our roles as a community, he thinks people need to take superficial ideas of diversity and put action behind it, especially with hip-hop culture. "I encourage everybody who wants to learn about hip-hop culture to learn about African American culture, to find an elder to talk to, to read, read, read, read and read some more," McDonald says. The work may be scary, but that means things are moving in the right direction. McDonald says, "Good change doesn't happen until you get a little bit scared and uncomfortable."

You can catch "Friday Night Fallout" every Friday from 10:30 p.m.–1 a.m. on KRCL, and to connect with McDonald's foundation, email keith.mcdonald@utah.edu.



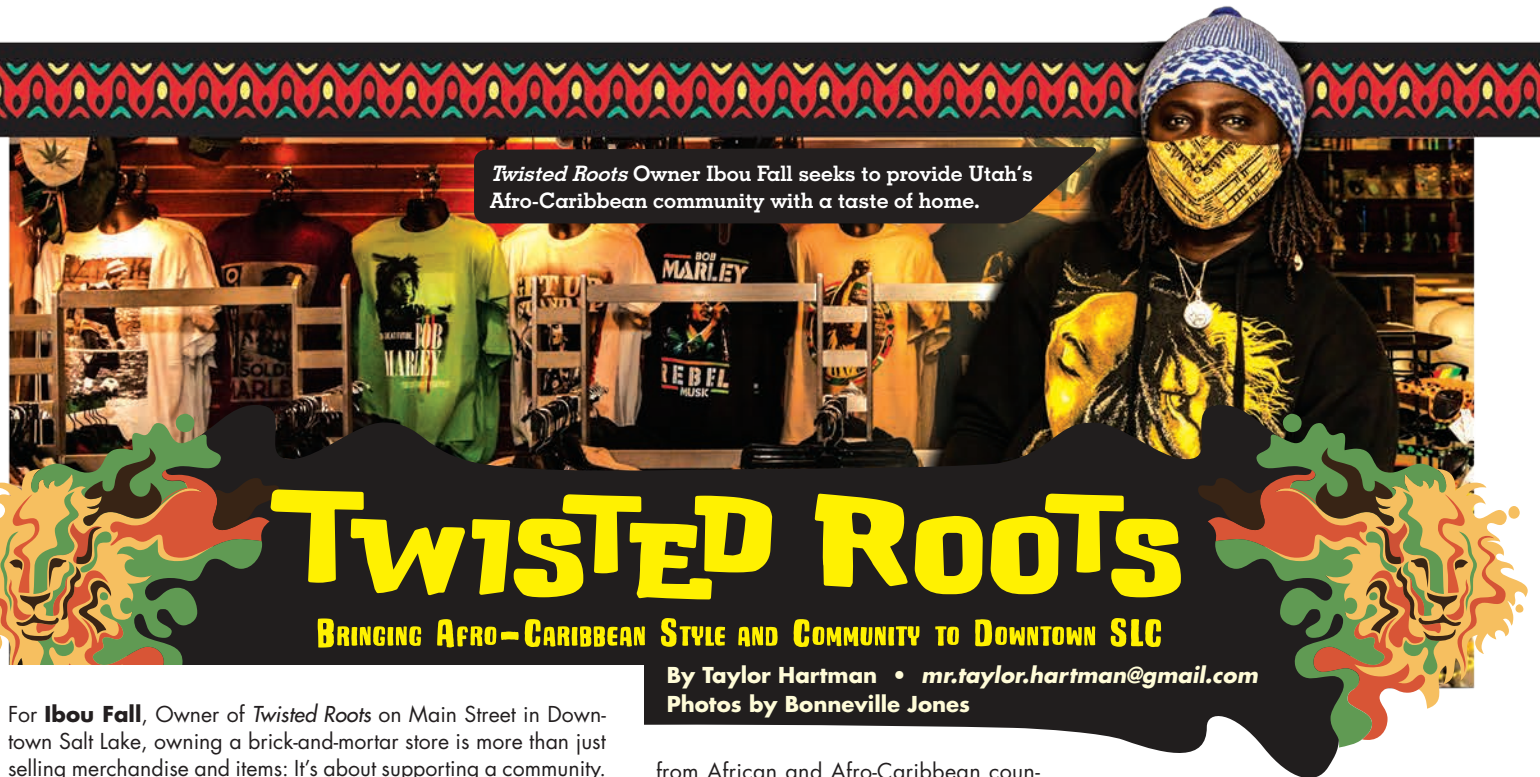
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Twisted Roots Owner Ibou Fall seeks to provide Utah's Afro-Caribbean community with a taste of home.

Twisted Roots

BRINGING AFRO-CARIBBEAN STYLE AND COMMUNITY TO DOWNTOWN SLC

By Taylor Hartman • mr.taylor.hartman@gmail.com
Photos by Bonneville Jones

For **Ibou Fall**, Owner of *Twisted Roots* on Main Street in Downtown Salt Lake, owning a brick-and-mortar store is more than just selling merchandise and items: It's about supporting a community.

Stepping into *Twisted Roots*, the bright colors of the Senegal flag—red, yellow and green—immediately greet you, hanging on the walls and appearing on merchandise, from backpacks to shirts to hookahs and tobacco products. The sweet smell of incense wafts slowly from the counter, and more often than not music blares throughout the store, sometimes turning into full-on dance parties inside or out on the sidewalk. Fall is often posted up behind the counter, beaming at customers as they walk in to check out his merchandise.

Fall describes *Twisted Roots* as an “African, bohemian and hippy store,” a description he says is ever-shifting from month to month, based on what might be in stock or what Fall might decide will be on sale at the time. There's a headshop-meets-surf shop present vibe throughout *Twisted Roots*: Reggae music plays, **Bob Marley's** face grins on merchandise throughout the shop, grinders and pipes are sold behind the counter and an occasional **Beatles Abbey Road** shirt walks its way into Fall's inventory.

But what stands out in *Twisted Roots*, and what makes it a unique store in the melting pot of Downtown SLC, is it's Afro-Caribbean influence and the way it gives back to Utah's African and Caribbean community. Fall hails from Senegal. Fleeing poor conditions in his home country, he originally moved to California in 1997 and came to Utah in 2002. “We needed to get out of Senegal; things were not great there,” Fall says. “We needed a change and the US was a good place for that.”

When Fall and his family arrived in Utah, they loved the affordability and the landscape with the mountains framing the city on either side. When thinking of what he wanted to do for work, Fall says he noticed there weren't many Afro-Caribbean stores in Salt Lake City and decided he wanted to change that. “There was no one in Utah selling this kind of merchandise—African-Caribbean merchandise—so we started to pioneer it,” Fall says.

Fall and his family began leasing a location on Main Street, and *Twisted Roots* was born. Soon after opening, Fall says immigrants

from African and Afro-Caribbean countries began to trickle in. “They started to hear about us with word of mouth, trying to find some Afro-Caribbean clothing that reminds them of home,” Fall says. “And we're the only place that has those things for these people.”

Fall says he also started to notice immigrants needing other help with services, or just finding a community to feel part of. Knowing what it's like to be in a new town, and to be disconnected from one's roots, Fall started providing the members of Utah's immigrant community who visited his store information he found helpful when he first moved to Utah. “I tell them places to eat, African or Caribbean places, places to find housing where immigrants from the same area are,” Fall says. “So they feel like they're more home, comfortable in a new place. I know it's hard to come here and get used to a new culture, so I want to help these people get that sense of home a little.”

Now, *Twisted Roots* stands as a gathering place for a community of Afro-Caribbean immigrants. Fall says the store has transformed over the years from something that offers merchandise to a pillar of the community and a valuable place to find help. He says that he sees his store as a staple in the Downtown area as well, which has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. “We like it on Main Street, even though at times it's been hard,” Fall says. “We bring a booth to all the Downtown music festivals and want to help make Main Street strong. There are drawbacks

to being Downtown—no one can park easy, people live out in West Valley, West Jordan—but we have lots of regulars here, too. We just hope it comes back soon after the pandemic.”

Like many small business owners across the country and globe, *Twisted Roots* has suffered and sales have dropped since COVID-19 started sweeping through the nation over a year ago. Fall says he was forced to close and reopen the store in fits and starts, and even though they're back open, things are still quite slow. “We survive on foot traffic and regulars from offices near here,” he says. “There's been so few of those, even through Christmas, which is our busy time. Now we're back to the slow season after not much picking up in December.”

Sticking around and remaining committed to helping his community during these crazy times is the least thing he can do for the city Fall says he's grown to love and call home. “If people can't pay full price, or if they need something we have at the store, I want people to know we can work it out for them,” Fall says. “Everyone is struggling [and] no one is immune, so why should we ask someone to pay full price when we know how tough it is? We're here for Utah. Utah's here for us.”

You can check out *Twisted Roots'* latest inventory and highlights from the store on Instagram [@twistedrootsut](https://www.instagram.com/twistedrootsut).



By Austin Beck-Doss
austinbeckdoss@gmail.com

Photos By Dominic Jordan

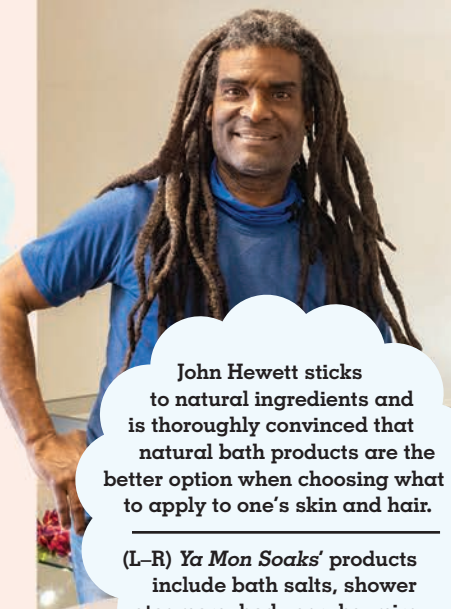
John Hewett founded *Ya Mon Soaks* for one very important reason: “My wife and I dig each other,” he says. “We wanted to start a business together.” Now, the Ogden-based bath products company is up-and-running, selling a full line up of hand-made, all-natural items including bath bombs, body and face scrub, shower steamers and shampoo bars.

When *Ya Mon Soaks* began, Hewett had already been making and using his soaps and bath crystals for years. Now, *Ya Mon Soaks* sells over 20 unique products out of their Ogden storefront and online. Everything that the company sells is made by *Ya Mon's* four-person team in Utah.

Hewett and his wife fatefully arrived at the idea of *Ya Mon Soaks* while Hewett was mid-soak in the tub. “My wife [**Brenda**] said, ‘Why don't we sell those bath salts that you soak in all the time?’ and I was like, alright!” The couple was seeking a business plan that would allow them to work together. “We both agree that it is counterproductive to spend more time with your work than with your own spouse,” Hewett says. Within moments of Brenda's epiphany, the couple knew they had identified the perfect shared project.

In addition to his fondness for soaking, Hewett also had experience with soap-making, which began years earlier as an apprenticeship of sorts. “My late wife [**Alexandria**] was a soaper, meaning she made soap,” he says. Alexandria would often enlist Hewett to help in the process, a skill set that now serves him well as the owner and tinkerer-in-chief of *Ya Mon Soaks*.

Hewett, whose personal nickname inspired the name of the company, self-describes his soap-making process as careful, precise and “by the book.” In the “About Us” video on the company's website, Hewett is shown in his workstation carefully mixing ingredients in test tubes, beakers and measuring cups. As he works, he



John Hewett sticks to natural ingredients and is thoroughly convinced that natural bath products are the better option when choosing what to apply to one's skin and hair.

(L-R) *Ya Mon Soaks'* products include bath salts, shower steamers, body scrubs, miracle creams, bath bombs and more.

taps lightly on a container and explains with a smile, “Man, I put love into everything!”

While developing the soap bar that *Ya Mon Soaks* now sells as part of their product line, Hewett rode the wave of trial and error as he worked to create a product that he himself would want to use. “The first version I made was nice,” he says. “It lathered well, and even though people like[d] it, I thought it was a little drying.” Seeking improvement and balanced moisture, Hewett entered his recipe into something called “the soap calculator” and started gradually altering the ratio. “The problem is, as you take out one ingredient and put in another, you create different problems,” he says. In the end, though, persistent tinkering led Hewett to the ultimate moisturizing recipe. “I finally got what I wanted,” he says. “Our soap bar is creamier, has more lather and leaves my skin feeling wonderful.”

In constructing his products, Hewett sticks to natural ingredients and is thoroughly convinced that natural bath products are far superior to the kinds of chemical-filled concoctions that people are likely to find in the supermarket aisle. Comparing his shampoo bar to commercial shampoo, Hewett says, “Right off the bat, our bar will stop stripping the hair. Once your hair is used to the bar, you won't even need a conditioner.” The shampoo bar is made of recognizable ingredients such as coconut oil, olive oil, shea butter and peppermint essential oil. As an experienced soap maker, Hewett's unwavering endorsement of natural ingredients should leave the rest of us questioning the quality of whatever products we're currently using in the shower. Wandering the shampoo aisle, we are likely to encounter dubious bottles with names such as “Dark Temptation” and ingredients like “diethanolamine.” Yikes! Meanwhile, *Ya Mon Soaks* products are

handmade “with the highest quality ingredients and packed with Ya Mon's love.”

For customers checking out *Ya Mon Soaks* for the first time, Hewett recommends trying his essential oil-packed shower steamers. These puck-shaped products are the shower's answer to the bath bomb, and, as Hewett says, “They can really liven up your shower time.” Place a shower steamer on the floor or shelf in your shower, and it will give off a powerful and enjoyable steam, creating an in-home aromatherapy spa. “Our Breathe EZ steamer is packed with menthol and will open your sinuses. Each person seems to have their own way of using our steamers,” says Hewett. Soon, *Ya Mon Soaks* plans to release a new line of shower steamers without essential oils that feature various satisfying aromas.

Ya Mon Soaks products can be purchased at yamonsoaks.com, via Amazon or at their store in Ogden. Currently, the products are made in small batches to ensure freshness. The business can also be found on Instagram [@yamonsoaks](https://www.instagram.com/yamonsoaks) and Facebook under “Ya Mon Soaks.” Also, keep an eye out for new product releases on the digital and physical shelves—Ya Mon is always tinkering.

TELL ME SOMETHING GOOD!

Performance with Alexandra Barbier

By Parker Scott Mortensen • @_coldbloom

After a shit year, Alexandra Barbier wants to celebrate with you. In her upcoming performance piece for the virtual *Salt Lake City Performance Art Festival*, *TELL ME SOMETHING GOOD!*, Barbier will celebrate eight people's successes and their good news through a dynamic performance that includes dance, confetti, applause, champagne and more.

In the span of about 40 minutes, Barbier will be handed submissions she's been collecting through her website and read them aloud. She'll then spin a wheel marked with various methods of celebration and follow through on whichever activity it lands on, ranging from eating cake to dancing. Barbier will not have seen the submissions until the moment she reads them, so combined with the set activities from the wheel, *TELL ME SOMETHING GOOD!* provides Barbier a structure in which she can improvise her celebrations.

"What I'm trying to focus on in this performance is the unexpected nature of performance art," says Barbier. While the celebratory acts on the wheel are predetermined, the order of the performance can't be rehearsed. "Improvisation leads to unpredictability. There's some part of my nature that really enjoys surprise and playfulness and spontaneity," she says.

In 2020, if it wasn't one thing, it was another. Barbier's emphasis on playful improvisation is extremely welcome after months of identical days and isolation from each other. Though this performance doesn't necessarily focus on dance, it's built on Barbier's lifelong history of dance as her foremost practice. In her time studying dance in the *University of Utah's* MFA program, Barbier has focused on tapping into the ways dance has historically brought people together.

"So much of how I think about dance now has changed because of coronavirus," Barbier says. "I've gotten really interested in Black vernacular dance, particularly of minstrel shows [and] vaudeville shows from the late 1800s and early 1900s." Those forms of dance were happening in the social dance clubs in Harlem during its renaissance, and they are the forebears of what we understand today as jazz and tap. The movements that made up those dances eventually became self-evident vocabulary and became easily repeatable but still gave room for individual expression, Barbier says, and they were activities that made communities come together.

Barbier, a Salt Lake transplant who arrived in 2017, doesn't recall exactly when she conceived of *TELL ME SOMETHING GOOD!*, but the collaboration with an audience is clearly building on the foundation of her thesis project she completed as part of her MFA program, which she completed at the *U* in the spring of 2020.

"It makes sense to me that this is what comes next," she says. "For my thesis, it was in person and interactive. It was all about creating relationships between performers and spectators, and I feel like this is doing the same thing but in a more distanced way." It was a response to the nearly 30 years Barbier had spent with dance to that point, an experience that reinforced dance as rigid and



After all the bad that 2020 offered us, dancer/performance artist Alexandra Barbier wants to celebrate what's good with you in her piece *TELL ME SOMETHING GOOD!*

formal. She grew up doing ballet, transitioned to modern dance as she got older and eventually "got to a point where I hated all of that," she says.

Barbier's interest in making dance feel more accessible and relevant is entwined with her study of dance as a history, especially as it intersects with Blackness. Dance, and conceptions of the possibilities of what dance can be, vary by place and people, and the spread of those dances among its groups is different, too. "There's this difference between learning from a dance master, which is very valuable to a lot of people who participate in Eurocentric, Western ways of thinking, and then there is dancing in your community and learning from your community, which is very popular in African diasporic dances. That doesn't mean those dances don't have teachers—that's not what I'm saying—but there is a difference that many dance historians have noticed in the transmission of information when it comes to dancing."

Of all of the art forms, people are most afraid of dance, she asserts. Our culture is rooted in a puritanical desire to control and judge our bodies. "Since [bodies are] the main tool of dance, a lot of

people get nervous and uncomfortable imagining themselves as dancers," she says. "These dance TV shows that really value virtuosity and intense training, I think that's restrictive. It makes dance this exclusive act that only lets certain people [perform] based on the ability of their body, shape and size of their body. That pissed me off." In response, Barbier doubled down on exploring methods of dance that promoted community and that were anti-training, anti-technique and anti-virtuosity. "If we tell people that they have to train to be dancers, we're turning away a lot of people. That's not helpful for us right now. We need as many people as we can get, right?"

You can offer up your success to Barbier for potential celebration at her website, abarbie.com, in preparation for the *SLC Performance Art Festival* this April 2–3. More information on the festival is available at events.slcp.org/event/4880736. If you miss the live show, you can also watch Barbier's archived version on her site, abarbie.com, where she'll upload the footage within two days following the festival. Follow Barbier on Instagram for more information @hello_alexandra, and be sure to show up ready to celebrate.

black lives matter

@manda.bull

SLUG Mag stands with you in demanding equality and justice for all.

An Acronym for Salt Lake UnderGround, *SLUG Magazine's* mission is to amplify Salt Lake City's thriving alternative and underrepresented music, arts, lifestyle and events subcultures with thoughtful media coverage and exclusive event curation.

SLUG Mag recognizes the long history of racism and discrimination that continues to live in the independent arts and lifestyle communities we exist within and cover, not just here in Salt Lake but across the country. We're working internally to review our processes and practices to reevaluate whether we're truly accomplishing our core mission of diversity and inclusion across all the fields and disciplines we cover.

If you have any comments, questions or feedback for us, please reach out to our Executive Editor, Angela H. Brown, at: angela@slugmag.com.

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JAY WARREN

SLUG Mag's April Virtualized: An Online Concert Featuring Utah Bands showcases **Jay Warren, Bri Ray** and **Dee-Dee Darby-Duffin**. Both Warren and Ray are R&B artists in Utah, and both are very in tune with their respective creative processes. Check out *SLUG's Virtualized* on April 22 at 8 p.m. on *SLUG Mag's* Youtube channel.

Jay Warren is a careful artist, in the sense that he's very strategic and detail-oriented about every moment of his creative process, from how he records his songs to how his ideas are formed and even down to the chord progression of his tracks. Ultimately, this carefulness has paid off for him—his debut album, *Give Love*, charted #1 on the iTunes R&B charts, making Warren the first Utah artist to accomplish this. In my review of *Give Love* for *SLUG*, I noted that the album seems to be a “love letter to music itself.” This careful attention to every aspect of music is something that Warren developed when he was young.

“I’ve been singing since I can remember,” Warren says. “My mom tells a story of me trying to sing along with **Whitney Houston's** ‘I Will Always Love You’ at 18 months old.” Warren’s first real musical memory comes from the 2nd grade, where he sang a solo in front of the class. From that moment on, he was involved in school and church choirs, bands and more. He taught himself to play piano in high school then started writing his own songs.

While there’s not a specific moment Warren can recall where he fell in love with music, he does have a chronological Spotify playlist of 35 albums that have “shaped who he is musically.” The first album on the playlist is **Michael Jackson's** *Thriller*, and he fondly recalls it as “the first album that I really just listened to the entire way through and absolutely loved it.”

While writing *Give Love*, he listened a lot to *Thriller*. “One of the things that I love about that album is that it is so versatile. It’s all over the place, genre-wise. And as I was listening, I [thought], I would love to be able to write songs, kind of in any genre, and just write good songs,” Warren says. It’s a goal that Warren ultimately accomplished in a way that comes across seamlessly to listeners and upholds the album’s consistency. Although *Give Love* is listed under “R&B and Soul,” it has pop flairs. The soaring vocals are akin to soul music, and everything from club bops to romantic ballads are interspersed throughout. It showcases Warren’s extensive range as a musician.

Despite the cohesiveness of the album, Warren doesn’t have a practiced approach to creating music. “Certain songs, I’ll just sit down at the piano and I’ll just start messing around with some chords and find a chord progression that I really like,” he says. From there, he hums along and tries to find a melody, then come the lyrics. Other times, a producer will send over a track and he’ll write to that, which was the case with “Outta Your Arms.”

When it comes to the production process, Warren learned early on he didn’t want to get too involved, stating that it was easy to get overzealous. “For the *Give Love* album, I kind of took a backseat on the production,” he says. Warren would come up with the demos—keys, vocals, and sometimes drums—before sending it to **Nate Wade**,

the executive producer of the album. Along with producers **Mike McClellan** and **Chance Clift**, the team would pass the tracks back and forth with revisions.

It all comes back to the same careful consideration Warren has had throughout his career. *Give Love* was “in the making for three years,” and he specifically wanted to wait until he had a significant fan base to release an album.

Over those three years, Warren and Wade worked on the album in almost stolen moments, since both of them have families with young kids. “Most of the album was recorded between 11 p.m. and 4 a.m.,” Warren says. But there were memorable moments during the recording process—like with the lead track “‘Go Slow’—that actually happened by mistake. “I was trying to finish writing ‘As I Am,’ and I was trying to find another chord progression because I felt like it was getting too repetitive,” Warren says. “I was going back and forth between these two chords and I started playing it a little bit faster, and I was like, ‘Oh, I think this is a different song.’”

While the pandemic has thwarted plans for live productions, Warren has been working to make sure that the songs go over well live when the time eventually comes. He says, “The silver lining [of the pandemic] was that I could spend a lot more time on the album than I normally would be able to.”

As the light at the end of the tunnel for live shows begins to grow brighter, his team is ready for the next phase of his career—growth. “I think we’ve done a really great job of trying to get my name and face in front of people in the region, and so the next thing is to go national,” I don’t doubt that with such a careful approach to his craft, Warren will succeed nationally. But, we won’t forget him here in Utah—nor he us.

Utah singer-songwriter Bri Ray is all about creativity in its purest form—the type that allows unbounded expression of emotion, conveys freedom and nods to undiluted expressionism. For her, music is the bridge to all of these things.

“Confidence” is Ray’s latest single and one that embodies all of these traits. It comes together in a dreamy combination of pop, R&B and soul. Yet, it was made almost by accident. “When ‘Confidence’ was created, [collaborator] **Joshua Strauther** and I were brainstorming ideas for a different track. We recorded a melody, and six notes caught Josh’s attention. That’s now the melody you hear during the lyrics, ‘I feel good in your arms’ and throughout the chorus,” Ray says.

And the deeper meaning behind those lyrics only makes the track dreamier. “The inspiration for ‘Confidence’ was an idea I had been toying with for a few months,” says Ray. “So often I see women get into relationships and lose an ‘edge’ of their confidence.” Ray wanted to craft a track to redefine this idea. “A relationship in which someone can be their own self fully without apology, a relationship that recognizes and supports the hopes, dreams and abilities of each individual—that kind of relationship not only encourages continuous confidence but also builds new realms of confidence within a person.”

“Confidence” is only one example of Ray’s keen talent for emotional tracks. Her previous singles “Woman,” “Sweet Thing,” and “We Don’t Have To Take Our Clothes Off” are powerhouses in their own right—some soft, some soaring, but all imbued with emotional depth.

Another aspect of music that Ray loves is collaborating with other writers such as **OSTON, Victoria Canal, zhavia, David Archuleta, Mason Murphy, Tia Thompson** and **Quinn Sullivan**. Despite recently shifting her focus to her own projects, she says, “It’s so fun to merge two or more creative minds together and see what comes out of it! I do think cowriting played and continues to play a huge role in my development as a songwriter.”

For Ray, creativity and collaboration go hand-in-hand. “Through cowriting, I’ve

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BRI RAY

learned different writing techniques and expanded my creative mind and process. Writing songs specifically for other people is amazing because you get a glimpse inside their creativity once the song comes to life.”

This sense of collaboration is something that Ray developed when she first fell in love with music. It started when she woke up listening to her father singing gospel songs. Music was a way for the two of them to connect. From there, she explored music on her own, and **Alicia Keys’** “No One” was the first song she could sing and play at the same time. “From there, it was game-over—I was hooked. I became obsessed with the freedom music provides to creativity, expressiveness, emotion and experimentation,” she says. In terms of her approach to creating music, Ray says it “most often starts with a concept [or] the direction I want the song to go.”

Part of Ray’s musical experience is rooted in her time with the **Young Arts Scholarship** program and the networking opportunities she experienced after winning the Presidential Scholar of the Arts award in the singer/songwriter discipline. “More than anything, though, was the validation,” she says. “Being raised in Utah with minimal trips to L.A. and Nashville, I constantly questioned if I would be ‘good enough’ in the music world outside of Utah. Being selected to participate in these programs and walking

away as an award-winning singer/songwriter in both Miami and Washington D.C. was incredibly validating.”

Being an R&B artist in Utah hasn’t been easy for Ray. “Utah is interesting because even though there’s a decent music scene in Salt Lake and in Utah County, the two don’t mix often, which makes it feel like two separate scenes. Though this is starting to change now, it made my development as an R&B artist more difficult,” says Ray. Growing up in Utah Valley, there weren’t a lot of artists or mentors for her to connect with in the R&B scene. She says, “Giving room for R&B and soul to live and breathe within a song expands my artistry, continues to challenge me and allows me to connect in magical ways.”

As far as creating and collaborating during the pandemic, Ray thinks the process has ultimately been “beneficial” for her. “I think the biggest change for creatives is not being able to be in a collaborative space together. The share of ideas and energy is an important part of creation, so figuring out how to capture that virtually is difficult, but it can be done,” she says.

Ray’s newest single—“Tough Love”—was released last month on March 17. She strives to continue making music that bares her soul and speaks to the emotions of others at the same time. Check out Bri Ray’s music at thebri-ray.com.



SAUCE BOSS SOUTHERN KITCHEN Comfort Food, Catfish & Cornbread

By Audrey Lockie | audrey@slugmag.com • Photos by @tbzdphoto

For **Julius Thompson**, the Owner and Head Chef at *Sauce Boss Southern Kitchen*, the path toward his culinary career was a personal one. "Everyone in my family has skills in the kitchen," he says. "Growing up with little to no food made me appreciate it even more. My grandmother was the most talented cook in our family, and whenever I could, I would shadow her and try to absorb as much as I could when she was in the kitchen." Such a framework—a combined reverence for family traditions and the glorious necessity of food—provides *Sauce Boss* with its defining approach to the healing powers of comfort cooking.

After a stint in the pharmaceutical industry, Thompson decided that food and being a restaurateur are his true calling. "I realized that even though being a pharmacist would make me money, it wouldn't make me happy," he says. "I was already a good cook, and I realized that food is one thing that brings people together. Whether they are of [a different] culture, country, religion or orientation, everyone wants and enjoys good food! When I was at my lowest, food brought me peace, and I wanted to bring that to others."

When it came to selecting a focus for his restaurant, the choice of cuisine was an obvious one for Thompson. "Southern/soul food is near and dear to my heart," he says. "Slaves were given scraps and unwanted pieces of meat and had to turn it into something palatable to eat and survive. The learned techniques and methods for turning something undesirable into something wanted are the base roots of soul food ... Many African Americans don't need to be from the South to know Southern/soul food, because it was taught and fed to us by our elders—it's in our DNA!"

With an emphasis on deep-fried foods, rich fats and spices that heat you up from head to toe, the Southern cooking tradition provides the ideal base for Thompson's food-as-family and food-as-force of life ideals. His approach hones in on a tried-and-true, authentic take on Southern classics, from entrées such as Catfish (\$14.29), Blackened Pork Chops (\$11.59) and Shrimp and Grits (\$12.59) to a mouthwatering sides menu that boasts an array of delectable options, collard greens, candied yams and a mac n' cheese dish among them.

For my recent visit, I started out the meal with the staple of Fried Green Tomatoes and Okra (\$6), served with the restaurant's house-made ranch sauce. The deep-fry technique at *Sauce Boss*, found across a number of dishes from my meal, stands as one of the restaurant's greatest achievements. The thick, fried shell is made out of a grainy cornmeal breading, a dredge full of peppery spices and flavor-packed herbs. And the fact that each fried food held its crunch and shape even after

my 20-plus-minute winter drive back to Salt Lake from the store's Draper location testifies to the fry mastery found at *Sauce Boss*.

The second factor that separates *Sauce Boss*' fried foods from the rest arrived through the interior vegetables. The tomato juices burst into my mouth from the first munch, and the bite through the okra was soft throughout, from stem to shell to core. Like the fried veggies, my Catfish entrée touted an almost unfathomable combination between a crispy exterior and a gooey-soft interior. The same cornmeal breading provided the body-warming spice, and the catfish inside was cooked to perfection—buttery, rich and apt to fall to pieces at the simple tap of a fork. If the fish itself was a marvel, the accompanying "soul sauce" was the push the reaffirmed the verisimilitude of *Sauce Boss*' name, attaining a binge-worthy balance between the smoky, hot-pepper flavor of the sauce and the spices found in the deep-fry dredge.

Each plate comes with the choice of one or two sides (depending on the entrée choice), and I toiled between the eight options before settling on the Collard Greens and the Black-Eyed Peas. If the catfish was a gorgeous explosion of heat, the collard greens offered a more nuanced flavor profile. Though the greens had been slow-cooked to perfection—leaves intact, stems soft—they retained an element of their characteristic bitter bite, a quality complemented by the rich, lingering sweetness of the bacon bits. *Sauce Boss*' Black-Eyed Peas came in their own seasoned sauce, but the experience was less an onslaught of flavor as they—to their benefit—reveled in the earthy grit of the beans' natural flavor notes, a welcome counter to the surrounding dishes' heat.

Of course, every entrée must also offer a "slice"—a word used liberally by *Sauce Boss* in its distinction from "slab" or "mound"—of cornbread, which walked the beautiful line between side and dessert. *Sauce Boss*' thick cornbread capitalized on the inherent sweetness of its core recipe, augmenting the sugary cornmeal dough with a post-bake buttermilk soak that filled each bite with a succulent satisfaction.

Though the full breadth of the restaurant's family-oriented communalism is currently on hold while the restaurant operates in a takeout-only capacity, *Sauce Boss*' to-go orders still provide Utahns with the chance to bring soul-food comfort into their lives. While the pandemic has been as hard on Thompson and *Sauce Boss* as any other business, his unwavering determination carries the business forward: "I plan to continue to cook and write until my hands fall off!" he says. Find more information at saucebosssouthernkitchen.com.

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THE RISE OF DIVERSITY

UTAH THROUGH THE EYES OF A STAND UP COMIC

By T.J. Taylor | tjisfunny@gmail.com



Photo: @robtookthis

In addition to making his way around the SLC comedy circuit, T.J. Taylor co-hosts the weekly podcast *The Downstairs*.

I've been doing stand-up comedy in Salt Lake City for a while now, and the best thing about my experience so far has been the people I've met along the way in our local scene. While Utah is not known for being a diverse place, I can tell that more doors are being opened, and there are increasingly more opportunities for cultural diversity to be celebrated here. There are Black Utah groups popular on social media and Black events popping up all over the valley. Many Black men and women have come forward in this state to set up their own events, serving as beacons for anyone who wants to show appreciation and support Black businesses and artists, and people are coming from all over the country to answer the call.

I started doing comedy here in 2019, and it's been the most inspiring and fulfilling path I have ever been on in my life. I can take everything that I feel and think and break it down for people in the funniest way possible, and in turn bring joy and laughter into someone else's life. Being a stand-up comic has brought out a side of my personality that I have longed to show. Every day I get the chance to face my own ideas and beliefs head on. In the face of the obvious difficulties brought on by the current COVID-19 pandemic, I've been fortunate enough to have been featured on several shows and have jumped at every opportunity to get better at my craft. As I worked these audiences, there was something I was beginning to notice: There was a response to my point of view that I had not seen with other comedians. And not just my point of view—any person of color that got on the stage.

I grew up in the South. As a kid, I moved around a lot, and I've lived in most of the Southern states. In my travels across all these very different plac-

es, there was one thing that remained consistent: Black people. There are communities in the South that I have lived in that were made up entirely of Black and brown people. This ethnic clustering is the result of the segregation in America that established those communities, and as a result, these types of communities exist all across the country. So you can imagine the culture shock I experienced moving to Utah just six years ago. It was like going to a place you only see on TV.

Utah is a beautiful state. The landscape is beautiful, the people are beautiful and the possibilities are endless. But because of its history with the LDS church, the state's geographic location and several other factors, Utah doesn't have the aforementioned Black communities or communities that are particular to any other marginalized groups of people. But what it does have is room in the soul of its culture that is being filled one beacon at a time.

Every one of those cultural beacons is vital here, in this place that is so hungry for diversity. In capitalism, the product that is the most unique, if marketed correctly, will have an advantage on the competition. The value intrinsic to the growth of these diverse cultures also brings social richness and understanding to a community. Stand-up comedy is an art form based on a direct translation of the experience of the comic. In a predominantly white city like Salt Lake, the comics are going to bring unique experiences, but those experiences will be more directly parallel to their audience's than a comic from a different place or of a different ethnicity. I notice that when I'm on stage, there are times I may say things in my jokes that get laughs, even when I wasn't expecting them to. Usually, it's when I say something that either the audience has never heard anyone

say or they didn't expect to relate to. Those simple footholds of relation, and the empathy they allow, can bridge gaps in people's minds that keep this country divided.

This country is riddled with scars from years of systemic racism and white supremacy. Every political attempt to heal those scars has been met with intense pushback. So, a lot of the healing has to be done socially and communally. America is a democratic country, stitched together with the ideals of advancement and a right to the pursuit of happiness for all people. Promoting representation of every demographic in every field—whether that be art, politics, entertainment, business or anything else—is the best way for us to ensure that every person gets an opportunity to be heard. This is the lifeblood of democracy. I feel the most effective way to expand a person's mindset is to help them understand and empathize with other people from disparate places and cultures. Our growth is determined by our ability to adapt to our environment, and when you grow to accept other people, that's a beautiful thing.

Comedians, in my opinion, are modern-day philosophers who value thought over everything else. We observe our experiences and translate it into something funny, then deliver it to you in an entertaining way. The more ethnic diversity and representation we have in stand-up comedy, the more people have a chance to hear the experiences of people of color in their community and relate to or further understand us. And that goes for more than just comedy. Any Black event that is held here is inherently valuable, and more Utahns should attend those events to be introduced to new ideas and people that could change your perspective.

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By Olivia Greene • greenecg@gmail.com

Miss Essie's Southern BBQ brings "the South to your mouth" through home-cooked smoked meats and authentic BBQ sauce. Miss Essie's keeps Southern-style cuisine alive with family-inspired recipes and BBQ sauces that are sold wholesale and through curbside pickup.

Owner and Founder **Marcus Jones'** grandmother, **Miss Essie**, is the inspiration behind the go-to BBQ restaurant in Murray. Essie's sheer determination and faith laid the foundation for Jones to create a family business. Jones recalls how Essie moved her family of six children from Arkansas to California by herself: "The community took care of her and she took care of them," Jones says. "That relationship is what the business Miss Essie's is: We are not just a family to be consumers and to take. We want to build something that builds long-lasting relationships."

The lineage of determination extends further back to Jones' great-great-grandfather, who owned a farm and had a small grocery store on site that provided for his family and the nearby community. "I fell in love with the fact that my grandfather was a Black, independent man who worked hard to have his own business for his family ... even through opposition," Jones says. He notes how those ideals must be translated into society today; how he is setting up a legacy for his family just as his great-great-grandfather did.

As Jones gets older, he understands just how Essie supported the entire family through her cooking. Jones says, "She took care of Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. My grandmother and spirituality were the backbones of the family." Jones' culinary knowledge spurs from his grandmother's understanding of small-batch, home-cooked meals. He sought to create a unique sauce that enhanced the integral Southern-style food it accompanies. A sauce, he says, "that is full-bodied, refreshing and makes you want to go back for more." Jones and his father, **Manuel Jones**, began cooking a sauce recipe handed down from Essie, and officially started Miss Essie's as it is known today in 2008 with his business partner, **Deonn Henderson**.

Jones and his father took the core, "backyard cooking-style" family recipes and created a sauce that builds upon spice and flavor for a product that stands out above the rest. The Smoked BBQ Southern Style ribs, Southern Honey BBQ pulled pork and honey-glazed

chicken thighs are slow cooked and made to work with the unique spice blend of each BBQ sauce. Jones' recipes and Miss Essie's BBQ sauces can be paired with their Southern comfort dishes, including the Southern-seasoned roasted garlic mashed potatoes, sweet corn, green beans and mac and cheese with a southern twist, available through the business' catering services.

Vegetarians or vegans can order smoked portabella mushroom lettuce wraps or jackfruit pulled pork-style sandwich paired with the Apple Cider Vinegar BBQ sauce, a combination that Jones says he is proud of because "they are healthy, flavorful and enjoyed by non-vegans too." **Jenny Gnash**, Miss Essie's Marketing Director, publishes recipes on the website that infuse their BBQ sauces into each dish. For instance, the fried green tomatoes

use the Honey BBQ for a dip, and loaded nachos with BBQ sauce offer a creative way to use the BBQ sauce without meat.

If you are to order online, the meals and side dishes will come in a ready-to-bake oven safe container or can be picked up warm and ready to eat. Miss Essie's catering is equipped to provide meals for the range between intimate events to large corporate ones. Miss Essie's, for instance, caters large events hosted at the Costco in Salt Lake a few times a year. For small or large parties, Miss Essie's chefs are able to create a customizable menu developed during personal consultations based on clients' tastes and budgets.

For Jones, Miss Essie's stands as the pinnacle of family and offers quality food that brings the community together. To him, the business also fills a niche that needed to be met in Utah. "As a Black-owned company that does Southern cuisine, we stand out because I've worked with chefs and used my background to refine our menu and make it look as good as it tastes." More specifically, "Everybody can cook pulled pork, but it's what you do with it that matters. It tastes like your grandmother's, but has a crafted restaurant flare," he says.

Miss Essie's was built on the foundation of spreading community through food. Amid the pandemic, patrons have been able to get the iconic BBQ sauces and well-crafted cuisine through contactless pickup. Jones has seen, even through turbulent times, that the community responds resiliently. This business, its traditions and patrons, represent something larger to Jones: "This is ours, our piece of the American pie," he says.

Besides curbside pickup and catering, Miss Essie's BBQ sauce can be picked up at associated *Smith's* grocery stores. In the future, Jones plans on making the product even more accessible through stores such as *Costco*, *Harmons* and *WinCo*. Find more information at missessiesbbq.com.

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Photo: Joshua Joye



Miss Essie's BBQ sauce is the latest incarnation of a time-honored family recipe.



Photo: Bonneville Jones

Michaëlle Martial's stage name, The Caribbean Nightingale, is fitting: Just like the bird, Martial's song never ends, strongly singing through both the light and dark. "To me, singing both day and night means you rise and help yourself and help other people feel uplifted in both good and bad times," Martial says. "In a way, I felt like it was a no brainer to start a business and try to promote the healing power of the arts."

The Caribbean Nightingale is much more than a stage name—it is an organization that has been working to cultivate community with artistry far before the LLC was finalized in October of 2020. From *Relaxation Through Verse* (intimate poetry shows featuring BIPOC and LGBTQ+ artists) to *Cupcakes for Breakfast*, (an artist meet-and-greet hosted by Martial) The Caribbean Nightingale has it all. On a personal level, Martial had been sharing her story through spoken word with the Salt Lake City community for years, doing performances, book signings and more. Starting the business was a slow process, but a steady one, Martial says, as the idea for Caribbean Nightingale continued to expand and grow. "When it comes to running the business of the Nightingale, it was a matter of trying to help other minorities, other women—Black women, specifically—feel that they have a voice," she says.

Relaxation Through Verse, which started back in 2018 out of a Caribbean restaurant, has now grown into a recurring event. The performers receive payment and support, and the audiences receive a creative show like no other. *Relaxation Through Verse* isn't an open mic, where Martial says the main goal is packing as many people into one space as possible. "Our main focus is to have a very clean and uplifting experience—a

one-on-one, intimate setting type of thing where you can have exchanges between the artist and the audience," she says.

While the setting has been forced to become virtual in the wake of the pandemic, Martial aims to return to in-person events soon. Still, the pandemic hasn't stopped Martial's dream of fostering conversations between communities. "I hope that other community members will feel more inclined to open their minds to other communities," Martial says. "We'd like community members to take away the power they have within themselves when they come. I hope that the community will consider attending *Relaxation Through Verse* as part of their self-care routine."

The Caribbean Nightingale also sells coffee on their website in what's dubbed the Poetry Cafe. But that's not all—the *TiGla Boutique*, an online store where local Black artisans can sell their products, has a special place in Martial's heart. After her mother passed in May 2019, Martial realized she wanted a space to honor her mother's caring, artistic legacy, and it came in the form of the boutique. "She always was there for the women in the community, especially for young girls, and I realized, 'Oh my God, I've missed that,'" Martial says. "I missed that part about her that made me feel happy, that saw me for who I am and helped the community."

Martial knows she has ambitious goals, but with her dedication, these dreams are coming to fruition, even despite the hurdles of the past year. As a domestic violence survivor, Martial is passionate about supporting shelters all around the world. Currently, she's organizing a partnership with a shelter in Ghana while also working

with Utah-based domestic violence advocacy groups, hoping to create long-term partnerships and recurring donations. Martial also dreams of opening a brick-and-mortar for The Caribbean Nightingale where artists can connect with their environment and the community can unwind in a safe, welcoming space. "Just like the community needs us, we need the community," Martial says. "Even though life is hard for each one of us right now, I feel like we have an understanding, and I feel so supported by the other artists I've collaborated with. We're in this forever, baby—it's important for us to keep going."

Little by little, Martial continues to build the foundation in support of her big goals. Although the journey might be long, Martial says she doesn't mind waiting, especially if that means building it right. "As an artist, I see everything through the lens of a child filled with wonder, so I see a bright future," Martial says. "We can make a beautiful place around us where we can coexist, and I just like to think that The Caribbean Nightingale Poetry Cafe and Boutique can help a tiny bit with that."

Martial is open for booking several types of workshops and events. You can book her at caribbean-nightingale.com/bookings and explore all of what The Caribbean Nightingale offers at caribbean-nightingale.com. Funding is the biggest hurdle for The Caribbean Nightingale. If you'd like to support their missions to uplift local artists and domestic violence survivors, you can direct your donations to @Caribbean-Nightingale on Venmo, bonjour@caribbeannightingale.com on PayPal, and \$CaribbeanNightingale on Cash App.

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LOCAL MUSIC SINGLES ROUNDUP

With spring just on the horizon, look no further than your local-music community for some tunes to bring in the warmer weather and new growth. Start it off by bumping along with the infectious beats of **Young Spit** and **DEEMRTN**. Then, make sure to relax and enjoy some chill time with **Pho3nix Child**. Our April *Local Music Single Roundup* offers some great vibes to shake loose that winter slump.



C.Valenta

"So Far Gone"
Self-Released
Street: 02.14
C.Valenta = Earl Sweatshirt + lojii

Local rapper, poet and advocate C.Valenta grapples with intergenerational trauma in his new single, "So Far Gone." The track features a swaying, stirring beat, which serves as a cradle for Valenta's purposeful lyricism. He reflects about feeling trapped in a cycle of poverty and shame with the lyrics, "If this don't stop now / Tell me when will it?" The well-produced single ends on a note of deliverance as Valenta promises himself that he will be the one to break the cycle. He sings, "We never had role models / But we got visions." As insightful and moving as it is catchy and cool, "So Far Gone" is masterfully layered. —Kia McGinnis Wray



DEEMRTN

"Wish On Me"
Self-Released
Street: 01.18
DEEMRTN = The Weeknd + PARTYNEXTDOOR

I can taste the start of an early summer party in DEEMRTN's "Wish On Me." It's a fun tune that I imagine playing in the car before heading out for Salt Lake City's nightlife with friends. It's quite catchy with lyrics, "Don't touch my hair / my face / I'm feeling like **Solange**" that do become redundant as the track goes on. The track is all about feeling good and wishing good things for yourself, and I find that important in anyone's life. DEEMRTN's voice stays energetic and meshes well with the beat, and could be mistaken for a track off one of The Weeknd's albums if his voice was deeper. If you want to feel good about yourself now and for the year to come, turn on "Wish On Me." —Kimberly Portillo



The Pho3nix Child

"Universe Song"
Self-Released
Street: 08.09
Pho3nix Child = Quelle Chris & Chris Keys + Open Mike Eagle

The Pho3nix Child's "Universe Song" lives in the liminal space of effortless confidence. Atop a beat with a butter-smooth bassline and deep-pocket, neo-soul drum loops (produced by **PK Beats**), The Pho3nix Child cycles through a series of nonstop verses extolling the virtues of holism and mental clarity. References to meditation, selflessness and a Positive Mental Attitude float through the sidwinding bars, all leading to a series of conclusive affirmation in the track's final verse: "I'm everything and everything is me / Blessed is how I be, no darkness touching me." "Universe Song" proves that, for at least its sub-three-minute runtime, The Pho3nix Child lives truly as one with the stars and beyond. —Audrey Lockie



Young Spit

"Uwanje"
Self-Released
Street: 02.15
Young Spit = Gn Nephew + Post Malone

"Uwanje" is the musical equivalent of stepping in warm sand. Founded on standard trap sounds, the music fuses in a synthetic, woody bass that adds a comforting depth. Young Spit also uses hyper-auto tuned vocals, which produces nostalgia for the hip-hop of the 2010s. Already a bright-sounding track, a shredding guitar makes the song shine even brighter. Originally from Burundi, Young Spit also blends in an unmistakable, East African flare through wooden percussion, Swahili lyrics and more. "Uwanje" is like listening to a perfect summer song for the first time. Young Spit has created a chill, warm and overall good-feeling track that may just be the thing we need to thaw out from this winter. —Marina McTee

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Coultrain – Phantasmagoria
 (Positive Elevation, 04.21)
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 –Connor Brady



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