

PILLOWNOTES

by Melanie George

The PillowNotes series comprises essays commissioned from our Scholars-in-Residence to provide audiences with a broader context for viewing dance.

“Your Favorite Dancer’s Favorite Dancer.” This is how LaTasha Barnes is referred to within the dance community. With a performance history that includes Caleb Teicher & Company, Dorrance Dance, Ephrat Asherie Dance, Ladies of Hip Hop, Passion Fruit Dance Company, and numerous wins in lindy hop, house dance, and hip hop battles, Barnes is as popular as she is versatile. After retiring from a career in the military at the rank of sergeant, she jumped feet first into her dance career, training with Junious Brickhouse’s Urban Artistry in Washington DC. The immersion in hip hop and house dance culture was a conduit to her study of lindy hop, and a rediscovery of the cellular memory of dances she learned from elders in her family. Barnes would go on to study with heavyweights from the pantheon of great vernacular jazz dancers of the early to mid-twentieth century. She is among the last generation to study with Frankie Manning and Norma Miller, among other luminaries, and carries the torch for the legacy through her work with The Frankie Manning Foundation and Black Lindy Hoppers Fund.

Concurrent to honing her skills as a performer, she also completed a graduate degree in ethnochoreology, with a focus on the aforementioned dance forms and the role and erasure of Blackness in their dissemination. Like so many artists working in African Diasporic forms originating in social dance environments, Barnes is more than performer. She is also a dance historian, archivist, community organizer, and activist. One must often take on these additional roles to effectively advocate for these dance forms. Jazz, and the resultant adjacent dances, are truly American art forms that, due to the confluence of Black American aesthetics and circumstance, could not have originated in any other country. The history of these forms can never be uncoupled from racism, appropriation, and marginalization. They are dance forms of resilience, innovation, celebration, and salvation—forms that are too rarely presented, funded, and promoted in the concert dance landscape.

As with all artistic endeavors coming from African diasporic sensibilities, Barnes’s work is grounded in collective community. The relationships you see on stage are not manufactured through choreography; they represent partnerships that are fundamental to the dancers and musicians working together. Forged in clubs and informal, impromptu gatherings, the performance is the manifestation of ‘the hang’ which can be equal in importance to the dancing. This is where bonds, artistic and familial, are formed. It is in these environments where individuals become

known for their distinctive stylistic signatures. What each collaborator brings to the group is highlighted, for their uniqueness is fundamental to identifying the work as jazz. Each performer and performance will be different every time. It is the amalgam of this individuality and variance that forms the work.

The Jazz Continuum is the title of Barnes’s debut production at Jacob’s Pillow. It could also be the informal designation of her life’s work. She is steeped in overlapping the movement vocabularies of dance forms that are often considered discreet from each other, but are actually demarcations in the lineage and evolution of Black American social dance. A study of the movement vocabulary clearly demonstrates that dance steps often reappear over time, with new names and stylistic modifications, but still originating from the same familial lineage. In the 1920s we had the Charleston; the 1960s gave us the Mashed Potato; in the 1980s we called it the Kid ‘N’ Play. Film of dancers such as Earl “Snake Hips” Tucker and many of the great flash tap dance acts of the 1930s and 40s show versions of dance movements we would later recognize as the bedrock of early hip hop movement. Each version was uniquely suited to the youth culture that identified it, while still having mechanics with a singular physical root. Accordingly, lindy hop and solo jazz, hip hop, and house dance are intertwined by their history. In the way jazz music led to rhythm & blues, which led to funk, hip hop and house, dance forms follow the same trajectory. Within each of those forms, communities steeped in the nuances of the culture arise.

The use of continuum in the title is important, as it asserts that these dance forms are not in hierarchy or relegated to a timeline. Though they come into prominence at different times in the twentieth century, vernacular jazz, hip hop, and house all have active global dance scenes in the present day. There is overlap between the hip hop and house communities, but there is not much cross pollination among those collectives and the contemporary lindy hop community. *The Jazz Continuum* is not only bridging gaps in our understanding of the relationships between these forms; by alternatively layering, fusing, and juxtaposing the movement, Barnes is weaving a new fabric in which the threads—be they historical or communal—are seamless, encouraging us to reframe the narratives we tell about these dances. In the words of author Octavia Butler, “There’s nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns.”

© 2021 Melanie George and Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival

Melanie George is the founder and director of Jazz Is... Dance Project and an Associate Curator and Scholar-In-Residence at Jacob’s Pillow.