

DC

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Center
For Dance

Black Concert Dance History 1932 - 2025



Jaylon Givan, Dissonance Dance Theatre

Written & Compiled by:
Shawn Short, MFA, PGC in Business

DC Black Concert Dance Report: Preserving a Legacy, Building a Future

Dear Readers, Arts Community, and Fellow Cultural Stewards,

It is with profound honor and deep responsibility that I present to you the DC Black Concert Dance History report, a comprehensive documentation of more than 80 years of Black concert dance excellence that has shaped the artistic fabric of our nation's capital. This inaugural report represents the culmination of extensive research, countless hours of archival investigation, and the generous sharing of memories from artists, educators, and cultural bearers who have sustained this vital tradition.

Starting in 2009, the project emerged from a moment of recognition and necessity. In 2019, as we launched Ngoma Center for Dance's Black Dance DMV Festival, it became clear that the rich history of Black concert dance in Washington, DC existed largely in the memories of its practitioners and the scattered archives of our community. The stories of pioneering artists, groundbreaking companies, and transformative educational institutions deserved more than oral tradition—they demanded scholarly documentation, preservation, and celebration.

Thanks to the generous support of the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, we embarked on this ambitious undertaking to create the first comprehensive historical record of Black concert dance in the District of Columbia. From the early pioneers of the 1930s who established the first studios on U Street to the contemporary artists who continue to push boundaries and create opportunities, this report captures the resilience, innovation, and artistry that have defined our community across generations.

As Founding Director of Ngoma Center for Dance and a lifelong advocate for equity in the arts, I have witnessed firsthand how the absence of documented history can diminish a community's sense of legacy and limit its vision for the future. Through rigorous research methodologies, extensive interviews, and careful analysis of available archival materials, we have worked to fill critical gaps in the historical record while honoring the voices and experiences of those who built this foundation.

This report serves multiple purposes: it is an academic resource for scholars and researchers, a source of pride and connection for community members, and a roadmap for policymakers and arts leaders seeking to understand the landscape of cultural equity in our city. Most importantly, it stands as a testament to the enduring power of Black artistic expression and the vital role it plays in Washington, DC's cultural identity.

What you hold in your hands represents only the first phase of a three-part research initiative. **Phase One** establishes the historical foundation and documents key figures, institutions, and movements from the 1930s through the present day. **Phase Two**, scheduled for completion in 2026, will expand our investigation to include detailed analysis of pedagogical approaches, economic impact studies, and contemporary challenges facing Black dance artists in the DMV region. **Phase Three** will focus on preservation strategies, community engagement initiatives, and policy recommendations for sustaining this artistic legacy into the future.

Throughout this research process, I have been continually moved by the generosity of spirit demonstrated by the artists, educators, and community leaders who shared their stories, opened their archives, and trusted us with their memories. Their contributions form the heart of this work, and their voices guide our understanding of not just what happened, but why it mattered and continues to matter today.

The DC Black Concert Dance Report arrives at a critical moment in our cultural history. As we navigate ongoing conversations about equity, representation, and cultural preservation, this documentation provides essential context and evidence of the profound contributions Black artists have made to our city's artistic landscape. It challenges us to move beyond tokenism toward genuine recognition, support, and investment in Black cultural institutions and practitioners.

To the young dancers reading this report: may you see in these pages not only where you come from, but possibilities for where you might go. To the educators and institutions: may this work inform your programming and inspire deeper engagement with this rich tradition. To the policymakers and funders: may these findings guide your decisions and resource allocation in ways that honor this legacy while building sustainable pathways for future artists.

As we continue this vital work of documentation and preservation, I invite you to join us in ensuring that the stories contained within these pages reach the audiences they deserve—and that the artists and institutions they celebrate receive the recognition and support necessary to continue their transformative work.

The history of Black concert dance in Washington, DC is not simply our past—it is our present, and it will shape our future. Through scholarship, advocacy, and community engagement, we can ensure that this legacy continues to flourish for generations to come.

With deep gratitude and unwavering commitment to this work,



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shawn Short'.

Shawn Short, MFA, PGC in Business
Founding Director, Ngoma Center for Dance
Principal Researcher and Author

Special acknowledgment to the dance faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee for their research methods education, the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities for their essential funding support, and to the countless artists, educators, and community members whose contributions made this research possible.

1930's



Black dance of Washington, D.C. originated in the 1930's. With many African-Americans living their lives as service men and women, factory workers, maids, and laborers, the arts were "out of reach" for most; a privilege for the educated and social elite. Image: Scurlock Photography Studios. Mrs. Bernice Hammond's Dancing Class (1938), Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History



During the 1930's of Washington, D.C., U Street's "Black Broadway" was in full effect. Dancer-celebrities like Pearl Primus graced the stages of U street's theatre house corridor. Additionally, dance clubs are created on Howard University's campus, which exposes students to modern dance. Image: unnamed dancers, c. 1930s. Scurlock Studio / Archives Center. Smithsonian Institution.

Bernice Hammond: Howard U Alumnae & Dance Pioneer



The Northeast Academy of Dance (NAD) founded in 1934^[1], became a mainstay for dancing Black youth and adults close to the H Street corridor. H Street was a busy African-American community main street of that time in the northeast corridor, while U Street was a prominent entertainment and social main street for African Americans in the northwest corridor. Mrs. Hammond learned classical ballet in the back room of a local dry cleaner; learning from the same Russian teacher as Washington Ballet's Founder Mary Day. Hammond created NAD's dance ensemble, Africana Americano, which performed throughout D.C.

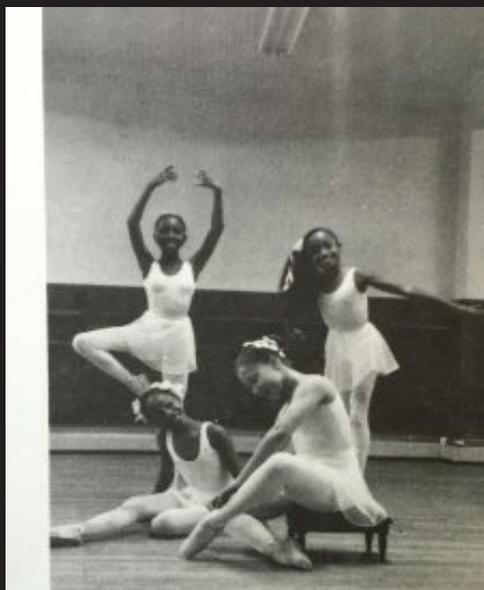
[1] "Washington, DC Dance Pioneer: Bernice Hammond." Personal interview. Apr.-May 2005.

The First D.C. Dance Business Was Black



Northeast Academy of Dance is the first dance entity to be registered as a business in Washington, DC; founded by Howard University' alumnae Bernice Hammond. Image: NAD on H Street NE /Shawn Short

1940's



The Jones & Haywood School of Ballet (Now the Jones and Haywood School of Dance) was founded in 1941[1], under the direction of Doris Jones and Claire Haywood, and eventually gained larger historical prominence in concert dance by becoming a 'dance-feeder institution' for Dance Theatre of Harlem and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. Image: Jones and Haywood students in pose. [1] Jones Haywood Dance School. Web. 28 Nov. 2011.

In 1961, the Capital Ballet was created which later became the first Black ballet company of Washington, D.C. The first attempt to establish the company in earlier years was unsuccessful. With the death of Claire Haywood, Doris Jones contacted American Ballet Theatre's first Black principal male dancer, Keith Lee (who was performing at the Kennedy Center of Performing Arts in DC) to be a guest teacher at the school. Image: Courtesy of JHSD Website/ Doris Jones and Claire Haywood.



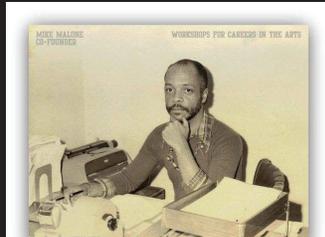
Eventually, Jones asked Lee to revive the company and become its new artistic director. He accepted and gathered 15 dancers in two months[1]. Some of these dancers included Hinton Battle, Charles Adams, and Sandra Fortune-Green (who was found by Bernice Hammond and brought to Doris Jones and Claire Haywood); Lynn Welters-Newman, a former student, departed from JHSD to create her own school New School of Dance.[2]

1968

DC Black Repertory Dance Company

The DC Black Repertory Dance Company (DCBRDC), under the direction of Louis Johnson and Mike Malone, had an impressive ensemble of dance professionals that would soon make their mark locally and internationally. Notable dancers of DC Black Repertory Dance Company were Kiki Sheppard (Apollo Theatre in Harlem, N.Y.), and Charles Auggins (Duke Ellington High School Dance Chair/DCBRDC ballet master, who directed and choreographed in London, England for over 20 years.

The company existed from 1968 to 1977[1]. Many DCBRDC dancers traveled abroad – making outside of the United States their home; others toured and returned back to the United States. Malone went on to co-found and develop Washington, D.C.'s first high school of the performing arts, Duke Ellington High School of the Performing Arts in 1974. Louis Johnson moved to New York to create his own dance company the Louis Johnson Dance Company and choreographed the film adaptation of The Wizard of OZ entitled The Wiz. [1] Malone, Mike. Personal interview. 01 April 2004



Mike Malone, Co-Founder of The DC Repertory Dance Company. Malone went on to co-found and develop Washington, D.C.'s first high school of the performing arts, Duke Ellington High School of the Performing Arts in 1974.



Louis Johnson, Co-Founder of The DC Repertory Dance Company. Louis Johnson moved to New York City to launch his own dance company the Louis Johnson Dance Company and choreographed the film adaptation of The Wizard of OZ entitled The Wiz with Quincy Jones.

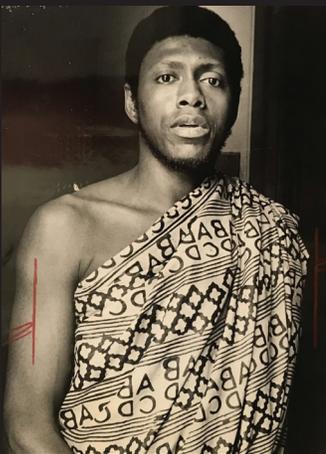
1970's



Mother Africa

The 1970s brought chants of “Black Love”, and a greater understanding and appreciation for Africa and African culture. Image: The Late Andrew Cacho (Husband of Bonito Cacho) of Andrew Cacho Drummers and Dancers “African dance influenced a greater sense in our blackness and who we were. We Danced Baby!” Tyrone Murray, the Founder of Rafiki Dance Theatre[1]. [1] “Dancing in The Dark: Black Concert Dance in Washington, D.C.; Tyrone Murray.” Personal interview. Feb.-Mar. 2010. Other African dance based companies (Circa 1970): Rafiki Dance Theatre under Tyrone Murray, Cacho Dance Theatre(1973) and Wose Dance Theatre (1974). Image: Andrew Cacho (above), Tyrone Murray (bottom)

Heritage Drummers & Dancers



Washington, D.C. native Baba Melvin Deal, the founder of the Heritage Drummers & Dancers, is one African dance pioneer who brought a mass appreciation of African dance and culture to southeast and northeast DC. A Howard University alumnus, Deal began his dance career at the Northeast Academy of Dance in 1959. Melvin, devoted his time and talents to the positive development of youth in the community. He founded the former African Heritage Center in 1973 (Housed on Minnesota Ave/Now Park 7 Apartments)[1]. His company Heritage Drummers & Dances trained many city youth and adults through their classes and provides them with a performance opportunity. Image: DC Humanities Council Video

[1] Baba Melvin Deal.1978

Rising from the ashes. In the 1980s, many talented African-American dancers in Washington, D.C., were lost to the onslaught of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Still, there were artists who made their marks in their respective genres of dance.

1980's

Memory of African Culture

The late Baba Diali Djimo Kouyate and his wife Akua Kouyate created their African organization Memory of African Culture in 1983. Baba Djimo and Akua wanted to give the Black community a taste of African culture through song, movement, art, clothes, language, and food. They wanted to provide the whole experience[1]. [1] Memory of African Culture INC DC. Web. 28 Nov. 2011.

DC Contemporary Dance Theatre



Founded in 1982 under the directorship of Japanese-American Miya Hisaka[1], DC Contemporary Dance Theatre was Washington, D.C.'s first multicultural dance company selected as cultural ambassadors by United States Information Service to represent the United States for a world tour for a decade. DCDT started with a group of dancers from New York City, Philadelphia, and Duke Ellington School of Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.[2].; notable artists include Tyrone Murray, Dewayne Murray, Vincent Williams, Lucy Bowen McCauley, Kevin Iega Jeff, Gene Sagon, Adrain Bolton, Elena Anderson, Lloyd Whitmore, and Kathy Smith. The company conducted performances at the Kennedy Center of the Performing Arts and overseas.



Adrain Bolton (Left) in rehearsal with dancers Danilo R., Maurice J., Antoine L. Shawn S.

Through their tenure and growth through performing and choreographing together, many artists went on to create companies of their own merit. Kevin Iega Jeff (Deeply Rooted (current)), Lucy Bowen McCauley (Bowen McCauley Dance (current), Adrain Bolton (Bolton Dance Company (closed) and Katherine Smith (Bolton/Smith (closed) created different venues to further the development of artists to grow in the Washington, D.C. area. Katherine Smith is now the Founding Director of Katherine Smith Contemporary Dance Ensemble. Image: Miya Hisaka/Website

[1] El Teatro De Danza Contemporanea De El Salvador. Web. 28 Nov. 2011.

[2] "Miya Hisaka Silva." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 11 Dec. 2012. Web. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miya_Hisaka_Silva>.

KanKouran West African Dance



KanKouran was formed in 1983, in Washington, DC, by Artistic Director Assane Konte and former Director of Music, Abdou Kounta, who grew up together in Dakar, Senegal. Kankouran has placed Washington, D.C., on the map through its energized performances and its founding and hosting of the annual West African Dance Conference that is held every fall in Washington, D.C. For over three decades, KanKouran West African Dance Company has been a force in the DC Dance community and across the United States. By providing classes in African dance and drumming to students of all ages, the company shares the history and culture of West Africa. Content and image: Founder Assane Konte web. 10 June 2019. < <http://kankouran.org/history/>>.

Tap's & Company



Tap emerges for the shadows. In the late 1980s, the resurgence of tap arrived with Toni Lombre's Tap's & Company (1989 – 2008)[1]. Lombre's students, Chloe and Maud, further their artistry and become nationally rank tap dancers (Sophisticated Ladies); founders of the DC Tap Festival. Image courtesy of DC Tap Festival. [1] Lombre, Toni. "Black Dance of Washington, DC." Telephone interview. Spring 2010.

Other Companies of the 1980's



Other dance companies (circa 1980): Jason Taylor Dance Theatre, Universal Experience, Cole Harrison Dancers and the Laverne Reed Dancers, Uhara Sasa Company, Ebony Impromptu, "Ajax" Joe Drayton (Co-Founder of Joe's Movement Emporium), and interracial duo Karen & Alvin. Image: Alvin Mayes and Karen Bernstein/Facebook

1990's

The 1990's : New Spaces and New Voices

In the 1990s, non-white dance spaces built in the 1970s gave life to more Black artists: Liz Lerman Dance Exchange in 1976, DC Wheel Productions, INC./Dance Place in 1978 (Carla Perlo & Deborah Riley), and Joy of Motion dance studio in 1976 (founded by Michelle Ava); all established by non-African-Americans. These spaces launched new Black dance artists into DC's dance scene.

Images of Cultural Artistry Inc



APRIL 12 & 13

Images of Cultural Artistry

In Africa, the drum is the great communicator, calling the community together when it is time to mourn and when it is time to rejoice. Images of Cultural Artistry, the company founded by Sherrill Berryman-Johnson over 10 years ago, attempts to capture this through dance. Based on the pioneering work of Katherine Dunham, ICA's style fuses traditional African and Caribbean movement with modern dance. "Women of the Hills... Treading the Waters of Cultural Terrains," the troupe's latest showcase, will feature six premieres as well as an international array of guest artists. Berryman-Johnson and playwright Sybil Roberts will present their collaboration *Song of Songoma...the Glass Dove*, a ritualistic piece that will soon be performed in South Africa. *Messengers of a Higher Calling* gives praise to guiding ancestral spirits, and *Release the Power* contrasts traditional values with those of the modern world. The titles of the pieces can be heady, but then again so can the intoxicating spirits of dance and the drum. At 8 p.m. Saturday & 7 p.m. Sunday at Dance Place, 3225 8th St. NE. \$12. (202) 269-1600. (Holly Bass)



Dr. Johnson was a choreographer, performer and artistic director for Images of Cultural Artistry Inc. (Circa 1990s), In The Spirit of...Performance Company. With extensive study at the Katherine Dunham Institute, East St. Louis Missouri and under the tutelage of Katherine Dunham and Pearl Reynolds peace and blessings be upon their souls, since 1982 she was given permission to perform works of Katherine Dunham as well as her choreography including the Katherine Dunham technique, ballet, modern dance forms, traditional dance of West Africa, the Caribbean and America. Dr. Sherrill Berryman (late) Johnson was the Founder/Artistic Director of the first HBCU B.F.A. Dance Program at Howard University in Washington, DC.

Katherine Smith Contemporary Dance Ensemble



Founding Director of the Katherine Smith Contemporary Dance Ensemble (Circa 1990's). Katherine Smith danced professionally with Dayton Contemporary Company, Forces of Nature, Gallman's Newark, New World and others, and toured nationally and internationally in George Faison's For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf; Debbie Allen's Soul Possessed, and Mike Malone's Black Nativity, Spirit, and Purlie Bessie's Blues. She has also performed in works by Donald McKayle, Ulysses Dove and Faye Snow, and been honored by the International Association of Blacks in Dance (IABD), of which she is a Board member. Smith formerly served as artistic co-director of the Adrain Bolton & Katherine Smith Dance Center and D.C. Explosion; artistic program manager for BodyMoves and artistic director of two Youth Ensembles and an Adult Repertory known as BodyMoves Contemporary Dance Company in Fort Washington, MD.

Source: <https://www.joneshaywooddanceschool.com/faculty>

Adrain Bolton Dance Company



A genius choreographer and passionate teacher (and different way to spell Adrian), Adrain Bolton is the former Founding Director of Adrain Bolton Dance Company and Co-Director of Bolton/Smith Dance Center. An alumnus of the Duke Ellington High School for the Arts, Bolton choreographed vivid and entertaining dance works throughout the Washington, D.C. area since the 1990's. He, like his longtime dance partner Katherine Smith, has touched the lives of many young Black students and professionals alike. He currently lives in Atlanta, Georgia. Image: Joe Movement Emporium

Step Afrika



Step Afrika, founded in 1994 by Brian Williams, is the first professional company in the world dedicated to the tradition of stepping^[1]. Based in Washington, D.C., the company serves as a cultural ambassador for the United States, representing the nation at events around the world through special invitations from American embassies. Step Afrika tours 50 cities annually during its American colleges and universities tour. The company is critically acclaimed for its efforts to promote an understanding of and appreciation for stepping and dance tradition's use as an educational tool for young people worldwide. Image: C. Brian Williams, founder and executive director of Step Afrika! (KK Ottesen/For The Washington Post)

[1] "Step Afrika! | We Step. We Tour. We Teach." Step Afrika! | We Step. We Tour. We Teach. N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.stepafrika.org/aboutus.htm>>.

Edgeworks



A native of Lafayette, Louisiana, Helanius J. Wilkins arrived in Washington, D.C., in 1995. Wilkins soon created a mixed raced dance company called Dimensions Dance Company that he dissolved in 2000^[1]. Two years later, Helanius created his present company Edgeworks - an all Black male dance company - that has performed nationally and internationally. Above Image: Men of Edgeworks (L to R) Unknown, Reggie Glass, Boris Willis, Helanius J. Wilkins, Reggie Cole) Below Image: Helanius, Unknown/Edgeworks Dance Theater



Wilkins had a vision for sharing his appreciation of dance as a form of expression for men, to bring an eclectic group of artists to work together on common ground to explore identity and masculinity. "The goal of this creative venture is to break down stereotypes about men, specifically from African- American perspectives" – Helanius J. Wilkins

Coyaba Dance Theater



Coyaba Dance Theater, founded in 1997 by Cincinnati native Sylvia Soumah^[1]. Sylvia arrived in Washington, D.C., in 1986 to focus her skills in modern dance under Carlo Perlo of (Carla & Company) where she was exposed to many choreographers, Lesa McLaughlin, Nancy Havlik, Debra Riley, and African American postmodern choreographer Alvin Mayes. In 1992, Sylvia began her extensive study of West African dance under the tutelage of Aidoo Holmes, Founder/Artistic Director of Wose Dance Theatre. Every two years Ms. Soumah hosts a two-week cultural dance and drum study tour to Dakar, Senegal, adding to the trans-continental sharing of culture started by Baba Djimo of Memory of African Culture. Coyaba performs around Washington, D.C. and through their school, The Coyaba Academy. Image: Coyaba Dancers/Dclibrary.org

[1] "Coyaba Dance Theater." Dance Place. N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.danceplace.org/coyaba-dance-theater/>>.

Tony Powell/Music & Movement



Dubbed, "a 21st Century Renaissance Man" by The Washington Post, Powell is a choreographer, composer, painter, sculptor, photographer, filmmaker, graphic designer, and writer. He is a 1995 graduate of The Juilliard School and directed his own dance company, Tony Powell/Music & Movement, for 10 years (1997-2007). Pulitzer Prize-winning, Washington Post, dance critic Alan Kriegsman proclaimed that Powell is, "a master of more artistic trades than one can shake a stick at...a fresh, brilliant, idealistic artist in our midst!"

A native Washingtonian, he has won numerous awards from the Maryland State Arts Council for his choreography, and his 4th String Quartet received the first-ever Metro DC Dance Award for Original Music. He has written three scores for the Internationally-renowned Parsons Dance Company, and he has created over 126 ballets for companies including The Joffrey Ballet, The Washington Ballet, Charleston Ballet Theatre, Baltimore Ballet, The Ailey School, PHILADANCO, Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago, Piel Morena Contemporary Dance, The Maryland Youth Ballet, Ballet Theatre of Maryland, The Manassas Dance Company, and Odyssey Dance Theater.

(Source: <https://tonypowell.wordpress.com/about-tony-powell-omni-arts/>)

Mason/Rhynes Productions (MRP)



Adding to the richness of modern dance, Gesel Mason comes to Washington, D.C. With her co-founder Cheles Rhynes, Mason incorporates Mason/Rhynes Productions (MRP) in 1998^[1]. The mission is to provide quality performing arts workshops, residencies, projects, and performances designed to challenge, enlighten and entertain diverse populations. MRP has assisted many minority dance artists in their development. MRP becomes the catalyst for presenting Gesel's dance works that range from comedic, Black narrative examination to feminists. Image: Mason performing Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's "Bent"/ Amitava Sarkar/Gesel Mason Performance Projects ^[1] "About Us." Mason/Rhynes Productions. N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.mason-rhynes.org/aboutus.php>>.

2000s

21st Century Black Concert Dance in Washington, D.C.

Contemporary dance emerges, and dance fusion of techniques became the norm in Washington, D.C. in the early 2000's.; artists launch their own journeys into new directorship: Lesole's Dance Project, Reflections Dance Company, Urban Artistry, Life, Rhythm, Move Project, Farafina Kan, and Dissonance Dance Theatre claim their place in the concert dance legacy. Young directors with diverse styles of interests.

Lesole's Dance Project



Lesole's Dance Project was founded by Lesole Z. Maine in 2003. Maine a native of Sebokeng, South Africa, a small township just outside of Johannesburg, moved to the United States in 2002. Lesole like many quickly started participating in performing arts projects. He created the Lesole's Dance Project^[1] (LDP) in 2003. The company creates and performs works that highlight the unique qualities of contemporary modern and Afro-fusion dance and provides educational residency programs on the movement and history of popular traditional South African dances such as Gumboots, Indlamu and Panstula. ^[1] "About Us." Lesole's Dance Project. N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.lesolesdanceproject.com/about.html>>.

Balafon West African Dance Ensemble



Under the direction of Kadiatou Conte, the mission of Balafon West African Dance Ensemble is to provide an insightful, woman-centered perspective on West African tradition and culture as a source of healing and balance by providing quality education and entertainment to audiences of all nationalities and walks of life; founded in 2001 as a non-profit organization. Source: <http://www.angelfire.com/on/balafon/html/kadiatou/index.html>

Washington Reflections Dance Company



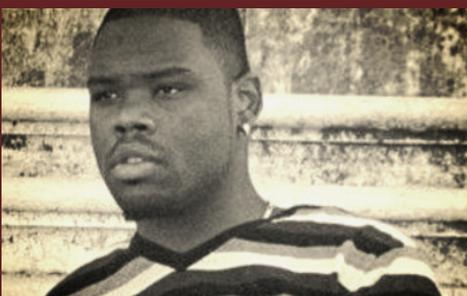
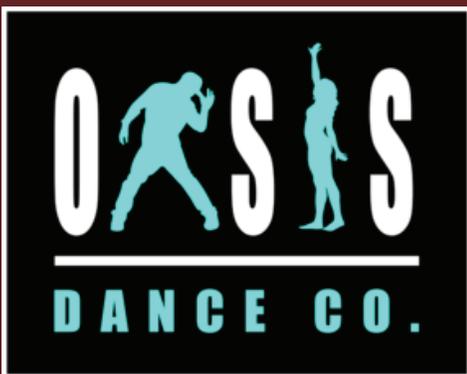
As the Founding Director of Dance Institute of Washington, Fabian Barnes developed Washington Reflections Dance Company in 2003[1]. Barnes wanted to provide a professional dance company to inspire his students; providing the opportunity to dance professionally in Washington, DC. Reflections performed the works of many notable minority choreographers, toured internationally, performed at the Kennedy Center of Performing Arts, Jacob's Pillow and the Theatre at Riverside Church in New York City. The company closed in 2009. Image: Fabian Barnes/ Dance Institute of Washington [1] "About DIW." Dance Institute of Washington. N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.danceinstitute.org/about-diw.html>>.

Urban Artistry



The emergence of a hip hop voice unfolds with Urban Artistry. Founded by Executive Director Junious "House" Brickhouse in 2005, Urban Artistry's core group consists of an international collective of artists, dancers, orators, designers, vocalist, musicians, photographers, and educators, who remain focused on the authentic and complete representation of urban dance genres[1]. These styles include (but are not limited to): b-boying/ b-girling, Popping, Locking, Hip-Hop, House dance, Waaking and Vogue. Image: Urban Artistry website [1] "About US." Urban Artistry. N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://urbanartistry.org/>>.

Oasis Dance Company/LGBT Owned



Dancers are welcome regardless of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, or religion. Founded in 2003 by Steven "Kahos" Wilson, the OASIS Dance Collective is a nonprofit located in the national capital region of Washington, DC, and Norwich, CT, committed to making dance a meaningful experience for all. OASIS combines all forms of dance to create an eclectic performance that captivates and rouses the senses of the audience. The collective participates in diverse performances, including local and national parades, talent competitions, television appearances, music videos, tours, and pep rallies. The dance collective's success reflects the commitment and enthusiasm of its members, and we use dance to build self-confidence and strength by encouraging open expression of emotions and allowing for collaboration with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. In doing so, our collective encourages the hard work and dedication that make outstanding dance performances possible.

Source: <http://www.oasisdanceco.org/homepage-.html>

Life, Rhythm, Move Project



A woman from St. Louis, MO named Aysha Upchurch. Aysha moved to Washington, D.C. to pursue her educational pursuits in international studies, international peace and conflict resolution at American University. Prior to American University, she studied with Hip-Hop and tap legends: Buster Brown, Diane Walker, Rennie Harris, and Mr. Wiggles. Upchurch locally performed with Joy of Motion's JAM Crew and DC Artistry before founding Life, Rhythm, Move Project (LRMP)[1] in 2006 to reflect her experience as a writer, educator and children's rights advocate. LRMP uses a mixture of various dance forms, including hip hop, tap and spoken word to fuse passion and education with artistry in addition to upholding the history and integrity of hip hop culture. Image: Aysha Upchurch/Hip Hop Education Center

[1] "Aysha Upchurch." Joy of Motion. N.p., n.d. Web. <http://www.joyofmotion.org/faculty/aysha_upchurch.htm>.

Sons & Daughters of D.C. African Dance

Reared from the traditions of African dance & drum elders of Memory of African Culture, KanKouran Dance Company, Sankofa Dance Theatre, Dono Drum and Dance Ensemble, Maimouna Keita West African Dance Company, and Wose Dance Theatre, the performers of Farafina Kan are born. Literally translates to Sound of Africa, Farafina Kan, which literally translates to "sound of Africa"[1], was founded in 2006 and is dedicated to maintaining the history and integrity of traditional African drumming and dancing. "We are eternally grateful to our parents for having the foresight to search for the traditions of our ancestors and the many elders who have and continue to pave the way for us to do what we do today" – Farafina Kan

[1] "About US." :: Farafina Kan :: N.p., n.d. Web. <http://www.farafinakan.com/about_farafinakan.html>.

Dissonance Dance Theatre



A young Black dancer during the decline of Washington, DC's Black dance golden age (1932 – 2000), Shawn Short represents one of the last African-American dance artists to study with notable Director Mr. Mike Malone (Fame – TV Show; Founding Director of Howard University's Musical Theatre Dept), and legendary D.C. dancers: Tyrone Murray, Assane Konte, Adrian Bolton, Katherine Smith, Sandra Fortune-Green, Adrian Vincent James, Fabian Barnes, and Miya Hisaka. Increasing D.C. dancer access to pursue contemporary ballet performance and artist development, Short founded Dissonance Dance Theatre (DDT) in 2007. Initially a laboratory for Short's choreographic progress, Dissonance Dance Theatre has become the artistic host institution for innovation in dance especially for artists of color. Since its inception, Short has created over 105 works for DDT. Under Short's leadership, DDT has developed artists that have launched careers performing locally, nationally and internationally; dancers have currently or formerly work at Complexions Contemporary Ballet, Virginia Ballet Theatre, Garth Fagan Dance, DV8 Physical Theatre, Elisa Monte Dance Company, Philadanco Dance Company, Deeply Rooted Dance Theatre, UniverSoul Circus, Washington Opera, Broadway musical and crew ship touring companies.

[1] "Dissonance Dance Theatre." Ngoma Center for Dance. N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.ngcfdtd.org>

2010s

The 2010's: Collaboration Remixed

Gentrification and new idealisms change the facade and feel of Washington, DC. Traditional D.C. Black dance companies begin to ebb and are replaced with multi-cultural creativity with Black artistic directors.

RawArts Dance Company



Founded in 2015 by Da'Shawn Rawl, RawArts Dance Company is a contemporary dance company based in the Washington D.C metro area. Its mission is to push dancers in a direction of nonstop growth and creativity; focusing on assisting dancers to step out of their comfort zones and find the source of their imagination. Source: <https://rawartsdance.wordpress.com/about>

Terre Dance Collective



Robert Rubama is the founder of Terre Dance Collective. Terre Dance Collective is a group of movement artists working to create emotionally engaging and physically compelling contemporary dance through collaboration. The collective was founded in July of 2017 and presents work in both the Washington D.C metro area and Cleveland, Ohio. Along with presenting in these locations, the group has also showcased work in New York City. Source: <https://terredance.wordpress.com/>

Tariq Darrell + The Unum Dance Collective



Tariq Darrell O'Meally, the Founder of Tariq Darrell + The Unum Dance Collective, is an artist searching for the power within introspection and vulnerability in the African American body, as a means to synthesize kinesthetic stories that will resonate in a way that is socially relevant, empathetic, and impactful. O'Meally is also Dance Place's 2017-18 New Releases Commissioned Artist and a 2018-19 Joe's Movement Emporium NextLOOK Artist. He pursues this work as the Creative Artistic Director of Tariq Darrell+the UNUM Dance Collective.

As a dancer & choreographer, O'Meally has worked and performed with Johnnie Cruise Mercer, the Red Project NYC, Ashani Dances, and others. He has presented his work at the John F. Kennedy Center, The Clarice Smith 34th & 35th Annual Choreographer's Showcase, Mid-Atlantic North Gala at the American College Dance Association and Richmond Dance Festival.

Source: <https://www.tariqdarell.com/about>

Project ChArma



Founded by husband and wife hip-hop duo Chris and Ama Law in 2017, Project ChArma is a collective of teaching artists, hip hop guardians, DMV representatives, parents, lovers, achievers, students and hip-hop ambassadors who promote social change through movement; pronounced "Karma" because it guides our lives. Source: <https://www.projectcharma.com/about-pc.h>

2020s

The 2020's: The Road Less Travel

The 2020s observed a drastic shift in traditional Black dance company entities. Due to political distress, and the new digital landscapes obsessed with social media, live theater takes a hit.

Black Leaves Dance Company



After returning home to Norwich for long-term dialysis care, Steven Wilson (Oasis Founder) began the process of fulfilling his life's dream: founding a modern ballet company whose mission meant everything to him. Premiering at the 2022 Intersections Festival at the Atlas Performing Arts Center in Washington DC, Black Leaves Dance Company is an all-Black, all-male, queer inclusive dance company specializing in modern ballet, highlighting the stories and perspectives of Black men in America. They explore themes related to identity and self-actualization: questions of masculinity, sexuality, religion, and race.

Source: <https://www.black-leaves.org/our-founder>

Textures Dance Theatre



Textures Dance Theatre's mission is to weave the rich tapestry of human experience into compelling dance narratives that inspire, educate, and connect our community. Founded in 2025 by Marcus Isaiah, Textures Dance Theatre becomes DC's latest Black modern dance company.

Source: <https://texturesdance.squarespace.com/about>





Youth Stand Tall: Black Dance Schools

The provided DC Black dance research focuses on the history of Black and Black-Managed dance companies, respectfully. However, many of these 20th century institutions fed dancers into these adult companies. These institutions include Therrell C. Smith School of Dance (1948), Davis Center (1969), Kelsey E. Collie Children's Theatre Experience (1973), Northeast Performing Arts Group (1979), DC Youth Ensemble (1983), Dance Institute of Washington (1987), Showbiz (Creative Dance Center (1989)), New School of Dance (Circa 1980), Knock On Wood Tap Studio (1994), Bolton/Smith School (2003), and the Ngoma School (2014). Image: The Ngoma School/Shawn Short

