Dear Members,

Welcome to this year’s Mercury! Early in our Club’s proud history, we adopted the Roman god of sports and athletes as a natural symbol for the LAAC. Mercury was fast, of course, but, as the inventor of the lyre, he also had a creative side.

This issue of Mercury focuses on the intersection of sports and the arts. As we delve into the stories of people and programs here at this intersection, we see the higher level of human achievement that comes from pursuing both the competitive and the creative.

Basketball star and jazz aficionado Tommy Hawkins epitomized this winning combination. He had a successful career in sports and wrote poetry on the side. After Hawkins retired from the NBA, he mixed his knowledge of professional athletics and his way with words to become a sports broadcaster, communications director, and emcee.

Since childhood, Clayton Snyder has been balancing competitive water polo with an acting career. He has gone from being a TV tween heartthrob to helping the Club develop a world-class water polo team.

Esther Williams embodied the blend of athletics and aesthetics found in water ballet and synchronized swimming. She made dangerous physical feats appear effortless and beautiful — and made a successful film career out of it.

These artistic athletes inspire us to embrace our creative instincts while pursuing physical excellence. The Los Angeles Athletic Club was largely built on this idea. We began filling our physical space with an extensive art collection almost from the outset. In 1913 Harry Marston Haldeman formed the Uplifters based on the idea that an athletic club should not just be about athletics but should also encourage artistic camaraderie.

Today’s Uplifters recently established an arts initiative aimed at providing studio spaces and Club memberships to select LA artists — yet another way of joining physical vitality and artistic virtuosity.

Historically, the prevailing energy of downtown LA has fluctuated between the competitive corporate world and the creative entrepreneurial world — with the Hollywood social scene dominating during the 1920s, for example, and the businesses of Bunker Hill dominating in the 1990s.

Here at the Club, these worlds come together. They enhance and invigorate one another. We find athleticism in the arts and artistry in athletics. We test our physical limits and push our creative boundaries. The ancients Romans valued this well-roundedness. And so do we.

— Cory Hathaway
Taking the Initiative
New Artist-in-Residence Program Draws from Our Past to Uplift Our Future

Plunge Café Dives into Specialty Coffee
New Poolside Pleasures Include Coffee by Ben Usen

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Taking the Initiative

New Artist-in-Residence Program Draws from Our Past to Uplift Our Future

The arts have always been an integral part of the Los Angeles Athletic Club. From musical performances to photography collections to members Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford uniting the artists of the film industry, the Club has championed the arts since its inception.

In 1913 an exclusive artists’ society formed an invitation-only club-within-the-club among its group of creative intellectuals whose stated purpose was “To Uplift Art and Promote Good Fellowship.” They called themselves “The Uplifters,” and they often pursued their serious mission through debaucherous hijinks.

Today’s Uplifters follow the same motto but with a focus on connecting art and sports. Last year, the group enacted an exciting new Arts Initiative that promotes this art–sports connection, not just at the Club but throughout Los Angeles.

Calling on LAAC’s resources and cachet, The Uplifters are establishing residencies and fellowships for local sculptors, painters, and mixed-media artists of exceptional talent. This new Arts Initiative constructs a two-way creative conveyor belt between the Los Angeles Athletic Club and an erupting Los Angeles art scene. Cultivating accomplished artists and seeking out lesser-heard voices from LA’s diverse enclaves, the Arts Initiative lassoes message-forward artists who care for their communities, inspire their neighbors, and uplift our future.

What follows are profiles of the impressive inaugural class of the Los Angeles Athletic Club’s Arts Initiative:
Before becoming a celebrated artist (with a master’s degree from Yale, artistic residencies in Paris, and exhibitions at MOCA), South-Central native Lauren Halsey was looking for a job. Relatives suggested kindly (as relatives do) something steady, something practical. A career in banking would do the trick. Though she was rightfully skeptical, Halsey interviewed at a bank catty-corner from the Standard Hotel in downtown LA. But after a quick trip through the revolving glass doors, Halsey confirmed that banking was not for her. Today, instead of looking up at the steel-and-glass structure from the street, Halsey views the U.S. Bank Tower from the comfort of her rooftop artist workshop at the LA Athletic Club.

Art was really the second-stringer on Halsey’s skill-set team. Basketball was the focus of her early life. She would practice at every opportunity, setting up cones and blasting through them to sharpen her dribbling skills. Through hours of daily practice, her father and uncle molded her into a tough, agile point guard. She played on school teams, club teams, Nike’s “Say No” Camp... Halsey didn’t really care about winning or losing; she just longed to play. “Basketball for me was like this intuitive dance that my body was doing,” Halsey recalls. “There was a certain poetry about it.” But when it became clear that the WNBA would not be blowing up her iPhone, Halsey shifted to art — first at Cal Arts and later at Yale. The discipline and rigors of basketball, however, still fire up the purpose and passion of Halsey’s artistic pursuits.

Walls have become symbols of division, suspicion, and separation in today’s America. But to Halsey walls are vessels of community. Her signature works blend architectural form and social activism into a search for meaning in a rapidly changing Los Angeles. Her visions for the city are literally monumental. She has laid out ambitious plans to construct a massive public art piece, The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project, on Crenshaw Boulevard where an African market used to be. Halsey was awarded a grant to build a prototype of the work, which was shown at the Hammer museum in 2018. The project is a four-wall, open-roof structure with messages and images carved into large, gypsum tiles. These are walls that can talk. They tell stories. South Central landmarks share space with carved Egyptian pyramids as if to say that even locals belong in the historical record. According to Halsey, her works are “stores of consciousness... living, visual archives of neighborhoods and people.” They champion the under-represented voices of Los Angeles — many from the area where she grew up.

Through her art, Halsey has found her voice — not just as an artist but also as an activist providing hope for the neighborhood that her family has called home since 1930. “Change is both good and bad,” Halsey notes about Los Angeles’s constantly creeping gentrification. Change can displace local residents, but it can also engender resilience and motivate people to collectivize for the common good. She invites us to participate in both the joys and the responsibilities of a fulfilling neighborhood life. This is the Los Angeles home that Halsey is building. Bank on it.
THIS & THAT
DISCOUNT
HOUSEHOLD - SHOES
CRYSTAL - CLOTHES
JEWELRY
Pablo Picasso once observed, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." As kids we drew and painted our imaginations onto paper, and we handcrafted objets d'art like burgeoning Michelangelos. At some point, though, we were told that daydreams were no longer needed for our success in this world, and we permitted our innate creative powers to wane.

The sculptures and mixed-media works of Ry Rocklen are an assault on the notion that free-form artistic expression ends in grade school. His pieces are playfully sophisticated and often tongue-in-cheek. Their processes are complex, often requiring blowtorches or industrial waterjet cutting tools. But beneath them lies a youthful playfulness and a bravery to explore ideas. Why else would he build furniture exclusively out of trophy parts or construct a two-story-high figure out of discarded pillows? For Rocklen — inventor of Trophy Modern and Mr. Pillowmin — art is a labor of diligent whimsy.

Rocklen’s unruly beard and long hair seem to externalize what is going on inside his head — as if his brain is being windblown by the hurricane of ideas he is chasing down at any one time. Inspiration seems to come in batches, and a single idea may take new directions and morph into new possibilities. Take his idea for Trophy Modern, the project that won him global acclaim at the 2013 Art Basel festival in Miami. Rocklen’s early work was rooted in the idea of re-purposing found objects into art. He became particularly fascinated with collecting old sports trophies and would scour thrift shops and junk piles in search of the kitschy memorials. Rocklen’s idea for Trophy Modern was to build a literal Throne of Games. He designed and assembled chairs, couches, and tables fashioned from trophy parts. When the idea drew sponsorship from worldwide brands, Rocklen started buying his materials directly from wholesale trophy manufacturers.

The trophies were the whimsy. Making the idea practical (i.e., making the furniture useable) required sophisticated design and structural schematics mapped out by Rocklen himself. One of the project’s pieces, entitled Second to None, secured him a spot in the post-modern gallery of LACMA beside Jasper Johns’s Flag and Jeff Koons’s Michael Jackson and Bubbles. (Not bad company to be in.) An example from the show is currently on display (and in use) in the LAAC lobby. Members are actually encouraged to sit on the artwork because, according to Rocklen, “Real humans complete the piece.”

Rocklen’s latest project, Food Group, pushes the idea of subversive kitsch even further. He first dressed actors in fast-food costumes he designed himself: a hot dog drizzled with psychedelic-colored condiments, a walking pizza slice, etc. Then he sculpted miniature versions of the actors wearing their food and perched those on top of ceramic “paper” plates. Is he implying that we should consider eating them?! Rocklen won’t say. But it is food for thought.
“Real humans complete the piece.”
- Ry Rocklen
Kohshin Finley's artwork is subtle and personal — the exact opposite of the snap-judgement syntax that dominates our mobile screens. Instead of shutting people out, magnifying differences, or trolling, he invites everyone in. “People have stories, and they want to tell them; you just have to ask,” Finley observes.

Finley grew up in an environment of abundance, creativity, and cosmopolitanism in South Central Los Angeles. His fashion-designer parents sold their ready-to-wear line at Neiman Marcus and custom tailored for NBA big men, A-list actors, and other wealthy and demanding customers in LA. They named Kohshin after Kohshin Satoh, an avant-garde, Japanese fashion designer who influenced their work.

Finley’s pieces go deep. The final products may be portraits on canvas, but the physical paintings represent only about 30% of the whole creative process. Step one is choosing a subject, and on this front Finley abides by no formal rules. It can be an acquaintance he’s known a month or a neighborhood confidante he’s known for years. His objective is to capture stories that are held privately but deserve to be shared publicly. Next, he interviews his subject while capturing their image on medium-format film. His subjects trust him, and he encourages them to be truthful and vulnerable. Then, before setting brush to canvas, Finley writes down a short poem. These poetic lines actually end up in the portrait, often as illegible script.

Life leaves its marks. But instead of shunning those scars, Finley believes life’s struggles “should be celebrated.” He seeks to pinpoint that defining moment when we confront our greatest challenge and manage to overcome it. He streaks white paint across the faces and bodies of his subjects. These paint strokes symbolize the person’s adversity — now worn as war paint for the journey through life.

As the audience, we are not privy to the subject’s specific struggles. And that’s the point. Life’s hardships brand us all. Finley intentionally paints his subjects in grisaille, so as not to create a racial detour from the universal message he is trying to convey. The portraits, with their naked imperfections, are ultimately life-affirming and inspirational. As Finley observes, “What makes these portraits special is how a conversation between two people gets translated into what the audience sees.”

Finley’s interpretive conversations, Rocklen’s audience participations, and Halsey’s ambitious constructions have ignited the path of the LAAC Arts Initiative with three trailblazing inaugural artists. Art has always been part of the Club’s identity. But, now more than ever, we are working to uplift the arts, promote good fellowship, and build a better future.
Ben Usen has a goal: to share his passion for great coffee with as many people as possible. He tells me this as we chat in his café, Installation Coffee, located on 7th Street next-door to the Los Angeles Athletic Club. As both a coffee connoisseur and a member of the Club, Usen was the perfect choice to create the coffee program for the sixth floor’s new Plunge Café — named after the long-time nickname of the LAAC pool. Usen sees this as an exciting chance to bring his passion to thousands of members and hotel guests. “A great opportunity,” he says, “to introduce people to really great coffee they didn’t know existed.”

Usen’s efforts debuted on a Saturday morning in late June when a red neon light — shaped like a diver executing a perfect dive — flickered on over the new Plunge Café. This morning introduced Club members to the newly renovated poolside space, which, in addition to the Plunge, includes a salt suite, massage parlor, barbershop, and nail salon. By early afternoon, hundreds of people had passed through the café and were walking around enjoying bite-sized sandwiches and blueberry smoothies. Small groups sat at the tables, relaxing and enjoying the atmosphere. Others sat at the counter, chatting with baristas and other guests. After more than 70 years, this poolside space had once again become a place for interacting, indulging, and imbibing.

In 1912, when the Athletic Club built its permanent home on 7th and Olive, the area surrounding its innovative indoor pool became the site of many social events — from luncheons to fashion shows. On New Year’s Eve 1915, L. Frank Baum, author of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, turned the space into a Venetian scene — complete with lamps, a string orchestra, and gondolas covered in flowers. When the clock struck midnight on January 1, 1916, Father Time pushed the Old Year offstage, and an infant New Year took its place as the orchestra played "The Star-Spangled Banner." In 1920, after returning from the Olympic Games in Antwerp, surfing legend Duke Kahanamoku gave a performance in the pool — wowing Club members with his swimming prowess.
In 1940s, the poolside café (along with all the social programming there) was cleared away to create a new women’s locker room. This arrangement remained until 2017 when the women’s locker room was moved to the fifth floor as part of an overall renovation and modernization of the Club — reopening the poolside space for new amenities.

The Plunge Café’s menu features smoothies and other favorites from the former Fresh 8 Café, as well as a Pimm’s Cup draft cocktail and a selection of wines and beers. To integrate his coffee program into the menu, Usen took a step back and looked at the whole Club experience. He wanted to make sure everything was consistent, quality-wise. “Food, drinks, coffee, the spa, locker room — you know, they’re all connected in my eyes,” he explains.

Usen’s own road to coffee began in 2010. At the time, he was a tea drinker and a keyboardist touring with his band, Princeton. While home between tours, Usen took a job washing dishes at a coffee shop on Pico Boulevard. "I'd never had espresso before," Usen recalls. "My very first day, I was taught how to make a pour-over. It was an Ethiopian coffee from Intelligentsia, and I was blown away by how it tasted. Ever since that moment, I became a coffee drinker, and really fell in love with it."

It wasn't long before Usen was managing the café and falling deeper in love with specialty coffee. "By the time I was back out on tour," he recalls, "I had become a pretty good barista." In each new city he played, Usen would visit local cafés and ask questions: How are you roasting your beans? What are your baristas' techniques for brewing? What equipment are you using? Then, he began spreading his passion to friends and family: teaching them how to brew, sending them links for what equipment to buy, and helping them discover the richness of a perfectly brewed cup.

Less than two years later, Usen started his own cold-brew coffee company. His friend Jessica Koslow, chef-owner of Sqirl, brought Usen to a shared kitchen space in Marina del Rey where he could brew and bottle his product. By early 2012, Installation Cold Brew was a reality — and growing fast. Usen was selling bottles to offices around LA as well as a few shops and online. In 2015 the website *Eater* named Installation one of the best cold brews in America, and *Imbibe* magazine featured Installation in "What We're Drinking Now." But, Usen notes, "I was doing everything myself." He was straining every batch by hand, buying bottles, having them screen-printed, sterilizing them, and delivering them around town.

If his cold brew company was to grow, Usen would have to make a large investment, assume more risk, and scale up. He realized that if he opened a café, he
could save a lot of money by getting rid of the espresso machine. With that, he said, "We have $30,000 worth of equipment, a lot of training, a lot of waste, a lot of quality control issues, and a lot of extra space." Knowing that 98% of espresso drinks — even at high-end coffee shops — are mostly steamed milk, he drew up a concept that would do away with espresso altogether. "Now I have much less overhead, so I can be faster, have less labor, and charge less," Usen explains. At Installation, a latte becomes a café crema. Usen's version substitutes coffee concentrate for espresso. The trade gives the drink more flavor while cutting the calories by two-thirds.

In 2018 Usen finally found his ideal location, and in October he opened Installation Coffee in downtown Los Angeles. "I wanted to make this place feel like a temporary escape," he says, "just for the few minutes that you're in here."

Soon, Cory Hathaway, the assistant general manager of the LA Athletic Club, began coming into the shop for coffee. The two got to talking, and Hathaway described his vision for the new Plunge Café. Usen was able to draw from his own experience and tell Hathaway, "Here are all the things that I've had trouble with. If you're going to do this and do it the right way, this is what it would look like."

The two discussed the concept further, and Usen was ultimately brought on as the Club's coffee consultant. "Creating a new café isn't as simple as picking a machine and a coffee vendor," Usen notes. "There's a lot more behind the scenes that you have to do: bar design... training... menu... glassware... maintenance... It's a lot."

To solve any issues with an espresso machine, Usen installed a fully-automated (or "super automatic") model to maintain consistent quality in the drinks while allowing baristas to focus more on the customer experience. "We don't have to worry about all those little details while making their drinks," Usen explains. "We can talk and see how their day looks. We can have better overall service that's a little more enjoyable for the customer."
Usen also introduced a signature drink to the Plunge called the Red Eye White Lips — a play on the classic red eye (coffee with an espresso shot) that adds milk (thus, white lips). "That’s going to be something on the menu that grabs your eyes," Usen says. A drink "that’s a little unique and really strong, but playful."

I ask Usen if creating a strong coffee program literally next-door to his own business would hurt his bottom line. "I don't view them as competition," he responds, "and I don't view business as working that way." The joy of the Athletic Club, Usen concludes, is that "it's a beautiful escape from downtown. When you're there, you don't want to leave unless you're leaving."
Prince Polymath

The Incredible Life of Tommy Hawkins
In ancient Greece, Eratosthenes calculated the tilt of the earth and created a math algorithm still used today. He also wrote poetry and was physically fit. And just for kicks, he helped invent music theory. He was what would later be called a "renaissance man" or "polymath."

If any LAAC member embodied the spirit of Eratosthenes, it was Tommy Hawkins, the renaissance man next door. In his eighty years on this earth, there was little that “Hawk” did not achieve. Yet, for all his versatility and exceptionalism, Prince Polymath still had time and empathy to give to us lesser beings. People he encountered were forever touched by him.
PREACH AND PRACTICE

It is difficult to imagine one person accomplishing so much in a single lifetime: first African-American to play basketball for Notre Dame (they retired his number and added it to their elite "circle of honor"), star player for the Lakers, definitive voice of LA sports radio, manager of communication for the Dodgers (during peak championship years)... But LAAC members remember Tommy Hawkins best as their beloved Wooden Award emcee when the ceremony was still hosted by the Club. And those are just the wiki-able highlights.

Between mastering the sports universe and being a published poet, Hawkins lent his time and fame to dozens of good causes and non-profits. He was an exceptional father, son, and husband, but he did have another significant other: jazz. Enraptured by his first live show at age thirteen, Tommy thereafter spent every penny he could scrape together on jazz records. Mel Torme and other jazz greats were blown away by his studied enthusiasm. And while other NBA players were getting into trouble after road games, Tommy parked himself in the front row of the nearest jazz club for some hard bop. He bequeathed a vinyl collection so massive, it will eventually fill an entire room at the Club.

To most Angelenos, Hawk was an Olympian figure perched atop a pedestal. But Tommy saw fame as a tremendous responsibility. He understood that he couldn’t simply “opt out” of being a role model. Instead of leveraging his name for monetary gain, Hawk used it to spread the gospel of humanism and positive thinking.

Many celebrities have public personas that mask flaws buried in their private lives. But Tommy lived as he preached. He had “normal” personal relationships and never made people feel like they were in the company of a superhuman. Sam Lagana, the voice of the LA Rams, met Tommy when their kids played sports together in Pacific Palisades. They shared many lunches at the Club over their decades of friendship. “I just knew I had a good friend who cared about my life,” recalled Lagana. “Tommy was always helping people to be better. He taught everyone how to be a great friend.”

Tommy constantly expanded his intellectual and emotional capacity by taking on new challenges and pursuits. But it was an innocuous interest in photography that led him to the person who would change his life forever. They called her Princess Layla.
WHEN TOMMY MET LAYLA

Layla believed in standards. She did not, however, believe in limitations. Although clear lines defined what was appropriate, she never kowtowed to socially imposed gender roles. When she was a schoolgirl, Layla’s outspoken, spirited nature earned her a reputation as unruly and defiant. But when she ran afoul of authority — which was often — her parents always provided a safety net. After one such conflict, Layla’s father put her on a voluntary hiatus to avoid school-imposed suspension.

It became a permanent suspension from life as she knew it. The year was 1979. The place was Iran. And the event was the Islamic Revolution.

Layla’s family was dead-center in the ousted Shah’s royal circle, and the new Islamist regime froze their assets and seized their property. Her entire family was abruptly uprooted and forced to flee. Layla remembers, “I went to bed a spoiled rich kid and woke up the next morning with no money.”

Layla did not wither from the sweat equity required for self-reinvention. She found her way to America. Every night before bed, Layla would comfort herself with an emphatic affirmation: “I came to this country with a dream, and I will achieve what I came here for!”

Similarly, Tommy, who grew up fatherless, was forced to flee from North Carolina to Chicago. It was there he fell in love with basketball. Of course, so did a lot of kids. The difference was that Tommy fashioned his own hoop out of junk he found in the streets, and when other kids were inside enjoying hot cocoa and TV, Tommy was outside in freezing temperatures practicing his jump shot over and over again, until the cold numbed his hands and feet.

After earning a degree in civil engineering, Layla followed her brother to Los Angeles where she landed a job at a photography shop. Famous faces would drop in regularly to pick up their headshots, but Layla was unimpressed. When Arnold, a young body-builder-turned-actor, fell head-over-biceps for Layla, she was more annoyed than flattered. Even when Mr. Schwarzenegger brought his mother into the shop as proof of his pure intentions, Layla remained immoveable. It was this uncompromising nature (and royal lineage) that earned her the nickname “Princess Layla” among her colleagues.

One day, Layla was developing prints when she heard a commotion. Even with constant celebrity drop-ins, she had never heard anything like it. “As I turned,” she recalls, “my eyes met this gorgeous, beautiful gentleman.” It was Tommy Hawkins. Her body shuddered. Her senses exploded. Their eyes locked, and the Princess of Self-Control was suddenly overwhelmed with helpless, love-stricken panic. Choosing flight over fight, she literally ran away — into the back of the store. “The intensity of my feelings terrified me,” she remembers.

When someone finally introduced the two, it did not go well. Hawk innocently suggested that he could teach Layla about baseball in exchange for photography lessons. Layla was agog at his presumptuousness. “You take too much liberty, sir! I do not agree to it. Good day!” she quipped and stomped away. Hawk was confused. Celebrities in Los Angeles rarely hear the word “no” from anyone. Though his pursuit of Layla would become a Herculean challenge, she confessed to one of her colleagues, “This is the man who will touch my heart. This is the man I will marry.”
DENIED

When the 1984 Olympics were underway in LA, and the shop was extra-busy, Layla reluctantly agreed to fill in for another photographer on a photo shoot of an exotic car. When she arrived at the owner’s home, the door swung open to reveal... Tommy Hawkins. There was an immediate stare-down. “He’s daring me to run away,” Layla thought, and stood her ground. Tommy invited her in and asked her to sit down.

He went to his typewriter across the room. “How do you spell your name?” Prince Polymath asked. Perplexed, she spelled it for him. He tapped away for a moment, stripped the paper from the carriage, and handed it to her. He’d written her name, the date, and a haiku-esque phrase: “It’s more than a feeling; it’s a force.” Layla bit back against her panic and recalled her observations about this man. Tommy had recently divorced and was arguably the most eligible bachelor in Los Angeles. Across the street from the photography shop, Layla had witnessed a succession of beautiful women getting into Hawk’s car. She was determined not to become just another entry in his little black book.

The photo shoot with his 1976 Avanti went smoothly. Layla maintained her professionalism, and Tommy was, as always, a gentleman. Afterwards, he asked the Princess out for a bite. The Prince had defrosted her heart (slightly), so she agreed. Once inside the car, Tommy reached across Layla in the passenger seat. She slapped his face hard, shouting, “What are you doing, sir?!” Taken aback, Tommy gently explained that the passenger door was broken. He could only shut it by pulling it closed from inside the car. Layla flushed red with embarrassment. At the end of the night, they shook hands. She refused to give Hawk her phone number, but she did take his.
NEAR-MISS LAYLA

Tommy could not erase this immovable woman from his mind. “All I could think was, ‘Where’s Layla? What’s Layla doing?’ I had no peace,” Hawk would confess years later. But, like a prototype episode of The Bachelor, Hawk’s love life was all over the airwaves, and Layla was determined to avoid becoming part of his public love-raffle roadkill. In what Layla describes as “the saddest night of my life,” she cut her ties with Hawk. She didn’t ghost him, though; she explained her reasons face to face: She had genuine feelings for him but thought it unfair to demand an exclusive relationship when he didn’t appear ready for that. “It’s incredibly hard for a woman in love to say goodbye,” Layla recalls all these years later. But she told him her decision was final and asked that he never call her again. As Layla turned to go, she heard Tommy’s shaking voice behind her. “Don’t leave,” he begged, tears in his eyes. With a heavy heart, the Princess walked away.

Tommy would make many attempts to connect with her, but she avoided him. Once, when he went to the photography shop, he was told that Princess Layla had left. Hawk drifted through LA in his Avanti, devastated and directionless.

Two years passed. Then, one Sunday afternoon, Layla got a desperate call from her former boss. The store’s printing machine had broken down. Layla, always a loyal friend, agreed to help. While she was working on the machine, the store’s phone rang. No one else was around, so she picked up the receiver. Layla recognized the voice right away; it was Tommy. She started shaking. He had no way of knowing she was in the store. “I just had this feeling I should call,” he said.

That night they had dinner with friends. Upon seeing her, Tommy hugged Layla “as if his life depended on it,” she recalls. He asked if she were seeing anyone. “It’s none of your business, sir,” the Princess retorted, right in character. But the Prince had grown. He was ready to accept her terms of engagement. Two months later, Tommy, in respect for her cultural traditions, asked Layla’s brother for her hand. Thirty-five years of marriage followed, sharing love and happiness — and a daughter — together.

The life lesson of Prince Polymath is a profound one: Curiosity, achievement, and mastery may make the man, but love makes him human. It was Tommy’s relationships that transformed him — in his own words — into “a cosmic functionary operating within the universe without consideration of race, color, or social circumstances.” That is the true legacy of Tommy Hawkins, Prince Polymath, the Renaissance Man Next Door.
I have a theory: The level of enjoyment from time spent at the gym is directly proportional to the amount of time spent at the spa. As the workout depletes you, the spa restores you — which makes Neptune a brilliant addition to the services at the Los Angeles Athletic Club.

“We didn’t have a spa before,” says Stela Tasu, Neptune’s spa director. “We had our massage therapist, Scott (Marder), who’s been here for 25 years, (working out of) a changing-area closet. It was on a need basis rather than being advertised.”

Scott must be happy now. On June 24, 2019, the Neptune spa opened, offering six kinds of massages (yes, one even includes CBD oil) as well as six different facials, three treatment rooms, a salt room, a nail salon, and a barber shop. Everything is exclusive to LAAC members and hotel guests.

“The goal is to implement the company’s core value of wonderment,” Tasu continues, “creating a community of well-being where the mind and the body can let go of everything else, disconnect, and just relax.”

I know I’m happy — and I only visited for one day! Invited to sample a range of Neptune’s services on a Friday morning that blissfully evolved into a Friday afternoon, I was pampered from head to polished toe. More importantly, I discovered that my new favorite workout is one that only requires a robe.
Sitting in a salt suite has a name: halotherapy. This is where my day began, with forty-five minutes reclining in a chair in Neptune's salt room. While the actual room isn’t made of salt (as the proud owner of a Himalayan salt lamp, I had imagined sitting inside an orange-colored dome), there is one wall lined with dimly-lit salt tiles. But that’s not where the magic comes from.

Instead, a halogenerator emits a fine spray of salt into the air. Himalayan salt generates negative ions that your body absorbs through inhalation, ions that — according to halotherapy advocates — benefit circulation, bone health, and the sinuses, while combatting anxiety, allergy symptoms, and skin conditions like eczema and acne. They even help prevent muscle cramps in athletes.

I suffer from allergies, and at the end of a long week fraught with the standard-issue stress that comes from being a freelancer, I had a fair amount of anxiety too. I was told to stay in the salt room for at least twenty minutes in order to reap the benefits of halotherapy, but forty-five minutes evaporated just as quickly. It may have been the silence that was therapeutic, but halfway through the session my lungs did start to feel a little lighter — and I didn’t sneeze once. I hadn’t brought anything with me: no headphones, magazines, or social media to distract; all I had to do was breathe. I could have stayed in there doing nothing all day, but my next appointment was waiting.

For those who want even more of a salt kick: Tasu is working on adding a Himalayan salt-scrub treatment that wraps the body in an infrared blanket. Penetrating the muscles deeper than a regular sauna, the infrared blanket helps the salt draw out impurities. A winning combo.
FINDING A NATURAL GLOW

My next appointment was for a facial with Sally Zach. I’ve had fussy skin for most of my life: dry, prone to breakouts, and now that I’m in my thirties, I’ve added anti-aging needs to the mix.

There are six different facials to choose from: the signature, brightening, age-defying, collagen, back-focused, and the gentleman’s facial. Even so, after asking me what my concerns were, Zach tailored a routine to my needs using a mixture of products from SkinCeuticals and Italian Comfort Zone.

First, she cleansed my face. Then analyzed it up-close. I had no plans for after my spa visit, so I agreed to some extractions, knowing how much better it is for your skin to allow a professional to clean out your pores instead of attempting it yourself. Zach started with an exfoliator, then used steam to prep my skin, and then extracted. It was hardly painful — and quicker than I expected.

Next, she used a glycolic peel on my cheeks and forehead and a salicylic peel on my chin. These tingled a bit, but removing them with cool water felt divine. So did the massage she gave to my shoulders, hands, and feet while a specialty brightening mask was draped over my face. I would go back just for that.

Finally, Zach gave me a scalp massage, removed the sheet mask, and finished off my 90-minute facial with a tinted layer of SPF 50. I was shocked at how not-red my skin appeared afterwards. Prior experience with facials had me expecting the inevitable redness that comes with extractions. I had none — just a healthy, plump, hydrated face that was immediately ready to be seen in public.
TWO POPS OF COLOR & A BLOW-DRY

After a quick smoothie break at the Plunge Café — the new coffee bar and eatery next to the pool — I met Maria Medina for a manicure and pedicure. Available by appointment only, Neptune’s nail salon promises to become the must-know time-saver for any LAAC member or hotel guest. After all, why juggle one more thing to schedule (and yet another fight for a parking spot) when you can have your nails treated and polished or gelled a mere staircase from the women’s locker room?

Medina instructed me to pick a color from the rainbow wall of OPI shades. Going for a classic summer hue, I chose orange, and she got to work soaking, filing, and trimming my cuticles in a style she later told me was called a “Russian manicure.” Being of Russian and Ukrainian descent, I appreciated that; it was the first I’d ever heard of it.

As my nails dried, she began the pedicure. No stranger to the nail spa, I instinctively switched on the pedicure seat’s massage button. It was easy to manage and just gentle enough to sustain. Medina used two treatments on my feet: first, a lemongrass-and-green-tea sugar scrub, which smelled delightful, and then a mint-and-green-tea paraffin to get my feet extra smooth and soft.

I was so relaxed by the end of my appointment that I suspected I might have trouble walking next door to the barber shop. Sure enough, as I got into Sid Molina’s chair for my blowout, I stepped on my freshly painted big toe and ruined Medina’s work. Graciously, she fixed it, and I’m happy to report that — over a week later — both manicure and pedicure are still going strong. That’s the longest I’ve ever had a manicure last without chipping. (Maria, A+ work. Truly!)

Back to Molina, who offered what I believe to be the other great post-gym time-saver: A freshly styled head of hair. Though Neptune’s barber shop is a full-service salon — offering cuts, shaves, dyes, and highlights, I opted for a simple tea tree shampoo and blow dry. It felt amazing. I normally let my hair air dry, and I was gratified that Molina took notice of my hair care efforts. He capped off my spa day by giving me perfectly imperfect tousled curls. Before I left, Molina even contacted Plunge and placed my to-go order for me: beluga lentil salad with added salmon.

My one regret from my time at Neptune is that I forgot to visit the secret speakeasy behind the barber shop! What better way to end a day of R&R than with a simple G&T? Be sure to ask Sid about it the next time you visit.

From the Archives

LAAC Sweatshirt with multiple versions of the Club’s logo, 1990s
More Than a Mermaid

A Look at the Life, Legacy, and LAAC Story of Swimming Star Esther Williams
The Golden Age of Hollywood may have been christened with gilded movie sets and larger-than-life studio heads, but it was baptized in a pool — specifically, a pool spouting colored smoke, spectacular fireworks, and one seemingly amphibious actress: Esther Williams. One of the most popular movie stars of the late ‘40s to early ‘60s, Williams was also one of the most distinctive, displaying a photogenic athleticism previously unseen in a leading lady.

And yet, to measure her only by the depths of her dives and the perfection of her waterproof makeup would be to miss a more intriguing tale. Williams proved, for women especially, that it is possible to be a champion first and a glittering icon second, even within the humble confines of one’s own discipline. Sometimes, the best claim to stardom exists in knowing what it is you love to do and staying true to it.

Born in Inglewood, California, on August 8, 1921, Esther Williams was the youngest of five children. Her family had moved to Los Angeles after her older brother Stanton was discovered by the silent film actress Marjorie Rambeau. He worked as a child actor until he died unexpectedly of a ruptured colon in 1929. The shock of his death, Williams later recalled in her autobiography, changed her as an eight-year-old. From that point on, she felt she had to take her brother’s place “and become strong.”

Early on, Williams recognized that when she was in the water, she was in her natural element. Her older sister Maurine, who taught her to swim, would take her down to Manhattan Beach, where she would fearlessly ride the ocean waves. Williams got her first job at the local pool counting towels in exchange for the five-cent entry fee. There, the lifeguards taught her proper breathing and pacing, as well as “male-only” strokes like the butterfly. Years later, Williams would use that same stroke to break records and win medals.

In 1937 former Olympian Aileen Allen recruited Williams for the women’s swim team of the Los Angeles Athletic Club and began training her for competitions and exhibition events. In 1939, Williams and her team set the club record for the 300-yard relay — clocking in at one minute and nine seconds. They also won three gold medals at the Women’s Outdoor Swimming Nationals for the 300- and 800-medley relays and the 100-meter freestyle.

Williams enjoyed competing. In her autobiography she wrote, “I loved the winning. I loved the feeling, day by day — and confirmed by a stopwatch — of increasing speed and strength.”

Her three gold medals at the nationals guaranteed Williams a spot at the 1940 Pan American Games in Buenos Aires. However, Coach Allen, afraid that the exotic Argentina would distract Williams from her training, hid the invitation when she received it. Regardless of how well-intentioned that deception may have been, when Williams found out about it, she left the LAAC team, determined to make it on her own as a freelance swimmer. She set her eyes on Olympic gold and qualified for the 1940 U.S. Olympic team, but her hopes were dashed when the games were canceled due to the outbreak of World War II. Regardless, Williams was still one of the best swimmers in the country by age 16.

When a D in algebra cost her a swimming scholarship to the University of Southern California, Williams was crushed and in need of money. She started working at a posh department store called I. Magnin while making up the algebra class at Los Angeles City College. A month into her job as a stock girl, Williams was approached
Young Esther by the pool
Esther Williams brought beauty to athleticism and athleticism to beauty
by producer Billy Rose to audition for his Aquacade show, which was set to perform at the San Francisco World’s Fair. Moving his show from New York to California meant he had to replace its former star, Olympian swimmer Eleanor Holm.

Over her lunch break, and wearing a swimsuit gifted by her manager at I. Magnin, Williams auditioned and won the role. She moved to San Francisco the following day.

Williams spent the summer of 1940 performing in Rose’s Aquacade with Johnny Weissmuller, the five-time Olympic gold medalist famously known for playing Tarzan. It was a dazzling spectacle of song, dance, and swim. Scouts from MGM tried to sign her then, but she turned them down to return to Los Angeles and the I. Magnin store — and to marry Leonard Kovner, a medical student she had met while attending L.A. City College.

Undaunted, MGM continued its pursuit of Williams, determined to find a sports star to compete with Olympic figure skater turned actress Sonja Henie, who was then under contract with Twentieth Century Fox. One year later, with her marriage to Kovner slowly unraveling, Williams met with Louis B. Mayer and agreed to sign a contract with the studio. She and Kovner separated soon afterwards.

Williams had two unusual clauses written into her contract: first, that she be given a guest pass to swim daily in the pool at The Beverly Hills Hotel; second, that she not appear on film for the first nine months so that she could take some time to study acting, singing, and dancing. This self-imposed “gestation time” to transform Williams from competitive swimmer to Hollywood actress appeared to pay off. Her first Technicolor musical, Bathing Beauty, was second only to Gone with the Wind as the most successful film of 1944.

Originally titled “Mr. Coed,” the film starred Red Skelton as a Broadway songwriter who enrolls at a women’s college in order to win back his sweetheart. Producers changed the title to Bathing Beauty after they viewed the film and decided that Williams should be more prominently featured. They upped her billing and used a picture of her in a bathing suit for the publicity posters.

Bathing Beauty — Hollywood’s first swimming film — was a cinematic feat. It required that a special pool be built on the MGM lot. The pool was twenty feet deep and large enough to accommodate lifts, fountains, flames, smoke, air hoses, and overhead camera cranes. Though the major swimming number doesn’t appear until the end of the film, Williams’s athletic ability is on full display throughout. Sporting glittering swimsuits and perfect curls, she effortlessly twirls through an underwater tunnel of synchronized swimmers, jumps above the water, and glides between fountains on cue. Such acts, along with sliding down ramps, diving from hoisted hoops and platforms, and performing aerial acrobatics, would prove to be hallmarks of Williams’s aqua-musical career, inspiring many to take up swimming and water ballet for years to come.

Williams made 26 films, most notably Million Dollar Mermaid, the first film to cost over one million dollars to produce. In it, she played Annette Kellerman, a real-life Australian swimmer, diver, and vaudeville star who helped popularize synchronized swimming at the turn of the century. Kellerman had also been famously arrested on a Massachusetts beach for wearing a one-piece swimsuit, something considered too scandalous for women to wear in public.

One has to wonder if Williams — who later said that Million Dollar Mermaid was her favorite film to make (it also became the title of
her autobiography) — felt a special kinship with Kellerman. Both women were swimmers and actresses, clearly, but they were also both on the forefront of feminine revolution, each in her own time.

Kellerman overcame polio as a child, broke barriers in her one-piece bathing costume, and was the first woman to perform a nude scene on screen. Williams single-handedly redefined the term “star power.”

Standing at 5’8”, Williams was initially thought to be too tall to become a star, vertically bypassing many of the male actors headlining at the time. She performed almost all of her own stunts, but she opted out of an 80-foot dive from a helicopter for Easy to Love because she was pregnant during filming. Instead, she negotiated for a fellow LAAC swimmer, high-diver Helen Crelinkovich, to perform it for the then-unheard-of rate of $3,000 per jump.

Williams did dive from 50 feet for a scene in Million Dollar Mermaid. Unfortunately, the headpiece she wore was made of lightweight aluminum instead of something more pliable, and the impact from the dive on the crown snapped her neck. She broke three vertebrae. Miraculously, Williams wasn’t paralyzed, but she had to live in a body cast for six months. The vertebrae later fused together, causing her headaches for the rest of her life.

A broken neck wasn’t the only injury Williams had to overcome during her lifetime of living in water. Her eardrums ruptured seven times. She broke a toe. She almost drowned when a trap door at the bottom of a stage pool was painted black, then again when a wool swimsuit weighed her down so heavily that she had to swim out of it (and onto the set naked). She also nearly missed crashing into a bed of black coral in Kauai when the canoe she was in capsized during the filming of Pagan Love Song. Trapped in the crest of a wave, Williams only narrowly survived, thanks to a geyser spurring out water at precisely the right moment to catch her. That stunt she did while pregnant.

The point of sharing her brushes with death is not to glorify them, but to demonstrate the physicality of a job that looked so effortless from an audience’s perspective. In 1966 Williams was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame. Her movie career was winding down, and she eventually left MGM. After that, Williams would occasionally appear for special swimming performances, and she was a commentator at the 1984 Summer Olympics. She later put her name on an above-ground swimming pool company and launched her own retro swimwear line catering to the mature female.

In 2013 Esther Williams died from natural causes at age 91. She had married four times and had three children, three stepchildren, and three grandchildren. Her ashes were scattered in the Pacific Ocean, a perfect end to the inspiring, storied, and magnanimous life of a woman who was — like the titles of two of her films — Easy to Love and Dangerous When Wet.
ports and general exercise may seem commonplace today — a pick-up basketball game with friends, football on TV, the daily routine of an hour at the gym — but these are actually fairly modern. During the second half of the 19th century, America saw a rise in amateur sports and athletics training. Various factors contributed to this rise, including a burgeoning middle class, newfound free time among industrial workers, desires for mass entertainment, and certain socio-political movements. The increased interest in athleticism led to the founding of athletic clubs in major cities around the country — places where members could train, compete, and even socialize. Here is a look at the origin stories of the seven oldest athletic clubs in America:
To see our full list of reciprocal clubs, visit laac.com/reciprocal-clubs/.
German-born brothers Arthur and Charles Nahl settled in San Francisco in 1853 after following the gold rush to Sacramento and then to the Bay Area. Germany had seen a rise in athleticism and training groups after their defeat to Napoleon a few decades before, and by 1855 the brothers had begun holding gymnastic training sessions in the backyard of their Bush Street home. These were the beginnings of America’s first athletic club, the San Francisco Olympic Club, officially inaugurated on May 6, 1860.

Over the next several decades, the Olympic Club expanded to include golf, swimming, boxing, and other athletics, while its membership roster added names like Mark Twain, Leland Stanford, and William Randolph Hearst.

Olympic’s downtown clubhouse was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake, but, after rebuilding it and reopening it in 1912, the club continued expanding its facilities, adding several golf courses in the 1920s and a tennis complex in 1936.

In 1955 the Olympic Club cemented its place in golf lore when Jack Fleck delivered an upset victory over PGA-favorite Ben Hogan. With Billy Casper defeating Arnold Palmer in 1966 and Scott Simpson edging out Tom Watson in 1987, the club developed a reputation for hosting upsets.

The 18th hole on the Lake Course is notoriously difficult. After the 1998 U.S. Open, David Fay, executive director of the USGA, said, “If we return to Olympic... we’re going to have to do something with that green.” The tournament returned in 2012 and saw another famous upset when Webb Simpson came from four shots behind to win his first major title.
In June 1866 John C. Babcock and William Buckingham Curtis set up dumbbells and other gymnastic equipment in the back of their 14th Street apartment in Manhattan. Their goal was to continue athletic training even when the weather outside wasn't permitting it. Guests were soon joining their training sessions, with Harry Buermeyer, a "father of American athletics," being one of the most frequent. Inspired by England’s amateur sports movement (and the formation of the London Athletic Club), Babcock, Curtis, and Buermeyer established the New York Athletic Club in 1868. Its stated mission was "to bring structure to the nascent world of amateur sport."

In 1886, Wall Street businessman William Travers arranged for the purchase of a 30-acre property in the Long Island Sound, now known as Travers Island, where the club continues to hold field sports like lacrosse and soccer as well as rowing and yachting.

In 1895, when NYAC’s uptown clubhouse was established on the corner of 6th Avenue and Central Park South, Harper's Weekly called the nine-story, stone structure a skyscraper rivaled only by the "very distressing hotel at the Fifth Avenue Plaza." Throughout the 20th century, the club grew to become the epicenter of amateur sports, not just for New York but for the whole country. Notoriously late to include women and minorities, NYAC finally became inclusive in 1989.

The New York Athletic Club maintains one of the largest contingencies of members to compete in the Olympics. Sixty-eight of its athletes played in the 2016 games in Rio de Janeiro, taking 21 medals home to New York.
The growth of the Los Angeles Athletic Club mirrors the growth of LA from a small town of 11,000 into the thriving city we know today. The LAAC started in 1880, the same year the Southern Pacific Railroad completed its route to Los Angeles. By the turn of the century, though, the Club was running low on money and members, and a group of prominent developers and businessmen reinvented the Los Angeles Athletic Club, making it a focal point of amateur sports in Southern California as well as a social club for the rapidly growing city. The Club has had many prominent members, including oil tycoon Edward Doheny, silent film star Charlie Chaplin, and author L. Frank Baum.

In 1912, the Club opened its 12–story home in downtown Los Angeles where it continues to flourish — adding the California Yacht Club in 1922 and purchasing a 1,320–acre ranch near Bakersfield in 1925. The LAAC was instrumental in bringing the summer Olympics to Los Angeles — first in 1932 and again in 1984 — and served as a training facility for athletes during both games.

In 1977 the Los Angeles Athletic Club began presenting the John R. Wooden Award to each year’s most outstanding male college basketball player, and it has been extending the award to the most outstanding female player too since 2004.
In September of 1882, eight young men from the Milwaukee Athletic Society officially established the Milwaukee Athletic Club, soon nicknamed The MAC. Their goal was to further gymnastics training in the city for the “developing of the bodily powers.”

In its first 25 years, The MAC operated out of nine different buildings. To construct a permanent clubhouse in 1917, the club partnered with the Milwaukee Association of Commerce, which helped fund the project. This partnership expanded the Milwaukee Athletic Club from being exclusively athletic to also being a center of the “civic, business, and social life in the city.”

The Association of Commerce remained a tenant in the MAC building for many years, and the two organizations had significant membership overlap. As the Wisconsin Historical Society notes, the club was the site of many business deals, and its roster included some of the city’s most prominent businessmen. The clubhouse has undergone several renovations (in 1948, 1954, and again in the 1960s) to keep competitive with the country clubs sprouting in the suburbs. But the most extensive one is currently underway — a seventy-million-dollar renovation ahead of Milwaukee’s 2020 Democratic National Convention. The MAC makeover includes upgrades to its hotel rooms, a new restaurant, and increased workout and lounging areas for its members.
As the amateur athletics movement gained momentum around the country, William Rathvon decided his city needed its own athletic club to secure Denver's position as a major American metropolis. The Denver Athletic Club opened 1884 (in a former church on 18th Street) with a gymnasium dedicated to “all proper sports and pastimes of any kind and nature whatsoever.”

As the children of Denver’s pioneers began returning home from colleges on the East Coast, they brought back a love of sports and a hunger to continue their training. By 1890, the club moved to the nine-story building in downtown Denver that it still occupies today. The Denver Athletic Club introduced one of the city’s first bowling alleys and one of the first athletics fields in the region. They consecrated the grass with a football game between DAC members and the University of Colorado—it was both teams’ first game.

The Denver Post has described the Athletic Club as a dynamic social setting for the city's elite philosophers, statesmen, artists, and industrial tycoons. “The club was familiar to them,” reported the Post, “for here the grace of social elbow-rubbing was a practiced, and not forgotten, art.”
The official founding of the Detroit Athletic Club dates back to 1887, before the city became a hub for the automobile industry. It was then that a small group of amateur athletes joined together to train and compete in various sports.

By the turn of the century, however, the original club was losing members, and in 1913 a new charter was signed. The two men instrumental to the creation of this new Detroit Athletic Club were Charles A. Hughes and Henry B. Joy. Hughes (also referred to as "Mr. DAC") was a key organizer of the Detroit Cougars — later renamed the Detroit Red Wings.

Joy, who was the president of the Packard Motor Company, became the new club’s first president. He organized his fellow leaders in the city's booming railroad and automobile industries, which helped secure the club’s position as a prominent social and athletic meeting place. On April 17, 1915, the DAC’s new building was opened in the heart of downtown Detroit, where it remains in use today. Visitors have included Henry Ford and President Woodrow Wilson.

Although the issue of allowing women to smoke in the club was debated in back in 1924, the Detroit Athletic Club was one of the first in the country to admit women — so long as they were wives of members.
Portland, Oregon’s population in 1891 was just over half the capacity of the Rose Bowl. Nevertheless, twenty-six members of the Portland Football and Cricket Club felt compelled to break off and create a permanent athletic club for the city. Within nine months, the Multnomah Amateur Athletic Club had swelled to 300 members. A massive fire destroyed the club’s first home in 1910, but a larger clubhouse was built soon after, with President Theodore Roosevelt joining in its dedication.

The Multnomah Athletic Club (the word “Amateur” was dropped in 1936) faced lean years during the Great Depression, but it persevered and prospered in the postwar era and beyond. The club has elected five female presidents since granting full membership privileges to women in 1977. Child-care facilities were introduced shortly thereafter. In 2012, the club’s culinary program brought on James Beard Award-winning chef Philippe Boulot.

Although known for its exclusivity — with reapplication requirements and a membership lottery every four years — Multnomah Athletic Club, with over 22,000 members, remains one of the largest athletic clubs in the nation today.

The growth and enduring popularity of these organizations bear testimony to the perseverance, influence, and importance of athletic clubs in our country’s history, in our individual communities, and in our lives.
The Jazz of Invention: Live and Swingin'

*Three Nights with the Magical Powers of Music*

So often we focus on the transformative power of the physical — things we can touch, see, and hold — that we forget about the unseen sparks that can be the most important factors for change. Those small moments of “maybe” or “what if” that challenge us to think of something new often prompt us to summon the courage to act.

Musical notes are like this. They are tiny agents of change rippling through space and reverberating through time with immense ability to transform everything from a moment’s mood to a life’s purpose. Music does the impossible: It creates meaning and matter seemingly out of thin air.

On this power, science agrees; listening to music is actually good for our health. Studies have shown that music can improve blood flow, lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol, reduce pain, and even provide a viable alternative to sedatives and anti-anxiety drugs prior to surgery. Music has the power to selectively activate beneficial pathways in the brain. It can heal, which is a form of transformation all its own.

Where am I going with all this? Well, to Invention, of course, LAAC’s own nucleus of musical activity! Three nights a week, Invention is home to a rotating cast of artists, and — as I discover after I visit each night — they all put the magic of music on full display.
WEDNESDAY NIGHT: THE MID-WEEK DREAM

What better time is there to sip a martini than at 7:00 on a Wednesday evening? It just feels right, I tell myself, ordering one with extra olives as I ease onto a stool at the bar.

The lights are low, conversation percolates around me, and jazz is playing. It’s the kind of environment where any other music would mar the scene. This is precisely what saxophonist Eric Oto wants. He and Paul Ahern on piano, Chester Wang on bass, and J.P. Tordilla on drums have been playing jazz at the Club’s Invention bar every Wednesday night for the past five-and-a-half years.

“Of the four of us that play, I’m the latest person to come to jazz,” Oto says. “I didn’t start playing until I was in my 40s. I had played in school bands through high school and college, but I didn’t really understand — or, actually, I was probably too intimidated — to start to play jazz because it seemed so hard.”

He went to law school instead, studying in the Bay Area and moving between San Francisco and Los Angeles until the mid-1990s when he landed here for good. It wasn’t until Oto decided to leave big practice and start his own law firm in the early 2000s that the saxophone re-entered his life. He was craving a better work/life balance, and Oto found it playing jazz.

“The most amazing thing about this music,” says Oto, “is that, if you’re new in town and you’ve never met a group of people before, you can walk in (to a jam session) and call any one of hundreds of standards. It depends on the work every musician has done up until that point, but you can play together and actually sound like a group. It’s very difficult to find a collective, artistic setting where that can happen.”

Oto claims that they rarely rehearse together, but the band on Wednesday nights doesn’t feel unfamiliar. “We are always working to get better, but we’re having a lot of fun,” Oto reflects with sincerity.

I order a second martini.

While the group understands that Club members are here to eat and drink rather than attend a concert, that doesn’t limit the quality of music or the level of showmanship.

“If you ask anyone who plays on Wednesday, it’s the three best hours they have in the week,” says Oto. “We don’t think of (this) as work. It really does feed a part of your soul that work doesn’t do. I can honestly say I have the dream attained for me.”
When I walk into Invention on a Thursday evening, the stage lights seem brighter and there are more chairs around the bandstand. I immediately get the sense that this is not a regular set. As laughter ripples through the crowd, I wonder, "Is someone telling jokes?"

Thursdays at Invention are known as the Jazz Salon. Every fourth Thursday — the night that I attend — hosts the "Jazz Living Legend," an award founded by Linda Morgan in 2009 to recognize jazz artists who have had careers of at least 25 years playing in Los Angeles. In the past ten years, it has been awarded to 160 artists.

"We have a list now of over 150 current artists who have been nominated to receive the award," Jazz Salon founder David Ross tells me. "Out of that list, we've identified at least 40 who are over (age) 70 or ill that we want to try to (honor) this year — while we still can."

Ross is the force behind the prestigious award and the primary reason live music is played at the LAAC. He eloquently unfolds why jazz first impressed him and why Invention felt like a natural setting for it.

"Unlike some of the other private clubs, here was a room that felt welcoming rather than intimidating," says Ross, detailing his thoughts on Invention's remodel in early 2013. "It had an informality; you could imagine yourself having fun there."

Sensing that it was a place where more social activity should occur, Ross pitched the idea of Invention hosting weekly live music. To him jazz in particular could serve a dual purpose: provide a service to the club and give him the opportunity to continue playing.

Like Oto, Ross started playing later in life. He was a 58-year-old full-time financial planner when he started taking lessons. Recalling his own "come to jazz" moment, Ross says, "I wanted to think of some activity I could start pursuing that, when finally on my deathbed, I could look back on without regret for even one minute spent because the activity would be so rewarding. It wasn't a difficult process of identification. I just thought, 'What if I was a jazz musician?' That would be so fun!"

He enrolled in a beginner program at Long Beach City College ten years ago and has been playing bass ever since. Having started in his late 50s, Ross admits that it has taken him a while to develop his talent, but he has also had the good fortune of playing with some of the greatest jazz musicians in the world, many of whom play regularly at the Jazz Salon.

One of those regulars is Rickey Woodard, a saxophone player who started his career touring with Ray Charles and later played with Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, B.B. King, and John Legend. Another is trumpet player Nolan Shaheed, who played with Duke Ellington, Aretha Franklin, Natalie Cole, and Marvin Gaye. (Shaheed is also an athlete — an eight-time world-record holder who has been named *Track & Field* magazine's "Male Athlete of the Year" more times than any other living person.) The Jazz Salon often features singers as well. Regularly rotating at the microphone are Barbara Morrison, Maria Howell, Elaine Woodard, and Cathy Segal-Garcia.

An essential ability for jazz players is to reach deep inside themselves for conception, spontaneity, and performance — and to do so continually until the last note of a song is played. Ross comments on how jazz differs from rock, classical, and especially popular music. "With jazz," he says, "the immersion is deeper in a profound way."

The shared joy between player and listener is evident, even to a jazz newbie like me. "It's hard to adequately describe," Ross continues, "but at the Jazz Salon in particular, the artists really want the audience to feel as close and as connected to the music as possible. They want the audience to have as much of the experience as the musicians are having."

Perhaps this is why Ross isn't shy about his need for outside support to fund the Jazz Salon. The Club pays him half of what he needs to break even each week, but he relies on the rest through tips and member support. He takes no money for himself.

"It's such a joy every single week that I end up, at the end of the evening, just happy," he says. "Happy and full of energy. It's worth it."
FRIDAY NIGHT: SOUNDS LIKE THE FUTURE

On Friday night at Invention, I don’t know what to expect. But Caleb Veazey, who curates Friday’s live music and regularly performs, says he hopes guests bring a sense of openness and curiosity to the show. “I see the Friday night series as a gateway to what the LA music scene is becoming,” says Veazey. “More localized, more independent, more entrepreneurial in a way.”

“Gateway” does feel appropriate. Tucked into one of the regal chairs next to the bandstand, I feel cocooned, ready for the start of my weekend. It’s darker here than on other evenings, with candles on the tables and just a few spotlights. I’m content to just sit and follow the rhythm.

To Veazey, playing at the Club represents a journey, not just for the greater music community but also for himself. He has played guitar since childhood, and he attended a performing arts high school. He earned both a music scholarship and a swimming scholarship to Arizona State. After competing as a swimmer in high school, college, and the Olympic trials, he retired from swimming in 2012, after which music became his sole focus. Veazey went on to receive a Master of Fine Arts degree in Jazz Performance from the California Institute of the Arts.

“That was kind of a rebellious time for me — to leave athletics and find my identity as an artist,” he says, “as opposed to living this crazy, split-personality life that was intensely competitive in collegiate sports (but also) very creative and thoughtful, seeing the world in a different way as a musician.”

And yet, it was swimming that paved the way for Veazey to play music at the LAAC. After accepting a part-time job last year as the Club’s swim coach, he was introduced to David Ross through members he met at the pool.

“(David) has such a unique outlook on life and is still so enthusiastic about art,” Veazey tells me. “We met and he was (convinced I should) play here on Fridays because the Club ‘needed more youthful spirits,’ him being the self-aware person that he is.”

Invention on a Friday night is a place for those who maybe aren’t “Living Legends” yet but who hold the potential for getting there. Veazey is looking to book other musicians who, like himself, are trying to forge their own musical paths in a city known for favoring only a select few. He believes that the LAAC, with its mix of tradition and innovation, is the perfect place to offer the eclectic sense of culture he’s been unable to find anywhere else.

“A spirit comes alive when you can feel the energy of people together in a room,” Veazey says. “I think the Club does that pretty well. There are so many different types of people here; everybody works in a different facet; everybody has a different story to tell; people feel invigorated and inspired to live their lives... That’s why I like playing here.”
Making a Splash

Actor Clayton Snyder Plays a Starring Role in LAAC Water Polo
In a pool in the Czech Republic, LAAC’s water polo team felt focused, confident, and ready. The only US team in the EU Nations Cup, Los Angeles was facing Portugal in the finals. They had seen enough to know that they could win this, even though differences in officiating and playing style had just propelled Portugal into an early lead.

LA answered, and the game stayed close and intense throughout, with red cards and foul-outs whittling down both teams as the number of goals climbed up. With about a minute to go, LA had them, 11 to 10.

One of the Club’s top players, Clayton Snyder, was among the penalty casualties. Having been red-carded from the game, Snyder sat on the sidelines, helpless to do anything but watch and yell.

Born in Long Beach and raised in Orange County, Snyder took to water polo as if born to play it. The sport requires extraordinary athleticism, not to mention top-notch aquatic skills. It’s not just any six- or seven-year-old who can watch a game of water polo and say “I can do that” and be right. Little Clayton Snyder, however, was no ordinary kid. “I had to wait, though,” he recalls. “They said I couldn’t start playing until I was eight.”

When Snyder was in middle school, he landed the part of Ethan Craft, the lovable young “himbo” on the hit Disney show Lizzie McGuire. For the next two years, Snyder’s success in both water polo and acting rolled along swimmingly. During the show’s two-year run, he played for the SoCal Water Polo Club and was a member of the Speedo Cup 14-and-under championship team.

According to Snyder and legend (and some 19th century drawings in the Library of Congress), early forms of water polo had players hitting a ball with paddle-like mallets while straddling floating barrels decorated to look like horses. “It started as a way of mocking the upper class,” Snyder explains, “putting horse heads on barrels and playing ‘polo’ in the water.” This fun-poking by those not wealthy enough to own polo ponies marked an early incarnation of the distinctive humor still found in water polo culture today.

Chances are, though, that the game was already a thing, and people rolled out the barrels and got silly with it because of the name “polo.” Early names also included “aquatic rugby,” “water baseball,” and “football in the water.” The name “water polo” probably stuck because they used the same small, rubbery ball — or Indian “pulu” (anglicized to “polo”) — that was used in the horseback version.

Goals were scored by placing the ball on the deck or shore at one end of the playing area, and goalies could prevent this by standing outside the water and jumping onto their opponents. The submersible ball was often forgotten as play deteriorated into underwater wrestling or chaotic gang fights. Players were even allowed to dunk and hold each other underwater. One strategy was to hide the ball inside one’s swimsuit, dive below the murky surface, and emerge near the goal. Another was the “flying salmon,” in which a player leaped through the air off the back of a teammate.

William Wilson, a British swimming expert, created the first official rules in 1877. His “aquatic football” was a kind of rugby-wrestling–soccer combination, all done while treading water.

As the sport developed and became more civilized, ball-handling, passing, and swimming skills became more important. Caged nets began marking the goals, and only the player with the ball could be tackled. The side-angling “Trudgen stroke” and a large, inflated ball led to one-handed, above-water passing, making the game faster and more elegant. Unnecessary roughness took a bottom rung to strategy, speed, and finesse.

America’s version stayed barbaric longer, though. In the 1890s “American style” water polo — like many spectator sports of the Gilded Age — gained popularity as an opportunity to see fights erupt. Thousands would gather to watch water polo champions battle it out in arenas like Madison Square Garden.

Snyder is no stranger to water polo's brutality, which often goes undetected since it’s often below the surface. But he’s also aware of the sport’s appeal. “Water polo is the oldest team sport of the (modern) Olympics,” he asserts, citing its inclusion in the 1900 Olympic Games. In the US-hosted 1904 games, however, Europeans eschewed water polo because Americans played by different rules. (Americans competed against each other that year with New York defeating Chicago for the gold.) Finally, in 1929, international rules were established, and water polo became standardized — and therefore truly competitive.

Snyder would have started high school as a varsity player, but he was in Vancouver and Rome playing Ethan Craft in The Lizzie McGuire Movie. After the film wrapped, Snyder decided to focus on academics and athletics. He was team captain in both his junior and senior years and was heavily recruited to play in college.

He accepted a scholarship to Pepperdine University and majored in Film Studies while on the water polo team’s starting line-up. Becoming captain as a junior, Snyder helped lead Pepperdine to place second in the nation. He continued as captain his senior year and was given All-American Honorable Mention.

After graduating in 2010 and training with the National Team through the summer, Snyder went
Clayton Snyder: from TV crush to crushing the competition
Water polo requires excellent aquatic skills, top-notch teamwork, and fantastic fitness.
abroad to play professionally. He competed in Italy, China, and Hungary then started the 2013 season in Montenegro at the top of his game. But injuries and acting opportunities soon had Snyder wrestling with his identity of athlete versus actor. “Lots of things,” he recalls, “were pointing to the question: Is this adversity to overcome, or is it ‘that time’?”

He decided to set aside water polo and focus on acting. Auditioning, networking, and workshopping kept Snyder busy, but life without athletics brought a sort of depression. “I believe in recreation,” he says. “It’s good to be involved in sport.” He points out that many people participate in athletics in their youth and think of those experiences as “glory days.” They’re expected to take the principles developed through sports and apply them in the “real world,” while letting go of the physical aspects. “To spend all that time developing it and then to ignore the physical is ludicrous,” says Snyder. When the opportunity came to play again, he took it. “The truth was I missed playing dearly,” Snyder admits, “so I agreed to hop back in the pool.”

His friend Wesley Kading was looking to form a new team to compete in the Masters League. Snyder had met Kading while playing in Los Alamitos, and the two bonded over their love of the game. “We’d constantly be talking about strategy and tactics between plays or after practice,” Snyder recalls. Another teammate, Eric Carnohan, joined them in reaching out to players looking for a team. The response was so great, they had to hold tryouts. Forty to sixty guys showed up. Clearly, observes Snyder, “There was a great hunger for a powerhouse team based in Southern California.”

With a nod to the Roman Empire, they took the Italian word for “republic” and called their new team “Repubblica.” After their first year, however, they realized that to be truly competitive, they needed to partner with an athletic club. “There’s an appeal for simply continuing as a grassroots club,” says Snyder, “but we felt our ceiling would be pretty low.”

LAAC was the perfect fit. Cory Hathaway, the Assistant General Manager, had been wanting the Club to have a water polo team, but he needed someone to spearhead it. Re bubblica was a startup club with its own funding; LAAC had the organization and prestige. They joined forces in 2016, and LAAC Water Polo was born!

Meanwhile, Kading’s new wife (also a water polo player) opened an office in Ireland. When the Dublin club team got invited to the 2017 EU Nations Club Cup, Kading asked if his LA team could compete too. That year, LAAC came in fifth. They returned the following year ready to take it seriously and ready to be taken seriously, and they easily won the tournament.

After dominating the 2018 Club Cup, LAAC entered the 2019 EU Nations Cup, and that’s how they found themselves fighting Portugal for the top spot. At the last minute, their opponents tied the game, and it went to a best-of-five shootout. Even the shootout was close, with LA up 1-0 for three rounds before losing the last two. Game over. Second place. According to Snyder, who watched helplessly from the stands, “It was the most heartbreaking shootout I had ever been a part of.”

Clayton Snyder continues to play and act. Lately, he’s been doing musical theatre. “An absolute blast,” he beams. Snyder also coaches, works in real estate, and is producing a World War II documentary series about his grandfather. He’s even being featured in a Lizzie McGuire reboot. “The future is bright,” he says, flashing his world-class Clayton Snyder grin.

He and Kading founded the team to grow the culture of water polo, and that culture continues to flourish. “It’s life-giving,” says Snyder. “It makes us more complete people, forces us to prioritize health, and helps in all areas of life.”

From the Archives
Men’s wool bathing suit from the late 1930s, in the style worn by many LAAC swimmers and divers
When it comes to fashion, the only thing cooler than a classic East Coast preppy look is the West Coast’s laid-back take on it. And the only thing cooler than that is the new level of style emerging at the Los Angeles Athletic Club.

We asked two contrasting fashion experts, Waraire Boswell and Lynn Ellen Bathke, to design looks for their fellow members, drawing on the LAAC’s unique history, West Coast identity, and athletic-social affinity.

Boswell is often characterized as being on the forefront of fashion, while Bathke proudly follows traditions that are hundreds of years old. The looks they designed for the Club are made to take members from working out to going out.

But first, a little historical context...
The Club was born in 1880, and from the beginning our purpose was twofold: vigorous physical pursuits and elite social pursuits. Per the suit styles of the time, gentlemanliness and sportiness were going hand-in-hand more and more: As sportswear was embracing uniforms, formal wear was becoming sportier. And thus, the clothing of these dual endeavors influenced one another, laying the groundwork for the enduring appeal of preppy fashion.

That style takes its name from the preparatory schools where young New Englanders with old money prepped for the Ivy Leagues. From the time J. Press first set up shop at Yale in 1902, students embraced the sporty new alternatives to the stiff and stuffy professorial ensembles that preceded them. Designed to be sold on campuses, these Ivy League styles drew from traditional upper-crust sporting activities such as tennis, boating, polo, and golf. As their instant-classic elements traveled from New Haven to Palm Beach to Los Angeles, they picked up new colors, fabrics, and sports influences along the way.

Here in LA, the film industry also began to shape fashion, as the rising stars of the silver screen ushered in the Golden Age of Hollywood. The depiction of athleticism in movies led to increased attention on how someone looked when sporting sports attire — even before red-carpet glamor and big-screen costume design helped steer the fashions of the day.

Bathke, who has worked to preserve some of Hollywood’s most iconic costumes, points out that the Club has always had close ties to the movie business. For instance, in 1929, LAAC member and AMPAS president Douglas Fairbanks hosted the first Oscars, presenting fellow Club member Charlie Chaplain with a special award for his numerous contributions to the industry.

Boswell also has ties to “the industry.” Long before becoming an entrepreneurial fashion force, Boswell toyed with a career as a talent agent. Top celebrities and Hollywood insiders still seek out and strut about in his creations at countless events, appearances, and awards shows.

Born, raised, and educated in Southern California, Boswell taught himself clothing design out of necessity (i.e., the need to reconcile his cutting-edge fashion sense with his six-foot-seven frame). Bathke grew up in Peoria, Illinois. She studied textile conservation in England and moved to Los Angeles in 2009 to work on a LACMA exhibit of 18th and 19th century European dress.

Despite their considerable differences, Boswell and Bathke share an apparent love of Los Angeles and a clear passion for customization. As the creator of California’s first brand of made-to-measure, hand-crafted women’s shoes, Bathke has made it her mission to bring back bespoke. “I truly believe that empathy drives great design,” says Bathke, who considers her pieces to be personal creations, each with a life of its own.

Boswell is known for bold designs that showcase the individuality of bold people. His many notable accomplishments include putting LeBron James in a pink suit for a Miami Vice–inspired Nike commercial, outfitting Andrew Wiggins for the NBA draft, and dressing Colin Kaepernick for his controversial “Men of the Year” GQ cover.

In his designs for the Club, Boswell gives his athlete a pair of pocketed, open-bottom sweatpants made from ripstop polyester, which he combines with Waraire–brand embroidered crew socks and a piqué polo shirt. Other shirt options include his all-cotton workout tee and a breezy button-up in a mix of cupro and Italian linen.
"Fashion is communication. What you choose to communicate daily is inherently linked to history, whether you realize it or not."

- Lynn Ellen Bathke
"Los Angeles is a major hub of commerce. With commerce comes wealth. With wealth comes prestige."

- Waraire Boswell
Then he lays it up with basketball shorts and matching jersey in athletic mesh with Club-tribute trim.

Boswell rounds out his collection’s casual looks with a luxurious terrycloth bathrobe, trimmed in navy and proudly displaying the LAAC logo.

For the female athlete, Bathke starts with a tank top and knit leggings under a reversible wrap dress made with a lightweight blend of hemp and organic cotton. She completes the outfit with a pair of sky-blue Mercury trainers featuring zip closures and optional wing embroidery.

Her second athletic look takes a mint-colored, rib-knit tank top with jade piping and pairs it with silk satin boxing shorts that sport an elastic belt closure and hidden side pockets.

Bathke’s LAAC swimsuit comes in jade, mint, and salmon. Ties that cross in the back run through side loops for either front or back closure. Her Huey sandals are made from vegetable tanned leather dyed with avocados. Bathke tops the ensemble with a logeoed swim cap and adds a custom terrycloth cape towel.

In researching her designs, Bathke knew she wanted to draw on the Club’s past. She attended an exhibition at the FIDM called Outdoor Girls: Sporting Fashion 1800 to 1960, which featured a 1930s swimsuit worn by a member of the LAAC. “I love the water,” says Bathke, who discovered the Club through a friend and joined for the pool.

Boswell joined after former neighbors invited him to come by and see the place. “Once inside, I was amazed by the historical footprint,” he recalls. “The LAAC is like a time capsule celebrating achievement and resilience.” He reminds us that to endure and thrive as the Club has is an amazing feat. According to Boswell, the Club’s history provided an anchor for his designs.

“The history of the LAAC is a major component of style because the Club represents the best in athletics and civil comradery.”

He points out that LA’s mild climate also played a role in defining Club fashion. Our warm weather and cool attitude put a playful spin on upscale dressing that spread in popularity beyond the California border. Instead of just imitating old-school sports from across the Atlantic, we rode new waves from the Pacific — like surfing styles, first inspired by LAAC legend Duke Kahanamoku, and the 50s sunbathing culture, which brought more fun to our poolside attire. And with our rich balance of exclusivity and acceptance, we were early embracers of high-end T-shirts, designer jeans, and upscale hip-hop elements.

Bringing a sense of style to the way one dresses at the Club is all about embracing originality while giving the past an appreciative nod and wink. The harmonizing of old and new is something that fashion and the Club have in common. “What you choose to communicate daily is inherently linked to history, whether you realize it or not,” says Bathke. “Fashion is communication,” she adds, noting that even the most classic pieces can become a canvas for self-expression. “Beauty is not disposable. It’s timeless.”

“My fashion approach is similar to my attitude,” says Boswell, “less is more and detail is key.” His clothing looks powerful and feels comfortable. Before fitting a client with a custom piece, Boswell has been known to give a tongue-in-cheek apology: “After you put this on,” he says with a knowing smile, “you’re not going to be able to wear anything else in your closet.”

Stylistically, dressing for formal occasions is not so different from dressing for casual ones. The key to great style, according to menswear pundit Christian Chensvold, is to be relatively dressed up for casual settings and relatively dressed down for formal ones. At the Club we have always engaged in social pursuits as well as athletic ones, and our style embraces casual elegance while exuding elegant casualness.

For his Club formal look, Boswell offers a sleek, crisply creased blue merino wool suit, which he pairs with a white pin-dot cotton shirt featuring a band collar and covered placket. He follows up with a double-breasted suit in ten-ounce wool worn with an Egyptian cotton button-up shirt and seven-fold tie.

Bathke gives us plaid linen trousers and a bishop-sleeved LAAC sweatshirt in medium-weight, jersey-knit fabric. Her silk-lined, cashmere-and-wool Alpenglow coat is shown over a backless crepe silk tank dress. Finally, strategic pleats and hidden pockets complete a striped wrap dress of hemp and organic silk satin. Featured footwear by Bathke Bespoke includes the Albers heeled oxfords, shown with custom LAAC fringed kilties, and the Delaunay — wedge-heel slip-ons in Bordeaux leather.

Much of Bathke’s inspiration comes from her vast knowledge of Club history, textile history, and costuming. “A decade of prolonging the life of sacred objects has certainly inspired me,” says Bathke, who came to fashion by way of the museum world.

Though Boswell may be less overt about drawing from history, his designs are not without ties to the past. “Fashion is cyclical,” he explains. “The mixture of vintage and new is a key element in the psychology of design—familiar but different. When the correct vintage pieces are redone and blended with current pieces, the result is amazing.”

From tennis whites to power suits, LAAC fashion trends have
reflected the times — but with a more relaxed attitude than our East Coast counterparts. “The city of Los Angeles is an invaluable cultural point of reference,” says Boswell. “Los Angeles is a major hub of commerce. With commerce comes wealth. With wealth comes prestige.” His personal dress code revolves around being appropriately outfitted for any given moment or occasion. “You can go wherever you want in this world,” Boswell proclaims, “as long as you dress for it.”
“If I didn’t grow to be 6’5”, I’d probably be wailing on a trumpet right now.”
— Tommy Hawkins