

Walker West preserves legacy of musical excellence

Written by Maya Beecham
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Walker West Music Academy

Music is alive on any given weekday afternoon in the modest building situated on the corner of Selby Avenue and Avon Street in the historic African American Rondo Community of Saint Paul. Children are keying chords on a grand piano, exercising vocal chords, or practicing an instrumental on horn. This is the location of the historic Walker West Music Academy, a 501c(3) non-profit community school of music, and one of the only African American arts organizations in the nation with a 20 plus year history, that is still in operation.

Over the years Walker West has produced decades of musical phenoms with international appeal, such as recording artists and musicians Larry Waddell and Stokely Williams of Mint Condition; jazz performing artist, songwriter and music teacher Paris Strother; and song writer, performer and recording artist Nikki Jean. Students and their parents come to Walker West in throngs because of its ability to produce skillful musicians; for the guidance and credibility of its dedicated founders the Rev. Carl Walker and Grant West; curriculum focused on music performance and instruction strongly influenced by the African American experience; and the commitment of accomplished staff. A portion of the school's mission reads as follows:

“Walker West Music Academy is a quality, well rounded community school of music as well as an outreach institution whose artistic purpose is committed to the recognition, education and celebration of diverse cultures through the study of their unique expression and contributions to the language of music.”

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It all started over 20 years ago when Walker approached West about the idea of joining forces to start a music school. They had many conversations about the idea, and one day Walker called West and said, "I have a building are you still interested." They started by renting the basement of a duplex on Hague Avenue in 1988, before moving into their current location at 777 Selby Avenue, which previously served as a restaurant. West said, "I think that it was a natural thing to do, to teach and open our music academy because playing music is really second nature, but it was first nature for both of us at the time."

The two joined their natural gifts and worked to give back to the community. Walker remembers the initial impetus for starting the school was to fill a void in the community. "There was a distinct need for young people to learn a skill in the arts rather than being in the streets. So, Grant and I decided to have students come together and after quite a bit of talking and discussion we started the school," he said.

West's goal is to inspire students from no skill to mastery of a skill. "My notion is that we can inspire a student to excellence, to teach the student a language because I think that music is certainly a language, and teach that language in a way that's very natural. And then moving from where you are to then some point that you can envision that you can. It's interesting when you show students something and they say it's hard, and then you say, 'yes, this is how you do something that's hard.' And you break it down for them so they conceptualize what's going on and then they began to tease out the part that is hard and then they are doing it. It's all about accomplishing something. I think it's important particularly for African-American kids, because a lot of life is skipped over because it's hard."

To date the school offers a robust program including Individual Instruction and Group Lessons in a variety of instruments, Performance oriented Ensembles (including the school's well known Jazz Ensemble), Summer Music Enrichment Programs, Jazz Workshops, Early Childhood Music Education, and After-School and In-School Music Education. One of the school's more recently developed programs is called Walker West Without Walls, where instructors make music education more accessible to all communities, by taking instruction outside of the school. This alleviates high transportation costs, and allows families with limited income to benefit from music education. Additionally, the school has a Scholarship Program endowed within the Pan African Community Endowment of the Saint Paul Foundation. Walker West has 8 full-time and part-time staff members, and a faculty of 26 music instructors.

Felix James, Walker West instructor and retired music teacher for St. Paul Public Schools, joined staff at Walker West shortly after its inception. He was riding his bike up the street contemplating a job situation within the school system, when, through the window, he saw Walker teaching a student. James walked in and asked when he could start teaching at the newly founded school. Shortly after James joined the Walker West staff he brought six students with him. James started the wind instruments program, and the jazz band program.

With an education and counseling background James often integrates all of his expertise for the betterment of his students, and he has taken particular notice of the disparities suffered by African American students. "Our kids sometimes develop a little slower because they aren't exposed to the lessons early enough. So we decided to use Central High School as a place

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where we are going to try and provide lessons to those kids who need it and to those students who we figure we can make a difference with; whether they develop to be great students of the instrument, or they just develop their minds.

“All these kids who pursue well-rounded music education end up doing great things with their lives and careers whether it’s in music or in life,” James further explained adding that music helps organize the brain at an early age. And this, he said, helps young people achieve personal victories with every lesson.

Sabrina Williams, First Lady of Mighty Fortress Ministries, experienced her own personal victory in the lives of her three children, ages 15, 12, and 8, who’ve been studying piano at Walker West for the last four years. “Our boys started off with no interest, zero interest, and they have been very much motivated. Their motivation has increased tremendously and they have really gained skills and ability. The quality of instruction that they receive shows Mr. Grant and Rev. Walker have worked really hard with our kids to motivate them and to teach them and it has paid off a lot,” said Williams.

There is a strong belief with the founders and instructors that their expertise is shared with students, in order to carry on the legacy of quality music education for generations to come.

Former Walker West student Paris Strother, expressed her appreciation for the instruction she received in a recent Walker West newsletter. “Walker West was great because to study tons of different styles, I didn’t have to leave the building! The understanding of different genres leads to a deeper appreciation of the diversity of the world.”

William Duncan, brother to famed Twin Cities jazz vocalist Debbie Duncan, began teaching at Walker West four and a half years ago when he arrived in the Twin Cities from Michigan. Duncan teaches voice, piano and organ. “I have witnessed some very intricate programs take place here; for example, there’s the summer enrichment program, where students learn five differentiated skills within a period of three weeks and then they perform a concert. Considering a lot of it is on the novice level, the knowledge that they get is very impacting because you don’t see a lot of that within schools around the country, and doing something of that magnitude,” he said.

Duncan said that he has been greatly impacted by the work of Walker and Grant West. “A lot of the influence they have has also impacted me. It made me recognize further our purpose is it to give back. As the Bible says to whom much is given, much is required. When you have something you have been blessed with you have to give back,” he said.

Peter Legget has spent the last four years giving back in evolving roles as the organization has needed him. He started off as a drum set instructor, and has continued to teach and has moved to more administrative roles. In 2009 he served as interim executive director and in 2010 took on the role permanently. As a musician, instructor, and staff member at Walker West, Leggett says he has, “a greater understanding and appreciation for what the school provides to the Rondo Community and St. Paul, and more people from Minneapolis are coming to the school for music education they can’t find.”

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He explained further that Walker West provides a community-oriented environment, and everybody --from students, to teachers, and parents—is recognizing that the lessons also serve as a creative outlet for students who are learning from a holistic approach.

West summed it up by saying, “at Walker West we teach the children, we don’t teach the music.”

For more information on programs offered at Walker West Music Academy visit www.walkerwestmusicacademy.org.