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## Collective Soul: An Appreciation for Pan-African Dance in LA

By Rachel Levin

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**The Dance Collective and Resource Center once resonated with the sounds of thunderous *djembes* and bare feet slapping on hardwood floors and was the heartbeat of Degnan Boulevard in Leimert Park, an urban village shaped over by African American artists and merchants.**

Founded in 1992 by dance teachers and choreographers Pat Taylor, Nzingha Camara and Lady Walquer Vereen, the Dance Collective hosted a vibrant array of Pan-African dance companies and classes, including West African, Afro-Caribbean and American jazz. During its 13-year run, the center joined such cultural spaces as the World Stage, the Museum in Black and 5th Street Dick's coffeehouse in fashioning a sense of community pride in the wake of the 1992 riot.

At Camara's evening classes, students—up to 100 per night crammed into a too-small space—would gather to stomp, shimmy and sweat through folk dances from Senegal, Mali and Guinea set to live drumming. The audience spilled into the streets, chatting and gathering around vendors selling hot food. Students had to push through the crowd to get through the door.

“In Africa we have a place called the *bantaba*,” Camara says. “That’s where the drumming is held, where the celebrations are held. The Dance Collective was our *bantaba*.”

Yet just as the dispersal of West Africans during the slave trade resulted in a vast variety of African-inflected world dance, the closure of the Dance Collective in September 2005 created a diaspora of Pan-African dance artists in Los Angeles. Change arrived when new landlords purchased the retail buildings on Degnan and raised rents, displacing many artists and businesses. Then-councilman Bernard Parks initiated a plan to redevelop Leimert by adding mixed-use housing and commercial retail in the heart of the village. The rising rents, along with changing priorities, prompted the collective to pull the plug.

While grassroots groups are working to preserve the architecture of Leimert, it is a great deal more difficult to

preserve what Save Leimert Director Lark Galloway-Gilliam calls the “cultural integrity” of the area as well as the spirit that drew people to sacred spaces like the Dance Collective. After the center closed, Camara explains, “everybody ran in different little corners. The umbrella wasn’t there.”

She moved back to her hometown in Missouri, Vereen returned to New York to work on her one-woman show and Taylor brought her Jazz Antiqua Music & Dance Ensemble to Crossroads High School in Santa Monica. Other teachers relocated to the Lula Washington Dance Theatre on nearby Crenshaw, but many couldn’t sustain their classes.

Nearly two years later there are signs that the scattered energy of the Dance Collective may be gathering elsewhere in the city. A smattering of neighborhood studios, some new and some enduring, are honoring the legacy of the Collective by incorporating Pan-African classes. Camara has returned to LA to head the African dance department at the Debbie Allen Dance Academy. Taylor is optimistic that someone—maybe even she—will ultimately recreate the Collective’s magic by cultivating community synergy and keeping “these dance traditions at the forefront.”

In the meantime, the dancers continue to recover from their loss by simply keeping on with their craft.

“That’s the African contribution to world culture,” Camara says. “It heals.”

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