

Memphis Flyer | Collage & Rebirth

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Rebirth Brass Band (Photo: Patrick May)

Alex Greene

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When Collage Dance started planning their third annual Memphis Dance Festival, set for Saturday, September 16th, they were thinking so big that planning began back before the second annual festival even commenced. The payoff? Having Collage’s professional touring company perform side by side with the renowned Rebirth Brass Band. While most touring companies, including the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, typically dance to prerecorded tracks, this special celebration — it’s also National Dance Day — calls for a unique collaboration where both music and dance can unfold in the moment. In bringing a group of such stature to Memphis for a free festival, Collage is signaling a commitment to both its art and the community in a major way.

As executive director Marcellus Harper explains, not just any live band would do. “We definitely sought them out. This has been two years in the making. Last year, we had the Hot 8 Brass Band, also from New Orleans, but I’m personally a big fan of Rebirth. [Artistic

Director] Kevin [Thomas] and I love New Orleans: the culture, the food, the music. And I remember seeing Rebirth at the Maple Leaf Bar. It was packed with the most diverse group of people I've ever seen and they were all vibing along. It's such an emotionally evocative music that it really makes you feel something."



Collage Dance Collective (Photo by Brittney Scales)

That's especially true for the upcoming Memphis Dance Festival appearance, which will culminate with the band and the Collage Dance Collective performing *New Second Line*, choreographer Camille A. Brown's response to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Dance fans may know the piece from a 2018 TED Conference performance available online (Brown was a TED Fellow), but even that relied partly on a prerecorded track. The Memphis staging will be all the more galvanizing for being completely live, and for being so familiar to the dancers.

"We've been performing this piece for almost eight years," says Harper. "It comes in and out of the repertoire, though the work was not created for our company. Camille is a pretty famous choreographer in the dance world. It's a piece I saw many years ago, and I just loved the combination of the music and the high-energy dancing. It really connected with the audience. And that's what we really are all about: finding ways to connect with audiences who might feel like dance is not for them, and really getting them excited about it."

The Rebirth Brass Band's command of nearly all eras and styles of African-American musical heritage, from New Orleans music to hip-hop, jazz, soul, and funk, dovetails neatly with Collage Dance's origin "in response to the ballet industry's lack of racial diversity on stage." As Harper points out, "So often in dance — and ballet, in particular — the themes, the stories, and the narratives have left many people out. I think that's part of the reason that dance audiences aren't diverse. People want to connect to what they see. And so with *New Second Line*, you have this great music and this really powerful story of resilience and navigating grief. It's especially relevant for African-American cultures and cultures of the African diaspora, and particularly in New Orleans. And even though the piece is inspired by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, you'll see a lot of celebration in it. The piece is actually very jubilant and very joyous. And it really complements that beautiful brass band sound."

Ultimately, hosting a festival with a free concert by one of the nation's premier jazz and funk groups is indicative of how far Collage has come since moving to Memphis in 2007. Lately, their years of work have paid off in the form of the new dance center, completed in 2020, being named a "Southern Cultural Treasure" by South Arts and the Ford Foundation, and, just last month, receiving a \$2 million dollar grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. All of the above will give plenty of cause for celebration at the festival, and not just by Collage dancers and students: Many dance groups will take the stage on September 16th, including Lil Buck. Noting the diverse lineup, Harper says that through the Memphis Dance Festival, "the community gets an opportunity to witness our city as both a music town and a dance town. With two of the largest dance companies in the nation right here in Memphis, it's outstanding to say dance has also created its home here."

The Memphis Dance Festival is at Collage Dance Center, Saturday, September 16th, noon-4 p.m.

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