

20th Annual Festival of Music & Dance Artist Biographies

Alafia Dance Ensemble was founded in 1993 by Valerie Watson, ADE was based out of the City College of San Francisco (CCSF) dance program. Watson was affiliated with CCSF for over 45 years, where she studied Haitian dance as a student. This is the company's 8th appearance in the CubaCaribe Festival. We are thrilled to participate in the 20th celebration.

Alayo Dance Company was founded by Ramón Ramos Alayo in 2002. Ramos was a principal dancer with several prominent Cuban dance companies, including Danza del Caribe and Narciso Medina Contemporary Dance Company, touring throughout Europe, Belize, and Canada. Since relocating to the U.S. in 1997 he has performed with Robert Henry Johnson, Kim Epifano, Sara Shelton Mann, Zaccho Dance Theatre and Robert Moses' KIN. He also founded CubaCaribe in 2003. His work is an innovative fusion of Afro-Cuban modern, folkloric and popular Cuban Dance, having choreographed and produced thirteen full length dance performances. The Company has performed throughout the San Francisco Bay Area at venues such as Theater Artaud, Brava Theater, YBCA, ODC Theater, Dance Mission Theater, Herbst Theater, Laney Theater, Sonoma Country Wine Theater, and La Peña Cultural Center, and have presented work in the Black Choreographer's Festival, The CubaCaribe Festival, and Intersection's Culture and Flow, Trolley Dances and more. Alayo was one of the first American companies to perform at the 2010 Festival del Caribe at Teatro Martí and partnered with Dance Brigade in July 2011 to perform in Havana's Teatro Mella in Cuba. Alayo also performed at the Diana Wortham Theatre, Asheville, North Carolina 2014. Ramos Alayo was an Isadora Duncan Dance Award Nominee, 2006, 2009, 2019, 2023. He has been featured in National Geographic Magazine, received the prestigious Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation Emerging Choreographer's Award, was recognized as "Best Dance Dynamo" by the SF Bay Guardian, was the recipient of a SF Bay Guardian Goldie Award, and has been hailed by dance critic Rita Felciano as "the best Afro-Cuban dancer whose choreography stands well beyond traditional modes." His piece *Goodbye* was named one of the best premieres in 2016 in Dance Europe Magazine. His most recent full length work, *Mouth of A Shark*, premiered in 2023 with previews in the SF Chronicle, San Jose Mercury News and more.

Aguacero is an artistic, educational, and cultural project that focuses on the traditions and creative expressions of Puerto Rican Bomba music and dance. Aguacero literally means a sudden heavy rainstorm usually followed by a refreshing sky clearing and gust of sunshine. The spirit and practice of Bomba, like an aguacero, is intense, healing and promotes life and growth. Through song, music and dance, Aguacero embodies the life, energy, and continuity of water in nature. Aguacero came together in 2006 as a collective of skilled Bay Area dancers, musicians, poets and songwriters practicing, studying, and performing Bomba and other Puerto Rican and Caribbean folkloric traditions. Aguacero carries out its vision to create and share new original works in Bomba and to affirm perspectives and expressions of the genre rooted in the teachings of our masters and ancestors. Aguacero was featured in the 2008 West Wave Dance Festival at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco and several years at the Cuba Caribe Festival in San Francisco. The collective has performed in numerous other festivals and Universities all over California including the San Jose, Oakland, and Alameda County Puerto Rican Day Festivals, and at UC Berkeley, Sonoma State, and Humboldt State University. In 2016, Aguacero was featured at the BomPlenazo in New York City. Aguacero has collaborated

and performed with Los Pleneros de la 21 and with members of La Familia Cepeda, as well as other renowned masters and practitioners from Puerto Rico. Shefali Shah is the founder and artistic director of Aguacero. Hector Lugo and Roman “Ito” Carrillo are the collective’s musical directors and mentors. Aguacero is available for performances, lecture demonstrations, and educational workshops.

Arenas Dance Company, directed by Susana Arenas Pedroso, was started in 2004 as an all-female ensemble that has developed an expertise in folkloric and popular Cuban rhythms and traditions. Their mission is to promote the rich and diverse Cuban folkloric and popular dance traditions from the percussive Arara, to the sensual Rumba, to the energetic Palo making it accessible to wide audiences via performances and classes. Arenas has performed at venues such as Dance Mission Theater, the Palace of Fine Arts, Yerba Buena, Herbst Theater, Stanford University, the University of California at Berkeley and Davis, Chico State, Laney College Theater, The Great American Music Hall, and La Peña Cultural Center. Performances to note are: *Yo Soy Cuba* (2005,2006); *Dos Aguas*, which received an award for Best Choreography from the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival; *A Night in Havana* (2013); *She Who Is Queen / Ada Ara* (2022); *Raices et Resistance* (2024) and *Mis Raices Profundas* (2025). Arenas Dance Company has also participated in the Black Choreographer’s Festival, the CubaCaribe Festival, Salsa Rueda Festival, Yemanjá Festival, Collages de Africaines, Stanford Jazz Festival and San José Jazz Festival.

Cunamacué is an Oakland-based Afro-Peruvian performing arts organization founded in 2010 to produce, present, and preserve Afro-Peruvian cultural traditions as living, evolving art forms. Through original choreography, live music, festivals, film, and community-based education, Cunamacué amplifies the history, cultural knowledge, and contemporary voices of African descendants from Peru. Rooted in Afro-Peruvian dance, Cunamacué’s movement vocabulary draws from modern dance and other African Diasporic forms to explore themes of ancestry, resilience, and belonging. We are committed to equitable access to high-quality arts experiences and provide free or low cost programs for communities of color, youth, and adults, across the San Francisco Bay Area.

John Santos is a master percussionist, internationally renowned seven-time Grammy nominee, composer, producer, bandleader, educator and cultural activist. He is a keeper of the Afro-Caribbean flame steeped in Cuban and Puerto Rican folkloric traditions as well as salsa and Latin jazz. A 2012 San Francisco Latino Heritage Arts Awardee, born and raised in San Francisco’s Mission District amidst an extended family of Puerto Rican musicians, he’s been at the center of the Bay Area’s Latin music scene for over five decades. He has written, recorded and published well over 100 original compositions. He served on the Smithsonian Institution’s Latin Jazz Advisory Committee, was SFJAZZ Resident Artistic Director (2013 and 2014) and has played an essential role in expanding Latin jazz’s rhythmic lexicon beyond the foundational Cuban grooves. He has produced a steady stream of critically acclaimed, peer-respected recordings on his Machete Records label since 1984 and has travelled the world as a performer, teacher and lecturer since the mid-eighties. He was founder and director (1985-2006) of the internationally renowned, Grammy-nominated Machete Ensemble, and currently directs the Cubadisco-nominated, John Santos Sextet. The documentary film, *Santos: Skin to Skin* about his life’s work, premiered at SFJAZZ, the Mill Valley Film Festival, and Cinefest in Puerto Rico in the Fall of 2023.

Juntos is a Cuban youth ensemble that originated from CubaCaribe's Moving Juntos class series that integrates various forms of Cuban dance, music, history and storytelling. Year round classes are taught by local artists with expertise in Afro-Cuban dance and music forms and traditions. The classes are a way for master artists and elders to pass down cultural traditions, knowledge and connections through dance, movement, music, and oral history and strengthen cultural communications between generations.

Los Lupeños de San José was established in 1969. Samuel Cortez Balderas is the current Artistic Director. Los Lupeños de San José stands out as one of the pioneering Mexican folk dance companies in the United States. Our company is passionately dedicated to promoting Mexican culture and traditions through the beautiful art of dance.

Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi is a filmmaker and documentary photographer, and the founder of FistUp, a media platform dedicated to uplifting underrepresented communities worldwide through non-extractive, community-centered storytelling. His work explores identity, culture and art, centering narratives often overlooked or misrepresented by mainstream media. His work has been published in *Rolling Stone*, *Vogue*, and *VIBE*, and exhibited in galleries and cultural institutions internationally. He states, "My dedication to my craft is deeply connected to my commitment to social justice and the belief in the transformative power of storytelling."