Lee Langston, Bukeka Blakemore, Bryan Alford, and Odell Talley are Kansas City-based gospel ambassadors who participated in a musical performance in 2018 in San Cristóbal de las Casas for a creative and cultural exchange between UNESCO Creative Cities of San Cristóbal de las Cruces, Mexico (Crafts and Folk Art) and Kansas City, Missouri (Music).

By Anna Marie Tutera

Corinthian Hall at the Kansas City Museum has been designed and constructed for a variety of history- and humanities-based multidisciplinary experiences. In addition to eight exhibit galleries featuring objects from the Museum’s vast collection, there will be contemporary art installations, a café, an interactive story sharing space, and a dynamic schedule of education and public programs featuring the visual, literary, cinematic, culinary, and performing arts. Storytelling, readings and book signings, film, cooking classes, theatre, spoken word, dance, and music will find a home at the Kansas City Museum.

Transforming a historic house into a 21st-century public museum is no small task, and the project team — including the primary architectural firm International Architects Atelier and museum design firm Gallagher & Associates — was particularly intentional about building an environment to support performances. Speakers for music and soundscapes are installed throughout all four floors of Corinthian Hall in exhibit galleries and program spaces. The third floor has an intimate 45-seat theatre. The ceiling of the R.A. Long Foundation Grand Hall has been restored with a special plaster to enhance the acoustics of the space, and the Grand Stair landing serves as a small performance platform.
Music will also be a prominent feature at the Kansas City Museum, with performances inside Corinthian Hall and concerts on the Museum grounds and the adjacent parkland. The Museum plans to showcase a variety of musical genres performed by Kansas City-based musicians and guest musicians from other Cities of Music in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. In 2017, the City of Kansas City, Missouri, became a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and was designated a Creative City of Music. UNESCO Creative Cities Kansas City will develop strategies for sustainable development including policies that meet the needs of musicians, creative sector workers, and cultural heritage preservation. Currently, Kansas City is the only City of Music in the United States.

“You cannot operate a museum of Kansas City's history and cultural heritage without talking about and experiencing music, and now our City Museum will be one of the venues to showcase our UNESCO designation,” says Anita Dixon, who prepared the UNESCO application. Dixon is leading the development of UNESCO programming in collaboration with Executive Director Dina Newman from the Center for Neighborhoods of the University of Kansas City-Missouri (UMKC), Associate Professor of Urban Planning and Design at UMKC Dr. Jacob Wagner, and a growing group of local and international partners.

Over the next year, organizational partners will help to plan the performing arts programs. Recently, the Museum has engaged The Black Repertory Theatre of Kansas City (BRTKC) and UNESCO Creative Cities Kansas City to develop the theatre and music programs. Founder and Producing Artistic Director Damron Armstrong of the BRTKC envisions the entirety of Corinthian Hall as a stage with small theatre productions, script-in-hand readings, and performative tours integrated throughout exhibit galleries and program spaces. Armstrong notes that “at the Kansas City Museum there is opportunity to give life to the neglected and often untold stories of Kansas City and that aligns with the mission of the BRTKC.” The BRTKC, a nonprofit that utilizes theatre productions and education to enhance the contributions made by African Americans in our neighborhoods, communities, and beyond, is one of the partners helping to create performing arts programming for the Kansas City Museum.

When Corinthian Hall was the private residence of R.A. Long and his family, the home had two grand pianos (one in the Salon and one in the Living Room on the first floor) and one pipe organ that sat on the Grand Stair landing in front of the iconic art glass. The Museum still has one of the original pianos, and the pipe organ was purchased at the home’s auction in 1934 by Emporia State University. In the plaster ceiling of the Grand Stair landing, the original grilles remain that were constructed to allow the sound of the organ to flow to the second and third floors. International Architects Atelier Principal Elizabeth Amirahmadi explains, “There is an imprint of past music in Corinthian Hall, and contemporary musicians will lay down new tracks that will become embedded in these walls and produce a harmonious continuing recording.”