By Austin Hines --- The Festival for All Skid Row Artists is getting bigger and better every year. The community really came together for this two-day art and music festival at Gladys Park that celebrates the artistry of Skid Row residents. Almost two weeks before the festival, the lineup was fully booked; bands were rehearsing for their performances, visual artists were choosing works to display and the crew of LA Poverty Department was ready to produce the 5th annual Festival. On Saturday, Oct. 18th at 1:00pm, festival veteran Gary Brown, a talented artist and musician with Lamp Fine Arts Program, which partners with LAPD each year hearsing for their performances, visual artists were choosing works to display and the crew of LA Poverty Department was ready to produce the 5th annual Festival. Gary was the first of over 90 performers who would take the stage that weekend, many who have performed year after year. The lineup included many different performance styles: poetry, gospel, hip-hop, rock, rap, reggae and folk to name a few. At times, the park even became a hotbed for drama. Dramastage Qum-ran, a Skid Row based theater company, performed their work “Nat’lheads,” a play about homelessness in L.A. The playwright, Melvin Ishmael Johnson, also helped to compile stories for another play that was being featured at the festival; “If The SHU Fits: Voices from Solitary Confinement,” a reading of stories from survivors of solitary confinement, performed by Rev. Sidonie Smith, Craig Walter, Paula Brooks, Sherri Walker and the festival’s renowned MC, Kevin Michael Key. Kevin Michael was especially excited to introduce fellow 12-stepper Abbey Williams an employee for the Weingart Center’s re-entry program. Abbey came to the festival to perform her rap, Recovery Twitch. “I write drug-free raps,” she said in an interview after her performance, “I write music about oppression, and recidivism.” Abbey combines her work and artistry into a powerful presentation of experience and skill.

In addition to the many performances, the park was filled with visual artists who were displaying their works. Myka Moon and Marvin Anderson, also with Lamp Fine Arts Program, displayed their artworks and did live easel painting. Myka talked about his work onstage (a new aspect of the event that highlights the visual artists). “I used to be miserable,” he said, “painting makes me happy and that’s why I do it.” He displayed a collage with paintings, drawings, and sketches made at the previous year’s festival.

Flo Hawkins also took the stage to speak about her work. Formerly addicted to drugs, homeless and living on the streets of Skid Row, Flo painted part of the mural that still exists on 5th and Crocker Streets. No longer homeless or addicted to drugs, Flo presented her pastel work, a stunningly precise portrait of Al Pacino, aptly named, Al Pacino. Flo was introduced to the crowd by Officer Rich who is famous in the Skid Row community for his kindness and canny ability to calm disturbances during his time working at the County Welfare Office. Officer Rich expressed his appreciation for Flo, whom he has known for almost 30 years, and held Al Pacino high up in his arms. After her presentation she proclaimed, “I was able to get off of these streets and you can, too!” Flo spent the rest of the day drawing portraits of people for free and Officer Rich volunteered, picking up whatever tasks needed to be done.

Both Flo Hawkins and Officer Rich have been honorees in Walk the Talk, LA Poverty Department’s biennial parade/performance that honors Skid Row visionaries and their initiatives. During the festival, an entire section of Gladys Park was dedicated to displaying Walk the Talk artwork. Portraits of the 44 honorees to date, including eight quilted works by artist Brian Dick and a banner with portraits of the original 36 honorees created by LA artist Mr. Brainwash, hung on the back wall of the park. Walk the Talk portraits were accompanied by short bios and festival attendees were able to, not only appreciate the current artistic vibrancy of Skid Row, but also learn about the history of the area and the people who have made positive change on Skid Row, some of whom were right there among the festivities. Other Walk the Talk honorees in attendance at the Festival for All Skid Row Artists included General Jeff, a Skid Row resident and activist responsible for the revitalization of Gladys Park; Manuel “OG” Comito, founder of OG’s n Service, a grass roots organization that cleaned up the streets of Skid Row (since the city was not doing it); the Founder of Skid Row Photography Club, Michael Blace, was there taking pictures (unfortunately, his photo printer stopped working so he was not able to print out pictures for people like he had done the year prior); and Charles Porter, poet and culture bearer and a longtime employee of United Coalition East Prevention Project (UCEPP), an alcohol and drug prevention program in the neighborhood. Charles performed with Adelene Bertha and DC of the UCEPP Youth Group.

It was truly a community event, a hub for the artists and residents to reconnect and appreciate each other’s talents. Artists who performed were given a t-shirt with the words “Skid Row Artists,” positioned under a group photo from last year’s event. The t-shirts were designed and printed as a donation by the Los Angeles based clothing company, Love Nail Tree. By Sunday evening, prior to the event closing, Gladys Park was packed with artists wearing those tees, a suitable way to distinguish the artists from the spectators.

The festival concluded with a spectacular performance by the LA Playmakers. A group of eleven rhythm and blues musicians, LA Playmakers was formed by lead singer Tommy Newman and keyboardist Joseph Warren with members from their church in Skid Row, The Church of the Nazarene. The LA Playmakers took the stage and rocked a 30-minute set, playing a variety of tunes, including Pharrell’s, “Because I’m Happy.” During the final minutes of the festival, attendees were on their feet, dancing and cheering, an apropos way to celebrate the vibrancy of Skid Row artistry and to conclude the 5th annual Festival for All Skid Row Artists.
By Kevin Michael Key --- The Festival has matured into a recurring community commemoration. It's our day in the sun, the day when we can shout out, "I live in Skid Row, and I know something you don't." Perhaps the most refreshing aspect of our "Festival For All Skid Row Artists" is how often Skid Row stakeholders use it as an opportunity to recast the mass media narrative about our lives and our community. The Festival has become a forum for the articulation of the hopes, dreams and aspirations of this community's collective imagination. When we tried speaking truth to power nobody listened, at our Festival we live out a self-evident truth that provides its own authentication. For these 2 days, Skid Row gives more than receives, we're cleansing ourselves. As Skid Row residents continue to coalesce in our creative space, for the changes they want and need, this Festival takes on added relevance.

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"I sing, I rap, I produce. I make music. -- I'm a rapper and a musician and an artist. I'm very creative and I love what I'm doing. -- I don't have to be sick and wealthy to be someone. -- You've got to do something to be something."
Danny Singleton loves playing flute with the SkidRoPlayaz. When he first started playing 36 years ago, Danny didn’t even own a flute. He would borrow his sister’s and go play alone in his car in the streets of New Jersey. It wasn’t until his family took a trip to Germany (his father was in the army), that Danny really fell in love with the idea of becoming a flautist. “I heard something with my earphones on the plane — it was flute, like a jazz flute solo — and that’s when I got my inspiration,” said Singleton. “It sounded so good. That’s what got me. I swear I heard angels outside the plane! A few months later, in 1979, I bought my first flute ever.” Danny has lived in the Skid Row Community for 20 years. He is a part of the music ministry team at the Central City Community Church of the Nazarene where he has been playing for the last seven years.

Abbye Williams works at Weingart Center at their AB-109 re-entry program which started in 2012 for people coming out of the penal system. It’s a supervised, one-year probation that helps individuals find housing and employment. “It can be an uphill battle,” said Williams. “I think that the system is designed to keep people down. I think it’s hard for people coming out of prison, we want them to get a job, but the system makes it very difficult to get employment. We want them to be responsible, but we make it difficult for them to have responsibility.”

“I write Drug-Free raps, music about oppression and recidivism. I came to the festival to celebrate. And now I work in the field. I am a firm believer that the arts can help rehabilitate people. We have a society of people - that are very artistic and very talented. A lot of talent comes out of the people that stay with us [at Weingart]. So if they have an outlet – something like this festival where they can show their talents, I think it does help to rehabilitate them.”

Jo Clark was a professional, internationally-touring dancer for 20 years with the Natasha Hall dance company. Her home bases were in Las Vegas, San Francisco and New York, but she’s been around the world. Her second favorite place to perform is in the Cayman Islands. But the first? “Skid Row. “These are real people – they’re going to let you know exactly how you are,” she said. “It seems like I am getting better now than I was when I was a professional because these are the critics – these are the people.”

While Clark has danced all sorts of styles, she is most well known as a Michael Jackson impersonator. “I mimic him from head to toe, from inside out,” she said. “I’m a big fan of his of course -- he was my idol from day one. I remember seeing him in New York at NASAAU Coliseum in 1979. I was so excited. We were in the 7th row and he came to a part of the stage where it was just noise, “But the community kind of came behind us to say to them -- these guys are good for the community, they’re not selling drugs, they’re not drinking. This is the one thing that we have that’s positive, well like you to stop harassing them.”

Lynn Rossi is not homeless, nor does she live on Skid Row. Yet, she says she is absolutely a member of the Skid Row Community — Skid Row changed her life. “Skid Row has been a healing place for me – it helped me recover from many obstacles in my own life and it has been a holy ground for me in terms of being able to express myself. -- It’s the first time I’ve ever really felt acceptance of myself from a whole community, so it really changed my life in a lot of ways.” Rossi found Skid Row in 2009 when she was introduced to Michael Blaze of the Skid Row Photography Club. She started taking pictures of the basketball games in Gladys Park. She’s felt at home ever since. “A lot of people don’t know what Skid Row’s about -- they just think its homeless shelters and people living on the street. They don’t really understand that this is a community. By having these festivals, it really opens up people to the diaspora and variety of creativity that is here.”

This year, Rossi brought a new series of photographs to the festival that tries to recreate the spirit of moments in African American history. “I take lessons in history and put a modern twist on them to encapsulate the spirit of the movement.”

“I really want people to question what they see. I want my photographs and say, what does that mean? I want people to question what they see. I want my photographs to not just be something to look at, but something to educate. That’s why it’s called Evolution of the Revolution, because you’ve got to keep evolving, not revolving.

Walter Fears plays a drum with the SkidRoPlayaz. The Playaz formed in 2009 when a group of homeless men, mostly drummers, started jamming together in a drum circle on the street. They have been the house band of the festival since the beginning in 2010. “We kept getting harassed by the police. When we started playing, they felt it was just noise,” said Fears. “But the community kind of came behind us to say to them -- these guys are good for the community, they’re not selling drugs, they’re not drinking. This is the one thing that we have that’s positive, well like you to stop harassing them.”

The hospital, envisioned by Chicago and sculpted by Cassandra, “will inspire you to heal” and features surfing and other ocean imagery and animals.
About Los Angeles Poverty Department

LAPD’s Mission: Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) creates performances and multidisciplinary artworks that connect the experience of people living in poverty to the social forces that shape their lives and communities. LAPD works express the realities, hopes, dreams and rights of people who live and work in L.A.’s Skid Row.

LAPD’s Vision: LAPD makes artistic work to change the narrative about Skid Row and people living in poverty. In doing so, LAPD aims to create a community of compassion, change individual lives and inspire the next generation of artists.

LAPD’s History: The Los Angeles Poverty Department has been working in L.A.’s Skid Row since 1985, hosting free performance workshops and creating art. LAPD was the first theater company run for and by homeless people in the nation, as well as the first arts program of any kind for homeless people in Los Angeles. Our original goals remain the same: to create community on Skid Row and to amplify the voices of the people who live on Skid Row, in order to share the lived experience of our company and community members with the larger city of Los Angeles and the nation.

Festival for All Skid Row Artists is produced by Los Angeles Poverty Department and its community partners Lamp Community’s Fine Arts Program and United Coalition East Prevention Project. This year’s festival is made possible with the support of the California Arts Council’s Creating Public Value program. – CAC’s CPV program is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts – the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Department of Cultural Affairs of the city Los Angeles, L.A. County Arts Commission, Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council (DLANC) and Alex Market.

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Enormous THANKS TO...
... our expanding group of community partners: Lamp Arts Project, UCEPP, Amity Foundation’s yearly volunteers, the LA Mission’s volunteers and Union Rescue Mission helped again with supplies and LA CAN surveyed Black Men & Boys. Alex Market paid for our lunches, Council District 14 provided tables and chairs, 4Feeds provided delicious meals for 300 folks on Saturday. Love Nail Tree printed our shirts, which were provided at cost by Jacob at the Fabric Planet. Michael Hubman alias Waterman celebrated his 8 year anniversary with us and Gladys Park chefs A.J., Chicago, Ron Smith and our volunteers Deborah Hermele, Gabriella Syom, Alexander Thimsen, Thanh Duc Mao, Gabriela Maria Aguilar, David Riccardo Bonilla, Magda Wittig, Harout Dermandjian, Melad Jamal, George Ma, Elizabeth Gordon, Lan Chen, Matt, Kieth Jackson, Nicholas Maccaron, Nia Fairweather, Danielle Charbonneau and Unoriode Ototojar I Coach Ron, OG man and volunteers, providing housing and food on the spot! And the artists who set up camp at the creativity stations: Kenny “Boog” Sanchez who lead poetry writing workshops based on hip-hop lyrics, Mindy Look making jewelry from recycled materials, Matt Miyahara managing the Paper Maché station, Jen Hofer writing personal letters and poems for anyone who needed one, Loronav Hartfield braiding beautiful flowers in your hair, The Big Draw LA and the people who invited us to re-imagine our neighborhood: Theresa Hwang, Saul, Areol from Our Skid Row and Faith Purvey who Build It Up! Our filmmaker: Helki Frantzen and the whole LAPD crew and staff who made it all happen.

Get Ready for Los Angeles Poverty Department’s 6th Annual Festival for All Skid Row Artists
Comming Up Saturday & Sunday October 17 & 18, 2015
The Festival is 2 afternoons of non-stop performances created and performed by Skid Row talents. We’re talking about performance of all kinds: music, dance, more music, spoken word, theater and yes even more music. Skid Row visual artists will display their work and we’ll have visual arts workshops going on, so anyone can make some work on the spot. If you want to perform or exhibit your work, contact us anytime between now and October and get a spot at the festival.

For more information about LAPD, please visit our website at lapovertydept.org.