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Get up and dance: Connecticut College presents 'Prophets of Funk' Friday

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Admiring the part funk, part poetry and part prophet in the music of Sly and the Family Stone led choreographer David Dorfman to create a new work inspired by not only the band's music, but its soul.

"Prophets of Funk —Dance to the Music" will have its world premiere Friday at Connecticut College's Palmer Auditorium. Dorfman is chairman of the college's dance department.

Dorfman saw core members of the band perform at the Wolf Den at Mohegan Sun about a year and a half ago. On his way home, he said he began to "scheme."

"I have had this incredible allegiance to the band, I have distinct memories going back to the beginning of high school and working out, playing sports and playing the 8 track. It was in my blood," Dorfman said.

Visual feast

But the kinetic dance, also described by Dorfman as a visual feast, won't solely be a representation of the music. Dorfman has endeavored to dig a bit deeper — not only in presenting lesser known songs, but also in the choreography. He also has added some dialogue. While the piece expresses funk, it also delves into melancholy. But, by the end of the evening, the ultimate goal is to have audience members up and dancing, Dorfman said.

"To me it's like a powerful co-existence to the music. It's far from the music as being an environment. It's using the music as fuel for the way we stage the whole evening. At times we are dancing to the music and memorizing counts and beats, literally. At other times we are propelled by the music and go in a different direction and it's more of a theatrical scene in that way."

Eight dancers, as well as Dorfman, will perform in the piece. Dorfman appears sporadically as a sort of specter. Unlike the other dancers, who are decked out in the colorful costumes that harness the color and fringe of the '60s and '70s, Dorfman is discreet in gray, to distinguish his presence as a sort of haunting.

Classic moves

"The movement itself is quite classic David Dorfman," said David Kyuman Kim, associate professor of religious studies at Connecticut College and scholar-in-residence for the company. For "Prophets of Funk," Kim served as creative consultant during the creation. "It's movement of a period as well as very much of our time — as well as one of the things David does so marvelously, and that is his capacity to synthesize and make new of what is familiar as well as innovative."

Like Sly and The Family Stone itself, the dancers represent a diverse mix of gender and color, said Dorfman, who admires the pioneering quality of the band.

"They showed diversity in gender and race and in viewpoint," Dorfman said. He struggled on whether or not he would keep a controversial lyric in the show, but, ultimately, Dorfman decided to use it, as he believes it reflects a sentiment on the band's part to reach toward higher tolerance.

"Once you hear it, it gives you pause. Those issues are still so unbelievably present yet they had the courage then," Dorfman said.

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