Remembering an Icon: Melvin Deal

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by Alona Wartofsky October 29th, 2021
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Melvin Deal was revered as a drummer and griot, a dancer and choreographer, a mentor and teacher, and then later, as an elder and icon.

Deal, who died last month at the age of 78 due to multiple health issues, was the founder and executive director of the African Heritage Dancers and Drummers. In that and other capacities, he served his community for more than half a century. His contributions were immeasurable.

The wide swath of people who loved him and whose lives he touched in many ways, referred to him as “Baba Melvin.”

“Some people, when they say ‘baba,’ they are using it the same way people use the word mister,” says drummer Mahiri Fadjimba Keita-Edwards. “Some people use ‘baba’ because he is a father figure in the Washington area...Other people, when they say ‘baba,’ they are anointing him with the highest level of spirituality. For me, when I’m saying ‘Baba Melvin,’ it’s not
mister for me, it’s his legacy as an elder who has been doing this work for so long and then passing down the torch.”

Deal believed that a greater connection to their African heritage could lift communities profoundly damaged by deep institutional racism. During the late 1960s, he established his African Heritage Dance Center and formed the African Heritage Dancers and Drummers company to educate his students and the wider community.

“Melvin was so instrumental in bringing an enlightenment about African culture to the DMV that if you were to draw a picture, his rays would ultimately surround the whole area,” says Carol Foster, who first met Deal during the mid-’70s in the city’s Black dance community.

Over the years, Deal operated studios in multiple locations in Northwest D.C., including the Perry School, the People’s Involvement Corporation on the 2000 block of Georgia Avenue NW, and the old Lansburgh Building, before settling on Minnesota Avenue NE. Colleagues say he was a firm and exacting instructor. “It would be tough love in the studio, but his humanity was overflowing all of the time,” Foster says.

Whatever the location and physical space, Deal always made sure that his students were fed and cared for. “He was like a surrogate father,” says percussionist and go-go artist Matt “SwampGuinee” Miller. “He literally took care of people financially and provided safe spaces for people to come off the streets. He gave them the ability to hone their craft and develop skills. He was that person; he was that genuine.”

Deal grew up in Northeast D.C. and attended Eastern High School while dancing under Bernice Hammond at her Northeast Academy of Dance. Years later, he often described how Hammond had discouraged him from
pursuing the White world of classical ballet, but also sought to steer him away from African dance to protect him from the spurious assertion that it was somehow less precious than other cultural traditions. But Deal had his own plans. After earning a bachelor’s degree in theater and education from Howard University, he went on to study at University of Ghana and the University of Nigeria at Ibadan.

Back in D.C., Deal founded his African Heritage Dance Center and dance company. Over the next five decades, the African Heritage Dancers and Drummers performed in nearly every auditorium in the city. Deal taught at his own studios and also played a role at multiple cultural institutions around the city. He taught at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts and served as a member of the D.C. Commission of the Arts and Humanities. As an arts commissioner, Deal sought to ensure that underserved communities also received the benefits of the commission’s programs.

“Baba Melvin was pivotal in our community because he spanned the whole spectrum,” says go-go historian and activist Charles Stephenson, who served alongside Deal on the arts commission during the ‘80s. “He educated us in terms of who we are and where we came from and made us feel proud of our ancestry. He was unapologetic in terms of standing up for the community.”

For most of the ‘80s, Deal opened the annual Malcolm X Day events in Anacostia Park. He also appeared at many public ceremonies and vigils, including one held at Malcolm X Park honoring the life of activist Dick Gregory.

“He made a commitment...to break the chain, break the cycle, and stop the bullshit within the institution of white supremacy and also the internalization of white supremacy in our people because that’s the colonized mindset,”
says We Act Radio’s Kymone Freeman. “He had to deal with a double-edged sword, institutions that were denying him access, and the colonized mindset that internalized racism. And he offset that by teaching so many people about our culture.”

“He confirmed our value as a people and the value of our culture because those things were always systematically undervalued in this society,” Freeman continues. “He was the starting point for so many people. If Marion Barry got everybody their first job, there is an equal number of people in this city who can say that Baba Melvin Deal gave them their first experience in appreciating their true culture.”

According to Stephenson, Deal was one of the first cultural educators to connect go-go’s complex patterns with traditional West African drumming.

“He educated a lot of us who didn’t instinctively know where the inspiration to play go-go was coming from,” he says. “It came full circle when Team Familiar and Backyard Band eventually went to Africa. I know that made his heart swell.”

Miller, who leads the ambitious go-go band Crank LuKongo, first met Deal during a 2012 “Teach the Beat” program bringing go-go to D.C. public schools. Later, they partnered for family workshops at Martha’s Table in Southeast D.C.

“Baba Melvin was a giant who was well-loved by the DMV community and empowered a lot of youth, particularly in Ward 7 and 8,” says Miller. “They owe a great deal of gratitude to that man.”

One of the most valuable gifts Deal gave Miller is a deeper understanding of go-go’s beat.
“A lot of people who claim to be scholars of go-go, they’ll tell you, ‘Yeah, go-go has its origins in Africa,’ but can they tell where?” Miller says. “Baba Melvin is the only person that I know of who can really articulate the connection between D.C. go-go music and African drumming. He was a master who broke it all the way down and could tell you which specific rhythms are directly connected to which specific region.”

Foster similarly remembers a time when Deal showed young cheerleaders how close their moves were to those of the dancing female warriors of the West African kingdom of Dahomey.

“He had a gift for seeing connections and was always so perceptive in picking up that genetic memory piece,” Foster says. “Even though we are seven or eight generations removed, we still function off a genetic memory.”

A deeply religious man who was driven by his belief in God and gifts from his ancestors, Deal gave lectures and presented performances everywhere from the Kennedy Center to the now-shuttered Lorton Reformatory, also known as the Lorton Correctional Complex; at the latter, he said he helped inmates “feel like real men.” It was not uncommon to find him working in his studio late into the night, cleaning or sewing costumes.

“He was an intellectual who challenged us all, including activists and people who thought they were conscious, to do more,” Stephenson says. “He was there for so long in the center of our community—stellar, unafraid, unashamed—and he loved his people. He loved all people.”

During his lifetime, Deal received multiple honors, including the Mayor’s Arts Award, but he did not always enjoy sufficient support. He lost his last dance studio on Good Hope Road SE because he couldn’t make enough to cover his rent. Friends say that during the final months of his life, he struggled with both physical and financial limitations.
But there are other forms of wealth—those that Melvin Deal always had in abundance.

“The concept of his work was to bring African culture and African American culture together and then to pass it down to the next generation and beyond,” Keita-Edwards says. “You cannot put a number on what he gave. You’re talking four to five generations all impacted by one man’s legacy and vision.

“In our oral tradition, we sit next to the elders to hear their stories that give you the energy to keep going,” Keita-Edwards continues. “He was one of those elders you wish was immortal. We lost a wealth of knowledge, and now we have no one to sit next to.”

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