

'The Jazz Continuum' celebrates a century of Black American dance

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LaTasha Barnes, center, will present "The Jazz Continuum" at the 2023 Bates Dance Festival on July 21, 22 and 23. *Photo by Steven Pisano*

LaTasha Barnes doesn't use the word "show" to describe "The Jazz Continuum," the work she will bring to the Bates Dance Festival this month.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "The Jazz Continuum"

WHERE: Schaeffer Theatre, Bates College, 329 College St., Lewiston

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. July 21, 22 and 23

HOW MUCH: \$25 or \$5 (pay what you can)

INFO: batesdancefestival.org

WHAT ELSE: LaTasha Barnes and musical director Christopher McBride will participate in a free artist talk at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, July 18, at the Bates Dance Festival Tent. Gesel Mason, an artist in residence at the festival, will moderate a discussion about the history and contemporary resonance of jazz music and dance.

Barnes will also be at Concerts on the Quad at 6 p.m. July 20. During this series, guests learn a dance style for 30 minutes in an open-level session and then enjoy an hour of live music and dancing. The band that night will be the Zoot Jumpers, who are based in Maine and play hot jump blues and cool swing. This event is free and open to the public.

She describes it instead as “an offering.”

“To each other, and most importantly, to our ancestors,” explained Barnes.

“The Jazz Continuum” is a celebration of Black American dance. It traces the lineage of jazz from historic movements to modern ones over the course of a century. The dancers and musicians move through styles such as house, voguing, the Lindy Hop, hip-hop, hand dances, line dances and more.



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The result is not a timeline, but a thread.

“I’m not just taking a jazz step and a house step and a hip-hop step and putting them sequentially one right after they other,” said Barnes. “They are steps that are absolutely informative to one another.”



“The Jazz Continuum” is a celebration of Black American dance. *Photo by Steven Pisano*

This will be Barnes’ first time at the [Bates Dance Festival](#), which brings 300 students to the Lewiston college campus over five weeks every summer. There are intensive training programs for high schoolers and professionals, plus a day camp for local youth ages 6-17.

Shoni Currier, the festival’s director, saw “The Jazz Continuum” at the Joyce Theater in New York City and immediately wanted to bring the artists to Maine. (Barnes is nominated in the outstanding choreographer/creator category at the New York Dance and Performance Awards, also called The Bessies, which honor creative work presented in the city.)

“There’s all this history really baked into it, not in an academic way, not in a verbal way, but in a physical way,” said Currier. “You really get this opportunity to see these master technicians showing the history of jazz, showing street dance, showing all of these different styles within the genre. You learn so much just by watching.”

Barnes, 43, is a dancer, choreographer and educator. Originally from Richmond, Virginia, she grew up dancing at family gatherings and [has spoken in interviews](#) about learning steps from her grandmother that she would later recognize as the Lindy Hop. The dance originated in Harlem in the 1920s and ’30s and has since spread around the world. Barnes joined the U.S. Army and then found her career in dance as she transitioned out of the military in her 20s.

Barnes started competing in dance, and in 2011 won a major world competition in house, a dance style that originated in underground clubs in Chicago and New York. She started seeing connections between house and jazz, and she started researching the relationship between the styles. Her work brought her back to the Lindy Hop and connected her with elders such as Norma Miller, known as the “Queen of Swing.” Barnes learned from the practitioners who came before her and became a tradition-bearer of Black social dances. “The Jazz Continuum” celebrates the knowledge and movement of these elders.

“It’s a really powerful responsibility to carry artistically,” said Barnes.

Shakia Barron first attended the Bates Dance Festival as a student when she was 15, and has returned for many years as a student and now an instructor. Barron is a choreographer, performer and dance educator who teaches hip-hop and street styles at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. She said Barnes has been an inspiration to her and to her students, and Barron is pursuing grants to travel to West Africa for her own research as a result of Barnes’ encouragement.

“When I’m doing locking and popping and breaking, I’m diving deep into those histories in the ’60s and ’70s,” said Barron, 37. “She encouraged me to go even deeper than that.”

Watching Barnes dance, Barron said, is seeing her spiritual connection to her ancestors. She saw “The Jazz Continuum” in Boston (“I was rocking in my seat the whole entire time,” she said) and said she is thrilled to see the work come to Bates.

“I’m really excited that Bates Dance Festival is uplifting these forms that are usually underrepresented in the dance world,” said Barron. “I’m excited for the audience to enjoy the performance, but as they’re watching, become educated on what’s right in front of their eyes. There’s history on stage.”



LaTasha Barnes is a tradition-bearer of Black American social dances such as the Lindy Hop. *Photo by Steven Pisano*

As part of her exploration, Barnes completed a self-designed master's degree in ethnochoreology, Black studies and performance studies at New York University. Now, she splits her time between New York and Arizona, where she is on the faculty at the Arizona University School of Music, Dance & Theater. She is also involved in the Ladies of Hip-Hop Festival, the International Lindy Hop Championship, HellaBlackLindyHop, the Black Lindy Hoppers Fund, the Frankie Manning Foundation and the NEFER Global Movement Collective.

Carrying on the legacy of her forbearers feels especially important as Barnes looks back on her own journey. She did not realize when she was growing up, for example, that jazz was the underpinning influence of New Edition and the boy bands she loved growing up in the '80s. Now, she wants to see Black dance celebrated both in history and today. That's what "The Jazz Continuum" does with an all-Black, intergenerational cast of dancers and musicians.

"It's a love letter to our culture," she said.

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