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Open for Business

How SoCal Venues Survived the Pandemic

By Brett Callwood

AMERICA'S COOLEST NEW ICE CREAM PARLOR OPENS IN DEATH VALLEY

An iconic venue gets a reboot

BY MICHELE STUEVEN



One of the hottest places on earth just got a little cooler. An old school Ice Cream Parlor soda fountain shop has opened at The Oasis at Death Valley, as part of a nearly six-year \$150-million renovation at the resort, which encompasses two hotels — The AAA Four-Diamond historic Inn at Death Valley and the family style Ranch at Death Valley.

The Ranch has 80 new bungalow-style, stand-alone cottages, steps away from the revitalized mission style town square that includes new retail shops, a restored saloon and restaurant. Originally a working ranch that was built in the 1930s, most of its structures were built in the 1950s. It offers 275 rooms in low-slung one- and two-story buildings

arranged around sprawling lawns, with many of the rooms open onto patios, while others have balconies overlooking the grounds.

The Ice Cream Parlor at the Ranch, known for years as Furnace Creek, is a sweet and nostalgic addition to the Oasis, with a variety of shakes like peanut butter cup, creamsicle and Badwater Caramel, banana splits, soda floats, sundaes and 20 different types of ice cream including date, huckleberry birthday cake and brownie extreme. The grill offers lunch options like burgers, grilled cheese, hot dogs and chili.

Adjacent to the new 1849 restaurant that offers breakfast, lunch and dinner buffet is the updated version of the Ranch's Western-style bar, now known



as The Last Kind Words Saloon. With its soaring ceilings and hearty fine-dining options like rib eye and flat iron steaks, filet mignon, prime rib and baby back ribs, it's a welcome addition to starving and thirsty travelers at the end of a long journey through the National Park.

The resort was originally built by the Pacific Borax Company in the late 1920s and was the getaway winter spot for Hollywood celebrities like Clark Gable and Ronald Reagan, and is where George Lucas filmed scenes from the original Star Wars movies. The oldest structure in Death Valley is now the Borax museum that sits on the Ranch property.

Originally built in 1927, the historic, four-diamond mission-style high-end Inn at Death Valley sits up on a hill overlooking the Ranch and reopened at the end of 2018, after major restoration. The property, privately owned by Xanterra Travel Collection, has 66 elegantly updated rooms, renovated fine-dining restaurant and cocktail lounge, new Tranquility Spa, verandas with panoramic views of Death Valley and the Panamint Mountains, opulent gardens, and a spring-fed pool (naturally at 87 degrees) bordered by a new pool café and numerous cabanas.

Twenty-two private, one-bedroom new casitas were built in the shadow of the Oasis Gardens' date palms, within walking distance to the pool. Each casita comes with a golf cart (cars can't get down to these rooms), as well as room options with either one king bed or two queen beds. In addition to the main sleeping quarters, each Casita also has a living room with a sleeper sofa, as well as a wet bar. There also are renovated suites in the main building.

The Inn Dining Room has expanded with additional seating areas including



outdoor options, and a new pool café has been added featuring sandwiches, wraps, salads, sides, and assorted beverages. If you're dining at the Inn, the Death Valley Date Cake is a local valley must. The gooey cake comes with caramel sauce, orange zested dates and candied pecans in a light cardamom cream. You can burn off the calories the next day with a quick morning hike to Zabriskie Point.

Across the road from the terraced stone inn is a new wedding and event venue, the stunning Mission Gardens. A palo verde punctuated courtyard open to the desert skies and surrounding mountains, the gardens are enclosed by Spanish-style, white-washed adobe walls that feature details crafted from Mojave Desert stones.

Because water is precious in the desert, sustainability is in focus at The Oasis. Every drop of the pool water in the two naturally spring-fed pools is purposefully used and carefully managed. The spring water is not chlorinated, eventually flowing through the pools to be used for a variety of other non-potable functions, like landscaping and irrigation of the neighboring Furnace Creek Golf Course (which also is an Audubon-approved bird sanctuary and is the world's lowest golf course at -214 feet that has been welcoming golf enthusiasts since 1927.)

Any extra is released so that it replenishes the aquifer beneath the valley floor. The property has a one MW solar PV system that generates more than one-third of the total annual electricity needs of the Inn, The Ranch, the golf course, employee offices and housing. The system was designed to withstand the harsh conditions of Death Valley and produces more than two million kilowatt-hours per year of clean renewable energy. ☐



OPEN FOR BUSINESS

How SoCal Venues Survived the Pandemic

BY BRETT CALLWOOD

In March 2011, we published a cover story in the middle of the pandemic that asked the question, “Can our stages be saved?”

The pandemic isn’t exactly over, but it’s certainly showing signs of slowing down. The majority of the public is vaccinated and, even though case numbers have been surging slightly, hospitalization and death counts remain stable. Live music has been back up and running for months now, with masking and mandatory vaccination requirements slowly going away. How wise that is remains a matter for debate – most health professionals still advise masking in indoor spaces.

But the answer to our question, for the most part, appears to be “Yes.” Our stages were largely saved. But Jesus, it was close.

L.A.’s Hotel Cafe started life as a small

coffee shop in 2000, but it has now been hosting live music for over 20 years. Over the past two decades, it has seen approximately 25,000 performances in front of over a million fans. Names as prestigious and popular as Adele, Billie Eilish, Ed Sheeran, the Lumineers, Gary Clark Jr., Katy Perry, Sara Bareilles, Bruno Mars, Haima, and Lord Huron have performed on one of its two stages.

“Some of the best shows at the venue were ones that unexpectedly blew us away, as well as some memorable secret shows and underplays,” said Gia Hughes of the Hotel Cafe. “I often think back to seeing Hozier’s showcase for mostly industry people, before he was a household name, and I left that show knowing he’d be a star. Hosting Chris Martin for an unannounced solo show also was as special as it gets. What

turned out to be Mac Millers last show was bittersweet, but something those in the room will remember forever. Ludovico Einaudi crushing a grand piano on our stage is one the folks in the room also will remember for a long time. Once, sometime around 2004 or 2005, someone who called themselves Weezer’s manager reached out via phone. We didn’t quite believe it, as it was the first bigger name to ask to play the room. When they actually showed up for soundcheck the afternoon of the show, we all got pretty excited. Of course the show was amazing. Oh, and Dave Chappelle has had some epic nights recently.”

So that’s the pedigree of a venue that has a capacity of 200 in the main room and a modest 75 in the second stage’s room. The Hotel Cafe is an established, beloved independent venue, and COVID pushed it to

the brink.

“The pandemic was extremely challenging - financially, morally and spiritually,” Hughes says. “There were times that we honestly didn’t know if we’d make it. But with the support of Hotel Cafe artists, fans and friends, as well as NIVA’s advocacy, we made it. And we feel the love more than ever now.”

Yes, the intervention of NIVA (the National Independent Venues Association) was vital to the survival of many venues. It was they who sent a letter to Congress: “The National Independent Venue Association (NIVA), whose members, employees, artists and local communities are facing an existential crisis as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, are in urgent need of targeted legislative and regulatory assistance.”



They received that assistance in the form of the Shuttered Venue Operator Grant, previously referred to as “Save Our Stages,” which passed with bipartisan support in December 2020. Things are better now, but still not “normal,” according to Hughes of the Hotel Cafe.

“Things are still very up and down for most independent venues” Hughes says. “Cancellations because of COVID are common. Many of our patrons are still hesitant about packing into a small space with 200 other people. We’re staying hopeful, however, and things are definitely stabilizing and starting to look up. It feels like fall will be the real test, as many artists prepare to hit the road for the first big touring season since COVID.”

The Garden Amp in Garden Grove, Orange County, was called Festival Amphitheatre before it was taken over by new management, LFA, in mid 2017. It was primarily used as a venue during Garden Grove’s city’s event Strawberry Festival during Memorial Weekend or Shakespeare in the Park during the summer. Besides its “Locker Room” stage, it’s an outdoor venue, but still, it suffered.

“Garden Amp was completely closed down during the pandemic, but we tried experimenting with other shows,” says Anrea Santos. “We did a drive-in concert at the Citadel Outlets, which was a great turnout. We even tried a livestream concert with local bands. We also had a sold out show with Anthony Green at Oak Canyon Park in June 2021, right when live events were starting to come back. But when we opened Garden Amp again, our first couple shows sold out instantly. People were ready for live music again. Big Thief was our first show and then Turnstile last year in August 2021.”



The Whisky A-Go-Go is synonymous with rock & roll on the Sunset Strip. It’s been hosting the biggest names in music since the ‘60s, and it’s displayed remarkable staying power in sticking around. Still, COVID tested it to the fullest.

“[It was the] most challenging thing I’ve ever had to deal with,” says owner Mikael Maglieri Jr. “I didn’t survive – I’m a little dead inside. This struggle will continue for a long time. After operating for over 50 years, to just be shut down for over two years really hurt us. We’re trying [to come out of it]. It’s almost like a new start. Everything we built was torn away and it’s like we are starting fresh. At least we have our history.”

Alex’s Bar in Long Beach was purchased in 1998 and opened on Jan. 27, 2000. They have been open ever since, with the obvious exception of the pandemic.

“It was extremely difficult,” says owner Alex Hernandez. “I am still in therapy

trying to cope with the emotional rollercoaster it presented to our family, as well as our staff. Thankfully the community stepped up big time and helped us survive the pandemic. There is no way we would still be here without all the love Long Beach showed up. They purchased alcohol to-go, shirts, published a coffee table book by John Mair, started a GoFundMe – the list goes on.”

Hernandez says that Alex’s Bar is showing signs of life again.

“We have seen some amazing enthusiasm from the public who were so eager to come back and see live music, their friends, and their community again,” he says. “I am still seeing a lot of friends for the first time, even as of this week, who are just now venturing out back into the world.”

This is a survival story. The pandemic

tested everyone to our absolute limits, and people died. Many, many businesses had to close their doors. It has been an absolute nightmare, and no intelligent person ever questioned the necessity to put live music on hold for a while. But that doesn’t change the fact that business owners and employees suffered because of it. So the big question is, if something like this was to happen again, would venues be better prepared? Opinions are mixed.

“I think it’s tough in our industry to be prepared for something like that, but we would survive,” says Hughes of Hotel Cafe.

Maglieri thinks differently. “No, never,” he says. “The cost to just maintain a building on Sunset is astronomical and with no money coming in, it is impossible.”

Hernandez agrees. “Nothing can prepare you for an uncertain closure or even the lack of control you have over your own business,” he says. “I hope it never happens again. It’s not for the faint of heart.”

Clearly, this has been rough but again, thankfully, the majority of the region’s venues found a way to survive. And that’s a blessing that shouldn’t be taken for granted – never, ever forget how important these spaces are.

“The artists and fans are what make a great music venue,” says Hughes. “It’s important to have a culture of kindness and accommodation — our staff consists of the best people who genuinely care about making your experience a memorable one. But it’s also important to have a culture of music discovery and community. You can come to the Hotel Cafe any night of the week and either run into friends or discover a new artist you didn’t know of before. It’s our job to create and foster a community people keep wanting to come back to. And we think that’s why so many artists come back over the years.”

We thank you, all of you, for that. **LA**

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NEWS

HISTORIC SIXTH STREET BRIDGE IS NOW OPEN AFTER YEARS OF RECONSTRUCTION

More than six years and \$588 million later, the bridge connecting the downtown Arts District and Boyle Heights has reopened in grand fashion

BY ISAI ROCHA



PHOTO BY COUNCILMAN KEVIN DE LEÓN/INSTAGRAM

After six years of reconstruction, the historic 6th Street Bridge in downtown Los Angeles has finally opened to the public. The bridge connects the downtown Arts District and Boyle Heights in what the city called its largest project in history.

"The Sixth Street Viaduct isn't just a connection between our communities – it's a new landmark that represents the tenacity, beauty, and promise that defines Los Angeles," Mayor Eric Garcetti said in a statement. "I couldn't be more excited to celebrate with my fellow Angelenos who have been waiting for this day for six years and are ready to experience the benefits of this historic project."

The \$588 million project resulted in a 3,500-foot stretch of road, at 100 feet wide, and 10 pairs of arches towering 30-60 feet high.

The city also touted the bridge's safety features, with design points created to protect cyclists and pedestrians, as well as a "seismically safe" infrastructure that allows the bridge to sway up to 30 inches in all directions, in the event of earthquakes.

"After more than six years of being closed, we are excited to reopen the newly

built Sixth Street Viaduct and usher in a new era for Los Angeles," Councilmember Kevin de León said. "Once again, this bridge will take its place as one of Los Angeles' most iconic landmarks connecting the Arts District with Boyle Heights. This celebration will be a tribute to the years of dedicated work that went into creating one of the most inspiring public works projects in our city's history."

A weekend celebration was held for the grand opening, with the bridge being lit up for the first time and guests being treated to a fireworks show that illuminated the downtown sky.

July 10 marked the official opening to the public, with the viaduct opening to pedestrians and bicycles from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., and fully opening to all traffic at 7 p.m.

Renovations connected to the bridge are not over, however, as a 12-acre park is slated to be built and opened underneath the viaduct in 2024. The park will include an arts plaza and entertainment amphitheater with a stage and viewing area on the western most side of the viaduct. Additionally, multiple sports fields and courts, as well as picnic areas, a dog park and playground will be featured in the coming park.

"This federally funded \$588 million

landmark, known as the 'Ribbon of Life Bridge' or 'Puente del Pueblo' in Spanish, will reconnect Boyle Heights to Downtown Los Angeles and offer recreational activities – from bike paths to soccer fields – that will bring our communities closer together, California Congressman Jimmy Gomez said. “The Sixth Street Viaduct is a shining example of collaboration between members of the community and officials at all levels of government.”

NIPSEY HUSSLE: JURY FINDS ERIC HOLDER GUILTY FOR MURDER OF RAPPER

Eric Holder, 32, was found guilty of first-degree murder in the killing of west coast rapper Ermias “Nipsey Hussle” Asghedom.

Along with the murder conviction Wednesday, Holder also was convicted of two counts of attempted voluntary manslaughter and two counts of assault with a firearm for the wounds caused to two others in the area.

Hussle was shot and killed outside of his south L.A. store, Marathon Clothing, on March 31, 2019, after he and Holder had a heated discussion earlier in the day.

“Nipsey Hussle was a beloved member of our community. He showed a commitment to improving schools within his neighborhood and investing in underserved communities,” District Attorney Gascón said Wednesday. “Today we secured accountability for the loss of his life and will continue to work alongside so many others to realize a brighter future. We know there is no way to replace what was taken from his family, friends and fans who loved him, but we pray this verdict will move them one step closer to finding peace.”

Witness Herman Douglas, who worked in the shopping center owned by Hussle at the time, testified that Hussle and Holder had a conversation in relation to gang-related rumors that Holder had “snitched” to police in past legal proceedings, which was frowned upon in gang culture.

The witness also said Hussle did not approach Holder in a threatening manner, but in a familial manner, telling Holder to “address it.”

Holder then allegedly left the shopping center, before returning 9 minutes later with a gun, killing Hussle and injuring two others.

The trial for Nipsey Hussle’s murder began June 2, with closing deliberations taking place last Thursday, June 30.

In the trial, Holder’s attorney argued that first-degree murder was an excessive charge that should have been reduced to manslaughter.

Deputy District Attorney John McKinney countered Holder’s argument, saying it was premeditated, as enough time had passed between the first encounter between he and Hussle and the shooting.

Holder is scheduled to be sentenced Sept. 15, facing life in prison.

PRESIDENT BIDEN SIGNS EXECUTIVE ORDER TO ‘PROTECT REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CARE’ ACCESS

President Joe Biden signed an executive order July 8, which he said would “protect access to reproductive health care.”

The order was intended to increase access to free or reduced-price reproductive health care medication, contraceptive care, education on how to access the care, increase patient privacy and create a Reproductive Health Care Task Force to oversee it all.

The order comes in response to the Supreme Court’s decision to overrule the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling, where the court concluded that the U.S. Constitution did not grant the right to an abortion and would leave decisions on the matter to each individual state.

“This Court has made it clear it will not protect the rights of women,” Biden said Friday. “I will. That’s why today I’m signing an Executive Order to protect access to reproductive health care.”

The president does not hold the power to overturn a decision by the Supreme Court, and this executive order would not do that, but Biden added that to “restore” the reproductive rights in the U.S., would be to vote in two additional “pro-choice” senators and one House member to attempt to codify Roe v. Wade into a federal law.

“While I wish it had not come to this, this is the fastest route available,” Biden said. “The fastest way to restore Roe is to pass a national law codifying Roe, which I will sign immediately upon its passage.”

On the same day the Supreme Court announced it had override the case result, Texas Governor Greg Abbott vowed to work with the state’s legislature to “save every child from the ravages of abortion.”

“The U.S. Supreme Court correctly overturned Roe v. Wade and reinstated the right of states to protect innocent, unborn children,” Abbott said in a June 24 statement. “Texas is a pro-life state and we have taken significant action to protect the sanctity of life.”

Biden said Friday that “extreme Republican governors” have used the Supreme Court’s decision to pass the “harsh and most restrictive laws” in relation to reproductive care.

“What we’re witnessing is a giant step backwards in much of our country,” Biden said. “Already the bans are in effect... in a number of these states, the laws are so extreme they’ve raised the threat of criminal penalties for doctors and health care providers. Some of these states don’t allow for exceptions for rape or incest.”

As of the president’s signing, the Secretary of Health and Human Services has 30 days to submit a report to the president on how to incorporate the proposed measures for reproductive care access. [A]

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ENTERTAINMENT

LA WEEKLY MOVIE REVIEWS

From Baz Luhrmann's *Elvis* to Disney's *Lightyear* to the Return of *Top Gun*, Summer Blockbusters are Hot

BY LA WEEKLY



Elvis

PHOTO BY WARNER BROS.

Elvis Thrusts into The King's Life Story

Baz Luhrmann's *Elvis* has a feral energy you don't experience often in the movies; not even for a Luhrmann project (he's a director who notoriously

specializes in ostentation and glitter). A massive spectacle painted with thick brush strokes and brilliant colors, it has the depth of a soap opera, but the zeal of a symphonic masterpiece.

If you're expecting an authentic, historically accurate portrait, you'll be grossly disappointed. This movie needed to be big, so it could encapsulate its larger-than-life subject. We are talking about Elvis Presley after all, not John Denver. There's nothing subtle about the greasy-haired kid from Memphis who introduced Black music to the masses before disintegrating into a blur of sequined suits and pills in Las Vegas.

Narrated by Elvis' gluttonous manager, Colonel Tom Parker, played by Tom Hanks, the carnival barker's only talent seems to be usurping money from his acts. Hidden behind layers of latex,

almighty American dollar. However, at times, you can see a genuinely sordid and sad soul peek through The Colonel's pathetic need for capital gain. Hanks' portrayal offers moments of greatness.

As the titular icon, Austin Butler (*Once Upon A Time In Hollywood*) chews up the screen with an authority and effervescence that's rare for a relative newcomer. He also dances, scowls and sings with such ferocity, you'll feel the heat sizzle off the screen. It's an intense and bravura performance. When the movie actually gives Butler the space to discover his character, which isn't often enough, he brings a tragic sensitivity and ire to the legend.

You probably know the story. After Colonel Parker spots the Memphis-born ingenue at a barnyard concert while touring with his main attraction, country singer Hank Snow, the Svengali immediately twists his mustache and plans the country boy's career. From there, we're thrown on a rollercoaster ride of an artist's unprecedented rise to fame and devastating fall from grace.

Luhrmann rushes us through several stages of Elvis' career – recording at Sun Records, signing with RCA, his somewhat Freudian relationship with his mother, and the controversies regarding his pelvic thrusts on stage, to name a few. The film is more interested in the music that molded Elvis than his actual identity. By featuring artists such as B.B. King and Big Momma Thornton, the movie tries to show that Presley wasn't just influenced by these luminaries, but emotionally frayed by the rampant racism in the South. In actuality, the singer hardly addressed those social issues. Still, Luhrmann makes his point: Black rhythm and blues was the punk rock elixir Elvis harnessed to take over the world.

After our hero finds himself in a slump, starring in a slew of bad films, being overshadowed by the British Invasion, and weary from the Colonel's relentless branding, Presley paves a path for himself that culminates in the '68 Comeback Special. The filmmakers shoehorn his marriage to Priscilla Presley into the narrative, although they never meaningfully explore this relationship (or the problematic age disparity). They also soft-pedal Elvis' drug use, his curious obsessions, his weight gain, and his ties to what was called the Memphis Mafia, all of which led to his death at 42 years old. Luhrmann is more interested in the ebullient essence of The King and his music than the dirty details of his descent.

Even with its flaws, *Elvis* is a compelling and distinctive portrait of fame and its deadly trappings. It's also Luhrmann's vision of America, which encapsulates

a gargantuan fat suit and a thick Dutch accent, Hanks' performance is as bizarre and garrulous as the rockstar fairytale itself. He's constantly gesturing, trembling and bright-eyed, yearning for the



a melting pot-like beauty under a dark capitalist shadow. At nearly two hours and forty minutes, the film moves with a swift, thrusting power which flies by, mostly thanks to Butler. The kid is a natural. Even as we watch our hero decline in health and spirit, Butler gives him a quiet and mournful dignity that's unforgettable. He's the best actor to portray The King yet. You really can't help falling in love with him. **BY CHAD BYRNES**

This Toy's Life: *Lightyear* Leaps Onto the Screen

"In 1995, a boy named Andy got a toy from his favorite movie. This is that movie." This simple line of text appears as *Lightyear* begins, letting the audience know exactly what they're in for: a movie based on a toy from a movie about a toy. Though it lacks the emotional depth of typical Pixar fare, the film lives up to the setup and it's a charming tribute to classic sci-fi stories, as well as one of Disney's most technologically ambitious films to date.

Space Ranger Captain Buzz Lightyear (voiced by Chris Evans) and his partner Captain Alicia Hawthorne (voiced by Uzo Aduba) are on a distant alien planet when they are attacked. Due to a miscalculation on Buzz's part, they are marooned on said planet with hundreds of crew. Racked with guilt, Lightyear makes every attempt to get back home, even though with each undertaking to reach hyperspace, he loses years. While Buzz tries again and again to escape, his friends and crew make the most of their time, settle down, have families, and create lives. After decades, Buzz finds himself among strangers and hostile robots led by Zurg, his archenemy (as

seen in *Toy Story 2*).

This isn't a prequel or a continuation of the Toy Story universe, but rather an origin story for Buzz, laying out what inspired the toy itself. One can only hope that if this movie does well, a dark, gritty Western about an alcoholic lawman named Woody is next, with his love of catching bad guys surpassed only by his love of spirits, causing him to hallucinate "snakes in his boots."

So, this is Andy's favorite movie...but will it be yours?

Directed by Angus MacLane, it's safe to say that the animation is exceptional, even by picky Pixar standards. As the company's 26th animated outing, *Lightyear* sets itself apart from the studio's previous offerings via new ideas and technological achievement. It's absolutely groundbreaking, visually.

As for the story, it lacks the emotional insight and quippy language audiences have come to expect from the toon powerhouse. Not to say there aren't a few gut punches throughout the story, but it's nothing on the same level of *Up*, *Inside Out*, or the more recent *Turning Red*. Instead of a deep-digging story about intergenerational emotional trauma, this is a callback to science-fiction stories of yesteryear: uncomplicated, straight forward, and filled to the brim with action. Exactly the kind of film one would expect a mother to bring her son to in 1995. **BY ERIN MAXWELL**

Top Gun: Maverick Brings Back the Blockbuster Joyride

Top Gun is back, and all is right in the world. Well, maybe not all. Maverick still has problems, as he did three decades ago, and people like Iceman still



want to see him crash and burn. But for moviegoers who cherish the 1986 original that introduced Tom Cruise as Maverick and Kenny Loggins as badass, the good news is that writer-director Joseph Kosinski's *Top Gun: Maverick* is a formidable sequel, roaring into theaters with 140 decibels of delight.

If fans are hesitant to accept another *Top Gun* movie with open arms, it's to be expected. It's hard to imagine this being anything more than an attempt to profit off our love for Tony Scott's original, or our affection for Maverick, Goose and Iceman. But there's plenty of new stuff here – new characters, new locations – that mesh perfectly with the OG's mixture of steamy dialogue, epic action sequences and shirtless pilots who seem less suited for the Navy than they are for a Calvin Klein ad.

It's been 36 years since Jerry Bruckheimer made his mark as a blockbuster producer with the first film, and his crowd-pleasing sensibilities are on display here. Bruckheimer's resume includes two other sequels, *Bad Boys 2* and *National Treasure 2* (his more recent projects were standalone entries) and his skill with follow-up films is evident. Though most sequels focus on the past without exhuming the present, Maverick manages to do both.

Cruise once again commands the screen with megawatt, megastar charisma, this time as a Top Gun instructor on a top-secret mission. While he has other issues to contend with, like a commander who doesn't like him (John Hamm) and a woman who doesn't love him (Jennifer Conley), his biggest obstacle is the mission itself. He's got to get his team of pilots to navigate a canyon

in under three minutes, while missiles stand sentry below.

The task is made even more difficult when one of the pilots turns out to be Rooster (Miles Teller), the son of his late wingman, Goose. Rooster has good reason to be vexed by Maverick's presence, and the only thing that wipes the usual smirk off Maverick's face is the guilt he holds over Goose's death. These two have some feelings to work out, and what better way to do that than *working out*? Cue the shirtless volleyball games, slow-motion sprints, late-afternoon flights and early-morning weights, sun-drenched smiles and blood-soaked trials.

The formula doesn't always work, and often, it maintains the slow burn for a moment too long in quieter moments between pilots. But when Kosinski lets it rip, it's exhilarating. There's a particularly compelling scene in a California desert where Maverick flies his plane like Rudolf Nureyev doing a spin cycle, twirling around missiles before landing with impeccable grace. Cinematographer Claudia Miranda maintains the visual style of Scott and his director of photography Jefferey Kimball's mesmerizing long takes punctuated with powerful, booming quick cuts land as smoothly as the F-82's.

Following up a film that felt as fresh and explosive as *Top Gun* is a tall order, and *Top Gun: Maverick* isn't as efficient and effecting as Scott's film. But Cruise and Kosinski do justice to the journey of the characters while exploring the depths of their emotions and relations, and more importantly, bring us back to the danger zone for one last joyride. **BY ASHER LUBERTO** [M]

CANNABIS

TEN YEARS IN THE SECRET SESH IS STILL ROLLING

We chatted with Secret Sesh founder Tim Brown about California's most storied continuous cannabis event series

BY JIMI DEVINE



The Secret Sesh has served as the barometer for Los Angeles cannabis events hype for a decade, and it's back in full swing.

After a pandemic pivot that saw the famous event series get more involved in the media production side to stay in touch with the community it had built over the 2010s, the return to raging has been swift. Most recently the Secret Sesh team helped produce the championship edition of Greenwolf's Zalympix.

We caught up with The Secret Sesh's founder, Tim Brown, to hear how much the event has changed since the medical era. The first Secret Sesh event Brown put on was in 2012. He was definitely thankful the world is opening back up.

"Man, it was tough just to be completely candid. It was really rough not being able to do what we do and throw events," Brown told L.A. Weekly. "We decided really early to pivot to the live-streaming aspect."

The digital move proved a win. The Secret Sesh got partnered on Twitch, and the YouTube page was doing well. They built a whole new community online that's still growing and still very engaged today, even though The Secret Sesh is back doing live events.

Brown argues that part was sort of a blessing. They had always wanted to get more involved on the production side, but when you're throwing some of the most famous pot parties on the planet, despite having 'secret' in the name, time is at a premium.

But the story of The Secret Sesh goes way back. The event is one of the few legit things that is still going from the medical era. Brown considers getting to this point insane, but it was his dream, too.

tation of Proposition 64 were the learning curve. Things like dealing with the police and fire marshall made it a real business. They weren't just renting mansions and throwing house parties anymore.

"And I liked it," Brown said. "I like running an efficient business. I like knowing the rules and playing the game. But man, if I had a time machine, I'd go back to prop 215 in a heartbeat."

But the conversation moved back to the moment. Brown noted that the hesitancy they saw at events when they were first coming back is starting to lift. Despite nurses and covid testing onsite, it was fair to expect a little bit of anxiety.

"But now it's up and running, and I feel like we're back full speed," Brown said. "Brands are supporting. The attendees are supporting. The city is supporting. It's a blessing man. I think events are the life-line of the cannabis community."

There are a couple of ideas being tossed around in Sacramento around temporary sales permits for farms and delivery services being able to carry more products on hand. We asked Brown how important those kinds of moves are to The Secret Sesh being able to use its platform to keep as many people afloat as possible?

"Those are massive," Brown replied. "It allows these smaller brands and these farmers to get a product out there, man. It's such a blessing. And that's something that we've been discussing since the first license event we did and 2019, is allowing these small farmers to have a chance to get paid. Because at the end of the day, these farms are working their asses off and I want to see them eat. I don't want to see farmers struggling."

The Secret Sesh's longtime host Adam ill also weighed in on the moment. He's hosted a variety of cups and awards shows over the years, but when you hear the Secret Sesh come up it's hard not to think of him.

"It's great that these are opening back up, people are coming back out getting high together," Adam ill told L.A. Weekly. "It's just different now with the laws."

Similar to the event, he's also proven a successful streamer over the past couple of years despite facing constant profile takedowns on social media. But the communities fear would eventually run its course.

"In the beginning, it was really scary because no one really knew what to expect and no one knew how serious COVID was. But then after a little while, people started getting tired of staying home. And wanting to get out and experience real life again," Adam ill said, "So it was just creating safe places for people to come and enjoy our culture community like we used to, like it always has been."

Keep an eye out for the next rendition of The Secret Sesh on August 27. 📺

"We get to work with cannabis and I get to throw amazing events that bring the community together," Brown said. "When we were doing this in the medical scene, seeing brands develop, seeing individuals that started as attendees start a brand. And then now that same attendee, as a licensed cannabis brand, selling in retail stores. I feel honored to be able to produce these events for the community. And I hope I get to do it for the next 10 years."

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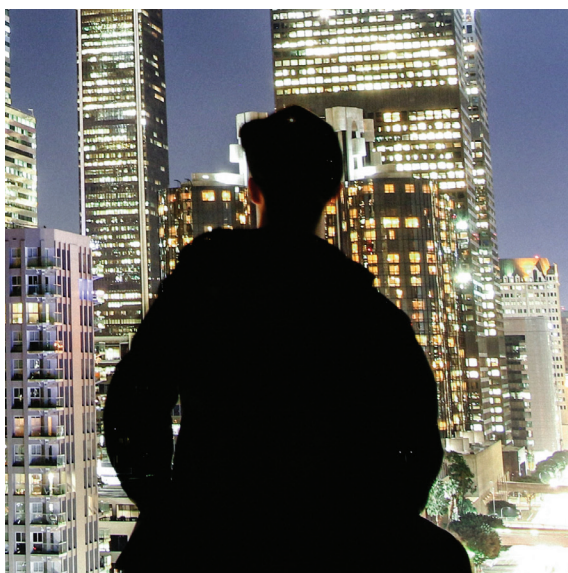
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