

ASPHALT PLANT RELOCATION TALKS • WU-TANG CLAN IN CONCERT • REVIEWS OF TOP STREAMING SHOWS

IRVINE

WEEKLY

OCTOBER 7, 2022 • VOL. 4 • NO. 11



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CLIMATE ACTIVISTS SPEAK OUT ABOUT CLIMATE INACTION IN IRVINE

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

In August 2021, leaders within the city of Irvine voted in favor of achieving carbon neutrality by 2030. Officially titled the Irvine ACHIEVES (Address Climate Change in Irvine's Environment, Values, and Energy Sources) resolution, the program was created by Irvine's Green Ribbon Environmental Committee and set out the intention of reaching a carbon neutral future five years ahead of California's zero-carbon goal of 2035.

Yet, a year later, climate activists and environmental experts in Orange County say they are disappointed with the lack of progress Irvine has made on its climate goals. And now the fear is that unless Irvine takes significant steps in order to reach these goals, some climate milestones may already be out of reach.

To address this concern, more than two dozen organizations in Orange County co-signed a document titled, "Irvine Must Act Now to Meet Its 2030 Carbon Zero Commitment," which was dated August 10.

The letter was addressed to Irvine Mayor Farrah Khan and the City Council and calls for the immediate electrification of buildings and the elimination of natural gas in new development within Irvine.

"Every home built in Irvine with gas pipes and appliances puts Irvine families at risk," a portion of the letter read. "In order to be the climate leader that Orange County needs and protect Irvine families, Irvine must stop allowing the construction of buildings that use gas as a fuel, and help existing homes replace gas appliances with electric appliances. 60 California cities and counties have now committed to phasing out gas in new buildings, including the other two Cool City Challenge winners – Los Angeles and Petaluma. Irvine's absence is notable."



Ayn Craciun, OC Policy Manager of Climate Action Campaign, a grassroots nonprofit organization, spoke to *Irvine Weekly* via phone to discuss the letter.

"We were very supportive of them joining the Cool City Challenge and adopting that 2030 zero-carbon resolution," Craciun said. "But, unfortunately, what we've seen in reality is Irvine is not following through on that cool city commitment to reach zero carbon by 2030. The city manager has been saying that instead of reaching zero carbon by 2030, we should just stay in line with the state's goals – carbon neutrality by 2035 – which would mean Irvine postponing its climate promises for 15 years."

On September 28, Craciun spoke on a sustainability panel, hosted by 2nd District Supervisor Katrina Foley. During her comments, Craciun pointed out that less than 20% of cities in Orange County have adopted climate action plans. From her perspective, Orange County is falling far behind its neighboring county of San Diego.

"Only 14% of cities in the county have adopted a climate action plan – com-

pared to San Diego County that is at 95% [of cities that have climate action plans]," Craciun said in her comments during the panel.

The lack of action in Irvine is a "scandal" given the current climate crisis. Given the current landscape, Craciun said the coalition letter written to council outlines several additions to the city's climate action plan that she hoped would be implemented.

Craciun also emphasized that the gas industry is also playing a role in the rate at which Irvine adopts climate policy.

"The Southern California Gas Company is a long-time opponent of climate policy. We know that SoCal Gas and their team of lobbyist in Orange County has been meeting with city staff and the elected officials there, and trying to get them to postpone inevitable and necessary action – especially on this building modification policy," she said. "Numerous environmental and health organizations have come out in opposition to it, because it is a delay tactic from the gas industry."

Craciun's comments come at a time where environmental experts everywhere are emphasizing the dangers of climate change and continue to push for the reduction of greenhouse gasses.

In 2021, Michael Prather, UC Irvine Professor of Earth Sciences, contributed to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). In his findings, Prather warned that there is no technology available that will help us correct this climate crisis, and there probably will never be.

As environmental alarms sound, more populations will be forced to adapt to these environmental impacts at a rate never seen before, Prather explained.

"The climate crisis is at a point where we don't have time to fiddle around and

distract ourselves with ideas that are not going to take necessary resources away from technologies that work today, that can be implemented – and have been implemented by 60 cities in California," Craciun said.

Dr. Kathleen Treseder, a candidate for the Irvine City Council, and a professor at UC Irvine has spent the last 20 years studying biology, fungi, ecosystems and global change. In a phone interview with *Irvine Weekly*, Treseder explained that she was optimistic to see Irvine adopt the ACHIEVES resolution last year. But, now says is less optimistic the city can follow through with its promises.

"2030 is coming up really fast – since there has been not as much action on those [policies] as we had hoped. Although one thing I'm really pleased about is that the City Council did vote for the city to put on 100% renewable energy for residents and customers in the OC Power Authority," she said. "That's a big step toward that goal."

Treseder was also involved with Irvine's Cool Block Challenge.

The Cool Block Challenge was part of Irvine's Cool City Challenge and started as a call to action by the city of Irvine, seeking 200 volunteers to help form environmental community groups, known as Cool Block Teams. Funded by the Empowerment Institute, Irvine was awarded \$1 million for its efforts in organizing local teams.

Treseder, who became a Cool Block leader, said she supports educational programs of this nature, but added that it takes a lot of climate responsibility away from the city – by putting the action on the residents.

"I don't think that program itself will add a big change in the city's carbon goals. It's a bit limited, not every resident is going to join that. What I don't want to see is organizations or municipalities putting the work back on individuals to fix climate," she said. "Individuals have some ability to moderate their activities and try to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but cities have so much more [ability] – ordinances they can pass, city wide programs – I get worried the city might be embracing a program because it kind of lets them but the onus back on the residents."

NEWS

ASPHALT PLANT RELOCATION TALK CONTINUES, BUT NO ACTION IN IRVINE

THE IRVINE CITY COUNCIL WILL CONTINUE ITS DISCUSSIONS TO REMOVE THE ALL AMERICAN ASPHALT FACILITY, WHICH IS NOW BEING RECOGNIZED AS A MAJOR POLLUTER.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

The Irvine City Council will need to make tough decisions as the city works to define its approach to removing a troublesome and odorous asphalt manufacturing plant in Orchard Hills. Originally slated to discuss the status of relocation in regards to the All American Asphalt plant during the Irvine City Council meeting on September 27, the item was pushed to a later meeting at the request of Councilmember Mike Carroll, due to time constraints, due to the Great Park meeting that lasted more than five hours.

Prior to its continuance, the council was set to address developments within a settlement agreement with the asphalt manufacturing facility stemming from a 2020 public nuisance lawsuit. Part of the agreement would provide a process in which relocation and closure of the plant can be achieved.

The report read:

"The settlement agreement is being developed in light of the fact that the city in 2020 filed a lawsuit against AAA, alleging that odors and emissions emanating from the plant constituted a public nuisance under the Irvine Municipal Code and the California Civil Code Subsequent to the filing, and in an effort to expedite near term community protections and relocation of the facility, the City Council directed staff to pursue a settlement agreement with AAA. Staff has worked closely



with ownership representatives from the company to craft an agreement that represents the interests of the City. The two parties are now finalizing the agreement which staff plans to bring back shortly for City Council consideration. Key terms of the agreement include:

- Responsibility and timeline for site identification;
- Funding and key milestone dates for plant closure and relocation;
- Interim monitoring of plant emissions prior to relocation;
- Protecting the City's legal rights in the dispute."

Now, the council will opt to discuss the options city staff have analyzed over the last few months at its next meeting on October 11. Another specific aspect of discussion will be the condemnation of All American Asphalt from the city.

During the council meeting on Tuesday, Sept. 13, Irvine Councilmember Larry Agran presented the aspect of condemning the facility. While Agran's suggestion was not seconded, the issue was continued to the following meeting.

Outlined within the September 27 agenda, the aspect of condemnation requires several key factors, including identifying a public interest, preventing the least private injury and proving that acquiring the private property is necessary in ensuring these goals.

"At this point, given the options available to the city to address the ongoing AAA concerns, direction from the City Council is needed to identify if pursuing a settlement agreement process is the preferred course of action, or if staff should pause settlement conversations to pursue condemnation proceedings," the agenda report read.

In a phone call with Irvine Weekly on October 4, Agran spoke about his perspective regarding the condemnation of the plant, which he views as the most effective way to end what he referred to as an "ongoing public health emergency."

"The surest and quickest route to that kind of shutdown and removal is a condemnation proceeding, which publicly and privately we've been advised could be concluded in as little as six to nine months' time," he said. "It's a very strong measure, but of course, we're looking at a public health emergency, and I can't speak for the other council members, but, in my judgment, it's imperative that the facility be shut down as quickly as possible."

Irvine Mayor Farrah Khan did not respond to Irvine Weekly's question regarding her views on condemnation of the facility.

On September 23, the South Coast Air Quality Management District held a virtual meeting with the Irvine community to inform residents of new findings and to review findings from its recent Health Risk Assessment, which was published on August 19.

During the meeting, held via Zoom, AQMD addressed the aspect of Title V permitting, which AAA will be required to present. The classification of Title V applies to "major source" facilities that "emit, or has the potential to emit any criteria pollutant or hazardous air pollutant at levels equal to or greater than the Major Source Thresholds," according to an AQMD PowerPoint presentation.

While it is unclear what specific date the AAA facility was recognized as a Title V facility, it will need to present specific permitting no later than 180 days after becoming subject to Title V.

Previously, the facility carried 18 "minor source" permits – for equipment that included crushers, dry filter conveyors, storage silos and other manufacturing equipment associated with crumb rubber asphalt production.

In its Title V permit process, AAA will be limited to its existing equipment, must not make changes to output, must not have an increase in emissions and must not add new processes or air pollution control equipment to its facility, according to AQMD.

GREAT PARK FINALIZES PERMANENT AMPHITHEATER WITH LIVENATION

LIVENATION WILL CONTRIBUTE \$20 MILLION TOWARD THE PROJECT AND WILL PAY IRVINE \$3 MILLION ANNUALLY THROUGH OPERATING FEES.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

Expected to open in 2025, the Irvine City Council and the Great Park Board of Directors agreed to terms, on Tuesday, Sept. 27, with LiveNation that will bring a permanent 14,000 seat amphitheater into the Great Park.

As a key component to the new Great Park Framework, which was approved by the Irvine City Council in August, the new LiveNation Amphitheater in Irvine will draw design inspiration from iconic venues such as the Hollywood Bowl and Millennium Park Amphitheater in Chicago, according to Irvine City Manager Oliver Chi. The agreement, according to the terms, will also bring plenty of economic benefits to Irvine.

In a phone interview with Irvine Weekly, Chi explained that once built, the agreement with LiveNation will generate more than \$3.5 million annually, from a base operating fee for the venue.

"What the agreement contemplates is the city and LiveNation would engage together on a design process. After the design we'd assess whether or not the facility can be constructed for an amount commensurate with the economic value that LiveNation will be contributing and paying to the city to operate the facility," he said. "The city will then construct the facility with the goal of turning it over to LiveNation for them to operate, starting with the 2025 concert season."

From an economic standpoint, the permanent amphitheater will generate revenue for the city of Irvine in a few different ways. For starters, LiveNation will contribute \$20 million toward the project, and will also pay a \$5.00 per-ticket fee that will be split evenly with the city of Irvine once events begin. Chi also added that the base operating agreement comes with an annual percentage increase.

"The agreement contemplates LiveNation bringing a \$20 million as an initial capital contribution toward the facility; they would pay a base operating fee of 3.5%, that would escalate at 3% annually. We've targeted using our independent financial analyst's projected cost of capital of 4-5% and it

RENDERINGS COURTESY OF LIVENATION AND GENSLER SPORTS



falls right within the parameters for a deal up to \$130 million," he said. "We don't know what it will cost to build it until we get through the design process, but that's sort of the upper limit of what we think the deal can be valued at, based on what we've negotiated with LiveNation."

Visually speaking, the outdoor amphitheater will feature a distinct landscaping feature known as a berm, and will also feature a sunken stage.

In a 4-1 vote, the Great Park Board of Directors and the City Council approved the new outdoor amphitheater project during a five-hour Great Park board meeting. Director Larry Agran had strong hesitation with approval and was the only person to vote against moving forward.

Specifically, Agran took issue with the aspect of traffic coming through the Great Park during event days.

"You're real confident that all this is going to be handled? This is going to be fine? Frankly, I don't believe it," Agran said.

Chi said given the extensive research on traffic related to the area, the city has a high degree of confidence it will efficiently control traffic for cars entering and exiting the Great Park.

"The way that the circulation system has been modeled, it's been studied through the traffic analysis that was conducted - 30 intersections looked at utilizing the interior road system and the access off of Great Park Blvd and Marine Way," he said. "The study found that traffic impacts are negligible. As a staff, we believe it's accurate to say this. There won't be a traffic impact on the neighborhood."

The new amphitheater will use approximately 25 acres within the Great Park's newly approved framework, which includes a 75-acre botanical garden, a library and numerous water features across a total of 750 acres. The outdoor amphitheater will be positioned north of the Wild Rivers Waterpark.

Bret Gallagher, president of Southern California Live Nation, spoke to Irvine Weekly via phone to discuss the

culmination of efforts over the years between the City of Irvine, LiveNation and FivePoint.

Speaking on years of work tied to this agreement, Gallagher said he's proud to be able to continue the tradition of live music in Irvine, which started with Irvine Meadows.

When Irvine Meadows went down in 2016, the desire and goal of the City Council, city staff and LiveNation was always trying to find a way to keep live music alive in Irvine. The good news is; we found FivePoint - I give FivePoint all the credit for giving us the property, to build our temporary FivePoint Amphitheater on, and the city has supported it since Day 1."

For Gallagher, time was the most challenging aspect to endure during this long process. And while Gallagher says he is aware of the pushback from residents in the community who are opposed to the permanent amphitheater.

"We're great community partners. We're great partners with people who enjoy music. We understand that there's a community at the Great Park - we'll work closely with them and respect their wants and needs," he said. "I think people just want to be heard. I view this as a collaborative experience."

The decision comes nearly six years after Irvine's previous live music venue, Irvine Meadows, was closed in 2016. In fact, the last shows at Irvine Meadows were held Oct. 29 & 30, 2016.

As both the city of Irvine and LiveNation begin to embark on this monumental build for Irvine and Orange County, Gallagher said is excited to have the opportunity to watch a state-of-the-art project of this magnitude be completed from the ground up.

"I've worked at lots of amphitheaters in my time at LiveNation and Canada. We're very proud of all our amphitheaters, upgrade constantly, and we improve the artist and guest experience. So, I'm excited to work collaboratively with our designers and the great people at LiveNation," he said. "We're going to make this one state of the art."



PHOTO BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

WU-TANG CLAN'S ATTEMPT AT FOREVER

AS ONE OF HIP-HOP'S MOST INFLUENTIAL ACTS, WU-TANG CLAN CONTINUES ITS QUEST FOR MUSICAL IMMORTALITY WITH THE HELP OF BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGY.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

Nearly 30 years have passed since the Staten Island-based Hip-Hop dynasty Wu-Tang Clan released its debut album *Enter The Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*. While some might not remember the fall of 1993, in 2022 the relevance of Wu-Tang Clan still remains deeply recognizable in Hip-Hop, contemporary art and internet culture.

Within its iconic debut, *Enter The Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* sonically blended audio samples from obscure Kung Fu films over gritty, aggressive beats. The album is fueled with intelligent lyrics rich with wit and drenched in a familiar, yet unprecedentedly detailed slang.

By way of this poetic art form, the voices of nine young men fiercely

PHOTO COURTESY OF WU-TANG CLAN



struck a vein within a global hip-hop community that is still hemorrhaging 29 years later.

Seemingly unaware of the adage that claims *Father Time is undefeated*, on the evening of Friday, Sept. 30, Wu-Tang arrived at FivePoint Amphitheater in Irvine, Calif. to demonstrate their verbal mastery to eager listeners.

Co-headlining with Nas and special guest BustaRhymes during the NY State Of Mind Tour, Wu-Tang performed some of the group's most well-known tracks including *Reunited*, *C.R.E.A.M.* and *Protect Ya Neck*, which RZA claimed to be the first Wu-Tang Clan song ever recorded.

In terms of members, only one of the group's nine original members has passed in the years since the group's first album. Ol' Dirty Bastard – born Russell Tyrone Jones – affectionately known by his moniker's acronym O.D.B., passed away in 2004.

Only to be replaced by none other than the late rapper's eldest son, Barson Unique Jones, who raps under the moniker Young Dirty Bastard, aka, Y.D.B.

The sight of thousands of Wu-Tang fans, with outstretched arms proudly displaying the unmistakable “W” logo with their hands, rapping in unison the

three-decade-old lyrics, 3,000 miles from the Shaolin soil where the timeless rhymes were first embodied, speaks to the group's undying longevity.

It could also be translated into a simple fact; Wu-Tang is forever.

While the concept of forever may seem out of reach, in its quest for music immortality, Wu-Tang has been metaphorically etching its well-known “W” emblem into the annals of art and internet history – with the help of the blockchain.

In a not-so-metaphorical saga that began in 2015, which involves the American federal government, securities fraud, cryptocurrency, and the sale of the most expensive album ever – Wu-Tang Clan's *Once Upon A Time In Shaolin* – Wu-Tang Clan may now be closer to forever, than ever before.

Produced in secrecy by RZA and producer Cilvaringz, more than a decade ago, *Once Upon A Time In Shaolin* is the seventh official Wu-Tang Clan studio album, but was never publicly released.

Instead, upon its completion, RZA and Cilvaringz opted to only print a single physical copy of the two-disc, 31-track album, which was kept in a hand-carved nickel-silver case, and a manuscript, and certificate of authenticity.

RZA and Cilvaringz released a joint statement on their website Scruzay/Ezclziv giving some context to their approach, specifically seeking to avoid “mass replication” in an effort to shift attitudes in both the music industry and the contemporary art world:

“By adopting an approach to music that traces its lineage back through the Enlightenment, the Baroque and the Renaissance, we hope to reawaken old perceptions of music as truly monumental art. In doing so, we hope to inspire and intensify urgent debates about the future of music, both economically and in how our generation experiences it. We hope to steer those debates toward more radical solutions and provoke questions about the value and perception of music as a work of art in today's world.”

In 2015, *Once Upon A Time In Shaolin* was originally purchased for \$2 million during a private auction by infamous “Pharma Bro” Martin Shkreli. A few years later, in 2018, the album was confiscated by the Department of Justice when Shkreli was convicted of securities fraud, after he intentionally raised the price of his AIDS drug Retrophin from \$13.00 to \$750 per-pill. He was sentenced to seven years in prison. He was released on September 14.

As a part of Shkreli's sentencing, the DOJ ordered Shkreli to forfeit \$7.4 million in assets – and eventually used the album as collateral.

In July 2021, the Department of Justice announced that it sold the unreleased album to satisfy Shkreli's debt. However, the contract of the sale limited the DOJ's ability to name the buyer at the time of purchase – and price.

“Through the diligent and persistent efforts of this Office and its law enforcement partners, Shkreli has been held accountable and paid the price for lying and stealing from investors to enrich himself. With today's sale of this one-of-a-kind album, his payment of the forfeiture is now complete,” U.S. Attorney Kasulis said.

The story of *Once Upon A Time In Shaolin* seemingly ends there – until it doesn't.

In October 2021, PleasrDAO, a decentralized autonomous organization,

came forward to announce their \$4 million acquisition of *Once Upon A Time In Shaolin*. With PleasrDAO's purchase, the album, which was purchased with cryptocurrency, also received a Web3 upgrade – a digital token of ownership – also known as an NFT.

After the purchase, PleasrDAO, a 75-member group of early Web3 adopters, NFT artists, and digital collectors added a blog post to its website, detailing the mission behind their purchase of this iconic 1-of-1 album.

Written by Jamis Johnson, PleasrDAO's Chief Pleasing Officer, the blog post recaps Johnson's experience of listening to the album for the first time and underscores the importance of this opportunity for both Wu-Tang, its fans and internet culture.

“Once Upon a Time in Shaolin in many ways is the OG NFT before NFT technology had made its way into the zeitgeist. It was their magnum opus, intended to push boundaries on what music could be as an art form,” Johnson wrote. “We believe the next chapter in the incredible story of this album should be Web 3.0 native. Although we are bound by the legal agreement underpinning this work of art and may not be able to duplicate and share the music digitally, we firmly believe there are ways to share this musical masterpiece with the world.”

In an effort to get a status update from PleasrDAO on what's next for the album, *Irvine Weekly* reached out to Peter Scoolidge, an attorney that represented PleasrDAO in the purchase of the album from the federal government.

“A documentary is currently in the works for this story so we are not able to comment any further on it for the time being,” Scoolidge wrote to *Irvine Weekly*.

For now, Wu-Tang fans will have to continue to wait for their chance to hear *Once Upon A Time In Shaolin*, but Johnson is optimistic it will be around for a while.

“A lot of things in life are temporary, fleeting, impermanent. But remember this – just like our blockchain, Wu Tang is forever.”

UNDER THE MIDNIGHT SUN

THE CULT IS BACK WITH A NEW ALBUM AND A SHOW AT THE GREEK.

BY BRETT CALLWOOD

The last time we spoke to the Cult's enigmatic frontman Ian Astbury, it was a pre-pandemic summer of 2019 and the band was preparing to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the *Sonic Temple* album at the Greek Theatre. For a band not heavy on nostalgia, it was a rare glance back.

No, the Cult has always much preferred to keep moving forward. Sure, they play the hits at the concerts – the fans would crucify them if they didn't – but it's been just about the old songs. The Cult makes a point of ensuring that they don't stagnate. So of course, the lockdowns were awfully difficult for them, much like everyone else.

"I mean, the planet stopped, for god's sake," says Astbury by phone. "Traditionally you're out touring, working and performing a lot of the time, and The Cult essentially started as a live band. We came out of punk, post-punk, and then just toured. Started making records, and then toured, then made a record. That was the cycle for decades, then along comes the pandemic and a spanner goes in the works. It all grinds to a halt, and we all deal with existential anxieties and real anxieties. We went through it here. Crime activity went through the roof. We're in East Hollywood. It was intense for two years. Meanwhile, with the people around us, relationships were breaking up, suicides, people losing their jobs and homes – it was brutal. You come out the backend and touring – I can feel the effects. It's different. We're in a different space. That said, what it did to the music, it gave us the opportunity to let the songs marinate. To gestate and reach their natural conclusion."

The new album is *Under the Midnight Sun*, the follow-up to 2016's *Hidden City*. It was produced by Tom Dalgety, and while it was written and recorded under



challenging circumstances, it has all of the hallmarks of a Cult gem – notably, Astbury's post-punk croon and Billy Duffy's majestic guitar tones. That it was written across the Atlantic while Duffy and Dalgety were stuck in the UK, until they could eventually reconvene and finish it, is impressive because the album feels utterly cohesive. The title is inspired by an experience in Finland in the '80s, when they were performing deep into

the night and the sun was still up.

"I watched a show of us in Finland that I hadn't seen since then, in '86," Astbury says. "I remember it was 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning and the sun was still up because of the northern hemisphere. The people were hanging out, making out, smoking and laughing. Just a perfect, beautiful, surreal moment. You take a memory like that and retain it somewhere in your center, your core. Here we

are in the middle of the pandemic and I'm looking at this footage, and the whole wave of it came back to me."

True to the form, the album marks an evolution, a march forward, from *Hidden City*. It's not necessarily easy to put a finger on specifics – for the listener, each album just feels different. Of course, the singer can offer context.

"A new producer, a different idea of the sonic picture, brings different ideas," he says. "This record has piano, and a 36-piece orchestra. We had a quartet once, but not a 36-piece orchestra recorded in Prague. The title track is profound. It's one of the most staggering things I've been a part of, ever. The Cult is getting closer to the animal it was meant to be. A polymorphous, multi-integrated, multi-faceted entity. Of course it's formatted to a quasi-rock band, but even that doesn't apply anymore, because what is rock music now? Who's saying what is what? It's whatever you want it to be. For some people, anything with a guitar is rock."

The Cult formed in the early '80s, initially as Death Cult after Astbury's first band, Southern Death Cult. So Astbury and Duffy now have been working together for four decades. The frontman says that they're still able to surprise each other.

"Billy's evolved as a musician and as a player," he says. "He's a self-taught musician, but he's really put the time in to learn his craft, and he's spent a lot of time developing his tone. He's very particular about what he plays and uses – it's everything for him. So he's evolved. One of his real fortes, apart from being a very gifted musician and performer, is that he has a very good ear for melody. I'm inquisitive – I need to know – even if it might not go well. I need to explore. So I brought a lot to this from experiences during the pandemic. So it's fresh. We're not doing a pastiche of the *Electric* album. I'm not going out there in leather trousers and a cowboy hat. We did that."

This week, the Cult returns to the Greek Theatre.

The Cult's Under the Midnight Sun album is out from Oct. 7. They perform at 7 p.m., on Sunday, Oct. 9, at the Greek Theatre.

PHOTO BY TIM CADIENTE

LORD OF THE STREAMS

SHOULD YOU WATCH THE DRAGONS, THE ELVES OR THE REBELS?

BY LINA LECARO



(HBO)

Streaming services, cable TV and Primetime television are fighting for your viewership now more than ever. UNBINGED is here to help you weed through it all, with reviews of the latest shows that highlight what we love, what we hate and what we love to hate-watch, too. This week, we spotlight three big ticket shows hoping to revitalize the streaming service market. Sorry Netflix, but this is the big leagues. These are the shows that are vying for your interest, your time, and your subscription dollars. From the creatures and cretins in HBO's *House of*

the Dragon to the elves of Prime's *Lord of the Rings: Rings of Power* to the Sith lords of Disney+'s *Andor*, these shows feature billion dollar properties that have one goal in mind: to change the game.

House of the Dragon (HBO)

Built from the ruins of a devoted fandom and new subscriber goals comes the latest reason to renew HBO Max. Though *Game of Thrones* fans have a reason to be wary after the searing disappointment of Season 8 and the betrayal of a "Storyline That Was Prom-

ised," HBO hopes to win back the interest and devotion of an embittered following with *House of the Dragon*. With the help of pricey sets, an impressive cast, and a story that includes the beginning, middle and end of an epic tale written by George RR Martin himself, it appears to be working.

So, what is the main difference between the two series? Other than a few centuries and a few dozen key players, much of the politics will seem familiar. While *Game of Thrones* was a fantasy adventure filled with sex, violence, incest and a promise of dragons in future

seasons, *House of the Dragon* is a fantasy adventure filled with sex, violence and dragons with a promise of incest; Targaryens are known for their "pure" bloodlines, and this series has dozens of them all vying for the Iron Throne.

Showrunner Ryan Condal and the good folks at HBO were smart in their story selection, opting for Martin's *Fire & Blood* as the basis of the series, particularly the Dance of the Dragons, aka the Targaryen civil war. This sets up the series in a similar scenario as the early seasons of *Thrones*, offering political intrigue and court affairs.

As the series kicks off, King Viserys Targaryen names his daughter Rhaenyra as his heir, bypassing the tradition of male-only heirs, and thus vexing his brother Daemon. When he remarries to his advisor's daughter, matters are further complicated when she begins producing more heirs. Eventually, every Targaryen dragon rider will soon have a valid reason to reach for the Iron Throne.

While the first season is about setting up the chess board and introducing the players, it is also about rebuilding faith in the series and the brand. Wrapped in extravagant sets and costumes, *House of Dragons* core story will feel familiar enough to *Thrones* fans. If HBO doesn't deter from the path set by Martin and his book, it should restore their trust as well. Bring on the mead, the tourneys, and the fire breathers. We are in for a hell of a ride.

The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power (Amazon Prime)

Even before it made its debut, Amazon Prime was quick to point out that their new flagship series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* was one of the most expensive series ever created. And it certainly looked like it. But once audience eyes adjusted to the splendor of the production and costumes, what was left?

Set in the Second Age of Middle-earth, the Amazon Prime series offers longtime fans a chance to plunge back into the realm of elves and Orcs, dwarves and harfoots. Where men are at the mercy of magic and magical beings, which in turn is being threatened by the return of Sauron, the hovering all-seeing eye from

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the award-winning *Lord of the Ring* movies.

The series has a lot of ground to cover and an ambitious gameplan to do so, with five seasons already planned, exploiting every footnote, appendices, post-it note, and grocery list left by J.R.R. Tolkien. Starring Morfydd Clark, Markella Kavenagh, Ismael Cruz Cordova, and Robert Aramaya, among dozens of others, the series will cover the epic story of Númenor and the rise of Sauron, which brought on the Last Alliance of Elves and Men.

The series has sparked debate among die-hard Tolkien fans and that is a good way to get them engaged, for now at least. But what does the series hold for the common folks, those who enjoyed only the movies and maybe the many memes it inspired? These people should know that the first season of *Rings of Power* is less in the spirit of *Lord of the Rings* and more in the spirit of *The Hobbit*. In terms of pacing, tone and general storytelling it's a bit long in the tooth. The journey is lovely to look at, but meandering at times.

The show itself is quite an undertaking. Over 30 characters, many of which are new to the franchise, each with their



own storylines, their own set of objectives and ambitions, and their own obstructions. Even for an audience familiar with the subject matter it's a lot. Watching the series is almost as laborious as the creation of the series itself must have been.

The Rings of Power is neither the tragic misconception of Tolkien's life work nor a modern masterpiece of storytelling. Instead, it drifts in the middle. Right now, the series is weighed down by its need to set up the story and characters. To really

allow viewers to get lost in the world of Middle-earth will take time. Hopefully the payoff will be worth it.

Star Wars: Andor (Disney+)

In 2016, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* offered a new chapter in the sci-fi franchise that longtime fans were not expecting. The story was a departure from the Skywalker saga as the film focused on a rag-tag group of Rebels who gave their lives in exchange for offering hope

to the Rebellion.

Though outside of the familiar franchise, the film was regarded as one of the best in the *Star Wars* chronicles thanks to its cast, a stellar script, and the final breath-taking 20 minutes featuring Darth Vader in all of his badass, light-saber wielding Sith glory.

Now, six years later, *Rogue* co-scribe Tony Gilroy returns to the world of *Rogue One* with *Star Wars: Andor* for Disney+. Set five years before the events of the feature film, Cassian Andor (Diego Luna) is the main focus of the series as we follow his development from scoundrel to hero.

When we first meet Andor in *Rogue One*, he is already a leader, but here, he is just one notch above a derelict. A thief who runs on impulse, he acts without thinking and suffers the consequences. Joined by Stellan Skarsgård, Forest Whitaker, Adria Arjona, Kyle Soller, Fiona Shaw, and Denise Gough, Luna embodies Andor. He's a man whose people and planet have been destroyed by the Empire, yet his spirit remains intact. In early episodes, it is difficult to see the self-sacrificing leader he will eventually become, but that is the journey promised by *Andor*.

Andor keeps the story grounded by keeping the action mostly on the ground, thereby making it the most relatable of the *Star Wars* properties. A smart move for a franchise that was quickly approaching fatigue as Disney continues to milk it for movies, series, and animated efforts. Though still rich with culture and the politics that drive the *Star Wars* universe, *Andor* is a more nuanced story that pulls from the characters and their actions, rather than the fanbase. However, those looking for another *Mandalorian* might be disappointed by the darker nature of the show.

In the end, *Andor* is less of a spin-off and more of a spy drama that makes use of its pedigree to tell an engrossing story. At its heart, it is a character study told on the backdrop of a revolution. We know the outcome for all involved, so audience interest must rely firmly on Andor himself. Thanks to Luna, we care, as both the actor and Gilroy have created a compelling character. Good news for those who have hit *Star Wars* ennui.