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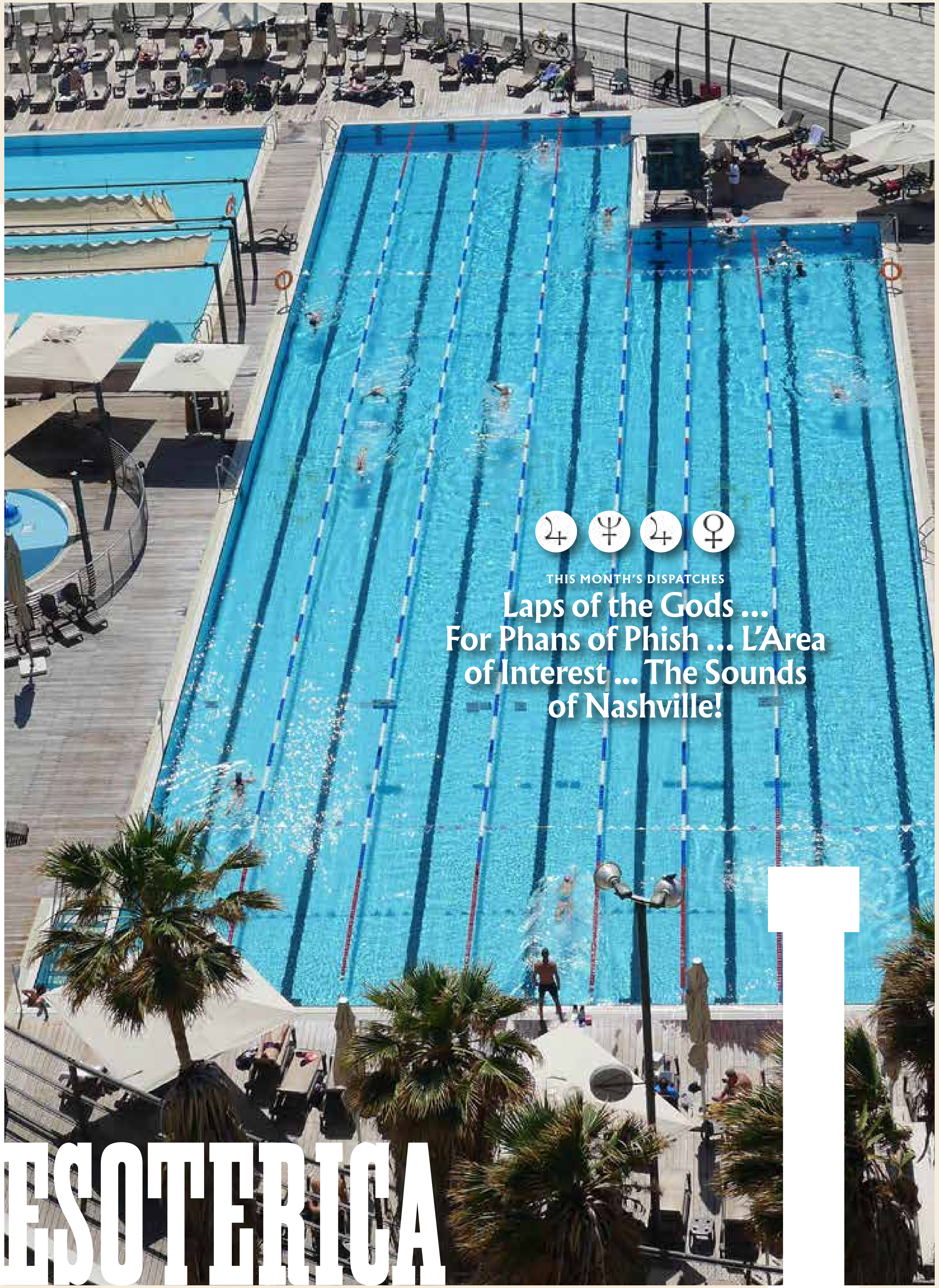
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THIS MONTH'S DISPATCHES

Laps of the Gods … For Phans of Phish … L'Area of Interest … The Sounds of Nashville!

ESOTERICA

THE TEN

Two handfuls of items that you should know happened, or are happening

1 On Jan. 16, 2025, days before Trump's inauguration, a company controlled by the Emirati royal Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed Al Nahyan paid $500 million for a 49% stake in World Liberty Financial, the cryptocurrency firm launched by Trump's son Eric and special envoy Steve Witkoff's son Zach. According to corporate documents and "people familiar with the matter," half that sum was paid up front, directing $187 million to entities controlled by the Trump family and $31 million to entities controlled by the Witkoff family. An additional $31 million went to an entity controlled by co-founders Zak Folkman and Chase Herro. "At the time of the investment," the Wall Street Journal notes, "World Liberty had no products," and the deal granted the Emirati company no rights over WLF's future crypto token sales.

A few months later, the Trump administration approved the sale of 500,000 Nvidia artificial intelligence chips per year, including state-of-the-art Blackwells, to the UAE. Under the Biden administration, these sales had been blocked due to fears that the chips could fall into Chinese hands. In particular, there was bipartisan concern about G42, an Emirati AI company owned by Tahnoon, and about its China-born CEO, Peng Xiao. According to a Senate report, Peng "operates and is affiliated with an expansive network of UAE and [People's Republic of China]-based companies that develop dual-use technologies." Under the deal announced in May, G42 will annually receive 35,000 Blackwells, which are prohibited from export to China.

Indeed, G42 now appears to be deeply enmeshed in WLF's corporate governance. Under the deal, a Tahnoon-owned company called Aryam Investment 1 became WLF's largest shareholder. The deal placed two Aryam executives on WLF's five-member board. Both of these "Aryam executives," however, were also executives at G42, which jointly manages Aryam with the Tahnoon-owned investment firm MGX. One of them was Peng. G42's head of crypto and blockchain, Fiacc Larkin, joined WLF in January 2025 as its "chief strategic adviser."

After the initial January investment, the Trump and Witkoff families made other deals with Tahnoon-owned entities, even as Tahnoon was lobbying for access to U.S.-made chips. In May, Zach Witkoff announced that MGX would be using WLF's stablecoin, USD1—a crypto token pegged to the value of the U.S. dollar—to make a $2 billion investment in the crypto exchange Binance, in a project to be managed by G42's Larkin. The deal, which overnight made USD1 one of the world's largest cryptocurrencies, meant that WLF could earn an additional $80 million per year just by investing its $2 billion cash pile in U.S. Treasurys.

Following the investment, the UAE began lobbying for Trump to pardon Binance's founder, Changpeng Zhao, who had pled guilty to financial crimes including money laundering and spent four months in a U.S. prison in 2024. (A lawsuit filed in November 2025 under the Antiterrorism Act accuses Binance of "knowingly moving at least $50 million for Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other terrorist organizations.") Zhao, who has close ties with the Emirati royal family, was pardoned by Trump in October 2025. The Journal reported in August that WLF had generated $4.5 billion since November 2024 in large part due to "a partnership with an under-the-radar trading platform quietly administered by Binance." That platform, PancakeSwap, tried to increase the usage—and therefore the value—of USD1 by offering payouts to top users of the currency. Many of those users, according to the same report, communicated with one another in Chinese.

The same overlapping set of companies was involved in the Trump administration's TikTok deal, which allowed the platform's Chinese former parent company, ByteDance, to retain an ownership stake in TikTok US. Under that deal, MGX received a 15% stake in TikTok US, as did Silver Lake, a U.S.-based private equity firm that is a major investor in G42. A former investor in ByteDance, G42 sold its $100 million stake in the company in February 2024, as part of a bid to convince the Biden administration to allow it to purchase AI chips.

Eric Trump, the Trump Organization, Zach Witkoff, Steve Witkoff, and WLF have all denied any wrongdoing. WLF claims that Donald Trump and Steve Witkoff have had no involvement with the company since taking office. A White House spokesperson told the Journal in January, "There are no conflicts of interest."

Sources at tabletmag.com/tenthings

2 A new startup claims that it will let you order sunlight from space.

3 A 25-year-old Spanish woman was euthanized, setting off a huge controversy. Earlier, as a minor with mental health issues, Noelia Castillo Ramos was removed from her parents' care by Spanish authorities. Her father's lawyers have alleged, in connection with his litigation to halt the procedure, that the hospital pushed for Noelia to be euthanized because her organs had already been earmarked for donation.

4 Brazilian researcher Tatiana Coelho de Sampaio unveiled the results of a small clinical trial using the protein laminin to treat paraplegia. During the experimental phase of the treatment, which is applied directly to the spine, patients experienced at least a partial recovery of movement.

5 The 25-year-old son of two Norwegian diplomats killed himself, after months of fevered media vitriol over his parents' alleged relationship to Jeffrey Epstein. Neither parent has been implicated in any sexual wrongdoing.

6 One year into cellphone bans, Dallas schools saw a 24% increase in library book checkouts. "I started hearing, 'Oh, I'm so bored. I can't get on my phone after I do my work or during lunchtime,'" Hillcrest High School librarian Nina Canales said. "Once they lock into these stories, they don't seem to care about their phones at all."

7 Japan now has more daily active users and more time spent on X than any other country in the world outside the U.S., according to the company's head of product. Over two-thirds of the country's 123 million people are active monthly on the platform, formerly known as Twitter.

8 Three people in the U.K. farming and agricultural industry are dying by suicide every week, according to the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP).

9 The discovery of 15,800-year-old canine remains in Turkey reveals that domestic dogs have been companions to humans for nearly 5,000 years longer than previously believed.

Ivan Ivic/Cantonal Archaeological Service (KASH) of Schaffhausen

10 At this year's University of Michigan graduation, professor Derek Peterson thanked anti-Israel protesters. "Sing for the pro-Palestinian student activists, who have over these past two years opened our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel's war in Gaza."

THE DEEP END

BARCELONA — The smell of chlorine is my madeleine.

My father was the one who submerged me for the first time. In a photo from my childhood, he holds me in his hands and smiles at the camera from the pool at my grandfather's house. According to him, the family was categorically opposed, considering the submersion a danger. I consider it a baptism.

These days, my mother and father swim to say they do something, and my uncle Jaime wakes up at 5 in the morning to take a bus to the "Olympic" pool of the Mexico City JCC, the Centro Deportivo Israelita. (The adjective is in quotation marks because, according to legend, it falls half a centimeter short.)

When I travel, the first thing I ask is whether there's a pool. I've swum in pools in New York, Istanbul, Tel Aviv, Vienna, Mexico City, and many other cities around the world.

New York University's underground swimming pool occupies what used to be the Palladium, one of the most famous '80s clubs. When you're changing in the locker room, you can hear the L train rumbling above. Vienna's swimming pools were constructed during an early-20th-century socialist period called Red Vienna, and are made of marble and heavily ornamented.

I've swum in a public pool in the Asian side of Istanbul, under the stare of Atatürk: a massive poster hung above the lanes, which were heavily programmed so that women, dressed in full body suits, would not be seen by men. It took me weeks of searching and a tetanus shot in a shady clinic next to Taksim Square to gain my plastified ID.

And of course, there's the Gordon Pool in Tel Aviv. It's a rough place to swim—not only because it's exposed to the scorching Middle Eastern sun, but because of the peculiarity of being flushed and refilled every day with the ocean.

They say swimming is therapeutic, but not why. Swimming is tactile; it suspends the primacy of the visual and, with it, the everyday posturing of identity. Water reduces friction but not movement, and makes our finitude tangible by denying us access to oxygen. And the pleasure of floating only grows when the body is sore or exhausted from carrying the weight of gravity.

Some can only do it under the stern gaze of an instructor; others obsessively document every lap; others care not about distance but about time. Some only swim crawl; others swim everything except butterfly. There are devotees of the paraphernalia—fins, paddles, snorkels—and purists who use nothing.

Each stroke has its spirit and its virtues, though some, like the breaststroke, are particularly maddening in their slowness. The backstroke inverts the terms of the water, and the butterfly—especially the kick—turns the body into a wave.

Philip Roth was a dedicated swimmer, as well, to a lesser degree, Franz Kafka. So too Robert Moses. A pool gives the main character of *Life of Pi* his name. His grandfather, or his uncle, I don't remember, was a devoted swimmer who traveled the world in search of the most beautiful pools and found his favorite in Paris. That is why the grandson, or the nephew, was named Piscine. Pi must survive weeks on a lifeboat alongside a tiger, a chimpanzee, and a zebra, all surrounded by the immense Atlantic. The element contained by pools acquires terrifying dimensions, from a source of recreation and socialization it becomes an arena of survival.

Water, as Christians know, redeems: It not only creates life, it transforms it. And it is precisely in a pool that Karl Ove Knausgård finds, in the first volume of his monumental autobiographical work *My Struggle*, a vehicle for a new life after a ferocious depression that had turned him into a morbidly obese man. In the scene he describes the symmetrical elegance one must maintain while performing the crawl, and how that attention to the body—which simultaneously moves forward, stretches, and balances on its own axis—can be understood as a spiritual practice.

I could go on with many more examples of the members of this sect who aspire, through immersion in a foreign element, to transgress their terrestrial condition—among them the Austrian author Friedrich Torberg, a dedicated member of the Jewish athletic club Hakoah, who wrote something like a love letter to swimming pools that I have not been able to read because I have only found it in German, and I don't know the language well enough. Life's too short to learn German. Especially if you spend all of your free time in the pool. —*Alan Grabinsky*

When I travel, the first thing I ask is whether there's a pool

PHISHING THE SPHERE

LAS VEGAS — The screen in James Dolan's Las Vegas entertainment behemoth is 160,000 square feet, and it wraps around the venue like an LED sky. Every note played is amplified by 167,000 speakers, which, nightly, consume the energy required to power roughly 21,000 homes.

I saw the Eagles play the Sphere a few months ago, and left feeling physically and spiritually sick. This, I thought then, was how music died: not with a whimper but with a bang. The sky-screen above me drizzled pixels of AI slop, literal and dumb—see? A lone desert highway! In California! And look here! A hotel! The band was barely visible amid the digital distractions. It was probably 78-year-old Joe Walsh playing his guitar a few feet in front of me, but it might as well have been a Chuck E. Cheese animatronic robot bobbing its head and belting, "Life's been good to me so far."

This is all to say I was quietly dreading seeing Phish play the same vaunted venue. For my sins, I had never seen the cult act in concert before, despite listening to and loving their music for years. Just my luck, I reckoned: I get to see this great jam band play live, and instead of some lively, moving experience I'm going to get punishing sensory overload at the tail end of a Vegas cash grab.

My fears were eased even before I hit Sin City. The entire plane heading over from New York's JFK was thick with phans, decked out in gear from concerts past and channeling a live-show energy onboard. Forget quibbling about who took up too much of the overhead bin space or who deserved that middle seat armrest—the men and women on Phish Phorce One, as one dude in a ratty concert tee from 1995 dubbed our aircraft, were sweetly propositioning each other, exchanging hotel room information and making promises to meet up in the empty hours not consumed by seeing Phish again and again and again on their three-night run.

As I watched these titillated travelers treat each other to free snacks from the JetBlue pantry, I realized what we all had in common. We were members of the same generation, my generation, Generation X, born anywhere between the mid-1960s to the very early 1980s. There wasn't a millennial or a boomer in sight, and not one Gen Zer to behold. Just men and women in their early-to-mid-40s or early 50s, quickly checking in on teenaged children back home or on elderly parents before turning off the phone and giving their all to the band they love.

When I saw my fellow travelers again later that night, standing in line and waiting to be admitted to the globular musical machine on the Strip, they were transformed. The lady from seat 16C was now in a gown that looked homemade, with red and white waves running all throughout it. On the back, in big blue letters, were the words "I love." We do! A gentleman I'd seen enjoying a Pepsi while waiting in line for the plane's bathroom was now in short-shorts, a vest, and a bucket hat. There was hugging by the merch stand.

I have felt this way before. At *farbrengens*, where Hasidim gather to drink copiously and learn and be together, realizing that the spirit and the spirits strengthened each other. Before I even took my seat, the Sphere was already beginning to feel like a wonderful *shtiebel*, warm and soulful and packed with 20,000 new friends chanting *nigunim* to unlock their souls and free their hearts.

But as I entered, to an enormous image of the band's Vermont farmhouse on the sky-screen, all my fear returned. We've been tricked too often since the days of our youth not to see what was coming. Soon, the AI images will rain down upon us fast and furious, and all this warmth and humanity will melt into air.

The band took the stage, appearing completely unfazed by being in the front of the digital death star. They nodded a quick hello, as if they were not in Vegas but back at Nectar's bar in Vermont, where the band started, just jamming along. Behind them, the old farmhouse was breaking apart, turning into a set of interlocking wooden structures and then into a spiral of musical instruments chasing each other across the sky as the band delivered a relatively tight 8 minutes and 24 seconds of "46 Days."

Maybe it was that third martini at dinner. Maybe it was the cover of Bowie's "Moonage Daydream" that the band offered up, or a 20-minute-long "Dark Puddle," which felt like an exploration of the furthest reaches of existence—it was so intense that the guy next to me, the one in the bucket hat, had to run outside not to smoke weed but, I could clearly smell when he returned, to burn some sage. Sometime after the first two-hour set ended and the second two-hour set began, I relaxed my shoulders, high-fived the two dad-dudes behind me who were dancing up and down the aisle to "Backwards Down the Number Line," and breathed a sigh of relief: Phish is not here to surrender—they're here to save us all.

While the '60s survivors are slouching toward yet another absolutely final farewell tour, and while the younger bucks of rock invest their energy in conformist antisemitism and radical posturing on social media, Phish played music. Gorgeous music. Complicated music. Their music. Not music designed as a collab with some luxury brand. Not music written nearly a century ago and mined mercilessly for small nuggets of nostalgia. Not music surrendering to technology and its dire temptations. Just guitar, bass, drums, and keyboards, and four Gen Xers determined to bite back.

Somewhere at the back of the enormous structure sat Chris Kuroda, fondly known as CK5, the band's unofficial fifth member.

Kevin Blumenthal

Under ordinary circumstances, the legendary lighting designer's job is tough enough: With thousands of permutations at his fingertips, he has to pick up on the subtlest cues, know exactly when the band is about to wrap up, say, or when it is only getting started, and cue lights to match the mood. None of it can be preprogrammed, as it is for virtually every other act these days. The lights are played, like an instrument.

And soon, the video animation, as stunning as it was, gave way to something even more exhilarating: an enormous light rig, unencumbered by gravity, glittering in the sky-screen for Koruda to control. Every riff, every solo, every musical idea and feeling the band was testing out in real time received a luminous affirmation. The band wasn't being dwarfed by the death star tech; they were rebels commanding every inch of it, making technology serve human emotion rather than the other way around.

It was almost midnight by the time this insight sank in, and it was almost time to leave the Sphere and return to an alternate reality in which the machines are winning big time. But Phish didn't want us to go gently into the good night. They had one more song to play, titled "More," and it began with a video of what seemed like a giant synagogue with beautifully painted stained-glass windows. The structure soon collapsed, though, and what replaced it were three lights, in red and green and blue, the basic building blocks of all color. Koruda made them all quiver ecstatically on Trey Anastasio's face as he sang the refrain over and over and over again:

"But I'm vibrating with love and light
I'm pulsating with love and light
In a world gone mad, a world gone mad
There must be somethin' more than this."

I'm here to tell you yes, there was.
—*Liel Leibovitz*

Phish is not here to surrender—they're here to save us all

THE LAST COOL PLACE IN THE MARAIS

PARIS — You wouldn't know it, but situated behind the Place de la Bastille on Rue des Tournelles, a small street that connects Bofinger Brasserie and the Synagogue des Tournelles, two steps away from the Place des Vosges, stands what's quietly the trendiest place in the French capital—L'Area, a small, two-room restaurant of which the bar takes up at least one-third of the interior. I first entered it on a spring afternoon in the early '90s. I was spending a lot of my time, back then, wandering around Le Marais, Paris' historical Jewish neighborhood, where I was then living, and that was still pretty much an interlacing of old bars and stores stifled into thick walls darkened by time, instead of the overpriced and heavily touristed shopping mall it has become. I'm not sure what made me push open the door that day. It was the middle of the afternoon, and except for Edouard and Lydie cleaning glasses behind the bar, the place was empty. There was a certain suspended quality in that emptiness, though. A feeling that things were just waiting to happen.

That day, I just had a coffee, chatted a bit and left. If I remember correctly, I repeated this routine four or five times during the following weeks. By then, I still had no idea who Edouard and Lydie were (Jews from Lebanon and Algeria, who had lived between New York and Rio and spoke five languages), nor that L'Area, the only restaurant in Paris where you could eat Brazilian and Lebanese food while listening to live gigs by Cesáre Évora or Bonga, would become a hub for writers and photographers, movie people, DJs, and fashion people on both sides of the Atlantic—and my favorite hangout for the next 30 years.

Neither did Edouard and Lydie, probably. As it turns out, I discovered the place right after they opened it. "Once we settled in France in the early '90s," Edouard told me recently, "Lydie began to work while I was trying to get papers, which took one year and a half. Meanwhile, we were looking for a place to start a restaurant of our own; we wanted Le Marais, I don't really know why, and finally we found an old Iranian restaurant we could buy." Why the name? Because it means the same thing in so many languages. In Lebanese, Portuguese, English, Italian, Spanish, it is "the place"—it is home.

Edouard Chueke was born in 1964 in Rio to a family from Beirut. His father, Felix, had textile factories in Lebanon—cotton, polyester, linen. "My parents, most of my uncles, and their friends share the same pattern," he explained. "First it's Alep in Syria, then Beirut, then Milan, Italy. Once in Milan you have to decide between Paris and Rio. Why Rio? I think it's because of the similarities with Beirut." Brazil shelters what is perhaps the biggest Lebanese diaspora in the world, many Jews among them.

At 14, Edouard went to the French high school in Rio. He passed his final exams two years later and headed for New York, where he lived for four years in the early 1980s. Mexico, Italy, India: He's traveled the world. "But contrary to most of my family, I'm viscerally attached to France," he said. "My cousins, my parents, their friends like the Safras have been hugely successful in Brazil. And I am successful in my own way, but for me, it had to be in Paris. I always felt moved by the history of France. I defined myself as Franco-Lebanese, my first language was French; Lebanese, English, Italian, and Portuguese came only later and in that order, and I still believe in the values of this country. So all those years I lived everywhere Paris, remained a childhood dream for me. So when Lydie and I decided to settle for good in the late '80s we thought New York, maybe Rio—but ultimately it had to be Paris."

Edouard and Lydie, met first in New York. They met again by chance on Ipanema Beach in Rio before meeting a third time, again by chance, at a Seder to which they were both invited. Three years later, they settled in Paris and opened L' Area as soon as Edouard got his papers in order (an issue Lydie did not have, her parents being from Constantine, Algeria, France's former colony).

The choice to offer both Brazilian and Lebanese cuisine was immediate. "Between 6 and 7 million Lebanese live in

PIN A woman recommending something to her friend group has a higher conversion rate than your entire paid ads budget
@madsf88 on X

Brazil," Edouard told me. "Any Brazilian even in the most remote corner of Amazonia knows what hummus and tabbouleh are." This form of cosmopolitism is one of the defining features of the place—along with its laid-back sophistication and glamour (you may come across artists or models from Paris, the U.S., Israel, Lebanon, or Italy in L'Area, but somehow, you never know it, and when you do, you don't care).

For those like me who discovered L'Area in the '90s, the memory remains a fever dream of freedom that no longer feels possible outside the walls of this specific establishment. Heated discussions, dance, flirting, solitary free spirits gathering together, gifted with the feeling of being at home. Wednesdays, it stayed open until 5 a.m. Live concerts mixing Arab music, Lebanese rock and traditional and Brazilian or African music, spilled into the streets, enlivened by bottles of arak and wine. People danced on the tables and between the cars—and woke up sometimes the next day unsure in whose friendly bed.

This atmosphere lasted up until early 2010, when after a complaint from neighbors the place was closed for a month by police. "It was a Friday," recalled Edouard. "We were expecting 80 people that very evening for Karl Lagerfeld's birthday. The cops called, we came to the precinct, and they just delivered us the paper. No explanation, nothing. I had to call a friend to move the party elsewhere in Paris."

COVID was the second serious ordeal L'Area had to face. The restaurant closed for two years. "Three months more and it would have been over for us," Edouard said. "What kept us going were the messages we received by the hundreds asking us when we would reopen."

Today, Gen Z brings its own code (less dope, less alcohol) but according to Edouard, "it's the same thing. People want to have as much fun as before, they wanna hit on people as much as before and they wanna fuck as much. They're just more careful about the way they handle it." Political discussions, however, are shelved. The cuisine remains the same though, as does Lydie's brunch on Sundays. The pictures of the week posted on Instagram (@lareaparis) are the same, and judging by the comments on Insta, people still feel at home here.

"One day it will stop, I know it," Edouard said. "Not too soon, but not too late either. What I would like for people to say in a few years after it stopped, is, 'there was a place that was absolutely fantastic. A real place.'" *—Marc Weitzmann*

DON'T BE SHLA
L'AREA

MERDE Magazine

COUNTRY MUSIC HALL OF FAME

NASHVILLE — On a visit to a prison outside of Houston, the reform-minded Pat Morris Neff, Texas governor from 1921 to 1925, heard a short performance from Huddie William Ledbetter, a musician in the early years of a three-decade sentence for murder. If anyone still thinks about Neff in our present day, it's because of a song that Ledbetter, the country blues titan better known as Lead Belly, wrote about the governor in a longshot bid to free himself. "Had you got my nephew like you got me / I'd wake up in the morning, I'd set you free" goes the final verse of "Governor Pat Neff," which Lead Belly claimed he performed for Neff and only got around to recording in the late '40s, after serving a multiyear sentence for a different attempted murder in Louisiana. The pardon certificate that Neff issued for Lead Belly in 1925 is now in Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, right next to the legend's hobo knife, a ring of tools that also includes a spoon, a corkscrew, and other implements for survival in what was somehow both a harsher and more forgiving world than this one.

A couple cases down from the Leadbelliana is an object from 1947 that documents the real-time creation of one of the transcendent artistic products of that now-alien America: a record of the exact moment when Hank Williams realized the words "no more sorrow-filled days and nights" were too melodically cumbersome to follow the ecstatic triple proclamation that he had seen the light. Williams, then 24 years old and five years away from finally drinking himself to death, crossed the line out in pencil and wrote below it words more familiar and now immortal: "No more darkness no more night." Williams' script is crowded and curvy, and the punctuation is inconsistent, as if he wrote in a fevered, inspired rush—but then he also had the true artist's awareness to second-guess his initial fit of inspiration and then to improve upon it. The jarring thing about the original lyrics to "I Saw the Light," the great hillbilly prayer to the holy presence that suffuses every barroom and freight train and gas station hot dog roller in this alternatingly lost and found land of ours, is that we weren't all born with these words inside us already.

But country music comes from somewhere. Part of the hall's purpose is to guide its 1.6 million annual visitors through a more or less official explanation of the music's nature and origins. To that end, the final work of the New Deal-era American muralist Thomas Hart Benton, which hangs amid the plaques in the hall's rotunda, is titled "The Sources of Country Music." Painted in Hart's distinctive, high populist style in the long-ago year of 1975, it covers a lot of the big stuff: singing church ladies, pistol-packing cowboy troubadours, the white and Black peasantry with their fiddles and banjos. Lead Belly and Hank Williams were the tribunes and inheritors of these toiling rural masses, whom Benton depicts as the inhabitants of a primordial America, a place half-remembered and half-imagined. What's most striking about the painting is that everyone and everything in it, including a zooming locomotive and a distant steamboat, angles skyward.

"The Sources of Country Music" is a beautiful distraction, like any myth. Country is the most rigidly controlled of America's major music industries, the labels and publishers on Nashville's curiously nondescript Music Row forming an efficient, almost self-contained machine for finding and promoting salable talent. "The almighty dollar and the lust for worldwide fame / Slowly killed tradition, and for that someone should hang," sang the multiplatinum everyman poet Alan Jackson in a 2000 song titled "Murder on Music Row," a rare protest from within the country establishment. The wood-paneled General Electric tabletop radio that inspired Jackson's "Chasin' That Neon Rainbow" is in the Hall of Fame, as is Jackson himself.

The Nashville machine once had warmth and wisdom

There's nothing automatically cynical about the profit-seeking mass simulation of subaltern folkways, American popular culture being the world-changing sum of the commercial upscaling of a million small and local wonders. A mere 37 years after a Georgia cotton factory foreman named Fiddlin' John Carson recorded "The Little Old Log Cabin In the Lane" for New York City's Okeh Records in 1923, producing the first national country hit, Elvis Presley was a big-enough celebrity to own a limousine with a TV, a minifridge, and a record player. The exterior of this regal chariot, which is also in the Hall of Fame, was painted using a blend of diamonds and fish scales that still gives off the subtly lustrous shimmer of polished stone.

The Country Music Hall of Fame is the best of America's pop culture museums because country music remains a coherent and semi-unified concept sustained by an industry that has yet to fully lose contact with its own past. There is little of the tedious apology or self-critique that you'll find at the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures in Los Angeles. The Country Hall is not self-conscious about its own coolness like Cleveland's Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, a much younger institution with far less confidence in itself. The Country Hall was founded in 1961 by the Country Music Association, which itself dates to the late '50s. The idea of a Rock Music Association is self-evidently absurd, which might explain why the Rock Hall, founded in 1994, is so pointless and mockable—rock is a countercultural phenomenon, a rupture with tradition, meaning it gets lamer the more organized and controlled it appears to be. Country music is inevitably bound to tradition even in its most progressive forms, which must acknowledge tradition even in the course of revolting against it. There's no glaring self-contradiction in an attempt to present an official history of

OCAMA
SAMANÁ, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

country and its dominant Nashville-based sales organ. The lyrics to Kris Kristofferson's "Help Me Make It Through the Night," one of the hall's prized possessions, are handwritten on stationery from the Monument Record Corporation.

The hall has its share of nagging omissions. The museum draws a notably hard line between country and the folksier end of rock 'n' roll—fans of Gene Clark will search for their hero's relics in vain, despite the pair of now-classic bluegrass records he made immediately after leaving The Byrds. The hall nods to alt-country by including a beat-up guitar that belonged to Joe Ely of the Flatlanders, though David Berman, the great trailblazing lyrical talent of the past 40 years of country music, isn't mentioned anywhere. Berman came up through indie rock labels; the hall doesn't treat his music as country because his career never involved the Nashville machine. Laney Wilson, 33 years old and a thoroughgoing product of Nashville, got a bizarrely vast exhibition in her honor when I visited this past February.

As we get closer to the present day, the hall has little trouble presenting country music as a living, changing artform, part of the ceaseless churn of American life—but those changes leave us very far from Kristofferson, never mind Hank Williams. One of the last galleries has the black sequined cowboy outfit Lil Nas X wore in the 2019 music video for "Old Town Road," a bedroom-produced country-rap novelty that conquered the Billboard charts for four straight months and that has aged far better than anyone could've guessed back then. Having reached Jackson's neon rainbow, Nas X was arrested this past August after walking down Ventura Boulevard in nothing but underpants and boots. He then drew felony charges for allegedly assaulting a cop while on drugs. Nas X had a longer-than-expected run as a rapper and pop artist, but as the possible casualty of a fame he didn't expect or prepare for he now embodies one of the oldest tropes in country.

The most commercially successful country artist in history is Taylor Swift, and there's a jewel-encrusted guitar and thin silver slip from the Eras Tour on display at the hall's Taylor Swift Education Center, which comes right before the main exhibit begins. Swift hasn't made country music for years, Permanently inscribing her name on the leading public institution of the genre she outgrew is a characteristically canny move.

The hall's current home, built in 2001, is fronted with a 200-foot concrete curtain wall that tells you nothing about the structure's purpose. You could be looking at a community college, or at a minor-league hockey arena named after the leading bank of whatever town you're in. The building dates from about the same time as the rest of downtown Nashville, a generic assemblage of 21st-century glass-and-steel rectangles. Before that, an attractive, now-demolished barn-shaped building on Music Row housed the hall, and before that the plaques commemorating its members were displayed in the Tennessee State Museum near the Capitol. Thus the hall followed the same downward aesthetic trajectory as the Grand Ole Opry, the century-old industry star-maker held in the churchlike Ryman Auditorium until March of 1974, when it moved to a purpose-built brutalist pile a 15-minute drive from downtown, anchoring a new theme park and convention complex.

Courtesy of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum

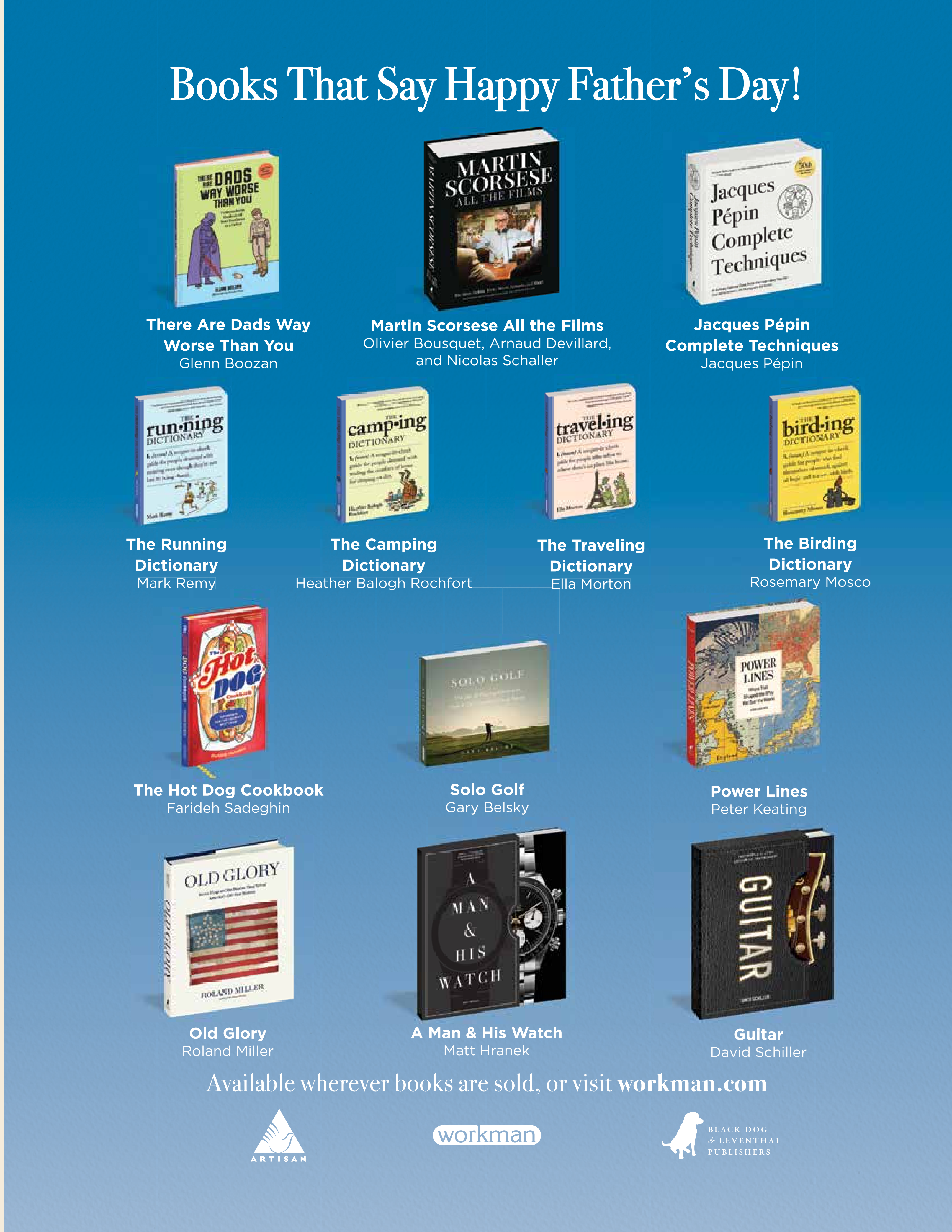
You can go to the Opry's live radio-broadcast showcase on a random Saturday night, and there's a decent chance you'll get to see an actual living, breathing member of the Country Hall. One of the eight performers the February night I went was "Whisperin' Bill" Anderson, born in 1937. Anderson wrote "City Lights," a hit for Ray Price way back in 1956, and "The Lord Knows I'm Drinking," a country chart-topper for Cal Smith in 1971. As a performer Anderson could express the deepest human pains with an understatedness that was suggestive, rather than merely numb. "Five Little Fingers," which he wrote and recorded in 1963, and which is sung from the perspective of a widower finding solace in his young daughter, is among the most heartrending of all country songs in part because of Anderson's controlled lack of vocal embellishment and his denial of the cheap comforts of melodrama. It is in that rarified category of songs that feels like it's actually being sung by the person it's about. Since this was Valentine's Day, Anderson opened instead with the Mike Settle-written Kenny Rogers number "But You Know I Love You," which Anderson recorded a popular version of in 1969.

Country is the most rigidly controlled of America's major music industries

"Now the morning sun streaks across my room," Anderson started in a voice that was distant and slightly lost. The 88-year-old, a vision of some other era's higher standards of seriousness, realized he'd missed a musical cue and stopped singing. With no panic, with patience and professionalism and perhaps with an understanding that there are feelings and realities that a strict devotion to quality can't convey, he let the audience linger over the opening line, waited until the backup singers and musicians of the Grand Ole Opry Band brought the number's uptempo but subtly bothered melody around again, and gave it another shot: "Now the morning sun streaks across my room / And I'm wakened up from another dream of you / Yes, I'm on the road once again it seems / All I've left behind is a chain of broken dreams. / But you know I love you—yes I love you—oh I love you."

Here was something that deserved to be called poetry, proof that the Nashville machine once had real warmth and wisdom. That machine had never discarded Whisperin' Bill, who then silenced a crowd of 4,000 Opry-goers with a sweetly haunting love song he wrote only two years ago, one in which an old man sings about how he's on the downhill side of life's mountain and knows his memory is probably about to go. "The Last One I'll Forget" might not even be a love song—maybe it is Anderson's oblique, not-fully-conscious reckoning with time's merciless erasure of nearly all careers and legacies, with his listeners cast as impending dementia cases and a Hall of Famer accepting that he's nothing more than one of the final artists we'll consign to the void. The institutions of country music have more sense than to hasten that process. Nashville might be jealous of its control over narrowing apertures of production and fame, but it isn't yet in the business of hating or destroying its past.

—Armin Rosen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