

# Through Local Dance Companies, Memphis Puts Its Best Foot Forward

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photograph by ariel j. cobbert

If Memphis is the “Home of Blues, Soul, and Rock-and-Roll,” as the city’s official slogan boasts, it’s worth pointing out the unifying subtext behind all those musical forms: dance. Social bodily movement was intrinsic to the blues, soul, and rock-and-roll from their very origins.

Popular dance was not always celebrated in elite conservatories, focused as they have been on Western balletic tradition. But that began to change through the second half of the twentieth century as visionaries like Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey incorporated American folk forms into their choreography. Today, due to this city’s role as a crucible of popular music and dance, that merging of what were once thought of as “high” and “low” movement art is accelerating — and putting Memphis on the cutting edge of innovation in the dance world.

Crucially, this is happening in the context of professional dance companies, which have grown exponentially here in the past 20 years. That was underscored this August when a study by the [Dance Data Project](#) named Ballet Memphis and Collage Dance among the 50

largest dance companies in the country, with the former ranked at #32 and the latter at #46. Only one other Tennessee dance company, Nashville Ballet, made the list. These companies additionally have affiliated school that offer training opportunities for young dancers.

The rankings are based not on aesthetic criteria but on the size of the organizations' annual expenses (based on 2021 data). In future years, Collage Dance will likely rank even higher, thanks to the \$2 million Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant the school received this summer.



photograph by andrew parks

*Students training at the Collage Dance Conservatory.*

## Raising Community Consciousness

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Collage Dance, on the other hand, does not trade as heavily on the popular Christmas dance extravaganza, though the touring company does perform *The Nutcracker*. That's partly due to its provenance and the focus of its mission.

Founded as a performance company in 2006 by executive director Marcellus Harper and artistic director Kevin Thomas to remediate the ballet industry's lack of racial diversity, it was first based in New York, not Memphis. Their mission grew directly out of Thomas' ten years of experience as the principal dancer at the Dance Theatre of Harlem. They relocated here the next year and added the conservatory to the organization, sensing that dance was not only gaining momentum but had potential for growth in Memphis.

They were onto something. That same year, in 2007, a video emerged of Lil Buck mixing ballet and jookin' in a solo to Camille Saint-Saëns' "The Swan" for a New Ballet event in West Memphis. It went viral, helping to launch the dancer's career and raising the profile of Memphis dance as a whole. Meanwhile, Collage worked to find its footing locally, teaching in various host locations beginning in 2009, and attracting more students every year. And their professional company, officially known as Collage Dance Collective, was building its reputation and touring internationally.



photograph by david roseberry

*Collage Dance faculty member Danielle Pierce teaching tap to adult programming participants.*

Karen Nicely, Collage's community engagement programmer and faculty teacher, has worked with the organization from the start, and is not surprised by her company's rapid evolution into one of the South's leading companies and conservatories. "I have been with Collage every year and it's been amazing to see. It's grown because of the mission that the guys have: to expand access and quality training to even more communities and especially underserved communities."

The culmination of that came in 2020 when, despite months of quarantine, Collage raised \$11 million to build a dedicated dance center of its own.

Befitting the group's mission, it's in the heart of Binghampton, at Sam Cooper Blvd. and Tillman. "The directors really wanted to be in a community that needed more growth and development," says Nicely. "And Binghampton is one of those areas of Memphis that is often kind of forgotten. It has lower-income families, and not as many resources as other communities in Memphis. So the choice of location was made with that in mind."

With its walls angled skyward, the center stands as a beacon in the neighborhood, not least because its wide windows open its dance classes to the community. More than just a visual effect, it represents how Collage is coming to function in the city's wider dance scene.

"Music and dance are inextricably connected," he says. "We need music to create dance and music makes all of us want to move, and our city is both a music town and a dance town. With some of the largest dance companies in the nation right here in Memphis, it's outstanding to say dance has created its home here." — Marcellus Harper

When Lil Buck began rehearsals for his *Memphis Jookin'* production, it was in Collage's new building, his dancers on full display to passersby. It's also an inspiring site for the public events Collage sponsors, such as this September's Memphis Dance Festival.

The free event was a day-long celebration of dance featuring performances by Lil Buck, artists from New York City Ballet, SOLE Defined (from Washington, D.C.), Alonzo King LINES Ballet (from San Francisco), and the Nashville Ballet. Local companies were also featured, including Ballet Memphis, the Grizz Girls, Studio 413, Grind House Dance, Kindred Spirit, the Collage Youth Ensemble, and Company D, a dance company of young adults with Down syndrome.

The event's capstone, however, was the Collage Dance Collective's performance of Camille A. Brown's "New Second Line," a celebration of New Orleans and the perseverance of Black people after Hurricane Katrina, all to the live music of the internationally renowned Rebirth Brass Band.

The way Harper sees it, such danceable, accessible music is key to their mission. "The first time we did it, the combination of that music and the high-energy dancing just connected with the audience," he says. "And that's what we are all about: finding ways to connect with audiences who maybe feel like this is not for them, and really getting them excited about it."

He explains that part of that is really being strategic about the music that you use. "It's also about the story, the message. In dance — and ballet in particular — the themes and the stories have left many people out, or have not included diverse communities. That's part of the reason that dance audiences aren't diverse. People want to connect to what they see."

That also explains why Collage's annual showcase dance is not their take on *The Nutcracker*, but Kevin Thomas' "Rise," set to the final speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to be performed next year on February 2-4 during Black history month. As Shelby Smith wrote for *Choose901* upon seeing it earlier this year, "I'd been dancing for 22 years before I'd ever seen a ballet production with a majority-Black cast."

And, as Thomas told Smith, Collage also pursues gender inclusivity. "When we started the school in 2009, I was telling someone that my idea was to get boys into ballet," Thomas says. "They told me I was crazy — that I'd never get boys here from Memphis to do ballet, but it happened. ... When you see ballet and you say the word 'ballet,' right away the thought is female — which is funny, because when ballet was created 400 years ago, it was created for men. ... We are really educating people. Not just our dancers, but the community who is questioning why we dance in the first place."

Events like the Memphis Dance Festival, or the 34th annual International Conference and Festival of Blacks in Dance, which Collage will co-host on January 24-28, 2024, further that educational mission, but Collage's core activity is engaging people directly through classes. In addition to conservatory instruction, Nicely touts their Turning Pointe program, where "teachers from the conservatory go to schools in Memphis and surrounding areas and teach dance. We average about 13 active schools at any given time, but we have a roster of 20." But the outreach goes beyond kids. Collage's Continuum program is a collection of classes and programming focused on adult instruction.

The scope of such education, not to mention the Collective's busy touring schedule, is one reason Collage Dance was recently named a "Southern Cultural Treasure" by South Arts and the Ford Foundation. With the new building and last month's multi-year Mellon Foundation grant, Collage's star is clearly rising.

As Marcellus Harper explains, Collage's move to Memphis helped make that possible. "Music and dance are inextricably connected," he says. "We need music to create dance and music makes all of us want to move, and our city is both a music town and a dance town. With some of the largest dance companies in the nation right here in Memphis, it's outstanding to say dance has created its home here."