

# Datebook

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE AND SFGATE.COM | Wednesday, February 11, 2015 | Section E



Associated Press 1977

A Stanford University project explores Richard Pryor's early years in Peoria, Ill., where he was raised in a brothel.

## Interactive insight



LEAH  
GARCHIK

### Ready, set, love

Valentine's Day is looming once again, and let this three-day series of columns remind you to go out right now and buy the chocolates/lingerie/six-pack of beer. The ways of love are mysterious, as a year's worth of gathered utterances prove. As always, we follow the arc of romance.

#### First, love needs a motive

» "The trick is to marry a rich guy who was married to a witch first."

(Woman to woman, overheard at the Plant in Mill Valley by Roger

Thornhill)

» "I am not married yet. I want to date a rich person and then a poor person first, so I have both experiences." (Young man on BART, overheard by Karen Bianchini)

» "The first thing that women ask nowadays is 'What's your FICO score?'" (Man to man, overheard in San Rafael restaurant by John Rosenberg. I needed explanation, too: A FICO score is a financial rating given by Fair Isaac Corp.)

» "Man, I can't wait to have a girlfriend, so I can go trinket shopping." (Man to man, overheard on Cape Cod by Lisa Bates)

Garchik continues on E8

### WATCH BOX

#### What's on tonight

"The Americans" remains one of the best series on TV and is worth a look at 10 p.m. with the new episode, "Open House." While some series tend to stumble after a solid first season, this FX show continues to thrive. I used to be a fan of CBS' "Person of Interest," also at 10 p.m., until Taraji P. Henson's character got killed off. That enabled her to move to Fox's terrific "Empire," but it took the wind out of "POI's" sails for me. It's still on my TiVo, but the first show I catch up with on Thursday is always "The Americans."

Eugene Levy — whom you know from the "American Pie" and Christopher Guest movies, has teamed up with his son Daniel to create the new comedy series "Schitt's Creek," premiering at 10 p.m. on the Pop channel, which used to be TVGN and can be located on Com-



Associated Press 1977

A Stanford University project explores Richard Pryor's early years in Peoria, Ill., where he was raised in a brothel.

# Interactive insight into Pryor's origins

By Jessica Zack

As Scott Saul is keenly aware, even in an almost 600-page book like his exhaustively researched and highly praised new biography, "Becoming Richard Pryor," there is only so much room between the book's covers for all of the "historical goodies that are unearthed during years of archival delving."

Saul, an associate professor of English at UC Berkeley, spent a decade painstakingly exploring the comedian's lesser-known pre-fame roots, with particular emphasis on Pryor's childhood spent living in his grandmother's brothel. *Pryor continues on E2*



Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

Spatial History Project Creative Director Erik Steiner, who helped develop the interactive website, views a large digital rendering.



Scott Saul's biography of Pryor is informed by a trove of recordings made by a KPFA engineer.

## Berkeley days caught on tape

By Andrew Gilbert

Unsettled by the massive Sylmar earthquake, strung out on cocaine, and increasingly frustrated by the entertainment industry's gilded cage, Richard Pryor lit out for Berkeley in the winter of 1971. That's where Scott Saul picked up his trail some four decades later, uncovering Pryor's multifarious activities during a brief but protean East Bay interlude.

A treasure trove of unknown recordings made by the late Alan Farley, an engineer at KPFA and avid Pryor fan who had offered the comedian a place to crash, unlocked the first of many mythologized phases of Pryor's life.

From Peoria's hard-scrabble red-light district to Greenwich Village joints where Pryor pushed *Saul continues on E3*

What's on

"The American best series on 10 p.m. with the House." While ble after a solid show continue fan of CBS' "Pe 10 p.m., until T ter got killed of It's still on my catch up with c "The American

Eugene Lev the "American Guest movies, son Daniel to c series "Schitt's p.m. on the Po be TVGN and c cast, DirecTV a www.poptv.co

The new ser formerly rich v whose wife, M is a soap opera Annie Murphy Chris Elliott is actor-driven c who suddenly r repairs to the s bought years b

And, yes, we name in a fami can't say it out



"Duck Dyna of its seventh p.m.

The provoca miniseries, "Ea into its regular KQED with an which M. Sanj Bear Rainfores and forests in For complet www.sfgate.co

David Wiegand, Chronicle's TV dwiegand@sfc @WaitWhat T

## ARTS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT

## Pryor's Berkeley sojourn gave biographer insight

Saul from page E1

at the edges of his craft during extended improv sessions with fellow scuffling comics, Saul explores the origins of Pryor's searing genius in his critically hailed biography, "Becoming Richard Pryor" (Harper Collins).

"Alan Farley was an incredibly scrupulous gearhead who would tape everything and label it," says Saul, 44, an associate professor of English at UC Berkeley. "Pryor arrived in Berkeley when he was at loose ends and started experimenting wildly. Alan got it all: spontaneous poetry, scenarios for a guerrilla film, an avant-garde sound collage, Pryor's stand-up routines and just talking to friends. It was a mother lode of material that gave me so much insight into his struggle, and made me think of him as a person who was searching to find himself as an artist, not knowing where he was going, following his nose."

While many reviewers have focused on the sensational aspects of Pryor's life, from being raised in a brothel to his tangled and often violent relationships with women, Saul's signal achievement isn't digging up dirt. It's bringing his critical but sympathetic intelligence to bear on Pryor's slippery art. Biographers are prone to falling out of love with their subjects, but Saul seems to retain an abiding affection for Pryor, arguing that his



Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images/1977



Harper

At left: Actor and comedian Richard Pryor performs live onstage circa 1977 in Los Angeles. Above: Scott Saul's biography of Pryor, who died in 2005 at age 65.

**Scott Saul:** 6:30 p.m. Friday, Feb. 27. The Booksmith, 1644 Haight St., S.F. (415) 863-8688. www.booksmith.com; 7 p.m. Monday, March 9. Book Passage, 51 Tamal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera. (415) 927-0960. www.bookpassage.com.

faults and flaws are inextricably bound up with his ability to strip himself emotionally bare in front of an audience.

"It was a conflicted childhood and he became a very difficult, conflicted person who was always searching for a place he was accepted and

loved," Saul says. "He lived betwixt and between, where the trickster lives. Remember, Peoria was only 10 percent black in 1950. The first world he grew up in, the red-light district, was mostly black. But when they demolished it, he was thrust suddenly into a very white world, and that's when he's becoming a comedian. He brought black working class truths to a larger public. I see him as a crossover comedian at root."

Saul's obsession with Pryor was sparked in the dark of a movie theater when he happened to see the 1976 film "Sil-

ver Streak." Identifying with Gene Wilder's nebbishy book editor, who gets a life-saving jolt of street wisdom from Pryor, Saul felt that "he was revealing something to me that I needed to see about my world." Without downplaying the impact of Pryor's albums and concert films, Saul makes a compelling case for the influence of his often overlooked work as an actor.

After Pryor's breakout role in the 1972 Billie Holiday biopic, "Lady Sings the Blues," when he made such a powerful impression delivering his single line that he was written into

the entire film, "Pryor changed every movie he was part of," Saul says.

"And his films changed our culture. 'Blazing Saddles' inaugurated this era of spoofs with an edge. 'The Mack' is the ur-text of hip-hop culture. In 'Silver Streak' he improvised the interracial buddy comedy into existence. He was born into very narrow confines and he kept bursting out of these boxes. Through the force of his imagination, he catalyzed our culture."

Andrew Gilbert is a Bay Area freelance writer.

## MOVIE GUIDE

SAN FRANCISCO

SUNDANCE KABUKI CINEMA &amp; 5

AMERICAN SNIPER (R) 11:00, 12:35, 2:15, 3:50, 5:35, 7:15, 8:55, 10:25

THE IMITATION GAME (PG-13) 6:50, 9:30  
QUELMA (PG-13) 6:30 p.m.

THE IMITATION GAME (PG-13) 11:10, 2:00, 5:10, 7:55, 10:40

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

# Peoria project peers into Pryor's past

*Pryor from page E1*

el in Peoria, Ill. The city itself was the butt of Pryor's early jokes — “a hometown that served him better as a punch line in his act than as a haven in his life,” Saul says.

While place itself is often central to the biographer's task of teasing out the real-world forces that shape a subject's life story, for Saul, Pryor's hometown became critical. “I wanted to understand how Pryor and his family experienced Peoria with a historical perspective,” Saul says.

“What was it like to grow up black in the city? What was the history of segregation, desegregation and vice? What did it mean to operate in a red light-district world like his grandmother did? I ended up with this massive box of research materials,” everything from Pryor's school records and his parents' divorce papers (documenting repeated abuse) to coverage of the black community center where the budding comic first took the stage, Pryor's Army file and early draft screenplays.

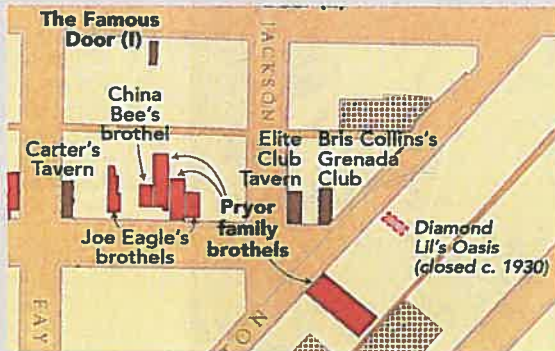
**Giving public access**

Unlike most authors who typically wade through their primary



Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

Zephyr Frank (left) and Erik Steiner check out a digital rendering of Jasper Ridge at the Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis. The center has prepared an interactive website on Richard Pryor's formative years.



same year the National Endowment for the Humanities established its Office of Digital Humanities, which funds more than 50 digital projects every year, according to Marc Ruppel, senior program manager for NEH Public Programs.

While digital humanities is increasingly popular among academics (Frank estimates that one-third of Stanford's history professors have at one point had a research project at CESTA), Saul's “Peoria” project represents a tilt in the burgeoning field toward less arcanelly academic, more publicly accessible projects.

“It makes the process of history feel very contemporary,” Frank says.

It's a noteworthy example of how digital tools can complement and enhance mainstream scholarship and biography in compelling ways.

**Popular history**

Slate recently named “Pryor's Peoria” one of the top five digital history projects of 2014.

“Biography is by far the most popular mode of history,” says Saul, “so a project like this can potentially bring a lot more people to the task of thinking for themselves as historians, connecting the dots.

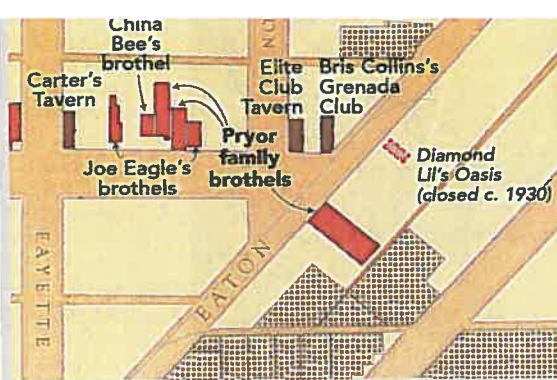
to coverage of the black community center where the budding comic first took the stage, Pryor's Army file and early draft screenplays.

### Giving public access

Unlike most authors who typically wade through their primary sources in private, distilling choice artifacts of their subject's life into a coherent narrative, Saul took the unusual next step of making the archival riches themselves — his documentary “eureka” moments — available to the public.

The result is “Richard Pryor's Peoria” ([www.becomingrichardpryor.com](http://www.becomingrichardpryor.com)), an interactive and visually rich website developed by Stanford's Spatial History Project and Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis, known as CESTA, which is a unique digital companion to the book. Saul spent a year on hiatus from teaching to focus on the book project as a 2010-11 fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center.

More than 200 documents, photos, audio tracks, newspaper clippings and custom-made maps serve to “open up



Stanford Spatial History Project

the biographer's workshop and invite everybody in,” Saul said in a recent interview with the site's lead designer/engineers in the lively CESTA offices off Stanford's main quad.

A pioneering interdisciplinary lab with researchers and students drawn from more than a dozen disciplines, CESTA is at the forefront of the growing field of digital humanities — the robust intersection of technology and humanist scholarship. Scholars at CESTA, and at least 90 other U.S. universities with digital humanities labs, are using advanced digital technologies — mapping, data-mining, creative data visualization — to

better analyze their research findings and deepen their storytelling capabilities.

### Insight through data

“If I could simplify the big idea of this place, it's how do we use data and design to create new insights, maybe even invent some ways of thinking that make an impact in fields ranging from history and English to geography, anthropology and classics?” says Erik Steiner, the Spatial History Project's creative director. “We're part maker community, part startup and two parts academia.”

A geographer specializing in cartography and information design,

Steiner led a team of student researchers in creating the “Pryor's Peoria” site, including devising maps that clarify visually the complicated block-by-block racial divisions of Pryor's birthplace.

“A place is never frozen in time. Urban tapstries are always changing,” says CESTA director Zephyr Frank. “In this case, we're looking at Peoria not just through the biography of one person, but we're seeing the geography of the place change over time.”

“Big data has been at home in the humanities for some time, but Scott's (Pryor) project is the first time we've had the opportunity to do a



Paul Chlenn / The Chronicle

The interactive website features such Pryor artifacts as his report cards and family photos, above, as well as a map of his birthplace, left.

multimedia representation of a combination of social history, biography and old-fashioned storytelling.”

Frank oversees a group of about 100 researchers at CESTA working on such historical deep dives as: creating an “emotional map” of London by analyzing the language associated with the metropolis' place names in 18th and 19th century novels, researching the poorly understood lives of the Chinese migrant workers who built the Transcontinental Railroad, reconstructing a site-specific history of California's open-space conservation efforts, and a photographic and cartographic exploration of the history of the Grand Canyon called “Enchanting the Desert.”

The Spatial History Project was begun at Stanford in 2007, the

top five digital history projects of 2014.

“Biography is by far the most popular mode of history,” says Saul, “so a project like this can potentially bring a lot more people to the task of thinking for themselves as historians, connecting the dots. They'll see (Pryor's) report card is here.

“Why is it noteworthy? Well, it shows a comedic genius with unconventional talents who struggled through conventional 1950s schooling. He was labeled ‘emotionally unstable’ at age 6 by his teacher. We can look at that through the lens of knowing that he'd later transform his emotional instability into unbelievably compelling art.”

Saul, as well as CESTA's Frank and Steiner, hope “Richard Pryor's Peoria” will serve not only as an entry point for people to learn about Pryor, urban history and African American history, but that it is potentially a new “public-facing model” of an expertly curated site that roots an important cultural figure in historical place. “Think Langston Hughes' Harlem, or Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia,” Saul says.

Jessica Zack is a freelance writer.

THIS VALENTINE'S DAY  
GIVE THE GIFT OF FILM

## THE BROADMOOR

“STAY CONNECTED TO THE LIFE YOU LOVE”



- Distinguished Independent Senior Living
- Great Location
- Family Owned and Operated
- Beautifully Appointed Affordable Units
- Fine Dining Experience

## PUZZLE ANSWERS

### Crossword Puzzle

L	A	G	L	O	G	O	F	F	C	A	L	M
T	R	A	A	M	O	R	A	L	A	V	I	A
B	E	R	R	I	E	S	E	R	E	F	O	N
R	E	Y	E	S	E	B	B	T	I	D	E	
A	L	B	A	H	A	R	R	I	C	A	R	A
U	P	T	A	K	E	S	E	N				
A	B	S	O	R	I	N	G	S	T	A	Y	
R	O	E	W	I	S	E	M	E	N	O	W	E
K	A	Y	O	S	W	A	N	S	N	E	T	
R	A	S	A	A	R	W	A	Y				
B	U	D	D	I	H	O	L	L	I	N	D	A
I	S	E	E	N	O	W	I	N	U	R	E	
T	U	N	A	A	N	D	Y	R	O	O	N	E
T	A	I	L	T	U	N	E	I	N	G	N	O
E	L	M	S	P	A	S	M	S	Y	A	P	

### Sudoku Puzzle

### Today's Crossword

F	A	T	U	G	L	A	D	S	Q	U	I	P
O	M	A	N	R	I	V	E	T	U	R	D	U
G	O	L	D	E	A	G	E	R	A	G	E	S
G	R	E	E	N	E	R	E	F	R	E	S	H
R	O	D	W	I	T							
A	B	E	T	S	K	E	A	O	Z	A	R	K
L	E	N	O	A	N	S	W	E	R	G	E	O
B	L	O	W	S	H	O	T	A	N	D	C	O
E	E	K	T	A	T	E	R	S	A	R	I	A
E	M	I	L	E	S	S	E	T	R	A	C	K
A	L	E	A	R	E							
R	E	S	P	E	C	T	P	R	U	D	E	N
Y	I	P	S	O	R	B	I	T	F	R	E	E
E	R	I	E	L	I	O	N	S	O	G	R	E
S	E	N	D	E	M	P	T	I	E	R	O	O

### Challenger Chess