

# KCRW

## Which Way, LA?

### Performances And Parades Celebrate LA's Skid Row

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Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles has a reputation. Homelessness, substance abuse, mental illness, and crime.



Los Angeles Poverty Department presents "Walk The Talk." Photo by Avishay Artsy.

But those who live and work in the neighborhood want people to see it as just that – a neighborhood.

On this three-day memorial weekend, parades and outdoor performances brought to life the people that make Skid Row a thriving community.

At San Julian Park in downtown Skid Row, it's common to hear the sounds of hip-hop blasting out of a boombox out of a grocery cart, while friends and neighbors greet each other. A less typical sound on these streets? A brass marching band.



Every couple blocks, the band stops and a group of residents act out a piece of Skid Row history. At the corner of Wall and Boyd Streets, for example, they stop to describe “Another Planet,” an outdoor cultural space. It flourished for a year, before burning down in 1989.

This program is called “Walk the Talk,” and it’s put on by the [Los Angeles Poverty Department](#). The other LAPD, as they jokingly call it.

“It’s really an epic history of the neighborhood, said John Malpede, who founded the performance art group in 1985. “People living in this neighborhood have a broad sense of how to embrace a broad variety of people. So it has a very sophisticated recovery sensibility.”

The marchers in the “Walk the Talk” parade hold signs featuring portraits of community leaders, painted by street artist Mr. Brainwash, the subject of the Oscar-nominated documentary “[Exit Through the Gift Shop](#).” One of the portraits features Wendell Blassingame. He created a series of free weekly film screenings called “[Movies on the Nickel](#).”



“People didn’t have nothing to do on the weekends, that I saw,” said Blassingame, “and people were just walking around.”

Robert Garcia, who has been living on the streets of Skid Row since 1991, says these types of history lessons are important because Los Angeles is a city that suffers from cultural amnesia.

“They’re always tearing down the old buildings and building new,” Garcia said. “So a lot of times the history gets lost in between those movements.”

One of the people watching the performance at San Julian Park is a boisterous, middle-aged black woman who seems to know everyone within hugging distance. Angelia Harper, affectionately known here as “Big Momma,” works with convicted felons and homeless people to help them find work and medical care, and says the LA Poverty Department plays a critical role in Skid Row.

“They connect more with the people,” said Harper. “It’s more than going in a door and seeing an office and getting the information. They come out here.”

And with that, Harper interrupted the interview to greet an old friend and ask for a cigarette. This is a community, after all.