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FEATURES

Power of Young Hollywood

23 For our annual celebration of rising stars, we dug deep with Sam Nivola, Finn Wolfhard and the South African singer Tyla. Plus: 41 new leaders under 40 and 10 assistants who could someday take your job.

By Thania Garcia, Ethan Shanfeld and Tatiana Siegel

Cover photograph by Richie Shazam

On the cover: Styling: Alex Badia; Senior Fashion Market editor, Emily Mercer; Senior Market editor, accessories: Thomas Waller; Fashion assistants: Ari Stark and Kimberly Infante. Sam Nivola: Grooming: Kumi Craig/The Wall Group; Full look: Acne Studios. Finn Wolfhard: Grooming: Ruth Fernandez; Full look: Saint Laurent. Tyla: Makeup: Jimmy Stam/OPUS; Hair: Ursula Stephen/A Frame Agency using Ouidad Beauty; Nails: Tiana "Tiny"; Jumpsuit: Dsquared2; Shoes: Christian Louboutin; Earrings: Self-Portrait; Cuff: Saint Laurent; Bracelets: Bvlgari; Rings: Tiffany & Co. Tiffany Titan by Pharrell Williams. This page: Dress and pants: Duran Lantink; Shoes: Christian Louboutin; Earrings: Self-Portrait; Cuffs: Saint Laurent

MARQUEE

11 **The Ellison Era Begins**
The CEO of the newly minted Paramount Skydance has tech-forward plans for turning around the declining studio. Can he pull them off?

EXPOSURE

20 **Death Becomes Her**
Jenna Ortega walks the purple carpet at the “Wednesday” Season 2 premiere in London. Plus: Pamela Anderson and Liam Neeson celebrate “The Naked Gun” in NYC.

FOCUS

59 **The Future of Hollywood**
Meet the New Leaders and Assistants to Watch, ready to take showbiz into new frontiers.

AWARDS CIRCUIT

83 **Be Our Guest**
Actors — and even some directors — make the most of their small-screen time, and Emmy voters notice. Also, all the music nominees in one chart.

REVIEWS

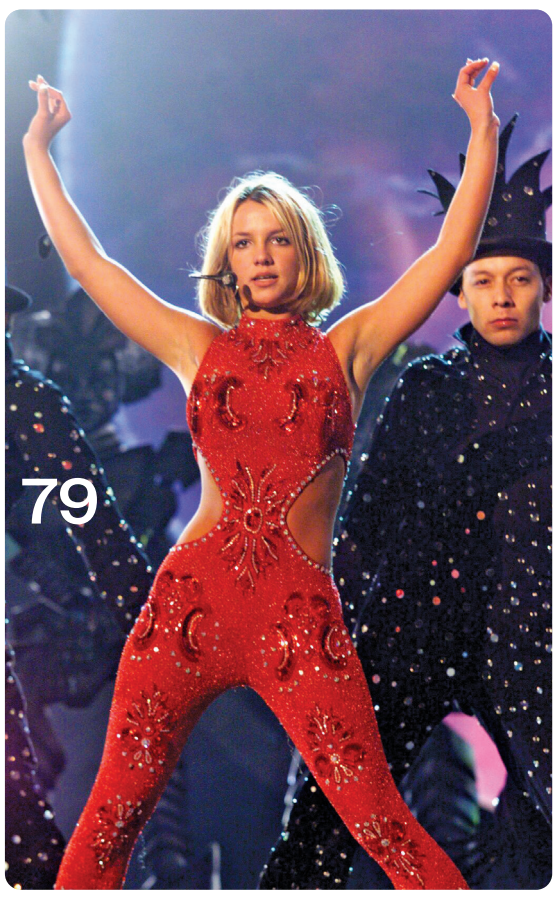
95 **‘Naked’ Fun**
The new iteration of the 1988 classic isn’t as aggressively funny, but it’s an amiable goofball comedy in its own right.

DEPARTMENTS

6 **Editors’ Letter**
Hollywood may feel like it’s in disarray, but we’re betting on a strong future for our standout Young Hollywood talents.

98 **Back Page**
What do Mr. Burns from “The Simpsons” and Seth Milchick from “Severance” have in common?











Clockwise from top: Diego Luna in “Andor”; Elton John in “Elton John: Never Too Late”; Ruth Negga on “Presumed Innocent”; Jamie Lee Curtis in “Freaky Friday”; Britney Spears in 2000

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Clockwise, from top: Lucasfilm Ltd.; Disney+; Apple Tv +; Everett Collection; Dave Hogan/Getty Images

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IN A DRAMA SERIES
SCOTT GLENN

OUTSTANDING DIRECTING
FOR A DRAMA SERIES
"AMOR FATI"
MIKE WHITE

OUTSTANDING WRITING
FOR A DRAMA SERIES
"FULL-MOON PARTY"
MIKE WHITE

OUTSTANDING PRODUCTION DESIGN
FOR A NARRATIVE CONTEMPORARY PROGRAM (ONE HOUR OR MORE)
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OUTSTANDING CASTING
FOR A DRAMA SERIES

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FOR A SERIES (ONE HOUR)
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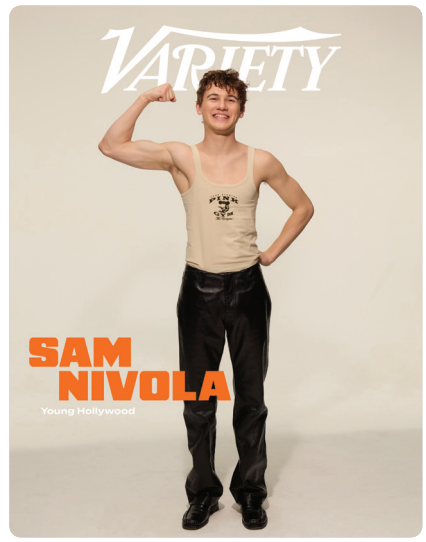



The Future of Hollywood Is Here

→ Like most of *Variety*'s readers, Sam Nivola grew up loving movies. His actor parents, Alessandro Nivola and Emily Mortimer, sensibly discouraged him from following in their footsteps. But like the character who would eventually rocket him to fame, Nivola was determined to go his own way. He dropped out of Columbia University, landing an agent without asking his family for help. After small roles in movies directed by Noah Baumbach and Bradley Cooper, Nivola became an overnight heartthrob as the winning Lochlan Ratliff on the third season of "The White Lotus."

Now, the 21-year-old is focused on producing, writing and starring in more projects through his production company, Cold Worm. "We'd rather make good movies than get filthy rich," he tells our Ethan Shanfeld over lunch in Manhattan's East Village. That's the spirit!

The industry is experiencing a tense moment (what else is new?). But our annual Young Hollywood issue always gives us hope that the future is indeed bright. Nivola is one of three cover stars for this franchise; the other two — Finn Wolfhard, 22, of "Stranger Things," and Tyla, the 23-year-old South African singer — have already attained more star-powered success than many performers dream of in a lifetime.

That this trio has achieved so much while most of their peers are still in the internship phase of their careers is inspiring. But they've accomplished it the old-fashioned way: through hard work. That's a familiar theme, too, among this year's class of Hollywood's New Leaders, our list of executives and industry visionaries under the age of 40. If you have a chance to work with any of these talented people, jump at it now — before they're running their own empires.





CO-EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Cynthia Littleton Ramin Setoodeh

Littleton: Photograph by Dan Doperalski; Setoodeh: Photograph by Alexi Lubomirski

AULI‘I CRAVALHO
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Young Hollywood Impact Report

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From left: Al Seib/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images; Alberto E. Rodriguez/Getty Images for ASCAP

Game Time

David Ellison survived unprecedented M&A chaos to acquire Paramount. Now all he has to do is save the entertainment business

By Matt Donnelly

→ On Thursday morning, David Ellison will clock in for his first day at work as a media mogul.

That's when Ellison's Skydance will officially get the keys to Paramount Global — the Sumner Redstone-created corporate giant whose falling fortunes come as streaming services and YouTube have spun the industry off its axis.

But Ellison has a plan. He wants to shed $2 billion in operating costs, revive the creative engine of the studio by bringing in a new team of executives and make the new firm (to be called Paramount, a Skydance Company) a tech-leaning operation. It's a blueprint that has remained unchanged even in the face of staggering obstacles, including foot-dragging from Shari Redstone, Sumner's

daughter and former Paramount custodian; eleventh-hour rival bids; and an ugly, protracted legal battle between President Trump and CBS.

Now the Ellison era at Paramount truly begins. Here's what he's up against, what he's got going for him and what he has to prove.

The Town

Ellison was once shrugged off as a billionaire's son (his father is Oracle founder Larry Ellison) with an airplane collection, but sources across the media sphere say that he has matured into a worthy leader, with a grasp of both the business and the art of making movies and shows. Rivals and analysts suggest that Ellison has improved at managing profit and loss and appeasing superstar creative talent like Tom Cruise and Charlize Theron (arguably the two most important tasks in running a studio).

Today, other C-suite dwellers admire the tenacity of Ellison, who twisted in the wind so publicly during the Trump fiasco. The president's lawsuit over the editing of a "60 Minutes" segment with his White House rival Kamala Harris dragged the Ellison deal into the muck — especially as Trump's Federal Communications Commission was weighing regulatory approval on it. Ellison suffered in silence, which has earned him respect in power circles. But now, the habitually behind-the-scenes bigwig will be thrust into the international spotlight, thanks to Paramount's sheer size and economic impact. Some in town are quick to note that Ellison has never run something as massive as Paramount, with its more than 18,000 employees.

"I don't think it's an accident that he has gotten to this moment. He doesn't have bravado like a lot of CEOs."
Veteran producer who's worked with David Ellison

"I don't think it's an accident that he's gotten to this moment," says one veteran franchise producer who has worked with Ellison and his team at Skydance. "He doesn't have bravado like a lot of CEOs. He's poised and understated, but very intelligent."

Throughout the tumult, Ellison seemingly stuck by his mantra that superior storytelling is the way to drive long-term value. He flew to the home of one of Paramount's top creators to discuss scripts and spinoff pacing in the spring, mid-Trump meltdown, two sources tell *Variety*.

Some competitors suggest that the optics of Paramount settling with Trump, followed quickly by the network's canning of late-night host Stephen Colbert, who was a critic of the deal with the president, could hurt the incoming Ellison regime's ability to lure A-list talent. Will they want to work for someone seen as kowtowing to Trump?



Incoming president Jeff Shell has been tasked with rebuilding Paramount's most basic services.

Numerous agents that *Variety* spoke to challenge the thinking, with several offering variations on the same response: "A buyer is a buyer." And it could have been worse. If Paramount had sold to another major studio, it likely would have led to even deeper layoffs and a decrease in production. With Ellison's billions behind it, Paramount may actually ramp up production.

The Street

Speaking of long-term value, "good storytelling" isn't exactly Viagra for a company's stock price. Yes, Ellison is well capitalized, but what does he know that leaders at Disney, Comcast or Warner Bros. Discovery don't? Tech is his bet.

Basic technological functions at Paramount — like systems that govern payroll, data and content protection — are so archaic that another source compares it to "a semitruck running on AA batteries." Ellison, according to two sources, also believes that tech will save Paramount+, which has struggled to attract subscribers, from obsolescence.

It was previously reported that he will partner with Oracle to aid in combining Paramount+ with Pluto TV. A hulked-up Paramount streaming service will also benefit from Oracle's expertise in user experience (reminder: Oracle is responsible for TikTok's algorithm).

Two insiders also say Ellison has plans for making Paramount a "studio in the cloud." That means sharing content in all stages of production digitally, in hopes of shortening lead times on work like post-production on movies and shows. And Team Ellison has teased a new artificial intelligence tech, one designed to help content travel to international markets faster. Time, of course, will tell how much these improvements impress Wall Street.

There's only so much tinkering that Ellison can do when it comes to Paramount. The studio faces challenges that even the brightest minds might not be able to overcome. Movies are not nearly as popular as they once were, and audiences are moving away from broadcast and cable, which used to be cash cows, toward subscription streaming services. In that realm, Netflix towers over Paramount+.

"This is a declining studio in a declining segment of the entertainment industry," says Peter Newman, the head of the MBA/MFA program at NYU Tisch School of the Arts. "The odds of turning it around are stacked against them."

The Operation

Earlier this week, Ellison solidified his new leadership bench: former NBCUniversal CEO Jeff Shell as president; Josh Greenstein and Dana Goldberg as co-chairs of the studio group, handling both film and TV; George Cheeks staying in place as head of CBS, linear networks and unscripted; Cindy Holland as head of direct-to-consumer; and Andy Gordon, of Skydance equity partner RedBird Capital, as COO.

Ellison intends to take a close hand in the creative process, multiple insiders familiar with the deal say, and will work in concert with Greenstein and Goldberg to ensure Paramount wins big film packages and splashy overall TV creator deals. Goldberg's top Skydance lieutenants — Matt Thunell from TV and Don Granger of Skydance Sports — will join Paramount in the coming days.

Shell is making his own return of sorts and has been tasked with rebuilding the most basic services of the company. Two people familiar with Shell's day-one plans say he will focus on streamlining the distribution verticals, work to bring down costs in programming for the cable networks (which is certainly happening at all of Paramount's rivals) and play to one of his biggest strengths — squeezing all the juice he can out of the company's sports business. Among CBS' biggest assets is its contract with the NFL to carry AFC games on Sundays, and CBS is in the rotation every few years for Super Bowl rights. Skydance's sports division also has an exclusive adaptive content deal with the NFL.

Shell and Ellison will also contend with the immediate collateral damage from layoffs — the scourge of Hollywood morale across all studios. More than 1,000 jobs will be slashed in service of the pledged $2 billion in cost cutting. A bright new day at Paramount will come with a lot of pink slips.

Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images

Sound Decisions

Amazon restructures Wondery podcasting division to focus on celebrity-led titles

By Cynthia Littleton

In a crowded market, stars shine brightest. This was Amazon's guiding principle in the restructuring of its audio entertainment operations. The company's decision to consolidate aspects of its Wondery podcasting division with its larger Audible audio book division surprised the podcasting sector when the news broke on Aug. 4.

Audible has been part of Amazon since 2008. Wondery, launched in 2016 by entrepreneur Hernan Lopez, was acquired in late 2020. In the five years since, podcasting has exploded as a medium, seeing in particular a big boom in video-enhanced programming. It was that growth spurt that spurred Amazon to make structural shifts at Wondery and Audible.

"This was definitely a strategic decision," Steve Boom, Amazon's VP of audio, Twitch and games, tells *Variety*. "As we've seen how the market has evolved and how we need to best organize to address the market opportunity where we're seeing the most success, it became pretty apparent to us over the last several months. This acceleration of video podcasting is really what prompted this restructuring."

Boom says the moves were spurred by the clear bifurcation that Amazon audio leaders began to see in Wondery's output. Many of the platform's most popular titles fell into one of two broad categories: narrative-driven and personality-centric. Narrative titles tend to be deeply reported productions focused on true crime, history, pop culture, investigative reports and, increasingly, kid-centric shows. Personality-focused shows include such high-profile titles as Dax Shepard's "Armchair Expert," Jason and Travis Kelce's "New Heights" and LeBron James' upcoming "Mind the Game" series.

"This acceleration of video podcasting is really what prompted this restructuring."
Steve Boom, VP of audio, Twitch and games, Amazon



Personality-centric shows like "New Heights" will stay under Wondery's purview.

Courtesy of Wondery

Tom Webster, a partner in the podcast trade organization Sounds Profitable, says Amazon's reorg is right in line with the larger trends in podcasting.

"So much of the current narrative in podcasting is really being driven by video, even though most consumers spent most of their time with audio only," Webster says. "But for the biggest shows, they want to see LeBron. They want to see the Kelce brothers."

Over time, Amazon brass realized that the two kinds of podcast required different approaches to development, marketing and audience retention support. With the restructuring, Wondery's narrative titles will be added to the vast archive of programs available under Audible's subscription platform. Wondery's focus will turn to the care and feeding of its celebrity- and personality-fronted shows.

"On the one hand, the video-creator podcasts are monetizing incredibly well through advertising," Boom says. "In contrast, with the narrative podcasts, those are best monetized through a premium business model. And it turns out that we have in Amazon the leading company in the world in premium spoken word modernization. So we decided that if the best business model [for narrative shows] is premium, then it makes sense to bring these two things into one place where we can actually monetize them appropriately."

Wondery ranks high among the most popular podcast platforms in the country. But as the overall podcast marketplace became increasingly crowded in the post-pandemic years, Wondery looked to differentiate itself with both volume of production and starry names. More recently, ESPN and other networks are turning to video podcasts as low-cost content options that ideally become a daily or weekly habit with viewers.

"Video has grown much more quickly than audio-only over the last two or three years. And within the video segment, you have some that are really premium in terms of production values and the quality of the talent and the guests on the shows," Boom says. "So there's more and more content out there to consume. Even though the overall audience for podcasting is growing, with that much growth in [the volume of] content, you have a very uneven environment where some shows are growing their audiences, others are flat and others are down."

Amazon's audio tune-up will result in about 100 layoffs within Wondery. Many staffers will move to new positions within Amazon. Jen Sargent, who has been CEO of Wondery for the past four years, will exit the company after a transition period.

Boom stresses that Sargent has been "a phenomenal leader," for Wondery. "Sometimes the market changes, and you have to respond to those changes," he added.



Spotify CEO Daniel Ek said that the year-over-year decline in advertising sales was "an execution challenge, not a problem with the strategy."

Why Spotify Stock Has a Catch-22

The audio streaming giant's shares have boomed, but that comes at a 'social cost'

By Todd Spangler

For most media and tech companies, a surging stock is a valuable asset they can use toward compensating and incentivizing highly valued employees.

But for Spotify, the recent run-up in its stock price was a double-edged sword. During the second quarter of 2025, the audio streaming giant's shares climbed 40% on the Nasdaq as optimistic investors rallied on subscriber- and earnings-growth projections.

The problem? The stock's jump also increased Spotify's "social costs" for the period, which include payroll taxes for share-based compensation to which the Sweden-based company is subject in various European countries. In Q2, Spotify's social costs totaled 115 million euros, nearly double the 59 million euros in the year-earlier period.

That was the primary reason Spotify missed expectations on operating income and swung to a surprise net loss of 86 million euros (42 euro cents per share). Wall Street had been betting on another profitable quarter, pegging earnings of 1.90 euros per share. Spotify's top-line revenue also came in light, as advertising sales declined 1% year over year, and the company issued Q3 financial guidance below analyst targets.

On the disappointing Q2 results, Spotify's stock fell 11.6% on July 29, its biggest one-day drop in two years. That wiped out some $16 billion in market value. Ouch.

Here's the deal with the social costs: According to Spotify, when employees in certain countries vest a restricted stock unit it is required to pay a social security contribution in an amount equal to the profit an employee realizes upon vesting multiplied by the applicable tax rate. For example, about 18% of Spotify's employees are in Sweden, which levies a 31.42% tax on the profit an employee realizes on the exercising of stock options or on the value of vested restricted stock units.

"Social costs" were the primary reason Spotify missed expectations and swung to a surprise net loss.

It's a situation that can cause unpredictable fluctuations in Spotify's costs from quarter to quarter. Nevertheless, execs are committed to the approach, seeing the pros of lucrative stock grants to staffers outweighing the cons. "We think it's a good model to have a share-based program with our employees, and it's been successful over the years," Spotify chief financial officer Christian Luiga told Axios after the earnings announcement.

Overall, Spotify continues to show enviable growth in users and engagement. The company highlighted the positives: In the first half of 2025, subscriber net additions grew more than 30% compared with the first half of 2024, according to the company. The quarter also marked its second-highest Q2 for monthly active user net additions, which climbed 11% to 696 million. Spotify Premium subscribers rose 12% year over year to 276 million, a net gain of 8 million in the quarter.

One weak spot was Spotify's advertising-supported business. CEO Daniel Ek told investors on the earnings call that "it's really an execution challenge, not a problem with the strategy." He added, "While I'm unhappy with where we are today, I remain confident in the ambitions we laid out for this business, and we're working quickly to ensure we're on the right path."

Meanwhile, the company signaled a willingness to boost its stock price through buybacks. Spotify said its board had approved a $1 billion increase to the existing $1 billion share-repurchase program (announced in 2021), of which $104 million has been exercised. That, along with a "robust balance sheet" that includes 8.4 billion euros in cash and 1.9 billion euros in debt, "supports continued investment in growth initiatives and shareholder returns," says CFRA Research analyst Kenneth Leon.

Other Wall Street analysts taking the long view affirmed their confidence in Spotify. Indeed, the company's Q2 ad sales underperformance represents an opportunity because "clearly Spotify advertising remains seriously under-monetized," Pivotal Research Group analyst Jeffrey Wlodarczak wrote in a note.

"Our view is that Spotify has already won the global audio streaming wars ... allowing them to [increase subscription] price and still generate solid subscriber growth, a powerful combination," according to Wlodarczak, who reiterated a "buy" rating on the stock.

Noam Galai/Getty Images for Spotify

Column

By Owen Gleiberman



Can DC and Marvel Kick the Habit?

Now that they've relaunched, their challenge is to avoid the same old, same old downward spiral



"The Fantastic Four: First Steps" infuses its iconic characters with a human relatability.

Everett Collection

If superhero fatigue is a trend that became all too real, the movies that brought it on might be likened to an addiction. The studios that produced them got hooked on the idea that comic-book films would be a limitless cash cow. And so they started to make those movies without limits, jacking up the budgets, the thorny interconnectedness of the characters and the sheer volume of films they greenlit, each one promising — in theory — to be the box office equivalent of Christmas Day. But it didn't work out that way. For audiences, more turned out to be less. After a while, the sheer overkill of comic-book cinema began to look like it might kill off the golden goose.

This summer, though, the release of two cool, vital, game-changing superhero movies has created a kind of Christmas in July. With "Superman" and "The Fantastic Four: First Steps," DC and Marvel, the reigning studio factories of superhero movies, have brought off more than just a course correction. They have, in effect, started over, relaunching expectations for a bold new era in which comic-book movies become successful again — and, more important, *stay* successful — by avoiding the addictive missteps of the past. Both films have connected with audiences the old-fashioned way: by merging spectacle and emotion, infusing their iconic characters with the kind of human relatability that got squashed in the superhero-overkill era.

That said, even two terrific flagship movies do not a revolution make. James Gunn, the co-chairman of DC Studios (and the writer-director of "Superman"), and Kevin Feige, the president of Marvel Studios, have both spoken of the new era they're embarking upon in the abashed, let's-own-our-failures language of recovering addicts. Gunn has vowed that he won't put a superhero movie into production until it has a fully realized, well-carpentered script — the absence of good scripts, in the face of ever-more-bombastic onslaughts of CGI, being the most notorious feature of bad comic-book movies. And Feige has vowed that he'll produce fewer films and TV spinoffs, and exert the kind of quality control that went out the window at Marvel as the studio went on its bender of more, and lesser, comic-book product. You deeply want to believe these two, because they sound like they mean it, and because anyone who cares about the future of movies has a vested interest in seeing Hollywood maintain a thriving and creatively disciplined blockbuster culture.

In both "Superman" and "The Fantastic Four," the filmmakers (Gunn and Matt Shakman, respectively) made the very canny decision to spin right past the usual origin-story narratives. Both films are, in effect, second chapters. And there's a tradition in comic-book cinema of second chapters being the charm. "The Dark Knight" is the crowning masterpiece of the whole genre, "Superman II" is, for many of us, deeper and richer than "Superman: The Movie," and "Spider-Man 2" is universally cherished.

But if second chapters are the sweet spot, they're also the easy part. "The Fantastic Four," especially, benefits from the fantastic *simplicity* of its storytelling design. But the film concludes with a teaser of an end title that I, for one, found worrisome: "The Fantastic Four will return in 'Avengers: Doomsday.'" In other words: The next time you see these characters, they'll be in a movie that features 14 superheroes. And just like that, we could once again be in the land of overkill.

I believe Gunn and Feige when they say they're newly committed to quality control. The challenge they're facing is this: As their shiny new universes grow ever more complicated and multi, which is going to start happening in about five minutes, the new DC and Marvel are going to lose, almost by definition, the elemental, no-strings-attached quality that "Superman" and "The Fantastic Four" have. They're going to become glorified puzzle pieces again, fitting into a larger and more elaborate whole that ... we once again stop giving a damn about? I'd be a cynic if I said that was destined to be true. I'd be a realist if I said there's a very good chance it could be.

Even two terrific flagship movies do not a revolution make.



Revival of the Fittest

Sequels never get old, even if the originals opened decades ago

By Brent Lang

It's never too late to get the band back together. Decades have passed since "Freaky Friday," "Practical Magic," "The Devil Wears Prada" and other classics hit multiplexes, but Hollywood thinks it's time to remind audiences of what they've been missing. It's part of a wave of sequels that are scheduled to hit theaters in the coming years, joining a slew of long-gestating, recently released sequels like "Happy Gilmore 2" and "Karate Kid: Legends." So does anticipation grow with age, or have audiences moved on?

Here are six films that are about to find out how nostalgic moviegoers feel.



Freakier Friday

YEARS BETWEEN ENTRIES 22
WHO'S RETURNING It's a full family reunion, with Jamie Lee Curtis, Lindsay Lohan and Mark Harmon signing up for another round — even former teen heartthrob Chad Michael Murray is back and ready to be ogled.
RESERVE YOUR TICKET? Better hurry. It opens on Friday, and early word is it recaptures the body-swapping fun of the OG.



Practical Magic 2

YEARS BETWEEN ENTRIES 28
WHO'S RETURNING The coven's all here: Not only are Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman set to star, but Dianne Wiest and Stockard Channing are resuming their witchy ways.
RESERVE YOUR TICKET? The sequel opens Sept. 18, 2026. But will it cast a spell? The first film was a financial failure that got rediscovered on cable. And for younger viewers, cable is kind of like Netflix.



The Devil Wears Prada 2

YEARS BETWEEN ENTRIES 20
WHO'S RETURNING Runway's masthead still boasts Anne Hathaway, Stanley Tucci, Emily Blunt and, of course, Meryl Streep as Miranda Priestly. That's all.
RESERVE YOUR TICKET? No one wants to miss out on Streep's withering side eye, but print journalism is a lot less glamorous than it was two decades ago. Where's our expense account and black car?



Focker-in-Law

YEARS BETWEEN ENTRIES 16
WHO'S RETURNING Robert De Niro and Ben Stiller are reviving their cringe comedy act, and reenlisting Owen Wilson, Teri Polo and Blythe Danner. Barbra Streisand and Dustin Hoffman are sitting this one out.
RESERVE YOUR TICKET? Since the last "Meet the Parents" film, Stiller's on-screen kids have reached adulthood, and theatrical comedies have been shunted off to the retirement home. Still, awkward encounters with in-laws never get old.



The Social Network Part II

YEARS BETWEEN ENTRIES TBD; "The Social Network" came out in 2010
WHO'S RETURNING Aaron Sorkin, who wrote the first film's screenplay, will pen the script and direct. Otherwise, it's a whole new Silicon Valley crew.
RESERVE YOUR TICKET? It's not even in beta mode. Jeremy Strong may play Mark Zuckerberg, and Jeremy Allen White and Mikey Madison are being eyed. The story of social media keeps getting darker, so don't expect anything feel-good.



My Best Friend's Wedding 2

YEARS BETWEEN ENTRIES TBD; "My Best Friend's Wedding" opened in 1997
WHO'S RETURNING So far, no one. But if Julia Roberts doesn't sign up to foil another ceremony, we'll be heartbroken. And while we're at it, it won't be a party without Rupert Everett.
RESERVE YOUR TICKET? Wedding bells aren't ringing yet. But it's a good sign that Celine Song, the Oscar-nominated filmmaker behind "Past Lives" and "Materialists," has been tapped to write the script.

Clockwise, from top: Netflix; Everett Collection (6)

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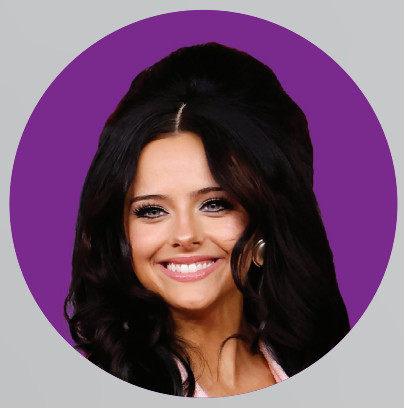

JESSIE MURPH



LOLA YOUNG



OWEN THIELE



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The "South Park" season premiere gleefully bulldozes President Trump in terms he might appreciate.

Column

By Daniel D'Addario

Crude Awakening

The rebellious lewdness of 'South Park' makes it surprisingly effective resistance TV

→ Perhaps the comedians best suited to fight President Donald Trump are the ones who speak his language of crass insult most fluently.

The season premiere of "South Park," which aired July 23, depicted Trump in crude caricature — involved in a gay sexual affair with Satan and embarrassed over his minuscule genitalia. The townspeople of South Park are subject to Trump's frivolous lawsuits, which eventually settle out of court; they then are forced to produce an advertisement for the president, which, once again, paints one particular part of his anatomy as microscopic.

(In response, Trump's White House issued a statement: "This show hasn't been relevant for over 20 years and is hanging on by a thread with uninspired ideas in a desperate attempt for attention. President Trump has delivered on more promises in just six months than any other president in our country's history – and no fourth-rate show can derail President Trump's hot streak.")

Is the episode especially groundbreaking? Well, no, neither for "South Park" — which, since its launch on Comedy Central in the Springer-ized cultural moment of 1997, has been gleefully gross — nor for our country. (It was, after all, the current president who made a certain kind of history by declaring on a debate stage that he had "no problem" with regard to his manhood.) But it's striking all the same for its willingness to challenge Trump, and "South Park"'s corporate owners at Paramount too. In daring to venture into the breach with the nastiness this era merits, "South Park" may not be the best show right now, but it's perhaps the best show *for* right now.

Consider that it had perhaps the most startlingly timed response to Stephen Colbert's departure from CBS. As Paramount (which owns both CBS and Comedy Central) sought federal approval for its planned merger with Skydance, it announced Colbert was to be cut loose, a supposed coincidence that struck many as fishy. "South Park" creators Trey Parker (the episode's credited director and writer) and Matt Stone make their contempt for their corporate siblings clear, in a feat of timing that's due both to their finishing the episode very close to air and to their having just reached a streaming deal to place "South Park" on Paramount+, which will bring the duo some $1.5 billion over the next five years. (Unlike "The Late Show," which no one contests was financially challenging for Paramount, "South Park" is hugely lucrative — too big, perhaps, to silence.)

The creators' recent deal, though, hardly means that Paramount is immune from critique — quite the opposite. "60 Minutes" journalists covering the story of South Park's persecution by the president are depicted as terrified to say anything but positive things about Trump, a nod to CBS News' capitulation in settling his lawsuit against it; Jesus Christ himself appears to the community to urge them to settle, citing Colbert's fate and telling them that even He, the Son of God, has been subject to Trump's lawfare.

The episode, intriguingly, wriggles away from easy classification as partisan art: In this, Stone and Parker differ from Colbert, whose monologues and frequent booking of Democratic Party officials positioned "The Late Show" as the voice of the institutional center-left. Indeed, the most coherent political philosophy of the episode is expressed by Cartman, the show's fourth-grade id, who is furious that NPR has been defunded ... because now he can't laugh at how inane he finds it. With Trump's election having shifted the culture away from "woke," he proclaims, there are no jokes that one can't tell.

Well ... except for one type of joke. The episode makes the case that the only taboo in contemporary society is criticism of our president — and then giddily bulldozes him in terms that he might appreciate, if applied to anyone else. As for the rest of the season to come? Say this much for Parker and Stone: Once they alight on an angle of approach, they're loath to let it go. A trailer for the next episode features Trump, once again in bed with Satan, as well as footage of the characters on an ICE raid. One imagines at least one viewer, on Pennsylvania Avenue, furious that he can't shut this show up.

The episode, intriguingly, wriggles away from easy classification as partisan art: In this, Trey Parker and Matt Stone differ from Stephen Colbert.

Comedy Central

Case in Point

‘Justice on Trial’ finds Judy Sheindlin revisiting some of America’s most foundational legal disputes

By Cynthia Littleton

More than 10 years ago, Judy Sheindlin found herself “enraged” over the outcome of a high-profile legal case in New York City.

The celebrated TV jurist — better known as Judge Judy — channeled her surplus energy into developing an unscripted series for CBS that would examine hugely significant legal cases. The idea was to re-create the original arguments to study the legal theories and courtroom jousts that shaped landmark decisions.

The project never got off the ground at CBS. But last month, Sheindlin’s vision took shape with the debut of “Justice on Trial” on Amazon Prime Video. The series’ initial eight episodes launched on July 21, which marked the 100th anniversary of the famous Scopes trial over a Tennessee science teacher’s effort to instruct his students on Darwin’s theory of evolution. Yes, the Scopes trial is one of the eight cases tackled.

“A hundred years ago, people were fighting over what you should be teaching children in school,” Sheindlin tells *Variety*. “That’s what it was about. And we’re totally still fighting over it today.”

America is accustomed to seeing Sheindlin behind the bench for small-claims and other less consequential disputes. But on “Justice on Trial,” the famed legal eagle presides over episodes that take a hard look at the foundational cases for legal pillars that Americans hold dear — such as the right to due process and the protection from self-incrimination.

Given the nation’s political climate, the scrutiny of law enforcement actions and the conduct of prosecutors and judges could be seen as an incendiary move. Sheindlin isn’t worried. She believes that picking apart foundational decisions will only help viewers who don’t have law degrees understand how the system is designed to function.

“Justice on Trial” marks the third Sheindlin production for Prime Video since she relocated to the streamer in 2021 after 25 years with CBS and the syndicated hits “Judge Judy” and “Hot Bench.” She launched on Amazon platforms with “Judy Justice” in late 2021. “Tribunal Justice” arrived in 2023.

Many of the cases hinge on themes and controversies that resonate today, which only reinforces Sheindlin’s faith in the show’s concept. “Justice on Trial” weaves in reenactments of the crimes featuring actors who then play the same roles in the legal proceedings. TV judges Dan Mentzer and Larry Bakman assume the roles of lead attorney for the prosecution and the defense, respectively. Those two square off using the basic arguments from the original cases, while Sheindlin presides over the proceedings. In the cases involving appellate court hearings and rulings, the three-judge panel comprises the trio that preside over “Tribunal Justice”: Adam Levy, Tanya Acker and Patricia DiMango.

“The thread that runs through it is, the more things change, the more they stay the same,” Sheindlin says. “The world’s problems are very rarely solved. They just put on a different outfit.”

She adds that she leaves it up to viewers to draw their own conclusions: “What I say is ‘What do you think?’ I’m making you think. I’m not giving you an answer.”



On “Justice on Trial,” Judy Sheindlin presides over reenactments of landmark cases like the Scopes trial.

Clockwise, from left: Michael Becker/Amazon Prime; CAA; Gregg Roth; Courtesy of APEX; ESPN

Executive Shuffle



Benjamin Kramer has been named president of U.S. distribution for Black Bear, the independent studio backed by investor Teddy Schwarzman. Kramer had been co-head of media finance at CAA.



Jennifer Way has joined music label and publishing fim Empire as executive VP of Nashville. She spent the past nine years with Sony Music Nashville, most recently as senior VP of marketing.



Justin Alvarado Brown has been elevated to co-CEO at Ridley Scott’s Scott Free Productions. Previously president and chief operating officer, Brown joins CEO Luke Scott in managing the company’s global businesses.



Flora Kelly has been promoted to senior VP of ESPN Research. Kelly joined the sports powerhouse in 2006 and was upped to VP in 2023.

exposure

Edited by Marc Malkin

‘The Naked Gun’ Premiere

SVA Theatre, New York JULY 28

Liam Neeson, who stars in the reboot with **Pamela Anderson**, has a very simple reason why he thinks audiences need absurdist comedy. “Because we’re all fucked, and we need a few giggles,” he told *Variety*. YouTuber-turned-actor **Liza Koshy** believes the rapid-fire pace of jokes will help hook the social media generation. “It’s back to back to back,” she said. “It engages your attention span just like scrolling on TikTok would. So it’s going to be a dopamine rush.”


Questlove


Pamela Anderson and Liam Neeson


Busta Rhymes and Liza Koshy


Paul Walter Hauser


Seth MacFarlane flanked by Paramount Pictures’ Michael Ireland, Jon Gonda and Brian Robbins


Elsie Hewitt and Pete Davidson


Keke Palmer and Eddie Murphy

‘The Pickup’ Premiere

Regal LA Live, Los Angeles JULY 27

The premiere marked **Pete Davidson** and girlfriend **Elsie Hewitt**’s first public appearance since announcing they were expecting. “This is the baby’s first red carpet,” Davidson told *Variety*, adding, “It’s kinda crazy. We were talking about that in the car. Like one day that baby will see that and be like, ‘I’m in there!’” Davidson and **Eddie Murphy** co-star in the movie as armored vehicle drivers who get enmeshed in a $60 million Atlantic City casino heist. Murphy joked about being in an action comedy at age 64. During one scene, two young actors “were improvising, and they said, ‘Come on, old man!’” he recalled. “I almost said cut. I was like, ‘Who are they talking to?’” Even so, Murphy said, smiling, “I feel like me still — just a little stiffer.”

‘Outlander: Blood of My Blood’ Premiere

DGA Theater, West Hollywood JULY 28

Eleven years ago, **Sam Heughan** walked the red carpet at the premiere of “Outlander,” in which he stars as a Highland warrior who falls for a time-traveling nurse (**Caitríona Balfe**). Now, the Starz prequel series centers on their respective parents’ love stories. “It’s a full-circle moment to be — I guess I’m the grandfather of it,” Heughan told *Variety*, joking about the complicated timeline of the expanding universe. **Jamie Roy** and **Harriet Slater**, who play his character’s father and mother, promise the new show has plenty of the original’s DNA. “Whether you’re an OG fan of ‘Outlander’ or if you’re brand-new and curious, you’re going to get something that you’ll really enjoy — whether that’s the love, war [or] politics,” Roy said.


Sam Retford, Graham McTavish and Sam Heughan


Jamie Roy and Harriet Slater

Clockwise, from top left: Dia Dipasupil/Getty Images; ristina Bumphrey/Variety (4); Gilbert Flores/Variety (2); Christopher Polk/Variety (2)


Nicholas Stoller and Francesca Delbanco

'Platonic' Season 2 Premiere

Hammer Museum, Westwood JULY 30

With a seemingly endless list of projects he's appearing in or involved with, **Seth Rogen** jokes he could be the new **Nicole Kidman**. "Put me on 'Lioness' now!" he said, laughing. But don't assume he's feeling overworked. "I slept eight hours last night," Rogen boasted. "I do like to work, and I like to shoot. I especially love being on set. I do tend to make a lot of things and always have." **Rose Byrne** talked about reuniting with Rogen for the second season of the Apple TV+ show as best friends Sylvia and Will, saying they're like family now. Just ask Byrne's husband, **Bobby Cannavale**. "He's like, 'Get me the weed,'" Byrne said, referring to Rogen's cannabis company Houseplant. "[Seth] is a man of many traits. He's a Renaissance man."

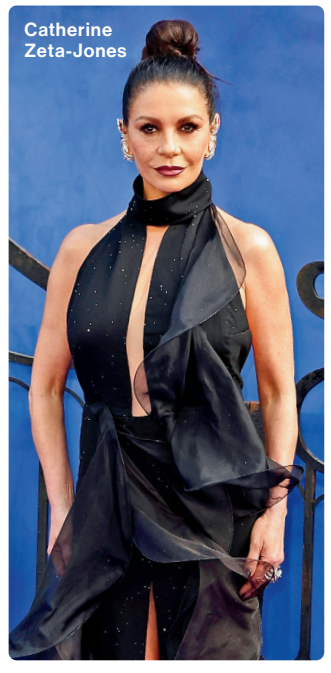

Luke Macfarlane


Seth Rogen and Rose Byrne



Joy Sunday, Jenna Ortega and Emma Myers


Isaac Ordonez


Catherine Zeta-Jones


Tim Burton

'Wednesday' Season 2 Premiere

Central Hall Westminster, London JULY 30

Gargoyles and fake crows dotted the purple carpet, and there was even a photo op with a "Wednesday"-branded hearse. Though guest star **Lady Gaga** didn't appear due to her ongoing "Mayhem Ball" tour, **Tim Burton** told *Variety* that he found working with the pop star "inspirational." "She's such an artist," said Burton, who executive produces and directs the series. "You see the whole crew kind of light up — it's a beautiful thing to witness." He added that work has already begun on the next chapter of the show, which scored an early Season 3 renewal — but revealed that he's "still finishing one episode [of Season 2]. Shhh."

Clockwise, from top right: John Phillips/Getty Images; Tristan Fewings/Getty Images; John Phillips/Getty Images; Michael Buckner/Variety (3); John Phillips/Getty Images

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YOUNG HOLLYWOOD IMPACT REPORT

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THE PENGUIN

Tom Francis
YOU

Keyla Monterroso Mejia
RUNNING POINT

UP NEXT

Fabrizio Guido
RUNNING POINT

Chase Infiniti
PRESUMED INNOCENT

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POWER OF YOUNG HOLLYWOOD

FEATURING

FINN
TYLA
SAM

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHIE SHAZAM • STYLING BY ALEX BADIA

Every August, we devote the pages of our magazine to those who are just starting to come into their power. It's one of our favorite summer traditions — our Young Hollywood issue, now in its ninth year, honors actors and musicians whose careers are creating heat. And this year's trio of cover stars have plenty to celebrate. ● After rocketing to fame with "Water" and releasing her first album last spring, 23-year-old Tyla delivered a tour-de-force performance at Coachella and was one of Paris Fashion Week's defining "it" girls. Finn Wolfhard, 22, has a full dance card after "Stranger Things" ends later this year — he's already directed his first film and toured the world with his band, the Aubreys. And even among a cast of acting heavyweights (including those playing his family), Sam Nivola, 21, held his own in the latest season of "The White Lotus" as a lost boy with a heart of gold. ● Read on for our list of 41 New Leaders under the age of 40, and our selections for this year's class of 10 Assistants to Watch. One thing is certain: Even if this is the first time you're reading some of these names, it definitely won't be the last.

ACTOR AND MUSICIAN FINN WOLFHARD ON SHOOTING THE FINAL SCENE OF 'STRANGER THINGS' AND PURSUING BIG-SCREEN STARDOM

BY
TATIANA
SIEGEL

VARIETY
08.06.2025

P.24



POWER
OF YOUNG
HOLLYWOOD


FINN

AS THE LAST DAY OF SHOOTING THE FIFTH AND FINAL SEASON OF 'STRANGER THINGS' APPROACHED,

Finn Wolfhard was determined to stay in the moment. • "Everyone was thinking about the end and was down, and I would just be like, 'Yeah, but we're all here hanging out. It's fine,'" he recalls. "And I would push it away." • On Dec. 20, there was no more denial. He was filming the grand finale on a stage in the show's Atlanta studio and noticed a massive crowd, including no less than Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos, gathering. Among the throng, Wolfhard spotted cast members Natalia Dyer, Charlie Heaton, Joe Keery and Maya Hawke, who all remained in Atlanta even though they wrapped production days earlier. "I turned around from the monitors, and it was hundreds of people just hanging out for the first time in the same room after 10 years of working. And they were just watching," he remembers. "So if that wasn't enough of a mindfuck there, it was also like, 'Wait, that means it's *ending*.'"

Then Matt and Ross Duffer — the brothers who created the '80s-set coming-of-age paranormal drama — called "action" for the very last time. Wolfhard can't say much considering that the series, a global phenomenon that peaked at No. 1 in 88 countries, is guarded more closely than a Demodog den in an underground labyrinth. All I can glean is that Wolfhard appears in the denouement alongside "some" of the "kids," as he refers to castmates Millie Bobby Brown, Gaten Matarazzo, Caleb McLaughlin, Noah Schnapp and Sadie Sink. "There was a moment where there was true joy from *everyone* because of a moment that happened," he lets slip before stopping himself from spilling further. "When I walked out from doing the scene, it was just one of the greatest moments in my entire life. I didn't process at the time because it was just so emotional. There was a lot of Champagne.'"

Wolfhard is sitting cross-legged in a hipster-adjacent café in his native Vancouver. The 22-year-old star is, for the first time since childhood, free from playing Mike Wheeler, who began his arc as the valiant but often obstinate tween avenger who wrangles a group of kids to battle the dark forces that reign just beneath the surface of Hawkins, Indiana. Unlike Eleven (Brown), Mike has no special powers. He relies on board game-honed wits and a fierce sense of justice that take him through his freshman year in high school (even if Wolfhard was 21 while still playing a high schooler in Season 5). And as he looks back, he's endlessly twitchy, plugging his nose repeatedly like a swimmer about to take a plunge before gulping down some white coffee.

For Matt Duffer, Finn and the headstrong Mike have always been entwined — but never so much as in those waning hours, which he calls "an emotional sledgehammer." "The way we write these characters is based in small part on the actors themselves," he says. "The way Finn has matured into this very confident young man is mirrored in the show and in Season 5 in particular. You see Mike become that leader again that he was in Season 1, but a more mature, confident version." Back in the first season, Mike eludes evil government agents and a bloodthirsty Demogorgon to help reestablish order in this Anytown, USA; now, he's back at the head of the Hawkins crew.

"And it's just been so fun," Matt Duffer says, "to see Finn sort of tap back into that fearless-leader mode but bringing that more adult maturity to it."

With Season 5 rolling out in three waves, beginning with Volume 1 (Episodes 1-4) on Nov. 26, followed by Volume 2 (Episodes 5-7) on Christmas and the Finale (Episode 8) on New Year's Eve, the actor is savoring the twilight of a show that defined him. The nearly decade-long "Stranger Things" run might be ending, but Wolfhard has already laid the groundwork for a giant career.

In between five protracted seasons, he managed to star in 17 movies that earned more than $1.8 billion — including two "It" films and a pair of "Ghostbusters." Of his "Stranger Things" co-stars, no one comes close to boasting that box office cred. (Brown is next in line with two "Godzilla" movies, which pulled down a combined $857 million.) At the age of 19, Wolfhard

Styling: Senior Fashion Market editor: Emily Mercer; Senior Market editor, accessories: Thomas Waller; Fashion assistants: Ari Stark and Kimberly Infante. Grooming: Ruth Fernandez. Clothing on previous page: Full look: Saint Laurent. This page: Shirt: Wooyoungmi; Pants: Denzil Patrick; Tie: Brooks Brothers; Rings: David Yurman and Lagos



moved into the director's chair with the camp-set horror send-up "Hell of a Summer." (In addition to co-helming with friend Billy Bryk, he wrote, produced and starred in the film, which was released by Neon.) And in June, he released his debut album, "Happy Birthday," an ode to the British invasion and power pop bands like the Cars. He's got more Instagram followers than Timothée Chalamet.

Jason Reitman, who directed Wolfhard in "Ghostbusters: Afterlife" and "Saturday Night," says the key to the young star's success is an ability to harness his own constant state of change. On "Ghostbusters," Wolfhard's post-puberty limbs were becoming a tangled mess. So the actor introduced some physical comedy into his performance, purposely bumping into objects.

"No normal 16-year-old is looking for ways to make themselves look like a buffoon. They want to look attractive. They want to look cool. They want to look charismatic," Reitman explains. "And here he had the wherewithal to understand that his body was going through a growth spurt. He was lanky and gangly at the time, and he saw the humorous opportunity."

In another feat of intuitiveness, Wolfhard is the only one who correctly guessed what the "Stranger Things" spinoff might be.

"Nobody — not Netflix, not any of the producers, not any of the directors, not any of the actors — nobody else has figured out what the spinoff is. Finn figured it out, which is remarkable," Ross Duffer says. "We've mind-melded with this kid a bit."

As for what Wolfhard speculated, he tells me: "Like David Lynch's 'Twin Peaks.' Sort of an anthology and different tones but similar universe or same universe. I think set in different places and all tied together through this mythology of the Upside Down. Don't even talk about Hawkins. Don't have any mention of our characters. They were toying around with ideas in case Netflix wanted them. I'm sure they do, and I'm sure it will happen, but there's nothing official. I think the coolest way, the way that I would do it, there has to be labs everywhere. If there was one in Hawkins, there's one in Russia. Where else could they be?"



Back in 2015, when the Duffers and casting director Carmen Cuba were looking for their series protagonist, they viewed hundreds of tapes. Wolfhard's, a video recorded by his father of his son sick in bed, stood out.

"He just had this precociousness but also energy, and he felt like a real kid," says Ross Duffer. "There was none of those sort of play-acting tendencies that you see from so many kids. Finn fidgets and he talked really fast, which wasn't how Mike was written. But honestly, once we saw him, we knew it was so much more interesting than what we had written on the page."

Only two actors were called in, but the second was more of a perfunctory meet. There was no doubt in the Duffers' mind that Wolfhard was the one.

Hollywood is littered with cautionary tales of child actors whose natural development is stunted, leaving them unable to ride the physical and emotional chaos that follows. "At that time, my focus was on staying sort of as quote-unquote normal as I could be," he says of his two worlds: rising Hollywood star and youngest of two boys in a traditional family. "I was never really a normal person — whatever normal is, whatever I thought that normal was. But I definitely was aware of how many child actors had it bad, how it ended up so bad."

Religion was a big part of his childhood; he continued to attend a nearby Catholic school throughout the early seasons rather than go the homeschool route. Today, he describes himself as "pretty agnostic" but a fan of Pope Leo XIV, whom he dubs "a cool liberal-looking guy who actually cares about people."

Like much of Gen Z, Wolfhard is political. But unlike peers such as Schnapp, who faced backlash over pro-Israel comments, he prefers to keep mostly low-key. "I am active in my personal life and try not to be in public, but I also know how that sounds in the sense of 'Everyone has a platform' and 'I should be more …'" He strug-

Trench: Lanvin; Sweater: Dolce & Gabbana;; Pants: Willy Chavarria; Gloves: 032c; Boots: Bally

gles for the next word before trailing off.

He identifies two issues of particular importance: Ukraine and Indigenous land rights. (His attorney father advocates on behalf of the latter.) "I think the amount that the government gets away with, by just fucking over so many Indigenous groups ..." he says, trailing off in his worked-up state. The fact that "they have to fight the government to try to get money from them for stolen land is just insane."

As for the Ukraine-Russia conflict, he donates monthly to United24.

His quiet activism — like his 17 movies — might be a tactic for avoiding his inner Demogorgon. Wolfhard's anxiety came acutely — and early. "Diagnosed, yeah," he says. "Then I started seeing a therapist. It's something that's worked for me. I can either try to bury that stuff and just do project after project, not think about it, or be able to ask myself these questions."

Said questions are not existential in nature: Why are we here? Why do we die? Instead, they involve how he is perceived, either in an intimate setting or on the global stage. "Death is so abstract to me, I just don't even know how to start with that," he says, pulling his baseball hat on and off repeatedly, as though that will make it fit properly over his nearly bald head, shaved recently while in character on a small indie film, "I think about saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing in social situations, doing the wrong thing in my career, disappointing people. "

Fortunately for Wolfhard, the decision-makers were almost always pleased. One of his few career disappointments was losing out to Asher Angel for the role of the teen version of the titular superhero in DC's "Shazam!" "I was disappointed, but I was never really bummed," he says. "I don't think I'm a very competitive person. Part of the reason why I started acting was because maybe it felt less competitive."

After all, his peers weren't the problem. It was the prospect of rejection. "It's really hard not to take it personally because they're literally not casting you because of you. The way to do it is to separate and compartmentalize. In the last few years, I've auditioned for stuff. I definitely don't enjoy that part. I like proving myself, but it's never fun to go through the process of 'You're too short' or 'You're too this or that.' Because then you're just thinking about 'Oh, what am I?' And then that's why actors get so in their head and crazy."

Over the years, he drew inspiration from "Harry Potter"'s Daniel Radcliffe and teen actor-turned-Oscar nominee Jesse Eisenberg, two performers who pivoted to showbiz adulthood effortlessly and whom Wolfhard calls "heroes." Eisenberg cast Wolfhard to star opposite Julianne Moore in his feature directing debut, 2022's "When You Finish Saving the World."

"I was just kind of astounded by this young man who was so talented and also very self-aware, ambitious but smartly ambitious," Eisenberg says. "Finn is two things that you very rarely see together. One is this unbridled, limitless confidence about what he can achieve and what he can try. But the other side of him is this incredibly self-doubting, nervous person."

It's the riddle that even Wolfhard — and his therapist — can't crack.

> "MY FOCUS WAS ON STAYING SORT OF AS QUOTE-UNQUOTE NORMAL AS I COULD BE. I WAS NEVER REALLY A NORMAL PERSON."

Seven months prior, I sat down with Wolfhard at the Sundance Film Festival, where his A24 movie "The Legend of Ochi" was making its world premiere. The movie was something of a departure for A24, the studio known for edgy fare like "Moonlight" and "Midsommar." "Ochi" earnestly depicts a group of kids roaming through forests, trying to track down an elusive mythical species. In Park City for the first time, Wolfhard seemed more at ease than in Vancouver and ready to bask in the indie-film environs. He strode over to director Boots Riley. As he filled a glass with cucumber water from a mason jar pitcher, I asked if he and Riley talked about collaborating on a project. "No, just geeking out over films," Wolfhard said.

Talk to any director who has worked with Wolfhard and the common refrain is he's a genuine cinephile. In Vancouver, where he lives with his parents, he can access several repertory cinemas. Later this week, he will catch a showing of "Barry Lyndon," Stanley Kubrick's three-hour-plus historical drama. As for his favorite director, Wolfhard names Steven Soderbergh. "Not even based on his filmography, which is obviously incredible, but just the way that he does things," he says. "He's so pro, just making stuff and not being precious about it and just putting it out. He's not obsessing over one project over the other. He's a doer."

For the next month, Wolfhard has zero commitments and can catch up on old films before jumping into a remake of the 1999 cult horror film "Idle Hands." He is producing it alongside Reitman but will not star or direct. Still, this summer marks the first time since he started "Stranger Things" that he doesn't have another acting project lined up. On a personal note, he won't be spending this sliver of downtime with a significant other. As he explains his current relationship status, Wolfhard suddenly struggles to articulate a complete sentence.

"I'm single and like ... I feel like that's something that I'm also kind of thinking about right now is just like ... This is the time kind of where I have been doing the most work kind of in my life. So I feel like it's been kind of ... Maybe it's been subconsciously — what's the word? — deliberate? — to not have a committed partner," he says, his pace quickening even as his thoughts do not cohere. "Just because I'm 22, I don't really want to put my ... Also considering how ... At the rate that I'm traveling all the time and working and stuff, I just feel like it's not the time to do that."

Instead, Wolfhard is trying to hold on to the last gasp of "Stranger Things," which will soon become a memory. He tells me that a group of 11 cast members considered a group tattoo. Sink proposed a flashlight. Others voted in favor of a simple "7-15-2016" to mark the date that the series first aired. Wolfhard liked the idea of a tiger, in a nod to the Hawkins school mascot. "No one could agree what to get because everyone had different storylines, and the show meant different things to different people," he says with a hint of sadness. "Honestly, I think moving forward, we might still do it."

Leading up to TV's most-anticipated finale since "Game of Thrones," Wolfhard is thinking about an alteration that is less permanent than a tattoo. He just wants his hair to grow back before press duties call; he's longing for those thick waves that make him instantly recognizable.

"It was my 'V for Vendetta' moment — and just as powerful," he says with a laugh, invoking Natalie Portman grabbing the electric razor and going to town on her scalp. "My fan base is predominantly girls that are younger teenagers to my age, and it became this collective 'No!' I really did not expect for people to care as much. But hair grows back, apparently."

With that, Wolfhard becomes more contemplative, processing what has passed and what comes next. As the competing thoughts fight for control in his head, he arrives at a Zen moment. "The way for me to sort of advance in my life and my career is not to try to replace the show. It's to try to really embrace it," he says. "Because to fight it would be the wrong thing to do, because then you're forgetting where everything started." ●

TYLA





POWER
OF YOUNG
HOLLYWOOD

BY
THANIA
GARCIA

VARIETY
08.06.2025

P.31

‘WATER’ TRANSFORMED TYLA INTO A GLOBAL SUPERSTAR AND FASHION ICON. THE SOUTH AFRICAN SINGER ON MAKING HER FANS EVEN HOTTER

"DO YOU MIND IF I JUST STAY IN MY ROBE?" TYLA ASKS, HER SLIPPERS ALREADY ON THE FLOOR.

The 23-year-old South African pop star seems even smaller than her 5-foot-3-inch frame as she curls into the corner of a dressing room couch, her knees tucked to her chest, after standing for nearly three hours in front of a camera. • It's 9 p.m. on a Friday in a Manhattan studio, and while the week should be winding down, Tyla isn't. She cues up her just-released single, "Bliss," briefly lowering the volume on the song, a mesh of R&B and Afrobeats, so she can more clearly explain the lyrics. • "It's such a real love song," she says, acknowledging that its deeply sensual lyrics are "a bit dramatic" (the single's cover artwork features her drenched in sweat, her head buried in a man's bare chest). "But they are things I've said and felt: 'I don't want to live without you.' It's so intense ... but beautiful. Losing something or someone that I love is probably my biggest fear."

The intensity of the song is no accident and may have another source of inspiration beyond romantic bliss: Since the release of her critically revered self-titled debut album last year — and the global success of "Water," the smash single that started it all — Tyla has been fixated on how to follow it.

It's no small challenge. The song, built on a foundation of amapiano — a subgenre of South African house music — but infused with pop and R&B melodies and accented by elements of Afrobeats, was unlike anything else on pop radio at the time. Despite the success of many recent Afrobeats artists, "Water" has a directness that made it the breakthrough song for the genre.

It became a near-instant hit after Tyla and her choreographer, Litchi, posted videos of the singer doing a distinctive dance on TikTok in August 2023. In it, she glides across the floor while pouring water over her swaying hips and singing, "Make me sweat, make me hotter, make me lose my breath, make me water." The move went viral, and Tyla did too — everything from her dancing to her look.

Today, she admits that she's still recalibrating from that unexpected success. "When 'Water' happened, I wasn't ready," she says. "I became obsessed with the idea of doing things 'right.' I wanted more time to make mistakes to fully figure out who I am as an artist, but then things just went ... Well, you know."

We know. "Water" was a major hit in more than 40 countries, reaching the top 10 everywhere from Australia to Romania to South Africa to the U.K. It hit No. 7 on the Billboard Hot 100 in the U.S., where Tyla became the highest-charting solo female African artist in the country's history. In Brazil, the song was even certified two-times diamond (the next — and only — step up after platinum). It was nominated for BET and BRIT and iHeartRadio and Ivor Novello and VMA and Kids' Choice awards and won a Grammy for best African music performance — all before the release of her debut album.

That momentum has continued. In April, Tyla debuted "Bliss" during her first performance at the Coachella festival (without telling her team in advance), and she released a new four-song EP in late July.

On the heels of that success, Tyla's quickly become a high-fashion darling, delivering standout red carpet fare — from the custom Balmain sand dress she wore to the 2024 Met Gala to the vintage Roberto Cavalli she wore for the 2024 MTV European Music Awards. She's had such an impact that Vogue editorial director Anna Wintour made her a member of the 2025 Met Gala host committee.

Directly after this evening's interview, she's off to another photo shoot, for her stint hosting the Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards. Earlier in the week, she was on the Met Gala carpet, rocking a pinstripe gown styled by Law Roach and a bleached-blonde pixie cut. Later that evening, she co-hosted Richie Akiva's swanky afterparty with Doja Cat, Colman Domingo and Edward Enninful.

It's all a long way from her hometown of Edenvale, South Africa, a village of 70,000 people outside the metropolis of Johannesburg. "What's happened to me is not a

Styling: Senior Fashion Market editor: Emily Mercer; Senior Market editor, accessories: Thomas Waller; Fashion assistants: Ari Stark and Kimberly Infante. Makeup: Jimmy Stam/OPUS Beauty; Hair: Ursula Stephen/A Frame Agency using Ouidad. Nails: Tiana "Tiny" Clothing, previous page: Jumpsuit: Gucci; Shoes: Christian Louboutin; Earrings: Self-Portrait; Bracelets: Bvlgari; Cuff: Saint Laurent; Rings: Tiffany & Co. Tiffany Titan by Pharrell Williams. This page: Stole: Dsquared2. Next page: Bodysuit, skirt, stole and earring: Schiaparelli; Shoes: Christian Louboutin; Bracelets: Bvlgari



normal thing," she says. "I don't think any human could go from where I came from and feel normal about millions of people knowing who you are. I respect the African and South African artists that came before me and literally helped me get here. I'm grateful for everything, and to be able to represent my country is something that I'm so happy to carry."

There was a massive tree in the backyard of Tyla's childhood home in South Africa that she and her siblings — two sisters and a brother — would clamber up and around, turning its branches into props for their superhero fantasies, pretending they had the power to do or be anything. "There was no choice but to entertain ourselves and each other," Tyla says, her eyes softening at the memory.

Theirs was a isolated adolescence, imposed by their parents, whom she describes as "intentionally strict," although she's come to appreciate the discipline. "We weren't allowed to sleep over or even go to friends' houses," she recalls. "But I didn't mind it terribly; we'd be having so much fun just staying home." Born on Jan. 30, 2002, as the second-youngest of the four siblings, Tyla Laura Seethal grew up in a loud, lively, music-filled household. Her father would sing to wake the kids up before school, and on Sundays he'd blast everything from country to R&B radio while cleaning the house. Her mother had multiple occupations, from candle-making to real estate and even acting in commercials.

Music ran through the extended family, too. "My uncle used to sing all the time," Tyla recalls. "He was the life of the party, and he'd be capable of just pulling out a guitar in the middle of a crowd and encourage us to sing along." Her grandmother also had good pipes, competing in local singing competitions when she was younger. "Our house was never quiet, and our neighbors definitely hated us," she says. "We were all always singing or laughing at the top of our lungs."

By the time Tyla was 14, she was convinced that she belonged onstage. She and her friends would form impromptu girl groups during recess, turning the playground into their stage. "At break time, we'd tell everyone, 'There's a performance here at this time,'" she recalls. Inspired by Destiny's Child, they'd sing and dance for their classmates, who gathered on the sidelines to watch.

Tyla began posting videos on YouTube, and by the time she was 16, she had built a small online following that caught the attention of FAX Records co-founder Garth von Glehn, who invited her to use his stu-



dio to record. With her parents' reluctant support, Tyla accepted the offer. "In my culture, there's a heavy emphasis on respecting your elders, and it's an unspoken [rule] that you can't question them," she explains. Her parents gave her a year to pursue her dream of a musical career.

"I just remember telling them they could trust me, and they told me all they truly cared about was my safety," she says. "My best friend, Thato, who is now my creative director, went with me everywhere and has been with me every step of the way. That made it easier for my family, who ultimately just wanted to know I wasn't alone."

By 2018, Tyla had signed with FAX Records, inking a deal with her current manager and label co-founder Brandon Hixton, who later brought on Colin Gayle, an artist manager from Jamaica. "At that point, we were all committed to [breaking Tyla in] Africa," says Gayle. "It was early days, and we weren't on anyone's radar."

Tyla signed with Epic Records in 2021 after a bidding war that saw Epic chief Sylvia Rhone posting billboards across South Africa featuring the singer's image with the message "Epic Records, love Sylvia Rhone." It was the only way to secure the singer's attention despite travel restrictions tied to the pandemic.

It was a lot for a 19-year-old to absorb. "When I got signed, a lot of opinions came in," she recalls, "and it was a very overwhelming experience." She tried a number of different musical styles over the course of many songwriting sessions and content-creation workshops, some of which tried to steer her into a bubblegum-pop direction. Those songs "didn't feel like me at all," she says, remembering one session where the songs pitched to her "were the most generic compositions you could ever think of."

Adding to the pressure were cultural mores whereby women are in submissive roles — "You stay out of men's conversations, the men eat first," she says — making it even more challenging for a young woman to take charge. "I remember being in my hotel room and my managers were calling me, 'Come down, we need to cut the song,'" she recalls. "I was crying and thinking, 'This is not what I want. I didn't get signed to do this,'" she says of the push to record songs that didn't reflect her vision. "They had to [coax] me out of that room. "But," she continues. "I think through doing that, I realized how much more I love African music. It made me more persistent in keeping my ideas." So she cut out the noise and focused on the sounds she felt in her heart.

"I think back to recording 'Water,' and I couldn't have been more closed off to the outside world," she recalls. "It was just me, my engineer and his pregnant wife."

"Tyla's first hit had to come from an African perspective — sonically rooted in Africa, but with the ability to travel globally," says Ezekiel Lewis, president of Epic Records. "'Water' was really the fulfillment of that vision. It confirmed what we believed: that she needed to launch her career with something authentic yet universally resonant."

"I'VE HAD SOME HEARTBREAK, SO I'M STRONGER NOW, BUT I LOVE HARD. LIKE, IF MY HEART IS BROKEN, IT'S *BRRRRROKEN*."

When it came to crafting the thematic material of her new album, Tyla had more than a few life lessons to bring. "I had to grow up fast, especially for someone coming from a strict family," she notes. "It was a constant challenge to learn."

One of those challenges related to her ethnic identity. Her background — a combination of Zulu, Irish and Mauritian-Indian heritage — became an unexpected point of controversy as her fame surged, fueled in part by the resurfacing of a 2020 TikTok in which she refers to herself as a "Coloured South African." In a June 2024 interview, Charlamagne Tha God asked her to explain the "debates that they be having about your identity," and she declined to answer, furthering the drama.

But although the term "Colored" can be triggering for Black Americans, a painful reminder of the country's ongoing racist history, in South Africa, the term is more nuanced, often used to reflect a mixed-race heritage. In a statement posted online, just hours after the Charlamagne interview, Tyla said, "I don't expect to be identified as Coloured outside of [South Africa] by anyone not comfortable doing so because I understand the weight of that word outside [of South Africa]. But to close this conversation, I'm both Coloured in South Africa and a Black woman."

"That [controversy] was really confusing for me," she admits. "I understood both sides of the story, but I was left asking, 'OK, but what do I do now?' When who you are is challenged, especially when it's all you've ever known, it shakes you. You want to stand your ground, because if you don't, someone else will try to define it for you."

The experience carried over into the new songs collected on her recent four-track EP, "WWP" (referencing the age-old South African chant, "We Want to Party"). In the biting "Mr. Media," she sings: "Misdemeanor, why, why, why?/ Why you gotta tell them, lie, lie, lie? / Honestly I'm not surprised, Mr. Media ... No matter how hard I try / I can never get it right."

"I wanted to have music out there that felt like who I am right now," she says. "I wanted something very aggressive and loud and summer-banger worthy. I needed to say what I said in 'Mr. Media' and let those ideas out before the album came. 'We Wanna Party' is meant to be a bridge to the album — and when the album comes," she teases, "it's going to be such a totally different vibe than what people are expecting."

As for the EP's love songs like "Bliss," although no current love interest has been confirmed, it's a fair assumption that a certain someone is a source of inspiration. Is she in love right now?

She lets out a whispered "Yeah," before laughing. "Well, I'm in love with a lot of things," she says, and adds, "You really have to make time for romance, and I purposefully set aside time for it when it's worth it. I've had some heartbreak, so I'm stronger now, but I love hard. Like, if my heart is broken, it's *brrrrroken*."

In September, Tyla will release a new amapiano single called "Chanel," and her second album is expected to follow in October.

"I had more time to work on this album than I did the first, so I have a lot of songs," she says. "It feels really current — this time, I'm living what I'm singing, and it feels way more personal," she concludes with a smile. "Way more like *me*."

As she gets ready to head to her next engagement, Tyla still isn't quite ready to trade her robe for more conventional clothes. "You better look after me," she jokes to her security guard as she gathers her things, "because this robe could unravel at any second!"

Asked what's next, she offers up an expansive list of career goals: more performing, acting, voice acting ("It'd have to be a really funny character") and creative direction for other artists.

"I want to do almost everything," she says. "I want to look back one day when I'm older and be like, 'Damn! I really lived my life.'" ●

THE 'WHITE LOTUS' STAR SAM NIVOLA ON FIXING HOLLYWOOD AND FILMING THAT SHOCKING SCENE WITH PATRICK SCHWARZENEGGER

BY
ETHAN
SHANFELD

VARIETY
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SAM

"FUCKIN' HOT!" ARE THE FIRST WORDS OUT OF SAM NIVOLA'S MOUTH WHEN I MEET HIM

in the back of a small Japanese restaurant. • I've just asked him "How are you?" and it's a fair response, considering it's the hottest day in New York City since 2012. We're on St. Mark's Place, where the triple-digit temperature has caused even the crust punks, a mainstay of this stretch of the East Village, to slither toward refuge in tattoo parlors and liquor stores. • "I walked two blocks to get down here, and I'm pouring with sweat already," says Nivola, clad in a "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" T-shirt and a baseball cap concealing his boyish brown curls. I omit the fact that I arrived 15 minutes early for the sole purpose of drying my face with paper towels in the restroom.

"This weather is gnarly," he says. "It's worse than Thailand!"

Nivola spent seven months on that country's sweltering beachfront shooting Season 3 of "The White Lotus," in which he played the brooding and awkward teenager Lochlan Ratliff, whose desire to impress his older brother, played by Patrick Schwarzenegger, results in a near-death smoothie experience and some brother-on-brother incest. The role turned the 21-year-old Nivola into one of Hollywood's most promising young stars — and perhaps a new kind of sex symbol.

"It's totally changed my life and the scope of my career," says Nivola, who previously had modest parts in the Noah Baumbach film "White Noise" and the Nicole Kidman-led Netflix whodunit "The Perfect Couple." "When 'The White Lotus' was at its peak, I literally couldn't walk down the street in Brooklyn — my hometown — without being swarmed."

The swarming got so bad that, in search of a quiet place away from all the fanfare, Nivola and his friends once prompted ChatGPT, "What is the worst bar in the East Village?" The result was a taproom where speaking is strictly prohibited. "We're yelling, 'This place is fucking awesome!' and everyone's like, *'Shhh!'*" recalls Nivola, buckling forward, index finger pressed to his lips.

Perhaps this is why Nivola has brought me here, to this mostly vacant "sleeper hit" of a restaurant tucked underneath a barbershop. He's taken command of the menu. When I ask him what's good, he rattles off a handful of dishes before asking eagerly, "Are you down to share?"

Nivola grew up in the Brooklyn indie film scene. He watches one to two movies per day. He begins more than one sentence with "Not to be pretentious, but ..." In other words, acting is in his blood. But his parents, Emily Mortimer and Alessandro Nivola (of "Newsroom" and "Face/Off" fame, respectively), initially discouraged him from following in their footsteps, fearing their son would hurtle himself toward an unstable and often difficult life. They forbade him from auditioning for roles before he turned 18.

Still, when Nivola was 17, his high school drama teacher helped him net an audition for "White Noise," in which he'd play the son of Adam Driver and Greta Gerwig's characters. It was during the pandemic, and Nivola sent in a self-tape in secret. He only told his parents about the opportunity once he made it to the next round. "Holy fucking shit, it's a Noah Baumbach movie?! You *have* to do the callback!" he remembers his parents saying. (Nivola's younger sister, May, ended up playing his sibling in the film.)

I say the words "nepo baby," and Nivola breaks into tickled laughter. "Other than my genes, I don't think I can attribute much of my success to my parents," he says. "I feel proud that I've done it for myself, and sometimes in spite of them."

Of his first movie role, he says, "I didn't get my dad's agent to call up so-and-so. I did it by myself. I didn't want to give anyone an excuse to be able to say that anything I've achieved has been because of anyone other than me. And I'm proud of that."

These days, when a Nivola family stroll is interrupted by a fan asking for a selfie, odds are the camera is pointed toward Sam. "But that just goes to show the trappings of fame," he says. "Because I'm not half as talented as my father or my mother."

If Nivola's first leap of faith was the secret audition tape, then his second was drop-

Styling: Senior Fashion Market editor: Emily Mercer; Senior Market editor, accessories: Thomas Waller; Fashion assistants: Ari Stark and Kimberly Infante. Grooming: Kumi Craig/The Wall Group. Clothing on previous page: Full look: Calvin Klein Collection. This page: Coat, blazer, sweater and pants: Ferragamo; Belt: Dehanche, Gloves: 032C



ping out of college after just one semester at Columbia, where he studied Latin and film. "My parents were upset," he says. "It totally scared them, which is understandable. I wasn't happy at the time because I couldn't dedicate everything in me to acting. And," he says, blushing, "I have problems with authority figures."

Nivola spent the next couple years auditioning, with his big break happening just a few months before his friends put on caps and gowns.

The story of how Nivola landed "The White Lotus" is "boring," he insists between sips of beer. There was a tape, then a callback read with Mike White, and then three days later he got the part. "I'm just grateful that there are people who are not casting things based on how many Instagram followers you have," Nivola says. (He has 145,000.) "They're casting based on who is right for the job. Like, 'You might not be Jacob Elordi, but you're the guy.'"

If the casting process was unremarkable, the filming was anything but. The shooting of the third season of "The White Lotus" was, by the accounts of some of Nivola's castmates, a seven-month slog that featured unbearable humidity, sickness and behind-the-scenes drama. And throughout that time, Nivola lived in a hotel room that was identical to Lochlan's. While it was isolating and confusing, those blurred lines made it easier for him to step into the character.

"I've always been the actor that's like, 'You got too stuck in your character? Fuck you. That's bullshit,'" says Nivola. Then he traveled across the world and hung out almost exclusively with actors playing his family members, including Jason Isaacs and Parker Posey, who rarely dropped those North Carolina accents. "Sometimes I actually felt like I wasn't myself," Nivola says. "I finally understood the thing of getting lost in your character."

And that brings us to the incest. When the drug-fueled intimacy between on-screen brothers lit the internet on fire, Nivola didn't take kindly to the discourse. "It was at times painful. It's hard when people view your character as a monster or pervert or freak," he says.

Headlines deemed the scene, in which Lochlan kisses his brother on the mouth and then jerks him off in a threesome, "shocking," "sickening" and "so disgusting and unnecessary." On social media, Lochlan was labeled a "creep" and a "sicko." Meanwhile The Daily Beast asked, "Is It OK to Think the 'White Lotus' Incest Scene Was Hot?," and Nivola's DMs were flooded with thirsty older men.

"It was hard feeling like people had lost sympathy for this guy that I lived inside. I got a little defensive," Nivola says. "You have to love your character, otherwise you're fucked. My character jerked off Patrick. I don't *like* that. It's a bad thing he did. But I try not to pass judgment."



After "The White Lotus," Nivola says he's been inundated with offers to play similar roles — "socially awkward, virginal kids who are a little weird," as he defines it. "I'm starting to feel a little boxed in by the characters I've played in my career. But I'm also finally getting offers to do things where I'm a little more grown up. Hopefully the next one will be something a little different."

Nivola recently wrapped production on a Bobby Farrelly film, "Driver's Ed," that he hopes will breathe life into a wilting genre: the R-rated comedy. ("We say 'fuck' *so* many times," he assures.)

"It's rare to have comedies at all. It's been pretty dry for a little while," Nivola says. (He lives with his girlfriend, Iris Apatow, whose father, Judd Apatow, reinvented the studio comedy in the 2000s.) "Can you think of any good ones that have come out in the last five years? Other than 'Friendship'?" He attributes the decline to studios being more financially "conservative."

"They've 'Moneyball'-ed the film industry!" Nivola says, pointing his chopsticks at me in a Wolverine claw. "Everything is

Jacket: Marine Serre; Shirt: Gucci; Pants: Louis Gabriel Nouchi; Tie: Brooks Brothers

about data now — and trying to predict, to the nearest dollar, how much money a movie's going to make. It screws the idea of risk-taking, and comedy is more about risk-taking than any other genre."

In terms of careers he admires, the first name on Nivola's mind is Tom Cruise. "He's excelled in every kind of movie," he says. "He gives one of the greatest comedic performances of all time in 'Tropic Thunder,' and he's not at all a comedian. 'Jerry Maguire,' 'Risky Business,' 'Magnolia' — he's an incredible dramatic actor. And then he has this whole latter half of his career of being an action star."

But when ageless box office magnets like Cruise exist, Nivola isn't convinced Hollywood is interested in birthing new ones.

"The old movie stars are getting plastic surgery, and they're looking younger and they're staying young. You have these really old people playing young roles. And it's not giving any space for the young'uns to move in and make a name for themselves," Nivola says. "With all due respect to those people, one day they won't be here anymore, literally, and they will have to create new stars."

He adds, "I think Timothée Chalamet is one of the best actors alive, and he's a total star. He's one of a very few examples I could come up with. But it's a different kind of movie star; he's not huge and jacked. He looks a little more like me." Nivola glugs the rest of his lager. "I wish!"

Even in his young career, Nivola has worked with some of today's most celebrated talent. In "White Noise," he uttered the words of an Academy Award-nominated screenwriter and acted opposite two Oscar nominees. On "White Lotus," he put his trust into television's topmost taboo breaker.

And on Bradley Cooper's "Maestro," he learned the hard way the humbling power of the edit. In the Oscar-nominated biopic, Nivola played Leonard Bernstein's son, Alexander. He remembers filming a pivotal scene with Cooper in which the legendary composer reprimands his son for smoking a joint before the boy confronts him about his lifetime of hypocrisy and infidelity, saying something to the effect of "You're cheating on my mother with men. Who are you to tell me what to do?"

When the film premiered at the New York Film Festival in 2023, SAG-AFTRA was on strike, so Nivola gave his tickets to some buddies and planned to meet up with them for a drink afterward. Nivola was waiting at a bar around the corner when his friends broke the news: "Dude, you're not really in the movie." Nivola was dumbfounded: "'What do you mean? What about my big scene?!'"

"SOMETIMES I ACTUALLY FELT LIKE I WASN'T MYSELF. I FINALLY UNDERSTOOD THE THING OF GETTING LOST IN YOUR CHARACTER."

He admits now, "I was slightly annoyed to be chopped out of the movie. But, annoyingly, it was the right decision." Bisecting a piece of spicy tuna on rice cake with a chopstick, he says, "I don't like to be the guy that gets their feelings hurt about being cut out."

Nivola praises Cooper as an "innovative filmmaker" and a "lovely guy," and says he still thinks about what he calls the "Bradley Cooper shot": "Just taking a camera around and following the actors around and letting them do whatever they want and rolling for 30 minutes straight."

It's just now settling in for Nivola that he is, by all metrics, a successful actor. For a kid who was raised by famous actors, he never expected to be famous himself. "I love acting so much that I would be totally content working a run-of-the-mill, 9-to-5, minimum-wage job for the rest of my life if I got to do this on weekends," he says. So now that he is surrounded by a team of industry professionals and his phone is ringing off the hook, he finds himself in a surprising predicament.

"It's a lot easier when you're starting at ground zero to look upwards and be like, 'There's all this exciting stuff that could happen but probably won't' versus being catapulted to the top of this totem pole where suddenly it's like, 'How do I hold on to it? How do I stay up here?' At least, that's what people tell you your mindset has to be," Nivola says. "It's scarier to hold on to something for dear life than it is to be grasping at a potential future."

Plus, it's a weird time in Hollywood. Movie theaters are shuttering, production has plunged and thousands of gig workers are scrambling to find work. Opportunities to audition are few and far between. Earlier this year, as if these anxieties bubbled up to the point of combustion, Los Angeles, the global center of the movie industry, literally burst into flames.

"One of the biggest fears I have is that nothing can afford to shoot in America anymore," Nivola says. The business model of moviemaking in the U.S. is so out of whack that "you can hire a team of 10 gaffers in Hungary for cheaper than hiring one key grip in Los Angeles."

"It's so silly, Trump saying he's going to put a tariff on foreign films," he says. "That's the opposite of what we need to be doing. It's not that we shouldn't be watching foreign films; it's that we need more tax incentives to shoot movies in America."

He wishes the U.S. would take a lesson from the state-funded British Film Institute, which promotes filmmaking in the U.K. — and subsidizes movie tickets to people under 26 at Nivola's favorite London cinema. "It's mobbed with kids my age watching weird, old Kurosawa movies," he says. "It's packed every weekend because it's cheap, and that's because taxpayer dollars are going toward art instead of toward fucking missiles." He stakes his chopsticks into the table. "Not to sound cliché, but it's just so frustrating. Like, take a little bit of that Tomahawk money and put it into movies and inspire a generation of people."

He sets his utensils down and smiles. "I also must plead ignorance and say I don't know what I'm talking about. I took a crash course in economics in college."

We've spent half our dinner trash-talking Hollywood, so Nivola wants to make one thing clear: "I just want to say for the record that I am optimistic about the future of the film industry."

A couple years ago, he started a production company called Cold Worm with two of his best friends. They've made two feature films on five-figure budgets — one funded entirely by grants and the other by private investors. Nivola has directed a short film through the banner — about a lovesick stoner who falls victim to a flirtatious scheme — and he's written several scripts that he's in the process of pitching. It's a priority for Cold Worm to land an overall deal at a studio, but Nivola says, "We'd rather make good movies than get filthy rich."

It was not long ago in Wales that Nivola realized the dream of indie filmmaking is still alive. He was shooting a movie in what he calls "the most depressing town in Europe" on a shoestring budget, sharing a bed with his two co-producers. They didn't have towels, so they attempted to air-dry their bodies in the freezing temperatures. "It was miserable," Nivola says, "and it was one of the most fun times of my life."

A bunch of kids, joyously suffering for a shared vision, journeying into the unknown to make something from nothing. "That will never die," insists Nivola. "As long as there are people fighting the fight and trying, it's going to be OK." ●

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YOUNG HOLLYWOOD IMPACT REPORT



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MOGULS IN THE MAKING

THE YOUNG HOLLYWOOD IMPACT REPORT DRILLS DOWN ON ACTORS, DIGITAL STARS AND MUSICIANS SHAKING UP SHOWBIZ

The talents on *Variety*'s Power of Young Hollywood Impact Report rep the future of the entertainment business. They are all between the ages of 18-28 and cross all media platforms and look to a worldwide audience. "Across the globe, people are more alike than we think — bound by simple deeply human themes," says "Anora" star Mark Eydelshteyn. Musician Jessie Murph can't wait for the rest of 2025 and her tour. "I am so excited to go out and see people again. Connecting with fans and hearing their stories of how they've resonated with the music is the most special experience." ● Although their careers are on the upswing, they still recognize the hurdles in the biz. "Every day can be a challenge. In terms of my life as an actor, one of the lucky things we get to do (if we choose to) is seek out difficult things, and hopefully use them as opportunities to learn and grow as people," says "Gen V" star Asa Germann. ● As for any wisdom they've gleaned along the way, "Adults" star Owen Thiele references a character from the mind of another talent who hit it big while in their twenties, "Honestly everything Hannah Horvath ever said ... it's both advice you shouldn't take and should also live by."

By Matt Donnelly, Thania Garcia, Steven Horowitz, Carole Horst, Abby Lee, Giana Levy, Seth Marumoto, Brooke Mazurek, Leia Mendoza, Rosemary Rossi, Jazz Tangcay, Chris Willman, Michaela Zee



2hollis
Musician

Just days after wrapping a sold-out headlining tour, the musician born Hollis Frazier-Herndon released his highly anticipated debut album, "Star." In addition to performing the new music at Coachella, Bonnaroo and Lollapalooza, his album also landed 2hollis on Apple Music 1's "The Zane Lowe Show" and on Lowe's "25 for '25" annual selection of the most exciting new artists of the year. "I'm most proud of my friends and I for doing what we always said we were going to do, making it come true, and having the most fun while doing it," he says of a whirlwind year.



Milly Alcock
Actor

Alcock first made waves soaring the skies as Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen in "House of the Dragon." Next year, she'll take to the skies again as Kara Zor-El in Craig Gillespie's "Supergirl," where she'll travel across the world with her beloved dog, Krypto, on a mission for revenge. This year, Alcock teased the character and the anticipated movie with a memorable cameo in blockbuster "Superman." The Australian actor also gained fans when she came out on top against Meghann Fahy and Julianne Moore in Netflix's soapy hit series "Sirens."



Shabana Azeez
Isa Briones
Jalen Thomas Brooks
Supriya Ganesh
Actors

Everyone's raving about the cast of "The Pitt" — and for good reason. They bring a raw, urgent authenticity to the ER drama that's both emotionally gripping and career-defining.

"It's always been a dream to work on a show of this caliber and meet artists of that same caliber," says Brooks (Mateo). "Just to soak everything in has changed my perspective on so many things, which I'm so grateful for." Ganesh (Samira) says the experience gave her clarity she hopes to share: "Know your worth and wait for what is right for you. I wish I had had more faith in myself earlier on ... hold true to what you deserve and what you need." Azeez (Victoria) found inspiration in those leading the show: "It's such a cop out to say [exec producer and star] Noah Wyle and [exec producer] John Wells, but I've never seen leadership modelled quite like this before." And Briones puts it simply: "Things have gotten even more scary in the world... I wanna see the reality, because I need to know and I need to care about it."



Wally Baram
Rish Shah
Actors

Prime Video's "Overcompensating" became an instant hit when it debuted in May, with Baram and Shah starring as friends (and, to varying degrees, love interests) of Benito Skinner's character Benny. Baram originally joined the series as a part of the writers room, later landing her first acting role opposite Skinner. "That was by far the most I've ever been pushed out of my comfort zone in any artistic pursuit," she says. "Everything from the skills I was using to managing work-life balance to the endurance of shooting for three months — all of those things were a new muscle for me and I'm really proud of the work." "Overcompensating" was a first for Shah as well, with the series being his first time doing comedy. "Being around such brilliant, hilarious and witty minds and watching my colleagues fire on all cylinders at 100mph whilst absorbing everything was incredible," he says. "Every day on set was a new adventure and kept me on my toes." Up next, Shah is set to star alongside Charli XCX in A24's "The Moment."







Clockwise from top: Milly Alcock, left, with her "boss," Julianne Moore, in "Sirens," Rish Shah stars in "Overcompensating" and Shabana Azeez attends to an emergency in "The Pitt."

Clockwise, from top left: Edward Berthelot/Getty Images; Courtesy of Alcock; Jonathan van der Knaap; Sam Pickart; Collin Starkk Photo; Courtesy of Ganesh; Brandon Michael Young; Kai Sundiltu/Dave Benett/Getty Images/Netflix; Courtesy of Prime, Max, Netflix



Simone Biles
Athlete, entrepreneur

Since her 2024 Paris Olympics domination, Biles has been on a roll. She recently wrapped up her Gold Over America Tour (GOAT), and joined production company Religion of Sports, co-founded by Tom Brady, Michael Strahan and Gotham Chopra, as a creative partner and board member. She starred in the Netflix series "Simone Biles Rising," and her new role at ROS will open doors for her to more media platforms. She's even opening a restaurant, Taste of Gold, at the Houston airport. "One of the biggest things I learned about myself this past year is that no matter where my journey takes me, I'm my best self when I'm able find time and space for myself," Biles says. "I believe hard work, determination and dedication — even in facing difficult challenges — is important in pursuing your goals and dreams, but so is prioritizing your own mental health. Through it all, having fun and staying true to myself has made this past year so memorable."



Quen Blackwell
Content creator

With more than 19 million followers and 4.3 million gained in this past year alone, Blackwell has proven herself a true multi-hyphenate with a hit YouTube series ("Feeding Starving Celebrities"), a short-form show ("International Food Reviews"), a guest-starring acting debut in Rachel Sennott's untitled HBO comedy pilot, and her first-ever fashion brand, Riquera. "I sort of just fell into comedic cooking content," says Blackwell. "It was what I'd make when I wasn't sure what else to do, but it's somehow become my marquee thing. I love it so much." And so do her long list of celebrity guests — including Kali Uchis and Lil Yachty, with Charli XCX and Billie Eilish on deck.



Up Next

Sarah Bock
Actor

The first time "Severance" star Bock felt a love for acting was on a trip to New York City when she was 8 years old. "I saw my first Broadway show, 'Matilda,' and since the show has a lot of kids starring in it, it kind of made me realize that this is something I could do now or sometime in the near future." After playing the role of Lumon Industries' Miss Huang, Bock imagines that her character left the corporation with a new perspective on the world of innies and outies. "I think even though she did change and have that character arc in Season 2, she gained more empathy. I'm not sure if that would be enough yet to completely flip her to any side. Lumon is a corrupt system, and as someone who loves what the innies are fighting for, I hope that Miss Huang would at some point be on their side."



Marissa Bode
Actor

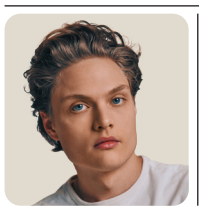
As a young child, "Wicked" star Bode never thought she'd be immortalized as a Lego figurine or even a Barbie. "It's wild," Bode says. The actor, who plays Nessa-Rose in the hit musical, has heard from audiences who have responded to her performance, specifically from disabled people and parents of disabled kids. "They've said how much my casting means to them, and that somebody that looks like them in real life," she says. Bode hopes to be a voice for accessibility.

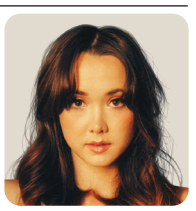
"I got to create a character who literally shrinks and grows depending on how she's feeling — she's basically the human embodiment of imposter syndrome meets body image issues." Lizze Broadway



Marissa Bode and Cynthia Erivo at Oz's Shiz University in "Wicked"







Lizze Broadway
Asa Germann
London Thor
Actors

Germann, Broadway and Thor star in "Gen V," the hit Prime spinoff of "The Boys," which returns in September. Germann, who is shooting "Gargoyle 2" right now, will be seen in the highly anticipated "Scream 7" next year. "All of my favorite moments on 'Gen V' have to do with the people. Not just the great cast and crew, but all the people I've met who watch the show and are excited about it; it makes everything feel so meaningful in a really special way," Germann says. Thor, who credits her mom, Alice Carter, as her biggest mentor, has a packed schedule as well, and says, "'Gen V' was a huge challenge for me because it pushed me to do things that were out of my comfort zone, and it has allowed me to grow in so many ways as an artist." Broadway, who played for laughs in "Kinda Pregnant," says, "I got to create a character who literally shrinks and grows depending on how she's feeling — she's basically the human embodiment of imposter syndrome meets body image issues. Emma represents the pressure so many young women feel to shrink themselves to fit in or puff themselves up to be seen."

Clockwise, from top left: Courtesy of Biles; Tanya Young; Universal; Courtesy of Broadway; Brian Van Wyk; Courtesy of Germann; Sami Drasin; Chessa Subbiondo



Miles Caton, right, with Michael B. Jordan in the action-packed finale of hit "Sinners"



Nicholas Alexander Chavez
Actor

Variety called Chavez's portrayal of Lyle Menendez in Netflix's anthology series "incredible"... and that pretty much nails it. As the dominant, arrogant, volatile older brother, Chavez's Lyle emerges as both a product and a perpetrator of abuse at the hands of their parents before he and his younger brother murder them in cold blood. "'Monsters' changed my career, but the play I'm doing now, 'Camino Real,' is changing the DNA of who I am as an artist," Chavez says. "The greatest gift we can possibly ask for, as actors, is the privilege of working on brilliant material with sharp actors who are equally as obsessed."



Brittany Broski
Content creator

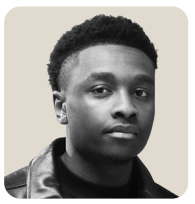
Broski became a familiar face to many in 2019 when a video of her reacting to kombucha went viral. Since then, she has built a social media following of over 18 million. She's the creator and host of the weekly podcast "The Broski Report" and the online talk show "Royal Court," which has featured guests like Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Saoirse Ronan and Josh Gad over the past year. "I want to invite guests into a world that's so ridiculous they have no choice but to lean in," she says of her medieval-themed talk show. "And I think disarming the guests in that way really is powerful because, when do they get a chance to be silly?"



Ken Carson
Musician

The Atlanta-born artist with over 4 billion streams across his catalog earned his first No. 1 on the Billboard 200 this year with "More Chaos," the follow-up to his critically acclaimed 2023 release "A Great Chaos," which was certified gold and landed on year-end best-of lists from the New York Times, Pitchfork, Billboard, Complex and Rolling Stone. Signed to Playboi Carti's Opium label and mentored by TM88, Carson's co-signs also include LeBron James, Young Thug and Justin Bieber. "Do whatever you want to do, because not everyone will understand what you're trying to do until it's done," Carson says of his ethos.

"I want to invite guests into a world that's so ridiculous they have no choice but to lean in." Brittany Broski



Up Next

Miles Caton
Actor, musician

When filming Ryan Coogler's "Sinners," Caton knew they were onto something special. What he didn't realize was to what extent. The vampire tale set in 1930s Mississippi surpassed $360 million worldwide and is the fifth highest-grossing horror movie of all time at the worldwide box office. "Life is different," Caton admits. Just four years ago, he was singing with music star H.E.R. and touring while still in school. He had just graduated when the call for "Sinners" came in. The film marks his acting debut, and fans have since been sharing artwork and music videos inspired by his performance. "It's mind-blowing," he says about its cultural impact. Caton is excited for the future. Hollywood has opened its doors, and he's been bitten by the acting bug. "Action and adventure" are among the genres he'd be open to. "And love," he adds. Caton as a romantic lead? We'd love to see it.



Rachel Chinouriri
Musician

After releasing her debut album, "What a Devastating Turn of Events," In 2024, Chinouriri has had a whirlwind year on the road headlining her first North American tour and as a supporting act for Sabrina Carpenter's European "Short n' Sweet" tour. "I don't feel like I realized my moment until this year. Once I finished off my album, there was a moment where I was proud of myself, and when I went to an HMV store and saw my vinyl, it was just the most mental and insane thing," she says. As she begins to work on her second studio album, Chinouriri hopes to see a more inclusive space for Black women in music. "I am hoping that more Black women dominating in pop, indie, alternative and rock spaces can be labeled as a separate Black pop star or Black indie star. It will become so normalized to see a picture of pop stars and it's mixed with Black and POC women."

Clockwise, from top left: Everett Collection; CAMRAFACE; Courtesy of Chinouriri; Mihailo Andic; Courtesy of Carson; Courtesy of Broski

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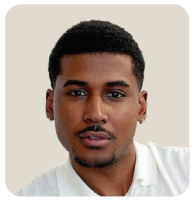


Michael Cooper Jr.
Lovie Simone
Actors

The reimagined Judy Blume classic, "Forever" became an instant success for Netflix, as did the two actors playing the teenage couple in the adaptation. "When I saw the project, it felt so authentic to Black culture, Black girlhood and womanhood," says Simone, who plays Keisha on the show and has just wrapped horror pic "Oddities." Less than a week after its May 8 launch, Netflix announced a Season 2. Cooper Jr. hopes to explore more of Justin's musical interests next season and reconnect with Keisha after they have grown individually. Having his first leading role in "Forever" has been his proudest moment so far. "You want people to feel seen and represented," he says. "It feels like a dream for this many people to feel something while watching the show."



Ivan Cornejo
Musician

Born in Riverside, the Mexican American singer-songwriter and guitarist has earned a reputation for his emotion-driven performances. Cornejo, who recently completed his second arena tour across the U.S., blends regional Mexican soundscapes with indie rock aesthetics. Proceeds from his latest tour went to the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights. "Touring has taught me a lot, not just about the world, but about myself," says Cornejo. "I've come to realize how connected we all really are, no matter where we come from." A new generation of teens are deeply identifying with this style, while Cornejo keeps it consistent — his third all Spanish-language album, 2024's "Mirada," became his first to reach the Top 20 on the albums chart in the U.S. (No. 17).





Michael Cooper Jr. and Lovie Simone in hit series "Forever," top; Ivan Cornejo in concert, left



Rachel Coster
Content creator

Coster, host of the viral TikTok series "Boy Room," is on a mission to revamp some of the most forbidding boy rooms she can find. She pitched the series to Gymnasium, which agreed to produce it, while working as a barista in New York City. Next thing she knew, the videos were hits. The best part, Coster says, is meeting the boys and getting a glimpse into their rooms. "It's not that I have good taste or anything, it's mostly just that I really like seeing stuff," she says, adding, "getting to see so many ways to live has been awesome." There's a lot she'd like to conquer next, particularly writing, acting and directing, maybe even music. "I can't deny that there's an amazing country music album in me," she says. "There's no evidence of that, I just can really feel it coming out." Her parting words? "There's no way to know what the universe has in store for me and I can't imagine it's anything but awesome."



Auli'i Cravalho
Actor

Cravalho reprised her role as the title character in the "Moana" 2024 sequel, which grossed $1 billion. She also made her Broadway debut as Sally Bowles in "Cabaret." "The story of 'Cabaret' hooked me instantly, how the palpable themes of 1920s fascism, morality and sexism still simmer dangerously in today's political sphere. And after years of playing my darling Moana, I craved a character that didn't feel safe," she says. Cravalho is exec producer of the live action "Moana," EP on short "The Queen's Flowers" and SXSW doc "Reef Builders." "You can expect to find me both in front of, and *faaar* behind the camera."



Kashus Culpepper
Musician

The Alabama-born country crooner first found his voice at 5 years old while singing in church. But it wasn't until the pandemic that Culpepper began picking up a guitar and learning cover songs for barrack bonfires during a deployment in Spain with the U.S. Navy. Fast forward five years: Culpepper is now readying himself for the release of a highly anticipated debut album and has found fans in both Elton John and Leon Bridges, with whom he recently wrapped a tour. "I've learned that making art is a lifelong journey," says Culpepper. "There's no finish line. It's best that I just stay present and focus on the work I have for the day."



Alix Earle
Content creator

Earle is one of the biggest names on social media and the voice behind the hit podcast "Hot Mess." She's known for her off-the-cuff humor, real-life moments and a wild ability to connect with just about everyone. From beauty tips to everyday chaos, her fans can't get enough, and brands call it the "Alix Earle [sold out] Effect" for a reason. "Looking back, the biggest difference I noticed within myself is my confidence," she says. "Having tough conversations, managing people and really coming to terms with me being my own boss is something I've grown into this past year."

"I've learned that making art is a lifelong journey."
Kashus Culpepper

Clockwise, from top left: Platform PR; Steve Glass; Mario Millan; Courtesy of Coster; Cedrick Jones; Courtesy of Earle; Courtesy of Cravalho; Todd Owyoung/NBC/Getty Images; Elizabeth Morris/Netflix

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Clockwise from top left: Mark Eydelshteyn in Oscar-winning "Anora"; Rhenzy Feliz in "The Penguin"; Tom Francis in Broadway's "Sunset Boulevard"



Rhenzy Feliz
Actor

It's not every day you can say you've walked the grim streets of Gotham and find yourself amid a rivalry between Batman villains, but Feliz opened the doorway to showing a more empathetic side in Gotham in his performance in "The Penguin." "I was honestly afraid that people wouldn't have enough empathy for Victor in 'The Penguin,' and I asked Colin [Farrell] about it. He said to lean into it, and to go further into the empathy. It gave me even more permission to put that fear aside and just dive further into Victor."



Tom Francis
Actor

Francis found himself on the "ride of a lifetime" with Jamie Lloyd's "Sunset Blvd." revival. "It's really opened up doors in a way that I don't think I knew it was going to do when I first signed the contract," he says. He nabbed a Tony nomination and an Olivier Award for his performance — and a rising profile that's led to on-screen roles in "You" Season 5, Noah Baumbach's upcoming "Jay Kelly" and Peter Berg's "The Mosquito Bowl." He's currently working on "Bowl," which involves training in a "boot camp" for the World War II football film.



Mark Eydelshteyn
Actor

One of the most promising young actors in Russia, Eydelshteyn found himself front and center at the Oscars this year as Sean Baker's "Anora" took home the award for best picture, and three other trophies. "Despite all the attention and crazy rhythm, we're still just regular guys and girls you can call in the middle of the night to discuss the new 'Superman' or a vegetarian pasta recipe," says Eydelshteyn, who played the mercurial son of an oligarch in the film. Having signed to WME earlier this year, the actor is currently slated to star opposite Sophie Turner in Donald Glover and Francesca Sloane's second season of "Mr. and Mrs. Smith."



Reece Feldman
Content creator

Feldman, the popular creator known as @guywithamoviecamera on TikTok and Instagram, gained a massive following through his viral behind-the-scenes content on film and TV sets. Now, he's a mainstay at some of the biggest events of the year, covering everything from the Oscars to the Met Gala. This past May, Feldman debuted his short film "Wait, Your Car?" in Cannes at a TikTok event during the festival. He finds that the time he's spent working on sets has helped inform his own work. "Seeing how James Gunn is directing 150 extras, and the way that he decides where the camera is ... you can't put a price on how valuable that is to watch someone like that and be that intimately close to them and ask questions." Coming up, Feldman has a pilot for a miniseries he's ready to pitch. "I just want to tell stories that people my age and around my age are excited about and tell them in a way that's thoughtful and that treats the audience with respect and as intelligent viewers."

"Despite all the attention and crazy rhythm, we're still just regular guys and girls you can call in the middle of the night to discuss the new 'Superman' or a vegetarian pasta recipe." Mark Eydelshteyn

Clockwise, frok top left: Everett Collection; Max; River Chad; Dujonna Gift-Simms; John Lamparski/Getty Images; Mike Coppola/Getty Images; Marc Brenner

ARTISTS FIRST

CONGRATULATES

Auli'i Cravalho
Keyla Monterroso Mejia
Miles Caton

ON BEING SELECTED TO

VARIETY'S 2025 YOUNG HOLLYWOOD IMPACT REPORT







Up Next

Fabrizio Guido

Actor

Guido quickly became a fan favorite on Netflix's "Running Point" with his standout performance as Jackie Gordon. "Watching it be so well-received and climb the charts on Netflix is something I'm super proud of," he says. "I'm always advocating for the show, not just because I'm on it, but because I highly respect the people I'm working with, both in front of and behind the camera." Guido's love for the series and his co-stars is evident, and he has a fitting description for the cast's relationship. "We love each other like a family, but we operate like a team,"he says. Before Season 2 starts filming, he hopes to fit in as many stand-up shows as he can and continue working on the pilot he's developing.



Up Next

Chase Infiniti

Actor

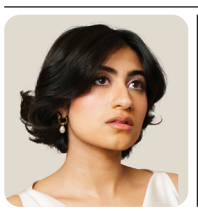
It's rare that a young star like Infiniti — born and raised in Indianapolis — would pay their dues on some of the most coveted sets in Hollywood, but such is her burden. We first met the actor as a worthy sparring partner for Jake Gyllenhaal, Ruth Negga and Peter Sarsgaard in Apple TV's buzzy "Presumed Innocent." As that series garnered four Emmy nominations, Infiniti skipped right over to Paul Thomas Anderson's band of players. She'll make her feature film debut in PTA's "One Battle After Another" this fall as the offspring of Leonardo DiCaprio and Teyana Taylor, joining a cast that's being watched closely for awards glory. She won't have much time off, as she's been set as the co-lead for Hulu's "Handmaid's Tale" spinoff, "The Testaments."





Chase Infiniti, top, in "Presumed Innocent"; Fabrizio Guido in "Running Point"







Jack Innanen
Amita Rao
Owen Thiele

Actors

Rao, Innanen, and Thiele collaborate in achieving comedic genius in FX's "Adults," an ensemble comedy written by "Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon" alums Ben Kronengold and Rebecca Shaw. It follows a group of twentysomething co-dependent housemates. The show debuted in May to critical acclaim, and the effects of success are already hitting all three of them. "It feels like new doors have been opened to be able to pursue acting, writing and comedy at this new level, which has honestly been keeping me up at night with both excitement and anxiety," says Innanen. "I'm looking forward to doing more projects of different genres and mediums — plays and musicals, horror and drama. I love live theater, and I love the grotesque," adds Rao. As for Thiele? "I've been so lucky to work on projects with people who deeply inspire me. I hope that continues."



Judeline

Musician

The Spanish singer-songwriter has quickly become one to watch for her distinctive and indie pop sound infused with Andalusian flamenco, Venezuelan folk, Arabic influences and modern electronic textures. After releasing her debut album, "Bodhiria," in 2024 and joining J Balvin on a European stadium tour as his opening act, Judeline entered the busiest year of her young career — making her Coachella debut, performing at the Royal Palace of Madrid and launching her first U.S. tour. "My biggest goal is to keep evolving," she says. "I'm dreaming of even more immersive shows, with visual art, movement, scenography ... I also want to collaborate with artists who get it, who aren't afraid to explore sound and vulnerability in strange ways. This industry moves fast, and I'm learning that staying grounded is key if I want to keep making music that's true."



Ella Langley

Musician

"You Look Like You Love Me" was one presumptuous song title, but it turned out to be prophetic, as country music devotees quickly fell head over heels for this Alabama native. Although she had help from duet partner Riley Green, the No. 1 success of this bar room-lust anthem had just about everything to do with the agreeable chutzpah of the ACMs' winner for best new female artist of the year. She became the only female artist to have a chart-topping country song in 2024, and her solo follow-up single, "Weren't for the Wind," made it to No. 2. Country needs a dozen more instant female stars just like her, but if it can only have one right now, there's no mystery why it's Langley.

Clockwise, from top right: Enanei; Courtesy of Langley; Courtesy of Thiele; Emily Soto; David Urbanke; Stefanie Frontera; Kathlyn Almeida; Apple Tv +; Netflix



Ravyn Lenae
Musician

When Lenae recorded her unexpected smash hit "Love Me Not," which hit the top 10 of the Hot 100 at the end of July, she knew it was something special. "There's this undeniable energy to it, something infectious that grabs you right away," says the R&B singer of the retro-pop song, which has been used in more than 500,000 TikToks over the past year. At this point, the Chicago native is something of an industry veteran: She signed to Atlantic Records as a teen and has since released three EPs and two albums, including last year's "Bird's Eye." Following the success of "Love Me Not," Lenae will hit the road on a solo tour before opening for Sabrina Carpenter.



Keyla Monterroso Mejia
Actor

Mejia showcased her comedic talent through standout performances in features "One of Them Days" and "You're Cordially Invited," as well as in episodes of "The Studio" and "Running Point." In these projects, she held her own alongside comedy heavyweights such as Will Ferrell, Seth Rogen and Keke Palmer. "I think, personally — as Keyla — I struggle sometimes with being super confident. And I think I got really lucky to always play very confident characters. That was super fun, super addicting," she says. "Feeling free and wild and getting to have fun is a really cool feeling that I got with comedy."



Isabela Merced
Actor

Merced knows a thing or two about stepping into beloved films and series. After joining the cast of blockbuster franchises such as "Superman," where she played the sardonic Hawkgirl, "The Last of Us" and "Alien: Romulus," the actor is excited for audiences to explore new worlds and new characters with her and set a positive example on set for future generations of actors. "I'm really hopeful for people setting a standard of quality of work that involves kindness. As a Midwesterner, kindness is a huge value for me, and for that reason, 'Superman' meant a lot to me. I've felt that love lately among stacked communities," she says.



Bella Ramsey, left, and Isabela Merced star in "The Last of Us."

Clockwise, from top left: Andy Jackson; Michael Buckner; Michael S. Schwartz/Getty Images; HBO; Exavier Castro;

COMIC CHOPS ON THE GRILL

POWER OF YOUNG HOLLYWOOD EVENT HOST ALEC FLYNN HAS HIGH HOPES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF TALENT

By Leia Mendoza



When Alec Flynn was in college, the comedian began using standup as a form of medicine to help with depression. "I needed some sort of creative outlet outside of getting blacked out every weekend and hanging out with the same five people that I've known since I was a kid in Boston," reveals Flynn, who is set to host this year's *Variety*'s Power of Young Hollywood event on Aug. 7.

After honing his comic chops in front of audiences in New Hampshire, Flynn went on to travel America doing stand-up shows and hosting "Big Al's Grill ASMR," where he interviews his closest friends and colleagues online. "Every time I would be on a podcast, I just felt like I had felt pressured to be funny. I just didn't like it. I would go, 'What do I like doing the most? I like grilling outside with my friends and having beers.' Now comedians want to do the podcast because they want to sit outside and have me cook barbecue for them."

Flynn says that the most rewarding thing about performing comedy live is the audience experience after the show, and learning about the people who engage with his videos. "In San Diego, there was a trans man who came up to me and said, 'Yo, dude, you're big bro!' and I was like, 'Yo, you're little bro, exactly.' Meeting people that are my age or younger, they come up and they say that the videos make them feel like they're not going insane."

As the host of Power of Young Hollywood's event, Flynn has high hopes for the next generation of storytellers across multiple media. "I hope that we just start making more stuff in L.A. I hope that we see more normalcy and see more people out getting beers and stuff at bars. It's about human connection and hoping for authenticity."



Jessie Murph
Musician

In July, the Nashville-born, Alabama-raised artist released "Sex Hysteria," a second studio album that included "Blue Strips" and "Touch Me Like a Gangster," two tracks that charted on the Billboard Hot 100 before the album was even released. Though Murph also found herself nominated for the new female artist of the year honor at the 2025 Academy of Country Music Awards, her proudest moment happened in April when she played Coachella for the first time. "It's something that's always been a goal of mine, so to see it actually happen was a 'pinch me moment,'" she says. Up next? A 54-city world tour.





Nico Parker
Mason Thames
Actors

When Thames and Parker were growing up, they never would have believed they would be soaring above the clouds on dragons and fighting inside Viking-era arenas on the set of the live action "How to Train Your Dragon." "Not to be too biased, but Hiccup is my dream character. He's in me and for the rest of my life, he will be a part of me, which is the same way with a lot of people who just watched the movies," says Thames, who has "Black Phone 2" on deck. Now as the new generation of dragon-riders for a younger generation of kids to discover, Parker can't wait to see what is next for audiences to find. "I love people getting to re-enter the world that they already know and love, but there is something so sweet about watching young kids that don't know what's about to happen. Watching them watch the movie for the first time is a dream come true," says Parker, who will next be seen in Maud Apatow's "Poetic License."



Role Model
Musician

Role Model has learned to keep his expectations low. Since debuting in 2017, the artist, whose given name is Tucker Pillsbury, has slowly built momentum with three EPs and two albums including last year's "Kansas Anymore," whose deluxe edition yielded the breakout hit "Sally, When the Wine Runs Out." "It's really clear when someone finds and settles into their sound," he says. "People got to watch me just figure my shit out. In a way, I'm glad it took me this long." Now, "Sally" is approaching 100 million Spotify streams thanks to TikTok and an opening slot for Gracie Abrams, all leading toward festival dates and an acting debut in Lena Dunham's Netflix romcom "Good Sex."



Jessie Murph is taking the country music world by storm.

"It's really clear when someone finds and settles into their sound. People got to watch me just figure my shit out." Role Model



Sombr is riding high on two hit records.



Julian Shapiro-Barnum
Content creator

While Shapiro-Barnum's often-viral content features celebrities, isn't really about them — the real stars in his online series are everyday kids. In 2021, he launched "Recess Therapy," in which he interviews children. Eventually, he started introducing celebrities to interact with the kids. "They also know that they have to play and be goofy and relinquish some of their carefully built personas," Shapiro-Barnum says about his famous guests, which this year included Lisa, Jimmy Fallon and Javier Bardem. He also hosts the shows "Gems With Miles and Julian" and "Celebrity Substitute." And in all of them, "the most important person on the show is the least famous person on the show, which is just the kid," he says.



Sombr
Musician

Not many artists can claim dual simultaneous hits, yet Sombr (aka Shane Boose) achieved just that after "Back to Friends" and "Undressed" went big on TikTok in March. Both songs reached top 40 and crowned various Spotify viral charts. "My music is resonating because it came from my heart," explains the artist, who dropped out of high school to pursue music after his 2022 hit "Caroline" picked up steam. He plans on bringing his bedroom-recorded strain of hazy pop across the globe on his headlining fall tour, with plans to write new songs along the way: "All I want to do is keep writing and touring and serving [my supporters] for the rest of my days. That's what gives me purpose."

Clockwise, from top left: Ashley Olahh; Courtesy of Role Model; Antony Jones/Getty Images/Spotify; Courtesy of Sombr; Francis Hills; Gilbert Flores/Penske Media; Courtesy of Thames; Courtesy of Parker



Debbie Hickey/Getty Images

ORIGINAL FORCE

VARIETY MUSIC INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR PINKPANTHERESS SAYS A LOT WITH LESS

By Jem Aswad

The timing of *Variety* Music's Innovator of the Year award (presented by Sandisk) could not have been more fitting for 24-year-old Victoria Beverly Walker — aka the British alt-pop singer-songwriter-producer PinkPantheress, perhaps best-known for her 2023 smash "Boy's a Liar" — She is now, somewhat officially, Dr. Pantheress.

She was awarded an honorary doctorate from England's University of Kent just two days before this interview took place in late July, even though she'd left college after a year to pursue music.

"They just offered me a doctorate, so obviously I'm going to have to say yes!" she says with a self-deprecating laugh. "That's pretty much it, to be honest. My dad used to teach there and I'm from Canterbury," where the university is based. However, she noted during her acceptance speech that she'd joined her first band in the city and uploaded her first songs to SoundCloud there — which was its own form of career-related higher education, and where her path to both honors began.

PinkPantheress' early SoundCloud and TikTok tracks showed her to be a both boundary-pushing and singular artist, with effervescent melodies sung in her unmistakable, breathy, British-accented voice over samples from the '90s and '00s and driving drum and bass-influenced rhythms. Most strikingly, the songs were short — often just 90 seconds or so — but they were fully formed, with verses, choruses and a bridge, a rarity in the snippet-obsessed TikTok age. It's a format to which she's partially returned on her latest release, the stellar "Fancy That," an eight-song collection that blazes by in just over 20 minutes but still feels like a complete statement.

"They were short," she says of her early tracks, "but not with an absolute, like, intentionality — it was just the natural progression of the songs. I don't think music needs to follow any rules, which is how I think everybody should feel. I just thought one-minute-30 wasn't a big deal as long as the song was good, and I still hold that same opinion."

She began posting songs in 2019 and within less than two years had signed with Warner Music's Parlophone imprint, releasing some of the tracks on her debut mixtape, "To Hell With It." But her career really took off when rapper Ice Spice jumped on a remix of the 2022 track "Boy's a Liar" and they ended up with a global hit that reached No. 2 in her native U.K. and No. 3 on the Billboard Hot 100. She followed with a proper debut album, "Heaven Knows," which found her taking on more conventional songwriting formats and sounds, but she returned to her scrappier, more experimental (and shorter) style on "Fancy That," which is officially categorized as a mixtape even though it could just as easily be an album. What's the distinction?

"I think those differences are subconscious more than anything," she says. "If I go in thinking it's a mixtape, then I operate a little differently: An album is a way more official body of work, a stake in the sand to really solidify and showcase all of your talents and say 'This is an era,' and a mixtape is more like 'This is how I'm feeling now.'"

She'll spend the fall supporting "Fancy That" on tour, which she says has been the most challenging aspect of her career so far. Like many artists whose stars rose during the pandemic, her popularity was far ahead of her experience as a performer when the world opened up.

"That's why I always say in interviews that people are watching me become a performer in real time," she says. "I set high standards for myself and I just don't do things that I'm not good at, so I've had to basically go against my nature and just jump into things that I know I need to work on. For me it's more of a confidence thing — like when [her first performance at England's massive Glastonbury festival] was coming up, my fear was, 'Well, I can't do this to a high enough standard, so should I just not do it?'

"But it's gotten better as time has gone on," she continues, "and I was shocked watching the video back from Glastonbury and realizing how confident I looked, and how nice I looked. I didn't know if I was gonna be able to get over my fear, and I'm pleased that I did," she concludes, before adding with another self-deprecating laugh, "Not to sound cheesy."



Up Next

Fina Strazza

Actor

At 19, Strazza was this year's youngest Tony nominee, landing a nod for featured actress in a play for her performance as Beth in the Gen Z, feminist phenomenon "John Proctor Is the Villain." She's not new to Broadway, having made her debut on the Great White Way in "Matilda." Still, the New Yorker was surprised at the recognition: "I don't know if I ever expected to be at Radio City on Tonys night, or let alone be nominated, and especially not at 19," she says. She also recently appeared in Netflix's "Fear Street: Prom Queen." For now, she's soaking up the last moments of "John Proctor," which closes Aug. 31.



Sophie Thatcher

Actor

Thatcher returned as Natalie in the third season of "Yellowjackets," taking the character into darker, more commanding territory as she stepped into a leadership role. Beyond the series, she played a love robot gone haywire in "Companion" and a Mormon missionary in "Heretic," as well as contributing music to both projects. Next, she'll appear in "Her Private Hell," from filmmaker Nicolas Winding Refn. "I go to places that I didn't know I could go to on camera. It sometimes feels like, when you're very hyper-aware of yourself, you can hit a wall — but I've never had such out-of-body experiences. It's incredibly thrilling and scary." Thatcher says she's already spoken to Refn about potentially working on the "Her Private Hell" soundtrack. "I want to help build the world," she explains. "And soundtracks, to me, are the most important thing."



Zach Top

Musician

The fastest-rising star in country music lists George Jones, Merle Haggard and Keith Whitley as his biggest influences. Of course, they all say that ... but Top is the rare county freshman who sounds like he means it. For fans of traditional country sounds (like the Saving Country Music site, which named him 2024 artist of the year), Top is looming as a potential savior. Even though he's on an indie label, TikTok spurred the attention that drove "I Never Lie" to No. 1 on Mediabase's country airplay chart. The winner of the 2025 ACM for best new male artist will be headlining arenas following the Aug. 25 release of his sophomore album.



D'Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai

Actor

The Emmy-nominated Oji-Cree First Nations actor gained major cred with his role in the critically acclaimed FX series "Reservation Dogs." Over the course of three seasons, the coming-of-age story, revolving around a band of young Indigenous friends on an Oklahoma reservation, received widespread acclaim, landing on over 80 critics' year-end lists. It also paved a major path forward for D'Pharaoh, who has since made waves with a starring role in Alex Garland's widely praised "Warfare" (released by A24 in April) and an upcoming role in Darren Aronofsky's "Caught Stealing" (set for release in August).



Lola Young

Musician

The South London singer-songwriter, who has garnered more than 1 billion all-time streams globally across her catalog, had a massive year with the breakout track "Messy." A song she first wrote as a demo in her bedroom amid a chaotic breakup, it went on to hit No. 1 on the Billboard Pop Airplay chart, the Hot Adult Contemporary chart and Alternative Rock chart — and led her to some powerhouse performances that included opening for Billie Eilish in Paris and a Coachella debut. The whirlwind ascension is likely to continue with her new album, "I'm Only Fucking Myself," which drops Sept. 19.







Clockwise from top left: Zach Top mines traditional country music, while Lola Young gets "Messy" with a bestselling track; Sophie Thatcher starred in "Yellowjackets" and as a robot in "Companion."

Clockwise, from top: Alexandra Arnold; Citizen Kane Wayne; A-Tai/Getty Images; Samir Hussein/Wireimage/Getty Images; Todd Owyoung/NBC/Getty Images; Jamie McCarthy/Wireimage/Getty Images; Terry Wyatt/Wireimage/Getty Images; Robert Ascroft

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NEW LEADERS

focus

41 under 40 Our class of 2025 New Leaders are ready to steer Hollywood into the future

Photographs By Michael Buckner



Jacob Moncrief and Mack Sovereign

→ As far back as the decline of gladiatorial games in the 1st century AD, pundits have complained that this or that sector of the entertainment industry is on the brink of oblivion, and it's safe to say that people have groused that the next generation is "going to the dogs" even longer. *Variety*'s 2025 class of New Leaders is an antidote to that type of thinking, proving that a time of contraction and disruption can also be a time of opportunity if you have a vision and the tenacity to back it up.

Digital

Patrick Carroll
Director, brands + gaming
Done+Dusted

Carroll executive produced "WrestleMania 41," which had a 114% increase in viewership over the previous installment, making it the most successful WWE event in history. He also co-executive produced "League of Legends Worlds 2024," which broke esports viewership records with a peak of 6.94 million concurrent viewers, and the Emmy winning "Valorant Champions 2024." "I found my first niche in gaming," he says. "I got my start at Done+Dusted because they were looking for somebody who authentically knew that world and I couldn't believe that was a job qualification."

Kylie Kelce
Host, producer
Not Gonna Lie podcast

Kelce was pushed into the media spotlight because of her marriage to Philadelphia Eagles star Jason Kelce, whose brother, Travis, happens to be dating a pretty famous singer called Taylor Swift. Jason is now retired from the NFL, but his wife grabbed the mic in December 2024, launching the podcast "Not Gonna Lie," mixing no-B.S. stories of her life and motherhood with women's sports stars and celebrity guests like Ed Sheeran, Kate Hudson and Michelle Obama. "If you're gonna talk about our family, if you're gonna talk about me, you might as well hear it from me," Kylie said at the time. It was an instant success — at one point taking over the No. 1 slot from Joe Rogan.

Jacob Moncrief
Chief operating officer
Mythical Entertainment

Moncrief got his start in traditional TV ("The Ellen Show," MTV), but the Mythical COO says his career really jumped to another level when he joined BuzzFeed in its early "Wild West" days. "I got to come in and experience a lot of growth very early on in my career in terms of creating systems and managing processes that allowed early OG creators to really shine," he says. Home to wildly popular YouTube shows like "Good Mythical Morning," the company is on track to grow branded revenue from last year by about 80%, he says, thanks to relationships with companies like Etsy.

Mack Sovereign
Chief content officer
Wave Sports & Entertainment

Sovereign oversaw Wave Sports & Entertainment's foray into lifestyle content with podcasts such as "House of Maher," featuring Olympic rugby sensation Ilona Maher and her sisters Olivia and Adrianna "Dre Baby" Maher, and "Not Gonna Lie with Kylie Kelce," the latter of which debuted at No. 1 on both Apple and Spotify and earned more than 26 million weekly views across platforms. "Our expansion and investment into women's sports and women's storytelling more broadly has been led by Kylie Kelce and Ilona Maher, who have massive fan bases already," he says. "It's been one of biggest successes of the year."

Roman Wassenmüller
Head of podcast business
Spotify

Wassenmüller's team launched the Spotify Partner Program in January, an initiative that allows podcasters to generate revenue directly from premium subscriber streams. It's been so successful — video podcast consumption on Spotify has increased by over 20%, and creator payouts have increased — the program has expanded to other global markets. "Progress has been phenomenal," says Wassenmüller, who credits Spotify co-president and chief business officer Alex Norström as one of his mentors. "Video will remain a major part of Spotify. It strengthens fan connections and opens the door ... to content creators."

—

Not pictured in digital / reps: Patrick Carroll, Kylie Kelce, Roman Wassenmüller, Andrew Mathes



Reps

—

Kyle Carter
Senior VP, Global Touring
IAG

Carter runs IAG's L.A. music office and leads the agency's hip-hop and R&B division, home to stars like Mary J. Blige and Keyshia Cole. He's got a serious knack for spotting crossover potential with film, TV and brand partnerships, which has helped artists like 50 Cent and Ne-Yo level up their global tours and sell out legendary venues. "The pieces always fall into place if you look and work for it," he says. "Never be afraid of failure as failure always leads to success as long as you're willing not to give up too early; there are never any real issues or problems, only solutions."



Alexis Fisher
Founder, CEO
Timeline Management, Timeline Touring

The value of Fisher's business plan and the sector it serves was demonstrated in December when Live Nation, the world's largest concert promoter, acquired a majority stake in her digital influencer management and live event company Timeline. In the months since, Timeline has announced deals for a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders tour offering fans live on-stage auditions and a Las Vegas live show for the stars of Hulu's "The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives." "My whole thing is taking things that you would not expect to go on tour, which is a similar model to what I did with influencers back in the day," she says. "It was like paving the road map for other for other people to then follow."

Left to right: Gabrielle Kachman, Josh Glick, Alex Yousefzadeh, Marissa Frobes, Zac Frognowski, Jermaine Johnson, Alexis Fisher, Kyle Carter, David Morris, Stephanie Roeser, Jillian Taboada

Marissa Frobes
Media finance agent
CAA

Frobes orchestrated the domestic sale of Brady Corbet's "The Brutalist" to A24 ahead of its Venice premiere last year, brokered the sale of "The Luckiest Man in America" to IFC Films following its Toronto debut and raised financing for Mona Fastvold's "The Testament of Ann Lee," co-written and co-produced by Corbet and starring Amanda Seyfried. Frobes also helped package and finance Jane Schoenbrun's "Teenage Sex and Death at Camp Miasma" with Mubi and the Zellner brothers' "Alpha Gang," both currently in production. She may deal in movies by trade, but that hasn't dulled her love for sitting down to watch good film: "I always can recenter myself by doing that," she says.

Zac Frognowski, Josh Glick
Managers and producers
Brillstein Entertainment Partners

Frognowski and Glick aren't just co-workers, they're best friends. Recent big signings for the duo include actor, comedian and YouTube personality Jimmy Tatro (brokered deal with HBO for his new show "Lifites") and Oscar-winning writer Stephen Gaghan (sold his film "Billion Dollar Ransom" to Amazon). Frognowski aims to have the projects he works on impact the larger culture in some way. For Glick, things clicked for him after a fateful encounter with a book. "I was given a copy of 'Where Did I Go Right: You're No One in Hollywood Until Somone Wants You Dead' and read it over a weekend and immediately knew I wanted to be a Hollywood manager," he says.

Jermaine Johnson
Partner
3 Arts Entertainment

Johnson produced "American Fiction," written and helmed by client Cord Jefferson, who won an Oscar for adapted screenplay for the film in 2024. He also closed major deals for clients including Dana Ledoux Miller, co-director and co-writer of "Moana 2," which grossed over $1 billion worldwide. "I would tell the next generation to pick up the phone and call people," he says. "The generation that's making the decisions calls people on the phone to talk through a negotiation. The upside of a phone call vastly outweighs the negative, so pick up the phone and you might make a new friend."

Gabrielle Kachman
Talent agent
Gersh

A first-generation American whose mom hails from Colombia, Kachman got her start as a literary agent assistant to Brendan Deneen at FinePrint in New York. From the agency's sludge pile, she identified an eventual bestseller that would spawn a movie adaptation, Kody Keplinger's "The Duff," bolstering her confidence. "That was the first break into being able to see that I could trust my instincts in a real way," she recalls. After spending time at CAA and Authentic Talent, Kachman landed at Gersh in 2016, where she's assembled an impressive client roster including "Abbott Elementary" star Tyler James Williams and Tony nominee Sarah Pidgeon, who's next set to play Carolyn Bessette in Ryan Murphy's "American Love Story."

Andrew Mathes
Partner
WME

By a quirk of fate, Mathes started work in the mailroom of Endeavor talent agency on June 1, 2009, the day the scrappy 14-year-old agency announced its stunning takeover of the venerable William Morris Agency. "It was quite a first day," he recalls. Mathes spent three weeks in what became overnight the WME mailroom before being promoted to the desk of literary agent Julie Weitz. That nod set him on the road to a successful career. "I love that you get to touch many different parts of the ecosystem, whether it's writers, producers, directors, actors. You get to really be part of the process of building a lot of these shows from the ground up," Mathes says. "It's highly rewarding."

David Morris
Agent, production arts
UTA

Morris represents an impressive list of behind-the-scenes talent, including the exec producers of the series "Andor" (Sanne Wohlenberg), "Black Rabbit" (Erica Kay), "Severance" (Caroline Baron), "The White Lotus" (Mark Kamine) and "Yellowstone" (Hilton Smith). He praises his team in the production arts department, which has a roster that earned a total 39 Emmy nominations this year: "I'm really fortunate to work with a diverse set of agents who have amazing disciplines, who come from a series of backgrounds, whether they are former executives like myself, or working in commercial studios."





Alex Yousefzadeh handled clearance legal for XTR's documentary "Diane Warren: Relentles," left; Stephanie Roeser is a leader on the legal team for Blake Lively.

Legal

Stephanie Roeser
Partner, employment & labor
Manatt, Phelps & Phillips

Roeser is at the center of one of the hottest entertainment stories of the past year as a lead member of the legal team representing Blake Lively in her ongoing litigation against Justin Baldoni, Wayfarer Studios and other parties and the defense of the actress and her husband, Ryan Reynolds, in a related countersuit. A complex matter raising issues related to California employment law and protected speech that now encompasses three consolidated cases, it's legal catnip for a born litigator like Roeser. "I was one of those kids who was constantly negotiating with my parents every single day, so I think they probably thought I was always destined to be a lawyer," she says.

Jillian Taboada
Associate
Del Shaw Moonves Tanaka Finkelstein Lezcano Bobb & Dang

Taboada is an integral part of a Del Shaw Moonves legal team that handles on-camera talent such as former Netflix exec Bozoma Saint John ("The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills") and "Access Hollywood" co-host Zuri Hall. She's also made big scores in the sports arena, including deals for the NFL related to Super Bowl LIX and the 2025 NFL Draft. "If I don't get the result I want, I'm not going to boo-hoo about it for too long," she says. "I'm going to pick myself up and try to find another way."

Alex Yousefzadeh
Partner
Donaldson Callif Perez

Yousefzadeh is the person you call if you're making a documentary and you don't want to get sued. He handles clearance legal for production companies including Kunhardt Films ("The Silent Witness"), Altimeter Films ("Carvile: Winning Is Everything, Stupid") and XTR ("Diane Warren: Relentless"). The work involves personal rights reviews and fair use counsel, the latter of which involves some tricky questions. "What is the potential for a claim that insurance is going to feel comfortable writing a policy for and defending against?" he asks rhetorically. "Or is this something that we can potentially bring within various parameters by making modifications to it so it's transformative enough that there won't be actual significant market harm?"

"If I don't get the result I want ... I'm going to pick myself up and find another way."
Jillian Taboada

From left: Greenwich Entertainment; Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images

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WILL PHELPS

VARIETY'S NEW LEADERS

I guess they're just letting anyone into these things nowadays... not good!

love, Paul Stacey

American High

Theater

Cynthia J. Tong
Producer
Tom Kirdahy Prods

Tong produced two of Broadway's starriest shows this year — "Just in Time" with Jonathan Groff and the "Gypsy" revival with Audra McDonald, the latter of which earned Tong her second Tony nom. She says working on the former for the last five years "from first draft to opening the show to maintaining the show" truly helped her grow as a producer. While her mentor Tom Kirdahy taught her the value of relationships and growing from failure, one of the lessons she takes most to heart is a simple one: "We must have fun doing the work we do, otherwise why do it?"

Music

Derrick Aroh
Senior VP, A&R
RCA Records

As someone who's always loved music, Aroh takes pride in working to develop the talents of many of today's top performers. He's collaborated with Latto, whose recent album, "Sugar Honey Iced Tea," debuted in the No. 1 spot on Billboard's Top Rap Albums chart. He also helped sign and develop Myles Smith, whose song "Stargazing" has over 1 billion streams. "The thing that means the most to me is to see the things I work on play a role in people's lives," he says. "I remember those moments for me when a Jay-Z song or a Biggie Smalls song did that for me."



Forrest Lipton and Derrick Aroh

Zach Friedman
Chief operating officer
Atlantic Music Group

Back in 2012, Friedman and his friend Tony Talamo started a management, merchandising and digital marketing agency out of their parents' basements in New Jersey, appropriately dubbed Homemade Projects, and they never really had any other jobs until 2018. That's when they began working with Elliot Grange's 10K Projects, which four years later acquired the company and its Homemade Records label. When Grainge was named CEO of Atlantic last year, he brought along Friedman and Talamo as COO and GM, respectively. "Taking our digital marketing [skills] and providing them at the executive level has been really exciting and fun," says Friedman.

Jessica Giraldo Navarro
CEO
Bichota Records

"For any manager, it's always about protecting the best interests of your client — but for me, it goes beyond that," says Giraldo Navarro. That's probably because her client is her sister, Colombian Grammy-winner Karol G, who also happens to be the founder of the label she runs. Launched in 2023 through a distribution deal with Interscope, the label allows Karol G to retain ownership of her masters, while the major handles distribution and promotion. Under the Bichota umbrella, the company also operates a creative agency and a film division, which partnered with Netflix to release a documentary on Karol G's stadium tour earlier this year.

Forrest Lipton
VP, marketing
Interscope Geffen A&M

Lipton is instrumental in the marketing efforts for such artists as Playboi Carti, whose 2025 album "Music" became his second consecutive No. 1 album on the Billboard 200. Lipton is also a central player in marketing the artists who've signed to Carti's Opium label, including rapper Destroy Lonely. "The first artist and team that gave me a shot was Benny Blanco and [his manager] Andrew Luftman and they taught me so much about music, marketing, storytelling and branding that I still use to this day," he says. "They're all marketing geniuses."

—

Not pictured in Music/Theater: Zach Friedman, Jessica Giraldo Navarro, Cynthia J. Tong

We proudly congratulate
our colleague
JILLIAN TABOADA
on her well-deserved
recognition as one of
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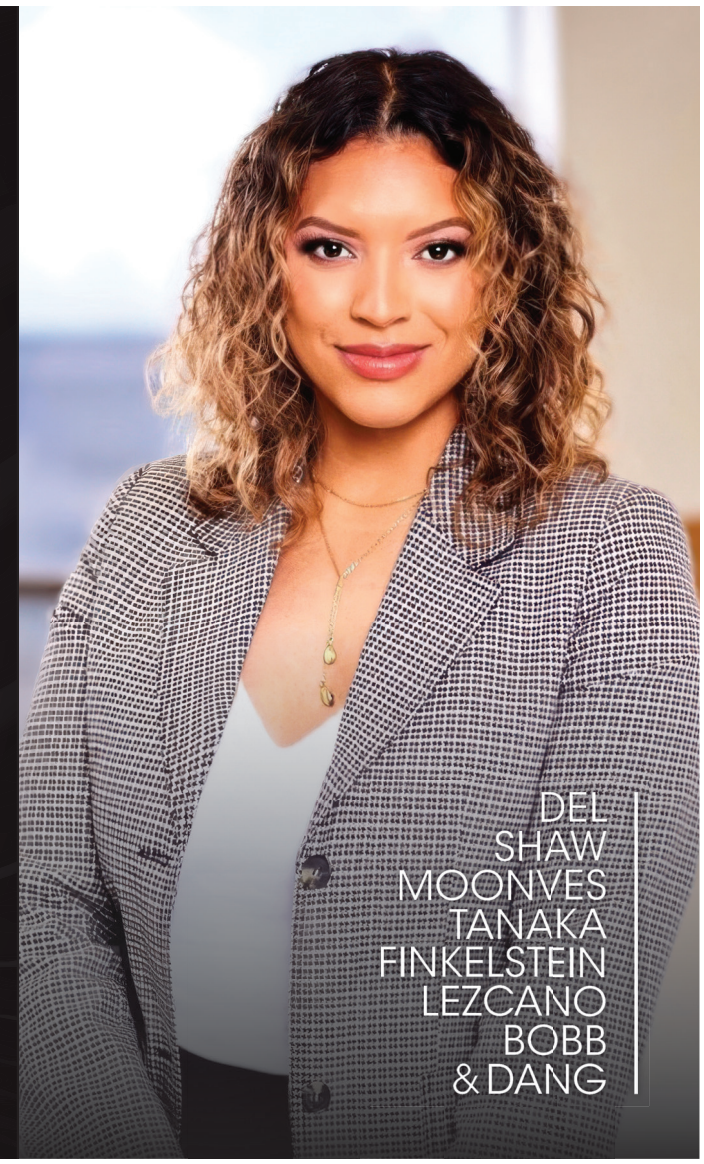

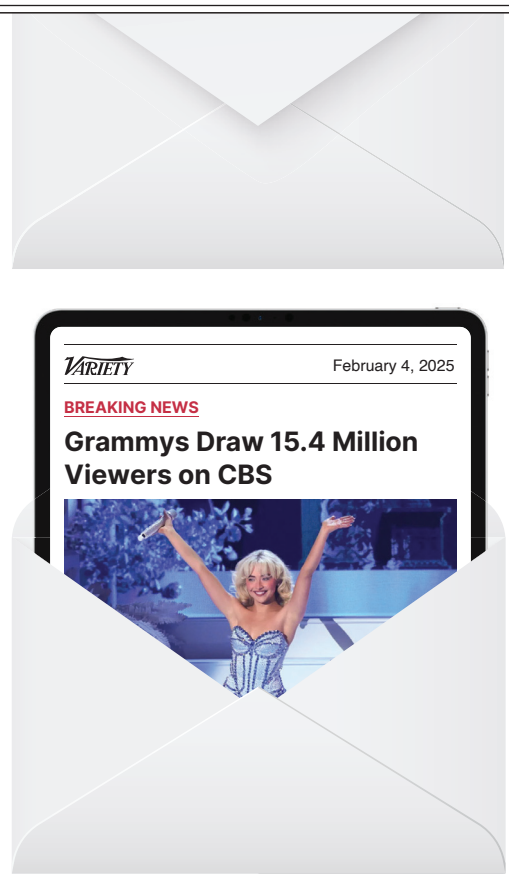

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Left to right: Courtney Freedman, Jason Wald, Shawn Goehl, Jasmine Daghighian, Chelsea Marotta, Sev Ohanian, Kaylon Hunt

Film

Ashley Alexander
VP, film
Hasbro Entertainment

Alexander oversees development and production on what she affectionately refers to as "nerd movies." She helped bring Hasbro's beloved tabletop role-playing game "Dungeons & Dragons" to the big screen with 2023's "Honor Among Thieves," starring Chris Pine, and with "Magic: The Gathering," directed by Matt Johnson, she's about to do it again. Though Hasbro has become known for attaching A-list talent to major IP, Alexander's process begins at a more grassroots level: "I go into the game shop every week," she says. "I love hanging out with our fans, like, 'What's exciting you today? Let's chat. You can destroy me in this game of "Magic."'"

Jasmine Daghighian
VP of film
Topic Studios

Last year was a major step forward for Daghighian and Topic Studios, which burst into the awards race with "A Real Pain" and saw the film's co-star Kieran Culkin win an Oscar and a Golden Globe. One of her personal career breakthroughs was pushing for a promising young actor to try out for indie film "Hot Summer Nights" at her previous company, Imperative. "I saw 'Interstellar' when we were casting the lead, and I saw Timothée Chalamet as the brother role," she says. "I was like, this kid is really special. We should maybe bring him in for an audition.'"

Courtney Freedman
VP, production
Paramount Pictures

Freedman helped shape the action-comedy "Novocaine" and was instrumental in bringing Michael Gracey's Oscar-nominated biopic "Better Man" to life. Up next: "Winter Games," "Reality Vice" and "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Last Ronin." "Someone once told me, 'Once you get to a certain point in your career everyone is smart and hard-working and the only thing that sets you apart is your taste, so you have to really cultivate that,'" she says. "I've tried to keep that in the forefront of my mind ever since and let it be my North Star in being thoughtful and intentional in the choices I make."

Shawn Goehl
VP, U.S. film development & production
CJ ENM

Goehl leads South Korean entertainment giant CJ ENM's domestic efforts to produce English-language films, from adaptations of the company's homegrown hits (including the currently-in-development "Extreme Job," "The Man from Nowhere" and "Veteran") to original projects such as Yorgos Lanthimos' upcoming film "Bugonia," starring Emma Stone and Jesse Plemons, on which he serves as co-executive producer. He attributes much of his current success to the five years he spent working with producer Donald De Line ("Ready Player One"). "I kind of got a five-year masterclass on how to produce a movie from him. and I've utilized that training here at CJ," he says.

Kaylon Hunt
VP, development & production
JuVee Prods.

Hunt has been with Viola Davis and Julius Tennon's JuVee Prods. for nearly 15 years, working on projects like "The Woman King" and the upcoming video game "Taria & Como," and he takes his job very

personally. "When you spend a lot of time working on something, whether it's developing something created by someone else or something you wrote, you're so close to it you have no idea how other people might receive it," says Hunt, who also wrote the book "American Wolf: A Journey of an Avoidant Heart," released this year. "It's terrifying but it's also freeing."

Anna Klein
Director of documentary programming
HBO

Klein says she loves working in nonfiction because "I get to work on so many different types of projects — biopics, portraits, politics, culture, crime." Currently, HBO Documentaries' "My Mom Jayne" is getting an enthusiastic audience response. She was inspired by working with the doc's director Mariska Hargitay. "I think it was something she had been thinking about for a long time, and it felt like such a privilege to be able to work with her, to help bring this story to light," says Klein, who started at HBO at 22. Up next: "Thoughts and Prayers," about the gun violence preparedness industry.

Chelsea Marotta
Creative producer
Religion of Sports

The Emmy-nominated Marotta brings more than a decade of experience in unscripted development to Religion of Sports, the media company co-founded by Tom Brady. Her recent work includes the docuseries "The Fastest Six Weeks in Sports," focusing on the time between the end of NCAA Women's March Madness and the beginning of the WNBA season, which premieres in September on the Roku Channel, YouTube and social media. Although her professional life is focused on sports, she's long harbored a passion for literature. "I think a lot of us in television loved books," she says. "I always loved them and I love magical realism and the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez."

Josey McNamara, Tom Ackerley
Partners, Co-CEOs
LuckyChap Entertainment

LuckyChap's origins are well-told lore: McNamara and Ackerley worked as assistant directors on a film in which Margot Robbie starred; then the trio —who became flatmates before Ackerley and Robbie married — founded the now red-hot prodco. In the decade since, McNamara, Ackerley and their "no so secret weapon" Robbie have shepherded attention-grabbing films like "I, Tonya," "Saltburn" and the $1.4 billion blockbuster "Barbie," plus hit TV shows "Maid" and "Sirens." As they look ahead to the next decade and think about expansion and growth, McNamara says, "It's always with the idea of, 'How do we improve the experience for filmmakers and talent when they work with us? Whether it's giving them new opportunities to explore TV, theater or music, how do we offer more of a 360-degree idea of what working with LuckyChap could be?'"

"We use the same strategy as our movies: shoot fast, make mistakes, learn from the mistakes and adjust quickly." **Will Phelps**



Everett Collection

Josey McNamara and Tom Ackerley produced the $1.4 billion hit "Barbie."

Sev Ohanian
Producer, Founder
Proximity Media

Ohanian's producing career began in 2008 when he wrote and directed "My Big Fat Armenian Family," a "no-budget" indie inspired by his life, shot on his dad's camcorder. It's a far cry from the Imax cameras used for "Sinners" — the blockbuster original thriller produced by Proximity Media, which Ohanian co-leads with Ryan Coogler and Zinzi Coogler — but that starter project influenced him to make filmmaking a career. Today, Ohanian oversees Proximity's slate, which he says had him spending 14 months living in Atlanta "shooting 'Creed III,' straight into 'Ironheart,' Zooming for 'Eyes of Wakanda' and helping run the company." Of what he loves about producing, Ohanian says, "Our job is to make the impossible possible."

Will Phelps
President
American High

Phelps has produced 19 feature films under his production banner American High, including "Big Time Adolescence" and "Plan B." The company operates out of a defunct middle school in upstate New York, which now serves as a movie studio. Phelps also put together a digital content arm with two sketch comedy groups that film at the former school. "We use the same strategy as our movies: shoot fast, make mistakes, learn from the mistakes and adjust quickly," he says. Next is their first theatrical release, "Rolling Loud," starring Owen Wilson.

Jason Wald
Senior VP, acquisitions & production
Neon

Wald led the negotiations for buzzy Sundance acquisition "Together" and "No Other Choice." But his biggest accomplishment is his collaboration with Osgood Perkins. He was the lead creative executive on the director's horror films "The Monkey" and the $100 million-plus hit "Longlegs," and Neon is prepping to release his next film, "Keeper," this fall. "Oz speaks to one of the main overarching reasons that we as a company got into production in the first place, which was to create a long-term home for filmmakers we love working with," Wald says.

—

Not pictured in film: Ashley Alexander, Anna Klein, Josey McNamara, Tom Ackerley, Will Phelps, Jason Wald



Left to right: Sahar Vahedi, Tre Shallowhorn, Loreli Alanís, Hilary Leavitt, Emily Furtani, Kenny Tsai, Lauren O'Connor, Ashley Cole, Jax Clark



TV/Streaming

Loreli Alanís
Senior VP
Point Grey Pictures

Alanis has worked on Point Grey's Amazon series "The Boys" since its inception and was a key force behind its first live-action spinoff "Gen V," serving as a producer on the ground in Toronto during the shooting of its second season. Now, the first-generation Mexican American and mother of two small children is developing a Spanish-language prequel, "Vought Rising," with Diego Luna and Gael García Bernal as producers. "'The Boys' does such a great job at skewering American power structures and how corporations and politics collide and impact people here domestically," she says, "and what this spinoff is doing is kind of showing how American power structures also impact people internationally, globally and, specifically, in Mexico."

Jax Clark
VP of development & production
Hoorae

For Clark, working at Issa Rae's production company Hoorae has been an opportunity to help bring creative voices to the forefront of entertainment in projects like the HBO series "Rap Shit," a comedy created by Rae based on the lives of two rappers. "I think the thing that gets me excited is discovering a new voice," says Clark, who planned to become a lawyer, but had a change of heart while traveling in Cuba. "If I read a script and find myself quoting from it or remembering it, then I know I've connected with the material."

Ashley Cole
Senior VP, drama development
Warner Bros. Television

At WBTV, Cole has had a standout year as the development executive behind two critically acclaimed series — "The Pitt" and "The Penguin" — with both being major Emmy contenders following multiple nominations. "I think people are really craving to feel something again, and to have the safety of people that are just trying to do good in the world, as you see in 'The Pitt,'" she says. Cole is also developing the "Crazy Rich Asians" TV adaptation for HBO Max, with the film's co-writer Adele Lim on board as showrunner. "[Lim] is just going to bring the tone and joy and humor and love that people fell in love with from the movie," Cole says.

Emily Furtani
VP, Comedy
Disney Entertainment Television

Furutani is helping shape the future of stand-up at Hulu with her work on "Hularious," the streamer's monthly series of comedy specials. Since launching with Jim Gaffigan's "The Skinny," it's become a go-to for both fresh talent and big names like Bill Burr and Ilana Glazer. Up next: new specials from Sebastian Maniscalco and Andrew Santino. She says it was watching shows like "The Office" and "30 Rock" with her family that led her to a career in comedy. "They gave us something to laugh about together, inside jokes and all. I was determined to be a part of creating that feeling for others, even in the smallest capacity."

Hilary Leavitt
President
Upside Down Pictures

The one thing Leavitt wants people to know is that she loves her job — and why shouldn't she? As the producing partner of the Duffer brothers, she's helped usher some of the most original storytelling to screens. That includes the upcoming final season of "Stranger Things" and two upcoming series — "The Boroughs," starring Geena Davis, and Haley Z. Boston's "Something Very Bad Is Going to Happen" ("It's going to be blow people's minds!" she enthuses). Growing up, Leavitt was obsessed with film and TV and says, "I now feel very passionate about making things that might inspire the same joy in other little weirdos out there."

"I think the thing that gets me excited is discovering a new voice. If I read a script and find myself quoting from it or remembering it, then I know I've connected with the material."
Jax Clark

Lauren O'Connor
Head of global IP acquisitions
Amazon MGM Studios

O'Connor snagged the rights to BookTok sensation "Fourth Wing" ahead of its publication in April 2023, paving the way for Amazon's upcoming romantasy TV adaptation to become one of the hottest projects in Hollywood. In recent months, she's also cut deals for adaptations of the video games "Mass Effect," "Tomb Raider" and "The Sims." "My entire role anchors on being early in identifying where culture and fandoms could go, and then believing in creators — whether that's the written word, whether it's a video game, whether it's a comic book," O'Connor says, adding, "When that amazing thing hits your desk, you just know."

Tre Shallowhorn
Global head of production
Bloomberg Originals

Shallowhorn began his documentary career studying abroad in Brazil, when he decided to turn his camcorder on locals and ask about inequities faced by Afro Brazilians. When he returned to his studies at UCLA, his footage earned him a spot in the film program. He went on to earn a master's in documentary production at NYU and serve as a producer at Vox Media and NBC News before landing at Bloomberg, where today he oversees a slate of originals that includes "The Deal" and "An Optimist's Guide to the Planet." He advises up-and-comers to gain experience in as many aspects of the production as possible, so they "can truly speak the language and better connect with folks up and down the chain."

Amazon's Lauren O'Connor s cut deals for "Fourth Wing," by Rebecca Yarros, left, and the game "Mass Effect," lower right. Sahar Vahedi developed "The Diplomat" upper right.

Kenny Tsai
Senior VP, current programming
Universal Content Prods.

Growing up as the child of two immigrants in Southern California, Tsai found his way into American culture via television. After attending NYU, his first job in the industry was as a showrunner's assistant on "Boardwalk Empire." Now, he looks at overseeing Apple TV+'s "Cape Fear" — a series inspired by John D. Macdonald's 1957 novel "The Executioners" and its big screen adaptations from 1962 and 1991 — as a full-circle moment. "I love working on the studio side," says Tsai, who also guides Hulu's upcoming "Murdaugh Murders" limited series. "It's what I always wanted to do."

Sahar Vahedi
Director, scripted series development
Netflix

As a self-described "latchkey kid of immigrants who learned about the world through TV and movies," Vahedi has always had a passion for entertainment. Now she's responsible for bringing it to the world via such Netflix originals as "The Diplomat" and "Ransom Canyon," along with an upcoming adaptation of Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth." She began her career as an intern "manning the Red Bull mini fridge" at Double Feature Films, where she was mentored by its co-founder Stacey Sher, who, she says, "taught me what it meant to be a fierce advocate for artists, and how to make the right kind of noise when it feels like no one's listening."

By Thania Garcia, Selome Hailu, Carole Horst, Karen Idelson, Angelique Jackson, Cynthia Littleton, Todd Longwell, Jennifer Maas, Jenelle Riley, Rosemary Rossi, Pat Saperstein, Ethan Shanfeld, Katcy Stephan, Michaela Zee







Clockwise, from left: Amanda Edwards/Getty Images; Alex Bailey/Netflix

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By Todd Longwell, Seth Marumoto, Andrew McGowan, Leia Mendoza



Nikki Bergman
Coordinator, film & TV division, Range Media Partners

Growing up in New York, Bergman didn't think of show business as a viable career, but she says her mind was changed when an agent spoke at one of her classes at USC. "I was like, 'I have to do this job. What is this job?' And ever since then, it was kind of full speed ahead." She joined Range Media Partners in October 2021 as an associate, working with founding partners Dave Bugliari, Mick Sullivan and Michael Cooper. Following a recent promotion to coordinator, she closed a deal for Range client Benjamin Clementine to join the second season of the Netflix series "The Gentlemen."

"The Devil Wears Prada," with Anne Hathaway, right, Meryl Streep and Emily Blunt, showed that great assistants are invaluable at helping their bosses navigate their worlds.



Katie Byrne
Assistant, desk of Casey Bloys, chairman and CEO, HBO & HBO Max Content

The UCLA grad began her career in comedy touring at UTA, later working at Tiny Reparations and Brillstein before landing on Casey Bloys' desk at HBO. "Every day is extremely different, which is exciting, because Casey has such a breadth of responsibilities and he's at such a high level that he interacts with so many different types of people, different shows, and his schedule is always changing," says Byrne. "My job is first and foremost making sure that Casey has what he needs to have a smooth day every day and be able to execute it at the level that he's at."



Kimia Simab
Executive assistant to Matthew Greenfield, president, Searchlight Pictures

An L.A. native, Simab graduated from NYU before working on desks at CAA and Untitled Management. For the past four years, she's been the executive assistant to Matthew Greenfield at Searchlight Pictures, helping shepherd such film and TV projects as "A Complete Unknown," "All of Us Strangers," "The Dropout" and the upcoming "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" reboot. She says that being at "a smaller studio within the Disney bubble has been really rewarding. It makes work feel less task-oriented and more project-oriented."



Bela Levin
Coordinator, office of Dana Goldberg, chief creative officer, Skydance

Levin says it was a gamble when she spent a big chunk of her savings to leave her native Brazil to enroll at UCLA and try to find a way into showbiz, but it seems to be paying off. Since joining Skydance in 2021, she's worked with CCO Dana Goldberg on some of the company's biggest projects, from the billion-plus-dollar big-screen blockbuster "Top Gun: Maverick" to the Amazon action series "Reacher." "If I've done my job right, she doesn't see half of the things that I'm doing because I'm making sure that she's able to do her job," she says.



Christine Murrain
Coordinator, office of Pearlena Igbokwe, chairman, TV studios, NBC Entertainment & Peacock scripted

Murrain has been at NBCUniversal for the past six years. She began as a West Coast page in 2019 and went on to work in strategy, production and acquisitions for Universal Pictures and Focus Features. She admires the composure of her current boss, TV executive Pearlena Igbokwe, stressing the importance of humility as a necessary quality in the entertainment industry. "If I get to be in a role where I can both shape the content that we're making and the experiences of the people who are making it," she says, "that would be fantastic."

Clockwise, from top left: Everett Collection; Courtesy of Simab; Courtesy of Levin; Scott Angelheart/NBC; Courtesy of Byrne; Courtesy of Bergman



Blake Maley
Coordinator, desk of Gersh Agency president Leslie Siebert

From the time he was a kid, seeing live theater shows with his mom, Maley has been drawn to storytelling and the influence of entertainment. "I knew I wanted to work with top dealmakers in Hollywood and learn from the best," the Chicago native says, and he saw talent agencies as places where storytelling and influence intersect. But at Washington University in St. Louis, he earned a B.A. in anthropology, which he points out has a strong emphasis on observation before action, in contrast to his current gig, where he often has to "jump in and learn by doing — and sometimes figure it out after the fact."



Jessica Omokheyeke
Executive assistant & project manager, DEI, for Harvey Mason Jr., CEO, and Ricky Lyon, director of diversity, equity & inclusion, the Recording Academy

After performing "Breaking Free" at her fourth-grade middle school talent show, Omokheyeke knew she was destined to pursue a career in music. She got her first taste of the business when she was a student at NYU, interning for record labels Interscope and Verve. Upon graduation in June 2023, she landed a job at the Recording Academy, where today she plans exclusive music industry events. "I'm really excited and inspired by a lot of the artists today just being unapologetically, authentically themselves in whatever way is true to them," she says. "Music now is becoming a lot more personal and seeing how artists choose to live their lives and what they put out musically is exciting."



Rose Poole
Motion picture literary assistant, desk of Ida Ziniti, motion picture literary co-head and board member, CAA

Starting as a CAA intern during her senior year at USC, Poole quickly realized that she was at the center of all the media she'd consumed growing up. Now that she's an assistant to Ida Ziniti, she's experiencing a full-circle moment. "Now I get to help put together what I got to see as a kid," she says. No day is the same for Poole, but, for her, that's the fun part. About 80% of her time is dedicated to typical assistant duties, from managing Ziniti's schedule to coordinating client meetings, and the other 20% is devoted to her work as a motion picture trainee.



Arman Yaghmai
Motion picture literary assistant to Verve co-founder and partner Adam Levine

Growing up in Los Angeles, Yaghmai discovered a love for writing stories at an early age. Now as a motion picture literary assistant for Verve, Yaghmai often reads six to seven scripts per week in search of new cinematic voices, while also planning philanthropic events such as the Verve Walk, which raises money to support Inner City Arts. "I'm most hopeful that more original stories will be made and will come to fruition," he says. "The things that stand out when I read scripts are the ones that have sort of a unique voice and a really compelling storyline that starts with characters that are distinct."



Olivia Zweig
Administrative assistant to Screen Gems president Ashley Brucks

Zweig began her career as a production assistant on Fox's hit reality series "The Masked Singer," then in November 2021 transitioned to scripted development at Sony, where she first reported to Maia Eyre at Columbia Pictures. Last year, she assumed her current role as assistant to Screen Gems president Ashley Brucks, working on a slate of genre movies like the ones she'd like to one day produce. She says her job gives her "the opportunity to contribute more and work closely with each executive," and "foster a creative eco-system across the division."

Clockwise from top left: Christine Murrain works with NBC Entertainment honcho Pearlena Igbokwe, while Olivia Zweig launced her career on "The Masked Singer"; Bela Levin assists Dana Goldberg of Skydance, which is behind "Reacher."

"If I've done my job right, she doesn't see half the things that I'm doing." Bela Levin







Clockwise, from top left: Brendan Mitchell; Courtesy of Yaghmai; Courtesy of Zweig; Michael Becker/FOX; Courtesy of CAA; Courtesy of Omokheyeke

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Netflix

Get It on Film Doc helmers explore diverse ways to expose the heart of the story at Truth Seekers

By Daniel D'Addario

→ Documentarians must perform particularly tricky balancing acts with each new project. The audience expects their work to be richly cinematic, entertaining and surprising; the standards of their profession, too, dictate that they must be fiercely attentive to the facts. Unlike directors working on scripted films, they can't find an easy fix if the facts don't suit their story — they must follow the truth wherever it leads.

That's among the challenges that several field-leading documentary filmmakers will discuss at *Variety* and Rolling Stone's Truth Seekers Summit on Aug. 14. The work each respective director has made recently diverges from their fellow panelists in style, in subject matter and in approach, but all the filmmakers share a commitment to using the tools of art to reveal stories the viewer may not have expected.

There are interesting concordances between the documentaries on offer. Many, for instance, cover figures and incidents in the history of the entertainment industry. In various cases, familiar faces or images open the door for deeper examination of the ways in which culture shapes us and is shaped by us.

Consider the two new films this year by panelist R.J. Cutler. The director has previously helmed docs about Anna Wintour ("The September Issue") and Billie Eilish ("Billie Eilish: The World's a Little Blurry"); in 2024, he released two personality-forward documentaries, "Elton John: Never Too Late" and "Martha." Both documentaries, like Cutler's Wintour and Eilish films, rely on the participation of their subjects — in this case, Elton John and Martha Stewart — but do not allow them to control the narrative. It's Cutler in control of the story as we walk through, say, John's personal challenges with substances and with accepting his sexuality, or Stewart's prosecution for insider trading. Both are ultimately stories of resilience, told in different ways, with John's ebullience showing us what it takes to be a show business survivor and Stewart's steeliness making clear that she's endured sexist vitriol and come through the other side.

"The Greatest Night in Pop," above, director Bao Nguyen will talk about his doc at the Truth Seekers event.

Panelist Bao Nguyen also has released two films in the past year, both about famous moments in media culture: "The Greatest Night in Pop" is a lighthearted and sweetly nostalgic look back at the production of "We Are the World," the superstar-driven single that was intended to raise money for and awareness of the victims of Ethiopian famine. "The Stringer," by contrast, is a hard-nosed investigative look at the true authorship of the famous photo known as "Napalm Girl," depicting a child burn victim at the height of the Vietnam War. "The Greatest Night in Pop" uses both archival footage and fresh interviews to charm viewers and to make a subtle, insistent case that monoculture moments like "We Are the World" have real value. "The Stringer," making a claim that credit for one of the most famous photographs of the 20th century was misattributed, also has mass culture on its mind — part of "Napalm Girl's" power lay in how widely it's been seen — but delves into thornier matters, too.

Mary Robertson is no stranger to using cultural moments to dig into complicated questions: the doc panelist's past work, from "Framing Britney Spears" to "Quiet on Set," has shifted the way we talk about the ethics of entertainment. "The Fall of Diddy," her latest docuseries, dug into both allegations of violence against Sean Combs and the ways in which his stardom kept him shielded from closer scrutiny. Robertson's work makes particularly clear the ways in which documentarians must use the skills of a reporter: Finding subjects willing to speak out against a wealthy and powerful figure is a special challenge — but if those people cannot be convinced to speak on camera, then there's no documentary.

Panelist Elegance Bratton brings a different skill set to his work: While the filmmaker had experience in documentary prior to this year's "Move Ya Body," his best-known project is likely the 2022 scripted drama "The Inspection," starring Jeremy Pope and Gabrielle Union. "Move Ya Body" depicts the birth of music genre house, which was driven in large part by Black and queer creators. It emerged as a counterreaction to the demise of disco music as the 1970s faded and such events as 1979's Disco Demolition Night in Chicago — in which popular records were showily destroyed

by self-proclaimed music purists — sprang up. The creation of an entirely new style of music, and its coming into being as part of a backlash to the anti-disco backlash, is a complex tale, and Bratton's braiding together the strands into a coherent, compelling narrative speaks to his gifts as a storyteller.

In the past year, panelist Jennifer Tiexiera has shifted between two stories about young people finding their creativity and confidence — one about a famous figure, one a story with slightly less famous participants. "Rebbeca," Tiexiera's look at the famous recording artist Becky G preparing to release her first-ever album of regional Mexican music, relies — like Cutler's work, among others — on the participation of its star and her willingness to dig deep into her thoughts and feelings on camera. "Speak," which Tiexiera co-directed with Guy Mossman, depicts five students' preparations for a high school speech-and-debate competition, and does a funny reverse-"Rebbeca" trick. "Rebbeca" convinces its viewer that within the superstar is a relatable, deeply human person one might meet in everyday life; "Speak" makes five normal (if very high-achieving) teens into superstars.

All of these works are, in their own way, in service of truth — and complicated truth, at that. Things as seemingly light as a pop star's career or an all-night recording session give way to complicated, startling humanity. It's fitting that the final director on the Truth Seekers panel is someone whose film's very title addresses the quest for honesty: "Bodyguard of Lies" (named for the Winston Churchill adage about how mistruths should be strategically deployed during wartime) delves into the public statements officials made during the Afghanistan war, and how far they diverged from the reality on the ground. Director Dan Krauss must get his arms around a massive story — a decades-long war, one that the public was told was both necessary and winnable, though the film makes the case that it was neither. He does so with a crisp, elegant storytelling style, and no shortage of sorrow.



R.J. Cutler's "Elton John: Never Too Late," below, and "Martha," left, explore big personalities.



"All of these works are, in their own way, in service of truth — and complicated truth, at that."

That's one element that distinguishes documentary filmmaking from, say, print journalism: Though both practices aim at sussing out fact from fiction, documentary has at its disposal both the tools of art and the ability to practice advocacy or to state a point-of-view plainly, something that most journalists, in pursuit of objectivity, cannot do. One walks away from each project under discussion at this year's Truth Seekers documentary panel with a crystalline understanding of what each filmmaker believes about his or her subject, even as the ways they express that belief can differ.

What the future holds for the documentary form is anyone's guess. As the media industry contracts and as potential hosts for adventurous, boundary-pushing work either fall away or grow intimidated under a climate of control and restriction, work like this may grow less common, less well-funded, less able to pursue the story wherever it leads. One hopes that artists like these will continue to find a way to get their stories out; no matter the subject matter, from a disco-demolition night to American foreign intervention, the spirit of inquiry, curiosity and refusal to blink are more urgently needed at this moment than ever before.

From top: Disney+; Martha Stewart/Courtesy of Netflix



On the Record From journalists to comics, the Truth Seekers Summit features influential voices of our times

By Carole Horst

→ *Variety* and Rolling Stone's Truth Seekers Summit, held Aug. 14 in partnership with Paramount+, spotlights influential voices shaping the future of news, documentaries and cultural commentary.

Jake Tapper, CNN anchor and chief Washington correspondent, will be honored with the Truth Seekers Award at the event in New York City. The co-author of bestseller "Original Sin: President Biden's Decline, Its Cover-Up, and His Disastrous Choice to Run Again" will participate in a Q&A with *Variety* co-editor-in-chief Ramin Setoodeh about his career achievements.

Another highlight is the Political Groundbreakers Roundtable, moderated by *Variety* senior TV editor Brian Steinberg. He'll engage a panel that includes NBC News White House correspondent Yamiche Alcindor, PBS News House co-anchor and co-managing editor Amna Nawaz, AP White House correspondent Zeke Miller and Alex Thompson, Axios



CNN's Jake Tapper, above, will receive the Truth Seekers Award. A conversation with "Daily Show's" Ronny Chieng is also a highlight.

national political correspondent and co-author of "Original Sin: President Biden's Decline, Its Cover-Up, and His Disastrous Choice to Run Again," about how they cover the fast-moving world of politics and current events.

A focus on documentary films includes a closeup on feature "Bodyguard of Lies," in which director Dan Krauss drills down on the costly war in Afghanistan. The talk will be moderated by Susan Zirinsky, president of See It Now Studios, and Krauss will be joined by exec producer and Washington Post reporter Craig Whitlock.

Doc "Room to Move" explores dancer and choreographer Jenn Freeman's journey as she navigates the most transformative chapter of her life after she received an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis. Exec producer Amy Schumer, Freeman and "Room to Move" director, cinematographer and editor Alexander Hammer will be onstage to talk with Aramide Tinubu, *Variety* TV critic.

"The State of the Documentary industry" explores broader issues and challenges nonfiction filmmakers face, with speakers Neon exec VP, nonfiction, Dan O'Meara; PBS chief programming executive & GM of general audience programming Sylvia Bugg; ITVS president and CEO, Carrie Lozano; Tribeca festival director and senior VP programming Cara Cusumano; and Abramorama CEO and president Karol Martesko-Fenster, in conversation with *Variety* executive editor, Brent Lang.

At the Documentary Roundtable, *Variety* chief correspondent Daniel D'Addario talks with the creatives behind recent breakout docs, including R.J. Cutler ("Martha," "Elton John: Never Too Late"), director Bao Nguyen ("The Greatest Night in Pop," "The Stringer"), director, writer Elegance Bratton ("Move Ya Body: The Birth of House"), Mary Robertson ("The Fall of Diddy"), director and producer Jennifer Tiexiera ("Rebecca," "Speak") and director Dan Krauss ("Bodyguard of Lies").

Other highlights include panel "Masters of True Crime and Investigative Storytelling," a slice of the nonfiction world that couldn't be hotter right now. Panelists include Joe Berlinger, exec producer, "Cold Case: The Tylenol Murders," and director and exec producer, "Cold Case: Who Killed JonBenét Ramsey"; Lisa Cortés, director and exec producer, "Murder Has Two Faces"; Ben McKenzie, actor and director, "Everyone Is Lying to You for Money"; and Julia Willoughby Nason, director and exec producer, "American Murder: Gabby Petito."

Humor in current events and politics is a staple on TV and, with that in mind, the Truth Seekers Summit hosts a conversation with "The Daily Show" correspondent and stand-up comedian Ronny Chieng conducted by *Variety* exec editor, film and media, Tatiana Siegel.

Amber Ruffin and Roy Wood Jr., the driving forces behind CNN's "Have I Got News for You," will also hit the stage to discuss breakout series with a humorous perspective on the week's news in a trivia format.

From top: Jeremy Freeman/CNN; Comedy Central

The Music That Made THE MILLENEUM

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britney spears

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Santana

OUTKAST

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Wheatus

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KMazur/WireImage/Getty Images

Top of the Pops Sony Music celebrates its iconic Y2K roster with wave of albums, merch and more

By Mike Wass

→ Pop culture is notoriously circular, but some eras never quite go out of fashion. The gaudy shimmer of the '80s still permeates music and film, while, more recently, nostalgia for all things Y2K has gripped the collective consciousness. The sounds of the early 2000s — from bombastic bubblegum pop to hook-heavy hip-hop — are as alive in 2025 as they were on "Total Request Live" a quarter of a century ago.

You can hear the frothy hedonism of the dawning millennium on Charli XCX's all-conquering "Brat," while Addison Rae dutifully pays tribute to the era's empowering pop princesses on her acclaimed debut album. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. With her mini shoulder bags and maxi skirts, U.K. breakout PinkPantheress lives and breathes the Y2K aesthetic, as do a seemingly endless parade of social media influencers.

For Monica Cornia, senior VP of marketing and partnerships at Sony Music's Commercial Music Group, that enduring resonance was impossible to ignore. Particularly given the label's contribution to the era. From *NSYNC and Britney Spears to TLC and Outkast, imprints like Jive and LaFace cranked out hit after hit. "I grew up with so much of this music," Cornia says. "We knew we had to do something to celebrate its 25th anniversary."

That "something" became "Y2K25: The Music That Made the Millennium," a lovingly curated compilation album featuring some of the era's biggest hits. Released in June on both CD and vinyl, accompanied by a wave of merch, anniversary campaigns and digital content, the project marks a milestone not just for Sony's roster, but for the generation that grew up on it.

Britney Spears famously brought a friend onstage during her performance at the 2001 MTV Video Music Awards.

"It was such a labor of love for the team," Cornia says. "We had so many ideas that it got overwhelming." Eventually, they settled on a package that balances radio-conquering hits with fan favorites. "We looked at radio play, video impact, album sales," she says, "but we also wanted to represent not just pop, but hip-hop and rock too." After all, this was a time when Wheatus jockeyed for chart glory alongside Toni Braxton and Savage Garden.

The blurring of genre runs through the "Y2K25" tracklist, which pairs pop classics like Christina Aguilera's "Genie in a Bottle" with seminal R&B and hip-hop cuts such as TLC's "No Scrubs" and Outkast's "Ms. Jackson." Also in the mix are Santana's "Maria Maria" and Ricky Martin's "Livin' La Vida Loca" — two mammoth chart-toppers that document Latin music's march into the mainstream in the early '00s.

"Those songs were everywhere," Cornia says, "and videos played such a big role." What was editorialized as the "Latin Wave," a movement that included Shakira, Enrique Iglesias and Jennifer Lopez, is now standard chart fare as acts like Bad Bunny, Karol G and Peso Pluma regularly reel off global hits. "It's fun to look back and see how that Latin influence was becoming a part of pop culture in such a big way," she says.

While nostalgia is a powerful force, the staying power of these songs isn't mere sentimentality. From the digital resurgence of *NSYNC's "Bye Bye Bye" following a sync in "Deadpool & Wolverine" (it became the second-oldest title to reach the Global Excl. U.S. top 10 on Billboard) to the TikTok-fueled revival of Wheatus' "Teenage Dirtbag," Sony's early-'00s catalog continues to drive playlists, influence emerging artists and ignite cross-generational fandom.

"Sony introduced me to the world — and the world to me," says Macy Gray, whose Grammy-winning "I Try" cracked the top 10 in multiple countries and became a staple of Y2K's eclectic soundscape. "If you get the opportunity to conquer the world, you'll always be able to release art, because somebody somewhere will be excited about that." That sentiment is shared by other Sony alumni.

Wheatus frontman Brendan B. Brown remains astonished by the reach of his band's 2000 breakout hit. "'Teenage Dirtbag' wasn't even supposed to be a single — it was too long!" he reflects in the midst

“We have so much incredible catalog from that time. Seeing the wave of nostalgia, it just dawned on us that we couldn’t ignore it.” Monica Cornia







Clockwise from left: Ricky Martin, Outkast and Backstreet Boys comprise some of the hitmakers from the Sony catalog.

of a 25th anniversary tour. “Whatever I intended [back then] isn’t really that important. It lives on in the hearts of others. We’re the luckiest band around.”

Even deep cuts have resurfaced with new relevance. Lit’s 1999 single “My Own Worst Enemy” still gets an audience on their feet, while Fuel’s alt radio-dominating “Hemorrhage (In My Hands)” continues to soundtrack YouTube Shorts and TikTok videos to this day. “Can you believe it?!?” Lit said of the 25th anniversary of sophomore album “A Place in the Sun” on social media. “It changed our world!” Icons also remember the era warmly.

Britney Spears — whose “Oops!... I Did It Again” became the fastest-selling album by a female artist at the time and remains one of the biggest records in history with sales exceeding 20 million — marked the pop bible’s 25th birthday. “[It] was recorded at such an exciting time in my life,” Spears said in a press release announcing an anniversary collaboration with Balenciaga, “and I’m so grateful to my incredible fans for keeping the legacy of this album alive!”

That sense of global reach and timelessness is exactly what Sony set out to honor with “Y2K25.” “We have so much incredible catalog from that time,” Cornia says. “Seeing the wave of nostalgia, it just dawned on us that we couldn’t ignore it.” But even she admits the scope of the idea surprised her. What started as a casual conversation ballooned into a months-long passion project involving a full slate of Sony’s marketers, A&R teams and catalog experts.

“Everyone was so passionate,” Cornia says. “Even the younger team members who weren’t alive then — they were into it because these songs are still everywhere.” In the streaming era, where playlists have replaced compilations, “Y2K25” also serves as a reminder that curation still has a place. “It brings the branding, the visuals and the hits together in a way you can really connect with,” Cornia says.

However, it’s more than just a cozy trip down memory lane. It’s a celebration of an era Sony helped define — and a catalog the company continues to actively nurture. “With so many artists, these conversations were already happening,” Cornia reveals. “We were already working on Backstreet Boys anniversary projects, such as their Sphere residency in Las Vegas. Outkast’s ‘Stankonia’ is also about to have a moment with them being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. It wasn’t just, ‘Let’s look back,’ but ‘Let’s keep it going.’”

Sony’s anniversary initiatives stretch well beyond the “Y2K25” compilation. The label has issued special editions, remixes and unique collaborations. They have even rebranded their “Popstruck” channel to serve as a hub for Y2K content all year long. “We’ll keep rolling things out,” Cornia says, hinting at upcoming surprises. Whether it’s soundtracking a blockbuster or popping up on a viral TikTok, Sony’s Y2K roster will remain part of the conversation.

When asked why the era still resonates so strongly, Cornia pauses. “The fashion, the culture — it was just fun,” she says. “It was a simpler time.” And that might be its fundamental appeal in a nutshell. At a time when clouds are gathering and everything feels heavy, the optimism of Y2K, along with its bright colors and slickly produced beats, is intoxicating. “These hits are undeniable,” Cornia says. “They’re going to endure forever.”

Clockwise, from top left: Fryderyk Gabowicz/picture alliance/Getty Images; Gregory Bojorquez/Getty Images; Scott Gries/Getty Images

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Never Forget Your First Harrison Ford, Martin Scorsese and more can celebrate their inclusion as Emmy rookies

By Matt Minton

While the shared dominance of acclaimed shows like “Severance,” “The Penguin” and “The Studio” on Emmy nomination morning may have made things look a little repetitive, many of these major titles gave high-profile actors — and a few Oscar-winning directors — their first shot at Emmy gold for acting.

With “Severance” Season 2 racking up 13 more nominations than Season 1 did, breakout performances from Britt Lower,



Sarah Shatz/FX

Jenny Slate landed her first nomination for her role in FX’s “Dying for Sex.”

As for the biggest first-time surprises and wild cards, Jeff Hiller received a supporting actor nod for the third and last season of "Somebody Somewhere."

Tramell Tillman and Zach Cherry resulted in their first nominations alongside expected repeat nominees Adam Scott and Patricia Arquette. If Tillman wins in the supporting actor category, he'll become the first Black actor to do so.

"The Studio" continued Apple TV+'s dominance with 23 nominations. Ike Barinholtz, Anthony Mackie, Zoë Kravitz and Oscar-winning directors Martin Scorsese and Ron Howard were all first-time acting nominees in the supporting and guest categories. Scorsese is a previous Emmy winner for directing the "Boardwalk Empire" pilot and "George Harrison: Living in the Material World." Seth Rogen also received his first nomination as a director for the episode "The Oner," in addition to recognition for writing and acting, all contributing to the show breaking a massive nomination record for a first season comedy series.

"The White Lotus" was once again a dominant factor in the supporting races with nine actors receiving nominations; Jason Isaacs, Aimee Lou Wood and Scott Glenn all nabbed their first. To date, Jennifer Coolidge and Murray Bartlett are the only performers to win acting Emmys for "The White Lotus," and they both won on their first career nominations. So, Season 3's newcomers are in good company.



Aimee Lou Wood was one of nine actors from "The White Lotus" who earned a nomination.

Another huge contender with 13 nominations, "Adolescence," saw first-time nominations for Owen Cooper, Stephen Graham, Erin Doherty, Christine Tremarco and Ashley Walters, with 15-year-old Cooper being the youngest nominee ever in the outstanding supporting actor category. In the lead actor in a limited series category, show creator Graham will face off against Colin Farrell for "The Penguin," another first-time nominee. And in the supporting actress category, Cristin Milioti for "The Penguin" and Jenny Slate for "Dying for Sex" are strong contenders.

"Presumed Innocent" couldn't quite make the cut for limited series, but Oscar nominees Jake Gyllenhaal and Ruth Negga were singled out. Oscar-winner for "Whiplash," J.K. Simmons received his first Emmy nomination this year (for "Die Hart: Hart to Kill"), while Oscar-nominee Harrison Ford took a supporting actor in a comedy series slot for "Shrinking."

"Monsters: The Lyle and Erik Menendez Story" actors Javier Bardem, Cooper Koch and Chloë Sevigny all became first-time nominees, with Bardem also receiving a nomination as an executive producer with the show's recognition for outstanding limited or anthology series.

As for the biggest first-time surprises and wild cards, Jeff Hiller received a supporting actor nod for the third and last season of "Somebody Somewhere," marking the first time an actor from that show has ever been nominated. The show's Bridget Everett, who some expected to receive a lead actress nomination, was not included, but she was recognized in the outstanding writing for a comedy series category alongside Hannah Bos and Paul Thureen. And in the short form comedy or drama series category, Tom Segura was the sole nomination for Netflix's "Bad Thoughts."

Within the massive ensemble of Max's hit medical drama "The Pitt," Shawn Hatosy and Katherine LaNasa received their first nominations alongside lead Noah Wyle, who is back in the Emmy conversation after five nominations for "ER" in the 1990s.

In total, 33 performers received their first Emmy nominations for acting this year, and there's still two months of campaigning left that will impact which of these actors reign supreme on Sept. 14.



Both Ruth Negga and Jake Gyllenhaal were nominated for "Presumed Innocent."

Fabio Lovino/HBO; Apple TV+

A-List Alter Ego ‘The Studio’ enlisted big stars to play themselves in its first season — most of whom landed Emmy noms

By Max Gao



Dave Franco had a blast portraying a version of himself in “The Studio.”

→ To build the world of “The Studio,” Apple TV+’s satirical send-up about embattled executives at a legacy Hollywood movie studio, Seth Rogen always knew he needed to enlist a slew of A-listers to play themselves.

“We put a lot of pressure on populating the show with the type of people that studio executives would actually be hoping to impress, or hoping to work with,” he says. “But then the writing, as we started to make the actual episodes, started to call on people who had incredibly specific roles within the industry and often had a specific persona that we were going to either play into or against within the industry.”

Case in point: For “The Note,” the writers needed a legendary director — with a “nice guy” persona — who had a two-decade-old movie with a twist ending that Rogen’s Matt Remick had foolishly tried to cut as a young exec. Ron Howard, who won a best director Oscar for 2001’s “A Beautiful Mind,” fit the bill. (In the show, Howard directs an overlong New York gangster movie starring Anthony Mackie and Dave Franco.)

At first, rather than sending scripts directly to potential guest stars, Rogen and show co-creator Evan Goldberg met with everyone individually. Although they had a “rough idea” for each episode, Rogen says his writers’ room would use those initial conversations to glean “how willing” the actors “were to push their personas.”

“The most important deciding factor for anyone, as they were weighing whether or not they wanted to be on our show, was: ‘Will I get to be funny?’” says Rogen. The actors playing themselves “wanted to get to participate in the hard comedy of the show. Once we realized that, we really leaned into it and worked to make these guest stars really drive the comedy.”

For Zoë Kravitz, initially slated to play a “more psychotic” version of herself in “The Golden Globes” episode but was then asked to return for the drug-fueled, two-part Las Vegas finale, “The Studio” represented a dramatic departure from the darker roles that have defined her body of work. “People think I’m a little bit more serious than I am, and I haven’t had the opportunity to do a lot of comedy,” she says. “I know that people see me a certain way — the word ‘cool’ is used a lot. I was really excited to lean into that as much as possible, and then break that down and be as childlike and as silly [as possible], and to use people’s expectations to help the performance.”

Rogen and Goldberg are ideal collaborators for actors, thanks to their encouragement of improvisation. Franco ad-libbed an explicit reference to his “Now You See Me” films, which then became a running gag in the last two episodes. Kravitz, who took a small amount of mushrooms two weeks before shooting the finale, came up with a bunch of lines that captured the “perspective shift” that occurs after getting high.

The writers were particularly keen to dial up Mackie’s penchant for lighthearted jokes and Franco’s naturally optimistic nature to the point of “toxic positivity,” but both actors insist that they are nothing like their fictional counterparts in real life. “That said, when you’re playing yourself, the crazier you get the better,” says Franco. “I have no ego about any of this. I just want to make myself look like a complete idiot. When I’m working with Seth and Evan, I feel so safe and protected. I feel liberated to take huge swings knowing that they will reel me in if I ever go too far. But more often than not, they just keep pushing me further and further, and that’s when you get some of this really wacky, fun stuff.”

Mackie and Franco think they’ll likely lose in their Emmy category to Howard or Martin Scorsese, who appears in the pilot. But Mackie jokingly sees a potential upside: “[They] are going to cancel each other out, so whichever one doesn’t win is going to fall to third place — and I’ll be in second place. It’s funny to me to think that I could beat one of them by losing to one of them. I’m very excited to see which one of them it might be, because they’re going to have to live with that forever.”


02



03



05



07



06



09







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1 Charlie Bushnell, Aryan Simhadri, Walker Scobell, Dior Goodjohn, Leah Sava Jeffries & Daniel Diemer **2** Devan Chandler Long, Asher Grodman, Danielle Pinnock & Utkarsh Ambudkar **3** James Remar, David Dastmalchian, Jack Alcott, Krysten Ritter, Michael C. Hall & David Zayas **4** Alison Brie & Dave Franco **5** Sean Giambrone, Mary Mack, Josh Bycel, Tiffany Haddish, Mike McMahan, Sydney Ryan & Thomas Middleditch **6** Christina Chong, Akiva Goldsman, Ethan Peck, Paul Wesley, Henry Alonso Myers, Jess Bush & Rebecca Romijn **7** Robbie Amell, Kevin Bigley, Allegra Edwards & Christian “The Rizzler” Savasta **8** Alyson Stoner, Vincent Martella, David Errigo Jr., Dan Povenmire & Jeff “Swampy” Marsh **9** Sandro Rosta, George Hawkins, Noga Landau, Alex Kurtzman, Karim Diane, Bella Shepard, Robert Picardo, Holly Hunter & Kerrice Brooks **10** Nathan Fillion



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"Severance," starring Adam Scott and Britt Lower, landed 14 crafts nominations.

In With the New Creative teams behind 'The Penguin' and 'Severance' look for their inaugural Emmy

By Jazz Tangcay

When the Emmy nominations were announced on July 15, HBO's "The Penguin" dominated the artisans categories, landing a grand total of 17 craft nominations. Close behind was AppleTV+'s "Severance," with a staggering 27 nominations — 14 of which are in crafts.

Among them are nominees seeking to take home an Emmy for the first time.

With "Severance," Jessica Lee Gagné became the first woman to be nominated in both the categories of cinematography and directing for the same drama series in the same year.

Oscar-winner Mike Marino earned his first Emmy nomination but is up against five-time winner Barrie Gower ("The Last of Us"). For "The Penguin," makeup artist Marino transformed Colin Farrell into the titular character. He whittled the process down from four hours to two and half and began by designing the makeup in clay and using silicone for the individual pieces. To ensure Farrell's face was not completely covered, Marino blended prosthetics into the actor's forehead and eyes, so it was hard for the audience to tell where the prosthetic started and Farrell's features ended.

And it's not just "The Penguin" and "Severance" seeking those first wins.

Composer Hans Zimmer might be loved by Oscar voters, but he has yet to win an Emmy. This year, Zimmer finds himself nominated with fellow composers Anže Rozman and Kara Talve for NBC's docuseries "The Americas."

Music superstars are also vying for their first Emmy; Beyoncé scored two nominations this year, one for live variety special and the other for directing for a variety special. In the former, she's up against Kendrick Lamar and husband Shawn Carter (aka Jay Z) for Apple Music's Super Bowl LIX Halftime Show.

The original song category sees "Saturday Night Live" alums Adam Sandler ("Adam Sandler's Song: 50 Years" from "SNL 50: The Anniversary Special") and Kristen Wiig ("Harper and Will Go West" from the Netflix documentary "Will & Harper") face off.

Emmanuel Lubezki won the Oscar for cinematography three years in a row; he's now nominated for his first Emmy alongside co-cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel, for AppleTV+'s "Disclaimer."

It's been eight years since Alan Tudyk scored his first Emmy nomination (for "Con Man"); now, he's nominated again, this time for this voice over performance in "Andor." However, he faces stiff competition from Maya Rudolph, who is on a two-year winning streak for voicing Connie the Hormone Monstress in "Big Mouth."

"Dune: Prophecy" is production designer Tom Meyer's first TV credit. His previous films include "The Orphan" and "Real Steel," and now, he's up against teams from "Andor," "Bridgerton," "1923" and "Pachinko." For "Dune," Meyer wanted the worlds to feel grounded and real, and not feel like science fiction. "It had a sense of history. The stonework in the palace would have the oil rub from people touching the stone over centuries," he says.

Elsewhere, the oner trend proved popular with voters across numerous categories. Gangé's "Severance" episode was recognized, as was director of photography Adam Newport-Berra for his episode of the "The Studio," aptly titled "The Oner." And DP Matthew Lewis worked with director Philip Barantini to deliver the director's signature one-shot style for Netflix's "Adolescence." There were no invisible edits, Lewis confirmed to *Variety*, saying, "There's no stitching of takes together. It was one entire shot, whether I wanted it to be or not."

Winners will be announced during Creative Arts Awards on Sept. 6 and 7.

Apple TV+







Voter Tune Up Charting the Emmy nominees in the music races

By Jon Burlingame

→ This year's Emmy music races are chock-full of first-timers, curious choices and maddening statistics.

For example: Thomas and Julia Newman, who scored "Monsters: The Lyle and Erik Menendez Story," are father and daughter, an Emmy first for a composing duo. Mick Giacchino, nominated for "The Penguin," is the son of Emmy-winning "Lost" composer Michael Giacchino.

Film-scoring legend Hans Zimmer, who already has two Oscars and four Grammys, could finally win an Emmy (in his seventh time at bat) for his music for the documentary "The Americas." Duo Leo Birenberg and Zach Robinson, the composers of "Cobra Kai," are finally nominated for the series' sixth and final season.

Other competitors in the race include "Saturday Night Live" vets Adam Sandler and Kristen Wiig, who could finally win an Emmy for songs they've co-written. And "The White Lotus" composer Cristobal Tapia de Veer was nominated twice more despite his very public spat with showrunner Mike White over how his music was treated.

But despite progress in many other showbiz arenas, women constituted only nine (or 16%) of the 55 composers nominated in Emmy's seven music categories (down from 12 last year). Thirteen, or 24%, however, are people of color, up from nine last year.

Nearly one-third, or 18 of the 55, are first-timers to the competition. But an almost identical number, 17, have won before.

The Television Academy's Music Peer Group now numbers approximately 750, and many lament the impossibility of watching the hundreds of shows entered (this year, that number is 480 scores, songs, themes, music direction and music supervision entries).

That may account for the fact that of the 21 nominees in the four music composition categories, more than half were scores or themes from shows that were also nominated for outstanding drama, comedy, limited series or documentary — in other words, popular programs seen by most voters.

But there were exceptions: the music nominations for "Based on a True Story," "Dept. Q," "Lazarus," "Leonardo Da Vinci," "The Supremes at Earl's All-You-Can-Eat" and "Your Friends & Neighbors" constituted the only Emmy Awards attention received by those programs.

Final round voting takes place Aug. 18-27, and the winners will be announced during the Creative Arts Emmy Awards on Sept. 6 and 7.

"SNL: The Homecoming Concert," left, with Cher,"The White Lotus," top right, and "Dept. Q," above right, all earned Emmy noms in music categories.

Clockwise, from left: Virginia Sherwood/Peacock; HBO; Netflix

CATEGORY	SHOW	COMPOSER-SONGWRITER-MUSIC DIRECTOR	EMMY RECORD PRIOR TO THIS YEAR (PRIME TIME ONLY)	NOMINATED WORK (EPISODE)	HIGHLIGHT OR VIBE
Music Composition for a Series	**Andor** Disney+	**Brandon Roberts**	One Emmy	"Who Are You?"	Elegiac orchestra and choir for Ghorman massacre
	Based on a True Story Peacock	**Sherri Chung**	First nomination	"Relapse"	Strings, percussion balance comedic with suspense
	Cobra Kai Netflix	**Leo Birenberg, Zach Robinson**	One Emmy for each	"Blood In Blood Out"	High-energy orchestra, Asian percussion, synths
	Severance Apple TV+	**Theodore Shapiro**	One win, two nominations	"Cold Harbor"	Mix of atmospheric and dissonant piano and strings
	The Studio Apple TV+	**Antonio Sánchez**	First nomination	"The Missing Reel"	Drums-percussion-piano-based music for noir sendup
	The White Lotus HBO	**Cristobal Tapia de Veer**	Three wins, one more nomination	"Amor Fati"	Evocative voices, percussion for Thailand setting
Music Composition for a Limited or Anthology Series, Movie or Special	**Black Mirror** Netflix	**Ariel Marx**	One nomination	"Hotel Reverie"	1940s orchestral noir for classic-thriller remake
	Black Mirror Netflix	**Daniel Pemberton**	Two nominations	"USS Callister: Into Infinity"	Massive orchestra, electronics for complex cloning tale
	Dying for Sex FX	**Ariel Marx**	One nomination	"It's Not That Serious"	Unusual collection of sounds for Molly's death
	Monsters: The Lyle and Erik Menendez Story Netflix	**Thomas Newman, Julia Newman**	One win for Thomas, first nom for Julia	"Spree"	Eerie voices, piano, synth sounds for murder scene
	The Penguin HBO	**Mick Giacchino**	First nomination	"After Hours"	Intense passages for strings, "trash-can" percussion
	The Supremes at Earl's All-You-Can-Eat Hulu	**Kathryn Bostic**	One nomination	Best friends weather life's storms together	Warm piano and strings for enduring friendships
Music Direction	**The Apple Music Super Bowl LIX Halftime Show** Fox	**Kendrick Lamar, Tony Russell**	One win for Lamar, first nom for Russell	Most-viewed halftime show in TV history	Lamar, SZA, Serena Williams, Mustard among performers
	The Kennedy Center Honors CBS	**Rickey Minor**	Three wins, 14 other noms	Bonnie Raitt, Francis Ford Coppola, Arturo Sandoval honored	Emmylou Harris, Savion Glover, Sheryl Crow perform
	The Oscars ABC	**Michael Bearden**	Two nominations	97th annual Academy Awards ceremony	Ariana Grande, Cynthia Erivo sing opening "Wicked" number
	SNL 50: The Anniversary Special NBC	**Lenny Pickett, Leon Pendarvis, Eli Brueggemann**	One win for Brueggemann, six noms each for Pickett, Pendarvis	"Saturday Night Live" 50th season celebration	Paul Simon, Miley Cyrus, Adam Sandler, Paul McCartney perform
	SNL 50: The Homecoming Concert Peacock	**James Poyser, Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson**	First nomination for each	"Saturday Night Live" 50th anniversary music special	Jack White, Cher, Jelly Roll, Brandi Carlile, Lady Gaga perform





Antonio Sánchez earned a nom for his music for "The Studio," left, while Leo Birenberg and Zach Robinson nabbed a nom for "Cobra Kai," right.

From left: Apple TV +; Curtis Bonds Baker/Netflix

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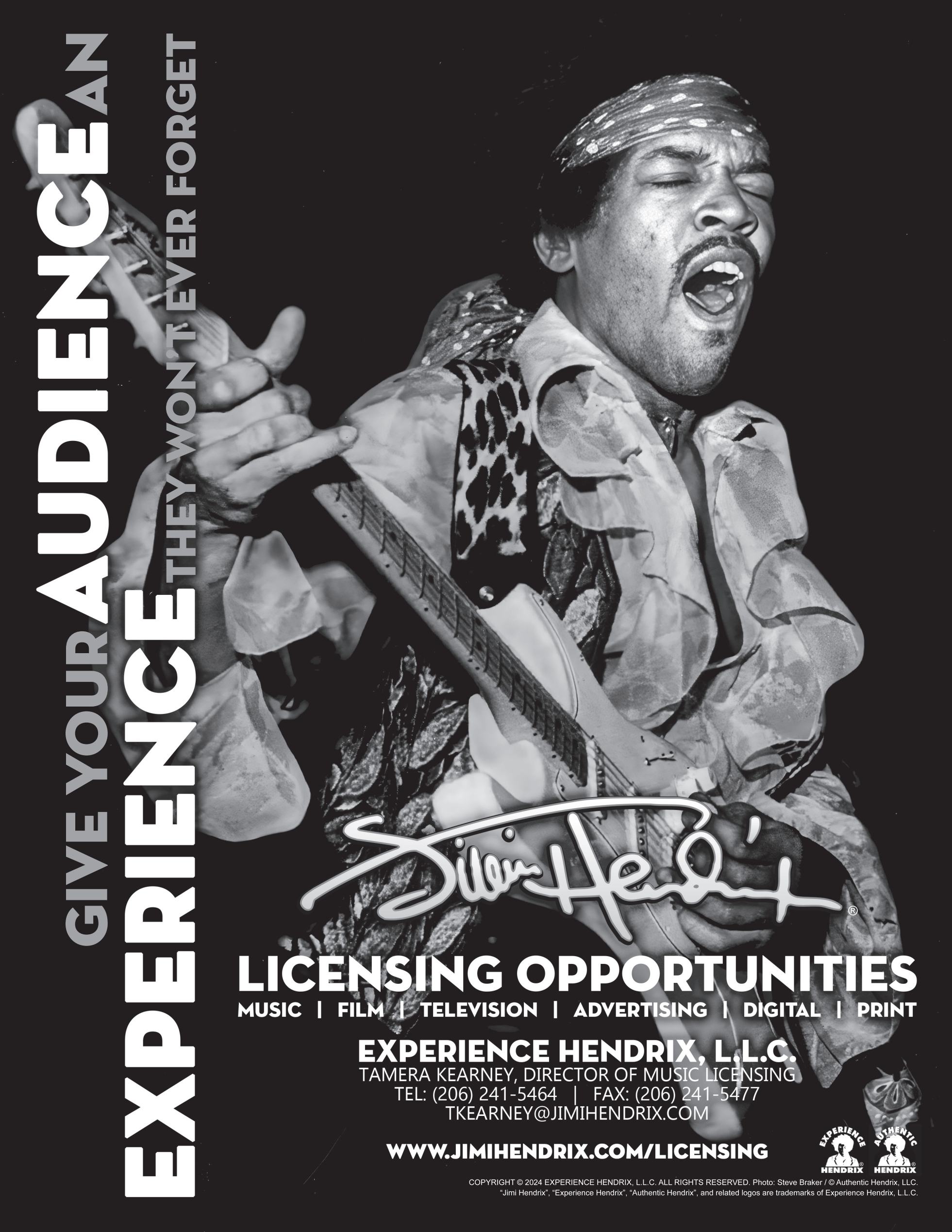

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From left: "Agatha All Along," "Andor" and "Will & Harper" scored noms for music.

CATEGORY	SHOW	COMPOSER-SONGWRITER-MUSIC DIRECTOR	EMMY RECORD PRIOR TO THIS YEAR (PRIME TIME ONLY)	NOMINATED WORK (EPISODE)	HIGHLIGHT OR VIBE
Music Composition for a Documentary Series or Special	**The Americas** NBC	**Hans Zimmer, Anze Rožman, Kara Talve**	Six noms for Zimmer, two for Rozman, three for Talve	"Andes"	Detailed orchestral writing for family-oriented nature doc
	Chef's Table Netflix	**Duncan Thum, David Bertok**	Two noms for Thum, first for Bertok	Profile of innovative Spanish chef José Andrés	Strings, guitar, piano gently convey Spanish flavors
	Leonardo Da Vinci PBS	**Caroline Shaw**	First nomination	Ken Burns film on 15th century genius	Classically styled string quartet, percussion, vocal ensemble
	Planet Earth: Asia BBC America	**Jacob Shea, Laurentia Editha**	Two noms for Shea, first for Editha	"Beneath the Waves"	Unique Asian colors, orchestra for David Attenborough doc
	Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story HBO Max	**Ilan Eshkeri**	First nomination	Profile of "Superman" star, later paralyzed	Inspirational themes played by London orchestra
Music and Lyrics	**Agatha All Along** Disney+	**Kristen Anderson-Lopez, Robert Lopez**	One win for each; four other noms for Robert, three for Kristen	Song "The Ballad of the Witches' Road"	Witches' chant recurs in multiple forms throughout miniseries
	Andor Disney+	**Nicholas Britell, Tony Gilroy**	One win for Britell, one nom for Gilroy	Song "We Are the Ghor"	Anthem for planet Ghorman, under siege by the Empire
	The Boys Prime Video	**Christopher Lennertz**	Two nominations	Song "Let's Put the Christ Back in Christmas"	Satirical holiday-on-ice song mocks fake morality
	SNL 50: The Anniversary Special NBC	**Adam Sandler, Dan Bulla**	Five noms each for Sandler, Bulla	Song "Adam Sandler's Song: 50 Years"	Sandler reviews half-century of "SNL" follies
	Will & Harper Netflix	**Sean Douglas, Kristen Wiig, Josh Greenbaum**	12 noms for Wiig, first noms for Douglas and Greenbaum	Song "Harper and Will Go West"	Wiig sings lighthearted ballad for cross-country road trip
Main Title Theme Music	**Dept. Q** Netflix	**Carlos Rafael Rivera, Scott Frank**	Three wins for Rivera, two wins for Frank	Emotionally scarred detective heads cold-case unit	Muscular theme for guitars with subtle Scottish colors
	Dune: Prophecy HBO	**Volker Bertelmann**	First nomination	Prequel series focuses on origins of Bene Gesserit	Moody mix of ancient and modern musical sounds
	Lazarus Adult Swim	**Kamasi Washington**	One nomination	Futuristic Japanese anime thriller	Upbeat jazz track features saxophone, strings, choir
	The Residence Netflix	**Mark Mothersbaugh**	Two nominations	Detective probes murder at White House dinner	Ominous piano and strings for brief animated opening
	The White Lotus HBO	**Cristobal Tapia de Veer**	Three wins, one additional nomination	Third season visits Thailand wellness resort	Dance-like piece for voices, accordion, saw u (Thai violin)
	Your Friends & Neighbors Apple TV+	**Dominic Lewis, Hamilton Leithauser**	First nomination for both	Fired financier struggles to maintain rich lifestyle	Leithauser sings about "keeping up with the Joneses"
Music Supervision	**Hacks** HBO Max	**Matt Biffa**	One win	"I Love L.A."	Queen on soundtrack; Randy Newman guests
	The Last of Us HBO	**Evyen Klean, Ian Broucek, Scott Hanau**	One win for Klean, one nom each for Broucek, Hanau	"The Price"	Joel assembles a guitar for Ellie, sings "Future Days"
	The Righteous Gemstones HBO	**DeVoe Yates, Gabe Hilfer**	One win for Hilfer, first nom for Yates	"You Hurled Me Into the Depths..."	Megan Mullally, as Lori Milsap, performs at telethon
	Severance Apple TV+	**George Drakoulias**	First nomination	"Cold Harbor"	Songs by Alan Parsons, Billie Holiday, Mel Torme
	The Studio Apple TV+	**Gabe Hilfer**	One win, one other nomination	"The Promotion"	Tommy Dorsey, Dave Brubeck tracks punctuate humor
	The White Lotus HBO	**Gabe Hilfer**	One win, one other nomination	"Same Spirits, New Forms"	Thai songs by Carabao, Charan Manophet set mood

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NO MORE HIROSHIMAS NO MORE NAGASAKIS

Cultural Leaders for a Future Without Nuclear Weapons

Eighty years ago, atomic bombs destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killed hundreds of thousands of people, and changed the course of history. Atomic bomb survivors, known as "hibakusha," have been warning us about what happens when nuclear weapons are used. Their deeply personal stories of loss, trauma, resilience, and determination are a clarion call in dark times.

Today, experts believe the risk that a nuclear weapon will be used again—by accident or on purpose—is as high as it has ever been. Conflicts are raging in regions with nuclear weapons—even *over* nuclear weapons.

The only remaining treaty limiting the number of nuclear weapons in the world expires in six months. Emerging technologies and AI pose new unknown risks to already complex systems. We're sliding into a costly and dangerous new arms race under the absurd premise that threatening annihilation keeps us safe.

But the ending isn't written yet, and the creative community has a leading role to play in pulling us back from the nuclear brink.

The stories we tell matter. In 1983, *The Day After*—the chilling TV movie about nuclear war—reached 100 million Americans and helped convince President Reagan to urgently pursue nuclear arms reductions. Around the same time, public support for a nuclear arms buildup plummeted from 61 percent to 16 percent. **Storylines about nuclear weapons helped pave the way for historic treaties that reduced worldwide stockpiles by 80 percent. But today, for the first time in 40 years, the number of nuclear weapons in the world may go up, not down.**

It doesn't have to be this way.

We believe nuclear weapons pose an unacceptable risk to our civilization and our security. We stand firmly against a costly new arms race and the development of more nuclear weapons. And we call on leaders to take action to ensure that a nuclear weapon is never used again.

This is a public commitment to use our voices, platforms, leadership, and storytelling expertise to call attention to the dangers posed by nuclear weapons and help audiences imagine a safer future without them. Together, we can build a critical mass to demand our leaders move us closer to—and eventually reach—a world without nuclear weapons.

For the victims and survivors and for our collective future, please join us.

Rosanna Arquette
Eli Attie
Joan Baez
Lawrence Bender
Asha Bhosle
Zanai Bhosle
Kathryn Bigelow
Yvette Nicole Brown
James Cameron
Gabrielle Carteris
Misha Collins
Auli'i Cravalho
Alan Cumming
Gabriela Díaz
Michael Douglas
Elia Einhorn
Jenny Fritz
Karen Fukuhara
Josh Gad
Walton Goggins
Topher Grace
David Grae
Hank Green
Clark Gregg
Jin Ha
Harry Hamlin
David Harrington
Annie Jacobsen
Paul Jay
Maz Jobrani
Greta Kline
Ayane Kozasa
Rod Lurie
Samantha Mathis
Travis Merriweather
Nicholas Meyer
Matthew Modine
Julianne Moore
Olivia Munn
Graham Nash
Sean Ono Lennon
Noah Oppenheim
Amanda Palley
Piper Perabo
Billy Ray
Lisa Rinna
Allison Russell
Shane Salerno
Richard Schiff
Greg Shapiro
Mark Shapiro
Martin Sheen
George Takei
Emma Thompson
Lily Tomlin
Mahsa Vahdat
Alok Vaid-Menon
Ocean Vuong
Scott Weinger
Mia Wenjen
Paul Wiancko
Roger Wolfson
Gideon Yago

This statement is endorsed by Governor of Hiroshima Hidehiko Yuzaki, Governor of Nagasaki Kengo Oishi, and Co-Chair and CEO of the Nuclear Threat Initiative Ernest J. Moniz.

See all the signatories and join us at nti.org/no-more-hiroshimas

NTI Critical Mass

PAID FOR BY THE NUCLEAR THREAT INITIATIVE

reviews



Frank Drebin Jr. (Liam Neeson) is a rogue officer in the LAPD.

Frank Masi/Paramount Pictures

FILM REVIEW / OWEN GLEIBERMAN

Gag Reflex

The new iteration of the 1988 classic carries some of its DNA but doesn't scale the same heights of hilarity

Naked Gun

Director Akiva Schaffer

Screenplay Dan Gregor, Doug Mand, Akiva Schaffer

Distributor Paramount Pictures

Cast Liam Neeson, Pamela Anderson, Danny Huston

→ Early on in the new version of "The Naked Gun," there's a moment that gives you that old "Naked Gun" feeling. Sgt. Frank Drebin Jr. (Liam Neeson), a veteran L.A. cop of unorthodox methods (he has a casual relationship with the law, and also with keeping his pants on in public), has just surveyed the scene of a fatal car crash that may have involved foul play. It's time for the wrecked car to be hauled away, so to accomplish that task they use a vehicle attached to what looks like a giant version of one of those mechanical claws in an arcade game. The claw lifts the car halfway up and then, at the crucial moment, drops it. The joke is that Drebin and his colleagues all let out adisappointed *"Ohhhhhh!,"* the way a million parents have when the claw guided by their 7-year-old drops the plushie toy it's trying to hoist (as happens just about every time). In its patented



Drebin has his eye on femme fatale Beth Davenport (Pamela Anderson).

absurdity, that gag scores a major laugh because it tickles a rib of recognition.

There are a handful of jokes that delirious in "The Naked Gun." But maybe not enough of them. The new movie, directed by Akiva Schaffer, is an engaging goofball grab bag, well-stocked with vintage terrible puns ("UCLA?" "I see it every day! I live here"), nicely detonated movie conventions (in the opening heist sequence, the villain's henchman steals a remote control marked with the words "P.L.O.T. Device") and serviceable running gags (Drebin keeps getting handed oversize cups of take-out coffee). All of that may be enough, in the eyes of many, to elevate "The Naked Gun" into the sort of "big-screen comedy we could all use right now," not to mention a worthy successor to the original "Naked Gun" — a film that emerged, in 1988, out of the "Airplane!" school of conceptual media-age insanity invented by the team of David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, and Jerry Zucker (ZAZ). At the time, those movies were often described as being fun in a "silly" way, as if they were just trivial diversions. And it's true that they didn't have a serious bone in their body.

Yet the beauty of the ZAZ school is that it used genre parody to take off on the whole wide world — of media and entertainment, of sex and politics and identity and everything else. In "The Naked Gun," ZAZ drew specifically on the conventions of second-rate TV cop shows, and the film noirs that had fed them, to skewer the Hollywood clichés you didn't even know were there. It was a movie about the way we watch movies, all held together by Leslie Nielsen, who played Drebin as an idiot cop who was also an innocently destructive force of nature. Nielsen, who seemed to be channeling Jack Webb, Ronald Reagan and Moe Howard at the same time, elevated cocksure befuddlement into a weird form of enlightenment, turning the myopic absence of self-awareness into comic gold.

In the new "Naked Gun," Liam Neeson plays the Nielsen character's son, who is very different from his father. Where Nielsen's Drebin, in his loony-tunes straight-arrow way, was by-the-book, Neeson's Drebin is a rogue officer, working for the Police Squad unit of the LAPD. He's at once an update of Nielsen's Drebin and a parody of all the cold-eyed vigilantes Neeson has played since his career was reinvented by "Taken" (2008). That may prove to be a commercially smart move — the idea of making a "Naked Gun" that's a semi-satire of demagogic action movies (with a semi-visible comment on LAPD overkill). And Neeson's lethal glare proves the jumping-off point for much skewed buffoonery. It's fun to see that Drebin is an icy enforcer who's also an addict for the Black Eyed Peas, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Sex and the City." "Have you ever heard about Miranda rights?" he's asked after having trashed police protocol. "I'm sure it's Carrie who writes!" he replies.

Drebin is up against Richard Cane (Danny Huston), an electric-car tech entrepreneur who plans to unleash a toxic gas that will allow him to start civilization anew. Neeson's Drebin, in the tradition of these films, is the cop as existential moron, living in the literal-minded moment. But Neeson, game as he is to be used as a glowering found object, is not a natural comedian, and you can feel that. His Drebin doesn't flow the way Nielsen's did.

And the movie, in its hit-or-miss way, lacks the fundamental quality of *aggression* the ZAZ films had. Some of the genre parodies they influenced, like "Scary Movie," had it too. "The Naked Gun" features a few edgy and absurdly extreme bits: Drebin biting the heads off guns, a love montage (scored to "Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now") in which Drebin and Beth squirrel away in a winter hideaway and the lunacy just escalates from there (it involves a live snowman in a ménage à trois), and a dashcam sequence that features too many chili dogs along with the crackpot revelation of Drebin's sexual fetishes.

"The Naked Gun" has enough honest laughs to get by. But critics, reviewing comedy, are always searching for other words to use that mean "funny," since there aren't a whole lot of them. We tend to keep going back to the well of phrases like "hilarious," "witty," "amusing" and "will make you chuckle." On that score, the original "Naked Gun" was *hilarious*. It was a film that practically had audiences wetting their pants. The new "Naked Gun," by contrast, is *amusing*. What it won't do, the way these movies once used to, is shock you into laughter.

Neeson, game as he is to be used as a glowering found object, is not a natural comedian, and you can feel that.

Frank Masi/Paramount Pictures

TV REVIEW / ARAMIDE TINUBU

Time out of Mind

The entrancing 'Outlander' prequel skips across centuries and settings as it follows two star-crossed romances

Outlander: Blood of My Blood

—

Platform Starz **Premiere date** Aug 8 **Episodes** 10
Creator Matthew B. Roberts **Cast** Harriet Slater, Jamie Roy, Hermione Corfield, Jeremy Irvine

→ Since its debut more than a decade ago, Starz's historical drama "Outlander" has captivated fans worldwide. The series revolves around Claire Randall (Caitríona Balfe) and Jamie Fraser (Sam Heughan), whose romance has defied time and continents. Now, with "Outlander" airing its eighth and likely final season in 2026, the universe is expanding. Based on the novels by Diana Gabaldon and adapted by Matthew B. Roberts, "Outlander: Blood of My Blood" introduces two new love stories, one that follows the romance between Claire's parents during World War I and the other centering on Jamie's parents' unlikely union in early 18th-century Scotland. With lush visuals and a complex narrative, this prequel is a thrilling addition to the franchise.

"Outlander: Blood of My Blood" begins with death. The scene is Scotland in 1714. At Castle Leoch, Clan MacKenzie is grieving the sudden demise of their Laird, Red Jacob MacKenzie (Peter Mullan). No one is more devastated by the loss than Red Jacob's eldest child, Ellen MacKenzie (Harriet Slater). Because Red Jacob did not name an heir, his sons, Dougal (Sam Retford) and Colum (Séamus McLean Ross), are locked in a battle for succession.

Red Jacob's death has left Ellen particularly vulnerable. Her beauty and unmarried status make her a valuable pawn in her brothers' quests for power, but she is determined to take control of her destiny. Further complications arise when Ellen meets and falls for Brian Fraser (Jamie Roy), the bastard son of the diabolical Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat (Tony Curran), who is the sworn enemy of Clan MacKenzie.

Centuries later, Lt. Henry Beauchamp (Jeremy Irvine) watches helplessly as his men are slaughtered on the front lines during the First World War. It's 1917, and one of Henry's letters is intercepted by Julia Moriston (Hermione Corfield), who has put her education on hold to work at the Postal and Telegraph Censorship Office. Through eloquent prose, the two strike up a friendship that develops into something much more intimate as the war progresses.

Series universe expansions can be challenging because audiences are so tethered to what they already know. Still, "Blood of My Blood" knocks it out of the park. Roy's Brian looks eerily similar to Heughan's Jamie, and Balfe and Corfield bear a striking resemblance to each other. Fan favorites, including Murtagh Fitzgibbons Fraser (portrayed here by Rory Alexander), also echo the older versions of their characters.

Moreover, the romances between Jamie's and Claire's respective parents, which anchor the 10-episode season (critics received six for review), possess the same magic electricity that made the original show so enthralling. One is a forbidden affair; the other, a once-in-a-lifetime connection severed by a shocking incident. The chemistry between the couples is potent and realistic.

"Blood of My Blood," like "Outlander," has no shortage of steamy sex scenes. But the sensual headiness is only one compelling element of this time-bending series. The historical aspects will likely engage both "Outlander" fans and those new to the world. Indeed, the narrative is sharpest when focusing on Ellen and Julia, whose journeys offer a perspective on the trials women throughout the ages face as they navigate the perils of patriarchal societies. An unforeseen twist also adds an enticing layer to the show.

Prequels and sequels rarely stand up to the original work. Yet "Outlander: Blood of My Blood" is a rare gem, glittering brightly on its own. Fascinating and detailed, the show retains all the beautiful components that made the first series so addictive, but allows a brand-new cast to shine.

The historical aspects will likely engage both "Outlander" fans and those new to the world.



"Outlander: Blood of My Blood" follows romances set in World War I and 18th-century Scotland.

Victoria Will/Starz



Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

→ In 1990, the biggest thing in movies was a 10-year-old boy whose head barely reached the top of the dinner table.

Macaulay Culkin's performance in "Home Alone" as Kevin McCallister, a wily grade schooler who foils a pair of robbers (Joe Pesci and Daniel Stern) after his vacationing family leaves him behind, turned the movie into a box office smash. It grossed a massive $476.7 million, surprising even 20th Century Fox, the studio that picked up the movie after Warner Bros. put it in turnaround over a budget dispute with its creator John Hughes.

No one could have foreseen just how hard audiences would fall for Culkin, who stole every scene, somehow conveying Kevin's innate sweetness even as he devised deadly booby traps for the dim-witted home invaders. When it came time to film the inevitable sequel, 1992's "Home Alone 2: Lost in New York," Fox was forced to pay up, handing Culkin a check for $4.5 million, compared with the $100,000 he earned for the first film.

For a time, Culkin was everywhere. He hosted "Saturday Night Live," starred in box office hits like "My Girl" and "The Good Son" and even appeared in a cartoon. But as he entered adolescence, Culkin grew tired of celebrity. After 1994's "Richie Rich," he stopped appearing in films for nearly a decade to have a "normal life."

But his childhood ultimately was a dark one. Culkin sued his parents to block them from controlling his trust fund and later went public about the alleged abuse he suffered at the hands of his father, Kit Culkin. It's a reminder of the more difficult side of fame and the struggles that even a kid who seemed to have everything could be forced to endure. — *Brent Lang*

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