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The spirit is willing

Newark festival builds musical bridge between the sacred and the secular

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The Lincoln Park Music Festival will bring both church folk and dance club devotees to its stage this weekend, for events celebrating spirituality and dance -- with a bit of Newark's nightclub history added to the mix.

The downtown festival will highlight the importance of music and movement in African-American culture, organizers say, with events ranging from a photo exhibit of celebrity performances at Newark's legendary Zanzibar nightclub, to liturgical dance performances at Friday's gospel showcase, to the dance-oriented house music concert Saturday and an old-school hip-hop show Sunday.

"When you think of church and they talk about 'the spirit,' it's when people 'get happy' and rejoice in the spirit of God, and they dance," said festival organizer Anthony Smith, who is deputy director of the Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District, which hosts the festival.

"With the club, you may come in not feeling as happy as you could be, you may have some things going on. But the music helps you escape and you dance. It's like a euphoria, and it's not drug-induced, it's music-induced."

Helping to further build what Smith sees as a musical bridge between the secular and the sacred will be singer and Newark native Kenny Bobien, well loved in dance music circles for his inspirational songs, including gospel standards remade for the dance floor. He and his wife, singer and songwriter Stephanie Cooke, will perform Saturday.

The festival, organizers say, is just a taste of what will be offered by the Museum of African American Music, which is planned as part of the area's redevelopment into a residential and commercial arts district.

An exhibit of photos by Vincent Bryant at the City Without Walls gallery is also part of the festival. As an official photographer at Club Zanzibar from 1979 to 1991, Bryant took hundreds of photos of the club in its heyday, when it attracted the likes of Patti LaBelle, Chaka Kahn, Grace Jones and the late Phyllis Hyman. Area talents who were creating what was known as the "Jersey sound" of club music also tested their work there. (The club, which closed in 1994, was part of the former Lincoln Hotel, which now stands fenced and vacant in the shadow of Newark's Riverfront Stadium.)

Bryant's most vivid memories of the club involve the fantastic themes created by club managers, including Shelton Hayes, who will host Saturday's concert. "You would never know from week to week what would happen," Bryant said. One Halloween a DJ was delivered in a casket; another night, Latoya Jackson rode to the stage on a motorcycle.

Many in Saturday's DJ and performer lineup also have connections to Zanzibar. Tony Humphries, one of the earliest DJs to take the "Jersey sound" to audiences in London, played regularly there, as did popular Newark DJ Naeem Johnson. Both had radio mix shows in the 1980s, Humphries on KISS FM and Johnson on WBLS.

Another festival performer, singer Loleatta Holloway, also was a regular at Zanzibar, where she performed "Love Sensation," "Relight My Fire," "Hit and Run" and other favorites. Holloway, who lives in Chicago, considers Newark a second home.

Rounding out Saturday's show with a younger DJ presence will be Newark's Jihad Muhammad, who produces music and has played clubs in Japan. Smith also called in an internationally recognized producer

and DJ in Joaquin "Joe" Claussell, who is probably best known for his role in Body & Soul, a weekly alcohol-free party that drew dancers to New York City on early Sunday evenings from 1996 to 2001.

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