



A Fire Within: Festival 2025 Artists Bios

DANCE COMPANIES

Batuki is a San Francisco based group featuring Brazilian percussion, dance, electronic melodic instruments and vocals performing a fusion of Latin music ranging from such backgrounds as Afro-Caribbean, Hip Hop and Funk. The rhythms and dances of Batuki are expressed by high energy, complex polyrhythms and dynamic movements. Batuki is an artistic collective made up of teaching artists, cultural ambassadors and community workers. Inspired by the word Batuque, it served as ceremonial dance and drum circles for Black communities in Brazil. People came together to carry on the rhythms of resistance to fight against Black oppression. Batuki was formed in 2020 in response to the pandemic, holding outdoor rehearsals and free performances throughout the Bay Area. Batuki allows us to further fortify these relationships and make sure we as individuals, our culture and communities thrive.

Artistic Director **Daniela Garcia-Piedra** is a first generation Mexicana-Hondureña woman born and raised in San Francisco. Here Garcia was able to learn about traditional afro brazilian dance through local master teachers like Tania Santiago. One of her projects Batuki, is an artistic collective made up of people of color, teaching artists, and community ambassadors with a mission to build community through art and provide local artists with paid performances.

Music Director **Pedro Gomez** studied with masters Jorge Alabe, Gamo da Paz, Giovanni Hidalgo, John Santos, Malonga Casquelourd, Bongo Sidibe, Lalo Izquierdo, Baba Duru to name a few. Pedro has recorded and played with Jaguar Wright, Eric Roberson, Al B Sure, Bayonics, Bebe Zahara, and Olodum.

Under the artistic leadership of co-founder Deborah Vaughan, **Dimensions Dance Theater** at 52 is one of the oldest contemporary dance companies in the US. DDT has become widely recognized for its presentation of both traditional dances and contemporary choreography drawn from African, Jazz, and Modern dance idioms. DDT has garnered national and international acclaim for its performances, having traveled to Nigeria, Jordan, Germany, Zimbabwe, Cuba, and Canada and performed throughout the United States, at the Olympic Arts Festival, FESTAC and the National Black Arts Festival .DDT is well known for its cross cultural and issues-oriented collaborations, bridging cultural, racial and ethnic differences through the arts. The company's collaborators have included Hugh Masekela, the Edwin Hawkins Singers, Street Sounds, Cab Calloway, Chanticleer, Omar Sosa, Anthony Brown and Fifth Stream Music, John Santos, Lily Cai, Avotjcha Jiltoniro, Kamau Daaood, Tamika Lewis, Black Panthers, Linda Tillery, Khalil Shaheed/ Oaktown Jazz - Catalyst, Latanya d. Tigner, Jose Cheo Rojas, Makaya Kayos, Isaura Oliveira, MJ's Brass Boppers - Down The Congo Line, Marvin White, JooWan Kim, Colette Eloi and Tigner - The Town on Notice, Destiny Muhammad & Oaktown Jazz - When You See Something Do Something and many more.

Artistic Director **Deborah Brooks Vaughan** has been committed to producing, creating, performing, and teaching dance that reflects the historical experiences, struggles, achievements, and contemporary lives throughout the African Diaspora. Deborah founded Rites of Passage in 1993, a community-based dance

education program housed in the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts. Deborah's contributions to dance and to the community have been recognized by numerous commissions and awards, including three Choreographic Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and a Creative Artist Fellowship from the Oakland Cultural Arts Division. Other awards include two Isadora Duncan Awards, KQED Award for success in preserving African American culture through dance, San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival award for outstanding performance, Jerash Festival Award for Culture and Arts, a Lifetime Achievement Award from In Dance Magazine (2006), and a Sisters of Fire award in (2006). She received her M.A. in dance from Mills College. She has traveled and studied traditional dance and culture in Jamaica, Cuba, the Bahamas, Trinidad, Haiti, and West Africa.

Esteemed Guinea culture bearer and arts educator [Alseny Soumah](#) has performed professionally with Ballet Merveilles de Guinea and Les Ballet Africains under the direction of the late Kemoko Sano. During his tenure with both companies, he toured throughout Africa, Europe and eventually the United States where he resides today. Alseny is an integral part of the African Dance and Drum community in California where he now resides and teaches Guinea style dance and drum classes regularly at the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts in Oakland, throughout California and at various African dance and drum conferences and festivals throughout the U.S., Mexico and Canada.

[Herencia Guantanamera](#) is a company rooted in the cultural traditions and artistic heritage of Guantánamo, Cuba. It specializes in promoting authentic Cuban music, dance, and crafts, drawing inspiration from the region's rich Afro-Cuban folklore and history. The company is dedicated to preserving and sharing the legacy of traditional Cuban art forms while adapting them for modern audiences. Known for their high-quality products and performances, Herencia Guantanamera is a symbol of pride in Cuban culture and identity, appealing to both local and international markets.

Artistic Director **Royland Lobato** is originally from Guantánamo, Cuba, and is a founding member of the Havana-based dance company, 7 Potencias, an Afro-Cuban Folkloric dance and music ensemble. With over 20 years as a dance educator, Royland has been teaching Afro-Cuban and Cuban popular dance throughout the Bay Area. He is also an Artistic Director and Choreographer of several acclaimed dance companies. Royland has also participated as a principal dancer and instructor and is an invited guest in performances, workshops and classes throughout the greater Bay Area, Hawaii, New York, Cuba, and Mexico.

Music Director **Angel Mullen-Robert** learned traditional and popular Afro-Cuban, percussion, and song from master musicians and dancers while growing up in Guantánamo, Cuba. He is a respected lead vocalist, composer, arranger, percussionist and director of folkloric band of Afro-Cuban Yoruba, Abakua (Calabar), Rumba, Arará (Dahony), Palo (Congo), and Franco-Haitian music. He is also a lead vocalist for traditional dance music: Boleros, Son, Changui etc. Before coming to the United States in 2013, he had worked with Danza Libre of Guantánamo Cuba and Habana Sonlar Dance Company. During this time, Mullen-Robert performed in the UK, London, Spain, France, Italy and Portugal.

[Folklo Ayisyen Lakay](#), which translates in creole to “House of Haitian Folklore,” is a local Haitian dance company led by master dance teacher and choreographer Laurie Fleurentin, a native from Haiti. F.A.L not only enjoys performing but also seeks to bring sacred ceremonies to the stage. F.A.L is dedicated to sharing and performing Haitian folkloric dance with all communities for the purpose of connection and healing.

Artistic Director **Laurie Fleurentin** was born in Haiti and began dancing at the age of five at Academy of Ballet and Arts under the direction of Heileing Herzog. She studied traditional Haitian dance with Armande

J. Piard and Vivianne Gauthier, and received a Graduate diploma in Dance at L' ENARTS (Ecole Nationale des Arts) School of Arts in Haiti and is a trained vocalist in Haitian Folkloric traditional chants. Laurie became a professional dancer for Vivianne Gauthier Dance Company where she met Florencia Pierre and started dancing for Afoutayi Jaka. She has also performed at San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival with Eloi Movement and the Haitian Festival at San Francisco with Afoutay as well as choreographed and performed at Cubacaribe in San Francisco. Currently, Laurie Fleurentin teaches at San Francisco State University, Destiny Arts Center in Oakland, Dimensions Dance Theater in Oakland and The Beat in Berkeley.

Music Director **Shawn Myers** played in Leyla McCalla's Band touring across the world for over 6 years and performed with many national and international luminaries, including Evan Christopher, Nduduzo Makhathini, Ed Petersen, Dave Liebman and Kenny Werner. He studied drums and percussion with Billy Hart, Jamey Haddad, Damas "Fanfan" Louis, and in Haiti, Ghana, Togo, and Benin. Spending many of his formative years in New Orleans, Shawn connected with "Fanfan," a Haitian Master Drummer and Hougan, who eventually took Shawn to Haiti to be initiated into the Vodou Drumming Tradition.

Founded in 1969, [Los Lupeños de San José](#) is a trailblazer among Mexican folk dance companies in the U.S., committed to preserving and enriching the vibrant tapestry of Mexican culture through the art of dance. Guided by core values of artistry, education, and performance, Los Lupeños not only showcases the captivating beauty of traditional dances but also empowers individuals through accessible educational opportunities, nurturing a profound understanding and pride in Mexican heritage. Their vision is to inspire audiences worldwide, celebrating the dynamic and evolving spirit of Mexican folk culture.

Artistic Director **Samuel Cortez** is a prominent Mexican dance artist known for his contributions to folklórico dance in the U.S. He is an immigrant born in Guanajuato, México, where he started dancing as a child. Cortez has led and mentored several dance companies across the United States over the past three decades and his dedication to the arts has been recognized with numerous awards, including a recent Izzie Award for his remarkable work with Los Lupeños de San José.

[Rueda Con Ritmo](#), founded in San Francisco in 2007 by Sidney Weaverling and Ryan Mead, is a community of dancers offering classes, events, and performances throughout the Bay Area and beyond. In 2023, RCR performed as the opening act before concerts by Los Van Van and Havana D' Primera in SF, and in Cuba with the Conjunto Folclórico Nacional, Compañía All Stars, and the Rueda de los Fundadores.

Artistic Director **Sidney Weaverling** is a professional dancer, co-director and co-founder of Rueda Con Ritmo. Sidney has applied her unique aesthetic and skills as a director, choreographer, and costume designer to San Francisco's annual Carnaval parade, in which RCR won first place in the Caribbean category in two of the last three years. She continues to study dance in Cuba while leading RCR's Cuba Dance Trips and is devoted to maintaining traditional Cuban dance styles as well as contributing innovative moves and choreography of her own.

Ryan Mead is a professional dancer, co-director and co-founder of Rueda Con Ritmo. He has been teaching Cuban Salsa and Rueda de Casino since 2005, and he has become a sought-after instructor and performer at festivals and special workshops across the United States, and internationally in Cuba, Mexico, Canada, and New Zealand. Ryan is an alumnus of the New England Conservatory, where he studied jazz percussion, and Stanford, where he wrote his thesis on the clave rhythm. He has traveled to Cuba more than 20 times to study both dance and music -- since 2015 he has led Cuba Dance Trips with

Sidney, where in 2018 he performed with *Compañía All Stars* with the Grammy-winning *Septeto Santiaguero*. Ryan is also co-director, percussionist and vocalist with *Son Chévere*.

[Batey Tambó](#) is a Bay Area-based, women of color-led cultural group grounded in the centuries-old musical tradition of Afro-Indigenous Puerto Rican Bomba, directed by Denise Solis (Bombera de la Bahía) and Julia Caridad Cepeda (Julia Danse). Batey Tambó's mission is to facilitate a discussion through teaching and sharing space for bomba *Bateys* (communal spaces) that intervene discussion and practice on racial, gendered and geopolitical contexts by offering an opportunity for dialogue. Batey Tambo offers space for imagining more fluid roles in the tradition of Bomba in facilitating a Batey that is inclusive and open to all gender expressions and taking on the roles that speak to your soul regardless of gender, we value keeping alive the morals of the tradition of Bomba and learning it with humility and respect in honor of our cultural and life elders, ancestors and liberation.

Artistic Director **Julia Caridad Cepeda Martínez**, also known as Julia Danse, is the daughter of Bomba Master Jesús Cepeda Brenes and Sonia Martínez. Julia is the granddaughter of Puerto Rico's patriarch of Bomba and Plena, best known as El Roble Mayor, Don Rafael Cepeda & Caridad Brenes. The Cepeda Family has devoted themselves to the preservation of Puerto Rican folklore for many years. Julia is part of the sixth generation of Bomba practitioners in her family. Her father, Jesús, best known as El Tambor Mayor, is the director of the Rafael Cepeda Folkloric Cultural Foundation. Julia made her debut performance in 1981 at the Center for Fine Arts in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in collaboration with the Ballet of San Juan in a piece directed by the distinguished Ana Garcia. In 1982, Julia was featured in the documentary *El Patriarca (The Patriarch)*, which told the history and significance of Puerto Rican folkloric culture. In 1983, she traveled with her family to Washington DC where they were presented with the National Heritage Fellowship Award by the National Endowment for the Arts granted by the Smithsonian Institute. At that time, all of the members of the Cepeda family were given a certificate of recognition by President Ronald Reagan. In 1996, she was brought to New York to teach Bomba classes, She also helped found the Proyecto Dos Alas (Two Wings Project). In 2000, along with her family, she toured 25 U.S states presenting Bomba and Plena throughout. In 2013, Julia moved to the Bay Area and has since been teaching and directing Bomba Classes in the Bay Area with the project she co-founded, Taller Bombalele, and is the lead choreographer and co-director for Batey Tambo.

Music Director **Denise Solís** is based in the Bay Area and has been a student of the Bomba tradition for more than 20 years. She founded one of the first ever all-female bomba ensembles, *Las Bomberas de la Bahía*, in 2007. Denise also co-founded and co-led Taller Bombalele together with Julia Cepeda, a Bomba learning and performing community. She has been mentored for several years by *El Tambor Mayor* (the elder drum, respected lead drummer in the bomba tradition), Jesus Cepeda, of La Familia Cepeda in Puerto Rico. Denise is one of the first women to play the *subidor* (lead drum) in the tradition of bomba. She has performed as a *subidora* (lead drummer) with many renowned groups in California, Puerto Rico and the Diaspora, and has been teaching bomba percussion and song in the Bay Area since 2016. Denise is on a lifelong journey as a student of bomba, and is grateful to all her teachers and mentors who have contributed to her journey. She currently co-directs, Batey Tambo, a Bomba ensemble she founded, co-led by her and Julia Cepeda, they both continue to teach through their project and class community, Taller Bombalele with regular classes at Rhythmix Cultural Works in Alameda, CA.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Master Dance Class Teacher [Emilio Hernandez González](#) was born in Cuba and is a master dancer, choreographer and teacher. He was a dancer with Ibeyis de Merceditas Valdés and Bailarín de la Compañía Pinos Nuevos, a soloist with Ballet Folklorico Orisha Oko, and dancer and choreographer with

the famous Havana Folkloric dance company Raices Profundas. He received the 2016 Ramiro Guerra Prize for best interpretation of Folkloric dance and the prize of the 2019 Nacional de Coreografía de la Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba. He has also been a judge and teacher at international festivals in Ecuador, Chile, México, France and the US. He recently immigrated to Miami from Havana, Cuba and is teaching Afro-Cuban Folklore.

Cuba Caribe 2025 Honoree [Gladys “Bobi” Céspedes](#) has been at the forefront of representing Cuban music in the Bay Area and internationally for over 40 years. Bobi’s music integrates Cuban folkloric and modern elements in an authentic and distinctive sound. Her resonant voice and dynamic stage presence lead audiences on a journey from Yoruba incantations to the Cuban son. She can belt out a rumba or move you to tears through a heart wrenching rendition of a classic bolero. Along the way she shares her narratives of family life and love, and the wisdom of Afro Cuban fables. Always present is her *chambo*—that vibrant Cuban soul—creative and resilient.

A vocalist in the Cuban son tradition, composer, band leader and educator, Bobi first won international recognition as director and lead vocalist for the award winning Bay Area band, Conjunto Céspedes. With Conjunto Céspedes, Bobi forged a unique sound that did not easily fit the salsa music category. As the dynamic star of the band, she led the local Latin music scene in the 90’s and toured internationally. She took a break from the Conjunto to record and tour with Mickey Hart, but soon returned to her calling as band leader, and singer/songwriter, establishing a band under her own name, which she has led for nearly 20 years.

The original compositions in the band’s new release, *Mujer y Cantante*, feature her distinctive voice and unique approach to the fusion of *son*, Afro Cuban music and jazz in a sound that’s irresistibly danceable. Returning to her roots in the Cuban *son*, Bobi boldly claims her place as *woman and singer*, paying tribute to a rich familial and cultural legacy, and providing lessons in resilience along the way. “In *Mujer y Cantante* Bobi gifts us with a collection of songs deeply rooted in the Cuban countryside where she was born, and full of heart and wisdom that serve as a magic elixir to facilitate our own transcendence in hard times.” (Umi Vaughan, PhD., author of *Rebel Dance, Renegade Stance: Timba Music and Black Identify in Cuba*).

The band has two previous recordings: *Rezos* and *Patakín*. *Rezos*, a blend of Cuban son and electronic beats, included the track “Awoyo,” a composition featured in season 4 of the smash Showtime series *Dexter*. (Other film credits include Les Blank’s *Sworn to the Drum*, and Peter Bratt’s, *Follow Me Home*. Her recording with Conjunto Céspedes, *Na’ Ni Na’*, was on the soundtrack for the 2006 film *Half Nelson*).

Among her accomplishments, Bobi performed at the festival inaugurating the Smithsonian’s Museum of African American History and Culture in 2016, sharing the bill with such illustrious world music divas as Angélique Kidjo and Meshell Ndegeocello. Her sold out shows in tribute to Celia Cruz at the SF Jazz Festival were so popular she was asked to repeat the tribute two years later in another memorable sold out performance.

An offspring of a large Cuban musical family that kept alive African beliefs and practices, Bobi has been a leader and pivotal player in the thriving Afro-Cuban cultural scene in the Bay Area for nearly half a century. As an educator, performer and community elder, Bobi provides fresh ways for contemporary audiences to be touched by Cuban music and culture, furthering the legacy of such vocalists as Celina González, Celia Cruz, and Merceditas Valdés.

Lecture and Demo Artist, [DJ Jigüe \(aka Isnay Rodriguez Agramonte\)](#) is the creator of the production company Guámpara Music, Cuba's only independent multi-media production label. He has produced the award-winning record of the Santiago duo Golpe Seko, as well as his own album, *Metamorphosis*. The rich African, Caribbean and Cuban heritage, together with the popular slang and the sounds of the neighborhood, are the irreplaceable ingredients of his creations. A combination that they have called the "Guámpara Sound" is undoubtedly a touch of freshness and originality for Cuban Hip-Hop. With a mission statement to give exposure to Cuban urban music that consciously stays connected to its deep Cuban musical roots, Guámpara Music is one of a kind. There are currently five artists under the label representing urban music genres like reggae, dancehall and hip hop. DJ Jigüe is the solo DJ on the Guámpara roster, and he's made his mark on the music world by making experimental electronica music that weaves afro-cuban traditional rhythms and beats. He calls his style 'afrofuturismo tropical', and his signature cowboy hat makes him known as somewhat of an Afrofuturistic Space *Guajiro*. 2017 brought considerable professional success for Jigüe, as he performed in the international music fair WOMEX (World Music Expo) in Katowice, Poland, followed by a two-week European tour in Berlin, Vienna and Brussels and showcased at SXSW in Austin, Texas. He was featured in Vice's Thump, The Fader, Vice, Red Bull Panamérica and Remezcla, Jigüe is poised to be the Caribbean's next Kaytranada or Sango. In addition to an exploding music career, Isnay is also a talented filmmaker, having produced and directed several films alongside Puerto-Rican/American filmmaker Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi. Together they created the documentary *Bakosó*. DJ Jigüe has also been featured in several documentaries, Vice's three-part series, *SUBCULTURE*, on the electronic music scene in Cuba, as well as the Brownswood Records album and documentary in collaboration with internationally renowned DJ and producer *Gilles Peterson*. He has also been featured most recently in the CBC's award-winning *Interrupt This Program*, discussing the challenges of making music in Cuba today.

Lecture and Demo Drummer [Einar Leliebre Nuñez](#) has been a lead musician with the esteemed company Danza del Caribe in Santiago de Cuba since 2003. He also plays and sings with Obbatuke, Grupo Barracón (by Luca Brandoli), has collaborated with Oyu Oro (led by Danys "La Mora" Perez) in New York, Manana Cuba in Cuba, England, Spain and Scotland and many more. He has participated in many national festivals such as the Olorun Festival, the Romerías de Mayo, the Jornada de la Cultura Iberoamericana, as well as national tours. He can be invited or hired to perform (singing and percussion) for events and remotely, lead percussion sections, give individual or group instruction in song and drumming, mount music with musical groups and dance productions, and construct Bata drums by hand. He is versed in the Folkloric music of Cuba, Rumba, religious music, and experimental collaborations with electronic and jazz styles.

WEBSITE: <https://www.cubacaribe.org/2025>

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