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Central Avenue Dance Ensemble

By *Jessica Koslow*, Posted 2/29/12

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Central Avenue remains synonymous with L.A.'s thriving jazz and rhythm and blues scene of the mid twentieth century.

Luminaries like Lionel Hampton and Charles Mingus defined the sounds emanating from the heart of the African-American community.

Enter Central Avenue Dance Ensemble, founded in 2003 by celebrated dancer Chester Whitmore.

"A long time ago we used to be inside of a church on 62nd and Normandie, and it had a giant ballroom in it. We used to do this thing called 'Swinging in the Hood' once a month, and do ballroom and swing with a live big band."

Chester Whitmore is a choreographer, instructor, historian and musician who has played with the Count Basie Orchestra. His company Black Ballet Jazz specialized in Afro-American vernacular dance and toured the world for 15 years.

"One of the amazing things about Chester is he's not just into teaching you dance steps, but also the history," said Central Avenue's Managing Director Ron Parker. "Where this happened? Who was involved?"

One of Central Avenue Dance Ensemble's proudest accomplishments is a revival of a two-hour, multimedia show, "The History of Black Dance in America." The first act opens in Africa and then journeys to the New World, and by the time the curtain closes we've seen dances from the early 1800s to the present day. Some of these dances include Walking the Dog in the early 1900s, Lindy Hop in the '30s, Big Apple in the '40s, Swing in the '50s and early '60s, and one of my favorites, Charleston in the 1920s.

Whitmore points to popular TV shows like "Dancing With the Stars" and "America's Best Dance Crew" for spurring a renewed interest in dance. "You have to have the new stuff, but they got to know where it comes from," he said. "We have to tell them about a foundation.."

Central Avenue Dance Ensemble performs for high schools, hosts workshops and residencies and offers classes and demonstrations.

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