Cultural Daily

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Playing Music at The Watts Conservatory of Music

Mike Sonksen · Wednesday, July 30th, 2025

“A wise man once told me we say ‘playing music’ because the joy of music is about play,” declares bassist Norwood Fisher to a room of 11 aspiring music students from 7 to 17 on a mid-June Tuesday morning in a classroom at Verbum Dei Jesuit High School in Watts. ”Music serves the soul,” Norwood tells the onlooking youth. The native Angeleno Norwood is the co-founder of the legendary ska band Fishbone. Norwood’s telling stories after jamming Stevie Wonder’s “Superstition,” with three other equally adept musicians: Jane’s Addiction drummer Stephen Perkins, Delta Nove/Long Beach Dub All Stars guitarist Bobby Easton and Long Beach Dub All Stars bassist/keyboardist Ed Kampwirth.

Their impromptu jam opened the Watts Conservatory of Music, a program 10 years in the making. Though the team behind the Conservatory has done several one-off workshops with several Watts’ schools over the last decade, it wasn’t until Tuesday June 17th that the Conservatory’s held

consecutive lessons in the same space over a prolonged period. The 17th kicked off an 8-week class held from Tuesdays through Thursdays, from 11am to 2pm, at Verbum Dei (VERB). Offering bass, drums, guitar and piano lessons, there's an all-star cast of teaching artists including the legends above. To top it all off, it's all free.

Over the last month, I spent four days watching the program grow. Here's the origin story.

Founded by David Moss, Norwood Fisher, music educator Fernando Pullum and Michael Balzary aka Flea from the Red Hot Chili Peppers, the Conservatory's mission puts musical instruments in the hands of Watts youth while teaching and inspiring them musically. The genesis dates back to 2015. Though Flea is no longer involved, the Silverlake Conservatory of Music he started in 2001 is the template of what the Watts Conservatory aspires to.

Co-founder David Moss is the catalyst bringing it all together. His inspiration for starting the Conservatory emerged after he founded the Harold Robinson Foundation in 2009. They worked with every Watts' elementary school along with Markham Middle School. Their program took students up to Camp Ubuntu in the San Gabriel Mountains.

“Watts is a unique community with a storied history,” Moss states. “Four large housing projects on the four corners of Watts all being rivals is another important part of what drives me. I believe music heals and unites and ultimately I’d like to see a band made up of members from each of the four projects.” The four projects are Nickerson Gardens, Imperial Courts, Jordan Downs and Hacienda Village.

Though Watts is only 2 square miles, very few LA neighborhoods match its cultural, political and social history. The legacy of local giants stretches back a century with performers like Buddy Collette, Charles Mingus, Etta James, Don Cherry, Eric Dolphy and Barry White. Other icons from the area include the Watts Prophets, Wanda Coleman, Walter Mosley and LA’s first African American mayor, Tom Bradley.

Following the 1965 Watts Rebellion, a movement of artists, poets, musicians and filmmakers emerged called the Watts Renaissance. The pianist/founder of the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, Horace Tapscott was central in this. His orchestra’s guiding principle was to “pass the magic” of music to the next generation. Tapscott said, “art is contributive, not competitive.”

The Conservatory continues this exuberance. Norwood lived in Watts early on along 111th Street. Verbum Dei is on Central at 111th, down the street from where Norwood lived. One block south is

Nickerson Gardens, the birthplace of Top Dawg Entertainment, Kendrick Lamar and Jay Rock's record label. Kendrick grew up just south at Central and 137th.

The proximity of this greatness motivates Moss and Norwood. The Conservatory is searching for their own building in Watts. Their partnership with Verb works well now because the school's philosophy is about "being a man for and with others." Altruism and the power of education is an objective they both align with. The program continues at Verb until school starts in mid-August. Once the academic year begins classes are after school.

In addition to eventually having their own space, the Conservatory has other objectives. "Next for the program," Moss declares, "is to continue to slowly organically build and develop the program. Acquire more instruments, figure out how we can send the kids home with instruments, how to get to one on one lessons and do it efficiently. How can we partner with a local lunch program to help support nutrition for our kids? We want to hire more teachers, develop more relationships in the community to get the word out and make sure every kid in the community knows that if they so choose, they can learn how to play an instrument."

Future performances are being planned while developing relationships with local elementary schools to become a feeder program for neighborhood partnerships with the Housing Authority of

the City of Los Angeles (HACLA), the Community Safety Partnership team of the LAPD, the Children's Institute and other receptive nonprofits.

Before closing, let me share some incredible stories from Norwood and Stephen Perkins. Fishbone's roots began in middle school where Norwood met vocalist and the band's co-founder Angelo Moore. They were signed by 20. His tales touched on LA punk rock, seeing Ice T perform at Hamilton High in his junior year, meeting Jane's Addiction's lead singer Perry Farrell on Cahuenga in 1984 at a hot dog stand and how Jane's first two rehearsals were in his mom's living room. Jane's first show was opening for Fishbone. Norwood has stories.

He met Jane's drummer Stephen Perkins when Perkins was 17. Perkins is renowned as one of the world's best drummers. I watched him give drumsticks to 7 different kids. In between instructing, he spoke about his favorite Jane's song: "Then She Did," from *Ritual do lo Habitual*. I listened to it driving home. Perkins was right about the 8-minute tour de force.

Obviously the kids learning from Norwood and Perkins might not even know how accomplished either player is, but there's a palpable electricity powering student jam sessions which end each class showcasing the ongoing transfer of knowledge and energy. Passing the magic. Program director Bobby Easton says, "it's like creating this new garden where we get to plant all these seeds and cultivate it in the vision that we have, which is a welcoming, safe, creative space."

Both Easton and Norwood tell me that their teaching mixes the feeling behind music with theory. In other words, they share the joy along with the technical aspect. As Norwood says, music is fun and that's why it's "playing music."

17-year-old Jean Paul Guadamuz is a Verb senior from Compton learning guitar from Easton. He states, "My experience studying and learning at the Watts Conservatory has been prominent in my music journey. I have learned so much in such little time… The teachers are amazing musicians eager to teach us with their wisdom."

The Watts Conservatory of Music is just getting started. On August 21st at Downtown LA's Regent Theater, "The Butterfly Orchestra: 10 Year Anniversary of 'To Pimp A Butterfly'" will celebrate Kendrick Lamar's record—*To Pimp A Butterfly*—with a bevy of musicians paying homage to Lamar as an orchestra. Though Kendrick will NOT be there, many of the musicians on the original record are playing. The show's organizers have agreed to donate some of the proceeds to the Watts Conservatory of Music.

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