

Chicago Tribune

ON THE TOWN

SWORD OF POWER

Sword-swallowing burlesque? Only from Chicago's **Sally Marvel**

By JESSI ROTT | Chicago Tribune

A sword plunging almost 20 inches down your throat to the bottom of your stomach feels as gentle as running the back of your hand down your arm.

It's true. So says sideshow artist, and Chicago's only active sword-swallowing burlesque performer Sally Marvel. And *please*, take her word for it.

"Sword-swallowing, along that line, is not like riding a bike where once you know how to do it, you can always do it," Marvel says during an interview at the Logan Theatre.

"I would equate it more to weightlifting. You can know how to lift 200 or 300 pounds, but not be able to do it. I can tell you how to swallow a sword exactly, but your body would not allow it because it hasn't been trained to accept it. You have to keep training."

As of 2017, the Sword Swallowers Association International (of which she is a member) counts 126 active, verified sword swallows worldwide. Of them, fewer than 30 percent identify as female — and of the three active members with a side of Vegas showgirl, Marvel alternates be-

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Sword swallower Sally Marvel poses in the lounge at the Logan Theatre in Logan Square.

CHRIS WALKER/
CHICAGO TRIBUNE 2018

POP MUSIC PREVIEW

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

For Chicago band Oozing Wound and its view of the world, quite a lot

BY ALLISON STEWART
Chicago Tribune

Chicago thrash trio Oozing Wound specializes in darkly funny, complex, misanthropic songs about mostly awful people. On the group's new album, "High Anxiety," their targets include posturing male musicians (the subject of their new single, "Tween S---bag"), the Flat Earth Society, and astronauts.

Lead singer/guitarist Zack Weil works a day job at the Empty Bottle, where his band plays a Saturday night record release show, and where entitled musicians are not uncommon; his distaste for Flat Earthers explains itself. The band's long-running beef with astronauts (one of the new album's best tracks is titled "Die On Mars") is harder to explain. "I get in a lot of arguments about this," Weil says in a phone interview. "The flat earth stuff is kind of rooted in anti-Semitism, so on one level, I hate it for that. On another level, I think it's funny to say I hate NASA, because who hates NASA?"

Weil also talked about the brutal economics of life in an indie band, the brutal realities of the music industry in the era of #MeToo, and who "Tween S---bag" is really about. The following is an edited version of that conversation:

Q: How much can you tour?
A: Not very much. It's kind of a problem. I'm not a real fan of it, I'm a big homebody. I prefer to just be at home on the couch. (Drummer Kyle Reynolds) has a full-time job at Trader Joe's, and he can only take off so much time.

Q: Do you think about dropping everything and making it a full-time thing?
A: In one way it's a dream, right? When you're growing up you're like, all I want to do is make a living making music. It's been the driving force for so long, but at the same time it's like, I see bands constantly that are on the road 200 days a year. It gets grueling, and it drains a big part of the pleasure out of it. I guess if in some way it was a possibility we



EVAN JENKINS

Beloved local thrashers Oozing Wound (Zack Weil, from left, Kyle Reynolds, Kevin Cribbin) still hate poseurs, Flat Earthers, and astronauts.

When: 8:30 p.m. Saturday (doors)
Where: The Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western Ave.
Tickets: \$10 (21+); www.Eventbrite.com

would try and go for it, but honestly it's never been possible even in the slightest. We're in our thirties, we need to make a certain amount of money just to live every month.

Q: "Tween S---bag" is about somebody in particular. Can you spell it out?
A: When I was writing the lyrics I had one particular thing in mind, but my feelings toward it have spread. The band that I think of now every time I'm singing it is Julian Casablancas and the Voidz.

Q: I can imagine what it must like when Julian Casablancas comes to the Bottle.
A: Oh, yeah. Jules — that's what his manager calls him. It's this mentality of what people are aiming for. I don't even get what the goal is anymore. There's all

these bands that sound normal, or, like, mediocre, or not trying very hard to stand out. It's like, what's the point? MTV's not a goal. Even the most famous people I know often have day jobs. Every successful musician I know is broke. Why wouldn't you just be as weird as possible?

Q: Do you ever find yourself getting into rock star posturing, and check yourself?
A: No. I don't think we've ever been a threat on this level. It would be great if it ever got to a level of success that we made some money back on it. Being in a band is a huge, huge time and money commitment. It only costs us more every time we put out a record. You go in debt every time, and you hope that every record is slightly more successful, because there are more costs to cover. ... We never have any time in the studio, because we're broke as hell and nobody gives us enough money. When you hear about Queen being in the studio for eight months, it's the most infuriating thing to hear. All that time and money that they had? I would love just a piece of that.

Q: You've been vocal about how men in bands should behave better. Do you see things changing in your world? There's still not a lot of women, right?

A: In heavy music in general, it's always been kind of limited. I just don't get the Boys Club mentality, it's so stupid. At the Bottle, any time we have a show where there's comments of sexual assault, or somebody told us they've been assaulted by somebody, we've gotten rid of the show. Everyone's very adamant that (it's) not OK.

Q: Why do you think rock hasn't had a #MeToo moment, like the movie industry did with Harvey Weinstein?
A: It's starting to. Ryan Adams is a good start. ... I don't know anyone who thought that guy was a good guy, and it's not too far of a stretch to see that someone who's (a jerk) to everyone they interact with, thinks that they're holier than thou, and (allegedly) gets the Strokes hooked on heroin — it's like, yeah, he's a bad dude. And go figure, he also sucks to women.

Q: Are you OK with this being the way things go (for your band)?
A: Yeah, I think so. The dream for me has never really changed. I've never wanted to be famous, I've never wanted to live my life on the road. All I've really wanted is for people to think that it was good, and not to get into that doldrums period, like, "Oh, they're still putting out albums, for some reason?" To make enough that it doesn't ruin our lives. That's pretty much all it is at this point. I just need to make enough so that when I take three weeks off from work, I don't screw myself for months. It's fascinating to me that anybody does that without outside help. I work as much as I can, and I pay for as much as I can, but my dad helps me. I couldn't do it without him helping me. These younger bands, it's like, where are you getting this money? You have to be funded by your parents.

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Burlesque

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tween two to three swords of various shapes and lased in Illinois, Marvel is one of two women.

For the last four years, she has been priming her craft — one of many picked up through various sideshow and vaudeville trades. Sword-swallowing burlesque, however, is her calling card. Employing a vintage, pinup aesthetic with a side of Vegas showgirl, Marvel alternates between two to three swords of various shapes and lengths during her act — all while shimmying and invoking the art of "the tease." After delicately guiding it to a certain point, she'll let a rapier blade drop freely down her throat, all while twirling bejeweled nipple tassels.

"I think because I do acts that are very visceral in nature and move people intestinally, and maybe emotionally, it becomes an experience they wouldn't necessarily get at another show," she says of her act — which she performs every Thursday during "Vaudeville," a showcase she also produces at prohibition-era style cocktail lounge Bordel with Chicago-based magician and host AJ Sacco.

In the three years since the establishment of "Vaudeville," being Sally Marvel has become a full-time gig. She's often booked for private gigs and has performed variants of her act at corporate and more family-friendly events. She tours with sideshows acts and often appears alongside many of the city's fiercest drag queens at clubs like Berlin — where she swallowed two swords at once during its ninth annual Lollapalooza Sideshow.

Because so few people practice it, sword swallowing is traditionally passed down through mentorship by an adoptive sideshow family. Marvel learned the mechanics behind the act from fellow performer Feli Fury, found Texas-based professional Bear Lee through SSAI's network and traveling, and linked up with a group of fellow lady practitioners from around the globe through

When: "Velvet" 10 p.m. Friday. "Vaudeville" 10 p.m. Thursdays
Where: Bordel, 1721 W. Division St.
Tickets: Free; www.sallymarvel.com

Facebook. Learning the standard Do's and Don't's — from the more obvious (don't force it; be aware of body posture) to less apparent (garlic and green tea in large amounts are blood thinners and can increase your risk of internal bruising) — by tapping into the small but dedicated community through the web has made the greatest impact on how she approaches her work.

But her transformation from martial arts practitioner, goth club regular and United States Navy intel-hopeful living in Madison, Wis., to nightlife persona "Shotgun Sally," to curator of vintage, visceral curiosity wasn't a fluke. Sally Marvel is the result of an intense commitment to challenging oneself and carving out space for "complete spectacle" to exist in the real world.

"My mother had been in the Navy when she was younger, so I was very inspired by her stories of traveling," Marvel explains further. "I thought, if I can't have this sweet job I want, I need to live my life like that — where I'm living it to the fullest and having these amazing experiences. This has allowed me to do that."

Through trial and error, Marvel pushed her mental and physical limitations to explore what she was capable of to make her act truly unique. Burlesque, something she picked up after moving to Chicago eight years ago, naturally came to mind. Not only to increase bookability, she says, but as a way to subvert the perception around both acts happening simultaneously.

"I can't remember if I took my bra off then swallowed the sword or swallowed the sword and then took my bra off," she laughs. "Anyway, I had figured out by this point that I could do little shimmies or bounce up and down to get the tassels to twirl by very gently going through these motions at home after I'd already gotten the sword down. But I realized I could recreate that on



CHRIS WALKER/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Chicago sword swallower and burlesque artist Sally Marvel is one of 50 female sword swallowers in the world.

stage. "My business model, in part, relies on sex appeal," Marvel confesses. "There is a very straight, white, heterosexual domination of burlesque consumption. I know all of my highest-paid bookings, that's who I'm supposed to be catering to. It can be difficult to be as inclusive and 'out there' as you want to be, but I think it does subvert the experience — especially when the swords aren't introduced at the start of the act. (Audiences) are like 'I thought it was just gonna be a burlesque act, now this cool s--- is happening.' "

She also argues that because of the cultural structure of commodification of women's bodies, her nudity helps alleviate some of the squirm-inducing intensity of your average sword swallowing performance — again giving her the unexpected upper hand.

"I was talking to male sword-swallowers who don't do burlesque — and I didn't know this was a thing until they told me —

but they were like 'Oh yeah, we swallowed swords; then keep swallowing them and it gets more and more intense. But then we notice people leave the room because it gets too intense and they can't handle it,' " she explains.

"I think when you're 'stripteasing' the act, the female nudity — the sexuality, I feel that already neutralizes a lot of emotions. Even if you don't know how you feel about the sword-swallowing, if it's a lot for them — there are boobs here."

Marvel has her share of hecklers and fans, who misconstrue the art of both sword swallowing and burlesque as explicitly hypersexualized — as opposed to a daring and empowering feat of mental and physical balance moonlighting as entertainment.

While men and women approach after her act to discuss whether or not certain bedroom skills would sufficiently prep them for sword swallowing training of their own, the performer

says even folks walking the line between offensive and genuinely curious are welcome — even if their definitions of "empowered" differ.

"But I think empowerment is something that we give ourselves and that the audience does not give us. ... Being a naked woman with a sword is always empowering, but also being able to know solidly 'Yes I can do this crazy thing on the spot, anytime I want and you can't. I'm gonna show you and it's gonna blow your mind.' "

"I'm into it," Marvel continues, "giving them the experience they didn't know they wanted. ... You want to challenge your audience and also shift their boundaries through that challenge — but you don't want to lose them. You're constantly straddling this, trying to make it work. You've got a lot of work to do and sometimes there's a lot of vomit on the way to victory."

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