

Featured Artists and Schedule Announced as annual Art & Soul program celebrates 30 years

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Indianapolis (March 12, 2026) - [Indy Arts Council](#) announces the 2026 Featured Artists and schedule, as part of the 30th annual [Art & Soul](#), its largest public program that has honored exceptional Black art and music in Indianapolis since 1996. The [Madam Walker Legacy Center](#) will return as a key program partner and will produce and host the Art & Soul Featured Artist Showcase to take place on Saturday, October 10, 2026. Art & Soul is supported annually by Lilly Endowment Inc.

2026 ART & SOUL FEATURED ARTISTS

Art & Soul is a celebration of Black art and music in Indianapolis. Each year, four Featured Artists are recognized for their exemplary contributions to our creative community. Featured Artists receive an infusion of support, including paid performances and exhibition opportunities, career coaching, media placements, and more.

In the fall of 2025, sixty central Indiana artists submitted an interest form or were nominated by the community for the 2026 Featured Artist opportunity. Indy Arts Council and Madam Walker Legacy Center selected candidates based on their exceptional talent and commitment to their creative career.

[Dr. Austin Dean Ashford](#) - Multidisciplinary artist

Dr. Austin Dean Ashford has written and performed award-winning solo shows and currently collaborates with local organizations like Flanner House and IF Theatre to mentor dozens of emerging Black artists in theatre, music, and storytelling. His goal is to build a sustainable creative empire that uplifts Black stories across stage, screen, and community. He aims to build a professional foundation that allows him to tour, produce, and publish at a higher level while continuing to mentor others.

"I build worlds that remix the past and reimagine the future, using Hip Hop as both a heartbeat and a blueprint for liberation," said Dr. Ashford. "I'm a playwright, performer, and musician who believes creativity is both protest and prayer, a way to survive and transform the world around us."

[Kenn.Wav](#) - Musician

Kenn.Wav is a pianist who moves through sound with intention, groove, and soul. Inspired by artists like D'Angelo, his work emphasizes connection, creating music that invites listeners into a shared experience. His recent projects include the 2023 alternative R&B release Frequency, featuring vocalist B.Slade, and a collaborative EP with Breon Lanier, expanding his sound while remaining rooted in soul and emotional honesty.

"My creative work blends gospel, soul, and R&B with contemporary and electronic influences, resulting in a sound that is both grounded and exploratory," said Kenn.Wav. "Through every

performance and project, my goal is to create work that is emotionally resonant, culturally rooted, and reflective of the vibrant communities that shaped me.”

Auboni Essence – Literary and spoken word artist

Auboni Essence is a poet and performer whose work blends personal experience with universal truth. Recently, they competed nationally with a slam poetry team, headlined That Peace Open Mic, and led a six-week youth poetry workshop and showcase. Known for their authenticity and magnetic stage presence, Auboni transforms every space into a platform for connection. Their work reflects a commitment to exploring life’s joys and struggles while inspiring audiences.

“I now have a repertoire of page poems, slam poems, short stories, and plays that connect with a diverse set of audiences,” said Auboni Essence. “Today, I allow my pen to take me where it wants to go, and I wrestle with the truths, the ideas, and the ideologies that present themselves to me. I carefully package them for others to see and stake my hope on them leaving inspired, delighted, and/or stimulated.”

D’yshe Mansfield – Multidisciplinary artist

Indianapolis native D’yshe Mansfield is a singer, songwriter, actor, and director building a career across music, theatre, and film. After training at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York City, she returned home in 2021 to create and give back to the local arts community. A genre-bending pop, rock, R&B, and soul artist rooted in emotional honesty and connection, she has performed at signature venues and events including The Jazz Kitchen, BLACK: A Festival of Joy, Legacy Fest, and BUTTER.

“I am a multihyphenate singer, songwriter, actress, and performer committed to helping communities feel and heal through music and storytelling,” said Mansfield. “While music allows me to process emotion, theatre allows me to create new worlds, which proves to be helpful along my journey of sharing stories through song.”

ART & SOUL 2026 EVENTS AND PROGRAMMING

Celebrating 30 years in 2026, this year’s Art & Soul will feature a year-round celebration centered on the Featured Artists, with a variety of events leading up to the Featured Artist Showcase. These include public events that celebrate art, music, dance, and literature.

- **Art & Soul Sundays series** at the Indianapolis Artsgarden (3-4 p.m.)
 - Sunday, April 12 – Tony Styxx (2012 Featured Artist)
 - Sunday, May 17 – Auboni Essence (2026 Featured Artist)
 - Sunday, June 14 – Kenn.Wav (2026 Featured Artist)
 - Sunday, July 12 – D’yshe Mansfield (2026 Featured Artist)
 - Sunday, August 9 – Dr. Austin Dean Ashford (2026 Featured Artist)
- **Art & Soul community events** | May through October across various Indianapolis venues (to be announced soon)
- **Featured Artist Showcase** at the Madam Walker Legacy Center | Saturday, October 10

CONNECT WITH ART & SOUL

Please follow @ArtsCouncilIndy, @WalkerTheatre and #ArtSoulIndy on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn to join the celebration. For more information, visit indyarts.org/programs/art-soul.

About Indy Arts Council

[Indy Arts Council](https://indyarts.org) is central Indiana's leading arts advocacy and services agency. Their mission is to champion arts and culture. Indy Arts Council believes every resident should experience arts and culture in a way that nourishes and inspires them. This vision of a creative life for all is central to the work they do to support artists, arts organizations, and the community.

About Madam Walker Legacy Center

The [Madam Walker Legacy Center](https://www.madamwalkerlegacycenter.org) represents a significant piece of the nation's history. It is located in the Madam C.J. Walker Building, which was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1991 and placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. It remains a beacon of pride, hope and the beauty that lies in diversity, ensuring that the significance of Madam C.J. Walker, Indiana Avenue and African-American cultural arts are not forgotten.

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