

Taking a Tour of Watts Towers for the First Time - Los Angeles Sentinel | Los Angeles Sentinel

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Starting the day with Yoruba ground blessings to all queen ensemble and ending with the jazz greats of the JMP All-Stars, the Watts Towers Art Drum and Jazz festival celebrates both musical greats and artistic mentors in a community known for its tenacity and genius. (PHOTO CREDIT BY WATTS ARTS CENTER)

I must say that I didn't know much about the Watts Towers other than its' role as back drop of an epic brawl against Nick Styles and Earl Talbot Blake in Denzel Washington and John Lithgow's 1991 crime thriller "Ricochet". However, I was quickly schooled to the real relevance of the Watts Towers' contribution to immigration history here in California. This past weekend, Saturday, September 30 and Sunday, October 1st, the Watts Towers Art Center campus celebrated over 30+ years in the community with their 36th annual A Day of the Drum and 41st Annual Simon Rodia Watts Tower Jazz Festival. Largely produced by the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and Friends of the Watts Towers Arts Center Campus, the two-day drum and jazz performances also included a wide array of arts exhibits and experiences from the Watts Arts Center. The festival displayed all the creativity and artistic mentorships that the Watts neighborhood has to offer, including children's and adult art activities taught by teachers like Howard Marshall. Marshall has taught at the Watts Towers for more than 20 years, creating mosaic necklaces with displayed images of jazz greats like Sarah Vaughn, Lena Horne, and Lady Day. But these weren't just basic arts classes; these came with historic references and stories of the hey-day of jazz. "Each picture tells a story and each story connects to us as a people," reveals Howard. "Use these images as inspiration and create your own work of art."



Alongside the "jazz great's" necklace activities, sat a long table where original small drums were handmade with noise-vibrating tubing and added strappings of black and brown leather in all hues and colored ribbon for pizzazz.

Next door to the homemade drum, sat one of the most popular tables, where artistic mosaics created of colorful broken tile crafted by veteran Watts's artist Carlos Spivey, known for his classes on mosaic masterpieces. Spivey has been an artist –in-residence at the Watts Tower Arts Center since 2010, where he hand-crafted the mosaic tile for the inner walls of the turtle pond inside the Arts Center Garden Studio. "You have to fill in all of the spaces and use as many colors [as]possible," instructs Carlos before laying in the dirt colored grout to formulate our mosaic stainless steel masterpieces. "Every piece is different and as beautiful as the person that made it."

The Watts Towers Arts Center celebrated the 46th Annual Simon Rodia Jazz Festival last Saturday, Sept 30 and Sunday, October 1 with vendors, performances and children's art activities for the entire community. Housed on the Watts Town Art Center campus, the two-day music festival included vendors and guided tours of the

infamous Watts Towers. (PHOTO CREDIT BY WATTS ARTS CENTER)



Several vendors aligned the main stage area were Yoruba ground-blessing drum greats opened up the day with libations and blessings to the ancestors. Lovely drum sets ensued from 12 noon until 4:30 p.m. with groups that included Nonosina Polynesian drummers with accompanying Tabatian dancers, celebrating over 50 years in the Watts community. Also performing the all Queen ensemble, Bate, Batuque-Bloco Obini, The Drum Apostles and an exciting West African drum troupe, Kouman Kele West and Rhythm Roulette, who performed to popular audience engagement. Saturday evening ended to a successful first day, as vendors packed up for day two of the festival.

The spirit of the festival on Sunday was all about growth and planting new seeds. Included in Sundays schedule was a tour of the Watts Tower and its relevance and tenacity, when telling the story of how Italian immigrant construction worker and tile mason, Sabato "Simon" Rodia built the towers with his bare hands; an undertaking that took him over 30 painstaking years to complete. "The infamous structure was created by Simon's own concoction of a type of concrete, wrapped with wire mesh," said a tour guide. "He built the structures with only his hands and his small tools with pieces of broken glass, pottery, mirror, even sea shell collected by local children." The Watts Towers are truly considered one of Southern California's most recognized works of art.

You couldn't attend the Watts Drum and Jazz festival without visiting Watts Arts Center, a facility that opened in 1970, built and staffed by the non-profit Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers. Opened for the committee, the center holds art classes, and displays contemporary art. It also houses the Garden Studio, a community garden that houses the turtle pond where turtles both big and small, young and old, call home. With plants and medicinal herbs available for purchase, the Garden Studio is both functional and an incredible habitat to two huge red-eared slider turtles, Shelly and Sheldon.

The festival wouldn't be complete without the smooth Jazz of Sunday afternoon; headlining such greats as Heaven, Dee Dee McNeil's Jazz band, Roy Gaines and his orchestra of Tuxedo Blues, Danny Cortez and Tony Harris band, Tai Chi Chuan, The Bennie Maupin, and the JMP All Stars featuring Patrice Rushen, Reggie Hamilton, and Justo Almaria who performed their greatest hits to an enthusiastic audience who were on their feet giving thunderous applause.