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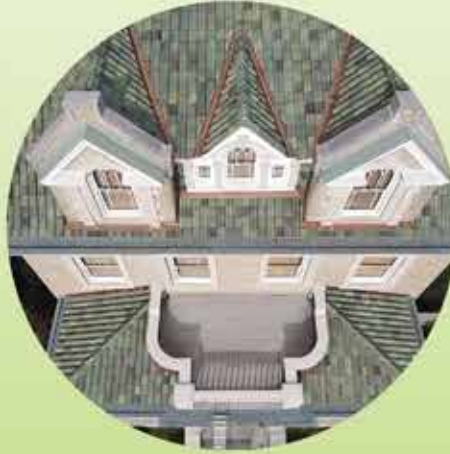
Alleys

in Richmond serve functions both utilitarian and aesthetic. They make it easy to gain access to the rear of almost every property in Richmond. Not only does this supply a means for the removal of trash and recycling, but it also affords police and firefighters a way to enter a property from the rear, if necessary. Alleys are much more than that though. They showcase the other side of our homes. In some parts of the city, carriage houses, hearkening back to a pre-petroleum era, are built up to edge of the alley. And many alleys contain remarkable outdoor spaces, pocket parks and the like, some of which feature massive playgrounds, while others are planned with the artistic eye and botanical sensibility of a Gertrude Jekyll. *(continued on page 12)*

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COVER oil painting by Richard Bland

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Steve Moore The Joke's On Us

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

This story about Steve Moore, a comedian and a writer, was published in February of 2009. For years after returning from California, Steve lived in Richmond, and on May 24, 2014, at the age of 59, he passed away in his native Danville, Virginia.

CHARMED LIVES LACK for something. If you're born in a state of nirvana or somehow privileged as a member of the elect, what's the point? It's only through trials, and sometimes the very worst kind, that we learn if we've got the right stuff. And that right stuff invariably seems to be the ability to laugh death and disaster in the face, send it on its way to where it rightfully belongs. That's what Steve Moore owns.

Stevens Spencer Moore, the man with three last names, was born in Danville, Virginia to Skeets and Wilma, and raised in a fundamentalist tradition. Skeets worked at Liggett-Meyers Tobacco Company; Wilma was a line worker at Dan River Cotton Mill. They later bought a little hot dog stand called the Dairy Hart, which is where Steve worked through high school.

We're sitting in his living room which is thickly peppered with nostalgic bric-a-brac, remnants of a former era. Steve tells me that as soon as he graduated from high school he dusted Danville off his heels and moved to Richmond where he began studying theater at Virginia Commonwealth University.

After two years at VCU, Steve headed up to the Big Apple. "At VCU you lie on the floor and you breathe and you learn exercises and you build sets," says Steve. "And I went, 'You know I'm not going to be a teacher, and if I want to be an actor I'm going to get out of here.' It's not like I could be up for a sitcom in LA and they'd go, 'Whoa, a BFA in acting from VCU. Why didn't you say so? It's your part.' They don't care where you went to school, they want to see what you've done."

Things didn't go so well in New York. About the only job Steve could land was playing piano at a silent movie house in Brooklyn, so six months

later he returned to Richmond and went to work as an entertainer at Kings Dominion.

After two months at Kings Dominion, Steve had managed to save

team called Granite and Pallazo. Steve played piano for them which led to a job at the Comedy Store. "I saw how so many comedians got work on sitcoms and TV shows and

serving stand up comics night after night, taught Steve the essentials of the trade. And he learned, too, that many comedians made their real living as warm up acts for sitcoms that were taped live.

Steve fell right in step. "I was really good at playing with an audience because of those years at the Comedy Store," he says.

He worked on 'Designing Women' for four years, then 'Roseanne', on an off, for five years. Of Roseanne Barr, Steve says, "I knew her when she first came to town. I saw her when she auditioned to be at the Comedy Store. I used to go play bingo with her and go hang out with her and the kids. And then she did the 'Tonight Show' and she was like this huge star. It happened overnight. Trailer trash with millions and millions of dollars. It makes you a little crazy."

Roseanne, as you might guess, wasn't the easiest person in the world to work for, but the pay was good—about \$1,500 a pop. "I'd do the warm-ups for her show and she fired me five times, I guess," Steve remembers.

Shortly after he'd been fired for the fifth time, Roseanne's producer called Steve. "It was the last episode of the 'Roseanne' sitcom and Al Lowenstein called me and said, 'You know she's really vulnerable and wants her old friends around her and we wondered if you would come and do the last warm-up for the show.' And this is where I learned the power of the word no. I thought about it and said, 'Al, you know what, she's fired me five times and I'm really not interested. Five is enough.'"

A couple hours later Lowenstein called Steve back. He offered him \$5,000 for one show. Steve told him, "I'll see you at three."

One of the hardest days Steve ever had was in 1989 as he was preparing for an interview with his agent. He had just been tested for AIDS. "I had

\$600 and with this modest bankroll headed west. "In California I was like a kid in candy store," he says. "All the queers, the most beautiful men in the world"

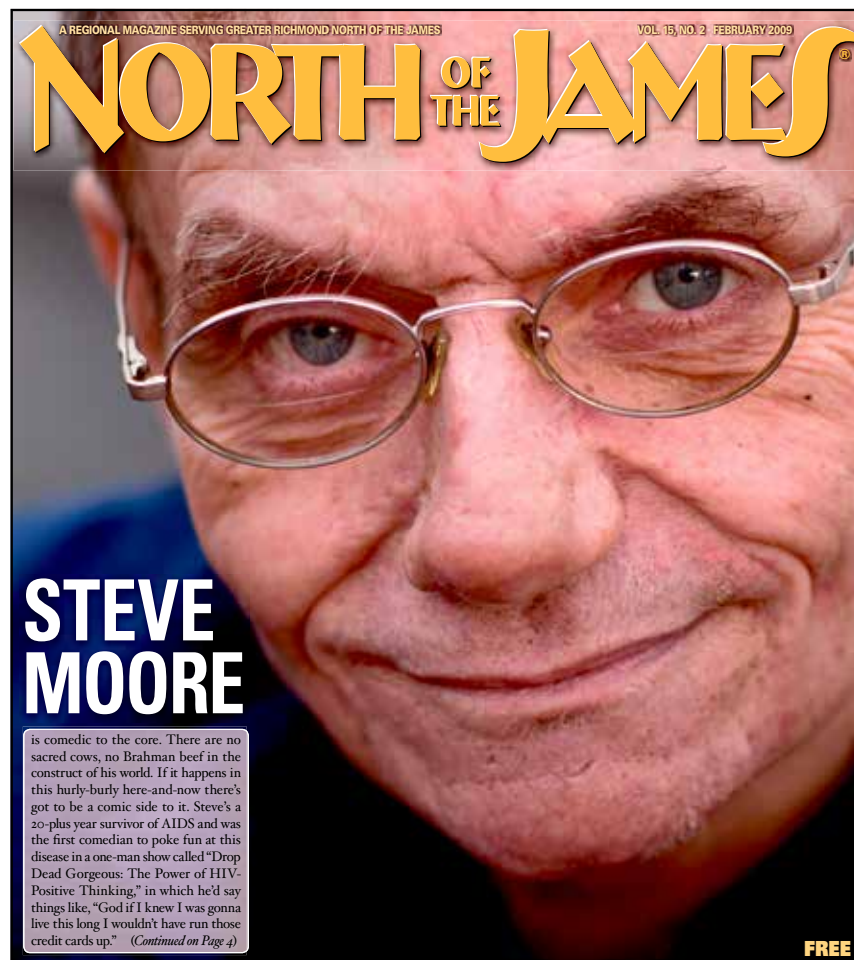
In LA he delivered the daily paper, and worked as a busboy and bartender at the Old World Restaurant in Hollywood. And then he started playing piano for Dee Anne McEnistry. They did an act called Beauty and the Burger, and later played the Ice House in Pasadena, opening for Gallagher.

Things got better. Dee Anne's boyfriend was a member of a comedy

when they worked they made good money," Steve says. So Steve changed his plans of becoming an actor, and honed his skills as a comedian.

"I'd write and perform funny songs," he says. "The first funny song I wrote was a parody of 'He Touched Me' and I wrote, 'I Touched Me.' And then I started talking to the audience from the piano and that parlayed into me emceeing a lot of times. And all of a sudden I had this act I could do anywhere. So I pretty much crawled my way to the middle. Opening act, middle act, head liner."

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my eight-by-ten pictures and my resumes with me and I swung by the clinic to get test results," he says. "It came out positive."

He pulled off the interview without a snag, in a state of absolute denial. But later at home things fell apart. He called his folks back in Danville and started crying into the receiver. His mother, Wilma, cried as well. "All I knew about it was that it was killing people and there was no cure and there was only one pill that you could take," Steve tells me. "So I am truly one of the lucky ones. I mean I went to funerals every week"

Health insurers then were pretty much what they are now—slime bags and miscreants. Steve found out that his co-pay for this new wonder drug was much higher than he could ever afford. But there were physicians who remembered their Hippocratic oath. "I went to this doctor and told him my story and he gave me a big brown bag full of AZT," says Steve. "And doctors would do that. And so that kept me alive."

Out of this immense personal tragedy, Steve drew on humor, gallows humor, the darkest and most rib-tickling sort that works its way out from the marrow. He began making jokes about AIDS and HIV, coming out of the closet, and breaking new comedic ground.

"All of a sudden I was the AIDS guy," Steve says. "People would say, 'Oh my God this guy has AIDS. He's a comedian and he's telling jokes about it. I did every talk show that you could imagine.'"

He tells a few jokes from that time in rapid fire. "Well my parents in Virginia think HIV stands for homosexuals in Virginia," he says. "I started talking about it like it was no big deal. And then I'd say, 'AIDS - God, I hope I never get that again. You guys got to be careful out there - don't mess with me or I'll open a vein and take out the whole front row.'"

All of this led to an hour-long HBO special that gave Steve instant international recognition, but more than that, it allowed him to be who he really was and it gave him a sense of self that he had never known before. Though the HBO special didn't make Steve rich, it did give him a good chunk of change so with money in hand, he decided to move back to Virginia.

Not long ago, grief dealt Steve a knock out blow. Dale Moore, his

brother and only sibling, was found dead in the James River. He was an avid kayaker and knew the waters well.

"It's always been me, my straight older brother's and my mom and dad," says Steve, lowering his voice. "We've always loved each other so much. Now I'm the one that has to step up to the plate. Because he's gone. And he's got the three kids. His daughter's having a baby today that he'll never see that baby."

He remembers vividly the day his brother body was found on a muddy shore of the James River. "It was horrific," he says. And the authorities and a local television station made it even worse.

One of the local news networks botched things badly. They flashed a photo of Dale and announced that his corpse had been discovered. Dale's children, who didn't yet know their father was dead, saw the news clip. "The kids start screaming," Steve recalls. "And then detectives come over and one says, 'Is this your father's watch?' It was a picture of his dead arm and the watch. And then they ask, 'Is this your father's necklace?' And the kids are screaming, 'Yes, yes, yes.' All of us went through a tailspin with that."

He tells me a little bit about his parents and the love they've always shared as a family. Many years back, Steve, while visiting from California, decided to tell his parents that he was gay.

"So Dale took Skeets out to the garage and I told Wilma in his bedroom," Steve says. "And I started crying, 'Mom I'm queer,' I said. And she said, 'You see me crying? You think I love you any less?'" At the same exact moment Dale was breaking the news to Skeets. "And this is what Skeets said," Steve tells me. "'Well, I reckon they're born that way.' Just like that, and that was it." He snaps his fingers.

Steve minces no words, does not try to paint life in rosy hues. No lies; no denial. He tells the clouded truth, examines the grayness of our reality. Perhaps that's why his routines always worked so well. Maybe that skewed path to truth is the essence of all great comedy. **NS**

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DIVERSIONS

Diner en Blanc Giving the Ooh La La

by FAYERUZ REGAN

IF YOU SEE SOMEONE dressed as Napoleon walking by, chest out and chin in the air, you follow him. If only with your eyes. It was my first Diner En Blanc, and though I didn't know what to expect, I knew Napoleon was onto something.

At the gates of this event were aerial dancers, spinning in hoops and smiling down at us. Because they were silent, they seemed like angels. They wore all white and feather headdresses straight out of the Belle Epoque. Just past this display were the revelers. Twelve hundred of them, to be exact. They streamed onto Arthur Ashe Boulevard in front of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA), which was closed to the public for this event. Dripping with diamonds, adorned with feathers, everyone was ready to have a good time.

The story of Diner en Blanc began in Paris, in 1988. François Pasquier invited a group of friends to an elegant outdoor picnic at the Bois de Boulogne, asking them to dress in white so they could all find one another. It was so special, that it became an annual tradition. Since then, Diner en Blanc has grown to encompass over 90 cities around the world.

When you think about it, 90 cities is not many when you consider every continent. It was fascinating that Richmond got in on the action. It's right up there with Athens, Singapore, and Cape Town. The Parisian phenomenon didn't even hit the United States until 2011, when Pasquier's son, Aymeric, brought it to New York City. Richmond adopted Diner en Blanc in 2017.

One thing that makes the event exciting is its secret location that's not revealed until the day of. Attendees pack an upscale picnic and load into buses that transport them to a public space – a coveted location that allows them to celebrate their city. In Richmond the party has been held at Tredegar Ironworks and Monroe Park, among



Napoleon flanked by dancers at Diner en Blanc.

other places. And these party guests weren't just unpacking food. Slowly, the thoroughfare became awash with twinkling lights, Eiffel tower statues, and crystal chandeliers.


Passersby could not believe the spectacle, asking anyone around them, "What is this? Who are they?" Though everyone is welcome to attend Diner en Blanc (and should!), in Richmond there's an impressive turnout from the Black community. I asked the host/organizer Ayana Obika how this came about. "There is definitely affinity within the Black community for all-white attire parties" Ayana told me. "Dressing in all white has always been seen as evidence of status or signifying a special occasion. Members of historically Black sororities are familiar with dressing in what is called 'uninterrupted white.' Sean Combs, AKA Diddy, popularized white attire parties in the 2000s with his parties in the Hamptons so it gave wearing all white a certain cachet and made it feel like you were doing something elevated – cool."

There are built-in traditions I've come to love. The napkin wave signifies that dinner is about to begin, so everyone stands and spins their white cloth napkin in the air. There's a champagne toast. After dinner, everyone lights a sparkler, which indicates it's time to dance and mingle. All traditions

are highly photogenic, and I have a hard time being in the moment for my want to capture it. Then the band starts. Dancers in LED butterfly wings flutter around the crowd. Napoleon joins the stage. In partnership with VMFA's then-exhibit on Louis XIV's belongings, they trotted him out to make a toast.

The year that Diner en Blanc hosted the event on Arthur Ashe Boulevard left a special impression on Ayana as well. "We hosted in front of the Virginia Museum of History and Culture, and we were surprised to see the people living in the apartments across from the museum had put on white outfits and were sitting on their balconies with glasses of wine," she said.

Diner en Blanc is an enchanting way to celebrate your city, good company, and good food. Only, you're doing it glamorously, like a French aristocrat would. "For me, the best part is seeing all of the moving pieces come together and seeing people who don't know each other sharing a meal and celebrating our city. This event brings out the best in people... so much joy," Ayana said.

For more information or to sign up for this exclusive event, visit the Diner en Blanc page for Richmond at richmond.dinerenblanc.com 

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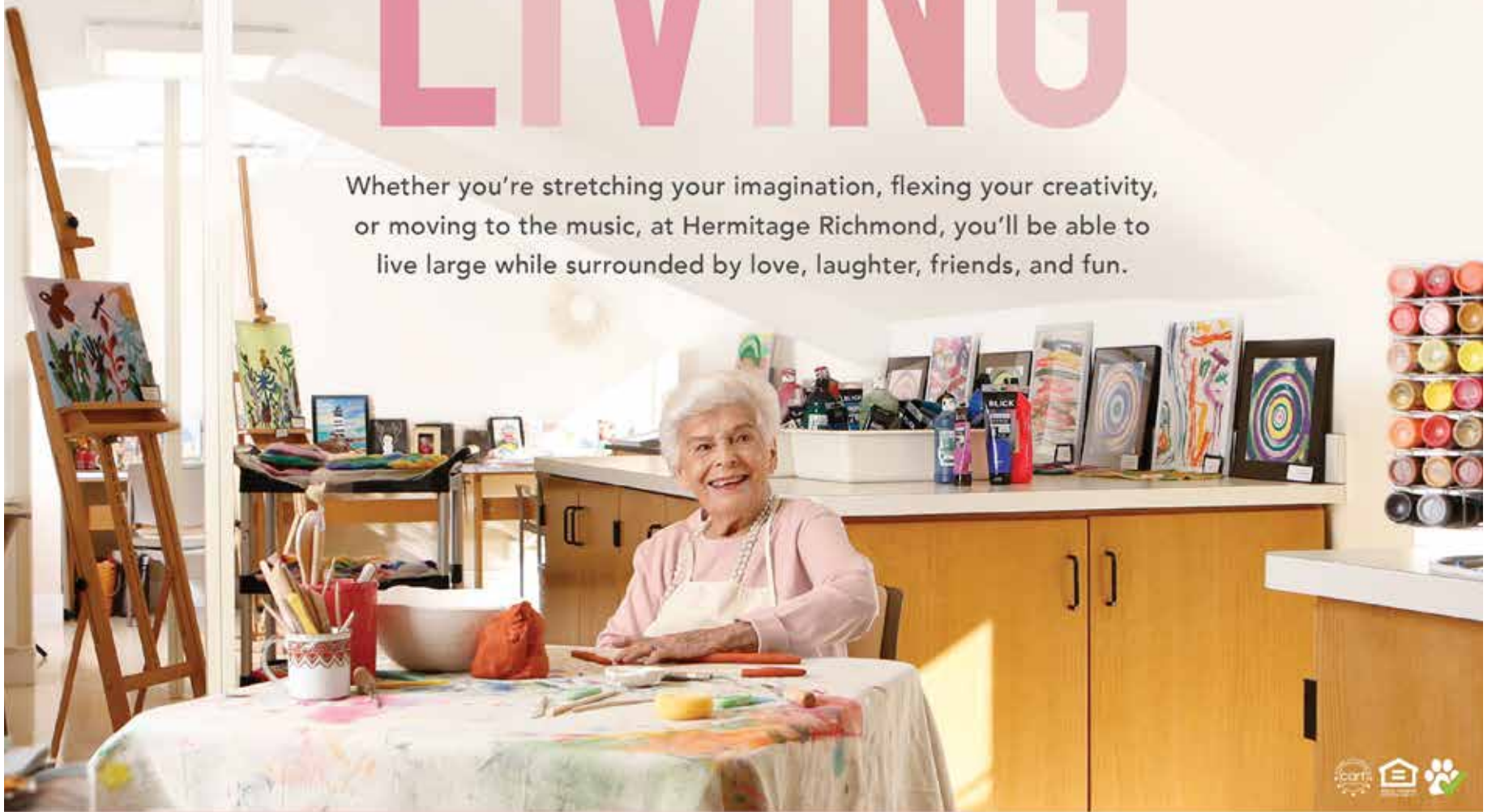
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UPDATE

13 Acres Named One of Virginia's Most Endangered Historic Places

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN



THE HISTORIC 13 ACRES building was just listed as one of the most endangered historic structures in Virginia by the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA). This year the APVA listed nine individual locations, including the 13 Acres site. “Once a historic place is demolished, it’s gone forever,” according to Preservation Virginia CEO Elizabeth S. Kostelny.

“This is extraordinary recognition of the importance of this structure as well as the imminent challenge of preserving and finding a viable and appropriate use for this, the second oldest structure in the Hermitage Road Historic District,” says Tim Pfohl, president of the Bellevue Civic Association. “I sincerely hope this attention/recognition helps further galvanize and focus our collective interest and collaborative efforts to preserve the house as a resource for this and future generations of Northsiders and Richmonders.”

Built in 1885, Thirteen Acres is one of oldest remaining homes in the Northside, and is the second oldest house on Hermitage Road. Back in 1967, the house and an accompanying thirteen acres was sold to the City of Richmond for \$475,000 by the Virginia Methodist Home for the Aged, which operated its facility there. Richmond Public Schools (RPS) planned to build an elemen-

tary school on the site, but there was fierce opposition from the adjoining neighborhoods. They argued that the location was too close to the dense traffic along Laburnum and Hermitage, and children might be hit by speeding cars.

For the next four years, the old house served as a school for children with special needs. Then, from 1973 until 1978 the building became home to the RPS community relations department. In 1978, RPS proposed using the site as a residential school for adolescents. The surrounding communities—Rosedale, Bellevue, Ginter Park—were vehemently opposed to the proposal, but two years later Thirteen Acres opened a five-day residential program for emotionally disabled students, ranging in age from six to twelve. It continued as a residential school until 2007, eight years after Holton Elementary School first opened its doors.

Since its doors closed permanently 16 years ago, the City has allowed the building to deteriorate. On the exterior, paint is peeling, exposed wood rotting, and window panes have been shattered and dentils pried loose from the fascia boards. The interior is in equally bad shape. The structure itself, though, is in very good shape and would be a perfect candidate for a complete restoration. **NJ**



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ALLEYS ROADS LESS TRAVELED, PART 2

EARLY IN THE MORNING, WITH HIS DOG IN TOW,

Rick Bridgeforth pushed through the gate in his backyard which led him into the vast alley space that runs between Grove and Hanover just off of Robinson. In the dim autumn light he could make out a handful of people seated before the assortment of tables—some of concrete, others of wood—behind World Cup Coffee. These folks, the uber hipsters of their era, would cavalierly toss plastic stirrers and Styrofoam cups and plastic forks and spoons onto the ground. As one young man balled up a napkin in his hand and prepared to throw it, Rick called him out on it, and asked him and the others if they wouldn't mind using one of the conveniently placed trash cans on this makeshift patio. A shaking of heads, slight laughter. Mainly though he was ignored with a searing silence. Then one afternoon, as he walked his dog, it came to him in a not-so-blinding flash. And he mouthed these words: "If you make it pretty, people won't litter."

And for the next 38 years, that's exactly what Rick has done with the alley area behind his home on Hanover Avenue.

About a month and a half ago, my son Charles and I came upon this alley in our wanderings through the Fan. Rick was out there, along with two women. It was a warm Sunday afternoon, and the three of them were enjoying beverages, surrounded by a veritable botanical garden that Rick had created over the years. The sheer size of the garden he created in the footprint of brick garages that once stood there amazed me. As we talked I was identifying flower after flower—larkspur, gigantic delphiniums, foxglove, summer flox, sweet William, iris, helleborus hydrangea, and scores of others—and the colors were vibrant and dazzling. All of it was planted in a fashion that called to mind the impressionistic landscape design of Gertrude Jekyll, an English gardener whose handiwork had a painterly quality.

He invited us to sit and enjoy the garden, and began to tell us how he began the garden in the first place. "I would get mad every day walking my dog and picking up everybody's coffee stirrers and coffee cups," Rick told us. "So I decided to make it pretty. That's how it started began, and it started in my parking place and just took over. It just expanded little by little. As soon as it became pretty, the littering stopped."



Section of Rick Bridgeforth's alley garden.

At that time, a garage, which Rick had rented, stood in the middle of the parking area bordered by the alleys. He stored his tools inside the garage and on the roof kept seven bee hives. About twelve years ago a storm took down the giant willow oak that grew in that alley. When it fell, the tree crushed the garage, and though Rick lost his bee hives (he has three hives now in his back-

yard), he was able to expand his plantings in the alley. "After the garage collapsed, I got rid of all the bricks, made those columns there," he said, gesturing toward a pair of vine-clad columns. "And I put in the apple tree."

The young woman sitting next to Rick held up her iPhone and began scrolling through dozens of pictures. She invited me to take a

look. Each photo captured waves of colors—reds and pinks, yellows and purples. "That's what this garden looked like back in April," she said.

Rick nodded. "I just ripped up 3000 tulip bulbs, last year it was 4,000," he said. I plant them in the fall and they sit through the winter. Then after they bloom I rip out the tulips and throw them

BY CHARLES MCGUIGAN
PHOTOS BY REBECCA D'ANGELO



Rick Bridgeforth, who converted part of an alleyway into a botanical garden.

away, and the perennials start to come in.”

Rick told me that he had attended William and Mary, studying French and pre-med. But his heart wasn't in it; it was something his father prodded him in to doing. So when his father passed away, Rick decided to chase his own dream. “When he died, I said, ‘I can do whatever I want now,’” he said. “I became a hairdresser. I moved out to LA and studied at Vidal Sassoon in Hollywood.”

Back in Richmond he would open his own hair salon, a shop called Wilma Ray at 7 West Cary. “I had that for ten years, and then the Jefferson asked me to open a salon there, so I opened the salon at the Jefferson and had that for twenty years,” Rick said. “I also ran the florist shop at the Jefferson.”

That was just one of his professions, though. He also did a fair amount of landscape design, putting the

finishing touches on fairly large gardens.

“The landscaper would put all the trees and shrubs in and then I would say, ‘We need this over here, that over here, fifty of those, six of these.’ And it made it look like it was born there,” said Rick. “A lot of the people that I used to design for wanted their homes

and gardens in magazines. I call what I did, adding the charm.”

Rick's fascination with things that grow in the good earth goes all the way back to his early childhood. “I've been doing this since I was six years old,” he told me. “I had a rose garden with one grandmother, and I helped my other grandmother with her vegetable garden.”

And here in this alley oasis that Rick has been perfecting for more than three decades, there is also a large vegetable garden that he also plants annually. On any given Sunday folks visit the garden, bringing wine and cheese and soaking up the sun and nature's beauty. And that's the day, Rick works in the garden, pulling weeds, tending his crops. “I don't go to church,” he said. “This is my church.”

Before my son and I left, Rick Bridgeforth said this: “I just try to get everybody to make their alley look pretty. Since I first started the garden along this alley, it has spread to other alleys in the Fan.”

MANY of the alleys in downtown Richmond, the Fan, and Church Hill are lined with what many refer to as cobblestones. These are those rectangular or square blocks of gray granite and are probably more accurately called Belgian blocks or stetts. They were cut by stone masons who worked in any number of quarries along the James River. There was a time in the early 20th century that these Belgian blocks were shipped by rail to cities throughout the country.

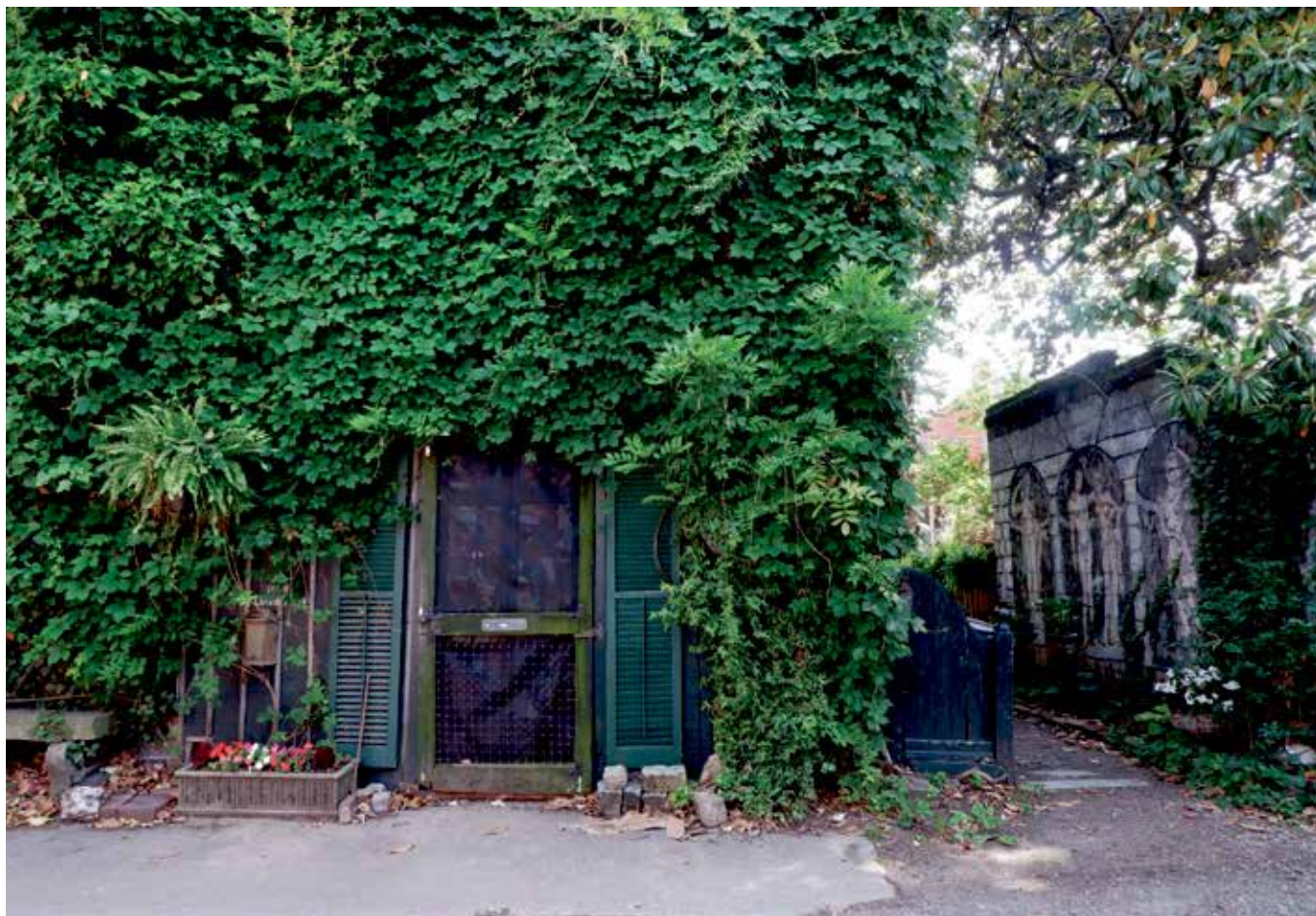
But the very earliest cobblestones were not locally quarried. Many of them were rounded field stones that served as ballasts aboard ships sailing from England. Once those tall ships arrived at a port city like Richmond, the cobblestones were unloaded on the docks, and the cargo for the return trip—commodities like tobacco—were packed into the holds. These cobblestones were sold from the wharf and used to line the streets and alleys in America's fledgling cities. There are few of these actual cobblestone alleys remaining in Richmond. There are several on Church Hill, and there was an expansive one near

Rocketts Landing. But that was scraped away in the name of progress several years ago when that area was redeveloped. One of the most notable cobblestone alleys in the city is behind the Poe Museum in the 1900 block of East Main Street. It's worth checking out.

Some alleys in Richmond actually bear names that are prominently posted like street signs. There's Walnut Alley down in Shockoe Bottom between 17th and 18th Streets. And on the northern edge of Oregon Hill, between Cary and Cumberland, there's Green Alley. One alley is named for an unconventional preservationist who was instrumental in saving many of Richmond's historic buildings. Fittingly, the alley that runs behind Linden Row on East Franklin Street is named after this woman, Mary Wingfield Scott, who had purchased seven of the homes that make up this historic row, and then began restoring them to their former glory. And this group of homes is now considered the best surviving row of Greek revival architecture houses in the country. Mary Wingfield Scott was their personal savior.



Actual cobblestone alley behind the Poe Museum.



Richard Bland's carriage repository sheathed in Virginia creeper, English ivy, and wisteria.

THERE is one man in Richmond who knows more about the city's strange and frequently convoluted histories, large and small, than anyone else I know. He has salvaged hundreds of artifacts and relics and written records that reflect those histories. What's more this man is a gifted painter whose work not only captures the beauty of our city, but acts as a sort of on-going chronicle of it. He's also lived along alleys most of the time he has called Richmond home, which spans over half a century now. Richard Lee Bland lives in one of the most curious and largest alley structures in the Fan. It's a two-story brick building, and its front elevation is completely covered by a veil of Virginia creeper, wisteria and English ivy. To the untrained eye, it could be mistaken for a carriage house. But it's actually something different than that.

"My old place in the alley was a carriage repository," Richard wrote. People in the early decades of the 20th century would hire drivers and "conveyances" from the repository. "My two doorways and windows open onto four connecting alleyways," he added. "I've known a personal seclusion of carriage house liv-

ing from the time of my renting a nearby carriage house dwelling in 1969. Views and sounds from the windows and the veranda overlooking the back alley most often are into the tops of trees—birds singing, squirrels in their acrobatic maneuvers, rabbits below silent in the bushes. Through my ivy covered lattice and trellis I can see brick-walled courtyards. These areas are shaded by tall elms and overhanging branches from a large oak."

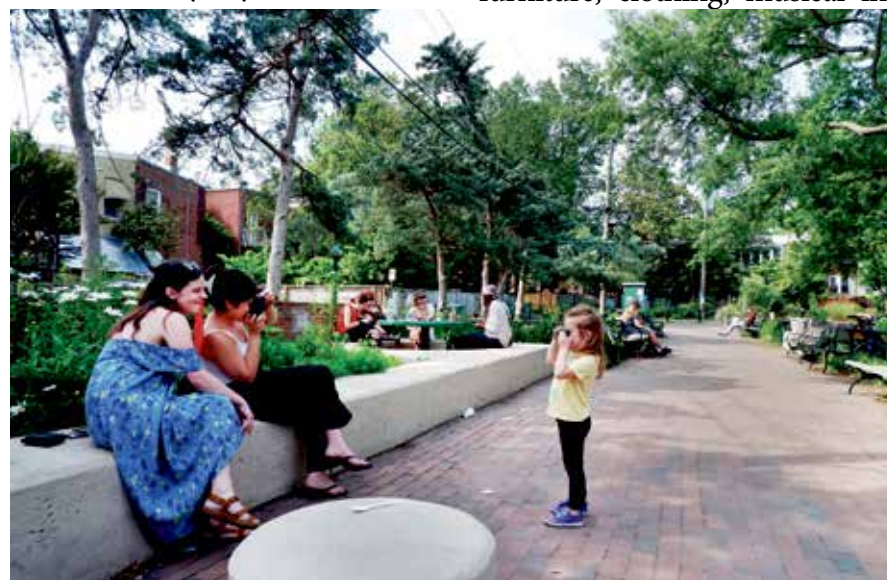
Richard then went on to write about the area of the city that has been his home for many years. "The Fan District west of Monroe Park had been a scattering of mansion estates known as the town of Sydney. This district is better known today as The Fan District due to the streets spreading into a fan shape around small triangular parks at the juncture of several streets . . . The interior of these city blocks and squares is a world to itself reminiscent of rural lanes, graveled stone on earthen alleys and granite pavers oriented to an east to west direction lined by brick carriage houses, verandas, sleeping porches, or shuttered windows, garages, brick arches, and ornate gateways, courtyards and gardens."

Like many of us Richard has done his share of shopping along the alleys. "Over the course of years I am not alone in furnishing my home from Richmond's alleys with vintage discarded treasures," he wrote listing scores of alley finds. Here's a partial list. "A jukebox from a Union Hill alley, a large taxidermy mounted sailfish from a downtown alley, a circa 1840's plantation table with turned legs a block up my alley, a circa 1900 wooden restaurant booth on a Granby Street alley, a circa 1900 rusticated bent wood with split wood back and seat on my alley, ornate advertising signs off several alleyway, a circa 1870's

plantation kerosene lamp encasement with large glass shade on a downtown alley, an embroidered tapestry and a middle eastern circular hammered brass squatting table with opening for a charcoal 'fire bowl,' hand-knotted oriental rugs, a splendid example of uranium glass platter and glass cup, discarded fossils and sea shells." Richard had been invited to appear on the History Channel's American Pickers, but declined the offer to preserve his privacy.

OVER the year I have found extraordinary pieces along our alleys, everything from original artwork to a Stickley end table (which I ended up selling for a huge chunk of change), and almost every piece of furniture in my home was rescued from an alley—an oak Morris chair, a walnut washstand with a pigeon-blood marble top, a golden oak barbershop mirror that I repurposed into a bookcase.

Friend and neighbor, Liz Scarpino, who contributed to last month's cover story, wrote eloquently about alley finds: "Alleys in Richmond still represent a sort of street-level liberation to me — places of DIY potential, where I can glean from piles of 'good garbage' (as my sister, who often alley-shopped boroughs of New York City, calls it) to harvest awesome finds of tossed artwork, furniture, clothing, musical in-



In Scuffletown Park, four-year-old Eleanor Busy trains a camera on her mom, Carlisle Wikinsoner, and Erin Soorenko, who also weilds a camera.



St. John's Mews on Church Hill.

struments, scrap lumber, old signage, you name it. No shame in it at all. Quite the contrary: my home/garden/wardrobe are filled with unique trash-to-treasure finds: some we mend or refurbish, some we repurpose or deconstruct entirely, some we save from a crushed-to-smither-eens landfill fate just in the nick of time, as the garbage truck lumbers and clamors close. In this age of planned obsolescence, timber mafias, ecocidal clearcutting, and particle board put-it-together-yourself-and-wait-for-it-fall-apart crap from big box stores, who wouldn't rather have quality, free, vintage stuff? Friends all over town alert me to particular castoffs, knowing I'll likely have a look-see and might-could use something there. I feel like this practice has imbued our home with a true sense of place, a connection to community, our own unique mise-en-scène narrative, and a greener, multi-generational aesthetic that honors the material culture and history of Richmond neighborhoods."

Another friend and neighbor, Rob Ullman, illustrator and graphic designer, had a thing or two to say about alleys. He's a Buckeye by birth, and moved to

Richmond 25 years ago, settling first over in the Fan. Here's what he wrote: "Immediately upon receiving the keys to my apartment on Park Avenue, I became enamored and fascinated with the city's extensive network of alleys. As the self-employed owner of a dog, I had hours to explore these urban shortcuts, and made use of every opportunity. Some of the alleys were so well-developed, with brick streets and fancy garages and carriage houses, and some were so wild and unkept, with little discernible rhyme or reason, at least to my historically ignorant eyes.

"Moving to Bellevue a few years later, I found the alleys different, but no less voluminous and interesting. These hidden passageways always seem to reveal the true personalities of the neighborhood's residents, in ways that the front of the buildings cannot. From the messy and in-progress to the manicured and overmanaged, you can find out a lot about a person by observing their house from an alley.

"I've run literally HUNDREDS of miles through the Northside over the last two decades, as many behind the homes as in

front of them. There is always something new to notice, something to catch the eye. Sometimes it's a great idea for a new outdoor space, sometimes it's a cool, discarded end table that would look great in my studio."

Like Rob and many others, I too migrated from the Fan to Bellevue. And on the Northside the alleys are different. For one thing, many of them are paved with loose gravel, not Belgian blocks or bricks. But like all the alleyways throughout the city those in Bellevue have an air of enchantment and are filled with surprises



Pebble stone garage in an alley overlooking Holton Elementary School.

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The country lane alley in Bellevue.

from the pebble stone garage on the alley facing Holton Elementary, to a towering carriage house just off Lamont.

ACROSS a guardrail along Stanhope there's a dirt path that takes

a deep dip toward a wider path that will take you along what looks for all the world like a country lane. Lined with towering trees and bushes and wildflow-

ers and weeds, this path, which stretches a full half-mile to its conclusion at Crestwood Road, is actually one of the few alleys in Richmond vacated by the city decades ago. It has become a wild area where native flora and fauna flourish. I've spotted coyotes there, picked blackberries in late June, found a mass of jewelweed, caught a five-foot long black snake, which I later released. And I found the tail feather of a red-tailed hawk, and on the very same walk discovered a primary wing feather from a great horned owl. That was a lucky day.

A few years back we had a rescue dog named Forest who was all muscle, with a solid black coat except for a small white triangle just below his neck that gave him the appearance of someone dressed in an ill-fitting tuxedo. He was loyal and erratic, and loved to kill rodents and rabbits. He would eat his quarry on the spot, frequently in one or two gulps, bones, fur and all. We sus-



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pected he was part Plott hound, and more than anything in the world he loved to run. So on our walks we would often make our way over to that country land off Stanhope, and once on the other side of the guardrail, I would unclip the tether from his collar and he would dart off like a greyhound. One early summer evening Forest began frantically circling a willow oak that grew up on a sort of hammock of rich soil. In among its massive roots there

were a number of holes dug deep into the red clay, and in an instant Forest dove snout first into it. His hindquarters tensed up and his barking became a deep and steady growl. And then there was single yip, and Forest backed out of the hole and cowered low to the ground, making his way over to me. There were streaks of blood from his forehead to his nose—three perfectly straight lines, one crossing his eyelids. At home, I washed the wounds with

hydrogen peroxide and alcohol and then applied a few dabs of neosporin.

A week later we were back on Bellevue's country lane, and Forest made a beeline back to the willow oak, but this time he went into a much larger hole on the other side of the tree. He barked, and growled. And then another sound rose out of the ground. It sounded like the chirping of a bird, but very loud, and there

was a rapid whistling like a tea kettle. After five minutes, Forest backed out of the burrow. He dragged out the body of a large animal with brownish fur. It was fully two feet long and was the only groundhog I had ever seen in one of Bellevue's alleys. 

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For more information please visit <https://maymont.org/calendar/skc2023/>

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The Night They Drove Old Disco Down

by JACK R. JOHNSON

TIME MAGAZINE ONCE described the music as a “diabolical thump-and-shriek,” but in the late 1970s disco dominated the American music scene. After the success of Saturday Night Fever featuring the music of the Bee Gees, U.S. radio stations began to adjust their formats from all rock to disco. In the process, a Chicago DJ named Steve Dahl was fired on Christmas eve, 1978. He did not handle this event well.

According to Andy Behrens of ESPN, Dahl was hired by rival album-rock station WLUP. Dahl and his broadcast partner Garry Meier organized their listeners around a simple and surprisingly powerful idea: ‘Disco Sucks’.

The spurned Chicago DJ was not the only one promoting the anti-disco fervor. In Seattle, hundreds of rock fans attacked a mobile dance floor, while in Portland, Oregon, a disc jockey destroyed a stack of disco records with a chainsaw as thousands cheered.

Dahl had something similar in mind for Chicago. He intended to blow up a crate of disco records while live on the air from a shopping mall. When Mike Veeck, the White Sox promotional director and son of the owner, Bill Veeck, heard of this, he liked the idea. They asked Dahl if he would be interested in blowing up records at Comiskey Park on July 12 in between games at a double header against the Tigers. Dahl eagerly agreed.

To promote the event, they announced that anyone who brought a disco record to the ballpark would be admitted for just 98 cents.

The anti-disco sentiment (and probably price) turned out to be a real crowd pleaser. Over 50,000 people



crowded into Comiskey stadium (it has an estimated sitting capacity of about 45,000) As the first game began, Mike Veeck received word that thousands of people were trying to get into the park without tickets and sent his security personnel to the stadium gates to stop them. Fans began throwing the uncollected disco LPs and singles from the stands. Records sliced through the air, landed sticking out of the playing field. Coaches urged players to wear batting helmets when playing their positions. Said one player, “It wasn’t just one, it was many [records]. Oh, God almighty, I’ve never seen anything so dangerous in my life.”

Attendees also threw firecrackers, empty liquor bottles, and lighters onto the field. The game was stopped several times because of the rain of projectiles. After the first game ended, Dahl, dressed in army fatigues and a helmet, circled the field in a jeep, then proceeded to center field where the box containing the records awaited, rigged

with explosives. Dahl and Meier warmed up the crowd, leading attendees in a chant of “disco sucks.” On the mound, White Sox pitcher Ken Kravec, scheduled to start the second game, began to warm up. Other White Sox players stayed in the dugout and wore batting helmets for protection.

At around 9 pm, Dahl set off the explosives, destroying the records and tearing a large hole in the outfield grass. Soon, some 7,000 attendees rushed onto the field. Kravec fled the pitcher’s mound and joined his teammates in a barricaded clubhouse. The Chicago Tribune reported that rioters climbed the foul poles, while

Others set records on fire or ripped up the grass. The batting cage was destroyed, and the bases were pulled up and stolen. White Sox owner Bill Veeck showed up and stood with a microphone near where home plate had been, begging people to return to the stands while a bonfire raged in

center field.

The scoreboard flashed “PLEASE RETURN TO YOUR SEATS,” to no avail. Attendees danced in circles around the burning vinyl shards like some weird festivity from “Lord of the Flies”. Only after the Chicago police arrived in riot gear, did the crowd calm down. Thirty-nine people were arrested for disorderly conduct; estimates of injuries to those at the event range from none to over thirty.

Tigers manager Sparky Anderson refused to allow his players to take the field for the second game due to safety concerns. He also demanded that the game be forfeited to the Tigers. He argued that under baseball’s rules, a game can only be postponed due to an act of God, and that the Disco Demolition riot was “no act of God” The commissioner agreed that the White Sox had failed to provide acceptable playing conditions—and the game was forfeited.

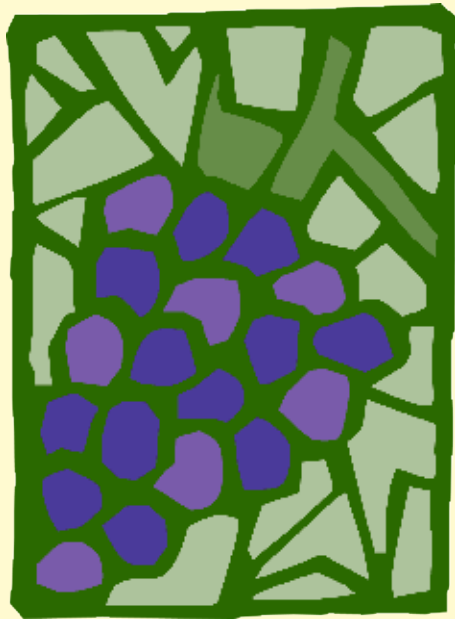
The “Disco Riot” was a turning point of sorts. Disco music began to fade from popularity shortly thereafter. Radio stations that had switched to disco switched back to rock. The Grammy awards canceled their best-disco-recording category after only one year. In the second half of 1979, only one disco single – Michael Jackson’s “Don’t Stop Til You Get Enough” – made U.S. No 1, for a solitary week.

In retrospect, however, there may have been a bit more to the riot than simple hatred of a musical genre. According to the Guardian, in 2019, when the White Sox commemorated Disco Demolition’s anniversary, it attracted widespread criticism, suggesting “that there was something distinctly ugly about the vast crowd of white men publicly destroying music predominantly made by black artists, dominated by female stars and with a core audience that was, at least initially, largely gay.”

But Steve Dahl remained defiant. In his book, “Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died”, Dahl wrote, “I’m worn out from defending myself as a racist homophobe. The event was not anti-racist, not anti-gay ... we were just kids pissing on a musical genre.”

Yet, as Alice Echols, author of “Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture”, noted in The Guardian, “There’s a weird correlation between the way Dahl has defended Disco Demolition – standing up for the ‘rock’n’roll lifestyle’ of straight white men in the face of disco’s dominance – and the language of the alt-right, where Milo Yiannopoulos claims that those taking part in a ‘straight pride’ parade represent ‘America’s most brutally repressed identity.’”

“It’s fascinating that this has happened now [2019],” said Echols. “It does sound very much in line with politics over here. It’s very ... Trumpist.”



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BOOK REVIEW

The Richmond Theatre Fire Rekindled

by FRAN WITHROW

“THE HOUSE IS

If so, were you on Fire,” is Rachel Beanland’s fictionalized account of the

real life Richmond theatre fire of 1811. This fire, which occurred at the site of the current Monumental Church on East Broad Street, was at the time the worst calamity ever in the United States. Seventy-two people of the six hundred or so patrons who packed the building died, and scores more were injured. The theatre was poorly designed, and people on the third floor had only one narrow staircase through which to escape as the entire building burned down. Others jumped from windows in desperation, only to die upon impact. This was a tragedy of epic proportions.

The fire was so horrible, and the identification of bodies so difficult, that the city decided to build a crypt on site to house the dead, which is now part of Monumental Church.

Beanland, a Richmond author, takes this story and makes it come alive through the lens of four people who represent those affected by the fire.

Sally Campbell is a widow who goes to the theatre on that fateful night with her sister-in-law, Margaret, and Margaret’s husband, Archie. Sally notices that Archie disappears in the darkness of the hallway during the fire, and that many men scramble over women in their efforts to escape. This may be why 54 of the 72 who died were women. Sally discovers untold reserves of courage as she attempts to aid those wounded by the fire.

Gilbert Hunt is an enslaved blacksmith. I found his character so fascinating I ended up doing more

research about him after I finished the book. Hunt is credited with working with a local doctor who dropped women from a window into Hunt’s waiting arms. It makes perfect sense to me that Hunt’s enslaver is furious when he finds out about Hunt’s courage because Hunt could have been hurt, which would have eaten into the enslaver’s profit.

Cecily Price has accompanied her enslaver, Maria, to the theatre. Cecily’s plight is a horrendous one: Maria’s brother Elliott has been abusing Cecily since she was five years old. Cecily has just learned that Elliott is to be married and plans to take her with him to his new home. When Cecily escapes safely from the theatre, she sees an opportunity to run away to the north. Can her uncle, Gilbert Hunt, help her escape?

Jack Gibson is a young boy who works for the theatre company as a stagehand. His mistake is the first catalyst for the fire. When the other actors devise a plan to blame enslaved people for the tragedy, Jack must decide whether to follow his conscience and confess, or keep quiet, despite threats from the theatre company that employs him.

Beanland expertly weaves the themes of racism, injustice, and sexism into the story. In “The House is on Fire,” Beanland brings a piece of Richmond’s history to life. Her story is a well written, gripping read about this little known historical event. I hope we haven’t heard the last from this exquisitely talented local author. **NJ**

“The House is on Fire”

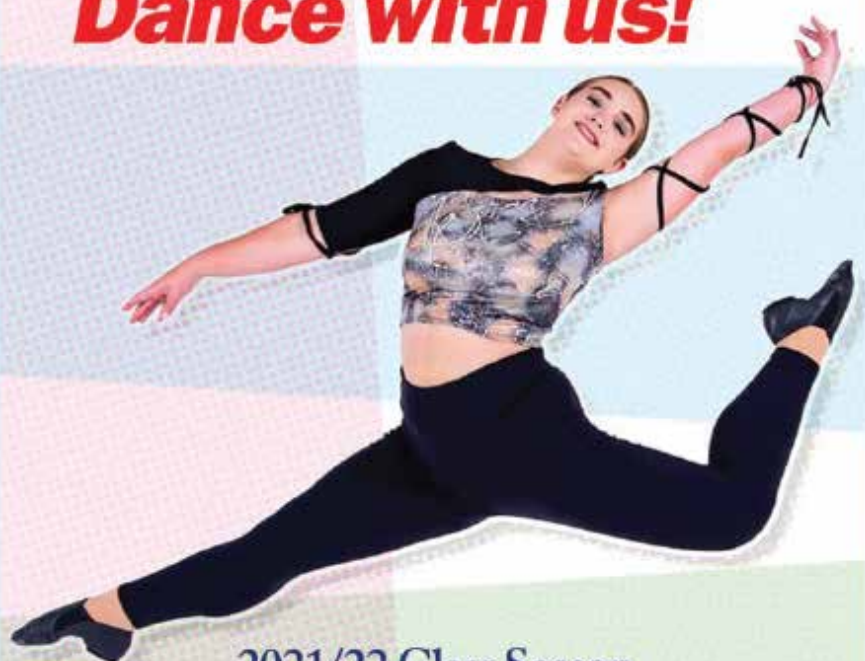
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