

Cultural Daily

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The World Stage: 25 Years of Seeking Light Through Sound

Scott Doyle · Wednesday, August 20th, 2014

When you first stand outside the modest storefront of The World Stage Performance Gallery on Degnan Boulevard in Leimert Park Village, it might not look like the kind of place co-founded by one of the most important drummers in the history of jazz, Billy Higgins. The name itself might strike you as making a bit of a bold claim. The world? In here?

But almost immediately after stepping inside, and even before the music or the poetry has begun, you get a sense of history and warmth and home, and you're no longer surprised to hear some of the great jazz musicians who have played or led workshops there: Elvin Jones, Max Roach, Ron Carter, Kenny Burrell, Roy Hargrove, Billy Childs. Or the writers: Sonia Sanchez, Yusef Komunyakaa, and the late Wanda Coleman.

[embedvideo id="PkM0oNk7VrY" website="youtube"]

The World Stage was founded in 1989 by Higgins and poet Kamau Daáood, who had come of age as a writer while participating in the famed Watts Writers Workshop. Higgins was an LA native who had travelled east in the late 50's to play with Ornette Coleman, gone on to play on countless classic Blue Note recording sessions, ultimately settling back in Los Angeles and Leimert Park. The late 80's were a quiet time in Leimert Park Village, for decades an important hub of African-American culture in the city. The Brockman Gallery, for many years the anchor of the Village's cultural life, was getting ready to close. But Higgins and Daáood were determined to keep the flame of community arts alive in the neighborhood, and began hosting jam sessions and poetry readings.



Dwight Tribble

The first few years of The Stage were quiet as well. But in the wake of the unrest that followed the Rodney King verdict in 1992, Leimert Park Village suddenly took center stage in South LA as a safe haven and gathering spot for community, healing, and the arts. Together with Fifth Street Dick's, the coffee house and jazz club that opened a few years later, The World Stage became the hub of a revitalized Leimert Park arts scene. Often four or five venues offered live music on a given night. The streets were filled with people mingling, reading poetry, playing chess. It was the city's most diverse block party—a singular history captured in Jeannette Lindsay's fine documentary *Leimert Park* (for sale [online](#) or at [Eso-Won Books](#) across the street from The Stage).

Through good times and bad, The Stage has kept its doors open, hosting performances and

readings, workshops, jam sessions, and a Women's African Drum Circle. Leimert Park businesses and cultural establishments have struggled in recent years, but with the approval of a subway stop on the recently begun Crenshaw/LAX line, the Village is poised for a fresh renaissance. On its own, the subway stop might prove to be a mixed blessing: providing new visibility and access to an area that for many Angelenos remains an undiscovered gem, yet also leaving those who made the neighborhood what it is economically vulnerable. But through the [Leimert Park Village 20/20 Initiative](#), community leaders, artists, and entrepreneurs are taking steps to shape the area's future economic development around its unique cultural heritage. A monthly Art Walk and quarterly Music Caravan are among the ventures undertaken by the grassroots effort, which also recently submitted a proposal for an LA2050 Challenge Grant.



At a benefit concert this Sunday, August 24, 6pm at the Ford Amphitheater, The World Stage will be honoring co-founder Billy Higgins and building for the future. An all-star line-up includes renowned flutist Hubert Laws, saxophonist Bennie Maupin, rising stars Kamasi Washington and Ambrose Akinmusire, and vocalists Carmen Lundy, Patrice Rushen, and Dwight Trible (also the new Executive Director). Poets Kamau Daáood and Jaha Zainabu will perform as well.

Visit [The World Stage online](#) for more info and a link to the Ford's ticket page.

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