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LAURA ANN

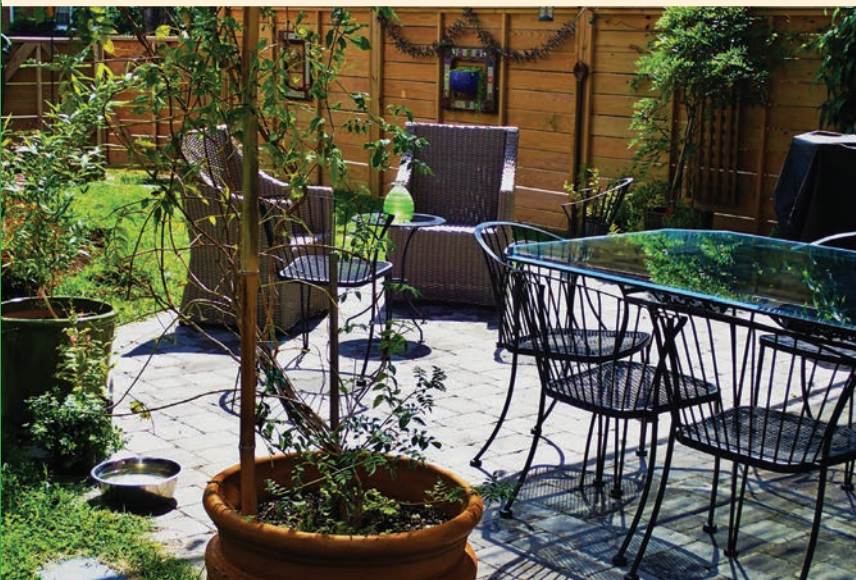
Singh

has a voice that can bring you to tears one moment, crush you with melancholy the next. Then lift you beyond your wildest expectations to mountains of sheer joy, to pinnacles of love, to summits of romance. Words fused with melody—a double-edged sword—can carve any emotion into your ears, can cleave your heart from your soul. Laura Ann grew up in an East Tennessee home that was filled with music, not far from the home of June Carter. But music would take Laura Ann to a world in another hemisphere, to the Bossa Nova of Brazil, and the Boleros of Latin America. Today she sings with Quatro Na Bossa and Miramar, both of which have a loyal following. When singing, Laura Ann experiences a wholeness and a fullness that connects her to the Divine.

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Victor Ayala: My New Project

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

VICTOR AYALA'S NAME has become synonymous with hardscape and landscape, and virtually any other kind of outdoor project. He formed his company—My New Project—a little over a year ago, but by then he had had many years of experience.

For Victor it all began in his native Guadalajara, Mexico where his father owned a metal fabrication workshop that specialized in custom windows and doors. That was almost two decades ago, and the young Victor, at his father's side, learned all the rudimentary skills that would serve him later life. "If you know how to cut, if you know how to use a square and a level, you're pretty much in on the game," says Victor. "Those principles my father taught me from the time I was twelve years old. And you always start with the basics."

A couple years later, Victor began learning the basics of hardscaping. He landed a job at the international airport in his hometown where they were doing extensive expansion and renovation, and through it all Victor learned how to work concrete.

At age fifteen, on his own, Victor crossed the Rio Bravo for a new life in America. He made his way to Richmond and found full-time work in construction. To supplement his income, he worked part-time in restaurants.

Within that first year he found a job that began honing other skills he would eventually need for his business. "I worked in landscaping designs," Victor remembers. "I was doing new beds, planting. I worked with that guy for the whole season, probably about eight months, and when winter came and that work got slow, I moved into doing masonry."

An older contractor named Daniel, who ran a masonry business out of Goochland County, hired Victor, and immediately took a shine to him. "He was a real nice man, and taught me to do many things," says Victor. "He taught me step by step. And one time he said to me, 'You are not the biggest guy, so I'm going to teach you how to do things in a different way.' He always

Top: A before and after view of some of Victor Ayala's handiwork.

Below: Victor Ayala.



challenged me to do work using the level, and to do detail work."

Victor continued doing masonry work until the 2008 recession, when his chosen work dried up as suddenly as a rain puddle in August. In order to pay his bills, Victor did an assortment of things. "I started cleaning houses," he says. "And then I started working for a general contractor company." He worked on a number of the old tobacco warehouses along the Kahawha Canal that were being converted into condominiums



"There was plenty of work," Victor says. "And if you wanted to learn something new that was the place." Not long after that, he moved back into hardscape, working for a pool contractor. He learned how to do the brick coping on the perimeter of pools, and fine-tuned his understanding of other kinds of masonry that employed native stone and precast pavers.

"I began to see a different side of construction, the patios and landscaping," says Victor. "So I started moving in that direction." He became an independent contractor, working for an array of companies that specialize in hardscape and landscape. "I would work for a couple of weeks for one guy, doing a patio," he says. "And then for another guy I would do raised beds, and plant trees and shrubs. Every project is a different story, and every project you pick up something new."

February a year ago he struck out on his own. "I'm doing well," he says. "I got a lot of referrals, and a lot of people speak well about me."

Before he begins any project Victor meets at length with the customer. "I start by asking them how often they are going to use the patio. You also need to make sure that the patio is the right size for the yard. You don't

want to go too big, or too small. It has to fit just perfectly for the house and the owner."

Victor can do any kind of landscaping, or hardscaping from patios and outdoor kitchens, to fire pits, walkways, retaining walls and raised beds. And he will use any suitable building material from brick to bluestone, from precast pavers to poured cement walks.

"I'm an artist," he says. "I know what looks good and feels right for the yard we're doing, both with the landscaping and the hardscaping. I can do any project, including wooden fences. Anything for the outdoors."

Victor is happily married to a woman named Jasimine, his soul mate, and they have a lovely eight-year old daughter named Diana. His wife has always helped him with the business. "We share everything," says Victor.

Last summer, Victor took his daughter to the city of his birth and showed her where he had attended elementary school. Young Diana got a chance to know the rest of the family.

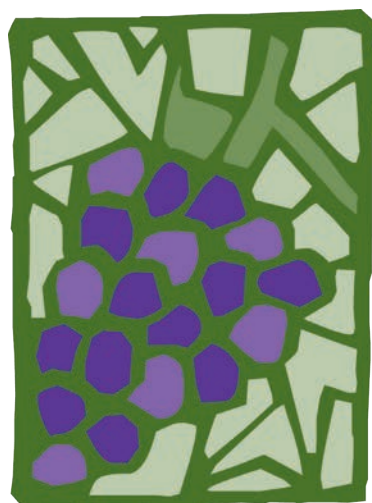
"I told my mom and my dad that I can't believe where I am now," Victor remembers. "I told them I am so thankful to God because I never saw myself in a different country, speak-

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ing another language and owning my own business.”

Through the years, when business was hard and when the ends didn't quite meet, Victor would call his father, who is also an entrepreneur. “And my dad would say, “That's business, you take the good and you take the bad. So, don't be sad, don't be mad. Don't get disappointed. It's going to get better. Just be there for someone to call you for a job, and pray to God.” Victor took his father's advice and it has served him well.

A couple weeks before Easter, Victor travelled down to Puerto Rico to help those who lost everything in the wake of Hurricane Maria. The country, a U.S. territory, is still far from full recovery. In some areas potable water is scarce, and there is still no electricity in other regions.

Victor and fellow congregants from El Camino Baptist made their way to the town of Utuado, twenty miles outside of Arecibo, home of world's largest single-unit radio telescope, an observatory that can see some of the most distant galaxies in the universe, can train its eye on the furthest reaches of creation.

For seven days, Victor and his friends toiled under the Caribbean sun, doing whatever work needed be done, while restoring hope to people who felt both frustrated and deserted.

“We worked with local pastors,” says Victor. “If somebody needed help cleaning their house, which had been under ten feet of water, we would go in and clean the floors, and wash the walls and the ceilings. Whatever needs they had, we would help. We supplied labor. And we tried to give some hope to people because I think that was a big need over there.”

“I'm not the richest man, but I think I have enough to pay my bills, and a little extra,” Victor Ayala tells me. “I know how you feel when you have nothing, when you lose everything. I saw my dad when I was younger when sometimes we didn't have anything. So, if I can go and clean the walls, sweep the floor, and give some words to another person that it's going to get better, I do it. I put all my trust in God. Whatever comes to my life, I take the good moments, and I take the bad moments, too. And I cannot believe my blessings.” **NJ**

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Marching for Their Lives Without Thoughts and Prayers

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

AT HIGH NOON, March 24, there was a showdown of sorts in downtown Richmond. As the bell in the clock tower near 9th and Franklin Streets tolled out the hour, thousands of people, many of whom had marched from Martin Luther King Middle School on Church Hill, flooded the main gate of the Capitol grounds, assembling in the shadow of an equestrian statue of the nation's first president, and then the crowd, ever-thickening, moved beyond a drumline, and passed groups of people chanting, until they reached their ultimate goal—the South Portico.

The showdown was between young people, and Republican leaders who have done nothing to change gun laws because of their fear of the National Rifle Association, one of the biggest and richest lobbies in America. These young people, who had seen peers die in school massacres across the country, had had enough.

Rounding the southeast corner of the Capitol building, I see thousands of people, young and old, packed along the rolling green knoll that spills off the portico and flows down toward Bank Street. A woman named Darian Wyatt stands before a podium and begins to speak. This is at about the same instant another young woman, just a hundred miles to the north, delivers a stunning silence that is heard round the world. Her name is Emma Gonzalez, and aside from being young and female, she shares another trait with Darian, who is about to speak. They are both skilled and natural orators.

"There are over five thousand of us here," Darian begins. "In our community and all across the country, innocent people are losing their lives because dangerous weapons are being placed in the wrong hands."

She mentions a twelve-year old girl, a North Side resident, who several days before Christmas two years ago, was shot outside her home, killed by a gunman, as she played along the sidewalk. "We have to let our legislators know

that we don't want to have to fear for our lives everywhere we go," she says. "We want universal background checks. We don't want assault rifles in the hands of ordinary citizens."

Darian is nowhere near finished. Nor are the other speakers gathered here.

"We've seen that gun violence affects everyone," says Darian. "Little kids in elementary school, older people in churches. On March 13th of this year, lest than two weeks ago, over seven thousand pairs of shoes were placed in front of the Capitol in Washington, D.C commemorating the more than seven thousand children who have been killed due to gun violence since the Newtown Massacre in 2012. In six years, over seven thousand children have been killed at the hands of these weapons, have been killed by guns getting into the wrong hands."

The response from Congress, of course, was to do nothing.

"We need to let our legislators know that there is no more silence," Darian says. "Too many legislators are reluctant to do anything about gun violence. Too many legislators are not willing to speak up. It's time to let our legislators know that the time for comprehensive gun control laws is NOW! Enough is enough!"

The applause and chanting that follows is thunderous, and as Darian leaves the podium, a young man named Maxwell replaces her.

"The message to every legislator and to every single individual in this country is that change is coming," says Maxwell. "Kids keep getting shot, and we keep doing nothing about it. A kid is shot in school, we do nothing. A school is shot up, we do nothing. An unarmed man is shot, we do nothing. A news reporter is shot on live TV, we do nothing. We're calling BS."

The crowd again erupts in applause. Like others gathered here and around the country this cool spring day, Maxwell does not mince words. He cuts to the quick.

"This isn't the America that our history teachers have taught us about," he says. "This isn't the America that respects



Top: My son Charles calling out BS.

Bottom: From the South Portico, reading off slips of blue paper, children recite the names of this year's victims of gun violence in Richmond.





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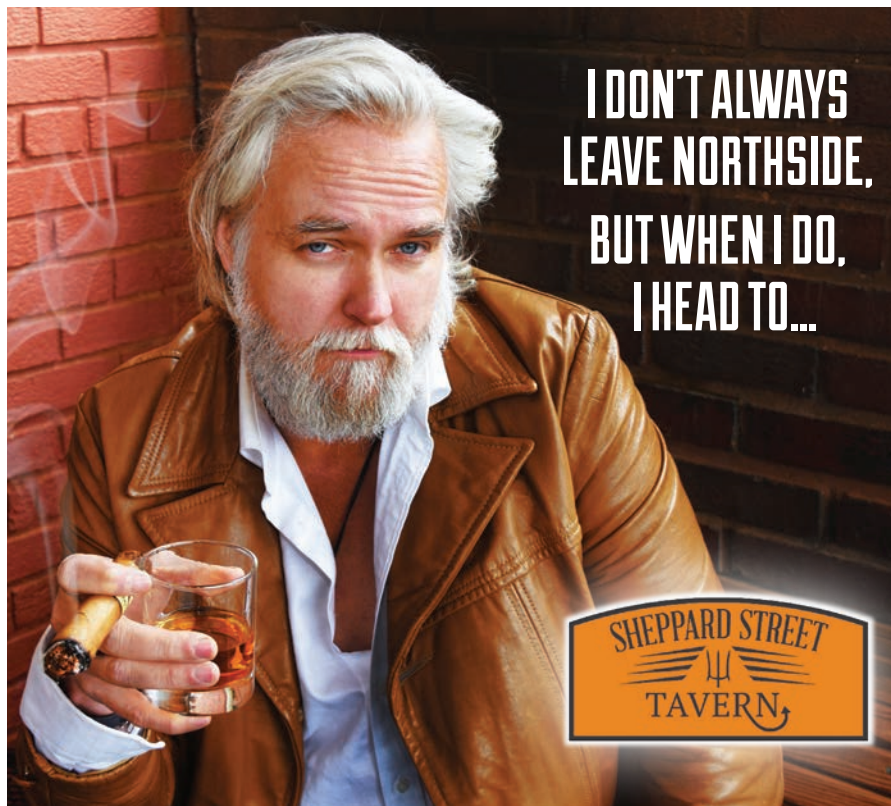

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FEATURE



Speaker Darian Wyatt with her sister, Kimberly McFarlin.

life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. No, this is the America where politicians and leaders prioritize lobbyists and money over the life of kids."

The words sear the air, and the crowd erupts again in loud cheers and sustained clapping.

"This is America where we're told we're too young to have a say and that we should shut up and listen to what our leaders say," Maxwell says. "Well guess what? They haven't done their job and we're calling BS."

The inaction of Republic politicians nationwide is staggering. Particularly when you examine the statistical data. Of all politicians holding state or national office, those who receive an A or A+ ratings from the NRA are invariably Republicans. This too: over the past twenty years in candidate and party contributions, independent expenditures, and lobbying, the NRA has spent over \$200 million.

Maxwell continues his speech.

"We're sick of hiding in the corners of our classrooms during shooter drills and not knowing what's going on, and having that fear in back of our mind that this may be the moment that we are shot because our leaders haven't, couldn't and can't take action," he says. "We're taught from day one to stand up for ourselves, to defend ourselves, and that is what we're doing today, right here, right now."

Again, the applause comes loud and long.

"And to all the people who doubt us, to all the people who undermine us, we're not going to stop," Maxwell says. "All we're asking for is the common sense changes that everyone agrees on."

Which is true. Upward of ninety percent of Americans want gun control reform—prohibition of the sale of assault rifles, universal background checks, a limit on the size of magazines and so on. Contrary to the ridiculous rhetoric

of the far-right, this is not about repealing the Second Amendment.

"So remember," says Andrew. "Vote! Vote! Vote! Vote!"

And the multitude chants the same word over and over, and it drowns out every other sound in the world.

"Vote them out," Andrew says. "Let's call BS and let's vote, let's make our voices heard."

To truly effect change in a democracy, you have to get the vote, and Claire Guthrie Gastanaga, executive director of the ACLU in Richmond, offers some pretty disheartening facts about the number of millennials who actually vote.

"I want to give you one number that's deeply dismaying and I charge all of you to be responsible for changing it," says Claire. "One out of five people between the ages of 18 and 29 vote. One out of five. And we need that to be what?"

"Five out of five," a thousand voices respond.

"That's your first charge," Claire continues. "And that's about your own personal registration and showing up and it's about encouraging and challenging all your friends to do so. And then I want to give you another number which is just short of half a million and that's how many people in Virginia who are disenfranchised and cannot vote because they were once convicted of a felony. So what we need to do is change the Virginia State Constitution, so everyone eighteen and over, who live in Virginia and are citizens, can vote. Everyone. Universal suffrage."

One of the most moving moments of this day of moving moments comes when a group of children, age ten through seventeen, mount the steps of the Capitol and read the names of gun violence victims who were murdered in Richmond this past year—more than seventy in all. As the kids read the names from slips of blue paper, a

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man with a drum taps out a slow funeral dirge, and many in this audience of five thousand are in tears. It goes on for well over five minutes, but it seems like an eternity.

Then a young man takes the stage and asks a simple but direct question: "If anyone in the audience has lost someone through gun violence, please raise your hand."

As he speaks, more than a hundred hands shoot up, raised toward the sun, which is just past its zenith

"We will take a moment of silence," he says.


And in that moment of silence, which also seems like an eternity, the absolute evil absurdity of the NRA crystallizes on the crisp, early spring air.

As the crowd begins to break up, I catch up with Kenya Gibson, Third District School representative, who had stood with the students on the South Portico during the proceedings. Her arm is draped over her daughter's shoulder.

"I'm here because enough is enough, and I'm also here because Black Lives Matter," Kenya tells me. "We are thankful that we haven't had a mass shooting here in Richmond, but ultimately we have to also recognize those folks being killed one by one. Unfortunately those victims are silent, and they are killed with no fanfare, no headlines. It's time to make some change happen. So let's get out the vote, let's put people before dollars."

Just behind Kenya is the young woman who began the day's event at noon with her impassioned speech. Darian Wyatt opposes the sale of AR-15s and other semi-automatic assault rifles to civilians, and Darian knows a thing or two about this. A self-proclaimed military brat, she tells me that even on garrisoned military bases, these kinds of weapons are always locked up, handed over to military personnel only for target practice or when the troops are deployed. Her father, who died defending his country, was the recipient of two Purple Hearts.

Like so many others gathered here today, Darian takes aim at ineffectual Republican representatives.

"The people who are in office now are owned by the NRA," says Darian Wyatt. "And I know it may sound pessimistic, but I don't think we can change them. The money is so big. And I don't think they care enough about us, to be quite honest. But what we can do is get them out of office, and vote for people who are not going to be bought by the NRA." 

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THE BLOSSOMING OF A WILDWOOD FLOWER



LAURA ANN SINGH SITS ON THE COUCH

in her sun-washed living room on a day that bursts suddenly with the full promise of spring after many false starts. Coats are long-last shed, and the temperature rises slow and steady as sap. A time of expectation and hope, two weeks before Easter. Her sea-green eyes widen as she begins describing her childhood in Kingsport, Tennessee. Laura Ann's ancestors were all Scotts-Irish and Irish, settling in East Tennessee and the coalfields of central Kentucky generations ago. Her grandfather had built a small grocery store chain in Kingsport called Oakwood Markets.

MUSIC FILLED LAURA ANN'S

childhood home thanks in large part to her parents Wallace and Jan Boyd. "Something that I have always kinds of marveled at is that we grew up singing socially," Laura says. "If we went camping or had just finished a meal, people would sit around and sing. On long car trips, my mother would teach us a song. She would teach me a high part, and my sister a low part, and we would sing three parts together. That's how I learned to hear harmony."

Her father played guitar and piano, also little songs for the kids. "So we always had music around the house," says Laura Ann. "Everybody kind of sang, but it didn't matter if you were really good, it was just a cultural thing."

"I was always drawn to music as a child," she continues. "A lot of times my dad or mom would sing us to sleep at night. I do the same for my daughter, now. I sing the old hymns my mom would sing to me, hymns she learned from her mother and her grandmother."

Then Laura closes her eyes, raises her head, and her mouth opens, and she sings.

*"Peace, peace, wonderful peace,
Coming down from the Father above."*

And the sunlight in the room seems to intensify.

After five in the evening there wasn't much teenagers could do in Kingsport. You could go to the Waffle House, buy a pack of cigarettes from a machine and smoke out back. Or you could go to a parking lot, roll down your car windows, and listen to crackling music from the radio.

But sometimes, Laura Ann and her friends would travel twenty minutes north to Hiltons, Virginia home of the Carter Family Fold. It was an unassuming music venue in an old barn, the inside of which was lined with tiers of well-worn bus seats, and every Saturday night a different bluegrass band would play.

"They've actually redone it lately, and it's not as cool anymore," Laura Ann says. "But June Carter's grandkids are still running the place, and Johnny Cash gave his last performance there a couple months before he died. They wheeled him out in a wheelchair, and he sang a few songs."

After a pause, she says, "There was a lot of music around that area, and though it wasn't the music I ended up with, it was still music."

Laura Ann's grandparents also had an influence on their granddaughter's love of music. "My grandparents loved big band music, so they introduced me to the early jazz sound in the United States," says Laura Ann "And through that I got interested in Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra, some of the crooners. So that was cultivated by them a little bit."

And Laura Ann's mother was and always been extremely supportive of her daughter's music career. "My mom has been one of my biggest advocates," she says. "Being a musician is really not very glamorous, and so a lot of times I've wanted to quit. And she's really pushed me to stay in it, and not pushed me as in a stage momish way at all. She would say, 'This is what you're good at, this is what you're meant to do. You should do it, the rest of the stuff doesn't matter. Just don't give up because it's important to you and it's important to the people who are going to hear you, to the people that are going to receive it. Don't give up.' Both my parents have always been supportive, and so has my husband."

When she was just eight years old, Laura Ann asked for an unusual present. "I wanted a French-English dictionary for my birthday because I've always been fascinated by other cultures and language especially," she says. "It shapes how you think, it shapes how you express yourself."

In high school, a boy she had a crush on gave Laura Ann a mixed tape. Among all the songs, one stood out and struck something deep within the girl. It

BY CHARLES MCGUIGAN
PHOTOS BY REBECCA D'ANGELO



was a piece performed by Stan Getz and Joao Gilberto, called “Desafinado”. Gilberto who wrote the song (he also wrote “The Girl from Impanema”) was one of the progenitors of a new kind of music in the 1950s and 1960s, a sort of jazz-influenced version of Samba called Bossa Nova, which quickly spread around the world. The voices are almost feathery, the four-against-five rhythm velvety. But the young Laura Ann knew nothing about any of this.

“That was the first time I had ever heard anything Brazilian,” she tells me. “And it stayed with me.”

As a senior at Dobyns-Bennett High School in King sport, Laura Ann listened to Paul Simon’s “Grace land” a million times over, and was blown away by the breadth of it. That year she toured colleges throughout the state—James Madison, University of Virginia, William and Mary, and University of Richmond. She decided on UR because of a concert they would be holding during her first semester there. “Ladysmith Black Mambazo was going to be playing at the Modlin Center,” she remembers. “And honestly that’s why I applied.”

But Laura Ann didn’t study music at UR. Instead, she majored in international studies. She minored in music for a time, but it wasn’t to her liking because the program was classically focused.

During her senior year in college she met Kevin



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Harding, and after graduation they began playing gigs together at the Tobacco Company. They mainly did standards, but would throw in a couple of Bossa Nova numbers as well. “And then eventually we ended up learning these songs and started this band called Quatro Na Bossa,” says Laura Ann. “Kevin played rhythm and lead, Aaron Binder was the original drummer, Randall Pharr bass player, and I was singing.”

Their focus was always Brazilian music, Bossa Nova, specifically, and they began landing gigs around town, and then on to the Big Apple.

“We got hooked up with this guy in New York who started booking us every year for a week-long run at Dizzy’s Club,” Laura Ann says. “We would be the closing act for this amazing Brazilian trio called Trio da Paz. We would go up in August for a week.”

By the by, Laura Ann would move into another music project with one of her best friends, Marlysse Simmons, keyboard player and music director for Bio Ritmo.

“Miramar is the name of our group, and we have been performing a lot,” says Laura Ann. She sings duets with Rei Alvarez, also of Bio Ritmo, and



Miramar, left to right, Marlysse Simmons, Rei Alvarez, and Laur Ann Singh

Marlysse plays keyboard or organ. Also in the group are Rusty Farmer on bass and percussionist Hector “Coco” Barez. And they perform Boleros, a slow-tempo Latin music.

“Boleros span all of Latin America,” Laura Ann says. “Eydie Gorme was singing boleros and getting hits in the United States. Miramar is kind of a romantic project that is more of a listening thing and less of a dancing thing. A more intensive listening experience than Bio Ritmo.”

It’s been about decade now that the band has been performing, and in recent years Miramar has had one success after another. “This was a kind of a passion project for us,” says Laura Ann. “Marlysse is just one of these people who absolutely has a focused idea of what she wants to accomplish musically, and she makes it happen.”

And happen it did. “We started performing with a string quartet in concerts,” Laura Ann says. “We released a record a couple years ago on Barbes

Records, a label out of Brooklyn. We got to do an NPR Tiny Desk with that record. And we’ve gotten to do some amazing shows in some beautiful concert halls. We performed at the Atlas Performing Arts Center in Washington, D.C. a couple of times with a string quartet. We played the Elebash Recital Hall in midtown Manhattan. We’ve played the Brick Music Festival in Brooklyn this past year.”

Laura smiles broadly. “We were number one on Amazon for Latin music for a few hours,” she says with boisterous laugh.

But all kidding aside, Miramar has a very strong fan base. “It’s amazing we found an audience for it that is much larger than what we ever anticipated,” says Laura Ann. “We just did globalFEST in New York, which is this giant showcase, and we were invited to play, which was really cool because a lot of people have to pay to play that festival.”

And when Laura Ann took a hiatus a couple years ago to spend more time with her daughter when the family relocated to San Francisco for her husband’s work as an attorney, things for Miramar began to mushroom.

Laura Ann remembers vividly the golden light of San Francisco, the faint scent of eucalyptus, the deep indigo of

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the Pacific, the crisp lines of the homes sitting on the curvature of hills. "I got to live in this amazingly beautiful place, and spend time with my daughter," she says. "And then I got to have some of the more rewarding work of my life. I mean we played the Lincoln Center outdoor concert series that same summer, and it was amazing. We had a little tour of the Midwest through Chicago and Minneapolis. It was a great time for me. It opened my eyes. The benefit of having a friend like Marlysse is she just believes, and so she doesn't face the same discouragement that can kind of cripple me sometimes. She just pushes for things she believes in, and we found people engaged. People loved these shows and we kept it up."

Just last month Miramar cut a 45 for Daptone Records, an indie company out of Brooklyn. One side is "Salida"; the flip side is "Urgencia". And both songs were written by Rei and Marlysse. "They called us to come in and do this because they want to release some Latin music," Laura Ann says. "These kinds of opportunities I just could not have imagined. We're super-excited about it all."

She remembers when both those songs were being crafted. "It's really fun to watch songs evolve," says Laura

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Ann. “Especially when you’ve been in projects long-term. You think about how it started and how it just became this whole other thing as you kept re-visiting it. That was one of the things I had to learn. I do write songs, but they’re mostly for me. They’re not great necessarily. That’s not one of my great gifts. And I’ve had to come to terms with the fact that it’s okay to be an interpreter, that that’s its own art. But I love watching these songs evolve, and I feel like I’ve had input, and I feel like I definitely have ideas about how they should be shaped and formed.”

She recalls one song Miramar had been playing. Laura Ann liked it, but sensed there was something missing. “I thought it was beautiful,” she says. “But then Marlysse added this string arrangement and this really small percussion part, and for me it just started to shimmer when we played it.”

Laura Ann mentions one of her favorite songs, “The Nearness of You” by Hoagy Carmichael and Ned Washington, and then she begins to sing it, and the room shimmers.

“It’s amazing how much music draws out of us,” she says, taking a deep breath. “The season in my life when I would go out and sing for three or four hours

a night in a loud room is not that appealing to me now. But I am so grateful for the ten or twelve years I spent doing that. That was my 10,000 hours.”

Laura Ann is extremely glad for the current season of her life, and projects like Miramar that give her audiences a different kind of experience. “I think we’re so inundated by sound and noise, digitally and otherwise, that people don’t realize what it does when you pause and turn your attention toward something that’s as transcendent as music,” she says. “Taking time out of your day to listen to a concert. That’s another reason I like the Bolero project, because we’ve kind of demanded that people pause and listen. It’s been a really special thing to have music that demands more attention, which is something we’re all short on right now.”

Laura Ann then asks me to consider beauty. “I’m a big fan of John Muir,” she says. “And exposing yourself to beauty is very important to our well-being. Culturally we’ve become inured to that idea. We ignore our spiritual sides, but we’re still spiritual beings that need to be nourished.”

Laura Ann, always humble about her own talent, talks about what music does to her. “There are so many peo-

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ple who know so much more about music than I do, and people who are much more talented than I am,” she says. “But I just know that when I’m singing, I feel the fullest. By and large when I’m singing I feel whole, and that’s a really precious thing, I don’t know that I feel that way much in any other sphere in my life.”

From outside we can hear the trill of birds. “There’s something about music that connects us to the Divine,” says Laura Ann. “It’s like being outside and witnessing beautiful things in nature. There’s

something in us that needs that kind of nourishment, and I think there are a lot of avenues to that nourishment.”

On an Easter Sunday about fifteen years ago, Laura Ann met a man whose father is pastor of the church she still attends, a place called Eternity. It might not have been love at first sight, but it could have been love at first sound. After meeting, the pair talked for hours and hours and hours, and within a year, they were engaged to be married.

“I also sing at my church on Sundays,”

Laura Ann says. “It’s one of the few places in the world currently where people still get together and sing. I don’t know any other time that people do that nowadays, and that’s really beautiful to me. So that’s been really rewarding. I love the people I get to play with there.”

“I think the reason faith is so important to me is because it says there’s higher consciousness, there’s higher purpose and we’re all complicated and we contradict ourselves,” says Laura Ann Singh. “We do things we

don’t want to do; and then we don’t do things we want to do. But still God loves us, and He actually cares about the minutiae of our day and our lives, and cares about the things that oppress us, that keep us from being our fullest selves. And that’s what it is for me, “Who am I really, who am I essentially? And can I get to that point where I feel that wholeness permeating more of my life?” That’s the same kind of wholeness and fullness I get when I sing. Music reflects, and does not deny the Divine” **NJ**

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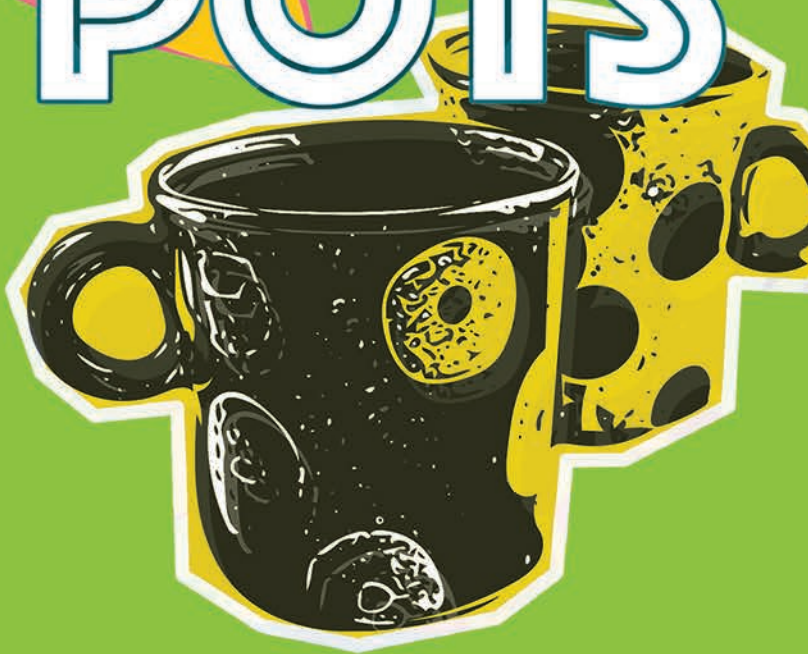
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BOOK REVIEW

The Things We Do for Love

by FRAN WITHROW

STACKS OF BOOKS, waiting to be read, teeter precariously throughout my house, and I also keep a notebook of “wanna read” titles on the desk by my computer. Bestseller “Little Fires Everywhere” was on my “to read” list, but I hadn’t gotten a hard copy yet. “Soon,” I thought. I’d heard a lot about this novel.

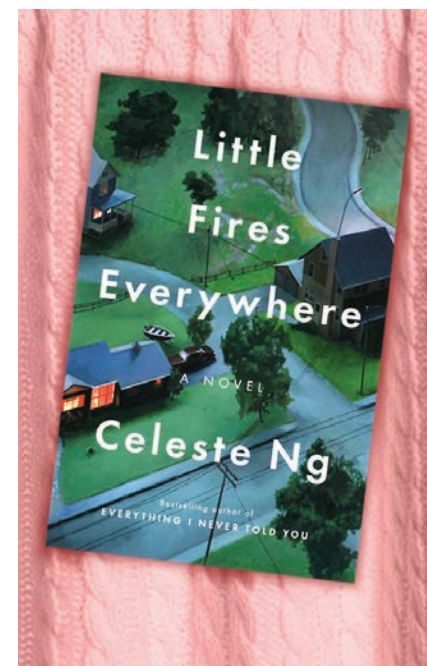
Then fate intervened. I was walking by a Little Free Library one day and there it sat, calling my name. I grabbed it quickly and headed home to see what the hubbub was all about. Turns out, there’s a reason for the buzz about this book.

From the first page I was swept up in the story, and I could no more stop reading than a leaf can stop bobbing down a rushing stream. Every word and sentence is strung together with fluid grace, each leading to the next so seamlessly that you can’t help but keep going. Superb writing and a great story: that’s a sure winner. I turned pages far into the night, only stopping myself from finishing it because I wanted to ponder what might happen before I actually found out.

Mr. and Mrs. Richardson and their four teenage children live in the idyllic and insulated town of Shaker Heights, Ohio. When the artist Mia and her teenage daughter Pearl move into the Richardson’s rental property, the families become intertwined in ways none of them could possibly have foreseen.

One of Mrs. Richardson’s friends has adopted an Asian baby, and, through a series of coincidences involving Mia, Pearl, and the Richardson children, the birth mother is found and a lawsuit ensues. Who gets the baby? There are extenuating circumstances all around, and Ng does a masterful job of making the reader feel sympathy for every character in the book. Parallel storylines involve Mrs. Richardson’s children and Mia’s daughter Pearl as they fall in love, deal with family dynamics, and struggle with secrets, sometimes with unintended consequences.

An undercurrent of white privilege, racism, and class runs through the



book as well, deftly woven into the story in a way that shows just how entrenched these societal constructs are, and how difficult to overcome. Isn’t that timely?

I was about two-thirds of the way through the book when I stopped in the wee hours of the morning. How could Ng possibly weave all these threads together? What would the judge rule regarding the adopted baby? Would we find out Mia’s secret, and what she and her daughter are running away from?

The ending was quite satisfying, and left me with one of the poignant truths of this book: that mother/daughter relationships survive, no matter what baggage the participants bring with them. Mia and Pearl, Mrs. Richardson and her two daughters, the adopted child and the women who would do anything for her: these are exquisite examples of the things we do for love.

This gem was so good I will be looking for Ng’s first novel. And I’ll put this one back in the Little Free Library for the next lucky reader. Maybe it will be you. **NB**

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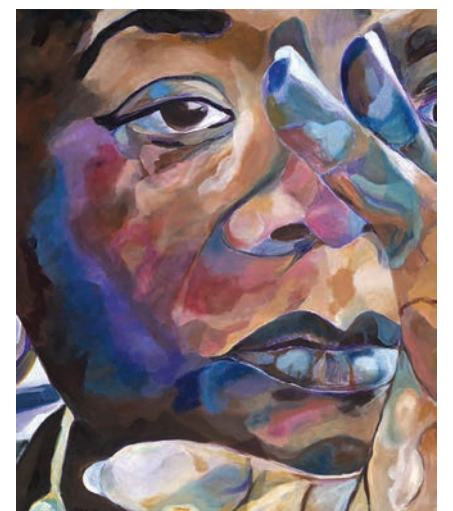
Featured potters are Carren Clarke, Cindy Eide, Maria Galuszka, Lee Hazelgrove, Jane Hendley, Denise Hennig, Karen Hull, Sharon Kincaid, Philip Mills, Chrisana Reveley, Kelly Riggs, Carolyn Royce, Nancy Sowder, Steven Summerville, Jeff Vick, Nga Weaver and Lindsay Wood. Their work spans the gamut of the clay arts, from functional to decorative, contemporary to traditional. All booths will be under tent for this rain or shine even. Food trucks, and beer, glorious beer.

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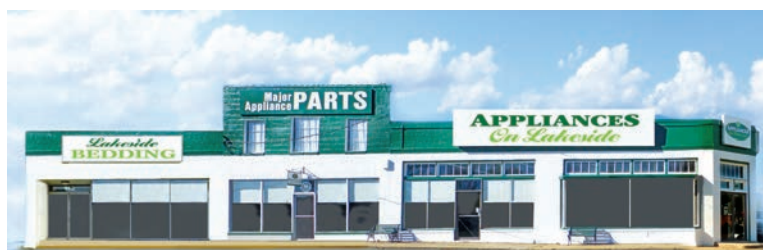


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